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# Gender in English teaching: inclusion of non-cisgender expressions in the EFL classroom and their representation in textbooks and materials

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### Abstract

Throughout the years, English Teaching as a Foreign Language (EFL) has evolved in terms of methodologies, strategies, frameworks, teaching content, etc. However, when it comes to the inclusion of “irrelevant” aspects of society, there is still a long way to go. Even though gender diversity is one thing that has existed for a long time, it is still considered “taboo” for some people. Acceptance of gender expression comes along with the fulfillment of normative behavior that has ruled society over time. Therefore, a literature review was conducted on the inclusion of non-cisgender expressions and their representation in the English teaching practice. In which not only different aspects that might affect perception over this type of expression were studied (gender identity, prejudice, visibility, etc.) but also different research on EFL books and materials were analyzed on the representation of the queer community and different gender expressions. The results clearly showed that there is a need to add visibility to people belonging to the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, two-spirit, intersex, and queer) spectrum and their freedom of expression.

Keywords: Gender, EFL, education, representation.

### *El género en la enseñanza de inglés: inclusión de las expresiones no cisgénero en el salón de clases de ILE en los libros de texto y materiales*

### Resumen

A lo largo de los años, la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera ha evolucionado en sus metodologías, estrategias, marcos de referencia, contenidos de enseñanza, etc. Sin embargo, cuando se trata de inclusión de aspectos no “relevantes” para la sociedad, hace falta mucho camino por recorrer. La diversidad de género es un tema que, a pesar de existir desde muchos años, sigue siendo considerado “tabú”. La aceptación de la expresión de género va de la mano con el cumplimiento de conductas normativas que han dominado a la población. Por ello, se llevó a cabo un estudio sobre la inclusión y representación de situaciones e individuos no cis-género en el aula de enseñanza de inglés, donde se analizaron no solo diferentes factores que pueden afectar la percepción ante este tipo de expresión (la identidad de género, prejuicios, visibilidad, etc.) sino que también se estudiaron diferentes libros y materiales donde los resultados arrojaron que hace falta bastante visibilidad de personas pertenecientes al espectro LGBTTTQIA+ y su expresión.

Palabras clave: Género, Enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EILE), materiales, educación.

## Introduction

Gender in English teaching is one aspect that might be overlooked when it comes to language learning. It is argued that language teachers and educational institutions ignore the inclusion of representation for these categories in the teaching practice and their resources.

For this essay, we will be focused specifically on the research synthesis about gender. Different papers will be reviewed to acknowledge the topic and include aspects like non-cisgender representation in materials, expression in the classroom, limitations, and stereotypes against it. This is merely based on the fact that every individual has their own gender identity, and even though most of the time such identity is biased toward the Cisgender (male and female), it is not the only one that exists; therefore, in the teaching classroom, this aspect tends to be left aside and, when it is approached, it is done controversially (for people to give their opinion, to debate about it, as a Pride month special topic).

As time goes by, society has evolved to understand that gender is a wide aspect, and not everyone would feel related to the heteronormative context that rules society, especially in Mexico. That is why educational institutions must have the intention to include different gender identities in their activities, materials, resources, events, and teaching practice; young students need to feel confident about themselves, and some others, like non-binary or gender-fluid individuals, are still looking and fighting to be recognized and respected.

Nelson (2002) states in “why Queer Theory is Useful in Teaching” that “including sexual identities within the ordinary keeps the focus on what people say and do rather than who they feel. Useful for social interactions unfamiliar to those who are new to a particular culture in the classroom” (p. 47). Something that causes an important impact when it comes to knowledge acquisition is the representation and connection between the learning experience of the student and their identity reality.

The literature review intends to open the Teacher’s minds to think about how to include different gender expressions in the teaching practice and understand the diversity that might be present in the classroom as well as provide options on activities and strategies they can use to implement the inclusion of non-cisgender aspects in the EFL classroom.

## Problem Statement

The inclusion of non-cisgender in the EFL classroom is not an aspect that arises every day. There is very little opportunity to talk about it or include it in the naturalness of the sessions; moreover, professors and schools do not seek to include this aspect in their policies or contents. For example: using a video with queer identities to teach a listening lesson or using a role model to empower students in a humanistic session. However, it is known that LGBTQ+ students exist, and each time they have become stronger and freer.

For this reason, EFL textbooks and materials should include homo-parental examples, queer role models, and universality of language: mother and father; a married couple, etc. To allow everyone in the classroom to feel confident and comfortable in their skin. The paper also looks to compare how representation can be one-sided to certain gender statuses (cisgender) and the lack of integration into other gender coding and identities by reviewing the examples and resources that analyze their inclusion in books provided to students.

### *Research questions*

1. What is the status of the use of non-cisgender expressions and representation in EFL textbooks and materials?
2. Why is it important to include non-cisgender identities and representation in the teaching practice?
3. What are some strategies that can be used to include non-cisgender expressions and examples in the EFL teaching classroom?

### *Research method*

In order to answer the research questions, a documentary research method was followed, which consisted of reading, reviewing, and analyzing different research articles and texts, where LGBTQ+ gender identities, their representation in EFL materials, and EFL/ESL education were related. The process allowed the researcher to connect ideas between authors and support claims based on the content of the articles. Authentic and reliable documents were used in order to provide trustworthy information in the paper and allow readers to use the references to widen their knowledge on the topic.

### *Objective*

To review the uses or introduction of non-cisgender expressions in the ELT classroom in textbooks and materials.

### *Specific objectives*

- To understand how prejudices in the classroom can affect the perception of this aspect.
- To empower professors to include such aspects in their teaching practice and expose students to non-cisgender examples.

## Research synthesis

### *Gender identity*

Gender identity has to do with the personal sense of oneself when it comes to their gender. As humanity has evolved, heteronormativity has decreased, and already existing gender expressions and identities have had a freer opportunity to express themselves and be recognized. However, the representation is lacking besides the community, and when it comes to educational fields, such representation is not as evident.

Barton and Satwa (2012, cited by Aguilar, 2021) argue that “the course book showed inequity of gender representation in favor of men and that it is male-biased” (p. 3). As previously mentioned, institutions and professors are not as educated when it comes to inclusion and recognition of other genders besides the one socially accepted (male and female). Therefore, the recognition of diversified gender expressions can be very little or even null, for example, pictures of queer expression, examples of LGBTQ couples, diversity in textbooks.

As stated by Bickmore (1999) and Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) (authors cited in Barozzi and Ruiz), research in the *Journal of Linguistics Philology and Translation* (2020) states “primary school pupils already possess much [wrong] information about gender and sexual diversity which needs to be readdressed and reoriented” (p. 90). This is a coincidence not only in elementary schools but in most schools in the country. The combination of misinformation and the lack of representation of non-cisgenders in the EFL classroom and materials has made it harder for queer individuals to feel safe and confident in their educational context.

Moreover, queer identities like Non-binary or Trans individuals have to strive for respect and recognition in the classrooms, not only from their classmates but also from the authorities. This idea is supported by Rojas (2012), who says that English classes should allow all students to experience their own identity and that professors cannot separate the students' life from their language development since there are possible variables that could affect their learning process.

This aspect is crucial because most of the time, teachers only focus on pedagogical purposes in their sessions or courses, thus leaving aside an important aspect for students to feel comfortable in their learning context, which is their identity as humans. To add to these ideas, Espelage (2016) states that there are key areas of research that need to be addressed such as “methods to assess sex, gender expressions, and sexual orientations, large scale school-based studies of youth” (p. 7), among others.

The aspects aforementioned provide areas that still need to be addressed by teachers, institutions, authorities, and facilitators before including different identities to the ones they are familiar with within the classroom. Protective factors are to be enhanced, but also education is as important to eradicate ignorance, which is one of the main factors that lead to discrimination.

Student's identity has been discussed previously, and the importance of taking it into account has also been mentioned; however, what happens to the other side of the coin? How is it that teachers

who identify themselves with other genders besides the Cis one could implement their own identity into the classroom? Lawrence and Nagashima (2019) claim that “queer pedagogy is effective and suited to ESL classrooms. Queer theory, when applied as pedagogy, problematizes all sexual identities. Analyzes how discursive and cultural practices construct what is perceived as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ (heteronormativity)” (p. 3).

The educational policy can be a huge challenge when it comes to gender identity inclusion in the classrooms. As mentioned, English makes it easier because it is related to the LGBTQ+ community and their practices (pop culture and other aspects). However, pedagogical implications might affect the decisions a professor has to make before trying to include “controversial” topics like this one.

Furthermore, the schools need to create a safe space for everyone to have a successful and satisfactory learning experience. Jarvis (2014) suggests that pre-service teachers should “explore their self-narratives pertaining to their gender identity. [It] should provide a safe space in which they can deconstruct religious and cultural discourses to build both tangible and intangible gender identity capital” (p. 185). It is a reality that religious and cultural perspectives might affect how such identities could be included in the classrooms. The impact on the students of a certain topic is highly influenced by the presentation that the teacher decides to give to it.

### *Inclusion in the Language Classroom*

To understand how to approach different gender identities in the classroom, teachers must pay attention to the concept called “inclusion of non-cisgender expressions.” This will allow them to understand that it must do not only with gender but with several different aspects that most of the time are not paid attention to or are just rejected.

Culturally responsive pedagogy can be considered when talking about inclusion. Norman (2020) mentions that “This teaching develops academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural competence, community building and connections; individual self-worth and an ethic of caring” (p. 9).

Throughout the years, the LGBTQ+ community has developed its own cultural and linguistic practices, from using clothing or accessories to communicate, creating safe spaces like ballrooms, to fighting for their rights with pride and using specific language to communicate with each other—like “Queen” to talk about drag or “Mug” to refer to makeup, etc. If the professor, in this case, understands how to include them and allow their students to be aware of their existence, it could have a positive impact on society.

Moreover, understanding different types of self-expressions—like a trans person using they/them pronouns or a queer person using language like “gaymer” or “aro” to communicate—will allow students to be aware of the wide diversity that humans can offer regarding identity. This claim is supported by Harbin (2016) with the following statement: “gender-inclusive

classrooms require professors to be familiar with concepts related to gender expression and identity and practice consciousness-raising. They must be highly educated to positively transmit it” (p. 2).

The reinforcement of old beliefs and practices might influence the perception of gender representation in the classroom. Männynsaló (2008) claims that “although studies suggest that, in the classroom, boys are the ones dominating mixed-sex talk and girls who give away power, usually the teacher is the one who often unconsciously supports discrimination based on gender” (p. 13). Professors must seek a way to eradicate these antiquated ideals and understand that personality comes along with leadership behavior, instead of highlighting gender and how it influences the input they bring into the class.

The preparation a professor gets over queer coding and different gender identities is also crucial to the understanding and inclusion of such. To support this claim, as stated by Paiz (2019), ELT practice has not addressed preparation for educators to queer their practice in the best way. Invisibility toward LGBTQ+ identities help to reinforce dominant heteronormative discourses. This happens to be a reality. As previously mentioned, recognition is an aspect that is still a goal for queer individuals resisting the heteronormative behavior that has ruled society over the years. This also reinforces the idea that straight people are “normal” and only their gender expression is the one that should be recognized, including language like their pronouns (he/she), when there are also “they” and “them” to refer to someone.

### *Stereotypes and prejudices in the classroom*

Stereotypes and prejudices play a negative role when it comes to queer and general LGBTQ+ perceptions of humans. When it comes to the educational context it is even harder to approach. Alan et al. (2018) mention that “results indicate that the personal views of the elementary school teacher may play an important role in mitigating or widening gender-achievement gaps. Mostly in countries where the topic is not widely discussed” (p.28).

This clearly shows how female individuals are the most affected by stereotypes and biased beliefs about the power that men have over society. The stereotype that women are weak characters, and their delegations must be out of power keeps perpetuating that femininity in any individual is negative.

Kapur (2019) states that “communities and individuals usually possessed traditional viewpoints regarding the education of girls. When they had limited financial resources, they believed resources should be saved for marriage and should not be spent on education” (p.2).

This quote reinforces the idea that female individuals are expected to be weak and obey male representatives. This negative perception of girls has provided male individuals to feel superior and to think they have some sort of privilege over people that are not on the same page as they want to be. Fortunately, society has evolved to face this issue with strong points of view and protests to eradicate such traditional practices and beliefs. One huge representative of this fight against heteronormativity is Johnson who was an African American transgender woman and revolutionary LGBTQ rights activist. She is credited for being an instigator of several riots that served as catalysts for the gay rights movement.

One of the main issues that keep maintaining negative stereotypes and prejudice toward femininity and LGBTQ+ representation is Heteronormativity, this norm that has been passed generation through generation that deifies male straight Cis-male individuals and rejects women and men that do not fit into their norms. Ayala and Gomez (2019) support the idea by stating: “the belief that heterosexuality is the sexuality for everybody, implies an idea of a binary gender society that celebrates it as natural sexual expression. Therefore, different ways of expression are condemned as unnatural” (p.19).

This Heteropatriarchy has maintained this oppression over the years; however, there could be a way to eradicate this through education from a very young age. If textbooks and materials seek to include queer coding, non-binary, transgender, transsexual, and gender-fluid individuals, they could allow newer generations to feel comfortable with all types of gender, loving and corporal expressions. Generating awareness of minorities and their rights is an excellent way for the students to understand the diversity not only among the LGBTQ+ community but also in other cultures, races, and social practices besides their own.

### **Gender representation in textbooks and material**

After analyzing the aspect, itself (gender identity) and how it could be included in the EFL/ESL classrooms, it is time to review what is included in the materials provided to learn, in this case, textbooks. Material plays a huge role in the student’s impact and perception of what is seen in class. Learners adopt behavioral practices and interests based on what is provided to them, such materials might reinforce negative views toward the unknown for them or educate them to understand and have a wider perspective when it comes to gender coding.

Musty (2015) stated that “gender studies of the type conducted here tend to focus on the dichotomy of male/female, relatively simple in its reach. Other groups in society may also feel disenfranchised by textbooks” (p.46). This is a clear example of how queer, non-binary, gender fluid, and trans individuals are dissociated. It shows how “normality” has enclosed society to only represent straight relations and practices instead of seeking equality among the diverse spectrum of gender

identity. The same article states that “continuous evaluation of gender-balanced teaching materials can be created, helping future immigrants to Britain to communicate inclusively” (Musty, 2015, p.46). This is a reality that humans need to accept, there is a lack of representation when it comes to minorities and such an aspect implies a challenge for people who do not identify as Cis-gender individuals to be seen and understood.

The materials should seek to include all ways of expression and approaching ways to these individuals. Aguilar (2021) argues that “the coursebook showed inequity of gender representation in favor of men. It largely maintains a traditional representation of gender roles characterized by women’s invisibility and silence” (p.3). This shows that textbooks are still reinforcing stereotypical and heteronormative practices, giving or relating male individuals to have the power and most of the time the success and leaving the female characters as weak. This relates to the queer individuals and LGBTQ+ community because female identity is the one that most of them might feel related to. There is a huge connection when it comes to queer people and women, there has always been an alliance and a perception of a safe place when it comes to women and gay men for example.

Moreover, Nelson (2019) claims that “one main problem regarding sexuality in ESL materials, is that they avoid discussing or portraying LGBTQ figures or representation (same sex couples, symbolisms, or LGBTQ+ members)” (p.45). The sexual orientation of an individual might not be seen as important when it comes to knowledge acquisition; however, it was previously mentioned how a connection is important for students to feel confident and motivated to take part in their active learning.

There is not a single institution that would not have a queer individual in the classrooms, these people have always existed, and they will continue to do so. Therefore, textbooks should improve on their inclusion and understand how little details like the one previously mentioned can lead to a positive perspective on the LGBTQ+ community and allies. In Nelson’s article, it is mentioned that “highlighted the glaring issues of the negative representations of outer/expanding circle nations and racialized women in the south, as well as the complete lack of LGBT+ representation” (Nelson, 2019, p.49). This, of course, makes evident the “norm” that institutions would follow for their materials; they do not show much interest in including new ways of non-cisgender representation. This could be influenced by educational policy, beliefs, culture, and even religion.

Training the professors on how to address biased gender issues is to be enhanced, to allow all the students to shape their minds and construct together open-minded and inclusive new generations. Jannati (2015) states that “teacher trainers should provide teachers with a gender perspective to address the issues of gender bias and inequality in teaching materials. Teachers should be able to use and manipulate biased materials” (p.220). An aspect that happens to be crucial to the perception of both teachers and students.

## Reflection and Conclusion

The primary purpose of the paper was to explore how non-cisgender expressions are approached in the EFL classroom, more specifically in textbooks as a resource/material, and encourage teachers to include non-cisgender expressions and queer representation into their teaching practice. Results on the inclusion of queer identities and expressions in ELF textbooks were negative, the material is still male-biased, and they keep reinforcing stereotypes on the idea of gender diversity and male empowerment. There is a need for professors to educate themselves on the topic to then understand which strategies are useful to include non-cisgender representation in their classroom. Professors also need to start eradicating normative behavior in their practice (for example using male-female examples only, reinforcing gender stereotypes like a male-cars female-Barbie, etc.) to approach gender aspects in a natural setting.

Non-cisgender expressions can be as diverse as the colors, they offer an excellent resource for whoever wants to be exposed to something different; however, from uniqueness also comes prejudice and judgment from majorities. The normative society has decided to settle how a human being should express, dress, speak and interact with others. Therefore, pushing the queer community not to be included in many of their common practices, one of them is the educational field.

There are still aspects to improve on the inclusion of non-cisgender expressions and queer representation in the EFL classroom. Many aspects might come into place for not including this aspect in the class (country norms, heteronormative behavior, cis gender-biased examples, and even teacher's mindset). The status of such inclusion in the classroom is very low; the inclusion of queer examples comes from adaptability (one teacher adapts and personalizes materials to use them in a particular class). Instead of being already included in existing textbooks, the professors can think of different ways to raise awareness of queer aspects and include non-cisgender examples in their classroom (using role models, and natural visual examples). Including these aspects is important based on the fact that by being aware of other people's practices and expressions the use of "culturally responsive pedagogy" is being applied. This brings several benefits to the students such as "academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange: community building and personal connections" (Norman, 2020, p. 8). The best way for teachers to approach this topic (queer expressions) is to educate themselves on it, to read and inform themselves first, to then try at least to include it in their teaching practice, using strategies like manipulation, examination, personalization of material, use of different pronouns, queer language to teach vocabulary, role models to raise awareness, etc.

To promote a gender-inclusive classroom, the professor must have enough knowledge to take advantage of doubts, participation, examples, and even queer individuals to share their perspectives. There is still a long way to go on the inclusion of queer identities in the EFL classroom; however, we are in a more open setting, in which teachers can face the system and adapt the material to include gender diversity into their teaching resources. This not only will allow students to be aware of such

important aspect but also for queer identities in the educational setting to feel safe and included in their learning experience.

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