

# Integrating Liberal Studies into English Language Teaching

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Liberal Studies has been a subject of broad and current interest ever since its introduction as a core subject in Hong Kong's high school curriculum in 2009. It has been widely believed that students' "critical, reflective and independent thinking skills" can be fostered (Cheung, 2014). On the other hand, with regard to English Language Teaching (ELT), the contextualization of language learning has been proposed by many researchers (e.g. Jurmo, 2004; Mazzeo et al., 2003 in Perin, 2001). It is suggested "direct reference to real world events and practices" can facilitate language acquisition (Perin, 2001). Under the circumstances, Pui Ching Middle School, Macau, recognized the above-mentioned benefits and the subject was first introduced as part of the school's senior-high English curriculum in scholastic year 2013/2014.

Having been teaching the subject for nearly two years, I have covered many social issues on both local and international scales (see Table 1) with my students. The selection of the topics is primarily based on a horizontal principle that emphasizes the coverage of a number of global themes, e.g. education, technology, environment. Meanwhile, there is a vertical penetration of relevant topics that can benefit from, as well as heighten, students' awareness of local issues. For example, in April and May 2015, I conducted a series of discussions on the sustainability of Macau's cash handout scheme, the pros and cons of the construction of the Macau LRT system, and the

effectiveness of the implementation of the 24-hour Macau-mainland border crossing in light of Macau's recent economic downturn. Many of the students were able to critically reflect on the three relevant topics with reference to data and news reports presented in class. Interestingly, the predictions the majority of the students were able to make prove to be fairly accurate in accordance with the problems we are facing a year later.

Table 1: Topics Covered in Scholastic Year 2014/2015 & 2015/2016

1. Comparing the Education Systems of Sweden, Singapore and Hong Kong
2. Technological Development and the Environment
3. Social Networking
4. Impacts of the Introduction of Competitions in Macau's Gaming Industry
5. Macau's Cash Handout Scheme
6. Changes to Macau-mainland Border Crossing
7. Housing Prices in Macau
8. Public Transportation in Macau
9. Is Air Travel Safe?
10. Sharing Economy
11. Uber and its Challenges to Macau's Taxi Industry
12. China's Two-child Policy
13. Global Environmental Problems
14. News Bias Detection Project

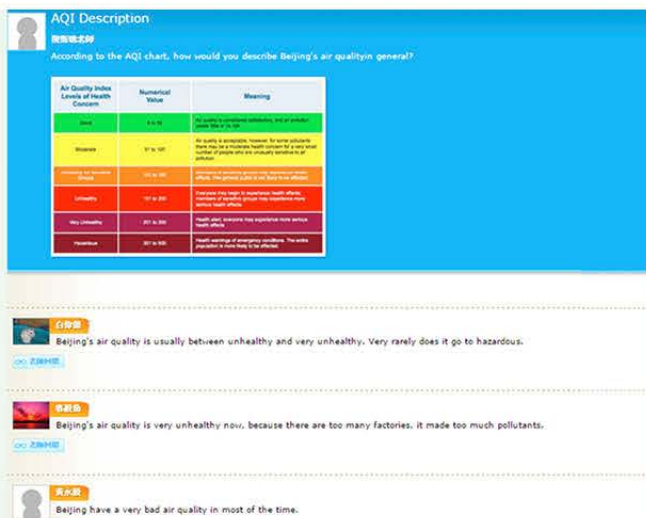


Image 1: Students Working on a Table Description in Class



Image 3: Students Working on a Task in Class

Teaching materials chosen for the course mainly consist of news articles published by local, neighbouring and international news agencies, YouTube videos, and occasionally extracts of research papers. As class size in our school is comparatively large, an IT-facilitated teaching approach, such as the use of iPads, is adopted to guarantee teaching and learning efficacy. During class time, students are required to answer questions based on the material presented (See Image 1 to 3).

In addition to in-class discussion, which is, for the most part, devoted to material presentation and language input provision,

students are encouraged to take advantage of the school-affiliated virtual learning environment, namely e-Class. The online forum provides a platform for students to be engaged in meaningful, topic-specific discussions with the teacher and even their fellow students from other classes (see Image 4).

In both scholastic years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, the course is brought to a close with a student project on news bias. It requires students to compare three news reports on the same news story by applying the eight principles of detecting news bias, adapted from www.media-awareness.ca. It is believed



Image 2: Students' Answers to a Listening Comprehension Task in Class

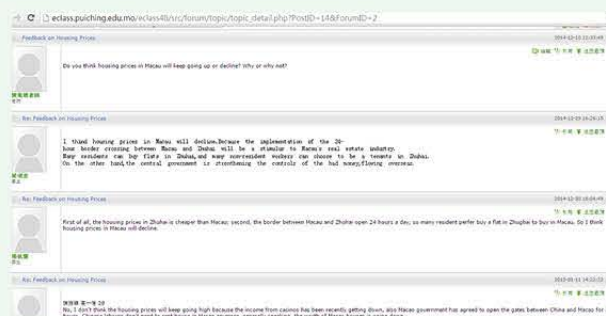


Image 4: Students' Responses on Online Forum



that during the process of preparation for the project, students are encouraged to learn to work collaboratively with their peers (see Image 5 to 7), apply what they have learned, and, most importantly, cultivate critical readership and citizenship.

Moving onto the third year of teaching Liberal Studies as a “sub-subject” of English, I would hope to transform the classroom into a more student-centered one by adopting a task-based approach to engage them in problem-solving situations. One possible alternative for the student project could be requiring them to publish class newspapers. All in all, it is hoped that through the use of more meaningful communicative teaching activities, students would ultimately, beyond merely passive receivers of information, become critical and self-responsible global citizens.

### References

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Image 5: Students Preparing for their Projects



Image 6: Students in Groups Working on their Projects



Image 7: Students Giving an Oral Presentation on News Bias Detection