

Chapter 12

Violent discourses and the (co) construction of gendered identities in an EFL classroom²³

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This is me, professionally

I have a BEd. in Modern Languages from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) and I am Magister in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution. From the time I was a trainee-teacher, I have been interested in discourse analysis. I have actually done some research on violence and gender in language classes for kindergarten children, as well as some work related to the field of peace studies. The results of this experience have been shared at different national and international academic events. I am currently a preschool English teacher.

A summary of my research

My undergraduate research project had a twofold purpose. First, it looked into violent discourses in EFL classrooms and their relationship to the construction of the gendered identities of students. Second, it studied the possible impact of these discourses on the teaching and learning of foreign languages. This violence is not always direct violence (e.g., physical and verbal) but may also be the result of structural violence which permeates discourses in many social systems using tacit systems (Galtung, 2003). I used

²³ This chapter draws on my thesis for the B.Ed in Languages at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2012, *Discursos de violencia escolar desde una perspectiva de identidades de género en el aula de clase de lengua extranjera*.

the method of participant observation, with an ethnographic focus, (Vasilachis de Gialdino 2006) to pinpoint such violent discourses in an EFL kindergarten classroom in Bogotá (Colombia).

The interactions in the classroom were recorded and transcribed on a weekly basis for six months and then subjected to a content and discourse analysis. The study revealed such violent acts as bullying, intimidation and verbal aggression as well as violent discourses as segregating, minimizing or ignoring within the interactions.

Language students seem to use these violent discourses to (co)construct gendered identities and these discourses hinder the progress of some of their classmates, especially when the teacher and the class call them poor students with what we would term “discourses of disapproval”. As a result, the victims participate less in class and feel excluded. Our findings should alert EFL teachers to the connection between violent discourses and the (co) construction of gendered identities and its harmful effect in the classroom.

The lessons of my study

In view of the above, my study draws the following lessons:

Our analysis of the interactions in the classroom showed that the gender stereotypes implicit in violent discourses lead to the exclusion or persecution of certain students who do not fit into heteronormative patterns and thus interfere with their learning. Children who do not follow the gender norms which society expects of them suffer discrimination, while others internalize them in their social construction at school and individual identity. One example was a student who was mocked by the teacher who described him using effeminate characteristics. It was done in front of the class as the said student participated in the class without the permission of his teacher taking the turn of one of his girls’ classmates who was supposed to answer what the teacher was asking. That might have harmed the student’s learning, because the attack on his masculinity could have affected the construction of his gender identity and interactions with his classmates. He would find on the fact of participating in the class portentously something that can be disapproved by the teacher and as a reason for being teased. This would potentially limit the use of the second language.

Findings about violence

In the end, this study found that a student's weak position of power in the classroom, and victimization by bullying or physical attacks, may cause him or her psychological harm and thus the use of these violent mechanisms could potentially have an impact on the identity construction of students as participants of a group, socially speaking, or as regards gender, thus causing limitations in the learning of a second language. Violent mechanisms could hinder or prevent the victim from acquiring a second language, as, for example, in the case of a child with speech problems who was ridiculed by the others in class. Any blow to a child's self-esteem may negatively affect his or her performance in the classroom and more so, when such harassment repeatedly occurs (Olweus, 1993).

Findings about discourse(s)

Discourses of disapproval are the main hindrance to students who are learning a second language. The discourses which are reproduced in the classroom influence the way in which students build their social and gender identities, especially when it is the teacher who disapproves of or ignores a student (Baxter 2003) with discourses which discredit or exclude the children the teacher is teaching.

One example was when a teacher told the student that she was misbehaving because she wrongly named the colors in English. In this case, the discourse was an assault on the student because it accused her of being undisciplined. As Castañeda-Peña (2009) points out, boys are often allowed to be aggressive or disobedient, because it fits in with the norms of masculinity, whereas if a girl behaves that way, she is reprimanded. Our study showed that violent discourses and practices may be an obstacle to learning, because they limit a student's use of English in the classroom. Likewise, the interactions among the students and teacher in the classroom may reproduce discriminatory discourses in the classroom. Students who are the victims of such discourses may be afraid to participate in the class or undertake certain activities, because they are afraid of being criticized by their teacher or classmates.

Some suggestions for further studies

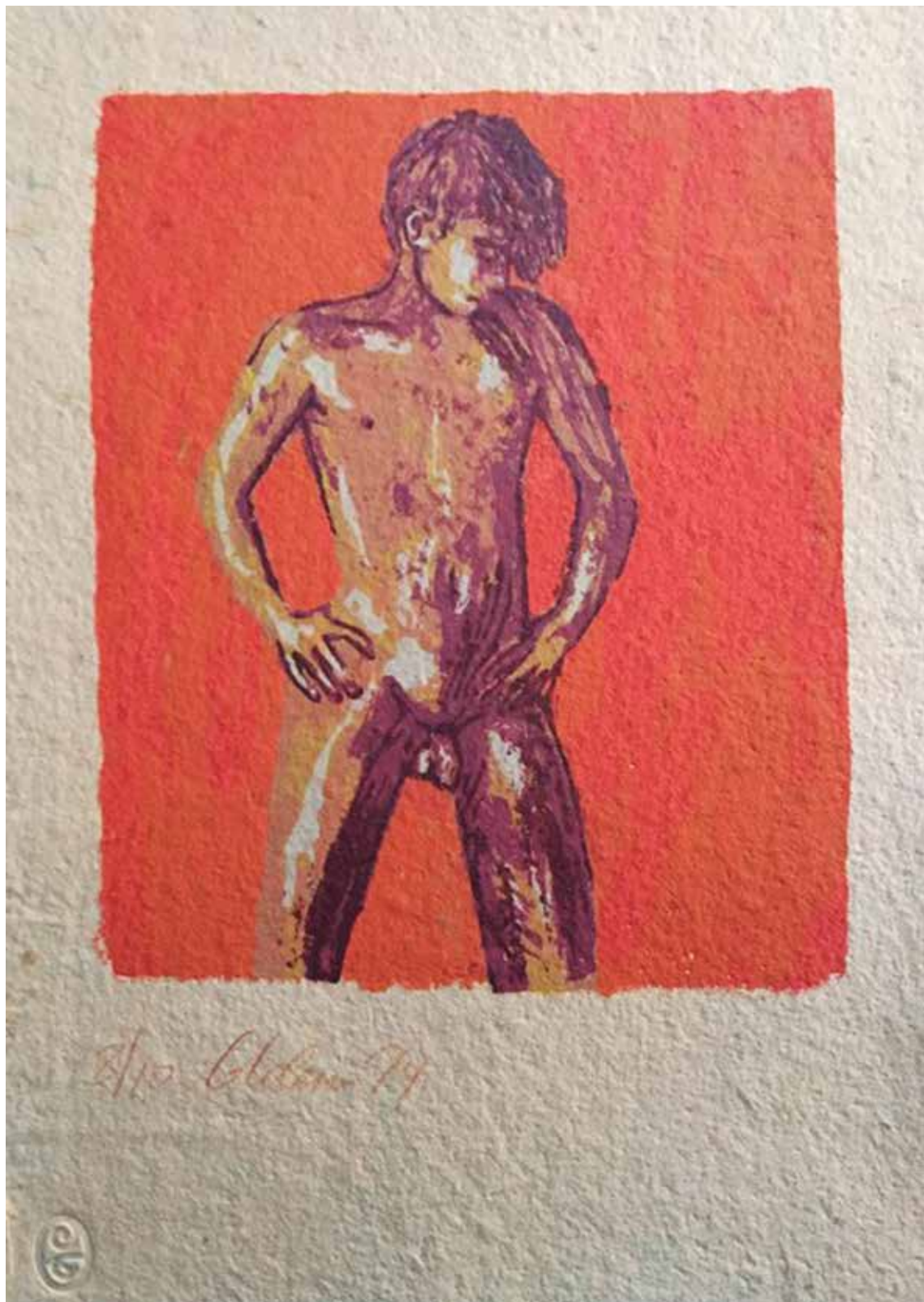
This study aims to give us a clearer understanding of school violence, from the standpoint of the gender discourses to which students are continually subjected, specifically in the EFL classroom. School violence is not only caused by peers, as is usually thought, but it can also come from teachers, educational materials and tools and the educational institutions themselves.

Therefore, we need to be aware of and learn from these disapproval discourses and help teachers to understand that they may have a harmful impact on both the gender identity and the progress of their students. This implies analyzing the use of such discourses in the L2 classroom and avoiding violent gender ones and other tools which legitimize ways of seeing the world which are harmful to students. We need to be proactive about rejecting methodologies which rest on normalized ideas about gender.

Finally, while the results pertain to the situation under study, it is possible that they may apply to other contexts and would lead to other studies that would help us to take steps to solve these problems.

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Desnudo masculino (José Chalarca)
Autor
Colección privada de Amparo Osorio.

Sus hermanos se limitaban a verlo ahí estático, y entre ellos susurraban y reían con esas risas solapadas que pasaban como un simple soplo por su oído. Ellos, como su madre, al igual eran mustios, presos de las circunstancias. Y quizás por miedo al mundo jamás la abandonarían.

Seguía ahí frente al vidrio sin que nada o nadie pudiera inmutarlo. Era su forma de escape, aislado de esa pestilente seudofamilia a la que pertenecía.

La ventana producía en él una especie de transición entre el estar y el ir; podía salir de ese encierro de olor a muebles viejos y sucios; pero cuando dejaba su trance porque ella abruptamente desaparecía, sentía ese nauseabundo olor que agobiaba más su ansiedad, odiaba cada vez más cada milímetro de ese repetido espacio, sofocándose por cada bocanada de aire.

No podría decir cuánto tiempo transcurrió para que llegara su gran día, aquel en el que decidió su escape. Con tan solo diecisiete años lo inundaba el temor de dejar de verla allí reflejada, de salir y no encontrarla. Este sentimiento de frustración lo hacía navegar entre decidir si sentir miedo o lograr entablar por fin esa necesidad de obtener ese coraje tantas veces llamado, esa dualidad interna que produce al saber que se apuesta a ganar pero se descubre que esa esencia de idealizar termina en un echar a perder; y así sin más preámbulo esa mañana decidió no asomarse, ya no la quería en el reflejo, la quería presente para hacerla suya, sin tocar el surco de sus labios a través del cristal opaco. Sentía la necesidad de tenerla completamente...