LGBTQ+ Visibility and Inclusion in the ESL Classroom
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Sustainable Development is aimed at improving human lives now and into the future. In 2015, the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which address several aspects of sustainable development, including social issues like education and inequality reduction. The SDGs include specific targets that ensure and promote quality education and opportunities for all. Education is especially important because it is an agent for social change – it can have transformative effects on several areas of sustainable development, including socioeconomic mobility and peace.

Issues of sex and gender have long been considered taboo in an ESL classroom, but in the light of the Sustainable Development Goals and a push for more inclusion, we can no longer afford to stay silent on them. It is understandable that breaching this topic for the first time will not be easy. Here we include a set of information and guidelines that can help you with this.

Useful Terms and Correct Language

To understand sexual identity and diversity it is important to define the terms gender, sex, and sexuality to avoid using them incorrectly. Sex is a biological concept and it is based on specific biological characteristics. Gender is how an individual is socially defined. This is used to describe personal, societal, and cultural perceptions of identity. Last but not least, sexuality involves who one is physically and romantically attracted to. Here we can find the different terms related to orientation like heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc.

The acronym LGBTQQIAAP refers to a sexual orientation and gender identities and stands for:
- Lesbian: Women attracted to other women.
- Gay: Men attracted to other men. This also refers to people who are attracted to a person of the same gender.
- Bisexual: People attracted to more than one gender.
- Transgender: People whose experience of their own gender is not aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- Queer: People who identify as LGBTQ+. Also used by those who do not identify with binarism, homosexuality, heterosexuality, or do not want to label themselves.
- Questioning: A person who is still exploring their identity.
- Intersex: People who may have biological characteristics of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit what biologically constitutes male or female.
- Asexual: People who experience a variation in levels of sexual attraction, including the lack of it.
- Ally: People who identify as straight and actively support the LGBTQ+ community.
- Pansexual: People attracted to people of any gender.
- + Plus: This sign is used to include all terms that are not listed in the acronym and is mostly used with shorter versions.

Learner Identity and Personal Identity in an ESL Classroom

The ESL classroom is an important space for students to define and express their identities. They use the English language not only to interact with others, but also to share many different aspects of their personalities, interests, and values, as well as the details of their day-to-day lives.

The modern ESL classroom is likely to include students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. There will also be many students whose parents, extended family, or close friends are members of this community.

The type of language that is used in the classroom – as well as the social environment that the teacher creates – can also contribute to the students' worldviews. It can tell students which types of identities are "allowed" and accepted in the classroom (and, by extension, in the larger society).

Teachers can make their classrooms more inclusive by using neutral language and diverse materials. They can also actively let students know that the teachers are allies and the classroom is a safe space for all. This can make students who are part of the LGBTQ+ community feel safer and more welcomed in the class which, in turn, can improve their confidence and performance in English.

It's important to consider how classroom language and behaviors affect students. Imagine, for example, a simple speaking activity that asks students to talk about what they did on the weekend. In a traditional classroom, a male student may feel that he is not "allowed" to talk about spending the weekend with his boyfriend. This could make his speaking less fluent or accurate due to nerves or the conscious effort to change pronouns to hide his orientation. On the other hand, if students know that all identities are welcomed and accepted in the classroom, and are encouraged to use English to express their own identity, they may feel more confident to participate freely and truthfully.

Promoting Inclusion in Your Classroom

It is disrespectful and invasive to outright ask for students' identity and orientation. What can be done instead is to make LGBTQ+ community more visible through inclusive material and language in the ESL classroom. Follow these four steps to become a better ally and a more supportive teacher:

- **Be mindful:** There are words and expressions that might be considered gender-specific or could exclude particular groups. Gender-neutral expressions could be more inclusive. However, these might leave behind the transgender individuals that do identify with a gendered term. To avoid invalidating binary/non-binary students, it would be helpful to teach all concepts with equal weight and at the same time. For example, husband/wife/spouse/partner, man/woman/person/human, boy/girl/child/kid.
- **Respect:** Do not assume learners' sexuality or gender identity. Respect learners' pronouns as they request. If you hear their classmates getting learner's pronouns wrong, correct them but do this sensitively. Avoid shaming learners when trying to be a good ally. This can be done through repetition and affirmative answers. For example, if you need to correct how their classmates refer to a transgender/non-binary learner you could say *Yes! [correct pronoun] has/ have done it very well!* Remember to use the pronoun that the student prefers, like *she*, *he*, or *they*.
- **Understand:** Read and learn about the LGBTQ+ community, its history and its struggles. This will help to understand their continuing obstacles to equality and will lead you to encourage empathy.
- **Do Your Part:** If possible, challenge prejudice, discrimination, and anti-LGBTQ+ language among colleagues and learners, and in your personal life. It is important to support (and promote) policies that ensure the equality and respect of all people's rights.

Using Inclusive Content

In terms of ESL material to support LGBTQ+ visibility in the classroom, the following points can be taken into consideration when choosing course books, worksheets, teaching tools, or visual support when planning a lesson:

- **Gender Representation:** Characters can look more gender neutral. Avoid gendered attributes like stereotyped hairstyles or adornments. Also pay attention to the ways characters' personalities and behaviors are described. Avoid stereotypical depictions like showing a group of boys playing sports while a group of girls play with dolls.
- **Inclusive Language:** There are many ways to use inclusive language in English.
    - Try to avoid language that implies a gender binary like "boys and girls". Terms like "children" or "everyone" can be used instead.
    - Use gender-neutral terminology when referring to occupations, like "actor" for both men and women, instead of "actor" and "actress".
    - Include gender-neutral terms for family members, like "parent", "sibling", or "carer", as well as relationship terms like "partner" or "spouse".
    - Discuss changes in language. For example, some people prefer the gender-neutral pronoun "they" instead of "she" or "he". Explain how and when the singular "they" is used in English.
- **LGBTQ+ Role Models:** Include famous LGBTQ+ people, like athletes, artists, scientists, or world leaders, in reading or listening materials. It's not necessary to identify or focus on the person's orientation – the goal is to normalize inclusion and representation.
- **Sexual Orientation:** If institutional and political constraints allow it, try to include material that shows same-sex couples in family scenes without explicitly stating relationship types. For example, you can show a larger group of people that includes multiple adults with kids – in this way anyone can identify the parents in the image as whoever fits their personal family situation.

Remember that education is about preparing learners to build a better world where diverse individuals can share the space in harmony. It is important to make learners (and all individuals) feel accepted, included, and respected to create better learning opportunities. This will ensure a great performance, but above all, inclusion can take your students to reach their full potential… and that is what teachers are for.