Chapter 26
Attempting to decolonize gender in a B.A. ELT program[43]

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A journey questioning gender roles

Like many Colombian men, I was raised in a household dominated by women. Growing up, I was a sickly and weepy child and I was constantly told not to 'be such a girl'. At my high school, a hegemonic idea of masculinity prevailed. I never played that role, though, and studied a 'female' major: language teaching. During my career, my bosses and colleagues have mostly been women. I see how keeping a balance between work and family is difficult for them: some are the sole supporters of their children and, others, of their husbands as well. Thus, studying the role of gender issues in ELT is important for me.

The knowledge I gained from my M.A. in British Cultural Studies and a Diploma in Sexual and Gender Diversity informs my work as a language teacher and teacher educator. Gender is a social construct, to which we are socialized even before we are born, for example, when family and friends decide on a specific color for the baby's wardrobe, blue or pink, depending on the baby's gender when defined in an ultrasound.

The school, the church, and the media reinforce this construct. So, like Mehta (2019), I agree that "teaching is … the process through which I contribute to … 'decolonising' bodies of knowledge about gender and sexuality" (p.

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43 This chapter draws on my thesis for the Ph.D. in Education at the Universidad Santo Tomás (Colombia), La Interculturalidad Crítica en los Programas de Formación Inicial de Docentes de Lenguas Extranjeras en el Contexto Colombiano Contemporáneo.

24). This essay describes my attempt to teach decolonial theories in a B.A. program in Bogotá.

Colombia is a racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist country

The premise behind the course I was teaching, *Language, Culture and Identity*, was, and still is, that Colombia is a discriminatory country, and that teachers, no matter what their discipline, should raise awareness of this situation and try to change certain beliefs for the sake of a better society. This course aimed at challenging discriminatory discourses about race, class, sexual orientation and, of course, gender, based on the concept of critical interculturality (Walsh, 2005). These two last subjects roused the most interest, since they questioned the beliefs and experiences of many of the students.

There are three aspects to teaching decolonial theories: a critical understanding of history, a repositioning of emancipatory practices, and a decentering of the colonial episteme (Díaz, 2010). The problem I faced was how to make them understandable to a class with a basic level of English and limited cultural background. The strategies I used were, first, to ask my students questions that would reawaken their prior knowledge and trigger their curiosity. Second, I drew some mind maps to explain where the different discourses about race, class, sexual orientation, and gender came from, in a sort of mini-genealogy. Third, to emphasize the link between theory and practice, I asked them, as a homework assignment, to watch movies and to read newspaper articles about topics we had discussed.

For the class about gender, some of the questions to rouse the students' curiosity were: *Who was Lilith? What is feminism? What is the Oedipus complex? What is hysteria? Who were the suffragettes?* The 'mini-genealogy' was based on the students' answers, further questions and the writings of Viveros, Olavarría and Fuller (2001), and Santos-Velásquez (2009).

Some of the activities were meant to expose gender stereotypes and analyze the relation between language and gender. I also used some articles in a local newspaper, E.g., *Una ciudad de machos* by Téllez (2013), and *La ciencia también malinterpretó a las mujeres* by Monsalve (2017). The emancipatory exercises included getting the students to speak of their own experiences, link

theory and practice, and find counternarratives in movies and articles and promote reasoning through them (Chisholm, 2015; Hooks, 1994; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Unsettling ideas about gender

During this course with different groups of students, many questions emerged which helped me to rethink and add new issues to the syllabus. From the classes about gender and sexual orientation, I present three controversial statements which stimulated what my students and I learned.

Feminism is the equivalent of machismo

The students´ answers to the questions of what 'feminazi' means, whether all feminists are 'angry lesbians' and whether *machismo* and feminism are the same thing showed me that they had a distorted view of feminism which reflected the ideas of society at large. Some women in class did not like the term 'feminist', since they thought it implied an antagonistic relation with men which blamed men for women's disadvantages.

Other women, due to their religious beliefs, felt that feminism stripped women of what they thought were female distinctive virtues, like motherhood and care-taking. Some men, in turn, resented the way that feminism made them feel that they were 'constantly under suspicion' or labelled them as sexist. Without being opposed to feminism, they were also critical of what they regarded as its overreaction towards "manspreading" and androcentric language when there were more important problems to worry about, like domestic violence, sexual abuse, and wage inequality, among others.

Discussing how the female subject was discursively constructed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Western science and psychoanalysis helped the students to understand their beliefs about motherhood, emotionalism, and virginity, among other subjects. Men asked themselves whether their behavior might be restricting the freedom of their girlfriends, for example, by forbidding their girlfriends to have male friends or by holding a double standard for sexual behaviors, and thus became conscious of their machismo.

Informing the students about the different waves of feminism and their political, theoretical, and practical implications gave them insights into the history of those movements. Likewise, examining the notion of sex-gender divide gave them a better understanding of gender as a social construction, and of sexual orientation as another factor that is frequently confused with sex and gender.

There is only one way to be a man

Language teaching has been pigeon-holed as a female, and even a gay profession. However, many of the participants in this study were men, three of them openly gay. This raised a challenge: to understand how we became men and either upheld or rejected the idea of a hegemonic masculinity. The first times I taught *Language, culture, and identity*, the gender perspective focused on women, which might have strengthened the belief that men were responsible for the inferior position of women in the past. I then realized I was in a contradictory situation because I was simultaneously advocating gender equality and neglecting the fact that socially constructed ideas of masculinity have also harmed men.

Some students came from small rural towns in Colombia where hegemonic ideas of gender still prevail regarding the way men and women should look, act, and treat one another and these students unconsciously reproduced these ideas. For others, their notion of gender was strengthened by their religious beliefs. For Colombian and Latino men in general, masculinity consists of: 1) virility, shown by physical strength and an active sex life; (2) manliness, as the equivalent of responsibility and public recognition, and (3) rejection of the feminine, reflected in a suspicion of a close link between mother and son that goes beyond childhood; men's incapability to impose authority and control the sexuality of the females in his household; men being a victim of infidelity, and men being passive partners in a gay relationship (Viveros, Olavarría & Fuller, 2001).

Deconstructing hegemonic masculinity drew on the students' own experience and helped them to find the sources of gender stereotypes. Some men understood why their non-hegemonic behaviors or beliefs were questioned and some women recognized the hegemonic idea of acting like a man in the conduct of their own families. The gay students discussed what

it means to be both a man and a gay. These insights were a first step towards raising their awareness of male identity issues.

Highlighting difference promotes inequality

The syllabus of *Language, culture and identity* was based on Cultural Studies theories. Therefore, the classes were organized in terms of identity markers, that is, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. One concern of the students was whether taking a differential approach to identity contributed to maintain inequality, even more so if an expected 'ideal' world is one where differences are not highlighted but rather accepted as part of everyday life. Some students claimed, for example, that homosexuality should be accepted as part of the spectrum of human diversity and that people should see that it is as ordinary as any other sexual orientation. This concern led us to identity politics.

Some students had a very utopian view of society which led them to think of the possibility of a world in which there is no discrimination against those who are different. However, their ideas became nuanced after learning about the traditional oppression of certain groups and the resulting need for a differential approach to class, race, gender or sexual orientation. By analyzing the goals of the different waves of feminism and breaking down the acronym LGBTQ+, the students learned how identity politics serves to unite minorities and enables them to effectively claim their rights. They also became aware of how heteronormativity conceals differences and furthers the idea that there is only one way to be a man or woman, or a gay or lesbian.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is a concept created by Black feminists which holds that discrimination does not come from only one source. For example, race and gender, or class and sexual orientation, may act in combination to discriminate against a person. This concept threw light on the interlocking matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) made up of gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation. It also underlined the need to acknowledge differences, an idea of identity politics, and helped the students to understand how different combinations of discrimination against a race, gender, class or sexual orientation have been responsible for violence against women in Colombia

New possibilities for learning about genders and sexualities

Recently, a senator from a Colombian right-wing party criticized a campaign by the State´s Family Welfare Institute to teach parents and children that toys do not have a gender. Similarly, during the peace negotiations with the FARC guerrilla, this right-wing party attacked its differential gender approach. Many Colombians are well aware of how right-wing media groups and churches have whipped up a panic about the danger of 'gender ideology'. However, there is no certainty that it really exists. Thus, analyzing how certain politicians capitalize on such fears could be a fruitful subject of study.

Teaching sexual diversity in schools is still difficult, as it is seen as a private matter. Even though LGBTQ+ rights organizations like Colombia Diversa have published manuals on this subject, schools are still unwilling to include it in their curricula. While teachers are willing to discuss sexual diversity in the classroom, they need help from parents and the mass-media to establish a more positive sexual education (Sanabria-León, 2016). The Colombian State has started to formulate a differential policy for the LGBTQ+ community; however, practical efforts to implement it in schools have been meager so far, another subject which merits further research.

During the course on *Language, Culture and Identity*, some of the gay students seemed to be always 'waving the gay flag', meaning that, for these students, their sexual identity prevailed over all other aspects of their life and their other identities were unconditionally linked to being gay, making all their other identities invisible. This attitude transmitted a new, essentialized gay identity, that is, it attributed a fixed characteristic or 'essence' as universal to all gay men, which make these students act out a predetermined role to justify their membership in the gay category. Here too, a study of the construction of the identities of gay youth and how homonormativity (Duggan, 2002), a hegemonic view of being homosexual, influences the building of young gay identities and the way youth become part of gay communities, as would a study of how race, class, age, and gender shape the construction of a gay identity, one based on an intersectional approach to sexual orientation.

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