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LGBT AND QUEER RESEARCH IN ESP: THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

> All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.
> George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Gender discrimination and inequalities in higher education are rooted phenomena. The overall structure of Western society shows that diversity of human sexual orientations has not been given sufficient attention and, as a reflection, scholarship on LGBT and queer individuals and organisations in higher education have claimed a deeper theoretical concern. The presence of several approaches in research on gender issues is the outcome of a limited application of queer theory on academic education. Indeed, as Renn (132) suggests, "[l]esbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and queer research in higher education is embedded in a central paradox: although colleges and universities are the source of much queer theory, they have remained substantially untouched by the queer agenda", thus highlighting the need of including in academic programs more inclusive gender-oriented curricula.

This article ventures to suggest that, notwithstanding the effort to recognise the value of queer theory, universities have not surrendered on the queering of higher education itself and strive to assure that every single person of the academic community is respected and valued regardless of his/her sexual orientation and/or gender identity. A respectful atmosphere would guarantee each member of the community a positive sense of self and a fruitful educational and personal growth. It also proposes reflections and theoretical implications on the interrelation between ESP and the new directions in LGBT and queer research to enhance and improve educational practise and expertise within both queer and non-queer academic organisations.

Queer theory initially drew on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies, but there are several points of contestation between these two approaches, originating mostly from their diverse standpoints on sexual identity issues. To contextualise the enduring tensions that characterise the dispute, it would be worth providing some theoretical notes on LGBT studies and queer theory. Indeed, the impact of *queer theory* on language could help clarify the relationship between sexual identities and English for Special Purposes. While not exhaustive, the following tenets analysed by Jonathan and Gibson (24.1:3) identify the recurring strains of thoughts in *queer theory*:

- Identities are constructed and performed rather than essential and "natural";

- All spaces (both inside the classroom and out) are saturated with gendered ad sexualized constructions of identity, which are never entirely our own but are given to us as "narrations" of self;

- We negotiate multiple identities through multiple social spaces, creating complex intersections between self, perception of self, other, and perception of other;

- Our conceptions of selves as sexualized and gendered beings are intimately connected to ways power is shaped, shifted, and shared between self and other in the social milieu;

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- Understanding the construction and negotiation of these identities allows us to resist *normalizing* identity, which robs our differences - and the differences of others – of their critical power (…).

Hence, a specific focus on the gender/ESP relation might help struggling communities – i.e. academic, private and public institutions - cope with an increasingly resource-stretched environment. By cooperating, communities might bring people together to solve common problems. In so doing, they overcome differences in perspectives that are brought about by the intermingling of specific organisational structures and personal backgrounds.

In this light, ESP could represent a particularly valuable approach for facilitating interrelations and learning among participants with different backgrounds and expertise, but sharing a mutual interest. Significantly, English for Specific Purposes could favour a learning process that focusses on the relevance of learning from each other's practice. Indeed, such a process would enable different groups to look critically at opportunities for the co-production of knowledge and to take a "social" view of learning and personal development, as opposed to one that aridly aims at memorising contents only.

The building of relations within academic fields and institutions should be based on the principle of reciprocity. Such partnership serves to create a dialogue beyond the boundaries that divide the university and the world of specialised jobs, and to foster a collaboration, which is open-minded, fruitful and, needless to say, "experimental".

1. ESP and queer identities: speculating on language and sexuality

Scholars and students are potentially influenced by academic and institutional power relations. As Sarah Benesch posits, critical pedagogy acknowledges students' and teachers' subject position, for instance, their gender, their race, and social class and she further endorses the assumption according to which the purpose of education is to improve human existence in all its aspects. Thus, a greater focus on developmental socially and linguistically constructed processes to secure integration among genders in academic contexts could be possible, also by means of the ESP approach. Indeed, it may implement and negotiate discussions on social issues such as gender, as well as on procedures and languages of specialised jobs and activities.

Teaching ESP at an academic level entails a twofold challenge: firstly, to "validate" a system of values that recognises, and valorises, the presence of "multi-gendered" human beings, and secondly, to investigate how higher education can promote integration by emphasising the contribution that ESP may foster in this respect. In order to define the role of ESP in changing the system of values of academic fields, it is necessary to circumscribe the boundaries of the cultural dominion that will be treated.

One of the most salient aspects that concerns identity is its realisation in professional settings. These "locations" are crucial to social identification, for spatiality – along with temporality - represent two crucial dimensions of human life. For instance, if we take into account the academic field as a place in which different identities interact with each other, it would be possible to define it as an intercultural environment that

> (…) is part of the "heterotopias" or "heterogeneous relational spaces" (…), i.e. the 'third space' that allows individuals to redefine themselves in relation to new situations they encounter. Indeed, multicultural professional settings provide a hybrid cultural space in which different cultural groups can work, develop and change together (…) (Salvi 21-45).

The "third space" that Rita Salvi evokes may find its realisation in the English for Special Purposes approach. ESP has been recognised as one of the generic competences to be improved at an academic level worldwide that enables students to communicate on a global level. In addition, ESP directly affects, and interacts with, the students' system of values, including the presence of "queer" learners. These values are actually the result of different beliefs and ways of thinking about specific issues, due to the existence of distinctive points of views. Obviously, the presence of several standpoints depends upon

(…) a specific subset of self-expression values recognized called emancipative values, which combines an emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunities, so they involve priorities for lifestyle liberty, gender equality, personal autonomy and the voice of the people. Emancipative values are crucial for the broader process of human empowerment which, if set in motion, empowers people to exercise freedoms in their course of action (Boyte *Building Civic Agency*)

In this light, the ESP support in higher education domain can help gender integration as well as enhance personal growth and professional expertise of both students and teachers. The new conditions brought about by contemporary society - i.e. gender integration, globalisation, and staff mobility -   lead to new research that focuses on the optimisation of teaching processes and gender recognition. This interest is accompanied by an ever-growing need for "integrative competences" that could empower effective interaction, especially in academic settings.

ESP could be of fundamental importance in academic research and syllabuses as it challenges students to think critically about how human lives are mediated through the process of constructing identities, also in higher education interaction. In this light, alternative curricula should include the revision of course material and content to represent the full spectrum of sexual orientation, identity, development, and life representations. Since language is also a way of promoting identities, ESP might be interpreted as an approach to identify and tailor learning and language needs to "specific" groups of students. Educators are responsible for training both heterosexual and LGBT students who may find themselves confronted with people that they feel different to address. As a consequence, a truly valid approach to gender-based relations should be based on an understanding and sharing the processes of language learning that could help avoid the damaging effects that homophobia has on students and educators alike. This is the case of ESP: English for Specific Purposes represents indeed an attempt to enhance students' autonomy and sense of respect in social relationships along with their linguistic and metacognitive strategies by making them cooperate and work for a common goal.

LGBT and queer students' gendered experience could represent a vital element in academic institutions, for they may offer what Homi K. Bhabha (40-52) defines as "moments of identification". Hence, in the academic context, in which English is the medium of everyday interaction, also ESP can offer the students, irrespective of their sexual identity as either LGBT, queer or straight, the possibility to "negotiate" relationships in mutual respect and, it goes without saying, increase their expertise in speaking English. If learning means fulfilling one's identity and needs and "preparing" for what is yet to come, then ESP has a primary role in academic education as it mediates between students' sexual orientation and language/s acquisition. Significantly, the following points may be taken as examples of discussion and reflection on the relationship between language and gender issues:

- Ask students to define the concept of homophobia and the effective implications it entails at social and educational level;
- Have students discuss examples of social justice and/or injustice relating to homophobia and LGBT discourse;
- Ask students why homophobia is a key-topic in education;
- Have students do research about homophobia and gender issues;
- Have students do reports on rulings that have impacted gender discourses locally, nationally, and abroad;
- Have students reflect on possible outcomes of living a life that does not consider gender equity as priority;
- Analyse language related to gender discourses, homophobia, and social justice: LGBT rights, violence, power, heteronormativity, equity, peace, academic institutions, and language embedded within the definition of gender issues at large.

According to several analysts (Brems and Strauss; Nelson 143-150), gender discrimination and homophobia can deeply affect education at any level. On this premise, any student and teacher should be aware, and

respectful, of the presence of individuals who live their sexualities and identities without upholding and/or sticking to heteronormative codes of behaviours. By offering more "open-minded" and integrative learning and teaching systems, the fear of discrimination would make room for social and sexual respect and avoid debates on the "supremacy" of a straight education. Scholars and practitioners in ESL (Jones and Jack) have worked out templates for curricula and materials that can be considered as "gay inclusive". For instance, in some commercial teaching materials references to gay and lesbian issues have been added to discussions on basic topics as family and social discrimination at large. The same process on integration/inclusion should be proposed to ESP learners. Sexuality and identity are crucial issues in education and every pedagogy that tends to underestimate this condition is bound to fail. So far, despite the efforts of several scholars to include a "queer perspective" on ESP,

> (…) some colleagues are puzzled, even perturbed, by the idea that lesbian or gay identities could have any relevance to language learning. To them, gay-friendly teaching is at best of marginal importance, of interest only to a small minority of learners and teachers (gay ones), and at worst invasive, inserting a discourse of (homo)sex into a field in which that discourse is neither relevant nor appropriate (Nelson 373).

This "puzzled and perturbed" behaviours are the consequence of a far-fetched approach to education and, more significantly, to human relations. On this premise, the term *queer* may bring about multifaceted reactions. The very word *queer*, once entailing negative traits, has now a twofold use due to the social "redefinitions" that it has undergone: on the one hand, it serves to blur clear-cut and institutionalised conceptions of genders and, on the other hand, it can be used as shorthand for the long phrase *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender*. The only difference is that, whereas lesbian and gay theory mainly focusses on lesbian and gay people, queer theory is concerned with all genders, "across the spectrum of sexualities" (Segdwick 1). According to this wider perspective on sexualities, the hetero-homo binary opposition is no longer relevant.

Thus far, there could be some practical problems to solve in projecting curricula and materials for the inclusion of queer identities. The first point refers to how a queer individual should be presented in curricula and materials for ESP. The second question concerns the "queer features" that teachers and material developers would include in their projects, without taking the risk of not mentioning all sexual identities. Undoubtedly, these assumptions are fundamental and should not be underestimated. A possible solution to "guarantee" inclusion/integration could be the following:
- to acknowledge that the domain of sexualities and identities is crucial to people for various reasons;
- to analyse both straight and queer sexualities, avoiding prejudices and judgements;
- to look at "alternative" ways of producing sexualities as a source in various cultural contexts (i.e., university and work) and discourses.

In this light, *queer theory* may provide a more flexible and "open" framework for allowing inquiry within the intercultural background of ESP. Obviously, on a practical level, queer-informed inquiry may offer a more accessible process of integration/inclusion, by advocating for a wide range of sexual identities.

2. Legal English: ESP meets law and identity

Conceptually, as Judith Butler (1-25) puts it, "social beings perform", at least in part, both their identities and subjectivities within, and by means of, articulated semiological languages, which include domains such as body, fashion, and photography with their "unspoken" communication (Barthes; Halliday and Hasan).

In such a "differentiated" context, an example of ESP application at academic level can be offered by International Legal English. Law students and practising lawyers are expected to work and seek employment in international legal domains and to be familiar with legal concepts and terms commonly associated with international commercial law. Within this field, the knowledge of legal terminology should keep pace with the interaction among "alternative" identities. I would suggest the question of sex change. If we take into account this issue, lawyers' expertise should present an extensive and appropriate knowledge, not only of a wide

legal vocabulary, but also of the "human factors" that influence such experiences. Thus, managing a variety of law-related topics pertaining to *queer* identities serves a twofold purpose: on the one hand, law students and lawyers may gain detailed understanding of linguistic structures and legal terminology. On the other hand, they can identify and come into contact with "alternative" realities that entail expertise in interactional and social skills, along with cooperation and negotiation abilities.

As suggested above, gender equality represents the goal that every government and international organisation should guarantee. At present, there are several ongoing discussions on the meaning of equality and how to achieve it. Obviously, there are global patterns to inequality between queer and straight individuals. Firstly, queers political engagement and their participation in decision-making institutions is inferior to straights'. Secondly, queer individuals have fewer socio-economic and legal opportunities. These issues – within gender discrimination – need to be addressed in efforts to promote gender equality.

Achieving equality between queer and straight sexualities will take time and require changes in attitudes, relationships, institutions, and legal frameworks as well.

Instead of sidestepping the complexities that inevitably characterise identities, a queer approach makes these problematic aspects the very focus of learning. The point is not to give up including queer characters or issues in ESP because of their innermost "peculiarities" of representation, nor to choose between the multifaceted traits of identity, but to make these considerations a central site of investigation. In this light, the following suggestions might be taken as "guidelines" to speculate on the relationship between ESP and *queer theory*:

- In your country, what is the general attitude towards *queers*?

- How is it different in other countries? How is it similar?

- Why do individuals sometimes want to be considered as straights and/or queers?

- Why do individuals sometimes identify other people as queer and/or straight?

- It is important to know if a person is queer or straight? Why? When it is not important at all?

- In your country, are some sexual identities more acceptable than others? Why?

While not exhaustive, these reflections might help constructing a fruitful approach to knowing other people's experiences and sexual identities - or better yet – to appreciate a wider range of human potential that, needless to say, requires a "special knowledge of language" to convey its kaleidoscopic spectrum. Moreover, taking into consideration how different sexualities and identities are "performed" and "represented" may encourage teachers and students, at any level, to demystify unknown aspects of the target language. Indeed, by considering different cultural contexts and backgrounds it is possible to get a higher level of expertise, also in deciphering the various "purposes" that identities and sexualities serve and negotiate them more strategically. Most significantly, the relationship between identity and language reminds us that the former "arise(s) at specific times, in specific places, to do specific work" (Poynton 17), whereas the latter is the result of sociocultural perspectives and structures of cognition that are rooted in daily social and cultural practises in which individuals participate. Thus, as Meg Gebhard (544) highlights, "participation, in this sense, is how an individual carries out activities with others through the use of physical objects, or *artifacts*, and symbolic sign systems, or *psychological tools* (…)". On a closer analysis, this assumption seems to confirm the fact that also communication - ESP included - is the result of the interaction of macro-cultural systems and identity-based constructions. Critical approaches to linguistic communication have underlined the dynamics through which language "mirrors" social relations. To this respect, Norman Fairclough (3-4) states that "discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities ad realities, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects".

Undoubtedly, a tension exist between the social "effects" of language and individuals' ability/capacity to manipulate and manage communication "for special purposes". This notwithstanding, a structured

cooperation between ESP methodology and *queer* identity could provide an insightful awareness on how "relatively powerless groups can look after their own interests and maintain their identity through language use" (Janks and Ivanic 315).

Such speculations and reflections on the interrelatedness between ESP and queer identities do not aim at challenging conventions, rather their objective is to engage with the processes and structures on which these conventions are based and, simultaneously, provide a dialogue for future transformations.

Such engagement, in which identities - be them queer or straight - are analysed and discussed should not be seen as an issue to side with or against, but as an opportunity to create a new dialogue between language and identity.

Amanda Knoradi (22) proposes the following points to explain the relation between *queer theory* and teaching:

> First, we must study human sexuality as socially structured and all human interaction as inherently sexual. We must analyse how all social institutions (i.e. family, medicine, criminal justice, and work) are involved in maintaining heterosexuality as a normative idea and practise. Second, we cannot assume that sexuality is fixed in people or in time or assume that individuals necessarily take their identity from their sexual practises. Thus, we must analyze sexuality as a spectrum of practises, rather than study individual people as homosexual or heterosexual. Third, we must challenge what is believed to be known about sexuality and the accepted academic paradigms for investigating and communicating about it.

3. Conclusion

Far from presenting the entire multifaceted academic scenario, this paper has illustrated some of the issues at stake, by fostering some examples of intercultural and gender-oriented approaches on ESP. In this light, gendered interaction can no longer be considered as an entity *per se*, but rather the result of the relations among various aspects of the human behaviour. Thus, culture, in its different manifestations, entails the concepts of "social identity" and "personal identity" (Tajfel and Turner, 7-24) in order to frame individual identification with a group. Culture, as a human phenomenon, can be defined on different degrees of analysis, ranging from the macro-level – i.e. national dimension – to micro-level, which includes individuals' identities (Scollon and Wong Scollon), described on the one hand as "projection of the self" and, on the other hand, as "the social and collective identity". Relentlessly, "personal identity" and "social identity" have been analysed in order to elaborate the diverse perspectives from which individuals identify with a group of any "category" (*Social Identity Theory,* SIT: Tajfel and Turner, 7-24; Straub *et al.*, 13-23). The results of these studies have shown that identity is not a "fixed" entity, rather it is a contigent dimension that cannot be "estimated". Upon closer analysis, it is likely that students attend university at varying levels of awareness about gender issues. That is a crucial point to take into account to develop behavioural models that aim at scaffolding a gender-oriented pedagogy into ESP courses at an academic level. It is fundamental that LGBT people are provided with equitable education and benefits therefore universities should develop initiatives and syllabuses to support students. In this light, ESP courses may offer the opportunity to implement language knowledge along with non-discrimination policy programmes to acknowledge the right of all students to be themselves.

In order to avoid the prejudice according to which culture represents a frightening element that might alter and mar social communication and relations, research should explore possible theoretical and practical solutions to retrieve an "in-between space" where people recognise themselves as "dynamic" identities, always "under construction".

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