

## **LGBTQIA ELs: Teacher Assumptions and Student Oppression**

by [Andrew Lewis](#) and [Molly Kelley](#)

Oppression is often thought of as malicious and overt, manifesting in purposeful, nefarious acts. We, however, are interested in oppression as the result of assumptions. As in the world outside of language teaching, the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) ESL students are assumed to be straight until their identity is explicitly stated (Calleja, 2013). Though this fact may seem inconsequential to some because of the relatively small number of queer students,<sup>1</sup> Coffman, Coffman, and Ericson (2013) remind us that roughly one in five people identify as queer, whether openly or not, a number that does not include the transgender and intersex populations. Yet this number should matter little to any teacher whose interest lies in teaching *all* of their students effectively because assumptions about students concerning gender and sexuality have a direct negative effect on the learning outcomes of queer students. Queer ESL students report anxiety in classrooms adhering to a heteronormative tradition and also a desire to learn in more inclusive environments (Calleja, 2013), and both anxiety and negative attitudes toward the learning environment often overpower good teaching goals and practices (Dörnyei, 2005). The assumption that students identify as heterosexual and cisgender has a high degree of influence, so why are more teachers not creating more inclusive classrooms? Many instructors, however unconsciously, prioritize the comfort of their heterosexual and cisgender students over the inclusion of all of their students, which leaves some students out in the cold. Teaching according to this assumption and within this comfort zone will have lasting negative effects on both our queer and nonqueer students.

### **Effects of Noninclusion**

#### **Ignoring Individuality**

In assuming the sexual and gender identities of our students, we treat our students as a monolithic group with no individuality. First, we know that this is an insufficient teaching method; “[individual differences] have been found to be the most consistent predictors of L2 learning success... No other phenomena investigated within SLA have come even close to this level of impact” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 2). Among these individual differences are student identity and motivation. To ignore individual differences does a disservice to all of our students; however, our queer students often face issues of motivation not experienced by their nonqueer counterparts.

According to a survey of queer students by Kaiser (2017), a lecturer in composition for multilingual students at San Francisco State University, many queer students are motivated by issues of identity. They study English to thrive in areas of the world where queerness is more likely to be tolerated. Additionally, they *want* to discuss and interact with topics of sexual identity in the classroom. If and when our queer students attempt to express their individuality, we often end up silencing them by treating them as those who would have them conform.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *queer* is often used to refer to noncisgender and nonheterosexual populations. *Queer*, as a succinct shorthand in an attempt to speak about these populations, is used in this manner throughout this article, interchangeable with *LGBTQIA*.

## **Treating LGBTQIA Topics as Taboo**

Another sinister effect of prioritizing a comfortable classroom for heterosexual and cisgender students is that it specifically punishes the victims of bigoted thinking by, in a twisting of logic, treating bigots as victims of diversity. We end up putting our students' education, social interactions, and health at risk. A central tenet of academia is the nurturing of critical analysis by exposing students to a diverse array of thoughts, experiences, and ideas. Yet, though inclusion of, for example, topics of race or women's issues is often lauded, if not actively encouraged, inclusion of LGBTQIA issues is often seen as preaching to a "captive" audience. In other words, academia praises the normalization of various experiences, but the normalization of queerness continues to take a back seat to the perception of other students' offense.

In addition, when a teacher avoids discussion of LGBTQIA topics, they set the social standard for student behavior. They, perhaps unintentionally, give students the mistaken assumption that these topics are offensive or that socially regressive notions concerning gender and sexuality are shared among students and the instructor. These together have the effect of stigmatizing queerness. On the other hand, normalizing LGBTQIA existence helps reduce the stigma attached to queer identities, which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), positively impacts the overall health of individuals in these communities.

Finally, all of this means that we primarily focus on making a subset of our students comfortable, students who would not suffer from exposure to LGBTQIA topics, rather than doing our jobs to educate *all* of our students, some of whom actively suffer from marginalization (Nelson, 2009). Oppression is not lessened by the avoidance of discomfort; it is reinforced. It is important, therefore, to normalize the existence of queer individuals in order to educate our students according to academic ideals, give them an accurate picture of their new academic social environment, and give our queer students a chance to participate in that environment without unnecessary burden.

## **Limiting Students**

These assumptions further harm students with respect to limiting them in both their exposure to topics of gender and sexuality and their sophistication when talking about them. ESL classes do not stop at coursework in the English language, but further serve as an introduction to academia in general, where topics of gender and sexuality are likely to come up. The University of Iowa, for example, allows students to specify their pronouns of reference and has active policies that prohibit discrimination based on a student's gender or sexual orientation. Thus, when we shield our students from LGBTQIA topics, we put them in a vulnerable position of lacking the requisite knowledge to navigate even basic information on a course syllabus. Additionally, when these topics arise in any situation (in class discussions, in coursework, in social situations outside the classroom, etc.), students may lack the vocabulary they need to participate in a discussion with sophistication.

## **Creating More Inclusive Classrooms**

It is our hope that this article has made readers aware of consequences that spring from the assumptions instructors may be making with respect to their students and LGBTQIA topics. We further hope that we have shown the harm this inflicts on ESL classrooms. To avoid these consequences, instructors should prioritize being more inclusive where they can be. The following recommendations come from our article, "[Creating Inclusive Classrooms for LGBTQIA ESL Students](#)," which you can go to for more information.

**Create a respectful environment:** One technique for establishing an inclusive classroom is to create a learning environment where expressions of queer identity are respected. The instructor can support queer students by taking class time to go through (institutional, if applicable) nondiscrimination policies and to establish expectations for the classroom, making it clear that neither the instructor nor the institution share a student's negative perception of queerness. In addition, your willingness to take class time to enforce policies and expectations meant to protect queer identities can make students feel seen, heard, and empowered to express themselves freely.

**Include relevant material:** Another easy way to make classrooms more inclusive is to include materials that cover LGBTQIA topics. In our article, we recommend books and podcasts that normalize queer experiences rather than make a spectacle of them by having a character's queerness be their only outstanding identifier. The key idea of these two suggestions is that "including" doesn't have to mean "focusing on." The instructor can acknowledge queer existence and include materials that do the same without shifting the focus from language to gender and sexuality.

These are, of course, not the only ways to be a more inclusive instructor; they are ones that have worked well for us. Our ultimate goal is to show you that inclusion can be implemented in the classroom without much work on the part of the instructor. If you have additional suggestions or questions, or wish to discuss these topics in more detail, we welcome you to contact us.

## References

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