

The Use of Ethics in the EFL Classroom

A 24-YEAR-OLD RUSSIAN STUDENT TOLD ME DURING OUR FIRST LESSON THAT HE suffered from “imagination problems.” When asked to write about a topic, he claimed it was impossible for him to write more than a few lines. He simply could not write about his family, his favourite film, or his activities last weekend. The next day, I asked him to write about whether it was acceptable to assassinate evil political leaders. He wrote twenty-four lines, and the remaining hour was spent in vigorous, but deeply enjoyable, debate. The problem was not his imagination but the uninspiring nature of his previous essay topics. More than mere boredom, the student suffered from low self-esteem because of his apparent inability to satisfy the quantitative requirements of written exercises. This is an important observation. Teachers must identify the reasons for the failure of students to achieve their goals, and these may well be extra-linguistic, such as lack of motivation.

One way to identify the reasons for failure is to ask each student: *Is the English too difficult? Do you find it interesting?* Asking such questions can help the teacher unearth the underlying cause of the problem. The EFL teacher's task, therefore, goes beyond that of teaching the fundamentals of English, just as a doctor's task requires more than focusing exclusively on the physical needs of the patient. The teacher must be sensitive to what excites and motivates students as well as to what might offend them or undermine their self-esteem. The student-teacher relationship can, after all, be a daunting one for students because of the power differential between them and their teachers. For all these reasons, the use of ethics cases as a methodology for English teaching can make a positive contribution to the EFL classroom.

To clarify, this article is not about the ethics of teaching but the teaching of English through ethics (a branch of philosophy that deals with questions of morality). As the case of the Russian student demonstrates, motivation is crucial in allowing students to express themselves in the classroom. I argue that carefully chosen ethics cases can motivate even timid students to speak out by removing their often excessive linguistic awareness and fear of committing errors and by encouraging their expression of heart-felt beliefs. One must agree with Chi-Kim Cheung (2001, 59) when he writes, "Teachers should present English in a way that allows students to interact with one another and to exchange information, attitudes, and feeling." Of course this can be approached through discussions on aspects of popular culture, but that presents the danger of segregating certain students who, for example, are not interested in computer games or are not cinema-goers. An ethics case is to some extent self-contained and does not require direct experience of the subject discussed. Even the reclusive student who has no hobbies whatsoever can participate in the discussion.

A sample lesson

Below is an ethics case that can be used in an elementary EFL class.

Helen, a 19-year-old woman, is severely ill. She is in hospital with a kidney disease. She currently uses a special machine that keeps her alive, but it is becoming less and less

effective. Her family members are tested to see if they can give one of their kidneys to Helen. The tests show that only one person can give her a kidney, her brother John. This would save her life, but John refuses to donate his kidney. He says that he has not been close to his sister in the past and that the risks to himself are too high. The doctor asks John to think again about his decision, since his sister will die soon without a kidney. Even after the discussion with the doctor, John still refuses to donate his kidney.

This case is based on a number of real-life scenarios, but it has been modified to suit the students' linguistic proficiency. A number of factual details have been left out, such as the success rate of kidney transplantation and John's slim probability of death in hospital. Also, difficult vocabulary (e.g., kidney dialysis machine) and complex grammatical structures have been removed or replaced. As long as the gist of the story remains, the teacher can modify the case at will, omitting details or even adding complications.

The teacher can incorporate certain types of linguistic elements (e.g., conditional *if/then* structures, anatomical lexical items) or choose to include material covered in previous lessons. In short, the ethically important elements must remain, but everything else can be shaped by the teacher's preferences. Yet for the teacher to leave the ethics of the case intact, he or she must first be aware of the major ethical issues! This exercise does not require specialist knowledge of moral philosophy, but it does require a few minutes of thoughtful reflection. What, for instance, can be said about the case of Helen and John?

The main ethical question is: Should John donate his kidney to Helen? The teacher should ask students to identify the arguments for and against. A rough sketch might be as follows.

Arguments for:

- a. Helen is John's sister. Family members have special obligations to each other.
- b. If John donates his kidney, he will save Helen's life. He will give his sister the most wonderful gift of all, the gift of life.
- c. John can quite easily help his dying sister. Not to do so would be wrong. Note

that this is incompatible with *b*, which uses the analogy of the “gift.” Failing to give a gift is not wrong, but giving one is particularly good. Philosophers will point to the distinction between obligatory acts (i.e., not doing them is morally wrong) and supererogatory acts (i.e., not doing them is *not* morally wrong, but doing them is particularly laudable). So *c* is a much stronger version than *b*.

- d. Donating the kidney will bring Helen and John closer together.
- e. If John were in Helen’s position, wouldn’t he want her to donate her kidney? (Teachers could refer to the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*)
- f. A “virtuous” person would probably donate a kidney to a close relative in need.

Arguments against:

- a. The kidney is situated in John’s body, which is his property. He therefore has the right to decide what to do with it.
- b. There is no obligation to a family member who is either not known by or is greatly disliked by the potential donor. Therefore, in response to “Helen is your sister,” John could legitimately say, “So what?”
- c. There is a low but real risk of death from an operation to remove John’s kidney. Therefore, John’s concern is valid and should be respected.
- d. There is also the risk of living with only one kidney. What if John has an accident or disease in the future which affects his one and only kidney? Again, John’s concern is a reasonable one and should be respected.
- e. Arguably, John’s donation would be supererogatory, so his refusal should not be deemed morally wrong.
- f. John lives in a society in which people are free to make their own decisions. There is no law forcing him to donate his kidney; he has the right to refuse the donation.

No doubt additional arguments exist on both sides. There is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. There may well be two or more

equally right answers. This is one way in which ethics cases differ from other games or problem-solving exercises used in EFL classrooms. They also differ in their relevance to the real world. The relevance of each case should be explained to the students, who will then situate the scenario within a “real world” context. The case of the kidney transplant, for instance, is highly pertinent at a time when thousands of people die in hospital for lack of available organs. In the absence of an absolutely “correct” answer, teachers must not forcefully impose their views onto students, although there is no reason why they may not express a preferred moral stance. Teachers should openly accept the plurality of opinions and acknowledge the complexity of many ethical issues.

Teachers can approach the case in a number of ways. They can use it as a springboard for general discussion or as a reading comprehension or writing exercise. If they choose the latter, they can ask students to write letters from particular perspectives, such as:

- *You are the doctor. Write a short letter to John explaining why it is important for him to donate his kidney.*
- *You are John. Write a short letter to the doctor explaining why you refuse to donate your kidney.*

(My experience suggests that the second answer will be shorter than the first one.) Whatever the chosen activity, teachers must play devil’s advocate to cover all aspects of the problem and encourage debate. Good points should be congratulated, weaker ones challenged.

Caveats

Although the use of ethics cases in the classroom can foster critical thinking and give students the confidence to speak out, there are some caveats. Cases which directly involve individual students should be avoided. For example, teachers should not ask students to discuss the acceptability of assassinating tyrannical leader X if anyone in the class lives in a country ruled by X (or might have relatives there). Likewise, a case in which a Jehovah’s Witness declines a life-saving blood transfusion is best left alone if one of the students is of that faith. Indeed, teachers should select cases unlikely to offend anyone. The desire for

a heated debate should not eliminate common sense. Although permitted to express personal opinions, teachers must act as moderators and, as such, prevent the build-up of tensions within the class. Healthy disagreement must not be allowed to escalate into hostility.

Sources of ethics cases

Teachers can find ethics cases in newspapers, books, ethics journals, or on the Internet. Ethics journals include: *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *Bioethics*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, and *Criminal Justice Ethics*. A useful website containing a wide range of cases can be found at: <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/resources/cases/HomeOverview.asp>. And many national newspapers have on-line searchable archives allowing the teacher to retrieve articles that could be used to supplement a discussion. The case of the Siamese twins in England in 2000, for instance, in which surgery was needed to save one twin at the cost of the other has been extensively documented. See, for example, articles by Gillon (2001) and English et al (2001). Ethical issues can be found in all kinds of fields, including personal/social, military, academics, and business fields. Students can also be encouraged to bring their own cases to be discussed in class.

Conclusion

The use of ethics cases can make an important contribution to the teaching of English

across all levels. The malleability of case presentations allows teachers to incorporate desired linguistic features and to conduct an array of linguistic activities. The pedagogical applications of a case range from straightforward reading comprehension exercises to more complex essay-writing exercises. Moreover, the realistic and pertinent nature of ethical problems avoids the somewhat contrived elements of many other EFL activities. The focus on practical moral issues blurs the conceptual divide between student and teacher by placing both parties on an equal moral plane, and it encourages debate whilst loosening inhibitions. In addition, the use of ethics cases develops critical thinking skills readily transferable to other areas of a student's life, both in and out of the classroom.

References

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