



GENDER AND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION IN A BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to investigate the representations of pre-service teachers in an educational blog of a Federal University in Brazil. The purpose is to understand how the gender theme is presented in the discourses of participants. This work is based on the critical perspective of discourse and is supported by studies about gender and sexuality. An interpretative research methodology was used, and the analysis sought to identify the discursive representations that are manifested in the linguistic choices of the pre-service teachers' blog. The findings suggest that critical reflection can be an excellent tool to question heteronormative hegemonic discourse in teachers' education.
KEYWORDS: representations, blog, discourse, teachers' education

GÊNERO E FORMAÇÃO DE PROFESSORES DE LÍNGUA NUM CONTEXTO BRASILEIRO

RESUMO: O objetivo deste trabalho é investigar as representações de alunos do curso de Letras em um *blog* educacional de uma Universidade Federal brasileira. O propósito é entender como o tema sobre gênero é apresentado no discurso dos participantes. O estudo se insere numa perspectiva crítica do discurso, apoiado nos estudos sobre gênero e sexualidade. A metodologia de pesquisa é de caráter interpretativo, e a análise buscou apreender as representações discursivas que se materializam nas escolhas linguísticas dos usuários do *blog*. As conclusões apontam que a reflexão crítica pode ser uma excelente ferramenta para questionar o discurso hegemônico heteronormativo na formação de professores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: representações, *blog*, discurso, formação de professores



Introduction

Recent studies have given reason for concern about gender themes and their social and political consequences in a contemporary context (MOITA LOPES, 2002; ALÍAS, 2008; HIGHTOWER, 2011). These works question how sexuality in the West is marked by a hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity that tries to legitimize social practices in terms of masculinity and femininity. Thus, men should be presented as naturally strong and domineering, while women as docile and fragile. However, this polarization denies the various ramifications of sexual expression. Contrary to this position, current studies demonstrate a certain flexibility in individuals who may identify with labels such as homosexual, transvestite, cross-dresser, bisexual, lesbian, amongst others, depending on their different social contexts.

Based on this view, the aim of this study is to investigate the representations of pre-service teachers in an educational blog of a Federal University in Brazil. In this context, we sought to investigate pre-service teachers' experience about gender and diversity. The work is supported by Critical Discourse Analyses (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001) and studies about gender and sexuality (SEDGWICK, 1990/2008; BUTLER, 2006, JUNQUEIRA, 2007).

One of the accepted premises of our society is based on the view that people were born into a defined sexual hierarchical role. Nevertheless, when we admit the multiplicities of feminine and masculine expression, it may cause us to rethink and reassess our hegemonic sense of stable identity. This view comprehends identity practices as complex historical and social processes, and individuals involved are being constantly reinterpreted by their interlocutors. It is due to this situation, that people are defined as belonging to a certain social space. This space is almost always built to deny differences and reinforce dichotomous thinking that justifies the supremacy of one group over another. The result of this ideology explains why a heterosexual male can affirm that he is not a woman, a child or a gay.

These binary poles are revealed through social practices (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001) which are not only symbolic, but relate to how our own world is organized. These social practices of discourse contribute to the composition of the "identity" of individuals and their social relationships, and their representations, and their knowledge. Thus, in this view, power relations and ideologies are essential to understand the social dimensions of sexual identity.

Ideologies (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001, p.117) should be understood as meaning something that constructs reality through the dimensions of discursive practices and their contribution to the production,



reproduction or transformation of domination in relationships. The discursive practices constitute the dimension of language used which in turn involves the processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts, which vary according to the types of discourses and social factors involved.

On the basis of this theoretical perspective, we are seeking to understand pre-service teachers' experiences with regard to genders, as the result of discursive conventions which legitimize and reproduce the male and female conditions. These representations generate ideologies that support our perceptions of male and female, thereby imposing ideas and attitudes, frequently imperceptible, with respect to individuals who identify themselves differently from the social standard. These same ideologies collaborate with the representations of social stereotypes, and this is the reason we constantly hear comments that try to portray people who are interested in the same sex as being promiscuous, or dangerous to the integrity of family and society. These constant distortions of gender identity and practices are often responsible for creating certain social spaces, as in the case of alternative communities formed by outsiders.

The school, in turn, as a state institution, can also be seen as an important device for spreading binarism (male and female, heterosexual and homosexual) in mainstream education. Thus, it is not unusual to observe discrimination reinforcing attitudes against gay/lesbian students. In some situations, Brazilian teachers prefer to ignore that the school is populated by individuals who differ from the conventional norms. Brazilian schools usually do not allow a pedagogical practice that might reflect upon these differences and their social and cultural effects.

Because of the need to question the perpetuation of hegemonic views in schools, a lot of Brazilian teachers and scholars have engaged in gender discussions to help students become more conscious of discriminatory actions in schools. This awareness may stimulate resistance against the dominant views and/or involve students in projects for action within a school setting.

In our discussion, we begin by summarizing our theoretical approach. We focus on several crucial concepts that have developed around gender in the setting of education. We then briefly portray ideas from Critical Discourse Analysis, identity and gender with the aim of presenting our discursive perspective which supports our research. Moreover, we describe the context of the research and the data collected from its participants. Finally, in the concluding part of this paper, we discuss our findings and their implications in teachers' education.



1. School and sexuality

The school setting has historically always been an environment of denial of gender differences. Teachers and students often “pretend” that they all live within the same standards of sexual behavior. However, this situation is constantly questioned, indicating that sexual boundaries may not be entirely controlled and defined. The school, in turn, reacts with devices that regulate and discipline students who might disturb hegemonic behaviors. Therefore, the common reaction of the school is to promote a discourse that obsessively repeats stereotyped images with the objective of avoiding any action which may deviate from the well-established rules.

Nevertheless, if some students insist on behavior that is considered inadequate, the school tends to isolate them to avoid that they contaminate others in daily interactions. Thus, the school tries to prevent any deviants from acquiring sympathy from others. Due to this situation, most gay and lesbian students are silenced and they have to take on an attitude of adjustment so that they can become more conventionally accepted.

On the other hand, for some reason, when the school mentions the issue of sexuality, it is always seen as a natural phenomenon often within the context of the church, and whose purpose is the marriage between men and women. Thus, in this world, all references to other forms of identification that are not straight are all too easily rejected. Educators, however, ignore that even the hegemonic discourse of masculinity and femininity is not factual, but only constructed from a social and historical basis. It is something natural; we can see why the figures of the female and male bodies have different shapes at certain times and in certain cultures. We may only understand this issue, if we bear in mind that sexual identities are discursively characterized. As a result of this vision, we can perceive that human relationships are mediated by constant power struggles that are not always transparent between those involved.

It is clear that through language that we have chosen the way of naming what is around us, we highlight the differences, we create symbols of unity and collective identification and we repress voices that we want to express. From this point of view, we may understand why hegemonic discourses surrounding the subject of sex seek to explain the natural boundaries between masculine and feminine. Analyzing this, we realize that heterosexual legitimacy does not occur randomly, but it is the result of a game with hegemonic rules, ideologically constructed to show how we should behave and move in our social theater.



2. Methodology

This work is based on an interpretative view (ERICKSON, 1986/1990, p.77 and 78). This assumes that the natural context and the participants clarify what is going on in a social situation. The point of this approach is to show the meaning of actions in social life, as well as the interpretation of the interaction between the various members that make up the environment studied. Seen from this angle, Erickson (1986/1990) considers that the goal of interpretive research is to comprehend the universe of human language microscopically. This does not mean that this approach does not take into account macro contexts. By the means of observing microroutines we may also understand the overall macrostructure. The relationship between the micro and macro proceeds dialectically. This research approach shares the view that the socio-cultural environment of each individual determines our social behavior.

2.1. Research context, participants and instruments used in collecting data and its analysis

The research was developed in a class of pre intermediate students in a language teacher's education course at a Brazilian Federal University in 2011. This was a good group of students, although some of them had a stereotyped vision in relation to gays and lesbians in the classroom. This was the reason I decided to implement a course with a critical literacy approach where pre-service teachers were stimulated to discuss language teaching and social issues. The context included critical reflection on teaching and learning, beliefs about languages and gender and sexuality in the ELT classroom, as well as integrated skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening.

This project had the purpose of helping students change their attitudes toward their own prejudices by giving them opportunities to reflect upon their common sense. In order to question students' views a blog was used as a tool to help them with their writing skills and revise their ideological positions. The limitations of this paper do not allow us to go into details about the activities which were implemented, so I will analyze fourteen comments by pre-service teachers that were made due to the following situation:

“Have you ever experienced a situation where you were expected to act a certain way because you were a girl or a boy, even though it may not have been the way you felt like acting?”



3. Results

In this section, I report how pre-service teachers deal with gender and sexuality. I concentrate on the discursive representations that are indexed by participants' linguistic choices. As I said before, the social interaction is marked by a hegemonic discourse about gender which seeks obsessively to legitimize heteronormativism. However, the normative identity is constantly misconstrued, as we can see in the following example.¹

One day I was playing ball with the boys at school and the teacher said it was ugly because it was a game for boys and not girls, so I left the game despite being crazy about football. I felt a certain prejudice on the part of the teacher, but I believe it follows the precepts that society dictates. Even still wanting to watch the game I received some criticism from people telling me that watching football is a guy's thing and watching soap operas is a girl's thing. I do not mind it because I'm married to my husband and I love watching football in his company, we celebrate together, and we celebrate goals and have fun together. (Carla², September 16, 2011 9:23 A.M).

In this excerpt, Carla describes her experience at school when she interacted with boys in a ball game. Her teacher immediately tried to change her attitude, told her that girls could not play with boys. In this manner, the teacher presented a negative aspect by using the adjective "ugly". As we know the way we communicate and the situation we find ourselves in revealing our *locus* of enunciation, that is, our ideological position and our identity practice. By making gender dichotomy visible, the teacher reinforced the hegemonic position and sought to legitimize the norms of cultural conventional ideas of gender. Butler (2006) points out the necessity of deconstructing the norm, not only in terms of gender, but also of sex. Thus, she affirms that gender is not a consequence of sex, but sex is an effect of gender and cultural norms. From this perspective, sex is a cultural phenomenon that governs the materialization of the body; sex is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time (BUTLER, 1993, p. 3). Maybe that is why Carla's teacher seems to establish in her action the role of teachers as missionaries who monitor student's sexual behavior, teaching good manners to young girls. In Brazil, Carla's teacher's attitude is not isolated; teachers randomly invoke actions which repeatedly try to fix identities and genders at school.

¹ These are examples of quotes from the blog of pre intermediate students.

² The names of the students were changed to preserve anonymity.



This is not to say, however, that the individual is passive and completely subjugated to cultural norms. In this example, our participant attempts to reinvent her deliberations on gender by questioning the existing cultural conventions (“I felt a certain prejudice on the part of the teacher”). In this way, Carla may find lapses in hegemonic power or have acts of resistance (“I’m married to my husband and I love watching football in his company, we celebrate together, and we celebrate goals and have fun together”). This situation simply reveals that our identity is naturally fluid and our performative construction of gender is always reinterpreted.

Family is one of the most remarkable heteronormative cultural conventions which institutionalizes our essential identity. Since childhood we learn our sexuality is innate, that is, we were born as man or woman. Thus, the family has an important role reiterating cultural norms as we may visualize in the next segment.

When I was a kid I normally had girls as friends. And my mother said to me that I have to have more male friends. It did not happen and I started to lie to my mom. The lies were more to protect me, but when I got 13 this action became so senseless I put my foot down on my mother’s attitude. (Diego, Sep 20, 2011 02:33 PM).

Diego states that in his childhood he used to have girlfriends, however, his behavior was considered inappropriate by his mother. In our patriarchal society, the boys need to interact with others from the same gender category to accumulate a repertoire of masculine roles; the hegemonic identity is dramatically repeated to include components that internalize models and ignore other identities, which it may not be ok to perform. On the contrary, if a boy mixes in a girls’ environment he may be put at risk in terms of his male model and reproduce some mannerisms typical of female’ stereotypes. This explains why Diego’s mother persuaded him to increase his male friendships (“my mother said to me that I must have more male friends”) and learn to be a man. However, he was not sure whether he wished to perform according to such hegemonic behavior, he lied as a strategy to cope with cultural convention and save his face (“It did not happen and I started to lie to my mom. The lies were more to protect me”).

A challenging practice of critical teaching is the examination of the structures of power and it is important to question truths that have been transmitted by family members. Students bring into the classroom a cultural background which is connected to a larger historical view of gender. This is definitely an uncomfortable topic that educators seem to avoid so as not to bring into the classroom incidents in relation to students’ parents. At home, for example, some male students are stimulated to be strong and aggressive when they do not behave



appropriately, and are consequently punished. Teachers prefer to ignore or avoid this because it is a topic sometimes marked by domestic violence.

When I was a kid I always saw a cartoon called the “X-men”. I loved this cartoon. I would wake up early and sit in front of the TV to watch my favorite Cartoon. I always watched it with my sister. One day my sister asked me who I wanted to be. I said I wanted to be the “Storm”³ and my mom heard it and hit me. (Fernando, Sep 22, 2011 05:30 PM).

Fernando relates an experience of his mother trying to legitimize heteronormativism discourse in his house. He draws attention to the visible difficulties that a minority of boys can face when not behaving appropriately. In this situation, Fernando only mentions a fantasy in his childhood. Probably he did not know the implications of his imagination; although it was enough for him to be punished (“my mom heard it and hit me”). Fernando had to be adjusted to not forget how his idea was considered inappropriate. In this respect, his mother’s attitude tried to prevent, among other things, him being seen as gay. This is not to say that he was completely silenced or his mother was successful in her lesson. He just learned he could not express himself in his house. That is one of the reasons many young gay people look for alternative communities where they can express themselves freely. This adjustment of behavior can be seen in almost all students’ narratives independently of whether they are male or female.

When I was eight, I fought with a boy at school. I don’t remember the reason why I fought with him, I just remember that I was so angry, and when I arrived home, I was with my arms and legs hurt and my mother looked at me and said that this was an attitude of boys! (Maria, Sep 22, 2011 04:57 PM).

To make Maria part of the heteronormative group, her mother discouraged her attitude of fighting with boys (“my mother looked at me and said that this was an attitude of boys!”). In regard to being ‘normal’, her mother seems to reinforce that women should be fragile and sweet while men can present a violent identity. Note that Maria’s mother did not ask why she argued with her classmate. One may make the point that Maria did not explain the situation in details. In this case we can see a clear process of normalization that presupposes the essence of the feminine category. Especially, in our patriarchal society, woman should be submissive to men’s attitudes. Probably, Maria’s mother was not aware of what she was saying; she only wanted to have an ‘educated’ daughter. Although, when her mother attempted to ‘fix’ a normal behavior, she forgot that people are diverse and there is a range of possible ways of expressing womanhood. Maria demonstrates that the

³ A heroine in the cartoon.



idealization of behaviour of the female sex is an illusion. Sometimes she is aggressive (like a tomboy), sometimes she can be fragile. Our identity is so flexible that the way we behave sometimes can approach the ideal-type of in our culture and at other times we can be treated as deviants from normality.

As many studies previously discussed, work setting is another social institution which tries to monitor people's behaviour using simplistic social categories (masculine and feminine) to define our gender performance, as we can see in the next fragment:

Some years ago I was at work when my manager told me to walk like a woman because I looked like a man, at that time I did not like what he said but over time I realized I really walk as a man, today this does not bother me anymore. (Paula Sep 23, 2011 08:59 PM).

In this scene, Paula remembers a situation where her manager called her physical behaviour to her attention, insinuating she was so masculine ("I was at work when my manager told me to walk like a woman because I looked like a man"). Apparently, her boss tried to normalize her behaviour, and this emerged as a reaction which tried to erase any attitudes about non-fixed notions of identity. Paula, however, realized her inappropriate mannerism was not a problem in itself, and that she could be a woman and also behave like a man ("I realized I really walk as a man, today this does not bother me anymore"). This example shows how gender identity can be a problem, psychologically or otherwise. Looking at this situation realistically, there is no theoretical or natural basis that supports Paula's manager's comments. He only reproduces the rigid gender/sex dichotomy which our society unfortunately encourages. Also any contact with people who identify themselves as gay or lesbian must also be corrected.

When I was a teenager I always had gay friends. I always understood them. But my older sister told me I was wrong to have friendships with them, because according to her, anyone who is seen with a lesbian or gay he/she is also recognized as gay. She tried to convince my mother not to let me talk with my friends, but my mother did not care about her comments. And I continued going out with them until I was married. Today I have classmates who are gays. I respect them and think that every human being deserves to be respected forever. (Paula Sep 29, 2011 5:15 PM).

In this fragment, it is notable that Paula's sister felt bothered about her friendships. Her sister sought to discourage Paula to not keep in touch with gay people ("When I was a teenager I always had gay friends. I always understood them. But my older sister told me I was wrong to have such friendships"). Maybe, Paula's sister is afraid of those people can be threat to her notion of womanhood. Thus, Paula might follow other behaviour



patterns which are more acceptable for a young girl. This situation again shows us how the idea of gender is socially mediated by our society. If it were not true, why does Paula's sister feel so offended? To answer this question, we realize that Paula's friends are not the problem themselves. The problem is what her friend can represent against hegemonic discourse. For this reason, Paula's friend should be banished before they contaminate her ("because according to her, anyone who is seen with a lesbian or gay he/she is also recognized as gay."). Fortunately, her sister was not efficient in convincing Paula and her mother ("She tried to convince my mother not to let me talk with my friends, but my mother did not care about her comments. And I continued going out with them until I was married"). It seems Paula is more aware of homophobia ("I respect them and think that every human being deserves to be respected forever") nowadays.

Final Reflections

In this paper, we have discussed how a group of pre-service teachers represents and identifies with different aspects of gender. So we decided to display some comments from an online blog which aimed to question our social reality. To support our idea, we used Critical Discourse Analysis and a gender studies' framework. Both theoretical perspectives are particularly interesting for capturing heteronormative norms and conflicts in students' narratives. Especially, as Butler (1993) states that gender is performative and not biologically determined.

In the examples, we saw that the comments attempted to capture the tensions between femininity and masculinity. In each of these cases, there was a perceived static within the traditional identity of gender. Students reported both physical and psychological violence that our system is responsible for in terms of silencing some kinds of unorthodox behaviour. To be accepted, the pre-service teachers had to be in alignment with hegemonic views; however, they also describe explicitly contradictions to be found within the conventional feminine and masculine roles. It is clear that the students point to unstable gender.

We would like to stress that pre-service teachers' voices may bring to themselves a sense of empowerment. They will be future teachers and they will deal with gender conflicts in their classroom. We believe when pre-service teachers deal with their own conflicts, they will be better aware of students' difficulties. We would like to say that is a simple topic at university. Some students felt anxious when gender topic appeared. However, we could see an effort to overcome tense moments whereby students are respected and not criticized by a professor. In Brazilian education, teachers, unfortunately, have great difficulty in reflecting upon genders. They prefer to ignore that in the classroom the students may have different sexual behavior. Finally, giving voice to students is probably one of the best ways of attempting to reveal many social stigmas.



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