

Children Learning English as a Foreign Language

Values, Character, and the Curriculum

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■ Character Education: A Definition

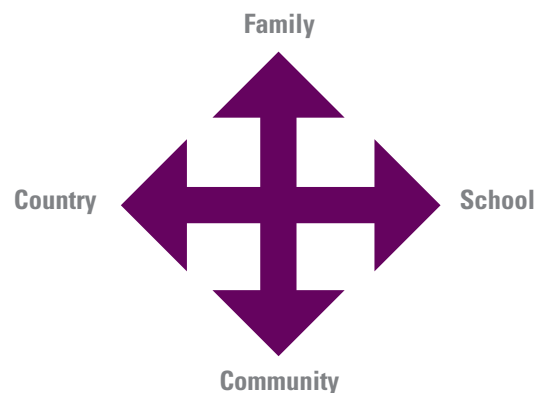
According to T. Lickona (1992), “Character education is the deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values.” He states that, “When we think about the kind of character we want for our children, it’s clear that we want them to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right — even in the face of pressure from without and temptation from within.”

■ Values Instruction

In today’s world, many parents and teachers recognize that their children’s classroom instruction in the skills of literacy and numeracy should be accompanied by values education in order to produce ethical and responsible members of society. As J. Heenan (1996) points out, “Societies since the time of Plato have made character a deliberate aim of education. They understand that to create and maintain a civil society there has to be education for character as well as for intellect, for decency as well as for literacy, and for virtue as well as for skills and knowledge.” In this article, the teaching of the ability to identify, reflect upon, and act upon values — the core beliefs and concepts of a society, community, or individual — will be discussed as an essential component in leading moral lives, clarifying goals, reaching responsible decisions, and educating the whole person.

■ A Process Over Time

The acquisition of values and the development of character is a process over time, occurring over a number of years and within a number of environments.



Since family members are the first teachers and models for children, the family environment is extremely important. Schools exist to transmit knowledge in order to create functioning citizens; by definition, they exist to impart the values and beliefs of the society in which they operate. Religious organizations and civic institutions often play a major role in the community, and function as other resources for social, ethical, and spiritual development. The implicit values that make up a nation’s cultural and political identity, often reflected in the media, have an impact on its citizens’ beliefs and behaviors. Through these relationships, ethical concepts are formed. “Adults do not simply transmit moral qualities and beliefs to children. These qualities and beliefs emerge and

continually evolve in the wide array of relationships that every child has with both adults and peers starting nearly at birth, and in children's felt knowledge of what is harmful, true, or right. In these relationships, children continually sort out, for example, what they owe others, what they should stand for, what traditions are worth keeping, whether to follow rules, how to contribute to their family, classroom, and community — in other words, how to be a decent human being." (R. Weissbourg, 1996).

■ Values and the School Environment

Ideally, "effective character education is not adding a program or set of programs to a school. Rather it is a transformation of the culture and life of the school." (M. Berkowitz, 2002). In this ideal world, the school is a seamless part of a whole encompassing the individual, family, and community — all of whom work together to build a world in which the highest ethical standards are recognized, cultivated, and followed. This requires the highest commitment on the part of everyone involved, as well as a multi-year timeline, a dedicated budget, and a curriculum that addresses agreed-upon values that are universal, transcultural, and consistent. As most of us know, this set of ideal circumstances rarely exists. However, this isn't to say that values instruction and character education can't be delivered through the curriculum in an effective way.

Subject-Area Teachers

Teachers of content have multiple opportunities to include values instruction through their particular subjects in their native language. A reading or literature class, for example, can address values through stories, fables, plays, and novels. Students can discuss the behaviors, personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and values of the literary characters, and discuss what they themselves would do in similar circumstances. A history class can provide opportunities for discussion of a particular historical event — its causes, results, and demonstration of specific values. A science class can yield discussions on environmental issues such as global warming, recycling, the expense of space exploration, and genetic research. A social studies class can address values such as civic responsibilities, community services, public health, the media, and current events. A math class can provide opportunities for discussion of issues of personal responsibility such as living within a budget, balancing a checkbook, and understanding the wise use of credit cards. Regarding thoughtful discussion of moral and ethical issues, "It is difficult to overstate the benefits of a meaty, morally challenging classroom discussion. Properly facilitated, discussions like these develop students' critical thinking skills, provide a group bonding experience, and engage the students in deep, meaningful reflection about the kinds of people they are and want to be". (D.H. Elkind & F. Sweet, 2004).

English Language Teachers

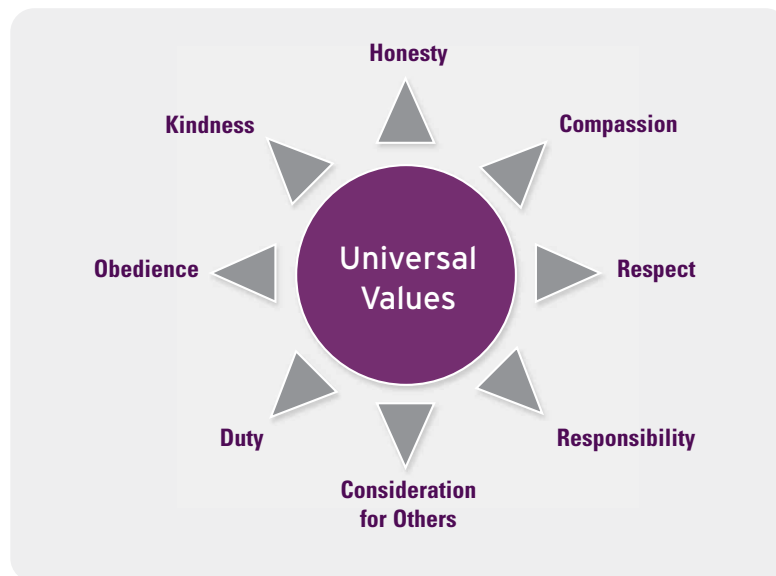
Character education also has a place in the language classroom. With careful attention to a child's age, level of cognitive development, and level of English, it is possible to address the moral and ethical development of the whole child by providing explicit lessons in values instruction. Ideally, these values are also addressed elsewhere in the school curriculum. When this is the case, instruction is mutually reinforced whether in English or in the native language. But even if values are not a focus elsewhere in the curriculum, instruction in English can serve as the children's introduction to this important part of life.

In the language classroom, the teacher can model good values, draw students' attention to specific values, discuss them, and provide activities built around them.

■ Selection of Values

Once a decision to include values education has been made, it is important to determine which values will be the focus of instruction. J. Heenan (1996) distinguishes between two types of values — values of preference and

values of principle. These two types represent “opposite ends of the moral spectrum.” Values of preference, like any preference, are subjective, personal choices that may be changed at will. In contrast, values of principle are objective, universal, and consistent. They build character and foster behaviors that benefit not only the individual but society as well. Some examples of universal values follow.



In addition to these values, a wide range of other concepts may be used for instruction. Young children, for example, may benefit from lessons on taking turns, sharing, taking care of a pet, being fair, being neat, and being punctual. Older children may benefit from lessons on cooperation, personal safety, setting of goals, protection of the environment, appreciation of diversity, and perseverance. All may benefit from the concept of social-emotional intelligence and its components: self-awareness, self-management, other-awareness, relationship skills, and problem-solving.

Language teachers must be constantly aware of their students’ age, cognitive development, and understanding of English during values instruction. It serves no purpose to present a beautifully planned lesson to discuss the ethics of using animals in product research to a group of second-graders. They will have neither the language nor the level of intellectual development to discuss such a complex issue in a meaningful way. Likewise, it is not effective to present a lesson on the value of sharing to a group of sixth-graders. Though they will have the vocabulary and the cognitive development to discuss the concept, they will likely feel the topic is “for babies” and lose interest.

■ Values Activities

In addition to matching the selected value to the appropriate age and cognitive level of the children, it is important to make sure the related activities are appropriate as well.

Discussions

Language teachers of course want to provide as many opportunities for oral discussion and practice in English as possible, and they know that children typically need additional support and scaffolding in order to have successful discussions. For example, it is important to make sure the children know what to expect and what to do. Before the first discussion takes place, perhaps the first week of school, the teacher can involve them in creating a list of discussion behaviors and rules to follow. The final list might include such rules as: *Don't interrupt. Don't talk to others when someone is speaking. Listen and speak with respect. Take turns. Don't do all the talking. Make sure you contribute to the conversation.* The teacher can have students make a poster of the agreed-upon rules and post it

on the classroom wall for reference. It is more likely that students will buy into discussion rules when they have participated in making them.

It is also a good idea for the teacher to remember that values are personal. Some children may feel confused, conflicted, or defensive at different times in class. They should feel that they are each a member of a group that knows them and respects them. Thus, it is useful to teach or review with students the language of polite disagreement (*I don't think so. I have a different opinion. I don't agree. I look at it differently.*), supporting the opinion of others (*I agree with Jack. That's a good idea, Pat.*), and backing up their own opinions with examples or evidence (*There was an example of this on TV last night.*). Ultimately, successful discussions are an important learning tool. As E. Schaps, E.F. Schaeffer, and S.N. McDonnell (2001) state, "The best forms of character education also involve students in honest, thoughtful discussion and reflection regarding the moral implications of what they see around them, what they are told, and what they personally do and experience."

Role Plays

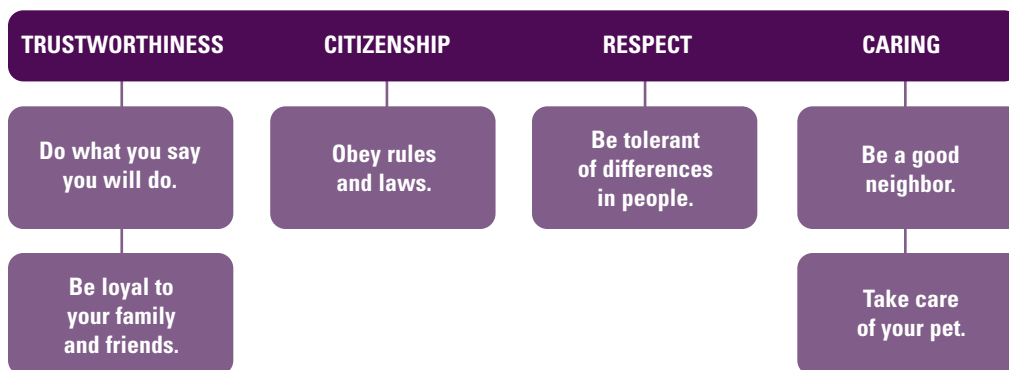
Long a staple of the language classroom, role plays can easily be designed to illustrate or reinforce a lesson in values. Role play is beneficial because it provides variety and a change of pace, opportunity for use of value-specific vocabulary as well as a wide range of other language, and a link to realistic situations that occur in the real world outside the classroom. Best of all, most children view role play as a fun and motivating activity. For young children, fairy tales and fables lend themselves well to role play adaptation because there is usually a clear moral or lesson to be learned. And it doesn't hurt that children are usually familiar with and already like a variety of fairy tales and fables! Older children enjoy role playing scenes in which there is a dramatic dilemma or problem to be solved; these scenes can be taken from stories and novels they are reading and adapted as role plays or readers' theater. They can also recreate a values-related scene from TV programs they have seen.

Index Card Activities

Activities that require the physical manipulation of index cards or strips of paper can lend themselves to values instruction. For young learners, the activity below both focuses their attention and provides additional practice.

1. Prepare cards or strips of paper with short examples of behavior that students must judge as right or wrong. Include two other strips—one that says *Right* and one that says *Wrong*. Place six examples of different behaviors and the *Right* and *Wrong* paper strips in an envelope.
2. Prepare an envelope for each pair or for each group.
3. Divide children into pairs or small groups. Give each pair or group an envelope; explain and model the activity. Children will classify each behavior they take from the envelope as right or wrong by placing them under the *Right* heading or the *Wrong* heading. For example, under the *Right* heading, there may be a paper strip that says, *Ben feeds and walks his dog every day*. Under the *Wrong* heading, there may be a paper strip that says, *Pat leaves clothes and toys all over the floor*.

For pairs or small groups of older learners, prepare a stack of *What If?* cards. Each card describes a situation and asks what the student would do. For example, one card might say, *What would you do if you saw a friend copying another student's homework?* or *What would you do if you found an expensive iPod in the school yard?* Another activity type suitable for older children uses envelopes of paper strips describing behaviors and paper strips naming a number of values. Students place the values headings on a desk and then place the behaviors described in the correct columns. For example, children might do the following.



Values Voting

This listen-and-choose activity encourages children to identify the best response out of three behaviors that may result from a situation. For each pair or small group of students, prepare three signs: one with a large letter A, one with a large letter B, and one with a large letter C. Describe a situation and then name three possible reactions. Students will listen and vote for the reaction they think is the best response to the situation described by holding up sign A, B, or C. Look at the example below.

Situation: A boy sees a teacher he doesn't like slip and fall on a sidewalk.
 Choice A: He pretends he didn't see anything and continues on his way.
 Choice B: He hurries over to the teacher and helps her get up.
 Choice C: He takes a picture on his phone to show his friends for a laugh.

Values and Creative Expression

Posters: Young children love to draw and color. Provide them with poster paper that features a value they are studying. Encourage them to draw a picture that illustrates the value. Have them sign their names and display their pictures on the classroom wall.

Chants: Many young children enjoy performing (and even writing) chants. A chant reinforcing a value may be as simple as the following.

Group: We help others — yes, we do!
 We help others. What about you?
 Tell us one thing that you do!

Individual: I (help mother wash the dishes.)

Group: Well, good for you! Good for you!

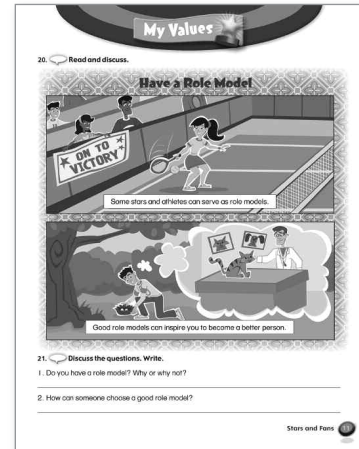
Class books: Groups of older students can write and illustrate original stories relating to a value and make them into class books for others to read and enjoy.

Values Lessons in Course Books

It is important to select a book that presents values effectively. The following examples illustrate different age-appropriate lessons in values.



from **Backpack 3**



from **TOPS 6**

■ In Conclusion

As stated by the Character Education Partnership, “When teachers bring to the fore the character dimension of the curriculum, they enhance the relevance of subject matter to students’ natural interests and questions, and in the process, increase student engagement and achievement.” Instruction in the ability to identify, reflect upon, and act upon values therefore plays a key role in educating the whole person to lead a meaningful and productive life beneficial to himself and to the society in which he lives.

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