

Chapter 6

Gender and sexual identities in EFL in Colombia: Narratives of L2 experiences of gay and lesbian students at a private university¹⁴

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Autobiographical positioning

I am a researcher and educator. I have a BA in Modern Languages from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Bogotá) and an M.A. in Learning and Communication in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts from the University of Luxembourg. Currently, I am part of the “Educación para el bilingüismo y el multilingüismo” research group at Los Andes University (Bogotá) and work in non-profit organizations as a project coordinator, where I design and develop education projects using artistic, alternative and participative activities. I am particularly interested in merging pedagogical practices and research on social transformation through feminist, decolonial and peace-building approaches to teaching, as well as migration, human rights and gender studies.

¹⁴ This chapter draws on my thesis for the B.Ed in Languages at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2013, co-authored with David Díaz Fontecha, *Experiencias narrativas de aula de estudiantes javerianos/as gays y lesbianas*.

The Context

ELT, like many other professions, has traditionally assumed heterosexuality to be normative. Therefore, LGBTIQ individuals and collectives have been systematically excluded and discriminated against in this context (Cantor, 2008 & Rondón, 2012). In order to change this situation –in and out of the classroom– there is a need to understand how gender and sexual identities are constructed (and how they could be deconstructed) within the field of L2.

In 2012, when I was an undergraduate pre-service teacher, we students sensed that there was a connection between a person's identity, broader power dynamics, and language learning. Specifically, our conversations with each other noted that students with non-normative gender and sexual orientations were facing problems in their English classes. This led us to devote our undergraduate theses to this subject and contribute to the then meager studies of this situation.

Why is this issue particularly important in ELT

By their very nature, English classes tend to include a wide variety of topics. The experiences, interests and beliefs of the students are often discussed in language classes. In addition, due to the fact that humans are discursive beings, personal identity characteristics (such as gender identity and sexual orientation) might become apparent through performative acts. In other words, gender and sexual orientation identifications might become evident in L2 lessons when talking, walking, reading, singing, etc. Thus, non-normative identifications can become implicitly evident through classroom interactions.

In addition, the contents of every course frequently convey the ideologies of the teacher, and students may later appropriate and use them in broader social contexts (García, 2007), especially in L2, where teachers usually encourage their students to reflect on the implications of the different uses of language, both in and out of the classroom. Teaching therefore becomes a political act, which is always embedded in a broader power structure based on the sociocultural dynamics of discrimination and oppression. Rondón (2012) and Walsh (2013) argue that teachers are in a position of power which not only enables them to impart knowledge, but also makes them responsible for

challenging oppression: *“Lxs maestrxs tienen la responsabilidad de activamente asistir y participar en el ‘despertar’¹⁵.”* (Walsh, 2013, p. 44).

The findings of our study

In view of the above, the aim of our study was to examine the relation between the experiences of certain university students of EFL and their non-heteronormative sexual orientations, based on their own narratives. To do that, we first held semi-structured interviews with five students at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana’s Language and Communication Faculty (Bogotá) who identified themselves as gay or lesbian (David, Laura, Andrés, Nicolás and Carolina). The interviews were later codified with a qualitative analysis software. Afterwards, we made a critical analysis of their narratives in order to determine if, how and why their sexual orientations may have influenced their study of English.

When ELT is heteronormative

The main finding of the study was that that heteronormativity was mostly seen and reproduced in the interactions between teachers and students and between students and their peers. It took the form of an idea of “otherness” which entailed exclusion and censorship. In other words, power relations are present in the above interactions, L2 learning activities and the contents of the courses, which rested on the assumption that heteronormativity is the only possible sexual orientation.

As an example of this, Andrés (2012) tells of a teacher who said that flirtation “obviously” occurs between a man and a woman, and vice versa. The teacher not only ignored that a man might be attracted to another man or a woman to another woman but also said, according to Andrés, that any other possibility would be “weird”. David (2012) mentions a teacher who, as an exercise in oral expression skills, asked his students to discuss scandals about public figures but they only spoke about theft, drug addiction, and homosexuality, which made David feel that the others thought his sexual orientation was

15 “Teachers are responsible for actively assisting and participating in ‘awakening’.” (Translated by the author)

a disease or a crime. Nicolás (2012), David (2012) and Carolina (2012) also mentioned that certain things their fellow students said made them feel uncomfortable. For example, Carolina's peers once referred to a lesbian as "horrible" (without knowing she was a lesbian herself). David (2012) also recalled receiving several emails, full of quotes from the Bible (sent only to him), from a fellow student who was a Christian, implying that it is a sin to be gay. Even though David had never talked about his gender identity with the person, he assumes that David's performative acts in the classroom had revealed his non-heteronormative orientation. This student not only interpreted David's personal ways of expressing as gay, but also decided to interfere by sending him an email invalidating his identity (and, thus, him as a person).

In general, the participants felt that their fellow students thought that any non-heteronormative identity was wrong. Thus, the five of them were afraid to reveal their sexual orientation in the classroom because it might lead them to be judged or lose their friendships with the other students.

When ELT is not heteronormative

A few of their narratives showed that gay and lesbian students were not always excluded: there were times when their sexual orientations were not stigmatized and/or treated with an inclusive perspective. Nicolás (2012) speaks of an occasion when, in contrast with what happened above, LGBTIQ topics were openly and respectfully approached. It was a debate, set by the teacher, to improve their communication skills and also discuss non-heteronormative gender orientations.

Similarly, Andrés (2012) mentioned a class when he was asked to speak about a topic of his own choosing and decided to talk about LGBTIQ+ identities. This freedom to choose his own lesson content gave him a position of power there expressing that non-heteronormative identities were valid identities to identify with for a discussion in the class.

Exclusionary or inclusive teaching practices and L2 language learning

We found that L2 pedagogical practices can be both exclusionary and inclusive. In the first case, we noticed patterns of exclusion, discrimination and self-censorship in the case of students identifying as gays and lesbians. This discouraged them from participating in the classroom and thus practice and sharpen their skills in the target language.

Most of the participants said that they would resort to self-censoring whenever they felt that their teachers or classmates had a negative view of their non-heteronormative identifications because they did not want to have confrontations about them when learning English.

In theory, L2 learning provides students with the chance to express themselves in English and translate their own life experiences, thoughts and beliefs into different social, cultural and linguistic codes. To discriminate against and ignore the sexual orientation of others also implies rejecting an important part of their identity and if the class content is not related to the identities of students, their learning will be impaired. Moreover, they might not have enough opportunities to use their own agency to considerably influence their language (and contents) learning process and to make it their own. If students with non-normative gender and sexual identifications are not regarded as whole¹⁶ individuals, they become homogenized by binary and heteronormative paradigms. Consequently, their learning of English is no longer based on their own subjectivities but a fictional and hegemonic reality

Indeed, the participants themselves said that when the approach to gender diversity was inclusive, they became more involved with the classroom activities, because they could relate them to their own experiences and interests. For example, Nicolás (2012) told us that whenever his classmates were open to a discussion of LGBTIQ+ issues, he felt more comfortable about talking in the class and joining coming lessons. These narratives show how an inclusive approach to gender diversity (both by the teachers and students) and the choice of learning activities can improve a student's learning process.

In this regard, responsible and critical educators face two challenges. First, we need to constantly acknowledge our own position of power in the

¹⁶ "A philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements" (hooks, 2014, p. 18).

classroom (and the ways it can be shared). Second, we need to understand students as whole subjects, with diverse self-identifications. If we do that, we can focus on making our teaching more significant for our students. Guiliano (2016) argues that the other is always a singular subject, impossible to define in terms of our own concepts or the power we have. Therefore, *“Comprender al otro no es sólo un acto cognitivo; es una acción política y moral”*¹⁷ (Benhabib, 1999, p. 69).

Conclusion

The study found that the classroom experiences of these five gay and lesbian students of L2 are directly related to their sexual orientations and influenced by their interactions with their fellow students and teachers, the materials and the learning activities. These interactions may be marked by exclusion and self-censorship whenever binary gender and heteronormative ideas prevail and are understood as universal for all students in the classroom. However, some of their narratives show that when non-heteronormative ideas about sexual orientations are included as L2 content, there is the opposite effect.

The study further showed that assumptions of heteronormativity not only have a discriminatory effect on gay and lesbian students, but they also hinder their classroom performance. It was evident that the participants act passively in the classroom because they are afraid of revealing their sexual orientations. This was done through three different strategies: deciding not to write or talk about their sexual orientation in the class, modifying their behavior in the classroom and spending less time there.

By contrast, certain narratives showed that whenever LGBTIQ+ issues were included in the course –either by the teachers or students– the participants felt more comfortable and played a more active role in the classroom, which had a positive influence on their learning and gave other students an opportunity to acknowledge their non-normative sexual orientations and to reflect about diverse gender and sexual identities.

Finally, the study revealed that heteronormativity is a dominant attitude in this university and probably applies to other Colombian ELT settings. Generally speaking, the teachers do not seem to be aware of the diversity of gender

¹⁷ “Understanding the other is not only a cognitive act, but also a political and moral action” (Translated by the author).

identities and sexual orientations in their students and are not only complicit in the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ persons, but also discriminate against them in the classroom. Thus, aside from helping to normalize this discrimination, teachers are also co-responsible for hindering the learning of such students.

Study contributions and subjects for further studies

In terms of methodology, on an academic level, the study is an example of a bottom-up approach and throws more light on the handling of gender and sexual orientations in ELT studies. On a pedagogical level, the study indicates that the ways in which LGBTIQ+ topics emerge in L2 English lessons affect not only students personally, but also their language learning processes; it calls for teachers who are more conscious, critical, decolonial and feminist, so that the teaching of L2 will be more meaningful for their students through engaged pedagogies. On a sociocultural level, it raises awareness about one of the most important issues in current social and political debates: the recognition of diversity.

However, the study, while tentative, does point to a number of factors which need to be examined in more detail. We acknowledge that the five participants may not be representative of the whole range of non-heteronormative English language students in Colombia. In order to broaden our understanding of these situations, there is a need for further research into the role of non-normative identities in the classroom, enhancing the scope by including experiences from students with other LGBTIQ+ identities. There is also a felt need of including an inter-sectional approach within these studies and an analysis of the attitudes of teachers, universities and educational materials, so that every actor in ELT is covered. Moreover, the investigation could also be replicated in other ELT settings.

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Dama (Luis Cabrera)
Autor
Colección privada de Amparo Osorio.

Ella

por Sandra Rocío López Rueda

Cada día se asomaba por una orilla de su ventana, con cuidado corría un velo polvoriento para observarla, poder verla minuciosamente. Esos grandes y cristalinos ojos negros le hacían sentir una profunda alegría, pero también agonía de no poder sentirla cerca. Se deleitaba al mirar los delgados labios que reflejaban su sensual juventud.

Tocaba tímidamente el vidrio pretendiendo delinear esa pequeña puntiaguda nariz, sentía que su dedo la podía tocar suavemente sin que ella se percatara de la caricia. Insistía en observarla para introducirse de nuevo en sus ojos, en sus pestañas, patas de araña. Largos pelos que se movían al parpadear, atrapando con su movimiento a cualquier hombre que deseara ser devorado con candente mirada.

Podría haberse quedado inmóvil por horas con el deleite de su rostro, sin inmutarse por lo que sucedía a su alrededor. Su madre aparecía y desaparecía entre los quehaceres limitados entre la sala y la cocina, una vida de rutina que a él le parecía insignificante, un ente que hacía ruido de pasos cansados; su madre se convirtió en una sombra que alguna vez sintió que amó, pero ahora era solo un hastío de vejez...