

Queering Language and Intercultural Education?

Fred Dervin, University of Helsinki, Finland

Introduction

Language and intercultural education has experienced manifold changes over the past decades – some ‘good’ and ‘bad’ changes. Although there is often a chasm between what is advocated by researchers and what practitioners are ready to take in, the language teaching of today is very different from that of 20 years ago. As far as the intercultural component is concerned, most scholars now agree that more space should be given to the ‘inter-’ of the notion rather than the ‘cultural’ – an old and tired concept that even anthropology has discarded. Giving back *agency* to the intercultural speaker – rather than his/her culture – has thus been high on the agenda. Critical social theory, postcolonial theory, critical race studies, to name but a few, have contributed immensely to these changes.

Yet sexualities have rarely been called to the rescue in language and intercultural teaching-learning while other educational fields have used e.g. ‘queer theory’ to examine curricula, classroom interaction, learning contents, etc. According to Nelson (2006: 1) “In the vast majority of language education literature, it seems as if we have been collectively imagining a monosexual community of interlocutors”. While the ‘multi’ is in fashion (as in *multiliteracies*, *multilingual*) the *mono-* still prevails in relation to gender, sex and sexualities in our field. The overemphasis on *culture* and *language*, and the ignorance of these elements, pose ethical problems.

In July 2014 a ludicrous story was widely reported around the world when a social media specialist and a blogger for an English language learning centre in the USA was fired for having defined the word “homophones” on his website. As we all know, homophones refer to words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings. The word thus has nothing to do with sexuality. The blogger’s boss let the employee go for having given the impression that the school, which had taught English to thousands of students from all over the world, was supportive of homosexuality... Needless to say that many of these international ‘customers’ would probably define themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual and thus be offended by this behavior. Would the blogger have been fired had he chosen to write about such expressions as *Chinese whispers* or *Muslim bags*? Why do some words appear to be more acceptable, more politically correct than others in certain language learning contexts?

In this contribution I propose to explore this largely ignored aspect of language and intercultural education and the ‘monosexualising tendencies’ (Nelson, *ibid.*) that characterize the field. I also problematize the use of queer theory beyond the “cul de sac of studies of sexuality and gender” (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014: 434) in intercultural and language education.

Language and Intercultural Education as a Place of Heteronormative Dominance

At a recent talk on *Diversities in Language Education* in Finland, many practitioners reacted negatively to my suggestion that we should start considering seriously

‘queering’ language and intercultural education. Some teachers said that sexualities were too taboo and a ‘private thing’ for their students and that, as heterosexuals, they felt they didn’t feel competent to delve into discussions on e.g. homosexualities. I counter-argued by showing them that many of the topics covered in language and intercultural education can potentially touch upon sexualities (family, hobbies, political opinions, etc.). This episode seems to confirm the shared argument amongst critical scholars that language teaching-learning still appears to be a place of heteronormative dominance, i.e. heterosexuality as the ‘norm’ in the language classroom and the silencing of sexual minorities. It also reveals the often apolitical and careful ‘identity’ of the field. With current heated discussions around gay marriage in Finland – which remains in 2014 one of the few European countries not to have legalized it – it is surprising to hear teachers being reluctant to discuss queering the contents of what they teach. Isn’t the point of education in the 21st century to ‘free’ our students’ as well as our own minds?

In a special issue entitled ‘Queer enquiry in language education’, the editor, C. D. Nelson (2006: 4), explains that “This special issue invites us to listen to the voices of students coming out as gay or lesbian; calling a classmate queer, whether disparagingly or admiringly; actively dis-identifying themselves from being seen as gay; or expressing curiosity about gay people”. These phenomena do take place in our language teaching classrooms and should be acknowledged, discussed and not ‘hidden’. By disregarding them we contribute to monosexualising our classrooms and language and intercultural education. We have become well-armed to face various forms of racism, neo-racism, xenophobia and stereotypes about the ‘cultural other’ that language and intercultural education can lead to but how ready are we to fight against monosexualising and e.g. homophobia in our classrooms? Do we know how to discuss these issues? As the aforementioned teacher puts it: Do we need to be personally touched by such elements to react? Do we need to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or/and ‘queer’ ourselves to act? Just like one does not need to be ‘black’ to react strongly against racism, one does not need to be ‘gay’ to include the agenda of the politics of sexual identities into our work.

A very easy way to start including these discussions in language and intercultural education is to consider the notion of *gender performativity* as proposed by the philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) to show our learners that gender identities are emergent, contextual and intersubjective rather than solid and static. Observing how in language textbooks for example different characters are made to ‘do’, conform and embody certain gender norms represents an easy and fruitful activity. If some characters are presented as *differing from the norm*, the students could be asked to discuss how s/he is made to perform compared to e.g. how such characters would perform in their own society. A link with how cultural identities are co-constructed, negotiated and performed can help students to understand the fluidity of sexualities.

As a summary Cynthia D. Nelson (2010, 455-57) has proposed the following three principles when attempting to queer language and intercultural education and move beyond heteronormativity:

“Be willing to engage with gay topics and perspectives, and use any discomfort or dilemmas that may arise (for oneself or others) to illuminate the

sociosexual dimensions of communication.

Frame class activities and discussions in ways that allow for gay speaking positions and vantage points, within social interactions inside or outside the classroom.

Be willing and able to consider the effects on communication of heteronormative practices that privilege heterosexuality and silence or condemn other sexualities”.

Step by step, while getting to know one’s class and each student, and building up trust, teachers but also researchers could make the language classroom more diverse and less heteronormative.

Queer Language and Intercultural Education Beyond Seeing Gender and Sexuality Everywhere

As asserted earlier language and intercultural education has tended to lack political perspectives. Interestingly a quick look at recent publications on language teaching-learning allows us to note the surprising absence of the keyword of *social justice*, which is now central in general education. Even though the notion has now become an empty signifier, the original idea behind it was stimulating for both scholars and practitioners. Awareness of and fighting against oppression, power differentials, misrepresentations of self and other and any form of discrimination all hide behind the notion of social justice. If taken seriously, these could turn language and intercultural education into a more political achievement. In this section I argue that queer theory can contribute to this objective.

Queer theory has often been criticized for seeing sexuality everywhere and triggering a view of social justice ‘tethered to a focus on gender, sex, and sexuality’ (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014: 441). There also tends to be an unfair and unjustified equation between ‘queer’ (in terms of sexuality) and ‘discrimination’. For scholars such as King (2008: 231) queer could be extended to refer to “people pushed to the margins in society (whether homosexual or not)” and to open up the notion beyond sexual identity. Just like *culture* or *religion* are not enough to examine oppression, discrimination, stereotyping, power imbalance between certain interlocutors, one needs to look into the notion of intersectionality to expand the benefits of queer theory in language and intercultural education. In other words, intersectionality could allow us to create a kind of queer theory beyond mere sexualities. Intersectionality is an analytic framework that allows relating dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, status, language and sexuality, etc. in education. As such the analysis of interaction between individuals in a certain (foreign) language can be enriched if one takes into account many of these aspects. For example, if one looks into the interaction between a woman from Saudi Arabia, wearing a hijab, and a male sales assistant in the upmarket department store Harrods located in Knightsbridge, London England, in order to understand what is happening one might have to take into account their different genders, their social and economic capitals, the power differentials (the customer vs. the assistant), the representations they have of each other, etc. For Susan R. Jones and Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe (2011: 12-13) intersectionality allows us to complicate identity, to dissect the experiences of the

disadvantaged, to unveil power in interconnected structures of inequality and to promote social justice and social change. While these objectives have been ‘mainstream’ in many sub-branches of education, language and intercultural education still seems to be lacking such important and basic perspectives today - the overemphasis on *culture* and *language* having blinded us.

Helping People Not To Feel ‘Vertiginous’ About Queering Language And Intercultural Education

It is our duty as researchers and practitioners to push through the agenda of queerness in Language and Intercultural Education, and to fight for the visibility of non-heteronormative aspects of self and other. A queer perspective on Language and Intercultural Education can also be defined broadly, well beyond sexuality. The keywords of *normalcy*, *difference*, and *visibility*, in relation to a social justice approach to language and intercultural education, can help us to open up discussions about discrimination and misrepresentation of many and varied groups, and individuals. A queer approach can also help us to put an end to the privileging of certain fights over others (racism vs. homophobia) and to complexify these phenomena. Intersectionality is a very fruitful tool in that sense.

To conclude let me paraphrase the writer Hanif Kureishi (2005: 99) in his criticism of bigotry towards multiculturalism: “if the idea of multi-culturalism [queerness] makes some people vertiginous, mono-culturalism [monosexuality] – of whatever sort – is much worse”. Many of us feel uncomfortable, ‘vertiginous’, about introducing the idea of queerness in our teaching and research – for fear of reprisals (bullying from colleagues and students, labeling, solid identifications, etc.). Very few of us were trained to deal with these phenomena. Maybe we could learn from this Mexican teacher, Lety, who taught in a language centre in Cuernavaca. A journalist from Toronto’s Star newspaper (2007) reported that this Spanish language centre runs special-theme programs throughout the year, including gay and lesbian courses such as *In/Visibility: Lesbian Lives in Mexico and Coming Out: The Gay Men's Experience in Mexico*. The students are taught expressions used in Mexico to talk about gays and lesbians and discuss the intersectionality between sexuality, ethnicity, language and social class in Mexican ‘culture’. The ‘vertigo’ experienced by most language teachers and researchers would improve if teacher education and researchers’ training involved such learning experiences...

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