

Introduction: Comprehensive sexuality education in ELT

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to introduce the Special Issue on comprehensive sexuality education in ELT. In this brief introduction gender and sexuality are conceptualised in relation to language education. The main issues and implications found in the articles for this special issue are presented and discussed.

Introduction

A cursory view of the literature in language education shows that, with a few exceptions (e.g. Nelson 2006; Paiz 2018), issues around gender and sexuality in English language teaching are recognized in journals focused on sexuality and gender but are seldom included in general ELT journals. Recent publications (e.g. Pakuła, Pawelczyk and Sunderland 2015) at the intersection of ELT and gender and sexuality provide robust theoretical and research evidence of the power that addressing these topics has. Notwithstanding, we believe that more practical orientations, as well as research-informed classroom strategies, should be offered in order to support educators in their quest for adopting a gender perspective in their ELT practices.

In this Special Issue, we attempt to balance practice and research under the concept of comprehensive sexuality education. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) invites educators and learners to reflect and become aware of gender inequality, gender diversity, and a holistic approach to caring for our body, cultural practices, and interactions among gendered beings. CSE seeks to alert on gender violence and to promote human rights for all based on respect. In this Special Issue, we are particularly interested in (1) raising awareness of sexuality and gender in English language education across educational levels (primary, secondary, higher education), (2) reflecting on how sexual education impinges on English language education and the wider social fabric, (3) strengthening critical and situated pedagogies through queer pedagogy and queer theory, and (4) providing informed accounts from teachers and teacher educators to enable others to engage in similar explorations.

In the following sections we first conceptualize gender and sexuality. Second, we discuss some of the main issues addressed in the articles included in this Special Issue. Last, we put forward implications for practice, research, and professional development.

Gender and sexuality

Comprehensive sexuality education recognizes the pivotal role that gender and sexuality play in education. Such a role is theorized through inclusive and post-structuralist notions of gender and sexuality particularly guided by studies on (1) identity from a queer theory perspective, and (2) critical pedagogy.

Most ELT research in the 1970s and 1980s conceptualized language learners' identities as their fixed personalities, learning styles, and motivations, however, more recent work understands learners' identities as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing in particular historical and cultural circumstances (Norton and Toohey 2011). From this perspective, gender, as a subset of identity-related inquiry, is approached as a socially and culturally constructed system that is subject to negotiation and transformation, and can extend beyond male and female divides (Pavlenko 2001).

Over the last few decades, the study of language teaching in relation to gender has expanded conceptually to include the notion of sexuality as an important aspect of identity in the language classroom (Nelson 2009). This is not only due to the importance of Lesbian and Gay Studies and Queer Theory, but also because of the increasing recognition of the intertwined nature of gender and sexuality in ELT. The importance of genders and sexualities can no longer be overlooked. Not only is it possible that some language learners (and teachers), in a given class, might be non-binary or non-heterosexual, but any topic in a language classroom is more likely than not to involve humans and human relationships (Pakuła et al. 2015).

Expanding on Critical Pedagogy (Giroux 1985) and its concept of education as praxis for creating a non-oppressive and equitable society, Queer theorists have consciously worked to understand the many intersecting layers of dominance and oppression as possible, reinforcing philosophies that share a radical vision of education as the way to achieving a truly equitable and just society (Meyer 2007). Queer Theory has contributed significantly to the way diversity (gender, sexual, or otherwise) can be considered in the English language classroom. As it shifts the focus from a civil-rights-related framework to one that centres on the analysis of discursive and cultural practices, it enables sexual identity to be approached as potentially relevant to anyone and not just a minority. Linguistically, explorations of sexual identities can allow language learners to become equipped with the necessary communicative competences needed to perform their identities in appropriate ways, enable respectful communication with LGBTQ+ individuals, and construe identities that they may encounter in their lives or popular media (Nelson 1999).

Queer Theory problematizes gender and sexual identities; it critiques the enforced norms of gender and sexuality including all claims of normalcy and the processes by which what is considered normal is defined and policed (Britzman 1998). Queer Inquiry (Nelson 2006), which can actively challenge how gender and sexual identities can be understood within and across different languages and cultures, creates spaces where critical discussions around the sociocultural relevance of all identities, gender, sexual or

others can be developed. Undertaking queer inquiry can then mean tracing the workings of heteronormativity and its effects by addressing sexual matters, identities, norms, and relationships, within daily patterns of thinking, speaking, and learning (Nelson 2006).

Queer theorist Michael Warner (1991) coined the term *heteronormativity* to describe a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as both, natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality. Heteronormativity privileges heterosexuality in social relations and it relegates sexual minorities to a marginal position. Under such heteronormative standards, heterosexuality and homosexuality are approached as binary opposites, while gender roles of masculine men and feminine women are naturalized (Robinson 2016). As heteronormative norms and ideals are privileged, homonormativity (Duggan 2002) emerges as sexual minority community members reinforce heteronormativity by asserting that they are just like their heterosexual counterparts with the exception of their same-sex partnerships. Thus, the issue of representation gains significance. Representation of gender and sexual identities in classrooms may carry different messages and may have different meanings for different students. For instance, the constant use of homonormative representations in the classroom that are unthreatening to the norm may not challenge heteronormativity in any vital way (Shlasko 2005).

In this sense, an important aspect of Queer Theory, especially for (language) teachers to understand, is the function of traditional heterosexual gender roles in reinforcing heteronormativity in schools and societies. The invisible nature of how masculinity and femininity are taught to children and EFL or ESL learners contribute to its maintenance (Meyer 2007). Butler (1990) takes a post-structural understanding of gender and shows how it has been theorized as performative, while also focusing on how the matrix of heterosexuality can contribute to the existing notions of gender. Unless gender behaviours, and representations adhere to traditional expectations of a masculine male who partners with a feminine female, individuals become curiosities and are often subject to harassment or unwanted attention. Given the silence about non-heterosexuality that may still circulate in classrooms and schools, a call to increase the visibility of gender and sexual diversity is much needed. Based on Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix, Queer Theory can serve as a framework to make the unintelligible intelligible by introducing LGBTQ+ identities and issues in the English language classroom.

As identities, including gender and sexuality, are destabilized and denaturalized, language and acronyms used to talk about people evolve as well. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) acronym has changed to LGBTQ, with the Q addition referring to queer or questioning. The + addition to the acronym, as in LGBTQ+ or an asterisk, is an acknowledgement to all individuals who may have non-normative identities, genders, or sexualities. In cases where an I and an A are added (LGBTQIA), the acronym includes those who self-perceive themselves as intersex or asexual.

Issues

The network created by key concepts such as CSE, gender, sexuality, identity, praxis, and pedagogy has brought about interfaces between queer theory and ELT and led to what has been called queering ELT (Paiz 2018), i.e. queer pedagogies that inform language teaching approaches and materials. Below, we organize the articles (authors' surnames in brackets) included in this Special Issue according to issues and types of papers.

In this Special Issue, queer pedagogy is particularly used to dismantle normativity (Buyserie and Ramirez), question heteronormativity, homonormativity and representation (Bollas) and promote the inclusion of LGBT issues (Gray; Lawrence and Nagashima) and identities in the language classroom (Blume). Queer pedagogy is also used to raise gender and sexuality awareness in teacher development (Mojica and Castañeda-Peña). Closely aligned to CSE as policy for the promotion of gender equality and diversity, gender roles and stereotypes are addressed through a gender perspective in language education with primary (Accardo and Mangini) and secondary (Cossu and Brun) learners. In all cases, queer pedagogy intersects with critical pedagogy and together create a notion of praxis that is oriented toward the deconstruction of identity in ELT.

Readers will note that the papers can be broadly organised into two types. The Special Issue includes critical proposals for the development of a diversity-focused approach in language education (Bollas), inclusion of explicit and implicit queer texts (Gray), and digital gaming to include LGBT identities and enhance transcultural communicative competence (Blume). Readers will also find practice-driven accounts underpinned by action research and reflective practice to describe different experiences: inclusion of queer texts in composition lessons (Buyserie and Ramirez), fusion of CSE and content and language integrated learning (Cossu and Brun), a course on teacher transformative practices and gender awareness (Mojica and Castañeda-Peña), inclusion of explicit and implicit teaching of LGBT issues (Lawrence and Nagashima), and the use of picturebooks and illustrated biographies (Accardo and Mangini). Whether the articles are labelled as proposals or classroom accounts, they are all research-informed and aligned with current notions of critical pedagogy and praxis as a means to acknowledge inequality and promote diversity in order to recognise the multiplicity of identities around us.

Implications

As guest editors of this Special Issue, we recognize the importance of creating educational environments which are inclusive of different identities. Such a direction contributes to deconstructing normativity and, more importantly, may lead to socially just pedagogies and learning experiences. Notwithstanding, we acknowledge that the proposals and experiences included in the issue cannot be universally or dogmatically implemented as an interest in CSE in ELT intersect with other influential factors such as policy and complex cultural practices across a diversity of settings.

In terms of practice, this Special Issue calls for teachers to allow themselves to explore different perspectives and create conditions that allow their learners and themselves to deconstruct identity, gender roles, and dominant beliefs in tandem with English language learning. This means that the language class can become a powerhouse where learners develop their critical thinking skills and mediation by using language to make sense of the world. In this regard, a focus on meaning and interaction may be vital to ensure motivation and engagement. Teacher education programmes and continuing professional development initiatives play an important role as they can prepare and support teachers to discuss topics which are not often included in the language curriculum or teaching materials. This could become an opportunity to enable teachers to assume agency in course design, materials development, and assessment.

In terms of research, the professional community may need to examine the extent to which the proposals laid out in this issue have a transformative impact on different settings. This would help validate, refine, and assess the proposals and help us all deepen our understanding of inclusive pedagogies in practice. On the other hand, the professional community may also need to see classroom accounts which provide detailed evidence of the ways in which the inclusion of a CSE perspective in ELT can lead to language learning and teaching enhancement. This may entail supporting practitioners in carrying out research through different approaches (e.g. action research, exploratory practice) to demonstrate how the combination of CSE and ELT has a positive effect on teachers' situated practices and learners' cognitive, language, and socioemotional skills.

As a last implication, the integration of CSE and ELT necessitates collaboration and interdisciplinary work to advance professional knowledge. On the centrality of collaboration, we would like to thank ELT Journal Editor, Alessia Cogo, for her constant support, patience, and guidance during the elaboration of this issue.

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