

Raising Awareness on Gender Issues in Higher Education: A Pilot Intervention in EFL Teacher Training from Spain

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ABSTRACT. There are biases and discriminations in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation issues in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, either through outdated and sexist materials or even teacher discourse and beliefs, as, according to several studies, teachers unconsciously transmit their negative attitudes and stereotypes to their students. As it has been proven by different studies, conducting training for teachers and future teachers with respect to non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities brings positive results. Thus, this paper proposes a pilot classroom intervention designed to train pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from the Bachelor's degree in Education Studies and the Master's degree in Teaching Secondary School, enrolled at the University of Burgos, Spain, during the academic year 2020-2021. The results of the intervention reveal the necessity of raising future teachers' awareness on the different non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities, in order to create more inclusive classes for all students and teachers.

Keywords: teacher training; gender; sexual orientations; awareness; prospective teachers of English; EFL

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1. Introduction

The educational system perpetuates the status quo by privileging a particular class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, while overlooking, silencing, or even stigmatising what is considered non-normative. It is necessary to build an education of quality for everybody, where all students are included in the educational discourse, regardless of their personal characteristics. Therefore, it is imperative that classrooms are built on the democratic principles of equity, solidarity, justice, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, freedom, and respect for differences (Forteza, 2011: 141). For a country to be truly democratic, it should address its minorities and strive for their full participation in society (CIE, 2008). This requires inclusive education that responds to the needs of all students, contributing to the effective inclusion of individuals and groups within society at large (UNESCO, 2005, cited by González and Martín, 2014: 13).

The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class and the education system in general influence individuals, serving as a space that shapes, socialises, sets rules and guidelines for the behaviour of its members and presents implicit rules through the hidden curriculum, which encompasses all the daily interactions that occur in the classroom between teachers and students, transmitting knowledge and values that are not explicitly taught (Hernández, 2011: 125). Thus, as it typically covers current topics and introduces a new culture, it plays a crucial role in representing minorities.

However, within the field of EFL teaching, there are still biological and dualistic conceptions of gender which generalise and exaggerate differences between women and men, ignoring the social, cultural, and situational forces that shape gender categories, relationships, and learning outcomes (Sunderland, 2000). Additionally, this view does not consider the fact that not everyone defines themselves as strictly male or female, thereby excluding non-binary, trans, and other non-normative gender identities. Similarly, heteronormativity is perpetuated, assuming that heterosexuality is the only valid and normal sexual orientation in society, discriminating against anyone within the LGBTQ community, whether due to their sexual orientation or non-normative gender identity.

According to Reveco (2011b, cited by González and Martín, 2014: 15), to advance in a comprehensive education for young people, a gender perspective must be incorporated into educational practices and the curriculum. This implies teacher training that provides the knowledge and skills necessary to establish connections between the classroom and real life. In fact, at the 48th International Conference on Education by UNESCO, *Inclusive Education: The Path to the Future*, teacher training was identified as the key to the development of future generations (Acedo, 2011).

2. EFL Teacher Training

Making students feel represented in EFL classrooms cannot be entrusted to publishing houses or the administration; rather, it is the responsibility of the teaching staff to take the initiative in creating an inclusive class without the support of these institutions, as, according to Paiz (2015), publishing houses often do not create inclusive materials in order to maximize their profits by catering to a broad range of markets.

Given this reality, the creation of an inclusive class begins with a teaching staff who is committed to representing all students in their EFL classes, as they have the ethical responsibility to set aside their biases in order to maintain an objective assessment of students. However, various studies reveal that teachers' personal values and beliefs often manifest implicitly in their teaching, negatively impacting vulnerable groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals, who often experience educational settings as hostile environments where they fall victim to abuse and harassment by students or even the teaching staff itself (Pilkington and D'Augelli, 1995, as cited by Morgan, 2003). According to Barozzi (2014), Guijarro Ojeda and Ruiz Cecilia (2013), Hall and Rodgers (2018) and Malo-Juvera (2015), among others, this is primarily due to a lack of knowledge on the subject, not out of malice.

Riggs (2011) concludes that the most effective way to reduce negative attitudes towards people with non-normative gender identities or sexual orientations is through the combination of cognitive and affective methods. Thus, various studies have been carried out, showing positive results following training sessions for teaching staff and future educators regarding non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities. This demonstrates how such training contributes to greater awareness among teaching staff regarding equality (Schneider and Tremble, 1986, as cited in Morgan, 2003; Elsbree and Wong, 2007; Kitchen and Bellini, 2012; Riggs et al., 2011, as cited by Malo-Juvera, 2015).

However, while the acronym LGBTQ is mentioned in previous interventions (in various different versions, depending on each work), most do not take into account gender identities belonging to the LGBTQ+ community such as transgender, bisexual or intersex individuals, thus solely focusing on homosexuality, i.e., the L and G in the LGBTQ+ acronym. Similarly, these interventions do not acknowledge that the female gender, in general, is a minority gender identity, as women, whether cis or trans, are oppressed by patriarchy, and, therefore, they face discrimination in educational settings in the same way as individuals of different races or abilities.

3. The Intervention

To mind the gap found in the literature, a new pilot in-person intervention was carried out in which all identities within the LGBTQ+ community were taken into account when training pre-service teachers on gender equality and sexual orientation issues in the EFL classroom.

3.1. Participants

A total of 115 future teaching professionals enrolled in both the Bachelor's degree in Education with a focus on English (future primary EFL teachers), and the Master's degree in English teaching (future secondary and adult EFL teachers) at the University of Burgos, Spain, participated in the study.

The participants were divided into three groups: third year of the Education bachelor's degree (46.1%), fourth year of the Education bachelor's degree (43.5%), and the Master's degree in teaching (10.4%). The groups were heterogeneous, with the majority being cisgender women (71.3%), aged between 18 and 30 (95.6%), heterosexual (85.2%), coming from cities with populations between 100,001 and 500,000 (60.9%), and having relationships with at least one person from the LGBTQ+ community (93.9%).

From them, an alarming number stated that they had never received any training related to gender identity (64.3%) or sexual orientations (53%). Furthermore, less than half (45.2%) had experienced discussions in class about sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, and 47.8% had never addressed topics related to sexual orientation in class. Over half (56.5%) had never addressed topics related to gender identity in their university classes. More than half responded that they had never been exposed to vocabulary related to sexual orientations (60.9%) or gender identities (80.9%) in English. Almost 60% of the participants had never learned about inclusive vocabulary regarding sexual orientations (59.1%) or gender identities (56.5%) in the classroom. Additionally, 49.6% stated that they had never been presented with didactic material representing all sexual orientations or gender identities (75.7%).

Moreover, the surveyed individuals expressed that they had not been taught to establish direct connections with real-world issues such as sexism (49.6%), homophobia (50.4%), or transphobia (71.3%). More than half affirmed that they had never been taught how to address homophobic (63.5%) or transphobic (74.5%) comments that might arise in their classrooms.

The data demonstrate the limited prior knowledge that the majority of pre-service teachers possessed before the present intervention.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments used to compile the data were two anonymous questionnaires (initial questionnaire and final questionnaire), a Likert scale, and a

short reflection text at the end of the first intervention, all anonymous. After the second intervention, participants were also asked to produce a written paper, which was not anonymous.

The written work in the second intervention was divided into two tasks: prospective primary EFL teachers were asked to design an inclusive teaching unit in a group of three or four people, while prospective secondary EFL teachers were asked to review an article on the topics covered in the individual interventions.

3.3. Methodology

This longitudinal practical intervention was divided into two sections: The initial interventions were split into five sessions. Each of the three aforementioned groups received a theoretical session lasting between an hour and a half to two hours. This initial intervention took place during the first semester of the 2020–2021 academic year at the University of Burgos, Spain, in November 2020. The subsequent interventions occurred four months later (in March 2021) with two out of the three groups that attended the first session, as the fourth-year primary Education students did not continue the EFL subject in the second semester. The approximate duration of the second intervention was also between an hour and a half to two hours.

These interventions were organized into three main steps: Firstly, the focus was on assessing the future teachers' level of knowledge on the topic, for which an anonymous questionnaire was filled out at the beginning of the first session. Secondly, the classroom experience was divided into an initial theoretical session of one and a half to two hours for each group and a second also theoretical session for two of the groups that participated in the first session. Finally, as an assessment, in the initial interventions, future teachers were asked to provide their opinions on the attended session; for the subsequent interventions, a final assessable assignment was requested.

For each session, Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) was followed: First, knowledge was presented to the trainees through the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) method. Second, the participants had to explain the given information through debates. In the third stage, they had to interpret the information, in the form of individual and group activities, divided into initial activities – those that introduce the topic, development activities – where students assimilate new concepts, and compilation activities – which reinforce the learned knowledge. Next, they compared what they have learned with other information they already knew. And, finally, they formed their own opinion on the subject in the form of an assignment.

3.4. Contents

Regarding the content taught, it is based on both theory and practice. The theory focuses on queer theory and inclusive feminism, leading to a perspective

on gender and the concepts of gender and sex, followed by specific terms related to sexual orientations and non-normative gender identities (LGBTQ+). Inclusive vocabulary concerning gender and sexual orientation is taught. Within the gender context, the aim is to teach both non-sexist vocabulary and inclusive vocabulary for all non-normative gender identities.

In terms of practice, videos and practical examples are employed to demonstrate how to implement all the knowledge taught during the theory sessions. Practical exercises are also presented, allowing students to apply the acquired knowledge during the interventions.

4. Results

After the intervention, the majority of the participants (93.4%) stated that they felt they had acquired the necessary terminology to address sexual orientations and gender identities in English. Most declared feeling more familiar with inclusive vocabulary related to sexual orientations (92.1%) and gender identity (93.8%). 86.8% claimed to have sufficient material to introduce topics related to sexual orientations in their future English classes, and 75% stated the same regarding gender identities. Moreover, the majority asserted they felt capable of addressing issues such as sexism (90.8%), homophobia (92.1%), or transphobia (82.9%) in their future EFL classes. Likewise, most expressed confidence in addressing homophobic (85.5%) or transphobic (76.3%) comments.

Concerning participants' attitudes toward using non-normative content in their future English classes, before the intervention, only half of the future English teachers expressed that the topic of gender identities (53.4%) and sexual orientations (50%) had a place in English classes. However, after the initial intervention, the majority of participants agreed on the importance of presenting such topics in classrooms (76% and 72%).

A minority of future English teachers did not think perpetuating gender (7%) and sexual orientation (6.2%) stereotypes in the EFL was a concern before the intervention. However, after the first intervention, at least 5% of these individuals experienced a shift toward a more inclusive view of their future English class.

Regarding the use of inclusive materials in the classroom, a significant percentage disagreed with the use of inclusive texts with all gender identities (8.8%) and all sexual orientations (6.2%) before the intervention. In contrast, only 2.6% of participants continued to believe that presenting inclusive educational material with all gender identities was not appropriate.

Concerning the use of inclusive language regarding gender identity and sexual orientation, even before the intervention, over half of the future English teachers (59.6%) considered that using inclusive language regarding gender identities and sexual orientations could help create a positive

atmosphere in the class. After the initial intervention, this number increased to 77.3%, with only one person (1.3%) disagreeing with this statement.

Similarly, when asked about the importance of teaching this inclusive language for the inclusion of all students, over half (69.3%) supported this assertion, while after the intervention, this percentage increased to 93.3% support. On the other hand, before the intervention, only 18.4% stated that words expressing a specific gender (such as inclusive pronouns) should be used only when strictly necessary and relevant to the context. In contrast, after the intervention, half of these participants (52%) agreed with this statement.

Finally, regarding the impact that using inclusive language regarding gender identities and sexual orientations could have on student education, before the intervention, over half (60.5%) declared that this impact would be very positive. After the intervention, it was the majority of future English teachers (90.7%) who agreed that using this type of inclusive language would be positive for their future students. Moreover, none of the participants thought the impact could be negative. 39% affirmed they would use inclusive language in their future English classes to avoid sexism and the misrepresentation of gender or non-normative sexual minorities. They also emphasized that it is “very important to address these issues with boys and girls from an early age, as it is the stage where they can acquire the most information and change it for a better world.”

On the other hand, the results of the questionnaire conducted four months after the initial intervention show that a percentage of students did not recall several key concepts necessary for conducting inclusive teaching on topics of gender identities and non-normative sexual orientations that were covered during the first intervention: Firstly, more than half of the students (58.53%) did not remember the difference between the concepts of sex and gender. 24.39% did not know the definition of the word “straight,” a minority was unfamiliar with the definition of “homosexual” (17.07%) or “non-binary” (14.63%), and 36.58% were unaware of the meaning of “intersex.” Finally, it is noteworthy that a surprising 17.07% did not remember that the community of individuals with a gender identity or sexual orientation different from what society considers the norm is the LGBTQ+ community.

Finally, the results of the final evaluation of the Primary Education bachelor’s degree groups show that, out of a total of 13 working groups, only 4 managed to create a truly inclusive teaching unit regarding gender identities and sexual orientations. However, the results of the final evaluation of the Secondary Education Master’s degree group show that, in general, they perceive this topic as highly relevant. They suggest that it should be taught in university classes, in addition to emphasizing their intention and readiness to include these topics in their future English classes.

5. Conclusions

After arguing for the need to create more inclusive classrooms where students can stop being harassed for their non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation, whether they are women or individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, this paper aims to contribute to the body of training interventions for future EFL teachers regarding the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations.

Following the implementation of this pilot intervention, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of future English teachers (93.3%) reaffirmed the importance of teaching inclusive language related to gender identities and sexual orientations throughout their formal learning period in university, both in the Teaching degree and the Teaching Master's program, after the initial intervention.

However, due to the longitudinal nature of the intervention, it was observed that an isolated four-hour intervention is not sufficient to achieve the goal of eliminating the ignorance of future teachers regarding gender identity and sexual orientation issues to create more inclusive classrooms. For the training to be effective it would be necessary, on one hand, more hours of training, and on the other hand, a specific training addressing these issues in a comprehensive and continuous manner throughout their academic training.



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Compliance with ethical standards

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author. Extracting and inspecting publicly accessible files (scholarly sources) as evidence, before the research began no institutional ethics approval was required.

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