Issues of power in relation to gender and sexuality in the EFL classroom - An overview

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Schools in general and classrooms in particular are among society’s primary socializing institutions (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996, p. 261; Adger, 2001). In particular, education, as an institution of Gramsci’s ‘civil society’ (Jones, 2006), can be considered a grassroots space where hegemonic gendered and sexual identities are constructed and regulated. This article looks at the context of the EFL classroom – a discursive space where learners are potentially (re-)constructed in relation to various (gender) roles in society as well as learning the practices, values and rules of a given society at large. In this paper we explore and discuss how the categories of gender and sexuality are represented, (re-)constructed and generally dealt with in this learning environment. We follow Foucault’s (1978, 1979) conceptualization of power as something which “weaves itself discursively through social organizations, meanings, relations and the construction of speakers’ subjectivities or identities” (Baxter, 2003, p. 8) and is enacted and contested in every interaction (see Mullany, 2007). We see power as being produced, reproduced, challenged and resisted in the EFL classroom in connection with the construction of gender and sexuality. The article discusses how views on what/who is ‘powerful’ in the context of the EFL classroom have changed over the years, from the early privileging of textbooks to the currently advocated central role of the teacher in addressing and promoting (or not) traditional and/or progressive discourses of gender and sexuality. Critical pedagogies and queer pedagogies are discussed as offering educators potent insights and tools to deal with heteronormativity and various forms of discrimination in the EFL classroom as well as helpful means for empowering all students by addressing their various identities. It is thus our contention that relationships between gender, sexuality and EFL education are in need of urgent (re)addressing as existing research is outdated, lacks methodological sophistication or is lacking in the Polish context.

Keywords
EN critical pedagogies, EFL classroom, gender, heteronormativity, power, queer pedagogies, sexuality, talk-around-the-text, textbooks

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From this standpoint, language is not simply a means to express or communicate; instead, it is a product that is constructed by the ways language learners recognize themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their potentialities for the future. In actual fact as Morgan represents, “politically engaged critiques of power in everyday life, communities, and institutions” are exactly what are needed to develop critical pedagogies in language education. Critical teaching is principled and it has a coherent view of society and the role of power in forming relationships in society. The critical language educator relates knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to knowledge of social problems and how to act to solve these problems.

In an overview of studies published by the mid-1980s, Janet Lindow et al. (1985) acknowledged their arbitrariness and conceptual weakness: “It would not be difficult for us to develop a long list of understudied topics. The following three examples share a concern with the question of identity in the context of interaction and language learning, a concern that is at the heart of the studies in this paradigm. With a focus on gender relations, Willett looked at the many intertwined “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973) at work in the classroom community. The teacher’s practice of seating boys next to girls in order to control classroom behaviour did not affect the closed gender communities. Gender-bias and heterosexism in EFL textbooks. Most of the articles indicate a development in awareness, yet still provide results exposing bias especially in sexual inclusivity. The relationship between gender and sexuality is discussed on its own and in relation to research. It is concluded that heterosexuality is a gender norm and thus should be included in analyses of gender roles in textbooks.