Linguistic Perspectives on Sexuality in Education: Representations, Constructions and Negotiations
edited by Łukasz Pakuła (2021)
Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, xxii + 444 pp.

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Sexuality has become crucial to inclusive education in the 21st century, where educational practices constitute the central domain of linguistic and discursive power. In this context, Linguistic Perspectives on Sexuality in Education: Representations, Constructions and Negotiations, edited by Łukasz Pakuła, scrutinises sexuality in education via a linguistic lens, collecting key writings by leading scholars and practitioners from nine different countries. This edited collection offers a nuanced exploration of the under-researched topic of how gender and sexualities are represented, negotiated and constructed in the English classroom. This unique and timely volume integrates theoretical and empirical work from a range of countries to investigate current themes, debates and methods in the field of gender, language and education. It analyzes local legal provisions like the UK’s Equality Act and Poland’s LGBT Declaration to recommend policy and practice changes that enhance diversity in relation to gender and sexuality in the classroom. As such, this book also provides insights into the field’s historical evolution: who contributed to it, what hindered its development and what directions it can now take, given a growing interest in the topic.

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The book consists of five thematic sections. Part I examines heteronormativity in textbooks and dictionaries and how non-heteronormativity is included or excluded. Part II explores diversity-driven pedagogical considerations in light of legal provisions and contributors’ practices with the aim to welcome marginalised voices in the classroom. Part III investigates how non-mainstream academic courses, such as scholarship on transgender identity or male-directed sexual violence, may develop reflexive thinking beyond the gender binary. Part IV addresses interventions against heteronormativity and heterosexism in classrooms aimed at teaching English. Part V discusses non-academic studies and makes recommendations for bridging university research and classroom practices. Critical discourse analysis or queer linguistics are applied as theoretical frameworks by all contributors. Under such frameworks, the discursive construction of sexual minorities is closely examined, revealing supposedly neutral, but in actual terms, privileged hegemonic sexualities.

The fundamental concern of the book is how English should be taught in a way that incorporates marginalised voices, given the pervasive (and often enforced) silence surrounding sexual minorities. It is worth noting that a discussion on Englishes is missing, possibly rendering the volume weaker on this account. Instead, most contributions highlight the importance of non-heteronormativity within a more general understanding of English curricula, considering the lack of LGBT themes in current textbooks. Theoretical and classroom perspectives are also offered; some chapters have strong viewpoints and in-depth analyses, especially those that deal with the role of teachers. For instance, Sunderland’s chapter identifies the need for teachers to educate themselves in queering the language classroom in reaction to dominant heteronormativity in English textbooks. She eloquently explains that teachers’ engagement with the text is paramount, as teachers can either perpetuate heteronormative discourses (and, in worst-case scenarios, advance homophobic discourses) or facilitate a discussion that problematises dominant views in favour of a more inclusive reading of the material. Moving to TESOL classrooms, Sauntson explores the inclusion and exclusion of sexual identities, similarly finding that teachers play a vital role in promoting inclusion in education. From the same perspective, Chojnicka and Pakula research Polish LGBT teachers’ sexuality discourses, arguing that teachers are ‘primary agents of social change’ (284). Unique identities enable teachers to ‘tweak classroom text treatment, and facilitate classroom discussions in an inclusive fashion’ (283), resulting in empowering students. As for specific ways to incorporate LGBT content, Goldstein’s chapter embraces Thornbury’s (2017) paradigm to propose seven strategies: Discretion, Normalization, Resistance, Awareness-raising, Activism, Research, and Self-Disclosure, which represent progressively increasing
challenges for teachers. In Goldstein’s view, ‘queering the textbook’ (365) by including LGBT content should happen in any classroom; therefore, the first three tactics are particularly critical because they are viable in all current teaching contexts.

Perhaps the most innovative contribution of the book to the field of gender and language is its focus on investigating non-heteronormative material in educational contexts, where ethical issues of research take center stage. Research ethics, in this book, ties all contributions together, either explicitly or implicitly. LGBT communities are the core group investigated in the book, as a marginalised, stigmatised and disenfranchised minority. In the introduction, Pakuła argues that scholars should embrace LGBT people in the classroom because they endure growing stigma and are crucial for inclusivity. Turning to research methods, all chapters emphasise ‘bringing research participants into the picture’ (13) and echo Pakuła’s tripartite approach, i.e. advancing a paradigm for socially engaged research that includes analysis of the researchers, the subjects and the study’s impact on the subjects. This approach requires researchers to consider the potential adverse effects of their research on subjects (e.g. depression, anxiety). In relation to methods, focus groups and semi-scripted interviews are encouraged by most contributors. This insightful methodology sheds light on the intricacies of researching sexuality and inspires scholars who aim to explore inclusive language education in complex global contexts. In this regard, some contributors report on the challenging aspects of their research on LGBT sexuality, such as group-specific minority stressors and psychological processes. Among them, Power’s research on a Canadian university’s first-year academic writing course on the topic of transgender people offers a unique contribution to the volume. Power assigned reflective writing and interviewed students with the help of the course instructor. She also asked the instructor to reflect on student learning and document learning outcomes. In this way, by recording and reporting on the uptake of transgender studies in a university course (rather than focusing on questions of gender more broadly), Power persuasively argues that engagement with nonbinary issues constitutes a prolific venue for boosting students’ academic writing skills. She thus provides unprecedented insight into how nonbinary content can be incorporated into university curricula.

In sum, this path-breaking volume awakens readers to the interplay of gender, language and education. It is informative and supportive in helping readers understand relevant concerns. It will appeal to those engaged in applied linguistics, discourse research, education, sociology and gender and sexuality studies.
Funding

Research funded by a National Social Science Foundation Project of China (21BYY009).

References