

# LANGUAGE EDUCATION, GLOBAL ISSUES AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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**Abstract:** A key trend within the English language teaching (ELT) profession is an increasing awareness of our social responsibility as educators and a growing concern with world problems of peace, human rights and the environment. As a result, the past 20 years have seen an explosion of interest among English teachers in the field of global education. While this has manifested itself in a number of ways, this paper will focus on the following: (1) new thinking within the profession about the role of English; (2) new ideas about the content of English language teaching; (3) the need for language teacher training in the field of global education, (4) professional out-reach efforts by ELT associations to global organizations; (5) the growing emphasis in ELT conferences on global issue themes; (6) the formation of "global issue" special interest groups within the English teaching profession, and (7) international youth exchange programs organized by language educators to promote global awareness and international understanding. The paper will document the commitment of the ELT profession to global education, discuss what it means to "teach for a better world" and give examples of how English educators around the globe are working to promote international understanding.

**Key Words:** language teaching; global education; global issues; international understanding

## GLOBAL ISSUES AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

### Global Education

As language teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we live in challenging times. Our world faces serious issues of ethnic conflict, social inequality and environmental destruction. How can we prepare our students to cope with these problems? What is our responsibility as language teachers in a world of war, poverty, prejudice and pollution?

"Global education" is a new approach to language teaching which attempts to answer these questions. Global education has been defined as "education which promotes the knowledge, attitudes and skills relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural, interdependent world" (Fisher & Hicks, 1985: 8). Another definition states that "global education consists of efforts to bring about changes in the content, methods and social context of education in order to better prepare students for citizenship in a global age" (Kniep, 1985: 15). A global education approach to language teaching aims at enabling students to effectively acquire a foreign language while empowering them with the knowledge, skills and commitment required by world citizens for the solution of global problems (Cates, 1990: 3).

The goals of a "global" approach to education are generally divided into the four domains of knowledge, skills, attitudes and action. Knowledge about the world's peoples, places and problems is the first goal. If we want students to work for a better future, they must know the nature of global issues, their causes and viable solutions. Acquiring skills necessary to solve world problems is the second goal. These include communication skills, critical and creative thinking, co-operative problem solving, non-violent conflict resolution, informed decision-making and the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives. Acquiring global attitudes is the third goal. These include global awareness, an appreciation of other cultures, respect for diversity, a commitment to justice, and empathy with others. The final goal is action - participation in the local and global community focused on action to solve world problems.

### **Comments from Language Educators**

A number of leaders within the English language teaching profession have addressed the importance of global education for teachers of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Some stress how global issues can provide meaningful content for language classes. Others stress the mission language teachers have to teach for a better world. The following statement, by one respected educator, highlights the rationale for a global education approach to English language teaching.

*Global, peace and environmental issues intrinsically affect every human being on earth. These issues provide content for (our) content-based humanized ESL teaching... We teachers have a mission, a mission of helping everyone in this world communicate with each other to prevent the global disaster ahead.* - H. D. Brown (1990)

The idea that foreign language teaching can contribute to creating a better world is not new, of course. Indeed, much traditional language teaching makes vague references to global education ideals. However, as one noted language educator points out, this has mostly remained wishful thinking:

*It may be well to ask ourselves whether international understanding, let alone world peace, has been promoted by the considerable amount of foreign language teaching in the world. Diligent learning of foreign words and phrases, laborious copying and recitation of irregular verb paradigms, and the earnest deciphering of texts in the foreign language can hardly be considered powerful devices for the development of international understanding and good will.* - Rivers (1968: 262)

If our language students are truly to become socially responsible world citizens, then, global issues and the four dimensions of global education (knowledge, skills, attitudes and action) must appear explicitly in our language teaching curricula.

### **The Linguapax Kiev Declaration**

For foreign language teachers, the most significant attempt to deal with language education and world problems is UNESCO's "Linguapax" project. The name *Linguapax* comes from the Latin words "lingua" (language) and "pax" (peace) and refers to a series of seminars dealing with language teaching for international understanding. The first

Linguapax conference, held in Kiev, USSR in 1987, brought together such groups as the *International Association of Applied Linguistics* (AILA), the *International Association for the Development of Cross-cultural Communication* (AIMAV) and the *World Federation of Modern Language Associations* (FIPLV) to discuss the “Content and Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages and Literature for Peace and International Understanding”. The resulting “Linguapax Kiev Declaration” (UNESCO, 1987) made four specific recommendations to foreign language teachers:

- (1) to be aware of their responsibility to further international understanding through their teaching;
- (2) to increase language teaching effectiveness so as to enhance mutual respect, peaceful co-existence and co-operation among nations;
- (3) to exploit extra-curricular activities such as pen-pal programs, video exchanges and overseas excursions to develop international understanding;
- (4) to lay the basis for international co-operation through classroom co-operation using language teaching approaches responsive to students' interests and needs.

Further Linguapax Kiev recommendations called for UNESCO and its member nations:

- to take steps to inform students and their families of the potential of foreign languages to promote better knowledge of world issues and concerns
- to organize workshops for foreign language teachers and students on contemporary world issues of direct relevance and interest to young people, such as environmental protection and the struggle against poverty and hunger.

## **GLOBAL EDUCATION AND ENGLISH TEACHING**

### **Rethinking the Role of English**

For English language instructors, a key step in becoming a global teacher is to rethink the definition of English. Definitions are important because they limit what we do. How do you define *life*, for example? As a party? A pilgrimage? A to-do list? A vale of tears? Each of these definitions will lead you off in a different direction. In the same way, how we define English determines what we do in our classrooms. What is “English” then? Traditionally, English has been defined as:

- (1) a linguistic system of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar
- (2) a school subject and a topic on national exams
- (3) a language of “daily conversation” about family, sports and hobbies
- (4) the mother tongue of English-speaking countries such as the US and the UK

These four traditional views have long formed the basis of much English teaching worldwide. A global education view of English, however, involves two further dimensions. It sees the English classroom as a place for teaching:

- (5) English as an international language for communication with people from around the world

- (6) English as a subject for learning about the world's peoples, countries and problems

A global education approach to EFL, therefore, means showing how English can be a language of world citizenship for learning about our global village, for communicating with people from other cultures and for working to solve problems facing the global community.

## **International Content**

In addition to a rethinking of goals, the “why” of English teaching, the new interest in global issues has also led to a rethinking of content, the “what” of education. This is related to the growing interest of the profession in content-based language teaching (Silver, 1991, p.2). Content-based teaching argues that language is most effectively learned in the context of relevant, meaningful, motivating content which stimulates students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Content educators such as Brinton (1989) and Mohan (1986) stress that language is a means of learning about the world and recommend the use of motivating themes and authentic materials in classroom teaching.

If one accepts this thesis of content language teaching, the next question that arises is “What content is worth teaching?” A growing number of educators propose “global issues” as one important subject which can meet the need for meaningful content and address the lack of educational relevance of much general English teaching in schools round the world. This view has been voiced by one British educator as follows:

*Global issues are real: the spoliation of the rainforests, the thinning of the ozone layer, acid rain, nuclear waste, population growth, the spread of AIDS, state violence and genocide in Kurdistan, Tibet and Bosnia, ecological disaster and war in Ethiopia and Somalia...the list is depressingly long. What has this to do with the teaching of EFL? English language teaching has been bedevilled with three perennial problems: the gulf between classroom activities and real life; the separation of ELT from mainstream educational ideas; the lack of a content as its subject matter. By making Global Issues a central core of EFL, these problems would be to some extent resolved.*

- Alan Maley (1992: 73)

## **Teacher Training**

For English teachers to promote global awareness, social responsibility, international understanding and world citizenship, they need effective training. However, MA-level language teacher training programs generally lack a component dealing with global education. One course addressing this need is entitled “Trends - New Directions in ESOL: Global Issues” offered as part of the MA-in-TESOL program of Teachers College Columbia University (New York) at its Tokyo campus in Japan. The course, which I have designed and taught, gives graduate students in the field of English language teaching the chance to explore teaching ideas, resources and activities from fields such as global education, peace education, human rights education and environmental education.

This one semester course was introduced in 1991 and has been taught annually since then. Course participants are English teachers in Japan (Japanese and non-Japanese) who work at various levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced), in various institutions (high school, college, commercial language schools) with various learners (school children, college students, adult learners). The “Global Issues” MA course consists of 60 hours of instruction and is divided into two parts: a methodology workshop and a practicum.

The methodology component introduces students to the field of global education and the teaching of global issues in foreign language classes. In the practicum, students explore specific areas of global education and experiment with the design and teaching of global issue language lessons. The course covers key aspects of global education such as definitions, a history of the field, objectives and rationale as well as global education approaches to curriculum design, classroom methodology and evaluation. Course participants study and discuss teaching ideas, techniques and materials from global education and from its component fields of peace education, human rights education, environmental education and development education. During the course, they examine global education teaching materials, experience global education class activities, and experiment with designing and teaching language lessons aimed at promoting global awareness and international understanding.

Course readings comprise a 200-page reading pack of articles on global education and an in-class library of global education books from the instructor’s collection. A special feature of the practicum is that students are required to design, teach and evaluate a model global education language lesson in their schools. These are video-taped, then analyzed and discussed in the MA classroom. A further assignment requires students to visit an organization involved in global issues (e.g. Amnesty International, UNICEF), write a profile of the organization, and analyze the teaching materials it provides. Student projects have ranged from curriculum design and materials writing to textbook analysis and educational research. Sample projects include:

- A Survey of Students' Global Awareness and Geographic Literacy
- A Content Analysis of Global Issues in Japanese High School English Textbooks
- A One-year Global Education Course Designed for Senior High School EFL
- A College EFL Lesson Designed on Tropical Rainforests
- An EFL Lesson Plan for Preventing Bullying

This course has enjoyed a popular reputation and has generated a great amount of enthusiasm. Participants are always surprised to learn about the wealth of teaching ideas, activities and materials they can find in such fields as global education, peace education and environmental education. On finishing, they leave the course with a solid idea of how global issues and international understanding can be integrated into their teaching. This type of graduate-level course for language teachers is, unfortunately, quite rare. Teacher training institutions and MA-in-TESOL programs worldwide should be urged to introduce similar courses to acquaint language teachers with fields such as global education and peace education, and thereby enable them to add a global perspective to their work.

## **Professional Outreach**

Another key trend related to the growing interest in global education concerns the efforts by language teaching associations to reach out for ideas, stimulation and resources to global issue experts and organizations. This outreach has taken a number of forms. In 1990, the organization TESOL (*Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*) was designated as an official NGO to the United Nations. As a result, it appointed an official liaison to the UN to write articles about the United Nations and the global issues it deals with for the TESOL newsletter and its 15,000 subscribers worldwide. TESOL has further shown its commitment to global education through a series of workshops which introduce English teachers to experts, resources and ideas from global issue fields. These have included "TESOL Day at the United Nations" (TESOL'91, New York) at which UN personnel instructed English teachers on how to integrate global issues into their teaching, "TESOL Day at the Carter Center" (TESOL'93, Atlanta, Georgia) where teachers attended workshops on conflict resolution by peace experts from former President Jimmy Carter's staff, and "TESOL Day at the Rainforest" (TESOL'94, Baltimore) at which English teachers were shown how to integrate ecological themes into their lessons by environmental experts. Similar initiatives have taken place in Japan where experts in peace education, human rights and environmental problems have addressed English teachers at the annual conference of the *Japan Association for Language Teaching* (JALT) on how to teach global issues in the EFL classroom (Casey 1994).

## **Conference Presentations**

This outreach can also be seen in the kinds of featured speakers invited to international conferences. JALT's 1996 international conference in Hiroshima, for example, featured UNESCO expert Felix Marti speaking on Linguapax, language teaching and world peace. Featured speakers at other international conferences have included US civil rights leader Andrew Young (TESOL'93), human rights advocate Mary Hatwood Futrell (TESOL'94), Vietnamese peace activist Le Ly Hayslip (TESOL'95) and cross-cultural expert Milton Bennett speaking on tolerance and intercultural understanding (Korea TESOL'95). The invitation of outside speakers such as these to international ELT conferences underscores the commitment of English teaching organizations to link English education to the outside world, raise awareness of global issues, strengthen commitment to socially responsible teaching and remind teachers of the wider social context of their classroom work.

English teaching organizations worldwide are increasingly highlighting global education and global issues in their conferences. One way this can be seen is through official conference themes being chosen. Examples include "Language and Social Justice" (ATESOL Australia, 1989), "Global Age: Issues in Language Education" (CDELTA 1993, Egypt), "Bridges to Better Understanding" (Mexico TESOL, 1995) and "World Peace and English Education" (Japan Association of College English Teachers, 1986). In Europe, an entire conference was held on the theme "Global Issues in Foreign Language Education" by the Modern Language Association of Poland (September, 1996).

Over the past two decades, there has also been an explosion of presentations focussing on global education topics at ELT conferences around the world. JALT's 1986 conference handbook, for example, reveals no presentations at all on global issue themes, yet its JALT'96 Hiroshima conference 10 years later featured over 50 such sessions. These

included presentations on international awareness through video, global education and the Internet, AIDS awareness activities, and teaching for human rights. JALT's annual conference now regularly features conference colloquia, roundtable discussions and workshops featuring English educators from countries such as Russia, Germany, Thailand and Australia addressing topics such as global issues, peace education, environmental awareness and international understanding as they relate to teaching methods, textbooks and curriculum design.

The same trend can be seen at other international conventions. In 1996, IATEFL (the *International Association for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language*) featured a first-ever global issues conference strand with presentations on global issue projects in Brazil, a *One World Week* event in Portugal, peace studies in Hong Kong and ESL-for-international-understanding in California. TESOL's 1996 conference in Chicago featured a peace education breakfast seminar, plenary talks on social responsibility, an academic session on peace education and materials writing, and over 100 presentations by teachers from countries as varied as Poland, Canada, France and Korea with titles such as *Global Issues E-mail Projects*, *Social Issues and the Language Class*, *Teaching Strategies for Reducing Prejudice* and *Integrating Global Cultures into EFL Materials*.

### **Peace as a Global Language (PGL)**

Some teachers have moved beyond national language teaching conferences to set up their own events focused specifically on peace and global themes. One example is the international *Peace as a Global Language* conference (PGL) held in Japan. This brings together language teachers, global educators, peace activists, journalists, NGO staff and others interested in working for a better world for an exciting weekend of talks, workshops, seminars and posters on topics linked to language, peace, education and global issues. The first *Peace as a Global Language* conference (PGL I) was held at Daito Bunka University in Tokyo in 2002. Subsequent conferences include PGL II (Seisen University, Tokyo, 2003), PGL III (Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, 2004), PGL IV (Kyoto Sangyo University, 2005), PGL V (Seisen University, Tokyo, 2006), PGL VI (Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, 2007), PGL VII (Seisen University, Tokyo, 2008) and PGL VIII (Shimane University, 2009). PGL presentations have ranged from topics such as *Student Peace Projects*, *Images of Africa in Language Textbooks* and *Global Citizenship to Teaching about Landmines*, *Media Stereotyping of Muslims* and *War Protest Music in the EFL Classroom*.

### **Special Interest Groups**

Another key trend within the English teaching profession is the formation of "global issues" special interest groups. Some of these have been established within national language teaching associations. These include a *Peace and Health Education* Interest Group formed in TESOL Italy (1994), a *Global Issues* Special Interest Group (SIG) in Korea TESOL (1995) and a *Global Education* Study Group (1996) formed within JACET (the *Japan Association of College English Teachers*). Similar groups have been established at the international level. These include a *Global Issues* SIG established in 1995 within the UK-based association IATEFL and a *TESOLers for Social Responsibility* Caucus (TSR) set up in 1999 within the US-based organization TESOL.

The establishment of these groups has enabled English teachers around the world who are involved with global, peace and environmental education to receive funds, begin projects, issue newsletters, hold workshops and obtain conference time to share their research and teaching experience, and to further promote global education within their national and international organizations. The existence of these groups further serves to validate global education as a legitimate goal of English teaching and to highlight the social responsibility of the profession.

### **JALT's Global Issues SIG**

The first such organization to become actively involved in promoting global education among language teachers was the "Global Issues in Language Education" Special Interest Group (GILE SIG) of the *Japan Association for Language Teaching* (JALT). This was established to promote global awareness, international understanding, and the study of world problems through language education. Its members comprise classroom teachers, school directors, publishers and textbook writers who share a special interest in global education, social responsibility and world citizenship. The group thus has a double commitment to excellence in language education and to "teaching for a better world".

JALT's Global Issues SIG was officially established in 1991 and now has a history of almost 20 years of research, education and action. Its official aims are:

- to promote the integration of global issues, global awareness and social responsibility into foreign language teaching;
- to promote networking and mutual support among educators dealing with global issues in language teaching;
- to promote awareness among language teachers of important developments in global education and the related fields of environmental education, human rights education, peace education and development education.

GILE SIG members receive the *Global Issues in Language Education Newsletter*, a quarterly 24-page newsletter packed with up-to-date news on global education and foreign language teaching. Each issue contains a wealth of information, from suggestions for teaching human rights to reports on international pen pal programs, from notes on the latest peace education books to environmental education activities for tomorrow's class. Regular features include summaries of articles on global themes from language teaching journals, profiles of global issue organizations, global education book reviews and a networking section where language teachers write in to share information on topics such as teaching about world hunger, sexism in schools or recycled paper.

Global Issues members benefit from the SIG's networking contacts in Japan and abroad. These range from Japanese development education groups to the Tokyo office of Amnesty International, from the group *TESOLers for Social Responsibility* to the European LINGUAPAX movement, and from advocacy groups such as Oxfam and Save The Children to world bodies such as the United Nations, UNESCO and UNICEF.

A major activity of the Global Issues SIG is organizing presentations for local, national and international language teaching conferences. Recent sessions held at the annual JALT



conference have included colloquia on peace education and language teaching, panel discussions on teaching global issues in Asia, workshops on designing socially-responsible language teaching materials, seminars on environmentally-friendly classrooms, and an annual materials display exhibiting resource books on global education for language teachers.

The Global Issues SIG also runs a number of projects. These include the publication of special magazine issues on global education, the production of English textbooks on global issue themes, the donation of used EFL textbooks to countries such as Vietnam, fund-raising for projects such as children's homes in India, the promotion among language teachers of international events such as *Earth Day* and *Human Rights Day*, and the creation of a website featuring back issues of the GILE Newsletter <[www.gile.org](http://www.gile.org)>.

The Global Issues SIG also brings to Japan experts in global education for workshops, lectures and conferences to introduce English language teachers to teaching methods and materials linked to global issues. These have included national Japan lecture tours by Russian peace educators, Australian conflict resolution experts, environmental education experts from Canada and Linguapax experts from Germany and Spain.

### **The Asian Youth Forum**

A final trend related to global education and English language teaching is the growth of international youth exchange programs for language learners. These range from key-pal programs to sister school exchanges to international youth gatherings. A large number of these programs are carried out each year by individual language teachers, by schools, by national governments and by international organizations. Here, I would like to introduce one such program that I helped to found and now chair.

The Asian Youth Forum (AYF) is a unique event which brings together college-aged young people from countries such as Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam to discuss language, culture, global issues and international understanding through the medium of English-as-a-global-language. The Asian Youth Forum is held as part of an annual "Pan-Asian Conference" (PAC) sponsored by national language teaching associations such as JALT (Japan), Korea TESOL, Thai TESOL (Thailand), FEELTA (Russia), ETA-ROC (Taiwan) and PALT (the Philippines).

The Asian Youth Forum was founded in 1999 by English language educators in Japan and Korea. It enables language educators throughout Asia to bring along EFL students to each PAC conference. At each AYF, youth from across Asia join together to learn about each other's countries, share mutual concerns, explore global issues and make cross-cultural friendships. The first AYF was held in 1999 in Seoul, Korea attended by 45 young people from nine countries. Since then, AYF events have been held as follows:

- ◆ AYF 1 was held at PAC 2 in Seoul, Korea (1999)
- ◆ AYF 2 was held at PAC 3 in Kokura, Japan (2001)
- ◆ AYF 3 was held at PAC 4 in Taipei, Taiwan (2002)
- ◆ AYF 4 was held at PAC 5 in Vladivostok, Russia (2004)
- ◆ AYF 5 was held at PAC 6 in Bangkok, Thailand (2007)

- ◆ AYF 6 was held at PAC 7 in Tokyo, Japan (2008)
- ◆ AYF 7 was held at PAC 8 in Manila, Philippines (2009)

AYF now has a history of 10 years and continues to grow. AYF 2008 in Tokyo, for example, brought together 110 Asian students from 15 nations (including Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam) with special student delegations sent by language teaching organizations such as Thai TESOL, Korea TESOL, BELTA (Bangladesh) and FEELTA (Russia).

Each Asian Youth Forum includes both an academic and a social component. In the academic program, students engage in seminars and workshops on stereotypes, global issues, cross-cultural communication, leadership skills and international understanding. The social program consists of homestays, excursions, school visits and cultural performances plus welcome and farewell parties. For the young people who attend, AYF brings a greater awareness of Asia, an appreciation of the role of English for international understanding, increased motivation to learn about other languages, countries and cultures, and an international network of Asian friends. The benefits that students take away from AYF are illustrated in the following quotes from participating students:

*I wanted to take part in AYF because it provides a venue for young people like me to discuss vital issues that affect our society, specifically environmental and social problems. I believe that young people in our own ways can help in solving world issues.*  
**Kim Doo Won (Korea)**

*By understanding other cultures we can promote peaceful co-existence. Participating in AYF, meeting people from various cultures and understanding diversity is part of the process of creating a peaceful world.*

**Melvin Jabar (Philippines)**

*In future, we'll carry the world on our shoulders. The world will be more globalized than now. So we need to learn and respect each other. We need to face problems and solve them one by one. Then we will be able to join hands to make this world better.*  
**Toshihiko Mori (Japan)**

*We all are different by nature, cultural habits and appearance, but we all are CHILDREN OF THE EARTH. We are in charge of the future of our cities, our states, and the world. If we want to achieve a peaceful society, we should start now. I believe we can.*  
**Emma Moyseychenko (Russia)**

International events such as the Asian Youth Forum demonstrate the magic that happens when young people from different countries are allowed to meet. They illustrate the value of youth exchange programs, and the potential these have to promote international understanding among young people through the medium of English-as-an-international-language. Further information, reports and photos on the Asian Youth Forum can be found at the AYF website <[www.asianyouthforum.org](http://www.asianyouthforum.org)>.

## CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of interest within the field of language teaching in global issues and global education over the past decade has helped to stimulate the profession in many ways. It has encouraged a reconsideration of the aims of English teaching, sparked a debate about the mission of our profession, promoted a healthy discussion about meaningful content and educational relevance, spurred outreach efforts to global issue experts and organizations, provoked a sharing of classroom experimentation through conference presentations, and led to the formation of special interest groups devoted to promoting global awareness and action to solve world problems. What is clear from these trends is that the commitment of English language teaching to promoting peace, international understanding and global awareness is firm and growing stronger each year thanks to the work of thousands of English educators in countries around the globe.

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## ORGANIZATIONS

- *Global Issues in Language Education* Special Interest Group (Japan) <[www.gilesig.org](http://www.gilesig.org)>
- IATEFL Global Issues SIG <<http://gisig.iatefl.org/>>
- Korea TESOL Global Issues SIG <[www.kotesol.org/?q=globalissues](http://www.kotesol.org/?q=globalissues)>
- *Peace as a Global Language* (PGL) <[www.pgljapan.org](http://www.pgljapan.org)>
- *Asian Youth Forum* (AYF) <[www.asianyouthforum.org](http://www.asianyouthforum.org)>
- *Japan Association of Language Teachers* (JALT) <[www.jalt.org](http://www.jalt.org)>
- *International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language* (IATEFL) [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org)
- *Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language* (TESOL) [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)