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Professional Development Through Inquiry: Addressing Sexual Identity in TESOL

Sexual identity is a topic that is relevant to adult ESL instruction, not only because some learners identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender), but also because LGBT identities are a visible part of American culture and ESL learners must learn how to discuss them in culturally and pragmatically appropriate ways. This article shares the results of a survey of ESL teachers' experiences with LGBT themes and discusses questions and challenges that teachers reported. Because many teachers feel underprepared to handle these challenges, the authors propose that sexual identity be included in TESOL professional development, and they offer suggestions for incorporating the theme into both existing TESOL curricula and in-service training for practicing teachers.

On my first day teaching a small, low-intermediate class at a language school, a student named Cielo (a pseudonym) mentioned her girlfriend. I was caught off guard—did the student mean “friend” or “girlfriend”? This was the first time I had heard a student talk about a same-sex partner in one of my classes. What did the other students understand, and how would they react?

This story, from the first author of the article, illustrates some of the questions teachers face when issues of sexual identity come up in ESL classes. This student never actually spoke of her girlfriend in class again, but she later approached the teacher outside of class to tell her that she had come to study in the US in part to escape from conflict with her parents over her sexual identity. While her motivation for studying English was closely linked to this identity, she had decided to hide it in English class after that first day because she was afraid that her classmates would reject her. Her teacher felt at a loss. She asked colleagues for advice, but they simply said that the student was probably right about how her classmates would respond. In the end, overwhelmed by (what she perceived as) the heterosexism of the ESL classroom, the teacher made no attempt to transform it, nor did she facilitate any way for the student to further express her sexual identity in class. She did, however, continue thinking about this situation and wondering what she could do differently the next time.

A year later, the same instructor was teaching an intermediate reading and writing class in an Intensive English Program (IEP) in San Francisco when an international graduate student came to observe her class. Since the class was discussing a unit on cultural differences, the teacher asked the visitor to share her own observations about differences between San Francisco and her home country. She quickly reported that she had been very surprised to see gay and lesbian couples showing affection in public, but that she later came to appreciate it. After she spoke, many students eagerly chimed in with their own observations about gays and lesbians in the US, and one student, Arthur (a pseudonym), ended up writing his final essay comparing attitudes toward gays in his country and the US. Afterward, the teacher wondered whether Arthur would have written about LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) identities if her visitor had not raised the topic first. These students clearly had a lot to say about LGBT themes; perhaps they were just waiting for the opportunity to voice these ideas.

The above experiences show how language learning, culture, and identity are intimately entwined. Reflecting on them, we see not only that LGBT identities were present in these classrooms, but also that many students (whether LGBT-identified or not) had questions or cultural observations to share. Furthermore, sexual identity was not just a peripheral topic in the class, but it was in some ways central to the project of learning English. For Cielo, sexual identity was part of her motivation for studying English. For Arthur, the way in which LGBT identities were expressed and understood was one of the major differences between his home culture and San Francisco. If cultural learning is intertwined with language learning, then students such as Arthur should have opportunities to explore the social and pragmatic issues associated with sexual identity in the target culture during their ESL classes.

LGBT themes and identities are clearly present in our adult ESL classes, whether on or below the surface. However, even though we completed our master's degrees in TESOL at a large, urban university in a famously LGBT-friendly city, sexual identity was never mentioned in any of our graduate classes. To be sure, discussing sexual identity in the ESL classroom can be a challenge for both students and teachers. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and often have differing, culturally specific understandings of gender and sexual identity. For many of them, discussing LGBT identities is taboo, and even those students who wish to discuss these themes may lack the language or pragmatic understanding to do so. Yet, it is exactly these challenges that make us believe sexual identity *should* be discussed in preservice and in-service training for teachers of adult ESL. Training will not only help teachers develop strategies to address sexual identity issues that come up in their classrooms, but it can also raise their awareness of the other "hidden identities" students bring into the classroom (Vandrick, 1997). In this paper, we attempt to broaden the discussion of sexual identity in the field of TESOL by:

1. Giving an overview of relevant literature on the topic of sexual identity in TESOL;

2. Sharing the results of our own survey of adult ESL teachers, in which most teachers reported that sexual identity was in fact relevant to their students' lives;
3. Discussing how ESL students are affected by teachers' responses to these issues; and
4. Proposing that sexual identity be incorporated in teacher training to better prepare teachers to manage challenges in dealing with sexual identity issues in their classrooms.

Background

Since the 1990s, researchers within the fields of TESOL and second language acquisition (SLA) have been looking at language learning as not simply a question of individual learners' cognition and motivation, but rather as a social process involving interaction and participation in social communities (Johnson, 2006). Consequently, learners' identities—as constructed by themselves as well as by others—can greatly affect what opportunities they have to practice English and to, in Norton Peirce's words, "claim the right to speak" (1995, p. 26), both inside and outside the classroom. Researchers have explored how several different aspects of identity, including gender and ethnicity, have affected language learning (Gordon, 2004; Norton Peirce, 1995).

Sexual identity has been less examined, but recent research has begun to tackle this issue (Nelson, 2009, p. 4; Vandrick, 2001, p. 2), in part by focusing on the experiences of students who identify as LGBT (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006; Nelson, 2010). These findings suggest that many LGBT immigrants come to the US to escape persecution based on their sexual orientation and gender identity in their homelands, underscoring how this identity is a fundamental motivation for learning English (Nelson, 2010, pp. 446-447). As Nelson (2010) has found, still others seek to learn English because it functions as a "gay lingua franca" that "facilitates entry into a global gay community" (p. 448). Yet, within the ESL classroom many of these immigrants hide their sexual identity (Nelson, 2009, p. 214), as was the case with Cielo, even in LGBT-friendly cities such as San Francisco (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006).

Despite the fact that these identities sometimes remain hidden, they can be central to the language-learning process. Within ESL classes, students are often asked to share personal information about their families, relationships, and reasons for leaving their home countries, which helps build a classroom community and gives the students tools for engaging in conversations outside the classroom. Needless to say, LGBT students' answers to all of these questions will be affected by their sexual identity. If they hide that identity in the classroom, they may not feel truly part of the classroom community and may be less prepared to "claim the right to speak" outside of the classroom (Norton Peirce, 1995). As Menard-Warwick (2005) affirmed, "Language learning can only be successful to the extent that it is congruent with the learners' sense of their gender roles, societal positions, class backgrounds, and ethnic histories" (p. 262). When these factors are ignored, learning will be limited; thus, LGBT students must be given opportunities to express their own identities in the classroom.

Moreover, open discussion of LGBT issues and identities can benefit all students, not only those with minority gender and sexual identities. For example, immigrants must be made aware of nondiscrimination laws and expectations (Dumas, 2010), and “the practices and norms of the new language and cultural milieu vis-à-vis sexual identity” (Nelson, 2009, p. 206). Through interviews with immigrant students, Nelson (2009) found that many had never interacted with openly gay or lesbian people before arriving in the US, and they wanted a deeper understanding of what gays and lesbians thought, how “gayness was signaled” in the US, and how to avoid offending gays and lesbians (p. 206). In the words of one student from Nelson’s (2009) study, who was concerned about learning the appropriate vocabulary to discuss sexual identity, “When I say something I must [be] careful like what I said. I don’t want to hurt [gay people]” (p. 190). Her words suggest that these issues around sexual identity are of great interest to students—yet it is rare for them to be directly addressed in class.

In spite of these benefits, many teachers wrestle with how to constructively address LGBT identities in the classroom. In a reflection on his own attempts to bring queer theory into ESL teaching, Curran (2006) reported that his colleagues thought discussing LGBT issues with students would be “inappropriate and problematic” (p. 87). Their reasons included dismissing sexual identity as “irrelevant” to the student population, anticipating that students from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds would be homophobic, and fearing that ESL students “lack the necessary language skills to talk about ‘such topics’” (Curran, 2006, p. 87). While some teachers are dismissive of LGBT concerns, others, such as Curran, wish to address them but may struggle to find appropriate ways to do so. These teachers may curtail discussions out of fear that students will make anti-gay remarks (Nelson, 2009); however, as Nelson noted, students may not understand this reasoning and instead assume that it is LGBT topics that are “unspeakable” in the classroom (Nelson, 2010, p. 450; Vandrick, 1997). Because “little has been done to integrate preparation for sexual diversity into teacher education curriculum” (Dumas, 2010, p. 621), teachers such as Curran are often left to resolve such issues on their own.

Teachers’ Experiences

Hoping to gain more insight into teachers’ experiences, we developed an anonymous, online survey, which we distributed widely, and 84 teachers of adult ESL from across the country responded.¹ Although instructors from a wide range of teaching contexts participated, the largest number taught at adult schools, community-based organizations, community colleges, and Intensive English Programs. Half of the respondents had been teaching adult ESL for more than 5 years.

We began the survey by asking teachers to identify the circumstances in which LGBT identities had been discussed in their classrooms, as well as to share a specific example. Although some survey respondents reported that sexual identity had never come up in their teaching, the vast majority indicated that this theme had arisen for a variety of reasons, including the presence of

LGBT members of the classroom and the larger community; student questions or teasing; and discussions of cultural differences or current events. The stories teachers shared illustrate how these discussions unfolded.

The presence of LGBT students is one of the most obvious ways in which sexual identity has an impact in the classroom. Of the teachers who responded to our survey, 20% indicated that they had LGBT students in their classrooms, and the anecdotes they shared touched on benefits as well as challenges. One teacher said, “I also had a transgender student once who was very open about his sexuality. The other students learned a lot from him.” A different teacher reported, “Another student was treating our gay student badly.” Their responses remind us that just as we must be prepared for the presence of diverse cultures in the classroom, we must also expect sexual diversity and foster an environment in which it is respected.

While LGBT students (both those who are openly so and those who are not) represent one way that sexual identity intersects with the ESL classroom, there are often other LGBT members of the ESL classroom—teachers. Some of the teachers who responded to our survey indicated that they identified as LGBT, and several discussed the often-difficult decision of whether to disclose this aspect of their identity to students. One teacher described a classroom situation in which she was prompted to disclose her sexual identity:

A group of ... students consistently asked me why I wasn't married. Finally, I told the group (after class) ... that I had a partner and that she was a woman. ... I wish I could have delved into the topic more with them, but I couldn't find any material and there was no institutional support at the time, so I just let it drop.

Other teachers said they try to share their sexual identity when it comes up naturally in the course of their teaching:

I am gay myself, and have rarely let my classes know that explicitly. Some figured it out and they talked to me about it. I've slowly been changing that and slowly trying to just be myself and expose little bits of my life to my students as every teacher does. That first time in a new class when I could say something like, “my husband and I ...” is fraught with the struggle of “should I say that, or not”?

Because one of the primary connections to American society and culture for international or immigrant students is through their teachers, these students can be very inquisitive about their teachers' lives. As the stories above illustrate, this curiosity is one of the factors that may influence LGBT teachers' decisions to come out to their students.

As the preceding examples of LGBT students and teachers show, the topic of sexual identity is not something that is brought *into* the classroom—in many cases, it is already there. Even those students and teachers who do not identify as LGBT may be concerned with minority sexual identities. Through our sur-

vey, we heard from teachers who had LGBT relatives and friends, and these relationships were often revealed only after a particular classroom discussion led the teacher to decide that students would benefit from this information. This is demonstrated in the following anecdote about a class discussion:

One student said that he stopped talking to a cousin who was gay and the other students said that that wasn't right, that he was still related and people had a right to be who they are. ... I told them that my brother is gay and several were terribly apologetic about the possibility of offending me.

In this narrative, we see that LGBT identity was significant to both a student (who had a gay cousin) and the teacher (who had a gay brother). Once the discussion turned toward sexual identity, it was a topic of interest, and students were able to gain pragmatic sociocultural information from the exchange.

The fact that some students and teachers identify as LGBT, and that others have LGBT friends, indicates that sexual identity is relevant to the ESL classroom. Another argument for addressing it is that students need the social and pragmatic information to successfully navigate American society. In the two examples that follow, students raised the issue of sexual or gender identity because it was something that they saw as having an impact in their own lives. One teacher recounted:

A student asked (in Spanish) "What do you call someone who is a man, who has the male parts, but dresses like a woman and wants to have sex with both men and women?" Apparently a person meeting this description had answered her ad for a roommate.

In another classroom, a teacher reported that

one parent was quite concerned about the thought that his son might play with LGBT youth or go to a house where parents were LGBT—only to discover, much to his surprise, that his teacher's mother was a lesbian!

Here, individual students discussed sexual identity not as an abstract topic, but as something that they had come into contact with in the US and that affected their lives as roommates and parents. The classroom was seen, perhaps, as a place to raise their concerns and get their questions answered.

Students' questions can also extend beyond their immediate lives to include reflections on LGBT identity in American culture at large; in fact, the most common way that teachers reported sexual identity coming up was through discussions of cultural differences. For example, one teacher reported that

in a recent discussion of "what surprised you when you came to [this town]" one student mentioned women holding hands. It was one of many things that came out of the discussion, so it was noted as something different without much further discussion.

In this classroom, students appear to be sharing observations as a way of coming to a better understanding of American culture. Many teachers see their own role as helping students through this. As one teacher said:

ESL classes should include not only English language lessons, but information about English-speaking countries' culture as well. As an ESL teacher in the U.S., I have noticed that my students who are new to the U.S. are often surprised that the U.S. is much more accepting of LGBTs than they are used to, and students need to know how to act appropriately in their new society when meeting LGBT people.

In other words, it is important for students to become familiar with attitudes toward sexual identity in the US as a facet of American culture and to understand pragmatically appropriate ways to interact with LGBT individuals.

Pedagogical Implications

The diverse experiences of the teachers we surveyed suggest that many ESL learners are interested in sexual identity for a range of reasons, some of which may not be obvious or intuitive. However, many teachers struggle with how to address sexual identity in their classrooms. One concern that they expressed was how to handle homophobic comments. As one teacher reported, "I have had this happen and many times I don't know the best way to respond because I don't want to put the gay person on the spot but I don't want to ignore the situation." In situations such as this, teachers must usually respond in the heat of the moment while weighing a number of factors. How can they protect LGBT students, maintain order in the classroom, and take advantage of a "teachable moment"? Consider this experience that one teacher shared:

During an exercise where students were asking one another questions about themselves, one student asked another if he was gay. I intervened before the student [could answer] and said that perhaps the student did not want to answer that question and offered that during this exercise students were free to respond "pass" if they didn't want to answer the question. The [student] did not answer the question and the questioner apologized for his question.

Taken out of context, it is impossible (and would be inappropriate) to evaluate this teacher's response to the given situation; however, we can consider how the two students may have interpreted the teacher's words. Viewing the incident through one lens, we can imagine that the teacher intervened so that one possibly gay student would not feel pressured to reveal his sexual identity and potentially get teased as a result. Looking at it through another lens, however, we can see how the teacher's actions could contribute to the framing of LGBT identities as something negative, to be ashamed of, or inappropriate to discuss in the classroom, as indicated in Nelson (2010). If the student were in fact gay, he may have gotten the message that he should hide that identity from his class-

mates. Additionally, the other student's apology indicates that he may have interpreted the teacher's intervention as a sign that this question was somehow inappropriate, but he may not have understood *why* the teacher thought it was inappropriate.

To prevent such situations from occurring, teachers may choose to introduce the issue of sexual identity themselves, rather than waiting for students to bring it up. Some of our survey respondents shared their strategies for doing so, such as attempting to prevent students from making homophobic remarks by setting ground rules of respect and/or making students aware of their school's antidiscrimination policy. One teacher went a step further and explicitly referenced LGBT identity by establishing a personal connection: "I usually make a statement in my classes that homophobia will not be tolerated and let them know that I have had gay friends." Other teachers acknowledged minority sexual identities in the classroom by introducing relevant vocabulary and legislation:

I teach family vocabulary in my beginning-low class and recently have included the term partner, along with husband, wife and spouse. I explain that people use partner in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, and then explain that people usually use the terms straight, gay and lesbian. I usually draw pictures to make sure students understand the typical gender configurations of these pairs/terms. I also explain that in some states, gay marriage is legal. There is usually no comment by students.

In taking such steps, teachers are setting expectations about being respectful of one another and also, as Vandrick stated, "demystifying" sexual identity and making it more "matter of fact" by referring to it directly (1997, p. 157).

Regardless of how teachers choose to respond to these circumstances, they should be aware of how their own biases may affect, positively or negatively, the environment of the classroom. When a student makes a comment about gay people, is he making a joke that should not be tolerated, or is he genuinely curious and testing the waters? If the teacher does not respond, or treats the question as a slur, what will the students think? If teachers assume that students are homophobic and uncomfortable discussing LGBT identities, as many of the teachers in our study reported, will they then close down students' genuine dialogue? These are all questions that could be addressed in teacher training on sexual identity.

Teacher Training

As these responses highlight, sexual identity is a topic that comes up in many ESL classrooms, most often introduced by students, and many teachers feel underprepared to navigate the ensuing discussions. Despite the presence of LGBT students and teachers and the cultural and pragmatic benefits to the broader ESL student population, the topic of sexual identity in the ESL classroom is almost completely absent from the curricula of pre- and in-service teacher-training programs. In fact, two-thirds of our survey respondents in-

icated that they wanted additional training on this topic as well as tools to adeptly navigate discussions and strengthen the classroom community.

We envision this teacher training as consisting of two facets: inclusion of sexual identity in TESOL degree curricula and professional-development workshops for practicing teachers. In TESOL programs, faculty could help raise preservice teachers' awareness of the relevance of LGBT identities to the ESL classroom by exposing students to scholarship on the topic. For example, in Fall 2010, we worked with the instructor of an introductory SLA class for 1st-semester MA TESOL students at San Francisco State University to include Nelson's (2010) article, "A Gay Immigrant Student's Perspective: Unspeakable Acts in the Language Classroom," in the unit on identity in SLA. The graduate students who read the article reported that it was both relevant and thought provoking. Another way sexual identity could be integrated into graduate programs is by including LGBT themes when discussing classroom management and L2 pragmatics. While we are writing about sexual identity here, we propose that this discussion would not happen in isolation; instead, the challenges and strategies raised could be used to discuss a range of identity issues. Thus, a graduate class in pragmatics might examine how to teach culturally appropriate ways for students to talk about race, sexual identity, gender, and disability. Crucially, teacher educators must not only raise preservice teachers' awareness of these issues, but they must also help them to "translate" them into "pedagogy for their own lived realities" (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004, p. 397).

While including sexual identity in TESOL education programs would help raise new teachers' awareness of how sexual identity might affect their classrooms, the responses to our survey suggest that even teachers with many years of experience desire training on responding to student questions and comments. To address this need, we also propose that existing professional development for practicing teachers should include sexual identity topics. Such training could include awareness-raising and reflection activities in which teachers consider how their current practices may influence the classroom environment, as well as develop strategies for responding to questions and comments, role play, and goal-setting activities. At the 2011 CATESOL annual conference we piloted a workshop based on these principles, which was attended by teachers from across the state. During the workshop, we observed that student and teacher narratives can be powerful tools for engaging participants in discussions, both for teachers who have long considered these topics as well as for those who were delving into them for the first time. We hope to expand this training to individual school settings in the coming year.

Conclusion

Discussing sexual identity in the ESL classroom can be challenging, but it can also offer new opportunities to explore the intersections of language, culture, and sexual identity. While "moments of conflict, disagreement or discomfort" may well occur, that is because these aspects of culture are contested, and thus, precisely the areas that students are most in need of investigating (Nelson, 2009, p. 86). Instead of ignoring or changing the subject when students

voice homophobic opinions, teachers could use such statements to engage in a language-enhancing discussion (Nelson, 2009, 2010). In other words, these “moments of conflict” can be opportunities to push students’ understanding of the language and culture.

While this article focuses on LGBT themes, they are really inextricable from the larger issues of diversity in the ESL classroom. Having a diverse range of social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities in class can lead to valuable exchanges about complex issues. Given that ESL students are already well versed in traveling between different languages, identities, and cultures, the classroom can be the site of shared inquiry to “bridge the different worlds and worldviews we occupy” (Morgan & Vandrick, 2009, p. 513). The class does not necessarily need to agree about sexual identity (or religion, race, disability, or immigration status); rather, the teacher could guide students to look past their differences to discover those places where the differing “cultural frames” through which they view the world can “intersect and work together” (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p. 27). We believe that by including the subject of sexual identity in teacher-training programs, teachers will be better equipped to explore these issues.

We began this article by describing two teaching moments that inspired us to begin questioning how we addressed sexual identity in the ESL classroom. This led us to explore other teachers’ experiences and consider ways to be better prepared for similar incidents. Reflecting on all that we have learned, we still do not have easy answers, but we do know that we will handle the situations differently the next time. When a student such as Cielo discusses her girlfriend during class, we will be more aware of how we, as teachers, set the tone for the classroom and will respond in a way that shows that this is both an acceptable and appropriate topic for classroom conversation. When a student such as Arthur expresses an interest in gay or lesbian culture, we will prompt him to go deeper in his analysis of heteronormativity and the relationship between language and culture. Having done this research, we are better prepared to respond when such circumstances arise in our classrooms, as they inevitably do in conversation, jokes, and questions. The more we pay attention to LGBT themes in ESL, the more we notice how present they are in our classrooms, right below the surface and waiting to be explored.

Authors

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Note

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