

Insights from a transgender student in the EFL classroom: from individual perspective to institutional change

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Abstract

Among other minority groups, the trans community is systematically repressed by a hegemonic heteronormativity. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching area, the perspective of this collective is equally absent. This study aims at gaining insight from a transgender student on his impact and perception within the EFL classroom to make secondary-school EFL contexts more inclusive regarding transgender. An exploratory case study constituted the basis of this article via an open interview with a transgender student. By exposing him to input stereotyping gender and marginalizing the trans community, their perception of the danger of the LGBTQIA+ community beyond the classroom was elicited. Different measures were discussed as potential improvements whose implementation could ensure safer environments and a more inclusive teaching experience. Further research could obtain insight beyond the trans community to assess the awareness and compromise towards the collective from individuals who are not part of it.

Keywords: *EFL textbooks, transgender, inclusive education, heteronormativity, positioning theory.*

1. Introduction

Striving for survival has been a primary urge within the human species leading to numerous conflicts throughout history. In dominating one community over another, not only does life prevail, but also other aspects entailing the foundations upon which societies are constructed: language, culture, and ideology, to name a few (van Dijke & Poppe, 2006). If today there is an aggressive spirit of making the trans community visible, it may have been summoned by the apparently complete triumph of its antithesis. This collective has been protractedly repressed by a hegemonic cisheteronormativity; nonetheless, recent accounts are evidencing a readjustment in most ideologies across cultures, aiming at increasing the visibility of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersexual, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) collective (Currier, 2012; see also Chen et al., 2023). The limitedness of representing this community in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) leads to the purpose of this study. Together with a literature review and proposal of improvements that can be made in the EFL teaching area, a case study approach has been followed through an online open interview conducted with a member of a trans community itself so as to elicit areas of improvement within the EFL learning field.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Power dynamics and investment

Catering for the needs of queer learners and asking questions about how classroom materials should be tailored to their profiles are issues that the field does not accustom itself to address (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006). Along with these concerns interweave the notions of power dynamics and learner investment. If identities are perceived as sites of struggle based on relations of imposing or submitting forces, and they are inscribed in discourse practices within a particular domain, it is because of this inseparable connection that texts are reflective of underlying systems of beliefs of varying typologies (Fairclough, 1995).

The tripartite model of investment is orchestrated through the interrelation of the following elements: identity, capital, and ideology. Following the emergence of the field of applied linguistics, the notion of identity has been discussed following a poststructuralist approach. Under this theory, identity is envisioned as “the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation-states, or regional territory” (Bamberg, 2012, p. 1) and characterized by being “fluid, multiple, diverse, dynamic, varied, shifting, subject to change and contradictory” (Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014, p. 200). To claim a particular identity involves facing three dilemmas, mainly the “sameness of a sense of self over time in the face of constant change,” the “uniqueness of the individual vis-à-vis

others faced with being the same as everyone else,” and “the construction of agency as constituted by the self and the world,” posits Bamberg (2012, p. 1).

2.2. Positioning theory

From the interrelation between identity and ideology, the positioning theory is developed. This theory was approached by Davies and Harré (1990), who understood it as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (p. 48). When a speaker positions themselves and other partakers in a given interaction, the following dimensions are taken into account: the words chosen by the speaker are inevitably synecdochic to the way the participant perceives the world; participants may not be aware of these assumptions nor the power of what they invoke particular ways of being, therefore downplaying the importance of what is said; the variation from speaker to speaker when interpreting these positionings depending on a wide range of factors; the positions created are the cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography rather than a linear non-contradictory one; and the positions may be perceived as “roles” or shifts in power, access, or blocking of access to features related to identity (p. 49).

2.3. EFL materials and ideology

So far, research has shown that students are fully capable to engage in LGBTQ+-related issues and content as these are inscribed in their daily lives, either by identifying as members of that community, having LGBTQ+ acquaintances, or through encounters in popular media (Day et al., 2019). As revealed by Moore in some of his studies (2013, 2016), among other issues, this was illustrated in how desirable it was for Japanese men to be able to perform a gay identity and find a welcoming community to acquire English in a motivating way. Furthermore, he also highlighted the dangers that could originate if critical reflection is not promoted by recognizing the conflicted nature of LGBTQ+ individuals within the classroom. Developing literacy in a language learning environment is as paramount as acquiring any other skill. However, when presenting students with different resources, teachers tend to dismiss LGBTQIA+-related topics within their methodologies (Pawelczyk, 2022). On this issue, Paiz (2015) suggested that it can lead to a “perpetuation of a heteronormative discourse in the classroom, which can be seen as detrimental to the learners and instructors in the class” (p. 78).

As seen in this literature review, although attempts have been made to widen the visibility of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum in the (E)FL teaching field, the vindication has not reached its objectives. Since the cisheteronormative system is not likely to be redesigned more inclusively, improvements can be made from other areas. For this study, the ideas aforementioned are adapted to a case study conducted with a transgender male student, who will reflect upon his own perception of the EFL context, the way his environment positions

him, and the improvements that can be made to ensure a more inclusive educational experience.

3. Method

The previous literature review leads to the purpose of this study, which is twofold: first, to gain insight from a transgender student on the impact and perception he has in the EFL classroom; second, to suggest ways in which secondary-school EFL contexts can become more inclusive regarding transgender issues. These objectives result from an area that has not been addressed in the literature review, viz. the opportunity to shed light on the topic of trans-visibility from the community itself with the expectation of knowing more realistically what the situation is, and what can be done to improve it. The Research Questions (RQs) which will be commented on in the Results and discussion section are the following:

- RQ1: How does a transgender language learner perceive trans-visibility and inclusion in the EFL classroom?
- RQ2: What steps can be taken to widen trans-visibility and inclusion on an institutional scope beyond the EFL subject?

3.1. Participant

One participant was selected for the procedure of this study, whose identity will remain anonymous by referring to them with the pseudonym of X. He identifies as a male transgender who is currently undertaking a Bachelor of Arts in a public university and combines their studies with extra English lessons at an official school of languages. The selection process was followed without the application of any inclusion or exclusion criteria.

3.2. Research instrument

For this study, an open interview was designed as the research instrument, which was divided into three main sections. These sections consisted in obtaining information about the student's vision of trans-related issues, exposing him to input regarding views on transgender issues in the EFL classroom, and proposing different measures to take action and make a difference to gain visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community at an institutional level.

3.3. Data collection and procedure

In order to meet this paper's objectives, Yin's approach to case studies (1984) was followed to opt for an exploratory case study. This type of analysis constituted the basis to design the interview which was carried out via online means (i.e. Google Meet). The interview was recorded so that active listenership would not become an issue in the process of asking questions to the student and to avoid excessive reliance on field notes. It must be noted that

the interview has been translated from Spanish into English and labeled with an “Excerpt” subheading with the corresponding numbering. If needed, some comments have been added and signaled through italic typography and in square brackets. One intervention in particular was implemented which consisted in searching for examples of how dominant ideologies were imprinted in EFL textbooks so that the interviewee felt comfortable enough to share his thoughts on it.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. *Transgender language student’s perception of trans-visibility and inclusion in the EFL classroom*

The first section of the interview was centered around obtaining data about Steven’s perception of himself and his environment. The results related to RQ1 (How does a transgender language learner perceive trans-visibility and inclusion in the EFL classroom?) indicate that he exerts a neutral attitude about how his condition is portrayed and included in the EFL classroom, in the sense that his environment, the instructor, and the written materials do not seem to impede his performance as a foreign language student.

Excerpt 1:

No, the truth is that since I got enrolled in this course, I have been feeling quite comfortable with my group mates and I have not found it difficult to socialize with everyone else.

The next step in the study consisted in reviewing EFL materials to comment on how gender diversity is represented in the Foreign Language Learning (FLL) classroom. From the beginning, the interviewee realized he had not reflected upon this issue, as he considered that he had other interests when he was taking part in the FL classroom.

Excerpt 5:

Every student after all has their interests when learning a language, and I have to admit that I have completely left out this crucial part [*referring to the inscription of ideologies into the materials made available for students*], not only for me, you know, but also for the younger generations.

As seen in the literature review, the role of the instructor in the classroom context is as paramount as the materials used as a means for the presentation of the TL community to the students. In X’s words, deciding on the types of materials is a responsibility that ought to be assumed by the instructors themselves, but making this seemingly objective and ideology-free decision can become challenging when the teacher is already a product of that ideology, therefore biasing the selection process:

Excerpt 7:

Whom do these decisions rely on? The English department? Then it should be them who ought to decide what materials are most fitting to meet the requirements of the class and which ones to discard [...] Although that could be troublesome because sometimes you do not really know if these textbooks are coming across as sexist, homophobic, transphobic and stuff, or let me rephrase that, sometimes you do not know if they are hiding a discriminatory ideology underneath.

The previous excerpt confirms X's acknowledgment of the role of other points of view to make the EFL classroom more inclusive. He also seems to be aware of the fact that curricula are not impartial in the ideologies they manifest, which can become a challenge when deciding on the type of materials that are presented to students.

4.2 Potential measures to widen LGBTQIA+ perspective and inclusion at the institutional level

After covering the previous items, the last section of the interview was devoted to proposing a series of actions that could be taken to increase the visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community at a more institutional level (*RQ2: What steps can be taken to widen trans-visibility and inclusion on an institutional scope beyond the EFL subject?*). In order to approach this last section of the interview, X shared the following comment about classroom materials:

Excerpt 9:

What I sincerely believe should be done is a systematic review of the English subject materials to see which areas are deficient -such as the exclusionary discourse rooted in the materials themselves- and therefore need to be reviewed, and from there start working to improve not the form of the materials, but the content.

The interviewee assured that not only should the scope of the topical areas of the units be broadened in EFL textbooks, but it should be extended to other relevant issues. What seems to be implied in Excerpt 9 is that curricular materials tend to explore different identities for language learners, but there may be a reinforcement of a particular discourse, (*viz.* heteronormativity).

Even though X does not currently feel threatened or unsafe in their classroom environment, he is aware that this may not be the case for every trans individual, hence the following action. To ensure a safe environment, as this privilege is not always granted to minority groups, institutions should become part of the inclusivity process by raising the corresponding awareness through different campaigns, like making LGBTQIA+-related workshops, organizing seminars, and promoting more tolerant attitudes towards those who are discriminated against daily. Referring to the literature review, these implementations may

not take place unless there is an active intention from the perspective of the instructors to redirect those materials whose perspectives might reify a particular ideology.

Following the previous idea, gender diversity was another aspect highlighted by X which was suggested to be promoted among students to keep on widening the scope and reach those non-conforming positions which oppose the traditional binary division of gender:

Excerpt 11:

Another thing I would consider when implementing all these things in the classroom materials is the gender spectrum. Ever since they [referring to the students] learn how to walk, they just do not care about gender roles, which is something they learn over the years as society includes them. So, although there might be a heteronormative discourse overruling and suppressing everything else, these materials should bring these topics up so that students may engage in interactive debates to make something useful out of those English lessons that often ignore these issues.

Once more, X mentions the issue of inclusivity concerning gender diversity and how the cisheteronormative ideology persists in today's society. Excerpt 11 reveals his awareness of how heterosexuality is presented as the only accepted sexual identity, confirming the previous findings of the literature review (Paiz, 2015), but despite the presumed dominance of this sexuality, he favors the position of including gender-related topics in the classroom and designing activities that allow for students to discuss openly on these topics. The aforementioned measures would go in line with the literature review's evidence that catering for the needs of queer learners and adapting classroom materials to their profiles is a question that is not frequently addressed in the teaching field (Kappa & Vandrick, 2006).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explain the circumstances of a transgender student in terms of his impact and perception of the EFL classroom as well as suggest ways through which inclusivity regarding transgender issues could be widened. Through an open interview, more information has been drawn from a member of the trans community itself, which can pave the way for a chain of changes toward realistic inclusivity. The implications of this study are centered on the pedagogical domain, specifically written materials, and the role of the instructors. Potential areas of improvement include those with dated underlying ideologies which can potentially become harmful for minority groups and contents that can be dynamized and presented as real-world issues.

It must be clarified that the current study has its limitations, as a case study may not have provided representative evidence to draw the conclusions stated in the article. However, it has served as a platform for a hidden voice to express his views regarding the transgender

community in the current EFL education system. Further studies could broaden the scope of the current paper and conduct different interventions to larger groups of students, gain a more representative insight of the status quo of transgender outside the community, and get a glimpse of their attitudes towards the collective and the role and/or degree of implication they believe they should have. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure safe environments where the learning experience of each individual is not hindered by the dominance of oppressive ideological forces.

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