

BOOK REVIEW

Pakula, Lukasz, Pawelczyk, Joanna and Sunderland, Jane. 2015. *Gender and Sexuality in English Language Education: Focus on Poland*. London: British Council.

The book reports on research findings from a British Council-funded project investigating EFL in Poland. The authors state that in research in Poland ‘there is a preponderance of studies of gender and just a little on sexuality *per se*’ (p. 30). The authors address this research gap by incorporating an exploration of sexuality alongside gender in their study. In this way, the book makes a very significant contribution to existing work in EFL, especially in relation to gender and issues around ‘identity’ more broadly. The other major area of significance is the book’s focus on the Polish context. This is refreshing as well as of great importance given the current preponderance of work focusing on Western Europe and North America. The authors justify this focus well by explaining that English teaching takes up a substantial amount of the typical school curriculum in Poland. At the same time, they observe that gender and sexuality have become almost taboo concepts in Poland which means that it is very difficult for EFL materials and teachers to accurately integrate more progressive socio-cultural and legal changes from elsewhere in Europe into their English teaching.

Pakula *et al* helpfully theorise EFL within a sociolinguistic community of practice framework. They successfully demonstrate how this aspect of sociolinguistic theory contributes to the investigation of gender and sexuality discourses. They draw on the analytical frameworks of multimodal discourse analysis, qualitative discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis in order to provide a thorough investigation of the research questions. Although the authors explain these frameworks clearly, I would like to have seen at least some discussion of how the frameworks were combined and the ways in which they complemented each other (and, indeed, if there were any tensions between them which had to be resolved in the process of their application). However, application of the frameworks to the data is fascinating and deeply revealing. The data itself is incredibly rich and the authors exploit it effectively to construct an overall argument that ‘gender is still made relevant in the language classroom in ways it should not be, and ignored in ways it should not be.’ (p. 95) The data analysis is also very effective for revealing the pervasive heteronormativity and non-representation of anything other than heterosexuality in the Polish EFL context.

The book has a coherent and accessible structure. Following the introductory Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provides a very helpful, comprehensive and informative review of existing literature on gender and sexuality research in EFL contexts. Chapter 3 describes the political and educational context in Poland, focusing in particular around current struggles and tensions around ‘gender’. In Chapter 4, the authors describe and justify the methodology for the project. They explain how the research involved the collection and analysis of three data-sets: textbooks used in Polish EFL classrooms; naturally-occurring EFL classroom interaction; interviews and focus groups with EFL students, teachers and textbook reviewers.

Chapters 5-7 are data-focused with Chapter 5 presenting and discussing the research findings relating to representations of gender and sexuality in the textbooks examined. In support of previous research, the authors find that women and girls continue to be underrepresented in the range of activities, occupations, discourse roles

and dialogue found in the textbooks. Unsurprisingly, they also found no examples of any non-heterosexual characters. A finding they note as more surprising was the extent to which heteronormativity was represented in the books examined – they comment on a regrettable dearth of examples of texts which offer any kind of non-heteronormative reading. However, the researchers emphasise their argument that it is what is ‘done’ with gender and sexuality representations in class that is more important than the actual content of the textbooks themselves.

Chapter 6 develops this argument by presenting and discussing findings around how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed and made ‘relevant’ through EFL classroom talk. They qualitatively examine what is *said* about the textbooks used in the classroom. Despite the fact that the authors do find some examples of teachers and students articulating challenge and resistance to the heteronormativity which pervades the textbooks, these are relatively rare exceptions. In most cases, they conclude from the findings of this aspect of the research that ‘it is clear that traditional, heteronormative thinking about gender is alive, well and frequently articulated.’ (p.72)

In Chapter 7, Pakula *et al* focus on the findings from their interviews and focus groups with EFL students, teachers and textbook reviewers. They find that gender and sexuality issues appear to be of some importance to some teachers, although ways of addressing these differ, particularly in the way that they elaborate on gender and sexuality in their practice. The authors note that all of the interviewees show a high level of awareness of the socio-political context of Poland as constraining open discussion of ‘taboo’ topics in classrooms. The interviews with textbook reviewers, however, revealed that the participants were still willing and able to comment critically on gender-related issues of representation in the materials. This leads the authors to conclude that ‘reviewing would definitely benefit from explicit policies and criteria in the guidelines for reviewers to ensure that all reviewers attend to these issues.’ (p.93)

The book ends with a concluding chapter in which the authors make insightful and important recommendations for dealing with gender and sexuality issues in EFL teaching and learning in Poland. These recommendations are helpfully subdivided into those for EFL teachers, EFL teacher educators, Ministry of Education EFL textbook reviewers and EFL materials publishers, writers, illustrators and series editors.

Throughout the book, the concurrent and integrated examination of both gender and sexuality is very welcomed and the authors do consider homophobia as well as sexism in their discussion of the data-sets. In this sense, they follow through on their claims to examine intersectionality. However, I would like to have seen more inclusivity around gender and sexuality diversity. There is no consideration, for example, of biphobia or transphobia. Furthermore, despite the authors arguing the case for greater gender and sexual diversity and fluidity, they still present gender and sexuality in rather binary terms for much of the book. For example, heterosexuality and homosexuality are given prominence whilst bisexuality, asexuality and other sexual possibilities are not discussed. Likewise, in relation to gender, binary sex terms such as ‘male’, ‘female’ and ‘mixed-sex’ are still used frequently throughout the book and there is little acknowledgement and no discussion of non-binary genders, transgender and cisgender identities or gender identity fluidity. As long as gender binary terminology continues to be used, it is difficult to see how this important work can effectively be used to contribute to the creation of truly ‘gender diverse’ classrooms.

Despite these issues, the authors argue convincingly that EFL practices in Poland work systematically to perpetuate heteronormativity and, through rigorous data

analysis, they show how this is discursively accomplished. Like much work which explores this and the concurrent practices of reinscribing homophobia through discourse, there is not much theorisation or critical examination of ‘heteronormativity’. It could have been pointed out, for example, that it is certain types of heterosexuality that are given prominence in the EFL materials examined (i.e. two-person, monogamous, married). Other possible forms of heterosexual identity are rendered invisible (e.g. three-person, non-monogamous). It is important to recognise that certain types of heterosexuality are marginalised just as much (if not more) as non-heterosexual identities, relationships and practices. However, this is less a limitation of the book itself and more of a wider research gap in the broader field of language, gender and sexuality. Motschenbacher (2014), for example, has been critical of the lack of theorising around the term ‘normativity’ in queer linguistics. He argues that much recent language and sexuality work makes frequent reference to the concept of normativity without fully explaining or theorising it.

In sum, I wholeheartedly agree with the authors’ assertion in the introduction that the book will be of practical use to ‘teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, textbook writers and illustrators, publishers, series editors and reviewers’. The book does an impressive job of helping to raise awareness of gender and sexuality-related issues in EFL teaching in Poland. I highly recommend this volume as a valuable addition to the field of language, gender and sexuality in education.

References

Motschenbacher, Heiko. 2014. Focusing on normativity in language and sexuality studies: Insights from conversations on objectophilia. *Critical Discourse Studies* 11 (1): 47-70.

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