

Dealing with taboo topics, using Gay Rights as an example:

1. Discussion topics (cards)

- The content of most coursebook materials is 'heteronormative', i.e. it assumes heterosexuality is the norm, and non-heterosexuals are invisible. Do you feel you should redress this?
- At what age (if any) do you think it's appropriate to introduce LGBT-themed content?
- The culture in which you teach outlaws homosexuality. Should you?
- In teaching the language of relationships and family, should you include LGBT-oriented options?
- 'Students don't want to talk about it (i.e. LGBT related issues).' True?
- Content supportive of the LGBT community is indoctrination, not education.
- Who should be responsible for reducing the level of prejudice? Home? School? Media? Government?
- Discrimination against gay men and women is a global issue.
- What does sexual identity have to do with the teaching of English?

2. Pyramid discussion – consensus

Amend this statement so that you all agree on it:

"LGBT content is not appropriate in the language classroom."

3. Scenarios: Do you think the situation was handled well? Why/Why not?¹

1. I had a student ... who wanted to come out [as gay] here in the United States I didn't know that much about it but I said to him ... You're in the United States and there's free speech, but there still are a lot of people who are prejudiced. So I guess that's about all I knew was to say Take your time, and take it step by step. But – so I'm trying to learn more about how to support students.

2. We had a student here a couple of years ago who ... very honestly came out to the class and ... explained to them that he had a significant other in Sweden ... It just threw the whole class for such a loop ... We [teachers] were all very worried about this student. Because ... he was just feeling so, um, isolated, and I was having just such a hard time knowing how to support him. [Other students] were really worried that they could get sick, or have AIDS.

3. It can be an uncomfortable topic ... There's always that [fear] that you're gonna get, um, a lot of negative resistance [from students]. The more I teach the more I don't feel like I'm God and I can change their attitudes and I should change their attitudes ... I can't want my student to change. I mean if he feels that he wouldn't want his friend to be gay, I can't spend class time trying to convince him not. I mean that's not fair.

¹ from Nelson, C. (2009) *Sexual identities in English language education*. London: Routledge

4. Although I'm not gay myself, uh, we often talk about, uh, sexual identities and gender in the classroom ... And ... some of the nicest students I know have some of the most, you know, really intense homophobic comments to make. And when that comes up, when these often off-hand remarks or aside remarks or little jokes or stuff, I don't know quite how to jump in there and ... challenge that.

5. The worst hour I ever had in an ESL class was watching [a student teacher use a] values clarification [task in which] ... they have to reach consensus over ... contentious issues ... It ... was a who lives and [who] dies ... sort of thing ... And one of the people was 'the homosexual.' And so for an hour we all sat there while various people from around the world said He should die ... It was really horrifying.

6. [Students] see things in movies and they come to class and they say Oh yeah all those fags ... And how do you deal with that ... I don't know if you can bring it up as a culture point, saying that in American culture that's not acceptable. Because it's not - in my American culture. But there are a lot of American cultures in which that is acceptable. And, um, they might run into that. And so I always brought it up as a personal issue. I just said, you're talking about my family and I'm really offended by that ...

7. [My students] pretty much ask me anything ... And so [a student] said ... You like women, huh? And I said What? And he said OK, no no no, he said never mind, never mind, never mind. And some people were kind of listening and so I thought I want him to ask the question again so that I can answer it for the whole class. And so I asked him to ask me again and ... I said Yes. And we got into this big discussion about it ... And we talked about different words for that ... Some students were appalled ... Two women ... from Somalia were devastated that this could be true.

8. If we're doing a [lesbian/gay] unit ... there are often homophobic comments ... If I hear a few comments like that ... I'll purposely come out sooner because ... it doesn't feel fair to the students that they're not able to make a knowledgeable choice on what kind of comments they make and how that might be hurting their teacher ... 'Cause they might be really embarrassed if they found out afterwards that they have said this about their teacher ... not realizing that she was gay.

9. [In class] I definitely, I guess, present myself as a straight person ... Maybe especially now because we're doing this ay topic ... One of the reasons that I'm not out to them is they're pretty much fresh off the boat, they've just gotten here and the one thing they don't need is to have a gay teacher on their hands and deal with him, culturally. I mean they have enough culture shock as it is.

4. Role play:

a. Director of Studies: You have asked one of your teachers to come and discuss an issue that has arisen: A student has complained about gay content in class, and claims to represent the class's discomfort about this.

Teacher: Your DoS wants to talk to you about the content of some of your classes. You believe that your students need to be acculturated into having a more inclusive attitude to sexual, ethnic and cultural diversity.

b. Teacher: It is Gay Pride week and you feel your school should celebrate the fact. You seek to persuade your supervisor.

Director: Your school accommodates a wide range of cultural and religious sensibilities which you feel should be respected, although your teachers don't always agree.

c. You are a parent of a transgendered teenager and you are looking for a school that will be supportive and where your child's transgender identity will be respected. You have arranged to meet the enrolments secretary of a school.

Enrolments officer: You handle inquiries about places on a school that caters for a wide range of teenagers of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. A parent has come to see you about enrolling their child.

d. Teacher trainer: You have just observed a class in which a trainee teacher ignored openly homophobic comments on the part of some students. You meet to discuss the lesson.

Trainee teacher. You have just been observed by your trainer. Your class went well, even though some students were rather boisterous.

5. Personalization (round)

Share your response (your feelings, reactions etc) to this topic. You can only speak one at a time.