Peace studies and EFL - providing critical outlooks and skills in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world

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Peace Studies and EFL – providing critical outlooks and skills in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world

Daniel Tang

Abstract: This essay describes the way Peace Studies and EFL is emerging as a crucial field of learning. It argues that Peace Studies presents critical political and pedagogical viewpoints effectively and efficiently. This view complements the Japanese government's push to globalize universities; however, this globalization initiative is itself founded against an increasing backdrop of conservatism in Japan and abroad. Thus Peace Studies and EFL has the opportunity to occupy a unique place that explores the connections between Japanese and international politics, war and peace, and the language needed to navigate such an important course.

Introduction

Everything is politics, said the Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann. In contemporary society, more so than ever, this seems to be true. On January 26 Mikhail Gorbachev said “it all looks as if the world is preparing for war” (TIME, 2017). American President Donald Trump has declared the need for a larger and stronger nuclear arsenal (Trump, 2016). Conservatism is on the rise, and it seems, globalism and tolerance is on the retreat. In Japan, traditions of pacifism remain strong, but debate continues over changes to Article 9, Japan’s right to a collective self-defense and the renewal of Japan’s armed forces (McCurry, 2016). Society itself is arguably becoming more conservative: Japanese young people are holidaying and studying abroad in fewer numbers than ever, while membership in extreme right-wing groups has risen recently1 (Kato, 2014). The picture is concerning, but at the same time, there is reason to hope. Japanese universities are looking to internationalize their student population as much as possible2.

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1 See Hiroshi Ota’s (2014) interesting study on the greater inward-focus of Japanese students.

2 As Carlson (2017) notes, in 2008, former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda announced a plan to raise the number of foreign college students from 140,000 to 300,000. Later, in June 14, 2013, the government started “Japan’s Revival Strategy” and the “Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education” to increase the number of international students to 300,000 by the year 2020.
Japanese trade and commerce continues to rely on international markets. English, communication and cross cultural skills are still valued by future employers. Against this backdrop, how and what can teachers do in the classroom? This short essay argues that utilizing an approach that emphasizes peaceful norms, while using English to engage and teach, is important and effective as an ideological bulwark and efficient as a pedagogical tool. To illustrate this, the essay starts with a definition of peace studies and EFL in the Japanese context. Next, it examines three recent and pertinent cases, while arguing for a focused use of digital content. Finally, limitations and further opportunities for research are discussed.

Peace studies and EFL

Peace studies is, at its simplest, an interdisciplinary field that identifies causes of peace and conflict, but importantly, works towards processes that aim to improve the human condition. It does this through influencing language and ideas. As the constitution of UNESCO notably says, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” The best ways to influence minds is through language and education. In Japan, peace studies and EFL has been part of the Japan Association of Language Teaching’s (JALT) Global Issues in Language Education (GILE) Special Interest Group since 1990. As the name suggests, GILE focuses on global issues and not specifically on peace. “Global education is an approach to language teaching which aims at enabling students to effectively acquire and use a foreign language while empowering them with the knowledge, skills and commitment required by world citizens for the solution of global problems (GILE 2017)”. For university students in Japan, many of whom have not travelled abroad or outside their comfort zones, it is sometimes hard to conceptualize global problems. It is here that the benefits of a focus on digital platforms can be seen.

A digital focus is important because it means relevance and easy access to authentic texts and mediums. This is in contrast with most peace studies literature available in English that is written for a native English speaker at the university level and is often seen with a marginal, leftist bias. To further peace norms, it is crucial to appeal to as many students as possible and digital sources has this ability. As well as easier linguistic access, focusing on popular digital platforms as sources for authentic learning allows a greater number of students to respond and actively take part. Students don’t need to navigate academic journals or complex (in their L2) databases. Studying and debating the validity of Donald Trump’s tweets is undoubtedly more fun, entertaining and greater in real-world applicability. Nearly everyone has Facebook and knows its founder. Here the peace studies debate begins.

Case studies

The first example comes from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who posted on January 28, 2017, about his concerns over President Trump’s executive orders to limit immigration (Zuckerberg, 2017). His post presents a topic

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3 See Johan Galtung (1975), who is considered the main founder of peace and conflict studies.

4 For example, posts and information about the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games are currently most popular on its website, http://www.gilesig.org/newsletter/.

5 Interdisciplinary fields, such as Women’s Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies, are often placed here. See Mason (2002) and Forcey (1995).
that is relevant and authentic. “Like many of you, I’m concerned about the impact of the recent executive orders signed by President Trump. We need to keep this country safe, but we should do that by focusing on people who actually pose a threat... We should also keep our doors open to refugees and those who need help. That’s who we are. Had we turned away refugees a few decades ago, Priscilla’s (his wife) family wouldn’t be here today”. Zuckerberg goes on to express admiration for some of Trump’s other initiatives, which itself illustrates a valuable cultural communication lesson – always balance constructive criticism with a positive comment or compliment. Additionally, Zuckerberg takes the important step of humanizing an abstract problem and making it personal, an acknowledged process on building towards understanding and tolerance (Renner, 1991). Another useful activity here is simply allowing the students to study some of the responses and discuss them in class – who’s opposed? Why? The final productive task could be working on their own comments and posting them in response to Zuckerberg. The possibilities are many.

Another useful case study is Mikhail Gorbachev’s recent article, “It All Looks as if the World Is Preparing for War” (Gorbachev, 2017). The whole article is interesting, but if we just examine one part: “Breaking out of the vicious circle - Today, however, the nuclear threat once again seems real. Relations between the great powers have been going from bad to worse for several years now. The advocates for arms build-up and the military-industrial complex are rubbing their hands.” The language from this short excerpt includes lexis such as “vicious circle”, “from bad to worse”, “great powers” and “military-industrial complex” are all introduced authentically and cogently. Additionally, students have the opportunity to discover/reflect on who Gorbachev is, his legacy and the relevance in today’s context. More traditional EFL exercises could also be incorporated, for example the creation of paper flashcards with new lexis.

The final case study is an article from The Guardian titled “Japan could change pacifist constitution after Shinzo Abe victory” (McCurry, 2016). Understanding how and why others perceive you in a certain way is a fundamental cross cultural communication skill and one important in building peace norms. This article is quite lengthy so highlighting specific portions may be necessary. Once again, certain parts will suit different objectives, class levels and student interests. Here, the article introduces a useful “other” for Japanese students: China’s Xinhua official news agency, which “described Sunday’s election result as a threat to regional stability, as it had given MPs who support constitutional reform an unprecedented advantage. ‘With Japan’s pacifist constitution at serious stake and Abe’s power expanding, it is alarming both for Japan’s Asian neighbours, as well as for Japan itself, as Japan’s militarisation will serve to benefit neither side,’ Xinhua said in a commentary.” Once again, the opportunities to present peace norms and EFL present themselves: the teacher could ask students “What is militarisation and why is China so concerned?” as one starting point. Another activity could be to poll the class and find out who thinks Abe’s election win is “alarming” and simply ask “why/why not?”. For more advanced students, a study on objectivity and language could be conducted on a greater range of Xinhua articles, which are just a few clicks away. A discussion could then proceed about the importance of a free press in communication and peace norms. Language used to support opinions and arguments could be pre-taught or elicited from the students. Once again, going digital allows
authentic and relevant examples to be easily utilised and adopted for EFL purposes. However, as with all things in life, there are disadvantages and limitations to this approach.

Limitations and further opportunities for research
The limitations of this approach centre around two main points: access to technology and the grading of language and tasks to match student ability. In Japan, the vast majority of students have access to personal smartphones and Internet, and Otemae – and presumably most universities – have libraries and computer labs. However, this may not be the case in other countries. A teacher could print materials out, but this largely negates the appeal of the digital approach. For example, students reading a Facebook post and then replying to that post is more appealing than reading it on paper and writing a reply. Thus the emphasis on digital sources and use means that the access to technology has to be available.

Grading tasks to suit ability is another difficulty teachers are likely to encounter. As this approach only uses authentic texts, it is necessary for students to be at least in the pre-intermediate to intermediate level and have a significant motivation to learn. This is not a basic communication or beginner level course. However, even with motivated and higher level students, texts may be challenging. This could be overcome by setting pre-reading of the text as homework, or even providing background homework in the L1 language. Additionally, grading the task should be utilised; for pre-intermediate students the focus could be on new lexis and grammar, while more advanced students could focus on writing replies to posts, letters to the editor and other similar activities.

Finally, this activity presents interesting quantitative research opportunities. An approach such as this closely resembles Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and thus some comparative studies with a more traditional classroom environment could yield interesting results. Aspects such as receptive and productive vocabulary, writing fluency and lexical richness could be evaluated via pre- and post-tests, along with other more quantifiable measures.

Author biography
Daniel Tang is an instructor at Otemae University. His interests include post structural discourse analysis and English pedagogy.

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