



## Innovating EFL Teacher Training in Spain: Post-Structuralist Approaches to Gender

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### Abstract

*In this paper we report on the outcomes of a study conducted with 14 pre-service English as foreign language teachers at the Faculty of Education of the University of Granada in Spain. The University of Granada is a highly intellectual and multicultural setting (top 1 Erasmus destination) with about 80,000 students.*

*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) states that otherness related issues ('sexual identity' in our case) should be treated in the Foreign Language classroom as a means to achieve Existential Competence. Given the fact that our EFL teacher trainees claim that they lack (in)formation to develop these traditionally silenced topics in their classrooms, we make use of ethnography as a qualitative research method in the process of acquiring "sexual identity conscience" from a Queer Theory perspective, a post-structuralist view on gender and identity (Butler, 1990). Interpretative ethnography provides us with new pedagogical reflexivity and intercultural production. The foreign language area constitutes one of the most relevant areas within social sciences to address these topics since learning a foreign language necessarily requires acknowledging the patterns of a different culture and integrate them within our cognitive, affective, and behavioural schemata.*

*We pursue the following objectives through the development of this paper: a) To design, implement and develop a well-planned ethnographic project in the EFL teacher training classroom at university level and b) to recognise the core importance of gender/sexual identity education in EFL teacher training.*

*The participants come from 7 different cultural backgrounds: Spain, United Kingdom, Morocco, United States, Bulgaria, Japan, and Chile. One man and one woman from each country are selected from the whole of exchange students at our University. This is highly positive for our analysis since it confers doses of controversy in discussion. The study is made up of the following stages following Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) and Goetz and LeCompte (1988) and their steps for ethnography: Identification of a phenomenon; identification of participants; selection of the research design: theoretical framework and ethnographic questions; information gathering (fieldwork): Verbal interaction among subjects (content and form), interaction with the researcher (content and form), non-verbal behaviour (gestures, postures, mimics) and procedures: participant observation, interviews, etc.; interpretation of information and elaboration of conclusions and final report.*

*After designing and implementing this ethnographic-queer research with EFL teacher trainees we conclude, in the light of results, that it is an appropriate didactic method for training teachers since it develops critical thinking, integrate theory and practice in a dialogic mode, and would-be teachers show more awareness (cognition, behaviour and affection) towards sexual identity otherness and its treatment within the educational system.*

### 1. Introduction

The increased visibility of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersexual, transgender) people in Spain is an expression of freedom of speech and sexuality reflecting that they are relevant and that they are fighting for their rights. But this has been reflected neither in the educational system nor in everyday educational practices.

The body of research on the concept of gender in the teaching and learning processes within the Spanish university system in teacher training is still quite marginal. We need to use education to foster tolerance towards other people, to be aware of the existence of the 'other', and to recognize the 'other' in ourselves as the result of a complex psychological and cultural process of internalization of differences in a multicultural world.

In this work we present a study of how a sample of EFL teacher trainees manages ethnography both as a method to research about sexual identity and as a method for teacher training. This is a good



educational practice because it helps us to fight against homophobia and heterosexism in educational settings.

## 2. Grounding post Structuralism: Sexual Identity in EFL

Gender is generally understood as a research category in social sciences which allows us to study social phenomena considering people as sexed individuals. As one of the last outposts of gender studies, Queer Theory provides us with some challenging critical ideas on the traditional conceptions on gender. It goes beyond the Western idea of duality: man vs. woman; heterosexual vs. homosexual, etc. Butler (1990)[1] bases her ideas on Foucault and Derrida and provides us with the idea of performativity. It is through the Queer Theory that we can try to dismantle traditional discourses on gender discrimination, violence, homophobia, patriarchy, or heterocentrism.

Learning a foreign language implies a process of "identity changing" as stated in The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001)[2], where general competences such as "existential competence" implies processes of identity, gender, culture, self-esteem, values, motivations, attitudes, etc. This complex idea provides us with a three-fold competence: cognition, attitudes, and procedures. This is an extension of the psychological concept of attitude which can be described as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object (Gardner, 1985) [3]. Being so, attitudes are subjective to be developed during the process of personal adjusting to their cultural context, and once developed. Experience organizes the process of learning, developing, and organising attitudes. We consider this "changing process" of paramount importance in Gender awareness acquisition. This is of valuable importance to follow a gender-consciousness approach to Foreign Languages considering the following approaches:

- De-centring: Trying to relativize sexism and homophobia which is not a natural and inherent feature of human beings.
- Penetrating the Other's system: To develop an emphatic position of opening up to others (queers).
- Negotiating: This implies compromise with and understanding of the values of the others (queers).

EFL teachers are encouraged to deal with diversity in the classroom but we suspect that the reality is far different from the postulates of Educational Laws. This situation is mainly due to the lack of training to address these issues in the EFL classroom and not a conscious homophobic position. There is the general belief amongst teachers that talking about sexuality is talking about sexual intercourse. As suggested by Smith (1996), sexuality is a complex term which involves issues of being and identity and not simply sex. For further research on these topics in the Spanish context, it is of paramount importance to have a look at these works: Guijarro (2006)[4]; Guijarro & Ruiz (2011)[5]; Guijarro (2013)[6].

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

A total of 14 pre-service EFL teachers at the Faculty of Education of the University of Granada in Spain. The University of Granada is a highly intellectual and multicultural setting (top 1 Erasmus destination) with about 80,000 students. The participants come from 7 different cultural backgrounds: Spain, United Kingdom, Morocco, United States, Bulgaria, Japan, and Chile. One man and one woman from each country are selected from the whole of exchange students at our University. This is highly positive for our analysis since it confers doses of controversy in discussion.

### 3.2 Method

Johnson (2000: 111)[7] considers ethnography as "a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observation of what people actually do." We can consider 'ethnography' both as qualitative method of research in social sciences and the text resulting from that research which has the following features (Hammersley, 1990; in Genzuk, 1999): 1)[8].

The study is made up of the following stages following Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) [9] and Goetz and LeCompte (1988)[10] and their steps for ethnography: Identification of a phenomenon; identification of participants; selection of the research design: theoretical framework and ethnographic questions; information gathering (fieldwork): Verbal interaction among subjects (content and form), interaction with the researcher (content and form), non-verbal behaviour (gestures, postures, mimics)



and procedures: participant observation, interviews, etc.; interpretation of information and elaboration of conclusions and final report.

#### 4. The Training Process

Evidently, we will follow an ethnographic approach to gender in English as a Foreign Language teacher training, but not as seriously as if the students were to become anthropologists. We rather follow it as a guiding model to arise in our EFL teachers positive attitudes towards intercultural understanding. The project lasted 4 months from mid-February till mid-June.

##### 4.1 First stage

This is an introduction to the topic of 'ethnography' which may not be familiar for our students. Ethnography has traditionally been related to the field of Anthropology, but recently, it is giving excellent results in the field of Educational Sciences and, more specifically, to research in the area of teaching and learning foreign languages. Students will work in groups of 4, a number which has proved to work efficiently in previous experiences.

This is mainly concerned with the appraisal of theoretical bases: What do we understand by "ethnography"? What are the implications for EFL teacher training? An outline of the introduction of sexual identity issues in the English as Foreign Language classroom and the concept of "otherness": Anthropological perspective, Post-colonialism, Postmodernism, and Literature.

##### 4.2 Second stage

- Identification of a phenomenon: We suggest our students to choose one of the following groups of immigrants in the city of Granada: Moslem origin, Latin American origin, Anglo-Saxon origin (especially those students who participate in the Socrates-Erasmus exchange programme among the students of the Universities of the European Union). Thus, we try to unveil hidden discourses around gender issues to eradicate negative attitudes (cognition, behaviour, affection) towards gender diversity in an intercultural perspective.
- Identification of informants and participants: At this stage, students have chosen four or five representative informants to conduct the research experience. The informants have to be heterogeneously chosen in order to get a richer view on the aspects studied. This is an important aspect to bear in mind since we have the traditional view, for example, that all the "gays" in the world think and behave in the same manner. As Eisenhart (2001: 214)[11] states "Ethnic, feminist, and gay and lesbian scholarship has made clear that not all people of color, all women, all men, or all people socially identified as members of any group have the same histories, experience the world in the same way, face the same problems, or construct the same meanings." We strongly reject the idea of culture as a homogeneous closed cluster because globalization has contributed new perspectives to the traditional concept of culture. We have to teach our teacher trainees that culture and knowledge are fluctuation, resistance, and change as stated by Judith Butler.
- Selection of the research design: This stage consists in underpinning theoretically the fieldwork practices. For example, if the students decide to research on gender issues within the Moslem community, they will have to look for information related to gender issues in the Moslem World.
- Generation of hypotheses or "ethnographic questions": A hypothesis is a tentative assumption made in order to draw out and test its logical or empirical consequences. An example of hypothesis would be: "African gays and lesbians in Granada are discriminated against because Spanish people consider them to be aids transmitters". At this point, it is very important that our students escape from ethnocentrism which is a quite inherent feature of all human beings.
- Descriptive or initial questions which guide the first steps to know the object of study. At this moment, questions arise such as: What sort of "cultural shocks" gay Erasmus students who come from Norway experience? How is sexual life for gay guys from Morocco? What influences does Moslem heritage in Granada from the Middle Ages exert on nowadays gay Moslem immigrants? or Why homosexual people choose Granada to emigrate? What is it appealing for them in Granada?
- Information gathering (fieldwork): Our students have shared long periods of time with the people they are investigating in order to gain confidence with them. At this stage we consider of paramount importance two research techniques: participant observation (verbal interaction among subjects; interaction with the researchers; and non-verbal behaviour) and the design and implementation of interviews. All these materials will make part of the final Queer-ethnographic Portfolio for evaluation purposes.



- Interpretation of information: This is a key stage in the research process. This step requires from the students to analyse and check the information gathered several times taking into account the phenomenon as a whole and in its different parts. We could say that interpretation means to put into context a given particular categorization so that it can be coherent. Students should adopt an attitude which leads them to consider all the perspectives to better understand a given phenomenon because it is in those “border spaces” (Anzaldúa, 1987)[12] where intercultural conflicts occur and must be clearly understood and analysed by our students.

#### 4.3 Third stage

- Elaboration of conclusions and dissemination of a final report: Students have explained their findings in two ways: 1) Writing a final report of their findings; and, 2) preparing an oral presentation of the results to the rest of the class.
- Evaluation of the experience individually, in groups, and of the whole group. With that purpose in mind, we have used The European Language Portfolio (ELP) which enables students to record any aspect of their performances in the process of implementing the ethnographic project in the English as a Foreign Language area. To adapt it to our needs, we have called it “Queer-Cultural Language Portfolio”. The QCL Portfolio includes formal or informal tasks, projects or free-based activities which enhance student’s motivation and which represent his/her competence of the EFL/ESL in terms of outcomes. One of the key aspects of the Portfolio consists of encouraging students to regularly update their assessment including new written or oral work in the folder. The set of didactic procedures students provide in this paper are to be included within the dossier of the ELP (European Language Portfolio) in order to accomplish students’ ethnographic communicative tasks. By creating a queer-research dossier, a record of anthropological values and perspectives is established to get acquainted with their own process of learning.

### 5. Conclusions

Within the area of Applied Linguistics to the teaching and learning of foreign languages there is not always a clear idea of what we mean when we talk about queer, gender or ethnographic approaches. There is the general belief among EFL teachers that teaching about gender/queer is teaching about sexual intercourse due to the hypersexualization stigma above “non-normative” sexualities. We, EFL teacher trainers, must break these cultural constraints and widen the view of English didactics as a worldwide instrument for communication and understanding, i.e. fighting against gender prejudices and stereotypes.

With the didactic proposal explained above, we try to foster queer awareness by means of conducting and implementing an ethnographic approach about the immigrant communities of Granada. This has given students a deep perspective of the discursive processes underlying every culture in isolation and in relation to other cultures. By being there in the fieldwork, they have experienced by themselves the problems immigrants must face when adapting to other culture. Teacher trainees have also got used to follow a research protocol which obliges them to be responsible and autonomous in their own process of learning.

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