



TeachingEnglish

British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers
of English



Episode 1: How can I integrate global issues into my teaching?

Transcript



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Duration: 0:27:28

Chris Sowton: Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work. Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to relevant websites.

In our first episode we will try to answer the question 'How can I integrate global issues into my teaching?' In our first 'From the field' report we hear about climate change in another podcast recently made by the British Council. And later on, we'll be talking to this episode's guest about another serious global issue, drug addiction.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, took place in November 2021. As one of their initiatives for this conference, the British Council created a podcast called the Climate Connection, which examined the relationship between the climate crisis and language education. To date, the podcast has been downloaded thousands of times by people in more than a hundred countries. Many of the listeners to the Climate Connection have been classroom teachers eager to understand more about these issues and keen to develop a strategy to talk more about the climate crisis more effectively in their classrooms. Across the ten episodes, four key themes emerged about how this can be done successfully. In the first half of today's episode, I'll introduce some short extracts from the Climate Connection, which highlight these particular themes. The first theme which we'll hear about is that children and young people can be powerful and effective agents of change and that we should not underestimate them.

So we'll now hear Feten discussing Tunisia, Chris talking about Togo, and Jouja reflecting more globally about this issue.

Feten Abdelmalak: I am an English teacher. As a teacher I'm aware of the climate change and plan to include this topic in our lesson plan and in our project works with learners. So, it's our responsibility to raise their awareness by the environmental issues. That's why, from the beginning we teach them how to solve big problems with mere habits, and to encourage their parents to be engaged to using eco-friendly substitutes such as paper and cloth bags instead of plastics. They have to be aware, and that's our duty to save nature and stop abusing Earth.

Chris Graham: So basically the project was around educating primary students to go home (I use the word educate) to educate Mum and Dad about plastic bag use and they've actually seen an impact apparently now taxis, have a container because traditionally people would go shopping, sort their shopping out in the taxi and throw their plastic bag out the window. Now there's a container in the taxi where the bags can be put, rather than being thrown out the window so it's actually seeing direct behaviour change as a result of English language education.

Jouja Maamri: Climate education isn't just important because it helps young people understand how they can, sort of, adapt their own lives in response to the climate crisis but it's also because young people are going to be the people who are going to be coming up with the solutions - hopefully - to solve some aspects of this crisis and so I think it needs to be really empowering and young people need to feel like they can be part of the solution and that really starts in the classroom.

Chris Sowton: The second theme we came across was that in order to help students understand wider global issues, teachers can use local issues as a 'way in'. To tell us more about this are Aleksandra and first up, Stephen talking about the very local – a project where students are each given their own plant to look after in their classroom.

Stephen Heppell: We've made them put the plants in a white pot, because we know how important light is, and I'll come to light in a minute but, you know, the plants are absorbing light for photosynthesis so if it's a white pot, they're reflecting light back into the room. But we make each child name their plant, and there's something about it's *your* plant, you know, they get really excited when their spider plant's having babies. You know, you can get quite, sort of flustered, about it all and they, but they've got skin in the game and we've had kids who've been poor attenders who once they've got their own plant, you know, find themselves coming in because they've got family in the room.

Aleksandra: There is this text about tropical rainforests being cut down at a terrible speed. Can we do it and then think about that, maybe we can have a project connected with this topic, but the project that is going to lead from this informing through changing attitudes to teaching specific skills, and then taking action. Because we can find links between what is going on in the tropical rainforest in the Amazon in South America, with what is going on in my backyard. Are there any trees cut down because they are constructing a new road in my area? Or just yesterday I

read a brilliant article about a man who stopped the desertification process in Sahel, by employing traditional, very old techniques. So, we can find, kind of, parallel issues in our local area.

Chris Sowton: Clearly, it's crucial that students learn about global issues in the classroom, and the language classroom is a particularly good place where this can happen. However, to understand these issues on a deeper level, students need to get out of their classrooms and into their communities, as we learnt from Caroline, Scott and Angela.

Caroline: So, Eco Awareness Day a few weeks ago, and invited young people, it was young people organised, they spent a year organising it, which was brilliant, and they were getting the children wild swimming, cooking food, digging gardens, lots of practical, engaged, and all of the whole of the Upper School was involved in this. So what was brilliant about this was it wasn't an add-in to the curriculum, everybody was involved for the day, all the teachers and all the children.

Scott Thornbury: When you say rewilding I'm reminded of the initiative that a number of Scandinavian Language Learning in the Wild project where people go out into the street with a particular task. I mean this is learning a language like Icelandic or Finnish or whatever, and they, they prepare for these tasks they go out, they do the tasks they take photos on their phones of the core interactions, they're having with people in the wild, as it were, and they bring these back to the classroom, and this is essentially the material of the course but it's very contextualised, and it's very interactive. I'm not suggesting that's the only way to learn the language through immersion for example, but the fact that people can do it suggests that we should be thinking of methodologies which are more immersive, as it were, in their approach.

Angela: Our programmes we're trying to inspire, and support or to encourage more people to learn about nature, to understand nature and its benefits, and its connection with other human beings. So for the English class that teaching curriculum, we try to integrate the nature education curriculum into indoor classes. Meanwhile, we also try to integrate the English learning with nature camps, so we take our students with both kids and their parents into the nature so our courses that the students to understand the nature, like some plants, animals and ecosystems and our heritage.

Chris Sowton: The fourth and final key theme which emerged was the importance of engaging students' imagination. To gain a fuller and deeper understanding of global issues, students should reflect critically on the world around them, and realise that everyone can make a difference, however small. Angelica, Kieran and Rose tell us more.

Angelica: And the idea here is to really connect children to nature because as the younger generation is, they're going to be the stewards of our planet, we really want to foster that sense of love and wonder and connection with nature.

So what we're doing is, we're following nature's lifecycle and introducing the Content Language Learning based on the lifecycle of edible fruit and vegetable plants. So throughout the projects, there's a very strong hands-on sensory component so children are learning in a contextualised environment where they're actually getting to grow the seeds of their knowledge, so to speak.

Kieran: An example of one of these frameworks, would be See, Think, Wonder, which is a visible thinking routine which was developed at Harvard Graduate School by teacher researchers, and this is a very, very simple routine which can be used with any image, and essentially there are three questions that the teacher asked the students. So perhaps if we think of just one image and probably an image which all of the listeners will know so it's the image of a polar bear clinging on to an iceberg, and so we could say to the students, what do you see? And the students would say what they see and they'd say they see a polar bear on an iceberg and then the next question is what do you think? And you said well I think this may be the result of climate change because and the students give their answer, and they say, what do you wonder? I say I wonder what's going to happen to the polar bear: did the polar bear survive? Did the polar bear manage to get where it was going? Did it the polar bear get any food? I wonder why we don't do more to try to counteract climate change? So this would just be a one example of a very simple routine that we could use and as I said, this can be applied in any context.

Rose: We have to counter the idea of, sort of, learned helplessness, this idea that we can't make a difference because everyone can make a difference. You know, we can do this on a personal level, we can do it on an institutional level, we can do it in all sorts of different areas of our lives.

Chris Sowton: You can find out more about the Climate Connection by looking in our show notes, or by visiting www.britishcouncil.org/climate-connection. The podcast can be downloaded here and is also available via your usual podcast provider or the Teaching English website. They are also available on YouTube.

I am now delighted to introduce our guest for this episode: Fadidac Jules. Fadidac is a languages teacher from Cameroon, in West Africa, and is currently based in the UK studying for his masters degree in TESOL. Fadidac is going to share with us his thoughts about a range of global issues. And I should say that in our conversation, we do talk about violence and drug addiction. Welcome, Fadidac.

Fadidac Jules: Thank you, Chris.

Chris Sowton: So Fadidac, we've just heard lots of different ideas about how we can teach language through the climate crisis. What are your reflections on this and what ideas have you personally used in the classroom?

Fadidac Jules: Well, these are excellent ideas on how we can address the climate crisis from the classroom. And especially from a language classroom, which at first glance may

appear not to be directly involved or have anything to do with climate change. I particularly love the idea of using local issues as the way in. You know, most often we have the wrong assumption that the climate crisis is limited to issues that affect the world on a large scale: we expect to hear about rising levels of waters and flood sweeping across cities or countries, we expect to hear about a long period of drought in a country, causing food scarcity and hunger on a large scale enough to call it climate crisis. However, what happens on a large scale is a result of what happened in each locality, and the climate crisis is a sum total of actions affecting nature locally. So creating awareness in learners, which is one of the ideas listed by the previous speakers, creating awareness of local issues as trivial or as small as they may appear to be, is a starting point to engage the learners into thinking about what is happening around them and to subsequently translate that thinking into what is happening in the larger community, in their regions in their country and the world at large. So engaging students imagination is an activity that I find very interesting and useful in the classroom. It provides an opportunity for students to think and come up with new and unique ideas.

Chris Sowton: And climate crisis is obviously just one global issue that we can use to teach languages. What other global issues have you personally used in order to teach English?

Fadidac Jules: I've tried drug addiction in the classroom and waste management. I know drug addiction is a major area of concern for teenagers and students, you will be surprised to find out how much experience they have of substance abuse. Two years ago in Cameroon, Cameroonians were shocked by a series of killings in schools, you know, related to drugs. A 14 years old student stabbed his teacher to death. The next day, another student cut off the fingers of his classmates and a student stabbed another student to death. Why did they not die from drug abuse or drug overdose? These gruesome incidents were indirectly linked to drug abuse in the school. From my findings, drug addiction is a crisis affecting every part of the world. So I decided to address the issue in a series of lessons with my students. I remember a task, for example, I put students in groups to brainstorm on pictures related to drugs, and to share their reflections and personal experiences if any, you know on the issue. And I was surprised at how much they knew and their experiences with drugs, some had taken drugs at one point in their lives, others knew a relative, a friend, a neighbourhood kid addicted to drugs. At the end of the lesson the students integrated a previously taught grammar lesson on declarative and negative sentences to come up with an anti-drug manifesto, which they posted around their classroom. They made declarations like: we are aware the problem is real, we are conscious of our responsibility, we're fighting against it, we pledge to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, we pledge to avoid peer pressure in all its form, we pledge to encourage our friends suffering from drug addiction to seek for help, we pledge not to shame our friends suffering from drug addiction. And the series of statements, the series of declarations, which made up the manifesto and we posted in the classroom to remind us to know that this is actually a real problem. So that's, that's an example of an activity of a global issue that I taught in my classroom and

later on, you know, wrote an article on that, that was published by the IATEFL Global Issues Special Interest Group.

Chris Sowton: And in that article, Fadidac, you ask a series of questions like: is it really my business? Why should I care? Shouldn't it be the responsibility of parents to teach their children about drugs? So why did you feel it was your responsibility as an English language teacher to do that?

Fadidac Jules: I realise that even though it is not part of the curriculum, official curriculum that we have to teach, but it is an issue affecting learners and good enough for the past in seven years, the Cameroonian government introduced, a curriculum in secondary schools and English language, it is organised in models, and it is the model that has to do with children's rights, it has to do with environment and other global issues doing drugs are not really identified in the model. But if it is an issue, that should be addressed. So on my own level, I felt that it is my responsibility as a teacher to address issues affecting students. It shouldn't just only be on grammar, on vocabulary, but the grammar and the vocabulary should be related, to their daily experiences to their day happiness, to issues affecting their lives. That's what I thought this was a time to address this issue before we hear of another person dying in my own school, or because of drugs.

Chris Sowton: And how did your students respond, Fadidac, to this? Did they respond positively to it? And also, what about their parents? How did they feel when you were raising the issues of drugs within the language classroom?

Fadidac Jules: They responded very, very positively. In fact, it was quite an amazing experience. Because their reaction was much less expected, I thought it will be something that will really stretch them I thought will be something that would not be related to, but because it was happening around the country I thought it was time to raise that issue. But to my surprise, the students had experienced that. And when I get the room to express their experiences, it was shocking. To learn from students aged 15, 16, 17 the fact that they have been taking drugs, that they have been in on drugs or that they've had an experience more than once with drugs. Now, parents, on the other hand, I can't actually tell because we don't have the opportunity to deal with parents on daily basis, especially the parents of the students that we teach. But as a parent also, I want to believe that their parents who have also a positive attitude towards raising this issue in the classroom because there are issues that can, of course, affect their students, their children.

Chris Sowton: And did you feel that your students were more willing to talk about these issues in a second language rather than in their first language?

Fadidac Jules: Definitely. They were very willing even though they had challenges with the language, especially at the level of speaking because most of these issues, the way actually integrated in a speaking activity, despite the shortcomings in spoken English, they were willing to speak. They were willing to open up, they were willing to share their

experience at a particular level, and I let go of error corrections or giving feedback on the language structures that they were using, I just let them express what they were feeling. Some even resorted to pidgin language, which is the lingua franca around to express your experience especially when it came to naming the various drugs that they experience they used the local name and to me it was fine. The issue was I wanted them to speak out what to do and see what what they think about drug abuse and drug addiction in the classroom or in their, in their life rather.

Chris Sowton: And have you seen a positive impact in their daily lives? Sort of following this series of lessons that you did with them?

Fadidac Jules: Definitely, especially as we posted the manifesto around the classroom, you know, each time I'd get to the classroom and even though we were discussing on a different topic by the end of the lesson I always take one or two minutes to point them to the manifesto and ask them if things have changed and ask them if they have a different opinion or a different attitude towards drugs. According to their manifesto to ask them if they're actually living out, living out the declarations they made and which is visible in that classroom. So from time to time, I actually try to evaluate how far they've gone with that issue. And of course, some, most of them, they hade drugs just one time and some vow never to try to again. Some said it was a terrible experience, it was a horrible experience and they are not really ready to try that any time in their lives.

Chris Sowton: Sometimes these global issues can feel very big or almost impossible to resolve or too depressing. How can we manage these challenges within the classroom? How can we approach the issue responsibly as teachers?

Fadidac Jules: One thing I want teachers to understand is that global issues, issues that are experienced differently in any given context. And the best way to collaborate or the ideal way to collaborate is to identify issues that are affecting one's own context. You've got to be on an issue that the teacher and his or her students are experiencing in their community. For example, when we're talking about global warming, that's a global issue. But it is a vast topic that can be discussed from several angles, and each region in the world experiences differently. So it will be less effective than an English lesson in Mali, or Senegal or my country, Cameroon, for example, to dwell on, let's say the Arctic region and the melting of the ice and the consequences for polar bears. That's not the reality of the learners in a given context. On the contrary, it will be very effective to talk about the expansion of the Sahara Desert, for example, or to talk about drought which are issues that learners may be experiencing. So identifying a global issue and focusing on how the issue is fought and experienced locally, and how it affects one's local context is to me, one of the ideal ways to go about global issues or to integrate global issues in the classroom and not feel overwhelmed by the issues.

Chris Sowton: And sometimes I guess as well, teachers should feel confident to go beyond their textbook. So sometimes if they're using very general course books, for example, there may be stories about polar bears in the Arctic, which aren't relevant for

that context, and teachers should feel confident to go beyond the materials which they are given.

Fadidac Jules: Definitely. Teachers, teachers will contextualise whatever resources they are using, be it a textbook, they should contextualise it and make it relevant to their own context. It can always be adapted.

Chris Sowton: And I guess as well in the context you're talking about in Cameroon if you want to talk about drought and desertification and so on, then students have very good resources in their parents or their grandparents who have a longer memory of these issues and they can be brought into the language learning process as well.

Fadidac Jules: Definitely. I remember the class on tsunami, we're reading a text on tsunami which is something that is not within the student's context. But then I wanted them to be aware that something like tsunami happens so we didn't dwell much on that. But I asked them to go back home and find out from their parents how the climate in Bamenda, that's the region where I teach, was some years backward. And what time people were expecting that the rains will come and what time during the day, it was, it was certain that at this particular time is going to be rain. So I asked them to ask from their parents how it was some years back and try to compare their findings and their experiences on what is happening, you know, at that particular moment, at the end of that experience, we have different answers. And they were able to see oh, our parents do all that in Bamenda. It was very certain that between 12 o'clock at 1pm was certainly going to rain in the rainy season, but now it's very uncertain if it's going to rain at that particular moment. Someone said oh, my parents said it was very certain by, by the 15th of March, or between the 15th and 23rd of March the rains were supposed to come back because by the 15th they are already planting, they are already farming, but now they are not too sure. There are times that the rains will come back in February, there are times that the rain will come back late March, sometimes in April. So these are actually issues affecting the climate, but which are relevant to the learners' context.

Chris Sowton: And it's also that these young people are going to be the ones responsible for dealing with these issues in the future as well. So they need to prepare themselves for that at this point in time.

Fadidac Jules: Definitely.

Chris Sowton: Fadidac, thank you very much for your time.

Fadidac Jules: Thank you very much, Chris.

Chris Sowton: It's clear that the language classroom can provide many opportunities to talk about important issues, such as the climate crisis, drug addiction and violence, as well as issues such as poverty, migration, hunger and sexuality. And whilst it may not always be easy to talk about these issues, it's important that young people have the

opportunity to discuss such things in the safe space of the classroom. Thank you for listening to the first episode of Teaching English with the British Council. We hope you enjoyed it. Please do like, subscribe and review. And please remember to download the show notes and transcript. Join us next time, for episode 2, where we will try to answer the question: *How can I make my teaching gender-fair?* Until then, goodbye.

The 'Teaching English with the British Council' podcast launches as COP26, the crucial UN climate change conference, draws to an end. In our first episode, we explore how teachers can effectively integrate teaching global issues in the language classroom. Initially, we'll examine this question from the perspective of one of the most pressing global issues of our time, namely the climate crisis, in particular the British Council's podcast series The Climate Connection. We'll then interview Fadidac Jules Champrien, a young and dynamic Cameroonian educator, about how teachers in any context and any situation can use language teaching as a way of raising global issues.