

Using Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to Facilitate the Discussion of Sensitive Topics Among English Language Learners

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the use of public service announcements (PSAs) and cause-related marketing (CRM) material as tools to engage English language learners in discussing and presenting sensitive topics. Through a review of literature, I investigate how PSAs and CRM can act as educational catalysts to foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and communication skills among students. I then explain how to build on existing textbook material with PSAs and CRM, to help learners broach and discuss sensitive topics, creating a promising avenue for educators to effectively engage students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

キーワード：公共広告、コースマーケティング、広告、英語学習

Key words : Public Service Announcement, Cause Marketing, Advertising, English Language Learning

Introduction

Educators intrinsically know that student engagement is one of the most important factors in a successful learning experience. Designing tasks that promote engagement is, however, not always easy, especially when programs and curricula require the use of set textbooks, thus reducing the scope of the topics covered in and out of the classroom.

Public service announcements (PSAs) and cause-related marketing (CRM) are both marketing strategies that can be used to raise awareness about a particular issue among members of the public. However, there are some key differences between the

two. PSAs are typically funded by government agencies, nonprofit organisations, or foundations, and are designed to educate the public about a particular issue, such as promoting safe driving, healthy eating, or preventing drug abuse. CRM, on the other hand, is a marketing strategy that links a for-profit company with a social issue. In CRM, the company may donate a portion of its proceeds to a nonprofit organisation for every product sold, or it may simply want to convey its support for people who are affected by the issue. PSA and CRM campaigns are typically short videos or series of posters, and often include very brief but impactful copy. Such simple, yet highly effective communications make these types of messages very useful for language classrooms.

Literature Review

Discussing sensitive topics in the classroom is both an essential practice and a challenging endeavour. On the one hand, these discussions are crucial because they promote critical thinking. By engaging in conversations about complex and delicate issues, students are encouraged to weigh different viewpoints, foster analytical skills, and engage in higher-order thinking. Such dialogues can also encourage empathy and understanding by helping students appreciate perspectives that differ from their own. This not only enriches their social awareness but also prepares them for real-world scenarios where they must navigate diverse social, political, and professional contexts.

On the other hand, the inclusion of sensitive topics in classroom discussions can be fraught with challenges. Emotional sensitivity to these subjects can lead to strong reactions that may be difficult to manage in an academic setting. In a multicultural classroom, the variety of perspectives on sensitive matters may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. This adds complexity to the educator's role, as teaching sensitive subjects requires careful planning, deep consideration of students' backgrounds, and skilled facilitation to ensure that dialogues remain respectful. Balancing the need for open discussion with the necessity of maintaining a supportive and inclusive environment can prove to be a delicate and demanding task. The works by Gee (2004) and Warschauer (2000) delved into these aspects in more

detail, providing theoretical or empirical insights into why talking about sensitive topics is both essential and challenging. Gee's work focused on the sociolinguistic dimensions of handling sensitive subjects, while Warschauer explored this theme in the context of technology-enhanced learning or globalised educational settings.

Vandrick (1997) examined how hidden identities in the ESL classroom unfold. He cautioned that "instructors need to be aware that discussion of certain sensitive topics could be upsetting to certain students" (p.157) and underlined the necessity of recognizing the emotional landscape of students when discussing sensitive themes. This work laid the groundwork for understanding the relationship between students' hidden identities and their receptiveness to discussing certain subjects, a vital consideration for educators looking to promote a supportive learning environment.

Singh and Doherty's study (2004) provided an exploration of the challenges faced by educators in an increasingly globalised academic environment. They aptly described "The awkward moments of discomfort, offence or distrust with students when sensitive topics are broached, and sensitivities are breached." (p.16) This idea encapsulates the pedagogical dilemmas that arise from the intersection of global cultural flows, highlighting the need for careful navigation and cultural awareness in modern teaching practices.

Cao (2014) posited that the identification of the topic factor consists of four subcategories: topical knowledge, familiarity with the topic, interest in the topic, and the sensitivity of the topic. This contributes to a nuanced understanding of what drives students' communication willingness and offers a multifaceted view of how subject matter and personal connections to topics can greatly affect student engagement. Similarly, Ramezanzadeh and Rezaei (2019) emphasised the role of context and diversity. The authors highlighted "the importance of contextually sensitive topics whereby students can appraise different ideas on a topic to achieve a more integrated solution or answer." (p.12) Their approach not only fosters inclusivity but also encourages critical thinking and reflection. The shift towards a more inclusive and diverse conception of authenticity, as portrayed in this work,

offers a pathway for a richer, more nuanced TESOL pedagogy.

The above studies provide a comprehensive view of the complex interplay between sensitive topics, student engagement, and the modern classroom's cultural dynamics. These works collectively stress the need for a thoughtful, nuanced approach to teaching sensitive topics, acknowledging the intricate factors that influence student comfort, willingness to communicate, and ability to critically appraise diverse viewpoints. They form a cohesive argument for educators to approach teaching sensitive subjects with empathy, cultural awareness, and pedagogical insight.

McNulty (2018) put forward the idea that the English language is not neutral, that it is used strategically to advance, and to challenge, the social, political, and economic realities of its learners. This underscores the importance of topic sensitivity in developing learners' interest. Language, as it is used and understood in real-world contexts, is inherently linked to the socio-political landscapes and personal experiences of the learners. Sensitive topics, therefore, may resonate more strongly with learners, as they often reflect real challenges, dilemmas, or issues that are relevant to their lives. By recognizing and tapping into these connections, educators can create a learning environment where sensitive topics are not just abstract concepts but are tied to genuine interests and personal or societal realities. Engaging with these topics, then, can become a dynamic process that draws students in, enhancing their motivation and involvement in the learning process. This can also be connected to Byram's (2012) position that critical cultural awareness is the key aspect of intercultural communication competence which allows individuals to understand both their own and other cultures' perspectives, practices, and products, as well as the underlying values associated with them.

The same assertion by McNulty can also shed light on why learners may experience increased emotional freedom when discussing sensitive topics in a second language (L2). As the English language is positioned as a tool to both challenge and reflect the social realities of its users, engaging with it in a non-native context can create a certain detachment or objectivity. Learners may find that speaking in L2 allows them

to explore sensitive topics with a degree of separation from their native cultural norms and personal biases. This detachment can create a space for more open and honest exploration of sensitive subjects without the immediate emotional reactions that might occur in their native language. By providing this 'safe distance,' a second language can serve as a unique platform where learners feel more comfortable and free to discuss issues that might otherwise be too close or too charged in their first language. This freedom can enhance both the depth of engagement with the subject matter and the development of linguistic skills in the L2. This concept is corroborated by Haidar and Fang (2019) who included it in a broader view that English should be introduced and used as a tool of communication and of access to information.

To summarise, it seems clear that there are great benefits and challenges to broaching sensitive topics in the language classroom. Content-based or CLIL classes can offer enough depth to allow for these topics to be explored, but I would like to explain how it is also possible to integrate these worthy topics inside of more regular language courses, in order to make learning more engaging, without making significant changes to the established curriculum.

Discussion

A cursory review of the topics used in 10 recent mainstream English language textbooks yielded a list of 124 topics, which, when grouped together by common theme and ranked by frequency, allowed the creation of the word cloud in Figure 1. It is immediately apparent that, with the exception of environmental issues, the majority of topics are overwhelmingly positive, or neutral at most. While many chapters included sections hinting at social issues, these were rather small and lacked meaningful tasks, or failed to go into much depth. All of these positive topics are certainly worth studying, and provide excellent opportunities to learn new vocabulary and phrases or grammar. However, educators also need to train students on more sensitive topics that will inevitably come up in discussions in real life situations.

Figure 1 Most common topics of study in general English textbooks



The challenge in broaching sensitive topics resides in finding meaningful ways to connect to, and extend on, the required textbook content, without taking too much time away from the curriculum’s English program. PSAs and CRM advertisements are typically very short, and thus easy to study in full during class time, while at the same time containing optimised communication about their content. The texts or dialogues used on posters and commercials are typically short and designed to maximise impact. All these features make them excellent tools for short, yet engaging, classroom activities.

Table 1 provides a list of possible social issues that could be discussed in class, based on their connection to some of the standard textbook topics detailed above. These are useful not only because of their intrinsic interest as social issues, but also because, while they are global issues, they are not necessarily often discussed in every culture. For instance, the issue of domestic violence is often prominent in the public debate in Western Europe, but rarely talked about in Japan. The issue is nonetheless present in Japan, as much as in every other society globally, and it is therefore useful and valuable for students to be able to learn, reflect and communicate about it.

Table 1 Examples of Textbook Topics With Matching PSA or CRM Area

Textbook Topic	Issue seen through PSA or CRM
Work, jobs, career	Gender gap
Daily life	Homelessness
Relationships	LGBTQ+ / SOGI Family
Family	Domestic violence
Education	Illiteracy
Travel	Road safety, drink driving
Health	Breast cancer / Tobacco / Alcohol

The very fact that all those issues are global issues is actually one of the key benefits to the approach explained here. Students already know about the issues and will be able to understand the PSA or CRM very quickly, even if these are not in their native language, thanks to the simple nature of the advertising message. This would not be the case with other kinds of authentic materials such as newspapers, magazines, or blog articles.

There are a number of possible ways to integrate the study of PSAs in the language classroom. One way would be to first allow the class to brainstorm, or discuss in small groups, what they know about the social issue. After that, students would analyse a range of foreign PSAs, ideally in small groups, and report their findings to the class or to their peers. Having many groups work on different sets of PSAs and then share them with the class will allow students to be exposed to a wide range of advertising messages about the chosen social issue, and how this issue is represented or communicated about in foreign countries. This should then be followed by individual or group reflections on the way the same issue is dealt with in the local society. Finally, it is always interesting to debate whether the communication strategies used in foreign-produced PSA or CRM could be used effectively locally. Ultimately, this type of activity can provide two significant learning benefits to the students. The first one is obviously language-related, whereby using a highly effective communication medium helps students use L2 extensively, with vocabulary and phrases that are often similar to the ones learned in the matching topics from their textbooks. The second one is to provide them with a way to engage in meaningful discussion about potentially sensitive topics which may be difficult to

broach otherwise. Hopefully this approach can genuinely broaden the students' horizons, and provide them a better understanding of social issues, both in their home country and abroad.

Conclusion

Discussing sensitive topics in the classroom can be both beneficial and challenging. On the one hand, it can promote critical thinking, empathy, and understanding, and prepare students for real-world scenarios. On the other hand, it can also be emotionally charged and lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. Educators need to be careful in planning and facilitating discussions on sensitive topics. They should be aware of students' backgrounds and comfort levels, and create a safe space for discussion. The English language can be used to challenge and reflect the social realities of its users, and this can create a safe space for discussing sensitive topics.

Public service announcements (PSAs) and cause-related marketing (CRM) advertisements can be used to teach students about sensitive topics in a safe and engaging way. These advertisements are typically short, engaging, and easy to understand, making them a good way to introduce students to complex issues. Using them in class can help students learn about sensitive topics in a way that is not too overwhelming. They can also learn about how the issue is dealt with in foreign cultures and compare this with their own culture. In addition to learning about sensitive topics, students can also develop their language skills by analysing PSAs and CRM advertisements. They can learn new vocabulary and phrases related to the issue, as well as how to discuss the issue in a clear and concise way. Overall, using PSAs and CRM advertisements to teach students about sensitive topics is a valuable approach that can help them learn about important issues and develop their language skills.

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