

Voice to Diverse Gender and Sexual Identities Through Gendered Literacy

CHI CHANG

Summary: This article examines the difficulties faced by individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities and suggests ways in which teachers, educators, and practitioners can create inclusive and informed classrooms in which individuals historically marginalized based on race, gender, and/or culture can thrive. This article examines best practices for gendered literacy pedagogy and their implications.

Keywords: gender identities, gendered literacy pedagogy, LGBTQ+, sexual identities, transnational students

Introduction

Transnational LGBTQ+ students (TLGBTQ+Ss)—who demand constant negotiations with language and resources between the origin and the settlement countries—want TESOL-related educators to consider their often-undervalued community and create opportunities to decrease homophobia, xenophobia, and heteronormativity in school settings (Nelson, 2010). This view validates TLGBTQ+Ss while highlighting the problem of gender inequalities and discrimination. Gender identity is closely connected with the interplay between language, semiotic resources, and capital, which may liberate individuals from gender-based exclusion and benefit scholars of applied linguistics and TESOL (Dovchin et al., 2016). This article invites conversations on gender-related issues that have rendered LGBTQ+ discourses invisible in the classroom (Nelson, 2010) and therefore, require extensive academic attention to promote inclusivity and diversity.

With the global increase in transnational education, as illustrated in writing as a social activity, attempts have been made to reinvent ideas and linguistic expressions (Dovchin et al., 2016) and reformulate the gender binary model (GBM) and heteronormative discourses to make space for equity and diversity. However, participating in gender themes in the classroom remains limited for transnational LGBTQ+Ss (Tran-Thanh, 2020), which may lead to members of heterosexual groups maintaining their ignorance and exclusionary attitudes toward LGBTQ+ communities unintentionally, resulting in gender-based deprivation and the reinforcement of gender norms (e.g., girls wear pink and boys wear blue) against LGBTQ+ communities (e.g., drag queens) based on GBM. This article highlights the importance of gendered literacy—the development of awareness and skill in socially constructed gendered narratives and performances and the need to consider students' positionalities and articulate the hidden identities—and explains the implications

of classroom educators situating people who identify as TLGBTQ+Ss in the context of power, agency, and legitimacy. It calls for de-pathologizing gendered literacy and advocating for inclusivity and diversity through classroom practices.

Gender Identity Across Borders

Identity is negotiated and reconstructed through language, whereas gender is a social practice that involves negotiating identity through daily practices (Dovchin et al., 2016; Nelson, 2010). The GBM places students in specific societal and linguistic boxes—either boy or girl, male or female, and he or she. Heteronormativity remains dominant in the TESOL field, even in transnational education (Tran-Thanh, 2020). As globalization propels individuals into increasingly hyper-diverse settings, more students from [trans]lingual, [trans]cultural, and [trans]national backgrounds are coming together to highlight the interwoven identities that may create inclusive and equitable teaching practices (Nelson, 2010). Under these circumstances, the heteronormative discourses greatly hinder teachers, educators, and practitioners who intend to incorporate diversity and inclusion in curriculum and instruction (Paiz, 2020). For instance, the teacher can reframe expressing queer identities as “linguistic failure” (Moore, 2016, p. 89). Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed as violating social expectations (e.g., nuclear family) (Nelson, 2010; Paiz, 2020). Thus, how do educators balance social norms and de-pathologize undervalued discourses in the classroom to recognize the needs of LGBTQ+ students?

Discussion Questions: Pedagogical Consideration

Discussing the following questions may help educators understand, implement, and consider inclusion and diversity pedagogical practices within classroom contexts.

Transnational students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community are often rendered invisible and marginalized by societal expectations (Nelson, 2010). To promote further equity and diversity within academic settings, ways to include, acknowledge, and appreciate these students in the classroom must be explored. The questions listed below are intended to provoke continued reflection into what practices may best serve the interests of diverse students and create a more supportive and communal environment for them:

- How may the LGBTQ+ community be represented in curricula and learning materials?
- If you include unwelcome gendered context in your teaching, will students consider such inclusion sufficient for their lives and needs? Do they want more of these controversial topics?
- How do you resist making assumptions about students' identities? How do you create an inclusive and diverse learning environment for invisible voices?
- How can you create spaces for gender-diverse students to explore LGBTQ+ themes through tips/clues about gender-diverse themes?

How can you encourage students to move beyond seeing differences and toward participating in larger collectivities in different contexts?

Gendered Literacy Pedagogy and Implications

The following section presents four steps to be implemented in the classroom as social and cultural practices (this can be adapted to the local context as needed) to promote equity, inclusion, and recognition of diverse voices.

1. Demystify normative discourses on gendered constraints to acknowledge diverse gender and sexual identities. This process involves the examination of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ identities. For example, students and educators may keep journals identifying implicit biases associated with gender and sexuality. This practice shows that unconsciousness or systemic effects reinforce heteronormative discourses in one's daily practice while raising the awareness of such implicit biases.
2. Engage students (e.g., *When I Was Growing Up* by Nellie Wong and *Eyes that Speak to the Stars and Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* by Joanna Ho) with various transcultural backgrounds and translingual nuances in exploring gendered differences as their subjectivity toward gender issues and diverse gender identities varies (Nelson, 2010). This may lead to cultural conflicts due to differences in students' beliefs and values; however, such tensions can be alleviated through social negotiations and engagement, promoting diversity and inclusivity. This step is intended to help students detach from the heteronormative discourses toward the acceptance of diverse gender and

sexual identities. For instance, students' clothing is a critical resource for exploring how sartorial choices relate to literacy practices between the intercultural perspective (the understanding and respect of more than one culture) and the transcultural perspective (the interplay of multiple modes of belonging and participation across different boundaries and cultures) to examine globalization and border crossing more critically. Equally important, as Dovchin et al. (2016) state, it may be used to uncover insights into how languages and cultures (re)construct understandings of [gendered differences] by integrating linguistic modes, genres, and styles.

3. Add related (sub)topics for discussion for K-12 (e.g., color or hairstyles, preferred name or nickname, choices of toys, games, and sports) and college level (e.g., domestic or transnational violence, sexual harassment in and out of school, and gendered inequalities in the digital context) and avoid the predetermined and decontextualized curriculum. Educators may introduce relevant topics centered on gender diversity while collecting feedback from their students and other educators. This must be approached cautiously, and educators may identify teachable moments to involve students in selecting locally relevant class content to meet their needs and interests (Moore, 2016). Not only does this denaturalize students from accepting certain cultural expectations as norms, but it also unsilences the gendered identities and arouses their related experiences. For instance, gendered inequalities [in the digital context] remain pervasive, where women are characterized as caregivers and homemakers (Kocaman & Ali Fuad, 2021). Educators can take this moment to include other gender identities, such as gender non-conforming individuals, and create the means and opportunities to decenter conservative thoughts and promote gendered literacy through geosocial contexts toward a broad social practice.

Employ personal storytelling activities, free writing, and interactive sharing to analyze students' experiences in larger social, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This final step should give center stage to the students and encourage them to take a dialogic stance — involving student-driven discussion—to promote collaborative and reciprocal learning. Integrating students' experiences may benefit their gender identities and gendered literacy practices. For instance, storytelling can unfold ideas about personal connections and promote engaging with peers to interpret multiple identities. Here, educators are facilitators to raise awareness of how individuals are considered differently based on their perceived gender and point out those excluded from heteronormative materials and discourses. Problematizing the non-existent in the materials and subverting the taboo associated with homosexuality will empower students to dispel ignorance and call out discrimination against gender and sexual minorities, contributing to the fact that most institutions are still heteronormative, neglecting LGBTQ+ individuals and their experiences (Kocaman

& Ali Fuad, 2021). Hence, when educators employ personal storytelling activities, free writing, and interactive sharing, it can foster collective sentiments of positivity, sympathy, and love to achieve social and public changes.

Teaching Practices

As of September 2023, I have been teaching an English composition class to undergraduate students, the majority of whom are multilingual. The act of composition involves not only writing and reading but also the ability to synchronize and convey one's position at the intersection of language, race, and gender—This class is mandatory for all major students. In it, I put gendered literacy at the center of the curriculum, coupled with identity in motion and practice against the norm of Standard English and predetermined identities, further illuminating the interwoven social power relations across linguistic repertoires.

The composition project is introduced over four weeks by advancing gendered topics in the classroom. While drafting my lesson plans, I constantly ask myself how to enhance students' understanding and appreciation of differences that are the norms. Thus, I assign the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* as part of their coursework, partially because it represents intersectional identities in a multiverse world—where one might explore parallel universes—and partially because of its critique of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and monolingualism (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). Analyzing the movie requires the students to engage with multimodal writing that allows marginalized communities (Dovchin et al., 2016) to dismantle gender identity constraints and promote diversity.

Through the four-week unit, learners are led implicitly and explicitly to consider their assumptions through the lens of implicit bias to understand gendered literacy and the importance of equity and diversity.

- a. In the first week, I ask What is writing? How does writing affect who you are? Is there good and bad writing? How do you differentiate between genres? How do these questions (dis)connect with your identity? To answer these questions, students write freely, participate in group discussions, and share their thoughts with the class. During this step, I do not tell them directly how gender affects their perception of certain things. In doing so, questions related to gender and language identities arise naturally from discussions and questioning through writing.
- b. The following week, I integrate the film into the curriculum by situating its characters' life experiences or moments regarding language, race, and gender (e.g., microaggressions, model minority, generation gaps) and further eliciting students' relevant personal experiences. I read aloud short articles (e.g., *Mother Tongue* by Amy Tan and *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert) that examine (dis)connection to prompt their critical thinking and creativity. Subsequently, I gradually begin to problematize

binary perspectives by explaining how oppressive discourses cast a shadow on the cultural, social, and linguistic understanding of marginalized groups of people, such as BIPOC and the LGBTQ+ community. One student's response was particularly impressive during the discussion: "Everyone lives differently through their interactions and prioritizations. Similar to language, ways of living sync up within cultures, giving many the misconception that some ways of living are not conceivable." Thus, the critical analysis of the film contributes to the learner's insight that one's identity is never static. Instead, the learner understands that identity is always moving, dynamic, and evolving in the face of social transformations, reflected in gendered literacy practices.

- c. In the subsequent week, I ask students to foreground the social conflicts (e.g., homophobia, xenophobia) depicted in the film while synthesizing the meanings produced in the in-class readings with personal experiences through discussion and writing. The students can examine profound social issues more critically while calling into question the stereotypical and biased ideologies of their lives to steer them further away from hegemonic concepts and uphold underappreciated discourses. The intention is to explore neglected communities and question our social and cultural taboos (Nelson, 2010), promoting the awareness of hetero/homonormative discourses.
- d. At the end of this project, the students turn in a reflection paper. This gendered literacy practice gives them a new space to analyze, comprehend, and reconstruct what they have learned or use their prior knowledge, including self-narrative, to reflect on explicit or implicit discourses. This teaching practice unpacks complex and silenced identities, as three of the students' reflections show (see Figure 1); despite the intensive writing practices, gendered literacy practices must be continued.

Thanks to the growing popularity of the internet, I, and many other young people, were able to educate ourselves on LGBTQ+ issues and discover things about ourselves that would have otherwise been first suppressed through offhand comments like "Boys can't wear dresses!" and then secondly internalized and repressed by ourselves (First Student, 2023).

Between in-class instruction and out-of-class drafting, I have become more in touch with who I am, forming connections I did not know existed. I have also realized that crafting these self-relevant texts made me understand those who made me who I am today. Because while I am me, the natural world that provokes my thoughts, the people I share meals with, and the people who fuel my passions are also me, and I'd be foolish not to credit them. Writing a personally valuable piece would not have been easy without reading others' stories. Learning about others' cultures, including silenced LGBTQ+, has been deeply insightful and informative. I am always a little drawn away from instruction that involves culture because I never seemed to have it. This project, however, has changed my mind. Instead of viewing my old life as lifeless and boring, I like to think of it as preparation and a site of discovery: The perfect amount of identity-building and assistance that set me up to have a meaningful cultural understanding and growth toward fulfillment (Second Student, 2023).

Joy (the main character in the film) connects to my personal life as she is a young adult trying to freely express herself and be her persona through her hidden identities. I am not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and I can't personally relate to the struggles she faces in her life, yet it expands my understanding and sympathy for such marginalized communities as her suffering. However, I am a first-generation Mexican American and can relate to the struggles of feeling like I don't belong and having to live up to societal and cultural expectations to be a perfect girl. Growing up, I always felt like I wasn't meeting my parent's expectations of being the perfect daughter. I was considered the more rebellious child out of my sister and me, making me feel like I wasn't good enough. Similar to Joy, I felt like it would be better if I weren't in their lives, but over time, I have accepted that it's not true and that those were expectations I unconsciously built upon myself (Third Student, 2023).

Figure 1. Students' Reflections

Gendered literacy cultivates a space where TLGBTQ+Ss and heterosexual groups can see different perspectives within the classroom. This practice enlarges the voice of LGBTQ+ individuals while promoting the mental, emotional, and social growth and connection between groups in the transnational and transcultural world.

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