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# Sexual Identities in the Language Classroom

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## Abstract

*The reality is that sexual identities are silent or being silenced in many language classrooms as a result of many complex reasons. However, studies that look into identities as they relate to language education have found that this reality can in fact be a major disservice to all students in their language learning as a whole. Consequently, it is argued that it is crucial for language educators to increase their knowledge and awareness about the topic. To help facilitate this process, this paper aims to (1) define how identities, specifically sexual identities, relate to language learning (2) highlight some negative experiences of queer students in their language classrooms (3) explain how this situation detrimentally affects queer and non-queer students alike (4) discuss the steps the field has taken to address the situation and (5) provide some suggestions on how language educators can foster a safe and equitable learning environment for all. The article concludes with the author's personal reflection about the topic.*

## Introduction

One of my recurring struggles in the classroom is in regards to tackling sexual identities. Like many other teachers, despite recognizing the importance of addressing the issue, I have long felt uncertain and anxious about how to handle it. As a result of my growing awareness about the topic of sexual identities and the politics of language teaching and learning in general, I have come to recognize that this is one area of my pedagogical practice that I and other educators may need and want to improve on. To do so, it is important to first understand the underlying and/or surrounding issues about sexual identity in the language classroom. Consequently, in this paper, I attempt to do the following: (1) trace when and how the notion of identity became relevant to second language learning (2) define how sexual identity relates to the second language classroom (3) give an overview of current classroom realities when it comes to sexual identities (4) present some of the factors that have been pointed out to contribute to this reality (5) highlight the arguments that have been made on why sexual identities need to be addressed in the language classroom (6) discuss some of the approaches the field has taken to address the situation (7) summarize some recommendations teachers could try to apply in their own classrooms and (8) end with my reflection about the topic.

## Identity in Second Language Acquisition

From the 1970s to the 1990s, cognitivism prevailed in the field Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Essentially, this learning theory views knowledge acquisition as a mental activity. How learners acquire, process, store, retrieve and activate their knowledge are the main subjects of study (Anderson, Reder, and Simon 1997; Greeno, Collins, and Resnick 1996 as cited in Yilmaz, 2011). As Yilmaz (2011) points out, cognitivism arose as a result of the limitations of and dissatisfaction to another learning theory called behaviourism. In contrast to cognitivism, behaviourism is more externally-oriented in that focus is heavily put on individuals' observable behaviour. Cognitivists argue that behaviourism does not account for how information is actually being understood and processed by learners. This is problematic because for cognitivists, prior knowledge and mental processes do play a role on how individuals respond to their environment (Yilmaz, 2011);

individuals do not respond to stimuli in the same way every time (Matlin 1994 as cited in Yilmaz, 2011).

However, during the 1990s, a major shift, or as Kumaravadivelu (2006) puts it, an “awakening” started to take place in the field as some researchers, most notably Firth and Wagner in 1997, began to criticize the “overwhelmingly cognitive orientation” SLA was taking on (Block 2007). Subsequently, pressure began to build to open up the field to social theory and sociolinguistic research, which eventually led other scholars to recognize that language learning is not exclusively about individual cognition and motivation, but a social process wherein participation and interaction in social communities are important (Johnson, as cited in Wadell, Frei & Martin, 2011/2012). As a result, the notion of identities became relevant to language learning as they can affect what opportunities learners have to speak and/or practice their target language (Wadell et al., 2011/2012).

Over the years, researchers have looked into various identity dimensions and how they relate to language learning. As Stille (2015) summarizes, work has been done on global location (Adawu and Martin-Beltran 2012; Canagarajah 1999, 2007; Lee and Norton 2009; Makoni and Pennycook 2007) gender (Davis and Skilton-Sylvester 2004; Norton and Pavlenko 2004; Pavlenko 2008), and social class (Block 2013; Vandrick 2009). Undoubtedly, all of this work exploring identity as it relates to second language education has contributed to the advancement of the field’s understanding of the language learning process. However, there are other identity aspects that are only beginning to be explored (Nelson, 1999; Wadell et al., 2011/2012): one of these is sexual identity.

## **Sexual identity in language learning**

Studies in sexual identity as it relates to language learning largely delve into the experiences of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) students and teachers (Wadell et al., 2011/2012). Of course, as Nelson (1999) points out, there are scholars as well as instructors who have expressed various reservations about discussing sexual identity in the language classroom: some have questioned its relevance to language learning; others, meanwhile, have challenged its appropriateness to be talked about in the first place as they see it as “invasive”.

Scholars who take on a more sociocultural view, on the other hand, have made the case that the issue of sexual identity is in fact not only relevant and appropriate, but can even be central to all students’ language education (Nelson, 1999; Dumas, 2008; Moore 2016). They reason that one’s sexual identity inevitably, like other identity dimensions, affects one’s level of participation in the community, which in turn directly relates to one’s opportunities to acquire, practice and/or use the target language.

### *Classroom realities when it comes to sexual identity*

Nelson (2006) argues that in addition to being multicultural and multilingual spaces, language classrooms are, in fact, also “multisexual spaces”. Given the degree of heterogeneity of people in any given classroom, it is almost always unavoidable that there is at least one person in the group who identifies as LGBT, be it openly or not (Moore, 2016; Wadell et al., 2011/2012; Vandrick, 1997). However, a number of researchers have noted that the reality in most of these classrooms is that queer identities and other queer-related issues are commonly silent or are silenced in different ways and in different occasions (Moore, 2016; Wadell et al., 2011/2012; Vandrick, 1997). To illustrate this situation, three example cases are presented.

First, in one study by Moore (2016) that looked into the experiences of queer Japanese students taking classes in both mainstream English language schools and in an exclusively queer English class in Japan, a participant named Junya, shares a typical predicament he encounters in his mainstream English classes:

Teacher ask us often... “How about your weekend?” or “What’s up?” ... Those questions were really annoying... I cannot talk about... when I go see movie with my gay friends... I cannot go “I went to go see the movie with my partner.” ... (p.95)

For Junya, these extremely common small talk questions regarding his weekend activities and how he is doing quickly became difficult as his responses are affected by his sexual identity. It is worth noting that asking about, and sharing of personal stories (e.g., about families, relationships, and reasons for leaving their home countries) is standard practice in language classrooms, be it in class activities or during informal conversations among students (Wadell et al., 2011/2012). Hence, an argument can be made that situations like this (i.e., queer students not being able to take part even in casual conversations) may very well be a recurring challenge for many LGBT students (Moore, 2016).

In another example, Wadell et al. (2011/2012) cites the case of a female student named Cielo, who, unlike the Japanese student cited above, did attempt to make her sexual identity known in her English class in the United States. She did so by sharing that she has a girlfriend in a big group discussion. However, after doing this once, Cielo’s fear of being rejected ultimately prevailed, so she never mentioned anything about her girlfriend in class again. What makes this situation truly unfortunate is the fact that she left her country to study English in the United States and to get away from familial conflicts over her sexual identity. Yet, in the end, this part of her identity remained hidden in the place she initially thought and/or hoped to be more welcoming of her queerness.

Finally, another gay student named Tomo, while talking about the advantages and disadvantages of studying in a mainstream language school and a class exclusively for LGBT students (i.e., OPEN class) relates:

One . . . special thing in OPEN class might be to have discussion . . . about romance or life plan with their partner . . . . That kind of thing is, er, difficult to talk in heterosexual world . . . . That is so stressful for us . . . . Sometimes I was asked, er, “Do you have any girlfriends? . . . When will you get married?” ... I need to tell a lie ... but in OPEN class it is not necessary to tell a lie. That is completely different point with other classes . . . I think that is the worth existence of this class (Moore, 2016, p. 98).

For Tomo, his situation is also very difficult given that he felt it necessary to lie when in the company of his straight classmates.

These experiences of the three LGBT students in their respective language classrooms clearly demonstrate that queer identities are silent, or are silenced, one way or another. Certainly, it is conceivable that many more variations of these negative experiences do happen to other queer learners elsewhere.

#### *Factors that lead to silencing*

A number of researchers have looked into what brings about this silence in classrooms when it comes to queer identities and issues. Some of the factors that have been identified that engender this negative environment for queer learners include different levels of homophobia, teachers not knowing how to handle such homophobia, and heteronormativity.

One reason that has been pointed out that contributes to the silencing of LGBT identities and issues in the classroom is homophobia, which is defined as “hatred and fear of homosexuals”. Homophobia in classrooms can either be institutional or simply an inevitability given the diversity of learners within one classroom. In regards to institutional homophobia, one example is O’Mochain’s (2009) experience teaching at a Christian women’s college in Japan. He shares that he feared suffering some form of professional repercussion if he introduced topics that could be seen as “promoting homosexuality” because his institution “rarely encouraged” students to discuss issues about sexuality (O’Mochain, 2009). At the same time, however, he deemed it important that students have a space to talk about these issues, as there may be students who are lesbians or at least are questioning their sexuality. In the end, although O’Mochain (2009) reported to have been able to devise some “context-appropriate” strategies for these topics to be explored, the point is that institutions do have the power to determine what can and cannot be talked about. In the case of O’Mochain’s (2009) college, sexual identity is not one of them. As for homophobia as an imminent reality in second language classrooms, Wadell et al. (2011/2012) point out that in many cases, students who study English (especially in study abroad contexts), have very rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although this is generally viewed as an asset, it also arguably makes inevitable, the reality that within one classroom, there will be students who have different and/or outright dissenting views or interpretations of LGBT people and issues (Nelson, 1999). Unfortunately, for many queer students the expression or even just the perception of homophobia in the classroom can be sufficient to silence them (Moore, 2016).

Another reason that contributes to the silencing of LGBT matters in the classroom is that many teachers simply do not know how to deal with the issue (Wadell et al., 2011/2012; Moore, 2016). To be fair, it is important to acknowledge that these situations can be very complex. For example, according to Wadell et al., (2011/2012), when teachers are confronted by homophobic comments in their classrooms, the following questions often arise in their minds:

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, would they then close down students’ genuine dialogue?  
(p.106)

Accordingly, it is not surprising that many teachers either fail to confront this prejudice when they do come up in class (Moore, 2016; Wadell et al., 2011/2012) or they choose to avoid talking about sexual identities all together, which in turn perpetuates the silence.

Finally, heteronormativity (i.e., “hegemonic norms positing heterosexuality, and only heterosexuality, as natural and desirable”), which manifests in different ways, also contributes to this silencing (Nelson, 2002). Language education textbooks, for instance, have been found to be pervaded by heteronormative assumptions. Nelson (2006) highlights the fact that many language textbook publishers appear to be “collectively imagining a monosexual community of interlocutors” because most textbooks only feature “straight people interacting with other straight people”, while LGBT characters are few and far between. Moreover, heteronormativity is also pervasive in class discussions. A clear illustration of this is the case Liddicoat (2009) presents in which a queer student is clearly asserting his sexual identity through his choice of adjectives. However, the teacher interprets the student’s assertions as “linguistic failure” (p.93):

Teacher: *Y Sam. (.) ¿Como es tu novia?*  
And Sam. What’s your girlfriend like?  
Sam: *Mi ubm (0.2) novio es alto y:: delgado.*

- My uhm boyfriend is tall (m) and slim (m).  
 T: *¿alta y delgada?* Tall (f) and slim (f)?  
 Sam: *¿alta y delgada?* tall (f) and slim (f)?  
     *Mi novio (.) uhm es alta y delgada.*  
     My boyfriend (.) uhm is tall (f) and slim (f).  
 T: *Tu novia es alta y delgada.*  
     Your girlfriend is tall (f) and slim (f).  
 Sam: *.hh uhm:: (n-) ¿novia?*  
     .hh uhm:: (n-) girlfriend?  
 T: *Si' tu novia e::s::*  
     Yes your girlfriend i::s::  
 Sam: *O::b no es novio. Mi novio es alto y delgado. Y tiene una barba.*  
     O::h no it's boyfriend. My boyfriend is tall and slim. And he has a beard.  
 T: *Lynn. (.) ¿Como es tu novio?*  
     Lynn (.). What's your boyfriend like?  
 Sam [sic?]: *Mi novio es guapo y alto.*  
     My boyfriend is handsome and tall.  
 T: *Muy bien.*  
     Very good.

In this extract, confusion ensued between Sam and the teacher, because the teacher had assumed that Sam has a girlfriend, as he is a man. This heteronormative assumption made the teacher interpret Sam's utterances as grammatically incorrect. Although this extract is taken from a Spanish language class, it can be argued that this type of exchange between students and teachers can also easily happen in many English classes.

Taken together, it is not difficult to see why many LGBT students end up being silent in their language classrooms. As presented above, the classroom reality for many of them is that (1) homophobia is present (2) many of the people who are supposed to have the authority to keep watch of such prejudice (i.e., teachers) often do not know how to do so and (3) the standards by which everything is presented or judged are based on the standards that are only directly applicable to the majority (i.e., their heterosexual peers). Therefore, the dynamics within the classroom itself have the power to curtail, if not completely silence, queer identities and other queer matters.

#### *So why must we address sexual identities in the classroom?*

A number of researchers have made the case that sexual identities must indeed be addressed in language classrooms because not doing so adversely affects students in different ways. Some of these detrimental effects include (1) students having negative feelings towards their language classes that are not educationally facilitative (2) students not being able to truly engage with their peers which in turn affects their motivation to learn and (3) students (whether queer or not) being denied the opportunity to develop sociosexual literacy that is a skill arguably becoming increasingly necessary.

First, it is clear that silence perpetuates homophobia and the hegemony of heteronormativity discussed above (Dumas, 2008; Nelson, 2006). Some point out that this is a problem that ought to be addressed because a classroom is supposed to be a place where students not only learn about the world, but also about themselves. Ideally, a classroom must be a safe space where students can examine and question all kinds of topics including their sexuality if they so choose. If homophobia and heteronormativity pervade the learning environment, however, that is

if the classroom is continuously constructed as a “heterosexualized zone” which in effect enforces compulsory heterosexuality across the board, then queer and questioning students would not have the opportunity, not to mention a sense of security, to go through this important process of inquiry. Indeed, it has been found that some LGBT students regard their language classrooms as unwelcoming and unsafe (Kappra & Vandrick, as cited in Moore 2016). Moreover, there are LGBT learners who report feeling marginalized, ignored, and even angry in their own classrooms (Moore, 2016). Certainly, these negative emotions are not facilitative of language learning.

Second, it is now fairly established in the field that learning a language is a social process, so it is imperative that students are able to interact and participate in their communities for them to be able to actually learn. However, often, LGBT students are not able to do so. Many are not able to genuinely engage with their peers as well as the materials they deal with in their classes because a lot of the topics that are being talked about and a lot of the activities that are being done in language classes are not really reflective of, and so not really relatable to, queer students. This is particularly disadvantageous because it can lead to students feeling disempowered, which in turn can potentially limit their motivation and learning.

Finally, Moore (2016) also argues that silence denies both queer and non-queer students valuable opportunities to develop sexual/sociosexual literacy defined by Nelson (2009) as “having the knowledge and ability to enquire how sexual identities are experienced and formed in day to day interactions”. This is arguably important because one way or another, students are exposed to, or will have exposure to, queer people and queer issues. It may be through having people in their lives who are LGBT or through the media, which now features relatively more LGBT characters and/or stories. Consequently, the ideal is that students develop the skills that would enable them to appropriately handle queer identities and issues around them. In addition, being literate in this way can allow all students to be critical participants in discourses around sexual identities both inside the classroom and beyond. However, because of the pervasive silence in classrooms when it comes to sexual identities, students are not able to develop this form of linguistic competence that is becoming more and more essential to be able to navigate today’s world more effectively. For this reason, sexual identities must be part of classroom discourse.

## **What has the field done and what does it know: lesbian and gay identity framework and queer theory**

### *Lesbian and gay identity framework*

Nelson (2002) notes that since the 1980s, there has been growing interest to make education in general more “gay friendly”. Most of the early efforts to achieve this goal was underpinned by the lesbian and gay identity framework which is based on the idea that people can and should be categorized based on their sexual identities (i.e. straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, etc.), as sexual identities are seen in this view as stable internal truths/facts. The primary objective of any endeavour grounded on the lesbian and gay identity framework is to ensure that all of these “subordinate” sexual identities (i.e., LGBT identities) are included, legitimized and tolerated. To do so, according to Nelson (2002), the following suggestions were offered through journals, newsletters, and conferences:

- addressing heterosexist discrimination at educational institutions and homophobic attitudes among teachers, administrators, and students (Anderson, 1997; Brems & Strauss, 1995; Hirst, 1981; Nelson, 1993a)
- making curricula, resources and teaching practices more gay-inclusive (e.g., Carscadden, Nelson & Ward, 1992; Hanson, 1998; Jones & Jack, 1994; in *English as a Foreign Language* see Neff, 1992; Summerhawk, 1998), for example, by integrating the topic of lesbian and

gay relationships within discussions of families, or homophobia within discussions of social discrimination.

- considering the educational needs of learners who themselves identify as lesbian, bisexual, or gay (Kappra, 1998/1999; Nelson, 1993a) and those who encounter gay people or issues in their everyday lives
- creating learning and working environments where any learner or teacher (not just straight ones) can be open about their sexual identity without fear of reprisals (Censotti, 1998; Destandau, Nelson & Snelbecker, 1995; Mittler & Blumenthal, 1994; Nelson, 1993a; Saint Pierre, 1994; Shore, 1992; Snelbecker, 1994)
- mobilizing support within the profession—for example, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an international organization, established a task force (now a caucus) to investigate lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns in relation to policy and pedagogy (see Cummings & Nelson, 1993a; Nelson, 1993b).

Despite its good intentions, some have pointed out that adopting approaches based on the gay and lesbian identity framework may not be the most pedagogically effective. For one thing, the notion of “inclusion” creates and perpetuates a hierarchy of the different sexual identities in which those who identify as heterosexuals predominate, while those who do not are rendered subordinate and their minority status continually reinforced.

Moreover, Nelson (1999) argues that this framework may be much too fixed and narrow to account for the diversity within the queer community. After all, there is not one kind of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer identity. As an out gay Japanese student in Moore’s (2016) study puts it, “... I don’t know sometimes, what is gay culture? Gay culture is many various gays exist and they have own preference and the sense of humor, sense of worth” (p.102). Just as there is no singular straight experience (i.e. heterosexuals experience their heterosexuality in different ways), queerness is also unique and profoundly individual.

To illustrate this difficulty, the following are some of the questions Nelson (1999) asks us to think about:

- “How is a “lesbian” to be represented in curricula or materials?
- Which characters or characteristics will be included, which excluded?
- After inclusive references are made, what happens next? Who decides?” (pp. 376-377).

### *Queer theory*

Subsequently, in the mid 1980s and 1990s, queer theory, which presents a more radical way of thinking about sexual identity, emerged. First of all, it is important to note that the word “queer” takes on two paradoxical meanings: one is to blur/protest the clear-cut notions of sexual identity, and second is to encompass all the minority sexual identities (Nelson, 1999). Queer theory, which draws from poststructural theories of identity, distinctly diverges from the lesbian and gay identity framework as it holds the view that sexual identities are not “stable internal truths” but “culturally readable acts” that people “do” or “perform” through discourse in day to day social interactions (Nelson, 1999). As Bauman (1996 as cited in Dumas, 2008) puts it, “though ostensibly a noun” identity “behaves like a verb: a verb in the future tense, as relationships are constructed across time and space with an eye to future possibilities”.

Therefore, because identities are readable or observable acts, about “becoming” as opposed to “being”, sexual identities can then be problematized, that is, be made subject to critical inquiry. This process of critical inquiry in turn could help people see, acknowledge, and examine the great



diversity of sexual identities and perhaps even see that sexual identities may be unnecessary to begin with. Moreover, this process of inquiry could also help people see how “heterosexuality and only heterosexuality is made to seem normal”. The main goal of queer theory is to facilitate critical analysis as opposed to facilitate the inclusion of LGBT people. It is hoped that through this inquiry-based approach, a better intercultural understanding could be fostered as a result.

Nelson (1999) offers a few sample questions to illustrate how queer theory could look like in practice (p.378):

- In this country, what do people do or say (or not do or say) if they want to be seen as gay [lesbian] [straight]?
- How is this different in another country? How is it similar?
- Why do people sometimes want to be able to identify others as straight [gay] [bisexual]? When is it important to know this about someone? When is it not important at all?
- Is it easy to identify someone as gay [straight] [lesbian]? Why or why not? Does it make a difference if the person is old or young, a man or a woman, someone you know or someone you only observe? What other things can make it easier or more difficult?
- In this country [in this city] [on this campus], which sexual identities seem natural or acceptable? Which do not? How can you tell?

It is clear through these example questions how queer theory puts the focus on inquiry as opposed to inclusivity and tolerance.

Nelson (1999) also suggests a number of reasons why the queer theory approach may be more useful than the lesbian and gay identity approach especially in “culturally and linguistically diverse groups” such as English as a Second Language (ESL) class: first, it is more “flexible and open ended” which enables analysis and questioning as opposed to obligating people to accept “subordinate” identities. Second, theorizing about identities as acts instead of stable, internal truths make it less abstract (i.e., observable) and “situates it in the realm of the ordinary” (Nelson, 2002). Third, from a teacher’s standpoint, the queer theory approach may be more “doable” because it focuses on inquiry. There are no expectations for teachers to have all the answers about the topic. Instead, teachers can focus on “fram[ing] questions, facilitat[ing] investigations and explor[ing] the unknown along with the students (Nelson, 1999). Finally, and most importantly, queer theory puts no pressure on students to expose any part of their identity they are not willing or ready to reveal.

## **Recommendations**

In terms of recommendations, a number of researchers/educators have offered some suggestions for how teachers can go about attempting to make their classrooms truly a place of learning for all students. First, as supported by Nelson (1999) and Moore (2016), the adoption of the queer theory-based inquiry approach to sexual identities would be beneficial.

Second, as Wadell et al., (2011/2012) note, given how teachers’ actions and reactions can be consequential to how issues (in this case, sexual identities) are framed and/or received in class, it would be valuable if teachers are (1) more proactive about the topic, for example, by introducing the topic themselves as opposed to waiting for it to come up in class and (2) presenting it matter-of-factly to demystify it. By doing so, it would make it clear to the students that the classroom is a place where openness, understanding, and respect are fostered.

Finally, as pointed out above, one of the biggest reservations among teachers when it comes to sexual identity is the fact that many of them struggle to talk about sexual identities in an appropriate/productive way. To address this, there have been numerous calls made for more

significant preservice and in-service teacher training, which could include awareness raising, critical reflection, development of strategies to respond to “challenging” comments and questions, and goal setting (Wadell et al., 2011/2012; Paiz, 2018). At the end of the day, perhaps it is safe to say that if teachers want to create a learning environment that is equitable and one that works for all, awareness and openness both on the side of teachers and students seem to be the most crucial.

## Conclusion

In summary, it is evident that there are indeed many complex issues surrounding sexual identities in the language classroom, showing the importance of making classrooms safe spaces for diversity instead of exclusionary places. The reality in many classrooms today is that sexual identities are not at all prominent. Many queer students choose to keep silent or are silenced as a result of homophobia, general lack of awareness both on the sides of teachers and students and heteronormativity. Researchers have pointed out that this is a problematic situation for a number of reasons. They argue that sexual identities must be addressed in the language classroom because failing to do is a major disservice to LGBT and non-LGBT students alike. There is no denying that it is not the easiest task, however, perhaps by taking the suggested inquiry approach based on queer theory and the other recommendations that have been put forth, we can make English teaching and learning more effective and beneficial for everyone involved.

### Reflection

I believe this topic is important because I know from professional and personal experience that the consequences are real. It is indeed very difficult when you do not have the opportunity or the sense of empowerment to be able to share what you want about your life and feel like you have to keep silent. Consequently, I would really like to be able to cultivate a learning environment in which queer students, or all students for that matter, as people, are free to be themselves. My hope is that as I try to apply what I have learned about how to tackle sexual identities in the classroom, my queer students, now and in the future, may be able to share more about their lives if they choose to do so and my non-queer students can learn how to listen without judgment.

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