

Article

“Is This a Safe Space?”: Examining an Emotionally Charged Eruption in Critical Language Pedagogy

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Abstract: Unexpected conflicts, or eruptions, in class during discussions of controversial issues are not uncommon in the field of English language teaching (ELT). This can be especially true for critical English language teachers who hope to address social justice issues in their classrooms. Existing literature of these events often mentions emotional responses of teachers and students, without fully analyzing the ways in which emotions are processed and constrained around these eruptions. This article examines a homophobic incident during an in-service English language teacher course taught by the author to illustrate ways in which emotions shaped the response to the incident, and how social justice aims can be achieved for critical language teachers in emotionally challenging environments, where there may be competing claims of injustice and narratives of oppression. Drawing on feminist theories of emotion, the case is made for a conceptualization of emotions not as private, individual experiences, but rather as public, socioculturally and materially mediated experiences. Social justice is theorized as an active fight against injustices that cannot be seen as an individual, isolated effort. Implications for critical language educators are shared.

Keywords: critical language pedagogy; LGBTQ; emotion; controversial issues



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1. Introduction

Conflict can arise suddenly and unexpectedly during class. This is especially true in fields like English language teaching (ELT), where teachers work together with people from widely different backgrounds with different cultural values and norms. It is also true for critical language teachers who have social justice aims and may bring in critical materials to help illuminate different perspectives [1]. Students may have strong reactions to perspectives that differ from or challenge their worldviews. These reactions can create a challenging, emotionally charged classroom in which it is difficult to work toward social justice aims. Additionally, students may, in such cases, also co-opt the language of or appeals to social justice in ways that further the oppression of non-dominant groups.

This article examines a classroom episode from an in-service teacher education program designed for Korean public school English language high school teachers in Seoul, South Korea (hereafter, Korea) in which a video sparked an unintended and sudden homophobic eruption in class. Nelson [2] makes a distinction between heterosexism, which is defined as discriminatory acts against gay people, and homophobia, which is prejudicial attitudes. In this paper, I refer to the incident as an eruption of homophobia, though realizing that, as Nelson [2] cautions, this term too is problematic as it centers heterosexuality as normative. As the instructor for the course, I was practicing a broadly critical language pedagogy in using critical materials to introduce perspectives from oppressed groups, and attempting to use a more problem-posing pedagogical approach in which I situated myself more as a co-learner than as an expert transmitting knowledge. At the time however, my steps were incremental, and I was not always able to fully practice critical language pedagogy, being constrained as a relatively new instructor in my program. In the episode I explore in this article, the video under discussion was not chosen to present critical views

or positions. The suddenness and intensity of reactions to the video prompted my own critical self-reflection and motivates the investigation in this article.

These sorts of moments have been defined in critical language pedagogy as “eruptions” [3]. Janks used the term to describe instances in which critical literacy materials “touched raw nerves in different classrooms” in ways that varied greatly and that she found unpredictable [3] (p. 211). The unpredictability did not lessen the intense emotional reactions students had to the materials, often associated with anger and violence, when they did find views presented that were in violation of values or power structures in which they were invested. The term was taken up recently by Chun and Morgan [4] in a call for further research on eruptions in critical language pedagogy, as they remain one of the most difficult situations for critical teachers to respond to.

Despite the salience of emotions during eruptions, there remains a lack of theorization of emotions in relation to those events. Feminist scholars have long noted the importance of understanding and analyzing emotions as public, socioculturally and materially mediated experiences that are subject to control, often in ways that serve to further delegitimize claims of oppressed groups [5–7]. This conception of emotions is useful to critical language teachers to better understand the ways in which emotions may be used, constrained, and shape responses to eruptions.

In seeking to understand how critical teachers can respond during these moments, it is also important to have a clear idea of how social justice aims to guide reactions. Young [8] and Fraser [9] offer competing, but compelling definitions of social justice that clearly define it as an active effort both for justice and against injustice. Having clearly articulated understandings of social justice can also aid teachers in responding to eruptions, particularly when there may be competing claims to victimhood being articulated.

In exploring the classroom episode in this article, the ways in which emotions shaped my response as a critical language teacher to the eruption of homophobia becomes clear. I am guided in my investigation by the question of what social justice could have looked like in that moment. Through my analysis of the moment, and a review of interdisciplinary literature, I recommend ways in which teachers might respond to eruptions such as the one that occurred in my classroom by seeking out critical educator groups and setting up structures of support for students in classes.

2. Eruptions in Critical Language Pedagogy

While eruptions are not an uncommon occurrence, there has not been a lot written about them from the perspective of critical language pedagogy [4]. Most of the reports that do exist are first-person accounts where scholars analyze their own classroom incidents. Janks [3] first explored them explicitly in her book on critical literacy, describing how students’ reactions to critical literacy materials varied so much that she was unable to predict what might spark such eruptions in class. Recent articles have expressed an inability to respond to such incidents in the moment [4,10–12]. Chun, in his dialogic piece with Morgan [4] described his own experience of a student unexpectedly replying to an innocuous question about immigrants to Australia by stating that they need to assimilate to Anglican values. Yackley [12], similarly detailed an incident where a student made a sudden Islamophobic comment during a class discussion. Both Chun and Yackley stated that because of the suddenness and forcefulness of the moments that they were unable to respond, with Yackley recounting with regret how he shifted the conversation by claiming they were running out of class time. In both cases, an overwhelming emotional response foreclosed any action to further social justice aims that they may have had for the discussion. This inability to respond to eruptions in the moment is echoed in the broader education literature reporting on such events [13,14].

Several instances of English language teachers responding specifically to homophobic eruptions in class are discussed by Nelson [2]. In her interviews, most of the teachers reported having strong emotional reactions, attempting to hide those emotional reactions, and not responding to the incidents directly. In one case, Nelson [2] reports on Tess, a

teacher who was able to address homophobic comments in the moment and reframe the focus of the students through questioning, to fearing gays rather than rejecting them. This was a unique case, however, with most other teachers reporting how they shut down in response to homophobic comments.

Kubota [10,11] examined her own response to an eruption in class in great depth that raised several unanswered questions about what might be a socially just response to such incidents. Sharing an eruption in her class over the denial of the Nanking Massacre by a few students in a mixed Japanese/Canadian teacher education course, she examined issues, including the use of controversial topics in class, how and if balanced views should be presented, teacher neutrality, and teacher disclosure of their stance on the topic. Unsatisfied with her response, she recommended a discursive inquiry approach (drawing, in part, on Nelson [2]) in which students critically examine the source of their beliefs, however, she warned against deconstructing illegitimate beliefs, like denial of genocide, racism, or sexism, for fear of falling into moral relativism and potentially reinforcing those beliefs. She left several unresolved questions, however, including how teachers can handle dangerous or illegitimate opinions in class, and remained conflicted on if they should be unpacked or not [11]. These questions are similar to those raised in studies on teaching controversial issues in social studies education, where there is a tension in how tolerant teachers should be of intolerant views. Hess and McAvoy's answer that "a teacher does not need to give a fair hearing to racist views, because racists do not treat people as political equals" [15] (p. 76—substitute "racist" for "homophobic", "Islamophobic", "genocide denial", etc.), fits with a critical perspective that those utilizing oppressive discourses should be challenged without treating their views as falsely equivalent or presenting simply "another side". Simply shutting down such views in class may at times be the strongest move to support critical aims, but if the aim is to shift or change people's beliefs or help them open to other perspectives, the best course of action may not be entirely clear and calls for a strong understanding of social justice and what those aims could be.

3. LGBTQ Rights and Protestant Opposition in Korea

To understand what social justice aims might be in response to the specific eruption in this paper, it is important to first lay out a brief history of the LGBTQ rights movement, and resistance from Protestant Christians in Korea. Emotional responses and claims to social justice in the classroom are connected to this broader context. In terms of equality and acceptance of homosexuality, Korea ranks near the bottom of various global scales (i.e., Rainbow Index, OECD statistical scores, etc.). Conservative, heterosexual values are dominant [16]. The LGBTQ rights movement has grown, however, with events like the Korea Queer Culture Festival (which hosts the Seoul Pride parade) beginning in 2000. While it began as a small event with fewer than 100 participants, it has grown in recent years with 80,000 participants in 2017 [17]. As it has grown, it has attracted anti-gay protesters, with evangelical Protestant groups organizing since 2014.

Opposition to the LGBTQ rights movement in Korea has been led by Protestant evangelical churches. Although Protestant evangelicals make up only 18% of Korea's population, they have exercised an outsized influence on politicians and have been especially organized and strident in their opposition to LGBTQ rights [16,18,19]. Their political power owes in part to their alignment with broader heteronormative discourses that are tied to ethno-nationalist conceptions of Koreans as heterosexual, and Confucian discourses of traditional family structure [16]. Protestant opposition to LGBTQ rights is driven only in part by biblical arguments, but more importantly by a narrative of victimhood, which pits LGBTQ rights against freedom of religion [19,20]. The legalization of same-sex marriage and other victories for LGBTQ rights in the United States are seen as a cautionary tale wherein, by virtue of those victories, Christian rights have been lost [20].

Currently in Korea, same-sex marriage or civil unions are not recognized, there are no LGBTQ specific anti-discrimination laws. Same-sex marriage is an issue that Protestant groups perceive as a politically salient issue and are organizing against [21]. Major political

parties remain opposed to LGBTQ rights, with the president Moon Jae-in declaring his opposition to same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination legislation during his campaign in 2017 [16], although he recently changed to endorse anti-discrimination laws in 2019, no laws have yet been passed [21].

Emotions are rarely analyzed explicitly in literature on LGBTQ rights in Korea. It becomes clear though, that hate (as expressed in ethno-nationalistic attacks on Seoul Pride participants, as documented by Han [17]), anger (as documented in the hostility of physical attacks on Seoul Pride participants in Han [18]), and fear (as documented by Jung [19], and Yi, Jung, and Phillips [20] as worries about cultural changes and as part of a narrative of Christian victimization) are the primary emotions that permeate the conservative Protestant response to LGBTQ rights in Korea. These emotional stances serve to demonize LGBTQ identified people, and make human rights into a zero-sum game wherein the rights of one group can only be increased by taking rights from another group.

The LGBTQ rights movement in Korea has specific policy aims for increasing social justice, including the repeal of Article 92(6) of the military code criminalizing homosexuality in the military, passing anti-discrimination laws, and legalizing same-sex marriage [18]. In the overwhelmingly negative environment, driven by conservative Protestant opposition, however, another major aim for LGBTQ activists is recognition, or the right to simply exist in public spaces [22].

4. Theoretical Orientation

4.1. *Theorizing Emotions in Eruptions*

Although the most salient and difficult aspects of dealing with eruptions are the emotional responses they evoke, emotions remain under-examined and untheorized in such situations. When emotions have been theorized in language learning, as in Krashen's [23] affective filter, they have often been theorized as an individual psychological function that could act as a barrier to language learning in emotionally stressful situations. In critical pedagogy, emotions have been important in the work of Freire [24,25], who stressed the need for hope and love, and bell hooks [26], who stressed the importance of fun and excitement in critical pedagogy, but these conceptions of emotion have not been explicitly theorized as socially constructed or experienced.

Drawing on work by feminist scholars, I theorize emotions as public, sociocultural phenomena, rather than as private or solely individual cognitive phenomena [5–7]. Jaggar [7] defined emotions as intentional and socially constructed. They are intentional in that they are not totally involuntary, but rather we understand what we are feeling and often why, based on a judgement that we have made of the situation. They are socially constructed in the way that there are culturally defined parameters for what emotions are appropriate to be felt and when. These norms are not neutral, and the judgements we make that guide our emotional responses are not value-free but are constructed within existing power structures that make emotions subject to control. Who is allowed to express what emotions and in which ways is political, and in education some emotions are strictly controlled [6]. Teachers and other students react to and, at times, sanction or censure emotional responses. As Bekerman and Zembylas pointed out, "emotions are public, not exclusively private, objects of inquiry that are interactively embedded in power relations" [27] (p. 1008). Those who are deemed to be expressing "outlaw emotions", or expressing them in non-normative ways, are often those who have less power, whose positions differ from those who hold power, for example a woman in a group of men who expresses anger at a sexist joke, rather than laughing as the men do [7].

Ahmed [5] added to this understanding by further theorizing the materiality of emotions. Emotions are not only socioculturally constructed and public, but they are embodied and, in her terms, sticky. Our bodies are affected by emotions, and importantly, we ascribe emotions to others and have emotions ascribed to ourselves based, in part, on bodies. Not everybody is treated equally, and some are ascribed a narrow range of emotional responses, as in Ahmed's example of a feminist as an "affect alien", who is the

antithesis of joy because she does not share in conventional emotional responses of the dominant group [5] (p. 38). This example shows how “some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness” [5] (p. 39). By virtue of who they are, and the emotions that they are seen as embodying, some people are not seen as “happy objects”, evoking negative emotions in others simply by their presence. Ahmed’s work has been used in critical language pedagogy by Benesch [28,29] to examine how emotions are constructed by language teachers and looks at the ways in which teachers’ emotional labor is undervalued (if not unvalued). This emotional labor is not only in helping students manage and work through their own emotional responses daily to things like grades, or during controversial moments in class, but also at times in making decisions to share their own personal experiences and parts of their identity to make powerful pedagogical moments possible [30]. Teachers must not only manage their own emotional responses in class, but they are often required to manage students’ emotions. A lack of awareness of this emotional management can result in teachers exerting control in ways that they may not realize, however.

Such an understanding of emotions as socioculturally constructed, embodied, and publicly experienced is vital to seeing the ways in which emotions are subject to control, and is tied to both communication and the work toward social justice aims in the classroom. It can also help teachers avoid unintentionally sanctioning or being sanctioned themselves for expressing outlaw emotions.

4.2. *Understandings of Social Justice*

Social justice serves as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of stances and issues from peacebuilding, antiracist work, language rights, etc. [31]. Having a clear, theoretical understanding of what social justice is can help teachers in better conceptualizing their aims and goals in teaching and can serve as a guide for teachers during strong emotional reactions to eruptions in class. It is important first to be able to recognize injustice as it relates to the eruption, and then to feel empowered to act against injustice. Young [8,32] and Fraser [9] offer compelling but competing theories of social justice. Fraser [9] divided social justice as fights for material redistribution on one hand, and social recognition (and political representation) on the other. Young [32] argued that this divide is too simplistic, and that power needs to account for the complex ways that intersectionality [33] impacts the way individuals feel and are subject to injustice. The concept of intersectionality comes from Crenshaw’s [33] work in legal studies where she found that Black women faced discrimination that differed from both Black men and White women. In this sense, we can understand intersectionality as meaning that a person may experience one or more of the injustices that Young [8] lays out at any given time, and that people experience them differently depending on who they are. Injustice becomes oppression when it is systemic, repeated, sustained, and widespread [34].

Young’s [8] definition of social justice is one of a fight against five faces of injustice: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. In the case of LGBTQ rights in Korea, from this perspective, just to take two examples, we can see their fight as one against the injustices of marginalization through discrimination based on sexual orientation, and violence in the form of physical violence against them at Seoul Pride and other events, and in individual cases of bullying and attacks based on their sexual identities. From Fraser’s [9] conception, we can see their fight for rights as one for recognition, a simple right to exist and be fully able to participate in public life as equal, regardless of their sexual identity [19].

In cases where injustice or oppression is clear in classrooms, critical educators must find ways to fight against injustice. By taking a more complex view of power and social justice, however, and in intense moments where there are eruptions in class, there may be competing claims for who is being oppressed, or definitions of what injustice is in that moment. It may not be immediately clear how power is being employed or to what effect, or what course of action would best fight injustice in that moment [10,35]. A general goal of

conflict resolution, achieving social stability, may motivate teachers in such instances, but social justice cannot be sacrificed for stability since a foundation that is built on oppression is necessarily unstable [36]. A strong historical-cultural grounding in the issues at stake can help teachers identify systemic causes of oppression that need to be examined in such cases, and remedies for oppression explored, with the aim of disrupting the status quo, rather than maintaining it for the sake of stability when that stability is oppressive.

5. The Eruption: Homophobic Comments during Class

5.1. *The Class*

In this section, I will present a vignette of an eruption that occurred in an in-service teacher education course I taught for Korean public high school English language teachers. While this is not an empirically driven article, it is useful to look at the example I draw in the form of a brief narrative of an eruption that occurred in a course I taught. In this sense, this article can be conceived of as praxis, or a reflection on my own teaching to inform theoretical understanding and action to work against oppression [24].

I use a narrative vignette because narratives are one of the main ways in which humans tend to understand and construct meanings, particularly of past events where values can be examined through actions in the narrative [37]. The vignette is drawn from my notes and journal at the time. Others who worked with the group in the program at the time also read drafts of the vignette to confirm some of the details, although the perspective on the event is necessarily my own.

The course was part of an intensive three-week in-service training session. The course was on video-based discussions, and was one of several courses they were taking, though they took all their classes together in the same group as a cohort. Teaching in the in-service program was new to me, as my main responsibilities and position was in the program at the same university for pre-service teachers. The class was small, with just under 20 teachers, mostly in their 40s and 50s, the majority of them female. They were unique in that they regularly held Bible study sessions together in the classroom at our university after their classes finished for the day. I never asked their religious beliefs specifically, although I did ask them about the Bible study sessions out of curiosity and did observe them meeting after class for Bible study regularly as I passed the classroom often on my way to other classes. I had never seen anything like this before, and I discussed their meetings with the program director and other instructors since this was my first time teaching in the program to verify that this was an unusual occurrence. Teachers in other classes rarely met or socialized as a group outside of class except on special occasions at the beginning and end of the program.

The incident happened on Tuesday of the second week, so we had not yet had much chance to get to know each other, but as intensive courses can do, I felt that we had built a solid rapport in that time since we met five days per week for two hours per day. In the previous classes leading up to the class in which the eruption occurred, we had discussed videos and how to use them in their own classes for teaching English, using the topics of gender roles in dating, marriage, and parenting. The class in the vignette was planned as part of a shift to using comedic videos in English language classes.

5.2. *My Positionality*

To understand how we can respond to eruptions, we need to understand our positionality in the classroom, in relation to both the dominant societal discourses where we are teaching, and to our students. My positionality as a white, cis, heterosexual male teacher from the United States in Korea shaped the way that I both interpreted and responded to the eruption in the vignette and afforded me many privileges (cf. [38,39]). I enjoyed a privileged position within the world of Korean English language teaching that is supported by a racial-capitalist system that favors white, 'native-speaking' teachers from certain countries and has historical roots in Christian missionary work [40,41]. My background and positioning shaped my reaction to the eruption, but it also likely shaped the reactions of the teachers during the eruption and our relationship.

Although I had a strong emotional reaction to the incident, my identity, which conforms with the heteronormative culture of Korea, was not under attack. This differs from teachers who “manifest in their very identity a challenge to hegemonic culture faces internal and external obstacles the moment they step through the school entrance” [30] (p. 39). In this sense, I had a great deal of privilege. Vandrick [42] argued strongly that in instances where teachers, particularly straight teachers encounter homophobia in the classroom, they have an obligation to fight it, as it is a social injustice.

The in-service teachers were all Korean nationals, and all presented as cis, heterosexual, religious Christians. Instances of homophobia, however, may impact those in the room differently and in ways that are not immediately apparent, and we need to consider those who may have hidden or invisible identities that are oppressed [43,44]. Further, students have friends and family members with these invisible identities. For these reasons, I am cautious in making heteronormative identity assumptions about the teachers.

While I had authority as the instructor of the course, my authority was limited. I was younger than any member of the class, had less experience teaching than any of them (all had at least 10 years of experience, and some had over 20 years of experience to my 6 years of teaching at that point). These facts were determined during our first class when they questioned me about my age and experience during our first class. Age matters in Korean culture for establishing hierarchies of relationships and is typically one of the first questions asked when meeting someone. In educational terms, some of the teachers also had the same level of education, a master’s degree, that I did. In these ways, although I had authority as the instructor, I did not hold the same type of authority that I might in teaching a class of pre-service teachers or undergraduate students and was not worried about my authority unduly influencing discussions.

5.3. The Eruption

In the course I was teaching on using videos in English language classes, the in-service teachers and I had just finished watching a clip from the TV show Seinfeld, the “Soup Nazi” episode (Season 7, Episode 6). On the PowerPoint behind me was a screen with a task for the teachers to work out definitions for terms from the episode like “regifter”, “close-talker”, and “yada, yada, yada”. Just after finishing the clip, before getting into the task, one of the teachers, a Korean woman in her early 50s raised her hand.

“Is this a safe space?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

She continued, “We won’t be judged for anything we say?”

“No. Why? What are you thinking?” I asked.

“I just think that gay people are possessed by the devil.” She went on a bit before another teacher, a woman in her early 40s jumped in.

“I think so too. I just worry that Satan is doing his evil work with them.”

I froze standing behind the podium in front of the class. The question seemed to come out of nowhere. It was not related to any of the pre-viewing questions or tasks, nor to any of the discussion tasks to come. There is, however, a side-plot involving two men, ostensibly a same-sex couple, arguing with Kramer, a main character, over an armoire. There is no explicit reference to the men’s relationship or sexuality. This was the detail that had prompted the comments from the two women. The teachers continued discussing with others seemingly agreeing with nods of encouragement. I bent the pen that I had been holding. Noticing this, I called for a five-minute break. When we came back, I made a conscious decision to jump right into the discussion tasks without giving further opportunity to continue the previous discussion and never mentioned or addressed the comments that were made.

My first impulse, to call for a break after hearing those comments, is supported by several conflict resolution frameworks which recommend taking a step back from the moment to cool down [45,46]. My second impulse, to move on and avoid the conflict,

is also a common response by teachers when faced with these sorts of moments [14]. Following the eruption, I wrote off the teachers. I showed up at the start of class, left during breaks, and never lingered after time. I stopped attempting to build rapport or trust in the ways I normally would by joining in small talk and spending time in the class to answer questions during break and after class. Journell [13] saw this as a common pattern for teachers to follow when controversial comments are made during class. Rather than engaging with them in a more potentially productive manner, my resentment built over time. The difference was marked by my relationship with a second group of teachers in the same program. I chatted with them during breaks, joined them for dinner out after the program finished, and kept in touch with some of them.

In other ways, I was passive aggressive. I worked to slightly change the curriculum to show more clips featuring same-sex couples and LGBTQ characters as we discussed videos on topics like beauty, war, and migration, among other topics. I never explicitly talked with the class about what I was doing or why, although I did share, in a smug, self-congratulatory way with my friends and colleagues what I had done. While this work to subvert heteronormativity could support the social justice aim of recognition by normalizing the appearance in a public space of same-sex couples, using those materials alone, without active engagement and discussion the inclusive material alone does little to combat homophobia or address the unequal power relations around sexual orientation and gender identity [47].

6. Analysis of the Eruption

6.1. Emotional Response

While my responses of shutting down the emotionally charged conversation and avoiding further conflict were in-line with how other critical teachers have reported responding to similar situations, that eruption and my response stand out as a particularly strong memory. One unintended consequence of my decision to exercise my power as the instructor to call a break was that not only could I limit and conceal my own emotional reaction, but I also allowed others who might have felt distressed by the comments to have space away from them and manage their own emotional responses, particularly those who may have had hidden identities that may have caused them to feel more threatened in that moment [43,44]. Benesch [28] makes the point that while teachers are emotion workers, often having to react to, mediate, and manage emotional responses in the classroom, it is an aspect of our work that we are never explicitly prepared for. My own lack of preparation for that eruption is apparent. I was unprepared to do the emotion work required of a critical language teacher in that moment.

I will first examine the emotional response of the teachers before looking at my own response. For the teachers who voiced their opinions that gay people were possessed by or in some way controlled by the devil, simply the image or presence of a same-sex couple sparked feelings of anger and fear. The bodies of those characters on the TV show were automatically attached to those feelings, precluded from being “happy objects” in the same way that Ahmed’s [5] feminist is in her telling for the bad feelings they represent. At the same time, the teachers who spoke out were signaling their emotional alignment with broader conservative and evangelical Protestant discourses. The first two teachers to speak were connecting directly with homophobic discourses based on biblical arguments [19]. The implication of the calling out of the same-sex couple specifically, and of invoking a “safe space” before speaking was to signal the Protestant narrative of victimhood [20], where the first teacher implicitly felt the need to have a safe space to denounce homosexuals, as if her rights to do so were in danger, or as if she needed pre-emptive protection from emotional responses to her denunciation. This appropriation of the term “safe space” is something I will return to in discussing social justice aims in that moment.

Two things were happening in my own emotional response. First, the initial framing of the request to comment indexed for me a coming disclosure from the student that would likely be taking a position that was in some way in danger and I was unprepared

for the comments that followed. At the same time, the teacher's biblical framing of the homophobic comments indexed for me my own previous experiences growing up in a small, religious conservative community. While the religious arguments and narratives were familiar to me growing up in a Protestant household, church for me was a place where I was often uncomfortable and bullied by peers. People never enter situations as emotionally neutral [5], and for me those comments and the tone of them immediately provoked an emotional response based on my previous experiences. This was compounded by a rapidly increasing sense that I was the only one feeling an emotional reaction contrary to what others in the room were feeling.

The emotion that I felt most strongly in that moment was anger as a reaction to threat and injustice. While some might describe this as an uncomfortable moment, or a moment of discomfort, I follow Fecho [48], who specifically adheres to the term "threat" rather than discomfort because "threat" for him retains the emotional urgency that most closely reflects how people can feel. While I did not feel a direct threat based on my identity, others may have been present who felt a more direct threat, and I thought of students of the teachers who might identify as LGBTQ who would be directly threatened by their comments. I felt what might be called a "moral anger" as a response to injustice [6,49]. Boler [6] discusses the differences between types of anger, including "moral anger" and "defensive anger" (felt when confronted with perpetrating an injustice), and while Zembylas [49] makes the case that "moral anger" has an emancipatory potential if harnessed to address social injustice in education, the potential for doing so was not clear in this instance. My anger at the homophobia was justified and legitimate, but the teachers likely would have felt that their own anger and fear were legitimate. In the broader narrative of victimhood in the face of LGBTQ rights that Protestants tell in Korea [19,20], their anger at perceived attacks on religious freedom called for "moral anger" and that anger is harnessed to heterosexist ends. My own angry response in return could have been dismissed as a kind of "defensive anger".

Taking a sociocultural understanding of emotions, it is impossible to disentangle my own response and emotions from my own cultural background or the broader discourses and systems that shape English language teaching in Korea. My emotional response differed from that of the teachers, and, as such, could have raised tensions along different axes. Most simply, my reaction could be read by the teachers as similar to the kill-joy stance of the feminist in Ahmed's [5] description. However, my emotional response could also have been attributed to my positionality as a white, heterosexual, American male, a positionality that was situated within colonial histories, and systems of racial, gendered, sexual, and linguistic inequities. Sharing my emotional response or reacting in such a way as to make my emotions known, given this positioning, could have been read by the teachers as further evidence to feed the Protestant narrative of victimhood in Korea wherein homosexuality is construed as attacking traditional cultural values and implicitly, therefore, as anti-Korean [20]. Voicing my moral anger in response to the eruption could possibly have provoked their own defensive anger by calling upon this narrative of victimhood and placing my response as evidence of a cultural outsider trying to change their culture.

My desire to conceal and self-censor my own emotional response went beyond the feeling of threat from the moment, however. Expressing emotion in that moment would have been a political decision to stand in immediate opposition to the group, in a way that I was not prepared for at that moment. Emotions in the classroom are political in nature and linked to larger political and cultural struggles [50]. As a critical language teacher, I have often found myself taking positions against those I feel to be perpetuating injustice or oppression, but that experience does not mean that I am always prepared mentally and emotionally for such struggles. In that moment, my sense of threat outweighed my feelings of anger and while the classroom had become a safe space for the teachers to express their support for the oppression of gay people, particularly given the relative authority I had in relation to the teachers, it was no longer a safe space for me to express my position in opposition. It is important to note, however, that despite my best attempts to conceal my

emotions, it is likely that at least some of the teachers got an impression of my feelings at that moment and guessed the reason for my calling the break and stopping the discussion. Teachers often unintentionally telegraph their feelings in myriad ways and students often know where teachers stand whether they are explicit or not [13,51].

6.2. Social Justice Aims

I did attempt to normalize the presence of LGBTQ people in my materials, thereby working towards the social justice aim of recognition, however, as has been found in other studies of similar approaches, these likely fell short of my aims [47]. There are at least two potential aims that I could have had as a critical language teacher in response to the eruption to further social justice: teaching language around claims to social injustice and utilizing a form of queer inquiry that Nelson [2] recommended to help the teachers become more aware of the source of their beliefs and potential negative impacts on their students.

The first aim is relatively straightforward and involves teaching different cultural understandings and historical roots of phrases and vocabulary commonly used to discuss social (in)justice. In this case, I could have spent some time discussing what “safe space” might connote given its historical use and the debates around the term in the United States. This is part of critical vocabulary teaching [52], and can be integrated into critical language tasks [53]. While teaching the cultural–historical roots of the term may not have changed the teacher’s use of it or intention in using it in the future, it could at least alert them to potential miscues that may occur when communicating with others, as the use of that term did for me index and prepare me for a different sort of discussion than what followed. This learning extends to the teacher also, especially coming from a different sociocultural background, they can learn more about how the term is being used and understood by those in the classroom.

The second aim is much more challenging and begs the question of: “at what point may, or must, the tolerant stop tolerating the intolerant?” [54] (p. 3). Applebaum [55] drew the line at assaultive speech that harms or is explicitly threatening to those who are marginalized. Her example is of a religious student making discriminatory remarks about gay people. The religious student’s freedom of speech served to silence the gay student, further marginalizing him. In instances like this, the teacher has an obligation to curtail the speech of more powerful or privileged students. Homophobic speech and heterosexist acts have no place in education. Simply shutting down the discussion, however, both damages the trust needed to achieve any sort of dialogue and makes more difficult the task of helping the teachers be more self-reflexive in understanding their own emotions around this issue and how their position may have serious consequences in alienating and harming students who identify as LGBTQ (who they had a duty to teach and care for as public-school teachers). This also extends to how they may have been engaging in policing emotions in ways that had negative impacts in their own classrooms.

In shutting down discussion and avoiding it after, allowing myself to write-off the class, I failed to engage in active trust building and repair that would have perhaps afforded a more productive discussion later in the class. Building trust is often the first recommendation for dealing with eruptions and discussing controversial issues [56]. Although building trust may have been complicated by my positionality, it is vital to build. Having trust between students themselves and between the students and the teacher helps make resolutions to conflicts easier, but it is also often damaged when these moments erupt. This was clearly true in my case as my relationship with the teachers deteriorated after the eruption.

Building trust would have allowed for an engagement with the teachers in what Nelson [2] calls “queer inquiry”, which she defines as following queer theory in focusing on discursive and cultural practices and problematizing sexual identities rather than discussions of rights or attempting to affirm sexual identities. Her recommendations for language classes include things like, “investigations of actual interactions to analyze ways of communicating, and communicating about, sexual identities; critical analyses of the

sociosexual dimensions and meanings of spoken and written texts; and even creative innovations that reimagine current conventions associated with sexual identity” [2] (p. 66). Since the teachers had brought conversations of sexuality to the class that raise important implications for their students and practice, these are things I could have potentially guided teachers to do in examining language in the videos we watched, further discussing how they could do such things with their own classes.

At a more basic though, having more trust might have helped to mitigate the strong emotional reactions to discussing homosexuality in class, and may have helped me to pose questions to the teachers that might aid in greater self-reflexivity as in Nelson’s [2] example of Tess’s class. In her English as a second language class, the students stated that if they found out one of their roommates was gay, they would kick him out of the apartment. Tess was able to engage with them and ask questions like what generated their fear of the imaginary gay roommate, what marks someone as gay or not, and why are gay bodies sexualized? In the end, she reported being able to reframe the issue, discussion, and reflection, from rejection of homosexuality to fear of homosexuality. Although I may not have been successful in this, had I returned to the discussion after a break to let emotions cool, and worked to build trust, it may have been possible, through dialogue and problem-posing, to help the teachers reflect on the anger and fear they might feel toward the LGBTQ community, what it means to use homophobic, biblical arguments about them, and what it might mean to have students who identified as LGBTQ in their classes, or students who have friends or family members that identified as LGBTQ when they hold these sorts of feelings and beliefs.

6.3. Critical Collaboration around Eruptions

In responding to eruptions, isolation can limit a teacher’s ability to address the situation or respond in the moment. Critical language teachers may feel isolated by taking a stance against injustices that exist in the status quo and administrators or colleagues that would rather not challenge the status quo. Those stances may lead others to position them as “kill-joys”, like Ahmed’s [5] feminist. Jaggar stresses the need for community building among those who stand against the status quo, stating, “when unconventional emotional responses are experienced by isolated individuals, those concerned may be confused, unable to name their experience; they may even doubt their own sanity”, however, “when certain emotions are shared or validated by others...the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms, and values” [7] (p. 166). This is the way in which outlaw emotions can lead to collective action against injustice. I felt clearly isolated during the eruption as (seemingly) the only person in the room experiencing a different emotional reaction to the materials and discussion. This eruption occurred during the first class I was teaching in the in-service program. I did not have a strong community in place to turn to at that time.

Others have established communities to support students and teachers engaged in critical work. Neville [57] reported on an out-of-school book club where outlaw emotions could be aired and explored in response to books that they read. Beck [35] gives an example of high school students in the U.S. debating the issue of same-sex marriage in 2009; before it was legalized in the U.S., Students were divided into small groups first to take either a “pro” or “anti” stance and build their argument together. During the full class discussion, some students from the groups arguing against same-sex marriage made aggressive, dehumanizing remarks about homosexuality. One girl in the class came out as bi-sexual during this discussion and took the floor to argue back forcefully and effectively in the face of those comments. Beck [35] struggled with how much he should interject into the discussion or censure the speakers, ultimately choosing to give space to the students to exercise their own agency in the discussion. The girl who came out and argued back against homophobia was brave, and she was also supported by a built-in support system in the way the class was structured with her small group of peers prepared to take her side

of the argument and to argue it collectively. That sort of planning is not possible when issues erupt in class unexpectedly, but systems of support can be built in when working with students to collectively establish ground rules for discussions.

For critical language teachers and teacher educators, there is also a need to find and build communities. Doing political work and taking a critical stance in fighting against social injustices in the status quo is dangerous work [58]. It is also emotionally challenging work. Building networks and working collaboratively is essential to the effectiveness and longevity of critical work. Having a group to go to for advice, support, and solidarity—a community that can affirm your own emotional response and reduce your sense of isolation—is vital to being able to carry on critical language teaching and find ways to confront injustice without emotionally burning out.

7. Conclusions

Eruptions, for all their challenges and for the fraught emotional responses they provoke, provide important learning opportunities. Critical learning often exists on the fulcrum of emotional responses to threat, since this is the place where beliefs and values are challenged [48]. To achieve social justice aims during and in response to eruptions in class, critical teachers need to be aware of the ways in which emotions shape responses. Having a sociocultural conception of emotions can help teachers better understand the ways in which emotional responses are political and may be constrained or policed. It is also important to have a clear understanding of what social justice aims may be during eruptions. At times, shutting down homophobic or other types of intolerant, hate speech may be necessary. Simply doing so may not always be the best way to meet social justice aims, however, if the goal is to help students see other perspectives and open to different ways of seeing the world. Teachers need to work to build trust as a foundation to having dialogue during and in the wake of eruptions. Having trust and understanding emotions in those moments can help teachers avoid patterns of avoidance that are common in response to eruptions.

Communities of support are important for both teachers and students to have to help navigate those moments. Critical teachers may feel isolated in feeling emotional responses that run counter to dominant norms, and in those cases having a community of other critical educators is necessary to avoid burnout from isolation, and to help educators maintain hope. Hope is necessary for social justice, and without it the struggle can burn critical teachers out [25]. Ayers and Quinn called hopefulness a “political and moral choice based on the fact that history is still in-the-making, each of us necessarily a work-in-progress, and the future entirely unknown and unknowable” [59] (p. xi), but maintaining hopefulness is challenging when teachers feel isolated.

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