

学術論文

EFL 授業における社会問題: 学生の視点から

Social Issues in the EFL Classroom: The student's perspective

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Abstract

For several years, social issues have been making their way into the English language classroom in Japan. What is the impact on the students of raising these issues? Are learners able to sufficiently cope with the language and with the subject matter? Is the information they learn meaningful to them? If so, in what ways? This paper reports the results of an action research project in which learners' comments in the form of homework answers were analyzed to find some answers to the questions above. The results show that through reading English passages and discussing a variety of social topics, student awareness of world issues increases as does their understanding of how these issues are interrelated. Focusing on the topic of HIV/AIDS in particular, students begin to reflect on their own lives, attitudes and behaviors, and seriously consider the consequences of the choices they may make in their lives.

Keywords: EFL, social issues, student attitudes, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

The "education vaccine" against HIV is likely to be the only one available for the foreseeable future.
(Vandemoortele and Delmonica, 2000)

The AIDS epidemic is now more than 25 years old. It is now nine years after the quote above was made, and there is still no vaccine. The most effective method of prevention, aside from abstinence, is the consistent and correct use of condoms or other barriers. How much do our university students in Japan know about this virus and the disease called AIDS? Where and how do they learn about it? Is their education enough to help them make wise choices in their lives? What have they learned about other issues such as poverty, the status of women around the world, and world conflicts? What does all of this have to do with teaching English in the university classroom in Japan?

Many teachers link what they do in the classroom with the interests of the students, and this encourages student motivation. Nunan (1999, p. 235) lists preconditions for effective student motivation: a supportive environment, appropriate level of difficulty, meaningful activities, use of appropriate strategies, and students can relate content to their own experience. What is the result when we, as English teachers, include information that students would *not* initially be interested in? Can we raise the topic of AIDS and

other social issues in such a way as to pique the interest of the students and help them see the relevance of these issues to their own lives?

When students are motivated and involved with the subjects they encounter, there is more chance of remembering the material. In particular, emotional responses have been found to enhance learning. Stevick (1996, p. 6) writes about the interaction of affect and language, quoting Brierly, "what is important and emotionally charged tends to be more rapidly [ensconced in memory] than that which is emotionally neutral or unimportant." The result may be that what we teach (and, hopefully, what is learned) has the potential of going far beyond the language classroom and can impact the lives of our students in many ways.

In raising the issue of AIDS in particular and the fact that HIV infection rates are increasing among their own age group in Japan, students begin to see that this topic is directly related to their lives, and they develop a greater intrinsic motivation for dealing with the topic. Kohonen states, "Learners will find school motivating to the extent that it satisfies their needs" (Kohonen, 1992, p.18). Many students may realize that when they learn about HIV/AIDS in English class, they receive information they need but have not previously studied. Some EFL teachers in Japan have reported that students who are normally rather passive become more active participants when the topic of discussion is HIV/AIDS (Haynes, 2001).

There is some research into how teachers feel when addressing controversial issues in the EFL classroom (see Haynes, 2001), but more needs to be investigated regarding the learners' perspective. How do the students' feel when dealing with issues of war and violence, poverty, sexual issues and sexually transmitted infections, power issues, and so on, in English? The next section presents the design and implementation of a study to discover some answers to that question.

The Study

The research questions

The main questions to be investigated in this study were: 1) After teaching 12 classes on various social issues related to the topic of AIDS, what changes, if any, in student attitudes/opinions occur as revealed through self-reporting? 2) How much of a change, if any, is there in students' knowledge about the AIDS virus and the factors involved in its spread around the world by approaching the topic through reading passages, discussion, and short audio/video clips in English? An additional focus of this action research was to give voice to students' reactions to their study of a topic not usually included in university coursework.

Study background

This was a required seminar course for sophomores majoring in International Cultures at a university in Aichi Prefecture. The course was to focus on reading in English, supported by discussion on the topics covered. Thirty-three students agreed to participate in this study, 31 from Japan and 2 from China. There were 25 female and 8 male students. The course was conducted in the fall of 2006.

Data collected

The data collected for this study include 1) a short pre- and post-test on HIV/AIDS facts, 2) participants' weekly homework reflections on the topics in the readings and on the class discussions, 3) responses to a voluntary, anonymous online questionnaire.

Methodology

The materials for the course were written by the instructor. The students in this study belonged to one of two groups that used the same materials and had the same instructor. The reading level of the students on average was pre-intermediate, and the materials provided were appropriate for this level, although the vocabulary was challenging for some students. For each reading passage, a glossary of English vocabulary with the Japanese translations was provided on the worksheet.

In class each week, students were given a short vocabulary quiz and then discussed in pairs or small groups the answers to the comprehension questions related to the reading passage. Students were encouraged to discuss the material in English, however many of the students' speaking skills were not yet comparable to their reading level. Therefore, the students were allowed to use Japanese in pairwork if necessary. This discussion gave them the opportunity to more clearly understand the topic and to respond to what they had read.

Students were given two assignments for homework: 1) reflect on the week's topic and answer several questions, and 2) pre-read the reading passage for the following week's class. In the next class, students checked their answers to comprehension questions and then watched a video clip, listened to a song, did a role play, or discussed the topic through discussion questions.

Student homework on Internet

Students were registered at an online database, <http://www.nicenet.org>, and were instructed to submit their answers to homework questions either via the web site or to e-mail directly to the instructor's address. The choice of an online or e-mail submission was made in order to make it easy for students to check the number of words through their word processing program and to facilitate collection and analysis of their responses.

It should be noted that in each week's homework, students were asked the question, "What surprised you about the information we studied this week?" rather than, "Did anything surprise you about the information we studied this week?" The latter allows the student to give a *yes* or *no* reply, whereas the former assumes that something did surprise the student and leads them to explain what this was. It was these more detailed observations which revealed students' deeper feelings and thoughts about the material that interested the researcher.

Because the homework answers were collected at least a day before the classes met, the instructor was able to determine which answers showed a misunderstanding of the material or which needed further explanation. In class, the instructor reviewed those points to the class as a whole or talked privately with individual students.

Analysis of the data

A variety of sub-themes related to the general topic of HIV/AIDS were included in this seminar: a general introduction, early (world) history of AIDS, a brief history of AIDS in Japan, discrimination, war/conflicts and AIDS, women/power, an explanation of the virus, testing and treatment, how to talk with a partner, sex trafficking, poverty and education. This section discusses some of the student responses which emerged from the data.

The first class brought out ideas or conceptions that the students had acquired from earlier classes in school, the media, friends and family. All of the students reported that they had had at least one or more class hours studying about AIDS in elementary, junior or senior high school health or physical education classes. The one exception was one student who stated that in China she did not learn about AIDS until the age of 19. Most stated that the information they were given was basic, focusing on the fact that the virus is in the blood, shaking hands with someone with HIV will not spread the disease, and other elementary facts. However, specific modes of infection and details about body fluids seem not to have been provided. One student stated, "I think direct expressions related to sex were avoided to the utmost then."

HIV: History, discrimination

The second week's passage gave students an overview of the early history of AIDS around the world. Early on, several students showed an understanding of acts of discrimination, for example:

First I was surprised that the first International Conference on AIDS was held in Atlanta in 1985. Because this was unexpectedly recent events. I thought the conference was held earlier. Second I was surprised that the U.S did not allow HIV-infected immigrants and travelers into the U.S in 1987. This fact showed discrimination against them and not to have correct information about HIV/AIDS.

and

I surprised that the history said, "A family -including three HIV positive sons (hemophiliacs) -have to leave their home after arsonist set fire to it." I think, this reason was that people had wrong knowledge, because of President's words.

President should have preceived that his words affect whole U.S. We should stop wrong knowledge and know about HIV.

Other students became aware for the first time of the number of people around the world who have been infected and who have died. Two students were surprised to read that Magic Johnson had been infected.

The following week's reading focused on the history of HIV in Japan. In this (verbatim) quote from the homework, we see that, even with limited skills in English writing, this student is able to express her emotional reaction to the information covered in the reading passage:

The history of AIDS in Japan had started 3 years ago when [before] I was born. The condition of AIDS most appearing in beginning, I knew that it is the hemophilia patient for the first time. Rather than saying that I was surprised, as for receiving the shock the doctor was accustomed to selling the important product high in the people of the patient of the

hemophilia, those that are infected to HIV in that product blended. And, it means that was used in 2 years patient 1987. And the products whose danger of the infection to which the price that is not heat-treated goes down is high because the product the Ministry of Health heat treatment in 1985 is permitted. If there is no this, perhaps the number of 60% hemophilia patients who are infected to HIV it had decreased more. It is the behavior, which is not permitted under any condition. Such, being unconcerned, you were surprised to being done and felt the anger.

Also in this unit, many students pointed out their incredulity at the case of Sean Duque:

I'm surprised that Sean Duque could not stay at a hotel in Tokyo. I think all hotels can accommodate to people who have AIDS today. In 1992, they were discriminated by public facilities. I feel very sad.

and

I had not thought can appear such matter in Tokyo. The hotel, however, refuses accommodation to Sean Duque, an AIDS activist from Honolulu and one the speakers, because he is infected with HIV. The country of Japan where the infection person continues to increase only with advanced nation. There are misunderstanding and prejudice for HIV/AIDS in the background. I think concerning the society which lives together. I was so sad to hear this story, however it was true.

In the reading for week 4, students read about the issue of discrimination as it relates to AIDS. In addition, short clips from the film *Philadelphia* were shown and students were encouraged to answer questions for discussion. The majority of homework responses showed students were unaware that prejudice and discrimination based on one's HIV status have been so widespread.

I was surprised that when an employer finds out an employee is taking medicine for HIV infection; the employee might soon be looking for another job. I was surprised that employee have HIV is dismissed by employer only reason of their disease of HIV. I didn't know this fact. Then, I was surprised that even today; in many countries there are many HIV-positive children who are not allowed to attend school with other children for disease of HIV. I think that we have to change this situation. I didn't believe those social situations. I want to know why HIV-positive people encounter is discriminated in work and education. I want to know this reason is only infection. If there are other reasons, I want to know them. I thought that I studied very important things in this week's class.

At this point, several students began to question their own beliefs and attitudes toward this subject:

To get rid of discrimination toward people with HIV/AIDS, I think it is necessary to smash misunderstanding about HIV/AIDS. Now, a large majority of people think that HIV/AIDS is other people's affairs. Moreover, I was also one of them. However, this is a big mistake. I think it is important to change this wrong recognition. So, when people are young before the wrong information is planted, I think that sensible adults should teach the right knowledge about HIV/AIDS to children through educational facilities.

One student expressed her concern about her own behavior if she were to be with an HIV-positive person:

I have never met people with HIV/AIDS, so I did not do discrimination for them. I know that not be infected only do shake hands, work together or eat meal together, but when I meet people with HIV/AIDS, I do not know do myself, I think for fear of surprise. I will hurt his feelings. I do not want to do. I hope to do not surprise, and give assistance to him. I can change my behavior.

Women and HIV

The reading in week 5 covered the topic of war and the use of rape as a weapon of war. One student links

the situation of war to that of poverty:

I think, war is very terrible. Especially, people cannot fight suffer from poverty. And their resisting power decrease little by little. And disease is spread very widely. For example, in Africa, happen many war. People who live there starve and be ill. And finally dead. In those, infection of aids is here.

He continues, writing on the position of women:

I think, especially women have not much power of fighting and protecting themselves. And they are used by soldiers to fill their greed of sex. War is very terrible and this is the battle of many countries. So many countries people contact the way of sex. So this is very sadly that women are vulnerable.

Students came up with many suggestions for steps that the U.N. and non-governmental organizations could take to address this situation. For example,

In my opinion, The United Nations should send Security Forces to the front and work countries to stop fights... humanitarian organizations should go to the front and look over refugees in free. They should keep refugees healthy. In my opinion, world leaders should appeal that war are useless and suggest the top of the country stop war... [T]he international community should raise the money for refugees. They should do for many war victims and give hope to them.

The topic of women's power was the subject of week 6, and in addition to learning briefly about the situation many women face around the world, students were encouraged to reflect on their own knowledge of women in Japanese society. In the homework comments, the attitudes of the young men and women in these two classes toward women's roles in Japanese society were mixed. Some believed strongly that the position of men and women were approximately equal. For example:

I think women have power in their relationship. For example in family, mother has big power. First, it is by mother that we were born. I think only the thing that mother bore us, mother has special power. Women should be passive, women should not say about sex too much, women should do housework and child raising and husband should working, these are old-fashioned thought. I think it is important to increase women's power to discard old-fashioned thought. This can say not only men but also women. And it is also important to women that to try anything. A thought for example: "I can't do because I am woman" should throw away. Things men can do are things women can do equally. [female student]

and

At first, I thought women in Japan didn't have power in their relationships. But I noticed that the Japanese women was changing and having power a little as I considered deeply. For example, women in Japanese come to work with men. The number of women who stand on their own legs is increasing. In addition, we can get information about sex in many ways. I think society should change view of women to increase their power. The key point is sexual equality. Men must cherish women and women must cherish men, too. [female student]

Yet, several voices disagreed:

I do not think that women have power in their relationships. Because they are scared that if they are unwilling, they are hated by their lovers. That is to say many women are passive. I think that this cause is their fear. Of course there are many women to have power. But in many cause, when man and woman are two, woman will follow on man. [female student]

I think that women in Japan have power in their relationships. women in Japan are more independence than other

country. For example, I think that women equally receive compulsory education. And women in Japan recently have power in most household. But, women are not equal to men in work. [male student]

I do not think women in Japan have power in their relationships. The sex industry is so prosperous in Japan. Because by the approval is the normalization. [female student, from China]

The HIV virus and AIDS

During the 7th, 8th, and 9th weeks of the course, students read about the HIV virus and how it works in the body, slowly destroying the immune system, which body fluids might have enough of the virus to infect someone and which do not, the use of a condom, female condom or other barrier, what treatments are currently available, and a brief overview of other sexually transmitted infections. Most students' commented on how little they had known about the routes of infection or specific body fluids, and the fact that HIV was not the same thing as AIDS. Many stressed the importance of using condoms. Again, several students made realizations they can use in their own lives or in supporting others:

I don't know the HIV antibody test do in Public Health Centers. I was surprised.

I was wrong this question's answer. I thought we can catch HIV from mosquitoes.

I learned many things from it. For example, when we drink we tend to become active for sex. We need to protect ourselves and decide things by our own will. We don't have to follow partner's will.

I was very interested in that HIV can pass through membrane in the mouth and throat, because I thought HIV will pass through only vagina, so I was very surprised that HIV will pass through membrane in the mouth and throat...

I also understood that we should not suffer alone but ask someone's support if we became HIV-positive.

Trafficking

The reading passage in week 10 dealt with the trafficking of women and children around the world, and how this is related to the spread of HIV. For the majority of the students, this was the first time they had learned of this problem, although a few had seen programs on television that had discussed it. The following student reports her reactions and also reflects on her need for accurate information in the media in order to form an educated opinion about her own country:

I have learned in the mass media about women who have been trafficked to Japan. They were tricked and brought to Japan. By watching the program of the topic, I could knew the fact of traffic in Japan and there were some bad people who committed such crimes in Japan. I was very shocked when I watched the program because I hadn't known the fact in Japan since then, but now, I think it was good for me to get chance to know the fact. I don't want to admit my country to be a good country without knowing the real things about Japan, so I think the topic of trafficked people should be reported by the mass media, and the mass media should report on TV and newspapers.

One student very astutely expressed his concern about men's participation in the trafficking cycle:

Men, we are customers for them. Then if we don't buy them, the industry will lost their income and they will not take

women and children. Though this is not actual way, because Japanese men's society tends to recognize having sex as adult behavior. Break this custom, or sex industry will not [de]crease.

In this unit, students began to see how various problems were related: living in poverty causes people to seek work and may be vulnerable to becoming victims of traffickers. In the next unit, we covered the issue of poverty, and the importance of education, in more detail.

I [learned] why poverty is one of leading causes for the spread of HIV/AIDS. First, I knew poorer people may not have access to good health care. And I knew that it is very difficult for poorer people to pay for medicines to fight diseases. Next, I knew that lower-income countries often have to pay back large loans plus interest on the loans to the World Bank and so on. So, if they couldn't get educations, it reduces their chances of finding employment. So, they often have to accept dangerous work to get money. Certainly I thought that poverty is concerned with HIV/AIDS. I knew that there are many causes to get HIV/AIDS. Then, I knew about of problem orphans by seeing video in this week's class. I thought that this is the most interesting thing.

In the final unit, students considered the government's role in dealing with the issue of AIDS. Students at this stage seriously questioned how government money could best be spent. The following example shows how this student struggles to find a solution:

The interesting thing I learned in this unit is that problem of the budget. I learned it is difficult to distribute money. How to use money influences the number of infected people. If the money is spent on education, it may be unsure the children have right knowledge of sex. I puzzled my mind about the problem. If there is limited amount of AIDS medicines available in a country, they should be distributed to victims of trafficking firstly. It is dreadful that no power people do not have choice and are infected with HIV. Politicians should precede such victims. If there is limited amount of money for food distribution in a country, they should be distributed to poor people who can not eat enough meal and ill people... In my opinion, the most important problem that must be faced if we are going to stop AIDS is that we tend to spend money poor countries rashly. To send money simply is not good because government may use money vainly. We have to think that the most effective way of reducing and stopping the number of people with HIV with politicians of that country.

Results of HIV/AIDS Knowledge Quiz

A 30-question HIV/AIDS knowledge test was given before any instruction on the first day of class and at the end of the final day. The questions asked about the difference between HIV and AIDS, testing availability and procedures, methods of infection and of prevention, and prevalence of the virus in Japan. The average score on the pretest showed 15.86 correct answers. On the final test, the average score was 20.96, indicating an improvement of 5.1 correct answers. Students were not told to study any of the material outside of class or that there would be any test to show how much they had learned. This test was given to assess the amount of comprehension these students were able to acquire without concentrated study. No student was able to answer all of the questions correctly, although all of the information had been covered during the course. This indicates that their knowledge about the basic facts of HIV/AIDS increased somewhat, though not dramatically, through interaction with the material over the course.

Pretest

Avg = 15.86
[8 – 21]

Posttest

Avg = 20.96
[14 – 28]

+ 5.1 questions correct
(lowest score – highest score)

Final comments on the seminar

Students were asked to give their overall impressions on the 12-week seminar and to indicate areas that could be improved upon. Two students indicated that it was difficult to discuss some topics—body fluids in particular—with another student who was of the opposite gender. This supports the findings of other research (data collected by the author in various courses dealing with HIV/AIDS) in which students have indicated more discomfort talking about sexual issues. One student stated that s/he was uncomfortable watching the video clips from documentaries, but that “we should know about the present condition.” Another student wrote, “I like every courses because these are important things for me. And this need to change my mind for recognizing that ‘sex’ is not a playing.”

今まで、学生生活をしてきた中で、ほとんどエイズのことを学んだことがなかったので今回授業を受けてみて、世界中のエイズで苦しんでいる人々のことを知ることができてよかったと思うし、エイズのことをちょっと他人事だと思っていた部分もあったけど授業を受けて、エイズって誰にでも起こりうる身近なことなんだと実感した。

(Until now, in my schooling, we never really studied about AIDS. In this course, I think it was good that I was able to learn about the people around the world who are suffering with AIDS. Also, there was a part of me that thought that AIDS was someone else’s problem, but through this course I’ve realized that it could happen to anyone and it seems like a problem that is much closer to me now.) [female student]

半年間の授業全部でエイズに対する考え方がだいぶ変わった。「War, conflicts, rape as a weapon」のトピックが良かった。エイズは日本は特に性交渉からの感染が多いから自分の責任と思っている部分が多かったが、それ以外の理由を見ることでエイズ/HIVに対する考え方が変わったと思う。

(Studying about AIDS in this course over the last half year, my thinking about the topic has changed. The topics of war, conflicts, rape as a weapon, were good. Here in Japan, because AIDS is related to sexual behavior, the thinking that it is one’s own responsibility is widespread, but learning that there are other reasons [for infection] has made me change the way I think about HIV/AIDS.) [female student]

私はこのクラスで“エイズ”について知ることができたので友人などとのちょっとした会話の中にエイズの話を出して、自分の知っていることを教えることができる。

Because I learned about AIDS in this class, in my conversations with friends, I’ve been able to raise the topic of AIDS and have taught them what I have learned. [male student]

In addition, students were asked to what degree they found this topic difficult to study in English. Comments ranged from “easier” to “more difficult”. Two students thought it was easier to study in English, and one revealed that was because talking in Japanese would have been too direct. Five students commented that it was more difficult because of the specialized vocabulary, but as they were able to use

dictionaries, it was not a problem. One student stated, "I think it was more difficult, but I tried to understand about HIV/AIDS harder than when I study in Japanese." Five students reported that they were unable to understand everything in English, and that they felt hampered by the difficult vocabulary, "It is little difficult for me. Because I can understand word but I can't understand sentence. English sentence sometimes difficult to understand."

In the final class, students were asked to complete an anonymous, web-based questionnaire at home. The results of this questionnaire will be discussed below.

Online survey

A total of 14 students completed the online survey. For question 1 (If you have a romantic partner now, have you talked with your partner about using a condom or other form of protection against HIV and other STDs?), 5 reported that they had talked with their partner, 1 had not, and 8 skipped the question. For question 2, (If you answered YES to question 1, did you talk to your partner because of the information you learned in the AIDS seminar?), 5 answered yes, and one did not respond. In question 3, (If you do not have a romantic partner right now, if you have one in the future, do you plan to talk with him/her about using a condom or other protection against HIV or other STDs?), 10 answered yes and 4 skipped the question. Finally students were asked if they planned to take any sort of action related to HIV/AIDS. A list of choices was given, and the response are as follows: thirteen responded that they would protect themselves (by using condoms, etc.), 11 said they would teach their friends and/or family about HIV/AIDS, 3 said they planned to make a donation to an AIDS group in Japan or abroad, 1 would like to work for an AIDS NGO here in Japan, and 4 planned to go to a developing country and work to help in some way. One student gave a written answer to "other" as "to get involved in AIDS charities."

Conclusion

There are several limitations to this study, mainly that there was no triangulation, no interviews were conducted with the participants, and there was limited questioning of the participants regarding discrepancies between grammatical inaccuracy and the researcher's comprehension of a student's intended meaning. The questionnaire was limited in the range of questions, especially regarding student attitudes toward the topic either before or after the study. There was no questioning of participants regarding how they perceived their own language development over the course. The results do show, however, that by the end of the course, the students showed a much greater interest and awareness of the AIDS epidemic, although their understanding of many of the details was not as great as I had expected. The course was not specifically designed to require the students to memorize the material, yet an average increase of 5 points on the knowledge quiz did occur. This could be attributed to an increase in passive knowledge about HIV/AIDS through the reading and discussion.

It is evident through the voices of the participants in this study that raising these issues had a very positive impact on them. Many confessed that they were somewhat embarrassed by not having known much of the information presented in this seminar:

Till now, I do not know that the actual condition well and I think that STDs or HIV are not relate to me, so I felt very woeful myself and reflect what ignorance. [female student, week 10]

and others expressed concern over the current Japanese educational system with regards to HIV/AIDS:

If I were a high school teacher in Japan, I would like to teach a lot of information about HIV/AIDS. I learned a lot of information about HIV/AIDS which I didn't know until I took this class. My knowledge about HIV/AIDS was poor until then. So I want to teach such information. I think many young people don't know about the actual conditions, history, discriminations about HIV/AIDS. I want my students to acquire right knowledge about HIV/AIDS. [female student, week 6]

The majority of the participants were able cope with the language and with the subject matter, and the information they learned was, indeed, meaningful to them. Although not quantitatively verified, student interest in the topics was clearly evident in the student comments. The written responses of the students at the end of the semester revealed that they were much more motivated to take precautions for themselves and others, and that they exhibited a willingness to help others in some way.

Approaching social issues in the English language classroom in Japan can be one effective way to help learners enhance their language skills, to increase their knowledge about the world, and, perhaps most importantly, to assist them in making healthy choices in their own lives.

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