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## LGBTQ+ Voices From the Classroom: Insights for ESOL Teachers

Research has indicated that heteronormativity in ESOL classrooms may prevent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) students from producing meaningful language output and negotiating their identities in new social contexts (e.g., Liddicoat, 2009). This study aimed to understand (a) how LGBTQ+ students perceive the framing of sexual diversity in classrooms and (b) the subsequent effects on their language and identity development. Qualitative interviews with 4 LGBTQ+ former ESOL learners in the San Francisco Bay Area were conducted and thematically coded. Results indicated that the strong desire for professional advancement dovetailed with the desire to affirm an LGBTQ+ identity, yet the ESOL classroom provided few opportunities to construct an LGBTQ+ identity. However, expertly facilitated LGBTQ+ content provided numerous benefits to learners. Teachers should reframe classroom discussions to be maximally inclusive and should choose an approach to discussing LGBTQ+ content that allows students to empower themselves.

### Introduction

*What might it look like to think queerly and transnationally—in tandem—about teaching, and what modes of inquiry can provoke new thinking on these sometimes contentious matters, among multiple audiences? (Nelson, 2009, p. 110)*

This article responds to Nelson's question at the intersection of queer inquiry,<sup>1</sup> transnational migration, and English as a second language education. Professional fields such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Composition, Sec-

ond Language Studies, and Second Language Writing have recognized that learning English necessarily involves the negotiation of identity as students participate in new physical or imagined communities and contribute to classroom discourse (e.g., Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Vitanova, 2005). The idea that identity and positionality influence learning, associated with the sociocultural turn in TESOL, supports the conceptualization of the classroom as a contact zone, a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt, 1999, p. 584), allowing explicit reflection on the identities students are assigned amid the power relations of the institutional setting. As students read, write, speak, and listen their way into (or against) classroom discourses, they also challenge, redefine, and remake themselves.

However, while the topics of cultures, ethnicities, and gender differences are commonly embedded in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) curricula and commonly arise in ESOL classrooms, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) identities are often absent from curricula and materials, or presented as inherently controversial (de Vincenti, Giovanangeli, & Ward, 2007). LGBTQ+ texts, discourses, and cultural perspectives are highly politicized and publicized around the globe (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002), yet there is a disconnect between the presence of LGBTQ+ people in the world and the absence of recognition of the LGBTQ+ experience in the ESOL classroom. Since classroom discourses construct the range of “allowable identities” for many immigrant students as well as render LGBTQ+ issues discussable, my project aims to investigate how ESOL classrooms frame LGBTQ+ topics and the subsequent effect on LGBTQ+ students’ development as authoritative language users.

There has been some discussion of how to address, reframe, or prevent homophobia in the classroom (e.g., Nelson, 2009; O’Mochain, 2006), which has generated invaluable resources for LGBTQ+-identified and non-LGBTQ+-identified ESOL teachers alike (e.g., Royal, 2012). Furthermore, some scholars in TESOL and English education have convincingly argued for a queer perspective on mainstream ESOL teaching practice and materials development. Examples include depictions of same-sex couples alongside opposite-sex couples when discussing relationships, teaching gender-inclusive words such as “partner,” or identifying and dismantling stereotypes about sexualities (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006; Nelson, 1999, 2009, 2010; Vandrick, 1997; Wadell, Frei, & Martin, 2011). To better evaluate these classroom activities, Nelson (2009) categorizes teaching practices related to sexual diversity into three categories: the counseling approach (which attempts to remedy homophobia by exploring popular opinions about

LGBTQ+ people), the controversies approach (which focuses on pro-con arguments about civil rights such as same-sex marriage), and the discourse inquiry approach (which interrogates how language practices and texts construct sexual identities). My project seeks to further ground these practical suggestions in evidence from classroom experiences of those most affected by speech and silence around sexual diversity: LGBTQ+ ESOL students themselves. Although I will argue for a discourse inquiry approach, I maintain that all teachers must make pedagogical decisions according to their teaching philosophy and any institutional or sociopolitical constraints.

### ***The Genesis and Scope of the Current Project***

Initially my colleague, Denise Lillian, and I posed the question: Could a separate “queer space” for LGBTQ+-identified ESOL learners and allies meet an existing need and reinforce language points learned in mainstream ESOL classes? On the positive side, such a class would render LGBTQ+ topics discussible and elicit a variety of LGBTQ+ perspectives that a mainstream ESOL class might stifle. In addition, a separate space would allow the experiences, questions, and needs of the participants to determine much of the course content without the constraints of institutional assessment. We predicted that such a class could satisfy learner needs in ways that the mainstream ESOL class could not; for example, it would promote networking among new arrivals and more established US residents, increase access to sexual and mental health services, and encourage identity construction and maintenance in a new cultural context. Since words have the power to construct worldviews (Freire & Macedo, 2005), we wanted to invite marginalized learners to claim the right to speak about themselves. We envisioned that, by the end of the class, participants would be able to articulate their experience in relation to larger transnational, political, and sociosexual currents.

However, the creation of a separate course presents many practical challenges: Where would the class be held, how would the leaders find the time to facilitate the class sessions, and how would participants be attracted and retained? Additionally, LGBTQ+-identified students may be reluctant to signal their sexuality by attending this class; their preferred norms of interaction may not sanction “coming out” as a declarative speech act, or they may be in the process of questioning their sexuality. Therefore, while the first goal of my project is to better understand LGBTQ+ learners’ perceptions of the classroom environment, a secondary goal is to collect and describe the needs of LGBTQ+-identified ESOL students in order to predict where these needs are best addressed—in the mainstream classroom, or elsewhere.

## Methods

I devised an interview protocol based on the following two research questions:

1. What is the relationship between learning English and the construction/maintenance of a LGBTQ+ identity? Between learning English and achieving life goals?
2. To what extent do LGBTQ+-identified ESOL students perceive the classroom climate as accepting of sexual and ethnic diversity? Relatedly, to what extent does the classroom permit the desired level of self-disclosure?

To answer these questions, I conducted semistructured interviews with four LGBTQ+-identified individuals who had taken ESOL classes in San Francisco (Trevor, Mary, Andrew, and Lola, all pseudonyms). Two participants, Mary and Lola, identify with the labels *lesbian* and *bisexual*, while Trevor and Andrew identify as *gay*. The data account for different learning contexts; Andrew and Mary studied primarily at an Intensive English Program, whereas Lola and Trevor studied primarily in noncredit ESOL classes at a community college in the San Francisco Bay Area. The participants took classes over a span of 20 years (from the early 1990s to the mid-2010s), a fact that allowed me to capture how the ESOL learning experience intersected with other life goals, dreams, and desires as they unfolded through time.

### *Philosophy of Interviewing*

I view interviews as knowledge-producing events inextricably embedded in a social and historical context (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 17-18). Rather than approaching the interviewees with a structured agenda intent on recording the target information, I acted as a co-participant in dialogue, attempting to clarify, follow up, probe, extend, and test the tenacity of emergent beliefs (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 4). Though this required flexibility and heightened attention on my part, allowing participants space to nominate and develop topics of importance enriched the data.

The participants were recruited through trusted networks. First, I contacted colleagues and ESOL campus coordinators in the San Francisco Bay Area who were interested in LGBTQ+ issues. Then, I requested referrals from potentially interested former students. Because LGBTQ+ and migrant identities are often kept invisible due to social or political stigma, this method proved to be the most effective way to recruit participants who were comfortable discussing their experiences.

### ***Scope and Limitations of the Data***

I cannot claim that these findings are representative of the experiences of all LGBTQ+ English learners, specifically because the intersection of ethnic identity, economic status, and other positionalities creates an experience unique to each individual. However, as has been noted in the literature on qualitative inquiry, “we can expect the same behavior from any other group with the same dynamics and the same constraints” (Weiss, 1994, p. 27). In other words, many LGBTQ+ immigrants likely feel a similar need to conceal their sexual identity at various points, giving rise to similar thoughts and behavior in different local contexts. Therefore, I argue that the findings from this inquiry should be exported into other (albeit diverse) contexts. My study aims to be illuminating, not fully explicative or prescriptive.

### ***Analytic Procedures***

The interview sessions yielded approximately seven hours of recorded audio data. I manually transcribed the recordings with word-processing software before conducting an initial coding of each interview, using the project goals and the theoretical framework to select and annotate noteworthy episodes. Gradually and iteratively, the codes coalesced into five major categories: desires, the role of English, identity, LGBTQ+ concerns, and projected course content. On the second pass through the data, I clarified the subcodes for each major code (for example, the category “desire” comprises seven minor codes: desire for professional advancement, independence, learning challenges, an environment of diversity, acceptance, romance, and flexibility). Creating categories allowed me to group quotations by importance and frequency of occurrence (see the Appendix for a full list of codes employed).

### ***Researcher Reflexivity***

I began the interviewing process conscious of my own subject positions. While my status as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, L1 English speaker may have contributed to a power imbalance during interviewing, my LGBTQ+ identity positioned me in the same category of subjectivity as the participants, allowing for a dialogic, or reciprocal, exchange of information (Bakhtin, 1981). This reflexive relationship built a strong rapport between the participants and me, allowing for ongoing reflection on the meaning of the data and constant improvement of the interview questions.

In the next section, I discuss three key theoretical insights that drive my interpretation of the data. Then I present key findings from

the interviews and discuss how the desires and experiences of Trevor, Mary, Lola, and Andrew give rise to pedagogical implications for ESOL classroom practice.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Identity in Second Language Acquisition Theory***

Some theories of second language acquisition have explained language successes and failures in terms of individual attributes such as extraversion or communicative competence (e.g., Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002). But subsequent inquiries into the centrality of identity and affect in language learning began to problematize this focus on the individual, suggesting that tensions between the individual and the social context affect language production (Block 2007; Firth & Wagner, 1997). Beebe (2002) gave an example of how the decision to produce language depends heavily on the speaker's desire to *perform* a certain identity. Similarly, Liddicoat (2009) found that learner output that attempted to resist signaling a sexual identity, including silence intent on concealing information, was interpreted as a failure of linguistic performance.

#### ***Figured Worlds***

The idea of figured worlds offers a framework for understanding what is meant by social context. A figured world is a socially and culturally constructed realm in which people come to understand and enact new conceptions of self, and in which different acts and outcomes hold various levels of social value (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Urrieta, 2007). Similar to Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice, the construct of figured worlds defines social membership primarily by level of participation in the "work" undertaken by a group of people with shared goals. In both frameworks, the level of participation in diverse social activity systems determines how one's identities are received. On the other hand, these two frameworks differ in their treatment of the "work" in which participants are engaged. Whereas communities of practice are concerned with maintaining a balance between core and peripheral members to continue the work of the group activity, figured worlds highlight the agency of participants to self-author by accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the discourses of the social activity in question (Urrieta, 2007). Finally, artifacts (e.g., objects, events, rituals, practices, or even people) in a figured world constrain participants to a set of culturally obligatory meanings (Holland et al., 1998).

Figured worlds provide an appealing way to conceptualize the present study's goals of creating a self-authoring space for LGBTQ+

learners in an ESOL classroom, as many cultural contexts and classrooms require adherence to heterosexual values, beliefs, roles, and speech patterns. Furthermore, the fact that participation in a figured world necessitates a shift in the understanding of self implies that the most empowering course would allow students to "... examine the social processes and language practices that may form their identity" (Morgan, 1998, p. 16). The focus on artifacts also harmonizes with Freire's (1970) mission to foster *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, and matches his pedagogical approach of reading the word and the world simultaneously as people grapple with the social and political implications of lexical items (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

### ***Desire***

Expression of desires pervades the narratives of the LGBTQ+ learners in this project who discuss their reasons for learning English. Motha and Lin (2014) argue that desires for ideal identities, images, capital (whether material, cultural, linguistic, or symbolic), and/or power are at the center of every English language-learning moment—desires that are intersubjectively constructed even though we may believe them to be fully our own. Therefore, the ESOL classroom should explicitly interrogate how and what learners desire so they may "harness greater control over ... whether [they] are fleeing an undesirable condition or pursuing a desirable one" (p. 355). Flight (from violence) and pursuit (of love, compassion, or career successes) are major themes in the narratives of LGBTQ+ learners. So are desires for safety, love, leisure, affiliation with whiteness, and/or public affirmation of an LGBTQ+ identity. Crucially, these desires may be at odds with the desire for English proficiency, which is commonly associated with happiness, "good"ness, wealth, and prestige in the social imaginary (Ahmed, 2010). Where there is tension between competing desires in the classroom, students may be unsure how to engage and unsure whether to speak. By claiming space in the classroom for language-related desires to be explicitly aired and grappled with, learners may engage with English as a self-reflective tool, crafting their own possibilities for selfhood and increasing control over their life trajectories.

Other theoretical constructs in TESOL, such as those of imagined communities and investment in the target language, have also accounted for the role of desires in English language learning (e.g., Peirce, 1995). But while the concept of investment may show why LGBTQ+-identified learners, who otherwise fit the profile of motivated, engaged "good students," divest from language-learning experiences they view as homophobic (or racist, or sexist), it does not address the question of where desires originate or how they are constructed.



This question is important because, as Motha and Lin (2014) point out, while desires may spur learners to inspire or create new possibilities for selfhood, they may also reproduce oppressive regimes of truth that regulate thoughts and actions, precluding resistance to the status quo. Theorizing desire has the potential to illuminate larger social and economic forces that construct it as the driving force toward the *promise* of a social position, skill, or identity, or, alternatively, as the *lack* of these attributes (Ahmed, 2010). Both forces lead students to pursue English language education, yet both forces may intertwine in complicated ways. Explicit interrogation of these promises and lacks may grant students greater control over their own language learning and self-making processes.

### ***Heteronormativity and the Curriculum***

ESOL curricula should also render transparent those desires of the state, which are embedded in materials and pedagogical approaches (Motha & Lin, 2014). One such value embedded in ESOL classroom pedagogies, curricula, and materials is heteronormativity. Originally coined by Warner (1991), *heteronormativity* refers to a worldview in which people are either *men* or *women*, attraction occurs between men and women, and coupling occurs between two people of the opposite sex. As Nelson (2005) pointedly observed, much of the literature in TESOL constructs a world “in which straight people—albeit from various national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds—were interacting only with other straight people” (p. 109). The heteronormativity of the literature appears to mirror the heteronormativity of classroom materials and practice. In a quantitative analysis of 45 ESOL textbooks, Paiz (2015) found evidence of heteronormativity in materials across the market, ostensibly because publishers must cater to the values of their clientele to increase marketability of products. Although heteronormativity in ESOL teaching and materials may align with the values and attitudes of many students and consumers, it contributes to the ongoing marginalization of LGBTQ+ learners.

The first responses to heteronormativity in the classroom in the 1980s and 1990s sought to include LGBTQ+ perspectives in the curriculum by discussing contentious issues such as gay marriage and stories about LGBTQ+ people (Nelson, 2009). While well intentioned, this pedagogy of inclusion positioned LGBTQ+ people under a sort of microscope as the subjects of a heteronormative gaze. In other words, the experiences of LGBTQ+ people were evaluated against heterosexuality, the dominant “normal” sexuality, which ascribed the label “other” to LGBTQ+ people, signaling that they are, at best, different and at worst, despised. By contrast, queer theory shifted the pedagogical

cal and theoretical focus of inquiry away from the marginalized group to the very discourses that marginalize them in the first place. As Seidman (1995) explains, the goal of queer theory is to develop “an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, and social institutions, and social relations” (p. 128). Instead of attempting to include LGBTQ+ people by sanctioning their participation in a heterosexist project, queer theory aims to interrogate how discourses of exclusion are reproduced, upheld, and constructed as unproblematic.

### ***The Intersection of English Learning and Sexual Migration***

LGBTQ+ learners may face a dilemma in mainstream language classrooms because they combine “a heteronormatively constructed context with questions which makes self-disclosure a relevant activity” (Liddicoat 2009). For instance, common ESOL classroom activities ask students to describe their ideal partner (boyfriend or girlfriend), describe their marriage, or simply describe their leisure activities. LGBTQ+ students must either perform heterosexuality (i.e., use an opposite-sex pronoun to describe their partners that, while grammatical, does not describe their reality), overtly signal their sexual identity, or withdraw from participation in the classroom exercise. The classroom should dissolve the heteronormative context and allow for alternative discourses to be aired and grappled with, and therefore for new “allowable identities” to be adopted (Roberts & Sarangi, 1995).

Another reason that LGBTQ+ experiences should be considered in ESOL education emerges from a confluence of historical and social factors regarding immigration. The field of migration studies, and the general public, has often assumed that “all the immigrants are heterosexual and all the queers are citizens” (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005). But according to a demographic survey conducted by the Williams Institute, an independent organization that researches sexual orientation and gender-identity policy, there are an estimated 904,000 LGBT-identified immigrants in the US, about 30% of whom are undocumented and approximately 60-80% of whom are Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander (Gates, 2013). This recent information should spur teachers to think about sexual migration (i.e., relocation across national borders primarily motivated by sexual orientation) as it relates to ethnicity since “the intersection of these identities—not to mention their imbrication with gender [and] class ... can result in profound isolation and marginalization from supports and resources” (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005, p. 38). Unfortunately, many LGBTQ+ immigrants arrive in ethnic enclaves in the US to face the same homophobia that they originally fled, leading to extreme isolation and further conceal-

ment or denial of sexual orientation (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005).

My project investigates the experiences of LGBTQ+-identified voluntary immigrant students in a new cultural context. I ask how the ESOL classroom can support all learners, including LGBTQ+ learners, in creating new possibilities for selfhood—not simply to accept notions of what it means to be LGBTQ+ unproblematically, but to grapple with and juxtapose them against other identities. Language teaching is integral to the process of self-making; as Weedon (1987) pointed out, “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (p. 21). In the next section, I will combine the perspectives of queer theory, figured worlds, and desire to generate a robust framework capable of interpreting key findings about ESOL learners’ sexual identities as they relate to language learning.

## Findings

### ***Strong Desires: Professional Advancement, Independence, Identity Affirmation***

Every interviewee expressed a strong desire to continue learning and advance professionally. For Trevor, learning happens in the constant challenge to learn from people who have more expertise, or to “be a small person in a big pool. If you get big in that pool, you need to get out of that pool and go to another, bigger pool.” His identity as an expert English user is integral to this quest for advancement. He rejects the label of second-language user, instead affirming himself as someone who works with native speakers to “make bigger stuff” collaboratively. In his case, “making bigger stuff” involves founding a start-up to satisfy his ultimate goal of “adding value to society.” Mary and Lola also cite their desires for higher education, yet frame them in terms of the negative consequences should they *not* pursue education. For example, the reason Mary decided to climb the ladder of academia was to stay competitive with her colleagues—she thought this was compensation for her lack of English proficiency. Similar to Trevor, she wanted to “add value” to society by conducting research to make social policy more inclusive for LGBTQ+ people. Lola focused more on the role of English proficiency, noting that she “wouldn’t stand a chance” as a business owner in San Francisco without it.

The desire for self-affirmation of an LGBTQ+ identity dovetailed closely with quests for independence and professional advancement. Both Mary and Andrew desired to escape traditional, rigid, and immutable life paths they believed were expected of them in their respec-

tive hometowns (this would have involved living in the same town as their immediate families, obtaining and sustaining a single career from their mid-20s onward, entering into a heterosexual marriage by age 30, and planning to raise children). Andrew recalls desperately hoping for an alternative to this prescribed life path and a desire to forge his own definition of masculinity, which proved difficult with “no source” to guide him in questioning his sexuality. “I couldn’t bring it up without coming out,” he reports, which led him to feel “totally lost.” When compared with the desires of Andrew and Mary, Trevor’s experience illustrates how the desire “to be accepted, like who I am” is a sort of prerequisite for the desire to “do the work besides just my identities and my personal life,” in other words, to have a “professional life, too” that focused on “what I can do for the society, instead of what people look at me as an identity.” While LGBTQ+ identity affirmation is important, Trevor will consider himself empowered only when his professional accomplishments are more salient to his onlookers than his homosexuality.

Returning to Ahmed’s (2010) idea of desires as promises and lacks, while the affirmation of the professional-personal identity nexus represents a consciously held, positive *promise* for my participants, it also signals their felt *lack* of recognition along the journey to self-actualization. Perhaps it is the dearth of public representations of LGBTQ+ people among the fabric of social life that impedes the development of an LGBTQ+ identity, as Mary and Andrew’s testimonies suggest. At its most mild, the social silence surrounding LGBTQ+ topics restricts identity ideation to the individual and traps it in a liminal state. Only after Mary made a major move abroad—in other words, pursued her desire for independence—was she able to challenge heteronormativity during a self-professed “turning point,” asking difficult questions such as “what was the world I lived in all this time? Because I always believed in [the] man and the woman, and now it’s not true anymore.” She had “never met any real gay people that look[ed] normal” until she was 26 years old. And Andrew may not have come out at all without the proper “ammunition,” or well thought-out defenses of LGBTQ+ life, to be used as arguments against detractors.

In more serious cases, the social silence surrounding LGBTQ+ topics may lead to internalization of broader social stigmas. For example, Mary cites what she refers to as her “odd” personality as one reason for leaving her home country. She notices the mismatch between her experience and what her country’s society, culture, laws, and traditions permit as normal, ultimately locating herself outside the possibilities for selfhood sanctioned by her country of origin. Although conscious of the heterosexist climate in her local context, her

comment evidences “negative social attitudes toward the self,” which may lead to “resultant internal conflicts” in a process called internalized homophobia (Meyer & Dean, 1998). Both learner-internal factors such as internalized homophobia and social-external factors such as the paucity of LGBTQ+ representation in heteronormative classroom “ecologies” have been found to decrease willingness to communicate in the second language classroom (Cao, 2014).

### ***Heteronormativity of the Classroom and the Importance of Teacher Authority***

Every participant perceived a degree of heteronormativity in the classroom climate despite having had an otherwise positive learning experience. Andrew and Mary were both quick to describe a progressive, accepting classroom atmosphere and open, caring teachers at their former Intensive English Program in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, the absence of LGBTQ+-related topics in the classroom was palpable, and the treatment of LGBTQ+ topics, having been left to students, was not maximally effective because students lacked the classroom authority to facilitate a respectful and nuanced discussion of social issues. Mary, who believes that “it [an LGBTQ+ perspective or issue] is not an advanced topic—it’s more fundamental,” wondered why “[the teachers] always talk about culture and discrim[ination] — globalization, and culture issues, but they don’t talk about the identity issues.” After she overheard her classmate say that people should avoid the Castro neighborhood because of the “weird” and “crazy” people there, Mary chose the presentation topic of gay marriage to challenge her classmates’ assumptions about gay people and “let them know that it is not scary.” Whereas Mary was comfortable with the role of cultural informant, Andrew points out that most students would not have taken the initiative to broach LGBTQ+ topics unless previously presented by the teacher. And the decision of whether or not to address LGBTQ+ topics, as Andrew and Mary indicate, depended on the philosophy of the teacher, with most teachers having chosen to avoid them.

Although many of my participants would have liked to have discussed LGBTQ+ perspectives, stories, and topics with the facilitation of a compassionate, open-minded, skillful teacher, navigating LGBTQ+ topics in the ESOL classroom presents complex challenges since different students filter their interpretations of sexuality through diverse cultural frames of reference. While sexuality is defined by personal actions in the highly individualistic North American context, identity may be defined “through interaction, where you belong with others, your socially recognized networks of relationships” in other

contexts such as Brazil or Japan (Valentine, 1997, p. 107). Andrew notes how for him and many students from East Asian countries, discussing sexualities of any kind is a taboo. And while many ESOL teachers in North America view the discussion of contentious social issues as part of their mission as progressive educators to foster critical thinking, students from some cultures may find this direct approach to controversial issues more threatening than liberatory (Brown, 1997). Therefore, many teachers avoid LGBTQ+ topics in hopes of maintaining a harmonious classroom environment, despite the fact that lesbian and gay themes are a popular topic among students that “can be used to illuminate linguistic and cultural practices and norms and also to question and critique them” (Nelson, 2009, p. 45).

Two of Brown’s (1997) recommendations, allowing space for students to express themselves and respecting all points of view, harmonize with my participants’ beliefs that social issues in the classroom, including sexualities, should be explicitly discussed and made relevant to everyone. “You can still disagree,” Andrew notes, but explicit discussion sends the message that LGBTQ+ topics are “okay to talk about,” or in other words, that they are legitimate ways of being in the world. A discourse inquiry approach to teaching best meets the goal of inclusive, explicit dialogue because of its focus on the discursive construction of sexual normativity. Instead of placing LGBTQ+ people or social issues “under a microscope,” an approach that may not engage heterosexual students, a discourse inquiry approach asks students to investigate how linguistic and cultural practices define all sexualities and construct power relations among them (Nelson, 2009). Furthermore, this focus on language brings up important identity vocabulary that students need in order to describe themselves and their surroundings. In Lola’s experience, people began to ask about her racial and ethnic identity in the US, but never in her home country. Knowing the implications of words such as “Latin” or “Hispanic” was crucial to her functioning in a new social context with strong identity politics, much like knowing the implications of words such as “partner” or “queer” might be for an LGBTQ+ learner.

### ***The Classroom as Figured World***

I have already discussed the importance of the classroom’s allowing LGBTQ+ students to imagine possibilities—to “expand their range of identities and to reach out to wider worlds” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 670). Responses indicate that the ESOL classroom often allowed self-authoring of professional identities but rarely of sexual identities. Thus, the classroom as figured world allowed students to create possibilities (for selfhood and learning) that would only par-

tially match their social realities. For Lola and Mary, LGBTQ+ topics were absent from ESOL instruction unless nominated by a student; for Andrew, LGBTQ+ topics surfaced only in the context of HIV prevention and AIDS awareness, which, while “it may have saved [his] life,” reflected a public-health outreach mission that did not provide the desired avenue for self-reflection.

One exception to this observation was Trevor’s experience with the “It Gets Better” project, a series of YouTube coming-out narratives intent on inspiring hope in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth and precipitating social change to benefit future generations of LGBTQ+ people. During a unit on LGBTQ+ history in San Francisco, class discussions of the “It Gets Better” narratives motivated him, a recent arrival to the US, to keep learning and advancing professionally. At the time, “life was dark.” He felt that “everything [went] against [him] because [he] was tiny, gay and Asian.” The nomination of the identity labels *tiny*, *gay*, and *Asian* strongly invoke a power differential between Trevor’s positionality and the normative opposites (namely: *built*, *straight*, and *white*) commonly associated with privilege and visibility. The “It Gets Better” project provided Trevor with multiple texts—artifacts of possibility—around which to self-author. After the “It Gets Better” unit, Trevor turned outward to his audiences and wrote a Facebook post asking people to consider and respect the gay experience. It was “really long, in English, even though [his] English wasn’t really good, but [he] tried.” Now thoroughly imbued with a sense of “you need to do something,” he also wrote a series of blog posts for a Vietnamese LGBTQ+ forum in which he shared his experience living as an out, gay, Asian male in San Francisco, with the goal of broadening the perspectives of people in the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community who may have been searching for “ammunition” to justify their sexualities to themselves, family, or their peers.

The accepting classroom environment that provided ample talk time for LGBTQ+ subject matter allowed Trevor to envision an LGBTQ+-friendly world and claim his “inner voice,” as he reports. The fact that he literally wrote himself into this world and used English to affirm himself suggests that teacher-facilitated LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom have affective benefits as well as learning benefits for LGBTQ+-identified learners. Other participants also indicated the desire for affective considerations during the language-learning process. For example, although Mary readily came out to and felt an affinity with her lesbian supervisor, she generally refrained from talking about herself in academic settings, citing apprehension about being judged negatively. Similarly, Trevor thought one of the key benefits of creating a physically separate LGBTQ+-themed class would be com-

fort—not confidence, he clarified, but comfort with one’s LGBTQ+ identity, which he views as a prerequisite to developing confidence as an English user.

When asked how an ideal mainstream ESOL classroom might address social issues, responses supported a queer-inquiry approach to sexual literacy. By sexual literacy, Nelson (2009) meant knowledge of how to talk about sexuality and representations of sexuality in the world, and how various discourses serve to disproportionately centralize, marginalize, silence, or amplify the experiences of people of all sexualities (Alexander & Banks, 2004; Britzman, 1997). Queer inquiry refers to a pedagogical approach in which these discourses are analyzed and problematized. For example, during the “It Gets Better” project, Trevor’s teacher asked students to reflect on their own experiences (“What do you think? Have you had this experience before?”), and to imagine a minority experience different from one’s own (“How do you think, if you are not an LGBT person?”). While these classroom questions evoke some elements of a counseling approach to framing sexual diversity, which has been criticized on the grounds that it essentializes LGBTQ+ experiences and does not apply to students of all sexualities, the question “How do you think, if you are not an LGBT person?” aligns with a queer-inquiry approach because it asks students to challenge a worldview that equates heterosexuality with normalcy (Nelson, 2009). And while it may be beneficial, as Trevor argues, to showcase positive examples of LGBTQ+ people living their lives, which would again align with a counseling approach to framing sexual diversity, he also indicates that a queer-inquiry approach is more likely to foster understanding of the diversity of human experience. According to Trevor, the fact that the “It Gets Better” discussion made visible his positioning as a sexual minority “helps him fight for black people too—[he] can fight for Asian and Latina, too ... and then create a networking, a community that they feel accepted and can feel comfortable about themselves.” As a result of the “It Gets Better” unit, not only did Trevor gain further awareness of his own identity position, but he also began to realize his potential for coalition building among marginalized groups. Texts and spaces for self-authoring in ESOL classrooms therefore have positive effects that extend beyond the individual across diverse communities.

It is important, as Mary points out, that classroom activities that address social issues such as sexual diversity must convey some message that applies to everyone. Trevor’s experience suggests that a queer-inquiry approach to framing sexuality invites all students to critically analyze their positionalities, promoting understanding of diverse life experiences.



## Final Thoughts

What can teachers learn from the experiences of Mary, Lola, Andrew, and Trevor? Most broadly, that behind each visible or audible classroom “performance” there are myriad details left unstated about a student’s dreams, hopes, fears, and desired identities. Like the underwater part of an iceberg, much of a student’s personal life remains hidden, yet it harbors enough mysterious inertia to slow the student down or even sink the proverbial ship. As teachers, it is tempting to assume we know what lies beneath the waterline in an effort to connect with our students. My project suggests that teachers should approach this process of relationship building with an attitude of healthy uncertainty and resist projecting assumptions onto students with the goal of rendering the classroom maximally open to student voices.

A stronger conclusion would point to a classroom pedagogy that reflects the diversity of the wider world. The experiences of my participants, especially those of Trevor, support the embedding of LGBTQ+ perspectives in larger curricular topics with the goal of legitimating the LGBTQ+ experience for queer and questioning students. Furthermore, LGBTQ+-authored texts provide students a means for self-authoring in a new context. Framing vocabulary lessons, pragmatics activities, and identity-related content in a maximally inclusive way redoubles the role of the teacher as sensitive, authoritative facilitator—a role that my participants valued highly.

My own teaching philosophy favors direct, expertly facilitated discussion of LGBTQ+ topics over avoidance of them. And as this article has shown, there are many ways to include LGBTQ+ topics in classroom pedagogy—from teaching a unit on stereotypes that deconstructs heteronormativity, to discussing narratives in the classroom (much like Trevor’s teacher did), to the inclusion of a text by an LGBTQ+ author but that itself is not about LGBTQ+ issues, to simply suspending assumptions about students during the teaching of a “typical” curriculum. It is ultimately the job of all teachers to craft an inclusive pedagogy given institutional constraints and the larger sociopolitical currents that govern their work activity. My hope is that I have presented a productive array of options to consider when crafting this pedagogy.

This project has focused on the experiences of learners in order to answer questions about heteronormativity in the classroom, all the while foregrounding the voices of the LGBTQ+ people about whom the literature is typically written. However, research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers is also important and underrepresented. Further research into LGBTQ+ teachers’ self-disclosure decisions, pedagogical orientations, and strategies for framing sexual diversity

in the classroom could complement research into teachers as student advocates and would generate insight into the complex and often hidden antecedents of classroom speech and silence.

### **Author**

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### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>The term *queer* has a long and contested history. When I use the term *queer* as in *queering ESOL*, I indicate a theoretical mission to investigate how all conceptions of normalcy—whether related to sexuality, family, success, or something else—are constructed by power relations in society. To encapsulate the diversity of sexual and gender identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, agender, genderqueer, etc.) and at the same time acknowledge the fluidity of self-identification, I use the term LGBTQ+.

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## Appendix Inventory of Codes Employed

<i>Desires (for)</i>	<i>The Role of English</i>	<i>Identity</i>	<i>LGBT Topics</i>	<i>Curriculum</i>
Professional Advancement	Confidence as User	Cross-linguistic, Cross-cultural	LGBT in Class	Content
Independence	English for No Specific Purpose	Voice (as change agent)	Advocacy	Outcomes
Learning Challenge	Expectations vs. Reality	Stereotypes and Remedies	Discrimination	Level
Diverse Environment	Power, Prestige, and Knowledge	Evolution—Social Responsibility	Social Attitudes Toward LGBT People	Implementation Challenges
Acceptance of Self by Others	Discourse Community Membership	Outness	Nonheterosexual/Nontraditional Life	
Romance	Perceptions of Nonnative Speakers	Hope	Institutional Connection and Support	
Flexibility of Lifestyle		Sexuality Labels		
		Masculinity		

