



Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014

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Issues of power in relation to gender and sexuality in the EFL classroom – An overview

ABSTRACT. Schools in general and classrooms in particular are among society's primary socializing institutions (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p. 261; Adger, 2001). In particular, education, as an institution of Gramsci's 'civil society' (Jones, 2006), can be considered a grassroots space where hegemonic gendered and sexual identities are constructed and regulated. This article looks at the context of the EFL classroom – a discursive space where learners are potentially (re-)constructed in relation to various (gender) roles in society as well as learning the practices, values and rules of a given society at large. In this paper we explore and discuss how the categories of gender and sexuality are represented, (re-)constructed and generally dealt with in this learning environment. We follow Foucault's (1978, 1979) conceptualization of power as something which "weaves itself discursively through social organizations, meanings, relations and the construction of speakers' subjectivities or identities" (Baxter, 2003, p. 8) and is enacted and contested in every interaction (see Mullany, 2007). We see power as being produced, reproduced, challenged and resisted in the EFL classroom in connection with the construction of gender and sexuality. The article discusses how views on what/who is 'powerful' in the context of the EFL classroom have changed over the years, from the early privileging of textbooks to the currently advocated central role of the teacher in addressing and promoting (or not) traditional and/or progressive discourses of gender and sexuality. Critical pedagogies and queer pedagogies are discussed as offering educators potent insights and tools to deal with heteronormativity and various forms of discrimination in the EFL classroom as well as helpful means for empowering *all* students by addressing their various identities. It is thus our contention that relationships between gender, sexuality and EFL education are in need of urgent (re)addressing as existing research is outdated, lacks methodological sophistication or is lacking in the Polish context.

KEYWORDS: critical pedagogies, EFL classroom, gender, heteronormativity, power, queer pedagogies, sexuality, talk-around-the-text, textbooks

Introduction: Power and the EFL context

This article provides an overview of research into how the categories of gender and sexuality are constructed in 'English as a foreign language' textbooks as well as in the context of teachers' mediation of textbooks'

(gendered) contents in classroom interactions. Gender and sexuality are two of the most salient social categories thus their (re-)construction and negotiation almost always entail the exercise of power, for instance, which discourse of gender relations prevails in classroom interaction is a matter of whose *voice* (publishers'?, teachers'?, students'?, parents'?) is more powerful in the current social but also local interactional context. The discussion to follow presents some complex intricacies involved in construction of gender and sexuality in the EFL context in relation to power. It also discusses critical pedagogies and queer pedagogies as important perspectives offering tools for both practitioners and analysts to (re-)address the unequal power relations in the EFL classroom.

Schools in general and EFL classes in particular are not clearly only in part responsible for teaching boys and girls about gender-differentiated social roles (cf. Gordon, 2004). Yet schools are in a unique position here. For example, through encouraging particular curricular choices for girls and for boys, and through gender-differential classroom interaction (in terms of teacher attention to boys and to girls, e.g. Kelly, 1988), they are in fact able to reinforce, for instance, the subordinate role of girls and women and the dominant role of boys and men (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p. 261). Teachers of all curricular subjects are also able, through simple casual remarks, to promote an unthinking heteronormativity (see Morrish, 2002).

Linke (2007; see also Sunderland, 2000) however talks about the low profile of gender in foreign language teaching, while Decke-Cornill and Volkmann (2007, p. 7) argue that "gender continues to be conceived in a trivialized, everyday, unquestioned form, and the common-sense belief in an essentialist, self-evident existence of 'women' and 'men' remains uncontested." Linke (2007) attributes a great deal of the neglect of gendered features of the target language to teachers' preoccupation with the 'language issue' itself:

the constant struggle by language learners and language teachers to find the right words and the appropriate grammatical forms to satisfy even basic communicative needs leaves little scope to take account of non-sexist language (Linke, 2007, p. 137).

Such a 'neutral' stance denies the fact that no language (including that produced in the foreign language learning environment) is ever produced in a social vacuum, as even the grammatical structures commonly practiced in the EFL classroom are almost always peopled with

individuals who are recognizably men or women. All in all, Linke (2007) referring to a global educational setting, regards neglecting gender issues by schools as a professional failure.

Education as an institution not only constructs but also *regulates* gendered identities (Jones, 2006), typically endorsing hegemonic identities (often hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and heterosexuality-as-the-norm). In this sense, following Fairclough (1989), education and the EFL classroom emerge as powerful entities with regulatory and prescriptive positions: “power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (1989, p. 46).¹ Fairclough (2001) underlines the significance of language here but also signals the role of language in resistance and potential change of social relations of power.

We see power in the educational EFL setting not as unidirectional or monolithic but as ‘a net like organization’ in which all participants in the learning process (teachers and students in the current discussion) are active ‘vehicles of power’, “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, 1981, p. 98). In this fluid model of power, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Consequently, power can be enacted but also contested in every interaction (Mills, 2002, 2003). This means that dominant, hegemonic discourse deployed in the EFL textbook can not only be challenged by the teacher but alternative, progressive discourses promoted. These can then be shared, taken on board or at least considered – or resisted, by students. Recognizing the *constitutive* nature of discourse means however that all language choices made in the EFL classroom can confront and potentially transform discriminatory practices and ideological values (Fairclough, 1989, 1992). Language then can be a primary factor through which traditional, sexist and heteronormative gender representations – like others – are explicitly and implicitly both perpetrated and challenged (McClure, 1992, p. 39). Given that Foucault’s and Fairclough’s theorizations of power enable resistance to the normative gender assumptions, when applied to the EFL context, these make classroom interaction epistemologically and ideologically very dynamic and complex, with a great deal of negotiation (at the level of textbooks, teacher-student interactions, student-student

¹ See Pennycook (1994) on English and linguistic imperialism.

interactions) of gender roles, gender stereotypes and gendered and heteronormative discourse potentially taking place.

While textbooks may play a role in social construction (see Gordon, 2004), as argued by Shardakova and Pavlenko (2004), language textbooks may more specifically empower or disempower language learners. The big question though is: what does it depend on? This is taken up in the next two sections of the article.

The power of textbooks?

Textbooks seem the most prototypical as well as the most researched of language learning materials (Sunderland, 1994, p. 55). In the 1970s and 1980s extensive research into gender representation in foreign language textbooks was conducted. Most of the analyses were content or linguistic oriented with the focus on the text-as-product (Sunderland *et al.*, 2002, p. 225). In this sense textbook content was treated as non-negotiable and the fact that learners may have (potentially different) responses to the textbooks' content was barely considered. Consequently, textbooks were conceived of as very powerful resources with the potential to convey non-negotiable portrayals of men and women.

Still, the analyses of the 1970s and 1980s generated a number of consistent findings concerning the representation of women and men, girls and boys in English language textbooks. As Sunderland *et al.* (2002, p. 223) describe, the findings relating to the (earlier) portrayals of women can be aptly described with such terms as 'Exclusion', 'Subordination', 'Distortion' and 'Degradation'. Early content analyses of language textbooks found males to be over-represented (e.g., Porecca, 1984). Various researchers also found gendered patterns of occupational stereotyping in both type and range of jobs. Men were found to occupy a greater range of occupational roles than women (e.g., Schmitz, 1975). More specifically, analysts identified an 'inadequate male' stereotype, i.e., male protagonists performing housework tasks badly (Pascoe, 1989). Relationship stereotyping was another finding where women were seen more often in relation to men than men were to women, usually in a relationship of 'flaunted heterosexuality' or a perpetually happy nuclear family and associated strongly with the domestic sphere (Pihlaja, 2008). Women were also found to be stereotypically over-emotional and timid (e.g., Talansky, 1986) as well as "more likely than men to be the butt of jokes" (Sunder-

land *et al.*, 2002, p. 223). The linguistic analyses also found disempowering discourse roles for female characters in the analyzed English language textbooks. In general women were found to perform a narrower range of discourse roles compared to men (e.g., Hartman & Judd, 1978; Talansky, 1986; see also Poulou, 1997). Hellinger's research revealed that the verbs associated with female characters reflected "some of the traditional stereotypic female behavioral patterns" (Hellinger, 1980, p. 272).

Even though the early analyses of foreign language textbooks disregarded the process of interaction between text and reader and assumed authoritative position of the text, they testified to the unequal representation of male and female characters. If we accept that discourse is always concurrently socially representational *and* socially constitutive (Fairclough, 2001), these images can be seen to have the potential to legitimate the relative 'Exclusion' and 'Subordination' of female characters and 'Distortion' of gender relations in general – depending, *inter alia*, how they are used and talked about in class. Some of these early findings still await attention on part of syllabus designers and textbook authors (see Kobia, 2009; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012). However, Jones and colleagues (1997), who looked at three EFL textbooks (*Headway Intermediate*, *Hotline Intermediate* and *Look Ahead 2*) to analyze specifically the language of dialogues (a characteristic feature of language textbooks), found an encouraging level of gender fairness, achieved through the creation of gender balance in social and occupational roles.

At this point the booklet "On Balance" should be mentioned as a publication written for publishers with the aim of raising awareness of gender bias. The booklet also provides teachers with ideas as how they could respond to 'gender bias' encountered in textbooks. For example, teachers are recommended to get involved in awareness-raising through discussion, subversion, and careful selection of texts and textbooks (Sunderland, 1994; see also Sunderland *et al.*, 2002).

The question that Sunderland *et al.* (2002, p. 224) pose is: "what, if anything, may gender stereotyping in written texts (and other forms of gender representation) mean for the learner's gender identity." Learners can inwardly resist what they read as well as outwardly contest it but in fact "reader's responses are unpredictable" (Sunderland *et al.*, 2002, p. 225). Sunderland (2000, p. 154) discussing various scenarios concludes that "looking at the text alone may be a fruitless endeavor."

There are a number of issues to be considered by writers, publishers and analysts in relation to textbooks and their use by students and

teachers. For instance, to what extent should textbooks reflect – if only symbolically – the way the world really is? Relatedly, should textbooks construct more ‘progressive’ images of femininity and masculinity than currently obtain? There may for example be a clash between women’s/girls’ professional aspirations and the stereotypical portrayals of women in their EFL textbooks. Another issue relates to learners’ interaction with the text at conscious and unconscious levels – are they aware of gender stereotyping? Do they think it is important? Do they say anything about this – to the teacher or fellow students?

Sunderland (in Mills & Mustapha, forthcoming) details an agenda for future textbook studies. She advocates *inter alia* analyzing specific textbook sub-genres such as ‘reading comprehension texts’, ‘dialogues’, ‘grammar exercises’ as well as looking at the polysemy of meaning of given textbook texts, and points to the value of the methods and insights of critical discourse analysis (for example, analysis of transitivity, in particular agent and patient, and if these are gendered). Also of particular importance in the context of the current predominance of visual culture is the focus on image analysis and multimodality of the textbooks’ content (see also Giaschi, 2000; Fairclough, 2001, p. 3). For example, is a potentially gender progressive text accompanied by equally progressive image(s) or, if there is a lack of congruence between text and visual, what do they ‘mean’ when seen together?

In the 1990s there has been a decline in content and linguistic analyses of gender in language textbooks. One of the reasons, as suggested by Jones *et al.* (1997), may be that gender bias is now in general less evident than hitherto. There was also a call for analyses that would incorporate less content analysis and more critical and linguistic theories (see Sunderland, 2000). Most importantly however, “theoretical developments suggested that text itself may not be the most appropriate focus of study” (Sunderland, 2000, p. 152).

Teacher’s talk around the (textbook) text

In 2000 in her article entitled “New understanding of gender and language classroom research: Texts, teacher talk and student talk,” Sunderland proposed a new perspective as to how textbooks should be analyzed in terms of gender representation and gendered discourse, starting with “let us consider the possibility that looking at the text alone may

be a fruitless endeavor” (Sunderland, 2000, p. 154). What she advocated in this and further publications (e.g. Sunderland *et al.*, 2002) is that what needs to be investigated is the teacher’s discourse in relation to gendered texts as these may be ‘available resources’ for his or her learners’ continually developing identities. This approach to looking at the textbooks underlines the teacher’s agency in the treatment of the text but at the same time does not predict how a given textbook text will be addressed by the teacher. This approach extensively diverges from a deterministic treatment of text and incorporates critical discourse perspectives (Fairclough, 1992).

Sunderland *et al.* (2002) use the term “talk around the text” (a concept from literacy studies) to explicate how the language teacher in his/her ‘read aloud’ role talks about gender in textbooks. From a critical discourse perspective ‘talk around the text’ exemplifies one form of ‘consumption’ of the text and “as soon as a text is ‘consumed’, it ceases to be text alone” (Sunderland *et al.*, 2002, p. 229). The early rather deterministic positioning of textbooks’ content and indeed influence has been replaced with one that allows for different and various (even opposing) *handling* of the same text and thus producing a variety of interpretations. A teacher’s ‘talk around the text’ can in the case of (some) EFL instructors constitute an example of a so-called ‘teachable moment’ (Havighurst, 1952), i.e., an ideal learning opportunity to offer some insight to students. Thus a teacher’s progressive (and appealing) treatment of a gendered text may for example lend itself to a lively classroom discussion during which students are able to explore a variety of progressive and non-progressive roles (including non-heteronormative ones) that men and women occupy in a particular community, along with their social implications and consequences (see Nelson, 2007).

Explorations of ‘talk-around-the text’ in terms of gender representation need to focus on those textbook texts in which gender is somehow evident – what Sunderland *et al.* (2002) call a ‘gender critical point’. This extends to many representations of women, men, boys, girls and gender relations more widely, progressive, traditional, or both. Teachers then need to do something *about* the particular gender critical point (Sunderland *et al.*, 2002, p. 231). There are of course a myriad of possibilities here ranging from ignoring it to accepting potentially discriminatory content by passive acceptance to active and forceful rejection of sexist content and presenting it in a way that allows for an emergence of a more progressive portrayal of gender relations (see Sunderland *et al.*,

2002). Consequently, gender-based texts are not necessarily vehicles of discrimination if teachers choose to use them critically in the classroom, as a means of challenging students' presuppositions – a teacher can 'rescue' a sexist or extremely heteronormative text. On the other hand, the most non-sexist textbook can become sexist in the hands of a teacher with sexist attitudes (Sunderland, 1994, p. 64):

a text is arguably as good or as bad as the treatment it receives from the teacher who is using it; in particular, a text riddled with gender bias can be rescued and that bias put to good effect, pedagogic and otherwise (Sunderland, 2000, p. 155).

The teacher's role then emerges as indeed crucial in dealing with issues of gender and sexuality as he or she usually not only decides on the selection of texts to be covered in class but also remains very much in charge of how these texts are treated. He or she further facilitates (particular) classroom discussion topics with the power to endorse some views, refute others and repress/ignore still others. Consequently the teacher's discourse and classroom discourse management during interaction have enormous potential for promoting or not certain gender discourses and hence gender relations in ways that (dis-)empower students.

'Don't ask don't tell' in (EFL) education: Heteronormativity

Although arguably underplayed by present day mainstream Applied Linguistics, research into sexuality in educational settings is, we argue, a current social imperative.² Bullying and harassment leading to homelessness (Rosario *et al.*, 2012) and acts of suicide (Agostinone-Wilson, 2010; Świerszcz, 2012), both with respect to non-normative sexuality in schooling contexts, have been extensively documented (Horn *et al.*, 2009). Language use in education provides fertile ground for exploring unequal power distribution between the various social actors involved in schooling. While the Foucauldian notion of 'elusive power' (Foucault, 1978) is applicable here, it is also imperative to pinpoint specific (dis)empowered actors in this research scene, i.e. teachers (of varying sexualities), students (or varying sexualities), parents, and governments

² In fact, it has been noted that the number of publications in the field of social justice and equity in education has been on the rise for at least a decade (Kaur, 2012, p. 485).

or other funding bodies.³ Indeed, power and language performed on a number of different levels (e.g. teacher-student, curriculum designers-teacher) in this context leads to the formation of sociocultural discursive practices and thus to the “inculcation of particular cultural meanings and values, social relationships and identities, and pedagogies” (Fariclough, 2010, p. 532). The following overview of findings in the field of language and sexuality in the EFL includes textbooks, classroom interaction as well curriculum design and a mounting resistance to institutional normativities – resistance which take the form of *critical* and *queer pedagogies*.

One of the areas of greatest interest for researchers in the field of language and sexuality is the means of sustaining heterosexuality as the norm, i.e. research into *heteronormativity*. The concept is most often understood as “all linguistic mechanisms that lead to heterosexuality being perceived as the naturalized norm” (Motschenbacher, 2010, p. 11).⁴ A related concept is that of *heterosexism*, defined as “distinction in which non-heterosexual forms of activity, identity, and community are denigrated or penalized and heterosexuality is privileged” (Queen, 2006, p. 288) which is imbued with issues of power imbalance. It is these issues, along with that of accompanying homophobic language use, that are at the heart of research into language and sexuality in educational settings.

Education and (sexual) equality research has been conducted with varying intensity. As far as Poland is concerned, sexual-identity-based research is something of a novelty. So far, broadly anti-discriminatory projects have been conducted (Abramowicz, 2011; Żukowski, 2004) followed by narrow investigations of non-heteronormative students at the University of Warsaw (Drozdowski, 2011) and the examination of treatment of LGBTQ issues in textbooks used in Polish schools (Kochanowski *et al.*, 2013). In some other countries the situation seems healthier with numerous books, projects, reports and journals devoted to social justice and equity in education, including the situation of LGBTQ students in schools (Elia, 2010; Franck, 2002; Gorski & Goodman, 2011; Hickman & Porfilio, 2012; Kehily, 2002; Toomey *et al.*, 2012). What is the reason for this quantitative (and qualitative) discrepancy? It is indisputable that research is somehow related to the political climate

³ This list should be treated as open-ended.

⁴ See also Motschenbacher (2011) on Queer Linguistics.

of a given country. The powerful responsible for allocating research funds (be it government bodies or researchers themselves) are in a position to either hinder or foster certain inquiry paradigms. Gray (2013, p. 43) theorizes heterosexuality in terms of “strategically privileged” in the era of capitalism, and thus also in the ELT undiversified market. In Poland, all the projects mentioned above, along with the one that the authors of this paper are involved in, have been funded by external sources.⁵

Monosexuality: The power of textbooks (and reference works⁶)

In his autobiography (2010), Michał Głowiński, a famous Polish literary critic, writes about his quest for finding a label for his sexual identity. Once he had come across the lemma ‘homosexual’ in the *Guttenberg Encyclopaedia* he felt relieved, even though the definition⁷ would be considered far from acceptable nowadays. This exemplifies the power reference works, such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias, have yielded over marginalised groups, not least in terms of identity. However, far from being objective, these publications have authorised subjective, ideologically-loaded meanings and discourses which have the potential of contributing to the oppression of the less powerful (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Kramarae, 1992; Moon, 1989; Treichler, 1989).

Trends in research similar to the investigations of the representation/construction of ‘gender’ in textbooks can be noticed with respect to the category of ‘sexuality’. These studies, however, have been carried out mainly outside the EFL context (Hawkins, 2012; Hickman, 2012; Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011; Kochanowski *et al.*, 2013; Suarez & Balaji, 2007).⁸ Gross negligence and ideological bias have been documented in a number of textbooks. To start with the most predictable flaw, most

⁵ All Polish research projects mentioned so far have been financed by the Stefan Batory Foundation. The research into gender and sexuality in the context of Polish EFL (carried out by Jane Sunderland, Joanna Pawelczyk, and Łukasz Pakuła) has been funded by the British Council.

⁶ *Reference works* is a term encompassing encyclopaedias, dictionaries, thesauruses etc. (Hartmann, 2001).

⁷ The definition can be found in Głowiński (2010, p. 47-8).

⁸ Examples of the curricular subjects include biology, civics, and sociology.

textbooks are permeated with heteronormativity, for example, by mentioning only nuclear families. However, more disturbing are instances of behavioural definitions of homosexuality (found in Polish textbooks for Family Education⁹) as the effect of a prolonged exposure to pornography along with the ‘information’ that it is curable and can be treated with, inter alia, electrotherapy (Kochanowski *et al.*, 2013). This policing of – assumed and at the same time unnamed – heterosexuality communicated to students who might not have fully developed critical text reception constructs non-normative sexualities as deviant and unwanted. Viewed from the perspective of the EFL students, uncontested by teacher authority, these legitimised discriminatory discourses may then start circulating in- and outside the classroom, “making students feel more alienated and, as a result hinder[ing] their language learning process” (Gray, 2013, p. 57; Nelson, 2007, p. 69).¹⁰ Gray (2013) notes that EFL textbooks aimed at international audiences feature exclusively heterosexual identities thus exhibiting “monosexualising tendencies” (Nelson, 2006). Our own experience, for example, suggests that nuclear families, with two married opposite-sex parents are common in EFL textbooks, as is the topic of heterosexual attraction and romance. Yet, Gray (2013) also observes that some materials tailored to meet the needs of more specific localised audiences take up the subject of homosexuality.

(De)sexualised classrooms: Queer pedagogies?

Seen as a forum for research-informed discussions, the classroom as a site imbued with heteronormativity has recently come under scrutiny (Rothing, 2008). Liddicoat (2009), in his analysis of classroom talk, notes contestation and resistance to non-heterosexual identities in this allegedly desexualized environment. Numerous examples adduced in his study testify to the fact that heterosexual framing of students’ identities is the norm, and he argues that this has the potential to hinder linguistic attainment.

In the world of EFL, Cynthia Nelson (1999, 2012, 2008, 2007) has championed utilizing the insights of Queer Theory (see Sullivan, 2003)

⁹ Polish name of the subject: *Wychowanie do życia w rodzinie*.

¹⁰ This has been corroborated by King (2008), who draws on the concept of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983) to show yet another possible motivation for foreign language learning: constructing sexual identities in a non-native language.

to provide a diversity-inclusive environment in the classroom; similar attempts have been observed in the academic context (Morrish & Sauntson, 2007). Nelson (2007) argues that, rather than catering for the LGBTQ minority, the classroom should be open to a wide spectrum of identities (e.g. ethnic as well as sexual) and be prepared to handle relevant discussions. Here, the teacher may need to waive their power in favour of empowering students and acting as a facilitator of in-class discussions. Yet should the homophobic views emerge, teachers need to be prepared to exert their power to challenge them. Nelson (2007) also advocates incorporating lesbian and gay themes to explore divergent cultural meanings and meaning-making practices with the intention of unpacking students' normative questions about gay people with a view of challenging heterosexual hegemony. This could, she suggests, involve examining the life history narratives of queer residents who are part of the same local communities as the language learners. Such practices have been subject to empirical scrutiny by testing students' perceptions of the ratio of hetero- to homosexual themes introduced in the context of the classroom: even gay-friendly students viewed gay themes as more frequent than straight ones even though the actual ratio was 2:1 respectively (Ripley *et al.*, 2012).¹¹ Other researchers (De Vincenti *et al.*, 2007) have tentatively probed into integrating queer perspectives into their own language teaching practices. For example, in line with Nelson's proposals is O'Mochain's (2006) attempt at introducing local queer narratives into the EFL classroom in Japan. This contribution provides initial evidence that non-normative themes can be successfully dealt with even in what might seem like potentially unfavourable conditions¹² (for other examples, see Pavlenko, 2004; Benesch, 1999).

The recent blossoming of research into the issues of inequality in education seems to have resulted in raising the awareness of practitioners. As Świerszcz (2012) points out although some teachers see the lack of professional training as problematic in acting against homophobic rhetoric, they feel the call to do so. Zack *et al.* (2010) found that other groups of teachers include "confronters" and "integrators." While the former see themselves as capable of embracing egalitarian worldviews and promoting them during classroom interaction, the latter recognizes

¹¹ Such results are explained by the phenomena of novelty attachment and content substitution.

¹² The sight of research was a women-only Christian college.

the power of existing curricula but still attempt to incorporate anti-homophobic rhetoric into the local teaching practice (Zack *et al.*, 2010). Another powerful change as regards teaching sexual diversity in the classroom in the UK context has been the revision of the *Handbook for Inspection of Further Education and Skills* by OFSTED¹³ (see Gray, 2013). Furthermore, anti-discriminatory teacher training in the UK is offered by *Inclusion for All*¹⁴, where homophobic bullying is an important concern.

Less optimistically, it should be emphasised that while the issue of heterosexism was signalled in the Anglophone educational context over a decade ago, 'sexuality' as a culturally (and linguistically) important identity category has been insufficiently addressed or recognised in few other educational contexts. There is, however, a palpable demand for intensified make-up for the arrears, not least as this state-of-affairs has been shown in e.g. the UK to lead to excessive verbal and physical manifestations of homo- and transphobia.¹⁵ Lack of research in this area contributes to the maintenance of the status quo of heteronormativity along with the lack of culture-specific methods for countering institutionalised discriminatory practices.

Conclusions: Acquiring broader perspective via critical pedagogies

The research presented so far can be inscribed in a broader and relatively recent educational project under the label of *critical pedagogies* (Monchinski, 2008; Norton, 2008). As regards language learning, Norton and Toohey (2004) identify four key themes: seeking critical classroom practices, creating and adapting materials for critical pedagogies, exploring diverse representations of knowledge, and seeking critical research practices. *Pedagogies* is intentionally plural to reflect the dynamism of different techniques and methods of teaching that, while addressing issues of unequal power distribution and inequality, are culture-sensitive (and recognize that, for example, what may be seen as oppressive in one cultural context may be seen as liberating by those in that

¹³ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, which carries out inspections and regulatory visits of schools (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>).

¹⁴ <http://www.shaundellenty.com> [accessed: Feb. 2, 2014].

¹⁵ Transphobia is defined as "fear or hatred of transsexual or transgender people" by the Oxford English Dictionary [accessed: Feb. 2, 2014].

context). Critical teachers are also aware of the constitutive power of language and of different languages – which both reflect and may construct our lived experiences. The idea of critical pedagogies seems particularly relevant here as ‘power’, ‘access’ and ‘identity formation’ are critical concepts whose blending seems not to have been fully appreciated in the educational research, including the Polish EFL context.

Work in the field of critical pedagogies importantly extends to the social categories and identity labels of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’. Viewed in the postmodern fashion (Foucault, 1978), as fluid and constantly being redefined, in part through social actors’ own agency and resistance, both critical pedagogies and queer pedagogies constitute relatively novel approaches to exploring, understanding and potentially improving the learning conditions of the disempowered social groups, such as women and LGBTQ people, in particular in the Polish context. More importantly, however, any research carried out through these approaches is intended to travel beyond the academia to teacher education and to actual classroom practice (see Norton, 2008). In the words of Zack *et al.* (2010) – as regards sexuality, but as also applied to gender issues:

We must ... provide the skills and knowledge that will aid young educators in effectively challenging homophobic rhetoric and behaviors wherever and whenever they occur. Only then can public schools begin to transform the homophobic and heteronormative attitudes that perpetuate hate and derision (Zack et al., 2010, p. 110).

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