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Mind the gap

an investigation into a perceived diversity gap in the English language learning sub-culture

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Abstract

In this article, the author reflects on the absence of gay people from English language teaching materials, and reports on a piece of action research in which a number of teachers used a worksheet which presented gay people in a gay context. The article is an edited version of an essay written as assessed coursework on the Certificate Programme in Adult Literacy, Adult Numeracy and ESOL Education at London South Bank University.

Introduction

Where are the coursebook gays and lesbians? They are nowhere to be found. They are still firmly in the coursebook closet. Coursebook people are never gay. Coursebook family trees and family photos are rigorously heterosexual. In no course book or EFL text does the word gay appear (Thornbury 1999: 15-6).

One of the most widely examined manifestations of sexist attitudes is omission (Porecca 1984).

I have worked as an English Language teacher since 1997 and become increasingly aware of and concerned by the almost complete absence of references to gay people in all of the currently published English Language Teaching (ELT) and ESOL *Skills for Life* materials and resources.

Why is this? Does it really matter? And what happens when images of and references to gay people do enter this world? I decided to investigate because,

I have never heard a straight colleague initiate criticism of the near complete absence of anything gay in our materials and our curricula. ... This silence, this void, is a problem. Those of us who are gay don't have the luxury of ignoring hatred and violence when it is directed against us. (Nelson 1993).

Does it really matter?

When challenged about the denial of visibility to and exclusion of gay people, a standard response is often: *We can't include all minority groups; gay people aren't the only ones we've left out.* Whilst this is undeniable, is it good practice? The implication is that all outcast minority groups can be lumped together in their exclusion. This should not be the case. Each group must be assessed separately and with a view to the reconsideration of its outcast status. Gay people represent a significant minority in society. To exclude any reference to them is absurd and anachronistic, offensive, and detrimental to learning.

Absurd and anachronistic

Absurd and anachronistic because as learners have pointed out, gay people are ubiquitous in the culture that surrounds them. They are aware of being surrounded by constant references to and images of gay people. So, if gay people are everywhere, they should be everywhere, ELT included.

Offensive

Offensive because there will be gay people in the classroom who have a need for and a right to acknowledgement, recognition and representation. Offensive because talking about gay people is equated with talking about sex in the learning environment, which is seen as inappropriate, but this is to reduce gay people to a sex act. Offensive because historically one of the most effective and insidious ways of oppressing gay people has been to deny their existence.

Detrimental to learning

Many current learning theories focus on the individual interacting in society. Both Lave and Wenger's Situated Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism emphasise the crucial role social interaction plays in learning. Maslow and Roger's Humanist Approach asks teachers to directly address the individual needs of learners and help them set practical social and personal learning goals. The Andragogic stance of Knowles asks us to remain aware that adult learners are adults and capable of making and taking responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Finally, Bloom (1984) in his *Taxonomy of Educational*

Objectives tells us we must:

- listen to learners,
- value and appreciate their individual enthusiasms, motivations and attitudes,
- be aware of them as individuals and respond to their personal feelings,
- recognise and help them with their moral dilemmas so they can become free, independent, autonomous and enlightened members of society.

It does seem that to deny the existence of gay people from the point of view of any of the above learning theories and theorists, who clearly all in their different ways stress the importance of addressing learners as individuals for effective learning to take place, would be detrimental to learning, definitely of gay learners and quite possibly of all learners, for:

All of our students know that gay people exist ... students themselves have brought up gay issues (Nelson 1993).

Students bring their own classed, raced and gendered biographies with them ... They ... accept, reinterpret and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge selectively (Apple 1992: 10).

... homosexuality is of interest to many students, both straight and gay, and is therefore a useful area for language teachers to exploit (John Eager, English teacher, U.K: 20th April, 2000 Response to Thornbury 1999).

So why is there this lack of visibility in ELT materials and resources, and what can and should be done about it?

Cynthia Nelson sums up one attitude expressed by some teachers:

Our students are from countries where there aren't any gay people. I honestly don't think they could handle talking about gays. It would be too controversial. Her riposte is: Many of our students are from countries where there are few, if any, gay rights. Gay people, however, exist everywhere and ... always have (Nelson 1993).

Both Cynthia Nelson and Scott Thornbury, in the articles already quoted, offer some fascinating insights into the reasons behind the lack of visibility and representation of gay people in ELT. They also refute the logic behind these reasons, in Thornbury's case seven years ago and in Nelson's case thirteen years ago. So why, when for so long there have been no good reasons for leaving out gay people from ELT, are they still excluded?

Many ELT learners, practitioners and teachers come from cultures where ignorance, heterosexism and homophobia are the norm, and where knowledge, acceptance and expression of homosexuality is at best wrong, often blasphemous, and in many places a crime punishable by death. Just as anyone who has grown up in a racist environment will have learnt to be racist and so must unlearn it in some way so as not to be racist, so the

same is true for anyone who has grown up in a heterosexist, homophobic environment and *all of us grew up and still live in societies that uphold heterosexism.*

So what, as teachers, are we to do? We work in a learner-centred culture of acceptance of diversity and differentiation, and yet live in a society where at some point we will have to deal with our learners', colleagues', other practitioners' and even our own cultural ignorance, heterosexism and homophobia. Well, as Nelson states in the aforementioned article: *Being heterosexual is not the same as being heterosexist* (Nelson 1993). Furthermore, ignorance can be overcome by knowledge and exposure. Heterosexism and homophobia, like all prejudices, are learnt. Anyone who has learnt to be heterosexist and homophobic has the potential therefore to learn not to be. Humans learn best **visually**, we need therefore, as a matter of urgency, to make gay people **visible** in ELT. To continue not doing so is unacceptable.

So what happens when we make gay people visible in the ELT classroom?

Those of us who are lesbian, gay or bisexual are often in very vulnerable positions. For us to raise gay issues, to come out to our colleagues or our students, or even to be out as allies of gay people can be very scary.

Yes it is, and yet... if not us, who? And if not now, when?

I wanted to investigate what happened when teachers presented learners with material which unequivocally presented gay people in a gay context. Since finding such a worksheet proved impossible, I prepared a worksheet of my own, which I then disseminated amongst my colleagues, asking them to report back to me what happened when they used it. With a colleague I also created a learner feedback sheet on the activity.

Before summarising the results of my research, I will first say a few words about the actual worksheet (see Appendix 1). I wanted it to have an image of two gay people so they were actually visible. I wanted it to be adapted from a currently published ELT resource so that it bore some resemblance to other materials and resources learners and teachers are familiar with. It needed to be usable quickly, across a variety of curricula, and by a variety of teachers and learners so that I could get as much feedback as possible. Finally, I am aware of the fact that it is not perfect. It throws the issue of homosexuality too much into focus, and though this was necessary for the purposes of my research, it would have been better to have made the role play 'imagine you are Adrian's next door neighbours ...' rather than his parents.

Research summary

Despite the worksheet's evident flaws, colleagues who were able to use it reported that the worksheet as a language learning resource was extremely successful. It provoked lively communication and generated lots of language structures and vocabulary for agreeing and disagreeing. Responses to the context of the worksheet ran the full range of reactions from expressions of complete understanding and acceptance to total misunderstanding and rejection. However, even learners who expressed absolute abhorrence of the idea of gay people's existence generally did so fairly calmly and recognised that their feelings were a result of their own personal, cultural experiences. They all, too, seemed perfectly aware that the culture they now inhabit has a different perspective on this issue even if they did not agree with it. Finally, all learners said they had never seen a worksheet before which made any reference to gay people, but none of them said they objected to the topic being raised and some of course welcomed it.

From my own personal experience I noticed three things in addition:

- I was quite apprehensive presenting and using the worksheet. It felt very exposing even as a fairly 'out' gay man.
- It became clear to me that many of my learners have either no idea or no desire to acknowledge that I am gay.
- It was unpleasant and upsetting to listen to some of the more negative opinions expressed.

Only one colleague refused to try out the activity, reporting back to me in writing that she was not there to 'change people's attitudes'. Whilst I agree, we are not there to **change** attitudes, we are required to **challenge** them. I wonder if she would feel quite the same if those 'attitudes' were racist or sexist.

Research conclusions

- 1) Nothing I have learnt from this experience has shaken my conviction of the need to make gay people more visible in ELT materials and resources. It is clear many learners would welcome this.
- 2) Many learners did exhibit a lot of ignorance, heterosexist prejudice and even homophobia, but this argues for making gay people more rather than less visible. It is the only way to begin to confront the issue.
- 3) For gay teachers in particular, the experience could be extremely difficult and challenging. They may need much support and encouragement from their colleagues and managers, and should never be made to deal with this either alone or before they are ready, willing and able to do so.

- 4) We need materials and resources that simply present gay people as a fact in everyday contexts without necessarily focusing on the issue of homosexuality.
- A listening activity which has two gay men who live together as partners, instead of the usual heterosexual married couple, talking about their daily routines to practise the present simple for daily routines.
 - A reading comprehension about two lesbians planning a dream holiday to practise 'going to' for future plans.
 - A family photo and family tree where one of the family members is clearly one half of a gay or transgender couple to practise language used to describe people.

These are just a few examples. The possibilities are endless.

Conclusion

There is only one thing worse in the world than being talked about, and that is not being talked about. (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*)

Or perhaps more succinctly: It's better to be looked over, than overlooked! (Mae West)

Imagine a world with no gay people. Absurd, and yet, as English language teachers and learners we are expected to enter such a world.

The ... situation mirrors the way Hollywood used to be, where 'gay characters and references to the existence of homosexuality were routinely laundered off the screen for the better part of half a century. (Thornbury 1999: 16, quoting from Russo (1987) *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies 1987*: 63)

Of course we are free to challenge the situation and change it by creating our own opportunities, images, materials and resources which place gay people fairly, appropriately and realistically in the ELT environment. Some teachers and learners do, but how many of us do so regularly and consistently? Don't we all perhaps deserve a little help with this? And even a little push? I am not proposing that ELT materials and resources should suddenly be awash with images of and references to gay people. But is it acceptable in 2006 with the current focus on individual learner autonomy, diversity and needs for there still to be almost nothing at all?

Endnotes

Quotations without specific references, throughout the essay, are taken from this seminal article: Cynthia Nelson in 'Heterosexism in ESL: examining our attitudes' *TESOL Quarterly* 1993.

Whilst working on this essay, I emailed the Skills for Life Strategy Unit about my concerns over the lack of gay visibility in their ESOL materials and resources. I received a very positive response which I feel offers much hope and vindicates this study.

Appendix 1

What do you think?



Edward and Adrian are students at a London University. They met two years ago and became boyfriends eighteen months ago.

When they leave university next year they are going to register as civil partners and have a 'gay marriage'. They want to invite their parents to the marriage.

Edward's parents know he is gay and do not have any problems. They met Adrian six months ago and think he is very nice.

Adrian's parents do not know he is gay.

Work with a partner

1. What do you think is Adrian's biggest worry?
2. What problems do you think Edward and Adrian will face when they get married?
3. Imagine you are Adrian's mum and dad, you have just been invited to your son's 'gay wedding'. Tell each other what you think of this?

*Adapted from page 37 'Conversation Gambits' by Eric Keller and Sylvia T Warner, Publisher ITP
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