

# An Integrated Approach to Dealing with Controversial Issues in the EFL Classroom

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## Introduction

Often Japanese EFL classes focus on one particular core English skill, namely reading, writing, listening or speaking. Here we present an integrated approach to English learning based upon using a controversial issue as the central theme, which is taught over a period of time as a single module. The choice of the module topic, some relevant background information and the methodology used to present the subject material will be discussed in this paper.

The basis of this methodology is to have students approach English as a whole rather than tackling single skill sets of English such as reading newspaper articles, listening to audio cassette materials or writing free compositions. This is achieved by having the students work on a single topical issue over a number of classroom sessions. It is important that the topic chosen is not only interesting to the students but also is controversial and therefore elicits a strong response from them. Sometimes EFL instructors shy away from such issues because they are afraid of confrontation, offending students' feelings or they lack the depth of knowledge to handle certain issues such as human cloning or euthanasia, for example. However, with adequate preparation and a wide range of sources of information and an emphasis on soliciting responses and opinions

from the students rather than a teacher-led presentation of information, we feel that these topics can be used in the EFL classroom effectively.

One of the key principles of this methodology is that many different types of media are employed and therefore rather than relying on, for example, just newspaper articles, a wide range of sources are used such as TV, radio, internet, drama and films. These sources of information should be relevant to your topic, and if possible represent a diverse range of views and opinions.

We have chosen the topic of the death penalty as our example, because there is a wide range of information available about this topic. It is very controversial and at the time of writing was the subject of a large amount of renewed debate within the US. In discussing the death penalty we would first like to provide some background information.

**Background:***The death penalty and its application around the world.*

By June 2002, 76 countries and territories had abolished the death penalty for all crimes. A further 15 countries had abolished it for all but exceptional crimes such as wartime crimes. At least 20 countries were abolitionist in practice, i.e., had not carried out any executions for the past 10 years. At present there are 111 countries which are abolitionist in law or practice, and 84 countries which retain and use the death penalty.

Abolitionist for all crimes	76
Abolitionist for ordinary crimes only	15
Abolitionist in practice	20
Total abolitionist in law or practice	111
Retentionist	84

Table 1: The death penalty and how it is applied across the world.

In 2001, there were 3,048 known executions in 31 countries, 90% of which took place in China (2,468), Iran (139), Saudi Arabia (79) and the USA (66). (Source: Amnesty International, 2002 Annual Report on the Death Penalty, From: <http://www.amnesty.org>)

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and some background information from UN documents.*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. It is the first human rights doctrine —or the principle document enshrining the rights of all men and women —created by the organized community of nations. It was in response to the staggering extent of state brutality and terror witnessed during World War II. The UDHR, consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, makes no specific mention relating to the death penalty. However, abolitionists argue that the death penalty is a violation of two fundamental human rights, citing Articles 3 and 5 of the Declaration:

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

## Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Although the UDHR is not legally binding on member states of the United Nations, it is considered to have great moral force and has inspired numerous legally binding international instruments in the field of human rights as well as influencing national legislation and the constitutions of many states. The UDHR has been supplemented with a large number of human rights covenants, conventions and treaties. And many countries have cited the Declaration or included its provisions in their basic laws or constitutions. Of these supplementary treaties, *The Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* is the one most influential to human rights campaigners who seek to abolish the death penalty. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, it provides for the total abolition of capital punishment unless under periods of war. Countries that have not ratified this agreement include USA, Japan, China and Iran.

*The culture of secrecy in Japan*

In most cases, capital punishment in Japan takes place when the Japanese Diet is not in session, for example during the summer or winter vacation, in order to minimize the criticism among the representatives of opposing parties and the public.

## Executions:

There are 7 detention centers with special chambers for executions. Chaplains must keep secret about what goes on inside the detention center and the

situation of prisoners. Inmates themselves are not informed of their execution until approximately two hours prior to their killing. Prisoners in Japan are executed at a moment's notice, and are not even allowed to say goodbye to their families.

### **Classroom activities based on the topic of the death penalty**

In this section we will describe some activities which use the theme of the death penalty and how they can be tailored to meet the needs of the students. We have identified seven activities suitable for the EFL classroom.

1. Questionnaire based activity
2. Interpretation, analysis and presentation of raw statistics
3. Advice and opinion forming
4. Newspaper articles
5. Comprehension and critical analysis/discussion of film
6. Role-play/short drama
7. Debate

#### **Questionnaire based activity**

- Students are presented with a short questionnaire with Y/N answers.
- Students are presented with a questionnaire in which they have to write short sentences/statements.
- Students write their own questionnaires/questions that are presented to the rest of the class.

*Considerations*

The choice of question; closed or open style questions. The questionnaire could either be used to test opinion or to establish the depth of knowledge the student has about the topic. Example: Do you think the death penalty is right? What crimes do you think carry the death sentence if convicted?

**Interpretation, analysis and presentation of raw statistics**

- Students use prepared data to present a verbal analysis of the data (see Graph 1). Or using tabular data find any patterns and describe them in simple sentences.

Example Question: What can you observe based on the following table?

Table 2: The number of executions in Japan since 1981.

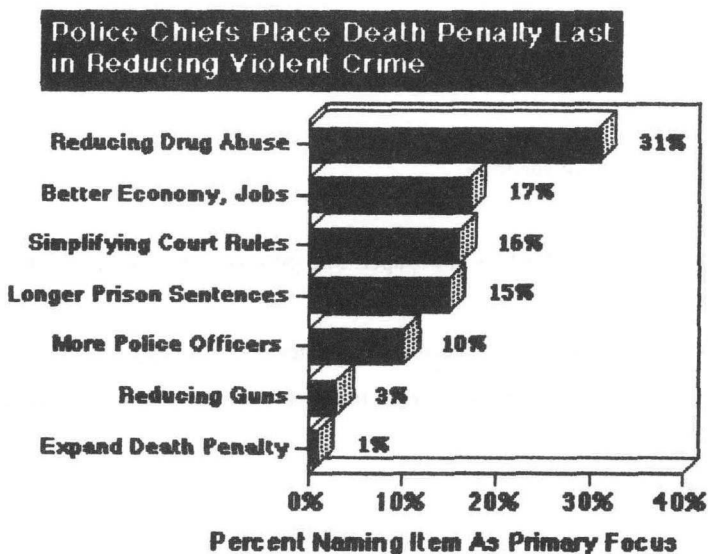
Year	Executions	Year	Executions
1981	1	1992	0
1982	1	1993	7
1983	1	1994	2
1984	1	1995	6
1985	3	1996	6
1986	2	1997	4
1987	2	1998	6
1988	2	1999	5
1989	1	2000	3
1990	0	2001	2
1991	0		

Interpretation: In the 8 years (1982-1989) before executions stopped, 13 persons were executed; but the number of executions in the 8 years since the restart is 39. This is three times as many as before.

- Students construct a graph using data provided and give a short presen-

tation of their data. An example would be to use the data from Table 1 in the background section of this paper and make their own chart or pie-chart using this data.

- Students use data from their questionnaires in order to give a presentation and interpretation of their results.



Graph 1: Example of a pre-drawn graph that can be used to illustrate one aspect of the death penalty issue and allow the students to describe their interpretation in their own words. (From: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/po.html>)

### *Considerations*

At the simplest level students are instructed to describe pre-drawn graphs or charts.

Often students will spend more time constructing the graph or chart rather

than interpreting the data. Therefore, if the graph axis and labels are already provided, this can speed up the process.

The lexical areas covered include comparatives, legal terms and general conversation.

For high-level students there are opportunities to explore issues in greater depth by obtaining the student's opinions and generating an open discussion. For example, in Graph 1, addressing drug abuse is the prime focus stated by police chiefs for reducing violent crime, how can this be achieved?

### **Advice and opinion forming**

- By writing a letter to a newspaper, to a politician, the victim's family or the accused party.
- By replying to a letter provided by the teacher. Students could be asked to write the letter while playing out a role such as an agony aunt or a politician.

### *Considerations*

Students need to think about formal and informal styles, addressing issues with tact (knowledge of appropriate alternative expressions, i.e., pass away/die).

Simple points such as how to format a letter, standard expressions and how the envelope is addressed can be dealt with.

Contrasting written styles between English and Japanese can be looked at. English written style is more direct and points are sometimes repeated in different terms for emphasis.



## Newspaper articles

- Looking at the structure and style of a newspaper article. Define the various parts of a newspaper article (headline, dateline, credit line, lead) and discuss the importance of the headline.
- Students write their own headlines to describe various stories.
- Two articles on the same story from different sources can be compared and contrasted. Is there evidence of bias?
- TV reports or radio news can be used in listening comprehension exercises. NPR ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)) provides transcripts of some of its radio programs for a small fee.
- Comparison between information given by Japanese and US sources.

### *Useful material*

#### In Japan:

「もう昔の話ですから。(何を言っても夫が)戻ってくるわけでもありませんし……」。永山事件の被害者の1人、斎藤哲彦さん(当時31歳)の妻睦子さん(54)は永山死刑囚の死刑執行の報に、函館市内の自宅でドア越しに話した。死刑執行は新聞朝刊で知ったという。「突然のことなので……」と戸惑い気味。

—— 毎日新聞(朝刊) 1997年8月3日(日) p. 21

#### The article says:

Mutsuko Saito, wife of one of the victims, said in an interview with a *Mainichi Shinbun* reporter that she did not know Nagayama had been executed until she read the morning newspaper.

If you read a Japanese newspaper article reporting an execution, usually the information you can get is limited to:

- When the execution was carried out
- Where the execution was carried out
- Who was executed

In the US:

**(1) McVeigh confronts death in good spirits**

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (AP) Timothy McVeigh marked off his final hours in an isolation cell, reportedly confronting death in good spirits and confident he would be the “victor” in his twisted one-man war against the government. His final requested meal: two pints of mint chocolate chip ice cream.

McVeigh spent the day in the 2.7 meter by 4.2 meter cell, a short walk from the execution chamber, writing letters of appreciation and good-bye to friends as he awaited death by chemical injection at 8 a.m. Monday. He communicated with family members Saturday, his attorneys said.

— *The Japan Times*, Tuesday, June 12, 2001, p. 1

**(2) Timothy McVeigh nears his final act**

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (AFP-Jiji) Condemned Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was transferred early Sunday to a small, windowless holding cell in the death chamber of the federal prison here, where he wrote goodbye letters and spoke by telephone with relatives and lawyers, his attorneys said.

A red telephone connects the facility directly to the Justice Department in Washington, so prison authorities can be notified of any last-minute developments that might put the execution on hold.

Barring unforeseen developments, the following is a timetable of events leading up to McVeigh's execution at dawn Monday, based on information provided by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons:

After 7 p.m., he would no longer be allowed to use the telephone. His only subsequent contact will be with attorney Nathan Chambers, one of the witnesses to his execution.

At 11 p.m., the Bureau of Prisons will inform the media of McVeigh's overnight schedule and activities.

At midnight, McVeigh may have a final meal. Meals under \$20 may be ordered from a local restaurant, but alcoholic beverages are not allowed. If he forgoes dinner, McVeigh will be allowed a snack closer to dawn. His preferences were not made known.

At 5 a.m., two hours prior to his execution, any last visitors must leave McVeigh's cell.

At 6:30 a.m., McVeigh would be searched and made to change into a T-shirt, cotton pants and slippers. Chained at the wrists and ankles, he would be escorted to the execution chamber, laid out with arms crossed and bound head to foot on a bed.

Curtains will then be opened, allowing witnesses to see into the chamber.

McVeigh may then say his final words before an officer with the Bureau of Prisons reads his sentence. A needle would be inserted into a vein in his right arm.

At 7 a.m., a mixture of Pentothal, pancuronium bromide and potassium chloride would be injected into his veins in quantities "sufficient to cause death." The chemicals cause, respectively, fainting, respiratory failure and cardiac arrest. Ten to 15 minutes later, a medical examiner would pronounce dead the man behind the deadliest terrorist attack committed on U.S. soil.

— *The Japan Times*, Tuesday, June 12, 2001, p. 1

### Comprehension and critical analysis/discussion of film

There are a number of very good feature length films that tackle the death penalty to some degree. These include *Last Dance*, *Dead Man Walking* and *The Green Mile*. They can be used in a number of ways; for listening comprehension, to provide the basis of a discussion or part of the script can be printed for further analysis. Using *Dead Man Walking* as an example, a number of questions can be raised to the students, some are given below.

- While you watched the film what emotions and feelings did you have?
- What scenes did you think were particularly powerful? Describe what happened during that scene.
- After watching the film what new information or opinions do you have about the death penalty?
- The character Matthew Poncelet changes in character during the film, what changes take place and why do you think they happen?

### Considerations

Using DVD instead of video allows you to quickly move to the scenes you want to show and gives the ability to change the language of the subtitle or the soundtrack.

Entire films may be too long to show during a single classroom session and it is unlikely if they are able to maintain the student's interest for that period of time. Therefore, think about using short clips or showing the film over a number of lessons.

## **Role-play/short drama**

Using either a script that is from a film, TV drama or self-written, the students act out a short skit.

Students are given part of the script, few lines or the situation, and they devise a short skit by themselves.

### *Considerations*

Role-play works best when there is a degree of confrontation involved and the students need to find a way to resolve the situation. The key is that they devise a way to solve the problem, and therefore understanding each other's point of view and the ability to compromise is important.

If the students use a script as the basis for their skit, have them act the play out a number of times at first with the script at hand and later on from memory. Encourage the use of alternative expressions from that of the script so that the emphasis is on communicating their point rather than memorizing the script.

Short-plays offer an excellent opportunity to correct pronunciation mistakes and foster the student's confidence in their spoken English.

## **Debate**

There are four key lines of reasoning often employed in the debate over the death penalty. Here we will discuss these arguments and look at ways in which the students can be led to reach similar lines of reasoning. These four arguments are:

### *Deterrence*

The death penalty acts to prevent people from committing serious crimes.

Pro-deterrence: The fear of being caught and the possibility of the death

penalty being used, acts to prevent many murders and serious crimes from taking place.

Anti-deterrence: May not have any influence over people that are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Furthermore, there is no evidence to prove it has a deterrent effect on crime.

### *Justice*

The need for natural justice or retribution after a serious crime has been committed.

Pro-justice: Some killers given the danger they pose to society and the brutal nature of their crimes deserve to die, also some others cite a religious justification for this standpoint.

Anti-justice: The argument is simplistic in nature, we don't for example, torture people that were found guilty of torturing others. The death penalty could also be considered an indicator of the maturity of a particular society.

### *Innocence*

If a mistake is made during the trial, the death penalty cannot be reversed once it has been carried out.

Pro-innocence: In the US, 1 in 7 cases of people in death row have successfully appealed their cases.

Anti-innocence: It is a rare but acceptable risk involved in the death penalty. Many of these appeals are based on technicalities rather than actual proof of innocence. Is the risk of letting murderers run free greater than the small risk of innocent people being killed?

### *The arbitrary nature of its application*

The death penalty is not fairly applied and often depends on factors not directly relating to the case, such as race, income and police methods.

Pro-arbitrary: In practice the death penalty is not used to single out the

worst offenders. Rather factors such as the country or state in which the crime took place, the quality of legal representation, the race of the defendant, the methods used by the police and the income of the defendant, all play a part in the decision to use the death penalty.

Anti-arbitrary: Discretion has always been part of the legal system, each crime is different and should be considered on its own merits.

### *Considerations*

Students often lack spontaneity and therefore some planning and preparation work is useful prior to the debate. Students should be encouraged to brainstorm on the topic with the help of the teacher, who can direct them towards ideas that they should build on further. Another factor is to make the students think about the possible rebuttals that could arise from their arguments and attempt to pre-empt these responses beforehand. In addition, it is useful to give some background to the students about the death penalty in Japan, so that they are able to feel that this topic relates to them (see background section).

## **Conclusion**

Here we have shown a number of ideas that can be used to teach the death penalty in the EFL classroom, and the methods can easily be modified for any suitable topic. This type of content-based teaching allows for the examination of complex and controversial issues while also improving a diverse range of language skills. We seek to show that issues such as the death penalty allow the students to articulate their ideas about emotionally charged issues and gain a depth of understanding about topics that normally educators would shy away from. We believe that educators have a responsibility to present material that is relevant, stimulating and encourages students to think in a responsible manner.

**Useful websites**

<http://deathpenaltyinfo.msu.edu/>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

<http://www.amnesty.org/>