Gender-Oriented Topics in Teaching English as an Additional Language

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Abstract

Given the great influence gender identity issues have in educational settings, it is critical to understand how students, especially in the K–12 context, are affected and how this contributes to their academic success. This article deals with the potential that lies in teaching topics of gender identity in the additional language classroom. Drawing on recent research in the German context related to language and culture and gender-oriented topics in English as an additional language (EAL) provides an international perspective. Exemplified through the German school context, the need to incorporate more gender-oriented topics into teaching is emphasized. The aim is to provide an understanding of topics related to gender and sexual orientation independent of the subject matter and to highlight some opportune teaching moments. In doing so, the role of the school as an agent of socialization and education in connection to topics of gender identity is explained, followed by an introduction to the field of gender studies in order to point out the main aspects to consider when planning a lesson for EAL. To make the theoretical field more accessible, three teaching examples for primary school and early secondary school research settings are presented.

Introduction

Canadian school policies have gained worldwide recognition for their inclusive and forward-thinking approaches. One excellent example is the British Columbia (BC) Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Educator Network. Formally launched as a pilot project in 2016/2017, it is now, four years later, an inherent part of BC's education system (SOGI 123, 2020). Its aim is to connect BC educators interested in SOGI-inclusive education, and it is successfully doing so: "All 60 B.C. school districts and several independent schools have joined the B.C. SOGI Educator Network to further help educators make schools safe and inclusive for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities" (Ministry of Education, 2019). SOGI 123 was designed to help all educators interested in SOGI-inclusive education. In alignment with BC's new curriculum, SOGI 123 provides grade-appropriate teaching material to help everyone understand today's diverse society (SOGI 123, 2020). In 2019, however, the BC Ministry of Education stated that 64% of queer and transgender students in Canada still feel unsafe at school, which underlines once more the need for furthering SOGI-inclusive education.

This fact alone justifies the importance of extending teaching material that helps foster SOGI-inclusive education. This paper will argue that the field of teaching English as an additional language (TEAL) is particularly suitable for helping students address topics of gender identity. It therefore addresses a still-prevalent research gap of gender-oriented publications and teaching methods in TEAL and introduces work from Germany on the subject matter. This gives educators from BC interested in SOGI-inclusive education in a TEAL context the opportunity to broaden their perspective as they acquire insights into TEAL in Germany.

BC TEAL Journal Volume 6 Number 1 (2021): 1–10
https://doi.org/10.14288/bctj.v6i1.373

In the following, two subjects will be addressed: firstly, topics of gender identity in TEAL and secondly, the omnipresence of gender identity at school. These topics will draw on the German school system as an exemplary case to emphasize the need to include more gender-oriented topics into schools and furthermore to encourage awareness of important aspects to consider when planning a school lesson with a focus on gender identity. Three teaching examples are introduced to substantiate the theoretical positions explained in the first section of this paper. Its structure and argument follow a survey of the implications of gender studies for foreign language teaching (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016), complementing it by adding perspectives from primary school and early secondary school research settings.

Topics of Gender in TEAL

Two recent publications, by Thorsen Merse (2017) and Lotta König (2018), are cases in point of cutting-edge publications about SOGI-Inclusive education. In his PhD dissertation, *Other Others, Different Differences: Queer Perspectives on Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, published in 2017, Merse discussed and differentiated current discourses in the fields of education and TEAL with the aim of developing the theoretical foundation for queer approaches in English language teaching. König's PhD dissertation, *Gender-Reflexion mit Literatur im Englischunterricht (Reflection on Gender Through Literature in the English Classroom)*, which was published in 2018, develops the concept of gender-reflection for students and explains its necessity. König suggested ways of implementing gender in TEAL and provided various teaching examples as well as empirical validations of her theoretical ideas. In their different ways, both scholars pointed to the benefits and the need of gender topics for TEAL and identifed three important subject areas—language learning, inter and transcultural learning, and discourse competence—that benefit from gender-oriented topics.

With regard to the specificities of language learning, it is argued that students' additional languages hold the potential for them to approach the topic of gender without the directness of their own linguistic environment. This potential provides students with a distanced perspective on classroom communication that allows involvement from a "safe distance." In light of research suggesting that different contexts, domains of life, and languages allow for different impressions, attitudes, and behaviours, learning other languages does not lead to a change of personality as such, but to improving the expression of another part of one's personality that can be shown in other languages (Prentis, 2017, Grosjean, 2012). Hence, students might be able to take part in classroom discussions with a lower risk of triggering fears or resistance when dealing with the topic (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016; Merse, 2017). Secondly, inter and transcultural learning are constitutional parts of acquiring an additional language. New perspectives and cultures are accessed, which might lead to a reflection of unquestioned certainties in students' lives. König, Lewin, and Surkamp (2016) explain that

> The ability to change perspective, which is an important learning goal in this framework, can also be applied to the cultural category of gender. Since the concepts and attitudes inherent to our own culture are very powerful in shaping our perception of the world, the ability to depart from one's own perspective is very important: only then are students able to see the norms and reflect on them as such (p. 22).

Thirdly, the topic of gender enables the development of discourse competence. On the one hand, gender is produced discursively (commonly called *doing gender*) not only through clothes and behaviour, but also by using language. In talking about this phenomenon (*doing gender*), students elaborate on gender by way of a meta-discourse. Consequently, students also gain language awareness and can reflect on the power of language (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016; Merse, 2017). One example that emphasizes the interdependency of language and gender discourse in the additional language classroom was observed by Cynthia Nelson (2009):

> In one of the first English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons that I observed…, the class was going through a grammar exercise on adverb clauses. One student gave his answer: "When I love someone, I tell him." Amid muted laughter, the teacher said "Try it again." With far less certainty the student ventured "When I love someone, I tell he?" Eventually, he provided an answer that satisfied the teacher: "When I love someone, I tell her." (p. ix)

In this situation, the teacher's assumption that the student has not understood the grammatical exercise betrays the teacher's heteronormative world view and a lack of critical language awareness.

Gender Identity Issues at School

The omnipresence of gender becomes apparent when trying to identify contexts in which gender does not play a significant role at all (Elsner & Lohe, 2016). Concepts of femininity and masculinity and of romantic/sexual relationships are strongly connected to all kinds of cultural expectations, patterns of interpretation, and social interactions (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016). Likewise, the variety of life concepts is steadily increasing. Liberal societies constantly integrate new ideas pertaining to lifestyles, familial relations, and identity. At the same time, traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity are still predominant today and strongly impact students' lives (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016). Since the engagement with gender identity evolves largely during the years at school, the educational field has the responsibility to support students in their development and decision making (Elsner & Lohe, 2016).

Commonly, it is argued that the school has a double function in the capacity of acting: school is being both an agent of socialization and an agent of education (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016). The next section discusses these two agencies in connection to gender identity. Firstly, the role of the school as *an agent of socialization* is introduced, followed, secondly, by the depiction of the school as an *agent of education* to initiate the next section of this paper about "queering" the English language classroom.

The School as an Agent of Socialization

Schooling can be defined as organized instructional activity in which the teacher has the explicit task of socializing children. Children today spend the majority of their active hours at school or in a school context. The school is the first large-scale institution of which children become members and which reflects the expectations and norms of society. It goes without saying that school therefore plays a major part in constructing and upholding dominant gender differences

and gender relations. The school is a place where gender is performed in interactions between students, between students and teachers, and between teachers. In most situations, gender is not sufficiently addressed and problematized at school. This missing element reinforces gender inequalities that can and tend to impact the career interests and life plans of students (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016).

The concept of heteronormativity helps illustrate the crucial socialising function of schools. This concept understands heterosexuality as a central power structure that dominates social and cultural areas in Western societies. Analyses of heteronormativity seek to challenge the common understanding that heterosexuality is to be seen as natural, definite, and fixed. Sexual identities besides heterosexuality are therefore often seen as a deviation from the norm (Katz, 2009; Richardson, 1998). That heteronormativity is not or is only rarely called into question at school can be seen in the field of career orientation at school. The school, as an agent of socialization, is responsible for educating and introducing students to the job market's variety, especially because the gender gap in the job market is extensive. The fact that certain jobs are ascribed to be rather male or female is also mirrored in the education of career orientation at school (Bartsch & Wedl, 2015, Thiessen & Tremel, 2015). This is why Barbara Thiessen and Inken Tremel (2015) demanded that career orientation always be taught in connection to gender and point to various studies highlighting the strong connection between gender and job choices made by young adults (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Thiessen & Tremel, 2015).

Moreover, the school is a place in which *doing gender* takes place. The concept of *doing gender* belongs to a constructivist perspective in gender studies. It establishes the assumption that gender is not an essential feature of a person, but constantly produced in social interactions (Degele, 2008). *Doing gender* happens through, for example, clothes, gestures, behaviour, or communication. Lewin, Surkamp, and König (2016) emphasized that these ways of doing gender at school are by no means arbitrary. The students are "connected to their gender categorization and are expected to conform to it at any time or she/he risks discrimination" (p. 25). Hence, students not only learn how to perform their gender identity in social interactions with their families, but also extensively in interdependency with their classmates at school. As pointed out before, one consequence of *doing gender* in nonconformity with standards of heteronormativity is the risk of discrimination. Documented evidence indicates that queer youth regularly experience discrimination and harassment at school because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In 2018, a study published by the German Youth Institute (DJI), one of the biggest social science research institutes in Europe, found that eight out of ten queer students stated that they have experienced harassment because of their gender identity. Also, queer youth are almost four times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth in Germany (DJI, 2018).

The School as an Agent of Education

As an *agent of education*, the school has precisely the task to support students in the development of their individual personality. König, Lewin, and Surkamp (2016) argued that "it is part of the educational mandate of schools in Germany to support students in developing fundamental ethical principles, which include respect, justice, tolerance toward others, and gender equality" (p. 21). Therefore, education about gender and the inclusion of teaching

material and methods that help students gain a self-confident attitude towards their own gender identity and sexual orientation are particularly important. In terms of critical thinking, educational practices should question and criticize heteronormative power structures in our society.

Furthermore, school education is still dominated by a hidden curriculum, which is shaped by heteronormative assumptions. The concept of a hidden curriculum emphasizes that education is never objective, but is structured through the transmission of unexpressed norms, values, and beliefs. All teaching content entails notions which are learned but not openly intended, such as heteronormativity (Onnen, 2015). That such unexpressed values influence the design of teaching materials, for instance, is one of the many aspects that "learning gender" takes into account. In 2011, Melanie Bittner published a survey about the depiction of gender in contemporary school books in Germany. Her study revealed that school books transport one-dimensional ideas about gender. Her findings showed that the binary thinking about gender and heteronormativity is emphasized by depicting characters in traditional roles, ascribing stereotypical characteristics to them, and portraying their outer appearance as explicitly male or female. Utterances made by characters such as "No, you don't. You never do jobs around the house. Boys have an easy life" (Bittner, 2011, p. 42) or "Girls cannot play football" (Bittner, 2011, p. 41) are commonly found in English language school books. Life concepts, gender identities, or sexual orientations that do not conform to the demands of heteronormativity are not offered. In a similar context, Lukasz Pakula, Joanna Pawelczyk, and Jane Sunderland (2015) explained that "if equal numbers are represented, but women and men, girls and boys are represented in stereotypical, limited or degrading ways, this may similarly affect self-image, as may a relentless, unchallenged heteronormativity for those (many) students who are not heterosexual" (p. 13). Since school books are supposed to help pupils construct new knowledge and behaviours and consequently influence social reality, these results are particularly alarming (Elsner & Lohe, 2016).

In the process of designing methods and material to teach gender-oriented topics, Jutta Hartmann, one of the leading researchers in the field of heteronormative critiques in education, highlighted the importance of positive visions for students. Often students are confronted with negative stereotypes as a method of questioning gendered attributions. However, in pointing out stereotypes in the first place, the problem arises that these stereotypes might be strengthened all the same. In applying positive examples of gender identities or sexual orientations to everyday teaching, alternatives are visualized for the students (Hartmann, Messerschmidt, & Thon, 2017).

Three Perspectives of Gender Studies

It is also essential for teachers to have fundamental knowledge about gender studies in order to teach gender. Following König, Lewin, and Surkamp's (2016) approach, this article addresses three main approaches of gender studies by sharing three teaching examples—one for each approach. The teaching examples were designed by students of the University of Cologne, who eagerly discussed the theoretical approaches and developed examples for TEAL in one of their teaching seminars.

In her introduction to *Gender/Queer Studies*, Nina Degele (2018) differentiated and explained three dominant schools of thought in feminist studies: the socio-critical, the constructivist, and the deconstructivist perspectives (p. 14). In the process of planning a school lesson that includes aspects of gender, it is important to be aware of the central questions each perspective focuses on. Only then are teachers able to formulate learning goals that take full advantage of insights from gender and queer studies and adequately translate them into teaching practice. Without a reflective and profound approach, well-meaning attempts to include topics of gender in school lessons can have unpredictable effects and even strengthen stereotypes (König, 2018).

The socio-critical perspective is mainly concerned with problematic aspects of gender hierarchies based on the division of humans into men and women. Gender is seen as a social category, and the main focus is on the disclosure of structural inequalities based on forms of binary thinking in heteronormative societies. The binary distinction of human beings into male and female leads to hierarchies in which white males are the most privileged ones. The job market is one example for persisting gender inequalities that need to be a subject of discussion with students at school.

The first teaching example is based on the school book *Camden Town 4*, published by Diesterweg (Hanus, 2015). It was designed for students in Grade 8 enrolled in a middle school. The tasks in the school book are concerned with various jobs that are suitable for 14-year-old teenagers. The introduction to the section on jobs informs students about legal aspects for working as a teenager and then introduces six different jobs: a sign waver, a gas station attendant, a babysitter, a farmhand, a newspaper carrier, and a pet sitter. The text itself does not assign jobs to a certain gender. In the description for the job at the gas station, it says for example: “However, he or she cannot work as a cashier” (Hanus, 2015, p. 64). The pictures illustrating the book’s page nevertheless portray traditional ideas about which gender works in what domain. A boy is depicted for the job at a gas station and a girl for the job as a pet sitter. Hereby, the book reinforces heteronormative assumptions about career opportunities for girls and boys. The given socio-critical teaching example builds its lesson on this circumstance. To get the students started, the text is read out loud. The next task involves a writing exercise. Each student is assigned a job and is supposed to imagine a successful and fun day in this job. The teacher makes sure that the boys get jobs that are rather considered to be female and the other way around. Therefore, students can have positive associations with different jobs independently of gender-related preferences. Consequently, the introduction of new perspectives and the broadening of students’ horizons are important. As pointed out above, Hartmann, Messerschmidt, and Thon (2017) recommended the establishment of positive examples without focusing on stereotypes beforehand and called this way of proceeding a “post heteronormative” strategy. The lesson ends with the students’ presentation of their day at work, which could lead to a discussion about the connection between gender and the job market. However, the outcome is not predictable in advance. The students might, for example, already be so open minded that they do not see problems in boys having jobs as babysitters or girls having jobs at gas stations. It is up to the teachers to decide whether or not it is necessary to further discuss this topic.

The constructivist perspective analyzes how gender is produced in social interaction. It focusses on restrictions that are imposed by heteronormative assumptions about the “right”

behaviour for men and women. The concept of *doing gender* is one main idea of the constructivist approach in gender studies. In a school setting, students are supposed to understand how gender differences are made by society and that gender is not an essential feature of a person, but something that is constantly constructed. König, Lewin, and Surkamp (2016) pointed out that

> In class, practices of "doing gender" are particularly accessible for students in areas in which notions of masculinity and femininity are strategically applied—for example in advertising. Normative gender expectations, however, can also be reflected in terms of activities or hobbies that are considered appropriate for "doing" masculinity, but not femininity—or vice versa." (p. 25)

The next teaching example takes up the idea to use students' hobbies as a target point for discussion. Thereby, the daily life of students is introduced to the classroom and hence, a relationship to their world is given. Only when students experience some sort of personal relevance of an issue or shortcoming do they get actively involved in the process of solving it. The lesson was designed for students in Grade 5. The teacher posts a chart with the headline *What kind of things do you like doing?* A number of students are supposed to share their ideas, probably such as reading, singing, playing football, and so on. The teacher simultaneously writes down the students' ideas on the blackboard. Each student then gets a sticky note with their name on it and is supposed to put their sticky note next to their favourite activity. When all sticky notes are posted, students can utter their favourite activity and ask who also likes to do this activity. The teacher then asks the class if they ever feel excluded from an activity because it is supposed to be for boys or girls instead of all students. If there are such activities on the board, students can work in small groups and think of ways they can help all kids at school feel included in the activities they like. The overall aim is to make students aware that there are no activities that are more suitable for girls or boys. Their hobbies should just be based on what they like and what they are good at, and not on their gender identity. The lesson could be followed by watching and discussing a movie such as *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000), in which a boy becomes a professional ballet dancer.

The last teaching example is based on the **deconstructive perspective**, which aims to question the supposedly natural characteristics of gender. The deconstructive perspective aims to detect exclusions based on gender norms, challenge ideas of heteronormativity, and question structures of power in society. Scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) have emphasized the performativity of gender and its establishment through the repetition and enactment of gendered behaviour by being cited again and again. For Butler, the distinction of sex and gender is not valid because sex could also be understood as discursive. In this sense, sex and gender are culturally constructed concepts and the result of the predominant discourse of each time period.

The focal point in this teaching example is based on the concept of *undoing gender*. The teaching example is designed for a Grade 8 or Grade 9 class. It is based on the novel *The Art of Being Normal* (2016), written by Lisa Williamson, in which the main character wants to be gender fluid. The students get a fictional diary entry without knowing the main character's name or gender identity. The text implies both a female and a male person, depending on the way it is read. The teacher reveals that the main character wants to be categorized neither as female nor as

male. The character can rather be described as gender fluid. A gender-fluid person's identity does not conform to the heterosexual world order because their gender does not follow from a specific biological sex, and sexual desire does not derive from either sex or gender identity. The character in the diary entry provides critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of the heterosexual world order. Importantly, the character in the text is not portrayed as deficient because the character does not conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility. The text emphasizes that gender can be thought of as radically different from sex. The students then work in groups to find out what gender fluidity means. In the following discussion they are supposed to understand that when identifiable differences between women and men are blurred, the heterosexual world order is weakened. Hence, students question the self-evidence of heteronormativity and binary gender.

Conclusion

The examples presented only serve as a first attempt to emphasize the broad range for conceptualizing and discussing an implementation of topics concerned with gender into TEAL and to add to extant research on gender-sensitive perspectives in educational settings. Educators from BC were given an international perspective, and teachers dealing with younger students might especially benefit from these insights as it was shown that it is possible to cover topics of gender independent of the students' age. Often teaching examples in TEAL focus on older students because they are more reflective and advanced in their language proficiency and, hence, it is easier to discuss rather complicated topics with them. Furthermore, all the teaching examples in this paper tried to implement positive examples for students to identify with. These examples avoid strengthening dominant stereotypes by first addressing them in order to deconstruct them afterwards. The positive examples function as agents in opening up "new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarism" (Butler, 1990, p. 24). The teaching examples also show how the classroom is connected to experiences of everyday life. The teaching is shaped by and responds to problems that might arise anywhere in students' lives. The combination of positive visions and the chance for students to explore their own role in society and in various discourse communities opens up the possibility to develop a deeper understanding of what those interconnections mean for them. As argued above, the school holds the responsibility to teach gender, and, in this process, should also deconstruct heteronormativity. The school, however, is a complex system combining a broad range of different expectations, ideas, tasks, and hierarchies. Reactions by oppositional organizations have proven that questions of gender identity and sexual orientation are often accompanied by emotions. These sensitive topics require negotiations of gender on the individual level, but also on a sociopolitical level (König, Lewin, & Surkamp, 2016, p. 21).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors, Roman Bartosch and Karen Ragoonaden, for their support during the research and writing process. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and the editor Scott Douglas for his publication guidance.

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