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SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE TEACHING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES – A CASE STUDY ON EFL HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

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Abstract

Part of the modern mindset, political correctness has become a complex phenomenon which has generated new ways of expression calling into question changes occurring at the linguistic level. Against the background of ongoing controversial viewpoints on the rationale and justification of politically correct language, non-discriminatory language occurrence in English speaking settings is a reality that should not be overlooked in the foreign language teachers’ attempt to build intercultural communication specific skills. Despite its lengthy history, political correctness is still an evasive term, and the propagated linguistic behaviour, which actually reflects the social change, is not universal, as it highly depends on the speaker’s values and beliefs, on the audience, the communication setting and the subject matter. This paper researches and presents a case study showing the attitude of EFL high school teachers on integrating politically correct lexicon into FL classes. Data for the research were collected from 30 high school English teachers via a questionnaire prepared by the authors. We reckon the outcomes of the study are relevant for further attempts to design teachers training syllabi, to adjust academic curricula or to add dictionary entries needed for translations. For the purpose of this study, we consider political correctness or politically correct language, including the abbreviations PC and p.c. only in terms of their linguistic implications, no reference thereto being intended to ridicule, criticize or offend.

Keywords: politically correct language, euphemisms, teaching strategy, non-discriminatory lexicon

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1. A brief history of political correctness

Showing consideration for the plurality and diversity of today’s society is a global manifestation which has resulted not only in a control of actions but also in a control of words. Politeness and tolerance are to rule our behaviour and attitude, our beliefs and the way we address other people, showing a common desire to not affront any individual. Interpersonal relationships and the characteristics underlying the notions of politeness and respect towards the others are governed by the constant care for not displeasing the others.

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Emerging “spontaneously in the West”, as some authors claim, political correctness “is a kind of voluntary social code of conduct” (Monashenko, 2021,149) which has generated significant changes in terms of attitude, deeds and words. Besides the policies issued and measures taken in order not to offend or disadvantage certain groups of people, there is also the linguistic manifestation of political correctness (abbreviated as PC), defined as “the principle of avoiding language and behaviour that may offend particular groups of people” (Oxford advanced Learners’ Dictionary, 6th edition). As inspiringly pointed out by Lukianoff and Haidt, the worldwide issue of political correctness is creating a culture in which “everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse” (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015).

Part of the modern lexicon, as well as of the modern mindset, political correctness is a complex phenomenon and one can hardly trace a linear history thereof, as the term is concerned with “neither politics nor correctness as those terms are generally understood” (Hughes, 2010,3). There has always been a tendency of dividing attitudes and language into correct and incorrect and the long-established compliance with proper language has been acknowledged as going back as far as the Victorians, whose disapproval of socially improper language used to be conveyed as “*It isn’t done*” (Lessing, 2004,76). According to Roger Kimball, the term political correctness emerged more than eight decades ago, in close relation with the Marxist ideology. More exactly, political correctness was already beginning to take form as early as 1919, when Georg Lukacs launched a cultural terrorism program and introduced a radical sex education part in the Hungarian schools (Kimball, 2011). Supposed to have taken off in the late 1960s, strongly impacted by the translations of Maoism writings (a communist doctrines practiced in China, as a variety of Marxism-Leninism) into English, the term “political correctness” used to convey at first a certain degree of verbal irony for addressing the extreme supporters of the Maoist ideology (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006,92).

Since the early 1980s, PC has become a familiar phrase used in reference to policies and guidelines governing hiring procedures, language codes and academic curricula (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006, 90). The PC movement has been a controversial topic in academic settings, with the Stanford University an example in this respect, where in April 1986 the members of Black Students Union claimed that the Western Culture course delivered to first-year students “was racist, sexist, and failed to address the needs of minority students or women” (Perez, 2019). The press played an important role in popularizing the phrase during the 1990s.

A number of related conceptualizations resulted in a specific vocabulary designating the same concern for not upsetting: “eco-correctness” governs our concern for ecology and the environment, “emotional correctness” refers to the observance of feelings and emotions, adopted dress codes fall into “dress correctness”, while the proper attitude towards religious groups is known as “religious correctness” (Monashenko, 2021,150). We also find relevant the emergence of the compound word “polcor”, which nevertheless enjoyed a limited popularity in time and geographical spread (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006, 90).

2. Politically correct language – a condition for functioning in English-speaking settings

The concept of political correctness has been differently approached by various researchers whose works depict both favourable and unfavourable, expected and unexpected aspects. Generally speaking, politically correct language is to be understood as polite and innocuous language. Being politically correct means using “acceptable” and “appropriate” language (Hughes, 2010, 4) to approach issues of culture, gender, race, religion, politics, the working environment, social status, appearance, health issues, ideology etc. Acknowledging its vagueness as a term, since “its meaning seems to change every time it makes an appearance”, as well as its “polemical baggage on board”, Allen and BurrIDGE associate political correctness with good manners and the new language forms with taboo words and linguistic censoring (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006, 90).

Politically correct language is not universal and it depends on people's values and beliefs. The speaker and the audience, the setting and the subject matter are the elements impacting the decision as to what is or is not politically correct language, so "what is PC in one context may be non-PC in another" (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 111). According to some authors, political correctness is criticized for "growing beyond any expectation" (Magnani, 2016, 261), being seen as a sine-qua-non condition which can prevent the progress of civilization and freedom unless it is closely observed. The various attempts to apply the principle of political correctness in educational settings have been considered as "arbitrary, abstract, hypocritical and unjustified challenges to the standard semantics of natural languages of various groups" (Magnani, 2016, 262).

Perez warns against a misleading first impression and compares political correctness with a "double-edged sword", which can, on the one hand "involve a new orthodoxy that liberates from old prejudices", while running the risk of being itself "a new form of prejudice with new victims" (Perez, 2019). Politically correct language has also been criticized for the exaggerated use of euphemisms and for the effects it has on the freedom of speech and thought.

Notwithstanding the wide selection of relevant studies conducted on the social impact of political correctness, on its political implications, on the changes it has determined in academic curricula and campus policies, including descriptive and theoretical approaches, we acknowledge that "the linguistic behaviour is the most conspicuous expression of the political correctness ethos, and language issues are key players in the PC arena" (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 90). Moreover, we must be aware that the circulation of people, highly accelerated lately by globalization, has occasioned numerous verbal personal and professional interactions among notably different individuals, with various views on culture, religion, life etc. The existing diversity of individuals and religious, cultural, political and professional beliefs has inflicted the unavoidable occurrence of proscribed or at least harmful topics.

Even if political correctness is not a phenomenon inherent in all cultures and nations, it is associated with a set of modifications in the English language norms which impact communication in English-speaking settings and translations into English. The continuous concern for avoiding displeasing, biased, condemnatory and critical vocabulary has generated new ways of expression which call into question changes occurring at the linguistic level. The restrictions on using certain words and phrases have determined either adjustments in the existing linguistic code, i.e. the use of euphemisms, or the occurrence of new means of expressions, some of which - lookism, phalocratic, other, significant other, sex worker, multicultural, herstory, disadvantaged, homophobic, waitron, wimmin, differently abled, to Bork, physically challenged, substance abuse, fattist, Eurocentric, Afrocentric, demographics, issue, carbon foot-print, glass ceiling, pink plateau, and first people, as well as code abbreviations like DWEM, PWA, HN, and neo-con - have been associated by researchers with artificial coinages (Hughes, 2010, 5).

Informing FL learners about PC language and the changes it has generated in the English language means nothing else than raising their awareness of the need to find out means "for speaking to and about others, particularly others perceived to be disadvantaged, oppressed and different from ourselves; people who may be overly suspicious of our motives and overly sensitive to what we say, finding slights where none was intended" (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 111). Going beyond the ideological and political beliefs underlying the concept of political correctness, we believe that FL students should understand the new language norms as recommended alternatives, deemed to be voluntarily used for showing a proper linguistic behaviour and not breaking social conventions.

3. Integrating politically correct language into the English class

Already an integral part of education in general, global education is closely governing foreign language education, since the integration of global issues into the learning process primarily consists in the integration of the relevant linguistic means enabling learners to first understand and then tackle

such issues themselves. Despite the ongoing controversial viewpoints on the ideological and political implications of political correctness, as a global issue nowadays, the non-discriminatory language occurrence in English speaking settings is a reality that should not be overlooked in foreign language teachers' attempt of approaching the current global issues and of assisting their students in building intercultural communication specific skills. EFL teachers play an important role in this context, not counting the fact that the incorporation of global issues, including political correctness and politically correct language, is up to teachers in terms of approach, strategy, further practice and development of relevant higher-order thinking skills. Considered to be helpful for both gaining an overall picture, as well as for providing useful data to be further exploited, the case study we conducted aimed at investigating the attitude of EFL high school teachers towards integrating politically correct language into the foreign language class, the strategies they choose in this respect, as well as their availability for encouraging further reflection among learners. The research aimed to provide sensitive answers to the following three research questions:

1. Is politically correct language integrated in FL classes under the umbrella of the unspoken rules of respectability in cross-cultural communication?
2. Do EFL teachers prefer any strategies for integrating and practicing the new language forms at FL classes?
3. Do teachers encourage students to reflect on the question of why established lexical units no longer satisfy modern language norms?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions underlying the purpose of our study, we opted for descriptive research, more exactly, for collecting qualitative data via a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 6 questions, with 5 open questions and 1 closed question. Despite several drawbacks, such as difficulty in data collection, analysis and schematic representation, we still considered the collection of qualitative data efficient in getting a relevant insight. The questionnaire was sent via email to the foreign languages department within 30 high schools from all over the country, inviting at least one teacher from the department to answer. The difficulty of finding valid contact emails on high schools' websites limited the number of high schools approached to only 30. A number of 26 FL high school teachers contributed to our case study, with 8 of the approached departments/high schools not having sent any answer.

The questionnaire is preceded by a declaration of purpose informing respondents on the purely academic purpose of our research. For the purpose of this study, we consider political correctness or politically correct language, including the abbreviations PC and p.c. only in terms of their linguistic implications, no reference thereto being intended to ridicule, criticize or offend. No personal data were collected, so we could not make any correlation between gender, age or geographical location and the teachers' answers. We considered these as limitations of the study when interpreting the results.

[Q1. What is your position as an EFL teacher towards the integration of the language changes brought about by political correctness into EFL classes?

Probe 1: *Is it necessary for the students to be familiar with the new language forms?*

Probe 2: *Are there relevant contexts which call for the need of using politically correct language during the English classes in your school?*

Probe 3: *How would you appreciate the attempt of informing EFL learners about the existing politically correct language alternatives: time-efficient and of interest, or only an irrelevant distraction?]*

70% of the EFL teachers interviewed have been integrating politically correct language into their English class for some time, especially with high school juniors and seniors (as 5 teachers claim), with half of these respondents admitting that the issue of using politically correct language or of being politically correct has been brought out in the class by the students themselves. No relevant contexts

are found in textbooks, according to our respondents, still different contexts occur during the English class, according to 18 respondents. Students’ awareness (3 respondents), students’ curiosity (1 respondent), the usual debates about the latest news available on the social media (3 respondents), discussions about latest movies (1 respondent), or the recent eligibility rules in the movie industry for international awards (1 respondent) are among the few relevant contexts where “*students need further explanations on the issue of politically correct language*”.

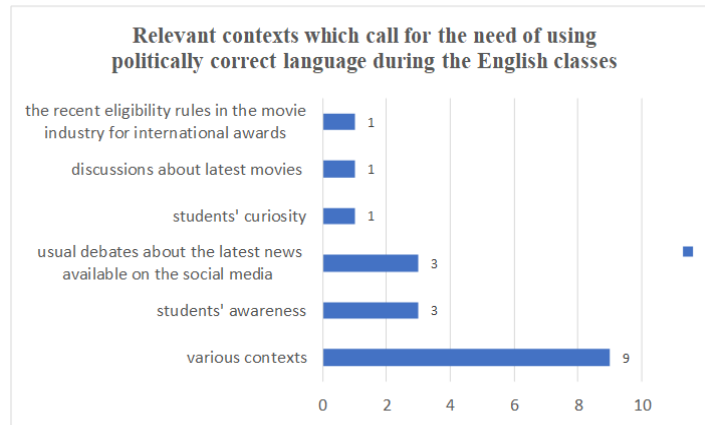


Fig. 1

Providing alternatives to the “*biased vocabulary which can be used intentionally or unintentionally*” is interesting (8 respondents), generates endless but useful debates (3 respondents), encourages students to think critically (1 respondent), encourages students to look up for further information themselves (4 respondents), is common sense nowadays (3 respondents) but it can also be an irrelevant distraction, according to 5 respondents, even “*a complete irrelevant distraction*”, as 2 of them have claimed.

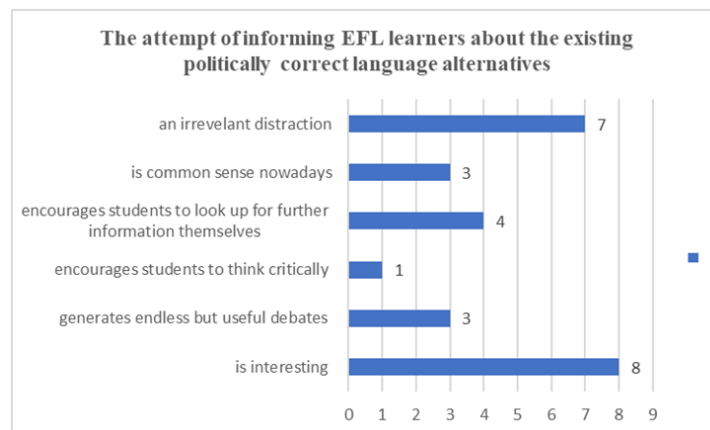


Fig. 2

We considered the lack of exactitude and the polemical nature underlying the concept of politically correct language issues which could impact teachers’ attitude towards integrating the new linguistic forms into their class. Reflecting the social change, being also politically and ideologically driven, politically correct language is still associated by some researchers with good manners. For Noam Chomsky, it is “a healthy expansion of moral concern” (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 90) while for Allan and Burrige “it is simple good manners”, with the “PC-inspired relabelling initiatives” being associated with “notions of taboo and censoring” (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 90).

For 70% of our respondents politically correct language means polite language (10 times mentioned), courteous phrases (15 times mentioned), extremely official (14 times mentioned), formal language (12 times mentioned), avoiding using words showing disapproval of certain issues (1 mention) and it is generally associated with good manners (19 times mentioned). Still, 3 respondents consider politically

correct language just a form of conformism (1 mention), a trend that will be quickly forgotten (1 mention) a political issue (1 mention) - [Q2. *How would you describe politically correct language in order to provide students with a clear and correct understanding thereof?*]

According to the teachers interviewed, no significant linguistic changes have occurred in the English textbooks - [Q3. *Please mention some linguistic changes you have noticed in ELT textbooks and that you consider to be the result of the concern for encouraging a politically correct linguistic behaviour.*] Still, the few changes identified relate to the neutral names preferred for designing jobs and occupations and to the avoidance of male and/or female pronouns for ensuring gender neutrality:

[Phrases such as ‘Every student has to inform their parents’ (instead of his or her), which actually violates the grammar rules of subject-verb agreement and makes it difficult to explain to students.]

[Words such as policeman and/or policewoman are hardly used in written texts, so students, especially very young ones, do not even know about their existence. They now use police officer. Whether it’s about politically correct language or not, we have the responsibility of updating our vocabulary to be able to use the modern vocabulary.]

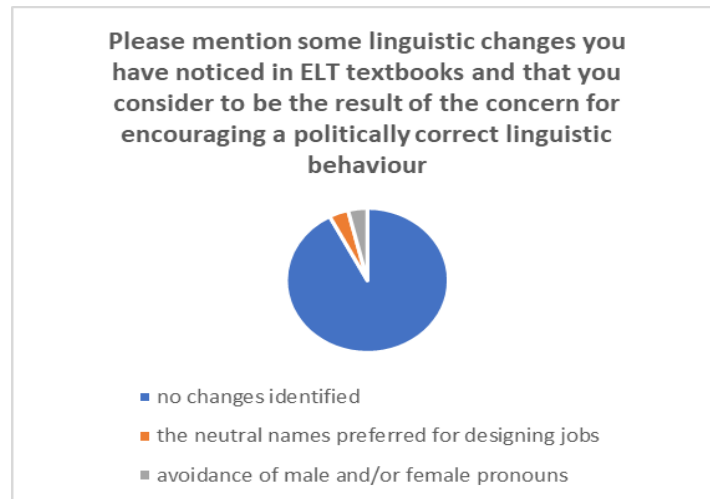


Fig. 3

There are not many teachers willing to dedicate special classes to integrating politically correct language into their FL classes [Q4] and most teachers do not find the lists with alternatives to politically incorrect words and phrases useful for teaching purposes. At the same time, 70% of respondents integrate the issue of political correctness and the relevant linguistic changes either in the warm-up activities (10 times mentioned) or in relation with any other reading/ listening activity (12 times mentioned) where students come across and/or they infer “*issues that people are sensitive to*”.

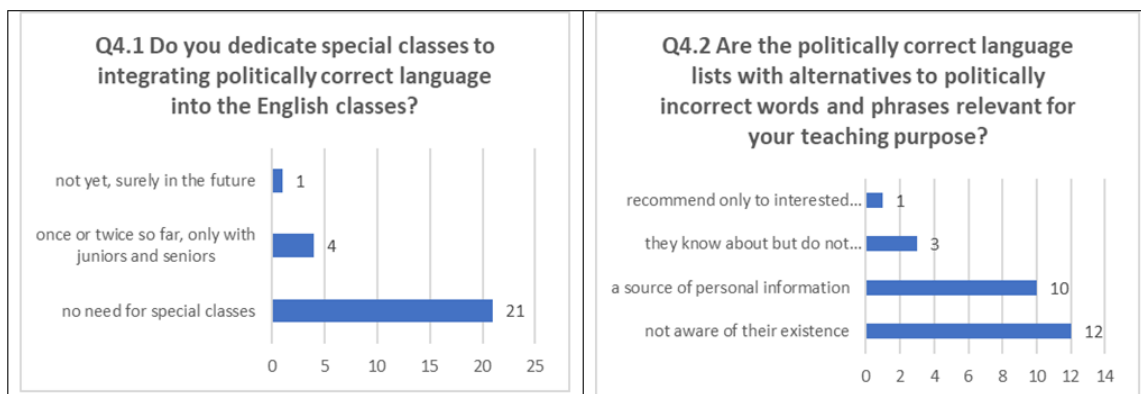


Fig. 4

Only 15 % of respondents dedicate time to designing extra activities for further practicing politically correct linguistic equivalents.

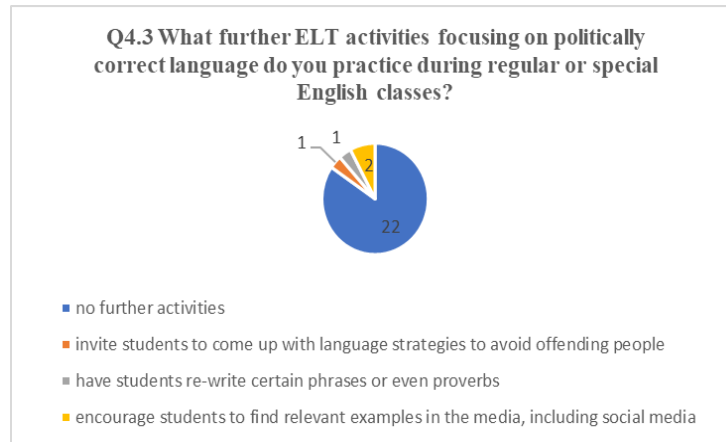


Fig. 5

Besides raising learners’ awareness and assisting them in building up knowledge, language education should also include the development of relevant critical skills for developing action competences and that is why one purpose of our study was to find out whether teachers encourage students to reflect on the question why established lexical units no longer satisfy modern language norms.

The suggestions shared by the few teachers (15% of respondents) encouraging students to think critically on the topic include *debates* over the *seriousness of this issue in certain regions of the world, the variability and mutability of language, the consequences of globalisation, the importance of always being informed.*

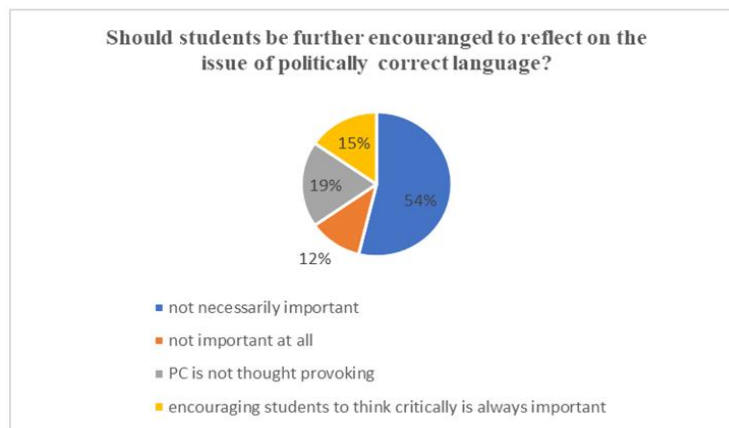


Fig. 6

None of the high school teachers interviewed is happy with the existing sources of information related to the issue of politically correct language, while half of them would find helpful any form of FL trainings/webinars/workshops likely to provide relevant information on the integration of the language changes brought about by political correctness into EFL classes - [Q6. *Do you find helpful attending FL trainings/webinars/workshops likely to provide relevant information on the integration of the language changes brought about by political correctness into EFL classes?*

Probe 1: *Are there enough sources of information at present?]*

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Notwithstanding the small number of respondents, acknowledged to be one limitation, we consider the case study as presented above valuable as a taking-off point for further studies. As some other researchers have already admitted, politically correct language seems to have become an extra quality

of “standard language” (Allan and Burridge, 2006, 114) to be added to the already acknowledged ones: accuracy, precision, faultlessness and appropriate register. Considering this and the highly accelerated changes due to globalization, being able to communicate in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts means to a large extent being able to understand and use appropriately a language which is considered to be politically correct.

As shown above, the answers we obtained reveal that 70 % of the high school teachers interviewed have already introduced some aspects related to politically correct language into their FL classes, under the umbrella of the unspoken rules of respectability in cross-cultural communication. The responses collected also show the high importance most teachers give to meeting their students’ educational needs and interests, by exemplifying a range of student-generated contexts. Still, for almost a quarter of our respondents, informing EFL learners about the existing politically correct language alternatives is an irrelevant distraction, which actually proves the reduced significance teachers themselves give to PC language. At the same time only 15 % of our respondents dedicate time to designing strategies for integrating and practicing the new language forms at FL classes and the same 15% encourage students to use their critical thinking skills for further understanding.

The study we have conducted primarily reveals the need for developing forms of training, likely to inform FL teachers not only about the importance of being familiar with politically correct language but also about relevant strategies and means likely to be used in teaching and practicing the new linguistic forms at FL classes.

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