

How to Handle Socially Acute Questions in the Language Classroom

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Introduction and Background

In contemporary, culturally diverse classrooms, language teachers increasingly face Socially Acute Questions (SAQs)—complex, controversial issues such as racism, discrimination, and social justice. However, many educators feel ill-equipped to manage these topics due to insufficient training and support. Teachers often report conflict and frustration when trying to navigate such discussions. This often leads to eschewing them all together, despite educational authorities seeking to institutionalize DEI frameworks (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion).

To address this growing challenge, I propose a customizable, actionable toolbox. It is intended to help educators foster constructive intercultural dialogue while meeting the academic and emotional needs of learners and teachers alike. Although the case study below focuses on racism within a tertiary-level English language course, the tools presented are designed for broader application across levels, languages, academic subjects, and various forms of bias.

Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations

The toolbox is informed by a broad range of theoretical and pedagogical frameworks, each offering strategies for managing SAQs in education.

1. Socially Acute Questions (SAQs)

According to Legardez (2017), SAQs require a performative teaching style where teachers become agents of “educ-action”—not merely educators, but facilitators of social transformation.

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2. **Transdisciplinarity**

Herweg et al. (2021) advocate decompartmentalizing disciplines and including non-academic perspectives through activities such as field trips and guest lectures. These transdisciplinary strategies help bring real-world relevance into the classroom and foster deeper understanding.

3. **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Originating in 1990s Chicago, SEL aims to promote inclusion by nurturing five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022). These can improve students' social and emotional competence (SEC), which are vital in sensitive conversations.

4. **Pedagogy of Encounter**

Gill (2015) emphasizes dialogue and biographical learning, where students construct knowledge based on personal experience. Mutual listening fosters a sense of “we-ness”, essential for meaningful intercultural exchanges.

5. **Safe Spaces vs. Brave Spaces**

Safe spaces aim to minimize emotional harm and foster respectful dialogue (Council of Europe, 2015), but can become echo chambers. In contrast, brave spaces (Shelton et al., 2019) invite participants to engage more authentically, take risks, and confront discomfort as a path to deeper learning.

6. **Story Circles**

Deardorff (2020) highlights storytelling as a powerful tool to develop intercultural competence. By sharing personal stories in structured story circles, students practice empathy and build relationships in a non-threatening environment.

7. **Cultural Intelligence and Pragmatics**

Menzies (2015) distinguishes between high-context cultures (where meaning is inferred) and low-context cultures (where meaning is explicit). Understanding these differences enhances cross-cultural communication.

8. **Teaching Styles**

Stradling et al. (1984) describe six approaches to sensitive topics. The neutral chairperson is the most cautious, guiding discussion without personal input. Depending on the situation, teachers can adapt between neutral, balanced, and committed styles to better facilitate dialogue.

The combined insights from these frameworks inform the proposed SAQs toolbox, which equips teachers and learners with language and strategies for engaging in intercultural dialogue.

The SAQs Toolbox

Drawing on Bauler (2019), the toolbox includes customizable speech acts—phrases learners can use to express uncertainty or curiosity respectfully, such as: *“I’m still learning about ..., so my knowledge of ... is limited.”* Pascual (2022) recommends that learners ask questions using general terms (*“normally,” “typically,” “usually”*) rather than targeting individuals, reducing defensiveness, and encouraging more open replies. The toolbox serves as a scaffolding system for teachers and students, helping them navigate sensitive subjects without causing harm or offense.

Case Study

The theoretical insights are grounded in a case study conducted at UCLouvain’s language center. An English interfaculty conversation class with a diverse group of 14 master’s students was asked to discuss SAQs related to Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the decolonization of public spaces. To prompt discussion, I presented images of a peaceful BLM protest in Brussels, a riot in Minneapolis, and looting in Philadelphia. Clara,¹ a white Belgian student, noted how such events often escalate from peaceful protest to violence. A debate ensued. One student, Li, who had recently arrived from China, remained silent during class but later submitted a racist written response via private email, avoiding the post-class forum.

Disturbed, the teacher consulted his supervisor, who advised a one-on-one meeting with Li. However, the teacher later organized a Teams meeting with the three Afro-descendant students from the class—Dionne, Mary, and Carlos—to explain the situation and his handling of it. They appreciated being consulted, but one student, Dionne, questioned why they weren’t informed earlier.

Discussion

Reflecting on my mishandling of the incident, I propose several preventive measures based on the literature review above:

- Transdisciplinary activities could bring social issues to life, encouraging broader perspective-taking.

¹ All names have been anonymized.

- SEL tools, such as visual prompts, might facilitate deeper emotional engagement.
- The Pedagogy of Encounter could foster shared understanding by treating learners as co-inquirers and prioritizing listening.
- Establishing safe or brave spaces would set clear expectations for respectful dialogue.
- A structured story circle format might help students express experiences and opinions in a more constructive and less confrontational way.
- Preparing students in advance on cultural pragmatics could reduce misunderstandings.
- The teacher might introduce the SAQs toolbox ahead of the activity, thus enabling students to communicate more thoughtfully and ask questions appropriately.

If I had addressed these areas proactively, I could have minimized upstream the harm created by Li's racist email, and prevented having to pick up the pieces downstream, thus improving the quality of the intercultural dialogue in the class described in the vignette above.

Conclusion

Language teachers are frustrated by a lack of training and institutional tools to manage the complex dynamics of SAQs. The proposed toolbox offers practical strategies and language resources to help teachers and learners alike build both intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and structural competence—an understanding of the deeper societal forces that shape behavior and perception.

Implementing this toolbox can prevent classroom incidents like the one described in the case study, avoiding downstream damage and emotional fallout. Instead, it promotes a classroom culture rooted in empathy, listening, and shared learning, equipping students to handle controversy not as a threat, but as an opportunity for growth.

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