



CURRENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGES IN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION WITH RESPECT TO GENDER AND SEXUAL-AFFECTIVE DIVERSITY

Lucía Muñoz-Martínⁱ,
María Amor Barros-del Río,
Concetta Maria Sigona
University of Burgos,
Spain

Abstract:

Gender identity and sexual diversity remain significant sources of discrimination in the 21st century, exacerbated by pervasive androcentrism, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity. In the context of the European Union (EU), education is critical for fostering social cohesion among an increasingly multicultural population due to migration and mobility. Initial Language Teacher Education (ILTE) plays a pivotal role in preparing future educators to instill values of diversity, inclusion, and interculturality. Despite the EU's efforts to unify educational frameworks through programs like Erasmus+ and initiatives such as the European Language Portfolio, discrepancies persist across member states regarding language teacher training curricula. These variations hinder the broader aim of creating an inclusive, cohesive educational system grounded in human rights and equality, particularly concerning gender and sexual diversity. This paper explores the challenges and proposes the need for a unified ILTE training that integrates the principles of inclusivity, social diversity, and respect for all identities.

Keywords: gender, LGBTQ+, ILTE, equality education

1. Introduction

Despite advancements in the 21st century, discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation remains prevalent, rooted in the societal norms of androcentrism, cisgenderism, and heterosexuality. This marginalization particularly affects individuals who do not conform to these norms, such as cis women and LGBTQ+ individuals, often manifesting covertly through stereotyping, exclusion, and silence. These discriminatory practices occur across various sectors, from legislation to education, contributing to higher rates of homelessness and suicide among these communities (Pawelczyk &

ⁱ Correspondence: email lucilumm@hotmail.com

Sunderland, 2014). While progress has been made in gender and LGBTQ+ rights in several European Union (EU) countries, the rise of far-right political movements has introduced ideologies that are often anti-immigration, ultra-nationalist, misogynistic, and hostile toward LGBTQ+ rights.

The expansion of the European Union (EU) has made communication and exchange between its member countries essential, highlighting the importance of social cohesion. Education plays a key role in this transformation by preparing individuals from diverse backgrounds to actively contribute to society. Two critical skills for migrant workers are becoming proficient users of the EU's lingua franca, English, and developing a broad, open-minded worldview. These skills enable them to integrate into modern European communities, fostering connections and reducing tensions (Kelly, 2011).

To cultivate these competencies, educational institutions at all levels must equip students with the values necessary for participation in multicultural societies. Teachers across the EU need training in critical thinking, social responsibility, and modern teaching methodologies to deliver a high-quality, 21st-century education (Barros-del Río, 2019; Yogev & Michaeli, 2011). The increasing mobility of workers within the EU has led to more diverse classrooms, requiring teachers to adapt to students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have also transformed education, making students independent learners with access to vast global information. This shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning demands that teachers adopt new teaching methodologies (Kelly, 2011).

In this evolving landscape, multicultural awareness, critical thinking, and respect for diverse values are vital for building a cooperative society. These concepts must be integrated into Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which is, as Caena (2004) describes, the *"first crucial stage in a teacher's professional journey."* ITE provides the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to teach both subject content and multicultural values effectively. However, there is a lack of digital platforms for university educators to share resources and best practices for Initial Language Teacher Training (ILTE).

To ensure consistency in language teaching across the EU, ILTE should be standardized. All EU countries should adopt uniform policies, curricula, and values to accommodate the mobility of students and workers who need to adapt to the education systems and cultural norms of different countries.

2. Current situation

Every student deserves to be taught by educators who are well-prepared to instill the skills and attitudes needed for success in a globalised world. Teachers must first master these competencies to serve as role models for their students (Caena, 2004). Therefore, the goal of Language Teacher Education (LTE) should be to train teachers and teacher-educators in a standardised manner across Europe. This would ensure that all language learners, particularly those learning English, acquire the same principles and curricular content, enabling effective communication and interaction with people across the EU.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) emphasizes that sexuality education must be delivered without discrimination or stereotypes and should promote gender equality. In 2013, the Council of Europe (CE) introduced the “Pestalozzi Programme” to counteract biases and stereotypes regarding sex and sexuality through education. It recognizes sexuality education as a key factor influencing social, mental, and physical health. The programme encourages open dialogue, respect for sexual and affective diversity, and the avoidance of taboos, violence, and discrimination (CE, 2013). Similarly, the European Institute for Gender Equality identifies several important aspects that should be addressed in school education, including differences in values, cultural perspectives, sexual orientation, gender identity, and personal experiences (EIGE, 2018). Addressing intersecting inequalities such as gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and disability is crucial for fostering inclusion and democracy in diverse educational settings (Richardson & Monro, 2012).

Inclusive education aims to combat gender biases and stereotypes. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) highlights several issues related to gender-based violence in schools, such as verbal or sexual harassment, bullying, cyber-harassment, and abuse. These issues can lead to absenteeism, poor academic performance, school dropouts, low self-esteem, depression, and increased risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like HIV, particularly among girls. Boys, too, face risks, especially those related to their sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability.

However, there is currently no unified system for foreign language ITE across Europe. Curricula, degree requirements, and internship periods vary widely from country to country (Eurydice, 2013; Karatsiori, 2014; Simarro *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the responsibility for ITE differs by country—some provide it through state agencies, while others rely on private institutions, which impacts both the cost and quality of teacher education (Musset, 2010). Each EU country has autonomously integrated gender equality into its Initial Language Teacher Education (ILTE) curriculum, leading to differences in the inclusion of gender equality laws in education.

Despite these differences, most European ITE programs share some key features, though they may not be implemented uniformly. The Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications (2010) outline the essential knowledge and skills teachers need, such as subject expertise, assessment abilities, teamwork, and an understanding of diversity (Caena, 2004). These principles are aligned with the EU's eight key competences for lifelong learning, which include multilingualism, digital competence, and cultural awareness.

Although there are approximately 40 core elements covered in ITE programs across Europe (Karatsiori, 2014), the lack of explicit standardisation leads to variations in the way these principles are taught. The Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers, which promotes quality education and prevents misconduct, has not been universally adopted. Some countries, like Spain and Portugal, have implemented it at a

governmental level, while others, such as Romania and Slovenia, have yet to fully incorporate it (Golubeva & Kaniž, 2017).

While the EU's education systems are highly individualised, there have been initiatives to promote cooperation and dialogue between member states. The ERASMUS+ program, established in 1987, has facilitated mobility among universities, promoting student and teacher exchanges. The European Universities Initiative, funded through Erasmus+, aims to create alliances between higher education institutions across Europe, fostering collaboration and exchange for the benefit of students, staff, and society.

In the realm of language teacher education, the European Council (2019) proposed guidelines for teaching languages, emphasising the crucial role of teachers. Initiatives like eTwinning and the European School Education Platform use ICT to connect teachers and students from different EU countries, encouraging collaboration and cultural exchange through the EU's lingua franca, English.

Several European projects have sought to enhance language teacher education. For instance, the Digital Competences for Language Teachers (DC4LT) program focuses on equipping EU teachers with digital skills, while the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) offers a summer academy for language educators to explore the latest advancements in language teaching. The VirTeach project, launched in 2018, provides resources for English language teachers to improve their qualifications.

However, these efforts have primarily focused on secondary education, often neglecting primary and pre-primary levels, and have not consistently emphasised the EU's core values of equality and human rights, including gender equality and respect for sexual diversity.

3. Challenges

Despite the importance of multicultural values, critical thinking, and inclusivity, achieving a common European teacher training framework remains challenging. The autonomy granted to individual countries has led to disparities in access to mobility programs and inconsistencies in training standards (Zgaga, 2013, as cited in Caena, 2004). These differences undermine the EU's goal of fostering a shared set of principles, as the Code of Professional Conduct has not been universally adopted. Countries like Finland and Italy have created professional unions, while others have made little progress toward implementing the Code (Golubeva & Kaniž, 2017).

Since the EU has yet to produce a comprehensive document on how to address gender in ILTE, individual countries manage the issue independently. In many cases, these guidelines are further divided into regional policies, making it difficult to achieve consistency across countries. This variation creates challenges for international students, who may not develop the same intercultural skills needed to coexist with people from other EU countries. Due to the diverse cultural, religious, political, and economic factors in Europe, each country has taken very different approaches to implementing gender equality education. As noted in a briefing by Beaumont and Maguire, "*Southern European*

States have deficient or inexistent sexuality education programmes," while "Best practices are observed in Benelux, Nordic countries, France, and Germany" (2013, p. 8).

The lack of a global assessment mechanism to ensure compliance with EU recommendations further complicates the situation. Moreover, the vagueness of some EU policies allows for modification at the national level, which may detract from the goals of social diversity and cultural plurality. Future EU documents must explicitly address various forms of diversity, including race, nationality, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

In addition, despite the EU's focus on gender equality, much of the emphasis has been on the workplace rather than education. For example, there are no specific guidelines on addressing gender and sexuality in European Initial Teacher Education (ITE) policies. This gap may be explained by Hollingsworth (1995), who suggests that since teaching is a female-dominated profession, gender issues are assumed to be implicitly understood, leading to a lack of explicit focus on them in the curriculum. However, formal education plays a crucial role in challenging inequalities. If gendered discourses and sexist behaviours are not directly addressed, students may not recognise or challenge these issues in everyday life.

For a truly democratic society, education must promote inclusion and respect for minorities, enabling them to participate fully in society (CIE, 2008). To achieve this, teacher training programs need to incorporate gender perspectives and other elements of social justice into their curricula. The 48th UNESCO International Conference on Education identified teacher training as crucial for shaping future generations (Acedo, 2011). However, integrating gender perspectives into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms remains a significant challenge for ILTE across the EU, as legislation is inconsistent, and gender equality is not explicitly addressed in many member states.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the unification of Initial Language Teacher Education (ILTE) across EU member states is essential for fostering an inclusive and cohesive educational environment that reflects the multicultural and diverse nature of modern European society. While significant strides have been made through EU-funded initiatives and frameworks, discrepancies in teacher training curricula and the limited emphasis on gender identity and sexual diversity present ongoing challenges.

To overcome these shortcomings, there must be a concerted effort to incorporate explicit references to diversity, inclusivity, and human rights within the ILTE curriculum. By doing so, future language teachers can be better equipped to model and teach the values of equality and respect, helping to create a more just and understanding society across the European Union. In addition, a more holistic and inclusive approach to incorporating gender and sexual-affective identities into EFL education is needed. This approach should be adaptable, regularly updated, accessible across geographical boundaries, and designed to be affordable and flexible, allowing educators to engage at

their own pace and convenience. By adopting these principles, the EFL education field can cultivate a more inclusive global community of educators. This could be done by the creation of an international initiative within the EU for integrating the gender and sexual-affective spectrum into English language teacher education, realised as an online training course.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Lucía Muñoz-Martín is PhD student and assistant professor of Didactics of Language at the University of Burgos, Spain. She holds two M.A.s, one in EFL teaching and another one in gender studies. She has published in international journals, presented her research at international conferences, and contributed to European projects and research groups.

María Amor Barros-del Río is Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Burgos, Spain. Her fields of interest are English language teaching, Irish literature and gender studies. She has published in international journals, authored some books and contributed to collective volumes. She has presented her research in international conferences and participated in European and national R&D projects.

Concetta Maria Sigona is Associate Professor in English Studies at the University of Burgos, Spain and holds an M.A. in English and her PhD from the University of Catania. Her main research focuses on English (EFL) language teaching and learning. Other areas of interest are Italian–Canadian literature in English and transcultural studies. She has published in international journals and contributed to collective volumes. She has presented her research at international conferences. She is a member of ICCLAS and LILADI at the University of Burgos, where she is an Assistant Professor in English Studies.

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