

6 Advancing gender equity in university-level world language learning in the US

The role of the instructor

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Introduction

Language, as a conventional system of communication, reflects the way speakers understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Learning a foreign language provides unique opportunities for comparisons and critical reflections on one's own and the target culture. Indispensable for such comparisons is the incorporation of students' assets such as their language(s), cultures, identities, and life experiences to foster empathy and understanding across social and political divides and to help them "participate in ways of life" (Kim, 2020, p. 519). Determining appropriate curricular adaptations and classroom practices, however, can be challenging in today's competing institutional and societal contexts in which teachers work.

The theoretical framework we adopt for promoting inclusion is the theory of critical pedagogy (CP) associated with Paulo Freire who developed teaching material and pedagogical practices to address marginalization and social divides through education (Freire, 1971, 1996). Critical language pedagogy (CLP) applies the work of Freire to heritage speakers, and speakers of second, third, and other languages using a social justice approach (i.e., Crookes, 2021; Giroux, 2011, 2020; Liasidou, 2012; Pennycook, 2001). CLP emphasizes honoring students' voices and acknowledges the role of students as active subjects learning to challenge prior knowledge and cultural norms. However, as Freire notes, CP is not a one-size-fits-all approach and varies in terms of how and to what degree it should be implemented in each culture: "I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them" (cited in Raddawi & DeGenaro, 2017, p. 63).

In this chapter, we adopt Crookes' (2021) definition of CLP as a "perspective on teaching languages that are based on values of social justice" associated with "equality, freedom, and solidarity" (p. 247). We investigate, through an instructor's survey at an American University in the Midwest, the selection of teaching material and the critical analysis of teaching context and teaching practices. We conclude with a discussion of how teacher education can best

contribute to advancing gender equity in the language classroom given the institutional and social context. While Freire's pedagogical theories originally addressed discrimination, marginalization, and social divides across a variety of social groups, our chapter focuses on the problem of gender, gender identity, and gender equity. This is important for two reasons: first, the classroom is a micro-reflection of society, and therefore, everything our students learn shapes the way they think and act in real life. Second, nowadays, many language classrooms are likely to include learners who identify as binary and non-binary, and learning to accept diversity and promote social inclusivity should be an important goal of world language education.

Gender, gender identity, and gender equity

Widodo and Elyas (2020) see gender as a "socially modulated and dynamic system of power relations and ideologically discursive practice" shaped by and intermixed with "socio-institutional, political, religious, racial, and socio-economic ideologies" (pp. 1021–1022). This process makes exploring gender biases in language education extremely complex.

Defining gender, gender identity, and gender expression and how these concepts are manifested in language and culture can be confusing. According to the American Psychological Association, most people are classified as being either male or female, with few being classified as intersex, referring to an atypical combination of male and female features (American Psychological Association, 2012, p. 11). This distinction, a person's sex, is rooted in biology and determined through biological criteria. The term gender is related to male or female, but it does not refer to the biological sex, but rather to cultural manifestations. Gender then is described as "the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex" (American Psychological Association, 2012, p. 11). Since gender is defined as a social construct, it can vary from society to society, and it can change over time as well. In cultures where male and female represent the most common gender roles showing a binary way of thinking, nonconformist behavior can have significant social consequences. Gender identity is used to refer to "a person's internal sense of being male, female or something else" (American Psychological Association, 2023) and gender expression refers to the way "a person communicates gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics" (American Psychological Association, 2023). The umbrella term transgender is used when gender identity and gender expression do not represent the sex a person was assigned at birth.

Understanding these terms and what they represent in each culture is important since gender roles and gender identities constitute an integral part of the target language and culture we teach. Such topics are also often welcomed, even requested by our students. Covering a full chapter on gender roles and gender identity in an advanced German conversation class was welcomed by the queer student in the classroom and by many others as a

fresh and more appropriate approach to teaching culture that reflects students' interests. However, some students questioned the "social bend" of the class, thereby leaving out other topics such as German football and German food that were of higher interest to them. Gender and gender identity can also be an issue for some of our students who are looking for ways of expressing their genderness in the new language they are studying. A testimonial posted on the discussion website Reddit (2019) by a student learning Arabic illustrates the student's struggle with the gendered nature of the Arabic language:

I'm learning Arabic, but my teacher says I need to pick a binary gender b/c no gender-neutral pronouns in Arabic. Are there any I can use (please like I know she speaks fluent Arabic but like maybe hopefully there're some anyways??) or is one gender generally considered more "neutral" or "default" than the other? What do I dooooooooooooo I can't drop the class now and Arabic looks so pretty send help please I'm struggling here.

As these few examples show, our students (binary, non-binary, and genderfluid), who are learning about a new language and culture, are nowadays interested in a variety of issues relating to gender. It is therefore important that we make every effort to adapt or change the curriculum, teaching material, and teaching practices to be gender-bias-free and inclusive. However, research tells us that especially language textbooks fall short of these expectations.

Gender bias in language textbooks

Much of what is being taught in a world language classroom is dependent on the choices presented in the available language textbooks. Textbook content is often arranged according to grammatical topics, choice of vocabulary, and traditional or outdated themes. Analyzing three language textbooks (Arabic, English, and German), Uzum, Yazan, Zahrawi, Bouamer, and Malakaj (2021) find that "nation-state ideologies and tourism discourse" (p. 1) prevail thereby failing to represent the complex identities of language users and learners.

Spurred by persistent inequalities between men and women, social initiatives and political debates associated with the second wave of the feminist movement focused on issues of social and cultural inequalities. As a result, textbook advocates and critics carried out a variety of studies exploring gender representation in teaching materials. Since textbooks play a crucial role in students' learning about cultural topics, these are important studies: especially young learners take what they see or read in a textbook at face value in the absence of honed critical thinking skills. As expected, in many textbooks, female characters are diminished, and sometimes excluded, and gender representations show stereotyping and gender bias (Mills & Mustapha, 2015). For example, Alsrabi (2010) studied the images of women in Jordanian textbooks. In these textbooks, women were primarily depicted as submissive, occupying traditional family roles. Al-Najy and Al-Rifai (2011) investigated

the representation of women in textbooks in Saudi Arabia. In these textbooks, women were described as wife, mother, girl, schoolgirl, sister, daughter, and grandmother first, before highlighting typical activities and professions for females such as nurse, teacher, and doctor. Sunderland (2021) notes that many of the textbooks studied about gender and gender representation are world language textbooks and numerous analyses have shown strong gender bias. Women were most often portrayed as dependent and weak, and men as active, independent, and strong (Nofal & Qawar, 2015; Sadker, 2000; Sulaimani, 2017).

Since world language textbooks represent the culture of the language being taught, not all language textbooks show equal gender biases and gender stereotypes. Foroutan (2012) analyzed Iranian textbooks for teaching Persian, Arabic, and English. While the male gender dominated in all textbooks evaluated, male domination appeared more frequently in Persian textbooks than in Arabic textbooks. He concluded that the association between "gender and language" was strongly influenced by cultural, societal, and ideological structures. Baghdadi and Rezaei (2015) analyzed English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Arabic textbooks in Iran. Their analysis showed that both genres of textbooks were "extremely traditional in presenting stereotypical gender roles" (p. 29) and lacked gender equality in pictorial representations and texts. The authors found only one legitimate picture of an adult female in the Arabic text, suggesting that women were mostly invisible. More recent textbook analyses show that many of the newer language textbooks still use a heteronormative approach, although there are clear attempts to be more equitable and inclusive (Sunderland, 2021). For example, a chapter on sports in one of the leading Arabic language textbooks in the US presented two male athletes with no female representation in the first edition. One Arab female champion was added in the second edition. In another very popular university-level elementary Arabic textbook used in the US and abroad, the feminine marker for nouns and adjectives (Ta Marbouta طالة / ة [female student]) appears only later after all the letters of the alphabet.

Textbooks for major languages such as German, French, or Spanish tended to fare better. Korell (2021) investigated gender-related aspects in Spanish language textbooks used in Germany. She concluded that these textbooks are "gender equitable on some dimensions but they still contribute in a subtle way to the social construction of gender inequality" (p. 219). Gender was still presented as a binary category. Since language textbooks must meet a wide range of requirements, "thematization of gender and LGBT in schools and the creation of a space for its reflection" is quite often left to the teacher (Korell, 2021, p. 219). Interviewing a textbook author of a prominent German language textbook used foremost in the US revealed that authors quite often struggle with the inclusion of gender-related topics and gender-neutral language. Hiring a gender study consultant brought some solutions to questions, but even repeated discussions did not resolve others. The publisher ended up sending out a survey to prospective adopters about the material.

they would be willing to tolerate in the new edition of the textbook, which underscores the multiplicity of factors that need to be considered when writing textbooks. Pakula (2021) writes, "Publishers now opt for writing and selling textbooks, dictionaries, and multimedia resources aimed at global markets thus neglecting the idiosyncratic needs of local communities" (p. 11). The availability of supplementary textbook materials outlining gender biases and stereotypes and giving examples of non-gendered language is a crucial aspect in helping instructors add gender-appropriate examples to their classrooms. Such material is readily available for some languages, but not for others. "Goethe Institute (n.d.)" publishes a page on gender-inclusive language in German teaching. The webpage (Geschickt genders, n.d.), skillfully navigating gender-neutral language choices, is a crowd-sourced dictionary of alternative gender-appropriate terms, listing, for example, a third non-gendered option such as "die angeklagte Person" (the accused person).

Notwithstanding these efforts, given the cultural, political, and religious climate in many cultures, there is no agreement as to whether gender-related topics including gender-neutral language should even be used. A recent debate in Germany (Nöstlinger, 2021) centered around the action of the editors of the influential Duden dictionary, who had begun adding feminine versions to nouns referring to males. In 2021, France's education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, actually banned the use of a new writing method in schools designed to teach gender-inclusive language (Piser, 2021). These ongoing debates not only influence the content and design of each textbook but more importantly, influence what an instructor is willing to bring into the classroom including concerns of how to teach the subject. This, of course, puts the responsibility on the instructors who not only need to be familiar with and accepting of gender issues, including appropriate pedagogical approaches, but must feel equipped to defend their classroom choices to students, other educators, parents, and the community. In the Arabic language context, all textbooks inside and outside the Arab world use binary pronouns exclusively, which is the nature of all gender-based languages. Male pronouns and male names seem to prevail over female references in most Arabic textbooks in the US. This is a stereotypical way of presenting the target language community where the learner is considered "uncritical and apolitical" (Uzum et al., 2021).

Critical and inquiry-oriented teaching

The desirability of including gender equity issues in teaching in general and in foreign language teaching, in particular, is well supported (i.e., Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2022). However, historically, most teacher training and professional development programs do not solely focus on promoting gender and gender equity in language teaching, and those few that do, do not specifically address the concerns of less commonly taught languages such as Arabic.

Teacher development programs focusing on gender employ strategies to raise teachers' awareness about their practices in the hope they will transform

what instructors do in the classroom. For example, Sadker (2000) uses video clips containing subtle gender-bias messages and asks the instructors to code the videos accordingly to raise awareness of gender bias. Vavrus (2009) describes a teacher training program that includes an autoethnographic narrative assignment (discussing gender identification, heteronormativity, patriarchy, sex education, schooling experiences, and teacher identity) to explore their own experiences and to detect subtle but damaging gender biases that may hold. As a result of the training, prospective teachers welcomed gender and gender issues as a legitimate topic for their classrooms and were enthusiastic to create an inclusive curriculum. Towery (2007) conducted interviews with instructors designed to raise teachers' awareness of and responses to gender inequities. Instructors made the most strides over the three years of training in three areas: their transformation (interactive, non-confrontational, anonymous exercises effectively challenged their personal beliefs), their engagement in critical self-analysis (for example, they examined their patterns of calling on students and found that they called on boys more than on girls), and their active engagement in community building (for example, the design of safe spaces in and outside their classrooms).

Surveying seasoned university language instructors

The working group on language curricula and gender (<https://gender-equity.northwestern.edu>), which is supported by the Buffett Institute for Global Affairs (<https://buffett.northwestern.edu>), and to which the three authors belong, has been researching for the better part of two years how the language curriculum can potentially reinforce, exacerbate, or disrupt cultural assumptions and stereotypes about gender. The group was interested in investigating, through workshops, presentations, and research seminars how everyday practices of teaching and learning across multiple languages could potentially contribute to promoting gender equity in foreign language education and beyond. As part of this research, we distributed a Qualtrics survey in the spring of 2023 to all world language instructors at an American University in the Midwest. The purpose of the survey was to find out how language instructors perceive their language teaching material and their classroom dynamics concerning gender and gender equity.

Of the 27 instructors who finished the survey, most were white (52% White Caucasian, 19% Asian/Asian American, 13% Middle Eastern/North African, 6% Latinx/Hispanic). Seventy-four percent identified as female, 19% as male, and two instructors preferred not to say. The following languages were represented in the survey: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish. Most instructors were seasoned instructors with many years of teaching experience at the post-secondary level (76% had more than seven years) and had taught different proficiency levels (first- through fourth-year post-secondary language classes).

Topics in textbooks and teaching material

To ensure a more equitable and gender-affirming teaching approach, an instructor must have the ability to choose a balanced textbook (if available) and/or be able to choose other appropriate supplemental teaching material. Only 16 of the 26 instructors included in the survey results currently make (or have previously made) decisions regarding the textbook selection of the course(s) they teach. Many must use the material assigned to them by a language coordinator or by the program or department. We also asked participants to rank a list of criteria (from most to least important) they might consider when choosing a language textbook. Range of themes and topics covered, soundness of pedagogical approach, and grammar topics, explanations, and exercises were the three most important criteria. Familiarity with the publisher, familiarity with the author, and high adoption rate in the US were the least important ones. A focus on equitable gender representation and the use of gender-inclusive language were only somewhere in the middle.

When asked about topics or themes currently being covered in the curriculum, the following were selected most often: holiday and other celebratory customs; food, restaurant, cooking; shopping and clothing; hometown, city life; vacation, and traveling; followed by season, climate, weather; family structure; health and fitness; and job and business. The LGBTQ+ community and youth and youth movements were selected the least often. This changed when asked about topics or themes instructors wished they could cover: gender bias in the language; the LGBTQ+ community; social issues, poverty, and social underrepresentation; youth and youth movements were listed first. Holiday and other celebratory customs; food, restaurant, cooking; shopping and clothing; hometown, city life; vacation and traveling; season, climate, weather; family structure; health and fitness; job, business, money; sport and free-time activity; history; and geography were listed last, indicating a discrepancy between topics chosen in textbooks and topics that instructors felt were important.

Gender and gender bias in language textbooks and teaching materials

The results of the survey also showed that the opinions about language textbooks and teaching materials vary widely. Forty-eight percent thought that the readings in their textbooks were balanced (but 30% disagreed and 22% were not sure); 43% thought that the pictures and illustrations were balanced (but 22% disagreed and 35% were not sure); and 40% thought that the videos and film clips were balanced (but 25% disagreed and 35% were not sure). Forty-five percent indicated that their textbook did not contain gender-inclusive language, and 48% thought that their textbook did not reflect the gender diversity of their students. Instructors of less commonly taught languages evaluated their textbooks and teaching materials as the least balanced and instructors of German and Spanish as the most balanced.

Leading discussions on gender representation and equity

The survey also tried to ascertain whether instructors felt comfortable leading discussions on gender and equity, whether they ever reflected on what students of a different or non-binary gender in class experience, or whether they were concerned that such students were not heard. All instructors indicated that they felt somewhat comfortable assigning readings and/or leading discussions on gender representation and equity but that they were concerned about students of a different gender and their experience in class. About half of the instructors were concerned about someone with a different gender not being heard in class or being criticized in class for their beliefs. All instructors felt quite prepared to discuss class material about gender, gender representation, and gender equity with their students. All instructors except one felt that their classroom was quite balanced and that everybody had a chance to participate and be heard equally during class activities. They listed the following activities, among others, to ensure a balanced classroom:

- "I try to avoid that students gather with their same-sex counterparts in group discussions, they need to work together, collaboratively, and equitably."
- "A very specific activity that I often apply is data analysis regarding men/women activities in different countries... Students need to find data and discuss gender roles and how we can fight against stereotypes."
- "I ask students for their preferred pronouns and explain how to use gender-neutral pronouns."
- "I have added many materials to make sure that we are creating space to explore ... I have created assessments that allow students to explore diverse identities."

Training for instructors

About 60% of the instructors surveyed had not received prior pedagogical training that specifically dealt with gender and gender equity in language teaching. Instructors of less commonly taught languages were even less likely to have had specific training. Most of the training that was received came in the form of lectures and workshops and many thought such training was "eye-opening" and "illuminating." Seventy-eight percent of those who already had received training indicated that they would like to receive additional training and 77% of those who had not received any training indicated that they would like to receive additional training on gender equity in world language teaching.

Advancing gender equity in language teaching

While all instructors believed their classroom environment was balanced in terms of gender representation and gender interaction, more than half of them

found that their teaching material was not and did not reflect the gender diversity of their students. Instructors of less commonly taught languages such as Arabic evaluated their textbooks less favorably than German and Spanish instructors who seemed to have the most balanced teaching material. It is not surprising that Arabic teaching material lacks equitable gender representation since language textbooks often are a micro-reflection of the target culture and society. However, perpetuating gender inequalities even if they reflect some aspects of the target culture is a lost opportunity to advance agency of change and gender equity in the target community. In conclusion, the instructor's survey revealed three significant findings:

- A clear lack of gender balance in the teaching material;
- A discrepancy between what the instructors teach and what they wish to teach in terms of themes and class discussion material;
- A continued interest in teacher training on gender issues.

Developing better curriculum

Raddawi et al. (2023) believe that "Real world gender equity starts with better curricula" and "...education is the main tool for achieving gender equity." The lack of teaching material that reflects a more balanced gender view is concerning. The fact that many books nowadays are sold and adopted worldwide does not help in developing more nuanced content responsive to the needs of a variety of instructors and students. Surely, the blame does not lie solely with the publishers, as they publish what instructors adopt. One way of making the content of textbooks more balanced is by encouraging female authorship. This aspect has not been given much attention, but it does impact gender equity in the teaching material. For example, Abu Jaber (2014) states that one review of 38 textbooks in Jordan found that female authors contributed only 38% of the content as compared to 61% contributed by males. This fact was confirmed by the primary author of one of the main Arabic foreign language textbooks. When asked why the new edition of the book included more topics and illustrations depicting females as compared to the first edition, he responded that the authoring team had added more female authors. Additionally, when writing a textbook, care should be given so that target language communities are not described in a stereotypical, uncritical way as is often the case. Even if a culture is predominantly patriarchal, there are usually ample illustrations of women who have contributed at all levels, and these examples should be highlighted. And lastly, hiring a DEI or gender study expert or consultant when developing a textbook is an important step in trying to make a textbook inclusive. Generally, neither the authors nor the publishers are experts in gender studies, and discussions about the inclusion of material can be very fruitful in developing appropriate language tasks, showcasing how to introduce and work with critical issues in class.

Topics that reflect what instructors want to teach

The discrepancy between what instructors teach in the classroom and what they wish they had taught was surprising. This outcome might be largely related to the adoption of a textbook that does not provide the desired topics. But it might also be related to the fact that textbook adoption is not always a democratic process. Including all teaching personnel in the textbook decision as well as in the design of the curriculum may help in eliminating this discrepancy. Decisions on the textbook, teaching approach, coordination of teaching steps, and curriculum in our Arabic program involve all Arabic instructors. We also believe that sharing the development of new teaching material, especially across languages, can allow for discussion and inclusion of non-traditional teaching material. Three instructors in our program developed together three similar courses in Arabic, Hebrew, and Turkish. The instructors focused on topics of social justice while promoting critical reflection to develop empathy for the target culture (Mikhaeel, Topçuoğlu, Tzucker-Seltzer, & Lys, 2023).

Continued teacher education

The importance of teacher training and professional development programs to learn how to critically analyze teaching material, classroom interactions, and one's own biases cannot be underestimated. It is supported by the participants in the survey. Indeed, we believe that ongoing professional development is needed to address continuously evolving issues of gender equity in all languages and cultures. We further believe that a strong critical and reflective approach to integrating gender equity in teaching practices is crucial and necessitates an "untethered," long-term, peer-led, and faculty-centered learning approach (Leafstedt & Pacansky-Brock, 2016) involving a community of learners engaged in self-reflection and conscious sharing of experiences (Bali & Caines, 2018). According to Giroux (2011, 2020) failing to encourage self-reflection and communicative interaction among learners is equal to manipulation and illusionary choice.

Ongoing professional development is a great way of ensuring that instructors develop over time and have a chance to apply what they learn in their teaching. It also allows, in addition to the development of critical reflection and questioning established norms, brainstorming about the course of action on what to change in the classroom and how, a hallmark of CP. The important part is for instructors to

- learn about basic intercultural communication concepts such as "prejudice," "stereotype," and "bias" to better understand those socially constructed roles and attributes to gender in their teaching material;
- be introduced to the topic of gender studies;
- discuss ways of integrating self-reflection exercises in the classroom on difficult topics to create critical learners;

- share experiences and discuss teaching material of marginalized groups in each culture. Hooks explains that cultural narratives often exclude the experiences of marginalized groups which further hinders the implementation of CP (Hooks, 2014).
- discuss what material might be appropriate for teaching about gender. This could include a short video or even a cartoon. Giroux argues that certain cultural norms and values can make it difficult to incorporate critical perspectives that challenge these ingrained biases (Giroux, 2011, 2020).
- consider the incorporation of community-based teachings such as visits to relief organizations and refugee centers. In undertaking some volunteer work in those organizations, students begin to understand different socio-economic realities and learn to share the target community experiences.

Instructors of world languages, whose cultures do not espouse equitable gender representation and freedom of gender expression may have a harder time integrating the concept of gender equity. Giving such instructors a voice by asking them to research and share unique examples with other instructors can be helpful. For example, the United Nations have published guidelines to help its staff communicate using a gender-inclusive language in the six official languages of the organization (United Nations: Gender-Inclusive Language, 2023). The LGBTQ and queer communities and activists in the Arab world continue to be stigmatized and suppressed. However, they have already created their pronouns resisting mainstream culture and official government circles. Examples from Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon can be found on the website (Nassawiyat Social, 2022), created by a grassroots movement. Another example is the Queer dictionary created by writer Massinissa Garaoun (2023), which includes a code understood only by the queer community in Morocco out of fear of legal sanctions and societal pre-conceived judgments. While such examples have not become a reality within educational settings in the Middle East and North Africa, they do show that even those languages can change.

Conclusion

While the role of the instructor can be very powerful in advancing gender equity through teaching material and classroom interactions, it is nevertheless quite challenging, especially for gendered and culturally tied languages like Arabic: "[...] schools are contested spheres that embody and express struggles over what forms of authority, types of knowledge, forms of moral regulation, and versions of the past and future should be legitimated and transmitted to students" (Giroux, 2013, p. 463). The success of our classes, however, in a world that continuously changes, is dependent on ongoing commitment to learning and training that challenges instructors to reflect critically across languages what it means to teach and learn (Freire, 2005). Prescribing the inclusion of gender-neutral language in highly gendered languages is a tall but not impossible task even if well-intentioned actions are not always feasible

or welcomed. Ideally, any major changes in a language should be initiated and first adapted in the countries where that language is spoken. Advancing gender equity and the addition of gender-neutral language as well as culturally sensitive topics in the classroom should be shared and discussed in the teaching community knowing that both language and culture are not static but dynamic processes.

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