

## Research Note

# Steps toward Respecting Sexual Diversity in the ESOL Classroom

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During the 2014-2015 academic year, we conducted roundtables related to queer identity in the ESOL classroom at ORTESOL's fall and spring conferences and at an in-service day at Portland State University's Intensive English Language Program. We centered our conversations on one question: How are teachers addressing sexual diversity in their adult ESOL classrooms? Participant responses were as thoughtful as they were multifaceted, a reflection of how complex the issue still is.

Not until the early 1990s did researchers start addressing queer issues in TESOL literature (Nelson, 1993, 1999, 2009; Wadell et al., 2011). Subsequently, Nelson wrote one of the first books that described practices teachers have taken to create an inclusive environment for their LGBTQ+ students, as well as the associated challenges (2009). In our roundtable sessions, however, we found many ESOL educators still struggle with how to integrate queer topics, support LGBTQ+ learners, and provide for their safety.

While predominantly sympathetic, roundtable participants--queer and ally alike--expressed a variety of perspectives toward the topic, ranging

from avoidance to activism. Strategies for addressing sexual diversity in the ESOL classroom fell along a similar spectrum. Here we present our summary of recommendations from the roundtable participants. Even as systemic change must be sought at the institutional level, these recommendations represent the first steps a teacher can take in their classroom to respect the sexual diversity of their students and to address homophobic notions and actions.

### **Make an inclusive space.**

- *Respect privacy.* Make offices and classrooms welcoming spaces where individuality is honored, but confidentiality is upheld. Let people come out on their own terms, but support them when they do. Understand that for some there are political, cultural, and social consequences of coming out.
- *Make it policy to respect others' backgrounds.* Communicate clear boundaries of what is appropriate behavior in your class. Enforce systematic practices against hate speech of any kind. Put this clearly in your syllabus and address it in the first class. For lower-level learners,

consider translating diversity statements into students' L1s.

- *Neutralize micro-aggressions.* Interrupt inappropriate comments (e.g., "That's so gay") just as you would for expressions toward other groups. Steer students toward more constructive language (See also Sue, 2010).

**Learn more.**

- *Educate yourself.* Learn the basics of queer culture just as you would learn the culture of another country. Understand you will have queer students in your classroom. Learn what it means to come out as a teacher, as a student, as an American, and as someone from another culture. Distinguish opinions from facts.
- *Know school resources.* Have information for students. Be familiar with your campus's queer resource center, clubs, and health care facilities.
- *Embrace learnable moments.* When students ask questions that you do not know the answer to, it is okay to say "I don't know. Let's find out together!" Learn why they are asking and begin discussion at the root of the issue.

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**Ratify the conversation.**

- *Undo the taboo.* Do not dismiss or ignore students who bring up LGBTQ+ topics. Acknowledge cultural differences, but make no assumptions about what others believe.
- *Represent.* It is meaningful for students to know that there are others like them and others who

respect them as they are. Try to be a role model for your students, whether that is as an openly LGBTQ+ teacher or a passionate ally. Adapt your teaching materials to include images or descriptions of

queer individuals, families, or members of a community and advocate for these changes when interacting with publishers and materials providers.

- *Put it in context.* When isolated, sexual diversity is othered. When interwoven into a regular lesson, it is another thread in the fabric of society, neither promoted nor denigrated. Fold LGBTQ+ identities into existing topics such as family, relationships, and civil rights.

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