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## Silenced Voices Speak: Queer ESL Students Recount Their Experiences

■ **While some attention has been paid recently to LGBT/queer issues in ESL, voices of queer ESL students have rarely been recorded. This article describes a study in which 10 such students were interviewed, and it focuses on the voices of 3 students from the San Francisco Bay Area, because although there are so many lesbians and gays in the area, these interviews contradicted our expectation that the liberal, gay-friendly San Francisco Bay Area would provide a safe and comfortable atmosphere for queer ESL students. The study is set in the context of queer theory, identity theory, and critical pedagogy. We conclude with pedagogical implications for ESL classes and the larger institutions housing them, as well as with implications for the TESOL profession.**

### Introduction

In recent years has finally been some—although still not nearly enough—welcome attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues as they apply in ESL settings. This attention, in the form of publications, conference sessions, and organizations, and addressing issues related to teachers, students, and classrooms, has predominantly been from the point of view of instructors. While these perspectives are extremely valuable, it is unfortunate that voices of LGBT

students have still been barely heard or recorded. This article attempts to address that gap. Because LGBT/queer issues are being increasingly discussed in U.S. and other societies, and because simple justice demands it, we believe it is past time that the field of TESOL engages with these issues and in particular listens closely to the voices of queer students. ESL teachers rightfully pride themselves on being sensitive to the needs of students; here is an area in which that sensitivity is particularly needed.<sup>1</sup>

To learn about the experiences of queer students in ESL classes, and to hear their views about those experiences, one of us (Kappa) was able—through his own contacts and through colleagues and listservs—to identify and contact 10 queer current or former ESL students and gain their permission to be interviewed and for the results of the interviews to be presented and published. He interviewed the students face-to-face and/or by e-mail. This article draws on these 10 interviews, but it focuses in particular on interviews with 3 students who studied ESL in the San Francisco Bay Area. In these interviews, we were particularly interested in what ESL teachers did, or didn't do, to make their classrooms places where queer students felt safe and welcomed and places where respectful discussion of sexual identity issues would be possible. In other words, what did teachers do that determined whether queer students felt silenced, or not? Here we focus on these 3 students because although there are so many lesbians and gays in the area (Marech, 2004), these interviews contradicted our expectation that the liberal, gay-friendly San Francisco Bay Area would provide a safe and comfortable atmosphere for queer ESL students; in fact, these 3 students sometimes found their ESL classrooms unwelcoming and even unsafe, at least unsafe for revealing their sexual identities. (However, we do note that the relative openness in this geographical area toward LGBT people may have been a factor in encouraging these students to speak with us about their experiences.) We argue that if this inequitable and problematic situation

exists even in such a politically and socially progressive geographical area, then it is likely to be at least as much or more a problem in other areas in the US and elsewhere. We further argue that the field of TESOL cannot and should not continue its almost total silence on the lives and experiences of queer students both within and outside of our ESL classrooms; such silence is not—despite the assertion of many teachers to the contrary—merely neutral, but it is in fact dangerous to the safety and well-being of our students. Research (see, e.g., Beautrais, 2000; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001) establishes that queer students very often have lower self-esteem, higher school drop-out rates, more problems with their families, and higher suicide rates. Although this research is not specifically addressing ESL settings, it seems logical that queer students in ESL settings are likely to experience similar problems as those in other educational settings. The statements of the students we interviewed show quite clearly that they feel, at the minimum, uncomfortable in classrooms where they cannot be open about their identities, or if they are open, they feel ostracized and even unsafe.

We examine the students’ responses in the contexts of queer theory, identity theory, and critical pedagogy, and of the literature about queer issues in education in general and in TESOL in particular; however, our priority is to accord as much space as possible to the voices of the students themselves.

### **Conceptual Contexts**

#### ***Queer Theory***

Queer theory provides the first part of our framework. One useful definition is that of Seidman (1996), who states that queer theory

has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to queer

theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. (p. 11)

Seidman says, further, that queer theory has recently

sought to shift the debate somewhat away from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference. (p. 9)

Further, Carlson (1998) also makes the point that we must question the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality because such a binary enforces “rigid boundaries or borders that police difference” (p. 113). We will see in the case of one of our interviewees, Sayo, an example of the importance of the flexibility provided by the term “queer” as explained above by Seidman: Sayo states that although she identifies as a lesbian, she prefers to identify as queer because she has at one point had a “little crush” on a female-to-male “trans guy” and also because the word queer is “more diverse.” She, like Seidman, challenges “the assumption of a unified homosexual identity” and realizes that “a politics of knowledge and difference” is involved.

Although there has been in recent years a small body of research and publications on queer students in non-ESL contexts (e.g., Eisen & Hall, 1996; Malinowitz, 1995; Zimmerman & McNaron, 1996), there has been a paucity of such work on queer students in ESL settings. Most prominent and useful has been the work of Cynthia Nelson (1993, 1999), whose work deals with queer theory and related pedagogical issues. In her 1993 article, Nelson focuses on the situations and feelings of queer teachers and students,

and she counters common “attitudes” ESL teachers have about LGBT sexual identities. An important point that Nelson makes that is very relevant to our study is her observation that “the more comfortable I have become in talking about gay issues in the classroom, the more students seem comfortable. They will discuss gay issues *if* it feels safe enough to do so” (1993, p. 146). The experiences of our ESL student interviewees confirm this assertion.

Building on the work of such queer theorists as Seidman (1993, 1995), Nelson’s 1999 article introduces to TESOL a queer theoretical framework that “shifts the focus from inclusion to inquiry, that is, from including minority sexual identities to examining how language and culture work with regard to all sexual identities” (p. 371). Nelson, following Butler (1990, 1991) and others, and like Kumashiro (see Endnote), argues for the use of the word “queer” rather than “lesbian and gay” to emphasize that sexual identities are fluid, constructed, and performed. Nelson’s 1999 article includes a detailed, insightful portrayal and analysis of an actual class discussion of the issue of students’ reactions to seeing pictures of two people of the same sex holding hands, a discussion in which the teacher attempts to focus on why people interpret situations the way they do, and how they learn that interpretation. This kind of close look at teachers’ and students’ interactions related to queer issues in actual classrooms provides a model of the kind of research needed in the TESOL field, a model on which we have drawn here in presenting the classroom stories told us by our student informants.

### ***Identity Theory***

Another useful conceptual framework in looking at the comments of queer students in ESL classrooms is that of identity theory. Norton (2000) argues that

notions of the individual and the language learner’s personality in SLA theory need to be reconceptualized in ways that

will problematize dichotomous distinctions between the language learner and the language learning context. I use the term identity to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. I argue that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. (p. 5)

Certainly the experiences of queer students in language classrooms are affected by these “larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” in ESL classrooms, and we will see examples of this influence in the words of the 3 students interviewed. It could be argued that identities of queer students, even more than those of most other students, are critical factors in how they experience their classrooms, their classmates, their teachers, and their educations every single day of their classroom lives.

Pennycook (2001), speaking of queer inquiry and of identity issues, adds that “critical education that aims to change how things are needs to engage with people’s investments and desires, not just to try to explain on some intellectual plane” (p. 159). One’s identity is closely connected to one’s “investments and desires,” and if these are ignored, students—whether queer or otherwise—will feel shut out and alienated.

### ***Critical Theory, Critical and Feminist Pedagogies***

Closely related to identity theory is critical theory, especially theory related to critical and feminist pedagogies. Proponents of critical pedagogy, beginning with Paulo Freire and including Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor, and of feminist pedagogy, including Carmen Luke, Jennifer Gore,

Elizabeth Ellsworth, and Patti Lather, have pointed out that education is a locus of power and politics, and that critical reflection, empowerment, and transformation are essential in the classroom. Critical and feminist pedagogues in TESOL, such as Elsa Auerbach, Sarah Benesch, Jim Cummins, Ryuko Kubota, Brian Morgan, and Stephanie Vandrick have reminded us that issues of power and agency are even more prominent when complexified by issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture, as they inherently are in ESL classes. Thus critical and feminist pedagogies have clear implications for queer ESL students, who are in an inequitable and vulnerable position in heteronormative classrooms, whether they are “out” or closeted. If they are “out” they are often ostracized overtly or subtly; if they are closeted, they must not show their authentic selves, must constantly monitor their speech and behavior to prevent inadvertently revealing their queer status, and must often suffer listening to homophobic remarks and jokes. The situation is worsened because of the very hiddenness of most queer students’ identities; teachers and students are more likely to be aware of and sensitive about racial and ethnic identities but not to acknowledge the existence and vulnerability of queer students in their classes. (See Vandrick, 1997a, for further discussion of hidden identities in the ESOL classroom.)

Further, there are close connections between queer theory and critical pedagogy. Spurlin (2002a) states that

queer theory’s investment in political struggle, in the proliferation of social differences, and in the creation of multiple, more participatory spheres of public deliberation is not unrelated to forms of critical pedagogy, such as those articulated by Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux, which do not see the construction of the disciplines and their institutionalized pedagogical delivery as politically innocent activities but as situated within specific relations of power. . . . Indeed, the intersections of queer theory and critical peda-

gogy are filled with numerous and exciting possibilities for productive classroom inquiry, cultural analysis, public deliberation, and social (ex)change. (p. 10)

These interrelated conceptual frameworks of queer theory, identity theory, and critical pedagogy provide a web of context for the voices and experiences of queer students, including the queer ESL students we interviewed.

### **The Study**

The 10 students interviewed self-identified as lesbian or gay in response to queries sent out to the researcher’s current and former students and colleagues and to selected listservs. Of the students, 8 are male and 2 are female. They come from a variety of countries: Argentina, Brazil, China, El Salvador, Indonesia, Japan, and Mexico. Their ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 18 to 33. Some were studying English in their own countries, some in the United States, and 1 in the United Kingdom. Those who studied in the US had studied or were studying in Intensive English Programs or at community colleges. Some had studied in several different programs.

Here we focus on the experiences of 3 students: Kaori, Marcelo, and Sayo. We chose these students because each of them had extensive experience studying in ESL programs/classes in the San Francisco Bay Area. As noted above, this region is known for its tolerance and openness on issues related to sexual minorities, but in spite of that reputation, the students interviewed had many less-than-positive experiences in their ESL classes.

### **The Students**

Kaori (who wanted us to use her real name) is from Japan. At the time of the interview she was 24 years old. She identifies as a lesbian female. She began her studies in the US at an Intensive English Program in Berkeley, California, and then transferred to a community college in Oakland, California.

Marcelo (a pseudonym) is from Argentina. When he was interviewed, Marcelo was 33 years old. He identifies as a gay male and describes his background as coming from a typical middle-class family. He studied at two different programs in San Francisco: a private language school for international students and a community college with mostly immigrant adult students.

Sayo (a pseudonym) is from Japan. She was 24 years old when she was interviewed. She identifies as a lesbian female, but, as discussed earlier, prefers to identify as “queer,” because, as she said, she had a “little crush” on a female-to-male trans guy and also because “queer is more diverse.” Sayo had studied at an Intensive English Program in San Diego, California, before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she studied at an Intensive English Program in San Francisco before transferring to a community college program, also in San Francisco.

### Discussion

The most striking points that students made in their interviews were related to the crucial role of teachers in creating—or not creating—an environment in which queer students felt accepted, safe, supported, and empowered. The critical factors can be broken down into, first, the general atmosphere created by teachers, sending out messages to students about whether it is or is not safe to be queer and to discuss queer issues, and second, teachers’ specific reactions when queer issues are raised.

#### *Atmosphere Created by Teachers*

Regarding the atmosphere created by teachers, the students’ experiences gave evidence that many teachers do not make a point of creating a safe atmosphere for queer students. Teachers may be socially progressive and accepting, and may think they are unprejudiced and open, but it is not enough to be simply passively unprejudiced; they need to be proactive, thinking ahead about situations that might be difficult for queer students and

making a point of being welcoming.

When the interviewer asked Sayo about the environment in her classes, she thought that it was usually not supportive.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the environment in your classes is supportive of LGBT students?

Sayo: Honestly I think it’s not too supportive, because they don’t talk about those things. We don’t get much information. I don’t think it’s supportive. Some teachers recognize that there might be LGBT students, but others don’t.

Interviewer: Did you ever have a teacher have rules of respect that included sexual orientation?

Sayo: Never! Never!

Interviewer: Did they have rules of respect for other groups like nationality, religion, etc.?

Sayo: Yes.

Interviewer: But they didn’t include sexual orientation?

Sayo: Never.

Later Sayo told of an experience she found shocking and disheartening:

I made a sentence using a word “prejudice” which was homework. “There is still public prejudice against LGBT people in Japan.” Then I got the paper back from a teacher. There was a circle on LGBT, and “??” there...Do I really have to explain what it means to the “teacher”? I was kind of shocked. I’ve never ever imagined that would happen here in San Francisco!!

Sayo’s comment about not imagining such a thing to happen in San Francisco reminds us that some queer students specifically choose the San Francisco Bay Area to study in because they know of the gay-friendly atmosphere there. Thus it is particularly disillusioning for them when they encounter prejudice or ignorance in their San Francisco classrooms.



Ironically, Sayo had much more positive experiences with ESL teachers and classes when she was studying in San Diego, a relatively more conservative city than San Francisco. What seemed to make the difference in her class there was the teacher's distributing a reading about children of gay couples. Even then, Sayo waited until after the class discussion of the topic to see how her classmates felt about the topic, and about lesbians and gays in general, before she felt able to identify herself as a lesbian. Once she saw that their reactions to the class topic were not negative, she made an ingenious plan with her teacher that would allow her to come out in a positive way.

She [the teacher] came up with the idea for the next class; she was going to say she was sorry that she couldn't find a guest speaker for this topic, but there is a person that knows about being gay very well in this classroom, and then she was like, "Would you like to say something, Sayo," and then I said, "Yes, I am a lesbian." I felt really good; coming out makes me feel more being who I am, and then I got many questions after I came out, but I think it was very good to come out in the class.

Here we see that the teacher introduced queer-related topics, made Sayo feel comfortable to come out, and worked with Sayo to find the best way of doing so. Her proactiveness made all the difference to Sayo and also helped to educate other students on the topic.

Still, even in this seemingly ideal situation, Sayo had to deal with some awkward situations in the classroom and sometimes censored herself accordingly.

Every day we have to make a sentence and in this sentence, everyone uses boyfriend if you are women and girlfriend if you are a boy, and I think if you say something like, "I broke up with my girlfriend," I think maybe the other students or maybe the teacher are going to correct my English, "No, you are not

going to break up with your girlfriend, you broke up with your boyfriend." So I always made sentences in a heterosexual context ... [or] I tried to avoid making those kind of sentences.

Sometimes her fellow students clearly didn't quite know how to respond to Sayo's being out, especially when she followed up with actual manifestations of her lesbian identity.

In a conversation class, we had a topic, kind of what your ideal women or man is, what's your type, and we discussed that. I like tall, handsome guy, or beautiful cute women, blah, blah, blah. But I had to say, I'm not interested in man, and I think the things I told the class, they just didn't pay attention... Maybe they just don't care, or maybe they don't understand what I meant.

One wonders whether the teacher who had been so helpful about Sayo's coming out could have also been more helpful in the two situations she described (above). Here, to draw on identity theory, we see that one of the most important and basic elements of Sayo's identity, her sexual identity, is invisible in the classroom; it is as if the possibility of anything other than a straightforward heterosexual identity does not even exist and is certainly not alluded to. Certainly this is an example of what Norton (2000) termed "larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (p. 5).

Kaori, too, felt that she had to censor herself in the classroom; her friends, who did not realize she was a lesbian, but who perhaps suspected it, told her even before she began class "not to be gay." This statement not only points out the perceived need for caution with others, but rather heartbreakingly seems to ask her not even to "be" who she is but to deny her sexual identity, at least in public, at least in the classroom.

Marcelo too speaks to the issue of why and how it is so harmful to queer students to have

to hide their identities; when asked why it is important for him to be able to be out in his class, Marcelo responds as follows:

First of all because I don't like to act. I don't like to lie. I don't create false images of myself. I try because it's difficult, to be as much honest. I know it's difficult in the world; it's difficult but I try. This [being gay] is one of my aspects of my life.

Like Kaori, he feels he is being asked to deny an essential aspect of who he is and to suffer the inauthenticity and dissonance of "acting" and "lying."

### ***Teachers' Reactions When Queer Issues Are Raised***

As for the second main issue that we can see in the interviewees' responses, teachers' specific reactions when queer issues are raised, unfortunately some teachers did not intervene when homophobic comments or jokes were made. Marcelo tells of one such instance at his program in San Francisco.

I was surprised because the other students, they were all young people...I was surprised, I thought they were more open-minded, they were very homophobic. I arrived and they were joking about gay people. They said that this city is full of gays, especially the boys, as usual. They were doing the feminine manners and I have a boyfriend, during the class, and I was very angry...The teacher, she was, she did not say anything. She smiled. I can't say she agreed with that, but she didn't say, you don't have to say that.

Marcelo's story points out the irony that in some cases the very facts that San Francisco has so many gay and lesbian inhabitants, and that lesbians and gays are often very open about their sexual identities and lifestyles, perhaps make it more likely, rather than less, that students will make homophobic remarks and jokes; the subject is more obvious and

thus draws more interest. The subject may, too, arouse more anxiety among students who feel the need to assert their own heterosexuality and "masculinity" or "femininity."

And, of most relevance here, the story also points out how important it is for teachers who hear such remarks to make it clear that the remarks are not acceptable. Saying nothing comes across to a queer student, and to the other students, as finding the comments acceptable. Marcelo's story provides yet another example of Norton's (2000) description of "larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (p. 5); classroom jokes and banter may perhaps seem less important than the instruction and class materials, but they can poison the atmosphere for students whose identity is being belittled and laughed at.

Marcelo's reaction to the incident above also points out the difficulties for queer students in responding to such remarks.

I was about to say something, but I couldn't. But I was just about to say something, then I said no, I will not fight. It's my first week in the States. ...I was very nervous and difficult. So I said no, I will not say anything.

Such a new experience—coming to a new country, entering a new school, meeting new teachers and students—can be very difficult in the best of circumstances. Then for a student to experience such open prejudice the first few days of class, and to have the teacher seemingly endorse or at least not dispute it, must greatly multiply the difficulty and discomfort level for that student as well as for other queer students and for more accepting heterosexual students who witness the situation.

On a more positive note, some students told of teachers who were open and accepting and thus of more positive experiences in some of the ESL classes. Kaori thought that her classes in Oakland were fairly accepting, at least in comparison to her negative experiences at a later ESL program in New York,

where students said of gay couples that they were “disgusting,” and made jokes a lot, even the teacher.” “Even the teacher”—it seems inconceivable, but these are situations queer students sometimes face. Such situations are obviously harmful to queer students; they also send out a terrible message to heterosexual students, a message that it is acceptable to joke about queer people.

But even in this “better than New York” setting, Kaori noted that “some friends around me in that class, they were saying that gay is poor right in front of me.” She went on to say, “Why they could say like this in front of me directly is they don’t know who I am. However, this is true actualities, isn’t it?” This comment points up, again, the double bind that queer students are in: If they come out, they may be mocked or ostracized or at a minimum feel marginalized from the main discourse of the class; if they don’t come out, they have to suffer ignorant and prejudiced remarks in silence. In the latter case, hearing such remarks makes it even less likely that a student will come out, thus perpetuating a kind of vicious cycle.

The factor that made a tremendous difference for Kaori was that the lesbian teacher of one of her classes in Oakland came out to the class. Kaori says, “At [name of college] I didn’t talk a lot with other students, but my dear teacher [name of lesbian teacher] did by coming out in our class, so that I felt quite comfortable, anyway.” Although it is clearly up to individual queer teachers whether they feel comfortable coming out to their classes, and just as clearly there are many reasons why a given teacher may not, Kaori’s experience reminds us how reassuring a teacher’s coming out can be to a queer student. In addition, the same coming-out process can also be educational to the straight students in the class; especially for students who think they don’t know any lesbians or gays, finding out that their familiar teacher is queer may make queerness less unknown and less threatening to them. It should be noted here that because many queer teachers do not come out to their classes because it does not feel safe within

their institutional setting, straight teachers—because of the protection and privilege they enjoy as heterosexuals—may have an added moral obligation to fight heterosexism and homophobia (Vandrick, 1997b).

### **Pedagogical Implications**

All teachers, queer or straight, can do much to create a welcoming, accepting, and safe environment in their classrooms, if they make up their minds to do so. The students we interviewed had some helpful advice for teachers.

#### ***Creating a Safe Atmosphere***

Concerning creating an atmosphere where queer students could feel comfortable, Marcelo believes that teachers should react when students make homophobic comments. About the teacher who simply listened and smiled when students made such remarks, Marcelo says,

She could have said, I don’t agree that you are joking about gay people. We are so used to hearing about that, that sometimes it doesn’t bother you. She was very nice, I am sure she is very gay friendly. Maybe she didn’t care or it was nothing for her. But I felt very uncomfortable, but maybe she should have said something.

As far as creating an atmosphere where queer students could feel comfortable actually coming out to the class, Sayo suggests the following:

I think at the beginning of the session, it would be good if the teacher tells us we should respect each other and respect different culture, different backgrounds, different sexual orientation at the same time. Maybe the local information, about community information, for things on campus, etcetera.

Marcelo adds that raising gay topics naturally, perhaps as part of a class lesson on a larger



topic, can be effective and would allow students such as himself to come out. He says,

To give some input in the class, for example could be listening. For example, we had listening, dialogues. And in these dialogues you can have for example a gay couple very naturally. And you can say this is a lesbian couple and they are talking about adoption because they want to adopt a girl. And you can say, here is very common that we have a lot of lesbians that they have their own kids, for example. Or, I don't know, you can talk about different, it's very common here in San Francisco, the fairs or the parties in different neighborhoods and you can talk about Castro [a predominantly gay San Francisco neighborhood], for example.

Once again we are reminded that being able to be out, to be honest with teachers and classmates, is no small matter. It embodies being able to be honest, to be authentic, not to have to “act” or lie.

Clearly teachers must understand that maintaining “neutrality” on identity issues, including sexual identity, is not enough. They need to realize that there could be queer students in any of their classes, and that even if there are not, they as teachers are—whether they address the matter or not—sending out messages about the existence of queer students and about the rights of such students to be acknowledged and accepted. Saying nothing, especially in the face of homophobic comments, is not neutral but negative and detrimental to the well-being of queer—and all—students.

Of course teachers need to make it clear to students that homophobic remarks or jokes are not acceptable, just as they would make it clear that racist or sexist remarks are unacceptable. But teachers should go beyond putting out such fires as they occur. Barnard (1994) offers some useful overarching principles, including the following: “Do not assume that all your students are straight”; “Set an example by not using heterosexist language”;

“Ensure that your students have easy access to addressing queer issues and that queer students feel that they can make their queer voices heard” (pp. 26-27).

This does not necessarily mean that all ESL classes must offer units on queer issues (although that would certainly be useful). It does mean that teachers should consider their class curricula, activities, and attitudes through the lens of how they might affect queer students. For example, in the situations that Sayo reported on, where students had to make up sentences or discuss ideal partners, teachers should ensure that the assumption is not that everyone is heterosexual.

It would also be helpful if, as Sayo suggested, at the beginnings of sessions and again whenever appropriate, teachers set out policies regarding respect of all people and groups.

### ***Instructional Materials***

For teachers who are interested in presenting readings and discussion of queer-related topics, not many ESL/EFL materials are available (although there are a few exceptions, such as Hemmert and Kappra's 2004 textbook, *Out and About*), so they will mainly have to find and create their own. This should not be too difficult, as there are many news stories, films, and other materials that can be adopted as the focus of discussion. One example of using events in the news to bring about discussion of queer issues, in the context of discussing respect for all groups, is Sarah Benesch's (1999) focusing on the tragic hate crime in which Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, was beaten, burned, tortured, left tied to a fence for many hours before he was discovered, and soon after died. This event was featured prominently in the news media. Benesch helped her ESL students explore the assumption held by some “that heterosexual men are justified in responding to the presence of homosexual men with anger or violence to assert a traditional notion of masculinity” (p. 577) and she concluded that

although one lesson or course cannot wipe out homophobia or other dangerous attitudes, the students in this class were asked to consider alternatives to intolerance and violence as reactions to difference, values I communicate to all my students, knowing that they may or may not choose to adopt them. (p. 579)

Some useful sources on addressing homophobia and on creating welcoming environments for queer students in ESL settings are Kappa (1998/1999), Snelbecker and Meyer (1996), Summerhawk (1998), and Vandrick (2001). Other sources not specifically aimed at ESL classes include Crumpacker and Vander Haegen (1993), Hart with Parmeter (1992), Peele and Ryder (2003), Pinar (1998), Spurlin (2000, 2002b), and Yescavage and Alexander (1997). Many of these authors/teachers have found teaching sexual identity issues within a context of identities in general, and within a context of teaching about prejudice and stereotypes of all sorts, to be a useful approach.

### *Academic Institutions and Publishers*

The onus to create safe and welcoming spaces for queer ESL students should be not only on teachers but also on the institutions where they work. Every office, administrator, and staff member should be aware of, and respond proactively to, the needs of queer students. Kato (1999), for example, writes of the importance of international student advisers' doing all they can to address the particular situations of queer international students. In a survey of 170 institutions in the US, she found that such students often did not receive much support and were not aware of resources available to them. Kato makes several suggestions to advisers, such as informing students of LGBT support and advocacy groups on campus and of campus policies prohibiting harassment of and discrimination against lesbian and gay students. Other useful resources on what institutions can do include (although these sources are not spe-

cific to international or ESL students) Besner and Spungin (1995), Friend (1993), and Wall and Evans (2000).

Publishers of textbooks also have a responsibility to solicit, publish, and support materials that are inclusive of all people and that engage with issues of equity. Publishers, being concerned about profit, generally avoid controversial topics, but they also can be influenced to change with the times. If teachers make it known that they want inclusive materials, and then order such materials when they are published, there will be at least gradual change.

### **Conclusion**

The voices of these articulate young queer ESL students remind us, first, that we in the TESOL profession need to find ways to listen to student voices—those of LGBT students as well as all students—and to find out what their actual lived experiences in the classroom are. In the interests of respect, equity, and justice, we owe our queer students, as we owe all students, the dignity of listening to and paying attention to their too-often-silenced voices, voices speaking of their very identities.

These voices also remind us of the real influence teachers have in setting up the classroom atmosphere that so strongly affects students, especially students of nonmajority identities. This influence confers on teachers an obligation to use it in such a way that all students feel acknowledged and safe in their classrooms. The evidence given by the students interviewed indicates that too many teachers, even in very progressive geographical areas such as the San Francisco Bay Area, are settling for “neutrality” and for a passive “fairness” that does not recognize the damage that such “neutrality” can do to the class environment and in particular to queer students.

Thus we ask ESL instructors to carefully examine their classroom practices, their curricula, their instructional materials, their openness—or lack thereof—to consciously being aware of students' possible various identities and resulting issues and needs. We

ask that instructors listen carefully, talk with students, discuss issues of inclusion with their administrators and institutions, choose their class topics and materials with care, and urge publishers to be inclusive.

### Authors

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Queer theorists and activists have recently preferred the term “queer” to refer to not only lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people, but to all people, activities, and beliefs that subvert heteronormative orthodoxy and behavior. Kumashiro (2001) defines “queer” as follows:

...*queer*...includes individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit (which is specific to Native Americans...), transgender (including transsexual and transvestite), intersexual (neither male nor female...), pansexual (can be attracted to females, males, and individuals of other genders), questioning (or, unsure), or in other ways “queer” because of their sexual identity or sexual orientation. (p. 3)

Thus, to acknowledge the wide range of sexual identities, we use the term “queer” in this article.

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