Gender and English Language Learners

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Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series

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INTRODUCTION

Why and how are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgenders' issues and perspectives being raised in English language classes, and what teaching challenges and opportunities arise as a result? This was a central question in my doctoral research, which involved observing ESL classes at three educational institutions in two cities in the United States; interviewing the teachers and adult students about their experiences of lesbian/gay topics in class; and facilitating four focus groups for teachers on sexual identities in ESL, held at a university and at an international TESOL convention (C. D. Nelson, in press). A total of 111 students and teachers participated in that study. This case looks at how one of the teachers used lesbian/gay themes to explore cultural meanings in her grammar-based ESL class at a community college in the United States.

Drawing on class observations, class handouts, and teacher interviews 1 (as well as relevant literature), this chapter augments my previous work on Roxanne's class (C. Nelson, 1999). The earlier article included a transcript from a class discussion accompanied by a commentary of my own moment-to-moment thoughts and impressions while observing. This chapter examines portions of that class discussion but from a different vantage point.

The interest here is in how the teacher framed lesbian/gay themes in a way that led to the exploration of cultural meanings and meaning-making practices. This chapter looks not only at what was said during the class discussion but also why the

1 In some interviews, I used a technique called stimulated recall (see Nunn, 1992, p. 94). I showed the teacher a rough transcript of part of a class session and played the selected portion of the audiospae, stopping it whenever the teacher had something to say about what she had been thinking or feeling at the time.
teacher paved the way for it, how she framed her questions to the class, and what concerns she was taking into account. Roxanne's teaching practices are examined with a view to offering practical suggestions to other teachers.

This case illustrates that discussing lesbian/gay subject matter can be a means of illuminating "the workings of language and culture" (C. Nelson, 1999, p. 389)—and that in this endeavor, poststructuralist theories can be of practical use.

◊ CONTEXT

Roxanne's grammar-based ESL class met 10 hours each week at a community college in the United States, as part of a government-funded program for refugees and immigrants. The 26 students were from 13 countries: Brazil, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Gambia, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, Somalia, Thailand, and Vietnam. As this combination of countries suggests, the students had notably divergent life experiences. Their ages ranged from early 20s to early 70s, and there were equal numbers of women and men in the class. They had been living in the United States from a few months to a few years, and although many were working and several had retired, most intended to pursue further study.

Roxanne had 20 years' experience teaching English in the United States (from which she hailed) and in Asia. The grammatical and functional objectives for this intermediate-level class had already been determined, but Roxanne had free rein as to how to approach them.

A central concern for Roxanne was that students be treated with respect and dignity in her class. Another priority was to make the class meaningful and relevant to students' day-to-day lives. As Roxanne put it,

I feel accountable for covering certain grammar structures. At the same time I... really want each class to be relevant for all 26 people and useful. I mean right now in their life useful... And make sense to them. And not seem as contrived and from a book as it actually is in terms of what I'm accountable for.

To Roxanne, it was important to make it possible for lesbian/gay themes to be raised in her class. During my 2-week observation period, posted near the classroom was a flyer advertising a local event for lesbian/gay rights. The community college was located on the main artery of what was commonly referred to as a gay neighborhood, within a city that had adopted policies prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual identity in areas such as employment and housing.

◊ LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Lesbian/Gay Topics in the English Language Classroom

Roxanne was not unusual in her desire to integrate lesbian/gay topics into her teaching. Since the early 1990s, interest has been growing in ensuring that English language teaching (ELT) approaches do not presume, and curricula and materials do

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2 Although this chapter addresses sexual identity rather than gender per se, the two identity domains are inextricably linked.
not portray an exclusively heterosexual world—that is, one in which all students and their interlocutors are necessarily straight, and everything students say, read, and think about pertains only to straight people. Newsletter articles and conference presentations (and, increasingly, academic publications) have described efforts to

- integrate gay and lesbian themes and perspectives into curricula (e.g., Summerhawk, 1998) and teaching resources (e.g., Clarke, Dobson, & Silberstein, 1996)
- address homophobia and heterosexism in the profession and in the classroom (e.g., Benesch, 1999; Kappra, 1998/1999; Vandrick, 1997a)
- consider the needs of students (and teachers) who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgendered (e.g., Jewell, 1998; Saint Pierre, 1994)

However, engaging with these aims in ESL classes is unlikely to be simple or straightforward. Some teachers (even gay-identified teachers) may feel they lack know-how on this subject matter. In O'Móchain, Mitchell, and Nelson (2003), Mitchell quotes a colleague who explains, "We ESL teachers are not prepared to treat gay events in our language classroom, neither are we trained to design materials that address the issue properly" (p. 129). A related concern is that discussing lesbian/gay topics in class might lead to the airing of "opposing views," which could threaten the "whole group dynamics for the rest of the course" (p. 131), as another teacher quoted by Mitchell puts it.

For some, the question is not how but whether gay/lesbian issues should even be addressed. O'Loughlin (2001) reports that "some teachers have told me they will not broach the topic of homosexuality in the classroom as they are concerned it will be offensive to learners from some cultural backgrounds" (p. 39). O'Loughlin considers this attitude "quite paternalistic," noting that "this silence may... betray such teachers' own discomfort in talking about these kinds of issues" (p. 39). He points out that "students of all nationalities are aware that gay people exist"—and, importantly, that "[students] will shape their own views on the subject" (p. 39). Instead of protecting students from potentially controversial topics, teachers need to acknowledge that "learners have agency and are more than capable of exercising it" (p. 40).

O'Loughlin (2001) further argues that instead of adopting a "simplistic... narrow, homogenised and overly prescriptive view" about what is or is not considered culturally appropriate, teachers should expose students to multiple "gender roles and behaviours" (p. 39). The aim is not to dictate to students "how to live in 'Australian society'" (in this case) but rather to expose students to the diversity they are likely to encounter in the new country—thereby helping them make "informed choices about what is appropriate for their own lives" (pp. 39–40).

My research strongly indicates that as ESL students interact at school, at work, in the home, with the media, and elsewhere, they encounter gay/lesbian themes—and, furthermore, that discussing these themes in class may give rise to uncertainties and mismatched expectations (C. D. Nelson, in press). Given the prevalence of lesbian/gay themes in everyday encounters, combined with the potential for intercultural misunderstandings inside and outside the classroom, ESL students may benefit when these themes are engaged with instead of avoided, as I argue in O'Móchain et al. (2003).
Poststructuralist Theories of Identity and Culture

What might it mean to teach in ways that help unpack the complexities of negotiating lesbian/gay themes in day-to-day interactions? The remainder of this chapter considers this question by looking at poststructuralist theories of identity and culture, and then at Roxanne’s teaching practices. Thus the practical suggestions that conclude the chapter are grounded in theory and practice (or theory-in-practice).

Identity

In a modernist or humanist view, people are thought to be “endowed with a stable ‘self’ constituted by a set of static characteristics such as sex, class, race, sexual orientation” (Lather, 1991, p. 5). But poststructuralist theories (e.g., S. Hall, 1992; Spivak, 1990; Weedon, 1987) have challenged this notion, considering identities instead to be

- constructed and negotiated through social relations
- multiple, able to be foregrounded or backgrounded, and even contradictory
- sites of struggle
- acts of strategy

In short, identities are conceptualized not as nouns but as verbs (see O’Loughlin, 2001, writing about gender).

Following this theoretical shift, the aim is to get beyond what Britzman (1995) refers to as pedagogies of inclusion to what I have called pedagogies of inquiry (C. Nelson, 1999). With an inquiry approach, the teaching aim is not to include minority sexual identities in order to encourage tolerance. It is rather to acknowledge and explore the ways in which sexual identities are part of day-to-day interactions. The focus is on analyzing linguistic and cultural practices (in this case, those pertaining to sexual identities) with a view to enabling second language learners to participate in those practices more fully, or perhaps more strategically.

Culture

Questions of culture arise in the class discussion featured in this case, so before turning to the classroom, I consider the notion of culture. A modernist view of culture informs much of the literature of ELT, which often uses the term to indicate “concrete, separate, behavior-defining ethnic, national and international groups with material permanence and clear boundaries” (Holliday, 1999, p. 242). However, as with identity, there have been shifts in ways of theorizing culture. As Usher and Edwards (1994) explain,

Postmodernism breaks with modernism in that the latter is a process of cultural differentiation producing clearly defined boundaries of practice and meaning whilst postmodernism on the other hand is a process of de-differentiation where boundaries break down. Consequently different cultural spheres lose their autonomy (p. 13, citing Lash, 1990)

With poststructuralism, then, regional or national cultures are not considered monolithic, mutually exclusive, or static but heterogeneous, overlapping, and
constantlly changing (Holliday, 1999). Cultures are "in a constant process of
transformation, redefinition, and reconceptualisation" (Simon, 1992, p. 25), and this
process involves struggle and contestation (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). Thus
cultures (much like identities) are considered not entities but processes, and these
processes are not mutually exclusive but interactive and mutually inflecting.

In terms of teaching English, Candlin (1989) argues for a "focus on inter-cultural
understanding rather than on cross-cultural accumulating" (p. 10). An intercultural
emphasis, as opposed to a cross-cultural one, underscores the fact that cultures are
neither fixed nor separate from each other. In addition, it keeps the focus grounded
in actual interactions. As Sarangi (1995) explains, "While 'cross-cultural' attends to
abstract entities across cultural borders, the 'intercultural' deals with the analysis of
an actual encounter between two participants who represent different linguistic and
cultural backgrounds" (p. 22).

An intercultural focus pertains not only to interactions between individuals but
to the shifting identities of individuals. As S. Hall (1992) puts it,

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)

It is crucial that these ideas be taken into account in ESL. As Norton (1997)
points out, although "immigrant learners' experiences in their native country may be
a significant part of their identity, these are constantly being mediated by their
experiences in the new country" (in Norton's case, Canada) (p. 413). This suggests
that it is not enough for teachers to simply invite students to discuss their native
countries. Instead, Norton argues, teachers need to provide opportunities for
students "to critically examine experiences in their native countries in the light of
more recent experiences in Canada or to critically examine their experiences in
Canada in light of experiences in the native country" (p. 413).

Something of this sort occurred in Roxanne's class, as the next section describes.

**DESCRIPTION**

Roxanne generally attempted to embed the grammar points she had to teach within
themes that students were raising in class and in their homework. She noted that in
their assigned journals, some students were writing about lesbian/gay themes on
their own initiative, with no such topics featured in their textbook. Nearly midway
through the term, Roxanne decided to incorporate this topic during a unit of work
on modal auxiliary verbs. Roxanne's approach to teaching modals was to consider
not only their lexicogrammatical aspects but also their social functions—in this case,
how modals are used in speculating or drawing conclusions based on perceptions
and how this use can be linked to, as she put it, "stereotyping."
SPECULATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Directions: For each situation below, think of 3 or 4 different possibilities to explain what is occurring.

Example: Those boys are hitting each other! They must be fighting. Or, they could be playing around. They might be pretending to hit each other.
1. She is talking so loudly to that man!
2. I saw my friend Jose hugging a strange woman on the sidewalk last night.
3. Those two women are walking arm in arm.

[...]

FIGURE 1. Worksheet

The Worksheet

Roxanne wrote a worksheet (see Figure 1) and assigned it for homework. After class I asked her why she included the scenario about the two women (No. 3).

[It's] a beautiful example because people see, especially on Oxford Street [a pseudonym]. It seemed to be a NATURAL example. . . . Almost across the board if a person's from this country [the United States] they're gonna visit that conclusion or speculation that the women are lesbians. And I think in other countries you could talk for a long time before that particular thing could come up for people.

In planning the next class session, Roxanne was eager to follow up in some way on that scenario—in fact, she explained that "the reason I did the whole worksheet was for No. 3." However, given the (potentially) lesbian subject matter, she was not sure whether "she should or could go deeper."

I tread softly on saying "So what do you think about that?" . . . It's possible that they're dying to be asked. But it's possible that they . . . don't really feel comfortable with the whole thing. . . . Being the kind of teacher I am where someone would say to me "Can I ask you a personal question?" And I just blush and sweat and freak out . . . I don't want to be so revealing in this public space. . . . So I'm hoping that this will come up naturally.

Before the next class began, Roxanne said she was feeling "nervous about that worksheet." She wanted to follow up the scenario of two women in some way, but she did not know how students would respond to it or even whether that particular scenario would stand out.

Although Roxanne was open to introducing lesbian/gay themes, or to having a student do so, at the same time she felt somewhat concerned about this. One reason was that she might feel, as she put it, "on the hot seat."

I don't know . . . if I'm gonna get a homophobic comment . . . I think people look at me like "What she gonna do or say?" . . . There's . . . always this fine balance of saying something that resonates where they are . . . and also probably challenges them but . . . not to lose them.
Another concern of Roxanne's was that she might appear uncomfortable.

I want to let students know that even if I look nervous or blush, that I do want this conversation to happen . . . , so there's this nervousness of mine to try to project across cultures that, uh, I wanna have this conversation . . . [Because] I'm not comfortable with that topic being so uncomfortable for most of us in the world. The topic of two women in love or two men in love.

Another factor adding to Roxanne's sense of apprehension was that she anticipated a wide range of experiences and viewpoints among the students in relation to lesbian/gay subject matter: "A lot of people in the room have a different starting place about this conversation . . . Some people live it every day, and some people don't think about it much . . . or don't wanna think about it." She expected that some of the students would themselves identify as gay or lesbian while others would find discussing homosexuality unfamiliar or even undesirable. It might be a challenge to accommodate this mix of perspectives and attitudes.

There was also the question of Roxanne's own sexual identity. In a previous class comprising newly arrived international students who wanted to study "lesbian and gay people," a student had asked Roxanne if she was a lesbian. Roxanne had found this question disturbing and unsettling, and she dreaded the prospect of facing it again in front of another class.

I'm afraid somebody's gonna, um, judge that part of me that doesn't yet know how to label myself . . . I don't want to, even. So that if the issue came up in class . . . I would already walk into it with sensitivity.

Given her desire to integrate lesbian/gay themes along with her concerns about doing so, Roxanne hoped these themes would be raised in an unobtrusive—what she called a "natural"—way.

Group Work and Class Discussion

Once in class, Roxanne had students form small groups to go through their answers to the worksheet and the reasons underpinning their speculations. As Roxanne circulated, a number of students asked her questions pertaining to the scenario of two women, such as whether it was possible to say I am loving someone and I fall love. As Roxanne interacted with each of the small groups, the focus was on grammatical structure, not on "how they felt about the situation": "I wasn't really asking 'Why do you say that? What makes you speculate that?' as much as 'So if you wanna express this, this is how you do it.'"

After 15 minutes of small-group work, Roxanne reconvened the class and invited questions about any of the worksheet scenarios. Roxanne fielded grammar questions about some of the other scenarios until finally, mindful that the class session was nearing its ending time, she decided to bring up the scenario of two women walking arm in arm. She did this by linking it to a student's question about using the continuous tense in one of the other scenarios, and she was grateful for "that natural segue."

Roxanne elicited some answers to No. 3 and then guided the class through an analysis of the grammar problems of sentences such as They could be loving. Focusing
on the grammar was “part of me as a teacher,” but also a means of coping with nervousness—“something to hang onto.”

As the discussion continued, one student (a man from Gambia) offered his answer. “They could be lesbians.” Roxanne then attempted to shift the focus away from grammar and onto the meanings ascribed to same-sex affection in public in the students’ home countries versus in the United States. Most students seemed to agree that, in their countries, same-sex affection did not indicate gender but that in the United States it did. Roxanne then asked how they had learned the local meaning. (For a complete transcript of Turns 159–246 of the class discussion, see C. Nelson, 1999.)

155 Roxanne: So I wanna know, how did you find out it was different in this country? Or, it could be different?

[..]

159 Roxanne: How about two men, 30 years old, walking down Oxford Street, they’re brothers. Holding hands, yes or no?

160 Students: No, no, no.

161 Roxanne: How did you learn that?

During the lively 15-minute discussion, an impressive half of the 26 students spoke in spite of the fact that getting and keeping the floor was not easy; most of Roxanne’s questions generated energetic responses, with a number of students speaking at once.

The students raised a range of issues and dilemmas about negotiating cultural meanings and meaning-making practices. For example, Raúl, a man from Mexico, said that in his country, it would be dangerous if two men were to hold hands. He contrasted this with the situation in the United States.

209 Raúl: It’s like, uh if were in my hometown, we see two people walk, two men, holding hands. Afraid they’re gonna get shot. (little laugh)

[..]

218 Raúl: So normal here to see couples holding

219 Roxanne: Yeah.

220 Raúl: Same sex together.

Given such sharp contrasts in the cultural practices that are associated with sexual identities, Fabiola, a woman from Brazil, raised the complex question of how to act when returning to her country after living away for some time.

228 Fabiola: . . . I . . . be like long time here and when get back, you know go back to my country again, I don’t know 1 year after that or something like. And I’m gonna see my friends! I’m gonna HUG them and walking you know? (little laugh)

And like, uh, you think people- maybe if you would do this here people “Ah! Maybe they are gay!”

Students noted that sexual identities are linked not only to cultural meanings but to gendered meanings.

252 Raúl: I think women will be different. I mean you can see womans everywhere in the world. They can hug and, you know, be kind of so sissy.
USING LESBIAN/GAY THEMES TO EXPLORE CULTURAL MEANINGS

Neuriden, a man from Morocco, raised another intercultural dilemma. He was not sure how to interact with children in the United States because touching them might be seen in a sexual way.

264 Neuriden: In my country they was playing around me. In my country I can play with them, I can touch them.
265 Roxanne: You can?
266 Neuriden: But here I was like afraid. (crosses his arms over his chest and laughs)

Raúl brought up the point that cultural differences are found not just between cultures but within them (intraculturally), citing contrasting responses in different parts of the United States to male-male affection in public.

302 Raúl: It depends on the city.
303 Roxanne: It depends on the city?
304 Raúl: Here . . . it's good . . . You go back to the East Coast, South, and Carolina, they'll BURN you there.

After class Roxanne reported being very pleased with the discussion. She felt the students had engaged with not only the grammatical form but also the intercultural complexities of formulating speculations. She also felt that she had benefited from the opportunity to reflect on her own teaching in relation to gay/lesbian topics.

It was a great experience . . . I'm really glad it happened when you were in the classroom too. Because . . . I get questions and more opportunities to think about it, which I think will make it easier for me to do this again. Continue. To not feel so freaked out by things that are part of life.

The students I interviewed were also very positive about this class discussion. (See C. D. Nelson, in press, for an examination of their perspectives, along with the classroom experiences of more than 100 teachers and students at other educational institutions.)

DIFFERENTIATING FEATURES

What was particularly innovative or noteworthy about Roxanne's attempts to acknowledge the multiplicity of sexual identities that exists beyond (and within) her classroom?

Taking Risks

On one level, what Roxanne did could be considered quite simple. In a worksheet, she included one scenario about same-sex affection, and in a follow-up class discussion, she initiated a discussion about that scenario, an activity pattern that was typical in her classroom. But as I have explained, Roxanne found these teaching events somewhat challenging because of the gay theme. Despite her own discomfort, she took the risk of making space for, and then pursuing, the lesbian topic.

Although students were writing about lesbian/gay matters in their journals (which only the teacher read), none had yet raised these matters in front of their peers. Although students working in small groups were discussing the same-sex
scenario and asking questions about it, when the class reconvened, none brought it up.

If Roxanne had not included that scenario on the worksheet or raised it for discussion in the whole group, even those students who wanted to bring up the subject may have felt it was inappropriate or too threatening to do so in the classroom context. If Roxanne had not taken it upon herself to create an opportunity for lesbian/gay themes to emerge, or if she had not responded with enthusiasm when this occurred, then the intriguing class discussion would probably not have ensued.

**Framing Questions Meaningfully and Respectfully**

Another distinguishing feature was how Roxanne framed her questions. She sought to make her class meaningful to all the students, respect students' privacy, and avoid distressing them in any way (knowing that some had experienced the traumas of war).

Keeping these objectives in mind, I note that Roxanne did not elicit students' personal experiences of seeing same-sex affection (or of engaging in it themselves). Instead, she posed a hypothetical situation in which students were asked to imagine (not to recall) witnessing same-sex affection ("Those two women are walking arm in arm") and to respond by speculating about what might be going on (see Figure 1). Through a series of questions, the students reached a general agreement that in the United States two women or two men displaying affection in public would tend to be seen as lovers whereas in many other countries this might not be the case. Roxanne then asked the class, "How did you learn that?"

This question gets at how people go about learning what unfamiliar cultural practices mean or might mean. By framing the interpretive process as potentially confusing, or inconclusive, Roxanne emphasized "ways of knowing" rather than "states of knowledge" (Bernstein, 1971, p. 57). In this way she steered clear of inviting discussion about the controversies that sometimes surround same-sex affection or relationships. She did not ask, for example, "Do you think lesbians should hold hands in public?"

She also managed to generate discussion about lesbians and gay men, but without making it prohibitive for lesbian and gay students to participate in the discussion. In other words, her questions did not construct the entire class as necessarily straight. She did not ask, for example, "When you see gay people walking down the street, how are they different from you?" (This made-up question and the one above may seem unlikely, but teachers in my study posed such questions to their classes, which is why I include them here in contrast to Roxanne's approach.)

**Framing Sexual Identities as Culturally Situated**

Also noteworthy is that Roxanne framed sexual identities as relational acts that are culturally situated, not as core inner truths that are timeless and universal and can be either expressed or suppressed (see C. Nelson, 1999). The emphasis was on examining local, everyday interactions, not exploring personal feelings or debating social issues (as it was in other classes that I observed). The focus was on how sexual identities are performed or communicated in particular contexts, and how meanings are made through this process. This focus made it possible to talk about the
challenging aspects of negotiating *acts of identity* (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), especially in intercultural contexts.

The class discussion touched on how sexual identities are open to interpretation and, therefore, misinterpretation, and how their meanings are not self-evident but must be learned. Interestingly, Roxanne did not specifically address sociopolitical questions in asking students how they learned that in the United States, two 30-year-old men holding hands are more likely to be lovers than to be brothers. But at the same time, students' responses to her question underscored the fact that sexual identities are not necessarily valued equally or neutrally but involve power differentials (as one student put it, in some contexts, two men holding hands might get shot whereas in other contexts this hand-holding might be considered normal).

What counts as normal or natural, then, is not inherent but socially created—and these norms are negotiated, managed, and contested. The underlying implication seems to be that sexual identities can be made to seem normal (or not normal). Although Roxanne's intention was not to debate the politics of sexual identities, the way she framed the discussion made it possible to acknowledge, or at least touch on, these aspects—but without courting controversy or setting up an issues-based debate.

**Foregrounding the Ambiguities of Identity Categories**

Another interesting aspect of teaching lesbian/gay topics involves the possibility that teachers' own sexual identities may be foregrounded in the classroom, which raises complex questions about how teachers are managing or representing their own (sexual) identities in class and what this might mean in relation to their teaching practices.

Whereas many contributors to the grassroots literature on gay/queer issues in language education (cited earlier in this chapter) themselves identify openly and unambiguously as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight, Roxanne did not identify with any of these categories. In the classroom or in the profession, when discussing lesbian or gay (or bisexual, transgendered, queer, or straight) matters, language professionals need to keep in mind that some people (students, their interlocutors, their teachers) do not ascribe to any of these identity categories. This may be because they are questioning or in transition from one category to another, because they object to the practice of classifying people according to sexual identity, or because they simply do not consider this identity domain significant enough to warrant attention.

In Roxanne's case, the openness and ambiguity that she herself felt in relation to sexual identity may have shaped her teaching practices—to good effect. Instead of fixed identities or positionings, the teaching focus was on the ambiguity of sexual identities, which worked well in this lesson about speculating.

Furthermore, the fact that gay themes were somewhat beyond Roxanne's comfort zone may have served more as a resource than a liability, causing her to carefully think through her teaching approach beforehand (while being prepared to take up opportunities as they arose in the moment). This suggests that for teachers, reflecting on their own motives for, and concerns about, engaging lesbian/gay themes in class may enhance their teaching practices.
PRACTICAL IDEAS

Drawing on Roxanne's experiences, this section offers practical suggestions for teachers who wish to acknowledge a range of sexual identities in terms of both what gets talked about in the classroom and whose perspectives get taken into account. The intention in putting forward concrete ideas in the form of questions for teachers to ask themselves is neither to be prescriptive nor to oversimplify complex matters but at least to put something on the table in the hope of sparking collegial discussions.

Create Opportunities for Discussing Lesbian/Gay Matters

Make a point of creating opportunities for students to discuss lesbian/gay issues:

- Have you considered the ways in which sexual identities feature within day-to-day interactions?
- Do your curricula and learning materials include representations across a range of sexual identities (straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer)?
- Where might there be openings to acknowledge this multiplicity and invite students to engage with it in some way?
- How might you proactively make spaces for lesbian/gay matters instead of relying on students to do so, as they may be taking their cue from you?

Address Tasks and Questions to Students of Any Sexual Identity

Frame classroom activities so that they are directed to students of any sexual identity:

- When framing learning tasks, activities, assignments, and discussion questions, do you consider to whom these are addressed?
- Are they directed to, and relevant to, students across a range of sexual identities?
- Do the tasks and questions invite the ready participation of all students, whatever their own positionings vis-à-vis sexual identity?

Use Lesbian/Gay Themes to Foster Inquiry

Make sure to use lesbian/gay themes to foster inquiry in ways that further the objectives of the class:

- When lesbian/gay themes arise, are they framed in ways that encourage inquiry, invite multiple interpretations, and take into account intercultural complexities?
- Are taken-for-granted notions problematized, explored, and opened up?
- Is it clear to students that gay themes are being used in ways that further the broader learning objectives of the class?
USING LESBIAN/GAY THEMES TO EXPLORE CULTURAL MEANINGS

Maximize Choices
Throughout the process of negotiating lesbian/gay themes, maximize choices for you and the students:

- When exploring bisexual/lesbian/gay themes in class, do you make a point of finding out students’ responses as a lesson progresses, to help you plan your next step?
- Do students have choices about the ways in which, and possibly the extent or the intensity to which, they are to participate in gay-themed discussions?
- Do they have choices about how personal or impersonal they wish to be?

Reflect on Your Own Motives and Concerns
Reflect on how your teaching practices are informed by your own motives and concerns with regard to (bi-, hetero-, and homo-) sexual identities:

- What do you hope to achieve by integrating gay, bisexual, and lesbian themes (or by not doing so)?
- How do your own experiences and viewpoints on this subject matter shape your teaching practices?
- Do you have any concerns about broaching the topic or dealing with it when others do so?
- Might the students have similar concerns as they negotiate discursive interactions in class and out of class—and if so, how can you structure learning tasks that will be of practical use to them?

◊ CONCLUSION
Roxanne was able to get beyond straight grammar in two ways. She explored not only grammar but also cultural meanings, and she did so in a way that encompassed meanings pertinent not only to straight people but potentially to anyone. Getting beyond straight grammar allowed Roxanne to accomplish her main aims: to make her teaching relevant to students in their day-to-day lives, and to integrate lesbian/gay issues in uncontrived ways.

By using lesbian/gay themes as a focal point, Roxanne made space to discuss acts of speculating—why they are sometimes necessary and how they are accomplished in English using modals. By asking about the cultural meanings and meaning-making practices associated with sexual identities, she made space to discuss the potentially perplexing aspects of managing intercultural interactions. Thus the ambiguity of interpreting same-sex affection proved a useful means of engaging students in thinking through the bigger-picture issues connected to the grammar point at hand.

This case suggests that keeping the teaching focus on questions of language, culture, and meaning-making practices may make it possible to engage lesbian/gay themes productively. Also helpful in this endeavor is conceptualizing sexual
identities as communicative acts or cultural practices that are accomplished in particular contexts with particular effects.

This teacher attempted to achieve a balance between "offering . . . opportunities for open-ended exploration and discussion and . . . fulfilling a responsibility for achieving established curriculum goals" (Mercer, 1995, p. 29). Roxanne managed to engage a student cohort that was multigenerational and markedly international (from 13 different countries) in a lively discussion about lesbian lovers during a lesson on modal auxiliary verbs. And she accomplished this despite her own nervousness with regard to gay themes. Paradoxically, what made this lesson stand out is that it did not stand out. This case demonstrates that integrating lesbian and gay themes in an ESL class can be, well, ordinary. Perhaps that is the extraordinary thing.

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❖ CONTRIBUTOR

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