



NAVEGANDO IDENTIDADE E AGÊNCIA: A APRENDIZAGEM DA LÍNGUA INGLESA COMO CAMINHO PARA A JUSTIÇA SOCIAL ENTRE MULHERES TRANSGÊNERO NO SUL DO BRASIL ATRAVÉS DE UMA PERSPECTIVA SOCIOCULTURAL E LGBTQIA+

Maurício Barboza Borges ¹

Universidade Jesuíta Privada (Unisinós)

Camila Quevedo Oppelt²

Universidade Jesuíta Privada (Unisinós)

Resumo: Este estudo investiga o potencial transformador da aprendizagem da língua inglesa como ferramenta de empoderamento e justiça social para mulheres transgênero no sul do Brasil. Ancorado na Teoria da Identidade de Bonny Norton (1997, 2013), a pesquisa examina como a proficiência em inglês funciona como um meio de acesso a comunidades imaginadas—espaços sociais, profissionais e acadêmicos orientados para o futuro, nos quais mulheres transgênero podem exercer agência e desafiar a marginalização sistêmica. Por meio de uma abordagem de métodos mistos, incluindo questionários com três aprendizes universitárias transgênero, o estudo analisa como fatores interseccionais, como identidade de gênero, classe social e barreiras institucionais, moldam suas experiências de aprendizagem. Os resultados revelam que pedagogias inclusivas, práticas de ensino empáticas e currículos culturalmente responsivos são fundamentais para promover o engajamento, enquanto ambientes educacionais excludentes dificultam a participação e a autoexpressão. As narrativas das participantes destacam o papel do investimento na aprendizagem de línguas, vinculado à validação identitária, dinâmicas de poder e aspirações por mobilidade social. Apesar das limitações no tamanho da amostra, o estudo ressalta a necessidade urgente de políticas equitativas de ensino de línguas que enfrentem desigualdades sistêmicas e amplifiquem vozes marginalizadas. Ao centrar as experiências de mulheres transgênero, esta pesquisa defende o ensino de inglês (ELT) como um espaço de resistência e transformação, oferecendo caminhos para dignidade, oportunidade e justiça.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem de inglês; Mulheres transgênero; Justiça social; Teoria da identidade; Comunidades imaginadas; Inclusão LGBTQIA+.

Navigating Identity and Agency: English Language Learning as a Pathway to Social Justice Among Transgender Women in Southern Brazil Through a Sociocultural and LGBTQIA+ Lens

Abstract: This study explores the transformative potential of English language learning as a tool for empowerment and social justice among transgender women in southern Brazil. Grounded in Bonny Norton's (1997, 2013) Identity Theory, the research examines how English proficiency serves as a means of accessing imagined communities—future-oriented social, professional, and academic spaces where transgender women can assert agency and challenge systemic marginalization. Through a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires with three university-level transgender learners, the study investigates how intersecting factors such as gender identity, social class, and institutional barriers shape their language learning experiences. Findings reveal that inclusive pedagogies, empathetic teaching practices, and culturally responsive curricula are critical to fostering engagement, while exclusionary educational environments hinder participation and self-expression. The participants' narratives highlight the role of investment in language learning as tied to identity validation, power dynamics, and aspirations for social mobility. Despite limitations in sample size, the study underscores the urgent need for equitable language education policies that address systemic inequities and amplify marginalized voices. By centering transgender women's experiences, this research advocates for English language teaching (ELT) as a site of resistance and transformation, offering pathways to dignity, opportunity, and justice.

Keywords: English language learning; Transgender women; Social justice; Identity theory; Imagined communities; LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Introduction: Empowering Voices, Envisioning Futures: English Language Learning as a Catalyst for Social Justice Among Transgender Women in Southern Brazil

In a world where language serves as both a bridge and a barrier, the ability to learn English holds transformative potential for marginalized communities, particularly transgender women. For individuals navigating the intersections of gender identity, social class, and systemic discrimination, English is more than a linguistic skill—it is a tool of empowerment, a means to claim agency, and a pathway to social justice. Bonny Norton's Identity Theory (1997, 2013) provides a compelling framework for understanding this dynamic, emphasizing how language learning is deeply intertwined with identity, power relations, and the ability to envision future possibilities. For transgender women, English proficiency can open doors to imagined communities—spaces where they can see themselves as valued members, whether in professional, academic, or cultural contexts (Moore, 2016). These imagined communities, though not yet realized, serve as powerful motivators, driving learners to invest in language learning as a way to transcend systemic barriers and achieve their aspirations.

However, the journey to English proficiency is often fraught with challenges for transgender women (although not exclusive to this community), particularly in regions like southern Brazil, where systemic inequalities and exclusionary practices limit access to quality education. The lack of inclusive pedagogies, empathetic teaching practices, and culturally responsive curricula further marginalizes this population, denying them the opportunity to fully participate in the globalized world. This exclusion not only restricts their linguistic development but also perpetuates cycles of social and economic disenfranchisement. By addressing these barriers, English language education can become a site of resistance and transformation, enabling transgender women to reclaim their voices, assert their identities, and challenge the structures that perpetuate inequality.

This paper seeks to explore how learning English can empower transgender women to engage with imagined communities, exercise agency, and contribute to broader social justice efforts. Drawing on Norton's (1997, 2013, 2019) theory of investment, as well as insights from queer-informed pedagogies and intersectional frameworks, we argue that inclusive language education is not merely a matter of linguistic competence but a vital step toward equity and inclusion. By validating diverse identities, fostering belonging, and creating opportunities for meaningful participation, English language learning can serve as a catalyst for social change, empowering transgender women to envision and achieve futures defined by dignity, opportunity, and justice.

Theoretical Foundations: Identity, Agency, and Social Justice in English Language Learning Through a Sociocultural and LGBTQIA+ Lens

The integration of LGBTQIA+ perspectives into educational practices, particularly in English language teaching (ELT), has gained increasing attention in recent years, driven by the need to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive learning environments. This section draws on key studies to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding how transgender women in southern Brazil navigate identity and agency in English language learning through a sociocultural and LGBTQIA+ lens. By synthesizing insights from research on marginalized students, queer integrative marginalization, and queer-informed pedagogies, this study situates itself within broader discussions of social

justice, identity, and agency in education, with a particular emphasis on Bonny Norton's (1997) theory of investment.

First, Eamon Tewell's (2019) study, *Reframing Reference for Marginalized Students: A Participatory Visual Study*, provides valuable insights into how marginalized students, including LGBTQ individuals, navigate information-seeking practices in academic settings. Using Photovoice, a participatory visual method, Tewell engaged students from historically marginalized backgrounds to document their experiences, revealing a preference for in-person support, visual aids, and accessible resources. However, the study also highlights systemic barriers such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism that shape these students' educational experiences. As Tewell notes, "Libraries reinforce cultural norms through many factors, including the languages of the signage, catalogs, databases, and especially of the book collections... and the demeanor of library staff" (p. 162). This underscores how institutional structures can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion, emphasizing the need for contextual, student-centered approaches that empower marginalized learners.

These findings align with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and mediated learning, as well as Bonny Norton's (1997) theory of investment, Norton's (2019) which highlights how identity and linguistic capital shape engagement with learning environments. Theory posits that learners invest in language learning when they perceive it as a means to access symbolic and material resources that enhance their social power and identity. (Norton, 2013).

Building on this, Christina Marie Chica's (2019) research, *Queer Integrative Marginalization: LGBTQ Student Integration Strategies at an Elite University*, examines how LGBTQIA+ students at Princeton University navigated their identities within a heteronormative campus environment. Chica introduces the concept of queer integrative marginalization, which describes how select elite LGBTQIA+ individuals gain limited access to mainstream spaces while remaining marginalized within broader heteronormative structures. As one participant noted, "I never felt unsafe at Princeton or felt like I couldn't be myself. I think the only spaces where I truly felt that were the eating club spaces" (Gabriel, class of 2010, p. 9). This study challenges the linear progress narrative often associated with LGBTQIA+ inclusion, showing that integration into campus life does not necessarily mean the incorporation of queer identities. Students employed strategies such as muting their queer identity to assimilate or highlighting it to

connect with LGBTQIA+-specific spaces. These strategies were shaped by intersectional identities, including race, class, and gender, as well as the availability of institutional resources like the LGBT Center. Chica's work highlights the tension between assimilation and difference, emphasizing that even in elite institutions, LGBTQIA+ students must navigate complex power dynamics to find belonging.

This research underscores the importance of addressing intersectionality and the limitations of institutional support in normalizing queer identities, which aligns with Norton's (2016) theory of investment. Norton (2013) argues that learners' investment in language learning is deeply tied to their ability to negotiate identities that are recognized and valued within their social contexts. For transgender women in southern Brazil, the ability to invest in English language learning may depend on whether their identities are acknowledged and supported within their educational environments.

Further contributing to this discussion, Dhoest and Wasserbauer's (2022) study on LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migration background in Belgium highlights the intersectional nature of discrimination faced by marginalized communities. Their research identifies key issues such as limited acceptance of homosexuality, rigid gender roles, and experiences of racism and exclusion. Participants emphasized that homophobia is not solely tied to specific cultures or religions but is also influenced by broader societal norms and historical contexts, such as Belgium's colonial past. As one participant, Mostafa, noted, "We have needed years to accept or realize who we are ourselves. Our family, our peers, they also need that time" (p. 19). The study critiques the tendency to impose Western LGBTQIA+ norms on migrant communities, advocating instead for bottom-up initiatives such as, increased representation in media, and education on sexual diversity in schools. This aligns with the principle of "nothing about us without us", (Charlton, 1998) emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions that prioritize the voices of those directly affected. Dhoest and Wasserbauer's work is particularly relevant to this study, as it highlights the importance of addressing intersectionality and the role of historical and colonial contexts in shaping LGBTQIA+ experiences. Norton's (2019) theory of investment further supports this by emphasizing that learners' investment in language learning is shaped by their access to social and cultural capital, which is often constrained by systemic inequalities. For transgender women in southern Brazil, the ability to invest in English language learning,

we assume may be influenced by their access to supportive communities and resources that validate their identities.

Finally, Joshua M. Paiz's (2019) article, *Queering Practice: LGBTQ+ Diversity and Inclusion in English Language Teaching*, argues for the integration of LGBTQIA+ issues into Language Teaching English (ELT) through critical, queer-informed pedagogies. Paiz defines queering as creating spaces where all identities, including sexual identities, are critically examined and respected, challenging dominant heteronormative discourses. The author highlights the importance of addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in ELT, noting that failure to do so can lead to the invisibility and marginalization of LGBTQIA+ students, reinforcing harmful norms and behaviors such as bullying and discrimination. As Paiz states, "by allowing heteronormative, if not downright homophobic, views to go unchallenged, we leave the door open to damaging and dangerous behaviors such as bullying, substance abuse, and more" (p. 3).

Paiz identifies two key areas for improvement: teacher preparation and curricular materials. He critiques the lack of adequate training for ELT practitioners to address LGBTQIA+ issues and the heteronormative worldviews perpetuated by mainstream textbooks. To address these issues, Paiz advocates for the incorporation of locally constructed, authentic materials that represent diverse LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences, as well as the integration of LGBTQIA+ content throughout the curriculum. His work also highlights significant gaps in the field, particularly the lack of engagement with transgender and bisexual issues, calling for more research on how these identities intersect with language learning and acquisition processes. Norton's (2016) theory of investment is particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes that learners' investment in language learning is tied to their ability to imagine future identities that are empowered and validated. For transgender women in southern Brazil, we posit, the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ content in ELT curricula could provide the symbolic resources needed to envision and pursue identities that are both linguistically and socially empowered.

Together, these studies provide a theoretical foundation for this research, emphasizing the importance of addressing systemic barriers, intersectionality, and the need for inclusive, student-centered approaches in education. By drawing on these insights, particularly Norton's (2016, 2019) theory of investment, this study seeks to explore how transgender women in southern Brazil navigate identity and agency in English language learning, contributing to broader discussions of social justice and

inclusion in ELT. Norton's (1997) framework underscores that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but a social practice deeply intertwined with learners' identities and their access to symbolic and material resources. For transgender women, the ability to invest in English language learning may depend on whether their identities are recognized and supported within their educational and social contexts, highlighting the need for inclusive pedagogies that validate diverse identities and experiences.

Bonny Norton's Identity Theory (1997, 2000, 2010) emphasizes the significance of social identity, power dynamics, and investment in language learning. Norton (1997) posits that language acquisition is not solely a cognitive endeavor but also a social practice shaped by the learner's identity and their place within power hierarchies. Central to her theory are concepts such as agency identity, power relations, language opportunities, investment, motivation, imagined identity, and imagined community. These elements collectively illustrate how learners' social contexts and aspirations influence their language learning journey.

In her later works (2013, 2016), Norton further develops her Identity Theory, presenting a detailed framework for understanding the complex and evolving nature of identity in language learning. She describes identity as fluid, multifaceted, and constantly reshaped through social interactions. Language learners are portrayed as active participants who shape their identities in response to their social environments, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Factors such as gender, race, and social class, along with interactions in various settings like home, school, and work, play a crucial role in identity construction. This perspective highlights how learners' unique social identities influence their engagement and commitment to language learning.

Power dynamics are a critical aspect of language learning, as they determine access to language opportunities and inclusion or exclusion from language practices. Norton (2017, 2019) stresses that learners often face barriers due to power imbalances, particularly between native and non-native speakers. To fully participate in language communities, learners must navigate these power structures and assert their "right to speak." For example, a learner may avoid language interactions if they feel marginalized by native speakers, demonstrating how power disparities can impede learning. This underscores the need for inclusive environments where learners feel empowered to engage.

Norton (2019) introduces the concept of investment as a complement to traditional motivation theories. Investment reflects a learner's commitment to language learning based on their social identity and the anticipated benefits of their efforts. Unlike motivation, which is psychological, investment is sociological, focusing on the learner's desire to enhance their social power or cultural capital. For instance, a learner might invest in learning a language to access better career opportunities or join a specific social group. This concept highlights the connection between learners' social aspirations and their dedication to language learning.

A key element of Norton's (2000) theory is the idea of imagined identity, which refers to the learner's vision of their future self, shaped by their goals and aspirations. This imagined identity acts as a strong motivator, driving learners to acquire a new language as a means to achieve their desired social position or community membership. For example, a learner might envision themselves as a successful professional in another country, motivating them to learn the local language. This future-oriented identity influences both their current actions and long-term objectives.

Closely linked to imagined identity is the concept of imagined community, inspired by Benedict Anderson (2020). An imagined community represents the groups learners aspire to join in the future. Although these communities are not yet real, they serve as powerful motivators for language learning. Learners invest in language practices to gain entry into these envisioned communities, which they see as essential to their future identity. For instance, a learner might aim to join a professional network abroad, driving their commitment to language learning. This concept highlights how future aspirations shape learners' present efforts.

Finally, Norton (2013) emphasizes the role of agency in language learning. Learners are active agents who negotiate their identities and invest in language practices based on their social goals. Agency involves navigating power dynamics and asserting the right to speak in various contexts. For example, a learner might use online platforms to practice a target language, demonstrating agency in creating interaction opportunities. This focus on agency highlights the proactive role learners play in shaping their language learning paths as they navigate social and cultural landscapes to achieve their goals. Together, these concepts provide a comprehensive understanding of how identity, power, and agency intersect in the language learning process.

Methodological Approach: Exploring Identity, Agency, and Social Justice in English Language Learning Among Transgender Women in Southern Brazil

This study employs a(n) (intended) mixed-methods approach to explore how learning English has impacted the lives of transgender women in southern Brazil. Initial contact with participants was established through word of mouth and through social media (namely Instagram and WhatsApp), a method chosen to ensure trust and accessibility within a community that often faces significant social stigma and marginalization. A total of three transgender women agreed to participate in the study by completing an online questionnaire designed to examine the extent to which learning English has influenced their lives and, if so, in what ways. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was structured to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, focusing on themes such as personal identity, social integration, professional opportunities, and access to LGBTQIA+ communities. While the participants consented to the questionnaire, they did not agree to schedule follow-up personal interviews within the timeframe required for this article submission (which we intend to further study in the near future), which limited the depth of qualitative insights but still provided valuable preliminary data.

The development of the questionnaire was guided by a sociocultural framework, particularly Bonny Norton's (1997) theory of investment, which emphasizes the relationship between language learning, identity, and access to symbolic and material resources. Questions were designed to explore how English language learning has enabled participants to navigate social and professional spaces, assert their identities, and connect with broader LGBTQIA+ communities. For example, participants were asked to reflect on whether learning English has enhanced their access to educational or employment opportunities, facilitated their engagement with global LGBTQIA+ discourses, or contributed to their sense of agency and self-expression. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions to capture nuanced personal narratives, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. This approach aligns with the study's goal of centering the voices of transgender women and understanding the intersection of language learning with their lived realities.

Voices of Resilience: Analyzing Identity, Agency, and Social Justice in English Language Learning Among Transgender Women in Southern Brazil

In analyzing the responses to the first open-ended question, the participants' answers reveal how their *social identities*—such as social class, educational background, and access to resources—shaped their investment in English learning. Participant 1's lack of access to English courses during childhood, Participant 2's limited exposure to English in school, and Participant 3's early and consistent engagement with the language through the internet illustrate how identity and resource availability influence learners' engagement with language learning. These experiences align with Norton's (1997) theory of investment, which emphasizes that learners' commitment to language learning is deeply tied to their access to material and symbolic resources.

The participants' responses also highlight the role of *power dynamics* in determining access to language opportunities. Participant 1 and Participant 2 faced systemic barriers rooted in her socioeconomic and educational contexts, which constrained her ability to engage with English. In contrast, Participant 3 benefited from early access to technology, demonstrating how power relations can either enable or hinder language learning. This reflects Norton's (2013) emphasis on how learners' investment is influenced by their ability to navigate power structures and claim their "right to speak" in different social contexts.

Furthermore, the concept of *agency* and *imagined identity* is evident in the participants' experiences. Participant 3's proactive use of the internet to learn English and Participant 2's decision to join an English course demonstrate how learners exercise agency to overcome institutional limitations and pursue their language learning goals. These actions underscore the importance of envisioning future identities (imagined identity) as a motivator for investment. Additionally, the participants' responses reveal how intersecting factors such as social class, education, and access to technology shape their language learning experiences. This aligns with Chica's (2019) concept of queer integrative marginalization and Dhoest and Wasserbauer's (2022) emphasis on intersectionality, as the participants' identities and social contexts influenced their ability to engage with English.

Finally, the findings underscore the need for *inclusive educational practices* that address systemic barriers and validate diverse identities. As Paiz (2019) argues,

integrating LGBTQIA+ perspectives and providing equitable access to resources can empower marginalized learners, including transgender women in southern Brazil, to invest in language learning and achieve their goals. By creating environments that recognize and support learners' unique identities and aspirations, educators can foster greater engagement and success in language learning.

The analysis of the second question reveals how *institutional support*, *power relations*, and *identity validation* shape learners' comfort levels in expressing their identities in English learning environments. Participant 1's positive experience at the university and Participant 2's comfort in the English course highlight the importance of *inclusive environments* that foster self-expression. These findings align with Paiz's (2019) call for queer-informed pedagogies that validate diverse identities and create safe spaces for learners. In contrast, Participant 2's earlier experience at school and Participant 3's discomfort during her school years illustrate how *power dynamics* and exclusionary practices can marginalize learners and hinder self-expression. This resonates with Tewell's (2019) findings on systemic barriers and Chica's (2019) concept of queer integrative marginalization, which emphasize the need to address heteronormative structures in education. These contrasting experiences underscore the transformative impact of supportive institutional cultures and the detrimental effects of exclusionary practices on learners' ability to express their identities.

Participant 3's journey from discomfort to confidence after transitioning demonstrates the role of *agency* and *imagined identity* in navigating power structures and reclaiming one's identity. Her ability to express themselves in English after transitioning reflects Norton's (2013) concept of investment, her as validated identity likely motivated her to engage more deeply with language learning. This transformation also highlights the importance of *imagined community*, as Participant 3's ability to envision themselves as confident English speakers underscores the motivational power of future-oriented aspirations. Additionally, the participants' experiences reveal how *intersectionality*—such as gender identity, institutional culture, and peer dynamics—shapes comfort levels in expressing their identities. This aligns with Dhoest and Wasserbauer's (2022) emphasis on the intersectional nature of discrimination and the need for culturally sensitive interventions. Together, these findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive, identity-affirming environments that empower learners to navigate power dynamics and express their authentic selves.

The analysis of the third question underscores how **power relations**, **agency**, and **imagined identity** shape learners' experiences of inclusion or exclusion in English learning environments. Participant 1's experience of feeling excluded when her English proficiency did not match her peers' highlights the role of **power dynamics** in creating barriers to engagement. This aligns with Norton's (2013) theory of investment, as exclusionary practices can hinder learners' motivation and sense of belonging. It also resonates with Tewell's (2019) findings on systemic barriers, emphasizing the need for inclusive practices that validate diverse proficiency levels and create equitable learning opportunities. In contrast, Participant 2's ability to avoid feelings of exclusion through sociable and communicative nature demonstrates the importance of **agency** in navigating language learning environments. Her experience reflects Norton's (2016) emphasis on learners as active agents who negotiate their identities and invest in language practices based on their social goals. This also aligns with Paiz's (2019) call for inclusive pedagogies that foster belonging and support diverse identities, highlighting how learners' social skills and proactive engagement can mitigate the effects of exclusionary practices.

Participant 3's lack of exclusion further illustrates the role of **imagined identity** and **confidence** in shaping positive language learning experiences. Their ability to envision themselves as successful English speakers likely motivated their engagement, reflecting Norton's (2013) concept of imagined identity. This underscores the importance of fostering confidence and validation in language learning environments, as learners who feel empowered are more likely to invest in their language development. Additionally, the participants' varied experiences reveal how **intersectionality**—such as personality, proficiency level, and institutional culture—shapes their experiences of inclusion or exclusion. This aligns with Chica's (2019) concept of queer integrative marginalization and Dhoest and Wasserbauer's (2022) emphasis on the intersectional nature of discrimination, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address the unique challenges faced by marginalized learners. Together, these findings emphasize the importance of creating inclusive environments that validate diverse identities, foster agency, and empower learners to navigate power dynamics, ultimately enabling them to achieve their linguistic and social aspirations.

The analysis of the fourth question highlights the critical role of *empathy*, *contextual relevance*, and *institutional support* in making English learning

more accessible and inclusive for marginalized learners. Participant 1's call for empathetic teachers underscores the importance of *student-centered approaches* that address the unique challenges faced by learners. This aligns with Norton's (2013) theory of investment, as empathy fosters a sense of belonging and validation, motivating learners to engage with language learning. Similarly, Participant 2's suggestion for contextually relevant activities reflects the need for *culturally responsive teaching practices* that connect language learning to students' lived experiences. This resonates with Norton's (2016) emphasis on imagined identity and imagined community, as learners are more likely to invest in language learning when they see its relevance to their social aspirations. These findings emphasize the importance of creating learning environments that recognize and affirm learners' diverse identities, enabling them to envision themselves as successful language users.

Participant 3's observation about the lack of courses focused on speaking skills and diverse backgrounds highlights systemic gaps in her language education. This resonates with Norton's (2013) concept of investment, as accessible and tailored courses can empower learners to achieve their social and professional goals. The participants' responses collectively emphasize the need for *institutional support* in creating inclusive learning environments, including empathetic teaching, culturally responsive practices, and accessible courses that address the specific needs of learners. These findings support Paiz's (2019) call for queer-informed pedagogies and Tewell's (2019) emphasis on addressing systemic barriers in education. By fostering empathy, contextual relevance, and accessibility, educational practices can empower learners to take an active role in their language learning journeys. This reflects Norton's (2016) emphasis on learners as active agents who negotiate their identities and invest in language practices based on their social goals. Together, these insights underscore the transformative potential of inclusive pedagogies that validate diverse identities, address systemic barriers, and empower learners to achieve their linguistic and social aspirations.

For a more visual understanding of the responses from the survey (unedited), we bring a table below:

| Open-ended question | Participant 1 | Participant 2 | Participant 3 |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
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| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p>Do you feel that your background (social class, region, schooling) influences your opportunities to learn English? Why or why not? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.)</p> | <p>Talvez sim, porque quando criança não tinha acesso ao idioma e nem condições por um curso.</p> | <p>Somewhat yes, because at school I didn't have a lot of english classes, and when I had It, was only the verb to be. So when I joined an English course I was very unfamiliar with English.</p> | <p>it definitely has a heavy influence. from my social background, i was one of the few people who actually got to understand english somewhat comfortably, whereas, after enrolling in superior education, most people seem to at least be able to read english. the main reason i got to learn english was because of an early, constant contact with the language throughout the internet</p> |
| <p>In your English classes, do you feel comfortable expressing your identity (accent, culture, personal experiences)? Why or why not? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.)</p> | <p>Sim, acredito que a universidade é um lugar acolhedor</p> | <p>At school I didn't have a lot of opportunities to express myself, either by speaking or talking about personal experiences. However, at the English course I felt totally comfortable.</p> | <p>during my school years, i never felt comfortable speaking english. most other students would mock anyone who tried speaking in english, and i only started speaking the language after i was 18 - after transitioning, at 21, i already felt plenty comfortable with my english skills</p> |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| Have you ever felt excluded or discouraged in an English learning environment? If yes, can you describe what happened? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.) | Sim, no momento em que meu nível de inglês não se "igualava" aos demais. | Since I feel that I'm a very sociable and communicative person, I rarely feel excluded. | not really |
| What would help make learning English more accessible and inclusive for students like you? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.) | Acredito que professores com mais empatia em saber o problema e a situação de cada aluno em relação ao inglês | I guess if teachers who work at public schools prepare different activities and try some other kind of approaches, like bringing some contexts that apply to the student's reality on speaking, reading, listening etc. | one thing i missed when i was at school was popular english teaching courses. nowadays, at the university environment and even professional spaces, i feel like there aren't many courses dedicated towards speaking abilities considering people's background |

Fonte: elaborado pelo autor.

The synthesis of findings from the four questions reveals how Bonny Norton's Identity Theory (1997; 2013; 2019) provides a framework for understanding the experiences of transgender women in southern Brazil as they navigate English language learning. Norton's (1997) theory, which emphasizes the interplay between identity, power relations, and investment, helps illuminate the ways in which social contexts, institutional practices, and individual agency shape learners' engagement with language learning. The participants' responses highlight the centrality of **identity** validation and

imagined identities in motivating learners to invest in English. For instance, Participant 3's journey from discomfort to confidence after transitioning underscores how the validation of one's identity can foster a sense of belonging and empowerment, enabling learners to envision themselves as successful language users. Similarly, Participant 1's call for empathetic teachers and Participant 2's emphasis on contextually relevant activities reflect the need for educational practices that recognize and affirm learners' diverse identities, aligning with Norton's (2013) assertion that learners invest in language learning when they perceive it as a means to enhance their social power and cultural capital.

Power relations play a pivotal role in shaping the participants' experiences, as highlighted by their responses to questions about exclusion and accessibility. Participant 1's experience of feeling excluded when their English proficiency did not match their peers' illustrates how power dynamics within learning environments can marginalize learners and hinder their investment. This aligns with Norton's (2016) emphasis on how learners' access to symbolic and material resources is often constrained by systemic inequalities. Participant 2's ability to navigate these dynamics through their sociable nature and Participant 3's lack of exclusion in their current environment further demonstrate how agency and institutional support can mitigate the effects of power imbalances. These findings resonate with Tewell's (2019) and Chica's (2019) work on systemic barriers and queer integrative marginalization, highlighting the need for inclusive pedagogies that address power asymmetries and create equitable learning opportunities.

Finally, the participants' suggestions for making English learning more accessible and inclusive underscore the importance of imagined communities and future-oriented aspirations in driving learners' investment. Participant 3's observation about the lack of courses focused on speaking skills and diverse backgrounds reflects how institutional gaps can limit learners' ability to envision themselves as part of desired communities. Norton's (2013) concept of imagined identity is particularly relevant here, as learners' motivation to invest in language learning is deeply tied to their ability to imagine future identities that are empowered and validated. By fostering empathy, contextual relevance, and accessible courses, educational practices can help learners bridge the gap between their current realities and their imagined futures. This analysis highlights the transformative potential of inclusive pedagogies that validate diverse identities, address

systemic barriers, and empower learners to navigate power dynamics, ultimately enabling them to achieve their social and linguistic aspirations.

Final Remarks: Toward Inclusive Futures: Reflecting on Identity, Agency, and Social Justice in English Language Learning for Transgender Women in Southern Brazil

Despite the limitations posed by the lack of follow-up interviews, the data collected through the questionnaire offer important insights into the role of English language learning in the lives of three transgender women in southern Brazil. The absence of interviews restricted the ability to probe deeper into individual experiences and contextual factors, but the questionnaire responses still provide a foundation for understanding how English serves as a tool for empowerment, social mobility, and identity negotiation within this marginalized community. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating in-depth interviews or focus groups to explore the broader sociocultural and institutional factors that shape transgender women's experiences with English language learning. This study's methodology underscores the importance of creating accessible and inclusive research practices that respect the autonomy and safety of transgender participants while contributing to the growing body of literature on LGBTQIA+ issues in language education.

The participants' responses to the fourth question illustrate how empathy, contextual relevance, and institutional support can make English learning more accessible and inclusive. By applying Norton's (1997, 2010, 2019) Identity Theory and the theoretical background on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in education, we can see that inclusive practices must address systemic barriers, validate diverse identities, and empower learners to achieve their social and professional aspirations. These findings underscore the importance of student-centered approaches, culturally responsive teaching, and accessible language courses in creating equitable and empowering learning environments.

Finally, the small number of respondents in this study may reflect a broader systemic issue: the limited opportunities for transgender women to access English language education, particularly in regions like southern Brazil. This lack of access not only restricts their ability to acquire linguistic skills but also hinders their potential to

achieve greater social and economic mobility. English, as a global lingua franca, often serves as a gateway to higher education, better job opportunities, and broader cultural engagement. (Elder; Davies, 2006). For transgender women, who already face significant marginalization due to intersecting factors such as gender identity, social class, and systemic discrimination, the inability to learn English can further exacerbate their exclusion from spaces of power and opportunity. This underscores the urgent need for inclusive educational policies and practices that prioritize the voices and needs of marginalized communities. By addressing these barriers, we can create pathways for transgender women to not only learn English but also to reclaim their agency, envision empowered futures, and contribute to a more just and equitable society. Language, in this sense, becomes more than a skill—it becomes a tool for social justice, enabling individuals to navigate and challenge the structures that perpetuate inequality.

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Appendix A – Online Form

Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido

Chamo-me Camila Quevedo Oppelt e sou pesquisadora. Você está sendo convidada a participar da pesquisa "**Identity, Agency, and Social Justice in English Language Learning: A Sociocultural Exploration of LGBTQIA+ Communities in Southern Brazil**". O objetivo deste estudo, para o qual conto com a sua colaboração, é investigar como mulheres transgênero de origens (marginalizadas ou não) no sul do Brasil navegam no aprendizado da língua inglesa, examinando a interseção entre identidade, agência e justiça social na superação de barreiras sistêmicas para alcançar mobilidade educacional e social.

Sua participação nesta pesquisa consistirá em (i) suas respostas a este formulário eletrônico e (ii) uma entrevista individual. Conto com sua contribuição pelo período de uma semana. As informações obtidas através dessa pesquisa serão confidenciais e asseguro o sigilo absoluto de sua participação, pois não serão divulgados nomes ou informações que possam identificar as participantes envolvidas e/ou os locais da pesquisa.

A sua participação não é obrigatória. A qualquer momento você pode desistir de participar e retirar seu consentimento. Sua recusa não trará nenhum prejuízo em sua relação com a pesquisadora ou com a instituição. Dentre os benefícios relacionados com a sua participação estão: potencializar o desenvolvimento de suas habilidades em língua inglesa, participar de momentos de interação na língua alvo e, especialmente, contribuir com a possibilidade de auxiliar no processo de (re)construção identitária e cultural de futuras(os) alunas(os) de língua inglesa como língua adicional (em especial mulheres trans). Os riscos relacionados com sua participação podem incluir eventual fadiga, enfado físico e psicológico. Você ficará com uma cópia deste Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido (que será enviado eletronicamente, com a cópia deste formulário), podendo tirar suas dúvidas sobre o projeto e sua participação, agora ou a qualquer momento com a responsável pela pesquisa Prof.^a Dr.^a Camila Quevedo Oppelt através do e-mail camila.q.oppelt@gmail.com.

Considerando que fui informada dos objetivos e da relevância do estudo proposto, de como será minha participação, dos procedimentos e riscos decorrentes deste estudo, eu (cujo nome está indicado abaixo) declaro o meu consentimento em participar da pesquisa, como também concordo que os dados obtidos na investigação sejam utilizados para fins científicos (divulgação em eventos e publicações).

* Indica uma pergunta obrigatória

1. E-mail *
2. Nome completo *
3. Eu, acima citada, concordo em responder participar desta pesquisa. *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Sim
- ☐ Não

Background Information

4. What is your first language *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Brazilian
- ☐ Portuguese
- ☐ Indigenous Language
- ☐ Outro: _____

5. How would you describe your socioeconomic background? *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Low-income
- ☐ Middle-income
- ☐ High-income
- ☐ Prefer not to say

6. What type of school did you attend for most of your education? *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Public school
- ☐ Private school with a strong English program
- ☐ Private school with a basic English program
- ☐ Other: _____

7. How accessible is English education in your area? *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Very accessible (many affordable options, qualified teachers)
- ☐ Somewhat accessible (some resources available)
- ☐ Not very accessible (few options, expensive courses)
- ☐ Not accessible at all

8. How often do you use English outside the classroom? *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly or less
- ☐ Never

Part 2: Identity & Investment in English Learning

9. How important is learning English for your future? *

Marcar apenas uma oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Very ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Not important at all

10. Do you feel that your background (social class, region, schooling) influences
*your opportunities to learn English? Why or why not? (If uncomfortable, could
be answered in Portuguese.)

11. In your English classes, do you feel comfortable expressing your identity
* (accent, culture, personal experiences)? Why or why not? (If uncomfortable,
could be answered in Portuguese.)

12. What motivates you to learn English? (Check **all** that apply) *

Marque todas que se aplicam.

- ☐ Better job opportunities
- ☐ Higher education (e.g., university, study abroad)
- ☐ Travel
- ☐ Access to media and global culture (movies, music, games)
- ☐ Other: _____

Part 3: Challenges & Barriers

13. What difficulties do you face when learning English? (Check **all** that apply) *

Marque todas que se aplicam.

- ☐ Limited access to good teachers or courses
- ☐ Financial difficulties
- ☐ Lack of family or community support
- ☐ Feeling that English is "not for people like me"
- ☐ Difficulty balancing work/study responsibilities
- ☐ Other: _____

14. Have you ever felt excluded or discouraged in an English learning environment? If yes, can you describe what happened? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.)

15. What would help make learning English more accessible and inclusive for students like you? (If uncomfortable, could be answered in Portuguese.) *

Este conteúdo não foi criado nem aprovado pelo Google.