

# Negotiating gender globally: GALE SIG interview with Roslyn Appleby

## Keywords

gender, marginalisation, visibility, masculinity, femininity, gender mainstreaming, military and development structures

Roslyn Appleby's research explores the links between gender, professional practice, and education in institutional contexts. Her research looks at how institutional barriers present challenges in incorporating a gender focus in education. Within institutions, we have to negotiate many conflicting discourses that have gender implications for our professional lives. This interview will focus on the *invisibility* of gender and discuss ways we can negotiate gender in the foreign language classroom. Appleby's book, *Time, Space, and Gender: English Language Teaching in International Development*, will be published next year by Multilingual Matters.

Roslyn Applebyの研究は、学校現場の中で、「ジェンダー」「専門職の実践」「教育」の関係を探っている。学校の壁により、教育の中でジェンダーに焦点をあてるのがいかに難しいかを研究している。学校の中では、ジェンダー専門家として生活と密接な関係を持つ多くの厄介な場面を乗り越えなければならない。このインタビューでは、ジェンダーが「目に見えないこと」について語り、外国語を教える教室でジェンダーを扱う方法について述べる。Applebyの著書 *Time, Space and Gender: English Language Teaching in International Development* は、Multilingual Matters から来年発行予定である。

**R**OSLYN APPLEBY is one of the featured speakers at the Gender Awareness in Language Education Special Interest Group (GALE SIG) panel discussion on Negotiation/Reinvention of Gender Globally during the upcoming PAC7 at JALT2008 national conference. Appleby is a senior lecturer at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia. Her areas of interest include language education and gender.

**Folake Abass:** Thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us. First of all, could you tell us about your current research and how you got involved in it?

**Roslyn Appleby:** There are a few strands to my current research. My interest in Timor came about as a result of my own work for an Australian aid project that was designed to provide English language and computer skills training for about 1,000 university students in East Timor. This was in 2000, when the country was in turmoil after the vote for independence. It was a fascinating and emotional context to be teaching in, and had a great impact on how I saw English language teaching. I completed a small reflective research project (Appleby, 2002) relating to my own experiences with two classes at the university, and then completed a larger research project (Appleby, 2005) that looked at the experiences of other teachers who had taught in similar circumstances.

I developed a keen interest in gender as part of that larger research project, because it became very apparent that the development industry provided a peculiar institutional context where gender hierarchies were very stark. This is particularly so in aid projects located in sites of political instability, and where there is a large military presence. Because the military tends to be highly masculinised, this can create a challenging work context for women teachers.

In my current teaching context as a language and literacy educator in an Australian university, I'm interested in how language teaching, as a gendered activity or profession, tends to be a marginalised activity in Australian universities and how this marginalisation aligns with the marginalisation of students from non-English language backgrounds. This research extends my interest on the links between gender, professional practice, and education in institutional contexts.

**FA:** Your research sounds quite interesting and relevant to those of us teaching here in Japan. Gender is a very controversial issue everywhere that is played out on a variety of levels. What are some of the challenges you face as you try to incorporate a gender focus into your language program?

**RA:** The invisibility of gender is one key challenge. Research tells us that for many teachers, gender is something that remains an invisible dimension of language education, so I think that raising awareness amongst teachers of how gendered discourses affect our students and ourselves is important. In Australia, gender tends to be seen as an issue only for women; and for many people there's a sense that women's lib has been done, it's finished, that we've achieved everything we want and have equality in all areas. Of course, this is far from true, and there is a role for education to play in furthering feminist goals for women *and* men. Even if a gender focus can't be an explicit aspect of all language programs, we need to be aware of the ways that continuing, relatively invisible gender hegemonies affect our professional lives and the lives of our students, limiting opportunities for women and men, girls and boys.

Ensuring that *gender* isn't defined as synonymous with *women and girls* is important. In this regard, I think it's a challenge to incorporate a gender focus in a way that is constructive for male students. Having two sons myself, and now teaching in male dominated disciplinary areas, I'm aware that many young men in Australia feel that they've had plenty of education which has incorporated feminist perspectives. However, many have ended up with a negative response to feminism, which they see as an issue specific to women's rights, and this seems to have left young men with a sense of frustration about how they should proceed. So incorporating an inquiry into masculinities is important, and I think male language educators would have much to offer in working towards this aim.

**FA:** Given that when we talk about gender there is an assumption that we are talking about women and not men, how can we make the issue of gender a more visible one especially since there are many of us who simply do not *see* the behaviours' and institutional structures that support gender inequity.

**RA:** This is a difficult agenda, and one that women have been working on for a very long time. Obviously, there's no one, single solution to making gender trouble visible, and so we need to challenge gender hegemonies in many different ways and on many different levels. As educators, we need to

draw on and engage the specific concerns and perspectives of our students, in our specific local sites, and in this process, we can keep the lens of gender available as a way of seeing the world, in the texts that we use and construct.

In my experience, older students, with family and work responsibilities, may be more aware of the gender issues that affect their worlds—though this varies of course, depending on the particular subjectivities and experiences of the students. Younger students might not have faced—quite so consciously – the barriers and restrictions of gender regimes. Perhaps our task in this regard is to work with students in tracing through the issues and experiences that are of concern to them and, by posing questions, examine how gender plays out in those issues and experiences.

**FA:** In your article on *Gender Politics and Language Teaching in East Timor* (Appleby, 2007), you talk about the challenges that exist in promoting equality in cross-cultural contexts. Can you tell us what some of these challenges are and how we can negotiate gender in the foreign language classroom?

**RA:** I think for EFL teachers, the main challenge is probably negotiating the range of different understandings of equity or social justice in regard to gender, opening up discussions that are stimulating and thought provoking, yet sensitive to students' interests and investments. This is a challenging task for some teachers (myself included), who have strong opinions about gender equity, women's rights and opportunities, and the continuing invisibility of patriarchal norms.

For EFL teachers from the English-speaking Centre—the UK, North America, Australia, New Zealand—working in non-Western locations, this is particularly challenging (cf. Phillipson, 1992). In one sense, the problem is trying to avoid being trapped in our own cultural paradigms and, from that location, having assumptions and making superficial generalisations about the way our students perceive and experience the world. Because the West is notorious for cultural imperialism, which can potentially be realized in English language teaching, international development, and certain feminist agendas, teachers need to be thoughtful in the way they project their own vision of gender equity. Other constraints come from the institutions in which we teach, and the curricula demands that shape our pedagogical practice. Because of these, it might not always be possible to incorporate a sustained, explicit gender focus in our EFL teaching.

**FA:** What is *gender mainstreaming* and what are some of the problems inherent in this practice?

**RA:** Gender mainstreaming is a principle adopted by many international agencies, including the United Nations, in an effort to advance gender equality (ECOSOC, 2007). In international development, gender mainstreaming means that the experiences and concerns of both women and men need to be integral to the design and implementation of all legislation, policies, and programs.

While gender mainstreaming has become the accepted development policy for improving the situation of women, critical feminist scholars have argued that it has largely failed in achieving greater gender equality and transforming gender power structures (Thomas, 2004). From this perspective, the incorporation of gender awareness into mainstream development policies has tended to produce an institutionalised, unreflective pursuit of formal equity through a range of administrative interventions that have depoliticised what is at base a political struggle (Baden & Goetz, 1998). Rather than empowering women, such interventions may tighten institutional control over women's lives. Within the economic frameworks set by transnational institutions such as the IMF, WTO, and World Bank, women may be seen as human resources to promote the efficiency of the market, yet without a commitment to political transformation, "the mainstream remains masculine" (Thomas, 2004, p.5).

**FA:** Based on this, what then are the implications of gender mainstreaming for EFL teachers?

**RA:** Despite these limitations with gender mainstreaming, the principles of gender awareness and transformation are still important for EFL teachers. EFL teachers working in development programs need to resist the discourses that would promote the West as the solution to gender problems, and remain open to, and work together with, their students' experiences and perceptions of gender and social justice. This means being aware of the gender dimensions of classroom interaction and, perhaps more importantly, thinking about how the EFL program intersects with the world outside the classroom.

**FA:** After a decade of gender mainstreaming, it would seem that it is now more widely recognised that the problem is not women's integration in development or lack of skills, credit, and resources, but the social processes and institutions that result in inequalities; that equalities between

men and women are not only a cost to women but to development as a whole and thus must be conceived as a societal issue rather than a *woman's concern*. How do you respond to this and what is required for mainstreaming to be more effective?

**RA:** I agree that inequalities and social injustice are systemic concerns for society as a whole, but here again there is no single solution for securing changes. I don't claim to be an expert in the field of gender in development, nor do I have a long-term career in development teaching. What I present here are some thoughts that arise from my specific interests, research and experience in this vast and complex field.

On a broad scale, I am particularly concerned with the intersection of development and military interventions, such as we have seen in Cambodia and East Timor, and the impact that this combination has on gender relations. This is an area that is very sensitive, in which powerful global, state, and multinational bodies are involved, but it is an area where I would like to see international organisations take more concerted action to raise awareness of, and prevent, gender-related exploitation.

At the next level, I'd like to see changes in the way aid is designed and delivered. These processes are too often carried out within a masculinised industry, dominated by visions and actions that advantage men in institutional positions of power at global and local levels. In particular, the global economic imperatives that drive mainstream development mean that gender transformations tend to remain a marginal interest. One of the most effective ways of transforming these structures is by engaging women and women's organisations in local partnerships, jointly developing gender equity objectives, involving stakeholders from all levels of society from the beginning, and working with projects and activities that have a long term perspective. It is also important to engage the support of men in gender equity activities. None of these strategies is new, and they are not always easy to implement amongst competing priorities and in the face of economic, social, and cultural obstacles.

**FA:** A government report on gender equality was released in June 2008 in Japan and it is a call on the public sector to help women to advance into leading roles in society ("White paper", 2008). The report cites the inadequacy of childbirth, child-rearing, and nursing care support as the main reason behind women's lack of achievement especially in the academic community. Accord-

ing to the Human Development Reports, Japan is currently ranked 54 on the Gender Empowerment Measure (United Nations Development Program [UNDP] n.d.) and although the white paper urges greater roles for women and the government recognises that more support needs to be given to them, how this is to happen remains to be seen. Based on all this, how can we help our female students to achieve their full potential as women in society and at the same time safeguard them against allowing their gender to define who they are or who they are supposed to be?

**RA:** In Australia, the process of achieving greater gender equality has been very slow, and women continue to struggle with the primary responsibility for combining paid work and family care. Recently, there was even talk of women being on a baby strike, so our national government started paying women a baby bonus to try and encourage women to have more babies. But women with children still face difficult decisions when they return to paid work. To address this, we need measures to encourage men to share in the task of raising children and doing the domestic work that our society depends on, and which society has long expected women to do for free. To help people combine work and family, we need to provide paternity (as well as maternity) leave, good affordable child care, and family-friendly workplaces with reasonable working hours.

We also need to go beyond legislative measures to effect change. I think parents have a great role to play in opening up discussions with their children about these issues, setting an example within their own domain, and encouraging everyone in the family to support the choices that women make about their careers. In the education system it's also very important to promote the loosening of stereotypes that limit both men and women in their life choices, and to encourage women's rights to a fulfilling career and financial independence. As academics we need to look for opportunities to make a change, in the classroom, in our workplace, in our homes, and in the world around us. I think looking outward from our classroom practices is important, so that the world in which students are living remains a focus for critical inquiry and challenge. This is a task not only for women academics and female students, but also for men and boys, who need to take their part in the process of making a better world for us all.

**FA:** Thank you again for taking the time to do this interview with us and we are all looking forward to learning more about your work at the GALE panel discussion during the PAC7 at JALT2008 Conference.

**Folake Abass** is a Foreign Language Lecturer at Kyoto Sangyo University. Her research interests include language and advertising especially as it pertains to gender. She is the program chair for the Gender Awareness in Language Education (GALE) SIG and one of the organisers of the GALE panel discussion during the JALT national conference to be held in Tokyo from October 31 to November 3.

## References

- Appleby, R. (2002). Language in development constrained: Three contexts. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36, 323-346.
- Appleby, R. (2005). *The spatiality of English language teaching, gender, and context*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.
- Appleby, R. (2007). Not my place: Gender politics and language teaching in East Timor. In *Proceedings of the 12th English in Southeast Asia Conference* (pp. 1-9). Bangkok: School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thailand.
- Baden, S., & Goetz, A. M. (1998). Who needs [sex] when you can have [gender]? Conflicting discourses on gender at Beijing. In C. Jackson & R. Pearson (Eds.), *Feminist visions of development: Gender, analysis, and policy* (pp. 19-38). London: and New York: Routledge.
- ECOSOC: United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2007, May 10). *Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system: Report of the Secretary-General*. Retrieved July 10, 2008, from <[www.un.org/ecosoc/docs/report.asp?id=1301](http://www.un.org/ecosoc/docs/report.asp?id=1301)>.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, P. (2004). Gender and development: Bridging policy and practice. *Development Bulletin, The Australian Development Studies Network, ANU*, 64, 4-7.
- United Nations Development Program. (n.d.). *Human development reports: 2007/2008 report*. Retrieved July 10, 2008, from <[hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/279.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/279.html)>
- White paper urges greater role for women. (2008, June 14). *The Japan Times*, p. 2.