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ABSTRACT

A sensitive topic can be used effectively in a class of English as a second language (ESL) if planned carefully. While there are the risks that non-native students will become embarrassed and withdrawn, or will develop negative feelings about American society, there are ways to minimize those risks. This can be done by considering the characteristics of the class and the amount of trust between students and teacher, easing into the topic, and maintaining an objective tone. Students benefit from controversial topics by developing confidence in discussing them in an atmosphere of trust and minimal personal risk-taking. The approach used in one university-level ESL course was to provide a preparatory lesson in anticipation of a visiting lecturer on the issue of child abuse, with three objectives: to learn what students already knew about the topic, to encourage them to think about related issues, and to have them come up with their own questions on the topic. The next class period was devoted to small group discussions based on topics presented in the previous day's lecture. The discussions, based on factual material and questions on the lecture topic, were related to American culture. (MSE)

USING A SENSITIVE TOPIC IN TEACHING LECTURE COMPREHENSION

Colleen Meyers and Diane Erdmann

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A sensitive topic can be used effectively in an ESL class. This paper reports on the experience of an advanced listening class with the topic of child abuse. Included are a discussion of the risks of using a sensitive topic, suggestions for minimizing the risks, a justification for using a sensitive topic, and a description of the way in which the authors approached the topic with their students.

The idea of using controversial topics in the ESL classroom is not new; many teachers use controversial topics, ranging from relatively "safe" topics, such as working mothers and the role of the elderly in society, to very sensitive topics, like homosexuality and abortion. It is probably correct to say that teachers have traditionally chosen topics that fall on the "safer" end of the continuum. We decided to try a somewhat risky approach with our students by choosing a topic which falls on the more controversial end of the spectrum. We contacted an expert on the topic of child abuse in the United States and invited him to speak to our advanced listening comprehension class at the University of Minnesota. This paper reports on our experience with that topic.

Before describing the lecture and the activities that we built around it, we will first address three questions: 1) What are some of the risks involved in using such a topic? 2) What can we do to minimize the risks? 3) If it is such a risky venture to use a very sensitive topic, why do so at all?

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THE RISKS OF A SENSITIVE TOPIC

One possible danger of using a topic like child abuse in the classroom is that students will become embarrassed and 'clam up.' Because this topic might be taboo in many societies, open discussion of it — especially in a class with both males and females — may cause some students to withdraw. Another possible risk is that of increasing the sense of alienation students may already feel from American society. Ideally, exposing students to aspects of American society will help them understand the culture better and thus make them more willing and able to interact with members of the culture; however, the danger also exists that our attempts may backfire and actually end up distancing our students by fostering negative feelings about American society.

MINIMIZING THE RISKS

Even though there are risks involved, there are ways we can minimize those risks. With any potentially risky topic, it is important to consider the characteristics of the class. One step is simply to consider the backgrounds of the students in relation to the topic. What countries do the students come from and how do their societies view the topic under consideration? (Answers to the latter question may require some library work or interviewing.) The teacher might also want to survey the students, formally or informally, as to whether they would be willing to deal with the topic in class. Another consideration is the amount of trust and rapport among the students and between the students and the teacher. A sensitive topic would probably work better toward the end of the quarter, at a time when good rapport and a high level of trust are likely to have developed and when the class atmosphere is likely to be more relaxed and open. In our particular case, we took up the topic in the ninth week of a ten-week course with a group who had done a lot of small group work and who seemed open and willing to discuss this type of topic.

Finally, the way of presenting the topic can make a difference. "Easing into" the topic — letting the students know the choice of topic well in advance and not dealing with the most sensitive areas of the topic at the very beginning — can minimize risks. Attempting to maintain an objective tone can also help. For example, the instructor can minimize personal bias and subjectivity by relying on outside sources, such as a guest lecturer, for information.

WHY USE A RISKY TOPIC?

If a topic like child abuse is so risky, why use it at all? The benefit, we feel, far outweighs the risks. Students are often aware of such topics through the media or through conversations with Americans or with other students, but may feel uncomfortable discussing them, either because the topic is taboo in their own culture or because they don't know how to discuss such a topic appropriately in English. By choosing such a topic for the classroom, we can give students experience dealing with a difficult topic in a supportive atmosphere of trust and minimal risk-taking. This experience may make them more willing to enter into conversations outside the classroom; it will, in any case, enable them to discuss the topic more knowledgeably.

PREPARATION FOR THE LECTURE

The day before the lecture we did a preparatory lesson on the topic of child abuse. The all-encompassing goal of the lesson was to give the students an orientation, or frame of reference, from which to listen to the lecture. This goal encompassed three objectives: (1) to find out what students already knew about child abuse and to give them some background information, (2) to get the students to come up with their own questions regarding child abuse, and (3) to get students thinking about issues related to child abuse.

The idea behind the larger goal was that if students have

prior knowledge of a topic, they will probably find it easier to understand new information on the topic. Furthermore, if they have questions about that topic, they will have a clear purpose for listening to discourse about the topic, which may also help understanding and retention. As an additional bonus, a preparation session may make it possible to clear up misconceptions students may have about the topic, misconceptions that could inhibit understanding.

At the beginning of the preparatory lesson, we told the students that one section of the blackboard would be reserved for writing questions about the topic that the students might come up with during the course of the lesson. We told them that this would be in preparation for listening to a live lecture on the next day. We encouraged them to think of questions, explaining that if they knew what questions they wanted answered while they listened to the lecture, they would know what to listen for and would perhaps understand more of what they heard.

After informing students of the question format, we asked the students if they knew what child abuse was. There was a lot of discussion at this point. Some students had accurate ideas of what child abuse was, and we used their input to create a general definition of child abuse: "touching a child as a man and wife might touch (sexual abuse) or harming a child physically (physical abuse)." One student brought up the area of child labor, but we decided not to include this in our definition because we wanted the students to focus on "closeted" forms of abuse which were of greater current interest.

We then asked if anyone had heard about child abuse in the news recently and if they had, what they had heard. Some had heard about a series of reports of child abuse in a small Minnesota town which had been in the news for several months; others had heard about some cases of child abuse in day-care centers which had sprung up in the news just prior to our preparatory session. One student, a journalism major, brought out a clipping on child abuse from his briefcase. Another student volunteered that there had been only one account of child abuse in his country and that it had been a case of incest; therefore,

he felt that his country was immune from child abuse — or that it wasn't talked about. Some students agreed with him in the sense that they felt child abuse was generally a Western problem; however, others felt that it was more of a global problem and thus a problem in their countries too.

Throughout this discussion, students raised questions which we wrote on the board. We did not attempt to answer any questions. When a student stated an opinion or reflection on the topic, we asked if the student could make a question out of the statement; we did not comment on the statement ourselves. In this way, we tried to put ourselves in the position of guiding the students' thinking processes rather than serving as experts on the subject. Several times this technique resulted in very good questions, including "What is the difference between abuse and discipline?" and "What is done to help the victims of child abuse?"

Next we prepared the students quickly for a taped radio news account about child abuse legislation, and then played the tape. This gave the students some practice listening to discourse about child abuse in addition to giving them new information about the subject. The report was from that morning's broadcast, emphasizing that child abuse was a current topic of concern. After listening to the report, the students were eager to discuss the issue further and to raise more questions which we added to those already on the blackboard.

For a final discussion segment, we divided the students into small groups, using discussion questions from a prepared discussion sheet as a guide. There were five questions:

1. What responsibilities do you believe a parent must carry out when raising a child? What legal responsibilities does a parent have in your country?

2. In your culture, how is a child expected to behave with adults?

3. How do you think the use of drugs and alcohol might affect a parent's ability to relate to a child and carry

out parental responsibilities?

4. The lecturer on slavery talked about human rights and inequality among people. Do children have rights? How might human rights issues influence society's attitudes toward child abuse?

5. Remembering the videotape about the University of Minnesota research on identical twins, do you think there might be hereditary or environmental influences on child abuse? What would those influences be and why would they influence child abuse?

(The last two questions referred to topics from earlier class sessions.) As it turned out, students did not get very far with the prepared discussion questions, but they did actively talk about the topic. Finally, we reconvened as a large group and shared insights from the small group discussions. For homework, the students were instructed to read and think about the questions on the prepared discussion sheet, as well as the questions they had come up with as a class, and to prepare to use these as a guide for listening to the next day's lecture.

THE LECTURE

We planned a full 45-minute period for the lecture; this allowed for a 40-minute lecture and a brief question-and-answer session at the end. The lecturer, a social worker from Family Service of Greater St. Paul, began with some statistics and a historical perspective on child abuse. He proceeded to discuss distinctions among the concepts of child neglect, child abuse, and legitimate discipline of children. He spoke of recent changes in society — its structure and its values — and related these changes to child abuse. He ended by listing several factors (for example, alcohol abuse) which seem to be associated with a higher risk of child abuse.

It should be noted here that the lecturer was not aware of

the questions the students had formulated on the previous day; he was simply asked to discuss whatever he thought was relevant to the topic of child abuse. As it happened, most of our students' questions were in fact answered. We want to emphasize, however, that the point is not for the students to formulate questions which the lecturer will inevitably answer. Whether the questions are actually answered is of secondary importance. More important are the process of formulating questions in advance and the purpose for listening that the questions provide. (Of course, it would be discouraging for students if none of their questions were answered, but there are ways of minimizing this risk. One way is to choose a narrow enough topic to that the lecturer is almost certain to answer at least some of the students' questions. Another is to give the lecturer the questions beforehand and ask the lecturer to try to address them during the lecture.)

After his lecture, the speaker asked for questions from the students. His talk had generated a lot of interest, so the students did have questions, ranging from questions about statistics to questions about attitudes toward child abuse.

FOLLOW-UP TO THE LECTURE

The day after the lecture, we asked the students to form groups for discussion. We distributed a handout based on the lecture. The first section of the handout posed questions such as these:

> How did child abuse laws develop?
>
> What is the difference between discipline and abuse?
>
> The lecturer described three types of behavior that fall under the cover term "sexual abuse." What are they? Give an example of each.
>
> What changes in attitudes over the past 20 years have

led to an increase in reporting child abuse?

Using their notes from the lecture, the students discussed these questions in their groups. The purpose of this activity was to help the students to self-assess how well they had understood the lecture and to get them to focus on some of the cultural values surrounding child abuse in this society.

The second part of the handout, intended to initiate a second phase of discussion, was less limited to the factual content of the lecture. It raised two questions:

> What does the information in the lecture tell you about American cultural values?
>
> Should society step in and protect abused children, or is the family a "sacred" institution that should police itself?

Discussion of these questions also took place in groups, with ideas from each group to be shared later with the rest of the class. It was hoped that these questions would encourage students to synthesize information and to share opinions about issues such as the individual's rights versus government intervention and the role of punishment in child-rearing. The discussion went well; the students realized that a "should" question such as the one above has no simple answer. They became aware of the paradox between the emphasis that American society places on individual freedom and responsibility and the increasing role of society in stepping in and protecting the rights of minors while at the same time overruling those of parents.

CONCLUSION

It is our hope that this paper will serve as a model for designing ESL activities based on other current and controversial topics. Other lectures on aspects of American society could be

handled in a similar manner by following the same general format that we followed: choose a controversial topic suitable for your particular group of students; prepare students by getting them to look at different ways of viewing the topic and by discussing the relevant values and attitudes in operation in their own cultures and in what they've observed here; guide them in approaching the topic by encouraging them to formulate questions that will provide a purpose for listening; and provide them with a follow-up discussion in which they have an opportunity to synthesize information from the lecture and to share opinions about the topic.