

## Revising the EFL curriculum through the lens of a multidimensional gender perspective

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### Abstract

Gender inequality, discrimination and violence are major problems everywhere in the world. In Argentina, several laws have been passed to address these issues. In spite of all this legal framework, gender justice is still a pending goal to be achieved. At university level, the interdisciplinary and multidimensional postgraduate workshop “Transforming the course curriculum: Workshop to integrate a gender perspective in the university curriculum” is an initiative to revise and transform the university curriculum from a gender perspective under three main dimensions: epistemic, political and ethical. In this account, I am sharing an experience of curriculum revision from the previously mentioned multidimensional gender perspective carried out in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course from Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, Córdoba, Argentina. I am also presenting some key concepts to understand gender inequality and exclusion and some interesting initiatives on gender inclusion in Argentina.

*Key words:* Gender perspective, EFL curriculum, multidimensional analysis, social justice

### Resumen

La desigualdad, discriminación y violencia de género son problemas importantes en todas las partes del mundo. En Argentina, diferentes leyes para abordar estos problemas han sido aprobadas. A pesar de todo este marco legal, la justicia de género sigue siendo un objetivo pendiente por alcanzar. A nivel universitario, el taller interdisciplinario y multidimensional “Transformando los programas: Taller para la incorporación de la perspectiva de género en los programas de las asignaturas” es una iniciativa para revisar y transformar el currículo universitario desde una perspectiva de género bajo tres dimensiones principales: epistémica, política y ética. En este artículo, comparto una experiencia de revisión de un programa de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera desde la perspectiva multidimensional presentada anteriormente en una carrera de la Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, Córdoba, Argentina. Así mismo, presento algunos conceptos clave para comprender la desigualdad y exclusión de género e iniciativas llevadas a cabo en Argentina.

*Palabras claves:* Perspectiva de Género, Programa de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, análisis multidimensional, justicia social

### Introduction

Gender inequality, discrimination and violence are major problems everywhere in the world. In Argentina, in the last decades, several laws have been passed to address these issues: Comprehensive Sexuality Education Law (2006); Violence against Women Protection Law (2009); Gender Identity Rights Law (2012); Femicide Protection Law (2012); Micaela Law (2018), that enforces Gender Perspective training on the employees of the legislative, executive and judicial state powers; and Same Sex Marriage Law

(2020). In spite of all this legal framework, gender justice is still a pending goal to be achieved. In this account, I am sharing an experience of curriculum revision from a multidimensional gender perspective. I am also presenting some key concepts to understand gender inequality and exclusion and some interesting initiatives on gender inclusion in Argentina.

## **Gender inequality and exclusion: An androcentric paradigm in Human Sciences and Education**

Historically, scientific knowledge has been the property of men. Women have been excluded from science or partially included as objects of study from men's perspectives (Bonder, 1984, p. 28). According to Ana María Fernández (1993), this exclusion has its origin in the Modern Era with the emergence of Human Sciences. To understand the structural inequality between genders, she refers to the concept of *episteme of the self* [*episteme de lo mismo*] to explain how the construction of scientific knowledge in modern sciences was centred on the male gender. In this period, men became the object of study of Human Sciences, while women were constructed as the “margin, negativity, double, shadow, reverse, complement” (1993, p. 35). Three main characteristics sustain this traditional knowledge structure: being attributive, binary, and hierarchical. Quoting Fernandez:

Attributive as it gives the male gender the property of the human model (Man = man). The other gender, therefore, is constructed in terms of negativity. Binary, since it alternates only two truth values, one being necessarily true and the other false (not A and B, but A and non-A). Hierarchical, as it transforms one of the two terms into inferior, complement or supplement. In such a logic, *the different one* will always be negative, the incomplete version of the one and, therefore, inferior. (1993, p. 39)

Under this paradigm, gender was understood as including only two main identities, either male or female, associated with certain attributes, and conceived in a hierarchical position of domination or subordination. Dissident identities, who did not fit into these categories, were excluded. Education, as all aspects of life, has been permeated by this paradigm. As Ruibal (2021) states, “[o]ur curricula and courses at the different education system levels, primary, secondary and university levels, have been influenced by an androcentric, patriarchal and colonial paradigm (p. 1).

In English Language Teaching (ELT) similar claims have been made. Quinterno (2022) expresses that the ELT curriculum is “cis-heteronormative technology which invisibilizes the trans-community” (p. 24) and calls teachers to transcend the ELT curriculum and its cis-heteronormative dominant discourse through queer language teaching. López Barrios (2022) also claims that gender and sexuality education are excluded from EFL (English as a foreign language) coursebooks. In a study of EFL materials used at upper-secondary schools in Argentina, he found out that controversial topics such as gender or sexuality education were not included in EFL textbooks, in spite of being required by the Argentinian Educational Legislation. As López Barrios explains, “[t]his tension between curriculum demands and the publishers’ need to make the coursebook a safe product, in the sense that it is acceptable to most of the potential users, and marketable, often results in the exclusion of topics indicated by the target syllabus such as gender or human rights issues” (p. 71).

## **Gender initiatives in ELT education in Argentina**

To fill this gap, there have been some interesting initiatives in ELT education in Argentina. Most of them integrate Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) from a gender perspective in EFL and ELT courses. Banegas and Lauze (2020) carried out an innovation which combined content and language integrated learning (CLIL) with CSE. This innovation was implemented at a state secondary school in Argentina and was based on the topics of same-sex marriage, abortion, LGTB rights, gender equality and gender violence.

Banegas et al. (2020) also conducted an investigation at an online Teacher Education Programme in 2018 to explore the impact of a teaching module with a gender perspective on 30 student teachers. The module comprised content related to gender and sexualities, the history of sexual education in Argentina, schools and pedagogies over bodies and sexualities, teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and rights vulnerability, sexual transmission diseases, discrimination and sexual diversity. The results indicated that the student teachers found the CSE approach meaningful, useful and applicable and in their future professional practices.

Bonadeo et al. (2021) implemented another initiative in a Teacher Education programme in Santa Fe, Argentina. A new module called “Material adaptation and development: a case for the integration of CSE content” was created by student teachers during the Practicum period. The module departed from the analysis and adaptation of mainstream materials and included content related to LGTBQIA+, identity construction, avoidance of binary/heteronormative-oriented gender roles, responsible use of social media, gender stereotypes and prejudices.

In the context of primary school Teacher Education, Beacon (2022) carried out a critical pedagogic analysis based on queer and feminist pedagogies of two contemporary picturebooks for primary English students and proposed creative teaching ideas for student teachers to work with children. The proposal aimed at “disrupting the commonplace in traditional fairy tales, challenging gender roles and introducing creative gender identities’ (p. 6). To that end, queer fairy tale versions, feminist critique to patriarchal practices, the use of graphic organizers to develop CSE awareness, critical pedagogical analysis and creative gender identity construction based on intersectional analysis were some of the ideas and activities suggested.

## **A multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspective to revise the university curriculum**

From an interdisciplinary and multidimensional stance, the workshop “Transforming the course curriculum: Workshop to integrate a gender perspective in the university curriculum”, is another initiative to address gender in university education. This workshop was first implemented by Universidad de General Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2019, with the aim of revising and transforming the university curriculum from a gender perspective. Since then, it has been replicated in many Argentinian universities.

According to Attardo et al. (2020), the curriculum is instructional discourse, created by teachers and aimed at students, which represents an arbitrary cultural selection within a possible universe. As the curriculum reflects perspectives, positions and views of knowledge, teachers need to analyse the curriculum as an object of study (p. 24). Feldman and Palamidessi (2001) state that every curriculum anticipates a purpose, defines an objective, or sets a goal, and presents an educational proposal which includes certain content, certain teaching and learning actions and expectations of what students will be able to do by the end of a course (p. 15).

The curriculum is influential, not only for what it includes, but also for what it leaves out and silences. Revising the curriculum from a gender perspective requires committing to the instrumental dimension of teaching and learning, to the epistemological dimension and to a subjective political dimension as well (Attardo et al., 2020, p. 26).

To achieve that purpose, the workshop aims at analysing the curriculum from three gender dimensions: epistemic, political and ethical. The epistemic dimension involves visualizing the traditional ways of constructing knowledge in modern sciences, making their attributive, binary and hierarchical logics visible. The political one implies thinking about power and asymmetric relationships as well as deconstructing modern assumptions of equality. The ethical dimension refers to the field of equity and social justice, and to the promotion of transformative actions (Attardo, et al., 2020, p. 27).

In addition, the workshop proposes an intersectional analysis. This analysis is based on the premise that people live multiple identities formed by layers that derive from social relations, history and power structures. Through an intersectional analysis, the various identities, discrimination and disadvantages caused by the combination of identities can be visualized (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Gender, thus, should be understood as one of the most important facets of social identity that interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age and social status (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 504).

Addressing gender from this multidimensional perspective requires reflecting upon what, why and how we teach, what and why we evaluate; how, why and by whom knowledge is produced (Attardo et.al, 2020, p. 26) and how we can take action against gender inequality, exclusion, discrimination and violence to contribute to social transformation.

## Revising the EFL curriculum under the lens of gender from a multidimensional perspective

To revise the curriculum under the lens of gender from a multidimensional perspective, I will share an experience of curriculum revision from an EFL course at university level. The curriculum belongs to a course called “English Language II” from the programme *Tecnicatura en Lenguas* at Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto. The course is in the second year of the programme and aims at developing communicative and intercultural competences as well. The objectives and content of the curriculum are in line with the descriptors provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) and correspond to a B1 level.

In order to revise the curriculum from a multidimensional gender perspective, the previously mentioned categories related to the epistemic, political, and ethical dimensions were used. The epistemic dimension involved visualizing the *attributive, binary* and *hierarchical logics* present implicitly and explicitly in the curriculum. The political dimension was analysed through the categories of *power*, especially through the recognition of *asymmetric relationships*. The ethical dimension was addressed through the categories of *equity* and *social justice*.

To carry out such analysis, the EFL curriculum was examined through the questions below (See table 1). The table shows the questions asked about the main components of the curriculum: subject presentation and objectives, content, methodology, evaluation and bibliography.

Table 1. Questions for curriculum revision from a multidimensional gender perspective	
Curriculum	Questions

components	
<b>Subject Presentation/ Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-How are the students addressed?</li> <li>-Are they represented as binary (male/female), dissident identities?</li> <li>-Which voices predominate?</li> <li>-How is the subject (English Language) presented?</li> <li>-What underlying theories and assumptions about education, EFL teaching/learning and knowledge can you identify?</li> <li>-Are these theories and assumptions in line with a framework of social justice and human rights?</li> <li>-Are there objectives related to gender issues? If so, which?</li> <li>-Are legal aspects related to gender (Laws) mentioned? If so, which?</li> <li>-Can gender biases be identified?</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Which content is included in the syllabus?</li> <li>-Is it relevant for the context of the students?</li> <li>-Is content related to any particular aspect of the English Language? Which?</li> <li>-Is content related to a particular country and cultural group?</li> <li>-Is content related to a particular social group?</li> <li>-Is there content related to gender? If so, which?</li> <li>-Can gender biases be identified in the content?</li> </ul>
<b>Methodology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What methodologies are mentioned in the curriculum?</li> <li>-Is reflection/critical thinking included in the methodology?</li> <li>-What methodologies could be necessary to raise awareness on gender issues?</li> <li>-What resources do students need to take the subject?</li> <li>- Are these resources accessible to all the students?</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment and Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What type of evaluation is mentioned?</li> <li>-What aspects are evaluated?</li> <li>-What instruments are mentioned?</li> <li>-Is gender content evaluated? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the authors present in the bibliography male, female, dissident identities?</li> <li>-Where are most of the authors from?</li> <li>-Which publishing houses are mentioned? Where are those publishing houses based?</li> <li>-Are there local authors included in the bibliography?</li> </ul>

### **Integrating gender in the EFL curriculum**

After the revision, a proposal which integrates a multidimensional gender perspective to the course curriculum was designed. I will present the revision made to each of the sections of the curriculum aforementioned: subject presentation and objectives, content, methodology, evaluation and bibliography.

#### **Subject presentation and objectives**

In order to address a gender perspective, the first section of the curriculum named “Subject presentation” was revised. Being this section the first instance of communication

between teachers and students, the language used to address the students was the first aspect to revise. Special attention to the use of more inclusive non-binary language was given. Kalinowski et al. (2020) refers to inclusive language as "a rhetorical and political phenomenon rather than a linguistic one" (p. 17) related mainly to the possibility of visualizing androcentrism and the inclusion of non-binary minorities, more than to language mutation and linguistic change. Therefore, rethinking about the language used in our curricula was a first political action towards gender inclusion and equality.

In addition, the examination involved defining and re-defining the object of study, in this case English as a foreign language in the context of the programme where it is taught. It also involved visualizing the explicit and implicit underlying conceptions and theoretical frameworks of EFL education (roles as educators, purpose of teaching English, approaches, educational policies, among others). Education for social justice (Nieto, 2010) and for Interculturality and Citizenship (Byram, 2008; Porto et al., 2015) offered theoretical frameworks to integrate a gender perspective since they relate ELT to wider educational goals rather than to linguistic or instrumental ones.

As the curriculum objectives were also a part of this section, they were also under examination. The curriculum included objectives related to the development of communicative competence, involving linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic aspects (European Framework, 2001) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 2008) but did not include any related to gender. Thus, they were reframed to include gender with the main purpose of reflecting on gender inequalities and discrimination, gender stereotypes and prejudices from an intersectional analysis. Table 2 presents the new learning objectives.

<b>Table 2. Learning objectives</b>		
<b>Objectives</b>	<b>From an Intercultural Perspective</b>	<b>From an Intercultural Perspective towards a Gender and Diversity Perspective</b>
That the students can reflect on:	intercultural content (foreign and own cultures)  stereotypes and prejudices related to cultural groups	gender inequalities and discrimination from an intersectional analysis  stereotypes and prejudices related to genders

### **Content: Integrating gender with the subject content**

Gender content was not present explicitly in the course curriculum. However, the content was organized around topics such as Emotions, Sport, Work, Food and Shopping, Human Body and Health. These topics could be the context to include gender and diversity content to achieve the previously mentioned objectives (reflecting on gender inequalities, discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices). In addition, an intersectional analysis could contribute to the visualization of inequalities and discrimination since it can provide categories to understand gender as part of social identity interrelated with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age and social status (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 504).

As it can be seen in the following table, the topics could be further expanded to include gender content from an intersectional analysis. Table 3 shows possible gender and diversity content present in the new curriculum.

<b>Table 3. Gender and Diversity Content</b>			
<b>Topics</b>	<b>Gender and Diversity</b>	<b>Possible Resources</b>	I N T E R S E C T I O N A L I T Y  race ethnicity social class sexuality, (dis)ability, age
<b>Emotions</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● emotions associated with genders in different cultures</li> <li>● Prejudices and stereotypes about emotions and genders</li> <li>● Myths about romantic love and gender</li> </ul>	* Literature: Bell Hook's poems * Videos	
<b>Sports</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● sports associated to the different genders in different cultures</li> <li>● attributes associated to genders and sports</li> <li>● transgender identities and division in sports at schools/universities/competitions</li> <li>● sports, bullying and genders</li> <li>● prejudices and stereotypes related to sports and genders</li> </ul>	* Newspapers / Media articles / Posts	
<b>Work</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● inequalities at work in relation to gender (positions, salaries, rights) in different cultures</li> <li>● transgender work exclusion - inclusion</li> <li>● hegemonic masculinity</li> <li>● prejudices and stereotypes</li> </ul>	* Newspapers / Media articles / Posts	
<b>Food and Shopping</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● household activities such as cooking in different cultures</li> <li>● women's roles at home</li> <li>● men's roles at home</li> <li>● prejudices and stereotypes</li> <li>● feminist economics</li> </ul>	* Literature - Preface to the book: "Who cooked Adam Smith's dinner?" by Katrine Marcal	
<b>Human body and Health</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● biological sex and gender</li> <li>● beauty standards in different cultures</li> <li>● functional diversity and accessibility</li> <li>● prejudices and stereotypes about diverse bodies</li> <li>● discrimination based on physical appearance and gender</li> <li>● transitioning</li> </ul>	* Advertisements (Past and present) * Gender Identity laws * Media Posts *Life experiences recounts on social media	

<b>Communication</b>	Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● inclusive language and strategies for inclusion through language in English and Spanish</li> <li>● activism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* TED Talks</li> <li>* Music</li> <li>* Art</li> </ul>	
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## Methodology, evaluation and bibliography

The curriculum revision also involved rethinking about the necessary methodologies to allow for gender critical reflection and action. As proposed by social justice education, intercultural and citizenship education, reflection and action were considered the main pillars to achieve the previously mentioned aims. Education for social justice provided a comprehensive framework for gender integration as it aims at deconstructing "misconceptions and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender and other social and human differences" (Nieto, 2010, p. 46). This type of education is in line with Intercultural and Citizenship education (Byram & Zarate, 1997; Byram, 2008; Porto & Byram, 2015) since they all highlight the role of foreign language education in promoting democratic and social transformation through the development of critical thinking skills and action.

Moreover, the inclusion of gender perspective in the curriculum had an impact on the evaluation processes as well. It questioned the traditional, product-oriented, teacher-centred evaluation in the EFL curriculum and prompted a need to implement alternative forms of assessment that could match the gender and diversity objectives. Thus, summative assessment was complemented with formative assessment. In addition to the previously used instruments in the curriculum (mainly tests and student's productions), journal writing was included systematically throughout the implementation of gender and diversity content. This allowed for reflection, dialogue and feedback.

Finally, the revision also brought changes to the canon included in bibliography since it had to deal with the unequal and unbalanced predominance of male, Euro-centred references. It led to the inclusion of voices from diverse genders.

## Conclusion

EFL has an important role in education for gender inclusion and consequently for social justice. To achieve such a purpose, we could start by questioning our curricula and examining whether we keep on contributing to the reproduction of inequality and oppression or whether we want to educate for gender integration and social justice. As Banegas & Lauze (2020) state "[t]here is a pressing need to imbue ELT pedagogical contours with gender topics to ensure diversity, equity, and social justice not only at a conceptual level, but more importantly, at an activity level. In other words, language learners should not reflect on gender diversity and other CSE-related topics but should work towards enacting diversity with their daily language-mediated activities" (p. 201). As the authors state, reflection is the first necessary step towards gender justice. However, taking action is the most imperative goal to achieve. Teachers can take action by revising their EFL curricula. To do so, the categories related to the epistemic, political and ethical dimensions of gender together with an intersectional analysis can be the lens for curriculum revision and transformation. They can visualize androcentric, patriarchal and colonial practices and offer guidelines to include gender perspective in the EFL curricula.

However, future EFL curricula should mainly encourage students to take action and become agents of social transformation in the communities they participate in. Action could take the form of more inclusive language use, active engagement in awareness



raising campaigns on gender topics, and/or, more importantly, development of context-sensitive proposals to put an end to any form of gender inequality, discrimination and violence.

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