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## **Fostering the Gender Spectrum Inclusion in English Language Teacher Education**

**María Amor Barros-del Río\***

**ABSTRACT.** The inclusion of gender in language teacher education and the EFL classroom has been a matter of concern for decades, with a marked interest in sexuality and queer pedagogies in more recent times. This demonstrates an interest in the relationship between language, sexuality and education, and more specifically, in enlarging the gender spectrum within language teacher education. This proposal combines a participatory design model for classroom intervention with a practical and interactive digital tool so that both educators and student teachers can address the inclusion of gender spectrum in their teaching practice.

**Keywords:** gender spectrum; language teacher education; EFL; classroom intervention; teaching practice; sexuality and queer pedagogies

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\*Universidad de Burgos, Spain, abarros@ubu.es.

Gender is a performative category produced via cultural acts, including language (Butler, 1990). The English language has become a lingua franca for intercultural communication (Sifakis, 2014). Considering that gender equality is a matter of social change and justice that needs to be addressed in education (Aikman et al., 2011; Norton and Toohey, 2011), we conclude that English language teacher education is an appropriate context to advocate for gender inclusion and transformative action with an effective impact in the long term both on practitioners and learners.

The inclusion of gender in language teacher education and the EFL classroom has been a matter of concern for decades. More than a decade ago, Pavlenko and Piller (2008) detected that “gender shapes interactions in the classroom” (61), but also that there is a general gender imbalance in curriculum, a matter much related to the persistence of language textbook stereotypes. In this sense, feminist critical discourse analysis unveils the diverse forms of social inequality through language use and production (Lazar, 2014).

More recently, scholars have shown a marked interest in sexuality and queer pedagogies (Whitlock, 2010; Álvarez-Bernardo et al., 2013; Yoshihara, 2016; Paiz, 2018; Pakuła, 2021). For instance, Pawelczyk, Pakuła and Sunderland have detected “power as being produced, reproduced, challenged and resisted in the EFL classroom in connection with the construction of gender and sexuality” (2014: 49), and they propose the implementation of critical pedagogies and queer pedagogies as helpful means for empowering all students by addressing their various identities. This profusion of research demonstrates an academic interest in the relationship between language, sexuality and education, and more specifically, in enlarging the gender spectrum within language teacher education, because according to Ballester Benito (2016), when teachers are silent about sexism or LGBTQ+ issues, they transmit that it is acceptable to dismiss these individuals from real life interactions. In this sense, most studies place the focus on students and how their learning a language encompasses invisibilisation of minorities or compliance with sexist linguistic uses. Added to this, they usually focus on particular experiences and deal separately with pedagogical approaches, material creation and classroom interventions.

To overcome this situation, this article focuses on the training of 21st century language teachers, a field that demands the implementation of reflective and critical attitudes so that prospective teachers become active agents of change (Barros-del Río, 2019). Departing from a learner-centred pedagogical approach, a participatory design model is tailored, so that classroom interventions combine quantitative (pre-test and post-test) and qualitative (interviews/writing) methodologies.

It is advisable to start any educational intervention passing a Likert scale (quantitative) survey, both pre- and post-intervention, with questions related to gender vs. sex, the gender binary, the gender spectrum (beliefs, attitudes)

and their relation with language teaching and teacher education. This step is necessary to assess the context, orientate the contents of the action, and appraise expected and actual outcomes.

After that, we suggest the groups are exposed to at least four sessions in order to raise awareness of sex/gender inclusion/exclusion in the English language, and in the way language is usually taught. For this purpose, a renewed syllabus needs to be designed following the three categories proposed by Hawkins and Norton (2009), i.e., Critical Awareness, as a ‘way in which power relations are constructed and function in society’ (33); Critical Self-Reflection, for ‘teacher-learners to critically reflect on their own identities and positioning in society’ (34); and Critical Pedagogical Relations, that would ‘encourage teacher-learners to consider ways in which their own teaching can enhance opportunities for language learners in their classrooms’ (35). These three approaches ensure an integrative view of the gender spectrum ranging from personal, societal challenge detection to learners empowerment.

The nature of these interventions is empirical and embedded with a critical and reflective approach for transformative purposes. As one of the goals is to assess the current situation of gender/sex spectrum inclusion in language teacher education, no particular selection among participants needs to be made. Gender vs. sex, gender binary vs. gender spectrum, and the defence of basic human rights are key constructs to be displayed and contested during the classroom interventions, with a particular attention to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, on the one hand, and diversity, difference and inequality on the other hand.

Regarding methodology, the classroom interventions should follow a participatory design model in order to engage participants in discussions around the mentioned topics. For this purpose, Dialogic Gatherings are an optimal tool. Dialogic Gatherings are a successful educational action based on the reading and discussion of books and academic works, which leads to a dialogic construction of knowledge among participants (Barros-del Rio et al. 2021). Hence, the four sessions relate to four selected readings that tackle essential and progressive contents for the gender spectrum inclusion in the teaching practices. These are herein related in their corresponding order: First, Dragowski’s (2021) article on gender because it includes identities and presentations that fall outside of the traditional gender spectrum. Second, Davis & Skilton-Sylvester’s (2004) article on the relation between gender and pedagogy, because it offers a historical overview, explores current trends, and suggests future directions of gender research and pedagogical approaches that inform TESOL. Third, O’Loughlin’s (2001) article on the TESOL classroom as an important site for the production and regulation of gender. Fourth, Nelson’s (2009) chapter entitled “Engaging with Gay and Lesbian Themes”, where she provides an overview of general issues to do

with the inclusion and exclusion of lesbian/gay subject matter in language curricula and classroom conversations. These four readings illuminate actual gender dynamics and false assumptions, as well as personal and collective reflections on attitudes, pedagogies and contents required for the gender spectrum inclusion in the TESOL field. Then, using the discourse analysis method (Talja 1999), complementary data should be gathered from the participants' writings (qualitative) to assess the students' interpretative practices of gender inclusion in teaching. These sessions seek to reinforce ethical principles and positive attitudes towards gender diversity, to promote a critical attitude towards discrimination and inequality in language education, and to strengthen student teachers and educator's capacity to plan inclusive educational practices.

Parallel tests and interviews may be passed among language educators to gather their reflections too. The combination of quantitative and qualitative results provide an integral and cross-country picture of student teachers' and educators attitudes and beliefs towards the gender spectrum inclusion in language education, with a special attention to one of the challenges detected by research: 'the differences in cross-cultural understandings of gender' (Pavlenko and Piller, 2008: 66). After a thorough analysis of data collected, reports may guide the guidelines of the following steps to take.

Because globalization has changed the way people interact, technology has become the norm in educational contexts, and a factor even more relevant in pandemic contexts. Geographical, social and cultural barriers can be overcome through the use of Information and Communications Technology (hereinafter ICT), which contribute to promoting the development of intercultural skills and fluency in communication. ICT also facilitates fluent communication among all members involved, enhancing collaboration and critical feedback among student teachers. ICT can be used to build an online community where students can collaborate and develop new pedagogies, learning from their peers' experiences and receiving critical feedback on the part of their supervisors. For these reasons, an interactive digital handbook would be our chosen means to include transformative contents, best practices and pedagogical strategies to foster gender/sexual inclusion in language teacher education. It would tackle a variety of scenarios and language level, each one including instructional materials and activities, participatory pedagogical approaches, and classroom intervention models.

This handbook would be available online and disseminated widely so that it becomes a widely used tool to foster a comprehensive and inclusive approach to the gender/sex spectrum in language teacher education.

Finally, this proposal combines close work with student teachers and practitioners in a collaborative and dialogic process, using participatory design model, discourse analysis method and data collection to create an

inclusive and dynamic tool that can be easily implemented. A digital and interactive handbook, created from a critical and international approach, may offer compelling opportunities for a fairer and more inclusive language teacher education.

There is still a long way to go for inclusive vocabulary, gender identities or sexual orientations inclusion in English language teacher education. Our present, and our future needs teachers who are prepared to combat sexism and homophobia. The educational intervention herein presented is a viable example of how to achieve a more inclusive teaching practice in the language field.



María Amor Barros-del Río, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2537-7405>

### **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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All data generated or analyzed are included in the published article.

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### **Conflict of interest statement**

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Disclosure by the editors of record**

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