## 2020 Plenary Speaker • Yoshi Grote

# Supporting Diversity in the Classroom Community

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We live in a gender binary, heteronormative world. Regardless of what versions of gender we personally perform or our individual ideas about sexuality, equality, or freedom of expression, we live in a world divided into pink and blue, salad and steak, ballet and basketball, strength and kindness.

The fact that you unwittingly felt a connection to the words "male" or "female" while reading those words proves this point. Whether we agree or not, we cannot argue with the fact that we understand, recognize and thus give value to the system which produces that whisper as I say cat and dog, beer and cocktail, knitting and rugby, aggressive and soft. You may be irritated by this whisper, you may completely disagree with the associations, but the fact that the whisper is still audible in your mind shows how deeply our society is organized along gender lines.

Above I use the word "society" in a very general way but, let's briefly focus on Japan. The reality for many of us is that we are teaching English using gendered materials in a country that recently ranked 121 out of 153 in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, 2020). Japan's gender gap is the largest among all advanced economies (Zahidi & Eda, 2020). Women's and men's roles, as well as appropriate performances of femininity and masculinity are deeply engrained in the language, rituals, institutions, expectations, products, and other aspects of Japanese society. Ladies' Day, women's only train carriages, female only parking spaces, different prices for *tabe* and *nomihoudai*—men and women are separated in a myriad of ways—perhaps even in the way they choose to sit in your classroom.

Yet as individuals, we may feel that we exist along the spectrum of gender in a much more fluid way. Even if you are a cis-gender, heterosexual male, you probably feel you have the right to pursue whatever hobby you like, order a cocktail, show compassion, and eat salad. To an extent, we are all somewhat "non-conforming" in our gender identities. In addition, we know that a significant number of people identify as trans, agender, and gender non-binary. We are also aware that there is far more variety in sexuality than the representations in advertisements, film, and textbooks would have us believe.

Unfortunately, as teachers it is easy to follow gender normative patterns. We may choose a male student to read the male part of a dialogue and a female student to read the female part without much thought of students' gender identities or sexual orientations. Textbooks may require students to talk about the "popular" subject of boyfriends and girlfriends and in simply trying to follow the exercises, teachers may perpetuate heteronormative stereotypes. As teachers, should these personal aspects of our students' identities even be our concern?

Yes and no. No, in that it is not necessary, relevant, or appropriate to enquire about individual students' gender identities and sexual orientations. Yes, in that it is absolutely our responsibility to address our gendered classrooms and our language learning materials to provide greater representation of, and space for diversity.

As language teachers, we are presented with a unique opportunity for driving change. Whether we admit it or not, teaching is a political act; every decision we make—the materials we create, the images on our PowerPoints, how we make pairs and groups, the language we use, our explicit classroom culture—makes a difference. This is not only an opportunity, but also a responsibility that we must seize. These choices matter. We need to make sure they are positive.

We need to do this to present our students with wider possibilities for their own experiences of gender, and also so that more of them can see themselves authentically represented in the materials we provide. Roughly 10% of the students in your classroom identify as LGBTQIA+[1]. That's two students in every class of twenty. They probably haven't come

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1    According to a 2019 survey conducted by The Japan LGBT Research Institute

out[2] and they might feel somewhat invisible. Invisible in Japanese society because cultural dimensions such as collectivism (Hofstede, 2003; Hofstede & Minkof, 2010; Triandis, 2018) make it difficult to stand out as different and a preference for indirect, high-context communication (Hall, 1989, 1990; Kittler, Rygl, & Mackinnon, 2011) makes "coming out" challenging. Invisible because in a family centered society, where fewer than 3%[3] of children are born out of wedlock and gay marriage is not possible, it may be hard for a young, gay, Japanese person to picture their future. In a society where the conditions for legally changing your gender require you to be over 22, unmarried, undergoing sex surgery, sterilized, and to have no children, it may be hard for a young trans person to imagine their place.

As teachers, we want our students to feel they have a place in our classrooms and we have that opportunity because teaching language is necessarily an intercultural act. English, for example, is usually used as a more direct language than Japanese. For some LGBTQIA+ Japanese, learning English can be connected to a motivation to be able to express who they are more directly, more openly, and to be met with greater acceptance. In the words of a research participant:

> [English not corrected] "I came out only to friends in the foreign language department so they may understand different cultures or have a large point of view. If I come out my sexuality to other people, not in the foreign language department, they might not understand me." (Gay male student interviewee).

Yet, belonging is a two-way street, and if a student cannot feel their identity is acknowledged and represented, they are likely to feel equally invisible and less engaged in learning. To create this space, we have to cast a critical eye over gender representations in our materials, give opportunities for preferred names and pronouns, be mindful of our own stereotypes, and choose image, text, and video where non-cis-gendered, non-heterosexual people are represented. There are so many ways we can do this. Consider just one. When we pre-teach vocabulary with the support of images, we can be mindful not to simply choose the first image our search presents for, "brave," but find one of a woman. Find an image of a man for teaching "tears", and include an image of a gay couple when teaching "romance." If the students laugh, great, you've opened the door for a dialogue. If they don't, you've taken one more step towards normalizing the authentic ways humans interact in this world.

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2    Tamagawa (2017), in a 2005 health report on nearly 6,000 bisexual and gay men in Japan (Hidaka, Honma, & Ichikawa, 2007) found that over half had come out to fewer than five people. This helps explain how a 2013 Ipsos online survey revealed that although 46% of participants worldwide said they had an LGBT friend, relative or colleague, only 5% of Japanese participants said the same.

3    https://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF_2_4_Share_births_outside_marriage.pdf

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