

LGBT and ESOL

Laila El-Metoui

Language acquisition can be hindered if learners are not in an environment which is conducive to fostering a welcoming atmosphere, where all feel free to talk about themselves, their identities and personal lives. This is particularly relevant to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) ESOL learners. However, ESOL learners can sometimes display strong homophobic views, linked to culture, religion and/or personal beliefs.

Furthermore, adult ESOL materials tend to have a strong heteronormative content, with few LGBT-friendly teaching resources available to ESOL practitioners. Despite the paucity of resources, one can still embed LGBT lives and issues within the ESOL curriculum, at any level. In addition to creating resources oneself, there are now more and more resources being created and made available.

Under the Common Inspection Framework (CIF), OFSTED identifies LGBT learners as a group vulnerable to discrimination, and educational institutions have to demonstrate how they address homophobia and transphobia. This is not about delivering a 'gay lesson' but about fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment, with a strong focus on language practice and acquisition.

Myths:

'You can't do it with lower ESOL levels.'

Students may have a lower level of language but they do not lack the concept. LGBT can be embedded at all levels, using the theme of family, for example, and looking at different families (1).

'You're not respecting their culture / religion.'

Embedding LGBT is about meeting British legal and institutional frameworks. We are lucky in the UK to be protected by the Equality Act 2010 and the Ofsted CIF. ESOL students are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who may themselves identify as LGB or T. Bringing this topic into the classroom leads to respect for all.

'It's too confrontational.'

Using a potentially controversial topic in the classroom is a great opportunity to develop language of opinion. From a linguistic perspective, teachers should aim to elicit the difference between:

an insult and an opinion; accepting and agreeing; normal and normative; religious teaching and personal interpretation.

The subtlety and indirectness of English can at times be a difficult concept to grasp for cultures that have a more direct way of expressing needs or opinions. It's important to get the students to think about the impact of what they say and how this can affect the recipient. Challenging homo/bi/transphobia in the classroom is not about changing people's minds. It's about developing students' ability to express their opinions in a non-offensive and more respectful way. All opinions and views are valid as long as they are not harmful or hurtful to others.

Teaching English is not just about the language. It's about developing critical thinking skills, encouraging students to question things and find out answers for themselves. It's about supporting them to become independent learners and take ownership of their learning (2).

What students might state / ask:

'There are no gays in my country.'

Students may not be aware of the existence of LGBT people in their home countries, given the fact that it is illegal in over 79 countries in the world (3).

'It's a sin / against my religion.'

It is not a case of one size t-shirt fits all. Each religion, faith and belief is on a spectrum, and some liberal and progressive voices within religions tend to view LGBT people more positively (4).

'Which one is the man / woman?'

As Ellen Degeneres once said: 'Asking who's the 'man' and who's the 'woman' in a same-sex relationship is like asking which chopstick is the fork?'. This theme provides a great opportunity to understand what can be perceived as a new concept for some, and to develop the ability to express opinion in a non-confrontational manner.

The ESOL context provides an excellent opportunity for challenging homophobic social representations and for enabling students to explore alternative representations regarding sexuality and sexual orientation, contextualised within a broad range of ethnic backgrounds (5).

Notes:

1. Some ready-made lesson plans and teaching resources can be found at:
<http://www.equalitiestoolkit.com/content/embedding-lgbt-curriculum-resources>
<http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/esolcitizenship/docs/04>
2. Further strategies can be found in this video:
Exploration of Equality and Diversity in the ESOL Classroom (British Council Seminar Series)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rkygkkowp60&feature=sharenoembed>
3. See:
<http://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/>
4. See:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_and_religion_topics#Homosexuality_and_religion
5. Further reading:
<https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/english-language-teachers-address-lgbt-issues-class>
British Council, ESOL Nexus Research Awards 2013. *Exploring LGBT Lives and Issues in Adult ESOL Final Report - March 2014*
https://esol.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/attachments/informational-page/Exploring_LGBT_Lives_Issues_Adult_ESOL.pdf
ESRC Seminar Series November 2013 to June 2015. *Queering ESOL, Towards a cultural politics of LGBT issues in the ESOL classroom*
<https://queeringesol.wordpress.com/>
Skills Funding Agency: *Research into Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equality in Adult Learning.*

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For further information, contact the Secretary:

**Ben Cosin
3 Halliday Drive
DEAL CT14 7AX**