

SPECIAL ARTICLE

# Communicating Your Way Through Clashing Cultures<sup>1</sup>

## Tools and strategies for addressing Socially Acute Questions in the English language classroom

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the handling of Socially Acute Questions (SAQs) in the English language classroom. SAQs have been described as complex and controversial issues that are considered acute in society, in research and professional domains, and in educational contexts. Although intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is being encouraged by our educational authorities, teachers feel at a loss as to how to achieve that learning outcome in their teaching-learning units (TLUs). Many of them have encountered problems and even conflict when trying to deal with SAQs. Even though they are struggling with a sense of frustration, they continue to consider that addressing such issues in their TLUs is key to 21st-century education. In this article, a customizable toolbox is proposed that second language (L2) teachers can draw from to foster and facilitate constructive intercultural dialogue when dealing with SAQs in their increasingly diverse English language classrooms. It starts off with a literature review providing perspectives on SAQs from transdisciplinarity, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and the Pedagogy of Encounter. It continues with an introduction to

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safe spaces, brave spaces, and story circles, as well as an overview of relevant concepts from cross-cultural pragmatics. The methods section then gives a detailed action-research-driven account of a racist incident that occurred in the author's intervention group, a conversation class at the language institute of Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), Belgium. Drawing from the literature review as well as the case study, and in the absence of institutional support to handle SAQs appropriately, the article concludes with a proposal for a customizable SAQs toolbox, meeting the stakeholders' (the L2 learners' and teachers') academic expectations as well as emotional needs. Little or no work has been done so far on how to deal with SAQs in tertiary education. The actionable roadmap proposed in this article tries to bridge that gap. Even though the case study focuses on racism in the English language classroom, the customizable toolbox can be adapted across languages, academic disciplines, and other forms of discrimination.

**KEYWORDS:** Socially Acute Questions, Social and Emotional Learning, Pedagogy of Encounter, intercultural dialogue, transdisciplinarity

**ABSTRACT:** Cet article examine le traitement des Questions Socialement Vives (QSV) dans les classes d'anglais. Les QSV ont été décrites comme des questions complexes et controversées qui sont considérées comme aiguës dans la société, dans les domaines de la recherche et de la profession, et dans les contextes pédagogiques. Bien que la compétence communicative interculturelle (CCI) soit encouragée par nos autorités éducatives, les enseignant.e.s ne savent pas comment atteindre cet acquis d'apprentissage dans leurs unités d'enseignement-apprentissage (UEA). Nombre d'entre eux rencontrent des problèmes, voire des conflits, lorsqu'ils essayent de traiter des QSV. Même s'ils éprouvent un sentiment de frustration, ils continuent de penser que la prise en compte de ces questions dans leurs UEA est essentielle à l'éducation du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cet article propose une boîte à outils personnalisable dans laquelle les enseignant.e.s de langues secondes (L2) peuvent puiser pour encourager et faciliter un dialogue interculturel constructif lorsqu'ils traitent des QSV dans leurs classes d'anglais de plus en plus diversifiées. Il commence par une revue de la littérature qui présente les perspectives sur les QSV à partir de la transdisciplinarité, l'Apprentissage Social et Émotionnel et de la Pédagogie de la Rencontre. Il se poursuit par une introduction aux espaces sécuritaires, aux espaces de courage et aux cercles de partage, ainsi que par un aperçu des

concepts pertinents de la pragmatique interculturelle. La section consacrée aux méthodes présente ensuite un compte rendu détaillé, fondé sur une recherche-action, d'un incident raciste survenu dans le groupe d'intervention de l'auteur, une classe de conversation à l'institut de langues de l'Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), en Belgique. S'appuyant sur la revue de la littérature et sur l'étude de cas et en l'absence d'un soutien institutionnel pour traiter les QSV de manière appropriée, l'article se conclut par une proposition de boîte à outils personnalisable pour les QSV, répondant aux attentes académiques et aux besoins émotionnels des parties prenantes (les apprenant.e.s et les enseignant.e.s de la L2). Peu ou pas de travaux ont été réalisés jusqu'à présent sur la manière de traiter les QSV dans l'enseignement supérieur. La feuille de route proposée dans cet article tente de combler cette lacune. Même si l'étude de cas se concentre sur le racisme dans les cours d'anglais, la boîte à outils personnalisable peut être adaptée à d'autres langues, d'autres disciplines universitaires et d'autres formes de discrimination.

**MOTS-CLÉS:** Questions Socialement Vives, Apprentissage Social et Émotionnel, Pédagogie de la Rencontre, dialogue interculturel, transdisciplinarité

## 1. Introduction

This study examines the handling of Socially Acute Questions (SAQs) in the English language classroom. More and more teachers are being confronted with SAQs in their increasingly diverse learnscapes. Even though intercultural learning is being encouraged by our educational authorities, teachers report they lack institutional support to handle SAQs appropriately. Many of them have encountered problems and even conflict while trying to deal with SAQs in their teaching-learning units (TLUs). Although they are struggling with a sense of frustration, they continue to consider that addressing them in their TLUs is key to 21st-century education.

In this article, a customizable toolbox is proposed that second language (L2) teachers can draw from to foster and facilitate constructive intercultural dialogue when dealing with SAQs in their English language classrooms. The article starts off with a literature review providing perspectives on SAQs from transdisciplinarity, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and the Pedagogy

of Encounter. It continues with an introduction to safe spaces, brave spaces, and story circles, as well as a review of relevant concepts from cross-cultural pragmatics. The methodology section gives a detailed action-research-driven account of a racist<sup>2</sup> incident that occurred in the author's intervention group. Drawing from the literature review as well as the case study, the article concludes with a proposal for a customizable SAQs toolbox, meeting the stakeholders' (the L2 learners' *and* teachers') academic expectations as well as emotional needs. Most of the literature on the subject involves primary and secondary education. Little or no work has been done on how to deal with SAQs in tertiary-education contexts. Even though the case study focuses on racism in the English language classroom, the actionable toolbox proposed can be applied across languages, academic disciplines, and multiple forms of bias.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Socially Acute Questions

The Council of Europe acknowledges that controversial issues and incidents abound in today's challenging 21st-century context. Educational policies need to reinforce a shift from the "theory-based acquisition of knowledge to active and participatory learning modes and engagement with real-life issues." There should be "a move away from knowing to doing" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 7). Controversial issues are "issues which arouse feelings and divide opinion in communities and society." Some are long-standing, while others are recent. They can also vary in time and in place (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 8).

Legardez and Simonneaux (2006) coined the French term *Questions Socialement Vives*, or *Socially Acute Questions* in English, in 2006. These refer to complex issues that are considered controversial. They are "acute" when they are contentious in one or more of the three following domains (Legardez, 2017, p. 82): in society, in research and professional domains, and in educational contexts. Legardez claims that teaching SAQs has a performative dimension. Teachers become agents of educ-action. He points out that teaching SAQs leads to education for, e.g., education for citizenship, for diversity, and for inclusion (Legardez, 2017).

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2 To dispel any confusion, racism is an ideology, while racial discrimination is acting on racist thoughts.

## 2.2 Transdisciplinarity

In the quest for academic answers to the sustainability challenges that our planet is currently facing, the Bern University, Switzerland, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) team coined the term transdisciplinarity (Herweg et al., 2021). Whereas interdisciplinarity blends the teaching and learning activities of several disciplines, where the sum is larger than the parts, transdisciplinarity goes one step further. Here, non-academic knowledge plays as important a role as academic knowledge in the constructive alignment of learning outcomes, classroom activities, and assessment (Biggs, 1996). Herweg et al. (2021) advocate decompartmentalizing the various academic disciplines, supplementing the outcome with non-academic knowledge. They claim that learning should be embedded in, and teaching tapped into, reality. This will result in several kinds of knowledge, for instance systems knowledge, which should lead to transformative moments, and a sense of responsibility in the learners. To implement transdisciplinarity in TLUs, they propose organizing field courses and excursions (taking the classroom to the real world) and inviting guest lecturers (bringing the real world into the classroom) (Herweg et al., 2021).

## 2.3 Social and Emotional Learning

In increasingly diverse classrooms where SAQs keep emerging, SEL is well established in primary and secondary education, but far less in tertiary education. SEL was developed in the mid-1990s in Chicago to promote diversity and inclusion among elementary-school children (CASEL, 2022). The CASEL framework “fosters knowledge, skills and attitudes” across the five areas of the so-called “CASEL wheel.” These can prove useful in the development of children’s Social and Emotional Competence (SEC).

*Social awareness* is “the ability to understand the perspectives of, and empathize with, others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts” (CASEL, 2022). Pickering (2021) has integrated social awareness in her EFL classes. She argues that it leads to empathy and commitment, two core SEL skills. She suggests using images and targeted vocabulary as lead-ins to writing activities, conversation tables, and debates, to help the learner engage in the topic (Pickering, 2021).

*Relationship skills* involve the abilities to navigate settings with diverse

individuals and groups (CASEL, 2022). Teachers can also promote *self-awareness* about understanding one's feelings, by sharing the vocabulary to express emotions (Plutchik, 1980/2001). Next, they can teach their learners how to deal with those emotions. This advocacy and agency of one's emotions involve *self-management* skills. Finally, *responsible decision-making* helps the learners scaffold their statements, thinking the latter through in terms of reflecting on the perspectives of their interlocutors, and delivering on the acceptance of the consequences in case of conflict (CASEL, 2022).

## 2.4 Pedagogy of Encounter

In the Pedagogy of Encounter, dialogue partners engage as “co-inquirers”, according to Gill (2015, p. 25). Being attentive to “otherness” exposes them to their own prejudices. Gill (2015, p. 12) advocates “biographical learning”, where learners draw upon their personal experience to construct knowledge. This implies a shared quest for meaning. In the Pedagogy of Encounter, listening is crucial: it will enable learners to develop a sense of “we-ness” (Gill, 2015, p. 26). This will lead to joint action to redress “power-imbalance, oppression/exploitation, and other forms of social malaise” (Gill, 2015, p. 25).

## 2.5 Safe Spaces

To address SAQs appropriately, the classroom can be converted into a safe space<sup>3</sup>. Not that it should insulate learners from controversy. On the contrary, it should provide students with an arena where they learn to listen to testimonials about, and deal with, “social evils” (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 10), such as racism and discrimination. Indeed, education should become a “bulwark against” those vices (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 10).

A teacher should not eschew the educational opportunities offered by addressing SAQs in class. However, if a safe space is not created upstream, the pieces might have to be picked up downstream, after harm has already been done.

To create such a safe space, the following issues will need to be addressed (Council of Europe, 2015). First, the teacher should navigate diplomatically

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3 “Safe spaces have their origins in the 1960s’ gay bars that offered LGBTQIA+ individuals . . . a place for practical resistance to political and social repression” (Shelton et al., 2019, p. 110).

between being genuinely committed to a cause and not choosing sides. Next, they need to protect the sensitivities of the learners directly concerned by the conversation topic. Tensions will have to be defused, to prevent the discussion from overheating (i.e., degenerating into conflict). The teacher should prevent the debate from underheating as well. This refers to learners switching off, not showing any willingness to engage, and the topic being canceled altogether. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to listen to points of view they do not share and learn to argue against them. The teacher will need to be able to deal with insensitive remarks, to de-escalate the atmosphere, not to spark in-class conflict or, worse, to prevent conflict from spilling out beyond the classroom (either verbally or physically, or both) (Council of Europe, 2015).

It might be useful for the teacher to organize an upstream information session, where the following “ground rules for creating a safe space for discussion” are clearly laid out (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 20). The course *will* tackle SAQs; if students do not like addressing these, for whatever reason, they are encouraged *not* to register. Neutrality does not exist. However, there is a difference between a committed course and a biased class with a hidden agenda. Having said that, the teacher *will* try to adopt the neutral chairperson approach, allowing everyone to express their views respectfully and productively. The facilitator should try to rephrase what opposing sides have said, removing the passion and emotion from the statements, and focusing on facts, not opinions. The classroom atmosphere will be open and non-judgmental. Stereotypical statements about cultural, gender, religious, or ethnic differences are out of bounds. The speakers’ sources of information must be communicable. The learners’ views can be challenged and defended, provided the appropriate language is used. Finally, threatening words are to be ruled out as well (Council of Europe, 2015).

When creating a safe space in the classroom, Bauler (2019, p. 233) states that the L2 teacher can become the L2 learners’ ally by being both a “cultural mediator” and a “culture enthusiast.” The former can be done by “modeling and teaching pragmatic norms in the new language”, the latter by embracing diversity, and “acknowledging that there are many ways of performing different social acts according to different cultural and linguistic practices” (Bauler, 2019, p. 237). In doing so, teachers can facilitate powerful discussions among all students in the classroom, who, in turn, “will appreciate being a part of an inclusive, welcoming, and learning-rich community” (Bauler, 2019, p. 237). She adds that, in order not to impose the L2 pragmatic norms, it is

crucial that teachers “foster a community in which learners feel they can take risks by talking about, reflecting, and negotiating cultural practices in the classroom” (Bauler, 2019, p. 238).

Recent developments in social work suggest moving from a cultural competence framework to a structural competence approach (Shelton et al., 2019). The former adopts an individualization and micro perspective, whereas the latter focuses on the underlying causes of social problems and embraces community/macro practice (Shelton et al., 2019). In keeping with the idea of structural competence, Shelton et al. (2019) promote brave spaces rather than safe spaces. The difference between the two, they argue, is that “whereas safe spaces establish rules meant to minimize conflict and moderate emotional responses, brave spaces invite authentic engagement and risk-taking” (Shelton et al., 2019, p. 113). Safe spaces all too often turn into echo chambers, reinforcing the biases of the participants, who thus remain “entrenched in the status quo” (Shelton et al., 2019, p. 110), and do not listen deeply to one another (Deardorff, 2020; Gill, 2015). “It is only through confrontation with these dynamics” (of structural inclusion and exclusion, dominance, and subordination) “that transformational learning can occur” (Shelton et al., 2019, p. 113). This echoes the idea in transdisciplinarity of transformative moments brought about by systems knowledge (Herweg et al., 2021).

## 2.6 Story Circles

Safe spaces can take the form of story circles, which have been developed by UNESCO. They have proven their worth in countries and communities torn apart by division and polarization, and now in the process of reconstruction and reconciliation. Examples are post-Apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda.

Deardorff (2020) highlights their advantages when used in educational contexts. Story telling focuses on fundamental aspects of intercultural competence development, such as listening for transformational understanding, empathy, and relationship building. Story circles are non-threatening, in that individuals can share their personal experiences and explore similarities as well as differences. The role of the facilitator is to introduce and debrief the discussion. However, they must not participate in the story circle, as this will impact the power dynamics of the group. The ground rules for the creation of the story circle should be clear from the

outset, e.g., listening is for understanding and not for judgment or response, stories must not be interrupted with requests for clarification, and each participant is allotted the same amount of speaking time (there should be a timekeeper in the story circle) (Deardorff, 2020).

## 2.7 Relevant Concepts from Cross-cultural Pragmatics

L2 learners not only need to acquire grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation competence. They will also need to expose themselves to L2's norms, especially if it is spoken in a different cultural context from the learner's first language (L1). Indeed, the Council of Europe acknowledges that L2 language development and the acquisition of L2 student discussion skills are essential. What is more, even digitally native students need help to identify fake news, raise their awareness about manipulation by AI algorithms, and confront their own confirmation bias. Indeed, culturally conscious learners should become "bias busters" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 20).

In 1975, Gadamer claimed that a second language provides an ideal opportunity for students to experience otherness. Dialogue is an ongoing game of give-and-take, where language serves as a bridge. Encountering a different language can open up channels for broadening a student's horizon (Gadamer, 1975).

Menzies (2015) speaks of "high cultural intelligence", which involves understanding how verbal and non-verbal communication are used differently across cultures. Oriental cultures, for instance, are "high-context cultures", in which "meaning is inferred from the context or setting instead of the words used" (Menzies, 2015). In "low-context cultures" such as in the United States, Africa, and Europe, meaning is "inferred from the actual words used." This cultural consciousness may have been key to understanding why the Asian student in the methods section below preferred not to take part in the class debate, but only listen, and to express his views in a private message to the teacher rather than on the forum. Indeed, speakers from high-context cultures do not want to come across as blunt. We now also understand why the Rwandan student (in the same case study below) thought the Asian student had been deceitful (Menzies, 2015).

Bauler (2019, p. 237) points out that "linguistically diverse learners will inevitably, and rightfully, draw on their L1's linguistic repertoires to make sense of what is being conveyed verbally and non-verbally in a conversation

with L2 speakers.” She adds, “unlike the case of grammatical errors, pragmatic differences are often interpreted on a social or personal level rather than as a result of the language learning process” (Bauler, 2019, p. 229).

## 2.8 Teaching Styles and Strategies

What is the ideal stance the L2 teacher can adopt when dealing with SAQs? In 1984, Stradling et al. identified six teaching styles: the neutral chairperson, the balanced approach, the devil’s advocate, stated commitment, the ally, and the official line. In keeping with the ground rules for creating a safe space for discussion (Council of Europe, 2015), the neutral chairperson approach seems to be the safest *initial* route to choose. While not expressing any personal views, the teacher “only” acts as a facilitator. However, their teaching style could be adapted, navigating the neutral chairperson, balanced, and stated commitment approaches, depending on how the intercultural dialogue story circle pans out.

The following teaching strategies can be helpful when SAQs emerge during cross-cultural dialogue in the EFL classroom (Council of Europe, 2015). Compensatory strategies were used to provide the Asian student, in the case study below, with facts and figures from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), disproving what he had written in his first, outrageous and racist, contribution. Empathetic strategies help students see an issue from someone else’s perspective. Exploratory strategies allow the teacher to organize a web-quest, inquiry-based, or problem-solving activities when they see that an issue is not well understood. De-personalizing strategies introduce society- rather than person-orientated language when presenting an issue (e.g., by saying, “*we*” or “*they*” instead of “*you*”). In engaging strategies, the teacher shares personal experiences with the students, or shows the students pictures or videos (Council of Europe, 2015). The latter technique is also advocated in SEL (CASEL, 2022), and applied to promote social awareness in language classes (Pickering, 2021). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) debate mentioned in the case study below was sparked off using images too.

Bauler (2019, p. 234) points out that teachers should develop an understanding that all the stakeholders’ “discourse and actions in the classroom are culturally shaped, not givens.” During an upstream information session, the L2 teacher can brainstorm intercultural dialogue by doing an ice-breaking activity (Bauler, 2019). For instance, the learners may be asked to

give examples of pragmatic divergence, which occurs when the speaker's and hearer's pragmatic behaviors clash. This often happens among speakers of different languages, "since cultural norms and expectations shape the ways we speak and hear" (Bauler, 2019, p. 239).

## 2.9 Toolbox

Bauler (2019, p. 236) suggests that the L2 teacher make available a toolbox that L2 learners can draw from during intercultural dialogue addressing SAQs. Her suggestions have been customized by the author, so they become actionable in EFL classroom story circle practice:

### (a) Speech Acts:

- *"Please don't be offended, but I would like to . . ."*
- *"I am still learning about . . . , so I'm afraid my knowledge of . . . is rather sketchy."*
- *"Could you share what . . . was like for you?"*
- *"I have always been interested in knowing more about . . ."*
- *"Where can I learn more about . . . ?"*
- *"What about . . . ?"* (make tentative suggestions);
- do not say, *"You must . . ."* (avoid making strong suggestions).
- *"I know."* (neutral agreement);
- do not say, *"I couldn't agree more."* (avoid strong agreement).
- *"That's true, but don't you think . . . ?"* (express reservations);
- do not say, *"That's ridiculous!"* (avoid strong disagreement).
- *"On the one hand . . . On the other . . ."* (give reasons for disagreeing by pointing out the advantages and shortcomings of one's interlocutor's statement).

In cross-cultural workplaces, Pascual (2022) recommends asking questions appropriately. Her suggestions have also been customized, so they become actionable in EFL classroom story circle practice, too:

### (b) Asking Questions:

- Ask open-ended questions (Wh-questions) and not close-ended questions

(Yes-No questions). This will allow one's interlocutor to express themselves in a non-threatening atmosphere.

- Ask questions in general, society-oriented, terms by including words such as “*normally*”, “*typically*”, and “*usually*.” This way, it is easier for the other person to reply, because they are not being pointed at specifically.
- Ask questions in the third person, instead of asking for a personal opinion. Ask what other people from their culture would think or do. This allows the other person to share their ideas indirectly.
- Including some of the words of one's interlocutor in one's questions will help them engage. For instance, “*You just mentioned that you . . .*”
- Ask one question at a time, not multi-layered questions.
- Ask questions in a casual tone. Avoid the use of jargon, as this may come across as threatening and condescending.
- Do not ask biased questions that beg answers.
- Ask follow-up questions (in the form of Wh-questions).
- Ask questions that help speakers with opposing views find common ground, beyond their differences.

## 2.10 Wheel of Emotions

Plutchik (1980/2001) created the so-called wheel of emotions or wheel of feelings, with eight core emotions at its center: admiration, terror, amazement, grief, loathing, rage, vigilance, and ecstasy. Scaffolding a list of emotions-feelings vocabulary can be helpful towards clearly labeling the learners' feelings, especially while promoting self-awareness in classes inspired by SEL.

## 2.11 Intercultural Dialogue Round Prompts

Deardorff (2020, p. 3) suggests using intercultural dialogue round prompts. Her suggestions have been customized by the author so they can be used as actionable classroom story circle practice. In their answers, the participants need to be as sincere as possible:

- Give an example of an early memory of difference.
- Talk about a memorable experience with a person who was different in age, religion, gender, socio-economic status, culture, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.

- Tell the class about a challenging interaction with a person from a different background.
- Recall a cultural misunderstanding.
- Give a personal example of thinking and talking stereotypically.

The action-research question that will be answered in the following sections is whether the various perspectives on SAQs outlined in the literature review above are actionable in tertiary-education English language classroom settings. Will the customizable toolbox presented enable English language teachers at higher-education institutions to deal with SAQs more appropriately than before, and as efficiently as this is being done in primary and secondary education?

### 3. Methodology

The teacher devises an advanced interfaculty English conversation TLU at the Université catholique de Louvain's (UCLouvain) language centre, the Institut des langues vivantes (ILV), involving a diverse group of 14 master's students from a variety of backgrounds. The case study participants' origins and academic backgrounds, as well as their productive CEFR<sup>4</sup> skills levels, have been presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Study participants<sup>5</sup>**

| Pseudonym | Origin  | Academic background | Reasons for taking this class  | CEFR Speaking | CEFR Writing |
|-----------|---------|---------------------|--|---------------|--------------|
| Thomas    | Belgium | Civil Engineering   | Final year of studies <sup>6</sup><br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange <sup>7</sup> | B2            | B2           |
| Jack      | Belgium | Criminal Law        | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange                           | C1+           | C1+          |

4 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>.

5 All the study participants' names have been pseudonymized.

6 They are virtually all in their second master's year.

7 They will be spending the final trimester of their college education as Erasmus-exchange students at a university in an English-speaking country or a university where English is the lingua franca.

| Pseudonym        | Origin   | Academic background    | Reasons for taking this class                                    | CEFR Speaking | CEFR Writing |
|------------------|----------|------------------------|--|---------------|--------------|
| <b>Dominique</b> | Belgium  | Clinical Psychology    | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | C1            | B2           |
| <b>Sebastian</b> | Belgium  | Applied Mathematics    | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | C2-           | C2-          |
| <b>Helen</b>     | Belgium  | Bioscience Engineering | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | C1+           | C1           |
| <b>Tess</b>      | Belgium  | History of Art         | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | B2            | B2           |
| <b>Emma</b>      | Belgium  | Linguistics            | Penultimate year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange         | C1-           | C1-          |
| <b>Mary</b>      | Cameroon | Communications         | Final year of studies<br>Maintain productive skills <sup>8</sup> | C2-           | C2-          |
| <b>Dionne</b>    | Rwanda   | Criminal Law           | Final year of studies<br>Maintain productive skills              | C1+           | C1+          |
| <b>Carlos</b>    | Burundi  | Architecture           | Final year of studies<br>Maintain productive skills              | C1+           | C2-          |
| <b>Ahmed</b>     | Tunisia  | Biomedical Engineering | Final year of studies<br>Maintain productive skills              | C1+           | C1           |
| <b>Julia</b>     | Italy    | Business               | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | C1            | C1           |
| <b>Suzanna</b>   | Italy    | Tort Law               | Final year of studies<br>Outgoing Erasmus exchange               | B2            | C1           |
| <b>Li</b>        | Asia     | Linguistics            | Penultimate year of studies<br>Improve productive skills         | B2-           | B2-          |

The teacher sets up a debate on an SAQ: BLM and the decolonization of the public domain. He has prepared a slideshow. The first three pictures

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<sup>8</sup> Before they enter the job market.

are one of a peaceful BLM demonstration in Brussels in June 2020, one of a race riot in Minneapolis, MN, in May 2020, and one of looting following a race riot in Philadelphia, PA, also in May 2020, all in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, by police officer Derek Chauvin, in Minneapolis, MN, on May 25, 2020. The teacher scaffolds the tricky lexis for the (mainly) French-speaking attendees, focusing on terms such as “riot”, “looting”, “grievances”, “spokesperson”, etc.

Emma, a white Belgian student in Linguistics, reads Martin Luther King’s quote, “Riot is the language of the unheard,” on the placard brandished by the rioter in the Minneapolis picture. Dominique, a white Belgian student in Clinical Psychology, points out that the three forms of protest often go hand in hand: a demonstration can turn into a riot, and then degenerate into looting. A debate unfolds. Li, an Asian Linguistics student who has only recently arrived in Belgium, is listening attentively, but not actively participating. As can be seen in Table 1 above, it should be pointed out (although this by no means condones what happened in the racist incident described below) that Li’s level of English, both in speaking and in writing, is lower than that of the other students (B2- compared to an average B2 or higher for the others).

The teacher shows a second series of three pictures, also from May 2020. The first is a statue in a Brussels Park of Belgium’s King Leopold II, daubed with red paint. The second is Christopher Columbus’s statue in Providence, Rhode Island, tagged with the words, “Stop celebrating genocide.” The third is of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol, UK, being toppled and pushed into the river Avon. The teacher again scaffolds lexical items such as “to be daubed (with)”, “to be toppled (into)”, “to be tagged (with)”, and “the (Colston statue) plinth.” He points out that the verbs in the list are often used in the passive voice. Emma thinks that acts of vandalism such as these may be warranted in the BLM context. It is only then the public will pay attention and its awareness will genuinely be raised, she argues.

After class, the students post an online forum contribution on one of the issues addressed during the debate. Li, however, submits his piece as a private email. His contribution has been reproduced verbatim in Figure 1 below (including the teacher’s highlights).

Figure 1: Li's contribution

In the first place, I would like to take the United States and France as cases to further depict my standpoints. The US is an immigration country where its citizens are from all over the world. And the racism in the US is the most sharpest and typical. And according to statistics, black people account for roughly 15 percent of total population in the country. But what surprises people is that the 15 percent of people contributes to 70 percent of crimes in the US. For example, they tend to abandon wives and children, selling blues and pimp as well as other crimes. Speaking of looting, I hold that the result of all demonstrations may be followed by looting. For instance, the campaign, Black Lives Matter, was quite famous across the world. But, the so-called campaign was finalized by looting. These demonstrators or protesters who are mainly black people, gathered on streets, protesting, fighting, setting fire and robbing things coupled the fact that they robbed Nike and Jordan shoes that are pricey for ordinary people and are regarded as symbols for them. So, under the circumstances, How can equality be achieved?

Because if a problem appears, parties involved can not blame others only. It is also crucial to think about yourself. And another typical example can be showed in west Europe countries, another advanced places in the world. That is, all the drug dealers in west Europe are black people or most of them are black ones. So, if a big proportion of a race always do bad things and exert passive impact, it is impossible to let the world respect you in a long run.

In the second place, I would like to portray viewpoints in the light of population growth. France, a superpower to a certain extent, can be regarded as the best example to display the situation. In the past, the country was not an immigration destination, but now it is often seen that black people are here and there in France. The serious phase is that white people in France has entered into a scenario that they don't have high desire to give birth, and need plenty of labor to balance the gap of labor markets. In this regard, they attract and hire tremendous amounts of blacks. In doing so, blacks get used to life in France. And what thrills people is that blacks have a high rate of birth. And therefore, there are increasingly numbers of black citizens living and settling in France. If people let the trend go, the country, France, will finally become another "African" country. In the course, some whites in France may wake up to turn the situation back to normal tracks. If so, some events will happen in the process. So I can make a bold prediction that there will be a big event to happen in the future speaking of racism or survival among different races in the world.

To sum up, I do think that it is absolutely impossible to live in a world without racism. Because from the perspective of survival of each race, they may strike a certain balance, but they, each other, can not reach a consensus and live in harmony due to their biological characteristics.

The teacher is perplexed. Its racist content is so outrageous that he decides to contact his supervisor. They rule out reporting the incident to the school director. However, doing nothing is not an option either. The teacher

has lived and worked in Africa and Asia for several years, which means he can only imagine how painful racism is, but also that many Asians, for historical reasons, do not know any better. The teacher's supervisor advises against raising Li's awareness in class: she thinks that the distress to the three African students (Mary, Carlos, and Dionne, students in Communications, Architecture, and Criminal Law, respectively) might be too great, and that the post-event consequences cannot be predicted. Moreover, the teacher knows that, in Asia, public shaming is one of the most drastic penalties imaginable. The post-event consequences in that realm cannot be underestimated either.

Eventually, the following course of action is suggested by the teacher's supervisor: plan an individual face-to-face meeting with Li, during which the teacher explains that what Li has written is outrageous and racist. Li is asked why he has sent the teacher his contribution through email and has not published it for everyone to read on the forum. He replies that he knew it would be controversial. He is asked what he has based his assertions on, and where he has found them. He says on Asian social media outlets.<sup>9</sup> He is provided with facts and figures from the CDC, proving the contrary of what he has written, e.g., on the demographics of drug use and drug trafficking in the US. He is asked to rewrite his contribution in light of his meeting with the teacher and publish it on the forum for everyone to read.

A couple of days later, the final session is held, during which Li requests to have a class picture taken. The teacher feels very frustrated, though. In fact, he feels bad, because Mary and Dionne (Carlos did not attend the final class) do not have a clue about what has happened.

The teacher then decides *not* to follow his supervisor's instructions. He sets up a first Teams meeting, with Dionne, Mary, and Carlos, explaining everything that has happened and justifying why he has handled the incident the way he has. Dionne wonders why the teacher had not informed them immediately after receiving Li's private message. Had she known about it, she would have refused to have her picture taken alongside Li. She argues that she disagrees with, but understands, the teacher's handling of events.

The teacher tells them he wants to set up a second Teams meeting, this time with Li, during which the three African students will be able to raise

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9 On 13 June 2022, BBC Africa Eye aired a very disturbing documentary, called "Racism for sale", about an Asian social media account called the "Jokes about black people club", which makes fun of African people and exploits vulnerable children across the continent.

his awareness and talk some sense into him. The teacher insists he will be setting up the meeting, but not attending, so as not to create the impression that the meeting has been organized top-down. Dionne says she will not attend, because, “I hate racism. I cannot predict what my reaction will be, either verbal or physical, or both.” The Teams meeting goes ahead but is only attended by Mary and Li. Immediately after the one-hour appointment, Mary calls the teacher through Teams and reports that the meeting has gone smoothly. Li understands that he has made “serious mistakes”, and has promised that he “will never write or say such things again.” She has debriefed Dionne.

### 4. Findings

During their first Teams meeting, the teacher briefed Dionne, Carlos, and Mary (the three African students from the case study) on how he plans to overhaul the way he will deal with SAQs in his classes in the years to come. In Table 2 below, the most salient of their own suggestions have been listed. Their remarks intuitively confirm the insights from the literature review in the sections above and prove that the proposal for a customizable and actionable toolbox, meeting the stakeholders’ (the learners’ *and* the teachers’) academic expectations as well as emotional needs, makes sense pedagogically.

**Table 2: Students’ suggestions**

| Suggestions  | Advantages  | Shortcomings         | Solutions   |
|--|---|----------------------|---|
| Design an A0-size poster indicating the ground rules for dealing with SAQs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity</li> <li>• Consistency</li> </ul>  | Might be off-putting | Display the “charter” only once, during the upstream information session  |
| Apply the ground rules in Speaking as well as in Writing activities        | Writers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can hide behind their productions</li> <li>• are less exposed</li> </ul> |                      | Favor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collective writing</li> <li>• pair writing</li> <li>• peer assessment</li> </ul> |

| Suggestions  | Advantages  | Shortcomings  | Solutions  |
|--|---|---|--|
| Avoid role-playing, simulated meetings and debates   | Role-plays <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>do not represent the participants' real selves</li> <li>build empathy</li> <li>allow the participants to say and do things they will not be censured for</li> </ul> | Role-plays <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>push the participants into feigning simulated roles they do not "own"</li> <li>might give rise to conflict, possibly spilling out beyond the classroom</li> </ul> | Favor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>dialogue</li> <li>authenticity</li> </ul>   |
| Question the teacher's "neutral chairperson" role  | Freedom of speech in the EFL classroom  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moral relativism</li> <li>Can everything be said and/or written?</li> <li>My freedom of speech ends where yours begins</li> </ul>  | Adapt the teaching style, navigating the <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>neutral chairperson</li> <li>balanced</li> <li>stated commitment approaches</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visit an ethnographic museum (in L2)</li> <li>Visit decolonized public spaces (in L2)</li> <li>Do volunteering work (in L2)</li> <li>Do problem-based learning (PBL) (in L2)</li> </ul> | Takes the students out of the classroom   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Might come across as biased</li> </ul>   |  |
| Organize a multicultural festival in L2, featuring film, music, cooking, etc.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brings the world into the classroom</li> <li>Focuses on positivity</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Might come across as biased</li> <li>Might come across as too shallow</li> </ul>   | Include awareness-raising activities   |
| Invite an L2 guest speaker (an asylum seeker, etc.)  | Brings the world into the classroom   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Might come across as biased</li> </ul>   | Take critical questions from the audience  |
| Ask students to argue from their own academic perspective, acknowledging other viewpoints  | Interdisciplinary approach  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talking at cross purposes</li> <li>Chaos</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add personal stories</li> <li>Be non-judgmental</li> </ul>  |
| L2 students want language feedback. How can the L2 teacher provide feedback if they should remain silent during the story circle?  | If the L2 teacher remains silent, the L2 learners will speak more freely, without inhibition  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language feedback leads to progress</li> <li>Immediate feedback favors L2 learner retention</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give language feedback during the debrief (individual or group feedback)</li> <li>Peer assessment</li> </ul>                    |

## 5. Discussion

What are the pedagogical implications of this action research for English language teaching practice? In light of the ideas from the literature review above, what could the L2 teacher in the case study have done to prevent the debate and post-debate forum activity from degenerating the way they did, to avoid the stakeholders feeling frustrated, and to stop the pieces from having to be picked up downstream?

Transdisciplinarity encourages the teacher to take the classroom to the real world and bring the real world into the classroom (Herweg et al., 2021). The former can be done by organizing museum visits, and by setting up educ-action (Legardez, 2017), Service-Learning, problem-based learning (PBL), or volunteering activities, all carried out in L2. The latter by inviting speakers who can offer first-hand testimonials of their experience with SAQs-related issues. These will enhance the learners' systems knowledge (Herweg et al., 2021) and structural competence (Shelton et al., 2019), and (hopefully) lead to transformative moments (Herweg et al., 2021).

SEL proposes using images as starting points for conversation and dialogue, and scaffolding the lexis upstream, to help the learners engage in the topic and enhance their social awareness (Pickering, 2021).

The Pedagogy of Encounter promotes active reciprocity through intercultural dialogue rounds. The dialogue partners emerge from these understanding-with encounters as sincere co-inquirers (Deardorff, 2020; Gill, 2015).

To do this, the classroom can be converted into a safe space, the ground rules of which will need to be clearly laid out upstream (Council of Europe, 2015). Such a safe space can take the form of a story circle, where biographical learning and listening for understanding are of paramount importance (Deardorff, 2020). It can also be transformed into a brave space, which encourages risk-taking and deep listening, and addresses structural injustice head-on (Shelton et al., 2019).

The facilitator can raise the L2 learners' cultural consciousness upstream about the characteristics of high- and low-context cultures (Menzies, 2015). The language coach can use various teaching styles and strategies that can prove helpful when SAQs emerge (Stradling et al., 1984), and make available a customizable and actionable toolbox that L2 learners can draw from in EFL classroom practice. Examples are ice-breaking activities during an

upstream briefing, bias-busting web-quests, offering intercultural dialogue round prompts, scaffolding intercultural dialogue speech acts and how to ask questions appropriately (Bauler, 2019; Deardorff, 2020), and exploring the wheel of emotions (Plutchik, 1980/2001).

It is worth highlighting two final points that came up during the Teams meeting with the three African students.

First, role-playing, simulated meetings, and debates might have to be avoided in story circles and intercultural dialogue rounds addressing SAQs. It has to be acknowledged that role-plays have the following strengths: they do not require the learner to represent their authentic self, and they build empathy, because the student is forced into someone else's shoes. They also allow the mentee to test out ideas without feeling they will be personally attacked for sharing them. However, there are drawbacks when role-plays are used in story circles, which focus on deep listening, dialogue, and authenticity: they push the participants into feigning simulated roles they do not necessarily own, and might give rise to conflict, either physical or verbal, or both, possibly spilling out beyond the classroom. One of the teacher's LGBTQIA+ students recently said, "I don't like debates, because they have become so divisive and polarised lately." The sincerity required in biographical learning favors dialogue rather than simulation.

Second, following Deardorff (2020), the role of the L2 teacher is to introduce and debrief the dialogue. They must not participate in the story circle, since this will impact the power dynamics of the group. However, one may wonder when the teacher should make comments about the L2 learners' language. According to Kawasaki (2020), a distinction needs to be made between mistakes and errors. The former are "accidents, things the learners know, and they can self-correct, both in speaking and in writing." The latter are "things the learners don't know, or L2 features that need refreshing." Clearly, a story circle focuses on fluency, content, ideas, and emotions, not on accuracy. During the upstream briefing, the L2 teacher should recap the ground rules of the safe space, and introduce the story circle topic, as well as the speech acts to be used. The L2 teacher can make notes of the major errors the L2 learners make and give individual and/or group feedback during the debrief. Peer assessment is also an option. It might be a good idea to ask the L2 learners during the introductory session what type of language feedback they prefer, and when (Kawasaki, 2020).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented a customizable and actionable toolbox that teachers can use to deal with Socially Acute Questions (SAQs) in EFL mentoring environments. The literature review has pointed to several ways of handling racist and discriminatory incidents, which keep surfacing in instructors' increasingly diverse classes. The language coach in the case study described above was poorly prepared for this. It is up to the institutions at which educators work to provide their staff with professional advice and tools upstream on how to handle SAQs in their TLUs, to avoid the pieces having to be picked up downstream.

If an SAQ is dealt with in a TLU (which it definitely should), the best actionable approach is to transform the learnscape into a story circle and blend into it the principles of transdisciplinarity (taking the classroom to the world and bringing the world into the classroom), Social and Emotional Learning (promoting social awareness by working with images as lead-ins), and the Pedagogy of Encounter (according to which deep listening and dialogue are preferred over debate). The customizable and actionable toolbox proposed can be used in both speaking and writing classes, across languages, disciplines, and multiple forms of bias. Modeling themselves on the success of said approaches in primary and secondary education, language coaches in tertiary education can be encouraged to customize the suggestions above to their own classroom ecologies. While not eschewing the advantages offered by brave spaces over safe spaces, instructors will thus learn how to deal with cross-cultural difference sensibly, and how to ask questions appropriately. Their learners will be encouraged to respect the sensitivities of their interlocutors by using the suitable speech acts. Thanks to the customizable and actionable toolbox presented in this paper, the stakeholders (both the mentees and their mentors) will benefit from developing not only intercultural communicative competence (ICC) but also structural competence.

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## Professional Profile

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