

Addressing LGBTQ erasure through literature in the ELT classroom

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This article argues the case for the use of well-chosen literary texts as a means of addressing ongoing LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning¹) erasure in the ELT classroom. In this way LGBTQ students are offered much needed recognition and those students who are not LGBTQ are given the opportunity to come to an understanding of those who are. Given the very different circumstances and constraints in which teachers work globally a distinction is made between Explicitly Queer Texts and Implicitly Queer Texts as suitable for different settings. Suggested titles and practical recommendations are included to enable teachers to plan lessons using literary texts in emotionally engaging ways.

Introduction

Stendhal famously compared the act of reading a novel – and by extension any literary text – with playing the violin. The novel, he said, was like a bow and the violin producing the sound was the reader's soul. As a metaphor for reading it is one that sees the role of the reader as a co-producer of meaning, suggesting that what we bring to the text is as important as the text itself. The metaphor also hints at the widely held belief that the sound of the violin improves over time as the instrument is played. Thus Stendhal indirectly implies that the act of reading literature is cumulatively transformative of the reader. It is this view of reading which underpins the case I make in this article for the use of literary texts in the English language classroom as a way of addressing the ongoing problem of LGBTQ erasure. By erasure I refer to the systematic editing out of the curriculum of certain categories of person, identities, events, injustices and histories for ideological, cultural or commercial reasons.

I will use the acronym LGBTQ as well as the term queer in what follows. Queer functions as a descriptor for a range of theoretical stances in which heteronormativity (i.e. the promotion and maintenance of heterosexuality as the default setting for all human sexual orientation) and the ways in which it intersects with other types of oppression (e.g. racism, discrimination against migrants, sexism, etc.) is interrogated and critiqued. From this perspective queer can be understood as having a more radical political agenda than straightforward calls for equality.

In recognition of the fact that some teachers work in settings where there is protective legislation relating to LGBTQ people, while others work in settings characterised by hostility towards sexual and gender minorities (Mendos, 2019), I make a distinction between what I have termed Explicitly Queer Texts and Implicitly Queer Texts. The former term refers to texts that include openly LGBTQ characters and address aspects of LGBTQ experience, while the latter refers to texts that have no overt LGBTQ content – but which carry within them ideas about the legitimacy of non-normative ways of being. Although it can be argued from a queer theoretical perspective that all texts can be read queerly (in the sense that they can be read and made to mean from a range of marginal perspectives), it is clear that some texts (such as those included below under the heading of Implicitly Queer Texts) can be read queerly more easily than others.

The affordances of literature

The use of literature in the language classroom has long been associated with specifically educational views of language learning (Kramsch and Kramsch, 2000). By educational I refer to an approach to second language learning that goes beyond the current predominantly instrumental view in which L2 learning is understood mainly in terms of skill acquisition. Such an approach holds that second language learning offers students the opportunity to relativise their worldview and to learn about others and the ways in which they encode the world, while simultaneously enabling them to reflect on themselves and their own language using. At the same time, literary texts, particularly if they are well-chosen in terms of students' interests and language level, may be said to offer the possibility of emotional engagement that the anodyne content of many textbooks does not permit. Here I draw on the work of Oatley (1994), who, following Aristotle's understanding of audience response to tragedy, argues that it is the power of literature to arouse emotions in the reader that can lead to identification with fictional characters who may be similar to or very different from ourselves – but whose happiness, passion, anger or disappointment we may come to understand, if not to share. From the point of view of LGBTQ students, whose erasure is a reminder of their marginalised status, opportunities for identification are particularly important, as it is through identification that we (partly) construct identities and become culturally intelligible to ourselves and others. But as Oatley points out, identification is not only a matter of self-recognition – it can also be the result of empathy, namely the ability to step outside oneself and to see the world from the perspective of the Other, as someone demanding and deserving of recognition. So in addition to providing LGBTQ students with opportunities for identification through self-recognition, literary texts have the potential to play a key role in enabling non-LGBTQ students to see the world through different eyes, enlisting their empathy and capacity for Other-recognition.

In the following section I suggest three Explicitly Queer Texts that I consider to be suitable for use in settings where LGBTQ citizens are protected by the law and where it is legitimate for topics relating to queer lives to be explored in the classroom. By way of illustration, I focus on one in particular. My approach to the text is in line with the principles of critical literacy in which a focus on language is combined with a critical perspective on social issues and a concomitant commitment to social justice.

Explicitly Queer Texts

It is important to bear in mind that using literary texts does not imply highly specialist knowledge or a radical departure from the way in which reading is normally approached in the language classroom. Titles of Explicitly Queer Texts and ideas for using them in the language classroom can be found in Logan, Lasswell, Hood and Watson (2014) and Eisenmann and Ludwig (2018). For teachers unused to working with literary texts or those who feel cautious about the introduction of LGBTQ topics short texts provide a good starting place. One useful genre in this regard is flash fiction which is usually defined as a very short story. The website Gay Flash Fiction (<https://gayflashfiction.com>) which specifies length of under one thousand words and features poems and stories in English by queer authors from around the world is a rich source of material. Three engaging pieces of flash fiction suitable for students at CEFR B1 are: 1) Santino Prinzi's (2017) story 'Toys' about a trans child who wants to play with what are considered gender inappropriate toys by some adults. Narrated in the voice of the child, the story could be used to practise the past simple while raising the issue of how transgender children are sometimes made to feel abnormal. 2) Andres Fragoso's (2017) story 'My father cringes when he sees Kyle hold my hand' is about a father's acceptance of his gay son. The story, which revolves around school swimming competitions could be used to practise sports-

related lexis, as well as providing an opportunity to discuss the difficulty of coming out to a parent. 3) Vikram Kolmannskog's (2018) prose poem 'Orlando, Mi Amor', which I deal with at length in the remainder of this section, could be used to practise lexis related to love and relationships, while raising the issue of homophobia. In terms of genre, a prose poem is a hybrid piece of writing that does not follow (or at least not consistently) the line breaks associated with poetry. It may include sequences of sentences as in a piece of prose but may also include repetition and fragmentary clauses, while aiming for an overall poetic effect.

'Orlando, Mi Amor' was written in the wake of the homophobic shooting in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida in 2016, when a gunman murdered forty-nine young mainly Latinx people. Media reports at the time suggested that the gunman may have been motivated by anger at having seen two gay men kiss publicly prior to going on the rampage. Whether or not this was so, the massacre was a clear case of Islamic State (IS) inspired terrorism, the gunman having pledged allegiance to this entity during the shooting spree.

The form of the prose poem is suggestive of an email or possibly a succession of text messages addressing Orlando as a personified lover whom the writer has not seen for some time. In doing so the poet focuses on the idea of the kiss and its potential to trigger an individual's homophobia and racism – rather than on the specific issue of state-sponsored homophobia. In this way the poet is able to draw on his own experience of prejudice as a queer man of dual Indian and Norwegian heritage, melding it with the events in Orlando (See prose poem Appendix 1).

As a recent guide shows (Paran and Robinson, 2016), there are many ways of using literary texts in the language classroom – so there are no hard and fast rules. However, many teachers are used to thinking of reading as involving 'pre', 'while' and 'post' stages and this may be a reassuring way to proceed for those who are new to working with literature. The text itself presents no significant stylistic difficulties, although the fact that it contains a number of words and simple expressions in Spanish mean these will need to be translated in some contexts.

As suggested above, the text could be used as a follow-up to a lesson or series of lessons in which lexical items associated with love and romance (e.g. 'to meet someone', 'to date someone', 'to fall in love', 'to be in love', 'to split up', etc.) are taught and practised, or as part of a lesson or series of lessons in which language associated with prejudice and discrimination (e.g. 'racist', 'racism', 'homophobia', 'Islamophobia', 'sexism', 'white privilege', etc.) is the focus. Although the poem does not include these items, students could be asked to use such language in their responses to the text – for example, writing a narrative account of how the poet came to meet, fall in love with and become separated from Orlando, or as part of a discussion about types of discrimination and prejudice in contemporary society.

Given the centrality of the kiss in the text and given that one of the aims is to work on identification and empathy it may be useful to start the follow-up with the idea of the kiss as a universal feature of human affection. This could begin, for example, with a focus on Doisneau's famous 1950 photograph 'Kiss by the Hôtel de Ville' (widely available on the Internet) as a joyous example of a public (heterosexual) kiss, and one much reproduced as a poster in subsequent years as emblematic of Paris as an inherently romantic city. Students could be asked to speculate about why the photograph achieved such fame, what it suggests to them, how they think the couple feel, how they feel as viewers of the image, etc. This could be followed by a second very different photograph of Melania Geymonat and Christine Hannigan who were subjected to a homophobic attack by a group of young men after being affectionate with one another on a London night bus in 2019 (BBC, 2019). The CCTV image (available in the previous

BBC reference) of the two bloodstained young women could be used as a bridge to the text and as means of encouraging students to think about the way in which same-sex displays of affection are met with violence in some settings. Students could be asked to speculate about how the women in the photograph feel, how they themselves feel about the photograph, and why they think such things happen, etc. In this way students are being helped to bring a range of ideas and feelings about issues surrounding kissing in public to the prose poem. That said, some teachers may wish to use a less distressing image and prefer to simply take a photograph of a same-sex kiss from the Internet by way of contrast.

Before moving on to the text itself it is necessary to decide how to address the Spanish expressions. These can be glossed with a translation in the margin so as not to interrupt the flow while reading, or they could be extracted from the poem and, having been translated, used as part of a pre-reading activity in which students speculate about the content of the text they are about to read. While-reading activities need to ensure initially that students have a basic comprehension of the topic of the prose poem and the story contained within it. For example:

Who do you think Orlando is?

What is the reason for writing to him?

What does the poet initially remember?

What happened at the station and on the bus?

What does the expression 'the white guy' tell us about Orlando and the poet?

Why did he feel afraid?

Why do you think some words and expressions are in Spanish?

After initial readings for general comprehension and clarification of any outstanding language problems, it is important to establish if students know about the shooting in Orlando in 2016 and what actually happened. It will probably be necessary to inform them about the basic events of the incident (an Internet search will reveal these) and then to invite them to consider how this influences the way in which they understand the prose poem. Until that point they may have understood the 'you' in the text as an individual by the name of Orlando. And indeed the poet may have had a lover with that name. Even so there is a deliberate conflation between Orlando, the place where so many died and Orlando, the name of a previous lover. So a second round of questions could encourage students to read the poem in the light of this new information – e.g. Does this new information change the way you understand the poem? Why does the poet feel brave enough at the end to say he will kiss Orlando in public? A third round of questions could move on to explore the nature of religiously motivated homophobia, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that many LGBTQ people are also members of faith communities.

Moving on to the post-reading stage, students might discuss how the prose poem makes them feel, and why they like it or dislike it. Thinking about how to interpret it could entail students working in groups and giving it a new title and justifying their choice to the whole class. Alternatively, the teacher could give them a list of titles to choose from and students could be asked to say which they prefer and why. Responses in which the aim is to develop empathy might include students imagining themselves as the poet and writing a second message, or personified as Orlando writing a reply to the poet. This could include how he felt about receiving his message, how he felt about their earlier disagreements about kissing in public and the events on the bus when they were shouted at by 'the white guy'. This reference in the text is a reminder of the specific difficulties faced by LGBTQ people of colour and the way in which racism and homophobia can intersect. Pursuing this angle could involve looking at an interview with Kolmannskog on *The Human Aspect* (2018) website where speakers from

around the world tell stories of overcoming obstacles in life. Kolmannskog talks specifically about the difficulties of growing up gay and as a member of an ethnic minority in Norway. The interview also sheds light on the prose poem and on his younger self who found it difficult to come out in the absence of role models he could identify with. Such an approach, where a multiplicity of sources is used alongside the literary text, is in line with Merse's (2018) advocacy of what he calls 'queer text ensembles'. This involves looking at an issue from a range of angles expressed in a variety of texts in which differing points of view are expressed and then discussed by students.

Implicitly Queer Texts

However, not all teachers and students are in settings where such work is possible. In hostile environments where there is no legal protection for LGBTQ people teachers may need to operate under the radar if they are not to expose themselves or their LGBTQ students to danger. Again literary texts can be used to great effect and here I want to signal the value of Implicitly Queer Texts. Such texts, particularly if the learning activities are sensitively devised, can act as signals particularly for those students on the lookout for endorsement of their own sense of difference. Classic children's literature is often a rich source of material of this kind and can frequently be used easily with adults as well. Here I suggest three entertaining and engaging texts, and as with the examples of Explicitly Queer Texts above I will deal with the third one in most detail: 1) Enid Blyton's (1942) *Five on a Treasure Island* could be used to practice extensive reading with students at CEFR B1 level. As well as being of historical interest, the mystery novel features Georgina, an eleven year-old tomboy who wears her hair short, eschews dresses and will only answer if referred to as George. Needless to say Blyton had no queer agenda in her characterisation of George, who can be read as potentially trans, nor indeed did Rosemary Sutcliff (1954), whose adventure story *The Eagle of the Ninth* is set in Roman Britain. This adventure story features a master-slave relationship between Marcus, a Roman centurion and Esca, the son of a British chieftain. Although there is no explicit sexual content, the way in which Marcus is drawn to the physically beautiful Esca allows for a queer reading. Novels allow for the sustained development of themes and *The Eagle of the Ninth* could be used productively with students at CEFR B2 level and higher to explore colonialism and slavery – and the problematic way in which Sutcliff deals with these. The fact that it was made into a feature film in 2011 also means that a teacher can use the film in tandem with the book – students can predict how scenes will be shot, the kind of changes that are made and the various omissions that take place. Its status as an Implicitly Queer Text needs no mention and the relationship between the two men can legitimately be discussed as one of growing respect and friendship. But some students may quietly read between the lines. 3) The third example is Edward Lear's (1871) *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*ⁱⁱ, also suitable for students at CEFR B1 level. This is an example of nonsense poetry, a genre generally characterised by whimsicality, invented words, rhythm and rhyme. Such poetry is often read to children - however, nonsense poetry is frequently far from being nonsensical, as a reading of this classic reveals (See poem in Appendix 2).

As with 'Orlando, Mi Amor' this poem could be used as a follow-up to a series of lessons about love and relationships, practising very similar language. Although I am presenting 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat' as an Implicitly Queer Text, its queerness is in many ways one of its most salient features. It is a love story, but clearly a very non-normative one. In Lear's poetry such superficially impossible loves are often shown to work – something which was at odds with his own experience of having spent many years of his life in love with a heterosexual man who did not return his affections.

Having clarified that 'runcible' is a nonsense word and that the Bong Tree does not exist, students could be asked to look at the first stanza and to speculate about the pair: Why did the owl and the pussy-cat go to sea? Why are some couples not able to get married? Clearly there are no correct answers, but questions such as these may allow for the (possibly unspoken) answer that the country they left did not approve of relationships such as theirs. The fact that they take food and money suggests planning and something more serious than an afternoon's boating, and 'going to sea' in English carries the implication of long journey.

The second stanza sees the pussy-cat's proposal of marriage. This mirrors the owl's serenade in the first stanza and queers any attribution of gender the reader may have made. In the heteronormative world it might be supposed that serenading and proposing marriage are generally male activities – but Lear eschews any such gendered schematising (interestingly many of the cartoon versions of the poem on YouTube gender the pair, making the owl male and the pussy-cat female). The decision to get married entails another lengthy voyage to a distant land where cats and owls can marry. The wedding itself is a parody (if not a mockery) of marriage, involving a ring, a ceremony and a banquet – and although their union takes place outside mainstream cat and owl society the story ends with the couple dancing happily together. Students could be asked questions about their future together:

Do you think the owl and pussy-cat will be happy together? Why? Why not?

Do you think they will miss their friends and families?

Do you think they will be able to return home to the country they left? Why? Why not?

By treating the text seriously and asking such questions students could be encouraged to see the poem as a celebration of love in its many guises. Its joyousness and innocence are in fact part of its subversive queer potential.

Conclusion

I began by saying that this article takes the view that the act of reading literature is cumulatively transformative of the reader and I located this perspective within an educational view of language teaching in which the aim is to enable students to learn more about the world and to live in it more fully through the experience of second language learning. My contention from the outset has also been that LGBTQ erasure is a double injustice – on the one hand against LGBTQ people who are denied recognition in the curriculum and on the other against those who are not LGBTQ who are denied the opportunity to see the world through different eyes. In those countries where there is protective legislation for LGBTQ people I have argued that the use of Explicitly Queer Texts can help us begin to address this double injustice. In other parts of the world where the atmosphere is hostile or dangerous for LGBTQ people our aims are necessarily more modest. Here the use of Implicitly Queer Texts may allow teachers to provide opportunities for students to read between the lines and catch a glimpse of the legitimacy of non-normative ways of being and loving. Despite decades of critique, demands that ELT textbooks address queer absence have fallen largely on deaf ears. For that reason it is incumbent on us as educators to attempt to fill the gap ourselves in whatever ways we can, and it is in this regard that I have argued that literature can help us undertake this important work.

Notes

(see end of document)

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Appendix 1

Orlando, mi amor,

I heard about the shooting. Sorry I didn't get in touch sooner.

They say the gunman had seen you kiss.

It made me think of us again. Those tentative first touches, your smell, hearts racing. But outside the bed so brutal, my silly rationalizations: Public displays of affection are just vulgar, I said, it's not about being less gay.

Lo siento, mi amor. Of course it was. About being less gay. About the terror. I was terrified when you tried to kiss me at the station.

And then te acuerdas, that time I fell asleep on the bus, my head resting on your shoulder? I woke up to an angry voice, I did wake up, that white guy yelling at us, perverts, burn in hell, you yelling back. Hearts racing. I kept my eyes shut, pretending to still be asleep, only later asking qué pasó?

Lo siento, mi amor. I've been so proud of you. And I've been so ashamed of myself, for not fighting more, fighting for our love.

But now, writing this, I also see that eyes closed pretending to sleep, I at least remained with my head on your shoulder. At least I did that. While you yelled back. I hope you felt that.

And next time we meet, Orlando, for old times' sake, for a future, let's do a public display of affection. Hell, I'll even sing your favorite song. Bésame, bésame mucho.

Appendix 2

The Owl and the Pussy-Cat

I

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea

In a beautiful pea-green boat,

They took some honey, and plenty of money,

Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

The Owl looked up to the stars above,

And sang to a small guitar,
"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!"

II

Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?"
They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the Bong-Tree grows
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
With a ring at the end of his nose,
His nose,
His nose,
With a ring at the end of his nose.

III

"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."
So they took it away, and were married next day
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.
They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon,
The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

ⁱ This refers to someone who is questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity

ⁱⁱ Pussy-cat or pussy is a common name for a domestic cat