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Envisioning Social Justice Education as Part of Inclusive Education

Deconstructing Gender Biases with Pre-Service English Teachers

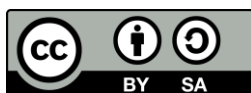
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Abstract: In this article, we approach the challenge of inclusive teacher education from the perspective of English language teaching (ELT). We do so by arguing for a broad(er) conception of inclusion that embraces diversity (rather than focusing on methodological challenges of learners with special educational needs) and which resonates with the Social Justice Education discourse. As one way of working towards social justice, we suggest uncovering and raising awareness of the representation of social inequities in cultural artifacts, using *gender* as our focal point. We present one activity that challenged student teachers to engage in inquiry-based learning concerning gender representations in their semiotic landscapes and show how this activity can serve as a puzzle piece in educating teachers for working towards social justice in their future English language classrooms. We emphasize the fact that the activity is embedded in pedagogical practices of modeling not only in the sense of teaching methodology, but in particular regarding the creation of democratic and compassionate classroom interaction that is needed for Social Justice Education and that we aim our students to introduce in their future classrooms, too. Finally, we draw some conclusions regarding ELT teacher education.

Keywords: inclusion; critical literacies; Social Justice Teacher Education; gender; English language teaching



1 Introduction

In (English) language classrooms, *inclusion* does not only constitute the challenge of “Embracing Everyone” (Küchler & Roters, 2014) in a teaching-methodological sense. English language teaching (ELT) also lends itself to taking up *inclusion* as a topic and educational goal in itself. In this context, *inclusion* is understood as the ideal of a socially just community, free of practices that perpetuate marginalization and discrimination of the minoritized (cf. Sturm, 2012). The necessary steps towards this ideal include making students aware of and sensitive to diversity (Eßer et al., 2018) regarding various dimensions, as well as addressing their role in becoming advocates of social justice in and out of the classroom. However, in ELT, the topic of *diversity* has often been dealt with in the context of intercultural learning, focusing on managing (cultural) differences rather than embracing them.

We argue that gender-related discourses, in particular, can be used as an example to work towards inclusion as an educational goal in ELT. These discourses are highly relevant to and present in students’ lives (cf. König, 2018; König et al., 2016). This results in a considerable potential for identifying and deconstructing practices of exclusion in this field. At the same time, the very omnipresence of gender-related discourse practices leads to the fact that they often go unnoticed so that students first need to learn to see (and analyze) these practices around them.

On this basis, ideas on how to contribute to a more inclusive society can be developed (cf. Govender & Andrews, 2022). This core argument of our contribution is rooted in the field of Critical Literacy (Gerlach, 2020; Luke, 2014) and allows to conceptualize the goals of Social Justice Education (Bell, 2010) as part of Inclusive Education in the (foreign) language classroom.

However, the focus of our contribution is not the school, but the university classroom: We argue that for this kind of education to happen at school, first and foremost language *teachers* need to be professionalized in a multidimensional sense (Louloudi et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2011), i.e. they have to be equipped with adequate knowledge and skills, but they also need to develop holistic – self-reflective – mindsets (Blume et al., 2021) and language teacher identities (Gerlach & Fasching-Varner, 2020; Kanno & Stuart, 2011) that allow them to create the milieu needed in their classrooms to discuss inclusive topics (cf. Pandya et al., 2022).

Our contribution presents one lesson activity with which several cohorts of pre-service teachers have been guided to identify and deconstruct gender-in/exclusive examples of representation in their everyday lives and their own thought patterns before conceptualizing a possible transfer into their future language classrooms. Our reflection of the activity mainly negotiates student reflection metadata and the first author’s observations. On these grounds, we suggest some implications for pre-service teacher education.

While the aim of Social Justice Education generally concerns teachers of all subjects, the approach we have taken here relates specifically to *language* subjects: Interpreting cultural artifacts with a focus on gender as a socially constructed category relates to language-related competences such as Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 1992) and Discourse Ability (Hallet, 2008). Here, we focus on the teaching of English in particular, following König’s (2018) argument that using the ‘foreign’ language English (instead of the pupils’ first/second language) to negotiate gender conceptions may create a beneficial safe space (König, 2018, p. 36).

2 Instructional notes

2.1 Context

The seminar in which we used the material presented here was developed as part of the project *Cultural and Digital Literacy in ELT*¹ and it carried the same title from winter term 2020–2021 to summer term 2022. The aim of the seminar was to introduce students to critical literacies and their implications for ELT environments. In doing so, students and the teacher educator worked towards identifying, understanding, deconstructing and, ultimately, transforming their existing perceptions of sociocultural categories, power structures and biases existing in the English classroom. Having said that, the focus was on sociocultural and sociopolitical issues (racism, sexism, climate change etc.) as relevant to students' own lives and experiences as well as to inclusion as a social responsibility in general.

2.2 Digital culture

A fundamental part of its structure and development was the use of the *Digital* as a way of being and doing in the classroom. More specifically, digital materials were at the core of the seminar, not only as additional artifacts, but as a fundamental piece of students' culture to be understood and deconstructed (cf. Stalder, 2017, on digital culture). This conceptualization targeted the two-fold aim of teacher education in a digital world (Beißwenger et al., 2020; KMK, 2016):

- Future teachers are supposed to be able to use digital tools flexibly and in a deliberative way (teaching *through* digital media). Consequently, digital tools such as Padlet, Google Jamboard, Zoom and so on were used and reflected on in each seminar session.
- Future teachers are also supposed to be able to reflect on the effects of the deep mediatization of society (Hepp, 2021) with their students (learning *about* digital media). Thus, artifacts of digital culture (Stalder, 2017) harvested from social media platforms such as Spotify, Netflix, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok were critically analyzed and probed for their teaching potential. This combination targeted what Ávila and Pandya (2013) call critical digital literacies, which aim at “the interrogation of digital, multimedia texts” in order “to critique the cultural worlds students inhabit and expand their understanding of culture” (2013, p. 13; cf. also Schildhauer et al., 2023).

2.3 Seminar concept

The target audience were English teachers-to-be for middle and high school. Figure 1 on the next page depicts the three central modules of the seminar structure: a) theoretical foundations of sociocultural and critical literacies; b) practical implications for the English classroom; and c) development of critical lesson units by the students:

¹ Course and material design were funded by the DH.NRW (funding programme: Curriculum 4.0). The conceptual and empirical research we share here is part of BiProfessional. The project BiProfessional is part of the “Qualitätsoffensive Lehrerbildung”, a joint initiative of the Federal Government and the Länder which aims to improve the quality of teacher training. The programme is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (funding number: 01JA1908).

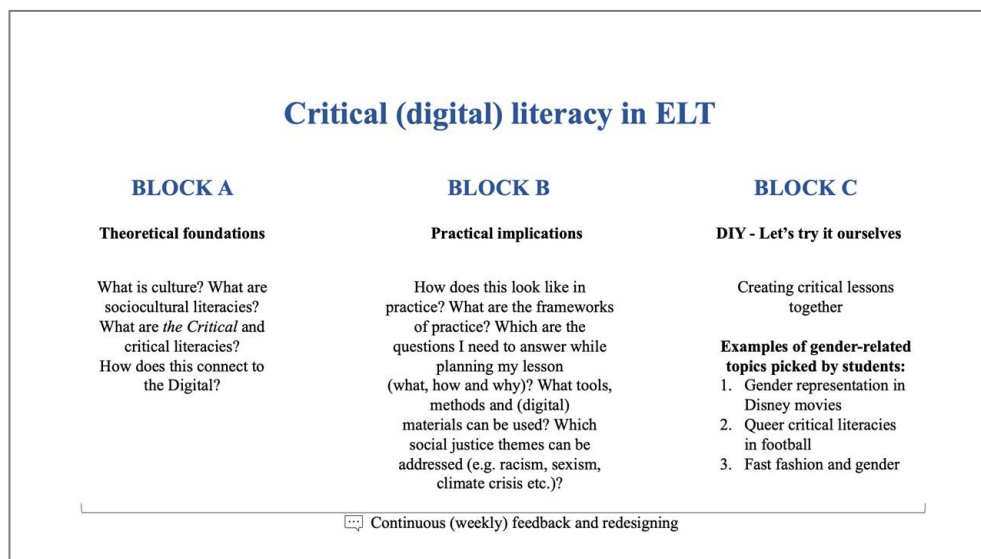


Figure 1: Course concept, Bielefeld University (cf. König & Louloudi, forthcoming; see also Online-Supplement 1)

At the core of the seminar was the intention to bring theory into practice and help students imagine how they can build critical literacy teaching units on sociopolitical themes (see also König & Louloudi, forthcoming; Louloudi et al., 2021) in their future ELT classrooms. Even though a great variety of sociopolitical topics was addressed during the seminar (e.g. residential schools, Black Lives Matter, poverty, body positivity, mental health etc.; see syllabus in Online-Supplement 2), the emphasis of this article lies on gender-related discourses. Thus, the material described below aims to show how narratives of and about gender were springboards to critical discussions and the deconstruction of preexisting biases for the teacher and the students.

3 The material

3.1 Content analysis

Gender has been approached by several research traditions (for comprehensive summaries, we are indebted to König, 2018; König et al., 2016; Merse, 2020), all of which converge on the common denominator of viewing gender as a category that is constructed socio-culturally and socio-politically. In historical and contemporary (western) discourses, this construction often follows a binary pattern and entails typical/normative features for ‘women’ vs. ‘men’. From a sociocritical perspective, this is, in many communities, connected to structural inequalities that manifest themselves in social structures as, for example, in the gender pay gap.

From an ethnomethodological (interactional constructivist) point of view (seminal: West & Zimmermann, 1987), the construction of gender happens on a daily basis, in any interaction in which ‘doing gender’ becomes relevant. Gender can be ‘done’ by drawing on several multimodal means such as clothing, hair styles (including the relevance attached to the absence of, for example, facial hair), gestures, body posture and so on. These ways of doing gender reflect (and sometimes subvert) underlying stereotypes.

The “discursive character of gender norms” (König et al., 2016, p. 25) has been negotiated by the deconstructivist perspective in the tradition of Judith Butler (e.g. 2004). This perspective raises awareness for the fact that even the category *sex* – seen by others as a neutral binary biological category – is a sociodiscursive construction in itself and, essentially, an expression of heteronormativity (cf. also Merse, 2020) or – in Butler’s

terminology – the ‘heterosexual matrix’. These considerations also show how intertwined perceptions of gender are with conceptions of sexuality, and how normativity plays a role (historically) in the way both are being regarded and expressed. Needless to say, all of these aspects are highly relevant to adolescents’ lifeworlds, in particular to processes of identity formation.

This prominence in adolescent lives as well as the stark contrast between heteronormative conceptions of binarity and the diversity of gender identities urge for a pedagogy that not only understands and analyses gender injustices, but also fosters societal transformation. In that, gender serves as a prime example of sociocultural diversity (next to categories such as *race*, *class*, *religion*, *ethnicity* etc.) which has historically been marginalized in society and education, leading to social injustice and exclusion.

The pervasiveness of gender as a category in our lives can be highlighted by tapping into the semiotic landscapes² (Schiedermaier, 2022; Ziegler & Schmitz, 2022) surrounding us as the following example illustrates:



Figure 2: Cartoon scientist, Bielefeld University (own photograph)

The photograph presented above was taken by the first author of this paper at Bielefeld University. The medium – a drawing at a university wall – already shows that dimensions of gender are not restricted to text, but reside in many forms in our semiotic landscapes. From the perspective of interactional constructivism, the picture draws on attributes associated with the female – namely long hair, the absence of facial hair, lip shape and open shoes with heels – to allow us to read the person depicted as a woman. However, not all attributes chosen are typically female (trousers, test tubes etc.). This relates to the fact that the person is portrayed as a chemist engaged in some experiment. From a sociocritical perspective, then, the image addresses the traditional distribution of work domains, with science being a domain traditionally dominated by men. This analysis builds a bridge to the deconstructive perspective as the picture can be read as subverting the heteronormative discourses in which males are the scientists and females are – if at all – assistants.

Examples such as this lend themselves to dismantling the “naturalised” (König et al., 2016, p. 26) character of gender as a basis of working with students to interrupt heteronormativity (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016) and redesign a better, more just narrative (Janks, 2018), as we will show in the next sections.

² Semiotic landscapes also entail soundscapes and, thereby, the entire repertoire of songs in popular culture. For example, students could discover that the now classic neo-Punk song *sk8er boi* perpetuates heteronormativity already in its opening line: “He was a boy / She was a girl / Can I make it any more obvious?”

3.2 Setting the scene: the session

The material described here was an activity in which students and the teacher engaged as part of block B (practical implications) of the seminar. In general, gender and its multiple sociopolitical understandings – whether related to the “social concepts of femininity and masculinity” or “romantic relationships” (König et al., 2016, p. 19) – was a topic that was brought up by students continually and in every semester, showing its “social relevance” (König et al., 2016, p. 19). The session in which the activity delineated below took place was dedicated to a depiction and deconstruction of representations of male and female role conceptions in various school-related as well as student-relevant materials, such as textbooks, classic picture books (e.g. Little Red Riding Hood) as well as Instagram posts, TV commercials and TikTok posts. Depending on the respective audience of students, their interests and experiences, different materials were used in each semester. The structure of the session conforms to a paradigm used in all sessions in block B of the seminar (Table 1):

Table 1: The structure of the session on gender

<i>Task</i>	<i>Tool</i>	<i>Materials</i>
<p><i>(Step 1) Identifying preexisting knowledge:</i> Students work in teams to answer the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think of the materials for today’s session? • How do you think you can make use of these materials in your English classroom? • Did you work with similar materials back in your school days? Why yes, why no? • Do you have open questions? 	Digital Pinboard (e.g. Padlet)	To prepare for class, students have been given a long list of (digital and analog) materials to engage with that represent both ‘problematic’ materials that perpetuate gender bias and more inclusive narratives, from the perspective of the disadvantaged. Students pick at least 3–4 materials to listen to/read/etc. and are also welcome to propose and bring their own gender-related materials to class.
<p><i>(Step 2) How can I apply that? Lesson planning on gender representation and stereotypes:</i> After the vivid discussions on the materials, the teacher proposes a critical lesson unit to be built using these materials in an ELT classroom (see Online-Supplement 1). The lesson unit follows the critical literacy frameworks of practice by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) and focuses on four steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging students’ thinking Guiding students’ thinking Extending students’ thinking Praxis-reflecting (see Louloudi et al., 2021) 	Visualization Tools (e.g. Powerpoint/Canva)	The materials with which students engaged (as well as those they brought with them) are now used to build a critical lesson unit, emphasizing on problem posing, deconstruction (of problematic narratives) and reconstruction (of more inclusive ones). Next to that, the English curriculum (KLP NRW) is used as a framework of competencies, and fundamental lesson planning questions (what, how, why) are also taken into consideration to put the Critical into a German ELT context.
<p><i>(Step 3) ‘Environmental Reflections’ task:</i> Is gender (mis-)representation still to be found around me? How can my experiences relate to this (or not)? Students engage in the activity described below.</p>	Digital Whiteboard (e.g. Google Jamboard)	Students take photos of their environment (university, neighborhood, room etc.) and post these on Google Jamboard.

3.3 The Jamboard activity

The activity, as depicted in step three of Table 1 on the previous page, aims to connect the students' gained knowledge of gender narratives to their own lives, environments and experiences. The task was posted on Google Jamboard as seen below:



Figure 2: The Jamboard activity (see also Online-Supplement 3)

The teacher educator participated as well, giving an example as depicted in Figure 2.

Students posted a great variety of photos, from Instagram posts, shopping flyers, posters on bus stops, pages from their biology textbook, Netflix series snapshots, street signs to their own personal items (e.g. gifts and medals). In the vivid discussion that followed, in which each student described their materials and how they thought they either perpetuate or challenge existing gender biases, the following realizations were made:

- Gender bias can (still) be found anywhere around us, but there is also societal progress to be seen.
- Making this transparent to our future students can be both engaging (deconstructive) and hopeful (reconstructive).
- Student teachers were able to connect these pictures to their own personal experiences with gender bias.
- All genders seem to be affected by gender bias, which makes the topic even more relevant to classroom practices.
- However, most student teachers did not have any interaction with the topic in their school years – these materials could be used as starting points for discussion/action research in an ELT classroom.
- The digital (e.g. Instagram posts) and how gender norms are portrayed online is of great importance, since the students spend a considerable amount of time engaging with digital media – discussing artifacts of digital culture in the classroom appears imperative (cf. also Schildhauer et al., 2023).

4 Theoretical foundation and implications

4.1 General rationale: inclusion and social justice

The activity is grounded in the interconnected principles of Critical Literacy (Luke, 2014), Social Justice Education (Bell, 2010) and Inclusive Education (Walton, 2016). In seeing these three fundamental concepts as intertwined, we aim to understand inclusion as an ideology, based on the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives. In that sense, Inclusive Education fosters “resisting dominating beliefs and practices in schools that are based on normalising principles and sustained by oppressive structures and unequal social relations” (Walton, 2016, p. 32). Critical Literacy provides a flexible framework of practice to apply this ideology that is tailored to the needs of the respective student audience and bound to the contextual – international, national and local – prerequisites of the seminar. Social Justice Education allows for a holistic, pedagogical understanding of a field that has been criticized for its superficial perspective of teaching culture as well as its fixation on cognitive skills and a technologized and purely process-centered orientation (Gerlach, 2020).

4.2 Inquiry-based learning in (digital) semiotic landscapes

The activity follows principles of inquiry-based learning (e.g. Legutke, 2020) in that it stresses the subjective relevance to and curiosity of the learners. The learners receive agency in exploring their own analogue/digital surroundings with a research question in mind. By orienting the learners to their immediate surroundings – their semiotic landscapes –, the pervasiveness of gender as a category is highlighted. The collective data is then interpreted with the help of guiding questions. These questions are in line with Critical Literacy in the form of problem posing questions (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2019) such as: Whose voice is represented, whose is missing, how might these pictures be perpetuating existing gender biases, which are these, how are they being challenged by other pictures? This form of questioning connects particularly well to the deconstructive perspective on *gender* outlined above (Chapter 3.1). The research process as such bears the potential of distancing oneself from the research object and one’s own immediate perspective, which is beneficial for making phenomena related to a category as omnipresent as *gender* visible and accessible to interpretation in the first place (König, 2021).

4.3 Social Justice Teacher Education

In the context of the seminar outlined above, this research process and its results are, in fact, a means to an end. They constitute one attempt at approaching the key aim of Social Justice Teacher Education to “prepare teachers who are willing and able to work within and outside of their classrooms to change the inequities that exist both in schooling and the wider society” (Zeichner, 2011, p. 7).

In order to achieve this aim, two crucial steps are taken:

- Through inquiry-based learning, students are made aware of the socio-discursive construction of gender as a category as well as the related inequities and exclusive practices.
- Further reflective questions allow the students to connect the activity as such to their past and prospective school context, which offers a way of integrating the experiences and insights into their emerging language teacher identities (Gerlach & Fasching-Varner, 2020; Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

These steps are filled with life by drawing on the conceptual framework of Queer Critical Literacies proposed by Govender and Andrews (2022) in that students engage in five forms of questioning:

- Questioning representation, already in the selection process of the pictures, by looking into the dominant gender narratives around them, in media as well as in their environment;
- Questioning reading practices, by investigating gender representation in their textbooks (e.g. English, Biology, German etc.) and the canonical literature used in school;
- Questioning policing, by reflecting on their own school practices: How have they dealt with gender in their school years? Why is that so? How can it be done differently?;
- Questioning knowledge, assumptions and meaning-making, by challenging their own pre-existing biases, or their stance towards narratives of gender;
- Questioning themselves, by identifying ways of becoming advocates of more just narratives, policies and ways of being, as well as teachers-to-be that will “transform classrooms into safer spaces for queer students” (Govender & Andrews, 2022, p. 89).
- This procedure is part of an underlying approach of modeling which is based on the conviction that
- The nature of teaching interactions that take place in teacher education classrooms is profoundly important. The first and perhaps most self-evident reason is that our preservice teachers are paying attention not only to what we say but to what we do (cf. Goldstein & Freedman, 2003, in Conklin, 2008, p. 662).

This modeling approach relates to the activity itself, but even more so to the compassionate, democratic and student-centered interaction created around it: The way the teacher educator modeled this kind of interaction is reflected in the fact that students are encouraged to bring their own material and, thus, shape the interaction according to their own questions and interests in the first place. It is also reflected in the way that the teacher herself becomes part of the learning journey, shares her own insights as well as discomforts and interactional symmetry in handing over the conversation to the students. It also manifests itself in the ways in which the students’ thoughts, interests, preconceptions and emotional reactions are taken seriously as part of a shared journey (Conklin, 2008).

In other words, surrounding the activity presented here, the teacher models precisely the kind of interaction and milieu we hope our students to create in their future classrooms. In order to make this transparent, these practices are ‘unpacked’ “so that the prospective teachers have access to the thinking behind [the] teacher educator’s practice” (Conklin, 2008, p. 661), again allowing them to integrate these into their emerging language teacher identities (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Hence, teacher educators endeavoring to work with the activity we presented here should also be prepared to (re)model their interaction patterns as both – activity and discourse – are sides of the same coin (Schildhauer, 2021, 2023).

5 Experiences from practice and outlook

Continuously throughout the semester and in a final survey, the students were invited to reflect on their learning process and the seminar as such by responding to open items such as:

Please, take some minutes after every session to reflect on something new you learned this week whether this is a new theory, a new school of thought, a new tool or a new method.

Be specific. Write a couple of sentences that give feedback to the learning materials, the style of teaching or the new concepts that you learn.

The theoretical considerations (see Chapter 4 above) are mirrored in some of the students' replies, which we chose as anchor examples representative of others:

Table 2: Selected student feedback

Category	Student Feedback
Inquiry-based learning as a means of creating subjective relevance and providing students with agency	<i>What I liked most this week was the homework we had to prepare on Jamboard. Personally, I like it better when I have to do an assignment that is not only theoretical, but when I can be active myself and relate the theoretical content to my own life. This is exactly how the homework was designed, as we were supposed to actively search for gender bias in our everyday lives and at university. I was amazed at how many different photos came together in the Jamboard and how well many of them could be deconstructed. I thought it was great that we did the deconstruction in small groups, because that way we could listen to several points of view and possibly discuss the photos.</i>
Modeling compassionate and democratic classroom interaction	<i>The positive learning atmosphere and the support provided by the lecturer helped me understand both critical literacy theory and its practices better. I really liked the atmosphere and the positivity in this course, as well as the fact that sensitive topics were treated appropriately.</i>
Biographical reflection as part of forming a language teacher identity	<i>We cannot recall working with any materials on gender. Our English classes were almost exclusively textbook-based and conversations were centered around the perspective of the Western society.</i>

The examples show that (some) students were able to engage successfully in the deconstructive, inquiry-based activity and connect this to their own school-based language learner biography as part of forming their language teacher identity. The students apparently also realized the importance of compassionate classroom interaction for their own growth, in particular as sensitive topics such as gender-biases were discussed.

Additionally, students reflected on which aspects may have contributed to building an inclusive, positive and safe learning atmosphere that allowed them to deconstruct. These point to the significance of building a holistic critical literacy milieu (Stribling, 2014) and not approaching (gender) deconstruction as an isolated learning incident (Vasquez, 2004). For this to happen, ELT classrooms need to move towards a *Bildung*-centered didactics (cf. Klafki, 2000) that exceeds the limits of teaching cognitive skills and sees education as a political act towards societal transformation.

What we cannot see in the student responses mentioned above yet are more abstract connections between the activity at hand and promoting inclusion as social justice in the ELT classroom. Arguably, students may rather conceptualize “inclusion” as the methodological challenge of allowing every student in a diverse learner group to reach given learning aims (Grosche, 2015) – which appears to be the main focus of the discourse of English didactics in Germany, too (Schildhauer & Zehne, 2022) – than raising awareness of and working towards social equity in a broader sense. Possibly, it may be worthwhile making this connection transparent, e.g. in block A of the seminar (Figure 1).

While we already see our paper as another piece of evidence of the importance of (ELT) teacher education on the way to an inclusive society, we aim to further investigate our students' experiences, thoughts, questions and ideas as a springboard to a critical teacher education and to a necessary redirection of language education in and out of the classroom (Louloudi & Schildhauer, under review).

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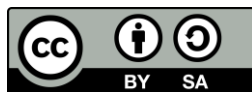
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Online-Supplements:

- 1) Our Course Concept
- 2) Our Course Syllabus
- 3) The Google Jamboard Activity

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