

The Global and Local Issue of AIDS

Louise Haynes, Nanzan University

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Abstract

AIDS is a global epidemic that affects issues of health, security, economics, and human rights. An estimated 40 million people are living with HIV or AIDS worldwide. Here in Japan, HIV infection is rising among young people in particular. Raising the topic in class provides students with an opportunity to learn about how the epidemic has affected the world, and can also help stop further spread of the disease locally. Yet EFL teachers are often reluctant to teach AIDS in their classrooms. These reservations can be overcome by following a few simple steps. This article gives some practical ideas that teachers can use to raise AIDS awareness in the EFL classroom in a relaxed manner. The Global and Local Issue of AIDS

Why teach about AIDS?

Globally, AIDS is an epidemic that reaches every continent with devastating international ramifications in terms of health, security, economics, and human rights. There are presently over 40 million people worldwide who are infected with HIV, many of whom are not aware they are infected (UN AIDS, 2001). Raising awareness of AIDS brings home to students the fact that it is a disease that crosses geographical, gender, racial, religious, age, and class borders. Hopefully, it will teach compassion for people around the world, and in their own communities, who are living with HIV.

EFL teachers in Japan may wonder why they should raise the topic of HIV/AIDS in their classrooms. "I rarely hear anything about AIDS here in Japan, so I just assume there isn't the same problem here as there is in other countries." "Students in Japan already know about AIDS." "I don't think my students are particularly interested in it. They think it doesn't pertain to them." Sound familiar? Many teachers here might be surprised to know that HIV infection rates in Japan are rising among young heterosexuals (Wijers-Hasegawa, 2002). According to one government report, about 40% of new HIV infections in 2001 occurred among young people in their late teens and 20s (Mizoguchi, 2002). AIDS cases are increasing among people who never even knew they were carrying the HIV virus (Kouseiroudoushou, 2002). When we teach about HIV/AIDS, we impart information that could help prevent someone from becoming infected.

Another incentive for raising the topic of HIV/AIDS is that students are motivated to learn and talk about it (Haynes, 2002; Miller, 1996; Phillips and Haynes, 1998; Welker and Houston, 1999). Young people in particular are interested in the topic because they do not always receive detailed information in high school.

Nunan (1999, p. 235) lists preconditions for effective student motivation, one of which is content that students can relate to their own experience. When students realize that HIV infection is increasing among their own age group in Japan, they have a greater intrinsic motivation for dealing with the topic. Some EFL teachers in Japan have

reported that students who are normally rather passive become more active participants when the topic of discussion is HIV/AIDS (Haynes, 2001). One reason for this may be that, as Kohonen explains, "Learners will find school motivating to the extent that it satisfies their needs" (1992, p.18). Many students may realize that this is information they need but have not previously received.

Teachers' reservations about teaching AIDS

Teachers may be reluctant to raise the topic of HIV/AIDS out of embarrassment. Almost everyone knows that the AIDS virus is transmitted through sex, but few want to talk about it explicitly. If the majority of students in a class are of the gender opposite that of the teacher, there might be added hesitation to talk about anything of a sexual nature.

Additionally, teachers may avoid the topic out of a lack of knowledge about the topic. It is relatively easy to find information on the details of the virus, how it works in the body, how it is transmitted, and what treatments are available. Many Internet websites carry enough information for the average person to understand the basics. As English teachers, teaching AIDS does not require us to be experts any more than would teaching about rainforest destruction, peace, homophobia, or hunger.

Teachers may also be uncertain as to how to approach the topic in class. The lack of materials and ideas may make the task of teaching AIDS seem a difficult one. In fact, there are many resources available for just about any level class or language skill focus.

It is an easy task to find excuses why not to teach the issue. However, the following student comments give evidence that AIDS education does, indeed, have a place in the EFL classroom.

Student reactions

I regularly ask for feedback, especially on classes dealing with AIDS. Comments from students are overwhelmingly favorable. The following examples from one freshman class of English majors give an idea of their reactions (quotes uncorrected).

We could learn many things, did many things, learn many new words: pneumonia, immune system, antibody, latex, and so on. (Nanako)

Using English to discuss the topic of AIDS not only increases the learners' vocabulary, but also addresses affective issues of dealing with possibly embarrassing information:

Studying about AIDS was interesting, because AIDS is a common problem all over the world. I have been interested in AIDS, but there aren't many chances to learn about it. The explanations about AIDS in English was easier to understand than in Japanese. And you can use some English words that you will be embarrassed if you speak them in Japanese. (Hiroyuki)

Students reflect on their own knowledge about the topic, and often state their own education has been lacking:

Education is the most important thing, I think. At junior high school, teacher should teach students about AIDS. Japan is the country which the number of

HIV patients is increasing. I think education isn't enough, so HIV patient is increasing. (Hiroko)

Through AIDS activities in Louise's class, I found that I had had little knowledge about AIDS or HIV. And I also found that we all must learn more about AIDS or HIV. Otherwise, people who have little knowledge will spread this terrible disease [sic], AIDS. It is never allowable that our indifferences cause the spread of AIDS. But I think that there are few chance to get the information about AIDS for young people. I think that government should adapt the program which make young people learn about AIDS. (Mayuko)

Through learning about this issue, Japanese students are able to link a topic used for their English language study to their own lives:

I had thought that AIDS existed in another world. We had no relationship to AIDS, although we had learned about the disease in high school to some extent. But this lesson actually made us think that the disease is our problem.... I think the most important thing is self defense. (Yasuhiro)

To illustrate the fears and rewards of teaching AIDS, allow me to share with you what I have experienced with my own students.

My personal experience

I have been teaching the topic of AIDS for over seven years, both here in Japan and in Spain. I have used the topic with junior high through university level students, as well as adult learners at language schools. When I first began I was very concerned about the reactions of the students and the administration to my addressing the issue. Yet in all this time I have never had a complaint about the subject matter. In fact, my experience has been quite the opposite. I, like many other teachers who have raised the topic of AIDS, have found that it piques students' curiosity, especially when they realize that HIV infection is increasing in Japan. Within the first few tasks many of them see that they did not receive enough detailed information in junior/senior high school, and once they realize how close they are to the problem, it touches them in a very personal way, as evidenced by the comments of this freshman English major:

Actually, I have experienced having sex, and I didn't worried about these problems when I have sex with my boyfriend. I have sex only with him [but] we didn't use condom three times or so... A few days ago, I talked to him about AIDS/HIV... He understood well, and we decided to pay much attention to AIDS/HIV. (Satsuki)

Although I do not believe that teaching about AIDS in English is a guaranteed method for HIV prevention, it does raise awareness and might just lead to changes in behavior.

Suggestions for teaching AIDS

- Do get to know your students and present it matter-of-factly. When students know you are genuinely concerned about their health and safety, they will take the issue

seriously.

- Do invite students to brainstorm what they already know and don't know. Have them then confirm, adjust, or correct their knowledge as they go along, thus showing evidence of increased awareness.
- Don't dwell on aspects you are uncomfortable with. If you haven't talked about HIV before, it's natural to feel a bit nervous the first time you bring it up. If you feel extreme discomfort at discussing with your students aspects such as modes of transmission, you could elect to show videos that deal with this, invite a guest speaker, or assign a reading passage for homework so that you need not discuss the details yourself. You could also choose to approach aspects such as the epidemic's devastating effects in other countries, the latest medical breakthroughs.
- Do show students that it is a problem here in Japan, though, as well as world-wide. There is plenty of information available about HIV/AIDS in Japan (see resources below). Students need to be aware that it is not only a problem in other countries.
- Be sure to provide students with sources of information in Japanese. Finish the class by writing on the board the telephone number of an organization such as the Japan HIV Center hotline where students can call to ask questions in Japanese.

Challenges

The main challenge I have found to teaching this topic is that students may not always understand the information correctly. They may make errors in listening comprehension when the information is presented orally. For this reason I use a variety of tasks so that they receive the information through both reading and listening input. Their feedback in action logs (Woo & Murphey, 1999) and written reports of their reactions to the material also often reflect mistakes in their understanding of the disease. These can then be cleared up by writing a note on their paper or as a point to address in the next class. In any case, I always write the telephone number of the local HIV/AIDS telephone hotline and encourage them to call to ask questions and get more information in Japanese.

Conclusion

Addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS is an experience that enriches students and teachers as well. Students benefit by improving their language skills through a topic that interests them. Teachers benefit by knowing that they are providing tasks that challenge students' language and critical thinking skills, and that they are providing a starting place for discussion about an issue that is relevant to their students' lives. There are many ways to approach the topic in the Japanese EFL classroom, allowing the teacher to judge what is appropriate for her/his particular students' level and learning styles, and to keep the focus of the topic within a comfortable range for the teacher.

Through the medium of the English language we can promote a better understanding of the disease and how to prevent it, and engender compassion for people in Japan and around the world who are living with HIV.

Resources

Internet

For teachers:

Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (statistics in Japan)
http://api-net.jfap.or.jp/mhw/survey/mhw_survey.htm
Centers for Disease Control (CDC) <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/dhap.htm>
UNAIDS <http://www.unaids.org/>
JAMA International Resources
<http://www.ama-assn.org/special/hiv/bestonet/global.htm>
JAPANetwork Newsletter (free, includes AIDS news, Japanese statistics, teaching ideas - contact aidsed@gol.com)
Japan HIV Center English hotline OSAKA (SAT.) 11:00 - 16:00 :06-6882-0282
TOKYO (SAT.) 11:00 - 14:00 :03-5259-0256

For students:

Japan AIDS Prevention Awareness Network (in English)
<http://www.japanetwork.org>
The Japan Times <http://www.japantimes.com> (search for HIV articles)
India AIDS <http://www.aids-india.org/> (in English)
Japan HIV Center 人権情報センター <http://www.npo-jhc.com> (in Japanese)

Videos

In Our Own Words (produced Media Works, Inc. P.O.Box 15597 Kenmore Station, Boston MA 02215, tel. 800-600-5779)
Educating Our Children (Pediatric AIDS Foundation, Santa Monica, CA)
And the Band Played On (historical movie about US AIDS epidemic)
Public Service Messages (Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, USA)
Sex in the 90s (for teens, produced by the Australian AIDS Council)

Projects

Student-produced TV or radio commercials
Student-produced comic books ((Valentine-Dunkley 1997) available through JAPANetwork)
Keeping a diary (Imagine you are HIV-positive. How does it affect your daily life, physically, socially, emotionally?)
Choose a country, research the AIDS problem and report back to the class
Design pieces of an AIDS quilt, assemble and display on campus
Conduct surveys on campus about student body knowledge about HIV/AIDS

Longer lists can be found at <http://www.japanetwork.org> or contact aidsed@gol.com for further information.

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Biographical Information

Louise Haynes, a native of Los Angeles, has worked in the field of EFL for over 17 years and has taught all levels of students both in Japan and Spain. She is presently teaching at Nanzan University in Nagoya. She is the founder and director of Japan AIDS Prevention Awareness Network (JAPANetwork). This organization offers free

HIV/AIDS lesson plans and activities, newsletters and a web site for teachers and students at <http://www.japanetwork.org>. She can be contacted at [aidsed{at}gol.com](mailto:aidsed@gol.com).