

Chapter 8

The narratives of queer students in content-based foreign language classes¹⁹

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Who are we?

I'm Paula Galeano Bohórquez. I finished my bachelor's degree in Modern Languages at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in 2017 and I finished a master's degree in Multilingual Educational Linguistics at the University of Hamburg in Germany. My fields of research include language acquisition, multilingual development, and narrative and gender studies.

And my name is Juan Felipe Sánchez Guzmán. I have a degree in Modern Languages from the Pontificia Javeriana University and I currently work as a Spanish and English teacher in Hamburg, Germany. My interests include teaching Spanish as an L2 and queer theory within the framework of applied linguistics.

19 This chapter draws on our thesis for the B.Ed. in Languages at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2016, "Exponerse es heavy": Experiencias narrativas de aprendizaje en clave de contenidos de clase de lengua extranjera de estudiantes LGBTI.

Our Initial Approach to Gender Studies

Having grown up in a conservative society like Colombia, the researchers were exposed (directly or indirectly) to different discourses that can be classified as highly heteronormative, some of which took place in the foreign language classroom. Our interest in investigating these discourses, which later led to an analysis of the students who were also exposed to them, was prompted by Juan, after a French teacher –assuming he was making a morphological mistake– changed the term “boyfriend” for “girlfriend” when Juan was speaking to the class, thus ignoring the sexual diversity of her students. We wanted to go deeper into the situation of teacher-trainees at universities to determine whether this behavior was persistent and what lessons students learn for their future teaching practices.

Up to 2016 –and even today–, there were few studies of the relationship between gender and the learning of foreign languages in Colombia, which shows that teachers often do not know how to deal with students who express their non-heteronormative sexual orientations. There seem to be even fewer studies of how the content of language courses influence the learning of students.

The objective of our undergraduate research, then, was to examine the content-related learning experiences of queer students by analyzing their narratives of the foreign language classroom in a teacher-training program in Bogotá. In other words, this project links learning experiences that occur from the proposed contents in the foreign language classroom. This means, that the analyzed learning experiences occurred in the moment when a gendered class content was introduced in the foreign language classroom.

For this purpose, we held semi-structured interviews with six students, which resulted in nineteen narratives which answered our research question: What learning experiences in relation to class content are evident in the narratives of queer students in the foreign language classroom?

These narratives, in turn, revealed that the stance of the contents (in terms of whether or not they go beyond traditional gender roles), along with the power relations in the classroom, lead queer students to have three different types of experiences: vulnerability, hiding, or emancipation. Regardless of the descriptive and analytical nature of our research, it is also a reflection and

a proposal towards conscious and responsible teaching in order to achieve safer classrooms regardless of someone’s sexual orientation.

Our contribution to the study of the role of gender in learning a foreign language

Our study especially noted that the teacher, as a wielder of power in the classroom, can consciously or unconsciously create experiences which expose hidden dimensions of the students - in this case their sexual orientation – which are then expressed in the classroom. These experiences are framed in the following model.

Model of foreign language learning narrative experiences based on gendered contents.

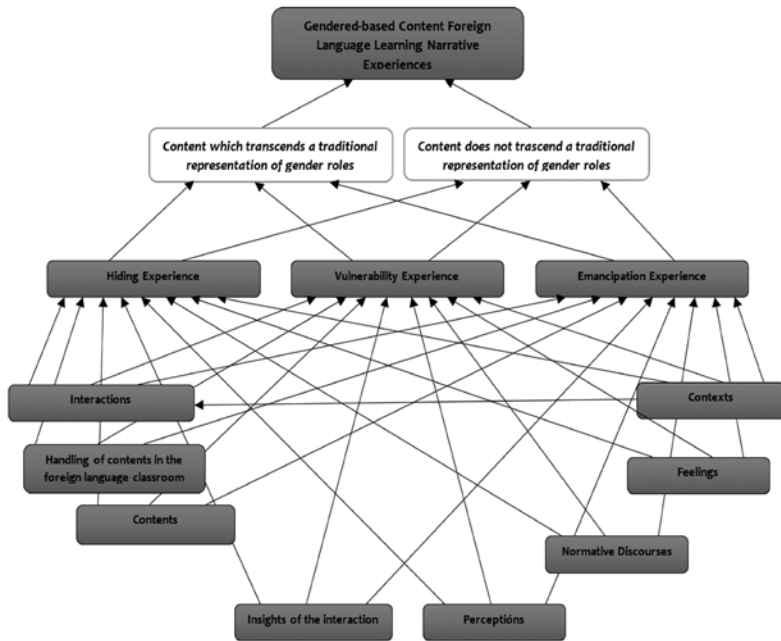


Figure 1. Diagram of foreign language learning narrative experiences based on gendered contents. (Galeano & Sánchez et al, 2016, p.42)

In this diagram we present the different types of learning experiences that arise from the analysis and classification of specific experiences lived and narrated by the interviewed students. This learning is probably the most relevant in our research since it brings new concepts to the field of gender research in the framework of foreign language teaching. This model was the result of an interpretation and possible complement to Sunderland et. al's (2002, p. 248) model of gendered discursive practices from which we took the concept of gendered texts and adapted it to gendered contents to focus specifically on the way these are consumed in the classroom.

It is therefore evident, from the introduced model, that when it comes to proposing content with a gender component in the foreign language classroom, the actors in the classroom can transcend -or not- the traditional gender roles of the contents. It is precisely this transcendence or non-transcendence of generated contents (Level 1) that gives rise to the three main types of learning experiences (Level 2) that we found in our analysis of queer learners' narratives: experiences of emancipation, of vulnerability and of hiding. These experiences are shaped by a contextual framework (Level 3) with specific characteristics such as normative discourses, interactions, etc.

This model therefore shows that there are three experiences, which depend on the individual, the context, the student's position in the classroom, and the actions of the teacher and the members of the class. We believe that this model could be turned into a general one about the power of discursive practices that affect (explicitly or implicitly) students with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, a subject which is not dealt with in teacher-training programs.

Learning experiences

It would not have been possible to design the model without defining what we mean by the learning experience. Among the many definitions found in the literature on education, we chose the ones of Dewey (2004) and Guzmán & Saucedo (2015), who state that it is formed by the relationship and interaction between the individual and the environment and includes the capacity of the subjects to re-construct meanings. On this basis, our definition of the experience of learning is "all of the experiences which take place in the classroom that are related to the interactions, interpersonal relationships, materials and contents which play a significant role in the learning process of students" (Galeano & Sánchez et al, 2016, p.29).

From this definition, we established three learning experiences: emancipation, vulnerability and hiding. Something valuable about the definitions we gave to these three concepts was the interdisciplinary vision in which they were conceived. Namely not only concepts seen from the applied linguistics' point of view but also from an anthropological and sociological perspective.

We understood the experience of vulnerability as an experience in which the student finds themselves in a potential position of susceptibility in the classroom, which occurs, above all, because of the power relationships present in the classroom. The experience of hiding was probably the most difficult to analyze. Given its close relationship to experiences of vulnerability, we catalogued the experience of hiding as the moment when students resort to hiding their sexual orientation. This, in order to avoid being exposed to members of the classroom and a potential experience of vulnerability. Lastly, the experience of emancipation implies that the students place their discourse above the traditional heteronormative norms of the class.

The teacher's duties

This research made us aware of yet a further aspect of reflection on the teaching profession: the impact of the teacher's actions and discourses.

Insofar teachers are key individuals in the hierarchy of power relations in the classroom. Many times we, as teachers, are not aware of the heteronormative bias of the discourses which we reproduce in the classroom. This research is an example of the impact that heteronormative discourses have. Teaching should defend the classroom as a space where all dimensions and diversities can be developed freely.

Subjects for future studies

This study yielded several questions which could be the subject of further research. The context of this research - a private and prestigious university in the country's capital - could be considered privileged given the levels of inequality that exist in Colombia. To generalize our model, one would have to examine the experiences of queer students in other socio-economic contexts.

We would further like to encourage researchers to investigate these learning experiences in more depth, with all of their nuances, and not limit them to the three experiences we have noted, though they may serve as the basis for a broader investigation of sexual diversity in the classroom.

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