

Transcending the Curriculum: Reclaiming a Voice for Dissident Identities in ELT

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Abstract

This article posits that the ELT curriculum is a cis-heteronormative technology which renders the lives of the trans community invisible by either excluding them or by fetishizing their inclusion. It then invites educators to transcend the ELT curriculum through a teaching praxis which seeks not only to give visibility to trans identities but also to assert their right to be heard. Based on a situated classroom account, some suggestions are made to queer the ELT curriculum so that both students and teachers can collectively work towards the construction of a more democratic and equitable society.

Keywords: ELT curriculum – cis-normativity – trans identities - queer pedagogy

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que el currículum de Inglés Lengua Extranjera es una tecnología heteronormativa que invisibiliza las vidas de la comunidad trans ya sea excluyéndola o haciendo de su inclusión un fetiche. Por lo tanto, invita a los educadores a superar la propuesta de dicho currículum a través de una práctica que busca no solo darle visibilidad a la identidad trans sino afirmar su derecho a ser escuchada. A partir de un informe de clase, se hacen sugerencias para un currículum realmente inclusivo, para que tanto estudiantes como docentes puedan trabajar de manera colectiva hacia la construcción de una sociedad más democrática y equitativa.

Palabras claves: Currículum Inglés Lengua Extranjera – normatividad cis – identidades trans – pedagogía queer

Introduction

When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. (Rich, 1986, p. 157)

In Argentina, the life expectancy of a trans person is around 37 years, whereas the average expectancy in the rest of the population is 77 (Florito & Camisassa, 2020). The trans population has difficulties in their access to formal employment due to their lack of an ID with their perceived new identity or as a consequence of prejudice (INADI, 2021). Trans people are more vulnerable to certain diseases and even to suicide, a situation which has been worsened by the pandemic (Lustig & Tommasi, 2020). Even though the Gender Identity Law (2012) has partially helped decriminalize and depathologize trans-identified individuals, certain institutional contexts - such as schools - still maintain a highly cis-normative matrix (Morgade et al., 2011).

Within the field of ELT, Paiz (2019) foregrounds the fact that there is an almost complete omission of trans identities in the literature. When it comes to coursebooks, the situation is not

different. Heteronormativity pervades most ELT materials (Gray, 2013) and a binary view of gender (male-female) permeates not only the language in coursebooks, but also classroom discourse, through simple questions such as ‘Do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend?’ or through the choice of pronouns used by the teacher. Besides, even though there have been improvements in the representation of dissident sexualities in ELT materials, it is “neither universal nor uniform” (Selvi & Kocaman, 2020), since certain contexts seem to be more conservative and, thus, reluctant to change.

In this article, I aim to explore how teachers can transcend the ELT curriculum – and its cis-heteronormative dominant discourse – in an attempt to queer language teaching; that is, to question the dichotomy man/woman and to acknowledge other forms of living and experiencing sexuality. I will also share a project I carried out with one of my high-school classes to later reflect on possible paths we can follow in order to help the trans community not only gain visibility, but also reclaim their right to be (heard).

The curriculum as a cis-normalizing technology

As da Silva (1999) has pointed out, “the curriculum is, among other things, a gender artifact” (p. 8); that is, a technology that both embodies and produces gender relationships. Silencing the voices of the trans community can have a direct impact on their lives, since this omission or misrepresentation in the *corpus* is inscribed on their *bodies* and therefore molds trans’ subjectivities. In da Cunha’s (2015) words,

Making the dimension of gender (as well as the dimensions of ethnicity and class) invisible - that is, omitting it in the curriculum or including it in a sugarcoated or banalized manner – operates as a mechanism to silence, hide or negate its ‘ontological status’ (its reality) and, for this reason, as a way to express and exert violence over ‘otherness’, but in such a fashion that this micro-violence is produced in an imperceptible way and, as a result of its own imperceptibility, it becomes a highly efficient instrument of legitimization of a truth regime established as hegemonic and unquestionable. (pp. 154-155, my translation)

Cis-normativity – the assumption that all human beings have a gender identity which corresponds with their biological sex – becomes the truth regime which seems to determine the boundaries of identity construction. If the curriculum omits or fetishizes dissident bodies, its epistemological force ends up acting upon the ontological level (the being); that is to say, upon the reality of both teachers and students in regard to who they can be(come). As Auerbach (1995) explains, “[p]edagogical choices about curriculum development, content, materials, classroom processes, and language use, although appearing to be informed by apolitical professional considerations, are, in fact, inherently ideological in nature” (p. 9), and they can therefore have long-lasting consequences on students’ construction of their sexual/political identities.

One of the very few attempts at the study of trans identities in the EFL class is Nguyen and Yang’s (2015) analysis of a queer learner’s positioning in ESL classroom discourse. The authors delve into the experience of a trans woman, Han, when learning English in the context of an ESL class. They observe that this student had contradictory positionings – both as a lazy learner and as an effective language user –, “expressing a lack of interest and rejection of classroom materials, activities and practices [as] her response to the disconnection between the language classroom and Han’s investment to become a member of queer communities” (Nguyen & Yang, 2015, p. 237). The study also unveils how this student resisted cis-heteronormative discourse and classroom practices and how Han agentively found a way to express her gender identity even if it was not part of the curriculum.

As we can see, schooling goes beyond the transmission of seemingly aseptic contents or the allegedly innocuous interaction between teachers and learners. It implies the interaction of (sexed) bodies, with their own desires and their personal and collective construction of identity. Thus, sexuality is an omnipresent discourse in schools (Sustas, 2014) and the curriculum, the ideal arena for the power struggle over the dominant narrative that gets to be taught. At this point, we need to ask ourselves the

now famous Freirean question: In favour of whom are we being a teacher? That is, who do we benefit through our teaching? If we implement a cis-heteronormative curriculum blindly or inadvertently, what kind of a society are we envisaging in our classroom? Whose voices are heard or whose subjectivities are represented? And whose are often silenced or underrepresented?

Transcending the ELT curriculum

In order to transcend the ELT curriculum, we first need to acknowledge the fact that we do not only teach grammar, vocabulary or the macro-skills. As Pennycook (2019) suggests, “[a] central goal of language education is surely the development of critical and resourceful language users who have good access to a range of linguistic resources, are good at shifting between styles, discourses, registers and genres” (p. 171), but, as the author adds, their “developing language practices [should] aim not just at personal but also social change” (p. 171); this is, it is not enough for students to learn the language, but they also need to reflect on how they can collectively use it as a tool (in Vygostkian terms) to transform the world into a more equitable place.

Moreover, if we are to transcend the curriculum, we must question the fetishized inclusion of otherness in ELT coursebooks for the sake of political correctness. As da Silva (1999) describes, “the ‘other’ is visited from a perspective which may be called ‘the perspective of the tourist’, in which a superficial and voyeuristic exploration of foreign cultures is favoured” (p. 25, my translation). If trans identities are introduced this way, we run the risk of addressing them as an object of study, and not as subjects of rights. That is why Whittle (2006) suggests that, “in order to hear the voices of trans people, as justice demands, one has to acknowledge the limits of sex and gender and move into a new world in which any identity can be imagined, performed, and named” (p. xv). This perspective implies questioning the cis-heteronormative system in which most curricula were conceived. We need to help our students “understand that trans identities challenge the core beliefs of some of society’s most powerful groups, and highlight the extent to which those groups wish to dominate the thinking of us all” (Whittle, 2006, pp. xiii-xiv).

Teachers as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) are not robots who just implement a given curriculum or use a coursebook automatically. As social agents, they can act upon these texts and subvert their original intentions. When it comes to the use of ELT materials, Kumaravadivelu (2009) points out that “what makes a text critical has less to do with the way its content is constructed by the author (though it surely matters) than the way it is deconstructed by the teacher and the learner” (p. 479). As to the curriculum, de Alba (2013) explains that the subjects of curriculum development (teachers and students), “translate, through practice, the curricular determination, realized in a specific curricular form and structure, imprinting diverse meanings and senses and, ultimately, having an impact and transforming, in accordance with their own social projects, the initial curricular structure and determination” (p. 90, my translation). Teachers and students can agentively reclaim the curriculum and, through a process of curricular overdetermination challenge hegemonic views through their micropolitical (classroom) decisions (Morelli, 2021).

A curriculum which gives visibility to trans lives and reclaims a voice for the trans community may epistemologically feed on transgender studies, a field which “asks why it should matter, ethically and morally, that people experience and express their gender in fundamentally different ways” (Stryker, 2006, p.3). Transgender studies constitute an invitation to consider what “we are going to do, politically, about the injustices and violence that often attend the perception of gender nonnormativity and atypicality, whether in ourselves or in others” (Stryker, 2006, p. 3). In the field of ELT, we need to build more equitable classroom spaces which give room to all voices – that is, to the manifestations of all subjectivities – and which question a cis-heteronormative curriculum not only through the inclusion of certain issues in the design and implementation of theme-based projects (see Table 1 below for possible topics), but also through our classroom praxis.

Table 1 – Possible topics

- Trans identities
- Trans parenthood
- Trans rights
- The Yogyakarta Principles
- Transgender childhood
- Transgender youth
- The pathologizing of trans identities
- Transitioning
- Transphobia and other forms of discrimination
- Black trans lives
- Trans work inclusion
- Trans representation and misrepresentation by the media
- Trans gender and inclusive language

An attempt to transcend the ELT cis-heteronormative curriculum

The following didactic sequence was carried out in a state-run school in the City of Buenos Aires. There were 34 sixteen-year-old students in this class and, on average, they had an upper-intermediate level (B1+ or B2 in the *Common European Framework*). Students were taught a 90-minute lesson per week as part of the official curriculum of this school.

We set off on the unit by reading a short story by Jennifer Finney Boylan called “The Missing Person” (in Cart’s 2009 collection of short fiction *How Beautiful the Ordinary*). Before assigning the story for homework, we read the beginning together: “That was the summer I gave up on being a boy, and became a girl instead. Most people notice the difference, because it wasn’t a matter of what I wore, or even how I acted. But something changed in my heart that year and never changed back” (p. 96). I asked students to try and connect the title of the story with this first paragraph. They brainstormed ideas and, towards the end of the class, I told them there were several missing persons in the story. I asked them to read it for homework and to try and find as many interpretations to the title as they could.

The following lesson, students got into groups of four and discussed the following questions:

1. Why is the story called “The Missing Person”? Share your ideas with your classmates and agree on the most relevant answers.
2. How is transitioning presented in the story? Explore the main character’s process and how other people facilitate or obstruct it.
3. Point of view in the story. Is this an effective choice of narrator? Why (not)?
4. There’s an embedded narrative in the story (Li Fung’s disappearance). What is the function of this fiction within the text? What associations can you make with the central story?
5. What do you make of the ending? Is the ending of both stories similar? Why (not)?
6. What are the main themes explored in “The Missing Person”?

After a whole-group discussion based on this questionnaire, we watched a video on a trans girl’s transitioning process: “I’m the Scary Transgender Person the Media Warned You About.” Before watching the clip, I asked my students to discuss what images the media often transmit in connection with trans identities. I then gave them a list of questions and asked them to read them in silence and to try and predict any of the answers.

1. When did her mother first notice Rebecca's need to be a girl?
2. How does Rebecca relate to the objects that belonged to her life as Benjamin?
3. What happened when Rebecca was 7?
4. What was the hardest part when transitioning?
5. When did she feel the happiest?
6. What does her brother think of Rebecca's process?
7. How did her classmates react to the fact that Rebecca had first been Benjamin?
8. What will the transitioning process be like, according to Rebecca's mother?

We then watched the video and students had a few minutes to share their answers with the classmate sitting next to them. We finally discussed each of the questions as a whole class.

Since the students' conclusion was that most of the times discrimination had its basis on ignorance, we agreed to design and implement a survey to find out how much people knew about Argentina's Gender Identity Law (Law 26,743, 2012). I asked them to think of questions they would ask and I told them it would be a good idea to go back to the original text of the law to come up with interesting points to include in our surveys.

The following lesson, students brought their questions and, before pooling them as a whole class, we reviewed the structure of the interrogative form in English. We used their own questions and we discussed word order and the use of the auxiliary in each case. Finally, we agreed on the questions we wanted to include as part of the survey and on the population that we were going to interview: adults in their own families and in the school. I asked them to work in groups and, for the upcoming lesson, to prepare a brief presentation based on the results of the surveys.

That same day, I gave students the beginning of an article entitled "Transgender stories: 'People think we wake up and decide to be trans'" (The Guardian). The segment included the introduction to the piece and the section on Nikki Hayden's story. I asked them to read the section in order to complete the table below:

	Difficult situations which they have had to face	First experiences / contact with trans identities	Experience transitioning
NIKKI HAYDEN			

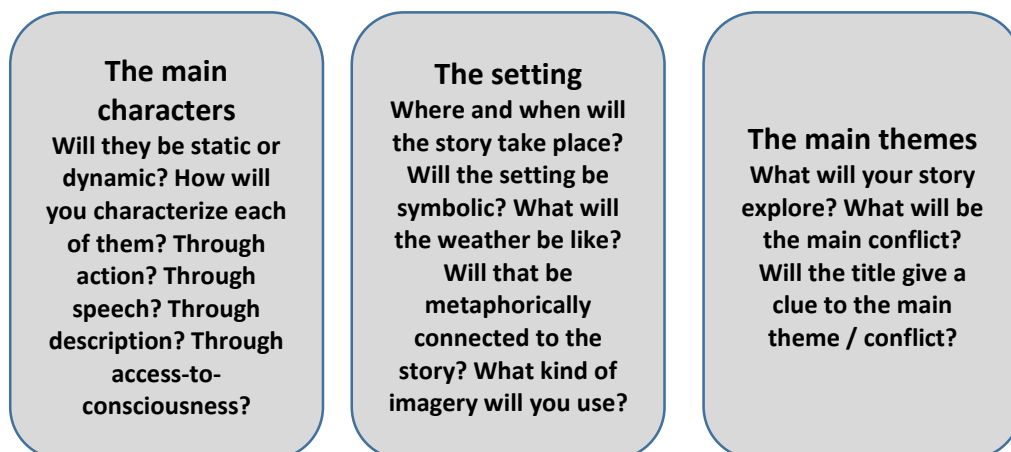
Once we had exchanged ideas on the three categories in connection with Nikki, I divided the class into four groups. Each group got a different section of the article. They were given a few minutes to read the section and complete the table.

	Difficult situations which they have had to face	First experiences / contact with trans identities	Experience transitioning
KEITH REYNOLDS			
SURAT-SHAAN KNAN			
JENNY-ANNE BISHOP			
J FERNANDEZ			

Every two minutes, I clapped, which meant that they had to stop reading and pass the text on to another group. This was repeated until all the groups had had a chance to get in contact with each section twice. Finally, each group was in charge of discussing one section and the rest commented on their own findings. At this point, I also introduced the concept of ‘intersectionality’ and we discussed how the categories of gender, ethnicity and social class were interrelated in some of the biographies. We ended this reading activity by talking about what all the stories had in common and by linking the article to the story “The Missing Person.”

The following class, we worked on two songs which deal with different ways in which people react to trans identities: Shea Diamond’s “I’m Her” and Terrorvision’s “Josephine.” I gave them some definitions of relevant terms for the discussion of these songs: “heteronormativity” / “homonormativity” / “gender stereotyping” / “transitioning.” I also gave them some statistics concerning the lives of trans people (e.g., life expectancy, job opportunities, etc.) for them to relate to Shea Diamond’s song.

We then worked on the song “Josephine” as a narrative text. We identified narrative elements such as setting, point of view, characters and their characterization, structure, symbols, themes and choice of title. After that, students had to choose a canonical literary text and re-write it from a trans perspective. I gave them the following questions to help trigger their ideas.



I asked them to write their stories as homework. Before we finished that lesson, the students briefly reported on their findings concerning the Gender Identity Law. They had found out that most adults in their families knew there was a law but were unaware of its content or had a mistaken idea of what the law stated. We ended the lesson by discussing some possible courses of action we could take as committed citizens to change the situation.

The following week, we kicked off the lesson by exchanging ideas on how to start a school campaign in order to inform the community about the content of the Gender Identity Law. Students also suggested starting a blog on which any learner in the school could share their own experiences with gender. In the next few weeks, students organized some “artistic interventions” in English during breaktime with the sole objective of drawing other students’ attention to the law, its main points and the importance of respecting people’s right to choose their gender identity.

Towards a queer pedagogy

A queer pedagogy seeks to lay bare the performative power of discourse. In the sequence I shared above, we worked on how trans people are constructed by the media, not only through the use of language, but also through the (mis)representation of said subjectivities. Throughout the unit, we also reflected on our own use of binary language in the questions we asked (e.g. for our surveys), or in the pronouns we used when speaking or writing in English. I remember a student signalled my use of the

pronoun 'he' to refer to a character who had transitioned. As the learner very cleverly pointed out, "the main character may not identify with either gender."

Another point worth mentioning is the importance of connecting the different forms of oppression. When reading the article "Transgender stories" we discussed how the categories of gender, ethnicity and social class were interrelated in the construction of social and political identities. A queer pedagogy seeks to expose privilege and, in so doing, it aims to help students become aware of their own positioning within society and the way(s) in which others may be at an advantage or at a disadvantage as compared to them.

A queer perspective rests upon the development of a critical praxis; that is, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1972, p.51). In this teaching sequence, there is a progression which goes from the exploration of the topic – through an enquiry-based approach – to socio-political action. Students learn that, if they want to become committed citizens, they cannot just point out the inequities of their social context, but they also need to act upon them.

In a pedagogy of liberation (Shor & Freire, 1987), it is definitely not enough to read *about* the lives of the oppressed, which would render them objects of study within the curriculum. We need to get to know their personal and collective narratives. For the trans community to reclaim the curriculum, it is their voices that must be heard. In the teaching sequence above, most texts contained a first-hand experience of trans subjectivities. The texts were not *about* trans lives, but they were either written by trans people or contained their stories in a first-person narrative form.

We also need to make room for any member of the class who may be willing to share their own (gendered) biographies since at the core of any queer pedagogy lies the question of desire. The word question is here to be construed not just as an issue, but as a form of (self) interrogation. As Morgade et al. (2011) suggest, the kind of Queer Sex Education that our students expect is the one that makes room for the question 'What is my own desire?', which can be formulated, but will be answered by each individual where, when and with whom they choose.

Closing words: Reclaiming a voice for the trans community

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence (hooks, 1994).

As teachers, we need to transcend the official curriculum (not just the one dictated by local authorities, but also the one/s outlined in coursebooks). The fight for curricular justice (Connell, 1993) is a power struggle over the dominant narrative, over what gets to be included and what is left out, over what is highlighted and what is made invisible. As Miller and Endo (2016) point out, "as language teachers and teacher educators, we can emulate through our own actions and the choices we make with our curriculum that, regardless of the content that we are teaching, social justice issues can become an integral part of the classroom" (p. 181).

The fight for justice is not the exclusive task of the oppressed. As Dervin (2015) invites us to consider: "Do we need to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or/and 'queer' ourselves to act? Just like one does not need to be 'black' to react strongly against racism, one does not need to be 'gay' to include the agenda of the politics of sexual identities into our work" (p. 3). We are all responsible – i.e., we have the ability to respond – in order to challenge the cis-heteronormative narrative which still dominates the world in the 21st century and which oppresses the trans community and other dissident identities.

One of our roles as foreign language teachers is not the development of a politics of tolerance – accepting otherness from the superiority of the self – but a politics of interculturalism and respect, conceived of as a non-hierarchical dialogue in which there is mutual acknowledgement of the other as an infinite other (Levinas, 1969), not as a projection of the self, as different from me. Giving centrality to the voices of trans-identified individuals can not only help us understand their predicament, but

above all, it can challenge us to act upon this world ethically to make it more equitable and democratic for all.

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