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## МЕТОДИКА ВИКЛАДАННЯ

17.	Батальщикова Е. Ю. Форми групової навчальної діяльності на різних етапах уроку іноземної мови.....	110
18.	<b>Бреславец Н. А.</b> Изучение иностранного языка студентами вуза в аспекте формирования компетентности жизненного проектирования.....	116
19.	Вербицкая М. Н. Формы организации самостоятельной работы учеников на уроках английского языка.....	123
20.	Воронцова Т. Ю. Формування інформаційної культури у студентів гуманітарного факультету при вивченні англійської мови на основі використання нових інформаційних технологій.....	128
21.	Гринчук В. О. Организация проектной методики в изучении английского языка.....	134
22.	Кокнова Т. А. Види навчально-ігрової діяльності, які орієнтовані на зростання самостійності під час вирішення професійних задач (на прикладі підготовки майбутніх перекладачів).....	140
23.	Kotlyarova O. O. Modern Tendencies in Teaching Writing to ESL Students.....	146
24.	Лутова Д. Д. Можливості мережі Інтернет у навчанні англійської мови учнів початкової школи.....	152
25.	Мацько Д. С. Навчання майбутніх учителів початкової школи побудови непрямої мови в процесі вивчення граматики англійської мови.....	162
26.	Мельник Ю. Ю. Интерактивные технологии в обучении английскому языку.....	171
27.	Мілова О. Є. Формування критичного та творчого мислення у процесі навчання англійської мови: досвід США	176
28.	Nekrutenko E. B. The Role of Tests in English Language Learning.....	185
29.	Резнік Н. В., Ткачова О. О. Проблемне навчання на уроках англійської мови.....	196
30.	Харчук А. В. Методика використання римованих текстів у навчанні молодших школярів лексики англійської мови.....	202
31	Шалдаісова Г. В. Когнітивна природа жарту в англійській мові.....	212
32	Fedicheva N.V. Incorporating World Problems into English Language Teaching.....	222
	Відомості про авторів.....	231

**N.V. Fedicheva**

### **Incorporating World Problems into English Language Teaching**

Incorporating global issues or world problems into English language teaching is comparatively a new branch of language pedagogy. The emphasis on the application of global issues as a content for developing students' language skills can empower them with the knowledge, skills and commitments required to become world citizens who can solve global problems. The article explores the reasons for introducing global and controversial issues as an important topic for English language classrooms, gives examples of both global and controversial issues, examines teachers' and students' views and attitudes on teaching and learning global issues, and considers methods in terms of teaching English as a foreign language pedagogy. The results of the surveys conducted among students and teachers show that all teachers are unanimous in saying that global issues and controversial topics can provide meaningful content for language classes. Students' answers show that they want to discuss these issues. Ways of using global and controversial issues in the language classroom have been explored. Both discussion and debate as particular teaching procedures or strategies can effectively integrate a global perspective into classroom instruction through a focus on global issues and controversial topics. Findings, considerations and ideas presented in the article can be found insightful and useful for English teachers and for teacher trainees. In the classroom where global issues are used as content for reading, writing, speaking, and course assignments, students learn to question what is around them and try to find solutions to problems. While discussing global issues, sharing ideas on controversial topics students develop language and social skills as well as gain social awareness and democratic attitudes.

#### **1. Introduction**

New realities have radically changed the tasks of education in general and the tasks of teaching foreign languages in particular. Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are seeking ways to maximize their potential to enhance the learning of their students, to effectively use technology to teach language skills, and to prepare young people to professional and personal communication with representatives of different cultures. At the same time many EFL teachers in different countries of the world express their desire to bear responsibility for promoting active concern for the world problems and are thinking of how to prepare students to be world citizens. Brown claims that language teachers are supposed to be „agents for change in a world in desperate need of change: change from competition to cooperation, from powerlessness to empowerment, from conflict to resolution, from prejudice to understanding” (2001, p. 445).

How can teachers do that? The answer might be in educators' attempts to incorporate global perspective and controversial issues in the content of teaching English. Recent years have seen an increased interest in global issues by the international English teaching profession. Educators (Brown, 2001; Brinton, 1989; Gates, 1997; Swenson, 1993; Yoshimura, 1993) emphasize that language can be a means of learning about the world and recommend the use of motivating themes in English language classroom teaching. Teachers all over the world are already experimenting with the incorporation of a global perspective into foreign language education, stimulating and inspiring their students to become active „world citizens” and promoting democratic attitudes. The term „global education”

is no longer a buzzword. Kip Gates considers it to be a new approach to language teaching which is gaining momentum (2013).

The purpose of the article is fourfold. It aims to: (1) provide the rationale for using global and controversial issues in the EFL classroom; (2) suggest ideas of what issues can be considered global and controversial and give examples of both; (3) to investigate how students and teachers react to them; (4) to explore ways of using global and controversial issues in the language classroom.

## **2. The rationale for using global and controversial issues in the EFL classroom**

Firstly, educators note that young people are not very interested in current events in their own country and in the world. Young people do not know how they can show themselves in practice to benefit society and the country. Most of them are passive and treat with indifference the problems which are not related to their personal interests.

Secondly, many schools around the world are often locked into traditional education system that uses memorization, examination pressures and discouragement of critical thinking. Teachers in such schools do not take into account the modern world needs, their students' interests, and assign to learners of all ages and abilities passive roles. As a result, students do not feel that they are prepared to live in a world full of challenges, to behave intellectually without coercion from „powerful people”, cherish their beliefs and traditions without the threat of change and cope with global problems (Brown, 1990). It's noteworthy to mention here that the theme of a pre-conference event held in April 2013 in England was „Unlearning Learnt Helplessness”. The aim of the event was to share how teachers can help students shake off their helplessness and encourage them to believe that they can be free to be themselves, make a difference in their own life, in the life of their country, and in the lives of other people.

Thirdly, the potential of foreign languages classes in the sphere of upbringing and raising patriotism, building social conscience, developing commitment required by world citizens to solve both local and global problems, has not been studied. As a result, some teachers realize that they do not use all potentials of their subject matter. My analysis of the course books published by Longman, Macmillan, and Oxford University Press shows that global issues and controversial issues are excluded. Most books deal with neutral and apparently harmless topics such as travelling, sightseeing, shopping instead of dealing with real world problems. Many texts are bland and even boring. I did not find any discussions or questions related to global issues or controversial topics. In dialogues of such books speakers talk about issues which are far removed from the lives of many learners. There is no doubt that these books do teach language skills but they do not bring up students to love their country, to be responsible world citizens, and take actions for a better world. Meanwhile, educators note that global issues can provide a meaningful content for English language classes and even claim that the mission of language teachers is to teach for a better world.

Fourthly, the current media, television talk shows, dialogues on radio are full with discourse of „hot topics” designed to get attention, startle, excite, etc. For students, such discourse serves as a model for how to discuss and manage conflicting situations. Studies conducted by educators and teachers show that in contrast with talk show efforts to stir up feelings on minor issues, dialogues on significant issues are lacking in many English language classrooms. The incendiary discourse in the media and on television and the silence of the classroom pose a challenge to educators and language teachers. Kip Gates notes that English language teaching has been bedeviled with three perennial problems:

the gulf between classrooms activities and real life; the separation of ELT from mainstream educational ideas, and the lack of content as its subject matter. He claims that by making global issues a central core of EFL, these three problems would be to some extent resolved (2013).

Finally, it is a well known fact that English as a foreign or second language or even English for specific purposes has a certain degree of flexibility of topics that other subjects do not have. Content is one area of teaching where instructors can integrate a global education perspective. Global issues and controversial topics can be used as content for reading, writing, speaking, and course assignments.

### **3. Global issues and controversial topics**

Global issues have been referred to as „issues of global significance” (Anderson, 1996), or as „problems in the world” (Mark, 1993). According to Pike and Shelby (1999), a global issue is a contemporary phenomenon affecting the lives of people and/or the health of the planet in a harmful or potentially harmful way. Controversial issues can be defined as concepts that have significance and invoke conflicting sentiments or views held by large number of people in schools, community and nation. According to the internet sources, a controversial issue is an argument or debate concerning a matter about which there is strong disagreement, especially one that is carried on in public or in the press. In the literature, there is no common agreement as to what issues can be considered global and what issues or topics can be looked upon as controversial. Having analyzed some publications, I would suggest five categories of global issues and four categories of controversial ones. In the literature the term *controversial topic* is used more often and we will use it further in the article.

#### ***Five categories of global issues:***

1. War and peace: terrorism, ethnic conflicts, wars, nuclear arms race, refugees, nonviolence, colonialism,
2. Social and economic problems: world hunger, poverty, consumer society, social inequality, population growth, tolerance and non-discrimination, one-child policy in China, teen drinking, single-parent family
3. Human rights : racism, political prisoners, apartheid, , gender equality, domestic violence in families, abandoned children, girls’ education in developing countries, child rights, freedom of speech, inclusive education, freedom of religion or belief, capital punishment.
4. Environmental problems: environmental destruction, environmental conservation, the thinning of the ozone layer, nuclear waste disposal, Chernobyl disaster, ecological disasters, “disposable” lifestyle, the destruction of the rainforests, poaching, acid rains, recycling, lack of access to clear drinking water, natural disasters, deforestation, desertification, global warming.
5. Health and medicine: the spread of AIDS, people with limited possibilities, drugs, organ transplantations.

#### ***Four categories of controversial topics:***

1. Social and economic problems: the influence of media on personality development can be good and bad; child-free families are becoming popular; early marriages (ages 15-20) are bad; getting married is out of fashion; the death penalty should be accepted in some cases; curfews can be good for teenagers; soft drugs should be legalized; people cloning can be beneficial; prenuptial agreements should be obligatory; a woman cannot have a happy family and a very successful career at the same time; most business ladies are not happy; wealthy people should help the poor.

2. Human rights: people who smoke in non-smoking areas should be put in prison; gay people can become parents; lesbians can adopt children; priests cannot marry – it is not good for their roles; unmarried people’s choice to have children – good or bad idea?; someone with a criminal record can be allowed to work as a teacher – is it possible?
3. Health and medicine: beliefs about HIV/AIDS are stereotypes; euthanasia should be legal; kids should not have cell phones until the age of 12.
4. Education: cheating is a crime; students who plagiarize should be excluded from universities; severe punishment in schools will improve the discipline; standardized tests: pros and cons.

#### **4. Students’ views on the ELT content and global issues.**

In March 2013, I conducted a survey among 70 university students, ages 20-21, majoring in two languages: an oriental one and English. Respondents comprised of 42% male students and 58% female students. A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed with 69 of them being returned. Some of the questions I asked them were the following. (1). Do you feel you are prepared to live in a world full of challenges and cope with global problem? (2). do you think you will be a responsible world citizen? (3). Do your language teachers stimulate and inspire you to become active „world citizens?“ (4). Please mention one or several global issues or world problems that you personally worry about. (5). what topics does your course book deal with? (6). What TV talk shows do you watch? (7). Do you think a talk show can serve as a model for how to discuss and manage conflicting or controversial issues? (8). would you like to discuss global or world problems in the classroom? (9). Can you personally do something to change your community, society, nation, and the world?

Only 16% of respondents answered in the affirmative to the first question. Most students -86%- answered „Hard to say“ to the second and third questions. Among the global problems that students personally worry about, were mentioned the following: natural disasters, global warming, and lack of clean water. Answering the question about topics in a course book, students mentioned travelling, shopping life style, environment protection, and holidays.

About 52% of respondents said they watch TV talk shows that deal with issues related to health, medicine, and environmental problems. 78% think that talk show can be a model of how people can discuss and manage controversial issues. Most students – 89% - answered affirmatively when asked whether they would like to discuss global problems in the classroom. Answering the last question, 51% of students said they can personally do something to change their community and society. 49 % of students acknowledged to be defeatists by saying they feel there is nothing they can do to change their community or society, nation, and the world.

#### **5. Teachers’ views on the ELT content and global issues**

In March 2013, I also conducted a survey among 37 university instructors of English. The instructors (ages 25-41) had at least 5 years of experience in teaching and were mostly female (86%).

The survey for university instructors of English as a foreign language consisted of 10 questions. Some of the questions were very much the same that I asked students, but the focus was a little changed. Some of the questions I asked them were the following. 1. Do you think your students will be responsible world citizens? 2. Do you stimulate and inspire your students to become active „world citizens?“ 3. Please mention one or two global issues or world problems that you personally worry about. 4. What topics does the course book that you use in the English language classroom deal with (neutral, apparently harmless topics;

controversial topics; global issues)? 5. Do you think that global issues and controversial topics can provide meaningful content for language classes? 6. Do you think that new material – grammar and vocabulary- can be taught with a global perspective through a change of content?

Most teachers – 55% - don't think that their students will be responsible world citizens in spite of the fact that 93% of teachers stimulate and inspire students to become them. Students' answers to the same question but worded differently (if they can personally do something to change their community, society, nation, and the world) almost coincided with the teachers'. Teachers worry about the following world problems: terrorism, consumer society, social inequality, freedom of speech, inclusive education, and „disposable” lifestyle. None of the students mentioned those problems. All the respondents said that the course books they use have mainly neutral, apparently harmless topics. They also noted that books are politically and socially harmless and global issues as well as controversial topics are not included. All teachers – 100% - were unanimous in saying that global issues and controversial topics can provide meaningful content for language classes. The percentage of students wanting to discuss these issues is 89. To the question of whether teachers think that new material – grammar and vocabulary- can be taught with a global perspective through a change of content, most teachers – 81%- gave a negative answer.

## **6. Teaching methods**

I will provide an overview of discussions, debates and brainstorming „buzz” groups formats which I believe can be advocated in the teaching of global issues. While designing and conducting activities related to global issues or controversial topics it is important for teachers to realize that students do not develop global competence *after* they have gained fundamental knowledge of the issue and certain language skills, but rather *in the process* of gaining knowledge and developing skills.

Discussion can be used to achieve important instructional objectives: to help students learn important communication skills such as stating ideas clearly, listening to others, and responding to others in appropriate ways; to give students public opportunities to talk about and play with their own ideas; and to help students construct their own understanding of the issue being discussed. I have experimented with the discussions of such topics as domestic violence in families, inclusive education, and lack of clean water.

There are many debate formats but I think that two can be particularly effective in the language classroom. The first is formal, *Oxford-style debate*, which includes opening speeches by students with opposing positions, interrogation and defense of each side's argument, and rebuttal speeches. A second form of debate is *advocate decision making* in which students debate a single position on a public issue. I have tried both formats and as a teacher I acknowledged that both were effective. Students found them interesting, motivating and enjoyable. Controversial issues that we debated were the following (1) Early marriages – good or bad? (2) The influence of media on kids' personality development: positive or negative? (3) Standardizes tests: pros and cons.

Buzz group activity got its name because students sound like a group of busy bees while working on a task. I selected issues that were suggested by my students and experimented with the topic „security of an individual in a big city” based on the question „How the police can protect the public against crime?” During debriefing, students noted that discussing and debating global issues and controversial topics make them feel more connected to the world and current

events, extend their existing knowledge of the issue, and increase their ability to think about its causes and possible solutions.

Other approaches which I think teachers can try out include: a discussion board, a teacher's story, a case study, project work, essay contest, poster contest, a student's oral presentation, a round table discussion, simulations, role-plays, guest speakers, English speaking guest lecturer, video exchanges, e-mail discussion groups, English speech contests on global themes.

Merely discussing global or controversial issues is not sufficient to promote global understanding and democratic attitudes. Much depends on how the teacher sees the objective of the activity and on the classroom atmosphere in which the discourse occurs. To my mind, the objectives can be the following: to analyze the problem, discriminate between facts and opinions, draw sound conclusions, respect the opinion of others, and accept the principles of majority and the rights of minorities. The teacher's attitude is also important: he/she should treat the issue in an impartial and unprejudiced manner and refrain from promoting his/her own point of view. The atmosphere in many cases revolves around a teacher who has substantive knowledge of the issue and procedural knowledge of the method/format/strategy being used. A teacher is supposed to prepare and orchestrate an honest dialogue where there is an exchange of divergent views and respect for student ideas, opinions and beliefs. A teacher should ask clear, though-provoking questions, wait for and listen to student response, welcome all responses and include quieter students in the participation. Needless to say, a teacher should try to fit the issue into the schedule, gather and organize pertinent facts, carefully prepare a lead-in stage, and equip student with vocabulary.

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### **Федічева Н.В. Вплив світових проблем на навчання англійської мови**

У цій статті автор правильне пояснення глобальних проблем і дискусійних тем на уроці. Учителі можуть об'єднати їх в навчанні в різноманітні шляхи, які включають зміст навчання мови, методи, і матеріали. Було запропоновано п'ять категорій глобальних проблем і чотири категорії дискусійні теми. Результати дослідження, які були проведені серед



студентів, і учителів показують, що усі учителі були односторонні у висловлюванні, що глобальні проблеми і дискусії теми можуть забезпечити значимий зміст для учнів. Відповіді студентів показують, що вони хочуть обговорювати ці проблеми.

*Ключові слова:* обговорення, дискусійні теми, навчання мови, розвиток мови, читання, письмо.

### **Федичева Н.В. Влияние мировых проблем в обучение английского языка**

В этой статье автор правильное пояснение глобальных проблем и спорных темам на уроке. Учителя могут объединить их в обучении в разнообразии путей, которые включают содержимое обучения языка, методов, и материалов. Было предложено пять категорий глобальных проблем и четыре категории спорных тем. Результаты исследования, которые были проведены среди студентов, и учителей показывают, что все учителя были единодушны в высказывании, что глобальные проблемы и спорные темы могут обеспечить значимое содержимое для учащихся. Ответы студентов показывают, что они хотят обсуждать эти проблемы.

*Ключевые слова:* обсуждение, дискуссионные темы, обучение языку, развитие языка, чтение, письмо.

### **Fedicheva N.V. Incorporating World Problems into English Language Teaching**

In this article the author provided the rationale for using global issues and controversial topics in the EFL classroom. Teachers can integrate them into their teaching in a variety of ways that involve language teaching content, methods, and materials. I suggested five categories of global issues and four categories of controversial topics. The results of my surveys that I conducted among students and teachers show that all teachers were unanimous in saying that global issues and controversial topics can provide meaningful content for language classes. Students' answers show that they want to discuss these issues. I explored ways of using global and controversial issues in the language classroom. Both discussion and debate as particular teaching procedures or strategies can effectively integrate a global perspective into classroom instruction through a focus on global issues and controversial topics. It is hoped that my findings, considerations and ideas will be found insightful and useful for English teachers and for teacher trainees. In the classroom where global issues are used as content for reading, writing, speaking, and course assignments, students learn to question what is around them and try to find solutions to problems. While discussing global issues, sharing ideas on controversial topics students develop language and social skills as well as gain social awareness and democratic attitudes.

*Key words:* discussion, controversial topics, language teaching, develop language, reading, writing.

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