Inclusion and Exclusion: A Case Study of an English Class for LGBT Learners

ASHLEY R. MOORE
Osaka Institute of Technology
Osaka, Japan

This article presents a case study of an English conversation class organised by a nonpolitical group of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) people in Japan. The primary aims of this study are to explore what kinds of learning needs these students had and to consider more generally how educators can best meet LGBT students' needs. Using interview data from six class participants, the author uses an applied thematic analysis to examine their experiences of learning in mainstream, commercial educational contexts as lesbian and gay students. He then contrasts this with their experiences of learning in the LGBT English class. He shows how the LGBT class allowed the necessary space for students to speak honestly as themselves, an affordance increasingly seen as crucial in the development of second language proficiency, which was often not granted to them in commercial conversation schools. However, the inclusivity of the LGBT class was not a given; new members often struggled to establish themselves in the group. Moreover, the content of the LGBT class often restricted learners' voices in other ways by focusing on issues not relevant to learners' lived experiences, disadvantaging students who had limited interest in mainstream gay culture, and at times reinforcing heteronormative discourses and essentialised images of gay identities.
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What kinds of learning needs do queer-identifying[1] second language learners have? Are the teaching materials and practices employed by educators meeting these needs? If the ways in which sexual identities are performed and understood vary across different sociocultural contexts, how does this play out in a classroom that serves as a nexus between two or more such contexts? A small yet growing body of research has started to explore the answers to these questions.

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[1] This article uses *queer* to refer to the wide range of sexualities that lie outside of the definition of *heterosexual*. At the same time, terms like *lesbian* and *gay* are employed where it seems more appropriate to refer to the historically and socially constructed categories they refer to.

In terms of teaching materials, it has been more than 20 years since Littlejohn and Windeatt's (1989) call for second language textbook writers and publishers to examine the heterosexist assumptions underlying the vast majority of language learning materials. Yet Gray's (2013) very recent sampled survey of U.K.-published English language textbooks produced for the global market found "no reference to same-sex sexual orientation in any of the titles" (p. 49). A small number of textbooks have introduced themes related to lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) people and their lives (see Nelson, 2009, pp. 15–16 for a brief overview), although these instances, even in those textbooks, are rare and the content is often framed as a controversial issue (de Vincenti, Giovanangeli, & Ward, 2007). Nelson (2012, p. 83) has referred to such attempts at inclusion as the "re-gaying" of education and has argued that such efforts have mostly failed from a queer theory perspective because they ultimately reinforce heterosexist norms by perpetuating essentialised taxonomies of sexuality and presenting anything queer in a marginal way. Indeed, in many of the studies that have looked at how queer issues can be included in the language classroom and what happens when they are, the content is almost always selected or created by an individual teacher (Nelson, 2009; Ó'Móchain, 2006; Summerhawk, 1998), suggesting that the number of commercially available materials that incorporate queer issues in meaningful ways is still insufficient.

Of course, although teaching materials may not engage with queer themes in a sustained way, it does not necessarily follow that these topics do not come up during discussions in the classroom. Indeed, if we can assume that some of the students in any given classroom will be queer-identifying, or questioning, or will have queer loved ones, acquaintances, and co-workers, it seems logical that such themes will naturally arise as students talk or write about their lives. However, although there is scant empirical evidence with which to test this assumption, what is available suggests that such themes rarely surface. Nelson (2009) reports a discussion that touched on queer themes in one of three classes she observed as part of her study on sexual identities in English language classrooms. Although the discussion was only 15 minutes of a 100-hour course, she remarks on how significant that was for a gay student in the class (p. 215) because this was the first time that he had experienced that kind of topic coming up in any language class. Furthermore, in the postobservation interviews that Nelson conducted with various students from the three classes, it is striking how many non-queer-identifying students positively evaluated the inclusion of queer-related topics in their classes. Such opportunities were crucial in that they allowed students to talk about their lives, make sense of the cultural and belief systems in a new country (the United States), understand their local communities, and relate to their friends and family.

These findings are further supported by data from a recent report on LGBT lives and issues in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes in the United Kingdom (Macdonald, El-Metoui, Baynham, & Gray, 2014) in which six out of eight students, most of whom were non-queer-identifying, took part in a focus group and talked about their direct personal experiences of LGBT lives. Indeed, after the focus group, the students' tutor noted that LGBT topics started to come up during class discussions "as a normal part of everyday life, as they had been sanctioned as acceptable" (Macdonald et al., 2014, p. 18). These examples indicate two crucial points: that queer-related themes are being institutionally silenced within language classrooms and also that, on the rare occasions when they are discussed, they are crucially important to not only queer learners, but all learners.

How and why the pervasive silencing of queer themes occurs is likely to be a result of numerous factors. I have already discussed the paucity of queer-related content in commercial textbooks. In addition, teachers who identify as heterosexual may feel they lack enough knowledge to introduce LGBT-related themes into their classrooms (Macdonald et al., 2014; Nelson, 2009; Yoshihara, 2013). Institutional homophobia, which Ó'Móchain (2006) has discussed in relation to a Japanese university with an explicitly Christian mission, can also have a negative effect on teachers' motivation to broach queer issues in class. In addition, the perceived and sometimes vocalised homophobia of a queer learner's classmates could prevent such topics from being discussed by either students or indeed the teacher, as Nelson (2009) has found. This factor is especially complex when one considers the multicultural makeup of many English as a second language (ESL) classrooms because the social norms regarding what can and cannot be said about queer people may differ depending on the background of each student. Lastly, students themselves may be reluctant to bring up such topics as they may be struggling with their own understandings of their sexuality. Whatever the causes, where such a homophobic miasma exists or is perceived, students may choose to change the topic abruptly, silence themselves, or find themselves forced to lie. Indeed, Malinowitz (1995) found that many gay and lesbian students in a university-level writing class purposefully avoided writing about queer topics in their assignments, necessitating a great deal of effort as they tried to circumvent those aspects of their lives in their work (and perhaps not producing their best work as a result). Moreover, many of the above coping strategies can have serious negative psychological repercussions for students.

Queer Inquiry

In response to these challenges, Nelson (2006) has called for language educators, materials designers, and researchers to adopt a critical approach grounded in queer theory which she has termed *queer inquiry*. Queer inquiry involves actively questioning and challenging how sexual identities and practices are performed, understood, and maintained within and across different languages and cultures. Importantly, the focus for those engaged in queer inquiry is not just on queer identities but also on those discourses that have traditionally been seen as non-queer, which is to say *straight*. In the classroom, such an approach leads language teachers away from facilitating debates about same-sex marriage or asking students to give their personal reaction to a lesbian coming-out narrative. Instead, teachers might ask students to think about the different ways in which an image of two men holding hands could be interpreted and examine where the assumptions that underpin those interpretations come from or to consider how transgender or straight characters are portrayed in the media and how different people might react to such portrayals.

Queer Language Learners

The above discussion on teaching materials and practices has touched a little on the experiences of some queer language learners, but empirical research on the learning needs of queer language learners remains limited. Kappra and Vandrick (2006) have investigated the experiences of three queer learners studying in the San Francisco Bay Area, a place often characterised as being a bastion of liberal values in the United States, especially in terms of its highly visible LGBT communities. They found that contrary to what one might assume, the students found that their classrooms could be "unwelcoming and even unsafe" (p. 138) and that this atmosphere was often seen by the students as being engendered through their teachers "settling for 'neutrality' and for a passive 'fairness'" (p. 147) when topics pertaining to LGBT people came up in class. Although they described some positive experiences, the participants all recounted feeling like they had to censor themselves in terms of their sexual identity in some of their classes and this clearly had a deleterious effect on how enjoyable the classes were for them as they felt marginalised, ignored, and angry. Indeed, Liddicoat (2009) found that even when students choose to express queer identities, it can be reframed by the teacher as "linguistic failure" (p. 201) rather than a performance of a nonheterosexual identity. Some queer learners, however, have found ways to exploit

their sexual identities to enhance their language learning. King's (2008) exploration of three queer Korean men's language learning in naturalistic settings found that they were able to utilise their marginalised positions as gay men in Korean culture to legitimise their access to English-speaking gay communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Queer Japanese Language Learners

A small number of studies have explored the intersections between queer Japanese students and their second language learning endeavours. Harrison (2011) used autoethnographical accounts from queer Japanese bilingual participants to investigate the relationships that existed between the participants' sexual identities and English language and its associated cultures. He found that English and the cultures that the participants associated with it represented both a safe house from what they felt to be the constraining norms of heteronormative Japanese culture and a tool through which they could actively emancipate themselves from such constraints. These findings support the conclusions of my own study in which I draw on Dörnyei's (2009) second language (L2) motivational self system to posit that the participants (five Japanese gay male learners of English)

> had developed a generally positive (though not unproblematic) conception of an imagined international community in which they felt they could live more comfortably as gay men. Through envisaging their own participation within this community, it could be argued that they also developed what might be termed ideal sexual selves. These possible selves... were also linked to their ideal L2 selves as the participants tended to view English (in its capacity as a global language) as a linguistic resource that could be used to help them in their struggle for participation.
>
> (Moore, 2013, p. 149)

The commonalities in these findings are further supported by Ellwood's (2006) account of a Japanese student of English who drew a stark contrast between the differing possibilities that he felt were available to him in Japan and Australia. Ellwood also notes that, similar to Malinowitz's (1995) observations, the student experienced difficulties in answering apparently straightforward questions pertaining to his language learning motivations and personality before he came out to her, because these matters were inextricably linked to his sexual identity. The findings from these studies indicate that, for at least some queer Japanese English learners, a crucial relationship exists between their motivational investment (Norton, 2000) in English and their

sexual identities. To what extent, then, do the educational practices prevalent in Japanese English classrooms take into account the needs of these learners? There is little research available to support an answer to this question, but Bailey's (2006) study of the promotional materials used to market English conversation schools in Japan notes the prevalence of images pairing white males with Japanese females and suggests that heterosexuality remains the default understanding of romantic relations in such contexts. Takahashi (2013) has also observed that in popular literature and *renai* texts (educational books and magazines containing information about how to conduct romantic and sexual relationships in English) "the discussion of intercultural romance almost always assumes … the ideal of heterosexuality" (p. 145). Thus, the literature offers a glimpse of the limited sexual possibilities discussed in Japanese language classrooms, but there is little to tell us about queer Japanese learners' experiences in these spaces.

THE STUDY

The participants were all members of an English conversation class organised by a Japanese nonpolitical group (hereafter referred to as OPEN, a pseudonym) providing community services for the LGBT community, HIV/AIDS awareness programs, and counselling services. OPEN is based in a large Japanese city. The conversation class was established in 1990 with three goals in mind:

- to provide a comfortable space for LGBT learners of English in which they could talk openly about their lives
- to form part of OPEN's LGBT community program
- to raise money to help fund OPEN's other activities

There are two classes: Beginners, which is tailored to lower level English users, and Regular for those with higher levels of fluency. The cost per lesson is substantially lower than that charged by most commercial English conversation schools in Japan (as noted above, this money helps to fund OPEN). The classes take place once a week. The teachers of the classes, all of whom are queer-identifying, work on a volunteer basis and come from a wide range of backgrounds (although the majority are male expats). They typically rotate so that most teachers commit to one lesson per month. The content of the classes is decided by each individual teacher and there are no official guidelines as to what the lessons should include. As such there are no defined learning goals for the classes and no recognisable start or end point to the program. Students simply join the class for as long as they want (although joining the class is not unproblematic, as I discuss

later). I chose to focus on the Regular class because the general level of English communicative proficiency was very high among the students (which facilitated the interviews) and the students' attendance was noticeably more consistent than those who took the Beginner class. Notably, many of the students had been participating in the Regular class for several years, often for longer than most of the teachers, creating a dynamic in which the teachers were temporary facilitators of discussion for the more permanent class members. As noted above, however, the power to make decisions regarding the content of the classes lay resolutely with the teachers. Given these dynamics, the Regular class can perhaps best be understood as a learning community of practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998) in which initial legitimacy (at least) is granted by the institution (OPEN) on the basis of shared LGBT status.

The research questions that I wished to explore in this case study were as follows:

- How do the OPEN learners understand their experiences of learning English in other educational contexts such as English conversation schools?
- How do they understand their experiences of learning in the OPEN class?
- What can these accounts tell us about the needs of queer learners in Japan and other contexts?

The six participants in this study, five male and one female, had all been members of the Regular class for at least 1 year. The participants volunteered to take part in face-to-face interviews outside of the class. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews took place between August 2011 and September 2012. The interviews were semistructured, and questions were based around the following topics:

- their English learning histories
- their experiences of life outside of Japan
- their experiences of learning English prior to joining the OPEN class
- their experiences as students at OPEN

The interviews were conducted mainly in English, although Japanese was sometimes used by the participants and me as the interviewer. This decision was made based partly on my experiences in my earlier study (Moore, 2013) involving Japanese gay male learners of English, in which some of the participants reported a strong feeling of discomfort when talking about their sexual identity in Japanese, and is further supported by accounts from some of Harrison's (2011) participants. The fact that the interviews were conducted in English,

the participants' second language, meant that they may not have been able to express themselves exactly as they wished. However, as noted above, all of the participants knew that I had some Japanese proficiency and many chose to use Japanese at certain points of the interview, often when they felt difficulty in communicating their thoughts in English. Lastly, the participants knew me prior to the interviews because I had been teaching at OPEN for 3 years. As I discuss in my analysis, there were instances when I felt this relationship influenced their responses, especially when talking about their experiences learning English at OPEN. This limitation is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the participants knew that I would shortly stop teaching at OPEN (two of the interviews took place after I had left) and the fact that many students presumed that the teachers did not know each other well as there were few opportunities for us to interact other than with the program coordinator. I feel this insider status both allowed me to ask better questions and, given the sensitive nature of some of the questions and of the participants' responses, meant that the students felt comfortable sharing their experiences (see Miller & Glassner, 2011).

Over 10 hours of interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcription is by no means an atheoretical process and is in itself a form of interpretation (Davidson, 2009). Some features of the discourse have been omitted from the transcript, such as minimal responses from the interviewer (e.g., *yeah*, *hm*) during a participant's turn where they did not appear to shape the data unduly and including them would have made the data harder to follow. Data originally spoken in Japanese was translated into English by me and checked by a professional bilingual translator. The original Japanese is preserved in the transcripts (written following the Modified Hepburn Romanisation system) and followed by the English translation (for a transcription key, see the Appendix).

The data were analysed using an applied thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). I subjected each transcript to a close, line-by-line initial thematic coding. I then compared these initial codes, looking for relationships and restructuring and consolidating them when needed in order to identify potential themes. With a developing codebook in place, I went back to the data set and tested the integrity of the themes, refining the coding within each theme, looking for negative instances that contradicted the analysis, comparing the themes to one another, and assessing how representative the themes were of the data set as a whole. Although Guest et al. (2012) note that applied thematic analysis is biased towards a positivist perspective, they acknowledge that the analytic method "is itself a highly interpretive endeavour" (p. 15).

Talmy (2010), while acknowledging the strengths of thematic analysis and the insights that studies employing it have contributed to the field of applied linguistics, has called on researchers utilising qualitative interview data to include in their analyses a "heightened reflexivity" (p. 143) towards how the interview, its context, and the participants involved are theorised. Thus, in my analysis of the data I adopt a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014) by assuming the existence of multiple realities, acknowledging that both what is said in the data and how it is said are shaped through the interaction and relationship between the researcher and the participant (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). In the discussion of the findings, I endeavour to pay explicit attention to these concerns and, in doing so, arrive at a deeper understanding of the social world of the OPEN class and the learning needs of its participants. In my presentation of the data, I have tried to find a balance between the competing demands of showing enough examples from across the data set to support the representativeness of my thematic analysis while also including samples of the interaction of the interviews in order to reflect on at least some of the data from a constructivist perspective.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Commercial English Conversation Schools and Gay Learners

All of the participants had studied English until they were 18 and graduated from high school. Only one of the participants, Daichi (all names are pseudonyms), had specialised in English at university. The others had all taken compulsory English classes as part of their tertiary education in other fields. Saki had spent 1 year studying in the United States when she was in high school, and Ken had been sent to the United States for 1 year by his company early in his career. After graduating from university, four of the participants had studied English at commercial language schools or paid for private one-to-one lessons.

When talking about their experiences as lesbian or gay learners at these commercial language schools, their responses varied. Ken stated that, although he was not *out* at the commercial school he had attended, he had never felt uncomfortable as a gay man during the classes. Indeed, he was pleased when another class member brought up the topic of gay marriage during a group class and the other students responded positively. However, in the 7–8 years that he had been attending those weekly classes, this was the only time LGBT-related topics had come up. It is interesting to note here that it was a student, rather than the teacher, who introduced the topic. This can

be seen as an example of the institutional silencing of nonheteronormative topics and one must wonder, along with Nelson (2009), about "what feats [had] been... performed by language-education practitioners to erase these perspectives and themes" (p. 53) during all of those classes.

Both Saki and Junya reported that LGBT topics had never come up in the classes they took at commercial language schools, and I noted a number of negative emotional evaluations as I coded their recollections of their experiences at the schools. As I explored the code further, it was interesting to note that these negative feelings arose not from the absence of LGBT topics in their classes but from everyday questions and topics. As Saki remembered,

> In that class I was ... uncomfortable about talking about daily topics. Non-gay topics is OK but talking about daily things ... was uncomfortable because other people talked their private things but I couldn't.

As Junya further explained,

> Teachers ask us often ... "How about your weekend?" or "What's up?" ... Those questions were really annoying.... I cannot talk about ... when I go see movie with my gay friends.... I cannot go "I went to go see the movie with my partner."... In Japanese, we can say it "Tomodachi to eiga itta" {I went with my friend to a movie} but in English we have say "He said something"... you can guess it's male or female in English. That's kind of problem for me. How should I say about that or something? So it's annoying.

Questions such as "What did you do on the weekend?" form the beginning of many language classes because they are often seen as easy topics that teachers can use to help students warm up. However, Junya's and Saki's responses reveal that even such seemingly straightforward topics can prove difficult to answer for LGBT learners and other who choose to keep parts of their lives private. Junya dealt with those questions by trying to avoid them, talking about work or just stating that he had done "nothing special." Because he did not perceive the classroom as a safe environment in which he could talk honestly about his life, Junya, in a similar vein to the students in Malinowitz's (1995) study, lost out on a learning opportunity that the teacher and many of the students around him may have taken for granted. Sadly, both Saki and Junya stated that such experiences demotivated them and partly influenced their decisions to quit their English classes.

Junya's comments on the difference between the use of pronouns between Japanese and English and a speaker's subsequent ability to control the level of disclosure in terms of the gender of the people she or he is talking about are also interesting. Japanese allows the

speaker to either drop the subject if it is assumed to be understood by both speakers or continue to use *friend* (*tomodachi*) as opposed to *he* or *she*. This allows Japanese speakers to discuss their private lives whilst not disclosing too much about their personal lives in public spaces, a vital skill in a society in which people are often encouraged to disregard their personal wishes (*honne*) when interacting with people in a public context and instead follow commonly accepted social rules (*tatemae*). In English, Junya felt a linguistic (and perhaps cultural) need to reference a person's gender when talking about her or him. I would argue that this indicates a broader need for language teachers to ensure that they focus not only on the linguistic competency of their students, but also on sociolinguistic competency. In this case, it would have benefited Junya to have known that *they* is sometimes used in place of *he* or *she* in English when we wish to leave someone's gender ambiguous.

Affordances of an LGBT English Class: Relationships and Honesty

All of the participants had initially been intrigued by the idea of an LGBT English class and some, such as Saki and Junya, saw it as the only way in which they could enjoy their English learning after their experiences in commercial language schools. When talking about the positive aspects of the classes at OPEN, two common, related themes became apparent to me: relationships and honesty.

In the data pertaining to what the participants enjoyed about the OPEN class, I coalesced my initial codes such as *making links with gay community*, *making friends*, and *maintaining relationships* under the larger theme of *relationships*. The relationships that the participants had developed while participating in the OPEN program were frequently put forward as one of the main reasons why they enjoyed coming to the classes. For example, Daichi reported that there was a 6-year period during which he did not miss a single class and that this was because the OPEN program "was the only channel for [him] to communicate with gay people." Hide said he enjoyed the feeling of having a "common purpose" with other gay people, in contrast to his previous experiences of feeling like an outsider when talking with other Japanese LGBT people. He went on to tell me, "*Totemo suki desu. Nande ka to iu to, . . . ningen kankei wa chanto shiteiru kara* {I really like it. If I was to say why, . . . it's because I can really make good relationships with others}. Heart by heart." Saki, too, explicitly drew a link between her desire to see her friends in the class and the motivation behind her continued attendance. In many ways, learning English appeared to be a secondary

benefit of the classes for the participants, as the classes seemed to afford them a feeling of solidarity and community with other LGBT people. These responses all support my earlier description of the OPEN class as a learning CoP in that the class members are mutually engaged and share a joint enterprise (learning English and interacting with other queer people; Wenger, 1998). The other defining feature of a CoP, shared repertoire, cannot be empirically proven here as classroom interactions were not part of the data set.

However, as I pursued the theme of relationships in the interview data, it became clear that these strong interpersonal links could also have a negative effect on how comfortable people felt in the class. Junya, Saki, Daichi, and Hide all expressed feelings of discomfort and nervousness when I asked them to think about their initial experiences in the OPEN class. Although the strong relationships that the participants had built up over time proved to be extremely motivating for them, these intragroup bonds also presented a barrier for those wishing to join the class, something that I, as a teacher of the class, had witnessed when new students arrived only to struggle to participate, seemingly in awe of the high levels of proficiency and fast-paced repartee of the established members. It was notable for me that many first-time students did not come again. Here I focus on an extract from Hide's interview, just after he had told me that the first month was "not comfortable" and I tried to explore the reasons why.

Ashley: At the beginning ... what made it a little bit difficult? Was it language level or?

Hide: Ah language level is the first problem and I don't speak so much *dakara* ... *jishin ga nakatta* ... *minna yoku shabereru kara kowakatta* {so ... I didn't have any confidence ... everyone could speak well so it was scary}.

Ashley: .. Now do you feel part of the group?

Hide: Ah yeah yeah yeah yes.

Ashley: How- When did you start to feel ...

Hide: Ah, *dankaiteki ni* {step by step} ... *saisho wa Masa-san to yoku shaberu yō ni natte ... de sono ato de Yasuhiro-san to shaberu yō ni natte, Saki-san mo shaberu yō ni natte, saikin Daichi-san to shaberu yō ni natte- nanka mō daijyoubu da to omotta* {first I often talked with Masa ... then after that I became able to talk with Yasuhiro and Saki too, recently I became able to talk with Daichi- Then I thought it was OK}. <laughs>

As I try to explore the reasons for Hide's discomfort, I offer a potential answer by positioning him as a lower level English user compared with the old-timers. Though echoing my idea, Hide resists it by reframing his feelings as the result of a lack of confidence rather than linguistic deficiency. His switch to Japanese to do so may be because he felt he could express himself better in his first language, but here it could equally be a response to my unfortunate implicit positioning. He then goes on to emphatically stake his claim of legitimate membership in the group and, as I invite him to talk about when this happened, he takes the opportunity to reposition himself as the primary agent in this transition as he talks about consciously choosing conversation partners of increasing status within the group, culminating in him being able to talk with Daichi, one of the key members of the group with perhaps the highest level of English fluency. Here I assert that the knowledge of the group shared by Hide and me allowed him to use the names of the other students as a kind of symbolic shorthand for the strategy he employed.

The evidence suggests that the OPEN CoP was so well established and the shared repertoire so extensive that it had become quite impenetrable for many newcomers. The fact that the teacher changed from week to week and that new students might show up at any time further complicated this issue as it made it difficult for the class to prepare for and accommodate peripheral members seeking legitimacy within the group.

I started to consider that, as the participants moved from the periphery of the group to a more legitimised membership and forged meaningful relationships with others, this engendered the affordance of another common theme: honesty. Five of the six participants talked positively about the fact that they could openly discuss their personal lives in the class.

Tomo: One ... special thing in OPEN class might be to have discussion ... about romance or life plan with their partner .... That kind of thing is, er, difficult to talk in heterosexual world .... That is so stressful for us .... Sometimes I was asked, er, "Do you have any girlfriends? ... When will you get married?" ... I need to tell a lie ... but in OPEN class it is not necessary to tell a lie. That is completely different point with other classes ... I think that is the worth existence of this class.

Junya went even further as he described how much he valued the capacity for honesty that the OPEN classes afforded him.

Ashley: Would you go back to *eikaiwa* {English conversation} school one day or?

Junya: I don't think so . . . . I should have much opportunities to speak English but I don't try to back those schools again.

Ashley: Why not?

Junya: .. *Yappari* {As I thought}, gay teachers is much better for me I think. I can speak honestly. That's comfortable I realised after I started going to OPEN class so I can't go back to those heterosexual conversation school anymore. And especially I got a partner now so . . . I don't want to avoid those topics such as "How about your weekends?" or something. Now I do want to speak honestly about my weekends . . . . So I don't want to go back to those ordinary schools.

Ashley: Is that because you feel uncomfortable talking about that in an ordinary school?

Junya: Yeah.

Ashley: What makes it uncomfortable?

Junya: I have to- I need to lie. I don't want to do that again anymore.

In these excerpts we can see how the heteronormative assumptions that routinely pervade ESL textbooks and classes can have a profoundly debilitating effect on many LGBT students in the classes, either silencing them or forcing them to feel the need to lie. In contrast, the affordance of feeling comfortable when discussing one's private life was clearly something that participants valued about the OPEN class.

The participants' discovery of a space in which they were able to talk about the topics that mattered to them is, of course, heartening. However, classes such as those run at OPEN are extremely rare and simply not available to the majority of LGBT ESL students. Furthermore, Junya's choice of words when he describes the fact that he cannot return to "those heterosexual conversation schools" suggests the development of a dichotomy in the minds of the OPEN students, between the queer OPEN classroom and the heteronormative corporate language classroom. If LGBT students like Junya cannot find a comfortable space in the language classroom to talk about their lives and withdraw or find alternative spaces such as the OPEN class, one could argue that both LGBT students and heterosexual students are being denied valuable opportunities to become more sexually literate by enquiring together into how sexual identities are experienced and formed. Nelson (2009) has referred to this process as the development

of "sociosexual literacy" (p. 208). The dichotomy also reinforces an essentialised taxonomy of human sexuality in which the binary (and from a queer theory perspective, unsatisfactory) categories of gay and straight are left unquestioned.

Resistance in the LGBT English Class: Essentialisation and Nonconformity

As discussed above, the participants generally reported enjoying the OPEN classes and were very appreciative of the efforts of the volunteer teachers. That is not to say, however, that they were universally uncritical about the content of the classes. When analysing the data on which aspects of the OPEN classes were less positive for the participants, I identified a common recurring theme which I labelled *resistance to the OPEN class*, under which I delineated two subthemes: resistance to the predominance of LGBT-related content in the classes and feelings of discomfort as a result of nonconformity with perceived group norms.

According to the students, a great deal of the content of the classes tended to focus directly on gay-related issues, and for students like Saki and Hide this could be a positive aspect of the OPEN class. Daichi went further:

Daichi: Basically at OPEN I like to do something gay . . . . I know some teachers say "I don't like only gay things" and I don't understand why because . . . if they didn't teach anything about gay stuff, why do I have to go out of my way to come here? . . . I come here to do some gay-related . . . activity . . . . I feel a bit sorry when someone says it.

However, when I asked Daichi whether he had any favourite topics, rather than directly answering the question, he resisted my questioning track:

Daichi: This is my really really personal opinion but I've had enough of gay marriage stuff . . . . It's important thing and if no teacher did it that would be a problem. I know I need . . . some information . . . . I know it's so . . . hotly debated . . . we have so many lessons regarding gay marriage, almost every month . . . . If one more time another gay marriage lesson was done, I would say "Ah, again gay marriage!" <laughs>

Daichi's use of hedging ("This is my really really personal opinion but . . .") and laughter suggests that he was mindful of my feelings as

a teacher of the class. However, the fact that he chose to co-opt my original question as an opportunity to share his feelings of exasperation at the prospect of another lesson about gay marriage suggests that this was a very important point for him. Indeed, his hedging might indicate that he felt even more strongly than he intimated. Junya expounded on this:

Junya: .. almost all week we have to talk about gay-related topics. That's enough I think . . . . For example we are really interested in cultural difference between foreign- Westerners' countries and Japan . . . but we don't talk about that. For example, . . . after the [2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami] . . . teachers didn't talk about earthquake or radiation . . . . That's kind of, um, "Why?" . . . I want to talk about general topics more. We don't need to talk about gay-related topics every time . . . . But each teacher makes an effort- what kinds of topics are good for us gay people and eventually it became . . . we talk about gay topics each week.

In what again might be a face-saving gesture on his part (given my status as one of the teachers he is talking about), Junya voices an awareness of some of the pressures that the teachers faced in trying to create lessons that every member of the class could relate to and enjoy. However, he still finds the dominance of gay-related topics, at the expense of other important aspects of his life, to be frustrating. Although there may have been other reasons for the teachers not to have brought up the topic of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster (counsellors at the university where I was teaching at the time advised faculty members not to bring up the topic in class unless the students themselves chose to talk about it), it was clearly perceived as an extreme case of ignoring a major life event because it was not explicitly gay-related. In effect, although the teachers' efforts (including mine) were presumably to create inclusive lessons, for some students these lessons in fact seemed to deny them opportunities to talk about other aspects of their lives as holistic individuals with varied interests and concerns.

As discussed above, the strong social bonds that long-term OPEN English students enjoyed could conversely act as a powerful barrier that new students had to overcome before they could feel at ease in the class. In addition, the extent to which participants could identify with the particular modes of gay identity and experience that were available in wider mainstream gay culture and enacted and perpetuated by the teacher and the students during the classes also had an effect on the level of their enjoyment. As the teachers created gay-related content for the classes, they must have made certain assump-

tions about what is and what is not a gay topic. This is problematic because these assumptions about what gay people are like or are interested in are often based on very narrow conceptions of what gay culture and identity are (see Cameron & Kulick, 2003, pp. 74–105, for an overview of queer theory challenges to the essentialist and reductionist approaches to sexual identity signified by labels such as *gay* or *lesbian*). Tomo noted that a number of lessons had focused on so-called gay icons such as the singers Katy Perry and Lady Gaga and presented this as a positive aspect of the class as "almost all members like them and it is enjoyable." However, I feel that his choice of "almost all" here is telling. Tomo went on to describe his struggle with the demands of conformity that the OPEN class represented to him:

Tomo: [In OPEN's] class … that kind of the demands of culture … is not so strong compared with [bars in the city's well-known gay district] but still I feel some kind of pressure or uncomfortable feeling because, er, … some member are so professional gays. <nervous laugh> … Sometimes I feel I am so stranger so I'm not … suitable in this world I think . . . . It makes me so uncomfortable.

He continued to describe his feelings of discomfort in classes that focused on aspects of what he saw as mainstream gay culture.

Tomo: .. you know many teachers … is so, er, strong personality sometimes . . . . That kind of class not suitable for me. Especially fashion … drag queen or something . . . . I don't know sometimes, what is gay culture? Gay culture is many various gays exist and they have own preference and the sense of humour, sense of worth.

Thus, although teachers may select topics from mainstream gay culture in an effort to be inclusive, they could in fact be unwittingly excluding those individuals who simply are not interested in or have a strong aversion to such topics. In fact, as we try to identify a gay culture and define it, what we inevitably do is reduce it to a narrow range of stereotypes that cannot possibly reflect the multifaceted lives of queer individuals.

PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

As an educational program in which all of the students and teachers identified themselves somewhere within the LGBT spectrum, the OPEN English classes offered a unique opportunity to explore the needs of queer English learners and identify the kinds of pedagogic

practices that both enhanced and limited their learning. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article suggested, the findings have implications not only for teachers of similar LGBT-focused programs, but also for those teaching LGBT-related content and, most important, for anyone teaching LGBT students (which realistically means almost all teachers). Given this, I adduce five implications from the study.

Implication 1: Teachers need to critically reflect on the confessional burden that seemingly innocuous questions such as "What did you do on the weekend?" can place on LGBT students. Saki and Junya's feelings of discomfort when faced with seemingly neutral questions such as those relating to their daily lives show very clearly that there is a need for educators, curriculum developers, and materials designers to reassess what kinds of burdens we place on students when we ask them to share information about their personal lives. This is not to say that asking students to engage in activities that require some level of self-disclosure should be avoided. Indeed, encouraging learners to internalise the target language and speak for themselves is one of the central tenets of most modern approaches to language teaching, but, as Nelson (2009) has asserted, "teachers (and material developers) should craft tasks and questions in ways that allow for—but do not require—a confessional mode" (p. 214). Teachers might also pause to think about whether they have considered all of the possible causes why a particular student remains silent or shows signs of discomfort during a seemingly straightforward group discussion.

Implication 2: Teachers must include sociolinguistic competency in their pedagogy in order to allow students to control their level of personal disclosure in culturally appropriate ways. Learners must be presented with the necessary linguistic and sociolinguistic literacies that are routinely employed by queer individuals in their first language as they navigate the social contexts in which heterosexuality is often assumed, privileged, or even enforced. Teachers tend to value specificity and detail in students' output, and we place a premium on honesty. How often do we teach students how to circumvent an unwanted question? How often is it assumed by both the students and the teacher that all questions must be answered? Are students being shown how to use gender-neutral terms to avoid an uncomfortable level of disclosure without being forced to lie? Moreover, there is a danger that the need for sexual literacy (Alexander & Banks, 2004) is considered only in relation to queer learners and that it becomes sidelined as a niche concern. However, as Nelson (2009; after Britzman, 1997) states, "matters of sexuality are in fact matters of knowledge and society and as such are manifest in the public domain and are relevant to anyone, not just gay people" (p. 207).

Implication 3: In learning CoPs like the OPEN class, care must be taken by both the teacher and the community members to ensure that the strong intra-

group relations that help maintain and define the group do not present a barrier for new members who wish to join the community. Through participating in the OPEN class, the participants in this study developed meaningful relationships with each other and these connections became inextricably linked to many of the participants' ongoing motivational investments in the class and the project of learning a second language in general. However, these relationships, though valued, were also viewed by some as a barrier that made it difficult for new students to integrate in what I have suggested is an established CoP, suggesting that more needed to be done by both the teachers and the students to help support newer members. Reflecting on my own practice, it is clear that merely asking the group to share quick self-introductions was clearly unsatisfactory in terms of helping incoming members move from the periphery of the group and claim membership. A more promising strategy might be for teachers of similar programs to work with established members to decide on ways to welcome new students.

Implication 4: Students are best served by the adoption of a queer inquiry approach to matters of gender and sexuality in the language classroom. In trying to meet the assumed needs of the OPEN learners, the volunteer teachers often selected materials directly related to gay topics. All of the participants responded positively to this in general but often voiced their frustrations at what they saw as the overwhelming prevalence of these topics, at the expense of other aspects of human experience. I have argued that this preoccupation with gay issues sometimes did little to empower the learners and may have even reinforced heteronormativity by positioning queer subjectivities as controversial or difficult. By frequently focusing on Western political discourses that may not be relevant to the immediate lived experiences of the participants, such as those surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage, the content of the classes often seemed to fatigue and frustrate the students. Teachers might better meet the varied needs of students by adopting an approach in which they include diverse topics which are locally relevant. Finding ways to involve students in the selection of class content would be one way to ensure that it meets their needs and interests more effectively. These recommendations are included by Nelson (2009) as she outlines the key features of queer inquiry in which students and teachers examine "sexual matters (identities, norms, relationships) within everyday patterns of thinking, speaking, learning, and working, with a view to understanding the complex sociosexual dimensions and meanings that are part of day-to-day interactions, cultural practices, and social structures" (p. 209).

Implication 5: Teachers working with marginalised groups must be mindful of individual differences and resist essentialising assumptions. Although the participants frequently noted how much they enjoyed being able to

talk candidly about their lives, Tomo's illuminating comments illustrate the contingent nature of this "honesty." As he talked about his struggles with the demands of culture in the OPEN class, Tomo gave me an important reminder that "though a community is often associated with sameness, it is in fact marked by experiences of difference'"(Nelson, 2009, p. 169). Even in programs such as OPEN's, in which inclusivity of marginalised people is one of its *raisons d'être*, it is important for educators to critically examine their practices of inclusivity and consider whether we are neglecting the sometimes hidden needs of students.

CONCLUSION

The thematic analysis of the participants' reported experiences enabled me to identify a number of learning needs pertinent to LGBT students and extrapolate five pedagogic implications that have wider significance for language educators. The study also raises a number of issues that could usefully be pursued in further research. I posited that the OPEN class could be conceptualised as a CoP and used this to offer a theoretical lens through which to understand not only the participants' engagement in the class but also the struggles of new members to achieve a legitimised membership in the CoP. Empirical evidence from similar LGBT classroom learning communities could confirm whether in fact they do constitute CoPs (by empirically proving the use of a shared repertoire, following King, 2014) and also examine what kinds of community practices marginalise new members with a view to promoting inclusive counter-practices. I have also discussed the participants' crucial need for learning spaces in which they feel comfortable and safe enough to communicate honestly about their lives. Shared LGBT status and strong interpersonal relationships were the key factors that allowed for the OPEN students to be honest, but what other kinds of criteria do LGBT students use to assess whether they feel comfortable enough to express themselves in the language classroom? Lastly, how can teachers create environments that meet these criteria? If we are to create truly inclusive classrooms which meet the diverse needs of all students, the answers to these questions must be explored.

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THE AUTHOR

Ashley R. Moore is director of the Language Learning Center of Osaka Institute of Technology, in Japan. His research interests include exploring the links between identities, language learning, individual agency, and social structure.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Key

[2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami]	Text in square brackets indicates that the text was added by the researcher to clarify what the speaker was saying or to preserve the speaker's anonymity.
eikaiwa	Italic text indicates a Japanese word.
{English conversation school}	Text in curly brackets indicates that it is an English translation of the italicised Japanese text immediately preceding it.
. . .	Ellipsis indicates that a short portion of the original transcript has been omitted.
I almost spend- so basically I spend my life	A hyphen followed by a space indicates a false start or syntactic shift.
"How about your weekend?"	Text in double quotation marks indicates reported speech or thoughts.
<laughs>	Text in angle brackets describes nonverbal actions.