

# LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVITY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: ATTITUDES AND CONSIDERATIONS

By Tyson Seburn, University of Toronto

Acknowledgement that a struggle exists for members of any particular minority group is the easy part. How often do we see a shared news report about an injustice and think to ourselves, “That’s awful. Something should be done,” so we like the post on Facebook or maybe even share it with our friends and followers? I imagine that all of us may fall into this “slacktivism” category here and there. Going beyond this initial step can be difficult. It makes many uncomfortable. After all, action can disrupt of our way of doing things even if we know this way may not contribute to needed change for the better.

As language teachers, a tenuous line for us to navigate is drawn between learners from varying backgrounds/belief systems and the divergent attitudes they can encounter in their learning contexts. In teacher training programs, at least in my experience, trainees are often advised to remain neutral, to allow discussion to emerge and be negotiated between the learners however it may; our role only facilitates appropriate language use. We aim for safe spaces where learners can err, voices can be heard, and teachers encourage dialogue through English without judgment. Despite these intentions, we may produce the opposite effect, particularly when we make assumptions about the makeup of our class and our role within it. One such instance worth examining is the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly within a Canadian ESL classroom context. Is it our responsibility to consider including LGBTQ+ in our materials? If so, how do we approach LGBTQ+ topics and narratives in an inclusive manner? In a practical sense?

To answer these questions, it makes sense to first examine our acknowledgment of the struggle that exists for LGBTQ+ in English language teaching (ELT) and learning. First, is there a struggle and what is it? Second, why does it exist and what are the contributing attitudes that have created it? In Canada and several other countries throughout the world, LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms have progressed both socially and legally in the last several years (look at the increasing number of countries who have legalised same-sex marriage lately). I’d argue, however, that this is not reflected well in the classroom materials we are so familiar with and never has been.

Quite some time ago, Scott Thornbury explained that in ELT coursebook materials, being gay is invisible, that gay characters “are nowhere to be found. They are still firmly in the coursebook closet. Coursebook people are never gay ... coursebook people live with their families, on their own or with their opposite-sex partners. Coursebook family trees and

family photos are rigorously heterosexual” (1999, p. 15). He goes on to note that even well-known gay celebrities aren’t acknowledged as so, but stripped of their personal lives in favour of accomplishments only. It’s interesting to recognise here, however, that the same is not always true of heterosexual counterparts, as mentions of their husbands, wives, or children do tend to be interwoven into the information listed on the page.

One might think that in the last two decades, inclusion of LGBTQ+ narratives in published ELT materials may have improved. While I make no claim to have done a thorough review of every published material available, through a combination of conference talks I’ve attended and articles I’ve read (see References and selected literature), as well as through my own informal research and experience over the last 20 years in this profession, it has become obvious that representations of LGBTQ+ tend to fall into one of three categories, even today (Seburn, 2012):

- a. *There are no explicitly LGBTQ+ images or narratives included throughout the materials.*

Publishers, at least those not considered “niche”, tend to follow a general guideline of avoiding topics or issues that could in any way alienate any market from sales (see PARSNIPS and other topics often avoided, in Gray, 2002, p. 159). While this may also explain why there are very few Canadian-specific coursebooks (why cater to such a small market?), it spreads over to a broader section of people, such as the LGBTQ+ community. These are not comparable populations to exclude. I suggest that there is a significant difference between ignoring Canadian street names or spelling choices compared to not representing an already marginalised group.

- b. *Images of LGBTQ+ are as close to the heteronormative expectation as possible.*

When an image that could arguably be of a same-sex couple does appear alongside a text or activity, there is no explicit mention of LGBTQ+ language and thus the image itself remains in that unclear relationship category. Are the two men sitting on a park bench partners? Are the two women shopping together partners? Nothing about accompanying texts or activities suggests one way or the other, but given the heteronormative history of ELT materials, one largely assumes that they are merely friends or roommates. Even if there is some identifying behaviour (A hug? Holding hands? A kiss?), the people are as clean-cut and straight-looking as they could be.

- c. *The images and stories of LGBTQ+ are marginalised into one self-contained unit, often focused on LGBTQ as a topic.*

Rarely in coursebooks as a genre, but more often in discussion-starter teacher resources or instructor-sourced supplemental materials, LGBTQ+ inclusion is condensed to a particular lesson or “hot issue” to be debated in some form. While the aforementioned (a) invisibility or (b) sanitising most obviously contribute to the lack of inclusivity, this (c) marginalising may almost be the most problematic for our LGBTQ+ learners (Seburn, 2017).

Some might wonder if LGBTQ+ inclusion (or lack thereof) is a reflection of attitudes towards it by people within our profession: schools and organisations, publishers, teachers,

materials writers, or learners themselves. A few examples from these various stakeholders below may represent commonly-expressed, yet thought-provoking views. Judge for yourself. *NB: Where requested or to focus on content over identity, I've anonymized or paraphrased some comments.*

## Organisation attitudes

“Many LGBTQ+ newcomers come from countries where they have faced overt discrimination, violence and persecution as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Research shows the importance of practicing cultural competence to effectively serve LGBTQ+ newcomers. This can be facilitated with awareness of ...values held about sexuality and gender roles in the newcomers' homelands ... and our own values and assumptions on LGBTQ+ issues, and of how these might affect our service impact.”

*SettlementATWORK.org is a companion site to Settlement.org, which is funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.*

## Publisher attitudes

“All learning involves first identifying (proto-) typical examples of a behaviour, and only later accommodating more marginal phenomena. Hence the need to start with exemplars of the ‘norm’: e.g. white, middle-class, heterosexual family structures, before engaging with the ‘exceptions’.”

*Anonymous Publisher, IATEFL 2012*

“I feel that too much blame is left at the publishers' doors in this sort of debate, but the sad truth is that teachers and institutions are also complicit. Often authors and publishers \*do\* push the envelope, and are rewarded by poor sales.”

*Marcos Benevides, EFL teacher / author, a comment appearing on Thornbury, 2013*

## Teacher attitudes

“I guess you have to weigh the costs and benefits of including LGBTQ images and references. Inclusion might go a long way toward ‘un-strange-ning’...the issues, but at the same time, inclusion will undoubtedly open the issues, bringing out all of that negative propaganda that I simply don't want to deal with in my language class.”

*Anonymous Canadian ESL teacher, a comment appearing on Seburn, 2012*

“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. ... Many lessons are learned by students, not in the actual content, but in how the lesson is framed.”

*Shaw, 2013, in TESL Ontario Contact*

“Most teachers have either forgot about [LGBTQ] altogether because it stopped being the ‘it’ issue in education, or they’ve assigned specific lessons to it, making it a discussion topic. That’s not changing any norms then, is it? I think it needs to be more than that, and teachers need to make it part of ...life.”

*Delia C., a comment appearing on Seburn, 2012*

“Teachers’ responses implied that they would feel more comfortable and inclined to address gay and lesbian issues if they were incorporated within the official curriculum. Thus, ESL and EFL educators clearly still hold anxieties toward addressing matters relating to sexual identity.”

*Laurion, 2017, reporting on a study conducted by Evripidou and Çavuşoğlu, 2015*

“When you’re an English teacher [at a private academy overseas]...you’re supposed to be teaching conversational English and the culture you’re from. I can’t completely do this because I work in a repressed culture. It makes standing up for what you think is right difficult. At this point I value job security over defending gay rights... .”

*Brian, an ESL teacher in Laurion, 2017*

“In a previous edition [of one particular coursebook used in Japan] it included a passage in which a young man talked about his gay parents... . It wasn’t heavy-handed at all, and in fact invited fair debate from all sides. Sadly, the next edition saw these two units replaced by others due to teachers complaining.”

*Marcos Benevides, EFL teacher / author, a comment appearing on Thornbury, 2013*

## Materials writers’ attitudes

“The other problem I found when writing more critical material ... that such material can become ... ‘too earnest’. Put in the hands of an inexperienced teacher this becomes even more a case of otherizing (e.g. ‘now class, today we are going to learn about POOR people’). Not to say it isn’t important, but I think it’s very difficult to do it well.”

*Lindsay Clandfield, Coursebook author, a comment appearing on Thornbury, 2013*

“I don’t think about [LGBTQ+] as an issue to consciously highlight in class because that would be singling gay people out as an issue to be discussed. If it comes up, then fine, I treat it the same as any other topic.”

*Julie Moore, UK freelance writer, a comment appearing on Seburn, 2012*

“It IS the teacher’s job to mould and interrogate the content so that it reflects something of the lives in the classroom – or maybe it would be better to have no coursebook at all!!!”

*Jeremy Harmer, Coursebook author, a comment appearing on Thornbury, 2013*

## **LGBTQ+ student attitudes**

“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 [...] heterosexual...”

*Sayo, a lesbian student in San Francisco, in Kappra & Vandrick, 2006*

“I was surprised, I thought [my young classmates] 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. ... I was very angry...The teacher...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, a gay student in San Francisco, in Kappra & Vandrick, 2006*

## **On teacher training and PD**

Within professional development, I have examined the conference programmes of TESL Canada Conference, TESL Ontario Conference, and IATEFL Conferences between 2012-2017 and found only five talks by title or abstract that clearly indicated LGBTQ+ in any form (including my recent talk at TESL Ontario Conference last November, from which this article arose). I attended three of these sessions and they were highly popular in terms of attendance and ensuing discussion. Mine, on the other hand, was drowned out by the popularity of PBLA sessions. With apparent interest in how to incorporate LGBTQ+ sensitively, it begs the questions of why there are so few related sessions and then obviously, what conclusions can be drawn for the classroom itself.

## **Considerations within the classroom itself**

What happens now? Perhaps LGBTQ+ inclusion is not being discussed enough to bother making a difference. Perhaps there are too many restrictions placed upon materials creation that bring the conversation and action to a halt. Perhaps another practical matter is perceived by teachers to be more pressing to address. While these are all considerations, learners are our priority when selecting, creating, or supplementing classroom materials. Statistics alone suggest that a member of the LGBTQ+ community has, is, or will be one of our learners. With these students in mind, I propose we ask ourselves two simple questions as we prepare our materials.

*Consideration 1: Does the lack of LGBTQ+ images, stories, or vocabulary reflect the make-up of our society?*

It can be challenging—not impossible—for anyone who is not part of a marginalized group to understand how much of an outsider and invisible person you can feel when no images, stories, or activities you encounter include anyone like you. It can cause you to question your value, make you feel as though you don't belong, and create a space where your voice feels unheard. It can increase hesitance to be yourself in your new language. Just as we might take a language class ourselves to help us shed light on learner struggles, it might resonate if you put yourself in LGBTQ+ learners' shoes, too. For example, if you identify as Caucasian and heterosexual, imagine all classroom materials—videos, stories, activities, and texts—involve only gay Asian men. It only depicts *their* successes, *their* concerns, and *their* relationships. It introduces language common only to gay Asian men. The thought of such a coursebook seems preposterous, perhaps. There is no society made up of only gay Asian men. You're right; it probably wouldn't happen. Of course, Canada is not made up of only Caucasian heterosexual people either. Beyond this question, consider how a teacher's avoidance of LGBTQ+ may fail to prepare other students for interacting within our society appropriately.

*Consideration 2: Should LGBTQ+ issues be discussed as their own topic?*

The underlying issue with creating a unit on same-sex marriage, for example, is that doing so perpetuates the heteronormative narrative that it's an abnormal, self-contained topic that can be used once to stimulate conversation and then discarded. When one's rights are discussed (or even conclusions made about them) by a group outside the community, it makes these rights appear to be against the norm, not simply part of everyday life. Especially when in the Canadian context LGBTQ+ legally are regarded no differently than anyone else for the most part, separating LGBTQ+ into its own boxed topic counters social norms. It perpetuates another us vs them perspective. It creates another space (in this case our "supportive" classroom space) where LGBTQ+ learners voices are drowned out by a majority group who are empowered by the teacher with the ability to make determinations. Our learners are already placed within a minority role as immigrants and language learners. This places the LGBTQ+ student in yet another powerless role, except this time also within an already new linguistic context and culture.

Ultimately, I suggest the answer to both these consideration questions is "no". Instead, I recommend instead that LGBTQ+ characters, storylines, and imagery be included alongside the heteronormative narratives in classroom materials without attention drawn to them; LGBTQ+ language is simply included as any other useful language; it's just another variety of humankind. Learners, particularly from those cultures where the point-of-reference on LGBTQ+ or any marginalised group is quite different, may initially blink, ask questions, or even react with resistance, but like nearly anything, the more they are exposed to what is common in the culture they are now a part of, the more normalized it will become to them and the more prepared they will be to communicate appropriately for their own benefit as well as that of those around them.

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## Author Bio



Tyson Seburn is Lead EAP instructor of Critical Reading & Writing and Assistant Academic Director of International Programs at New College, University of Toronto. He holds an MA Educational Technology & TESOL from the University of Manchester. His main interest focuses on public spaces for exploring teacher identity and development. These include an EAP discussion group, #tleap (<http://bit.do/tleap>); his blog, 4CinELT (<http://fourc.ca>); and his work on the IATEFL Teacher Development Special Interest Group committee (<http://tdsig.org>). He is the author of *Academic Reading Circles* (The Round, 2015).