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Research article

Exploring how queer teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) negotiate sexuality in the classroom

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Abstract

This article presents a small-scale qualitative research project that explores how four queer teachers of English for speakers of other languages negotiate sexuality in the classroom and considers how it shapes their understanding of themselves, their students and their teaching practice. The project employs the conceptual tools of queer theory and a poststructuralist approach to policy studies as a means to illuminate some of the discourses employed by these teachers. Using semi-structured interviews to generate data and a thematic analysis, the article discusses how the teachers conceive of 'outness' as being desirable but threatening to classroom dynamics. It also explores some of the assumptions behind this, suggesting that, through parallel constructions of the English for speakers of other languages student as homophobic, and of the UK as tolerant, a discourse of homonationalism emerges.

Keywords further education; ESOL; sexuality; LGBT+; queer; homonationalism; fundamental British values

Introduction

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) has been described as 'a field in which LGBT+ students and teachers have traditionally been almost entirely invisible and inaudible' (Gray and Cooke, 2019: 201). This certainly chimes with my experience as an English-language teacher over the past 16 years. While there is a well-established body of scholarship that considers the experiences of queer teachers in schools (for example, Ferfolja, 2007; Gray, 2013) and, increasingly, in the broader context of English-language teaching (ELT) (for example, Lin et al., 2020), research situated in the specific setting of UK ESOL is more limited (but see Gray and Cooke, 2019; MacDonald, 2015a, 2015b). Given the particular contours of this context, it is, I believe, worthy of further attention.

The specific ESOL context I discuss here is the government-funded English-language provision taught in further education colleges and various community settings for students who have migrated to the UK and who have a first language other than English. ESOL policy across the different countries of the UK does vary (Simpson, 2019), so, while much of the discussion that follows may be relevant to the contexts of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it should be noted that my focus is on England.

A key motivation for me in choosing this topic is my own experience as a queer English-language teacher, initially teaching international students in what is often referred to as English as a foreign language (EFL), latterly teaching ESOL, with almost all of this in a further education setting. (There is a complicated conversation to be had about different identifiers, but there is not space for it here. In this article, I tend to employ *LGBT+* when referring to sexual identity or rights discourses, and *queer* or *queerness* to speak in more general terms about non-heterosexuality. However, I would argue that drawing too clear a line between the terms is unwieldy and, furthermore, potentially counterproductive.) While the way that I navigate my sexuality in class has changed over time, and my anxieties have reduced significantly, I have frequently doubted myself. Whether it was worrying that I might face hostility from students if I 'outed' myself; or deciding it was, in fact, inappropriate or irrelevant to do so; or, conversely, that not doing so was a failure in some way – to students who may have benefited from that kind of representation, to the wider 'community', with whom it might express some sort of solidarity, or to myself who must be suffering from some level of internalised homophobia – I have been reliably inconsistent. What I have realised I lacked throughout was a forum to discuss my concerns, a space that might have helped me to develop the tools to address them critically.

My aim in this project was exploratory: I was not seeking evidence of any particular perspectives or practices, but, rather, wanted to explore the experiences of other LGBT+ teachers, and to look for common themes. In my analysis, my intention is certainly not to offer a generalisable account of what it means to be a queer ESOL teacher, but rather to illuminate some of the discourses that are employed by such teachers to make meaning of themselves and their practices.

Queer theory

This article employs queer theory as its central theoretical lens. Rooted in poststructuralism, this school of thought aims 'to decentre the normative presence, privilege and practice of heterosexuality' (Kehily, 2005: 41) by interrogating seemingly commonsensical categories such as sex, gender and sexuality. From this perspective, 'what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts' (Butler, 2006: xv–xvi). These bodily acts, rather than expressive of a pre-existing gendered identity, are instead performative, with gender constructed through their performance (Butler, 2006). To interrogate how constructions of sex, gender and sexuality interact with and reinforce each other, Butler (2006: 208) refers to the heterosexual matrix, which characterises:

> a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.

This matrix renders heterosexuality 'the "norm" through which everything else is defined' (Renold, 2006: 493), with anatomy determining behaviour (a clear binary of masculine or feminine) and attraction (to the 'opposite' sex). Related to this is the concept of heteronormativity, which identifies 'heterosexuality as a normative notion that repeatedly asserts heterosexual life as the right life to live' (Reingardė, 2010: 83).

However, while heterosexuality is thus treated as inevitable and desirable, it is fundamentally unstable, representing not some fixed inner truth but rather 'a contingent historical possibility' (Heyes, 2014: 159). This contingency is of course not exclusive to heterosexuality: to identify as 'gay', for example, both reflects discourses dominant in a particular time and place and, through the identification, contributes to those discourses.

Two further related concepts need attention. 'Riffing' (Duggan, 2002: 191) on heteronormativity, Lisa Duggan (2002: 179) conceives of homonormativity, which 'is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'. If heteronormativity constructs an inevitable but unmarked heterosexual order, homonormativity depicts a homosexuality that not only fails to challenge this order but actively aims to assimilate into it. Building on this concept, Jasbir K. Puar (2017) coined the term homonationalism to underline how discourses around LGBT+ rights 'produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship – cultural and legal – at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations' (Puar, 2013: 337). While this can work at a transnational level, with entire nations labelled either 'gay-friendly' or 'not-gay-friendly' (Puar, 2013: 338), it also functions intranationally, offering a means to discipline racialised others within the state. Rather than conceiving of homonationalism as 'an accusation, an identity, a bad politics', Puar (2013: 337) suggests that it should be understood 'as an analytic to apprehend state formation and a structure of modernity'. Consequently, and importantly given my findings, 'homonationalism can be resisted and re-signified, but not opted out of: we are all conditioned by it and through it' (Puar, 2013: 336). Together the two concepts of homonormativity and homonationalism assist in 'interrogating a range of relationships that exist within Western LGBTQ culture, between that culture and broader Western society, and between Western and non-Western societies' (Mowlabocus, 2021: 15). They therefore offer crucial insight for research focusing on the ESOL classroom.

Queer teachers

There is significant evidence that schools enforce and reproduce heteronormativity, functioning as 'spaces that position sexuality as private whilst simultaneously enabling heterosexual teachers to speak their sexual identities unproblematically' (Gray and Harris, 2014: 4), and with queer teachers often marginalised, harassed and derided (Ferfolja, 2014). In the context of ELT, Alastair Pennycook (2001: 158, as cited in Gray and Cooke, 2019: 198) refers to sexuality as a 'major silence', listing the following as typical attitudes in the field:

> A general assumed heterosexuality; a belief that questions of sexual preference have no place ... a belief that students from other countries would find questions of sexual orientation too controversial ... a tendency for straight teachers to assume gay and lesbian issues are not their concern and should be addressed by gay and lesbian teachers themselves.

While this analysis dates back to 2001, more recent research suggests that little has changed (see, for example, Bollas, 2021; Gray and Cooke, 2019).

Given this context, it is perhaps tempting to characterise the queer teacher as a victim. However, through the varied strategies employed to navigate heteronormative spaces, it is important to recognise the agency that these teachers have 'to resist and challenge the dominant gender and sexuality discourses operating in their schools and society generally' (Ferfolja, 2007: 570). Various studies have looked into these strategies, with one prominent example (Griffin, 1991) identifying four strategies on a continuum:

- 'passing', where the teacher may actively lie about their sexuality
- 'covering', which entails self-censorship
- 'being implicitly out', with the teacher being honest about their sexuality without specifically disclosing it
- 'being explicitly out', where they openly share their sexual identity.

Importantly, a teacher may employ any or all of these strategies, depending on context, for example, by choosing to be 'explicitly out' with certain colleagues, while 'covering' with students (see Hardie, 2012). Janna Jackson (2020) conceives of a journey that queer teachers go through as they negotiate their classroom identities, with steps along the way labelled as 'coming into gayness', 'closeted teacher' and 'authentic teacher', to name a few. However, while such models are compelling, their emphasis on 'outness' as empowerment is arguably limiting. Although it seems clear that 'silence can be a result of fear rather than choice' (Hardie, 2012: 278), Tania Ferfolja (2007: 583) argues that it 'does not necessarily mean oppression, that passing does not equate to failure and that one does not necessarily have to be "out" to have agency'. Indeed, she suggests that silence may even 'challenge, resist and trouble the constructed "naturalness" of the heterosexual matrix' (Ferfolja, 2007: 583). This will be discussed further below.

The policy context: ESOL, citizenship and sexuality

When studying practices within the ESOL classroom, it is necessary to consider the policy context. My approach here, as with the discussion around gender and sexuality, is underpinned by poststructuralism, looking beyond policy just as text to consider also policy as discourse (Ball, 2006). In other words, a policy is not just a document offering a solution to a clearly defined, pre-existing problem; rather, in its pronouncement of what the problem is and how it might be solved, it reflects – and reinforces – particular viewpoints, while simultaneously restricting alternatives (Ball, 2006). While a policy may originate in government legislation, the way it is enacted in different contexts will vary hugely, with each institution – and, indeed, with each teacher – producing 'their own "take" on a policy' (Braun et al., 2011: 586), depending on local factors. This is important for this discussion, since I am interested in considering how certain policy discourses are incorporated into teachers' classroom practices.

The ties between ESOL and UK citizenship policy are strong (Peutrell, 2019), with moves from successive governments rendering the English language 'a condition of citizenship and … marker of integration' (Simpson, 2019: 26), and framing those who do not speak English, or do not speak it sufficiently well, as 'the object of concerns over social cohesion, integration and security' (Simpson, 2019: 31). In this way, the ESOL student is constructed, almost by definition, as a problem. Concerns around migrant language proficiency have escalated (K. Khan, 2016), as illustrated in various legislative changes that have taken place since 2001, such as the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002), 'which bound citizenship and ESOL together explicitly for the first time' (Cooke and Peutrell, 2019: 2), and the introduction in 2005 of the Life in the UK test (see K. Khan, 2016; Simpson, 2019).

For this discussion, the policy I am principally concerned with is the introduction in 2015 of the Prevent Duty and the related construction of the 'fundamental British values' (FBV) (see A. Khan, 2021; Vincent, 2022). The Prevent Duty mandates all those working in public institutions to report anyone who they suspect could be susceptible to radicalisation (see Vincent, 2022), thus taking a '"pre-crime" approach' (A. Khan, 2021: 135). As part of Prevent, there is a statutory requirement to promote the FBV, which are defined as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office, 2015, as cited in Vincent, 2022: 2078). While this legislation impacts all schools and colleges, it has been suggested that 'some minority groups are understood as more "in need" of FBV than the majority' (Winter and Mills, 2020, as cited in Vincent, 2022: 2082).

Simultaneous with this escalation in policymaking framing migrants as a threat to the nation has been the increased acceptance of (certain versions of) non-heterosexual existence, most obviously with the provision of legal recognition to same-sex couples (for example, Civil Partnership Act, 2004; Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, 2013). Considering these parallel developments side by side is illuminating. For example, in a prominent 2011 speech that laid out his support for gay marriage, Prime Minister David Cameron also called for a curbing of what he termed 'fake marriages' (see Mowlabocus, 2021: 30), meaning unions suspected of being entered into primarily for immigration purposes. Such policy manoeuvres demonstrate the 'folding in of homosexuality into the "us" of the "us-versus-them" nationalist rhetoric' (Puar, 2017: 43), with homonormative couples newly welcomed into the nation while racialised others face mounting hostility. Indeed, according to Puar (2017: 117), rather than seeing these as separate or coincidental phenomena, they should be understood as 'mutually reinforcing', with the veneer of benevolence provided by the former enabling the state not only to mask the cruelties it enacts, but also to rally its newly welcomed constituents to perform cruelties on its behalf.

It can then be seen how, within the framework of FBV, the notion of tolerance, mobilised as a supposedly shared national characteristic, could lead to 'a tendency in political discourse to promote LGBT+ inclusion as a "British value"' (Gray and Cooke, 2019: 197). In the context of ESOL, John Gray and Cooke (2019: 206, 196) observe that, despite the diversity of the students, they tend to be 'positioned as more conservative, traditional or religious than their British peers', with religious students in particular often 'uncritically assumed to be antagonistic to sexual diversity'. As previously discussed, through policy discourses that position English-language proficiency as fundamental to Britishness, the ESOL student is already constructed as a problem for the nation; here, we see that, as LGBT+ rights discourses have been absorbed into the national mythology, presumptions of homophobia provide further substance for an 'us-versus-them' (Puar, 2017: 43) narrative.

Methodology

For this project, I held semi-structured interviews with four ESOL teachers who identified as in some way LGBT+, and then carried out a thematic analysis of the data. While my methods are thus highly conventional for qualitative research, my approach is nonetheless informed by post-qualitative theory, cautious of claims of a tidy research process (St. Pierre, 2018), and alert to the entangled relationship between data, theory and researcher (A.Y. Jackson and Mazzei, 2013; Lather and St. Pierre, 2013). In particular, I am mindful of the ways in which the data have agency, influencing the researcher and leading them in potentially unexpected directions, thus indicating a more reciprocal relationship between the two (MacLure, 2013b). This dynamic is illustrated in the development of my research questions, which, as I progressed through the interviews, I realised needed adjusting to focus more on the discourses around citizenship that were arising. The final questions were:

1. How does a queer ESOL teacher's sexual identity influence how they interact with their students?
2. To what extent do they value 'outness' with students?
3. What assumptions do they make about their students with regard to sexuality and gender?
4. How might these assumptions connect to policy discourses around citizenship?

This insight into the nature of qualitative data impacts all aspects of the research process. Regarding this project, it is important to recognise that the data did not pre-exist and should therefore be seen as generated through the interviews, rather than collected or extracted (Springgay and Truman, 2018), with me, as researcher, 'actively involved in the meaning-making process' (Marvasti and Freie, 2016: 8). Furthermore, the coding process, which, according to MacLure (2013a: 167, 174, emphasis in the original), tends to position 'the analyst at arm's length from "her" data', in a hierarchical dynamic, should be reconceived as 'both active and passive – a matter of actively *making* sense yet also of accommodating to something ineffable that is already "there"', with the researcher becoming 'a live conduit' between the data and the concepts that might enable them to understand it. In my approach to coding, I tried to avoid being overly 'mechanistic' (A.Y. Jackson and Mazzei, 2013: 262), and I took an inductive approach (see Kawulich, 2016), highlighting anything that jumped out at me, or 'glowed' (MacLure, 2013a, 2013b). It is important to remember that another researcher may well have found other codes, other priorities. My reading of the data is not – cannot be – the only possible reading.

This project was completed for a master's dissertation at UCL's Institute of Education. Ethical approval was granted ahead of any data generation, and I followed British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines throughout. My most significant ethical concern from the start of the interviews was how to report my findings in a manner that was both respectful of my participants and frank in its analysis. I have great respect for the participants; moreover, I relate to many aspects of what they say. However, I have not shied away from difficult subjects, highlighting discourses that, I argue, suggest the logics of homonationalism. None of this should be interpreted as an accusation. I keep in mind Puar's (2013: 336) reminder that homonationalism cannot be 'opted out of: we are all conditioned by it and through it'.

Participants

I asked contacts at several colleges across England to circulate an invitation among ESOL teachers, with anyone who identified in some way as LGBT+ being eligible to participate. Through this, I found four

participants, who I have pseudonymised as Ana, Jack, Luca and Michael. While it is helpful to provide some background information about them, I will keep this brief to ensure that I do not make anyone identifiable. In summary:

- three of the participants identify as gay men, one as a lesbian woman
- all four are very well established in teaching English in further education
- all four are White
- two are British and speak English as their first language; two have other nationalities and first languages, with one being from a country in Europe, and the other from a country in Latin America
- three are in their 50s, one in their 60s.

Although this summary is unsatisfying in its brevity, it supplies some – limited – insight into the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) identities of the participants. It also highlights certain shortcomings in the research as a whole: while a study involving four participants could never hope to involve people representing an extensive range of identities, the fact that all four are White is noteworthy, as is the relatively limited age range.

Findings

As discussed previously, the relationship between data, theory and researcher is complex; what follows is an attempt to make sense of the data that 'glowed' (MacLure, 2013a, 2013b). I have divided my findings into three sections. The first section considers discourses of 'outness' and alludes to certain assumptions that the teachers make. These assumptions are then explored more closely in the second section, which looks at how the ESOL student is constructed discursively. In the third section, I look at some parallel discourses that construct Britain as tolerant.

'It's this balancing act': outness as valuable but risky

A theme that was explored in all four interviews, to varying degrees, was the notion of 'outness'. For three of the teachers, coming out to their class was seen as theoretically desirable but inevitably risky, with the potential to jeopardise their relationship with students:

> It's this balancing act of this, you know, I'm going to be teaching these students for three months or nine months … I want to keep a productive, nice atmosphere, a friendly, unthreatening atmosphere. And it's that thing of how soon can I bring it up? Can I bring it up? What happens if I bring it up? (Jack)

While Jack speculates about possible reactions to coming out, Luca is unequivocal about the student response:

> They find out that the teacher is gay, and it's just like war. (Luca)

He tells of students giggling at the mention of his husband and of one withdrawing from his class in protest. Such experiences lead him to stop being so open. However, he states emphatically that, if a student asked him directly about his sexuality, he would respond honestly:

> I've always said, if somebody should ask me, for whichever reason, 'Teacher, are you gay?', I wouldn't deny it, that I wouldn't do, but I'm not the one who initiates the coming out … I don't do that anymore. Because I just felt as if … it was really counterproductive. (Luca)

Although, as discussed previously, I have reservations about Griffin's (1991) continuum of identity management strategies, with its implicit emphasis on outness as empowerment, it is interesting to consider how this decision might illustrate them: while, in the past, Luca had been 'explicitly out' (Griffin, 1991), it appears that, through self-censorship, he has moved instead to the strategy of 'covering' (Griffin, 1991). This challenges any teleological model that suggests a journey towards outness (see J. Jackson, 2020).

Conversely, Ana appears to employ the strategy of 'passing' (Griffin, 1991), not viewing outness with her students as an option at all – indeed, she openly refers to her husband in class, despite having a wife, because she does not want to make anyone uncomfortable:

> I tell them I'm married to a man, which lots of people find shocking. But ... why I do that is … I'm asking them to tell me about your family, so they ask me back. And I don't want to say, 'No, you can't ask me any personal questions'. But, you know, if we say, 'Oh, yeah, this is my wife' … they won't understand that either. So, I do think, OK, they're … never going to be my friends. I'm here, my relationship with them is to teach them and for them to learn. So, it doesn't matter. (Ana)

The assumptions made about the students will be explored later. Here, I focus on the separation made between the professional and the personal. We see that Ana feels that discussion of her private life is to be expected in the classroom, but that honesty about it is impossible. In her suggestion that the students 'won't understand' her having a wife, there is an allusion to the logic of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2006), whereby her own intelligibility to the students depends on them believing her to have a partner of the 'opposite' sex. While she minimises the significance of this, she does express some unhappiness about it, saying later in the interview:

> It is frustrating, you know, because obviously … you can't be authentic. (Ana)

Elsewhere, the notion of having multiple selves is mentioned explicitly by Jack, who laments having to curtail the 'real' one:

> It would be nice if I could be exactly the same at work as I am away from work and … I try to do that and, but … there's going to be a difference, isn't there, because there's your professional self and then there's … your other self … I think it's difficult because we probably, over the years, when we start teaching, well, we've got to find, so what is the balance? How much of my real self do I bring into the classroom? (Jack)

In these extracts, we see a distinction being made between the 'professional' self on the one hand, and the 'real' or 'authentic' self on the other. In both cases, the perceived inability to reveal this is portrayed with some sadness. This notion of different selves arguably points to the performative nature of gender and sexuality, but, at the same time, the suggestion of a 'real' or 'authentic' self seems to reveal a discourse of essentialism.

While these three teachers conceive of outness as desirable but dangerous, Michael is largely uninterested in the matter. He is clear that he would not lie about his sexuality, but he plays down its importance:

> I wouldn't come into a class with a Pride badge on … in the same way as I wouldn't expect anyone else to go on and on about their heterosexual partner. You know, I don't necessarily think it's relevant for the classroom. (Michael)

This comparison between the acts of wearing a Pride badge and of 'going on and on' about a partner presents them as equivalent in their excess, while simultaneously negating the salience of sexuality in both: the potentially political allusion to queerness represented by the badge is irrelevant for the classroom in the same way that persistent personal gossip would be. Elsewhere, Michael explains further why Pride is not a theme he would cover in class:

> The reason I wouldn't do anything on Pride now is I don't think it ought to be seen as being something separate. I think it ought to be seen as, you know, just being part of society as it is now. I don't want it to be presented as something that is seen as being different. (Michael)

In both these extracts, we see a discourse that portrays sexual diversity as a non-issue, but the consequence of this is to silence it. Arguably, this demonstrates a discourse of homonormativity, with homosexuality being acceptable as long as it does not announce itself and disturb heteronormative society.

'But a lot of my students are Muslim': ESOL students as conservative/religious and therefore homophobic

In all of the interviews, we discussed if and when sexuality arises as a topic in class. Here, Ana responds:

> No, because it's not part of their reality … a lot of my students are African, Somalis, Uganda, South Asian, you know, Pakistan, Bangladesh – Bangladesh, a lot. So … they come from very conservative cultures … this is not part of their reality. (Ana)

Here, there is an explicit statement that certain nations, even continents, are inherently conservative, and, I would suggest, through the example nations provided, religion is implicitly evoked, as is the idea of 'not-gay-friendly' nations (Puar, 2013: 337). Jack also characterises ESOL students as conservative with regard to gender and sexuality:

> I don't feel comfortable enough because of the cohort of students … Perhaps I'm doing the students … a disservice, but when I get the students coming in, and the men only wanting to sit with the men and being uncomfortable if I asked them to work with a woman, and vice versa … well, if that's the situation, I don't think I've got much hope of getting a productive discussion going about sexualities. (Jack)

Here, the gendered behaviour of the students is taken as evidence of their conservatism around sexual diversity, although the generalisation does seem to be acknowledged.

This discourse, which conceives of ESOL students as socially conservative, is closely tied to another that assumes them to be religious, and this then leads to the construction of ESOL students as implicitly homophobic. Indeed, three of the teachers state explicitly that having a high number of Muslim students means that sexuality cannot be discussed in class, arguably demonstrating the logics of homonationalism. Here, for example, Ana comments on the content of a recent coursebook:

> It's always interesting … when we can talk a bit about the country … things like where it is, what's the capital … so it gives them a bit of a broader view of the world … And then, obviously, you have different ethnicities, different religions, so, but a lot of my students are Muslim. So, any LGBT, although it would be welcome, I don't know how they would deal with that. And maybe I have been a bit coward to … talk much about it … I don't know how ready they are for that and how ready I am for that as well. (Ana)

This extract touches on several themes. We see that the students are presumed to have a narrow view of the world, and that this is something to be challenged through exposure to diverse geographies, ethnicities and religions. However, diverse sexualities are considered to be a step too far, specifically because many of the students are Muslim. In her reference to cowardice, Ana is perhaps hinting at a discourse that sees queer teachers as having a particular responsibility to challenge heteronormativity. However, she feels that neither she nor the students are 'ready' for the discussion, again presenting homosexuality as a threat to classroom harmony. Later in the interview, she does acknowledge the generalisation she is making about her students, asking, 'Am I being unfair?'

Luca is less equivocal, as demonstrated in his reflections on the lack of LGBT+ representation in coursebooks:

> The reason why nobody has sort of created a set of resources … The symptom could be these people are not supposed to be exposed … This is the conclusion I've come to. I mean, why would you want to speak to Muslim students about something that they regard … and I quote my students over time, that is *haram*, i.e. not allowed by God. I mean, why would you want to teach something that upsets them and calls into question their strong … beliefs? (Luca)

It is noteworthy that Luca is the only one of the four teachers to say that he has encountered direct homophobia in his ESOL class. However, without wishing to diminish the impact of such experiences, the generalisation made here needs highlighting, with the reactions of some students leading to an assertion about the nature of *all* Muslim students. In this statement, it can be seen how a dichotomy between Muslim and queer can be constructed, with the two becoming mutually exclusive.

All four teachers describe being asked quite directly about their personal lives. Jack's reflection here brings together the key themes discussed so far, and so I quote at length:

> They do want to know if I'm married; they do want to know if I have children; some of them even ask why I don't have children. And I'm wondering … am I not giving my students the benefit of the doubt? Lots of my students are Muslim. And I wonder … I think it's because a

> lot of my groups are new groups … And so I think … I don't want to break rapport. I don't want to create any kind of bad feeling … I almost would rather they start asking me questions about marriage and children when I've been teaching them for about three months, because usually by that time, they love me, and they love my lessons and they see that I'm a good teacher, and I've got their best interests at heart in terms of English. And so … I don't want that to happen in the first day when they don't know me, because then they might make their mind up: 'I'm not going to like you, you're not going to be able to teach me English.' And I'm just wondering how much of that is coming, is me making assumptions on their behalf. I don't know. (Jack)

The comment 'Lots of my students are Muslim' is offered, somewhat obliquely, as an explanation for why Jack feels uncomfortable talking about sexuality, and the assumption being made (that Muslims are homophobic) is acknowledged and questioned. Interestingly, despite suggesting that he might be more open to these questions once the students have got to know him, he then casts doubt on this when recounting a moment at the end of the academic year:

> It was with a lovely group, and it was the end of the year – it was the June or beginning of July party, when the students brought lovely food, gave me presents, and I suppose because it was an informal atmosphere, one of the students felt they could say, 'So can you tell us about your … family life? Do you have a wife?', and I just said no … 'And what about children?' 'No.' 'But do you have a girlfriend?' 'No.' Yeah, and then another student didn't understand what was happening, so it was translated into Arabic for her. And then she looked into my eyes, looked very sad, and she says, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for you.' And I said, 'No, no, no, don't be, it's fine. I'm OK. It's OK.' But I didn't go, I didn't feel confident enough to go any further. Even though it was the last lesson and, but there was a possibility I might be teaching them again. (Jack)

Jack's discomfort about the questions he is being asked again highlights how queerness is constructed as threatening, and there is clearly some sadness in his description. However, an alternative reading of this moment might see it as quietly subversive: by expressing that he is 'fine' despite not having a wife, girlfriend or children, he is perhaps gently disrupting a dominant discourse of the teacher as always heterosexual (Ferfolja, 2007) and revealing the instability of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2006). I also find this extract striking in its depiction of a fundamentally harmonious classroom dynamic, with 'lovely students' who 'love' their teacher, thus complicating any narrative that might place the queer teacher and the ESOL student as essentially in opposition.

'The UK is tolerant': queerness and the state

Alongside the construction of ESOL students as conservative/religious, and therefore homophobic, is a parallel construction of Britain/the UK as tolerant:

> When I ask them what they like about the UK, they say, 'Oh, we like because the UK is tolerant', you know, 'you can wear the clothes with your country, you can have your religion'. So, they obviously value that, but they have their own prejudice … They can't make a parallel that they like that because they are accepted, their religion is accepted, they are tolerated. But they don't see they are being not tolerant. (Ana)

This teacher says elsewhere that she has never experienced direct homophobia from students, so it seems that their intolerance is assumed, with Britain's tolerance to both diverse religions and sexualities also taken as given. This discourse of British tolerance, emphasised by the construction of a supposedly intolerant other, echoes and reinforces policy discourses around FBV. Also evoking this discourse of British tolerance is Michael's brief description of how he responded to a potentially homophobic comment from a student:

> I challenged that. I wouldn't let comments go in the classroom. That in this country, we respect everybody, you know, whoever they are. And I did mention we also respect other religions. (Michael)

In this case, there is evidence of student homophobia. What is striking, however, is how, through the deployment of 'in this country, we…', the teacher underlines their own Britishness and also, implicitly, the student's otherness, with the latter also seemingly alluded to through the mention of 'other religions'.

In a different vein, but also alluding to British tolerance, Luca talks about those occasions when LGBT+ issues do get mentioned in class:

> On … World AIDS Day, I do mention it. In October, it's … International Coming Out Day. I always mention dates … next to the beginning of Ramadan, next to Diwali, next to Chinese New Year … It sort of comes under the umbrella heading of Life in the UK, so British culture. So, you do have to, people who are sort of preparing the … Life in the UK Test to get their citizenship … there are areas that they have to cover which are related to gender and all sorts of dates. (Luca)

Again, we see religious, cultural and sexual diversity presented alongside each other, all apparently celebrated in the UK. This comment also explicitly links ESOL to citizenship, feeding into a construction of ESOL as fundamentally about integrating migrants into society. Another allusion to the state appears here:

> One thing I say is, in the UK, the law is 'everybody is the same'. And then I will say … independent of your religion, race, gender, whatever, then … it's like, it's not 'you think that's the right thing', it's like, 'that's the law'. (Ana)

Through this reference to the law, we can see the silenced queer teacher – who might be construed as victim – implicitly positioning themselves as protected by the state.

While much of what I have presented above points to constructions of the ESOL student as homophobic and of the UK as tolerant, it is important to highlight that these narratives were at times challenged in the interviews. In this extract, Jack describes the interactions in one of his classes:

> I've got a trans student in my Tuesday morning class and … I wonder if my, the Muslim women in my class … do they realise? If they realise, is it just not a problem? Because sometimes she's the kind of student, my trans student, she likes to sit at different tables in each lesson … and sometimes she's sitting in the middle … of a group of Muslim women and working on something perfectly fine. And I must admit, I'm curious, I think, 'Is that going well, because they know and don't care or … they don't know?' (Jack)

Here, the teacher reflects on the possibility that the Muslim students may not be homophobic or transphobic after all. Shortly afterwards, speaking of a former role as a teaching and learning coach, the same teacher makes another revelatory comment:

> The homophobia that was mentioned was, there was, well, I don't remember any teachers mentioning homophobia when they were teaching ESOL students. They mentioned homophobia, and it was in the classes with the British teenagers. And there were problems. (Jack)

The statement should not be taken at face value: indeed, the construction of 'British teenager in a further education college' could contain its own assumptions in terms of class position or race, for example. However, it is certainly a striking observation when juxtaposed with the constructions, previously discussed, both of ESOL student as homophobic, and of Britain as tolerant.

Conclusion

This project has explored how queer ESOL teachers negotiate sexuality in the classroom, asking how their sexual identity influences their interactions with students. My research approach was exploratory, not seeking out particular discourses, but rather hoping to shed some light on those that emerged.

One key finding was that most of the teachers consider outness to be desirable, so that they could be their 'real' or 'authentic' selves. However, coming out was frequently constructed as risky, potentially jeopardising classroom harmony. Instead, most of the teachers expressed a need to perform a version

of themselves that they felt was intelligible to students. On the one hand, this points to the functioning of heteronormativity through the silencing of non-heterosexual existence. On the other, through the construction of multiple selves, the performative nature of gender is highlighted. It should be recognised that some real instances of homophobia were reported, and this should not be diminished. However, it was also clear that some assumptions were being made about the students.

Reflecting on these assumptions, I suggest that the ESOL student was often constructed discursively as conservative, with this alleged conservatism sometimes tied to nationality, but more often to religion, with repeated mention of Muslim students in particular; this then led to an assumption of homophobia. These constructions of 'not-gay-friendly' (Puar, 2013: 338) parts of the world, and of a dichotomy between queer and Muslim, appear to demonstrate the workings of homonationalism. It should be noted that these assumptions were frequently questioned and that, largely, the relationship between teacher and students was depicted in a positive light.

Parallel to these constructions of the ESOL student came a discourse that characterised the UK as tolerant, seemingly echoing policy discourses around FBV. Indeed, the juxtaposition of these two discourses seemed to be 'mutually reinforcing' (Puar, 2017: 117), with the supposed tolerance of the UK emphasised by the supposed intolerance of the ESOL student, and vice versa. At times, the reference to tolerance was tied to aspects of citizenship, suggesting a disciplinary function to this discourse. Again, this points to homonationalism, with the narrative of tolerance 'bolstering the nation' (Puar, 2017: 51) against a supposedly intolerant other. Here, too, assumptions were questioned, with a striking moment when one of the teachers observed that, over many years of working in further education, the only instances where student homophobia was a real problem was with British students.

It is important to highlight that these are not the only possible findings. The reciprocal relationship between researcher and data (MacLure, 2013b), and indeed between theory and data (A.Y. Jackson and Mazzei, 2013), mean that other readings will always be possible. I have picked out data that seemed to 'glow' (MacLure, 2013a, 2013b): for me, the most striking elements came in the generalisations that were being made about students, leading me towards a somewhat unexpected emphasis on citizenship. However, for another researcher, perhaps different data may have seemed to 'glow'.

Furthermore, since data are 'generated', rather than collected (Springgay and Truman, 2018), it is also the case that the data that I have reported findings on were, in some way, co-constructed by me: perhaps my Whiteness, my middle-classness or some other aspect of my identity, positioned me as somehow receptive to particular narratives; perhaps, in the questions I asked, it seemed that I was encouraging certain responses. Unavoidably, I am implicated in the discourses that emerged. Crucially, I do not claim to – indeed have no aim to – represent who these four teachers are, much less to generalise about the nature of ESOL teachers more broadly.

When I first decided to explore the experiences of queer ESOL teachers, I worried that it might be self-indulgent to focus on a theme so evidently relating to myself. However, I decided that such a feeling was symptomatic of how queerness is silenced in ESOL (and beyond). I had never previously had a space to engage with this issue critically, whether to reflect on my own anxieties and how this shaped me as a teacher, or to consider how it might impact my pedagogy. Having reached the other end of the research process, the need for spaces in which such critical engagement with sexuality can take place seems even clearer. This is not just about making queer teachers – or students – more comfortable at their places of work (or study); as discussed above, LGBT+ rights discourses can be mobilised to justify nationalist hostility towards certain 'othered' demographics. Taking from the lessons of queer theory, the priorities of these critical spaces must therefore extend beyond 'affirming minority sexual identities to problematising all sexual identities' (Nelson, 1999: 373). None of this is to diminish the very real difficulties faced by queer teachers navigating heteronormative classrooms. The point is not to excuse homophobia, but rather to ensure that the struggle against it actively resists discourses that would construct particular minoritised groups as mutually exclusive and inherently threatened by one another.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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