

“Cynthia Nelson Seminar, Tokyo; Issues in Gender and Sexual Identity: What Educators Should Know,” *Gender Awareness in Language Education Newsletter* (JALT publication), Spring 2005, p. 26-30.

**Cynthia Nelson Seminar, Tokyo**  
**Issues in Gender and Sexual Identity: What Educators Should Know**  
**Louise Haynes**

Cynthia Nelson was invited by Temple University to give a weekend workshop March 12-13 in Tokyo. On Saturday there were over 30 in attendance. Dr. Nelson gave an introduction as to how the play, *Queer as a Second Language*, came about from her research transcripts and interviews with teachers and learners. In small groups, the attendees were given scenes from the play, and after a brief “rehearsal” went to the front of the room and read the scenes. In order to clearly show which person was reading which part, each reader wore a sign with their character’s name written in large letters. After we had finished reading all the scenes, we discussed the play and how it felt to be the characters. Several people observed that because they had not read earlier scenes, it was a bit difficult to understand how their scene fit into the overall story, but that as they watched the performance, the pieces more or less fell into place and they were able to follow the plot and character development. The play had humorous as well as very touching moments, and was quite well received by those in attendance.

Dr. Nelson discussed how gay and lesbian issues have been presented in classrooms in the past. For example, from a psychological frame of reference, the teacher might focus on the feelings and attitudes of the students, and through class discussions students might become more self-aware which could lead to personal transformation and a change in discriminatory attitudes. From a sociological perspective, the issues are discussed with a focus on changing society as a whole, and on ending power imbalances, and ultimately, discrimination. Dr. Nelson discussed how these two categories might include a portion of language teachers, but not the majority. She raised the question of how it is possible to bridge the gap between those teachers who are advocates/activists and the more mainstream teachers who tend to limit the main part of their teaching to linguistic aspects of language teaching. She explained that since our expertise is the language, we can step back from discussion of the issues to also look at the discursive elements that are involved in the discussions themselves.

<b>Psychology</b>	<b>Sociology</b>	<b>Heteronormativity</b>
Personal	Social	The textual, the discursive
Fear/hatred of gay people	Institutionalized discrimination	Ways of normalizing heterosexuality
Feelings, attitudes	Social issues	Acts of language/culture
To emphasize	To challenge/confront	To analyze
Heterosexuality as norm	Oppressor/oppressed	To see how sexual identities permeate sexual practices
	End social discrimination	Focus on textual/discursive

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End personal discrimination		analysis
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On Sunday, Dr. Nelson went into more detail about how teachers can deal with discussions of sexual identity issues as well as further the students’ language learning goals. Although they are not complete, I have written out transcripts/notes (not necessarily verbatim) of a portion of her presentation, in bold below. For example,

**Students make their own meanings from our responses – or lack of response. We may think we share understandings with the students, but often what they are receiving and interpreting is quite different from the message we are trying to deliver.**

Not only students, but people who attend seminars. We hear the message but we probably interpret it through our own particular filters. During the entire weekend, I found myself filtering the messages in the play/discussion/lecture through my own experiences as an AIDS educator. Here, from this position, I would like to give my thoughts as I reread my notes.

**We need an approach that can be socio-cultural and socio-political but that is focused on discursive interaction where the aim is much more open-ended. Questioning how texts work... It may be that critical pedagogy does not appeal to many teachers because it often has a final answer, or puts forth a certain way of thinking. In order to bring the issues more into the mainstream language teaching, looking at the language rather than trying to change students’ minds or change the world, we can use the discussion of issues to example the language we use (or avoid using). This could be how we can show that discussion of queer issues fits in with language teaching.**

A variety of “issues” are increasingly finding their way into the language classroom in a number of course books. The popularity of these books suggests that teachers are becoming more accepting of the discussion of issues if they appear in EFL texts. Yet if an issue is not included would the same teachers go out of their way to include it? In my own research into why foreign teachers in Japan do/not raise any sort of sensitive or controversial issues, one of the respondents was very clear that the teacher’s position should not be used as “a bully pulpit” to put forward the teacher’s values and opinions. However, there is the argument that not raising issues sends a message that certain social issues are not important or not acceptable topics for discussion in the language

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classroom.

For the topic of HIV/AIDS in particular, the reasons most often given for not including it were 1) it's not a problem in Japan and 2) it doesn't fit in with language teaching. Another of my respondents wrote something like, “you can't do a drill with that topic.” This seems to be a rationalization for why the teacher would avoid discussion of a topic that they were not comfortable with, since a creative teacher would probably be able to bring out an entire grammar lesson based on a short reading passage about AIDS or anything else. If these teachers realize that as language teachers they are in the unique position of helping their learners observe facets of language and the impact of the language they use, they may be more open to including discussion of issues they might otherwise avoid.

**Students are interacting with these issues all the time (through people around them, news, movies, etc.) and we can make that our field of study rather than raise issues as though they are not already circulating. Challenging the idea that the idea of sexual identities do not already exist – if someone is wearing a wedding ring, or uses the label “Mrs.,” it brings up issues of sexual identity. How can we acknowledge the range of sexual identities that exist in our classrooms and schools, not only heterosexuality. By the way language works, terms are defined in relation to each other, are not separate categories.**

Again, through my HIV/AIDS educational filter, there is this myth that students are not interested in this topic. Almost any teacher in Japan who has approached the topic knows that it is one that heightens interest and participation among the students simply because, from my own observations, it has not been adequately discussed in junior and senior high schools here in Japan. I teach at the university level and have seen in comments in student journals that the issue of AIDS is, indeed, very much a concern in many of students' lives, regardless of how much (little) news coverage there is about it. They are also concerned about pregnancy, sexualities, and communicating with sexual partners. So, as Dr. Nelson pointed out, we are not bringing in these issues, they are already there.

**Perhaps many teachers feel that because they are not experts on a topic, especially with regard to queer issues, they might avoid talking about the topic. But because language teachers are experts on language, they are in a special position to direct students' attention to looking at dialog, the impressions that words carry, the implications of how things are said, intonation, text organization. Facilitating inquiry, “What effect does using a certain word/phrase/pronunciation have on the listener?” How is that part of producing identities?**

Last year I taught a 6-week workshop on HIV/AIDS to 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. One of the classes included an activity in which students were given an authentic handout of phrases in English that people can use when talking to their partner about using a condom. Several students commented that it was a very useful class and gave them ideas on how to approach the subject with their partners. This would be a good point at which to look at language and have students talk about why it's easy/difficult to talk about these issues, how what we say will be interpreted by our partner, how *how* we say

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it (intonation, etc.) affects their reaction, how our raising the topic changes how our partner views us, and so on.

**Teachers who are reluctant to talk about the topic are often focused on the topic, rather than looking at the text, which is our expertise. It can also work as a safety net. If emotions run high in a discussion, we can step back and look at the discussion from a discourse level. Some teachers tend to start from the language, then ask what everyone thinks about the topic, but do not come back to the language issue and look at how the discussion relates to the language. How would you talk about it differently, what different words would you have used, etc. One of our strengths as language teachers is that we know how to work with texts.**

**We need to come back to the question, what is our aim? What are we trying to do as language teachers? How does what we do further the learning objectives of the class? Are we here to help the student become a better person or to become a better writer/speaker/listener?**

I was packing up my office this week when a couple of students stopped by. We got to talking and I asked them if, in their English classes, they had ever talked about any pair/group conversations from a discourse level. One replied that the teacher had introduced the vocabulary related to the issue, but had never really talked about the interaction, or the effect of choosing particular phrasing or vocabulary over others. They said that although it sounded interesting, they probably wouldn't want to spend too much time discussing it. They really just wanted to talk about the issues. That got me to thinking about how to approach this sort of discussion... Would I make it a regular part of a lesson? Would I keep it in my “bag of tricks” for those awkward moments when I don't know how to respond? Is there “a way” to teach it and “a way not to”?

**Making it normal and not taboo to discuss various issues in the context of language learning, but being frank with discomfort or nervousness. “I'm wondering how to talk about this... Do you normally talk about this? Who would you talk about this with? Would you ever write about this rather than talk about it? How would you talk about it?”**

**...If a student gave a comment such as, “I'm from [country] and this is how people in my country feel about X people [that they don't like them, or those people don't exist in my country, etc.],” it opens up the possibility for examining that, with a response such as, “Oh, that's interesting because I've recently heard about a group of X people who are very active in your society and have a lot of support, etc.”**

**Example, “in Japan, people don't talk about gay and lesbian issues in the classroom.” “Oh, really? Actually, I've heard that Japan is taking the lead in raising these issues in the classroom. [Ex. Todai students several years ago requested that courses about queer issues be included in the curriculum, as have many other universities.] Temple University recently invited a world expert in queer issues in English language classrooms to give a seminar in Tokyo and Osaka....”**

Over the past few years in addition to AIDS education, I have introduced media literacy

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skills with my 1<sup>st</sup> year English majors. One of the things I stress is that we should consider just as carefully that which is not covered in news reports as that which is. We need to ask questions about things that are not reported, and to think about why that information is not given, whose opinions are not allowed to be expressed, and what effect that has on the audience. There is a clear similarity between asking these questions of the media and of asking them about issues that people often feel are “sensitive,” “controversial,” or taboo for the foreign language classroom. Is it all right to talk about some topics in class but not others? Why? Who decides such things? Where/How do we learn what is “OK” to talk about and what isn’t? If we were with people whose background/experience/culture allows them to discuss such issues, how would we feel? How would we react? Would we also be able to participate in the discussion? How could we do that? What tools (vocabulary/conversation management techniques/structures) would we use? Just how well-informed are we on such issues?

Cynthia Nelson’s seminar was thought-provoking for me. It gave me one more idea as to how we can help those teachers who are reluctant to use more sensitive issues in the classroom to understand that they do not have to take a stand on any issue, but to use it as an authentic text (coming from the students themselves) that can be analyzed discursively.