"She Is Not a Normal Teacher of English": Photovoice as a Decolonial Method to Study Queer Teacher Identity in Vietnam's English Language Teaching

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Abstract In this chapter, we utilize Photovoice as a decolonizing approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning experiences of a transgender teacher of English and a group of English LGBTIQ+ youth learners in Vietnam. Looking at ELT teacher identity theory and the concept of intersectionality, we investigate the role of queer teacher identity in framing LGBTIQ+ youth learners' learning experience. Findings include a sense of inclusiveness and belonging in ELT class. Students' perception of teacher as professional and confident is constructed by the teacher's and students' non-normative gender and sexual identities. Queer teacher identity positively impacts students' language attainment and learning purposes, in which students feel inspired to not only embrace their real identity but also become more passionate about their English study.

Keywords ELT · Vietnamese transgender · Teacher identity construction · Intersectionality · Photovoice

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, educators and educational researchers have sought to promote equity and inclusion across global education contexts (Freire, 2004; Johnson, 2018; Le, 2019). Relevant studies indicate a critical need to look into populations who are situated on the periphery of education systems (Altbach, 2004; Phan, 2018). These people include the LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and more) community, often seen as a marginalised group of learners and teachers in some educational contexts such as Vietnam (Le et al., 2021). Many educational researchers and English language teaching (ELT) practitioners have designed specific methods to help promote an optimal context for critical discussions on the teaching of English to gender minority and sexual identity learners, such as those from Vietnamese LGBTIQ+ communities. Likewise, we offer a decolonising method and a critical lens to investigate the ELT queer teacher identity in Vietnam.

We study a group of English youth learners who identify as lesbian and gay. Key to our study is an English teacher who is a Vietnamese transgender. We employ photovoice as a decolonising methodology for LGBTIQ+ people (Kessi, 2018). Photovoice is a participatory approach engaging people who are often labelled as peripheral communities in studies that instigate and inspire social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). This approach helps the researcher explore people's inner world and bring forth their voices through photographs (Le et al., 2020a, b). Through the visuality of the photovoice method, we can emancipate the mode of doing research on this marginalised community in education contexts including ELT.

From visual data, consisting of photos taken by participants, we aim to examine queer teacher identity through the perspective of intersectionality. This critical focus allows us to look at language teacher identity constructs (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2012) that the transgender teacher of English in our study presents. We use intersectionality to analyse the photograph data. Intersectionality, rooted in feminist theory, refers to the interactivity of social identity structures (e.g., race, class, and gender), in fostering life experiences of those encountering privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1994). This concept is used to examine how gender could be intertwined with other identity structures, such as being a teacher of English, to shape the language teacher identity construction of the transgender teacher in this study. The purpose of this chapter is to explore queer teacher identity in the framework of ELT teacher identity constructs (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Given the fact that data, including interviews and photos, were taken by students as research participants, we look at data from the viewpoint of students about the image and the role of their English teacher in forming an ELT gender inclusive environment.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Language Teacher Identity Construction

The present chapter approaches identity from an anti-essentialist viewpoint which rejects the idea that identity is an established and ahistorical classification (Taylor, 2015, p. 1). Similarly, teacher identity is less a fixed classification than a socially constructed category that is shaped through experience and the sense that is made of it (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Sachs, 2005). This approach reveals how language teacher identity is formulated in different locations and situations such as in the classroom and with different groups of students.

According to Pennington and Richards (2016, p. 2), identity is not only the reflection of the context in which a person is situated, but also the sense a person has of the self as an individual (e.g., self-image and self-awareness in front of others). Individual agency is the creation of one's identity and positionality within different cultures, social groups, and contexts for the use of language (Taylor, 2015, p. 2). What identifies the teachers' characteristics are their positions and roles, as well as how they negotiate and interpret meanings embedded in the classroom (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 3). As the relationship in the classroom between teachers and students is vital for any educational endeavour, teachers tend to reflect on their teaching in a way that better serves the varied needs of the learners (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 11). Zimmerman (1998) calls teachers' reflection "situated identity" (p. 90) which encourages new teachers to position themselves as if they were students and to practise their methods on these younger versions of themselves. The imagined power hierarchy between novice teachers and their learners may make such teacher-student relationship problematic. Developing a good awareness about learners ("student knowledge") is also conducive to effective learning facilitation in that students engage actively with learning content that suits their diverse needs and that boosts their self-esteem (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 15). This alternative teacher identity construction, "transposable identity" (Zimmerman, 1998), reflects a more "relationship-centered and learner-centered teacher identity" (p. 91). Nonetheless, for lecturers who have not yet mastered pedagogical skills, the "informal, personal, and authentic" identity construction can be hard to accomplish (Richards, 2006, p. 60).

In the field of language teaching, Richards (2012) lists ten areas that are positioned at the core of teacher identity construction. These areas can be separated into two main groups: foundational competencies and advanced competencies of language teacher identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 17). Four out of these ten fields as follows stand out as relevant to our research: (1) Contextual knowledge; (2) Learner-focused teaching; (3) Theorizing from practice; (4) Membership in a community of practice. While contextual knowledge and learner-focused teaching belong to foundational competencies, the latter two belong to advanced competencies.

In terms of elemental capacities, to acquire *contextual knowledge*, first, language teachers are not only required to have an explicit understanding of the language they teach, but they also need to develop effective interpersonal skills to be able to communicate with the students who have limited capacity in that language (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 7). Second, according to Pennington (2015), a "disciplinary identity," produced through formal education, is required for language teaching. Disciplinary identity helps to draw connections between diverse academic disciplines, which are related to each lesson's content (Pennington, 2015, p. 7). Third, teachers should have a clear idea about the teaching environment in which they will operate (e.g., class size, facilities, teaching resources, etc.) to be in a position to set the right atmosphere in class (Richards, 2012). The practice of *learner-focused teaching*, which results in the ability to facilitate learning practices (Borg, 2006), can be fulfilled by teachers' self-awareness and self-knowledge, that is, being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses to enhance one's teaching practice (Pennington, 1989). Furthermore, since teachers and students are in a mutually interactive relationship in which their thoughts and actions affect each other, teacher identity is constantly being negotiated with student identity (Pennington, 1992).

In terms of advanced competencies, as the teaching act is a 'performative' one, teachers are required to have a degree of flexibility to customise their courses as needed. The teacher identity is expected to integrate knowledge "in all phases of instruction – from planning to performing and then assessing teaching acts" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 13). The whole process from developing a course to transferring knowledge to students is regarded as a mechanism of internalization in which teachers build their own bank of techniques (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 14). Moreover, as Borg (2006) concludes from a variety of teaching strategies, experiences, and encounters, the formation of teacher identity is the process of *theorizing corporeal practices into knowledge*. Finally, besides synthesising knowledge, teachers have to nurture a *sense of belonging in a community of practice* for their students (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 7). Cummins (2011) emphasizes the linkage of identities of teachers and students; particularly if students are from marginalised social groups, they will immerse with education practices if such engagement affirms their identities.

2.2 Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, and it meant the interactivity of social identity structures—such as race, class, and gender—in perpetuating a broad-scale system of domination of Black women in the United States. Today, intersectionality has been widely used by scholars from diverse fields of studies: gender studies, ethnic studies, and education as an analytical tool to investigate the social identity structures of those encountering privilege and oppression across the world (Hill & Bilge, 2016). For example, Hulko and Hovanes (2017)

use intersectionality to investigate the diverse ways in which LGBTIQ+ youth find communities and build a sense of belonging in western Canadian small cities and rural areas. In the field of education, Grant and Zwier (2011) utilise an intersectional framework to build a holistic understanding of the multiple forms of discrimination faced by students and its negative impact (i.e., discrimination) on their well-being. Harris and Watson-Vandiver's study (2020) utilises decolonial intersectionality as a theoretical framework to centre around the potential for social sciences curricula to provide students with a greater sense of justice and healing in post-colonial societies such as the United States. Bracho and Hayes (2020) explore the interconnected relationship between gender, sexuality, and race among queer teachers of colour in Western educational contexts.

Lawrence and Nagashima's research (2020) is among the few studies that discuss queer ELT teacher identity in Japan. Their research points out how gender and sexuality impact day-to-day classroom interactions between ELT teachers and students, and thus create unique learning environments wherein teachers may incorporate their lived experiences and queer identity into their English lessons as a way to open up discussions regarding gender equity and social justice, when they feel safe to do so. Findings of Lawrence and Nagashima's (2020, p. 52) study indicate that ELT teachers who have experiences or knowledge of gender and sexual nonconformity, including those with gender and sexual minority identities (e.g., LGBTIQ+ identities), may have an intention to bring in gender and sexuality topics to discuss with their students since they seek to raise students' awareness of gender minorities and sexual identity diversity (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020, p. 49). This research opens up opportunities for future research to explore how non-normative gender performances in English teachers can potentially enrich the classroom environment and teaching practices by connecting (foreign) language education with social issues outside of the class.

The present chapter is an attempt to fill the literature gap by using intersectionality as a means of examining how the framing of teacher identity in English language education in a post-colonial educational context such as Vietnam can be decolonised. With a focus on teachers with non-normative gender and sexuality identities, we work with *Lien*, a transgender English teacher in Vietnam, and LGBTIQ+ students in her class to investigate how the intertwinement of gender and sexuality shapes her classroom, professional identity, and teaching performance. In particular, our study seeks to understand the influence of a language educator's gender and sexuality on the perceptions that students have of their teaching competence. From an intersectional perspective, the study explores how the English language classroom can be a safe environment for queer students, and how they are empowered to express themselves and address LGBTIQ+ issues and other social problems in the classroom. Overall, the use of an intersectional framework enables us to examine queer teacher identity while also learning to do research on this marginalised community in a way that challenges colonial concepts of gender binarism.

2.3 Decolonization of English Language Teaching Education in Vietnam

The linkage between teaching foreign languages and colonialism is clear-cut. Postcolonial theorists argue that the learning of colonial languages such as English and French in the era of colonialism was a tool to exclude the natives' languages, cultures, and ways of life (DeGraff, 2019). As a former colony, the educational landscape in Vietnam is determined by globalization and international inequality (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021). As English is being taught globally, inequality in accessing English education should be seen as a great concern, especially in non-English speaking societies (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021, p. 657). Previous reports have shown that a significant number of English teachers in Vietnamese public schools do not meet the government's standards to teach English (Toan, 2013). Conversely, foreign language programs in private schools tend to be more advanced and are better equipped (i.e., with up-to-date textbook materials, technology for teaching, etc.) (Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2014).

Despite the status quo of social inequality caused by the English domination in various fields of society, many English teachers in Vietnam wish to use the English teaching platform to educate students about social justice (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021). By adopting a decolonial pedagogy in the teaching of foreign language, language users' human rights as well as cultural sovereignty are brought to the fore. Hence, it is clear that ELT profession and the construction of teacher identity involve political agency (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021; Tran-Thanh, 2020). The Boston College (BC) model of socially just teaching and teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), which is adopted in the context of Vietnam, has three components: (1) A multi-dimensional view of learning that goes beyond academic training to include students' social, emotional and civic development; (2) The use of teaching skills that include teachers' ethical beliefs, their knowledge of subject matter and their knowledge of their students' learning styles, backgrounds and cultures; (3) The realisation of the connection between all teachers' actions in the classroom and the larger social and political context that defines students' lives (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021, p. 660). As such, the aim of social justice education in foreign language teaching is not only to provide learners with appropriate language and communication skills, but also to connect teaching content to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The inequality that gender minorities have to endure is also a topic that has been addressed in social justice oriented foreign language education (Tran-Thanh, 2020, p. 3). Tran-Thanh (2020) writes:

> The exclusion can, therefore, possibly push queer learners, who might remain silent or passive when the classroom discourse comes to topics related to sexual identity or regular topics being implicitly heteronormative, even further beyond the margins. (p. 3)

As a proposal for the advocacy of queer representations and queer voices, pedagogic values of queer theory must be evaluated from an internationally, multiculturally, and linguistically diverse perspective (Nelson, 2002). Semi-structured interview

research conducted by Tran-Thanh (2020) indicated a positive attitude from all participants when they recognised that LGBTQ+ issues should be included in the English classroom. There are three main reasons for participants to promote this issue: (1) Students must be aware of this important social issue; (2) English class is suitable for discussing this topic due to the progressive nature of Western societies; (3) The class can be an educational space where LGBTIQ+ students can be encouraged to negotiate their gender identities and express their value perspectives on difference (Tran-Thanh, 2020).

3   Methodology

3.1   Research Questions

This research aims to answer three main questions: How did students view the image and role of their English teacher in building a gender inclusive classroom where they, as non-normative gender and sexual identity English learners, felt safe and respected? How did the English teacher with a non-normative gender and sexual identity as a transgender person influence her students' learning of English? And how did she use her identities as a transgender and an English teacher to promote a good educational environment for her students?

3.2   Photovoice as a Decolonial Research Method

In this study, we chose to use photovoice as an overarching methodology. Photovoice is a creative form of participatory-action research that involves photography as a visual approach to examine social justice issues, such as education inequity that is experienced by minoritised and gendered others The purpose of using photovoice is to see the world through the viewpoint of people who are leading different lives. Key to this visual method is to allow participants to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues via photographs that are taken by themselves, and ultimately to reach out to policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1994). Photovoice is deployed as an anti-oppressive and decolonising approach that contests assimilationist colonialist ideologies by empowering gendered others to have authentic voice through visual counter-storytelling. Such images tell stories that serve to expose oppression and inequities within marginalised communities by contesting power imbalance and cultural hegemony (Le et al., 2020c).

   According to Le et al. (2020b, p. 4203), through photovoice, voices of participants are amplified, and their stories are told and presented via their photos. Hence, the photovoice research values lived experiences of grassroot communities and is intended to address challenges faced by marginalised people in an oppressive

society. For example, Suarez et al. (2020) used photovoice to understand LGBTIQ+ students' grief after an LGBTIQ+ nightclub shooting in the United States. Nguyen et al. (2015) explored the politics of inclusion and exclusion of Vietnamese girls with disabilities through photovoice. Similarly, Le et al.'s study (2020b) used photovoice to examine the personal narratives of three Asian teacher educators about inequities in education toward vulnerable children and youth, such as gay boys in Vietnam, financially disadvantaged children in rural Taiwan, and girls with disabilities in South Korea. In these studies, photovoice showed its ability to facilitate the expression of thoughts and feelings of participants who might find difficulty in telling their stories and sharing thoughts verbally, so photovoice involving photography allows them to do so through images.

3.3   The Context and Participants

In our study, we used photovoice to explore the impact of a teacher's non-normative identity on the learning and perceptions of English learners regarding a sense of belonging and inclusiveness in a private English classroom. We conducted this study at the time that COVID-19 had just expanded to Vietnam in 2020, with a few cases of infection. Under the influence of COVID-19, Vietnamese education experienced considerable disruptions, including nationwide school closures and a move to virtual teaching and learning at all levels of education (Tran et al., 2022). It is important to note that in the scope of this study, we had already planned to carry out our research before the global explosion of the pandemic, so our research purpose is not to investigate its effects on English language education. Rather, we focused on teacher identity from the perspective of learners with non-conforming gender and sexual orientations.

The class of English in this study was led by a transgender English teacher, who did not receive formal ELT training, but she was an influencer in the Vietnamese LGBTIQ+ community through her presentations in media, for example in beauty contests for Vietnamese transgender people. Her English proficiency was showcased in media via TV shows (e.g., Sharktank Vietnam–a reality show for Vietnamese startups and Miss Tiffany Vietnam 2018–a beauty pageant for Vietnamese transgender people). She had learned English by herself and by means of her experience as a homestay business owner for years before her current role as an English tutor. She offered English classes for LGBTIQ+ young adults in her private house in the city of Ho Chi Minh. The class chosen for our study was one of her classes. *Lien* was the tutor and her students who volunteered to engage in this study were four LGBTIQ+ young people: *Xuan, An, Kien,* and *Nien* (pseudonyms). They all were living in the city of Ho Chi Minh for their study or work. They reported that they had been learning English with *Lien* for almost 2 years and they knew her from her engagement in several TV shows as a transgender celebrity influencer. On television, *Lien* was confident and impressed the audience with her English fluency. Thus, students admired her excellent ability to use English. Participants' demographic information are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Background information of the respondents

Name[a]	Lien	Xuan	An	Kien	Nien
Age	28	24	30	20	22
Gender identity	Transgirl	Gay	Transgay	Gay	Transgirl
Occupation	English teacher	Journalist	Salesman	University student	University student
Years of learning English	7	5	12	11	13
Qualification	University	University	College diploma	High school certificate	High school certificate
Hometown	Tuy Phuoc, Binh Dinh	Tri Ton, An Giang	The city of Ho Chi Minh	Bac Lieu	Chau Doc, An Giang

[a]Note: To maintain confidentiality, respondents' names are pseudonyms

3.4 Methods

At the beginning, we ran an information session to introduce our project to participants. The purpose was to familiarise participants with the project's details, including the research purpose; we provided the team with contact information, essential requirements to participate, research activities, steps, and methods to be used. We explained the photovoice method and what they were expected to do in terms of photo production and description. Key participants were four students in *Lien*'s class: *Xuan, An, Kien,* and *Nien*. Even though *Lien* played a crucial role in connecting us to these participants, *Lien* was not required to take photos. *Lien* was the focal point for her students to observe and photograph. Hence, *Lien* in this study is key as we study her teacher identity from the perspective of her students. We asked participants to take photos of their class during their learning of English with *Lien* and send those photos to us every week. We emphasised to them that photos should be related to how *Lien* created a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere in her class in a way that permitted them to freely and safely express their real identities during their English classes. The photos also could depict how they viewed *Lien* as a teacher, whose identity was different from other English teachers who were straight and how *Lien*'s non-conformist transgender identity impacted their learning. We asked for one photo per person with a short description of what they photographed. We created an email address for participants to send their photos and information about their artwork. In this introductory session, we also delivered and collected their consent forms indicating that they were well informed about the project and agreed to participate voluntarily.

We collected photos from participants for 2 months. After this first data collection, we moved to the second stage in which we went through all photos with a description attached to each photo to identify photos that resonated with us the most in terms of what incidents they described and the meanings/stories they tried to deliver or tell. We selected 10 photos for a focus group discussion. We contacted only those participants who had taken those 10 photos for a discussion. We brought up these photos in our discussion with participants on the hidden meanings of the

photos. Participants were invited to draw links between the photos. They recalled what happened when they had taken the photos and what it meant to them. The description given for each photo helped them recount the context of the photo. In this discussion, photos and the meanings of the photos constituted the data which were co-analysed by participants and researchers (Nguyen et al., 2015; Le et al., 2020a, c). This collaboration between participants and researchers makes photo-voice a participatory research method (Walton et al., 2012). The research received ethics approval from University of Manitoba, Canada.

4   Findings and Discussion

Findings emerge from our discussions with participants in which we co-analysed data and findings presented through different themes (Creswell, 2013). Findings are supported by photos which demonstrate participants' key ideas about how *Lien*'s special ELT teacher identity has influenced their learning of English. Three key findings are inclusiveness and sense of belonging, students' perception of their teacher, and the teacher's influence. We analysed the findings based on insights from ELT decolonial pedagogy in relation to teacher identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

4.1   Inclusiveness and Sense of Belonging

Figure 1 captured regular moments in *Lien*'s classroom. On the left side, a boy in a long-sleeve orange t-shirt leaned his head on another student's shoulder happily. Likewise, on the right side, another boy in a grey t-shirt seemed to freely hold another student from his back. The student who took these photos claimed that he wanted to employ the photo to present undisputed closeness and connectedness

Fig. 1   An LGBTIQ+ inclusive class

among group members in this special classroom. He revealed that they felt constantly connected, accepted, and included in all activities in this class, and free to be and act out as themselves, unlike in most traditional educational settings. Some, such as *Nien*, expressed an exclusion from 'mainstream' learning activities at her university, which demonstrates the invisibility of LGBTIQ+ young adult learners, as Tran-Thanh (2020) indicated. *Kien*, a transgender person, reinforced *Nien's* painful experience as facing discrimination and isolation at school and a few English language centres, due to his sexual orientation. He was bullied and excluded from extracurricular activities because a LGBTIQ+ member was not allowed to participate in those activities with heteronormative people (Le et al., 2021). *An* said that "everyone should feel free to be themselves anywhere, but, clearly, LGBT people often do not."

Two gay researchers in this study can understand these students' narratives and experiences because they were themselves excluded, and even harassed at school due to their sexual orientation. It is discrimination that many marginalised LGBTIQ+ populations can relate to without hesitation (Le et al., 2020a, c; Trinh et al., 2022). In the context of Vietnam, Tran et al. (2022) point out the injustice a gay teacher may encounter when he would like to bring sexuality and gender knowledge to mainstream education. Savage and Harley (2009) argue that school curriculum and extracurricular activities reinforce negative thoughts and stereotypes of any sexual orientation other than heterosexual. The exclusion that LGBTIQ+ students and teachers must suffer is structurally widespread in that the presence of their stories, topics, and knowledge is completely ignored in ELT teaching activities in Vietnam (Tran-Thanh, 2020). The ignorance and inequity will exacerbate the oppression the LGBTIQ+ students have suffered for such a long time and that prevents them from attaining their full potential (Trinh et al., 2022). The inclusion and visibility of the LGBTIQ+ people are always critical for this community of identity. Educational equity should involve the promotion of a learning environment, wherein LGBTIQ+ students can feel more accepted and valued by making them more confident in their gender identity to be able to attain their potential academic performance. The visibility of the LGBTIQ+ students is also a crucial contribution to potentially creating an environment where homophobic, biphobic and transphobic discrimination can be problematised.

In this study's learning environment, the visibility of LGBTIQ+ people, an essential tenet of the teaching and learning of English for LGBTIQ+ people (Leal & Grooks, 2018; Moore, 2016), made the teacher and the students feel embraced. Feeling free to unmask their identity shows a sign of social justice in the classroom (Le et al., 2020a, c), which in turn can positively affect their study goals and performance. *Nien* felt "very safe and happy" when learning with those who shared the same identity. *Xuan* posited that the similarity and encouragement of the teacher and other students in uncovering their identity and sexuality played a critical role in helping them to be connected with other peers and understand more about the LGBTIQ+ community.

When having a discussion (see Fig. 1)*, Kien* and *Xuan* further pointed out that learning with *Lien* in the last two years usually made them "feel so warm". These

students appreciated that *Lien* cared about their feelings, and particularly encouraged them to be themselves and expose their real identities. In other words, instead of only focusing on lesson content and procedures in language teaching, *Lien* attempted to switch her focus to her students and interactions in the classroom, a very important characteristic of a skilled language teacher (Pennington & Richards, 2016), to help them meet their goals in improving their English skills. Her caring created a sense of belonging and inclusiveness: the class becomes their "second home", as *Xuan* and *Kien* said, in that they feel they are part of a "community of practice" (Richards, 2012, p. 46). In this case, *Lien* who faced extreme vulnerability and oppression due to her gender identity understood the realistic needs of her students, who always wanted to find a place where they could feel a sense of belonging. *Lien* also shared their anxiety, stress or crisis caused by social denial or unfair judgment towards their gender identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Tran et al., 2022). *Lien* managed to create a community wherein LGBTIQ+ students could have their own place to satisfy their passion and expectation for learning and practising English without facing any possible risks of discrimination. *Nien* indicated that *Lien*'s LGBTIQ+ teacher identity helped the students feel more welcomed, "more communicative," and most importantly, made it "much easier [for them] to acquire knowledge". The participants anticipated that the unique linkage and interconnectedness of the identities of a teacher and their students, members of "marginalised social groups", have made a positive impact on their English skill improvement.

The gender identity solidarity seems to help recognise a teacher's "contextually enacted way of being" (van Lier, 2008, p. 163) that shapes their pedagogical practices to empower themselves and their students in a gender-inclusive classroom (Leal & Crookes, 2018). However, some might argue that Lien's classes are not representative of multilingual/multicultural classes in our globalising world, and hence they would not meet the diverse needs of students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Yet, it remains fair to state that *Lien's* class is a mere fragmentation of real classrooms, and as such she managed to create a gender-inclusive environment, wherein marginalised LGBTIQ+ students are recognised, celebrated and accommodated, unlike in mainstream traditional educational and societal spaces.

4.2 Perception of Teacher

During our conversations with participants about the pictures, we realised that in addition to the particular connection developed between Lien and her students, they were also inspired by *Lien's* self-confidence, her English fluency and overall professional competence. Pennington and Richards (2016) posit that language proficiency and the personality of a teacher in language teaching play a crucial role in educating students who have limited skills to succeed. *Lien* embodied her ability to become an English teacher through her confidence and determination. Talking about *Lien's* ability, *An* stated, "She's so professional." *Kien* added, "I feel that she works very

determined. With her confidence and ability, I think she can do it and will be successful." *Xuân* supported her classmates' opinions by revealing that *Lien* is "very professional and confident" in teaching them how to master English skills.

Figure 2 features *Lien* as a 'professional' teacher from her students' perspective of a teacher of English, who needed to be confident and caring. Students asserted that *Lien's* English proficiency through her experience of self-study was inspiring. With her own stories and experience of learning and teaching, values, beliefs, and concepts as a student before and a teacher now, *Lien* built a personal, gender-related understanding of teaching (Borg, 2006). Hence, she integrated her funds of knowledge into her lessons by relating them to "individual classroom actions and decision-making" goals (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 15).

Lien also seemed to understand the importance of contextual knowledge in the construction of language teaching identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2012) and the "contextual factors outside of the teachers themselves" (Miller, 2009, p.175). In the Vietnamese educational context, being gay or lesbian could be perceived as a disease and can face punishment by family and teachers; therefore, exclusion from many social activities, discrimination, bullying, and harassment of LGBTIQ+ students is a big issue faced by a significant proportion of LGBTIQ+ students at school and at home (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Le et al., 2021). LGBTIQ+ students totally disappear in the curriculum building process, causing more injustice for this vulnerable community (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The presence of stories, or the visibility of relevant experiences of LGBTIQ+ students

Fig. 2 Lien as a 'professional' teacher

are rarely seen in the ELT curriculum and daily lessons (Tran-Thanh, 2020). LGBTIQ+ teachers and students in ELT classes can encounter countless "disfavouring conditions – negative influences or inhibiting factors that constrain teaching and learning" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p.10). However, as *Kien* stressed, Lien's students felt "very comfortable and sociable with other peers" because *Lien*, aware of those facets of exploitation, fostered a very welcoming environment in her classroom. *Kien* explained that *Lien's* efforts were very "good and helpful" in the learning process for all the students. "Happy" was the common word often repeated when these students talked about the class atmosphere and the way *Lien* dealt with their feelings during the last 2 years.

From the lens of intersectionality, *Lien* held dual social identities as a teacher and as a transgender that offered her privileges in inspiring students with non-normative gender and sexuality identities. Because of her unique teacher identity, *Lien* contextualised her ELT knowledge and skills (Richards, 2012), including the ability to incorporate gender and sexuality information into her teaching, in a way that helped to create an inclusive environment for LGBTIQ+ youth learners. *Nien* said, "I come to her class to listen to stories of other people who look like me […] *Lien* also teaches us about safe sex guides for people like us." *Lien* transgressed her role as an English teacher. She did not receive formal training to become a qualified ELT teacher, so she understood her weakness of not being well trained to serve as a professional ELT teacher. The perception and image of Lien as a professional ELT teacher came from her students when they described her as dedicated and caring with regard to making her classes gender inclusive. Such a gender inclusive environment is what made a big difference for her students (Nguyen et al., 2022). Lien's awareness of the importance of her role in creating a gender inclusive classroom refers to "self-knowledge as an element of the competence of a language teacher" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 11). *Lien* theorised her teaching from practice. She had accumulated past experience as a homestay owner through which she interacted with foreigners; she then translated that into her actions of teaching as an English teacher. She had also excelled in using English in TV shows (e.g., Miss Tiffany 2018, a Vietnamese beauty pageant for transgender women); she translated this into her actions of teaching English speaking with confidence. These experiences take *Lien*'s language teacher identity beyond training (Richards, 2012) to a higher level of reflection that boosts her ELT competence.

4.3   *Teacher's Influence*

From the students' perspectives about *Lien*, we have recognised the influence of queer teacher identity on students' language attainment and learning purposes. *Lien*, in her students' eyes, first and foremost, is a very beautiful lady who always proudly showed her gender identity. Talking about Fig. 3 below, the students claimed that *Lien* was not afraid of exposing her real identity and fashion taste which she was always fond of, wearing high heel shoes (on the left side) and *ao dai* (on the right

Fig. 3 The Elegant Lien

side) which is a traditional Vietnamese dress; she wore this on some special occasions to show her femininity in front of other people. *An* revealed that "*Lien* rất điệu" in Vietnamese (or "Lien is so stylish and girly" in English) to talk about *Lien's* hobby of wearing high-heel shoes and *ao dai* often. The students loved this side of her authenticity which made them feel more connected and braver in expressing their real identities in this class. *Lien's* students clarified that *Lien's* awareness of her female image and beauty was the first thing to attract students' attention. However, another more important reason that made them decide to study English with her was that they admired her talents and English skills. Although *Lien* did not receive professional training qualifications, she has intelligence, wisdom, positive energy, English competence, impressive confidence in public speaking, and especially the courage of self-expression. These elements, in combination, have built her impactful queer teacher identity for LGBTIQ+ English learners and become a source of inspiration for these students and other LGBTIQ+ populations in Vietnam. *An* argued that "I joined this class because the person I admire the most is my teacher *(Lien)* when I saw her on several TV shows." Likewise, *Xuan* stated that "Admiring Ms. *Lien* is another reason why I enrolled in the class. I have learned a lot from her." *An* also demonstrated her tribute for *Lien* by confessing that "Her *(Lien's)* charisma is amazing, she is smart, funny and so talented." *Kien* added, "I look up to *Lien* because she is so smart, brilliantly talented, and always learning new things. She proved that she was excellent in the top 5 Miss Tiffany 2018."

Figure 3 describes *Lien's* personality as a transgender teacher and an influencer, who promoted the importance of a positive personality and good attitude (Richards, 1996), and legitimised her queer teacher identity in language education (van Lier, 2008) in a way that transcends the confines of mainstream traditional teaching contexts. Her non-formal teacher education background and her impactful media presence have made of her an inspirational educational actor, with exceptional teacher

qualities. Her students strongly expressed their wish to continue studying with her in the future. *Kien* said, "I will learn a lot from her who has much knowledge." Similarly, *Xuan* expressed her belief in *Lien's* talent as a teacher. Hence, students showed their support and appreciation for all the activities *Lien* has done for the LGBTIQ+ community in Vietnam. She managed to bring diversity, equity, and inclusiveness to the fore in foreign language education in the Vietnamese context by stressing the urgent need to recognise the marginalised people's needs in curriculum design, to celebrate teacher agency and identity, and to decolonise pedagogical methods, educational administration, and leadership (Banks & Banks, 2019). By fostering a safe and inclusive environment for queer students in our English language teaching classrooms, relevant educational stakeholders will help to empower LGBTIQ+ 'communities of identity' to attain their learning potential.

5   Conclusion

This chapter explores a Vietnamese queer teacher identity and its influence on a group of gender-non-conforming young learners of English. Photovoice is the overarching methodology for this study, which entails a combination of data, including focus group discussions and photos taken by participants. *Lien* is an English teacher who is a transgender influencer in Vietnam, and the participants are her students, whose gender and sexuality identities are lesbian, gay, and transgender. Drawing on Pennington and Richards' (2016) framework of ELT teacher identity and the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994), we decolonise the context of ELT in Vietnam, where LGBTIQ+ teachers and students of English are invisible (Nguyen et al., forthcoming). The marginalization of this stigmatised learner population in ELT studies results in less gender-inclusive learning and teaching environments, especially in the non-Western contexts in which 'queerness' is still socially denigrated. Tran-Thanh (2020), Le et al. (2021), and Tran et al. (2022) assert that in Vietnam, gender and sexuality are still sensitive topics, and the underrepresentation of non-normative gender and sexual identity people is a considerable social justice issue across fields of research, including ELT. There seems to be a systematic erasure of gender and sexual minorities and the imposition of regimes of compulsory heterosexuality in Vietnamese upper-secondary ELT textbooks (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Although the limitations of our research (small group of participants and focus on one queer teacher) restrict the study's generalisability, it has important pedagogical implications that are worth sharing. Lien's unique identity as both a teacher and a transgender person gives her insights into how to build a welcoming and caring classroom environment for marginalised LGBTIQ+ students. She transgressed her formal teaching responsibility by not simply training students in English skills, but also by inspiring them to accept, value and express their gender and sexuality identities without fearing societal reproach or resentment. As a result, her students ceased to feel 'out of place' in her class. From the students' perspective, *Lien* appeared confident and professional. Professionalism in their eyes was demonstrated in *Lien's*

ability to understand and accommodate the learners' diverse needs. Her students were striving for a sense of belonging and this was realised through the nurturing of communities of identity and practice within the ELT educational space. *Lien*'s identity as a confident and proud transgender teacher influenced her students' performance and perception. They aspired to become as confident and successful as *Lien* in learning English as an additional language. Our study paves the way for further decolonising ELT studies, in relation to LGBTIQ+ research and ELT pedagogy in the Global South.

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