GLOBAL ISSUES IN FOCUS

On the benefits of working with Global Issues in the English language classroom

More often than not education is regarded as the main culprit of many of the evils afflicting human societies – if the illiteracy rates are too high or vandalism in the cities does not give in, if too many students fail their tests, then it is education that we put the blame on.

But, what do we mean by education?
Can more of the same education we have now bring about better results?

It is perhaps worth noting that the current state of affairs in the world is not the result of the work of ignorant people. Rather, it is largely the result of the work of people with the highest education degrees, just like the perpetrators of the Holocaust were the heirs of Kant and Goethe, widely thought to be the best educated people on earth.

In answering the question “what went wrong with education?”, Elie Wiesel has formidably synthesised what can and what has gone wrong with it:

“...Education emphasised theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstractions rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience”.

Making the Match

Very often teachers wonder what is the real connection between world issues or events, in many cases the direct result of education, and their own classroom situation with less teaching periods a week than desired, a very demanding language syllabus
and perhaps a number of other institutional and personal constraints. The answer lies simply on the way we approach things – be it education, a lesson, a given issue, life in general.

How can students not develop an interest in a foreign language if the content matter used is real, intelligible, palpable, so much in line with the things that happen to them and their personal environment? How can students fail to be interested in a foreign language which is widely used in the realm of computers and Internet, in songs where their idols and stars express many of the things they feel and in movies that show and address problems very similar to theirs?

In a nutshell, you make the match between Global Issues (seemingly the outside world) and your classroom (your real world) by providing meaningful content – content which matters to your students because it bears some relation to their own present and future lives.

However, a good selection of topics and activities is not enough to strike the right chord. For your classes with Global Issues to be something meaningful in terms of social development as well as language results, you need to lean on a very simple but solid scaffolding made up of: social skills (for example tolerance and understanding), critical thinking and empowerment.

Why are we not taught, for example, to decode advertisements when we know that many of the paradigms that shape our perception of the world and others are created by the advertising industry?
Why is it that we keep showing our children all those lovely stereotypes created by good old Disney without ever making a reference to how much these affect the way we relate to others?
Why do we teach about environmental problems but never seriously promote the search of solutions?
Why is it that most of us believe happiness can be bought at the shopping mall?

We have simply failed to include any one or all of the three scaffolding parts in our teaching/learning adventure.

So there is something wrong with what we understand by education when we fail to include the human element and when the sole target of the teaching métier is achieving syllabus goals.

The English language classroom offers a wealth of opportunities to work with Global Issues without overlooking desired language targets and if we truly understand the overall responsibility of everyone involved in the education process then we must acknowledge that the work with Global Issues is not an add-on, a bonus, but a real must.

Education will not save us. It is a given type of education that will help us shape a different world.

**Keys to working with Global Issues in the English language classroom:**

- Identify the issues you consider worth using by (a) eliciting these from your students through an open class discussion or (b) referring to specialised literature or using your own judgement
- Have these issues clearly written down in your folder, notebook or anywhere visible for ease of access (e.g.: human rights, discrimination, violence, substance
abuse, solidarity, war, etc) and make sure you go back to your list whenever you are searching for new materials

- Do not take a pessimistic view of things. We need to see and understand Global Issues but there is always a positive stance to them
- Give your students the tools so that they can act for a change and know it. This is called “empowerment” and is of utmost importance in the teaching of Global Issues
- Help your students develop their critical thinking skills
- Do not fear the questioning class. Fear the unquestioning nod instead
- Adapt or simply use authentic materials from Non Government Organisations (NGOs) working on the field of your interest
- Remember that you do not have a deadline and that every bit matters