About the Researcher

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Why Sexuality Matters

Since the early 2000’s, there has been an increased focus on the social issues in language teaching (see Block, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001). This shift away from dominantly cognitivist views also brought with it an attention to issues of social justice and equity (Nelson, 2006), which has resulted in issues of race, gender, and sexuality raising to the forefront of disciplinary attention. Cynthia Nelson (2009), a researcher from the field of English language teaching (ELT) has correctly pointed out that failure to consider the role of LGBTQ+ identities in language teaching reaffirms a social status quo where heterosexuality is sanctioned as the only acceptable and desirable sexual identity (Heteronormativity), thereby shutting both queer-identified students and teachers out of the language learning endeavor. Given that students are willing, and often desire, to engage with LGBTQ+ topics, this creates a need for educators—even straight-identified ones—to be prepared to address these issues in class. However, as I have shown elsewhere, both mainstream teacher training programs and commercially available curricular materials are ill-equipped to help time-strapped or novice educators to carry out the work of creating queer-inclusive classroom spaces (Paiz, 2015; 2018).

This comes together to create massive problems in language education because the invisibility of LGBTQ+ lives sends a tacit message to students that only straight lives are acceptable in all aspects of the target culture. Moreover, underprepared educators can end up casting LGBTQ+ students as deficient language learners when they attempt to enact their lived identities. Anthony Liddicoat (2009) provides a startling example of just how damaging squelching sexuality in the language classroom can be by providing examples of teachers’ well-meaning attempts to recast homosexual identity performances as straight ones when students respond to personal questions about their romantic lives. What each of the examples shares is that teachers begin from the assumption that the LGBTQ+–identified student has failed to grasp key grammar points and not that they are engaging in a genuine sharing of their lived experience.

Queer Inquiry-based Pedagogy

Central to a queer inquiry-based pedagogy is the notion of troubling, or coming to understand and build strategies to resist, heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the presentation of certain forms of sexuality (i.e., monogamous, married, child-bearing, able-bodied) as the only valid, and socially valuable, sexual identities. Moreover, it includes the discourse-based power structures needed to maintain this state. Here, it is helpful to begin with what queer inquiry-based pedagogy is not.

Queer Inquiry-based pedagogies are not focused on merely including LGBTQ+-friendly terms, or showing episodes of Modern Family or The Fosters in class. Below is a view of what queer inquiry-based pedagogies are. Understanding that this is just one view, as mainstream queer theory would take issue with pinning down terms like queer or outlining context-independent pedagogical interventions.

The queer inquiry-based pedagogies focus on equipping students to engage with normativity in all of its forms by creating space for them to engage critically with notions of identity and sexuality and its local relevance and modes of expression. Queer inquiry-based pedagogies would not, for example, ask students to engage in a two-sided debate over topics of marriage equality. Instead, it would encourage them to critically engage with the local relevance and realization of LGBTQ+ relationships and ways of life, seeking to understand their position in local power structures and how this has come to be shaped, negotiated, and maintained through language and dominant social narratives. This leads to the need to introduce students to questions such as:

- How is sexuality & sexual identity performatively enacted in the target culture?
- How does the language we use about sexuality (re)create systems of inequality or violence?
- What underlying assumptions about sexuality and sexual identity inform my reactions to the LGBTQ+ community?
- How do normative discourses advantage some? How do they disadvantage others?

Targeted Outcomes of Queer Inclusive Language Classes

Queer-inquiry based pedagogies can speak to many pedagogical and curricular concerns. Elsewhere, I have argued that they allow us to engage critically with our students about the regulation and value placed on certain sexualities and identities. By doing so, we can better understand who is given the right to speak and to act and who is not. Once we understand this, we can begin to more effectively advocate for ourselves and others (Paiz, forthcoming). Additionally, queer pedagogies allows us to guide students through thinking about how normative discourses can have both positive and negative impacts on our daily lives. What is particularly useful for language learners is that this lesson is one that not only applies to sexuality but enables them to critically engage with normative discourses at their institution around multilingual learners, which can help them to highlight better the unique value that they bring to the institution beyond their tuition dollars.

Moreover, Pennycook (2001) pointed out that critical pedagogies, such as the ones introduced here, can aid students in developing their critical thinking skills. Western-style critical thinking, and how we showcase this through academic writing, may represent a new challenge to some multilingual students, and queer-inquiry based pedagogies can help them acquire this vital academic skill. Additionally, Cynthia Nelson (2009) identified five additional outcomes of queer-inquiry based classes: 1. Highlighting the connection between sexual and cultural literacy for curricular purposes. 2. Facilitating further inquiry into the connections between sexuality, culture, and language. 3. Combating homophobia and transphobia by unpacking normative discourses in accessible, non-judgmental ways. 4. Valuing the sexual diversity of our students and teachers. 5. Asking queer questions to identify the limits of language and the room that exists for multi- and translingual creativity.

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References