

Chapter 18

The gender discourse in the EFL classroom²⁹

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My short story

I am an English language teacher employed by the Bogotá Municipal Secretary of Education (Secretaría de Educación del Distrito -- SED). When I took an optional course called “Identity and Language Learning” for my Master’s in 2014, I realized that it was important to include topics in the academic curriculum that would be relevant to the background of my students, so I decided to use short stories that would appeal to them, in line with the idea of Richards (1994): “each learner has a belief system, which is influenced by the social context” (p. 97). The most important thing was to give students more opportunities to interact with each other at the same time that they could learn to respect each other’s opinions and ways of being, that is, to give them the chance to show their social identities while doing the activities. The experience was very enriching, because some students became more aware of the social problems that surround them and ways to become better citizens who are more respectful of the viewpoints of others.

29 This chapter draws on my thesis for the M.A. in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) in 2016, “EFL students’ social identities construction through gender-based short stories”.

My graduate study

The purpose of the study I conducted during the first semester of 2015 was to analyze my students' discourses in order to unveil the identities they constructed through their interactions when they read stories which included gender topics in real-life situations. While reading the short stories, it turned out, they had experienced themselves, similar situations. It helped a lot when I asked them how they felt about a particular situation in the story, since they would unconsciously throw light on their ideas about their identity.

One of the biggest challenges when I started the implementation phase was to find a way to include gender topics in my lessons. It is no secret that such topics are controversial and may lead to criticisms by the school, their parents and the wider community. Fortunately, the school and their parents gave their consent and I always urged my students to express their ideas freely.

At the end of the exercise, the students' interactions were analyzed and they showed that students' conversations portrayed some social identities related to gender. Those identities, in turn, revealed something about how an actual community works, so the classroom became a small society. First, there were times when the students were disempowering, judging, demanding over others or even looking for approval. Second, they became more aware of the need to challenge gender stereotypes: they were able to put themselves in someone else's shoes and fight against discrimination. Third, the children participated on their own initiative and defended their ideas which demonstrated they were collaborating with each other's learning process. In other words, they created a better environment for learning.

What has been learned so far

Since gender topics are important today, they should be included in any curriculum, as they would help students to become better citizens and human beings, insofar as the students would learn the value of respecting those who are different.

The community as a source of information

As Luk (2002) points out, “positive affect has a powerful, and facilitating effect on thinking, creativity, decision making and risk taking” (p. 2). This applies to EFL classroom, where positive affect will create a positive learning atmosphere in which there are interactions and emotions between the teacher and the students. For instance, the students gathered information and spoke of real-life examples of gender discrimination they heard about from neighbors, relatives and friends. They created a healthy environment where they could freely express their opinions about situations they could criticize by creating debate, which they were reluctant to do at the beginning of the exercise.

A new school curriculum

As Tudor (2001) says, “students are individuals whose interaction with learning activities is influenced by a variety of cognitive, psychological, and experiential factors, and these factors give rise to certain affective interaction with the learning process” (p. 95). The different activities clearly exposed students’ attitudes and involvement in the lessons as they were related to gender topics. As is widely known, the grammar-based method is not attractive to students anymore: teachers have to innovate in order to hold their attention. We need to include some real-life situations in our classes so that students will be motivated and find their classes meaningful. In the course of the study, I saw how some students felt close to the short stories, since they had gone through similar situations themselves. We teachers should find room for a more student-centered education which includes contemporary issues.

The design of the materials

Luk (2002) also says that “teachers should be in the classroom with their body, mind, and emotions and one way to achieve this is through literature” (p. 3). Short stories about gender topics gave the students an opportunity to construct their social identities and create a meaningful learning environment. Introducing gender-based short stories into the lessons was a difficult decision, but I thought it would be a good way to explore the students’ point of view. In addition, one of the activities was getting the students to create their own materials by using technological tools that would yield information linked to the stories. This meant that they had to overcome their fear of talking to

the class or mispronouncing words. Some of the students created a game at home and used a Power Point Presentation to show it to their classmates, as if they were salespersons. Encouraging them to create their own materials made them more committed to the classes.

To sum up, the information students obtained from the community, the modified school curriculum and the creation of new material were three main aspects that generated learning during the development of the study. This is an example of how students should be encouraged to discuss issues of importance in society today and suggest possible solutions.

Topics to be explored

We thus created an environment where the students not only learnt English, but freely expressed their opinions about gender topics in the classroom, so that our approach became more innovative and student-centered.

First, there is an urgent need to develop more gender-based materials for the English class. Sometimes it is easier for the teachers to do it, but they would have to be trained to create this kind of material. “We ESL teachers are not well prepared to deal with this kind of topics [gender] in the classroom, neither are we trained to design materials that address the issue properly” (Nelson, 2004, p. 17). That is, EFL teachers have the necessity to create the new materials, but without excluding the participation of our students, as this material can promote discussion in a respectful way.

Next, gender topics should be included in the academic curriculum to promote equality but with an active participation from the students when designing the materials. As Barnes and Lock (2013) point out, “investigations into student perceptions of effective FL teachers are necessary, so that teachers in training and practitioners can understand how to approach and improve their practice” (p. 19). If students consider important the fact of working with a teacher who takes into account their needs, it would not only improve students’ learning process, but also teacher’s practice.

Finally, as Dascal (1997) proposes, “school should be opened to reality because it cannot be separated from the praxis. In this way, students can be practicing the language at the same time that they are talking, writing

or reflecting about their own context” (p. 247). It would also be useful to continue working with the community, since it is a good source of real-life examples of social issues and would give students the chance to look for possible solutions to them. In other words, it would help our students to become more integral human beings.

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