

Teaching Politically Correct Language

The importance of teaching EFL students politically correct English is no longer argued. Students who study English as a foreign language today should be aware of the importance of efforts towards inclusiveness and acceptance of diverse lifestyles and ethnicities in English-speaking cultures. This issue is important for those who want to be able to function in English-speaking academic and business settings. Teaching politically correct language in the English classroom not only provides important information for learners but also gives them an opportunity to become aware of important cultural issues.

Historical roots of political correctness

Politically correct speech became a matter of hot debate in the 1980s, when many native speakers of English became sensitive to biased terms and phrases that exist in the language. In the previous decade, activists of the feminist movement made the first attempts to diminish differences between men and women in society. They criticized the existing language

and culture as “male-dominated” and “patriarchal.” The history of society, as the feminists argued, was written from the male point of view (“it’s HIStory, not HERstory”).

The English language was also considered to be full of male-dominating patterns. Utterances like *Every teacher plans his lessons* referred to teachers in general, and words with the stem “man” (e.g., *mankind*, *chairman*) were used to denote both sexes. Feminists criticized these items as sexist; all patterns referring to men only were called “sexist, old-fashioned language.” Sexist language was opposed by “modern non-sexist or inclusive language” that suggested gender equality and neutrality.

Inclusive language suggested avoiding the use of male pronouns in the cases when the gender of a person is unknown. Utterances like *Every student has to pass his exams* were replaced by phrases such as *All students have to pass their exams* or *Every student has to pass his or her exams*. Today we can even see the phrase *Every student has to pass their exams*—which violates traditional rules of subject-verb agreement

but conforms to new rules of gender neutrality. General terms containing the segment *man*, such as *mankind* and *man-made*, were made inclusive by using synonyms such as *humankind* and *artificial*.

Later, the names of jobs and occupations were revised to become sexually neutral. Speakers of English have found new ways to avoid sex markers: *flight attendant* (since the terms *steward* and *stewardess* are no longer used), *sales person* (salesman and saleswoman have been outlawed), *police officer* (instead of policeman) and *chairperson* or *chair* (instead of chairman) (Zabotkina 1989).

While teaching politically correct language, a teacher should clearly differentiate between sexist language, pejorative language and taboo language. *Sexist language* is a term that labels the use of male-dominated phrases suggesting that members of one sex are less able, intelligent, and skillful (the examples cited above); *pejorative language* is the use of words or phrases disapproving or suggesting that something is no good or of no importance (labeling nationalities, aged people, etc.); *taboo language* includes words or phrases which are likely to offend somebody—certain words referring to sex or sexual organs, excretion, and people's nationality or race can be particularly offensive. (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English* 1995). Avoiding these words and phrases means using politically correct language.

Aspects of political correctness

In the late 1980s, the rules of political correctness (PC) began to be applied to a broad range of issues—such as race, age, sexual orientation, abilities. As people became sensitive to bias on the basis of race, gender, age, and sexual orientation, they tried to minimize the negative impact of language that reflected these biases.

The tendency toward “deracialization” in English provided new names for nationalities and ethnic groups. The words *Negro*, *colored*, and *Afro-American* were replaced by *African American*; *Oriental* or *Asiatic* became *Asian* or more specific designations such as *Pacific Islander*, *Chinese American*, *Korean*. *Indian*, a term that refers to people who live in or come from India, was differentiated from terms used for the native peoples of North America such as *American Indian*, *Native American*, or more specific terms like *Chinook* or *Hopi*.

Changing attitudes about aging made people aware of words that reinforce stereotypes (*decrepit*, *senile*) and the need to avoid mentioning age unless it's relevant. Terms like *elderly*, *aged*, *old*, and *geriatric* were replaced by *older person*, *senior citizens* or *seniors* (Zabotkina 1989).

New non-pejorative terms began to be used to name people with disabilities or illnesses. Blind people were called *visually challenged*; the deaf were called *people with hearing impairments*. The terms *challenged*, *differently abled* and *special* were coined to describe people with clinical diagnoses or mental disabilities. Today these words and word combinations are preferred by some people, but they are often ridiculed and are best avoided (Zabotkina 1989).

Tasks for teaching political correctness

The subject of politically correct English links historical, cultural, social, and linguistic issues. Since it also addresses current language usage, it appeals to language learners and teachers engaged in the study of English as it is actually used by native speakers today. Thus, politically correct English can be an interesting and useful subject of study for the ESL or EFL classroom. The tasks that follow can be used in the ELT classroom to help fairly advanced students explore this topic.

Warm-up activity

1. Ask your students to identify issues that people are especially sensitive to (they may name gender, age, ethnicity or nationality, religion, physical appearance).
2. Show your students pictures of different people and ask them what these people are sensitive to, what language strategies they can use to avoid offending these people. Present examples and suggestions on the board. Identify patterns, e.g., dropping *-ess* from *authoress*, *manageress*, *actress*, replacing *-man/men* with *person/people*, etc.

Task 1

The following phrases use sexist language. Rewrite them to make them inclusive.

1. A teacher should be tolerant with his students.
2. A child needs the love of his parents.

3. An actress is usually nervous before the show.
4. Mary is a camerawoman.
5. The committee elected a chairman.
6. Man is destroying our planet.
7. Today man-made fibers are used for manufacturing stockings.
8. This substance is not known to man.

Task 2

Although well known, the following proverbs are not politically correct. Try to change them.

1. Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
2. He who cannot obey cannot command.
3. A man's home is his castle.
4. Every man has his hobbyhorse.
5. He is happy that thinks himself so.

Task 3

Column A represents traditional names for different races and nationalities, and column B gives the politically correct version. Match the names from column A with column B.

| A | B |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Oriental | a. Native Australians |
| 2. Colored | b. Native Hawaiians |
| 3. Australian Aborigines | c. Asian |
| 4. Torres Strait Islanders | d. Caucasians |
| 5. Whites | e. African Americans |

Task 4

Many people are sensitive about their abilities, age, culture, and appearance. Make the following phrases sound inoffensive to the persons being spoken about.

1. She is looking after her insane mother.
2. The program offers long-term care for the elderly and immediate care for the mentally retarded.
3. A new clinic for the care of geriatrics is being proposed.
4. He is as blind as a bat.
5. My neighbor is as deaf as a post.

6. Jane is an emotional cripple.
7. Fat people need to go on diets.

(See Appendix for answers to Tasks 1–4.)

Tasks for further investigation

The movement for political correctness has both supporters and critics. This makes it a good topic for discussions, debates, and other exercises in critical thinking skills. Below are several topics for further investigation or discussion. They may not be familiar or appropriate for all settings, but they may help teachers think of politically correct issues that would be relevant to their students.

1. *Terms referring to racial, ethnic, or indigenous groups of people.* Sensitivity toward race and ethnicity is also reflected in language changes that have been motivated by political correctness. For example, in most common usage today *Asian* has replaced *Oriental*. However, there is not always universal agreement or understanding about which terms are favored, polite, or neutral in a particular setting. For example, some people prefer to use the term *Native American* while others prefer *American Indian*, and still others prefer *First Americans*.

Have your students design and conduct a survey of their classmates, neighbors, and friends who represent various racial and ethnic groups to collect information about this issue. Then, they can report their findings to the class.

2. *Terms used to disguise unpleasantness.* In an attempt to mask the truth or to hide unpleasant realities, governments or other special interest groups sometimes create euphemisms or expressions to put a more positive light on a situation. If *blind* sounds offensive, substitute *visually challenged*. *Genocide* may be referred to as *ethnic cleansing*. Sometimes, the new terms seem awkward, funny, or even offensive. Again, there is unlikely to be agreement on whether such terms are good or not. Consider this opinion from Dr. Kenneth Jernigan (1999), a leader for more than 40 years in the National Federation of the Blind in the United States:

The blind have had trouble with euphemisms for as long as anybody can remember.... The form has changed (in fact, everything is very “politically correct”), but the old notions of inferiority and second-class

status still remain. The euphemisms and the political correctness don't help. If anything, they make matters worse since they claim modern thought and new enlightenment.

Jernigan (1999) quotes a resolution passed by the National Federation of the Blind that says that using politically correct euphemisms instead of "such straightforward, respectable words as *blindness*, *blind*, *the blind*, *blind person*, or *blind persons*... implies shame instead of true equality, and portrays the blind as touchy and belligerent."

Ask your students: Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Jernigan? Explain why. Have students try to find other similar examples of euphemistic speech.

3. *Political correctness in languages other than English.* Politically correct changes are also occurring in languages other than English as a reflection of growing tolerance, inclusion, and other changes in modern societies.

Ask your students: What examples of politically correct speech can you identify in the native languages of your classmates or community? Have students create a list of examples.

4. *PC point of view.* Write the statements below on the blackboard.

- a. PC speech is an important issue in modern society and reflects a growing respect for others.
- b. PC speech is just a form of conformism and does not represent a meaningful change in attitudes.

Ask your students which of the two points of view most closely reflects their opinions. Ask them to explain, giving examples to support their opinions.

Conclusion

Politically correct changes are occurring in English (and in many other languages) as a reflection of the ideas of tolerance and inclusion. In order to produce competent users of English, we owe it to our students to explore this phenomenon and to give them opportunities to become proficient users of tolerant and inclusive terms in particular situations.

References

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Zabotkina V. I. 1989. *New lexis of modern English.* Moscow: Vysshya Shkola.

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APPENDIX | ANSWER KEY FOR EXERCISES

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Task 1

1. Teachers should be tolerant with their students.
2. A child needs the love of his/her parents.
3. Actors are usually nervous before the show.
4. Mary is a camera operator.
5. The committee elected a chair.
6. Humans are destroying our planet.
7. Today artificial fibers are used for manufacturing stockings.
8. This substance is not known to the human race.

Task 2

1. Early to bed and early to rise makes people healthy, wealthy, and wise.
2. A person who cannot obey cannot command.
3. Humans' homes are their castles.
4. Everyone has his or her hobbyhorse.
5. They are happy that think themselves so.

Task 3

1c, 2e, 3a, 4b, 5d

Task 4

1. She is looking after her *mentally challenged* mother.
2. The program offers long-term care for *senior citizens* and immediate care for the *developmentally challenged*.
3. A new clinic for the care of *older people* is being proposed.
4. He is *visually challenged*.
5. My neighbor *has hearing impairments*.
6. Jane finds it difficult *to express her feelings*.
7. *Overweight* people need to go on diets.