Anthony Verardi
LING 2142 Fall 2019
Second Language Teaching
Dr. Dawn McCormick

Selection 4: Gender and Sexuality in the L2 Classroom

For my final selection, I attended a roundtable discussion on gender and sexuality in the second language classroom hosted by the Department of French and Italian and moderated by Dr. Todd Reeser. The following is a summary of the content provided from each presenter as well as a synopsis of the Q&A portion that will serve as the "selection" for this entry, followed by a separate reflection.

Presenter 1: Caitlin Dahl, Graduate Student, Department of French

Caitlin's presentation focused on practical ways to apply sensitivity to gender and sexuality in the L2 classroom. She noted that while the recent focus on having students share their pronouns when comfortable is a step in the right direction, it must be incorporated into a broader politics of practice to be effective as a teaching tool. Participants were advised to avoid committing linguistic violence by misgendering their students, or using language that did not affirm their gender identities. She further added that attentive pronoun usage should be practiced from the first day, that trans and non-binary language should be planned for inclusion from the start and not as an afterthought, and that names and pronouns should accompany images used in class to illustrate concepts. Interestingly, Caitlin described how a reliance on images in the classroom (such as of a man in a suit, a woman in a dress) supports the "superiority of the visual" as a way of indicating gender identity; i.e. learners are implicitly asked to consider "who looks like a man or woman." As a final point, Caitlin asserted that traditional language textbooks alone are often woefully inadequate to address gender sensitivity in the classroom, if not actively counterproductive in avoiding the reinforcement of gender norms.

Presenter 2: Brett Wells, Senior Lecturer, Department of French

Brett's presentation effectively followed in the same style as Caitlin's, focusing on providing attendees with concrete examples of how they could use epicene, or gender-neutral, forms of language

in their L2s (while all of Brett's examples were provided in French, he did translate and give equivalents in English). During Brett's presentation, he spent time unpacking the notion that language was incompatible with grammar, pointing out that in Latin and Greek, agreement was resolved by attending to the nearest noun for gender and number, or whichever noun occurred first alphabetically. He also noted that as opposed to what traditional grammar would dictate, it is becoming more commonplace in French to use feminine plural words for groups that include masculine-identifying people if they constitute a minority in the group. Lastly, Brett advised attendees to give their students the choice of using whichever forms they had the most attachment to, but making sure to provide input that featured all of them for fairness.

Presenter 3: David Tenorio, Assistant Professor, Department of Hispanic Languages & Literatures

David's segment focused on using digital storytelling as a vehicle for "trans*ing" the canon and accordingly the syllabus for an upper-level content course on Latin American cinema. In this presentation, David explained the benefits of switching from a grammar-based model of language instruction to one that is based on content and ideological topics (in essence, content-based language teaching). He argued that language instructors should engage with Feminist pedagogical practices, considering a multitude of sources of information for learners from outside of canonical spaces (especially those that center trans narratives), and that it is the responsibility of each instructor to change any structures of oppression that we ourselves are complicit in replicating in academia. Many terms related to gender and sexuality center an epistemology that privileges the Global North, but as David noted, these are not globally applicable to local contexts. Concluding his presentation, David shared examples of "digital storytelling" that uplifted narratives not typically found in traditional language teaching, such as of a trans woman from Cuba introducing herself.

Presenter 4: Lorraine Denman, Lecturer, Department of Italian

Last, but certainly not least, Lorraine described ways in which attendees could think of language programs as vehicles for promoting social justice and social change. According to Lorraine, a commitment to diversity (not only in gender and sexuality, but also in race, ability, and so on) must permeate a program "from introductory to capstone," although the depth of engagement does not need to necessarily be equal from start to finish: "students don't need to be bashed with gender theory on day one, but you can certainly normalize gender diversity." She asked participants to take a step back and ask themselves who they are, what their teaching philosophy is, and what their pedagogical approach is. Acknowledging that not all of our colleagues or administrators may be aligned with these goals (and noting she was highly fortunate to work in a Department that was supportive of her efforts), Lorraine nonetheless reasserted the notion that we must do our part to disrupt ideas of monolithic target cultures; in essence, ideas that all speakers of Italian look, act, and behave a certain way, for example, or that there are no Queer speakers of a given language. In Lorraine's words, there are myriad ways to be a speaker of a given language, all of which are valid. As a concrete action, Lorraine recommended developing a thematic unit at the intermediate level that specifically focused on gender and sexuality; in her case, this was representation of women in Italian mass-media. In closing, Lorraine stated that language is dynamic, language is change; that descriptives, not prescriptives, inform the heart of what she does as an educator and as a scholar.

Q&A Synopsis

In the interest of full disclosure, I more or less became an unofficial panelist at this point when Todd asked if anyone in the room could comment on languages that were not Indo-European or otherwise from the Global North/West and shared some thoughts on my experiences with gender diversity in Arabic. Other faculty representing the Japanese and Chinese programs chimed in as well, noting that although Japanese is usually a gender-neutral language in third person pronouns, there are gendered options for referring to oneself, and this can pose difficulties for learners. A frequent point

that was brought up by panelists during the Q&A was that it was okay not to have an answer for what the best practice is, but that doing the least harm should always be the priority, and that if an educator is unsure of what to do in their language, they should try and turn to speakers from those communities for guidance.