The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching

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I can remember … [hearing about] your presentation at TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages] thinking why in the world? … Now I’m embarrassed … that I had such a narrow view of it. But I kept thinking What does this whole sex thing have to do with ESL [English as a Second Language]? (Janice, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 102)

Introduction

It is perhaps not surprising that a teacher might find it perplexing, as Janice once did, to think that sexuality, in this case sexual identity, could be relevant to language learning or teaching. Janice was referring to a colloquium entitled ‘We are your colleagues: lesbians and gays in ESL’, which was delivered at an international TESOL Convention in Canada (by myself, Lisa Carscadden and Jim Ward) back in 1992. At that time, there were virtually no discussions of sexual identity at language teaching conferences or in published research. Since then, research on language and identity has evolved substantially, as the current volume attests, but in much of this work the socio-sexual dimensions of identity are still barely acknowledged and rarely investigated in depth. Meanwhile, language and sexuality has become an established research area (Leap and Motschenbacher 2012), but the implications of its findings for language education are rarely considered (Nelson 2012).

Steadily coming into its own as a research area, though, are investigations of sexual identity in language education, which I have elsewhere called ‘queer inquiry’ (see Nelson 2006). Its key studies can be classified into two main strands. One strand examines sexual identity – most often, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) lives and issues – as content in language curricula and as a topic in class conversations. This work includes studies of the following: an ESL class discussion of same-sex affection and the pedagogic value of queer theory (more on that later) (Nelson 1999); language learners’ online discussions of homosexuality (Nguyen and Kellogg 2005); the use of local LGBT life-narratives as language learning material in Japan...
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(O’Móchain 2006); sexuality issues that arise in the teaching of French, Italian and Japanese as foreign languages (de Vincenti et al. 2007); LGBT absences and problematic representations in English language teaching materials (Gray 2013), and more.

The other main strand of research focuses on sexual identity as a dimension of language learners’ and teachers’ lives and interactions, in and beyond the classroom. This work includes studies of: language teachers’ intended sexual identity self-presentations versus their students’ interpretations (Nelson 2004); a teacher coming out as gay in his Australian ESL class (Curran 2006); gay language learners’ pursuit of English in Korea (King 2008) and in Japan (Moore 2013); teacher responses to learners’ openly gay stances in foreign language classes in Australia (Liddicoat 2009; see also Kappra and Vandrick 2006); the in-class identity negotiations of a gay Mexican immigrant in the United States (Nelson 2010), and so on.

Concerns pertaining to both research strands were investigated in the first, and to date the only, book-length study on the topic, which was published as Sexual identities in English language education: classroom conversations (Nelson 2009). This study investigated the role and significance of sexual identities in language education by analysing over 100 language teachers’ and learners’ perspectives and classroom talk on the topic. Interweaving empirical data with theory throughout, it addressed the following questions:

- Why and how does sexual identity content arises in English language classes and what teaching/learning challenges and opportunities result?
- What ways of theorising sexual identity are evident in classroom practice and which conceptual-pedagogic approaches are most engaging and effective for learners?
- How can poststructuralist identity theories – especially queer theory – be useful in language teaching?

This chapter is based on that larger study and presents a small sampling of its data and findings (for a full discussion see the original work). In so doing, my larger aim is to provide students and scholars in applied linguistics who study language and identity with a basic understanding of why sexual identity is not peripheral but integral to language learning and teaching. I also suggest that research on the relationship between language learning and sexual identity can enhance investigations in other language and identity arenas in ways that have yet to be explored. Before turning to the data, I provide an overview of some of the key concepts informing the study.

Overview

The focal study was interdisciplinary, drawing from research on identity (e.g. Norton Peirce 1995), sexual identity and queer theory, the latter of which is my focus in this section. Though the term ‘queer’ can be used as a term of derision or to succinctly summarise an array of non-heterosexual identities (LGBT and more), its usage in queer theory is meant to call into question the solidifying of sexualities into sexual ‘identities’ by deliberately blurring the boundaries between clear-cut categories and highlighting their constructedness (as opposed to their naturalness) (see Butler 1990; Nelson 1999, 2009; Sedgwick 1990).

Below I briefly outline three of the queer theory concepts that underpinned the study and that pertain to the data presented in this chapter.
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Not facts but acts: sexual identities as performative

First, the notion of performativity frames sexual identities as being not ‘natural’ or inherent but socially constructed, not properties or attributes but processes and practices, and not predetermined but performative social actions: in short, not facts but acts (Nelson 1999). This understanding of performativity is informed by Butler’s (1990) seminal work in which she drew on Austin’s notion that utterances act upon the world rather than merely describe it. It is through the cumulative effect of repeated discursive and semiotic acts that sexual identities become constituted; and these layered acts of identity are not freely chosen but subject to certain social constraints (Butler 2004). Thus, sexual identities are understood to be not inner essences to be suppressed or expressed but rather performative actions that are instantiated, communicated and contested through social interactions (see also Gray, this volume; Jones, this volume).

Beyond the bedroom: sexual identities as an important part of public life

Second, with queer theory the category of sexual identity (much like race and gender) is recognised as having broad social relevance, since the powerful ‘hetero–homo’ defining binary shapes societal knowledge and institutions (Sedgwick 1990). Thus, the performative acts through which sexual identities are (co-)constituted are not confined to the privacy of the bedroom but infuse public life. Moreover, the ways in which sexual identities are named, enacted, interpreted and negotiated – and the meanings and importance they are accorded – vary widely according to the specific cultural milieu, the confluence of local/global discourses at play, the setting, situation, interlocutors and so on (see Leap and Motschenbacher 2012).

Heteronormativity: sexual identities as unequally valued

Finally, the study engages with the notion of heteronormativity in order to analyse which sexual identity options seem available, allowable and valued in a given setting or situation and which do not. The concept of ‘heteronormativity’ refers to the normative discourses and practices through which it is heterosexuality – and only heterosexuality – that is made to seem normal or natural and therefore legitimate (Warner 1993; Nelson 2009; Gray, this volume). Powerful social and linguistic norms that constrain sexual identity options and enactments can be upheld, resisted and challenged; these norms are dynamic, not static.

Having offered a brief account of the identity theories that inform the case study for this chapter, in the following sections I turn to the methodology for the study and the data.

Methodology

To address the research questions outlined above, I conducted a multi-site study that involved an international cohort of over 40 English language teachers and over 60 learners. All adults hailed from (or had taught in) various countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania and included international students, migrants and refugees. I focused on a crucial dimension of second/foreign language education: participants’ interactions in the language classroom and their reported experiences of these interactions (van Lier 1996).
The study was in two parts. For the first, I collected data via teacher focus groups and individual interviews (all of which I recorded and later transcribed). The focus groups were held at universities in the United States and an international TESOL convention, and participation was voluntary. In each I posed the same question: ‘What, if anything, do sexual identities (straight, gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, queer, etc.) have to do with teaching or learning English?’ (Nelson 2009: 5). For the second part of the study, I observed English language classes at colleges and universities in two American cities over a six-week period and repeatedly interviewed the three participating teachers as well as nearly half of their students (28 in total). In many of the interviews I used the technique of ‘stimulated recall’, which involved replaying selected excerpts of a recorded class session, showing a rough transcript and asking the participant what they had thought or felt at the time (Nunan 1992: 94).

Through professional affiliations, I was already acquainted with about half of the teachers who took part in my study, which meant we had already established some trust, but also some distance, as I was no longer living in the United States. As both insider and outsider, my combined emic and etic insights about the teachers and their courses proved advantageous to the research (see Watson-Gegeo 1988). I had no prior knowledge of the students. I conducted all interviews in English so that any student who volunteered could be interviewed (rather than targeting those from particular language groups). Being interviewed in a language they were learning most likely limited what some students felt they could say and what I was able to understand of what they said; on the other hand, some may have found it easier to discuss this topic (sexual identities) in English, especially in an education setting (see Extract 3 below).

I collected 150 hours of data in total and took an empirical-conceptual approach to the analysis. This involved a rigorous and iterative, yet invariably subjective, process of listening to the recordings, transcribing the most relevant portions and rereading the transcripts numerous times to identify the emerging thematic issues and to code, categorise and refine these. In analysing the focus group and interview data, I sought to map out the main issues about sexual identities that participants considered significant to language learning or teaching; I also highlighted points of divergence or contention in order to illuminate competing discourses and changing practices at play. With the classroom data, I drew on Lemke (1985), Lather (1991) and others to analyse how participants were theorising sexual identities and how their conceptions were shaping their learning/teaching experiences, as well as how different participants experienced the same classroom interactions (Nelson 2009). In the following section I present ten short extracts of data that are illustrative of the research participants’ experiences of, and views on, sexual identities in language education.

The data

For the purposes of this chapter, the data extracts have been separated into two categories (though the categories are, of course, interrelated): first, those pertaining to sexual-identity content and heteronormative discourses; and second, those pertaining to learners’ and teachers’ sexual identities. It is worth noting that the research participants almost always discussed sexual identities in terms of gay and lesbian identities, with some mention of transgender people but almost no talk of bisexuality; there was also little talk about heterosexuality, with one important exception: straight teachers speaking about negotiating their sexual identities in class. Therefore, this largely lesbian and gay emphasis is reflected in the data extracts. Due to space limitations I have not included detailed transcriptions.
Sexual-identity content and heteronormativity

As Extract 1 illustrates, the practice of vocabulary development was found to be a way in which the subject of sexual identity became foregrounded in the language classroom.

Extract 1: ‘Boyfriend’

A male student ... was talking about his boyfriend ... So I had to explain that ... in this culture if you say ‘boyfriend’ that has a gay overtone to it ... Whereas a woman can say ‘girlfriend’ and it doesn’t have those connotations.

(Mark, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 50)

Due to the likelihood of lexical and grammatical errors in second and foreign language classes, such as with pronouns, it is not always possible to discern whether a student is mistakenly signifying a gay relationship or identity, as Mark believed his student was, or intentionally coming out as gay (see Liddicoat 2009). Thus, in explaining to students the gay connotations of an utterance, as Mark reported here, it would be problematic to imply that gay connotations are undesirable.

I found that sexual-identity content arose in class when defining vocabulary such as ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘transgender’, discussing ways of referring to same-sex relationships, debating same-sex marriage, and sharing information about (international) students’ host-families. The subject also arose in the course of talking about a number of topics other than family and relationships: for example, television shows, online communities, poetry, anti-racist and feminist activism, local businesses, and more.

Extract 2 is from a class discussion that touched on gender and appearance as part of a lesson on ‘community’. The extract shows a student from China, Ping, introducing the topic of sexual identity, and her teacher, who was from France, responding.

Extract 2: ‘Lifestyle’

Ping: Wear earring just for woman. But for man, lifestyle.

(Nelson 2009: 153)

The follow-up interviews revealed that this teacher and student had divergent understandings about what this exchange meant. The student was trying to explain to her (international) classmates that, in the United States, earrings on a man are a ‘sign’ that he is gay (ibid.: 156). However, the teacher believed that Ping was about to out a male classmate as gay, and to do so in a ‘nasty’ way. To circumvent this, the teacher tried to make the point to the class that ‘making assumptions about somebody’s sexual orientation because of the way they look’ is problematic, as she put it in our interview. Ping did not comprehend this message, though, thinking the problem was her choice of vocabulary: ‘I never get it good words’ (ibid.). Moreover, not all students picked up on the gay subtext of this classroom exchange.

In analysing the class discussion (necessarily truncated here), I noted the need to sometimes make implicit sexual-identity meanings explicit for language learning purposes, especially given the ambiguities often associated with this identity domain. However, doing so can be challenging, since having open conversations about LGBT identities is not universally practised or
condoned. This is illustrated in Extract 3, in which a student explained the situation in his home country of Morocco:

**Extract 3: ‘We don’t talk about that’**

Our education system, in the class we don’t talk about that ... In Morocco ... all the society is prohib to talk about that.

*(Neuriden, a student quoted in Nelson 2009: 185)*

In some countries homosexuality is not openly discussed, at least not in education contexts, which may help to explain why nearly all of the students interviewed for the study said they had not previously discussed LGBT themes in a classroom. Neuriden’s comment also underscores the need for teachers to be cognisant of the likely novelty, for some students, not of this subject matter necessarily, but of openly discussing it in class.

At the same time, Neuriden’s comment may also help to explain why engaging with this subject matter is often revelatory and useful for students: in the same interview, we were discussing a class discussion of the cultural variations of lesbian/gay signifiers which Neuriden enjoyed very much, describing it as ‘very good … very helpful … With this kind of discussion you … express yourself, you feel very comfortable, you feel happy after that’ (ibid.: 187). So even though openly mentioning or discussing LGBT themes may be unfamiliar for some students (and teachers), this does not mean these themes should be banned or avoided (see O’Móchain 2006).

Cultural and institutional norms dissuading open discussions of LGBT themes and perspectives are not restricted to certain countries, of course, but can be found worldwide. As Extract 4 shows, even in countries that are known to have visible LGBT communities and at least some legal rights for this population, LGBT content in classroom talk can be prohibited. In this extract, the teacher was referring to a language centre in the local gay neighbourhood in a city in the United States.

**Extract 4: ‘A block from a gay bar’**

I have friends who teach at [x], and their administrative dictate is This is not to be discussed in the classroom. So the teachers aren’t allowed to bring it up as a topic ... [Even though] the students walk outside the door and see men holding hands ... They’re a block from a gay bar!

*(Mark, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 47)*

Other teachers in my study mentioned similar silencing practices and unofficial policies. One told of a group of teachers who had prepared a handout with referrals to assist students who either identified as LGBT or who wanted to learn about LGBT issues, but the teachers were prohibited by their administrator from distributing it to students ‘because it was not the kind of thing that we should be talking about in our classes’ (ibid.: 46). Another teacher in my study took the view that overtly excluding people on the basis of race is not generally tolerated in language education, whereas excluding people on the basis of sexual identity is: ‘By saying Well we don’t talk about it’ (ibid.: 47).

In the interviews, a number of students spoke about the novelty of encountering openly gay or lesbian people in public and the benefits of being able to talk about this in their second language class. Sara was one such student:
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**Extract 5: ‘In front of your eyes’**

I think every people should know it … Especially if you living here … Because at first … I didn’t know anything about it … It just happen in front of your eyes … When you walking … you see the gay people they holding the hand … If you don’t know those gay people exist, you would question. But if you know they are gay … you understand.

*(Sara, a student quoted in Nelson 2009: 164–165)*

This student told me that back in her home country (Vietnam) she was not aware that gay people existed, so when she first moved to the United States she found it perplexing to see same-sex affection; thus, she was grateful for the gay-themed discussions in her English class because they helped her understand local phenomena.

Such comments underscore the importance of allowing, even inviting, students to talk about day-to-day identity practices that they find unfamiliar and confusing. As one teacher explained it, ‘What we’re striving to do is teach cultural fluency’, and she demonstrated the need for this by explaining that some students had gone to a bar of all men without realising they were in a gay bar (ibid.: 55). Another teacher said that students often tease each other about who is gay and who is not, which gives teachers an opportunity to explain the negative reaction they are likely to get locally if they talk openly about people in that way. Thus, understanding cultural meanings and norms includes understanding those associated with sexual identities and inequities.

With regard to inequities, one common challenge cited by teachers was how to respond to discriminatory, anti-LGBT language in the classroom. This is described in Extract 6 by one of the teachers:

**Extract 6: ‘Homophobic comments’**

Some of the nicest students I know have some of the most … intense homophobic comments to make. And when that comes up … little jokes or stuff, I don’t know quite how to jump in there and … challenge that.

*(Scott, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 68)*

On the one hand, teachers thought their students need to become familiar with the linguistic/cultural meanings associated with sexual identities and inequities, so that they do not unintentionally or unknowingly offend their interlocutors (this concern was also expressed by some students). But on the other hand, many teachers felt unprepared and unsure of how to go about this.

Some teachers would prohibit anti-gay talk in class, but a few took a more analytic approach. This latter approach is evident in Extract 7:

**Extract 7: ‘Display for one’s peers’**

If [students] want to write, um, homophobic stuff they have to understand that they’re representing a series of values for a community. That these aren’t given. […] I think … racist and homophobic comments often come from … a display for one’s peers.

*(Rachel, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 84–85)*
As Rachel noted, when someone takes a homophobic (or racist) stance in their writing or speech, this does not necessarily represent their true views, but can be understood as an attempt to establish an identity and foster a sense of affiliation with a given group. Thus, conceptualising homophobia and heteronormativity as acts of discourse can help language teachers to frame and examine these issues productively. It is also worth mentioning that, while some teachers in my study were disturbed by their students’ anti-LGBT comments, the converse was also the case: some students were disturbed by their teachers’ anti-LGBT comments.

**Sexual identities of language learners and teachers**

Though it is rarely acknowledged in applied linguistics research, for some learners the desire for a second language (in this case, English) is directly linked to their sexual identity. In Extract 8 this is demonstrated by Pablo, a student from Mexico:

**Extract 8: ‘Accepted’**

I decided to come to this country [the United States] because … I want to … be in a place where [being gay] is accepted, to– to see what I feel, how I change.

*(Pablo, a student quoted in Nelson 2009: 193)*

Given the anti-gay violence that Pablo said was rampant in the part of Mexico where he was from, ‘he considered migration a pathway to gay liberation, and English the passport to a cosmopolitan gay life’ (Nelson 2010: 458). At the same time, while learning to be gay in the new environment and language (see Espín 1999), Pablo was finding that the United States was not quite the safe gay haven he had imagined it to be. He did not directly disclose his gay identity in his classes, nor to his teachers, even those he guessed were lesbians (though he did send a coded signal to a classmate; see Nelson 2010). Taking part in just one 15-minute class discussion with lesbian and gay content (within a 100-hour class) was a rare opportunity that this student found extremely meaningful and pleasurable: ‘I enjoyed *everything* in that class [discussion] … every every word’ (Nelson 2009: 194).

A few teachers spoke of having students who were openly lesbian, gay or transgender in the classroom, but it was more common for students to come out to teachers privately (some lesbian teachers said this occurs on a regular basis). As Extract 9 shows, having a student come out to them outside class posed some dilemmas for teachers, especially those who felt that they lacked gay/queer knowledge.

**Extract 9: ‘Take your time’**

I had a student … who wanted to come out [as gay] here in the United States … About all I knew was to say Take your time, and take it step by step. But– So I’m trying to learn more about how to support students.

*(Maggie, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 31)*

Since students who identify as LGBT often lack well-established social and community networks in the new locale (family relationships can be problematic too), some turn to their language teachers for learning support and/or community resources and referrals – perhaps especially those students who are being shunned by their classmates, or who lack confidence or
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competence in their linguistic ability to connect with the local LGBT community (see Nelson 2010). Some straight teachers in my study wanted to be able to refer LGBT students to LGBT teaching colleagues for assistance. However, many of those teachers did not feel they could be open about their sexual identity in their teaching contexts.

On that point, another important issue that emerged for teachers was how they negotiated their own sexual identity in the classroom and how these identity negotiations and enactments shaped their teaching choices and interactions with students. Many varied perspectives emerged, one of which is illustrated in Extract 10.

Extract 10: ‘Agenda’

You guys can even say you’re straight and that’s fine … But me, if they [students] found out that I was gay … they would go Oh well he’s got an agenda.

(Tony, a teacher quoted in Nelson 2009: 113)

Addressing his straight colleagues in the focus group, Tony pointed out that they could openly enact their sexual identities in class. However, he felt it necessary to hide his sexual identity, believing that knowledge of this would somehow taint students’ perceptions of his motives – that he wished to change students’ attitudes, perhaps, or even that he was sexually predatory, given the prevalent hypersexualising of homosexuality, especially for men. Nonetheless, while Tony deliberately constructed a straight persona for his classroom, his students were not persuaded (see Nelson 2004).

A number of gay male teachers found it challenging to broach gay topics in class for similar reasons as Tony. On the other hand, a number of lesbian teachers did broach these topics regularly, and some came out in their classes too; one said she wanted her students to know that she was a lesbian because otherwise they might make homophobic comments in class and feel ‘really embarrassed if they found out afterwards’ that they were ‘hurting their teacher’ (Nelson 2009: 105). Meanwhile, some straight teachers said they avoided LGBT discussions because they would feel like ‘an outsider talking about this’ (ibid.: 113), or because they would feel ‘uncomfortable’ if their students were to make homophobic comments (ibid.: 68). Thus, I found that how teachers present and manage their own sexual identity in class can and does have a shaping effect on their teaching practices.

Discussion

As the small sample of data presented in this chapter from my larger study has shown, language learners can benefit from opportunities to talk explicitly about sexual-identity signals and norms that tend to be communicated implicitly and often ambiguously (Extracts 1 and 2). However, some learners (and teachers) may find it unfamiliar and uncomfortable when LGBT content is introduced, perhaps especially in the globalised classroom (Extract 3), while some may be pressured to avoid such content altogether (Extract 4). Yet learning a second language involves navigating the interpretive demands of the new cultural environment – and learning to decode the sociocultural meanings associated with the performative acts of sexual identity can be an integral part of that process (Extract 5).

Given the social inequities associated with sexual identities, one common challenge facing teachers and students alike is responding to heteronormative discourses, both oral and written, in the language classroom (Extract 6). Teachers in my study who adopted a rhetorical or
discourse-oriented view would have their students analyse the cultural and linguistic practices associated with sexual identities and inequities (Extract 7). For example, one teacher in my study asked her class to discuss possible interpretations of same-sex affection in their countries versus the United States (see Chapter 8 of Nelson 2009 for a full discussion); another asked students who were writing anti-gay essays to consider the effect their texts were likely to have on a local reader (ibid.: 84).

The significance of sexual identity in language education extends beyond curricula and pedagogy. It can drive the desire for a second or foreign language. Invariably, some language learners will be in the process of coming out (to themselves or to others) as LGBT, which can be all the more complex in the midst of a new language and country. Indeed, many second-language learners will have moved to a new country and be learning the new language precisely \textit{because} they are seeking a less heteronormative environment (Extract 8; see also Nelson 2010). This raises the question of how willing – and how prepared – teachers are to create learning environments that are supportive of LGBT and questioning students and to identify and address their needs as language learners (Extract 9). Exacerbating the challenge for teachers are the notoriously low levels of LGBT representation in language curricula and materials (Gray 2013).

Some teachers in my study were just beginning to consider how effective their teaching practices and curricula were likely to be with sexually diverse student cohorts. Although LGBT content and perspectives are badly needed in language curricula and pedagogy, it seems ironic that – due to the predominance of heteronormative thinking in the field – teachers who identify as LGBT often feel they cannot be open about their sexual identities in the language classroom, and must contort their teaching accordingly (Extract 10; see also Simon-Maeda 2004).

\textbf{Pedagogic implications}

As intimated in the data shown above, when content and perspectives associated with sexual identities are incorporated into curricula and classroom talk, this is meaningful not only to LGBT students but to all students – in part because understandings and expectations associated with the socio-sexual dimension of identity are not universal but culturally varied. Moreover, sexual-identity enactments and negotiations, both inside and outside the classroom, are subject to social and linguistic norms that constrain what can be said in certain situations and with certain interlocutors, so language learners may benefit from learning to unpack these practices and constraints.

My argument is that practices and dilemmas associated with sexual identities can and should be highlighted in the language classroom to both illuminate and to interrogate identity practices: in other words, for learning purposes the links between language and sexual identity can be examined functionally and critically. While this case is fully elaborated in my book, here I briefly describe some conceptual-pedagogic tools that can help in the classroom.

By examining a range of language teaching practices as well as participants’ perspectives on these, I identified and critically evaluated three main pedagogic approaches (often used in combination) to sexual-identity content (primarily, though not exclusively, LGBT content) (see Table 9.1 in Nelson 2009: 210). In brief, these approaches can be summarised as follows.

\textbf{Counselling approach}

The counselling approach conceptualises sexual identities as inner essences. It is concerned with homophobia, i.e. the fear or hatred of those perceived to be LGBT, and seeks to enhance
learners’ personal growth or social tolerance through a focus on feelings and attitudes about LGBT people. To this end, positive mainstream LGBT representations are included in curricula.

**Controversies approach**

The controversies approach conceptualises sexual identities as sociohistorical constructs. It is concerned with heterosexism, defined as institutionalised discrimination against those perceived to be LGBT. It seeks to enhance learners’ interest in social justice and human rights, focuses on social controversies, prohibits anti-LGBT utterances and involves class debates of issues such as same-sex marriage.

**Discourse inquiry approach**

The discourse inquiry approach conceptualises sexual identities as performative and is concerned with heteronormative discourses. It seeks to enhance learners’ ability to analyse linguistic and cultural acts of sexual identity by engaging in activities that involve unpacking socio-sexual identities and inequities in everyday discourses and public life. It is this third approach, though used the least often, that was found to be most effective with language learners (Nelson 2009).

In line with a discourse inquiry approach, language learners need to develop the capacity to understand and critically engage with the sexual-linguistic dimensions of identity, which are ubiquitous and socially meaningful, yet potentially fraught. Drawing on Alexander and Banks (2004), I argue that language learners (and, thus, their teachers) need to develop ‘socio-sexual literacy’ (Nelson 2009). This involves becoming adept at recognising, decoding and being able to produce cultural/linguistic meanings and innuendo associated with sexual identities. It also requires skills in identifying, analysing and critically responding to heteronormativity in spoken interactions and written and multimodal texts. It means too that, when addressing and interacting with classmates, colleagues and other interlocutors across school, work and community contexts, students and teachers do not unthinkingly presume that everyone is necessarily heterosexual.

Though anyone can potentially benefit from learning socio-sexual literacy, it should be noted that some LGBT people may have already developed a nuanced awareness of this, having had to ‘cloak meanings’ within heteronormative environments (Britzman 1997: 193). Accordingly, LGBT-identified people may already bring a well-developed linguistic awareness to their language learning endeavours (Nelson 2010), though this is rarely recognised in most language education research, where the existence of LGBT learners is barely acknowledged.

**Issues for applied linguistics**

The study presented in this chapter, along with other research into sexual identities, shows some of the reasons why sexual identity is highly salient in language learning and teaching. As this is not yet widely recognised in applied linguistics, several issues warrant serious attention in the future.

**Research**

There is plenty of scope for new research in applied linguistics on language learning and sexual identities, especially from the perspective of queer theory, as this is still a nascent research area that offers rich opportunities. Investigations set in and across various institutional types,
education levels and world regions would enrich the field, as would more investigations that focus specifically on heterosexuality (see Appleby 2014), lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenderality, all of which have received scant attention to date. Also fruitful would be work that draws out the implications for language teaching of language and sexuality studies and queer linguistics, as well as work that explores dimensions of sexuality other than sexual identity.

Given the intersectionality and interplay of identities – which is widely acknowledged in applied linguistics but not yet widely investigated – studies of language and identity should not overlook the sexual dimensions of identity or, for that matter, queer theory (see e.g. Harissi et al. 2012). And conversely, sexuality and queer-focused research would benefit from more fully engaging with other identity domains and theories, such as post-colonial, anti-racist or feminist theories, or those pertaining to space and place.

**Learner resources and teacher development**

The ongoing, overwhelming heterosexualisation of language learning materials and curricula – noted by many teachers in the study presented in this chapter – is an unnecessary hindrance for language learning; thus, language learning materials urgently need updating (see Gray 2013). Also, little is known about how existing sexual identity research is being incorporated into teacher education and development programmes and with what effects. It would be useful for teachers, teacher educators and teachers-in-training to share their accounts. In this, narrative inquiry offers alternatives that may be more broadly accessible than empirical inquiry yet still rigorous (Nelson 2011).

Creative ways of fostering engagement with sexual identity research are needed too. An example is my ethnographic play *Queer as a second language*, which is based on research transcripts from the focal study described in this chapter (Nelson 2013). When performed at universities and conferences internationally, it has generated lively post-play discussions of the issues at hand.

**Scholarly networks**

Significant advances in research, learning resources and teacher development cannot be made until the field collectively and visibly values this sort of work. Those who wish to develop LGBT-inclusive or queer curricula or pursue sexual identity investigations ought to be encouraged and supported and not dissuaded, harassed or subjected to negative career consequences (the latter is known to occur in applied linguistics, although it is not well documented).

To this end, an invaluable resource is face-to-face and online networks for teachers and researchers to discuss these issues, such as the innovative ESRC-funded seminar series ‘Queering ESOL: towards a cultural politics of LGBT issues in the ESOL classroom’, organised by John Gray, Michael Baynham and Melanie Cooke (see https://queeringesol.wordpress.com).

**Summary**

Given the persistent lack of critical engagement with, or even simple acknowledgement of, sexual diversity in many language and identity studies and language learning materials, it surely is not just Janice (the teacher I quoted at the opening of this chapter) left wondering why ‘this whole sex thing’ is worth discussing in language education. But as my focal study and related studies have shown, sexual identity is not irrelevant but integral to language use, language learning and language teaching.
This is showing to be the case across a range of geographic locations, as a raft of recent (and often small-scale) language-education studies, set in Cyprus, Germany, Spain, Thailand and elsewhere, are making clear (see Nelson 2012). Yoshihara (2013), for example, found that English language learners in Japan are more open to LGBT content than are their teachers, which underscores the urgency of incorporating this content into learner resources, teacher development programmes and language education research if the field is to keep up to date with language learners’ needs and interests in these changing times.

I hope the study presented in this chapter will spur the field of applied linguistics – particularly students and scholars of language and identity – to consider the socio-sexual dimensions of identity and will encourage language teachers and language teacher educators to develop their students’ socio-sexual literacy by experimenting with discourse inquiry approaches. To this end, it may be useful to utilise queer theory concepts, such as performativity and heteronormativity.

Related topics
Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and gender identities; Language and non-normative sexual identities; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homomasculine identity; Intersectionality in language and identity research; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading
Hall, K. and Barrett, R. (in press). *The Oxford handbook of language and sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Discusses sociocultural linguistics research, from various sub-disciplines, on language and sexuality, and recommends directions for future research; includes chapters on language learning and literacy education.)
References


The significance of sexual identity


