This article focuses on a subset of the student cohort that has, until recently, been largely hidden from view in the literature of language education: gay immigrants. Little is known about what sorts of classroom experiences gay immigrant students find engaging or alienating, or why this sort of knowledge is needed. This case study uses interview excerpts to examine self-accounts of three classroom interactions that were significant to Pablo (a pseudonym), a 25-year-old gay man from Mexico studying English at a community college in the United States. The analysis takes into account Pablo’s premigration experiences, together with relevant literature on second language socialisation, sexual migration, and gay language learners. By tracing Pablo’s responses to the shutting down of gay themes, the presumption of heterosexuality, and the potential risks of signalling a gay identity, the analysis shows how gay topics and perspectives are constructed as unspeakable in the language classroom. The findings indicate that it can be difficult for gay immigrant (and international) students to establish communicative legitimacy in the language classroom, which can restrict learning opportunities. The classroom challenges that gay immigrants encounter—and the identity savvy they require—yield useful insights about language teaching in this age of mass migration.

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What might language education learn by looking at classroom life from the vantage point of gay immigrant students? This question is clearly not one that the field is accustomed to asking. Students who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (or their rough equivalences internationally) have, for the most part, been strangely absent from the classrooms, chat-rooms, and corridors of second language programs—at least as these are represented in the vast majority of language-education research. This is the case even in the plethora of studies that focus on issues of identity. However, as indicated in a handful of recent studies and practitioner accounts, gay students are becoming increasingly visible in language programs and classes (Courtney, 2007; Nelson, 2009; see also Beebe, 2002; Clemente &
Higgins, 2005; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Ellwood, 2006; King, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004). Yet very little is known about why these students have migrated, what sorts of classroom practices they are likely to find engaging or alienating, or what teachers need to know about this segment of the student cohort in order to provide them with a quality education.

Existing literature suggests that teachers who have had a gay student come out to them after class are sometimes uncertain about how to respond, beyond a vague attempt to offer supportive advice to that individual. For example, an English as a second language (ESL) teacher in the United States said she felt at a loss when a male student told her he had come to that country in order to come out as gay: “I didn’t know that much about it . . . . About all I knew was to say Take your time, and take it step by step” (Nelson, 2009, p. 31).

Moreover, there is growing evidence that, when a student either comes out as gay or is called gay by others in the classroom context, it is not unusual for that student to receive a negative reaction from their classmates; when this occurs, some teachers are unsure of how to respond—often choosing silence (see Moita-Lopes, 2006; Nelson, 2009). For instance, during a discussion in an ESL class that Courtney (2007) was teaching in New York, a number of students were expressing the view that “homosexuals” could be readily identified as such because of “effeminate body language, or distinctive ways of talking and walking” (p. 14). The majority of students agreed that “all homosexuals should be avoided,” and at that point one student who had been quiet throughout the discussion spoke up: “Slightly ashen, his eyes fixed straight ahead,” Sam told the class that he was gay (p. 14). Some of the male students responded by moving their chairs far from Sam. The teacher reports that, after considering various possibilities, she “opted to say nothing about the repositioned chairs, and simply returned to the lesson” (p. 15); nothing more was ever said in class about the events of that day. One wonders how Sam himself experienced these events, and how they may have affected his social interactions and learning experiences in that class and beyond it.

Also clear from recent studies is that gay content is increasingly arising in curricula and classroom discourse (Benesch, 1999; Nelson, 2009; Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005), but ironically, some teachers are approaching gay subject matter in ways that seem to ignore or exclude gay students. For example, as part of a larger research study I was conducting on sexual identities in language education, I was observing an ESL class, at a university in the United States, in which the students had collectively chosen lesbian/gay culture as a class topic. The students were asked: “Do you have friends, know people, or know about people who are gay? If yes . . . . how are they different from you?” (Nelson, 2009, p. 129). Interviewing the teacher, Tony, afterward, I asked if he ever thought
about the possibility that some of his students might be gay or lesbian. He said, “I rarely get the feeling that my students are gay . . . I don’t [take] that care into my group of cares that I have when I’m teaching” (p. 135).

Not taking gay students into account, or being oblivious to their presence, is hardly unusual in language education, where little attention has been paid to gay immigrant and international students and how to support their learning. The widespread collective ignorance about gay students may have many reasons, including the following: A tendency to view (homo)sexualities as a private matter involving physical sex, rather than a public matter involving community, identity, knowledge, and discourse (Britzman, 2000); variations internationally and locally as to whether being gay is considered “cool” or can get one killed (Dalley & Campbell, 2006, p. 23); cultural variations about how sexual identities are conceptualised and how openly these are discussed (see Livia & Hall, 1997; O’Móchain, 2006; Santiago, 2002); the perception that gay students are few and far between; the difficulties for researchers of gaining access to this often hidden population (see Kuhar & Švab, 2008; Simon-Maeda, 2004); the potential career risks of researching transgressive sexualities; a tendency to normalise only heterosexuality, rather than sexual variation ( Warner, 1993); and so on. In my view, it is precisely because these issues are complex and often contentious that their effects on the field of language education—and, in particular, on gay students—warrant some rigorous attention.

This article explores the following questions: What sorts of classroom moments or interactions are particularly noteworthy or significant to gay immigrant students, and why? How do these students manage challenging classroom interactions that pertain to sexual identities or inequities? And how might a greater understanding of these students’ experiences in and out of class inform language pedagogies and enhance learning opportunities, especially (but not exclusively) for gay students? Taking a case study approach, I examine one gay immigrant’s experiences of classroom life and his creative resourcefulness in managing the constraints and opportunities that he encountered. The analysis focuses on transcribed interviews with Pablo (names of research participants are pseudonyms) and draws together a range of relevant literature, primarily on second language socialisation, gay migration, and gay language learners.

INTERVIEWING PABLO

Pablo was a 25-year-old man who, about 1 year previously, had migrated from Mexico to the United States, where he was studying ESL at a community college (and doing clerical work for a bank). My
interviews with Pablo were part of a multisite, empirical study that I was conducting on how and why gay and lesbian subject matter is arising in English language classes and how it can be usefully framed to foster language learning and student engagement (Nelson, 2009).\(^1\) Pablo’s ESL class was one of the classes that I observed for the larger study, and he was one of 28 ESL students who volunteered to be interviewed—in his case, three times over the term, for a total of just over 5 hours.

Our interviews focused initially on how Pablo had experienced one particular gay-themed class discussion that I had observed (for an analysis of the perspectives of Pablo, three other students, and the teacher, see Nelson, 2009, chapter 8). That interview topic served as a springboard for him to talk about many aspects of his life inside and outside the classroom, both before and after migrating. After transcribing the interviews, I undertook an iterative process of coding and recoding the transcripts. For this article I selected excerpts that seem to most vividly and succinctly illuminate key issues integral to Pablo’s life as a gay immigrant student—not just as an immigrant student, a gay student, or a gay immigrant.

Any research design has its limitations: With a case study approach, it is not possible to ascertain the typicality or otherwise of just the one case, so the generalizability of the analysis is necessarily limited, perhaps especially when presenting only one perspective on a reported interaction. Also, being interviewed in English, not his native Spanish, may have affected what Pablo was able to say and how well I could understand his intended meaning. Nonetheless, focusing on the reported experiences of one student across several of his classes makes it possible to produce an in-depth analysis, which can, I hope, help TESOL practitioners to look afresh at some habitual classroom practices that may be so familiar they can be difficult to see (following Harklau, 2000). Clearly, further research is needed on gay immigrant students, but I hope that this case study will prompt exactly that.

**THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

The analysis is grounded in the following concepts from applied linguistics, critical social theory, and education.

First, second language socialisation—or the processes of gaining expertise in new discourse practices and entry into new discourse communities (Duff, 2007)—can be impeded when immigrants are excluded from, rather than welcomed into, the conversations taking

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\(^1\)In line with the requirements of each participating institution, I obtained written informed consent from the more than 100 research participants, including Pablo.
place in those communities (Norton & Toohey, 2001). Particularly for new immigrants, classroom interactions and relationships play a crucial role in setting up expectations about what is possible and desirable in the new country (Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, what is especially important about in-class interactions is how the participants experience these.

Second, some voices “count” more than others: Interlocutors do not all share “equal speaking rights and opportunities” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 646). The processes of establishing communicative legitimacy are inequitable: Some individuals, some groups, have more say than others with regard to what can be talked about, and how (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). Within a given context and with given interlocutors, gauging what can or cannot be said involves assessing the likely “social conditions of acceptability” of one’s discourse (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 76). In the classroom context, it is generally teachers who play a large part in determining what constitutes “allowable discourses,” which are in turn linked to “allowable identities” (Roberts & Sarangi, 1995, p. 378).

Third, communicative exchanges are understood to involve acts of identity, including hidden identities (Vandrick, 1997). Social identities are understood here in a poststructuralist sense: not as static facts but dynamic acts—acts that are contextually variable, interactionally achieved, historically inflected, and differentially valued. It follows that language learners and teachers can benefit from a nuanced understanding of the processes, representations, and performances of identity as integral aspects of human communication (see, e.g., Canagarajah, 1993; Harklau, 2000; Lin, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996; Nelson, 2009).

The fourth concept, heteronormativity (see Warner, 1993), refers to the notion that only heterosexuality is normal or natural (as opposed to the notion of benign sexual variation [Rubin, 1993]). As I have noted elsewhere: “hegemonic norms [positing] heterosexuality, and only heterosexuality, as desirable are potent and pervasive; yet, at the same time, there are competing discourses in wide circulation that are challenging this heteronormativity” (Nelson, 2006, p. 4). In recent years, the widespread debates about same-sex marriage are but one indication that sexual identity discourses are highly contested and in flux worldwide.

Fifth, because of the pervasive power of heteronormativity, people who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, or queer have often had to develop “sexual literacy,” that is, a “meta-critical consciousness, often experienced as a running meta-narrative about how dynamics in particular spaces control, contain, prompt, or provoke various self-representations” (Alexander & Banks, 2004, p. 287). Malinowitz (1995) explains it this way:
Because lesbians and gay men must constantly assess the consequence of being out and negotiate the terms of disclosure, often necessitating elaborate monitoring of what is said and even thought. . . , a particular complication is woven into their processes of construing and constructing knowledge. Even for those who are most out, acts of making meaning involve constant confrontations with many of the premises and mandates of the dominant culture. (p. 24)

These meaning-making processes may be especially challenging for gay immigrants, for whom the premises and mandates of the new cultural milieu—and the new language—may be unfamiliar and puzzling (see Espín, 1999; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004).

Last, a few words about terminology. In this article I use gay rather than lesbian, queer, bisexual, or a phrase combining these. This is largely for empirical reasons: gay was the term Pablo used to describe himself, and most existing studies of sexual-minority students that I am citing focus on gay-identified men (women rarely feature, unfortunately). I use immigrant to refer to those who, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, have settled in a new adopted country (as migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers, with documentation or without), and to transmigrants—those who live betwixt and between national borders by regularly shuttling between two or more countries (see Luibhéid, 2005; Sánchez, 2007). Also, I tend to use the term classroom because Pablo was recounting face-to-face interactions that took place in physical classrooms, but many of the issues discussed here are likely to be relevant in virtual learning environments too (see, e.g., Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005).

LANGUAGE EDUCATION AS A SITE OF GAY MIGRATIONS

To gain a greater understanding of how gay immigrant students experience the language class and what this might mean for language education, it is useful to first consider the main reasons for gay migrations, and then Pablo’s in particular.

Some gay people who move to a new country do so because of war, poverty, or other reasons not directly related to their sexual identity. For example, gay high-school student Zadun had moved with his family from war-torn Somalia to Canada (Dalley & Campbell, 2006). But many gay adults who migrate do so, at least in part, for reasons associated with sexuality; in migration studies, this is referred to as sexual migration (Carrillo, 2004, citing Cantú, 1999).

“Sexual migrants” are those migrants seeking “greater sexual equality and rights,” or at least some distance from sexuality-related discrimination or oppression, and their numbers are on the rise (Carrillo, 2004, p. 59). Although recent years have seen enormous gains in gay rights
and visibility in some countries, many gay people worldwide are still living in dire situations. As recently as 2008: “In 86 countries, consensual, adult homosexual activity is a criminal offense. In 10 countries it is punishable by death. Crimes against homosexuals all over the world include killing, torture and arbitrary imprisonment” (Thapar, 2008, paragraphs 14 and 15). Those who flee their home country and, due to the dangers, are unable to return can be considered sexual exiles (Arman, 1992). Other gay immigrants are motivated not so much by a need to flee persecution as a desire to be with their partner (or to find a partner), or simply to enjoy the possibility of having sexual or romantic relationships in a less oppressive environment (Carrillo, 2004).

Fleeing persecution and violence and seeking love and companionship were the two main themes that arose in Kato’s (1999) survey of gay and lesbian international students in the United States. She found that the overriding concerns for these students were (a) the dangers that might befall them when they returned to their home countries if word got back that they were gay (for example, not being hired, or being attacked by so-called “social cleansing squads” [p. 3]); and (b) the difficulties of maintaining a relationship with a local or foreign partner, given the lack of legal options (e.g., marriage) allowing same-sex couples to live and work in the one country.

The interconnectedness of moving countries, developing gay identities and relationships, and learning a second language is prominent in the lives of the few gay students who do feature in language-education research. Three examples: Katsuyuki, a young Japanese man studying ESL, became an international student because he desired an Australian boyfriend (Ellwood, 2006); Hyoung and other Korean men found their English improved substantially when they socialized with English-speaking boyfriends overseas and within transnational gay communities (King, 2008); and Raimundo, an Argentinian who was imprisoned and tortured for being gay, ended up travelling the world, learning over a dozen languages, and settling in Japan, where he became a language teacher (Beebe, 2002).

Pablo’s Migration and Pursuit of English

As for Pablo, though he loved many things about life in Mexico and missed his parents, he had moved to the United States in order to escape the omnipresent threat of anti-gay harassment, persecution, and violence that was, by his account, commonplace in northern Mexico, where he was from. As just one example, when Pablo was a university student in Mexico, some of his fellow students were arrested in a police raid of a “big gay party”; afterward, these students were thrown out of
their homes (when their families learned they were gay), outing in the media, and expelled from the university, with those about to graduate not allowed to complete their degrees (for an analysis of educational policies internationally with regard to gay youth, see Sears, 2005). Pablo also said that in his hometown, it was not unusual for gay men to be murdered: “They kill very . . . sadistic. Like very—they destroy their bodies.” But crimes against gay men would not be prosecuted or even investigated, he said. The threat of anti-gay violence meant that Pablo lived in fear and did not even attempt to date: “What if I go out to meet somebody. And then I meet . . . the murder guy?”

As Pablo described it, living in Mexico as a gay man meant that whether he was at school, at work, at home, or on the streets, he almost always had to be “very careful”: “In Mexico . . . I never say it, I’m gay. . . . When I was asked in Mexico, most of the times I say it No I’m not gay. . . . I was feeling like Oh man, why why do I have to say this? But . . . people have to do that.” For gay people, he said, Mexican society was “a knife with two sides . . . any side you will go, you will get cut, you will get hurt.”

He said he had “finally” decided to move to the U.S. because he wanted to “be in a place where it [being gay] is accepted, to see what I feel, how I change” (Nelson, 2009, p. 193). Being able to socialise with other gay people was part of the impetus for migrating to the United States, where, as Pablo put it: “Americans, . . . they say I’m gay, any problem? [laughs] . . . They are so open.” He said in the U.S. he was able to have gay neighbours and friends and not “get problems”; whereas in Mexico, if he were to befriend someone known to be gay then he “would be gay for everybody too. Even if I’m not.” From our interviews, it was clear that Pablo was actually learning about and experimenting with new ways of being gay in this new country (Espín, 1999), as seen in his classroom accounts.

Also clear was that his level of investment in learning English (Norton Peirce, 1995) was very high, and was inextricably linked to his sexual identity:

I’m trying really hard to learn English because it’s very important . . . for gay people . . . to be prepared . . . I will meet [gay] people maybe from Iraq . . . But he is not going to talk with me in Spanish, in my language. And not even in his language. He’s gonna talk with me in English. So I need to—to speak English well. (Pablo as quoted in Nelson, 2009, p. 194)

Thus for Pablo, as for countless others, the English language functions as a sort of gay lingua franca that facilitates entry into a global gay community (see also Beebe, 2002; King, 2008).
CLASSROOM LIFE OF A GAY IMMIGRANT STUDENT

The following interactions recounted by Pablo took place in three different ESL classes with three different teachers, but all within the same community college ESL program, which comprised mostly immigrants and refugees.

Unviable Subjects: The Shutting Down of Gay Topics

In the language teaching literature, it is often emphasised that in the classroom learners should be encouraged to raise meaningful, timely issues from their own lives, and “not just react and respond to what the teacher says” (Kumaravadivelu, 1996, p. 243). The point is “to help language learners claim the right to speak outside the classroom. To this end, the lived experiences and social identities of language learners need to be incorporated into the . . . curriculum” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 26; italics added). This is considered vital for immigrant students in particular, given the social isolation and marginalisation they often experience (see Baynham, 2006). However, Pablo struggled to recall any time when gay identities or perspectives had been incorporated into any of his ESL curricula or classroom conversations, excepting the class session previously mentioned that I had observed in my larger study (Nelson, 2009). He did remember one other class in which something gay-related had arisen, albeit briefly.²

P One of the guys . . . in my class, he talked about gay people . . . But, uh, my teacher stopped him talking about that . . . She did something that, uh, took us to—to talk about something else . . . [The student] said I think that my boss is gay because he likes to hug male, young men usually . . . The teacher told us [putting on a nervous, high-pitched voice] Yeah, maybe he—maybe he’s gay. There are a lot of gay people in this country and, uh, and maybe . . . he enjoys, uh, hugging young people because he feels good. OK, the next, uh, the homework for—You know? [P laughs] . . . And I said [to myself] Oh, excuse me, hello! We’re talking about gay people! [We laugh]

Pablo perceived this exchange as one in which the teacher responded to another student by silencing, trivialising, or dismissing as irrelevant gay topics and, presumably, gay people. Pablo found the teacher’s reaction disappointing, but not surprising. He explained that he had encountered this sort of discomfort throughout his life, even after migrating (which ran counter to his usual construction of the United

²In the interview transcripts throughout this article, P= Pablo and C= Cynthia; an ellipsis indicates deleted speech that was redundant or extraneous to the point at hand (with a bracketed ellipsis indicating deleted speech across several turns); and italicised text indicates either a humorous, mocking tone or strong emphasis.
States as a sort of gay haven): “That’s what I have seen of people in every place . . . . I have been here in the United States, even here, and Mexico . . . . They kind of accept it [homosexuality] but . . . they don’t really accept it. They don’t accept it, you know, in the totality.” What Pablo perceived to be the teacher’s squamish discomfort in talking about gay men (much less with them) apparently made him feel alienated and disengaged in that class, which was in stark contrast to his enthusiasm for his other ESL classes and teachers.

In Pablo’s view, the teacher stopped the conversation because she was uncomfortable talking about anything gay. In my larger study, I found that some teachers were uncomfortable with gay subject matter and would shut down the topic when it arose in class. In fact, one teacher reported that when he brought up lesbian and gay topics at an English as a foreign language teachers’ conference, his colleagues were outraged; some even expressed the view that gay people “need to be killed” (Nelson, 2009, p. 85). However, it is also possible that in the “gay boss” scenario that Pablo witnessed, his teacher decided to take the floor and stop the conversation not to avoid hearing anything gay, as Pablo surmised, but rather to avoid hearing anything antigay. In my larger study I found that some teachers were uncomfortable hearing students express antigay remarks, and if they felt such a remark was imminent, they would jump in to change the subject; this was the teachers’ way of protecting any gay students in the classroom—or, in some cases, themselves—from feelings of discomfort (Nelson, 2009).

In any case, what is significant about the gay boss scenario is that, apparently, no reason was given by the teacher for swiftly closing down a gay topic—which meant it was up to Pablo (and his classmates) to surmise the meaning behind the teacher’s action. Thus Pablo’s account suggests that rendering gay subject matter unspeakable in the classroom—especially if done on a routine basis, and without any explanation—runs the risk of alienating gay students and cutting short valuable learning opportunities for all students. Importantly, it also indicates that when gay themes are absent from class curricula and conversations, as it seems they often are, this does not necessarily mean these themes have not been raised by students, or are not of interest to them; it may simply mean that these themes have been silenced, and for whatever reason are not considered “allowable discourses” (Roberts & Sarangi, 1995, p. 378; see also Nelson, 2010).

As an example of that last point, one teacher in my larger study said that, at a language school just one block from Pablo’s college, the teachers were prohibited from discussing gay themes in their classes: “[T]heir administrative dictate is, This is not to be discussed in the classroom. . . . So the students walk outside the door and see men holding hands . . . . They’re a
block from a gay bar! . . . [But] they have a conservative administration . . . . They see it as promoting a lifestyle” (Nelson, 2009, p. 47). Thus in some classroom contexts, even when out gay couples are literally in full view across the street, it is considered inappropriate to allow any mention of gay people. Under such heteronormative conditions, it is difficult to imagine how gay immigrant students would be able to achieve communicative legitimacy or feel welcomed into the discourse community of the classroom.

**Serious Parody: Skirting the Straight Presumption**

In language classes, activities in which students are asked to disclose autobiographical information are commonplace (Menard-Warwick, 2004), especially in relation to topics like family and marriage. In an article on “addressing heterosexism,” Kappra (1998) advises English language teachers to “be careful of activities that ask students to talk about romantic relationships” (p. 19), the idea being that such subject matter might be sensitive for gay students who do not feel they can be out, thus putting them in an awkward position. However, Pablo found a recent class discussion of marriage immensely pleasurable.

*P* Our teacher [Alicia] was asking everyone Would you like to get married? . . . How would you like your partner to be? . . . What would you like of your partner? . . . What wouldn’t you like? . . . She was asking like, um, *why* . . . of every answer . . . The day before somebody asked her Are you married? And she said No I’m not. So the student asked her Why? And she said Because I don’t wanna share! I don’t wanna share my music, I don’t wanna share anything. . . . That’s why I’m not married and I don’t have children. So yesterday she was asking everyone. And . . . when she asked me . . . if I wanted to get married . . . I answer exactly the same answer she gave us. [*P* laughs] I told her No I don’t wanna get married and I’m not married and I don’t have children. And she asked me Why? the same that the students asked her. And I told her Because I don’t wanna share! I don’t wanna share my music, I don’t wanna share anything. Exactly. [*P* is laughing] And she told me That’s the same answer I did—I gave yesterday! [*P* laughs] It was fun. It was fun. Very fun. [ . . . ] [Then] the teacher . . . [was asking] students who are men . . . Would you marry a lady . . . who has a second relationship . . . when is married with you . . . at the same time? . . . And a lady [in the class] said No I won’t! [*P* laughs] And everybody was laughing. . . . And I told Alicia, She’s lesbian! [*P* laughs] . . .

*C* Did you say that in the class?

*P* Oh no, I just—in my mind.

Pablo managed to find a way to actively participate in this class discussion—but without actually disclosing any information about his own sexual identity or relationship status and preferences. His answer to the teacher’s questions ventriloquised, and thus parodied, the same
non-answer that she had recently given when the same question was put to her by a student (see Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008).

Pablo told me he believed this teacher was lesbian, which I think may explain part of the fun for Pablo of this “verbal play” (Lin, 2005, p. 327). Seen in this light, Pablo’s parody of his teacher’s explanation of why marriage did not interest her can be read as a sort of inside joke with the teacher, an open secret between the two of them, performed in the public forum of the classroom. In this context, “I don’t wanna share my music, I don’t wanna share anything” becomes a coded message of queerness. Pablo reiterates it back to Alicia, letting her know that he’s gay too, and she, through her response of surprised delight, is letting him know that she gets his hidden meaning (following Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 115, on the intimacy of jointly transgressing social taboos). Thus, by “saying and not saying” at the same time (which Zwicky [1997, p. 28] describes as a common pragmatic strategy in “gay male talk and writing”), Pablo was able to display his wit and feel some connection to the class and especially the teacher—during a discussion of marriage, of all things.

It is also interesting to note Pablo’s tendency, evident in the transcript above and throughout our interviews, to recount things he “said” in class—which, on further questioning, often turned out to be things he thought or wanted to say but did not actually verbalise. He often seemed to feel that he was participating actively in communicative exchanges—especially with his teachers—that were nonverbal and relied upon innuendo. He seemed so accustomed to not saying that one wonders about the effects on his language learning of rarely verbalizing his “running meta-narrative[s]” (Alexander & Banks, 2004, p. 287).

This leads to another interesting aspect of this classroom interaction, namely, the sharp contrast between what Pablo felt he could say about marriage in the classroom versus outside it (see also Ellwood, 2006). In one of our interviews, Pablo raised the subject of marriage, expressing frustration about the lack of same-sex marriage options in the United States. It was “very hard,” he said, for foreign partners in same-sex couples: If they were “illegal” they could not stay in the United States with their partner, yet they could not “become legal” by marrying their partner because it was not legal to marry someone of the same sex. He joked about having to make another move—this time to England, as he had heard from his roommate that same-sex marriage was legal there. Yet he said none of these things in the classroom interaction recounted above, even when specifically asked by the teacher whether he wanted to get married. Of course, there are always things that students do not say in class (Menard-Warwick, 2004); that is, in itself, not a problem. However, there is a problem if classroom discourse and curricula focus exclusively on straight social conventions and routinely and unquestioningly presume
that all students have, or hope to have, heterosexual relationships. Such practices make it difficult for gay students to feel they have the option of speaking about their lives and concerns, should they so wish.

**Risking Rapport: Coming Out Codes in the Classroom**

As part of the underlife of the classroom, peer interactions that take place offstage, as it were, can provide students with a semiprivate space in which to bond together to resist hegemonic authority forces, such as the teacher, the school, Western interests or the middle classes (Canagarajah, 1993; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Harklau, 2000; Lin, 2005). But offstage interactions can prove problematic for students known, or perceived, to be gay, as they may be mocked, taunted, or shunned by peers (see Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Moita-Lopes, 2006). The peer exchange recounted by Pablo below took place between him and another immigrant from Mexico, on a day that their class was meeting in the computer lab. Even though the exchange was not without conflict, Pablo found it very pleasing.

*P* Playing with the computer I found how to change the colours in the screen . . . And one of my classmates, he’s Latin, I mean he speaks Spanish, he was sitting right beside me and . . . he told me Why are you doing that?! . . . I found valentines colour and I changed it and everything was pink in my computer. [*P* laughs] And I wasn’t embarrassed. And I changed it because I *knew* somebody was going to tell me something. Well [Raúl] told me right away when he saw my computer. *Why did you change to pink colour?!* . . . And I tell him Because I like it! Because I like it. And, so what? [*P* laughs] And he told me *Oh no!* He was like This is unbelievable for you, Pablo—from you! . . . Let me tell you [Cynthia] that in South America, I mean in Mexico, I mean in all the countries like where people speak Spanish, if a man likes pink colour that’s very interesting. Because it means for the people that he’s gay . . . Or if some man is wearing a pink shirt, they say He’s gay . . . I knew he was going to tell me something, that’s why I changed the colour . . . I started to speak English to him after he told me. To—to make [the teacher] hear us. . . . He was tellin’ me in Spanish. . . . He didn’t try to . . . fight with me. I mean, I didn’t either. I was, you know, I just was

*C* You were kind of testing, or checking?

*P* Uh-huh [We laugh].

*C* Uh, yeah. You wanna find out his attitude?

*P* Uh-huh. And I did . . . . He doesn’t like. [. . .] If I was looking for some answer now I have it. And I say I shouldn’t have told this guy that. That I like to work with pink colour in my computer. You know? But I should tell this [other] guy and he will say Ooooh! I have some pink markers, you can use them all. You know what I mean? . . .

*C* So you find out

*P* Who to be open with.
Once again, when it came to matters of sexual identity, Pablo was masterful at simultaneously saying and not saying. Here he managed to successfully convey to his classmate Raúl that he was gay, but without any sort of verbal declaration (Enteen, 2001; Santiago, 2002): he simply changed the screen colour, relying on an understanding (which Raúl apparently shared) that, in Spanish-speaking circles, the colour pink serves as a gay signifier (see Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, on indirect strategies for interpreting sexual identities). When faced with Raúl’s response of incredulity that he was gay, Pablo simply reiterated his preference for pink.

“The line between perceived tolerance and incipient violence,” Bronski (1998) notes, “[is] often shifting. . . . To overstep or misperceive the line could lead to harassment or physical attack” (p. 55)—possibilities that gay students often fear (Malinowitz, 1995). This may help to explain why Pablo code-switched from Spanish to English once Raúl reacted to his implicit coming out. At that point Pablo wanted to ensure that their teacher could overhear and understand what was being said, which suggests he considered her a sort of protective presence or resource if things were to turn ugly (not an unreasonable fear, especially given his premigration life). In fact, Pablo believed this teacher too to be a lesbian, so he may have surmised she would not tolerate any anti-gay comments from Raúl. The switch to English may also have served as a subtle reminder to Raúl that though they were both from Mexico, they were now on new turf, and the rules of the game had changed.

It may be important for many gay immigrants, as it was for Pablo, to ascertain who they can be open with about their homosexuality, and who else in the class is gay. On a practical level, this sort of knowledge can make it possible to find suitable conversation partners in the target language. King (2008) reports that gay Korean men in his study found it easier to learn English by interacting with other gay men instead of straight people because gay men granted them “instant legitimacy” rather than eventual tolerance: As Hyoung put it, speaking English with “straight people is . . . very difficult sometimes and not very much comfortable”; in contrast, “Gay people like they know our life and . . . the y’know experience and we can share” (p. 242). Subtly ascertaining who is and is not gay can also be considered a safety strategy, given the social ostracism mentioned earlier, and may be helpful in working out who to stay clear of in group or pair work, for example. Signalling a gay identity can also help students to access queer social networks, which are invaluable to gay immigrants, given that some have been rejected by their families (Thing, 2007). Queer study networks can also be useful, because, as Malinowitz (1995) found, “Lesbian and gay students lack an audience of their peers, a group whose ‘reading schema’ line up with their own” (p. 131). And of course, signalling a gay identity can be part
of finding other gay people for socialising with and dating, which in the case of some students, like Pablo, may have been a major motivation for migrating. Moreover, being able to connect with other gay people in the classroom becomes more feasible for gay students if they feel confident, as Pablo seemed to here, that their teachers are likely to challenge—rather than condone or ignore—antigay reactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

It is likely that there are far more gay-identified immigrant (and international) students in language programs than is generally recognised. As one ESL teacher I interviewed put it: "I think a lot of students come to this country [the U.S.] in order to come out . . . [from] cultures where that’s much more difficult to do" (Nelson, 2009, p. 33). Moreover, many immigrant students who are not straight are not readily identifiable—and do not wish to be, given the social and material dangers outlined in this article (for an account of a gay student who created a straight persona just for his ESL classes, see Nelson, 2010). Pablo, for one, was clearly not accustomed to explicitly telling people he was gay: Back in Mexico, as mentioned, he would deny it if asked (not surprisingly, given the dangers); and he had not told any of his U.S. teachers, not even the two he believed to be lesbians. In fact, it was only in our final interview, when I told Pablo that from the things he had been saying I was getting the impression that maybe he was gay, that he verbally came out to me, which, he said, was very rare for him to do: “You are one of the very little persons who I—who I say to that I’m gay.”

In this age of migration, teachers need to be aware that, as Pablo’s coded coming out to Raúl intimates, ways of conceptualising and signalling sexual identities are characterised by a great deal more implicitness, fluidity, and ambiguity in some parts of the world than in others. In the United States, for example, there tends to be an emphasis on coming out as an explicitly verbalised speech act, whereas in Latin American countries and cultures, coming out is generally understood to be less verbalised, less overt, and more wily (Santiago, 2002); similarly, a study of Thai women in same-sex relationships found that “the practice of verbally coming out is considered unnecessary, undesirable, and specifically Western” (Enteen, 2001, p. 114).

Though gay immigrant students are not necessarily recognisable as such to their teachers, their perspectives and concerns still need to be taken into account. This case study, though small in scale, provides a starting point for identifying some of the key classroom concerns of gay immigrant students, which can be summarised as follows:
• How one’s teachers and classmates do, or might, react when gay subject matter arises, and how open they are to engaging with it;
• how to respond to, or perhaps circumvent, autobiographical questions, perhaps especially involving one’s relationship or family life, and still take part in the group’s interactions; and
• how to identify other gay students and be identified by them, but without attracting negative attention from others.

What these concerns imply for language teaching is outlined below. Of course, the broad implications that follow would need to be modified and adapted in accordance with the needs, aims, and constraints particular to a given geo-region, institution, course, student cohort, teaching style, and so on. (Also, the following implications pertain not only to teaching but also to related endeavours that support student learning, such as teacher education and professional development, research, curriculum and materials development, educational policy, and student support services.)

Implication 1. Be willing to engage with gay topics and perspectives, and use any discomfort or dilemmas that may arise (for oneself or others) to illuminate the sociosexual dimensions of communication.

Student mentions of a gay boss, acquaintance, family member, and so on can serve to open up a conversation rather than shut it down. In terms of how to frame lesbian and gay subject matter and perspectives in transnational classes of English language learners, in my larger empirical study I found that what seemed most effective was neither a “counseling approach,” which focused on personal feelings, nor a “controversies approach,” which focused on social debates—although these two approaches were the most commonly used ones by the over 40 teachers in my study (who were based in half a dozen countries). Instead, what I found to be most effective was a “discourse inquiry approach,” which focuses on analysing the linguistic and cultural practices associated with identities, texts, meanings, and norms (Nelson, 2009, p. 210).

For example, the gay boss exchange that Pablo witnessed could have led to a discussion of how gay people are often hypersexualised and how such stereotyping might impede communication and social relations (see Benesch, 1999; Curran, 2006; Moita-Lopes, 2006); for example, interpreting same-sex affection as necessarily sexual, or gay people as necessarily sexually predatory, could affect one’s workplace interactions. Or that classroom exchange could have led to a more general discussion of, for example, what constitutes socially appropriate touching versus sexual harassment in local workplaces, and what one might say or do if faced with that situation. If there is a sense that some students are not comfortable with or used to talking about gay subject matter in a
classroom context, the discussion could be framed around how interlocutors handle interactions in which they do not agree about “what constitutes a culturally appropriate topic of conversation” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 646). The point is that simply ignoring or avoiding gay content when students bring it up may make any student—gay or straight—hesitant to bring up such content again, which can mean the class misses out on many potential learning opportunities. Moreover, one’s own discomfort as a teacher can be a useful signal that clashing discourses are at play and may need to be teased out.

Implication 2. Frame class activities and discussions in ways that allow for gay speaking positions and vantage points, within social interactions inside or outside the classroom.

The “Are you married/Do you want to get married?” line of questioning is a very common one in ESL classes, and gay immigrant students—like many other students—may benefit from an opportunity to learn some alternative ways of addressing it. When Curran (2006) was asked by his ESL students in Australia whether he was married, he first answered no, but followed this up the next day by asking the class to identify the types of getting-to-know-you questions that were potentially “sensitive, problematic, or offensive” and why (p. 87); this led in turn to an interesting class discussion of local family forms, including same-sex marriage and gay parenting (and, eventually, to the teacher telling the class that he had found the marriage question difficult to answer because he could not legally marry his partner, a man). Thus, class activities and discussions about family and dating can be framed in ways that invite the active participation of those in nonnormative relationships and that highlight the changing discourse conventions associated with a changing social institution like marriage.

Moreover, when a teacher is asked the marriage question, as Pablo’s teacher Alicia apparently was, another possibility would be to explicitly unpack the reasons for clashing expectations about what is considered an appropriate question, or what sorts of things one can say when asked a question one does not wish to answer. These sorts of responses might give gay (and, for that matter, straight) students in the class an opportunity to gain some useful knowledge about strategies of concealment in the new language and milieu. It is also important for teachers to be aware that the signalling of sexual identities does not arise only in discussions of relationships and marriage but is ongoing, as indicated by Pablo’s account of his computer-screen colour choice. Pablo’s subtle but purposeful initiative to signal his gayness as a way of identifying gay, or gay-friendly, classmates highlights the importance, for all students, of learning ways of communicating and interpreting identity codes of various types.
Implication 3. Be willing and able to consider the effects on communication of heteronormative practices that privilege heterosexuality and silence or condemn other sexualities.

Raúl’s reaction of disbelief and incredulity to Pablo’s signalled gay identity highlights the need to address how gay students’ participation and engagement in class may be affected by the devaluing of gay people, whether this is evident in “off-hand remarks or aside remarks or little jokes” among peers, as one ESL teacher put it (Nelson, 2009, p. 68), in teaching practices, materials or curricula, or in the life narratives that students (or teachers) bring into class (see Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005). In the language classroom, I would argue, the aim is not so much to eliminate as to illuminate the social inequities at play in social interactions—and to do so in ways that enhance language learning.

Within the intercultural, international arenas of language classrooms, where there are few shared “truths,” . . . there may be a need to discuss what constitutes homophobic speech in various situations, or what the possible effects of such speech might be. Thus, the teaching aim would [be] . . . equipping students with ways of analysing the production and negotiation of sociosexual meanings and norms. (Nelson, 2009, p. 90)

Taking a discourse inquiry approach as mentioned above, means examining the cultural and linguistic practices associated with sexual diversity, which might involve unpacking lesbian and gay representations in spoken or written texts (Curran, 2006; Moita-Lopes, 2006; Nelson; 2009), using problem-posing techniques (following Auerbach & Burgess, 1985), or having students conduct ethnographic observations (Barro, Jordan, & Roberts, 1998; Grey, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Judging by the paucity of publications on the subject, it would seem that (homo)sexual identities are rarely considered relevant to language learning. However, this case study has shown that Pablo clearly experienced his gay identity as highly salient to his social interactions, both inside and outside the classroom. In fact, it was the impetus for pursuing fluency in English and for migrating to an English-speaking country: He considered migration a pathway to gay liberation, and English the passport to a cosmopolitan gay life.

Thus, as Pablo’s case illustrates, self-identifying as gay can be absolutely central to the processes of moving to a new country and learning and using the new language. Yet few of the experiences, insights, or struggles of these students are likely to feature in class curricula or conversations. This is, in part, because they themselves may
not wish to be too forthcoming, given the social marginalisation that has marked their lives; and in part because in a class where gay people are scarcely mentioned (or, if mentioned, framed as “other”), they are not made to feel that they can be forthcoming. The unfortunate irony here is that, as Kappra (2003) puts it,

Students of differing sexual orientations often leave their countries of origin due to fear for their own safety, only to find themselves in classrooms where they are forced into invisible silence, or if they are unable to “pass” are often victims of the same type of harassment that they fled their countries to escape. (p. 12)

Even within a single geo-region, coming-out practices vary according to the specific context, situation, and interlocutors. For example, a young Mexican man studying English in his country was out at school but not at home (Clemente & Higgins, 2005), whereas a German man was out to his family and workmates back home but not to his ESL classmates and teachers in the United States (Nelson, 2010). Thus, as we have seen with Pablo, gay immigrants are having to renegotiate identity practices and possibilities as they learn how to be gay in the new locality (Espín, 1999)—even, or perhaps especially, when relating to others of a similar cultural affiliation, like Pablo with Raúl.

Pablo’s self-accounts provide a glimpse into how he was creatively negotiating his in-class interactions. His identity savvy included being adept at carefully gauging his audience’s likely receptiveness to his discourse; coding his communications with wit and humour; and taking the risk of establishing rapport through self-disclosure, in a discreet yet clear manner. Yet at the same time, Pablo was restricted, to some extent, by heteronormative discourses and larger social structures that made it difficult, if not impossible, to challenge the shutting down of gay topics when he found this disturbing; to raise gay topics himself; or when the topic of marriage arose, to explain his frustration that he could not legally marry a partner in either his home country or his new country—in short, to voice his thoughts or experiences when these were highly relevant to the discussion topic at hand.

If a major aim of second language education is, as Norton Peirce (1995) has argued, to prepare immigrant students to “claim the right to speak outside the classroom” (p. 26), then the question must be asked whether the field is adequately preparing Pablo—and Hyoung, Katsuyuki, Raimundo, Sam, Zadun, and countless other men, and women, who happen to be living gay lives—to claim their speaking rights, both outside and inside the classroom. That is, are the existing linguistic resources of gay immigrant students being sufficiently extended and further developed? Are these students learning the things
they need to know in order to manage their lives in the new country and the new language?

The question must also be asked whether students who themselves are not gay may need to consider things like the possible social consequences of speaking or writing in ways that unthinkingly construct their interlocutors as necessarily straight. For instance, in my interviews with Pablo’s classmate Mi-Young (a woman from Korea) she said she was concerned that, as a second language speaker and new immigrant, she might unintentionally offend gay people, so she wanted to learn what she called the “correct” words: “When I say something I must careful like what I said. I don’t want to hurt [gay people] . . . I didn’t want to tell like mean word” (Nelson, 2009, p. 190). Also, in my larger study I found that, as students who did not identify as gay interacted with people who did—whether strangers, classmates, workmates, acquaintances, friends, or family members—the communication- and culture-related dilemmas that sometimes resulted would rarely, if ever, emerge in their ESL classes; thus there were few, if any opportunities for peer exchange or support on these matters. Mi-Young, for example, had recently learnt that her (American) mother-in-law, who she liked very much, was a lesbian, which made Mi-Young want to learn more about the lives and perspectives of gay people; however, she did not realize that each day in class she was sitting near a gay person—Pablo. (Conversely, while Pablo was eager to find people with whom he could be open about his life as a gay man, he did not realize that each day he was sitting near someone—Mi-Young—who was close to a gay family member.)

Another crucial question is whether language teachers are being adequately prepared to teach student cohorts that are inevitably not just multilingual and multicultural but also multisexual. Are the issues that matter to Pablo and other gay immigrant students being addressed in the teacher preparation programs and research agendas of language education, or are monosexualising tendencies (Nelson, 2006) still allowed to predominate?

A final, related question is whether the field of language education can create effective learning environments for its gay students so long as working environments for its gay teachers remain restricted (see Curran, 2006; chapter 5 of Nelson, 2009; Simon-Maeda, 2004). Recall the two ESL teachers who featured in Pablo’s second and third classroom accounts. Pablo surmised that each of these teachers was a lesbian, though he never spoke with either of them about his hunch; having interviewed both of these teachers for my larger study, I knew that they were actually in a relationship with each other, but were keeping this quiet as they did not want their colleagues to find out. Recall Tony, the ESL teacher quoted in the introduction to this article. Tony said he rarely considered the possibility that some of his students might be gay,
or what that might mean for his teaching; it turned out that he himself was gay, though he went to some trouble to create a straight persona in the classroom (Nelson, 2009). For all three of these teachers, gauging the sayable vis-à-vis their own sexual identities was an ongoing, everyday occurrence in the classroom and on campus, just as it was for Pablo.

In closing, the communication constraints that gay immigrants commonly face—as well as the identity savvy that they must develop—represent a valuable knowledge resource for language education. Supporting students of all sexual identities in their struggles for communicative legitimacy both inside and outside the classroom is critically important in these changing times. I hope this analysis of classroom moments that were meaningful to a gay immigrant student, and the pedagogic implications these give rise to, offer useful insights to those who are working to enhance communication, and education, across all manner of social distinctions and divides.

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