

Teaching Human Rights in English Class: A Teacher's Opinion

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I am a Grade 10 English teacher at Mater Dei School in Bangkok, Thailand. I am also in charge of running the school's Human Rights Club. My school is an Ursuline Catholic school. I would like to share some points of view about teaching human rights in my English class.

With the school's theme emphasizing 'Justice and Peace', its principles of ethics and catechism (teaching Buddhism, Catholicism and the teachings of the school's patroness [Saint Angela's]), it is relatively easy for me to integrate human rights concepts into my English lessons.

Normally, I do not start teaching human rights by lecturing to the students about terms, definitions, principles or declarations. I often try to make human rights issues easier to understand by using interesting and relevant materials such as reading materials, songs and movies. All these help me facilitate their understanding of human rights.

An example of my teaching process is as follows:

- I usually start the lesson by asking questions, making them share or discuss interesting news or events concerning human rights violations, their causes and effects on people's lives.
- I then ask them to think of various solutions to the cases being discussed. I do not give any conclusions right away. I instead facilitate the students' formulation of their own conclusions after studying the materials at hand.

There are also other ways of making the

students study the materials. For example, for the reading materials, they are asked to answer questions individually and then discuss them (answers) within groups before reaching group conclusion.

The method I use maximizes the students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

Only after the students themselves reach the conclusion, with the teacher's guidance, that I tell them a theme or principle or information on human rights.

Through this learning process, I have seen my students having the chance to practice their English skills as well as seriously learn matters significant to their lives. More importantly, with the impression that they themselves can come up with practical solutions to relevant problems in society, the students tend to have positive ideas about human rights. Such positive ideas are obviously expressed through their increasing interest on current issues in society and more participation in activities concerning human rights. Accordingly, it is also expected that, besides having more self-awareness in respecting others, the students develop a sense of duty in observing, practicing or behaving in ways that sustain, rather than violate, and promote human rights principles. Thus, I, as one of the Mater Dei School teachers who believe in human rights principles, have been trying to implant and cultivate this important issue

into our students hoping that they are always learning things that make living worthwhile.

I include in this article some opinions from my students about one lesson on human rights in 2004.

“I learned many things from all the lessons I studied in school. One of them is an English lesson in Grade 10. The teacher let us listen to a song *Ebony and Ivory*. From this song and the activity in that lesson I learned something about human rights. I think we have been taught that human rights belong to us since we were born. In the past, our ancestors had to fight for their rights to live with equality in society, to live without being taken advantage of by others. They were successful. However, when speaking about human rights now, people do not seem to care much about its real meaning. They are mere words they refer to when they want to claim their own rights, but not when they themselves violate other’s rights. Therefore, I think it is good that in our society there are some people who want to remind other people of human rights by writing poems, songs, materials and books. The same interested people gather members to create organizations that work on human rights.”

Phanathip Chittayapuntagoon
Grade 11, Science program

Human rights I learnt last year

“In one of my English classes last year, I had the chance to learn about a good song, *Ebony and Ivory*, which tells me about the rights of different people. The ebony and ivory on the piano keyboard symbolize the white and the black peoples. The piano cannot produce nice music if it has only the white, or black, keys. It is like our world, which does not have only one group of people. We need different peoples for a balanced world, and there should not be any discrimination. No matter who you are or where you are, all of

us are important and we have our significant role in our world. We must move the world together, never to stop it with any form of discrimination. We can surely have a good life together because everyone has an equal right to live happily in this wonderful world.

From the song *Ebony and Ivory* I learned that the heart of a person should be free. However, the sound of piano is not always smooth, ebony and ivory keys have different sounds depending on the note and the touch. What is the real heart of a person? I think that skin color, or religion, or education does not matter. Be proud of yourself because you are as good as anybody else. We should never look down on anyone so that we can live together happily and peacefully.”

Angwara Sirivoranak
Grade 11, Chinese-English program

Human Rights - *Ebony and Ivory*

I learned a good song called *Ebony and Ivory* in my English subject. The song talks about different people - with different skin colors. Just like a piano, which needs black and white keys to sound good, our world needs different people. No matter what you are or where you are, all of us are important for the world. We must act together, without any discrimination. We can all have a good life in this world with everyone enjoying equal right to live in happiness.

Supak Jiramongkonrat
Grade 11, Chinese-English program

The song *Ebony and Ivory* taught me something good last year. First of all, I came to know about human rights. I am sure that everyone can spell the words ‘human rights’ but I wonder how many of them really understand these words and sincerely respect other people’s rights. Secondly, I learned positive thinking from the song. I learned about living in peace and with justice in this world. We have to care for one another although we do not really know each other personally. We

do not need to know who the people are before we respect them or their rights. I believe that we have to be merciful and polite to everyone.”

Pittaporn Tachagaichana
Grade 11, Science program

“Being patient with others and not judging them by their external look or appearance is what I learned from the song *Ebony and Ivory*. The world, which needs to be cured of illness, is now slowly being destroyed by human beings. For many years, people have been creating rules supposedly to help manage and put society in good order. Yet, who knew that such rules created by human beings would bring trouble to them as well? The more rules are laid down by some people for the well-being of all, the more people cry out for the violation of their rights. People who benefit from and those who suffer under the system cause both the enormous problems that result. These problems become more serious as time pass by. Therefore, nowadays we commonly see selfishness surpassing kindness, and this problem spreads so much faster than a virus that it is now the most feared disease in the world. The song that I learned in my English class last year talks about piano keyboards, with black and white colors made of ebony and ivory. The songwriter represents

the different groups of people with the different keyboard colors. He believes that people while having different skin color, thoughts, characteristics, etc. can actually, truthfully and rightfully live in peace in the same world. Isn't it that the piano keyboards though having different colors co-exist and create wonderful music for people to listen and enjoy? If piano had only the white or the black keyboards, would the sound be as beautiful? I believe this is no different with people who live in the big round world with their wide variety of wants and desires. If all of us accommodate one another much more, care more for one another, and stop discrimination, such problems as greed or selfishness will definitely and finally be solved. If I have a chance to ask people all over the world one question, this is what I will ask them: Think of how much you owe our big round home, and ask yourselves what have you done to return to the world the generous hospitality you received. Are the things that you do make life worth living or do they make it worse? Answer these questions yourselves and start to behave as human beings who live in the world in peace, not people who live like a piece of trash that mess up our society.”

Danaya Vutikornsombatkul
Grade 11, Science program