

Chapter 5

Teachers as Agents of Change: Unpacking EFL Lessons Through an Anti-Bias Lens

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ABSTRACT

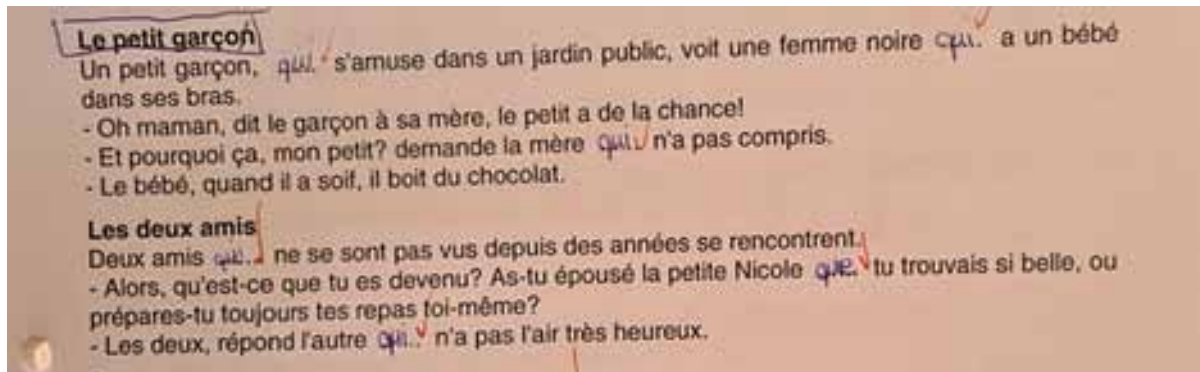
Public school teachers in Switzerland often feel bound by decisions made by ministries of education as to materials used in the classroom. In teacher training, teachers are often taught superficially about reflective practices, equity, and equality, but in their training to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the focus is too often on the mechanical aspects of foreign language teaching and the examples provided are often not provocative enough to allow for an anti-bias stance to education. Yet this stance is a tenet of most national curricula and is to precede subject-specific curricular aims. Therefore, neither teachers nor materials should shy away from or banalize topics around civil rights and social change. This chapter provides examples of how the dispositions for culturally responsive pedagogy scale and teaching tolerance social justice scales can be used in teacher training for analyzing and planning out lessons. Examples from lessons on the Black Lives Matter movement and general suggestions act as springboards for rethinking and unpacking EFL teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The year was 2020 and children were learning about relative clauses in French-as-a-foreign language (FLE) lessons in the German part of Switzerland by filling in “who”, “which”, or “that” in jokes (Figure 1). A learner in the class found the jokes to be offensive and confronted the teacher, only to be told that this worksheet was from the official coursebooks which had been approved by the ministry of education, thus acceptable to use.

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Figure 1. Homework brought home on December 7, 2020 - source unknown (author's translation)



The little boy

A little boy _____ was having fun in a park saw a Black woman _____ was holding a baby in her arms.

“Oh, mommy”, said the little boy to his mother, “that little boy is so lucky!”

“Why do you say that, sweetie?” the mother, _____ didn’t understand, asked her son.

“Well”, said the boy, “when the baby is thirsty, he can drink chocolate milk.”

Two friends

Two friends _____ hadn’t seen one another in a long time were catching up.

“So, what have you been up to? Did you marry little Nicole, _____ you always found so beautiful, or are you still cooking for yourself?”

“Both!” answered the friend _____ didn’t appear too happy.

This example can be viewed under many lenses. First of all, from a Freudian perspective, one could analyze the language of the joke, its intention, its author, its ability in this case - had the teacher taken the bait - to discuss social conventions and whether “provoking” through potentially racist and clearly misogynic language is actually a way of addressing social issues. Secondly, from a sociological perspective, even though such jokes are perhaps no longer deemed appropriate, they are still present, and the teacher demonstrates a certain blindness to the issue at hand or does not even recognize the offensiveness of such examples (see Nash 1999 or Bourdieu and Passeron (1965) for discussions on the collective habitus). In a similar manner, if the collective habitus is changing - as demonstrated by the learner questioning the use of this extract, - then disregarding the learner’s question shows the teacher’s lack of moral agency (Molla and Nolan, 2020) whereby agency might be a desirable quality in this circumstance (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Thirdly, this extract can be viewed under the lens of anti-bias or social justice education due to the offensive nature of such jokes when not discussed with the learners and their inappropriacy in coursebook materials should schools want to break cycles of oppression. The child was clearly able to unpack the joke by recognizing the offenses and questioning the intention though the teacher was unaware or decided to remain silent (see Sapon-Shevin, 2017).

The first pages of the curriculum used in much of Switzerland (D-EDK, 2015) call for values, contexts, and content on all school levels and in every school subject (which includes FLE as well as English as a Foreign Language (EFL)) that are “humanitarian and democratic.” These tenets have their

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