A critical discussion of inclusive approaches to sexualities in ELT

Angelos Bollas

The aim of this article is to challenge heteronormative as well as homonormative practices in English language teaching. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that both complete absence of LGBTQI+ references in ELT materials, as well as recent attempts to provide more inclusive approaches to materials design and classroom practices, can be problematic for L2 learners irrespective of their sexuality. The paper traces current developments in ELT materials design with regards to inclusive classroom practices and argues that attempts towards exclusivity may reflect (hetero/homo)normative views, and can therefore perpetuate a culture—learning and otherwise—of discrimination and social exclusion. It concludes by identifying the need for an alternative approach—one that does not focus on inclusion but on diversity.

Over the last few years, issues of sexuality in English language education have received considerable attention. Blogposts, conference presentations, and articles in academic and professional publications have emerged. These focus on justifying the need for more inclusive practices in relation to sexuality matters, as well as on specific strategies that teachers can deploy in order to provide learners with curricula which promote acceptance of non-heteronormative identities (Paiz 2019). The majority of these efforts can be characterized as interventions to traditional syllabi informed by heteronormative learning materials. In other words, building on the work of Gray (2013), among others, recent attempts to de-heterosexualize the English language curriculum confirm the absence of non-heterosexual identities in mainstream published learning materials (i.e. coursebooks and other supplementary resources), make a case against the exclusive representation of heterosexual identities, and encourage teachers to design and/or use inclusive materials in their lessons.

This increasing effort for inclusive practices in ELT is centred around one theme: representation. Criticizing the absence of LGBTQI+ representation in published coursebooks and promoting strategies and ideas for more inclusive representation are important steps toward better and safer education. However, as much as the importance of representation is acknowledged, it is equally—if not more—important to raise educators’ awareness about the meanings of representation. For each one identity...
that is being represented, there is another one that is not. This raises questions with regards to the meaning of diversity, the potential of curricula to become truly diverse, and the role of educators in providing safe learning environments that are respectful of learners’ diverse identities.

This paper follows Sauntson (2018) and Pawelczyk, Pakuła, and Sunderland (2014) whose work has moved from focusing on representation in ELT materials as an inclusion strategy to examining the ELT classroom as a locus for the destabilization of norms. In this paper, I emphasize the importance of addressing both heteronormativity and homonormativity when challenging established norms. For the purposes of this article, by using the term heteronormativity, I refer to the fact that particular heterosexual identities, practices, behaviours, and expressions (dyadic, monogamous, reproductive, etc.) are the accepted norm. The term ‘homonormativity’ is mostly attributed to Duggan (2003), who observes an assimilationist tendency of gay civil rights groups as a result of neoliberalism. In effect, homonormativity refers to the replication of heteronormative values by homosexual people.

The aim of this paper is to challenge inclusive practices that might seem progressive and beneficial, but could also be damaging in promoting excluding practices. In doing so, the need to develop a diversity-focused approach is proposed as a way of equipping teachers with the tools they need to cater for the needs of all learners.

The range of manifestations of heteronormativity in everyday life vary from reading fairy tales to one’s daughter about a princess who is looking for her prince, to asking a man who wears a wedding ring the name of his wife. In relation to English language education, heteronormativity manifests itself in the content, visual and textual, of mainstream published materials, as well as in classroom discourse, in interactions between students and teacher or among students. Global coursebooks present exclusively heterosexual characters (Bollas 2020), while classroom language use of the third-person singular pronouns he and she further attest to a heteronormative view of fixed gender identities: boys and girls; men and women.

Representation in learning materials is also important because it may affect learners’ motivation (Bollas 2020). Dörnyei’s ‘L2 motivational self’ system (2009) is centred around representation since learners develop a sense of an ‘ideal L2 self’, an idealized impression of what makes a successful L2 user, based on the contact they have with L2 speakers. Arguably, this contact comes from all types of media, for example television shows, songs, films, travel. However, learning materials play a significant part in bringing learners ‘in contact with’ L2 speakers too. The ‘L2 motivational self’ system suggests that based on the L2 learning experience (i.e. the context of learning, including learning materials), learners develop a sense of the ‘ought-to L2 self’ (i.e. characteristics learners believe they should possess to become successful L2 speakers themselves). In turn, language learning may be
seen as a means to becoming as close to the ‘ideal L2 self’ as possible (Bollas 2020).

Studies examining L2 learners’ negotiation of identity have shown that not being able to see themselves reflected in the L2 learning materials they use may result in learners not being able to use English for purposes immediate to them, as well as in limiting their L2 identity options (Vasilopoulos 2015). The relationship between the ‘L2 motivational self’ system and heteronormativity is clear: learners are exposed to materials that present L2 speakers as being exclusively heterosexual and heteronormative (Widodo and Elyas 2020). This results in at least two problems. If a learner does not identify as heterosexual, they are presented with possible ideal L2 selves with whom they cannot identify. As a result, they are excluded from a process that would, otherwise, affect their motivation and, in turn, their language learning positively. If a learner identifies as heterosexual, they are also presented with L2 speakers who are exclusively heterosexual. This might not affect their motivation as they are able to identify with an L2 ideal self, but they are presented with a reality which suggests that societies of L2 speakers are almost exclusively heterosexual.

To consider the implications of presenting learners with heterosexuality as the only possible identity in an L2 context, it is important to activate Gramsci’s construct of hegemony. Hegemony leads people to ‘affirm social orders, social practices and certain ways of living’ (Ludwig 2011: 91) even if these are against their best interests. Contrary to its quotidian meaning, Gramsci does not use hegemony to refer to forceful persuasion, domination, or oppression. Ludwig (ibid.) clarifies that Gramsci is interested in those practices which create perceptions, understandings, and judgements that are shared by the majority of people.

Therefore, by combining the earlier discussion about the L2 motivational self-system and Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, it emerges that learning materials as well as classroom discourse produce a false belief that heterosexuality is tantamount to the L2 reality. In other words, both learning materials and classroom discourses contribute to the establishment and maintenance of hegemonic heteronormativity (Allen and Mendez 2018); that is, heteronormative practices become common sense and, by extension, non-heteronormative practices become deviant acts that are to be stigmatized, discriminated against, and socially excluded. It is not difficult to imagine the effects that such practices might have on the lives of L2 learners and the people that L2 learners interact with. Those who adhere to the norm—in this case being exclusively heterosexual—enjoy the perks of being ‘normal’; the others suffer the consequences of their ‘deviant lifestyle’ and live in the margins of society. While this is a consequence of utmost importance, more often than not, language teachers do not assume responsibility by claiming that they have little part to play in the overall socialization process of their learners (Paiz 2019).

Considering the effects of hegemonic heteronormativity on the future lives of some learners might not provide enough reason for teachers and course designers to rethink their practices. It is, therefore, important also
to consider how promoting, intentionally or otherwise, heteronormativity affects the lives of some learners while they are in language learning classes. El-Metoui (2018) argues that by not addressing heteronormative practices, teachers may encourage discriminatory behaviour. This often has the form of bad language, mockery-type body language and gestures, stereotypical portraiture, negative attitudes, refusal to do pair/group work, as well as sniggering and laughing at learners who do not share characteristics with the stereotypical heteronormative portrait that is celebrated through coursebook materials and classroom discourses. Whether we understand it or not, classrooms become unsafe environments for some learners. This should be enough reason for teachers and course providers to take action and address the issue.

Recently, there have been attempts by some ELT professionals to focus on learning materials that include representation of a broader range of sexualities. For example, in 2019, Seburn delivered a talk at IATEFL where he presented an approach to designing and using inclusive materials. In a subsequent report of his talk on his blog, Seburn presented the ‘normalization approach’, the goal of which is ‘to include LGBTQIA2 as just one section within society and thus represented as such’. Indeed, this as well as any other talk on the matter seem to be positive and progressive steps towards fewer discriminatory practices in education. However, examining the accompanying coursebook-type materials that Seburn (2019) presented as samples for colleagues from the publishing world to see, some may notice that what was being represented seemed to be a replica of the heteronormative portraiture he criticized. The only difference was that rather than looking at heterosexual couples, there were homosexual couples living a heteronormative lifestyle.

The problem of homonormativity in representation

Around the time Duggan’s (2003) work was published, in the global North the majority of gay civil rights groups were focused on issues related to gay marriage and child adoption policies and laws. ‘No longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite’ (45) There has been a noticeable shift in contemporary activist agendas. Not only has the subject-matter of activist protests changed, but so has the rhetoric employed. Rather than celebrating diversity, attempts to ‘normalize’ difference are observed. ‘We are the same’ or ‘We are no different’ seems to be the message on placards. This resulted in certain social issues being overlooked in favour of focusing on gay marriage, family rights, and military service rights.

At IATEFL 2019, Seburn presented materials that portrayed ‘same-sex romantic relationships, a drag queen, and a non-binary person’s familial relationship’. As discussed earlier, both the same-sex couple, as well as the familial relationship of the non-binary person, fall under the category of homonormativity because, even though we are not presented with heterosexual individuals, the situations or contexts within which they appear are typically associated with heteronormative lifestyles, namely romantic relationships and the family. Drag queens have also been part of heteronormative mainstream society and culture as long as they
entertain. Seburn, possibly as a result of understanding the lack of true representation in his suggested materials, advises being ‘cognizant of realistically representing a wider variety of LGBTQIA2 people’s lives ... as we should (and more often do) with other members of the society’ (ibid.). Seburn’s suggestion here truly reflects what the cause of the problem with representation is: there cannot be an all-inclusive practice, and this is what needs to be reflected in learning materials and classroom practices.

By definition, to include something means to acknowledge the existence of, and unintentionally promote, a commonly agreed-upon norm. Therefore, any act of inclusion presupposes an act of exclusion. For each identity or practice that we want to include in learning materials, there is another—if not more than one—identity or practice that is left out. This is not only applicable to the category of sexuality. It extends to all other human characteristics, but for the purposes of this article, we will focus on sexualities. Even within the same category, for lack of better word, people express their sexualities in diverse and different ways. No two heterosexual individuals behave the same. Similarly, no two non-heterosexual individuals behave the same. Therefore, by attempting to adopt ‘inclusive practices’, we always run the risk of excluding certain individuals. As educators, therefore, we find ourselves in a vicious circle whereby we engage in inclusive practices by excluding ‘categories’ of people. This has similar results with the ones I discussed above when I presented the effects of hegemonic heteronormativity. By using, for example, materials such as the ones proposed by Seburn, we promote the idea that gay men are welcome in the society as long as they adhere to the core social principles of monogamy and family life.

Schools OUT UK, an education charity that aims to make education safe for LGBTQI+ individuals, has developed the VisiAble method (the-classroom 2020) as a means of providing teachers of all contexts—including language education—with more inclusive practices. This includes a two-step approach toward inclusive education: the usualization and the actualization approach. The usualization approach refers to the processes involved in acclimatizing people to the presence of what is to be usualized. In essence, it refers to the weakening of feelings of threat which are often the cause of fear and discrimination. In practice, the usualization approach ‘occurs when a teacher references Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual sexual orientation without inviting further comment’ (ibid., emphasis in original). The goal of this approach is to inform learners about the existence of LGBTQI+ people in all cultures, societies, and times. As a result, their existence is acknowledged, and the non-threatening nature of their difference is highlighted. Therefore, the classroom becomes a safer space for all.

The next step in this two-step method is the actualization approach. ‘Actualise merely describes the fact that they are aware that they are learning about LGBT lives. In “usualizing” this is not always the case’ (ibid.). Following the usualization process where learners have been presented with LGBTQI+ individuals as acceptable parts of reality, in the actualization process, learners are actively encouraged to engage with the realities of the lives of LGBTQI+ people. For example, in the usualization
process, learners might be working on a text about travel. The text might present the experience of a trans man and his partner when travelling to a certain destination, but the focus of the text and the accompanying questions are on the experience of travelling to the specific place. In the actualization process, the focus of the text as well as of the accompanying tasks would be on the experience of travel as a trans person. Usualization is about presenting something for what it is, while actualization refers to the process of unpacking this that has been usualized.

Despite the fact that the actualization approach can be regarded as more effective than the other two approaches in that it aims to problematize learners in relation to specific issues of LGBTQI+ lives, it does not manage to challenge the existence of a certain norm. In fact, all three approaches that have been presented so far follow a ‘corrective’ approach: they acknowledge the existence of a social norm that for the main part has been heteronormative and to a lesser extent homonormative, and they attempt to de-marginalize LGBTQI+ identities by making them part of the ‘accepted’ reality. At this point, it needs to be clarified that there is nothing inherently wrong with these approaches. Indeed, educators who employ them are commendable. However, these ‘corrective’ approaches cannot be fully successful, especially when they are applied to specific societies and cultures that tend to be less tolerant—let alone accepting—of difference.

Therefore, I propose that we stop focusing on promoting inclusion, but rather adopt approaches and practices that celebrate diversity. By activating a Foucauldian reading to the notion of inclusion, we allow ourselves to examine the power formations that emerge from inclusive practices, which, in turn, can be critically challenged as neoliberal practices for the reproduction of exclusion (Nguyen 2019). In other words, in this paper inclusion is viewed as a practice that inevitably encompasses forms and practices of exclusion. Who gets to decide who is or should be the norm, and at what cost to those who happen to be ruled out of it, are just examples of how power formations come into play when we focus on inclusion. Diversity, as it is used in this paper, focuses on the deconstruction of the norm. In other words, an approach that focuses on promoting diversity is an approach that does not aim to expand what is included and accepted as part of mainstream society and culture; rather, it renounces altogether the existence of a norm. Such an approach can be effective for three reasons. Firstly, it is not invasive and can, therefore, be adopted by educators in all places and cultures. Secondly, it does not recognize, and hence endorse, any one behaviour and/or practice as normative. Finally, an approach on diversity, rather than inclusion, is primarily an approach that focuses on language. Therefore, it can be applicable and easily adopted by language educators.

A diversity-focused approach in language education seeks to empower learners to interact or engage with, rather than embrace, people who are different from them. It aims to equip learners with linguistic tools that will allow them to coexist peacefully with others despite the fact that they may not understand why they live their lives in a certain manner. It is an approach that does not explicitly address matters of a certain ‘diversity’; rather, it enables learners to perceive and celebrate what is different to
them as diverse. The aim of such an approach is not to teach learners to accept one identity over another or change learners’ mindsets or beliefs. The main goal is to provide them with the necessary tools that will allow them to interact with others in a peaceful manner. As a result, neither a heteronormative nor a homonormative worldview is being promoted. Below are three examples of how a diversity-focused approach can be applied in English language education. It is important to highlight that the purpose of these examples is to illustrate how professionals in the field can start (re)considering language teaching in light of this approach.

One of the most commonly used topics in published coursebooks is the family (Bollas 2020). An inclusive approach would promote the need to present learners with a number of different types of families, rather than limit their exposure to the heteronormative images often included in coursebooks (Seburn 2019). A way to activate a diversity-focused approach, though, would be to encourage learners to consider why their coursebooks present them with a limited representation of family types. Questions that prompt them to think critically about who decides what is included in a coursebook, to what effect, how this might affect them or their peers, as well as how such representations reflect their society can prove productive in relation to developing learners’ critical thinking skills. Learners can also help educators equip them with the tools they need to question social forces that dictate normativity. As a result, educators do not run the risk of taking part—possibly unwillingly—in the politics of inclusion. Instead, they help their learners challenge exclusionary practices and, in turn, be more open to diversity.

A more practical area where a diversity-focused approach can be employed is teaching pronouns. Traditionally, learners learn to use he for males and she for females. Recently, teachers have started introducing singular they as a means of making genderless references to people. However, this has been something that learners are usually introduced to when they are at an advanced level of English, or when they study English for academic purposes. A diversity-focused approach in language education requires a re-examination of the way pronouns are taught in the first place. Therefore, rather than teaching beginners that he is to be used for males and she for females, we could teach them that they should be used to refer to anyone whom they do not know personally. They could also be taught to first ask others about their preferred pronouns. Therefore, rather than using a corrective method, which can often lead to resistance to change, we teach learners to celebrate each other’s choices from the beginning.

Similarly, teachers could follow a functional approach to language teaching to encourage learners to challenge the reality that is being presented to them, while maintaining respect and kindness towards each other. Teachers could focus on the difference between insult and opinion. A diversity-focused approach encourages learners to focus on the difference between insult and opinion not from the point of view of subjects that should or should not be discussed. Rather, it encourages learners to discuss and challenge all subjects while focusing on the language they use. An easy way to introduce this in class would be to focus on a trivial subject: ice-creams. Learners can be encouraged to identify the
difference between statements such as ‘I think ice-creams are gross’ and ‘I do not like ice-creams, but others love them, and it is ok’. By working with trivial subjects, learners can truly focus on the language used and the function that different phrases or lexical items serve. Therefore, when the time comes for them to express their opinions, they will be better equipped to do so in a non-offensive manner.

Conclusion

The three examples that are presented here illustrate how a diversity-focused approach can be applied to language teaching. This approach follows on from a framework I developed in 2020 (Bollas 2020) in which I argued that our goal as language educators is to equip learners with the linguistic means that will enable them to challenge and question established norms in a healthy and respectful manner. In this paper, I discussed how problematic classroom practices and published materials may be for some learners. When all that is being represented and promoted are heteronormative models of life, some learners will inevitably feel excluded and alienated. Similarly, when we attempt to incorporate inclusive approaches in our practices, there is a danger that we might further alienate some learners because inclusion presupposes a norm that, no matter how much we try to expand, will always leave some at its margins. Therefore, rather than focusing on inclusion, we should reconsider our teaching practices and reorient them toward celebrating sexual diversity. This paper proposes a diversity-focused approach to language learning and invites researchers and classroom participants to investigate its applicability further, as well as to consider how the widespread adoption of the recommended practices should be encouraged.

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The author

Angelos Bollas is a researcher at EROSS (Expressions, Research, Orientations: Sexuality Studies) at Dublin City University, Ireland. His main interests are representations of sexuality in popular culture, queer theory, and applications of diversity approaches in education.

Email: angelos.bollas@dcu.ie