

# Do We Need to Queer ELT Pedagogy in India?

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## ABSTRACT

*The present paper focuses on initiating discussion on the much-debatable issue of adopting a gender and sexuality perspective in ELT practices in India. Till quite recently our classes have been either mono-normative or heteronormative. The basic philosophy behind this kind of socio-educational fabric is due to the belief that all beings are binary and straight, whereas scientific inquiry has proved otherwise. Also, the misconception among teachers and educators that sexual identity has no impact on English Language Teaching, has further reinforced the practice of heteronormative ideology in the classrooms. The present study attempts to determine how teaching English as a second language (ESL) needs to be meaningfully queered to create safer spaces and sustain the learning motivation of the non-heteronormative and non-binary communities in the ELT classes. In the study, we argue to have Inclusive Education in India as per the mandate of the New Educational Policy, 2020. It is important to break the age-old narrow confines created against non-normative gender and sexuality learners, especially by queering English Language pedagogy and also providing them due representation in classroom interaction.*

**Keywords:** Heteronormative; New Education Policy 2020; learner engagement; queer pedagogy; gender equity in ELT.

## Introduction

Intersectionality between language, culture, gender, sexuality and education is inextricable. By learning a language, human beings are empowered to build relations with other fellow beings and have a deeper understanding of the patterned way of thinking and behaving with people who may be native or non-native speakers of that language. Further, it is the social and cultural realities that shape people's perceptions and beliefs regarding the norms of gender and sexual identities. So, the currency of sexuality and gender stereotypes gets internalized in the impressionable minds of children from an early age which is fostered by their immediate environment. A similar kind of complexity of association exists when it comes to language instruction, particularly second language

instruction. As a result, heteronormative ideologies (Warner, 1991) dominate the content and interactions in classrooms which creates a climate of discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) Identities. This kind of climate of discrimination against LGBTQI students regrettably renders classrooms unsafe for both LGBTQI individuals and their heteronormative peers. Therefore, language educators are required to be aware of how gender and sexuality issues intersect with curriculum, pedagogy, and learning. (Nelson, 2009)

Looking into the Indian tapestry of LGBTQI inclusion, we can say that India is legally and socially expanding its horizons to give transgenders and same-sex couples legitimate recognition in society. However, stigma and

discrimination still exist in the academic domains as the issue related to LGBTQI individuals or their experiences has still not found a place in the educational institutes. According to a study conducted by an organization in Chennai and the UNESCO office in New Delhi (Times of India, 2019), LGBTQ students are subjected to bullying, harassment, and discrimination on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation. The study reported, about 70% of LGBTQ students experience severe anxiety and depression because of toxic and distressing conditions that eventually lead to academic failure. The same report also stated that 73% had reduced social interaction, 63% reported lower academic performance, and approximately 53% of respondents indicated that they had chosen to miss their classes. About a third (33.2%) said that bullying was the major reason for them to drop out of school. Studies have shown that LGBTQI adolescents are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their counterparts. (Johns et al., 2019, 2020). In a 2016 study titled “Suicide and suicidal behaviour among transgender persons” conducted by Virupaksha et al., the literature search was used as methodology, using three sources, i.e., electronic databases (PubMed, ProQuest, Google Scholar, PsycInfo), manual search (library catalogue), and grey literature (consultation with experts). The study indicated that 31% of transgender people in India had committed suicide, and 50% had attempted suicide before the age of 20. According to Statista (2022), around 200 transgender individuals committed suicide in India in 2020. However, due to social stigma, many cases are neglected, and some go unreported.

Social discrimination and marginalization of LGBTQI individuals extend their detrimental influence into the academic realm. This pervasive presence of sexuality and gender biases

significantly hinders the development of inclusive and equitable teaching and learning communities within educational settings. Moreover, heterosexuality, known as “straight thinking”, is deeply ingrained in the curriculum, textbooks, classroom interaction, and instructional practices, which denies the very existence of LGBTQI students (Oakes, 1995; Thomas-Reid, 2018; Joshua M. Paiz, 2019). Everything in the educational domain, from curriculum to evaluation is all governed by dominant heterosexual ideology framing societal norms and regulations. So, the notion of cisgender and heterosexuality further creates the walls of ‘normal’ high in functional academic spaces. The majority of interactions and dialogues in language classrooms continue to revolve around binaries, causing the marginalization and discrimination of trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (Knisely, 2023) students which in turn makes them feel isolated. They are expected to remain “muted” (Frank and Treichler, 1978), as hegemonic binary and heterosexual learner groups continue to dominate the classroom spaces and subjugate learner groups that deviate from the norm which further promotes inequality and imbalance.

At the very outset, we would like to emphasize the scarce literature available in India in the field of education regarding gender and sexuality. The research that includes LGBTQI issues or experiences within academia in India is very less when compared to other nations. However, Arora (2018), in her research uncovered the prevailing gender and sexuality norms in the Indian education system. Her research argued that the prevailing norms of gender and sexuality in academic spaces do not cater to LGBTQI individuals, shifting them to the margins. It was also realized that unintentional bullying and discrimination was caused through the words used by the teacher, peers, principals and non-teaching

staff causing bullying and mockery. Further, Ahuja et al., (2019) conducted a study to foster a positive attitude towards the gay and lesbian community in India. They did an experimental study using interventional activities in an Indian university. The results indicated that there was some change in the attitude of the participants in reducing prejudice towards gay and lesbian people. Though there has been research in other fields of medical science (Sivasubramanian, 2011; Srikanth et al, 2016), identity stigma (Chakrapani et al, 2017), law (Misra, 2009), media (Gopinath, 2018; Jain, 2022; Arora & Sylvia, 2023), the academic fields lack behind in scholarships on LGBTQI issues and their experiences. Thus, the present study emphasizes creating secured spaces in education by upholding the norms and practices where everything other than binary and heterosexuality is unacceptable and abnormal both in the course curriculum and classroom pedagogy.

### **Grammatical Gender across the Languages and TESOL**

According to our current understanding of linguistics, the form of a noun conveys the inherent characteristics of a given grammatical gender system, and it appears that languages with grammatical gender can have anywhere from two to twenty distinct genders (Hockett, 1967). The majority of the world's languages, including English, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic, use binary pronouns to differentiate between male and female. This implies that there are no gender identities other than male and female. In gendered languages, all noun/pronoun cases, including subjective (nominative), objective (accusative), and possessive (genitive), designate humans as masculine or feminine. Any associated variables that reflect these specific gender differentiations are treated identically. In other words, teaching a language predicated on

binary gender norms results in non-engagement with trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming communities. In this type of classroom, non-normative language learners continue to experience discrimination and marginalization due to the conformist outlook of the teaching-learning communities. Therefore, the grammatical structures of gender in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) not only strengthen the normative ideology of gender binary but also reinforce the marginalized status of gender non-conforming identities.

After a careful understanding of the English language and its grammatical gender system, we can identify three major issues in the case of TESOL: (1) it is not the native language, (2) it continues to foster the age-old normative belief system instead of fostering openness and progressive beliefs, and (3) it hinders the learning process if the native language adheres to three or more gender principles.

Vandrick (1997), a renowned TESOL scholar, has emphasized the role of English Language Classrooms to create a safe place for all students with concealed identities that may be sexual, medical, religious, regional, racial, educational, or cultural. This necessitates that TESOL teachers, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should question and deliberate the long-standing tradition and its repercussions. They should focus on initiating dialogues about these issues and build harmony, parity, and inclusivity to prevent students from developing stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about gender and sexual identities in the classroom spaces, especially in the postmodern globalized world.

For including the non-normative identities in the classroom spaces, English language classroom researchers, practitioners and academicians

recommend different pedagogic techniques. Some researchers emphasized implementing a gay-lesbian framework and inclusive pedagogies to include non-normative identities in ELT classrooms (Britzman, 1996; Moita-Lopes, 2006). However, this pedagogy was criticized by other researchers (see Nelson, 1999; Piaiz, 2005; Bollas, 2021) who pointed out the problem of inclusion, they argued that labelling would enhance the stereotype that goes with any minority status. The process of inclusion would be tantamount to reinforcing the marginal status of the non-normative people by bringing them to the center stage. While investigating issues of gender and sexual identity in English language education, Nelson (1999, 2009) argued that queer theoretical framework is better than the gay/lesbian one because it shifts the focus from inclusion to enquiry and instead of including minority sexualities it enquires all sexualities with a lens of language and culture. Therefore, researchers like Nelson, Paiz and Bollas advocate for queer pedagogy, which emphasizes understanding the existing diversity in the classroom by questioning all genders and sexualities and creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging among all students including LGBTQI. Researchers, therefore, suggest designing a curriculum that incorporates a variety of course content and learning activities in terms of both heteronormative and non-heteronormative issues. As teachers do not have the time or the training to design classroom material related to non-normative identities, Bollas (2020) suggests to a framework for designing textbooks or supplementary materials that can be made readily available to the teachers, making their syllabus more inclusive.

While discussing the design of a course syllabus, Paiz pinpoints three fundamental goals: 1) Creating awareness, 2) Establishing significance

of understanding sexual diversity and 3) Enabling dialogue. Sunderland (2021) goes on to the next step into the discussion and highlights the three concomitant outcomes: 1) an enhanced understanding of LGBTQI issues, 2) critical and transformed behaviours of mind, and 3) verbal and rhetorical skills for respectful learner engagement. The queer theory research by Sunderland, examines varied aspects such as normative classroom practices, and textbooks (Liddicoat, 2009; Paiz, 2015; Sunderland, 2021). She further discusses how some researchers view English language learning (ELL) as a liberatory act, as English language proficiency provides individuals access to the distinctive identity and sociocultural benefits to join and succeed in a larger non-heteronormative i.e., LGBTQI community (Kachru, 1991; Peirce, 1989). It becomes essential to conduct a thorough investigation and assessment of the instructional materials in order to revise and make them more linguistically appropriate, encouraging instructors to engage in deeper critical thought.

Pennycook (2001), a critical applied linguistics researcher, believes that in the ELT classroom, a teacher should engage the class on non-heteronormative issues in addition to heteronormative issues in order to promote awareness and sensitivity among all students regarding the existence of diverse learner groups. Paulo Freire (1970), Henry Giroux (2010), Peter McLaren (2002), and Bell Hooks (2003) are among the practitioners in the field of critical pedagogy who suggest that more effective strategies be employed for enhancing students' critical thinking and promoting positive behavioural change in their lives. These anti-oppressive pedagogical strategies improve student consciousness, comprehension, and judgement by empowering them to speak and express themselves in the classroom. There is a growing trend of

employing a pedagogy, commonly referred to as queer pedagogy (Matthew Thomas-Reid, 2018; Giffney, 2009; Young, 2012), that emphasizes all sexualities through language and culture, as opposed to merely including minority genders and sexualities. In India, it is crucial to establish an inclusive educational system that embraces diversity in gender and sexuality, alongside linguistic and cultural diversity as also argued by Arora (2018). Our research, which focuses on gender and sexuality within English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Indian education system, will be a significant and unique contribution to this endeavour.

### **Gender and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the concept of inclusion in order to empower individuals by recognizing and respecting their age, caste, region, religion, disability, gender, and sexual orientation differences. The policy identifies Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDG) identities as ‘notably female and transgender individuals’ (NEP, 2020, p. 24). However, this does not explicitly specify and recognize the LGBTQI identities beyond transgender. As identities are not limited to female and transgender only, research should be conducted at the policy level and the policy should be formulated to be inclusive of all genders and sexualities. Bhattacharya & Jha (202) in their study mentioned that the policy regarding ELT needs more clarification and adaptation to the budding needs and demands of the younger generation. Therefore, policy research in India should prioritize the early introduction of important gender and sexuality issues into the education system. By initiating conversations about these issues with students at a young age, we can better

prepare them to address and act upon these challenges as responsible adults. This proactive approach ensures that the next generation of teachers and learners are not only aware of the pressing issues such as social inequality, discrimination in educational spaces and marginalization but also equipped with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and empathy needed to contribute meaningfully to society. (Brianna Burke on “Teaching Environmental Justice through The Hunger Games” for the ALAN Review).

Bell Hooks (1996) contends in her paper entitled, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, we concur that every pedagogy gets influenced and shaped politically, especially when there is “a lack of meaningful access to truth.” This kind of teaching learning spaces become more complacent and awash with discrimination and social injustice. Many academic institutes now endeavor to make their campuses secure for LGBTQI individuals and to engage all students in conversations about diverse sexual identities.

### **Summing Up**

While it may be difficult to take varied intersectionality approaches to something as complex as gender and sexuality, we argue that doing so will add strength and nuance to our understanding as well as to the teaching and learning of English in India. Positioning queer pedagogy in ELT classrooms can influence learners’ knowledge, tolerance, beliefs and ideology pertaining to LGBTQI identities. If the curriculum does not support LGBTQI inclusion, the teachers can bring LGBTQI stories, podcasts or YouTube videos to the classroom to educate their learners about sections of society that still remain marginalised. Educators can narrate life

experiences of Trans people who openly live their identities and conduct a discussion on them and their successful careers. Further teachers can also ask students about their perceptions regarding LGBTQI community and hold a discussion on the same. Teachers can also rely on social-media and cinema to divulge students in discussion relating to movies that portray LGBTQI characters. India being a culturally rich society can further help the educators to make students connect to its history and mythology to connect dots with the current and the historical status of gender and sexuality in the country.

Our understanding of the present curriculum indicates that NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) ELT textbooks prescribed by CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) do not adhere to LGBTQI inclusion. However, there is a scope to indulge in queer content by using certain chapters. The chapter 'The Proposal' by Anton Chekhov in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English textbook (First Flight, p. 120) opens an opportunity for the teachers to discuss same-sex love, relationships, marriages, their rights, and their status in society. This will lead to a healthy discussion and pave a path for the teacher to make the learners aware and accepting and also respectful of the individuals who do not fall into the confines of heterosexuality.

Thus, queering English teaching can play a significant role in bringing about behavioural change in Indian society; however, a number of experiments must be conducted in curriculum design, pedagogical techniques, classroom interactions, evaluation, and feedback of English language courses. This may create a stigma-free teaching and learning environment and a more respectful and accommodating atmosphere for everyone, regardless of their gender and sexual identity. Researchers may conduct

research in India on gender and sexuality issues in English language education at all levels, reflecting on how notions and practices related to gender and sexuality affect English language education and by experimenting with critical and situated pedagogies of queering the classroom, mapping the behavioural transformation among students.

Further, we hope that this article captures not just a discussion on the intersection of gender and sexuality with ELT but also an intersectional space which encourages our readers to utilize frameworks, methodologies, and pedagogies relevant to their research while they explore this intersectionality in their ELT pedagogy and syllabus in more nuanced and robust ways.

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