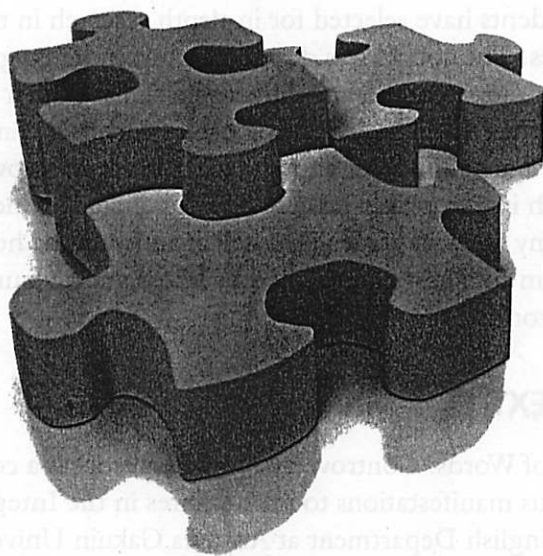


Adult Language Learners: Context and Innovation



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TESOL Classroom Practice Series

A Web of Controversy: Critical Thinking Online

Joseph V. Dias

What do smoking in public places, eating disorders, performance-enhancing drugs, domestic violence, and animal experimentation have in common? They all generate an enormous amount of heat in the media and are the focus of countless Web pages, newsgroups, and mailing lists. They are also representative of topics that students have selected for in-depth research in the course that this chapter describes. The course was designed to promote language development, academic research, employment, and citizenship skills. With a focus on researching controversial issues through Internet sources, university English majors in Japan move from a vague affinity for an issue to an intimate knowledge of it and identification with its key players. These adult language learners are called on to exercise autonomy at every stage. They select an issue and hold their own in a team that they form to investigate it, thereby becoming accountable citizens of the Web and of the world.

CONTEXT

A Web of Words: Controversy on the Internet is a course that has been offered in various manifestations to sophomores in the Integrated English (IE) Program of the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University since 1997. It was originally conceived to familiarize students with online resources and to give them an opportunity to carry out project-based international exchanges. Mantovani (1996) has noted that

as soon as a technology reaches the degree of maturity and reliability that really makes it usable, attention switches from the technological aspects of artifacts—which were previously difficult to master and therefore of great concern for non-specialist users—to the activities, projects and goals of social actors using artifacts for their own purposes. (p. 2)

This having been the case with computer and Internet technology over the past decade, the course organically evolved into one primarily concerned with researching controversial issues. The latest incarnation of the course challenges and stretches students' linguistic and academic abilities while providing a context for purposeful use of Web resources. Despite advances in the technical competence of adult language learners, they often require as much guidance in judging the validity of online sources as younger learners. Therefore, I offer suggestions later in the chapter on criteria for judging online information.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

In addition to the desired outcome of developing citizenship skills, information literacy is another key aspect of this course, especially Web-specific information literacy because students these days instinctively turn to the Web for their information needs. Pizzorno (2006), who describes an information literacy course for adult English as a second language (ESL) learners in California, points out how "the Internet has replaced . . . traditional research tools and now acts as a virtual library where students can access much of the information they need to complete academic tasks" (p. 263). Such engagement with technology-supported, purposeful tasks represents an embodiment of what has been referred to as *sustained-content language teaching* (SCLT; Ponder & Powell, 2001), which Pizzorno saw as the methodology behind his course as well. SCLT usually involves a focus on a particular theme for at least a term and aims to integrate that content with the four skills and "cognitive and metacognitive strategies; study skills; and the development of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, among other areas" (J. M. Murphy & Stoller, 2001, p. 3).

Unlike Pizzorno's (2006) course, in which information literacy was the content area, the course described in this chapter has controversial issues as the content and language skills and information literacy are cultivated as a means to accomplish the real-world responsibilities of finding out about, caring about, and possibly doing something about a particular social issue of consequence. At the outset of the semester, students are told that due to collaboration on assignments and group projects, regular class attendance is essential. The many artifacts produced in each phase of the seminar—blogs, surveys, Web sites or podcasts, concepts for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—all figure into final grades. Because the blogs show the fruits of students' research and should represent the most significant input of time and energy, they are given the greatest weight. Self-assessments and peer assessments are used for the evaluation of Web sites and podcasts.

Shopping for a Cause

After being introduced to controversial issues, students search for one that they feel can sustain their enthusiasm for an entire semester. The Web sites of many

university libraries offer excellent annotated lists of controversial issues, but those found in search engine directories or on Wikipedia are likely to be more up to date. Although Wikipedia can be useful for exposure to a wide variety of issues (*Category:Controversies*, 2008), students need to be made aware that it should not be relied upon for academic research.

An intake survey at the beginning of the seminar each year has consistently shown that few students have had experience using mailing lists or newsgroups. Because these tools will be used later in the course, an offline simulation is conducted to help students become familiar with how they function, to explore preliminary controversial issues, and to identify possible collaborators. A form is distributed to students who identify a controversial issue as the main discussion topic in this offline discussion (see Figure 1).

At this point, students need not commit themselves to researching the issue in depth. They write a message expressing their stance and invite contributors to the

The controversial issue is written here.

Main Discussion Topic: _____ **Discussion instigator:** _____

The person introducing the issue writes his or her initials here.

Sender: _____

Subject: _____

A subtopic (one aspect of the controversial issue) is written as the subject, and a message is composed that introduces the topic, expresses an opinion, and invites replies.

Message: _____

Sender: _____

Subject: _____

A classmate reads the initial message and writes a reply after inserting his or her initials and a new subtopic or Re: (previous subject).

Message: _____

Sender: _____

Subject: _____

Here, and in subsequent spaces, other classmates join in on the discussion. Ultimately, six students will have shared their views.

Message: _____

Figure 1. Offline Discussion About Preliminary Controversial Issue

discussion. Students circulate around the room, adding their input to the discussion sheets until they are full. For homework, the initiators of each discussion summarize the exchanges on a class message board. The following is an example of a particularly well-encapsulated discussion on the pros and cons of zoos:

I started out with a neutral message hoping to get opinions from both sides. Some think that it's cruel to keep animals in cages, and that it is better for them to live in their natural habitat. . . . I think zoos have their pros and cons, and I'm torn in between because as much as I love seeing animals from different parts of the globe, it's quite saddening to see them in such small confinements.

In the next stage of the task, students try to persuade their classmates—either online or through in-class discussions—to join a research team dealing with the issue introduced in their offline discussions. Here are a few examples of persuasive expressions that can be offered as prompts:

- This issue is important because . . .
- If something is not done about _____, then . . .
- We should do something to stop/reform _____ because . . .
- Won't you join me to find out what can be done about _____?
- Let me tell you a bit about _____ so you can see how important it is.

Naturally, for students to be recruited into a research team, it is necessary for one-half to one-third of the topics to be discarded. Although this is easy for the uncommitted, it can be painful for students who are genuinely interested in a topic but fail to convince their classmates.

A particularly useful clustering search engine, such as *Clusty* (Vivisimo, 2004–2009), is recommended as a way to help students map out the semantic domains of their issues and identify opposing camps. When searching for “bullying,” for example, the search engine lists clusters of Web sites under such categories as “dealing with bullies,” “parents and teachers,” and “cyber bullying.” Here are some questions that may help students structure their solicitations for collaborators:

- Are there opposing sides? [Show that the issue is really controversial.]
- Has the controversy been precisely identified? [It shouldn't be too general or too specific.]
- Is sufficient information available on both—or all—sides of the issue?
- Can the topic sustain your interest until the end of the course?
- Why are you personally interested in this topic?

Once the groups have been formed, the in-depth research into the controversial issues begins. As an aid to processing the information uncovered on the issue through various online sources, groups learn how to create and maintain a blog. The free blog-hosting site *Blogger* (Google, 1999–2009) can be used for this purpose, but other options have more flexibility, such as the open source *WordPress* (n.d.) or university-wide systems such as Blackboard (see Blackboard, 1997–2009). With these vehicles, students can demonstrate that they are struggling to come to terms with their issue by summarizing, synthesizing, and analyzing relevant information. Students are provided with a checklist that clearly delineates the requirements and individual responsibilities, which may include parameters for the length of entries, a stipulation that students must consult a variety of reference and news sources (e.g., online dictionaries, encyclopedias, podcasts, and possibly videos), and the necessity for commenting on each others' blogs to provide useful feedback and to ensure an appreciative audience.

Creating Criteria for Judging Online Information

Students can better understand the essential criteria for evaluating Web sources after being called on to locate and present to the class one Web site related to their issue that they feel is trustworthy and another that is suspicious. They are then asked to identify which features of the Web sites account for their trust or distrust. Although a few prompts will be needed, several phrases might be suggested to orient students to key issues: *well written, up to date, widely respected, user friendly, nonjudgmental*. Sentence prompts might also be offered: "I can generally trust Web sites that . . ." or "I tend to (dis)trust Web sites that have/offer . . ." or "I would absolutely avoid Web sites that . . ." Usually, in a class of 25–30 students, a list of criteria can be generated that is superior to those listed in books or journals (e.g., Clankie, 2000; Thiroux, 1999, pp. 64–70) and to the ones provided on Web sites that offer guidance in assessing the quality of Internet sources (see Appendix A).

In addition to items on their criteria lists, such as "good" sites having balanced information and known authorship, students often come up with unique criteria that make perfect sense for English language learners. For example, one recent group of students identified trustworthy sites as having bilingual support, an unambiguous perspective, and English that is appropriate to their level of ability, whereas untrustworthy sites lacked graphics to support the meaning of texts, were not constructive (overly cynical, personal, sarcastic, or unfairly critical), and offered a great deal of raw data without commentary to put it into context.

Creating an Online Survey

A goal of the course is to empower students so that they can create and not just consume information. They do this through their ongoing blogging and also by creating surveys on their controversial issue using the free mode of *SurveyMonkey*

(SurveyMonkey.com, 1999–2009), an online survey hosting service. Students are able to gain valuable practice in composing a variety of question types: yes/no, multiple choice, and open ended. They may also learn how to make polite requests (e.g., for soliciting participants), organize items in a logical way, and, after the results are in, summarize results graphically and in writing. Before the surveys are promoted more widely, classmates from other groups take them and evaluate their quality using a checklist (see Appendix B). This feedback helps students revise their surveys.

Once the surveys are made presentable, students seek out mailing lists and newsgroups where they are likely to find potential respondents. They can look on *Yahoo! Groups* (Yahoo!, 2008) and *Google Groups* (Google, 2009a) or on more sheltered mailing lists created specifically for language learners. Groups not intended especially for language learners, although less predictable, can provide students with a more interesting range of responses. The process of finding groups and observing how their participants discuss controversial issues can give students added insight and point them to resources they may not previously have considered.

Forming NGOs Concerned With Controversial Issues

The course has recently introduced a new element: having students form their own NGOs. This was done because after weeks of research some students were left feeling hopeless about the possibility of resolving the problems that they had identified. The first stage in the process of forming an NGO is exactly what the students in the course have just completed; it requires identification of a problem and assessment of need through original research or by synthesizing the research findings of others (Peace Corps, 2003). The next stage is to assemble ideas and resources in order to meet the identified needs or solve a defined problem in an efficient way.

Students are also given an option to create a Web site introducing their NGO or a video to promote it, which would be made available to everyone in the class as a podcast. Whichever option they choose, it is essential that they relate the research on their controversial issues and survey results to the NGO and its *raison d'être*. The Web site or podcast is introduced in a final presentation (for samples, see *Controversial Podcasts*, n.d.) that must also feature a skit or round-table discussion about the issue.

REFLECTIONS

Teaching this course is gratifying in that each group of students comes into it with scant knowledge of or interest in social issues, but they leave it feeling some degree of commitment to one issue and increased knowledge of others. Their stake in these issues comes from having labored arduously to separate the

Web's wheat from its chaff, deriving some kernels of truth and shaping them into something unique in the form of an NGO. Students' comments at the end of the course show that the process is a struggle, but a worthwhile one. One student commented that she gradually came to understand the point of NGOs and found making an NGO of her own to be a valuable process. Another mentioned how much he appreciated the opportunity "to be alert to controversial issues and actually 'speak out' and 'share' them," adding that he "would never have known about most of the sources [he] introduced on [his] blog otherwise."

Perhaps due to globalization and the consolidation of media outlets, students tend to gravitate toward general, global issues. Teachers may have to make special efforts to interest students in locally relevant ones. In the course described in this chapter, such issues as whaling, Japan's import ban on U.S. beef, and Japan's support of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan have all been considered by students. However, they are almost always rejected in favor of tried-and-true topics for in-depth research such as euthanasia, cloning, the death penalty, and underage drinking. In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, there are a number of advantages in having students research local, topical issues: (1) information is less likely to have been neatly packaged by others, requiring students to synthesize it themselves; (2) facts and opinions related to the issue are likely to be more plentiful in the students' first language, decreasing the temptation to plagiarize; and (3) there is more potential for teachers to learn from students, creating a genuine context for communication.

The use of videos and podcasts is new to the course. However, these seem to be a natural progression due to the increased exploitation of podcasts and *YouTube* (YouTube, 2008) videos by the controversial issue groups in the course of their research. Every recent group has embedded *YouTube* videos related to their topic in their blogs. This greater use of multimedia sources, as well as students' original podcasts, provides rich opportunities for students to improve their listening comprehension, an aspect of the course that previous groups felt had been lacking. Because exposure to the target language in EFL settings is particularly problematic, this has been one of the greatest, albeit serendipitous, changes in the course. At least one group from the last band of cohorts has continued their blogging—including embedding and commenting on relevant videos—months after the end of the semester. Although it may seem that the highly structured nature of the course might inhibit autonomy, it was found to be necessary in order to give students a secure place from which the sea of information before them could be organized and used constructively.

This chapter has described how investigating controversial issues can be used in an EFL context. In ESL situations, examining local issues can help adult students gain valuable knowledge about their adopted or host culture. Furthermore, this course, or selected parts of it (e.g., offline discussion, survey creation, blogging, brainstorming criteria for judging online content, formation of original

NGOs), would be appropriate in adult literacy programs or in vocational schools in which the codevelopment of English language, employment, citizenship, and computer skills is desirable.

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APPENDIX A: WEB SITES FOR DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Sites That Offer Guidance for Evaluating Internet Sources

- *Internet Detective* (tutorial for developing advanced Internet skills): <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>
- *Evaluating Web Sites*: http://www.lesley.edu/library/guides/research/evaluating_web.html
- *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources*: <http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/eval.html>

Sites to Test Students' Critical Analysis Skills

- *Dihydrogen Monoxide Research Division*: <http://www.dhmo.org/>
- *The British Stick Insect Foundation*: http://www.brookview.karoo.net/Stick_Insects/
- *Aluminum Foil Deflector Beanie*: <http://zapatopi.net/afdb/>
- *Feline Reactions to Bearded Men*: <http://www.sree.net/web/feline.html>
- *The Onion*: <http://www.theonion.com/>
- *Dwayne Medical Center: Male Pregnancy*: <http://www.malepregnancy.com/>

Additional Resources

- *Clusty* (metasearch engine that groups similar results into clusters, helping the searcher zero in on exactly what is being sought or discover unexpected relationships): <http://clusty.com/>
- *Blogger* (free blog-hosting site that allows users to set up nicely formatted blogs in minutes, invite others to comment on postings, and archive posts conveniently): <http://www.blogger.com/>

- *WordPress* (open source blog publishing system that allows more control than Blogger; files of various types can be uploaded and static pages created): <http://wordpress.org/>
- *SurveyMonkey* (free survey authoring and publishing service with a highly intuitive interface): <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>

APPENDIX B: EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF SURVEYS

Survey Topic: _____

Is there an item dealing with basic demographic data (age, gender, etc.)? yes/no

Are there any items that are . . .

misleading? yes/no _____

offensive? yes/no _____

unclear? yes/no _____

unanswerable? yes/no _____

Did this survey make you feel motivated to fill it out? yes/no

Why or why not? _____

In the case of multiple-choice items, are any choices missing? yes/no

Are there any spelling or grammatical errors? yes/no

If yes, in which survey item(s)? _____

Are there a variety of (at least four) question types (e.g., multiple-choice with one answer, multiple-choice with multiple answers, open ended, matrix)? yes/no

Do the question types seem suited to the kind of information the group wants to learn from respondents? yes/no