

Chapter 10

Narrative experiences of students in the L2 classroom related to heterosexual discursive practices²¹

Camila Arias

Colegio Santa Francisca Romana

Ricardo Díaz

Universidad del Rosario

This is us!

I am Camila Arias Briceño. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogota. I have applied my findings in gendered discursive practices through my work as an English teacher both at single-sex and coed schools in Bogota, with a focus on early childhood and elementary education. My undergraduate degree has been complemented with studies on Content and Language Integrated Learning as well as a certification in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Currently, I work as a teacher at Santa Francisca Romana School. My aim is to help students deconstruct their ideas about gender through my role as a teacher and my discursive practices inside and outside the classroom.

21 This chapter draws on our undergraduate research study entitled Narrative Experiences in the L2 Classroom of Students from Universidad Javeriana from the B.Ed. in Languages Related to Heterosexual Discursive Practices, submitted as a graduation requirement for the B.Ed. in Languages at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2015.

I am Ricardo Díaz Eljaiek. I am a professional in teaching modern languages. I was born in Cartagena and live in Bogota, Colombia. At the moment, I have five years of experience teaching different languages, including Spanish, English, and Italian. I am currently at the finishing stages of a master's degree in Journalism from Universidad del Rosario in Bogota. In 2018, I published a novel called *Avenida Resaca*, and I am now working in my second literary work, *Antología de cuentos y whiskies*.

About our research

Learning a language is a process that goes beyond the cognitive dimension of a person; it entails the construction of a new identity, formed by the reproduction of ideas and discourses and the attitudes of the learner towards the world surrounding them (Nielsen and Davies, 2008). The students that belong to the Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana are doubly forming identities: as language learners and as language teachers.

This research focuses on the experiences of pre-service teachers regarding discursive practices within their L2 classroom that have to do with gender identity and sexual orientation, and more specifically, the reproduction of discourses that can be deemed as violent or oppressive. In other words, these are heterosexist discursive practices, which perpetuate ideas derived from the thesis that there are only two gender identities: male and female, that are complementary to each other and for this reason must fulfill specific societal roles (Fonseca and Quintero, 2009). This, in turn, invalidates other existing identities and gender roles.

Throughout the research done and the ten semi-structured interviews that were performed, it became clear that there are different factors that contribute to the reproduction of heterosexist discursive practices within the L2 classroom, which consequently shape the identity of new speakers whose role is to teach the language. These factors are related to assumptions that both learners and teachers believe and bring into the classroom, as well as the content of the lessons and the way it is approached by teachers.

By analyzing the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews, different categories were established based on the nature of the experiences and

practices narrated. The subjects interviewed agreed that there is a prevailing heterosexual norm in the classroom, which often leads to stereotyping certain conducts and attitudes and even forces certain students to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation for fear of being rejected. The teacher plays an important role when heterosexist practices occur, whether by challenging them or by enabling them. Finally, there was some recognition of inclusive practices, but these seemed to take place less often and be less significant than those of an oppressive nature.

Our learnings

Keeping in mind that the research paper in question was done throughout 2014 and 2015, it is important to consider the studies that have been done since and the advances in terms of gender and queer studies in the realm of education. Terms such as “heterosexism” and “heteronormativity” have become mainstream and applied in fields outside academia. The points that will be discussed in this section are related to the outcomes that at the time of writing the original research paper were deemed novel and, in a way, territory that had yet to be explored by experts in critical discourse analysis and, more specifically, feminist post-structuralist critical discourse analysis.

Textbooks teach us to be heterosexist

When reviewing the data obtained throughout the semi-structured interviews, it became clear that a major issue was the content of the lessons. This includes the topics that were being studied, as well as the materials such as textbooks and workbooks required. Even though the physical materials were not the focus of the research but rather the discursive practices taking place within the lesson, these provided a basis for interaction and, in a way, determined what the students would discuss.

As part of the context for the research paper, a brief text evaluation was conducted. There were sections of the textbooks that dealt with issues such as relationships and family, and portrayed only typical heterosexual families. In other sections, men had a central role, while women were placed in the background of pictures, serving as extras or at times even

props (Guijarro, 2005). Needless to say, this remains a representation of the current societal structure.

Even though it is true that the purpose of the teacher is to conduct the lessons and guide the students and the topics in certain ways, textbooks are often selected by administrators, not teachers, which means that the latter must adapt to the decisions made by the former. Rules for teaching a language are often strict and already determined by a given methodology or approach, which at times means that teachers are not really free agents when it comes to their lessons. Likewise, given the conservative context of the Colombian education system, a teacher who is outspoken and openly criticizing issues within the materials used for their own lessons might be perceived as having their own agenda in the language classroom (Cantor, 2009). This poses a dilemma for people who want to make their classrooms a safe space for all students, but who are coerced by institutions that reproduce and promote violent discourses.

An outcome of the research conducted was the clear need to reevaluate and rethink the materials that are available for language learning, especially within the BA in Modern Languages at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. The underlying messages that are being sent can be harmful for the students' construction of their identity as learners as well as future teachers.

Bringing Heterosexism Into the Classroom

People who come into the language classroom bring with them discourses they have reproduced and assumed as societal norms. These discourses are related to different aspects of their lives, such as attitudes and behaviors that are deemed as appropriate in terms of gender roles and expectations, acceptable gender identities and sexual orientations (Nielsen and Davies, 2008). Different ideas are brought into the classroom and converge throughout the various dynamics of a lesson, which results in the construction of the second language learners' identities.

Because learning a language is a process and the content is regulated by its level of complexity, the lessons are often oversimplified and based on stereotypes that can be easy for students to understand and assimilate. This, of course, is an idea that has been reproduced and assumed as true: the fact that stereotypes are used because they are the norm; in other words,

they are what is considered normal (Lauretis, 2008). In this way, it would be deemed easier for students to learn the family members if an example of two heterosexual parents is shown, as opposed to one with a single parent or homosexual parents.

These same stereotypes permeate the interactions in class and affect the perceptions the learners have of their own identity and what might be thought of as normal or acceptable. If, when discussing romantic relationships, a male-presenting student is asked whether they have a girlfriend or vice versa, there is gender stereotyping since there is an automatic assumption that there are only two gender identities and these are complementary to each other. Gendered discourses within the classroom, albeit those that are seemingly harmless, are influential to the learner's positioning within the power dynamics in class and their attitude towards the language that is being learned (Castañeda-Peña, 2008). When further analyzed, the mere fact that gendered nouns are being used to ask about a hypothetical romantic partner is an indication of the assumptions that society has reproduced about gender identity and sexual orientation, even within spaces, such as the classroom, that are supposed to be safe for students.

Teacher's Do Their Best -But It's Not Good Enough

There are different agents that intervene in the discursive practices in the classroom. Administrators and those responsible for the selection of the curriculum and materials are indirect agents since they are not present in lessons but their choices affect what happens within them. Direct agents are those within the classroom, who reproduce, approve or disapprove discourses (Farfán, 2013). Proficiency and overall knowledge of the language give the teacher a status of power over the learners, which makes them not only direct agents but also perhaps the most influential ones.

The influence of a teacher when referring to issues of gender identity and sexual orientation can be both beneficial or detrimental to the construction of the students' identities as learners and as future teachers. On one hand, teachers can create safe spaces for diversity to be embraced in the classroom by reproducing discourses that challenge the socially accepted norms regarding gender stereotypes. However, a teacher can also do the opposite, even without noticing, hence negatively affecting the positioning of the student within the classroom and towards the language itself (Gómez, 2012). Neutrality is

also a dangerous position for teachers to assume, since keeping quiet when witnessing demonstrations of violent discursive practices is equivalent to agreeing with these. If a teacher does not openly challenge a norm, then they are silently acknowledging it.

Teachers hold a great responsibility towards their students, but it would be unfair to say that it relies solely on them. Pre-service teachers learn about different methodologies and approaches for language teaching. They learn strategies for assessment and incorporating technology in the classroom. However, they rarely learn about their role in the construction of the identities of the students, or the fact that identities are diverse and that teachers will most likely encounter manifestations that do not correspond with what they grew up considering a norm (García et al, 2013). Pre-service teachers must be educated about critical discourse analysis, and not simply as a unit in a syllabus, but as a separate subject that is part of the core pensum of university programs.

Other related research topics

From the time when the research paper was carried out to the present year, there have been advances within the field of education pertaining to gender, language learning, and identity. The papers that have been published, however, are usually set in the United States or European countries, which have made considerable progress regarding the way diversity is structurally perceived, and which have even taken steps towards implementing policies that ensure that different identities are visible and validated in various social contexts, including the educational one.

In this way, there is a need to critically evaluate and analyze the discourses that are reproduced in Colombian classrooms, which have been adopted from conservative and so-called “traditional” norms and have a basis in historically predominant catholic teachings. This critical discourse analysis can be a starting point in understanding why Colombian classrooms may not be considered a safe space for students with diverse identity constructions, and as such, it can also provide the foundation for a proposal on how to train teachers to embrace diversity in the classroom and avoid neutrality towards violent discourses.

This shift in the research towards teacher training is key, not only in issues regarding gender identity and sexual orientation, but from an intersectional viewpoint. More research must be done regarding disability, neurodiversity, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in Colombian classrooms, and how these interact within each other as well as gender and sexual orientation. In assessing the way in which English teachers are being trained and the changes that should be made regarding this training, researchers might have a better understanding on ways to stop the reproduction of violent discourses in class.

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