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Struggle to Teach World Religions in English as a Global Language: Teaching the World by Teaching the Words in Multi-Cultural Society

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Afrasian Research Centre, Ryukoku University
Phase 2



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Struggle to Teach World Religions in English as a Global Language: Teaching the World by Teaching the Words in Multi-Cultural Society

Tomomi Ohba*

Introduction

Migration is increasing on a global scale. According to the International Organization for Migration (2010), approximately 192 million people are currently living outside their place of birth, comprising roughly 3% of the global population. In many parts of the world, one's neighbors are often from other countries. In order to enhance communication between peoples, both language education and cross-cultural understanding are essential for coexistence.

The purposes of this paper are to explain the categories of the English language as well as the relationship between language education and cultural understanding, to analyze why teachers in Japan do not teach world religions, regardless of the fact that it is inevitable to deal with its culture when a foreign language is taught, and culture and religions are closely related. I cast doubt on the common belief that 'religions must not be taught in English language education,' and provide reasons for teaching world religions. Moreover, this paper also introduces lessons that nurture students' cultural understanding as well as English language competence.

1. Transformations of the English Language

The English language is widely used for communication across the globe. In Graddol's *The Future of English?* (1999), it was estimated that slightly more than 377,000,000 people worldwide use English as their first language, and the total number of people exposed to English accounts for one-third of the world population.

Kachru (1985) classified these English speakers into three groups: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle.

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Figure 1: Kachru's English Circles



Source: Wikipedia, *World Englishes*.¹

English speakers in the Inner Circle live in countries in which English is the first or dominant language: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and some small Caribbean countries.

English speakers in the Outer Circle live in postcolonial countries in which English, although not the mother tongue of most people, has for a long time played a significant role in education, governance, and popular culture: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, and more than 50 other territories.

English speakers in the Expanding Circle live in countries in which English has no special administrative status, but is recognized as a lingua franca and widely studied as a foreign language: China, Denmark, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, South Korea, and Sweden, among many others.

Because English is diffusing rapidly, it is becoming one of the most diverse languages of the world. Many aspects of it have been transfigured over time; some common classifications of the English language today are as follows:

(1) English as a Second Language (Crystal 1995, 108)

This refers to English in countries where it holds a special status as a medium of communication (the Outer Circle). The term has also been applied to the English of immigrants and other foreigners who reside in a country where English is the first language.

¹ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/ae/Kachru's_three_circles_of_English.jpg/220px-Kachru's_three_circles_of_English.jpg.

- (2) English as a Foreign Language (Crystal 1995, 108)
English seen in the context of countries where it is not the mother tongue, and therefore, has no special status (English in the Expanding Circle). Well over half the world falls into this category.
- (3) English as an International Language (Crystal 1995, 108)
The use of English for international communication. This notion is especially relevant among professionals who do not use English as their mother tongue.
- (4) English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer 2011, 7)
Any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whose English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option.
- (5) English as a Global Language (Crystal 1997, 3–5)
English achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. Other than the countries in which English is spoken as the mother tongue, the language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in areas such as for governmental, legal, media, and educational purposes. The language can be made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching, despite not holding an official status. It becomes the language children are most likely to be taught when they start school, and the one most available to adults.
- (6) Globish
A synthesized word meaning both Global and English, the term was invented in 1995 by Jean Paul Nerrière, a Frenchman who was vice president of international marketing at IBM (cf. Nerrière and Hon 2013). The language is based on English but restricted to 1500 vocabulary items, so that non-native speakers can acquire and use it easily. Because it was aimed for global use, it was designed so as not to reflect the special cultural and linguistic features of English-speaking countries.
- (7) World Englishes (quoted from dictionary.com)
“The many and varied dialects of English spoken in different parts of the world, including not only American and British English, but such varieties as Indian, Pakistani, Australian, and New Zealand English, as well as the English spoken in various African and Asian countries. In some parts of the world, English is spoken as a natural outgrowth of a colonial period during which certain countries, now independent, were part of the British Empire. In other places,

people have been encouraged to learn English because of its widespread use as a language of global communication.”

The linguistic term “English” has been used in various ways since it spread around the world over time. English originated in England (and the original homeland of the Angles and Saxons on the European mainland), and traveled to other regions of the world when they were colonized by the British Empire. The language used to belong to the culture of the speakers in the countries; however, it gradually became mingled with the native cultures of the colonized countries. With an increase in non-native speakers of the language worldwide, the cultures of the language were transformed and diversified. English became distanced from its original culture, and it is natural to assert that English is no longer predominantly the language of native speakers, such as British or American people, but instead is cross-cultural among non-native speakers, or between native and non-native speakers.

It is difficult to decide who is a native speaker of English: for instance, many immigrants of non-native speakers of English journeyed to the United States or other English-speaking countries to settle down, and their children who were born there started acquiring English as their mother tongue, while they might simultaneously have acquired other languages from their parents as a first language. Moreover, the cultures of English-speaking countries and others are likely to be mixed partly and reproduced within the societies they belong to. One example is Southall in London, where the majority of residents are South Asians who immigrated in the 1950s.

It is almost impossible to teach a language as separate from its culture. Globish tries to exclude cultural settings, emphasizing the function of language as a communication tool. Only 1,500 words, which are thought to suffice for daily communication, are taught in Globish, but because of its limitations, it is not as popular as English.

Kramersch (1993) explained the close relationship between language learning and culture as follows:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (Kramersch 1993, 1).

2. Culture, Communication, and Language Education

English has undergone numerous changes over time: after departing from its culture of origin, it became mixed with the cultures of non-native speakers, and simultaneously became a lingua franca, used for multicultural communication. Written ‘international’ in the titles of the books of French (1963) and Graham (1964) from the 1960s, the English language gradually became more widespread and regarded as “international,” along with the global advancements of transportation and information technology. From the 1990s to date, criticisms of English-language imperialism abound: the cultures of English-speaking countries dominate the context, and segregate the native speakers from their non-native counterparts. Holliday (2005) cautioned that the language can divide the world in two:

Language is by its nature cultural; and it may be particularly attractive in some setting to attach English to a British or American world (among many other possibilities) with its attendant literatures and accents. However, this need for cultural education must not be associated with an ‘us’–‘them’ division in which educators are discriminated against by virtue of nationality, speakerhood, or race. In a Position 2 of cultural continuity all parties are equally present within their own communities of cultural richness (Holliday 2005, 168–169).

However, languages can also be a lubricant for human communication because they express thoughts and understanding. As Kachru and Smith (2008) stated, “people from different parts of the world using the same medium—English—may be able to accommodate each others’ ways of using their own varieties for achieving common goals.”

This raises the following question: What can these global, common goals be? One key is global education. Tada (2000, 6–7) indicated that “the role of education in the global era is to teach children how to think globally and act locally, to accept others whose cultural background or viewpoint is different, and to live with them in harmony” (Author’s Translation). Birch (2009) linked global education with English language teaching, stating that “English language teachers and learners are located in the global civil society—an international network of civil organizations and NGOs related to human rights, the environment, and sustainable peace. English, with its special role as an international language, is a major tool for communication within this network.”

Such a content-based approach in language education became diffused in the 1990s. Cates (1996, 207–208) advocated the importance of teaching global issues in English language education, which promotes the knowledge, attitudes, and skills relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural and interdependent world. It is synthesized with personal development, and as Freire (1970) emphasized, teaching techniques such as problem-posing education can

cultivate students' critical thinking while they are acquiring a language, and English is no exception.

In Japan, where English is not a second but a foreign language, it is closely tied to intercultural communication. The stories of both native and non-native speakers are found in popular English language textbooks at secondary school, which thus present multicultural or international stories. A quantitative research study in 2002 revealed that all 51 high school English language reading textbooks in Japan addressed global issues or intercultural communication (Ohba 2002) and concluded that English language education in Japan contributes to students' personal development and ethical pedagogy, and that students were more motivated when knowledge in class was linked to the outside world, thereby encouraging the practical use of an acquired language in order to address global issues.

As Gee (1994, 190) stated, English language teachers are at the center of the most crucial, educational, cultural, and political issues in this era of globalization.

3. Taboos in English Language Education

In our times, despite the globalization of society and the mixing of faiths and cultures as well as the accompanied spread and development of English as a global language, English language textbooks tend to neglect reflecting these global changes. Taboos that no longer exist in many areas of society are still seemingly prevalent within published English language textbooks.

According to Gray (2010, 119), PARSNIP (Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms, and Pork) themes are generally avoided by textbook writers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. However, they are acceptable in social studies. Gray cautioned that global language course books are a "problematic artifact." Similarly, Dellar (2006) argued that "taboos—and the language we use to encode and discuss them—are part of everyone's daily experience, wherever in the world they may live" (Dellar 2006, 10). Okazaki (2005) reported that controversial content such as homosexuality in English as a Second Language courses stimulates students to engage in dialogue and writing, resulting in increased language and literacy proficiency.

Regarding taboos in EFL education, I conducted research on teachers' attitudes toward language education in Japan related to religion. In the following sections, I analyze what hinders these teachers from teaching this topic, and advocate for its importance.

4. Factors Discouraging the Teaching of World Religions in English Language Education in Japan

Teaching world religions is essential in order to prevent prejudice-motivated crimes and promote peaceful living in a multi-cultural society. However, it is avoided as if it were taboo.

The following are opinions related to this issue, which I collected by asking English language teachers their reasons for refraining from teaching world religions:

(i) Schools or institutions prohibit teachers from teaching world religions

A British teacher who owns a language school in Japan said that he used to work for a school where the headmaster told the teachers to concentrate on teaching, not the context, but the language itself. Perspectives associated with culture should be limited or reduced to only information conveyed by the language.

(ii) Teaching world religions is a duty for social studies teachers, but not for English language teachers

In Japan, politics and religion are separated, and world religions are taught in social studies class in middle school. Thus, it is natural for English language teachers not to teach world religions during their lessons: the history or the outline of the world religions is fully explained in social studies; therefore, they may consider that they should abstain from the topic, because it is the social studies teachers' responsibility to teach it.

(iii) Lack of knowledge on world religions

A Japanese high school English language teacher in his forties asked me whether Muslims ever eat fish. (They do.) Another teacher in a public school said, "I don't know the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant that well." Basic knowledge such as this is often missing among English language teachers and people in general. Social studies teachers are more confident in teaching world religions because they have learned about them at university more than English language teachers have, and social studies textbooks provide them with supplementary knowledge.

(iv) World religions are not mentioned in English language textbooks

Although intercultural issues are popular in Japanese English language textbooks, religions are scarcely addressed. One of the most notable stories, which has been in English language textbooks for a long time, is the life of Anne Frank; in the version of the story in the texts, it states that she is Jewish,

and the ritual of Hanukah is described, yet no further details of Judaism are described in the textbook or in the teacher's manual.

(v) Teachers' preconceived notion that religions are not to be taught

In Japan, a common belief is that people should not discuss politics or religion with others. This is probably because of an anxiety around potential disputes caused by differences in beliefs. Therefore, religions are not to be discussed in class.

(vi) Fear that a teacher might propagate a certain religion in class

Some teachers might start "recommending" or propagating their beliefs in class, without equitable treatment of the other religions.

(vii) Possibility of disputes between believers of different religions

Students with different faiths might contend to justify their beliefs, rather than understand differences and accept others.

(viii) Extremists may attack schools addressing world religions

A teacher trainer in his fifties claimed that he did not want to teach world religions in his class because he feared repercussions from political extremists, for instance right-wing groups (*uyoku dantai* in Japanese) who might attack schools should they learn that the schools are teaching world religions during English-language lessons. These extremists believe in the Japanese emperor and Shinto, and they show resentment toward schools teaching topics related to Japanese flags, Japanese anthems, or anything they believe to be against Shintoism.

(ix) English-language teachers are too busy teaching the language, and have no time to provide details of cultural aspects

Many teachers claim that the school curriculum is dense and intensive: they feel that they teach so many words, phrases, or grammatical structures of the language that they cannot spend time explaining cultural aspects or deep contexts. This heavy workload is often due to entrance examinations; teachers in middle school are supposed to meet students' or the parents' expectations to be accepted by leading high schools or universities. The English language is a compulsory subject, and therefore, teachers instruct the language with a focus on test strategies, rather than the broader context of the language.

5. Reasons to Teach World Religions During English Language Lessons

Language plays a vital role in communication, and through discourse people come to understand more about others. In foreign- or second-language education, teachers nurture students to gain knowledge for themselves, broaden their understanding internationally or interculturally, and acquire good manners to be global citizens. In other words, teaching languages is not only about teaching the grammatical structure but also about teaching sociolinguistic competence for successful communication. This obligation of language education must be shared with social studies and other subjects, and this is rebutting (i) ‘Schools or institutions prohibit teachers from teaching world religions’ and (ii) ‘Teaching world religions is a duty for social studies teachers, and not for English-language teachers.’ In reply to (ii), when lessons are interrelated or conducted under an immersion-like approach in tandem with other subjects, the teachers of different subjects can provide the knowledge that others may lack.

In reply to (iii) ‘Lack of knowledge regarding world religions,’ discovering supplemental materials that help English language teachers teach world religions is important; these materials can be found in books or online. Meeting or contacting a religious expert and asking for advice for lessons can help teachers gain accurate knowledge as well.

In reply to (iv) ‘World religions are not mentioned in English language textbooks,’ the teachers can also request publishers to include information on the features of world religions or explanations of religious customs (e.g., the characteristics of Hanukah in the Anne Frank story) in either students’ textbooks or teachers’ manuals.

Connecting the classroom to the outside world is essential in education. Vettorel (2010, 159) stated, “Teenagers in Expanding circle countries, for whom English is in most cases a compulsory subject at school, are already part of a global culture made up of pop music, TV, advertising, videogames, blogs, U-Tube [sic] and various e-spaces.” Csizér and Dörnyei (2005, 21) confirmed that school learners’ motivation to learn English in a Hungarian secondary school includes “besides the pragmatic goals of getting a job or a place in higher education, a range of other incentives such as travelling, making foreign friends, and understanding all the lyrics of English songs.” In the real world, people often discuss politics and religion; it might be considered unusual to exchange ideas regarding the issue with strangers among the Japanese, but when they meet people from other countries or regions, discussions can become relatively commonplace. When I personally have been to other countries, including the United States, Switzerland, and Malaysia, people have asked questions frankly and frequently regarding my religion.

Because they do not usually speak up about religion inside or outside the classroom in Japan, few young people are aware of their own beliefs or religion. This indifference may lead to ignorance regarding world religions, and also result in prejudice against them. By reflecting on their own religion or their cultural and family backgrounds, students can become more deeply aware of their identity, and from that experience they can begin expressing themselves as they are.

Fujiwara (2011) proposed that religious education at school aim to achieve three goals: education for (a) developing students' personality, (b) fostering an understanding of other cultures, and (c) raising students' competence in logical or critical thinking as well as in discourse. These are similar to the goals of English-language education in the course of study guided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT 2009) in Japan. "Discourse" is conducted only through language, and "cultural understanding" is a key objective in English language education. Therefore, teaching world religions in English language education is relevant [in reply to (v) (Teachers' preconceived notion that religion is not to be taught)].

In reply to (vi) 'Fear that a teacher might propagate a certain religion in class,' (vii) 'Possibility of disputes between believers of different religions,' and (viii) 'Extremists may attack schools teaching world religions,' Milofsky (2012) correlated peacebuilding with English language teaching as follows:

Conflict management and peacebuilding becomes the vehicle through which students learn English. The basic concepts and skills in conflict management and peacebuilding deal with reducing prejudice, building relationships, communicating effectively, and using negotiation to manage disagreements. With such closely aligned purposes, and since communication skills are a large part of language teaching, the English language classroom becomes a natural site for teaching conflict management and peacebuilding (Milofsky 2012, 23).

For successful communication in class, language teachers are required to treat students equally. The teacher–student relationship is also important in classroom management; the teacher's obligation is to hold an objective viewpoint toward world religions, and to ensure that no one offends other people's beliefs.

In reply to (ix) 'English language teachers are too busy instructing the language, and have no time to provide details of the cultural aspects' of the language, teachers must perceive that entrance exams in higher education have changed; the MEXT released "Action Plans for Renovating Tertiary Education" in June 2013, reinforcing the evaluation of students' critical thinking. Acceptance criteria for tertiary education are changing from mere written exams,

which test applicants' knowledge, to integrated evaluations based on their motivation, competence, and aptitude for further study.

In contrast, developing students' critical thinking skills is not achieved in a short period or through only a single subject. Cooperation with other teachers is significant, and through it teachers might be able to manage lessons without expending too much time (e.g., explaining the outline of world religions in social studies, followed by English language lessons with a discussion on the topic). Alternatively, in alignment with special events such as field trips, students can visit religious sites to deepen their understanding of the topic. Before starting a new lesson, teachers can always review their previous lesson to explore more effective methods of teaching.

6. Classroom Practice for Linguistic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralisms

When the Central Council for Education in Japan released "Education in Our Country Foreseeing the 21st Century" in 1996, the importance of international understanding was asserted as follows:

For teaching international understanding education, what must be excogitated is to raise students not to judge "right or wrong" against their diversified lives, customs, or thoughts, but to cultivate their attitudes to recognize the differences and accept them, recognize their similarities, and respect each other's historical traditions or values in [a philosophy of] pluralism (Author's Translation).

However, concrete classroom plans to promote such an international environment in class are missing from the normal course of study; therefore, teachers need to revise their lessons. Tada (2000) indicated that it is a misapprehension to expect maturity from young people when teachers establish only a learning environment without contriving teaching materials and techniques adequate to their learning styles.

I followed Muller's (2008) approach in order to create an activity to enhance understanding the world religions. The approach is inter-cultural and also inter-religious: Muller insisted that schools must be a center of society for mutual understanding among people. His model of learning is empirical; while non-Christian students join in the service at Christian church, non-Muslim students experience Islamic rituals together with the Muslims in the school curriculum. This curriculum is intended neither to confront against other believers nor to propagate the different religions, but to comprehend and accept the others without giving up one's faith.

This approach originated in religious pluralism in Europe: in accordance with recent movement of linguistic and cultural pluralisms, a British researcher on theology, Hick (1974) suggested the existence of ‘multi-faith’ in the world religions, and practiced the education of religious pluralism in classroom in Birmingham, where many students were immigrants.

The vitality of these lessons is in linking knowledge with action and the classroom with the outside world. In Japan, an international understanding often focuses on gaining knowledge of foreign countries. Nevertheless, exploring the different cultures around students and finding an opportunity to use the English acquired in class out in the community stimulate their motivation for further learning.

What is most effective in eliminating stereotypes against world religions perpetuated by ignorance or prejudice is discourse with believers. Imai (1999) stated that understanding other cultures is an “action and activity”: the act of exclusion of fixed images of stereotypes and their continuous modification are the true core of cultural understanding.

The realization of a peaceful multicultural society is dependent on positive and considerate relationships between diverse citizens. As a site for the implementation of the multicultural fieldwork model, I chose Kobe, for three reasons: (a) Kobe was only 30 minutes away by train from the international high school I worked for; (b) it is one of the biggest and most cosmopolitan cities in Japan—non-Japanese from 118 countries reside there, comprising 3% of the population in 2008; and (c) a mosque, a Shinto shrine, a Catholic church, a Jain temple, a Buddhist temple, and a synagogue are all located within five minutes of each other walking distance.

7. Report of the Fieldwork

To make the fieldwork meaningful, teachers have to be familiar with world religions. I visited the religious sites beforehand, and asked for cooperation from the religious leaders and the believers, explaining the purpose of the fieldwork; it is for multicultural understanding, and not for the propagation of a certain religion.

Having taught cultural differences in an English reading class and world religions in a global studies class in the same week, I took the students out to engage in fieldwork in Kobe on Saturday as a special event. In preparation for the fieldwork, the students practiced relevant English conversation because they were going to have an opportunity to talk in English to religious leaders and believers at the Jain temple, the mosque, and the synagogue.

The fieldwork lasted 5 hours, during which time we visited seven religious sites. The students

met an Egyptian imam, an Indian Jain worshipper, an Israeli rabbi, and American Jewish worshippers there, and communicated with them in English.

The feedback from a participant is as follows:

I have been wondering about the entity of god. I used to think that there is only one real god, and everyone believes his or her god is the only one. I also thought they often argued with other believers. In conclusion, my conception was quite incorrect. Visiting various religious sites, my doubts about the religions before the fieldwork cleared up. Every believer loves his or her own god, and they found no problem even if their religions were different. It seemed that happiness in their minds was most important. Although I still haven't received an explicit answer to my question (the entity of god), I somehow feel that it is sorted.

In reality, not every question can be answered. However, feeling sympathy and affinity toward believers through communication helps students become open to other cultures and widen their view of the world.

8. Further Issues

It is essential for teachers to keep encouraging students to continue communicating with others in English. Conducting a single fieldwork activity is merely a beginning to understanding; in order to eliminate stereotypes, teachers need to talk to many believers. Discussing issues such as world religions in English is difficult, especially for students at a young age whose English competence is not high and their knowledge of the subject is incomplete. Teachers must modify the lessons according to their students' language level and also their degree of comprehension regarding the issue.

The administrators in the teachers' schools should determine whether such topics should be included in English-language education. Gray (2010) stated that English-language textbooks reflect trends in society. When feminism and egalitarianism started to be raised as a center of attention in the 1970s and 1980s, they were featured in textbooks. Thus, taboos in current English-language education might be addressed in them in the future. Freire (2005) conceived of teachers as cultural workers; he taught poor peasants how to read in order to empower them. Freire asserted that there is more to literacy education than merely teaching words. In teaching a word such as "hunger" to the peasants, he informed them why hunger existed among them, or what made them poor and others rich. He called their process of learning "reading the world before reading the word." In this context, in the era of globalization, teaching English as a global language is also teaching global issues in order to enhance awareness and solve them.

Conclusion

Teaching the world religions is a great struggle—a struggle for justification against people who do not approve teaching taboo matters, and also a painstaking struggle with oneself, because a teacher must exert great effort and expend a considerable amount of time developing effective teaching approaches or materials. Nevertheless, challenging oneself while dreaming of a better future is a worthy pursuit.

The following websites might help teachers plan lessons addressing world religions:

<http://www.urantia.org/urantia-book-standardized/paper-131-worlds-religions>

<http://www.thinkingstrings.com/revealing-world-religions.phpz>

<http://quizlet.com/14860580/chapter-1-world-religions-flash-cards/>

<http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme/>

<http://www.esldiscussions.com/>

<http://lessonstream.org/>

<http://jamiekeddie.com/>

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/>

<http://www.eslflow.com/>

<http://www.esl-galaxy.com/>

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