TESOL Connections
Keeping English language professionals connected

Helping English Learners Respond to Difficult Situations
by Zuzana Tomaš and Trisha Dowling

Occasionally, we encounter situations in which we, or someone nearby, experience or witness mistreatment or injustice, such as an inappropriate look, gesture, or remark; discriminatory behavior; or, in the worst possible cases, a physical attack. And even if we are fortunate to never encounter such situations, the current nationalistic tendencies, increase in hate groups (Beirich, 2019), and heated rhetoric around immigration and other social, economic, political, and environmental issues in many places around the world leave us wondering how we may best respond to difficult situations rather than being caught off guard by them.

An appropriate response to issues such as the aforementioned can be even more difficult for those who are still developing language skills. As educators sensitive to the challenges that English learners face in the real world, we can empower our students with strategies that help them address these challenges in a manner that safely promotes their sense of agency. In this short article, we describe a lesson designed to guide students' thinking about difficult situations that they, or someone else, may encounter and examine the different ways in which they could respond to such situations. Though we taught this lesson to adults, teachers can easily adapt this lesson to adolescent learners. With young learners, we recommend addressing these issues through culturally responsive children's books, videos, stories, and age-appropriate conversations.

Part 1: Introducing the Lesson

When teaching this lesson, begin by sharing a personal encounter with a situation in which you, or someone in your proximity, experienced a social injustice. You can tell students how you reacted (or failed to react) and elaborate on the experience.

To illustrate, in her ESL speaking class, Zuzana chose to share a situation from her home country of Slovakia where, many years ago, she witnessed a woman from a minority group being verbally abused on public transportation. Zuzana recollected the situation and shared that she failed to respond to it because she felt paralyzed and unable to think of anything to say or do on the spot. This failure to act is something Zuzana has always regretted.

In the absence of a personal story, in her ESL class, Trisha chose to draw instead upon media. She used a segment from Morning Edition on National Public Radio entitled "When a Somali-

American Woman Was Attacked, Support Came from an Unlikely Source." She had students listen to the story and discuss it in pairs prior to sharing as a class. A more recent public radio piece that can be used in the initial part of this lesson is "Where I Came From," a segment by Ben Calhoun on This American Life.

Part 2: Making Personal Connections

Next, encourage students to think of similar situations that they may have experienced. We encouraged students to freewrite or think independently first before sharing in small groups. We used the following questions to help guide our students' thinking:

a) What was the nature of the mistreatment, injustice, or discrimination you experienced, witnessed, or were exposed to?
b) Did you feel threatened/safe, stressed/not stressed, angry/calm during the encounter?
c) Who had "power" in the encounter? How did you know who had power?
d) How did you respond to the situation?
e) Were there any bystanders? If so, did they engage during the incident? To what effect?
f) Did your response make the situation worse or did it help deescalate the situation?
g) Did you find the outcome satisfying or not? What do you wish had been different?
h) What did you learn from this difficult situation?

If students don't have their own situation to share or aren't comfortable sharing, they may share a story they know that occurred to someone else, and answer the questions as best they can, or imagine as if the incident had happened to them.

Part 3: Brainstorming and Practicing Responses

After students shared their experiences, we asked each group to focus on one of these situations and brainstorm a way in which they would choose to respond to such an incident. Students who chose speaking up as their preferred response were asked to list a phrase or several phrases that they would use if they encountered this situation. We suggested that students prepare two sets of responses—one with the purpose of deescalating the emotionally charged situation in order to feel safe and avoid further altercation and one where they may feel sufficiently safe to speak up and attempt to educate the person responsible for initiating the incident. Students then presented their situations and language with which they would respond. As a whole class, we discussed the effectiveness of the proposed responses and helped provide ways to improve students' answers.

Some of the linguistically oriented discussions we had involved the likely differences between using commands (e.g., "Stop!"), requests with a follow-up action (e.g., "Please, stop or I will call the police."), requests with a follow-up appeal (e.g., "Please, stop. This is not civil or appropriate."), and requests followed by a hypothetical question (e.g., "Please stop. How would you feel if someone said that to you?"). We also discussed how certain responses may differ in effectiveness depending on interlocutors' cultural or personal backgrounds.

Opening these uncomfortable topics up for a discussion in the safe classroom environment and providing linguistic support for forming responses to difficult situations helps students

experience a sense of agency and have the ability to make well-informed choices in how to respond (Shapiro, Cox, Shuck, & Simnitt, 2016). By extension, this encourages students to be mindful about how they speak up, which is necessary to avoid potential danger and miscommunication. Through open discussion in the classroom and providing multiple real-life experiences, you are neither oversimplifying nor providing a cookie-cutter answer to all incidents, but rather, you are recognizing that responses are context dependent and vary depending on the particular individuals and circumstances.

Reflection

Students' Willingness to Share

In both of our classes, we were impressed with the students' willingness to be vulnerable and share their experiences with classmates. These experiences ranged from instances of stereotyping and discrimination to instances when they were explicitly silenced (e.g., asked to speak in English and not their "own" language) to instances when they felt uneasy, or even threatened (e.g., being followed). It is important to note that some students were reluctant or even declined sharing specific experiences, as they may have been embarrassing or traumatic. Though not all students were comfortable sharing, they did respond positively to the openness of discussing these potentially difficult situations.

On a more positive note, two students were proud to share an instance of when they found their agency in difficult situations, which served as a powerful example to their class peers. We were humbled by our students' graciousness in that they sympathized with the wrongdoers, attributing lack of perspective or education to the wrongdoers' inability to appreciate diversity.

A Safe Space for Difficult Topics and Conversations

We were also pleased by the linguistic engagement our students displayed in the lesson in that they were able to brainstorm and use effective responses for such difficult circumstances. Most importantly, we were taken aback by our students' gratitude for discussing the topic. Several students said that topics related to micro- or macroaggressions are something that had been on their minds and they appreciated having a safe space to discuss them.

Before arriving in the United States, international students may hear that discussing politics and race is discouraged. After arriving, though, they realize that these types of discussions are integral to university life, as well as the broader sociopolitical environment in which they function. Students soon recognize that in order to participate in class and everyday socialization, they must learn how to navigate these controversial conversation topics. In the classroom, you will likely find that students may hesitate to discuss social or political topics until instructors establish the classroom as a safe and trusting space and explicitly articulate that though outside of the classroom some topics may be uncomfortable, or even taboo, inside the classroom students can safely engage with these issues and ask questions. Once the door is opened, you will likely find many questions and comments arise related to race and discrimination.

Teachers feeling uneasy about opening doors to these kinds of topics and conversations may want to first work on preparing themselves for managing difficult class discussions. To do so, we recommend exploring concepts in the area restorative justice practices, such as Talking Circles that help establish safe spaces.

Adapting and Extending the Lesson

You can adapt this lesson with your own students and extend or localize the discussion by selecting a news story from your own community that students can examine. We also recommend that teachers whose students may feel particularly inspired by this lesson explore engaging in further sharing of what they have learned. For instance, students can prepare a poster, a blog entry, collaboration with a school newspaper or nonprofit organization newsletter, or a short presentation to educate other students at their or other institutions. Opening up these difficult conversations and learning about effective bystander/bully interventions can, after all, go a long way in not only helping certain groups of English learners, but expanding the educational and cultural horizons of all.

Closing

It is important to explicitly articulate that while expecting difficult situations to arise may be a current reality for many English learners we work with, it is not a reality that we, as their advocates and allies, can ever accept as the status quo. Our students deserve to focus on personal and academic growth rather than spending emotional energy on difficult and unfair situations (Pucino, 2018). We must communicate that we are here to engage with them and our broader communities to defy hate, xenophobia, and bigotry. Finally, we should also know where to refer students for further advice, counseling, or resources if they want to follow up on any instances of mistreatment or discrimination.

In closing, though we hope that our students never have to tap into this lesson in real life, we appreciate knowing that they would have tools to know their options for responding effectively if they do.

Additional Classroom Resources

- Active Bystander Lesson Plans (available for early primary–senior secondary): The Active Bystander lessons explore the impact and importance of active bystanders for individual students and the whole school community (Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group)

- Respond to Racism (Grades 8-adult): Many people want to stand against racism but aren't sure how. Here is what you can do (video and webpage). (Australian Human Rights Commission)

- Lesson Plan: Facing Discrimination and Racism (Grades 11–12): Students analyze acts of discrimination and racism against Chinese-Canadians, as well as responses to those acts,

and generalize about trends and changes in the acts and responses (CBC)

- Video: Standing Up to a Racist Bully (For kids): Short animated video (storybooth)

- Lesson: Where We Stand (Grades 3–5, 6–8): Students examine how they face everyday moral dilemmas and consider who and what influences their reactions when conflicts arise (Teaching Tolerance)

- Upstanders, Not Bystanders (Grades 6–9): An interactive conversation on what it means to cross the line from "bystander" to "upstander" (Common Sense Education)

- What Makes Someone a Bystander: Lesson Plan (Grades 7–Adult): Students explore the psychology of why some people remain bystanders instead of choosing to intervene (PBS)

References

Pucino, A. (2018). Iraqi refugee-background adolescents' experiences in schools: Using the ecological theory of development to understand discrimination. In S. Shapiro, M. J. Curry, & R. E. Farrelly (Eds.), *Educating refugee-background students: Critical issues and dynamic contexts* (pp. 208–224). Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.

Shapiro, S., Cox, M., Shuck, G., & Simnitt, E. (2016). Teaching for agency: From appreciating linguistic diversity to empowering student writers. *Composition Studies, 44*(1), 31–52.

Beirich, H. (2019, February 20). The year in hate: Rage against change. *The Intelligence Report*. Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2019/year-hate-rage-against-change

---

Dr. Zuzana Tomaš *is an associate professor of ESL and TESOL at Eastern Michigan University. She has conducted numerous professional development workshops with in-service teachers in the United States and internationally and has coauthored three books and multiple book chapters and articles in the areas of academic writing pedagogy and teacher preparation.*

Trisha Dowling *is a lecturer at the University of Michigan English Language Institute. She received her MA TESOL from Eastern Michigan University. Trisha has taught ESL in community college and university settings across southeast Michigan and is passionate about regularly incorporating service learning, community engagement, and social justice components into her courses.*