LGBT invisibility and the heteronormative framing of identity in English Language Teaching (ELT) materials

Breaking the Ice: Addressing LGBT Issues in the ESOL Classroom
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John Gray
j.gray@ioe.ac.uk
Repeated refusal of recognition to an individual can produce serious psychological damage and refusal of recognition to a group also damages its well-being and ability to function in wider society [...]. Many oppressive social relations such as those of racism and homophobia involve misrecognition – part refusal of recognition and part stigmatised recognition.
Overview

- Impact of feminism and feminist language reform on the representation of gender in ELT publishing
- The current state of LGBT representation
- LGBT educators: some initial soundings and implications for the way forward
Evolving representations of women

Streamline course 1979

Headway course 2000
Gayness is about as omitted as anything can be. The EFL 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” [...] And it is not just coursebooks that are de-gayed. Significantly, the issue of heterosexism is glaringly absent from discussions of material bias and cultural content (Thornbury 1999: 15).
... those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged, and necessary (p. 55).

Ricardo and Simon

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**Ricardo:** 'It was New Year's Eve and I **licked** some people around to my house to celebrate. I planned a quiet party but my friends brought other friends and by twelve o'clock there were lots of people. I was making some drinks in the kitchen when I noticed this guy on his own. He didn't seem to know anybody, so I **waved** over to him and **recognized** myself. He said, "So you're not Antonio, then?!" He was at the wrong party – he had made a mistake with the address! I asked him to stay and we got on really well ... and now we're together.'
Ricardo: "It was New Year's Eve and I invited some people around to my house to celebrate. I planned a quiet party but my friends brought other friends and by twelve o'clock there were lots of people. I was making some drinks in the kitchen when I noticed this woman on her own. She didn't seem to know anybody, so I walked over to her and introduced myself. She said, "So you're not Antonio, then?!" She was at the wrong party—she had made a mistake with the address! I asked her to stay and we got on really well...and now we're together.'

Simone, 42 and Ricardo, 46 (Argentina)
Mike: I wonder why people believe rumours. We’re two men who are very close to each other. Best friends.

Ben: What would people think if we were women, not men?

Mike: What do you mean?

Ben: Well it’s OK for two women to have a close relationship. You know, no one would think they were gay. But two men?

Mike: Hmm, maybe you’re right, Ben. Maybe there’s a double standard.
A: We usually don’t see two men holding hands.
B: Yeah. That’s not very common. What about women?
C: Sometimes I see women holding hands.
D: Me, too. I guess that’s OK.
NIACE Citizenship materials for ESOL learners:
The United Kingdom as a diverse society

Civil partnership

- This is a very sensitive topic and teachers will need to use their judgment and discretion in deciding which activities are suitable for a specific group of learners.

- “I think it’s wonderful that everyone can now enjoy this long-term commitment”

- “I don’t think same-sex couples should have the same rights as married couples – it undermines the importance and status of marriage”
Different kinds of families

This could be a very sensitive topic; learners may be bereaved or separated from their families, and teachers will need to use their judgment and discretion in deciding which activities are suitable for a specific group of learners.
Teachers’ perspectives: Cathy

‘... it isn’t enough to just bung it in to a set of materials and presume that’s going to be ... the matter sorted out ... I think what’s missing from all teaching, not just ELT teaching, is politics, is ideology, is getting students to analyse and evaluate the culture we’re living in, which would include lesbian and gay issues, representation, discrimination, law, the family, gender, all those things. So I think it has to be part of a larger critical take ...'
Talking down to ESOL students: Cathy

I have an anxiety about all of this which is part of a much bigger anxiety and that is to do with this whole kind of thing about promoting lesbian and gay issues in the west as this kind of mark of liberalism with students who are regarded as non-liberal ...[Citizenship materials] present a vision of society that doesn’t really exist, where everybody gets on, there’s no real racism, there’s no real oppression, there’s no real homophobia or anything like that, everyone gets on and rubs along together and sort of multiculturalism supposedly works, which I find very problematic.
My own internal homophobia is sort of brought to life sometimes by, by the class or given, given voice ... we’ve grown up in a society which is predominantly straight, so we’re outsiders anyway, so I think you, you keep that with you for a long, long time maybe a very small amount but it’s there and I think that classes can sometimes trigger that ...
Institutional support: Ana

... if you don’t have that drive from senior management to say we’re going to stamp on homophobia then if you are the teacher who tries to do something and you don’t have the support from either your line manager or senior management, you’re, you’re setting yourself up to fail ... even if you had like gazillions of material available [and] every single coursebook’s got a section on gender ...
Implications

- A need to move beyond mere inclusivity in materials
- Discussion needs to be framed in ways which are less dichotomous and allow for nuance and exploration
- A need to problematise the citizenship material and to approach issues dialogically
- Teachers need training in dealing with homophobia
- LGBT discrimination needs to be linked to other forms of discrimination the students may experience
- A need for institutional support for teachers and a clear institutional stance on homophobia
- A need to respect difference and to teach the language of opinion and show how it differs from the language of insult