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Addressing Gender in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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■ During the past 2 years, while coediting a Case Studies in TESOL Practice book titled *Gender and English Language Learners* (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004), we have had the welcome opportunity to consider the diverse ways in which TESOL colleagues worldwide are addressing gender issues in their language classrooms. In this article, we share the insights we have gained not only from the contributors to the case study collection, but also from our engagement with the broader literature (e.g., Casanave & Yamashiro, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller, & Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001).

Rather than seeing gender as an individual variable, we see it as a complex system of social relations and discursive practices, differentially constructed in local contexts. This approach, situated within a post-structuralist framework, foregrounds sociohistoric, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic differences in constructing gender. We do not assume, for example, that all women—or all men—have much in common with each other just because of their biological makeup or their elusive social roles, nor do we assume that gender is always relevant to understanding language learning outcomes. Instead, we recognize that gender, as one of many important facets of social identity, interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students' language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes.

In this article, we discuss how English language teachers worldwide address gender in the classroom in four ways: curricular innovation, that is, creating new programs and classes that address the needs of particular

learners; feminist teaching practices, materials, and activities; topic management, that is, how teachers can engage learners in critical reflection by incorporating gender issues into already existing classes; and classroom management and decision-making practices. We draw ESL examples from a variety of contexts in Canada and the United States. We draw EFL examples predominantly from Japan, where grassroots EFL feminist pedagogy first took shape in the 1970s. Feminist pedagogy has been documented there to some extent, and we hope it will continue to be documented in future research and feminist teaching practices elsewhere in the world.

DEVELOPING A LIVED CURRICULUM

Curricular innovation in teaching practices involves creating new programs, revising existing ones, and introducing new classes and modules, all aiming to better address learners' needs. In ESL education, curricular changes often aim to accommodate the needs of immigrant women. The plight of immigrant women in English-speaking contexts is well documented. Their access to ESL classrooms can be constrained by numerous factors, such as their domestic responsibilities as wives, mothers, housekeepers, and caretakers (Frye, 1999; Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000; Rivera, 1999), by transportation and safety concerns, especially when taking evening classes (Frye, 1999; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000), and by the need to prioritize immediate employment over educational opportunities (Goldstein,1995, 2001). Addressing these multiple concerns within a single curriculum can be a daunting task.

Rivera's (1999) case study of the El Barrio Popular Education Program shows how one program serves immigrant women's needs. El Barrio is a community-based adult education program in New York City, where Latinas come to learn English, acquire literacy skills, improve their basic education, and prepare for the high school equivalency exam. Most participants are mothers with children attending public schools; many are unemployed workers. The program addresses their needs in a variety of ways: by scheduling meetings during the day when the children are in school, by choosing class locations in the neighborhood and thus not forcing the women to commute, and most important, by offering a bilingual Spanish-English curriculum that incorporates the women's knowledge and experiences. The women also conduct research in their communities on a variety of topics, from housing issues and trash collection to the uses of English and Spanish.

In contexts where creating new programs is impossible, curricula may be revised to include classes that target certain participants. Frye (1999) developed an ESL class for immigrant women in a community education

program in Washington, D.C., which otherwise focused on its male students' needs. The new class used a problem-posing approach to teach language, literacy, and critical reflection skills, and it highlighted issues that the Latinas defined as central to their lives. Frye involved the participants in designing all aspects of the class, from child care and scheduling to deciding which topics to cover. In class, the teacher served as a guide, collaborator, and facilitator, while the participants generated themes for discussion such as employment practices, school policies, interaction with native English speakers, racial prejudice, and gender equity.

Yet immigrant women are not the only ones who can slip through educational cracks. In EFL education, women's needs and concerns may also go unacknowledged unless special efforts are made to incorporate their voices. Case studies from Japan offer an array of approaches to feminist language education (Cohen, 2004; McMahill, 1997, 2001; Saft & Ohara, 2004; Simon-Maeda, 2004).

Simon-Maeda (in press) describes a feminist course she has developed in a women's junior college. The course introduced a variety of topics: sexual harassment in the school and workplace, domestic violence, sexism in textbooks and the media, and sexuality. Throughout the course, the students examined gender inequality from a linguistic perspective that highlighted the discursive practices that construct gender. Further, the teacher did not expect the students to passively accept her Western feminist notions. Rather, she encouraged them to consider on their own terms why they might hold certain views and how women have come to be positioned in a given context.

Simon-Maeda works with college students. Also working in Japan, McMahill (1997, 2001) facilitates feminist English classes for adults, which she has done for more than 20 years. The participants, Japanese women of various ages, manage the classes by deciding which foreign instructors to hire or to invite and by negotiating the class content with these instructors. The classes typically combine linguistic goals (improving one's English) with feminist goals (presenting at international women's conferences or translating feminist books).

Yet gender issues can be productively discussed in places other than women's groups. Saft and Ohara (2004) developed a 4-day module on gender to encourage both male and female Japanese university students to consider the dynamic quality of gender and to think critically about women's position in Japanese society. During the module, Saft and Ohara examined the gendered use of language in English and Japanese, assigned reading on the position of women in Japan, and discussed the practice of *onna rashii hanashikata* (a womanly way of speaking in Japanese). Although both male and female students discussed the topic, some male students resisted the idea that Japanese women experienced

discrimination, and female students recognized that if women are to have more options, men as well as women must be committed to gender equality.

Our perspective emphasizes sensitivity to local contexts. We do not proscribe all-women's classes nor do we exclusively focus on women's needs. Rather, a feminist critical approach urges continuous needs analysis and reflection that examine the situation of all learners. Govindasamy and David (2004) describe a needs analysis study conducted in the International Islamic University Malaysia, where almost two thirds of the student population is female. The study determined that although male students do not feel intimidated in the classroom, they are less invested in language education, which does not adequately prepare them for the business world. As a result of the study, the department created a new course, Language for Occupational Purposes, which aimed to meet the needs of male students.

To sum up, we emphasize that feminist curricular innovation is not equivalent to traditional "thinking up" of new programs and classes. Rather than working with a fully predetermined and decontextualized curriculum, critical TESOL educators organize and reorganize the curriculum around the needs and lived experiences of particular populations, be they young Japanese women, unemployed Latina immigrants, or male college students in Malaysia. Despite their diversity and ever-changing shape, these curricula have much in common. All incorporate the participants' experiences because feminist teaching practice generally recognizes that students are more engaged in their learning if they have an investment in the curriculum, and if they can relate their learning to the challenges they experience in life outside the classroom. The participants' languages and cultures also become a meaningful aspect of the curriculum, whereby Latinas in El Barrio programs are learning literacy and critical reflection skills in English and Spanish, and Japanese college women compare linguistic constructions of gender in English and Japanese.

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

The second area that deserves closer consideration is the practices common in feminist classrooms and the rich range of materials and activities they incorporate. We consider one advanced-level ESL writing class in Toronto, Canada, where students—predominantly female—expressed an interest in soap operas (Schenke, 1996). The teacher used this interest as an opportunity to explore with the students the personal histories evoked while watching soap operas, and how feminist analysis can frame such reminiscences. To do so, students read excerpts, sometimes paraphrased by Schenke, from Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*;

Coward's (1985) *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought, and Packaged*; Hall's (1990) "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media"; and Simson's (1989) *Adrift in a World Not of My Own Making: Feminism and the Melodramatic Text*. They were asked to reflect on their own formations of femininity and, in the one case, masculinity. The vibrant oral discussions were complemented by written papers linking personal histories and critical analysis. Schenke suggests that "feminism, like antiracism, is thus not simply one more social issue in ESL but a way of thinking, a way of teaching, and, most importantly, a way of learning" (p. 158).

In turn, Cohen (2004) describes an advanced EFL undergraduate course in a private university in Japan. Her textbook selections also had a feminist focus: Chaika's (1994) *Language: The Social Mirror*; Skuttnabb-Kangas's (2000) *Linguistic Genocide in Education*; Cherry's (1987) *Womansword: What Japanese Words Say About Women*; Nilsen's (1999) *Living Language*; and Walker's (1983) *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. These texts were complemented by teaching sequences that helped students engage dialogically with the texts. One particularly effective teaching sequence used a Japanese TV news report delivered by a demure young woman and a confident older man. Cohen invited interested students to write up their translations of the presentations, which she then compiled for distribution, discussion, and analysis. Questions for class discussion included, "What accounts for the failure of two of the four student-interpreters to acknowledge the very presence of the female commentator?" Thus, using both provocative texts and innovative teaching sequences, Cohen drew on students' lived experiences, encouraging students to develop oral, interpretive, and writing skills, while simultaneously gaining greater insight into gendered dimensions of language learning and use.

Toff (2002), also teaching in Japan, describes how she uses life writing in English to help her female junior college students straddle "the language of experience with the language of narration" (p. 22). The use of life writing, she argues, enables her students to write with great depth and imagination, addressing topics that might otherwise have been deemed too controversial. She begins the course by giving students models of life writing such as "My Place" by Morgan (1987) and "Dakara Anatamo Ininuite" by Mitsuyo (2000), which inspire students to reflect on their own histories and experiences. She also uses Mah's (1998) *Falling Leaves* to help students incorporate historical perspective in their writing, and McCourt's (1996) *Angela's Ashes* to learn about the centrality of voice in writing. By drawing a distinction between the "I" perspective of writing, which is grounded in personal experience, and the "eye" perspective, which provides an analytic framework, Toff encourages her students to develop greater awareness of how the reader and writer

interact in constructing meaning. In this way, students learn to address personal and sometimes controversial topics, while gaining greater control over the writing process.

All in all, we see that transformative practices, which include but are not limited to reading and reflection, personal storytelling, journal writing, and discussions of scenarios, incorporate students' lived experiences and then locate their experiences and beliefs within larger social contexts. Such practices encourage students to imagine alternative ways of being in the world and to consider a range of life trajectories.

TACKLING CHALLENGING TOPICS

Regardless of which particular class one is teaching, be it language and gender, or simply English grammar, at some point every teacher is faced with a controversial question, comment, or topic. We firmly believe that teachers need to be well-prepared to handle such topics, while maintaining a positive dynamic in the classroom. In fact, they may do best by being proactive, as EFL and ESL classrooms represent unique spaces where different linguistic and cultural worlds come into contact. Such classrooms offer unparalleled opportunities for teachers to engage with cross-cultural differences and the social construction of gender and sexuality, and thus to help students develop linguistic and intercultural competence, or multivoiced consciousness (Kramsch & von Hoene, 2001). This approach respectfully acknowledges students' and teachers' own diverse backgrounds, while engaging them with alternative systems of knowledge, values, beliefs, and modes of gender performance. The way in which debates are framed, questions are asked, and responses are evaluated, is crucial in this regard.

Nelson (2004) examines how one teacher, Roxanne, used lesbian and gay themes to explore cultural meanings in her grammar-based ESL class in a community college in the United States. In a lesson on modal auxiliaries, the students, hailing from 13 different countries and ranging in age from early 20s to 70s, were asked to provide a number of possibilities to explain the scenario, "These two women are walking arm in arm" (one of several ambiguous scenarios on a class worksheet). In the ensuing discussion, Roxanne coordinated a productive debate on lesbian and gay cultural practices by framing questions in a highly skilled manner. Instead of asking, for example, "Do you think lesbians should hold hands in public?" she asked, "How did you learn to interpret public displays of affection between two women in the United States?" This line of questioning enabled her to focus on the extent to which sexual identities are culturally situated and to demonstrate that what counts as *normal* is not inherent but socially constructed. The discussion also provided students with great insight into the ways in which modal

auxiliaries are used for acts of speculation. Blending grammar teaching with exploring gay and lesbian issues, Nelson powerfully demonstrates that topics previously seen as taboo have great potential for teaching both linguistic and intercultural competence.

Morgan (1997) provides an example of how students' experiences can be incorporated into a lesson on intonation. Drawing on a text called "Decisions, Decisions" (Bowers & Godfrey, 1985), he presented the predominantly Chinese students with a description of a scenario that addressed gender roles in a Chinese family. He then asked students what advice they would give to the female protagonist, Yuen-Li, who wished to learn English but felt constrained by family obligations. The class considered a number of options available to Yuen-Li, which were then incorporated into a scripted dialogue that Morgan brought into class the next day. The scripted dialogue was particularly helpful for students who had difficulty producing their own work but wished to participate actively in the discussion. It also provided students with the opportunity to read English dialogue, which in turn allowed Morgan to explore the politics of intonation. As students debated the multiple meanings of *Oh* in diverse intonation contexts, they drew on a range of experiences that might otherwise have remained unspoken.

Although the case studies just discussed are situated in college-level and adult education classrooms, challenging topics can also be productively introduced in teacher-training programs. A case study by Boxer and Tyler (2004) explores how different international teaching assistants (ITAs) perceive scenarios that, in the view of U.S. undergraduates, involve sexual harassment. The authors found that in some cases, understandings of appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior differed not only between undergraduates and ITAs but also between Chinese- and Spanish-speaking ITAs and between men and women. Because what is considered *sexual harassment* differs from one context to another and one culture to the next, the authors recommend a scenario-based consciousness-raising approach for all ITA training programs.

Our analysis shows that to recognize diversity and achieve parity and inclusiveness, teachers may introduce controversial topics that students have not raised. In doing so, they often opt for a problem-solving approach that invites students to respond to particular scenarios and discuss ways in which specific situations would be treated across languages and cultures. Ensuing discussions raise students' familiarity with alternative discourses of gender and sexuality and enhance their ability to reflect critically, to interpret verbal and nonverbal behaviors in context, and to perform gender in context-appropriate ways.

SHARING POWER

Empowerment in the classroom may take place not only through explicit discussion of gender inequities but also through negotiation of power and control between teachers and students. As seen in the preceding discussion, the trademark of feminist critical pedagogies is a decentering of the teacher's position, while students gain greater control of the classroom. This control means involving students in making decisions on meeting times, locations, child-care arrangements, and choosing and managing discussion topics (Frye, 1999; McMahill, 2001; Rivera, 1999).

The research of Fujimura-Fanselow (1996) in Japan provides much insight into the ways in which unequal relations of power between teachers and students can limit classroom participation, particularly for women and girls. She makes a convincing case that the relative silence of young Japanese girls in not unique to the Japanese educational system but is characteristic of most societies in which women have unequal access to power (see also Julé, 2004). To address these power inequities, Fujimura-Fanselow structures her women's studies classes in a way that requires active participation for teaching and learning. She achieves this by negotiating a curriculum that includes mini–research projects and makes them integral to the course rather than an adjunct to it. She suggests that by ensuring that both teacher and students serve as the audience for these projects, power relations in the classroom become less rigid and hierarchical.

Another convincing example of power sharing, according to Jordan (2004), can be found in college-based writing centers. Working within the U.S. college system, Jordan explores the extent to which feminist composition pedagogy, which has tended to focus on native English speakers, can be applied to the ESL tutoring that takes place in college-based writing centers. His work seeks to raise awareness of institutional and gender-related politics in and around these centers, and to show how these politics can be harnessed for the benefit of students in general and ESL students in particular. A writing center, Jordan argues, is an ideal place for the practice of feminist composition pedagogy because it is an educational site that views students as a source of knowledge, focuses on both process and product in writing, and seeks to decenter authority, particularly with reference to gendered inequities. Findings from his research suggest that a writing center can be a safe place that does not look or feel like a classroom, where teachers can exercise flexibility in engaging students' native rhetorical abilities while addressing demands for standardized English expression.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed a variety of transformative classroom practices common in feminist pedagogy: flexible curricula that recognize the diversity of the students' needs, shared decision making in the classroom, teaching and learning that incorporate students' life trajectories, pedagogy that locates student experiences and beliefs within larger social contexts, and practices that encourage students to imagine alternative ways of being in the world. We are grateful to the editors of the special issue for an opportunity to express our views on the topic, and look forward to future research that will deepen and expand the perspectives presented here.

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Language Learning: A Feminine Domain? The Role of Stereotyping in Constructing Gendered Learner Identities

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■ The study of gender and its significance in language learning environments has for a long time focused on difference. Critical views of the *difference approach* to understanding gender and language learning have emerged only recently (e.g. Ehrlich, 1997; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001). These critiques point out that difference approaches are inherently context- and culture-blind because they regard gender as a static, context-free category (e.g., Ehrlich, 1997; Schmenk, 2002; Sunderland, 2000). Based on poststructuralist premises, the critiques conceive of language learners' identities as contested sites and argue for developing an enhanced framework for studying gender and its meanings within particular communities of practice (e.g., Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001; Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2001; Schmenk, 2002). Instead of looking at what males are like and what females are like and constructing generalized images of male and female language learners accordingly, critical voices note that language learners are themselves constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in specific contexts and communities. To understand these processes and reflect on their possible implications for language learning and teaching, English language teachers, researchers, and teacher educators need to take into account individual learners and their respective positioning in particular social and cultural contexts.

The present article aims to add to these recent views by focusing on a widely held assumption in many language learning environments, namely,