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## Exploring Discursive Positionings and Negotiations of Gender Diversity in English Language Teaching Through the Lens of Critical Pedagogy

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores EFL students' perceptions of gender diversity by analyzing their interactions about Chile's same-sex marriage law in 2022. The study focused on fostering linguistic and critical skills through classroom discussions. A safe space for open conversations allowed students to express diverse views on gender diversity. While opinions varied, students' discussions were navigated respectfully and indicated that the pedagogical approach used by the teacher encourages critical awareness of societal inequalities in Chile.

### KEYWORDS

Queer pedagogy; critical pedagogy; gender diversity; LGBTQ+; ELT in Chile

Throughout history, the field of English language teaching (ELT) has focused primarily on the formal and cognitive aspects of language, neglecting the social dimensions of language learning (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Nelson, 2020; Paiz, 2019). Despite some efforts from socio-cultural theories and the communicative competence movement, there remains a lack of attention to the diverse experiences, subjectivities, and identities of language learners concerning issues of gender, sexuality, equity, and diversity. This oversight is particularly pronounced in Latin American societies, including Chile, which have experienced periods of national authoritarianism, strong hegemonic power from the Catholic church, military rule, and social and political oppression (Moreno-Doña & Gamboa, 2014). In English language teaching and learning, the context in the last few decades has been signaled by the tensions between educational policies aiming at economic growth within a neoliberal agenda and education for social justice (Matear, 2008). In light of this complex scenario, critical pedagogy emerges as a relevant framework to address social injustices around the neglect of students' diverse positionalities in ELT. While Paulo Freire, the pioneer of the critical pedagogy movement, did not explicitly address these issues, his posthumous writings indicate a desire to champion the educational struggle for inclusion and justice across different realms of education and other interconnected (eco)systems (Khan, 2010). This presents an opportunity to leverage the socially-just orientations of critical pedagogy to facilitate critical dialogue and reflection in ELT settings regarding social issues such as gender diversity and LGBTQ+ rights, within safe learning environments (Freire, 1970; Nemi Neto, 2018).

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Most efforts aimed at establishing inclusive learning environments have primarily concentrated on addressing the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of students. An illustration of this is the well-established concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), which is described as “a student-centered approach to teaching that acknowledges and nurtures the unique cultural strengths of students” (Lynch, 2016, para. 2). While this instructional approach, grounded in the idea of embracing the lived experiences of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, has been successful in recognizing and supporting diverse cultural backgrounds, it has not yet fully addressed the intricate gender and sexual identities of English language learners, particularly those who confront challenges related to heteronormative perspectives on gender diversity.

In contexts of English language learning, whether it be second, foreign, or additional language learning environments, there is a strong impetus for attending to the fluidity of diverse views, understandings, and experiences of language learners (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2022). While an inclusive lens indeed serves as a pivotal approach to embracing the multifaceted positionings, identities, and subjectivities of language learners, it is imperative that this inclusivity be coupled with a resolute commitment to critical pedagogy that centers on issues of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (Pennycook, 2001). Such an amalgamation signifies that the discourse surrounding topics like gender diversity within the ELT classroom should transcend superficial treatments and tokenistic gestures or become just the latest fad. Instead, it should embrace a multifaceted perspective that grants due prominence to the visibility and authentic representation of sexual identities belonging to what are often designated as ‘minority groups’. In the pursuit of creating truly inclusive and equitable ELT classrooms, a paradigm shift is essential—a shift that transcends the conventional boundaries and ventures into the realm of queering ELT practice. Paiz (2019) suggests that this transformative shift involves queering all facets of ELT practice, indicating a departure from normative assumptions and practices that perpetuate binary notions of identity. Queering, in this context, takes on the role of a catalyst, inviting students to engage with militant pedagogies that encourage the exploration and critical interrogation of dominant discourses surrounding (sexual) identity.

The concept of allyship emerges as a central force in the realm of queering ELT practice. Allyship entails a conscious commitment to stand in solidarity with marginalized and minoritized individuals. It entails leveraging one’s privilege to actively dismantle systems of inequality and oppression. To weave allyship into the fabric of ELT, teachers must actively engage in the process of awareness-raising, as argued by Reynolds (2010). This awareness-raising entails shedding light on social injustices, deconstructing privilege, and fostering empathetic understanding of the experiences faced by marginalized communities. At the core of queer pedagogy and allyship in ELT classrooms lies this study. Set within the context of Chile, where English is not a dominant language or medium of instruction but rather a foreign or additional language, the article presents findings from a study that explored students’ dialogic interactions and discussions during an English lesson on gender diversity. The main objective was to uncover students’ perspectives, opinions, and positions regarding gender diversity by analyzing news media articles related to the recently passed same-sex marriage law in Chile. The research question arising from this context is: How do Chilean EFL students and their language teacher critically navigate and negotiate their supportive stances on gender diversity in a classroom-based activity?

## Queering the ELT Classroom

Queer pedagogy, a transformative approach to education, challenges conventional norms and heteronormative perspectives in teaching and learning (Hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2002). Rooted in queer theory, this pedagogical framework seeks to create inclusive and affirming learning environments for LGBTQ+ students while also addressing broader issues of social justice and equity (Jagose, 1996). Furthermore, queer pedagogy calls for the deconstruction of traditional norms and assumptions about gender and sexuality, pushing against binary frameworks prevalent in education (Hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2015). From this perspective, students are encouraged to engage in critical thinking, questioning established ideas, and challenging normative views and assumptions that perpetuate exclusion and underrepresentation (Hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2002).

In ELT contexts, there have been multiple attempts to integrate issues of gender diversity and sexual identities. Some of these efforts have focused on disrupting the highly heteronormative nature of coursebooks and ELT materials (Gray, 2013) and integrating them into ELT practice with students of all backgrounds. Although some studies (e.g. Keles et al., 2023) have shown the systematic perpetuation of gender biases in globally produced ELT coursebooks, others such as Goldstein (2021) have proposed pedagogical strategies for the integration of queer content within a 'discretion model' by adopting a 'discrete approach.' That is, pedagogical attempts to integrate materials and resources that address LGBTQ+ issues must be made in ways that are sensitive to the social-contextual characteristics of the specific learning and teaching setting. This sensitivity to context is much more relevant in Latin America, where the field of ELT has been dominated by heteronormative standards and only recently has started exploring its intersections with identity and gender diversity (Castañeda-Peña, 2021).

Important pedagogical interventions can be accounted for that have intentionally endeavored to queer the ELT classroom. Research indicates that students, even at a young age, are capable and willing to engage with LGBTQ+ issues. For instance, a study conducted with Brazilian middle-school students revealed their eagerness and motivation to participate in discussions about LGBTQ+ topics (Moita-Lopes, 2006). Despite this, an interesting finding was that teachers, possibly due to lack of preparation, unacquaintance with LGBTQ+ matters or adherence to heteronormative ideologies, tended to suppress such conversations. As a way to democratize the learning environment and incorporate queerness into their pedagogies, McBeth and Pauliny (2018) pushed the boundaries and normative practices of academia by introducing queerness into their writing classes for first-year college students. The students were given a provocative prompt, "How are you Queer?," intended to encourage them to reflect on their educational otherness. This resulted in compositions that highlighted students' non-normative positions on various personal, social, and cultural matters. Whether through intentional teaching adjustments or pedagogical interventions aimed at integrating queerness into the ELT classroom, these instances foster a critical awareness of how our everyday social and cultural practices contribute to the (de)construction of societal norms and the creation of socially just spaces.

By actively practicing allyship, educators can work toward cultivating a classroom environment that prioritizes fairness, inclusiveness, and a sense of safety. Allyship is more than just superficially embracing diversity or showing respect for students' sexual identities. According to Sharma (2019), an ally is someone belonging to a privileged group who actively supports the rights of marginalized, racialized, or disadvantaged individuals. In the context of the ELT

classroom, teachers practicing allyship can recognize the fluidity of students' identities (Trinh, 2022), exhibit respect and self-reflection (Potvin, 2016), and nurture what Love (2018) terms as "a consciousness of liberation" with the goal of instigating transformation and advocating for social equity (Reynolds, 2010, p. 13).

Teachers play a crucial role in establishing safe and socially equitable spaces for all students, fostering awareness of their sexual identities, and empowering them to challenge practices that favor heteronormativity (Selvi & Kocaman, 2021). For instance, Nelson (2009) explored how teachers' own sexual identities intersected with their teaching practices, leading to valuable classroom discussions about how heteronormativity in ESL/EFL classrooms marginalizes LGBTQ+ students. These instances serve as critical opportunities to raise awareness about inequalities and social injustices faced by sexual minorities, sparking value-based conversations that encourage activism, allyship, and potential collective action.

Safe learning spaces, especially for queer students, can be facilitated through approaches and practices that truly embrace diversity (Bollas, 2021). For this to be achieved, teachers must be pedagogically prepared to use the classroom context as a critical site for the destabilization of normative thinking and doing. To this end, Bollas (2021) argues for the necessity to develop a diversity-focused approach as a way of "equipping teachers with the tools they need to cater for the needs of all learners" (p. 2). That is, teachers must be able to make agentic moves to not only embrace diversity in the classroom but create spaces that disrupt normative practices in society. This is vital as El-Metoui (2018) asserts that by failing to address heteronormative practices, teachers may encourage discriminatory or prejudiced behavior.

In conclusion, in the realm of ELT, efforts to incorporate gender diversity and sexual identities have been diverse and dynamic. Attempts have been made to disrupt the heteronormative nature of classroom practices, striving to integrate these concepts across diverse student backgrounds. While research highlights instances of gender biases persisting in globally produced ELT coursebooks, there are pedagogical strategies proposed to discreetly integrate queer content in a manner that respects the socio-contextual characteristics of the learning and teaching environment.

## The Chilean Context

In order to grasp the complexities of the educational and socio-political context that underpins the current study, it is essential to acknowledge the significant impact of the military dictatorship (1973–1990) on education and the influence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies that have shaped the present Chilean educational system. The military takeover in 1973 led to profound changes in Chilean society, encompassing social, political, economic, and educational aspects. The premise of "absolute control of the nation" (Beltrán & Preller, 2003, p. 11) justified military intervention in almost all aspects of human activity, reinforcing power imbalances, social injustice, and inequalities while suppressing any form of socio-political activism, reform, or social transformation. In the sphere of education, the military government implemented drastic measures to eliminate what they perceived as "the Marxist cancer," targeting views and ideologies that posed a threat to the prevailing military order. A policy of control was devised to eradicate all existing teachers' unions (Nuñez, 1984), which were considered sites of social and political opposition. According to Mora (2013), the Pinochet government aimed to minimize, and ideally eliminate, any educational instances and

opportunities that could foster a sense of commitment, social responsibility, and courage among young people, empowering them to critique and challenge the status quo.

The immense influence of a military regime, combined with long-standing patriarchal beliefs and practices under the control of an orthodox Catholic church, has significantly shaped the limited perspectives on diversity and tolerance held by a substantial part of the Chilean population. Consequently, it was only in 2021 when there was a decrease of 12% in the number of documented homophobic and transphobic attacks in public spaces that tragically led to the loss of numerous innocent lives (MOVILH, 2002)

### ***Same-Sex Marriage Law in Chile***

In January 2022, the Chilean Congress took a historic step by approving a bill that allows same-sex couples to marry. The bill was first introduced in 2017 and faced several delays and debates before finally being approved. The bill's approval marked a major milestone for LGBTQ+ rights in Chile, as it represented a step toward greater equality and recognition of same-sex relationships.

Prior to the approval of same-sex marriage, Chile recognized civil unions for same-sex couples in 2015. The Civil Union Agreement (Acuerdo de Unión Civil, 2022) allowed same-sex couples to register their partnerships and gain some legal recognition and benefits, like those of married heterosexual couples. However, it fell short of providing full marriage rights, including adoption rights for same-sex couples. The approval of same-sex marriage in Chile reflects a growing acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ rights in the country. However, like any significant social change, it has also faced opposition and controversy from conservative groups. Nonetheless, it signifies progress toward greater inclusivity and equality for the LGBTQ+ community in Chile.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical pedagogy in education is an approach that aims to empower learners by encouraging them to critically examine and question the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape their experiences and knowledge. Rooted in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), critical pedagogy emphasizes the role of education in promoting social justice, challenging oppressive structures, and fostering democratic and transformative learning experiences. This pedagogical approach recognizes that education is not neutral but influenced by power dynamics and societal norms. Freire (1997) expressed his intentions that his pedagogy be reinterpreted and reconstructed to accommodate for the diversity of sociocultural and historical milieus in which it could be situated.

Critical pedagogy seeks to foster critical thinking (Veliz, 2021; Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2019) and engage students as active participants in their learning process, encouraging them to question, analyze, and challenge dominant ideologies and social inequalities (Shor & Freire, 1987). It emphasizes the importance of creating a learning environment that respects and values students' diverse perspectives, identities, and experiences (Giroux, 1997). Through critical dialogues and reflection, students develop critical thinking skills and become agents of change, actively working toward a more just and equitable society (Giroux, 2010).

In the classroom, critical pedagogy encourages educators to adopt a student-centered approach that considers the lived experiences of students and connects the curriculum to their

real-world contexts (Kincheloe, 2008). By integrating issues of social justice and equity into the curriculum, critical pedagogy provides students with opportunities to explore and address societal problems and become socially responsible citizens (Darder, 2012).

Furthermore, critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and challenging structures of oppression and privilege within educational institutions (Giroux, 2003). Educators are encouraged to confront their own biases and assumptions, promoting a pedagogy that is reflective and responsive to the needs of all students (Hooks, 1994).

In summary, critical pedagogy in education is a transformative approach that empowers learners to critically examine and challenge the social, cultural, and political realities that shape their lives. By fostering critical thinking, promoting social justice, and respecting fundamental ethical principles and students' diverse perspectives, critical pedagogy seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that prepares students to be active agents of change in society.

## Methodology

Unlike quantitative research that focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research delves into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings of individuals. Qualitative research is characterized by its emphasis on understanding the complexities and nuances of human experiences and behaviors (Creswell, 2013). It seeks to capture the richness of data by using open-ended questions and allowing participants to express their views and perspectives in their own words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By creating classroom safe spaces, the teacher-researcher provides a vantage point to understand students' values, views, practices and agendas (Canagarajah, 2015). Researchers often employ various data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis to gather in-depth information and triangulate results.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study was gathered from audio-recorded guided conversations involving six students, organized into three pairs. Teacher's reflective notes were collected and examined using content analysis, with coding categories derived directly from the data to prevent any interference from preconceived ideas by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dawson, 2007, 2009). A similar methodological approach was adopted for analyzing classroom interactions. The analysis of conversations was theoretically driven by the adopted framework of critical pedagogy. Each pair's interaction, lasting approximately 20–25 min, was recorded and transcribed. Due to the extensive length of the transcriptions, the teacher and students received transcripts of the first and last five minutes of their interactions to ensure accuracy and fidelity to their discussions. While this process was retrospective, the participants appreciated the opportunity to review and analyze excerpts from their conversations.

## Participants

The study involved six adult English as a foreign language (EFL) students who were attending conversational English classes at a private English Language Institute in Santiago, Chile. These



students possessed a B2 English proficiency level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with an ability to articulate ideas effectively, understand complex texts, and express opinions in a sophisticated manner. They were enrolled in an Advanced English course that primarily emphasized conversational skills at the Language Institute.

Some demographic information of participants is provided below in [Table 1](#).

Pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants to maintain their privacy and confidentiality. The participants agreed to being audio recorded for research purposes.

## The Teaching Activity

The class activity revolved around the discussion of two news articles obtained from public media sources. One of the articles dealt with the passing of the marriage equality law in the Chilean Parliament, while the other showcased stories of the first same-sex marriages that took place in Chile after the law came into effect. The lesson was structured in three stages. The first stage focused on building vocabulary related to gender diversity through explicit teaching and group discussions. This was followed by peer interactions and discussions centered on the news articles. The peer discussions, which are the primary focus of this study, were based on two open-ended prompting questions: (i) What are your opinions about this new law? and, (ii) Do you believe that this law was necessary in our Chilean society? Why? The final part of the lesson involved a reflective writing task where students were required to write about the perceived advantages of a same-sex marriage law for the broader community.

**Table 1.** Overview of students' profile.

Name	Age	Identified themselves as	Qualifications	Languages
Carlos	28	Male	Bachelor in Business (equivalent)	Spanish & English
Marina	32	Female	Master in Accounting	Spanish, English & some Japanese
Esteban	30	Male	Bachelor in Physical Education	Spanish & English
Josefina	26	Supporter* (Ally)	Bachelor in History	Spanish & English
Daniel	33	Supporter (Ally)	Master in Political Science	Spanish, English & German
Camila	26	Female	Bachelor in Business and Marketing	Spanish & English

*Note.* Pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants to maintain their privacy and confidentiality. The participants agreed to being audio recorded for research purposes.

\* Students indicated that they are "strong supporters" of the LGBTQ+ community.

## Findings and Discussion

The discussion of three extracts of conversations is undertaken in response to the research question as follows: How do Chilean EFL students and their language teacher critically navigate and negotiate their supportive stances on gender diversity in a classroom-based activity?

Camila and Daniel, as shown in Extract 1, are negotiating their understandings and views of the new law. Both students demonstrate a level of self-reflection that supports social justice against oppressed communities by, first and foremost, asserting that the country (Chile) has shown a degree of maturity toward inclusion and integration of "everyone in our society."



Camila: I think it's a sign of a 'mature' country, making progress about integrating everyone in our society.

Daniel: It's a great law, more fairness, equality and justice to everyone. We needed this for a long time, although discrimination will continue in many areas every day, it's a big step, but a sad reality.

Camila: totally agree. Discrimination is not in a law but in people's minds, and that is hard to remove from everyone against different sexualities, but even this class and discussion is a good starting point. (Extract 1. Conversation between Camila and Daniel)

Both Camila and Daniel displayed supportive views of the same-sex marriage law in Chile, and of its significance in bringing about more fairness, equality, and justice for everyone. However, Daniel recognized that despite the legal changes, discrimination might persist in various aspects of daily life, which is a disheartening reality. Daniel's perspective implies that while the law is a significant milestone, there still remains work to be done to address societal prejudices and discrimination, which is indicative of the structural and systemic issues yet to be addressed in the country. The extent to which these systemic issues are deeply engraved in society is made clear by Mayo and Rodriguez (2019) who point out that normative assumptions are intricately woven into every facet of educational implementation, spanning across pedagogical strategies, instructional content, administrative directives, and fundamental beliefs regarding the objectives and aspirations of education.

Of great significance is that Camila and Daniel's perspectives indirectly highlight the importance of education in promoting acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals. The mention of the class discussion as a starting point indicates that educational settings like ELT classrooms can play a vital role in fostering open conversations, dispelling misconceptions, and encouraging empathy, which closely aligns with the arguments put forth by Bollas (2021) and Paiz (2019) about the necessity to create safe learning spaces that empower learners to engage with people who may be viewed as different from them.

In the following extract, students showed not only their varied levels of support toward issues of gender diversity as per the same-sex marriage law, but, most importantly, respectfully negotiated their individual positionings toward and differences of opinion about 'what is a priority' in the Chilean society. Josefina's use of inclusive language in her discourse was noteworthy. Although she clarified that she was not a lesbian, her use of "we," a first-person plural pronoun, conveys a strong sense of support, allyship, and to a large extent, group belonging, respect, and tolerance toward LGBTQ+ communities, as evidenced in Sample 2.

Josefina: Absolutely amazing! From a legal point of view, we can now get married, and get official recognition of our bonds. I'm not lesbian, but a fond supporter. Go gay people! This is my favorite class so far. I love to talk about these issues!

Esteban: Yes, it's needed for equality in our country and gay people can now legally marry, but if you think about it, what's then for them and us? What do we get as a society?

Josefina: more fairness, it's a change in how we think about diversity, and this also shows how much we need to change.

Esteban: ...understand, what's a priority for some is not for others, but that's life. And this is probably a priority for a minority but not for the majority, but I totally respect this.

Josefina: Agree with you, but this is how we bring big changes in conservative countries...by making changes that really matter to the minorities. (Extract 2. Conversation between Josefina and Esteban)

Josefina's first exchange reflected a positive and supportive attitude toward the legal advancements that have been made for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in relation to marriage and official recognition of their relationships, which also implies an alignment with critical pedagogical goals of fostering allyship and solidarity with marginalized communities. Her statement also highlighted the importance of creating a classroom environment where discussions about LGBTQ+ issues are not only welcomed but also celebrated. These spaces should be safe for students to express their support, allyship, and advocacy for marginalized communities (Canagarajah, 2015; Trinh, 2022). Josefina's appreciation for the inclusion of gender diversity topics in the class echoed the claim by Riquelme-Sanderson and Longoria (2023) in their duoethnography as LGTBQ+ language teachers to explicitly include gender diversity issues in the ELT curriculum.

Esteban also acknowledged the importance of the law in achieving equality in the country and granting legal rights to gay people. However, he raised a thought-provoking question about what the broader societal implications are, for both the LGBTQ+ community and society as a whole. By asking "What do we get as a society?" and probing deeper into the implications of these changes, Esteban engaged in critical thinking that goes beyond a surface-level celebration of progress. His query embodied the essence of critical pedagogy, encouraging others to critically consider the complexities and potential contradictions within societal changes. Esteban refrained from full support and allyship with this community as he implied that while the law addresses the rights of same-sex couples, there may be other aspects to consider for the benefit of society.

Overall, the conversation reflects a range of attitudes and viewpoints about the legalization of same-sex marriage. Josefina's enthusiastic support and emphasis on social change contrast with Esteban's consideration of broader societal implications. Their exchange highlights the diversity of opinions and the significance of engaging in open discussions on LGBTQ+ rights and social progress. In addition, the dialogue exemplified how critical pedagogy can encourage students to engage in thoughtful discussions about social issues, critically assess societal changes, and explore the complexities of social transformation. Through their exchange, they demonstrated a willingness to question, reflect, and understand the implications of social change from various perspectives.

Just like the previous conversation extract which showed how students successfully and respectfully navigated their discursive differences, the following dialogic exchange reflected the honest and open positionings of students. Despite opposing stances on the significance of the law, students critically negotiated their heterogeneous viewpoints as seen below:

Carlos: ...not a medical breakthrough but needed by some. Yeah, it's fine for me but at the same time there are some many other important issues that should happen in Chile that we should be celebrating.

Mariana: like what...?

Carlos: Come on, Mariana! The divide between the rich and the poor, poor quality education, crime rates, people feeling vulnerable, discrimination of indigenous peoples, and so many other things.

Mariana: Couldn't agree more but one step at a time, but social activism for people who suffer discrimination is more important.

Carlos: yeah, it's needed for some, but it could have been a different step but it's ok and understandable.

Mariana: Mmmm...but it's needed because Chile is a very unjust country, and I don't want a country like this. (Extract 3. Conversation between Carlos and Mariana)

Carlos acknowledged the significance of legal developments for the LGBTQ+ community, viewing it as a necessary change that is welcomed by some. However, from a critical pedagogy perspective, he also highlighted the presence of other pressing issues in the country, such as socioeconomic disparities, education quality, and discrimination against indigenous communities. Carlos's perspective suggested a concern for a comprehensive approach to social reform which highlights his critical consciousness of the interconnected social problems within the country (Freire, 1970).

Mariana's response exemplified the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in recognizing the importance of social activism. She shared Carlos' concern about other pressing matters, but she emphasized that addressing discrimination and advocating for marginalized communities are crucial steps toward social justice (Giroux, 2003). Her perspective reflected the critical understanding that combating injustice requires progressive action and the recognition of the rights and dignity of marginalized groups.

The conversation exemplified how critical pedagogy can foster critical thinking and social awareness among individuals (Hooks, 1994). Carlos and Mariana engaged in a dialogue that highlights the complexity of addressing multiple social issues within an unjust society. By encouraging dialogue, reflection, and an examination of social norms, critical pedagogy can empower individuals to become active agents of change (Giroux, 2010).

Overall, the conversation showcased the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in raising students' awareness of social injustices and promoting dialogue about the steps needed to create a more just and equitable society (Freire, 1970). By engaging in reflective conversations about the interconnectedness of social issues, students can become advocates for social change and strive to create a more inclusive and compassionate world. Further, it can be observed that while students' different positionings toward gender diversity may be seen as contentious, they reflect healthy and respectful dialogic interactions whereby "ELT practitioners [can] trouble dominant disciplinary and societal discourses through a pedagogy of inquiry and disruption" (Paiz, 2019, p. 271).

### **Teacher's Reflections**

While the students' dialogues play a central role in understanding their views, attitudes, and positionings about gender diversity and sexuality, the agentic moves and actions of the teacher who facilitated, delivered, and mediated the lesson discussions add significant pedagogical value. At a convenient time, once the lesson had been carried out, the teacher was asked to write reflective notes on the lesson. The teachers' reflection was prompted by two open-ended questions: How did my lesson go? What could I have done differently?

Upon reflecting on the conduct of the lesson, the teacher notes that:

Although I was quite nervous about this lesson before I started because I didn't really know how it would go, I am very happy with the lesson overall, the quality of conversations, and just how respectful students were in presenting their views. I was nervous about the lesson mainly because I had never done anything like it before, but I feel much more relieved now.

While the teacher initially expressed nervousness about conducting the lesson due to its unfamiliarity and the potential challenges it might entail, the reflection indicated a positive experience and successful engagement with the topic. It must be noted, though, that the teacher's apprehension before the lesson reflects a common concern when introducing sensitive and potentially controversial topics in the classroom. For teachers of History, for example, introducing topics like human rights and the Chilean dictatorship may involve uncomfortable experiences with school authorities that enforce a univocal view on such matters. This apprehension is likely due to a lack of prior experience, uncertainty about students' reactions or, most importantly, fears about oppressive heteronormative voices and forces that might emerge during discussions. This aspect of the reflection illustrated the teacher's willingness to step outside their comfort zone and engage with a subject that is important for fostering critical thinking and addressing societal issues. The fact that the intentionally created dialogic atmosphere was conducive to a sense of respect on the part of the students is in line with Bollas (2021) argument that language teachers should "equip learners with linguistic means that will enable them to challenge and question established norms in a healthy and respectful manner" (p. 8).

As the lesson unfolded, the teacher noted that students actively participated in discussions and shared their views openly without having to "shy away their views":

The best thing I liked about the lesson was the fact that no one tried to shy away their views and opinions about this really controversial topic in our country, so all students made a contribution and felt they had an opportunity to be heard. Some students said to me in class and at the end of class that these activities should happen more often.

This reflective piece shows that the teacher was successful in creating a "safe and inclusive environment" (Trinh, 2022) where students felt comfortable expressing their thoughts, even on a topic that can be polarizing. The fact that students willingly engaged in discussions about a controversial topic reflects the teacher's ability to establish an inclusive and respectful classroom culture. Another teacher's reflective note stresses on the significance of open and honest conversations within the educational context:

Obviously, one thing that could be different is the frequency of these honest conversations. I think they are really helpful for students as they learn new vocabulary, push themselves to use new vocabulary, and engage in critical conversations. I think it also pushes them to think more critically about social, cultural and political issues that are very relevant to our context.

Critical pedagogy seeks to empower students to think critically about societal norms, power structures, and cultural dynamics (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010). In this context, the frequency of these conversations takes on a transformative role. By engaging in frequent and candid discussions, students not only expand their vocabulary but also challenge themselves to use new language effectively. This aligns with critical pedagogy's emphasis on reading the word/world and praxis—the integration of theory and practice—as students actively apply their language skills to address real-world issues. Incorporating an LGBTQ+ perspective, these conversations can also create a space for acknowledging and validating the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Trinh, 2022).

In another reflective note, the teacher highlights his efforts in maintaining safe spaces in the classroom:

Although all students made a contribution in conversations in confident and safe ways, a space that I always tried to maintain very carefully, I think allowing them the opportunity to engage in some reflective writing, and perhaps even anonymously, would have been an even safer space for students to express further and deeper thoughts and feelings about this topic. I might try this in the future when I teach another similar lesson.

The teacher's intention to provide an opportunity for reflective writing aligns with the principles of critical pedagogy and LGBTQ+ inclusivity insofar as critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and empowerment among students while challenging oppressive systems and norms (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010). The idea of using reflective writing, potentially anonymously to create a safer environment, adds another layer to the critical pedagogy approach. It recognizes that some students may have deeper thoughts and emotions related to LGBTQ+ issues that they may not feel comfortable expressing verbally.

A rather interesting extract from the teacher's reflective notes alludes to the nature of resources used for the pedagogical activity, and the difficulty of sourcing ELT materials that incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives.

I didn't really know what materials to use but I am glad I used those articles. They were authentic articles with real vocabulary because otherwise I wouldn't have found anything in books as this issue is not talked about.

The teacher highlighted the importance of thoughtful material selection and the challenges associated with finding appropriate resources. He capitalized on the need for authentic and relevant content that addresses LGBTQ+ topics, which are often underrepresented in traditional educational materials. This idea aligns with Paiz's (2018) call for the necessity for educators to queer commercially available classroom resources with LGBTQ+ perspectives, thus fostering secure and respectful environments for students to explore LGBT topics while learning a second, foreign or additional language.

It becomes apparent that while the intentional discussions about the selected texts in class served as a basis for critical dialogue which reflected the complex discursive constructions and representations of gender and sexual identities upheld by students, the teacher seemed to have formed a safe place for students to voice their attitudes and positionings toward LGBTQ+ communities. In line with Moita-Lopes (2006) study, a sense of motivation and desire was evidenced in students' discussions to partake in this unusual class activity, which served the purpose of destabilizing classroom norms and structures (Reynolds, 2010).

## Conclusion

This study focused on EFL students' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ communities through classroom discussions on the same-sex marriage law in Chile. The study highlighted the relevance of critical pedagogy in addressing issues of gender diversity and sexuality that lie at the intersection of social justice and inclusivity. The research findings revealed a common concern among students regarding the persisting unequal power structures that perpetuate the marginalization of LGBTQ+ communities in Chile. Despite varying attitudes toward the same-sex law's benefits, all participants demonstrated a collective stance of support, tolerance, and respect for marginalized voices and identities in society. This reifies the transformational

power of queering the ELT curriculum through pedagogical orientations to creating opportunities to open up and be brutally honest about teachers' and students' positionings toward issues of gender and sexuality.

The classroom discussions shed light on the persistent marginalization and discrimination faced by gender diverse individuals in Chilean society. However, they also highlight the need for intentional efforts within and beyond the school environment to foster open and reflective conversations. Critical pedagogy comes into focus as a transformative educational approach that encourages heightened awareness and allyships among students, particularly those in privileged positions, about their own social cognitions and their potential to perpetuate inequality. By promoting critical examination of dominant social norms and values, these classroom dialogues serve as a platform to not only disrupt and destabilize prevailing power dynamics but also to provide safe discursive opportunities for students to discuss and negotiate their contrasting viewpoints in a respectful manner. This aligns with the principles of critical pedagogy, which advocates for challenging oppressive structures and fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (Freire, 1970). At the same time, this is consistent with queering the curriculum for it offers students opportunities for participatory and metalinguistic engagements over what gender diversity means.

While the central focus of this study was on the discursive interactions of students concerning gender diversity, the role of the teacher must be acknowledged as it is pivotal in fostering inclusive and diverse learning environments. As voiced by Nelson (2009, 2020), pedagogical approaches to queer inquiry necessitate language teachers and educators to incorporate discussions about sexual and gender identities into classroom dialogues, challenging the assumption of heterosexuality as the default norm. The teacher's facilitation of intentional discussions around selected texts created an avenue for critical dialogues that unveiled complex discursive constructs and representations of gender and sexual identities endorsed by the students.

Just like in any other research study, methodological or theoretical limitations must be acknowledged. Methodologically, it is clear that any attempt to bring about sustained transformative changes in ELT practice must be consistent, systematic, and (ideally) supported by educational policies rather than ad-hoc intentional efforts, impromptu marginal measures, or lip service to a good cause. Further critical research is needed in the Chilean context and beyond to challenge not only epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical norms but also the pervasive heteronormative thinking and practices embedded within educational systems. These entrenched norms often uphold prevailing power structures and ideologies that act as stumbling blocks for deep social and educational transformation toward equity and social justice. By delving into these complexities, researchers can uncover the subtle ways in which heteronormativity operates in educational settings, reinforcing unequal power dynamics and marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals and perspectives.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the significance of incorporating critical queer pedagogies in ELT classrooms to address complex issues surrounding LGBTQ+ communities. By encouraging dialogue, reflection, and empathy, educators can play a pivotal role in challenging social norms and advocating for greater equality and acceptance for all students, regardless of their sexual and gender orientations. Furthermore, it calls for broader societal efforts to integrate discussions about LGBTQ+ rights and social justice into the ongoing journey toward a more inclusive and equitable Chilean society and a new emancipatory educational discourse, with critical pedagogy as a guiding framework for transformative education (Giroux, 1997).



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