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# Debating controversial issues in the TESOL classroom: a risk worth taking?

Michael Hepworth

Should teachers and students debate controversial issues in the post-16 classroom? What might be the benefits and risks of this? Are the risks worth taking?

In this short article, I offer something of my own take on these questions. I also aim to faithfully reflect the views of a cohort of culturally and ethnically diverse MA TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) students at a university in the Northeast of England. We debated these questions in class and the students then contributed to an online discussion.

In this discussion, and with their permission, I weave their voices in with my own, using quotation marks when introducing their voices. I claim that debating controversial issues promotes language learning and citizenship and is a risk worth taking, although, as we will see, some of my students did not share this view.

There are many benefits to working with controversial issues in the language classroom. My research suggests this can develop language skills in a range of different ways. This might involve anything from lexical work: 'introducing new vocabulary and related collocations', to the development of oral fluency through the construction of a viewpoint.

Moreover, debating controversial issues can be a productive way of: 'promoting critical thinking'. Thus, speaking of the Russian-Ukrainian war, one student asserted that: 'you can use this as a topic to train students in argumentation and refutation skills'. The complexity of controversial issues makes them a fertile seedbed for the development of such skills among mature adult learners. Teachers can also promote critical thinking around the ways that sources of knowledge, such as mainstream media, often reflect and reinforce the views of the powerful.

Debating controversial issues implicates knowledge as well as maturity. Thus, for the teacher,

'a crucial aspect is staying well-informed about recent global events . . . to facilitate informed discussions'. TESOL is a subject without content and, by debating current events, informed teachers can promote meaningful democratic citizenship, which is surely predicated upon an informed citizenry.

Beyond language learning and critical thinking, debating controversial issues can also foster democratic citizenship in the classroom through 'increased student engagement'. Controversy implicates emotion and our deepest human values and often motivates participation. Furthermore, handled skilfully, debate can increase tolerance and a sense of respect for the views of others, thus promoting social cohesion. As one student said:

'The goal is to create a classroom environment that values diversity of thought, where students learn not only to articulate their perspectives but also to respect and engage with differing opinions'.

In this way, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the world outside, a classical *agora* where mature citizens debate issues of the day. Dealing with controversial issues also: 'encourages students to explore ideas beyond their comfort zones' and this, in today's world of trigger warnings, is a risk worth taking if we are to develop mutual respect and understanding.

However, debating controversial issues is a double-edged sword and there are clearly risks, as one of my students asserted:

'Introducing divisive topics risks alienating or marginalising individuals whose identities and lived experiences are implicated in the debate. It can negatively impact student well-being and relationships that enable peer language practice'.

Clearly, controversial issues bring with them the

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threat of offence - both individual and collective - and thus to student wellbeing. Classroom cohesion can fragment, and this can damage the collaboration essential to successful language learning. Thus, one student highlighted the risk that debates over, say, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, might degenerate into 'a clash of predetermined positions'.

What, then, is the role of the teacher in such debates? Should they disclose their personal stances? I deliberately disclosed mine on the Israel-Palestine issue to model openness and my view that a teacher can manage a debate and disclose their personal stances.

However, none of my students followed my example; indeed, some argued against teacher disclosure, with one asserting that: 'regardless of circumstance, I would not disclose any personal stances on such issues, as that could intimidate those with differing views' and another that: 'teachers should strive for impartiality, managing discussions

effectively even if they have personal opinions'.

Furthermore, several students expressed concern about institutional pressures that could be brought to bear, restricting the academic freedom for teachers and students to debate and disclose on controversial topics. This is a clear and present danger to academic integrity in the university sector, with alleged surveillance of academics around their views on issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In sum, for me, debating controversial issues in the post-16 language classroom is very definitely a risk worth taking, developing language skills, and promoting citizenship, although this view, as we have seen, is not necessarily shared by all my TESOL students.

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