

Open Classroom Communication and the Learning of Citizenship Values

Since the early 1990s, the development of well-informed, effective, and responsible citizens who can decide for themselves about different personal and public issues has been an objective of non-formal and formal education and training (Branson 1999; Quigley 2000; Patrick 2003). This connection between learning and citizenship includes language education, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) practitioners are involved in the discovery of how to best contribute to the development of knowledgeable and responsible citizens.

In Morocco, where political parties and non-governmental organizations are recognizing the global trend towards cultivating human rights and civil society, the educational system has recently undergone some important reforms, including the implementation of programs designed to raise students' awareness of human rights and encourage the spread of civic values. This focus on human rights and civic education was a fundamental goal of

the 1999 National Charter of Education and Training, which is concerned with modernizing the educational system to meet Morocco's developmental needs. A growing concern with the new challenges of an increasingly interdependent world is part of an emerging political culture that sees citizens as active participants in the socioeconomic and cultural development of the country. If Morocco is to undergo a successful transition to democracy, it will need the support and participation of citizens with a solid foundation in the principles of civic education.

This article addresses the issues of preparing of students in the language classroom to be effective citizens. It discusses the knowledge, skills, and values required for civic education and suggests how these principles can be applied to EFL instruction, particularly by considering (1) the selection of content, (2) teacher and student roles, (3) classroom activities, (4) the teacher as motivator, and (5) teacher education.

Principles of civic education

Civic education is based on a set of general principles that are concerned with enhancing the culture of human rights in society through formal education (learning that takes place in a recognized educational institution) and non-formal education (learning that takes place outside of a recognized educational institution). It holds that open communication, mutual respect, and collaboration and cooperation between people can bring about prosperity and improved conditions for all. According to Quigley (2000, 3), many educators around the world develop civic education by focusing on the following three interrelated components:

- Civic knowledge consists of fundamental ideas and information that learners must know and use to become effective and responsible citizens of a democracy.
- Civic skills include the ability to understand and evaluate principles of government and citizenship, which enables citizens to participate in the political system and influence public policies.
- Civic virtues are the character traits necessary for the preservation and improvement of democratic governance and include respect for the worth and dignity of each person, civility, tolerance, compassion, and a commitment to human rights and equality.

Civic education is more than the simple inclusion of lessons about human rights in history, language, and Islamic Studies classes. Rather, it is the act of recognizing the student as a full human being in all aspects of teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of creating autonomous and responsible individuals who can make decisions for themselves. Therefore, civic education encompasses the subject matter of lessons, the classroom atmosphere, patterns of classroom interaction, and the quality of the students' learning, both in and out of school. Civic education in the EFL classroom is part of a broader approach to education that incorporates all these factors and also involves the various participants concerned with educating young people for effective and responsible citizenship, including parents and governmental and non-governmental organizations. Tourney-Purta,

Schwille, and Amadeo (1999, 30) report that civic education should be:

- cross-disciplinary
- participative
- interactive
- related to life
- conducted in a non-authoritarian environment
- cognizant of the challenges of social diversity, and
- co-constructed with parents and the community (and non-government organizations) as well as the school.

As discussed below, these components of civic education have important implications for the content, interactions, and activities in the EFL classroom.

Selection of content

The selection and organization of educational content is an excellent way to directly convey civic education values in the language classroom. For example, some topics that reflect good citizenship are human rights, gender and racial discrimination, and socio-cultural and linguistic diversity. One way to evoke these topics is to explicitly teach the cultural component of language. This is likely to foster in the students a tolerant attitude towards the second language, its speakers, and its culture, which will in turn make the students value their own culture and identity.

As Ouakrime (1995, 29) indicates, cross-cultural understanding is a two-way process that creates learners who "are encouraged to develop not only a tolerant attitude towards the target culture and members of the target culture community, but also a positive attitude towards their own culture." Because of the importance of English as an international language, there is a risk that learners will reject their own culture; however, according to Melouk (1995, 9), if this occurs "it is generally a consequence of ignorance (lack of knowledge), misjudgment and hasty value judgments" and can be avoided by choosing appropriate content. Content that allows serious discussion and debate about substantive social and global issues will encourage students to consider all sides of an issue and develop critical skills that transfer outside of the classroom.

As Patrick (2003, 7) states, an essential element of good civic education is achieved when the teacher creates a democratic ethos by discussing a relevant topic in a classroom environment that “is conducive to and supportive of a free exchange of information and ideas, and where there is mutual tolerance for diverse opinions” and “respect for the dignity and worth of each person in the group.”

Teacher and student roles

In the traditional language classroom, students and teachers often have defined roles. For instance, in highly teacher-controlled classrooms, the teacher decides who talks when and about what. This teacher-centered pattern of communication does not encourage students to assume an active participatory role and does not foster the development of interaction and communication skills that are an essential element of citizenship.

The implementation of the principles of citizenship education depends crucially on teachers’ successful management of and learners’ active participation in EFL classroom communication. Therefore, teachers and learners should contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a cooperative relationship. Teachers need to create an environment that is conducive to learners’ practice of different participatory and intellectual skills. When teachers relinquish the controlling role and recognize students’ contributions to the learning process, teachers and students become collaborators in the learning process (Lynch 1996). In addition, as students become aware of different aspects of and problems related to the process of teaching and learning, they will come to better appreciate the teachers’ attempts to engage them in classroom communication.

The focus on the learner’s active and participatory role in classroom activities does not mean the teacher’s job is an easy one. On the contrary, the teacher who shifts from the dominant role as the source of knowledge and begins to empower students has even more responsibilities, including roles as coordinator, manager, organizer, and adviser; all these roles of the teacher who oversees a learner-centered classroom make him or her a facilitator (Littlewood 1981). It is interesting to note that this role of the teacher is similar

to the role of the facilitator in non-formal education and training situations. As Owen and Saddler (1999, 14) explain, “the job of the facilitator is to create a safe space within which people can work and then get out of the way.” For teachers, this means that they need to create a relaxed and safe atmosphere in the classroom where students share responsibility for conducting classroom interaction and management.

The prevalence of a rigid distribution of roles and power relationships between teachers who assume the role of sources of knowledge and students who assume the role of passive recipients of this knowledge certainly impedes any attempt to put the principles of civic education into practice. This implies the need to design more student-engaging and motivating activities and establish patterns of communication more predisposed to students’ active participation in the classroom.

Classroom activities

Developing a sense of citizenship in students demands classroom activities that will allow them to exchange ideas with one another, express their opinions, and develop learning strategies and communication skills for successful negotiation. Therefore, a critical element of civic education that will create interactive patterns of classroom communication is small group work or pair work, where the “major defining characteristic in terms of participation is that the learner is primary speaker” (Van Lier 1988, 173). Group work provides opportunities for students to be involved in cooperative classroom communication and helps create a stress-free and motivating atmosphere in the classroom. Group work activities have the advantage of engaging students in interactive communication and negotiation of meaning that develops associated participatory skills and the virtues of tolerance and mutual respect.

Group work activities are also learner-centered in that they require learners to assume a high degree of participation and to adopt a very active and creative role. According to Nunan (1988), some learner-centered activities include:

- *Problem-solving activities.* Learners are presented with a scenario and asked about their opinions, experiences, and

what they would do in a particular situation.

- *Role plays and simulations.* Learners are assigned to play a part in a certain social situation, and express to a partner or partners what they think and feel.
- *Opinion-gap activities.* Learners share or defend their attitudes or preferences about an idea with their partners.
- *Information-gap activities.* Learners exchange information with their partners to solve a problem or collect information.

These activities are learner-centered and motivating, and provide the opportunity for students to engage in the type of negotiation and critical thinking that will help them develop the participatory and intellectual skills necessary for effective citizenship. In other words, students share responsibility for the management of interaction in communication tasks that empower them by putting them in control (Nunan 1988). Such activities expose students to each other's opinions with the ultimate purpose of developing their communication strategies and skills; more importantly, these activities help students recognize that there are different ways of looking at things and that communication can be a give-and-take process that is an essential element for the resolution of conflict.

In addition to small group work and pair work, whole class discussion also allows students to freely engage in interactive communication while they express themselves and exchange ideas and information. For this classroom dynamic Littlewood (1981, 45) suggests that an informal circular arrangement of students "can help greatly to reinforce the learners' equality as co-communicators." Owen (1997, 5) agrees that a circle enhances open human communication because "in a circle, people can simply be with each other face-to-face," in contrast to rows, where they "face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen."

An EFL class that encourages open communication through group work and whole class discussion in a circle format provides learners with invaluable opportunities to engage in dialogue and to share responsibility for the management and success of classroom

interaction. This is likely to contribute to their acquisition of citizenship knowledge and skills as well as the values of mutual respect and collaboration.

The teacher as motivator

The development of students' participatory and intellectual skills increases when the teacher has the ability to motivate students. The teacher's ability to motivate is important because it creates a stress-free atmosphere and establishes a relationship of mutual trust and cooperation. This atmosphere is important for civic education because the classroom is a social setting in which relationships influence character traits that strengthen the skills and virtues of effective and responsible citizenship. The ability to motivate students enables the teacher to create an environment where learners are eager to engage in civic educational experiences. When students are in a relaxed and safe place and in as open a space as possible, they will feel self-confident and be more able to assume some responsibility for classroom interaction and management.

Motivating students to take an active role in their learning requires teachers to challenge students who have preconceived ideas about classroom roles; such students might expect the teacher to assume total responsibility for their learning, their achievement, and for classroom management. In that case, teachers need to use icebreakers to involve uninterested sub-groups or unmotivated and shy students in classroom activities. Teachers can also create an atmosphere of familiarity, friendship, and mutual trust in the classroom through group work, pair work, and collaborative class discussion where students engage in purposeful communication that promotes their participatory skills and their sense of responsibility and independence. In this way, the negative impact of the formal nature of the classroom and its institutional context, characterized by rigid disciplinary routines and the strict distribution of roles, is reduced to its lowest level.

Teacher education

Knowledge of the why, what, and how of civic education requires professional training because no one can successfully teach specific knowledge, skills, and virtues to students if

he or she has not learned them. To focus on the students' personal development and their social and emotional needs, and to accept them as partners in the learning process, requires training and experience in various disciplines of the human sciences, such as education, psychology, and sociology.

This training helps form teachers' beliefs about education in general, and language education in particular, and makes them capable facilitators in the language classroom. In addition, teachers' professional experiences should be consistent with the principles of civic education, and a high degree of motivation and intellectual and pedagogical commitment on their part is likely to help reach the desired outcomes. According to Owens (1997, 21), "the best way to get something done well is to give it to somebody who cares enough to do it."

Finally, every teacher also needs to assume the role of researcher in order to evaluate and understand communication in his or her EFL classroom, for the purpose of introducing the necessary and appropriate changes required to meet the needs and expectations of the students.

Conclusion

Preparing students to be effective citizens by applying the principles of civic education is a broad educational endeavor, of which language education is an indispensable part. EFL instructors can apply these principles to all aspects of the language classroom by carefully considering the content they select, the activities they engage in, and the type of interactions that occur in their classrooms. The goal is to increase students' active participation in the classroom as they develop communication strategies and skills and a sense of responsibility for the learning process. Acting as a facilitator, while adhering to citizenship and human rights education and actively motivating students, a teacher can create an EFL environment in which students become collaborative citizens who practice tolerance and mutual respect.

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