

## Making Global Issues Local

As a materials writer and teacher trainer, and one who is particularly interested in Global Issues, I have often been asked why coursebooks always seem to include the same GI topics and why these topics are nearly always dealt with in such broad terms. To be honest, this complaint – that most coursebooks are too generic and do not address local needs and issues – is usually levelled at all aspects of coursebooks. However, as most of these coursebooks are written for an ‘International market’ this is not really a surprise. What does surprise me is that writers, trainers and teachers themselves have not done more to address how these materials could be made more local in context.

I think one of the problems is in the very name Global Issues itself. Although these issues are global one of the most important aspects about them is that they are local as well, or at least there are local consequences. If they weren’t, then their relevance and importance to students would be far less than it is. Maybe it is time for a more local focus on what is global and, to achieve this, only those people with local knowledge (usually the teacher and students) can really do much about it.

After all, what do generic issues such as *peace, justice and equality; human rights and social responsibility; globalization and world development; social identity; and the role of the English language and English Language Teaching in the world*<sup>1</sup>, really have to do with individual students in individual classes around the world? Sure, if you ask students if they think these topics are important or interesting they will usually say ‘Yes’. (Although I have heard more than one student groan when the next topic in the coursebook has been *Pollution* or *Women’s roles* etc). But how relevant is ‘*Smog in LA*’ or ‘*Tigers near extinction*’ or ‘*Fairtrade – what’s on your shelves*’<sup>2</sup> to students studying English in Spain or Poland or Argentina or Hong Kong or many other countries in the world?

However, these topics, and the way they are dealt with in coursebooks, often provide an excellent way into looking at more local issues. I have found that once you localize the topic and issue there is so much more you can do with it. In fact, you can almost generate an entire course simply from one topic. So, how do you go about localizing a Global Issue?

Let’s take two very common Global Issues – *Endangered animals* and *Natural resources* – and look at how we could localize these issues.

### *Endangered animals*

Almost all the lessons I have come across in coursebooks focus on one of three animals; The Giant Panda, Tigers or Rhinoceros. Beautiful animals, no doubt. Endangered, no doubt. But how meaningful are these animals to the majority of our students? And, why exactly should students care about animals becoming extinct? But, if students become aware of many of the factors underlying the issues of endangered animals, and these can

be linked in with their own daily lives, then the relevance of animals such as The Giant Panda or Rhinos becomes clearer.

Start your lesson by brainstorming the names of endangered animals (and/or follow some of the materials in the coursebook), where they live, why they are endangered – elicit ideas such as hunted/poached, destruction of environment etc. and write these all up on the board (using a spidergram can be a nice way of collating the information). If it hasn't already come up, raise the concept of the *Food Chain* and check your students understand it. Tell your students that you want them to look at these ideas and issues more closely, but this time on a local level.

Put your students in groups and ask them to think about where they live. Write up some focus questions on the board e.g. *Has the place you live changed in the last five/ten years? Are there more houses? More trees? Do farmers grow the same crops? Have farmers, or other people, changed the land?\** *Do you see the same animals? As many? Are there any new animals? Where did they come from? What impact are they having on the local wildlife?* etc. Give groups plenty of time to answer these questions and think of any other related questions/issues. Monitor, prompt and help (if you know of any local issues you may want to add those to the mix – but sometimes it's best to give students a free rein, otherwise every group ends up looking at the same things).

Depending on time, and availability of things such as the Internet etc, you can turn this into a project. Groups go away and research a particular aspect of the topic, in subsequent lessons a certain amount of time is devoted to groupwork where the individual members of each group can exchange information within their group. Finally, in a given lesson (or sequence of lessons), each group reports back on what they found out. This can be done through a variety of methods e.g. powerpoint slide show, poster, or even a lesson conducted by a group. For example, one group once 'taught' a lesson that included a reading text and a role play on the rights, wrongs and what should be done about the particular situation.

Initially using (some of) the material from the coursebook as a springboard into the topic often helps students think of some of the issues, as they usually include things they have already heard about.

### *Natural resources*

At the end of a lesson leave yourself about ten minutes. On the board write up the words *Natural resources* and brainstorm some examples. It might well be that one in particular is a local issue and you want to focus on that. However, if none of them strike you as locally relevant then choose one e.g. *water, oil/petrol* to focus on (In this particular example I've taken *Water* as my lesson focus). Then set the students some homework – to find out 5 facts about water (or whatever you have chosen as your focus).

In the next lesson put students into groups and ask them to make a 'factsheet' about water.

Then, on the board, write up the following questions: *How much water do you use every day? What do you use the water for? Is it all necessary? Do you ever try and 'save' water? How (what do you do)? What is the most important thing you use water for? Is there anything you do with water which is absolutely essential? If you were limited to only five litres per day what would you use it for?*<sup>3</sup> Ask students to discuss these

questions in their groups before asking a few students to report back on their discussion to the whole class.

Next, give students the choice; of designing a survey looking at water use, or thinking of five ways of saving water and how they would persuade people to carry out these water-saving measures. For the survey they should plan to ask at least five people the survey questions. For homework get students to interview five people and complete the survey. In the following class tell the students to collate their survey results and present them in the form of a chart or graph. Those who are looking at water-saving measures should discuss their ideas and think about the practicalities (they might even want to try out some of the ideas e.g. putting a brick in a plastic bag inside the cistern tank of the toilet, turning off the taps while brushing their teeth etc).

By making Global Issues local a number of things seem to happen. The first is that students become far more involved in the topic, often to the extent of the theme leading to a whole series of tasks and lessons. Another interesting phenomena is that the amount of language generated seems to far exceed that originally included in the coursebook lesson, and the language is often of more immediate use to the students. Finally, there is a practical aspect to these lessons. Rather than simply being English lessons, and a means of improving students language skills, the lessons can be a means of activating students and getting them to do something constructive in terms of a Glocal Issue<sup>4</sup>. In almost every area generic coursebooks can be localized, but when the topic is a Global Issue failure to do so is an opportunity missed to turn awareness into action.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This list was taken directly from the Global Issues website - <http://www.iatefl-gisig.org/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Although these are not actual headings from coursebook lessons they bear a close resemblance to many currently in print.

<sup>3</sup> Most sources state that a minimum of two litres of water is needed by each person per day for survival.

<sup>4</sup> Glocal – Global & Local

\* For example, a group might take a wading bird that used to be common in their area. They may note that farmers have drained fields that used to be wetlands in order to grow crops or graze cattle. By draining the wetlands the farmers have altered the environment and the habitat in which animals such as frogs and insects which the wading birds fed on lived.