

Perspectives

The ESL Classroom and the Queerly Shifting Sands of Learner Identity

Jacqueline Dumas

Class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are increasingly recognized as complex constructs of varied forms of identity. We now tend to speak of learner identities in the plural rather than learner identity in the singular. In this context, issues of sexual diversity intersect with those of cultural and linguistic diversity. The ESL classroom is one place where learners should not feel shy or afraid to explore and negotiate their identities, including their sexual identities. To help them in this process, teachers can provide a safe classroom environment where learners can discover what options are available to them.

On reconnaît de plus en plus la classe, le genre, l'ethnicité et la sexualité comme des concepts complexes au sein des formes variées de l'identité. Nous avons maintenant tendance à parler d'identités d'apprenants au pluriel plutôt qu'au singulier. Dans ce contexte, les enjeux de la diversité sexuelle recoupent ceux de la diversité culturelle et linguistique. La salle de classe ALS est un milieu où les apprenants ne devraient pas se sentir gênés ou avoir peur d'explorer et de négocier leurs identités, y compris leurs identités sexuelles. Pour appuyer leurs élèves dans ces démarches, les enseignants peuvent créer un milieu où les apprenants peuvent découvrir les options qui leur sont accessibles.

Identity as a Sociopolitical Construct

Recent critical work in the teaching of English as a second or other language (TESOL) has drawn on postmodern theories that recognize that class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are not “transparent givens onto which language may be mapped” (Pennycook, 2003, p. 514), but complex constructs of varied forms of identity. As Pennycook (1999) reminds us, in this respect we are called to focus “on questions of power, inequality, discrimination, resistance, and struggle” (p. 332).

Identity is a term applied to the escape sought from the uncertainty of postmodernism (Bauman, 1996). In this context, we speak not of *identity* in the singular, but of *multiple identities* that are “constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Some of these identities—citizen/non-citizen, professor/student—are relations of power (Norton, 1997) that are often “more

relevant and consequential than class and racial/ethnic categories” (Berard, 2005, p. 73). From this standpoint, language becomes but one among many shifting identities, and the teaching of it “a question of cultural politics” (Pennycook, 1999 p. 334). As we abandon the concomitant notion of a generic learner (Canagarajah, 2006), the effect of identity on language-learning in the ESL classroom acquires greater significance—as does, conversely, the effect of language learning on identity.

An identity “does *not* signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’” (Hall, 1996, p. 3). Nor does one put on an identity at will (Pennycook, 2003); one takes up its performance in relation to culture (Butler, 1990/1999). In other words, we do not use language because of who we are: we *perform* who we are using varieties of language. English, for its part, is performed and (re)fashioned by learners as they invent new selves.

Identities, then, are about *becoming* rather than *being*. Hence identity, “though ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb” (Bauman, 1996, p. 19): a verb in the future tense, as relationships are constructed across time and space with an eye to future possibilities. In this sense, identity relates to desire: desire for recognition, affiliation, and security and safety (Norton, 1997). Learners’ desires, for their part, are usually linked to economic resources that provide access to power and privilege, which in turn influence both the understanding of one’s relationship to the world and the perception of possibilities for the future. When individual learners make an “investment” in the target language, they do so with the understanding that “they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources” (Norton Pierce, 1995, p. 17). For an immigrant, learning English means that previous experiences are mediated through the new experiences taking place “across multiple sites in the home, workplace, and community” (Norton, 1997, p. 413).

Under these conditions, neither language nor the teaching of it can be considered as neutral and value-free (McPherron & Schneider, 2005); rather, language and its acquisition become “obviously but nontrivially” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 526) linked to one’s social and political world (McPherron & Schneider). Because learners’ identities in particular can be fragile and dependent on external factors, the social needs and aspirations of learners must be seen as inseparable from their linguistic needs.

Multiple Identities, Loss, and Reconstruction

Educational institutions often operate with “an unfortunate tunnel vision” (Berard, 2005, p. 67), which can obscure the great variety of relevant social identities and relations located beyond the conventional categories of class, race, culture, and gender. As Berard notes, “If class (or race, or gender) *always*

matters, *regardless of the data at hand*, then we really need to ask *in what sense it could matter, and to whom?*" (pp. 73-74).

One approach to these questions is to shift the "focus of investigation from language structure to language use in context, and to issues of affiliation and belonging" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 156). Correspondingly, a participation metaphor, which considers learning as a process of becoming a member of a community of knowledge and practice, can be more useful than an acquisition metaphor, which involves gaining possession over knowledge (Sfard, 1998). Participation becomes not just about taking part in staged Heritage-Days-type cultural events; it becomes "about a profound struggle to reconstruct a self" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, p. 174).

Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) put forth a unifying metaphor of self-translation, which "entails a phase of continuous loss and only later an overlapping second phase of gain and reconstruction" (p. 162). The losses of one's linguistic identity, subjectivities, frame of reference, and inner voice, as well as first language (L1) attrition, are gradually replaced by the appropriation of other voices, the emergence of a new voice, the reconstruction of the past, and the continual growth into new subjectivities and positions.

Hoffman (1990) writes of moving from Poland to the United States as an adolescent and having to reconstruct herself in English: "If I'm to write about the present," she says in her diary, "I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self" (p. 121). She describes her diary as

an earnest attempt to create a part of my persona that I imagine I would have grown into in Polish. In the solitude of this most private act, I write, in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self. The diary is about me and not about me at all. But on one level, it allows me to make the first jump. I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self.... This language is beginning to invent another me. (p. 121)

Through her diary, Hoffman is able to come to terms with her intersecting selves: her Polish (past) self, her emerging (present and future) English self, and her (future) imagined Polish self.

Understanding multiple identities in terms of affiliation and belonging, participation and nonparticipation—as opposed to a search for commonality—has a profound effect on how we view second language (L2) learners. Kubota (2004) points out how liberal multiculturalism paradoxically emphasizes cultural differences at the same time as it "tends to obscure issues of power and privilege attached to the white middle class" (p. 35). A focus on commonality reinforces "difference blindness" (p. 32) and "fails to recognize the social and economic inequalities and institutional racism that actually exist in schools and society" (p. 33).

In this respect, nonparticipation can be either “an act of resistance from a position of marginality” or “an opportunity for learning from a position of peripherality” (Norton, 2001, p. 165). A tight-knit L1 community that fears assimilation, for example, can work against social integration (Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, in press). In a study of Francophone and Mandarin speakers learning English in Québec, Gatbonton, Trofimovich, and Magid (2005) found that L2 learners treated their peers’ L2 accent “as an indicator of these peers’ degree of ethnic affiliation” (p. 497). Peers (both Francophone and Mandarin) attributed greater group loyalty to the heavily accented than to the moderately accented or non-accented speakers. Creese and Kambere (2003) noted a similar tendency in a study of African immigrant women. The issue becomes one of peripherality (a chosen site) versus marginality (a site imposed from without), a situation in which learners must assess the consequences of the social costs in aiming for more complete integration.

Queer Identities and Second-Language Acquisition

Identities are developed against the grain, in relation to the Other, so that they operate as points of identification and attachment through exclusion (Butler 1990/1999; Hall, 1996), or as Bauman (1996) puts it, “One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs” (p. 19). In addition, identities are “constructed within, not outside, discourse” (Hall, p. 4), which means not only that “we must conceive of learners as having identities that often accommodate English seamlessly with other languages” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 14), but also that it may become normal for learners to see themselves as different when marginalized as non-native speakers (Marx, 2002).

If whiteness is the racial norm in North America and English the linguistic norm, compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1986/1994) is the sexual norm. And just as commonality tends to erase non-white racial identities, so too does it erase alternative sexual identities. In this regard, a “queer theoretical framework may be more useful pedagogically than a lesbian and gay one because it shifts the focus from inclusion to inquiry” (Nelson, 1999, p. 371).

Queer theory calls into question the privileged status of heterosexuality by conceiving of sexual identities not as private matters, but as performative acts that have shaping force and societal significance (Nelson, 2006). In addition to reclaiming the word *queer*, queer theory places such terms as *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgendered*, and *two-spirited* in relationship with the terms *gender*, *race*, and *class* (Code, 2000). By problematizing all these terms, queer theory posits a critical rethinking of the ideology that shapes sexual identity, thereby rejecting homosexuality as a clinical, scientific category, gender as a biological category, sexual preference as a choice, and sexual orientation as an innate quality.

Whereas a lesbian and gay approach challenges prejudicial attitudes (homophobia) and discriminatory actions (heterosexism) on the grounds that they violate human rights, a queer approach looks at how discursive acts and cultural practices manage to make heterosexuality, and only heterosexuality, seem normal or natural (heteronormativity). (Nelson, 1999, p. 376)

Yet if referring to our society as monocultural is generally discouraged, a cursory examination of ESL learning materials will nonetheless attest to a "monosexual community of interlocutors": straight people who interact "exclusively with other straight people" (Nelson, 2006, p. 1). Misrepresentations like these give rise to several important questions. Do such monosexual depictions limit efforts to foster multilingualism and multiliteracies? How is this monosexualizing tendency tied to learner motivation and empowerment?

Critical Learning and Learner Autonomy

Graman (1988) recommends not a classroom that prepares students for the real world, but one that is the real world. Disequilibrium or conflict is considered as part of the struggle for knowledge, and teachers can help learners through their process of identifying problems and coming up with their own solutions. In his ideal classroom, "students and teachers critically analyze real problems and take action to solve them" (p. 441). Consequently, learners are free to develop "the critical consciousness and linguistic ability needed to function not as servants but as active decisionmakers" (p. 441) in society. As Graman writes, "The point is not to learn what to think and say, but rather how to think for yourself and express those thoughts in a new language" (p. 446).

Norton (2001) refers to Wenger's (1998) three modes of belonging to the larger community: engagement (active involvement), imagination (our created images of the world based on experience), and alignment (the extent to which we try to fit in). Learners can be encouraged to produce "new images of possibility and new ways of understanding" (Norton, p. 163). By acknowledging and valuing such efforts of individual thinking and expression, teachers can set learners on the road to self-empowerment and autonomy.

Using language to express one's identity is intrinsically motivating; in turn, motivation facilitates empowerment. For learners who enjoyed identities as respected professionals in their native countries and for whom these identities are best validated by professional peers in their adopted community, it is important to understand motivation and acquisition "in terms of social participation and identity construction" (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 9). As

Canagarajah reminds us, “practices that are process-oriented, autonomous, and experiential are considered empowering” (p. 15).

Pedagogical Implications

Politics, including sexual politics, is implicit in education, and “it is particularly important to expose this fact in relation to language education” (Graman, 1988, p. 439). The notion of world Englishes and its “implications of pluricentricity” (Kachru, 1997, p. 66) suggest that if monolingualism and monoculturalism are to be rejected as norms, so too should compulsory heterosexuality.

Queerness in Canada is a cultural, social, and legal reality. ESL teachers might consider addressing the general invisibility of lesbians and the stereotyping of gay men in the ESL classroom, if only for practical reasons. For one thing, popular media in North America already yield a more diverse picture than some other cultures that underacknowledge the existence of queer people (Nelson, 1999; O’Móchain, 2006). The challenge is threefold: to help learners navigate these new sensibilities; to make the classroom more relevant to queer-identifying learners; and to make it relevant to those who interact with queer-identified people in the classroom or in the community at large and who encounter issues while watching television or a movie (Nelson, 1999). As Nelson (2006) puts it, L2 learners need

to develop the types of fluency required to take part in—and to critique—contemporary discourses (which increasingly involve sexual diversity alongside other aspects of diversity). On a broader, ethical level, excluding queer perspectives and knowledges from our classrooms and our literature is, in effect, a way of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality, which hardly seems an appropriate role for second language educators and researchers. (p. 7)

Learners in a new culture must make choices about which traditional roles they will struggle to maintain and which they will let go of. It is particularly important for those who identify as queer or who are questioning their sexuality to be able to “create a coherent and affirmative narrative of self” (O’Móchain, 2006, p. 52). Discussing sexuality in an institutional and educational context can serve to affirm the identities of students who are not heterosexual (O’Móchain). Supplying the appropriate linguistic codes to be able switch between the straight world and the queer world can be empowering. Students need to name their world in order to understand it (Freire, 1999).

To make the classroom a safe and caring environment for all, both homophobia (a prejudice) and heterosexism (systematic discrimination) need to be addressed. The first step in this process might be to ensure that materials evaluations include homophobia and heterosexism in their criteria,

because sexual identity is already an integral part of ESL. An examination of curricular materials will show countless references to husband/wife, dating, marriage, in-laws, and so forth (Nelson, 1999). The result is that heterosexual hegemony is promoted by two silencing processes: ignoring the existence or presence of queer people and constructing only heterosexuality as “normal.”

What are effective and realistic strategies to counter this bias? Are we to “provide marginalized students access to dominant discourses or help them develop voice in order to resist them?” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 16). And what if student expectations “disallow that type of inquiry or find it deeply incongruous?” (O’Móchain, 2006, p. 53). Do we then risk “alienating the ideologies of individual students?” (McPherron & Schneider, 2005, p. 234). In other words, is it best to *let sleeping dogs lie*, or is it a disservice to our students to allow the dogs to remain undisturbed?

The ESL classroom is an ideal setting in which to counter the hypersexualization of gay-identified people (Nelson, 1999). The ESL teacher, especially at lower language levels, is in the unique position of being able to provide a safe environment for queer people, which is of particular consequence to people from countries where being gay can be punished by jail or even death, and/or those who have gained the possibility of public affection with a lover. Another circumstance to consider is that of the learner who on moving to Canada has lost the ease of physically expressing affection with a friend because it is perceived here as homoerotic (Nelson, 1999).

However well-intended it might be, inclusion can be problematic. An emphasis on including minorities can serve to reinforce their minority status: ESL learners who become racialized when they come to Canada are also at risk of becoming sexualized if they declare their sexual identity. A well-meaning teacher might also struggle with which particular representation of *a lesbian* or *a gay man* is to be used in curricula or materials (Nelson, 1999). On the other hand, if these questions are approached within the framework of a queer-informed inquiry, with the focus placed on analysis rather than advocacy, then “a range of sexual identities [can] be referred to or discussed throughout curricula rather than only in relation to so-called gay topics” (Nelson, p. 377).

What, then, are context-appropriate ways to explore sexual identity? First of all, a normalized environment can be established early on in the classroom in order to signal to students that sexual diversity is an acceptable topic for discussion. It is important to consider how queer topics arise in the classroom: what choices or challenges they present and what strategies are helpful in dealing with them (Nelson, 1999). O’Móchain (2006) describes an EFL class in Japan in which he presented the true story of a young local queer woman in tandem with the fictional story of Jess and her best friend in the film *Bend it Like Beckham*. In the film, Jess’s parents are appalled to discover that she has been secretly playing on a women’s soccer team; in their culture,

soccer is considered a boy's game. In addition, the mother of Jess's friend jumps to the false conclusion that her daughter and Jess are in a lesbian relationship. O'Móchain relates how he juxtaposed the isolation felt by the fictional Jess with the authentic narrative of the local queer woman. By presenting the narratives in this way, he encouraged students to draw parallels between the two stories and offered them a nonthreatening way of discussing potentially contentious issues at the same time as they were analyzing and producing meaningful language.

If gayness is put forth as a societal reality rather than as a subject for religious or cultural debate, the topic becomes normalized. Using the words *gay*, *lesbian*, and *queer* as positive or neutral terms relocates them as positive or neutral words in English, even if they have negative connotations in the learner's L1. In addition, whatever values these terms might connote in another culture, their use in a value-positive or value-neutral way in English implies that the associated practices are accepted in the new culture.

Thus it is not a matter of *teaching* sexual diversity; nor is it a matter of having ready-made answers. If students bring up topics, teachers can be equipped with follow-up questions that allow for multiple perspectives. For example, a teacher might ask the class what people say or do not say in Canada if they want to be seen as gay (or lesbian or straight). How is this different or similar in other countries? Why might people want to be seen as straight (or bisexual or gay)? Why might they not want to? Why might people sometimes want to be able to identify others as straight (or gay)? When is it important to know this about someone? When is it not important? (Nelson, 1999). A question such as *Is homosexuality a choice or are people born that way?* can be reframed to *What leads people to think they're straight or gay?* (Curran, 2006). By shifting focus away from "learning about (or learning to accept) lesbian, gay, and bisexual people" (Nelson, p. 377), it becomes feasible to analyze "how language and culture work with regard to all sexual identities" (p. 377).

Lesson tasks can be made "accessible and potentially relevant to any student" (Nelson, 1999, p. 387). If marriage is being discussed, for example, it can (and should) be mentioned that in Canada same-sex marriage is legal and that same-sex common-law couples have the same rights as opposite-sex couples. In role plays, instead of asking for students to play husband or wife, father or mother, they can be asked to form their own families. In this way it becomes not a question of teaching sexual diversity or even bringing up queer issues in the classroom, but of actively providing a safe, open space for learners who might *want* to bring them up.

As demonstrated by O'Móchain (2006), authentic queer material can be integrated into curricula. Other resources can be made available to students who are interested. For example, an information table could be kept stocked with pamphlets and Web site listings about gay resources in the com-

munity—such as the local gay and lesbian community center and the gay youth group—and made available alongside information about other community resources: public libraries, bookstores, local knitting groups, Amnesty International, Alcoholics Anonymous, women's shelters, and the like.

Such a classroom would be filled with emancipatory potential. Such a classroom would support true learner autonomy.

Conclusion

We know that how one is treated affects identity and that identity is related to learner empowerment. The ESL classroom can become the one place where learners do not feel shy or afraid to explore and negotiate their identities. To help them in this process, we as teachers can provide a classroom environment in which learners can make their own choices about whether to try to fit in completely or whether to resist the dominant culture. By helping them discover what options are available to them, we can help learners find a space in which to appropriate or integrate discourse for their own purposes.

Awareness is the first step in the process of change (Pennycook, 1999). For this reason, if we are to help all learners find and define their social place in their new culture, it is important for us as teachers to be self-reflective, and to examine our personal ideological tenets.

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The Author

Jacqueline Dumas recently graduated from the master's program in Teaching English as a Second Language at the University of Alberta. She lives and teaches in Edmonton.

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