

# The CI-slot approach to controversial issues: The students' views

## Keywords

controversial issues, teacher stance, disclosure

While using controversial issues (CI) in the language classroom has been widely advocated, some have argued that EFL is being sidetracked for purposes other than language teaching. Taking into account such concerns, the author introduced CI in the form of slots that occupied only a small part of pre-existing communicative lessons. These CI-slots comprised a video followed by disclosure of the teacher's personal viewpoint. A questionnaire study was conducted to ascertain students' reactions to two CI-slots, one on the topic of environmental destruction and the other on the dangers of fast food. Results showed that most students responded positively to the slots, in part because the issues they dealt with were considered *mijika*, or close to their lives. The majority of students also considered their teacher's disclosure to be appropriate. Implications of the study for the teaching of CI are discussed.

英語の授業で、題材として社会問題を扱うことは良いことであると見なされている。しかし、社会問題に焦点を当てると、学生の視野を広げる効果をもつ一方、文法などの言語の学習が疎かになると指摘する者もいる。これらの指摘を踏まえ、筆者は「社会問題の広場」のような形で、既存の授業のごく一部に社会問題を扱う題材を導入してみた。この「社会問題の広場」は、関連するビデオを視聴させ、そのあとに授業者が自分の意見を述べるという形で進めた。社会問題として扱ったのは、環境破壊と食育の2つのトピックである。そして学生がこの「社会問題の広場」に対して、どのような感想を持ったのかについて質問紙調査を行った。その結果、大半の学生がこの時間を肯定的に評価した。その主な理由は、ビデオ教材を使うことで社会問題を「身近」に理解することができたというものであった。そして、授業者の率直な意見を聞くことについても肯定的な反応が見られた。これらを踏まえ、本論文では、英語の授業において社会問題を扱ううえで、注意すべき点について考察した。

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At JALT2010, human rights activist Anna Baltzer gave a presentation on her experience of living in Gaza (Baltzer, 2010). Although she did not explicitly encourage teachers to take her talk's message back to the classroom, some in that room appeared eager to do so. One teacher, for example, suggested making the Israeli occupation “more relevant” to students by focusing in class on the campaign to boycott a well-known Japanese retailer because of its plans to open branches in Israel. While the teaching of controversial issues (CI), including what Weintroub (1998) calls the “hot potato” of the Israel-Palestine conflict, has been advocated widely, the use of English language classes for this purpose is itself not free of controversy. The author, taking into account certain concerns raised against the teaching of CI, has integrated them into his class in the form of short slots, centered on a video conveying a certain message on a social topic. After discussing some of the arguments over the use of CI, this paper reports on a study that examines students' perceptions of two CI-slots. Of particular interest to this exploratory research was ascertaining students' reactions to the presentation in the classroom of only a single viewpoint.

## Why teach controversial topics?

Much communicative language teaching “involves ... relatively trivial topics” and is imbued with a sense that “it is simply engagement with the language that matters” with content being of little significance (Johnson, 2003, p. 29). CI, on the other hand, foreground content. Moreover, when CI are discussed, students benefit from “hearing new perspectives” and “actively engaging others who might not agree with them” (Guest, 2005a).

Haynes (2009) focuses on the topic of HIV/AIDS in her classes to signal to her students that it is an issue of importance and relevance to our lives. While acknowledging that whether students alter their behavior is ultimately a personal decision, one of the aims of Haynes' classes is to encourage students to make healthy, informed choices (personal communication, December 20, 2010). It could thus be argued that she is acting, in the words of Brown (2010), as an "instrument of social change." To see oneself, he argues, in such a role is not only acceptable, it is imperative: "Either you are a teacher who believes that your job is one whose value must extend outside the classroom, or you are one that tows the party line that language is no more than a sum of its parts" (p. 6).

### *Concerns about the teaching of CI*

In a rejoinder to Brown's contention that it is the ELT teacher's job to effect social change, Perrin (2010) argues that his students "pay good money" because "they want to learn how to talk in English" and not to "extend their world view...[or] change their outlook on life" (p. 43). He points out that "what distinguishes foreign teaching from mother tongue instruction...is that in the L2 classroom, the emphasis has to be as much on form as on content" (p. 43).

### *Slots of controversy*

Perrin (2010) also asserts that ELT teachers should stick to the "unglamorous work" of teaching language rather than "cast[ing] round for other roles" (p. 45). Controversial issues can, of course, be contained in tasks that focus explicitly on the language. Norton and Pavlenko (2004), for example, report on how a teacher raised students' awareness of gender issues while practicing modal auxiliaries. Nevertheless, in the light of the admonition made by Perrin, the author reflected on his own teaching of CI. He was concerned, in particular, with achieving a balance between content and form and between the "regular" topics used in communicative language classrooms and CI.

Emerging from this reflection was the insertion of CI-slots into already existing lessons. In these slots students watched a short video, completed a simple focus-on-language task, and then

listened to their teacher's view on the issue. The language used in the third stage of the CI-slot cycle (i.e., the teacher's talk) was carefully targeted to the students' proficiency level. Writing key words and phrases on the board and translating some low frequency lexis provided support for the students during this teacher-conducted "live listening" (Harmer, 2007, p. 306).

CI-slots were kept short (under 10 minutes) so as not to displace other parts of the lesson; no time, therefore, could be allotted for debate or discussion. The CI-slot approach meant that CI were given considerably less prominence in the author's course compared to one that followed, for example, Altan's (2010) recommendation of devoting each week's lesson to a different (global) issue.

### *Teacher stance*

An important consideration for teachers using CI is that of stance, that is, whether it is best to remain neutral, adopt a balanced approach (i.e., present all sides of an issue), or take a committed position and disclose their opinion (for more on teacher's stance see *Global citizenship guides*, 2006, p. 7). While Guest (2005a) advises teachers to remove themselves from "center stage," Cotton's (2006) research found that maintaining complete neutrality when teaching controversial issues can be difficult, if not impossible.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

This study involved 53 first-year students (34 female and 19 male) taking a required English communication course at a private university in central Japan. The students, all non-English majors, had a low-intermediate proficiency level and were in two classes ( $n=30$  and  $n=23$ ) following the same course syllabus.

#### *Procedure*

Due to space limitations, only two of the four CI-slots used during the autumn semester in 2010 are considered here. The videos were selected because they linked to material in existing lessons, and because they were short (around one minute each) with highly visual, immediately understandable messages. What

follows is a summary of how the CI-slots were integrated into the lessons and a brief description of each video. To bring these descriptions to life, readers are encouraged to watch the videos for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

### Video 1: "I was lovin' it"

This CI-slot followed an activity in which students asked about each others' vacations, forming questions from prompts, the final one being "Find someone who ate at McDonald's." The author then wrote "I'm lovin' it" on the board and asked students why this could be considered ungrammatical; this led into a brief review of stative verbs. Prior to viewing, students were asked to note down how this catchphrase had been changed in the video and by whom the video had been sponsored.

The video shows an overweight, middle-aged man dead on a mortuary trolley, with a woman weeping over his body. In the corpse's hand is a half-eaten McDonald's hamburger. After eliciting the answers to the task and explaining the language in the voice over ("High cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart attacks. Tonight, make it vegetarian"), the author disclosed his views on McDonald's recounting some of the reasons he tended to avoid eating there.

### Video 2: Environmental destruction during COP10

Video 2 was incorporated into a lesson focusing on the phrase *used to*. Students talked about changes in their lives, in the lives of family members, and in the world around them. In the CI-slot, students were shown a video made by campaigners fighting to save Hirabari Satoyama, which was possibly the last remaining *satoyama* ecosystem in Nagoya.

The video opens with a scene of a tranquil forest and lake. With the video paused, students described what they saw on the screen. After the captions "COP10開催中に伐採が始まった" (The felling began in the middle of COP10), the scene changes to one of destruction with trees being cut down. The video ends with the captions "私たちのお金を里山開発に使わないで" (Don't use our money to develop Satoyama) and then a close-up of a certain bank's passbook being cut in two. Following the video, students completed

sentences with *used to* by inserting the appropriate phrasal verb; for example:

*There used to be a big forest but it was [cut down].*

*There used to be lakes full of fish and frogs but they have been [filled in].*

The author then spoke with some passion—he had been involved in the campaign to save the site—on the destruction of the Hirabari Satoyama, explaining, for example, the meaning of the word *hypocrisy* in relation to the bank highlighted in the video.<sup>2</sup>

### Data collection and analysis

Students completed a questionnaire, co-written by the author and a Japanese native speaker, that sought to ascertain their views on the appropriateness of the videos and their teacher's disclosure. Students' comments that were written in Japanese were translated into English by the author and analyzed for salient features and common themes (all the comments included in this paper are translations).

## Results and Discussion

### Video 1

In response to the statement "It was appropriate to use this video in class," 46 (88%) of the 52 students present for this lesson marked either "very appropriate" ( $n=20$ ) or "appropriate" ( $n=26$ ). One reason given for this response was topic relevance: the word *mijika* (身近), familiarity or closeness, appeared in 12 (26%) of the comments. Although the detrimental effect of "junk food" could be considered common knowledge, 22 students (41%), including the writer of comment *a*, indicated that the video was awareness-raising:

a) *It's something I eat without thinking about it, but this video has made me aware of what kind of damage this food can do.*

Four students indicated that the video, and most likely the teacher's talk that followed it, challenged preconceptions of Westerners' dietary preferences:

b) *I don't want to sound rude, but I had the image that foreigners loved fast food. It was interesting to know that some don't.*

There were six comments that negatively evaluated the video, including the one below:

c) *I know that this was some kind of parody, but in Japan we have a strong antipathy to criticizing specific institutions so openly. Showing this video raises questions about your lessons.*

That the Japanese tend to avoid open criticism may be true, but it is interesting that no negative comments were received in relation to the attack on the bank in Video 2. Perhaps the targeting of a company so much a part of students' lives as McDonald's was taken somewhat personally.

### Video 2

Of the 46 students attending this lesson, 43 (93%) responded that it was "very appropriate" ( $n=26$ ) or "appropriate" ( $n=17$ ) to use this video in class. An analysis of the comments showed that there were two main reasons for the students' positive evaluation.

The first was familiarity or closeness with the topic (the word *mijika* appeared in 18 [39%] of the comments). This familiarity was both spatial—Hirabari, being the location of the Aichi Driving Test Center, was a place known to all students—and temporal—this lesson was taught a week after COP10, a major convention on biological diversity held in Nagoya in 2010. Awareness raising was the second reason. Twenty comments (46%), including *d* below, indicated that this CI-slot had alerted students to a reality of which most were unaware and, without this lesson, would most likely have remained so.

d) *I am embarrassed to say that I knew nothing about this before the lesson, although COP10 was taking place a short distance from here. It was a valuable chance to realize how ignorant I am about environmental issues; I'm glad this lesson made me feel embarrassed about my ignorance.*

The students' unawareness of the situation was initially surprising since the controversy surrounding Hirabari Satoyama had received extensive coverage on local television and in the national press.<sup>3</sup> However, talking to students, it became clear that many rarely, if ever, watch or read the news. This suggests that even without discussion, and even if only one side of an issue is presented, an activity that raises awareness

can be valuable if it encourages students, even out of embarrassment (see comment *d*), to take a greater interest in the world around them.

Of the four comments that expressed negative sentiments, one considered showing the video to be "pointless" because "there was nothing we could do about [the situation]," while another felt it "just showed how difficult it was to hold back development."

### Teacher stance

Responding to the statement, "It was good for your teacher to give his opinion on controversial issues," all 53 students indicated strong agreement ( $n=40$ ) or agreement ( $n=13$ ). A number of students commented that listening to the teacher's opinion served as a chance to reflect upon and deepen their own. It was particularly interesting that 15 comments (28%), including *e* below, indicated in some way that the teacher's views were regarded as emanating from just another individual and assumed no particular significance.

e) *The opinion of the teacher is just one of many. Hearing the teacher's opinion makes us aware that such views exist and makes us think about our own views.*

Hess (2005, p. 47) points out that teachers who disclose their opinions often stress they are duty bound to "model the importance of taking a stand on issues." This was a view echoed in four of the students' comments, including *f*.

f) *If the teacher takes a neutral stand and just talks about innocuous things, then we will also take a neutral stand on everything. If the teacher gives his opinion, then we will realize that we should give our opinion.*

No students considered their teacher's disclosure inappropriate, but six students (11%), including the one below, qualified their comments:

g) *As long as students in the lesson feel free to give their opinion, then it is good for the teacher to give his.*

While the author sought to foster a classroom atmosphere in which students, including the writer of the last comment, felt comfortable expressing an opinion, not allocating time for discussion certainly limited the opportunity for

students to respond in class to the issues raised in the CI-slots. The slots, it needs to be reiterated, were to some extent a compromise: a way to introduce stimulating and substantive content into, but without greatly disrupting, pre-existing lessons aimed at students whose overall proficiency would have precluded discussion in the L1. Nevertheless, a chance to respond could have been provided. In the case of the author's course, end-of-semester interviews, which formed part of the final evaluation, would have been an ideal venue for students to voice a (prepared) response.

Although there was no explicit indication in the comments that students felt a certain viewpoint was being imposed upon them, it could be argued that reinforcing the video's message with the teacher's opinion rendered the CI-slots too overbearing. Using video material that did not reflect the teacher's viewpoint would provide more balance to the CI-slots. More balance would also be achieved if teachers, after first declaring their own position, then presented other viewpoints. As well as expressing his personal views about McDonald's, the author could have introduced, for instance, the opinion of Holmes (2010) who argues that many of McDonald's practices could greatly improve catering in UK hospitals.

### Conclusions and limitations

Although this study was conducted primarily to inform the author's teaching of CI, it was hoped that its findings would be of potential use to the wider teaching community. It is important to note, however, that teacher personality, the degree of teacher-student trust, and classroom situation variables are factors which limit the potential for making generalizations.

Moreover, while the questionnaire did ask students for their "honest response," serious consideration needs to be given to the possibility that the overwhelmingly positive evaluation received may have been in part the result of response bias; that is, students may have answered the questionnaire in a way they thought the teacher wanted them to rather than according to their true beliefs. Conducting the study with students not usually taught by the author would have increased the validity of the results. Of course, it may also have been the case that the

positive evaluation was because the messages expressed in two CI-slots were those that students happened to agree with. A slot that challenged culturally sensitive issues—for instance, one that incorporated the trailer from the movie *The Cove*—would perhaps have elicited more critical and/or defensive comments.

The questionnaire would have provided further insights if the students had been asked not only about their teacher's disclosure in general, but also about each of the teacher talks following video 1 and 2. Future research should employ a more detailed questionnaire to enable a deeper probing into the specific factors that influence students' responses, and supplementing the questionnaire with interviews (conducted by a third party) would also allow for a considerably more in-depth analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study does raise several points that may be of interest to teaching practitioners. Firstly, complete lessons, or even courses, do not necessarily have to be devoted to CI; students' awareness can be raised, and their interest in an issue piqued, by short slots of CI. Teachers not wishing to make drastic changes to existing courses could incorporate these slots, as could those concerned about spending excessive time on "weighty" content.

Secondly, a key reason for the positive evaluation of the CI-slots was that they dealt with issues students felt were close to their lives. This result, together with the motivational benefit of relevance reported in the literature (see, for example, Dörnyei, 2001, p. 126), underlines the importance of topic relevance when selecting materials for CI.

Thirdly, while a comparison of students' reactions to neutral, balanced, and committed stances could be included in future research, and notwithstanding the possibility of response bias mentioned above, the positive reaction to teacher disclosure perhaps suggests that students are more interested in their teacher's views than we might suppose. Moreover, the fact that a number of comments indicated students did not attach particular weight to their teacher's viewpoint might indicate that worries voiced by Guest (2005b) about indoctrination of "impressionable" students are somewhat unfounded.

Finally, Parker (2010) contends that ELT is moving into areas such as “saving the world” in which it “has no business venturing” (p. 335). While his assertion may be contentious, it should at least remind those teaching CI, in whatever form, to consider their motivations for doing so. This study has indicated some of the benefits for students of incorporating CI, but teachers also have much to gain, not least because bringing such issues into the classroom nudges us to reflect on our professional roles and priorities.

## Notes

1. Video 1: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx0IJnO3o8g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx0IJnO3o8g)>  
Video 2: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWwwqjVzmlW](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWwwqjVzmlW)>
2. Despite advertising on its homepage (<[www.juroku.co.jp](http://www.juroku.co.jp)>) its membership of 日本の森を守る地方銀行有志の会 (“Save the forest in Japan”), the development of Hirabari Satoyama was financed by this bank. Its role in the development was raised by congresswoman Tomoko Abe on November 9, 2010, in a Diet committee, footage of which can be found at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5grP10kxm8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5grP10kxm8)>
3. For an English language article, see E. Johnston (2010, March 4), Battle lines drawn across Nagoya land. *The Japan Times*, p. 3.

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