CHAPTER 8


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ABSTRACT OF “HETEROSEXISM IN ESL: EXAMINING OUR ATTITUDES”

The following is the text of a speech delivered in March 1992 in Vancouver, Canada, at the 26th Annual TESOL Convention. It was part of a colloquium entitled “We Are Your Colleagues: Lesbians and Gays in ESL.” Lisa Carsadden, Jim Ward, and I presented the colloquium, the first official TESOL event to specifically address lesbian and gay issues, to an audience of more than 300 people. The oral character of the presentation has been preserved.

ABSTRACT OF “SEXUAL IDENTITIES IN ESL: QUEER THEORY AND CLASSROOM INQUIRY”

Within ESL, interest has been growing in the pedagogical implications of poststructuralist theories of identity and in the need for gay-friendly teaching practices. However, research on identity has largely neglected the domain of sexual identity, and efforts to develop gay-friendly pedagogies have not yet engaged with poststructuralism. This article introduces some of the key concepts of queer theory, which draws on poststructuralism, and suggests implications for teaching. The central argument is that a queer theoretical framework may be more useful pedagogically than a lesbian and gay one because it shifts the focus from inclusion to inquiry, that is, from including minority sexual identities to examining how language and culture work with regard to all sexual identities. This article then comments on an ESL class discussion in the United States that focused on lesbian and gay identities.
ROIBÉARD ÓMÓCHAIN RESPONDS

Since the early 1990s, issues of sexual identity have gained more prominence in the field of ESL. This is an especially significant development for teachers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT). In recent years, the debate about sexual identity in education has been enriched by queer theory. Reading Cynthia Nelson’s article “Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry” surprised me, challenged my previously held assumptions, and inspired me to pursue a line of research I never would have expected.

Morrow (1997) speaks of seven typical stages in lesbian and gay identity development. The final two stages are

(f) identity pride, in which the individual immerses her or himself in the lesbian or gay community and separates from the heterosexual community;
and (g) identity synthesis or commitment, which involves integrating one’s sexual orientation with one’s overall identity and seeing oneself in the context of a larger culture. (p. 5)

When I came to Japan 3 years ago I was probably still in the penultimate stage of Morrow’s identity model. I sometimes introduced myself to new colleagues on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program by saying, “I’m Robert. I’m a gay man,” something I could not imagine doing now. I have changed. I often think of that question from the movie The English Patient (Zaentz & Minghella, 1996) “Why should it matter where someone is from?” Formerly, as soon as I was introduced to someone, I liked to ask, “Where are you from?”—but not anymore. I hope this is because I have developed an awareness of the implications of using labels, and a desire to establish genuine communication with others as much as possible.

In the workplace—senior and junior high schools in Osaka, Japan—I was closeted. Official JET publications had warned LGBT participants in the program not to come out to work colleagues because this was not part of Japanese culture. I saw this as institutionalized homophobia, and, in a way, it is. Having gained some familiarity, though, with the discourses that are interwoven in Japanese lives, I would now say that, in another way, it is true that coming out is out of sync with the mainstream culture here, and not only for reasons of heteronormativity. Coming out is based on notions of the true self, of human rights, of the value and appropriate location of self-disclosure, and on other notions that are discordant, I feel, with Japanese experience.

This is not to say that I think we should discount organized endeavors to gain inclusion here or elsewhere. There will always be a need for such an agenda in many contexts as long as heterosexism manages to make heterosexuality seem the only normal or natural sexual identity. We should be aware, though, of the dangers involved in such an approach if it reinforces unhelpful dichotomies or ignores cultural sensitivities. Moreover, the agenda of inclusion may not be the best agenda for every educational context or for all classroom inquiry.

Returning to my own case, I would say that lack of self-disclosure was not a major problem for me because I only worked part time in the schools for one or two semesters. The situation must be more difficult, though, for JET participants who may be in one school only, for 3 years, especially those in rural areas. I was able to join a group that organizes social events for LGBT people. I could go to a gay bar or club on a Saturday night. These things allowed me to become part of a network of friends and acquaintances, but they are often completely lacking for people in small towns or rural areas, who write about a sense of isolation in Brix, the newsletter of AJET Stonewall, an organization for LGBT participants in the JET program.

In my situation, I was not sure if I could achieve anything by coming out to teachers or students, and I never did. However, a niggling interior voice, my Stonewall conscience, you could say, reprimanded me for my cowardliness: “If every closeted LGBT person came out boldly, gay people would never feel the same isolation or stigmatization again.” “These students live in a homophobic world; lesbian and gay students need support, they need role models.” Yet I was never entirely convinced by this niggling voice of gay liberation. I knew there was some truth there, but I could not help feeling that it was not quite that simple. The value of Cynthia’s article, I think, was in helping me understand why things are not so simple. It was also a marvelous revelation to know that issues of sexual identity are not totally alien in the world of ESL!

In her 1999 article, Cynthia addresses four main questions:

1. How are sexual identities theorized according to queer theory?
2. What does queer theory imply for classroom practice?
3. What did this researcher find noteworthy while observing an ESL class discussion in which the topic of lesbian and gay identities came up?
4. How can classroom practice be analyzed with queer theory in mind? (p. 374)

Excerpts from a discussion in a U.S. community college showed how queer theory can provide a framework for exploration that students find relevant, meaningful, challenging, and interesting.

Cynthia provided a critique of the theoretical base of the mainstream lesbian and gay movement, where lesbian or gay identity is a stable attribute, a universal essence, a position that has been pathologized by poststructuralism and social constructionism. Perhaps the notion of universal essences is a fiction, and identities are social constructs, something that we do. Here, the value of coming out boldly was called into question as perhaps reinforcing a simplistic straight-gay binary that regulates sexual identities in society. Here, finally, was a call for a shift from a focus on
inclusion to a focus on inquiry. Whereas before, gayness was the thing that made me who I was, my essential, defining characteristic, now it was understood as one identity among many, all interacting with one another. This certainly rang true for me.

After I came out, people often related to me as though gayness was my only salient trait. My family identity, my class background, my religious upbringing, all these are parts of who I am. And this who I am does not have to imply a true self, an inner core I must get in tune with to find myself. If universal essences are a fiction, perhaps I can be happy with myself here and now as a contradictory being. Perhaps I can also be happy with myself as a teacher. My duty as a gay instructor may not be to come out to all and sundry in my school and start a campaign for gay rights. My duty might simply be to subvert simplicity whenever identity is constructed in a simplistic way—framing questions, facilitating investigation, exploiting with learners the multiple layers of sexual identity construction, undermining preconceived notions of what is normal or true; engaging with people, culture, reality in all their rich complexity. I am still trying to put this into effect as a teacher. Generally, in my situation as a part-time instructor, I can make it happen by taking advantage of opportunities that arise in the course of instruction.

For example, during one recent university class I conducted on presentation skills, a student recounted an incident in which he experienced an irate reaction from a customer at a health club. The instructor had a summer job as a receptionist at the club. The customer called by telephone and expressed amazement that his call was taken by a male receptionist. “You should be a woman, not a man!” he repeated loudly. I thanked the student for an interesting contribution and put some questions to the class. “What makes one job masculine and another feminine?” “Does this definition change depending on time or place?” “Why do some people feel uncomfortable when something like this happens?” The students seemed a little surprised by these questions, but they generated a valuable discussion that broadened out around questions of sexual identity and how some behavior draws the label gay or straight in some places and not in others. The discussion was relatively brief (15 minutes), unplanned, and, unfortunately, not part of a wider curriculum that would allow further exploration. That is regrettable because most of the students seemed truly engaged with the topics they were talking about, as they are not with many of the generic, textbook-imposed topic discussions. The discussion also brought out for me how closely questions of gender roles are related to questions of sexual identity.

Cynthia’s article gave me the courage and desire to initiate that type of classroom inquiry in my own teaching situation. It also stimulated me to do some research into some of the authors and approaches she mentioned in the article. When I read that the teachers’ organization special interest group I belong to—Gender Awareness in Language Education (GALE)—was holding a conference in Hokkaido, I decided to take up the challenge. If I submitted a proposal saying that I could speak—with some degree of knowledge, it is presumed—on the topic of “Identity, Culture, and Language Education: Making Connections with Queer Theory,” it would mean I had no choice but to do some study and find the answers to my questions. I began reading authors who challenged many of my notions on gayness as a defining essence, on the meaning of coming out in the workplace, on the possibilities of being a role model, and on how to approach discussion of queer identity in the classroom. Many of the concepts I dealt with were complex and intellectually demanding, but they also gave me a sense of empowerment. I was finally beginning to understand why Cynthia’s approach in her 1993 article, “Heterosexism in ESL: Examining Our Attitudes,” contrasted with her later one, as I was able to see which theoretical base was involved in each case. Some of the principal points I made at the conference follow.

In Cynthia’s 1999 article, sexual identity is seen as a constructed category, and queer theory focuses on inquiry into discursive and cultural practices in relation to all sexual identities, thereby becoming potentially relevant to everyone. Queer theory is more comfortable with the notion of spectrum than with dichotomy for consideration of socially constructed categories such as male-female, gay-straight, middle-class-working class, intelligent-dumb, and other examples of dualistic thinking. Cynthia asserts that acts, not facts, are queer theory’s reading of sexual identities. Grand narratives (Loytard, 1984), narratives that claim absolute precedence over individuals or small groups in an attempt to legitimize static, reductionist notions of subjectivity and totalizing, homogeneous versions of society, are part of an unchallenged regime of truth that mistakes social constructs for natural ones. The queer teacher will probably seek ways to subvert taken-for-granted notions within an educational institution. Cynthia concludes that “For a number of reasons, queer theory may provide a more flexible, open-ended framework for facilitating inquiry, particularly within the intercultural context of ESL, than lesbian and gay identity theory does” (p. 577). Discursive mapping in research and classroom inquiry can be used to forge new, more complex understandings of sexual identities.

It was not easy to make it to the conference to deliver the presentation; as a part-time instructor I have no research budget and had to cover my own expenses. But it was money well spent. It gave me the opportunity to meet and talk with other people in education who share an interest in questions of identity. Teachers and professional researchers sat around the same table for discussion and for meals. I experienced a sense of energy and support from one and all. The most special aspect, for me personally, was that Cynthia was there, heard me speak, and spent time with me afterwards. She could not have been more supportive. The questions she had challenged me with in her article had brought me to the conference, and it was so appropriate—the word I’m thinking of is neat—not only to
meet her; but to receive her sincere encouragement. In short, I went to the conference in Hokkaido as a teacher and came back a teacher-researcher. All I had actually done was to give a 20-minute presentation, but the event had changed my professional self-perception in a definitive way. Now, as a graduate student at Temple University Japan, I am preparing to work on a doctoral dissertation on understanding the implications of queer identities for LGBT Japanese educators.

Reflecting on my experience with Cynthia’s articles brought forth the realization that the time we spend engaged with challenging articles and texts that energize our educational endeavors can never be time wasted. For me, Cynthia’s 1999 article was and is such a text. It clearly outlines why a focus on inquiry, rather than a focus on inclusion, can be of benefit to all of us, no matter what our sexual identity may be (or be becoming). In this way it seems to tie in harmoniously with my own personal development, moving toward the final stage in Morrow’s (1997) model of “gender synthesis, seeing oneself in the context of a larger culture” (p. 5). Cynthia’s insights triggered a great deal of personal and professional development. I cannot wait for the dialogue to continue.

MAREN MITCHELL RESPONDS

Introduction

Cynthia Nelson’s articles were two of the assigned readings for an elective course on Critical Issues in TESOL taught in the winter 2002 quarter by Sandra Silberstein in the MATESOL program at the University of Washington, in the United States. Both “Heterosexism in ESL: Examining Our Attitudes” (1993) and “Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry” (1999) were covered under the topic of “Sexual Identity and ESL,” along with other topics, such as identity and language learning, world Englishes, critical pedagogy, and language and culture. For each topic, students submitted a one-page written response to the assigned articles, and one student presented and led an in-class discussion of the topic. The following is a discussion of the dialogue and written responses generated by Cynthia’s articles.

The Presentation

As I glanced through the syllabus on the first day of class, I was excited to see that finally someone was bringing up the topic of “Sexual Identity and ESL,” and that our professor felt it was an important topic to include in this class. As the sign-up sheet for discussion leaders circulated around the room, my heartbeat quickened; should I take on the topic of “Sexual Identity and ESL”? As I wrote my name down, I knew I was committing to more than just doing a presentation; I was committing to representing my community and being out to my fellow students. Although it was not prerequisite for me to be gay or to be out to do this presentation, I hoped that by being out I would set the stage for an open discussion of issues affecting all gay and lesbian teachers and be able to openly share my experiences as a gay teacher. Like Cynthia, who noted that “the most comfortable I have become in talking about gay issues in the classroom, the more students seem comfortable” (1993, p. 146), I found that coming out at the beginning of my presentation led to a free-flowing discussion with students openly sharing their experiences and concerns.

This brings me to the question, “If I hadn’t chosen to present this topic, would someone else have?” In her list of seven problematic attitudes straight ESL teachers have about gay and lesbian students, teachers, and topics, Cynthia describes Attitude 7 as, “Only gay people can address gay issues. I’m no expert. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (1993, p. 149).

Several students mentioned this in their written responses with comments such as, “As I read Nelson’s article, I sensed a part of her alienation. Nevertheless, I continue to feel less than an expert on the subject at hand, and would like to see more support for heterosexual and gay teachers alike in addressing it,” and, “We ESL teachers are not prepared to treat gay eventualities in our language classroom, neither are we trained to design materials that address the issues properly.” Unfortunately, I too have come to expect that only gay people will address gay issues. Because of either discomfort or lack of concern, I assume that my straight colleagues will not make it a priority. That is why I was so impressed and encouraged by the number of students who came to show me materials dealing with gay and lesbian topics that they were using or planned to use in the weeks following the reading and discussion of Cynthia’s articles. It was obvious that her articles had had a direct impact on their teaching practices.

We were fortunate to have a diverse class of students with 11 women and 2 men representing the United States, Taiwan, Latin America, and Northern and Eastern Europe. What really surprised me was that some students thought discussing gay issues was a purely U.S. phenomenon. One wrote,

It is true it is very common to talk about gay issues in the classroom in the U.S.; however, it is not common to discuss this in other parts of the world. In the same way that gay people demand for respect and recognition, these cultures demand the same for their beliefs.

Another student wrote,

It tends to be a North American tendency to be on very familiar terms with the teacher, and the issue of sharing personal information in class is assumed to be the norm. However, in most Hispanic, and many European countries, the relationship between a student and a teacher is not personal, and it is not considered appropriate to discuss family or marital status in the classroom. Perhaps the issue of being gay or not is more of an issue in an ESL classroom.
in America, or in any other classroom where the teacher-student relationship is familiar.

These students' comments touch on several interesting questions. Is talking about gay and lesbian issues in the ESL classroom unique to the United States? I wondered if they thought this because the gay and lesbian minority in the United States has become increasingly vocal and visible over the past couple of decades. There are certainly large gay populations in other countries as well, and I would be interested in knowing how these countries treat gay and lesbian issues in the ESL classroom. Another point made was whether or not a person is gay is only relevant in classrooms where the teacher-student relationship is familiar. This point reiterates Cynthia's Attitude 2: "Whether or not a teacher is gay simply doesn't—or shouldn't—come up in a classroom. It has nothing to do with teaching English" (1993, p. 145). In this case, the student is saying it does not come up due to the nature of the teacher-student relationship. Although Cynthia includes the question "Are you married?" in her discussion of how being gay or lesbian comes up in the classroom, she also uses the example of "What did you do last weekend?" For a straight man to answer, "I went to the movies with my girlfriend" is not a big deal, but for me to answer, "I went to the movies with my girlfriend" would produce an entirely different reaction in the classroom. In many places and situations, it might be impossible for me to give an honest answer at all.

The issue of sexuality does come up in classrooms, and not just U.S. classrooms. What many of us remain unsure of is how to deal with this subject in settings where it is not culturally appropriate to discuss it. As one of my classmates wrote, "It is a good idea to incorporate more gay language and images in language textbooks, since they are part of the target culture." Even if we choose materials that represent gays and lesbians in the culture of the target language (English), do these portrayals represent gays and lesbians in other countries? In addition, as I read Cynthia's article, I questioned what other hidden identities were not being represented in my teaching. It is a difficult question, indeed, of what to include and not include in an ESL classroom, and one to which I still do not have the answer. Several students felt classroom discussions should reflect norms of the host culture and not the target language culture. One wrote, "We also need to remember that in some cultures talking about personal and not to mention gay issues is not considered appropriate." Another U.S student, based on her experience teaching English in a country where English became increasingly associated with the work of Christian missionaries, worried that by including gay and lesbian subjects she could possibly be jeopardizing the future of English language teaching. If gay and lesbian topics or teachers were associated with the English language, then a country might try to eradicate discussion of gay issues by halting English language instruction.

One thing we all agreed upon was that the language classroom should be a safe space where all students can genuinely express themselves, regardless of sexual identity or any other identity. Like me, most teachers assume that we do this through attitude, that something in the way we conduct the class and interact with students signals that we respect them and value their input, and that they are free to express their personal feelings. Can students really gather that the classroom is safe through such subtext? Alternatively, is it necessary to overtly state a policy of acceptance either in a syllabus or by placing a list of behavior standards on the wall, as is most common in elementary classrooms in the U.S.? One student felt that by including the topic of sexuality in a class, a teacher might actually be making the classroom unsafe. She wrote,

How do you talk about it with a group of Muslims or conservative Christians who may simply find the issue abhorrent? And if we find ourselves dealing with a group with opposing views, or better yet, with a gay/lesbian student? No matter how supportive the teacher may be, such a discussion may evolve into a confrontation and change the whole group dynamics for the rest of the course.

If we value the right of every student to express individual opinions, then we must be prepared to listen to both sides of the argument, even if that is uncomfortable for us as teachers. Clearly stated rules for classroom discourse may be one way of ensuring that people express differing views in a respectful manner. Still, there is a great need to train future teachers on how to establish and maintain the classroom as a safe place.

Safe spaces are needed for teachers, as well as for students. This is not about promoting a gay agenda; it is about giving all students and teachers the opportunity to live an authentic life. In her 1993 article, Cynthia says that she had not heard of anyone being fired because of being gay. Although my classmates and I agreed with Cynthia that the field of TESOL is more accepting than other fields, many teachers are still forced to keep their sexual identity hidden in order to keep their jobs. I specifically moved away from my home state because I could be fired there for being an openly gay teacher in the public school system. I refuse to be one of the many teachers who suffer a lifetime of mental anguish from living cloistered lives, yet I am aware that not all teachers have the luxury of moving to a non-discriminatory environment. Some gays and lesbians may never have the chance to teach ESL at all, because their sexual identity prevents them from gaining admission to MATESOL programs. I was astonished to hear one woman report that at her university, the admission committee attempts to screen gay students during their application interviews, with the logic being that MATESOL students are required to do student teaching and the public and private schools are unwilling to accept gay student teachers. Thus, the university has a problem placing gay students. It is unfathomable that such forms of discrimination exist, and will continue to exist unless more teachers, gay and straight, take a stand against them.
Conclusion
When I first looked at her 1993 article, I thought Cynthia’s discussion of attitudes might be isolating. However, as I discovered, the way the article was framed was well received by students in the class. Several students remarked that they could identify their own preconceived notions because they had seen themselves in the attitudes Cynthia discussed. Comments included, "I realize that I have set up some explicitly heterosexual classroom activities in the past, which must have made some students feel uncomfortable," and, "Nelson’s article made me realize that it is an issue that pertains to me as a teacher. We must not assume that all students feel comfortable discussing weddings and love life, differences between boys and girls or other gender/sexuality related issues."

I also found myself in Cynthia’s article as she talked about her struggle to find lesbian colleagues in the field of ESL. It is important not only to find colleagues, but also to find professional role models. Throughout my primary, secondary, and undergraduate education, I had gay teachers, but it was not until I reached graduate school that I had a lesbian teacher who was out. Finally, I had found a positive, professional lesbian role model in my field. Cynthia herself is a role model as she brings these important issues to the forefront.

Cynthia’s article not only fostered a heightened awareness of issues facing gay and lesbian students and teachers, but it also helped us better understand ourselves and our teaching. In the end, we still sought guidelines on how, when, and in what settings we could include gay and lesbian themes or discussions in our classrooms. One way of avoiding this dilemma would be to use queer theory, as Cynthia discusses in “Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry.” With queer theory, by questioning all notions of knowledge and identity, we circumvent the problem of zeroing in on one particular identity (e.g., lesbian identity). One of my classmates remarked that queer theory seemed easier to use in the classroom because it does not require the teacher to be an expert on gay issues. I also think queer theory could address my question of how to include all sexual identities, not just straight and gay, as well as the multitude of other types of identities found in the language classroom. My only fear is that once the questioning begins, there would be no end to it. Using queer theory in the classroom does look promising, but with only one example of a classroom lesson, I do not feel adequately prepared to venture into this method of inquiry in my classroom.

These articles have jerked us out of our indifference and made us realize how relevant these issues are to our lives as teachers, students, and human beings. With so little literature on gays and lesbians and ESL teaching, we might not even have discussed this topic in our course if Cynthia had not written these articles. The articles worked well as a pair; with the first article opening an important and necessary dialogue on how
Thinking Through Identity Work and What It Means for Teaching

Roibeárd offers a self-reflective response to my 1999 article on queer theory and classroom inquiry. He reflects on the complexities and dilemmas of negotiating his own (gay) sexual identity in teaching contexts in Japan, with an emphasis on how these identity negotiations have changed over time (and place), in terms of both what he says (e.g., introducing himself to colleagues as a gay man) and what he thinks (e.g., conceptualizing sexual identity as "becoming" rather than "being"). Roibeárd, citing Morrow (1997), traces his own shift away from identity pride toward identity synthesis. He then links this shift to his own teaching practices—away from an imperative to "come out...and start a campaign for gay rights" toward "subverting simplicity—framing questions, facilitating investigation, exploring with learners the multiple layers of sexual identity construction, undermining preconceived notions of what is normal or true: engaging with people, culture, reality in all their rich complexity."

I think the value of Roibeárd’s piece is that it illuminates the close connections between how teachers think about their own sexual identity—and about sexual identity as a concept—and how they approach sexual and other domains of identity as subject matter in their classrooms. Roibeárd demonstrates how teaching practices are informed by teachers’ own identity work, and he illustrates this interconnectedness with an example from his own teaching practice.

Maren and Roibeárd each raise a number of issues worthy of detailed discussion. Given the limited scope of my response, I will touch on only a few areas that I find particularly compelling.

Rethinking Culture

Do teachers need to decide for students what is culturally appropriate with regard to gay or lesbian themes? Or examine with students the intercultural complexities of negotiating these themes?

Maren and Roibeárd each raise complex questions about who can say what where with regard to lesbian-gay matters, and each invokes the notion of culture as an explanation. Maren reports a concern among her teacher-in-training peers that being willing to include gay themes and representations in part of classroom discourse may be a "purely U.S. phenomenon" which would be "culturally inappropriate" outside the United States. (It is not clear to me whether the teachers voicing this view were referring to EFL or ESL classes, or both, but it should be noted that my classroom-based research examines ESL contexts in the United States only.) Roibeárd describes an administrative dictate forbidding exchange teachers (in Japan) who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered from coming out to colleagues. He reflects on whether this dictate constitutes a form of "cultural sensitivity" or "institutionalized homophobia"—or both.

If students' cultures (or the exchange teacher's new host culture) are perceived as spaces in which lesbian and gay identities are not discussed in public forums, then it follows that allowing lesbian-gay topics to become part of classroom (or workplace) discourse could be seen as disrespecting students' (or colleagues') cultures or cultural identifications—perhaps even, as a student teacher in my research put it, "being sort of culturally imperialist" (Nelson, in press b). De-gaying classroom discourse becomes understandable, perhaps even desirable, when this is equated with affirming students' culture(s).

It is important to acknowledge, as do Maren and Roibeárd, that a particular phenomenon can mean one thing in one cultural setting and something quite different in another; that decisions about what happens within the walls of a classroom or school must take into account what happens beyond those walls; that the"degree of importance associated with sexual identities...[is] not universal but varies[s] according to the cultural context" (Nelson, 1999, p. 375); and that teaching a language means taking into account who can say what where. However, in my view, these are the very reasons why it may be useful for students to have opportunities to discuss lesbian-gay matters in their language classes.

Why? Consider ways of conceptualizing culture. To poststructuralists, cultures (much like identities, as I explain in my 1999 article) are considered not entities but processes, not monolithic but heterogeneous, not mutually exclusive (cross-cultural) but interactive (intercultural), not static but constantly changing, not free of conflict but characterized by struggle (e.g., Holliday, 1999; Sarangi, 1995). If a culture is understood to be an interplay of cultures, and this interplay is understood to be fraught and in flux, then what is considered culturally appropriate? How is this to be determined? And the crucial question—by whom?

To illustrate these ideas with an example, recall that Maren chose to move interstate (in the United States) "because I could be fired there for being an openly gay teacher in the public school system." She decided to open the class discussion of sexual identities in ESL by coming out as gay, and she found that her openness "led to a free-flowing discussion with students openly sharing their experiences and concerns." So, in the United States, is it considered culturally appropriate for teachers to come out as lesbian or gay? It seems that this is not a yes-no question, but one that would require some discussion.

Consider, too, ways of conceptualizing cultural identities. According to Hall (1992), "Everywhere cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in transition between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalised world" (p. 310). Roibeárd provides an example of
this. He used to introduce himself as a gay man, but now—after 3 years in Japan—he cannot imagine doing that. His sexual and cultural identities are not static, but changing, and mutually inflecting.

It is precisely those aspects of culture that are in flux, that are being contested, that are most likely to confuse students. How to negotiate competing discourses may be exactly what language students need to learn. In ESL contexts, the fact that discussing lesbian and queer themes can be complex culturally is precisely why doing so can be productive pedagogically—not productive in the sense of furthering a gay agenda or a campaign for gay rights, but in terms of enhancing the ability to understand, participate in, and negotiate discursive practices.

As Auerbach and Burgess (1985) note, “what is excluded from curricula is as important in shaping students’ perceptions of reality as what is included” (p. 480). The point I wish to stress here is that teachers can take it upon themselves to predetermine what is or is not appropriate culturally (or interculturally) with regard to lesbian-gay themes in their classes, or teachers can bring these dilemmas to their classes. In other words, why not make these complexities the object of inquiry?

Rethinking the Need to Be Experts

Do teachers need to be experts on lesbian and gay issues in order to facilitate inquiry? Or experts at facilitating inquiry?

A number of Maren’s teacher-in-training peers consider themselves “less than an expert” on lesbian, gay, and queer matters. My research indicates that this feeling may be common to many teachers, even those who themselves identify as lesbian or gay. In my 1993 article I challenged the notion that teachers had to be gay or lesbian themselves in order to bring up gay or lesbian topics, and that so-called expert knowledge had to come directly from the teacher: “Do you have to be an expert to initiate a discussion, select a video, invite a guest speaker, or find an article in the newspaper?” (p. 149). At that time there was almost no discussion of this in the language education literature, so my aim was simply to get teachers talking about it.

Over the past decade, newsletters, conferences, and textbooks have begun to bring lesbian and gay issues into the pedagogic frame. But it is not enough to simply introduce, or allow students to introduce, these issues—this needs to be accomplished in ways that are productive pedagogically. In my 1999 article I contrast pedagogies of inclusion with pedagogies of inquiry, arguing for the latter: “On a practical level, inquiry may be more double than inclusion because teachers are expected not to have all the answers but rather to frame questions, facilitate investigations, and explore what is not known” (p. 377). In that article I make a case for thinking through the theoretical frameworks that inform teaching practices, using queer theory as a tool for promoting inquiry. One of Maren’s peers noted that a queer approach seems “easier . . . since it does not require the teacher to be an expert on gay issues.”

In fact, not being an expert may have advantages:

Either the teacher must be an expert or he [sic] must be a learner along with his students. In most cases, the teacher cannot in the nature of the case be an expert. Pedagogically this may in fact be a preferable role to that of the expert. It implies teaching by discovery or inquiry methods rather than by instruction.

(Stenhouse, 1975, p. 91)

Stenhouse is writing about teachers in general, but his argument is especially pertinent to language teachers. Our expertise generally lies not in the subject matter itself, but in analyzing language and framing learning, and, more specifically, shaping in-class interactions into educational experiences about the workings of discourse outside of the classroom. Integral to interactions are identities; these are constructed in tandem (Scollon, 1998). Thus, we can further our expertise in language teaching by thinking about how we think about identities.

Consider Roibeard’s account from his classroom. While studying presentation skills, a student related an incident in which he, a receptionist, was told by an angry customer, also male, “You should be a woman, not a man!” Roibeard responded by asking the class, “What makes one job masculine and another feminine? Does this change depending on time or place? Why do some people feel uncomfortable when something like this happens?” After a while, the discussion turned to sexual identities, which engaged students far more than most “textbook-imposed” topics.

Roibeard shares this example to illustrate that thinking about sexual identities as “doings” instead of “beings,” as I advocated in my 1999 article, helped him to facilitate an effective discussion by inspiring him to unpack gender and sexual identities, examining them as acts (not facts) that are contextualized and regulated. I think Roibeard’s questions to the class do not indicate that he is an expert on queer matters, in the sense of accumulating knowledge or assembling facts about queer people, or even identifying as gay himself. Instead, his questions indicate that his reflections and readings on queer identities have furthered his expertise in facilitating inquiry. (By way of an aside, I would be interested to know whether, after discussing the bigger picture issues, the class returned to the reported interaction between the male receptionist and male customer to brainstorm possible responses to the gender challenge; and if so, whether the more abstract discussion served to enrich the more language-based one.)

I do not mean to suggest that it is easy to facilitate inquiry or to negotiate lesbian or gay topics in class. Far from it. The point I would like to emphasize is that negotiating lesbian or gay topics in class, whether raised by a student or teacher, can be made easier when the aim is to facilitate inquiry rather than to transmit information. And facilitating
inquiry can be made easier when sexual identities are conceptualized as what people do and say, rather than what or who they feel themselves to be.

Rethinking Safety as an Aim

Do we need to make our classes safe spaces for gay and lesbian topics and people? Or for questioning and unsettling our understandings of straight, gay, and lesbian topics and people?

Maren writes, "There is a great need to train future teachers on how to establish and maintain the classroom as a safe place," and goes on to explain that it is not just students who need safe spaces, but teachers as well. She describes as "unfathomable" the gatekeeping practices of a teacher training program that refuses to admit students who are perceived to be gay or lesbian. I agree that it is extremely problematic to make (perceived) heterosexual identity a required criterion for applicants to teacher education programs (or, for that matter, teaching positions or promotions), and I acknowledge that workplace and professional issues like this one very much affect the domain of the classroom. However, in the limited space here, I will address only the in-class issues pertaining to safety.

The desire for safety is paradoxical. On the one hand there is a desire to make the classroom "a safe space where all students can genuinely express themselves, regardless of sexual identity or any other identity," as Maren puts it. But at the same time, there is the recognition that if students do genuinely express themselves with regard to lesbian or gay topics, a class discussion "may evolve into a confrontation and change the whole group dynamics for the rest of the course," as a colleague Maren quotes puts it. Thus, a desire for safety means more than just freedom of expression; it means group cohesion and a supportive learning environment, among other things. How can this apparent paradox be resolved?

It is not only sexual identity that generates such fears, of course. In hooks' (1994) analysis, teachers' reluctance to consider "race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained" (p. 39). The potentially contentious nature of lesbian-gay content may be exacerbated within the intercultural arena of ESL. Not only may teachers and learners have different points of view about a given topic, but they may not have the same expectations about what sorts of topics are even appropriate to discuss in a classroom context, as Maren's colleagues note.

The notion of classrooms as safe spaces gives rise to some tough questions: Safe for what? Safe from what? And, as Maren's colleague notes, safe for whom—the lesbian, or the homophobe? If classrooms are meant to be places in which thinking is encouraged, then is it desirable—or even possible—to make them intellectually or emotionally safe (Bretzman, 1995)? If pedagogy is understood as "a space within which meanings are posed and contested" (Sinon, 1992, p. 69), if language is understood to involve negotiating and contesting meanings, and if differential power relations that exist beyond the classroom are understood to exist within it as well, then is it possible to avoid fear or discomfort?

According to Pratt (1987), the idea that classrooms are, or ought to be, "stable, harmonious, smoothly-running discursive arenas" (p. 52) is linked to an "impulse to unify and harmonize the social world" (p. 56). Instead of this, Pratt (1999) argues, "We are looking for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone" (p. 595), referring to those "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 584). If teachers expect divergent views and anticipate a degree of discomfort, then the challenge is not to smooth over or sidestep differences, but to exploit these for educational purposes. The aim, then, is not to stir up controversy for its own sake, but, rather, to make the classroom a space in which it is safe to question what Roibard calls "taken-for-granted notions."

Interestingly, in my research interviews (Nelson, in press b), when I asked students whether they had felt comfortable during the class discussion presented in my 1989 article, all of them answered emphatically that they had felt very comfortable. However, when I asked whether any of their classmates had felt uncomfortable, they were less certain but surmised that this was probably the case. For Neurider, a man from Morocco, it was the African students who might have been uncomfortable; for Mary, a 64-year-old woman from Hong Kong, it was the older students; for Mi-Young, a woman from Korea, it was the Muslim students; and for Pablo, a man from Mexico, it was the straight students. (It should be noted that I did not propose any categories whatsoever; students came up with them on their own.) This fascinating array of answers—by region, age, religion, sexual identity—suggests that teachers should be cautious about attributing discomfort to certain types of students. Such attributions may say more about the one speaking than the ones being spoken about.

Towards Queer Identity Inquiry

Maren and her colleagues seek teaching guidelines. I hope that the questions I have posed that accompany the headings will be of some practical use in approaching queer identities from an inquiry stance. In addition, the very things that Maren and Roibard are doing in their texts may be the very things that teachers and students find productive when engaging lesbian or gay themes (e.g., representing divergent viewpoints, asking challenging questions, relating an idea or a reading to specific interactions that one has had).

In Maren's teacher education class, my TESOL Quarterly articles served as a sort of problematizing code to generate discussion (following Auerbach & Burgess, 1988). Teachers (and teacher educators) may find it helpful to develop such codes for their students, making their own teaching dilemmas explicit. Perhaps, drawing on Maren's text, something along these lines would be useful:
How do you talk about [lesbian or gay topics] with a group of Muslims or conservative Christians who may simply find the issue abhorrent? Or with a group with opposing views, or, better yet, with a gay or lesbian student? No matter how supportive the teacher may be, such a discussion may evolve into a confrontation and change the whole group dynamics for the rest of the course.

For teachers: If a colleague made this comment to you and asked for your advice, what would you say?

For ESL students: Another ESL teacher made this comment to me and asked for my advice. What do you think I should say?

For those who wish to read more, the teaching issues touched on in this dialogue are discussed in detail in the book I am currently completing (Nelson, in press b), which is based on my doctoral research. The book analyzes teaching practices that involve sexual identities, with particular attention to the teachers’ and students’ perspectives. I have also written a play deriving from the same research, which has been performed at conferences and universities (e.g., Nelson, 2002).

In addition, an upcoming book on gender and teaching ESL includes a chapter on how the teacher, Roxanne, experienced the class discussion that is recounted in part in my 1999 article (Nelson, in press a). This case study outlines practical suggestions for teachers who wish to integrate lesbian and gay themes in their classes. A further article, which features Roxanne and one of her students, looks at coming out conundrums, instances in which the meanings students were making of their teachers’ sexual identities diverged from the meanings that the teachers intended to convey (Nelson, in press c).

If my TESOL Quarterly articles “jerk us out of our indifference,” as Maren says, and “energize our educational endeavors,” as Roibeard says, then their responses give me the great pleasure of having companions in these efforts. I look forward to more reflections and research as these dialogues on queer identity inquiry broaden and deepen.

CHAPTER 9


Carmen T. Chaóón, Luisa Cristina Alvarez, Janina Brutt-Griffler, and Keiko K. Samimy

ABSTRACT OF THE BRUTT-GRIFFLER AND SAMIMY ARTICLE

Although historically much teaching of English has been done by nonnative-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), research on their concerns as English educators has been neglected. This article takes as its central focus the narrative of NNESts in the context of critical praxis. It discusses a graduate seminar offered for perhaps the first time in a TESOL program for NNESts. The article presents the process of interrogating the naivety paradigm among NNESts themselves via their own experiences and self-representation. It discusses the validity of conceptual tools designed to overcome disempowering discourses that may exist in TESOL programs and centers on the construction of identity among NNESts that neither prescribes a limited role for them in the profession nor specifies definite boundaries to their capacities therein. The study suggests that the process of empowerment of NNESts is neither linear nor simple but can nevertheless be generated within and by teachers engaged in critical praxis. It also demonstrates that many of the participants found a new relationship with their contexts, analyzed the causes of their powerlessness, and generated a new sense of agency as teachers and scholars in the field.

CARMEN T. CHAOÓN AND LUISA CRISTINA ALVAREZ RESPOND: CRITICAL PRAXIS IN THE EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR NONNATIVE-ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS

When we read “Revisiting the Colonial in the Postcolonial: Critical Praxis for Nonnative-English-Speaking Teachers in a TESOL Program,” we found ourselves mirrored in the voices of the nonnative-English-speaking (NNE)