

FRAMING LGBT ISSUES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

By Amber Shaw, Alexander College

Whether it is ESL, EAP, LINC, or any other form of TESL, our job is a big one. We are language teachers, and with that comes culture. There is no way to separate the two. Our students need social and cultural survival skills in order to be successful. These sociocultural competencies vary as far and wide as English grammar does, and just like grammar, sometimes those rules need to be explicitly taught. Our students are not trying to be successful in a language, they are trying to be successful in a culture, in a career, in a country. Unfortunately, sociocultural competence is not as well laid out as linguistic competence. There are no Canadian Cultural Benchmarks to act as a guide.

This lack of structure about how to teach Canadian culture, coupled with the current Communicative Based methods, which focus on student centred discussions, debates and the like, have lead to some issues being framed outside of the acceptable Canadian norm. To bring this theoretical discussion to a practical end, let's focus on one "hot topic" currently used in classrooms: LGBT rights. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) issues must be carefully framed by language instructors so students will understand the Canadian sociocultural boundaries surrounding this minority group.

Framing LGBT issues

The push for participatory learning has necessitated the use of discussion and debate activities in current language classrooms. The involvement of students in interesting current event discussions or socio-political debates, naturally invites a wide variety of language use but also opens opportunities for discrimination, including discrimination against the LGBT community. Adding to the classroom the influence and use of U.S. media in these types of participatory activities can lead to the improper framing of LGBT rights as something debatable which may have dangerous consequences.

This is not about having a socio-political agenda in the classroom but how essential it is to define for students the social boundaries of acceptability in Canada, put simply, what is up for debate in Canada and what is not. Nor is this about trying to change a student's personal beliefs, morals or values, but teachers do their students a service by describing the new playing field that they are in. To allow students to express homophobic views in the ESL classroom gives credibility to those views and allows students to assume such

expression is permissible in our culture when it is not. Much of this confusion about the social acceptability of expression of anti-LGBT views can be prevented through proper framing.

Many lessons are learned by students, not in the actual content, but in how the lesson is framed. There are inherent assumptions made in the structure of a lesson plan. For example, a debate assumes that there are two or more sides to an issue. Debates also assume that both sides have valid arguments. For example, in English for Academic Purposes courses, students learn not only from the debate itself, but also from the topic given by the instructor. Students learn which topics make valid academic research theses by observing which topics are explored in class. If a student is allowed to debate LGBT rights in class, that student learns that this is an appropriate debate topic. The student also learns from the framing of the debate that both sides have valid arguments. This is a disservice to the student because those same views expressed openly in Canadian university classrooms would not be tolerated (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Those same views expressed in a Canadian workplace could even land the person in front of a Human Rights Commission (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2009).

This framing issue becomes particularly blurry when American culture and media are brought into the classroom. More and more often, ESL teachers of all types are engaging in Media Studies. Students are consumers of media (Internet, Film, Periodicals, Current Events, etc), and therefore it makes for more engaging classroom discussions. One problem encountered here is that the vast majority of the media that our students voraciously consume is produced in the U.S. While the debate over LGBT rights persists in the United States, students need to be made aware of Canadian norms. As the majority of my students are destined to live in a large urban area, it is important for me as an English instructor to explain the different norms between the countries. With a solid one-third of same sex couples being married in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012), students should be clear that many of the views expressed in American media are not acceptable in a Canadian public environment.

In response to the potential problems caused by framing LGBT issues in either a debate or discussion format, the answer may be found in doing more direct cultural/social norms instruction. We should come to see culture as we do grammar. There are rules, most of them have exceptions, sometimes native speakers break those rules, but however confusing, they are what they are and our students will have to follow them to get through a job interview. It is our job to directly teach the students those cultural rules. In the same way that a grammar rule would not be framed as a discussion or a debate, cultural rules need also to be taught explicitly. A direct approach to teaching Canadian social norms needs to be included in lessons, and these should include LGBT rights along with other topics that are not openly debated in Canadian workplaces such as interracial marriage, abortion, and disabilities. Students are quite interested in cultural differences and can enjoy exploring them. LGBT rights need to be framed in this manner.

To this end, The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) has worked well in my EAP courses. I have seen many other ESL teachers comfortably use the Canadian Human Rights Act to teach the boundaries of discrimination. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2009) is another valuable resource. I would like to see issues faced by the LGBT community naturally included in this type of teaching of social norms. For example, with a group of business owners new to Canada, it is important to know what information can be included on a Canadian resume or elicited in an interview. This lesson can easily employ the The Canadian Human Rights Act, which states, “The prohibited grounds of discrimination are race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, *sexual orientation* [emphasis added], marital status, family status, disability...” (1985). While it is more difficult to teach invisible minority rights than visible minority rights, that is precisely why it is so important for our students.

From the lessons that I have seen take place in Canadian ESL classrooms, it is obvious that including invisible minority rights is much more difficult than the visible minority groups that we are accustomed to working with. Every ESL teacher can tell you how many students in the class are male and female, which countries they are from, and how old they are. All teachers need to remember that there are LGBT students in our classrooms as well. They may not be not visible, but they need to be protected and respected. In deciding if material is appropriate play the substitute game. Try to substitute a visible minority group for any LGBT materials covered in the class. Since LGBT rights are the same as any other protected group under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, when LGBT issues arise in the classroom, see if you are comfortable substituting in another minority group. If not, then the topic, question, or debate is not framed correctly.

These learning outcomes and framing issues are not trivial. They are, in fact, part of why Canadians have so much to be culturally proud of. This country has consistently set the benchmark for human rights and protection from discrimination. Many of our students are here for just that reason. We also know that social and cultural norms are not always obvious to our students. It is not fair to our students to try to make them guess where our cultural boundaries are; it is also disrespectful to the LGBT community for us to keep using outdated or imported materials that do not accurately reflect the society in which we hope each of our students will participate and be successful. If our lessons are framed correctly, and our learning outcomes are clear, then we should have fewer problems establishing clear sociocultural boundaries for our students and for ourselves.

References

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Author Bio



Amber Shaw holds a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics from Old Dominion University. She has spent the last nine years teaching EAP, TESOL, and Linguistics. She is currently a regular instructor and the EAP department coordinator at Alexander College in Vancouver, British Columbia.