

# Gender sensitisation through course design thinking

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## Abstract

Translators' training providers, including Higher Education (HE), play a big part in shaping the minds and behaviours of future translators. Therefore, translation courses must focus on implementing practices and resources which will enhance not only students' linguistic and technical skills, but also cultural awareness, social responsibility, and ethical principles. Sexual/identity discourse is an area of critical enquiry which presents significant challenges that translators frequently do not seem to be able to handle due to their generally low level of gender understanding and sensitivity. This is where translators' trainers need to take action. The current article – which collects the first findings of an in-progress educational project carried out at London Metropolitan University – suggests examples of activities and aspects to consider in curriculum design to create an effective framework which can ensure a more consistent embedding of gender-sensitive policies in the curriculum of translation courses.

**Keywords:** course design; translators' training; gender sensitisation; gender awareness; gender-responsive approach

## Resumen. *Sensibilización de género a través del pensamiento crítico en el diseño de cursos*

La educación superior, así como otros proveedores de formación, tienen un papel importante en moldear las mentes y los comportamientos de las futuras generaciones de traductores y traductoras. Por lo tanto, los cursos de traducción deben centrarse en implementar prácticas y recursos que desarrollen no solo las habilidades lingüísticas y técnicas del alumnado, sino también la conciencia cultural, la responsabilidad social y los principios éticos. El discurso sobre la identidad/sexualidad es un área de investigación crítica que pone desafíos significativos que a menudo quien traduce no es capaz de afrontar, debido a su bajo nivel de comprensión y sensibilidad de género. Aquí es donde tiene que intervenir quién forma a los traductores y las traductoras. El presente artículo, que recopila los primeros hallazgos de un proyecto educativo que se está desarrollando en la London Metropolitan University, sugiere ejemplos de actividades y aspectos que hay que considerar en el diseño de cursos, para crear un marco eficaz que pueda garanti-

zar una incorporación más coherente de directrices sensibles al género en el plan de estudio de los cursos de traducción.

**Palabras clave:** diseño de cursos; formación de traductores y traductoras; concienciación de género; conciencia de género; enfoque receptivo al género

### Summary

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## 1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a renewed and visible commitment to the promotion of gender equality goals in the context of higher education (HE) through concrete initiatives aimed at creating a safer gender-inclusive environment for all its members: students, academics and people working in professional services. This commitment is surely grounded in the 2015 Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly which lists gender equality among its global goals to be pursued by 2030.<sup>1</sup>

These concrete actions have predominantly targeted the area of administrative language and, in most Western HE institutions, have led to a consistent – though not rarely criticised – revision of the grammatical and lexical patterns used in institutional documents, for example, contracts, reports, calls for bids (Albert Muñoz 2019; Jiménez-Yañez & Colmenares Díaz 2022; Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito 2018; O’Connor & Irvine 2020).

The implementation of a gender-responsive approach in the curriculum of HE courses has instead been more unsteady, although gender training has long been embraced and fostered by large world organisations. The UN has been particularly vocal in advocating the need to use training as a driver of important social changes in all sectors:

Training for gender equality is an essential part of UN Women’s commitment to this vision and is **transformative**. By raising awareness and **empowering women and men with relevant learning, knowledge, attitudes and skills, we can advance gender equality at the individual and collective level**. (<<https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org>>, my emphasis)

1. Please note that “gender equality” is officially Goal 5 in the list of sustainable goals mentioned in this Resolution, but in fact there are five goals addressing gender-related issues (4, “inclusive and equitable education”; 5, “gender equality”; 8, “inclusive and sustainable economic growth”; 10, “reduce inequality in all countries”, and 16: “accountable and inclusive institutions”). This demonstrates that equality in all its forms has an impact on all aspects of people’s lives as social individuals’ wellbeing ensures a healthy and just economy (United Nations 2015).

The attempts to “engender” the curriculum has been often put forward by strongly motivated – but solitary – tutors who embrace this same vision and believe that (higher) education is one of the economic and societal contexts where gender concerns need to be addressed more consistently and collectively, and more at the level of the teaching delivery. This appeal seems to be particularly poignant within the area of Translation Studies where, for a number of years, numerous academics have been experimenting impactful teaching practices aimed at raising students’ gender awareness and equipping them with knowledge and skills which go beyond the purely linguistic and technological sphere (Castro & Ergun 2016; Corrius, De Marco & Espasa 2016; Martínez-Carrasco 2019). Despite their best endeavours, many of these academics have denounced the isolation in which they have operated, and the contradictions inherent to their universities which often promote themselves as gender inclusive, but hardly implement gender-inclusive language in their promotion channels or sometimes even hinder the spread of gender-responsive teaching practices in the curriculum (Baldo 2019; Montés 2019; Zaragoza Ninet & Martínez-Carrasco 2022).

These experiences demonstrate that there is a widespread acknowledgment that we, as educators, are among the main social agents in shaping the future of the young generations through the training we offer them and, therefore, in shaping the future of employment of which they will soon make part. Strangely, HE management tend to urge academics to design their courses in such a way as to bridge the gap between education and the professional world by developing students’ most requested employability skills. Yet, they often fail to realise that becoming fully gender aware, gender sensitive and gender responsive (and responsible) has become an integral part of the competences that translators-to-be need to enhance. This is because developing a gender-responsive mindset is anchored in an “economic efficiency approach”,<sup>2</sup> which most employers are keen to embrace in view of economic growth, and because language-service providers, which are the main employment outlets for our graduates, are increasingly recruiting gender-sensitive candidates as their clients have become more varied in terms of gender identities. Therefore, the more inclusive the language their employees can use in the tasks that they perform as translators, proofreaders, or interpreters, the wider the audience they can reach and retain.

## 2. The case study

Acquiring a gender-responsive mindset does not happen overnight. Students need to be exposed to a full range of aspects which underpin gender equality principles over a continuous period. In other words, neither can the focus of the teaching

2. The concept of “economic efficiency approach” is based on the idea that when a society is more gender-balanced, that is both women and men have access to the same rights and opportunities (education, work, vote, etc.), they are more likely to significantly contribute to the economic growth of that society. An interesting insight in this respect is offered by Berlanga Alessio Robles: <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/07/23/gender-equality-as-smart-economics-questioning-the-assumptions-behind-the-claim/>> [Access: 19/02/2023].

provided be limited to theories and activities centred around gender-inclusive language, nor can this awareness be developed in few, isolated sessions integrated in well-established modules whose learning outcomes are not linked to the gender agenda. Creating an independent module with a clear gender focus for translators, with logically related learning outcomes and in which the content is spread across at least a trimester is paramount to ensure that students develop awareness of what they are learning, the relevance of the knowledge they are acquiring for the work which they will perform in the near future and, above all, enhance their critical thinking which is essential to forge social responsibility. These motivations should be the pillars underpinning the design of a translation module and should be used as evidence to persuade the institutions' governors that making gender training an integral part of translators' training is feasible, viable, necessary and, above all, in line with the current global social and economic agenda.

The present article fits into the range of experiences and initiatives undertaken to sustain this goal. It is part of a multi-phased project which intends to build up a gender-responsive framework through the design of a postgraduate (PG) module named *Gender-responsive practices for translators* at London Metropolitan University (London Met). This project supports and innovatively contributes to the university's Education for Social Justice cause<sup>3</sup> because: 1) it addresses students as main targets and beneficiaries of the teaching/learning practices experimented (1<sup>st</sup> stage); and 2) it involves translators' trainers within and outside London Met as the following step is to design a training-the-trainers course. The aim is to strengthen the students' background in consciously and critically dealing with gender-related challenges, as well as to share gender-inclusive teaching practices which can be integrated collectively in HE institutions in different countries, with a view to triggering a stronger social impact (2<sup>nd</sup> stage).

This module is meant to last 12 weeks (with sessions of two hours each), is targeted to a culturally varied student body,<sup>4</sup> and is being designed with a hybrid teaching delivery format in mind. While a face-to-face teaching delivery is still our students' preferred option as it is deemed to be more interactive and stimulating because it favours socialization, after the Covid-19 pandemic experience, distance learning (DL) has gained momentum due to the flexibility it offers. The hybrid format has therefore been considered a good compromise and a more inclusive option because it addresses the needs of students who may have caring

3. The Education for Social Justice (ESJ) framework has been introduced with the aim to align the courses' curricula and teaching practices with the principles of equity, with who this institution's students are and with the challenges facing London and its multicultural communities: <<https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/about/equity/centre-for-equity-and-inclusion/a-fair-outcomes-approach-to-teaching-and-learning/the-degree-awarding-gap/education-for-social-justice-framework>> [Access: 19/02/2023].
4. Although most of London Met students embarking on our MA Translation degree come from European countries, the course is open to students using the following languages paired with English: Arabic, Chinese Mandarin, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.

responsibilities, disabilities, or visa restrictions. As challenging as this can sound from the trainer's point of view, this is an important aspect which is worth taking into account when designing a module which promotes (gender) inclusivity and that has an impact on the types of activities to be planned. This module will be initially offered as an optional module to ease its integration into a well-consolidated PG programme and to assess how positively it is received by both students and senior managers.

Another important element to incorporate into the design of such a module is clear learning outcomes (LOs) to be presented to the students in every session. UK HE institutions are rather good at making the general aims and LOs visible in both the course and module descriptors. However, in a training course in which both linguistic, cultural, and social skills are to be enhanced and the content needs to be handled sensitively and with consideration for the students' personal backgrounds, LOs also need to be clarified at session level. This module has therefore the following aim and module LOs, and one or maximum two LO(s) per session depending on the topic introduced in each session.

**Table 1.** Module aim and module LOs

Module Aim	Module LOs
Enhancing students' receptive attitude to gender concerns, by making gender (and gender equality principles) an integral part of their consciousness and, therefore, of their professional ethics.	By the end of this module, students will have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Developed an understanding of the importance of addressing gender concerns as translators;</li> <li>– Examined how gender biases manifest in verbal and non-verbal language;</li> <li>– Practised the use of non-sexist/gender inclusive forms in texts;</li> <li>– Reflected on the impact of their translation decisions on the lives of others.</li> </ul>

The following table presents an example of how two sessions are being organised in terms of topics, LOs, possible activities and tools.

**Table 2.** Examples of the organisation of two sessions

Session	Topic(s)	Activities	LO(s)
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What is gender?</li> <li>– Why is addressing gender concerns in the translators' training relevant?</li> <li>– Why now?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Brainstorming activity asking students what gender is for them.</li> <li>– Students are asked to create a 'Story of why' followed by a 'best practice' scenario.</li> </ul>	By the end of this session students will have reflected on their own (and their culture's) perception of gender issues.

Session	Topic(s)	Activities	LO(s)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What would be the implications of not addressing this topic for the future of translators' work?</li> <li>- What is gender analysis?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion of 'best practice' scenario results to be linked to tutor's presentation on gender analysis.</li> <li>- Tutor's gives a graphic non-detailed overview of the different directions into which Gender Studies have branched out (gynocriticism, gay/queer studies/postcolonial studies) and asks students to work in group to make research on these directions. Afterwards, students are brought back to plenary.</li> </ul>	<p>By the end of this session students will have:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussed the impact that developing a gender-responsive mindset will have on social behaviours;</li> <li>2. Identified the multiple aspects gender identity consists of.</li> </ol>

The first session proposes a necessary introduction of how each of us perceives gender. For the ice-breaking activity dealing with a sensitive topic with which not all students may feel comfortable depending on the cultural backgrounds they come from, it is advised to resort to a presentation tool such as Mentimeter which respects the anonymity of the participants' replies and is suitable in both a face-to-face and a DL teaching environment. This brainstorming task can be followed by a tutor's presentation of different definitions of gender drawn on both academic and non-academic sources. The following "story of why" activity entails asking students to imagine a "worse-case scenario" in ten years time, with gender concerns not having been addressed in translators' training. Students need to reflect upon why this negative scenario may come about and what the implications would be. The "best practice" scenario would complement the previously negative scenario and be organised, for example, as a 5-point manifesto. Considering the density and length of the previous activities, the manifesto could be assigned as homework. In this way students are given more time to assimilate the notions acquired and the discussions originated during this introductory session, and come up with more reasoned suggestions. For both activities, and to keep students' engagement high, a highly interactive and visual application such as Mural<sup>5</sup> could be used by all participants.

The second session builds on – and expands – the findings of the previous one to introduce an important concept which future translators need to be fully aware of in order to consciously understand how to handle texts, gender analysis. In this respect, the tutor presents the differences in the definition of "gender analysis" provided by academics and international organisations. Within academia, gender analysis – which has always been circumscribed to Social Sciences – is linked to "the unbalanced representation of men and women as perceived through

5. <<https://www.mural.co>> [Access: 19/02/2023].

the use of the (sexist) grammatical and linguistic patterns of a language – for example, in literature – and the use of the images selected to portray male and female bodies – in the case of the mass media” (De Marco 2016: 314), whereas according to the International Labour Organisation, gender analysis requires “the identification of: *a*) [t]he division of labour between women and men; *b*) [w]ho has access to and control over resources and benefits; *c*) [t]he needs of women and men; *d*) [t]he constraints and/or opportunities, that is that extent of direct and indirect discrimination in the socio-economic environment” (International Labour Office 2005: 101). Despite the visible differences in focus between the two interpretations, this overview is expected to prompt students to reflect on whether and how their current perception of gender takes into account these perspectives when behaving on a personal (interacting with other people) or professional level (dealing with texts), and what this awareness means for their work responsibilities. This introduction is preparatory to the second task, in which the tutor can present Gender Studies different branches as a tree and group the students in breakout rooms where they can take a closer look at the commonalities and divergences about these branches and discuss them. It is worth suggesting to also examine trans and non-binary studies, as this is a topical subject at the moment, and ask them to look at the decisions around pronouns and what directives councils and other authorities are following around this issue.

As can be seen from these two examples, while students are introduced to a varied range of themes and issues each week, the sessions are sequentially linked, although this link may not always appear obvious to students. This linear organisation of the topics follows Bruner’s “spiral curriculum” approach (1977). Although in curriculum design this pedagogical model has been sometimes questioned as it is deemed to be more suitable for scientific disciplines characterised by linearity and predictability of learning outcomes (Ireland & Mouthaan 2020), in this specific case I find it a successful approach. From previous experience made before coming to this stage of the project, I noticed that when students are introduced to gender concerns in a non-linear order, not only do they not fully engage, but they also struggle to appreciate the relevance of gender in their work as translators. On the contrary, by using a sequential approach which consists in introducing a new aspect related to gender training every week, while some aspects covered in the previous week are redeveloped or expanded, students are gradually and continuously exposed to ideas and challenges associated with gender. In this way, they end up acquiring a more comprehensive awareness of the many aspects to consider when conducting a gender analysis for translation purposes, and that gender is an integral part of what they are as persons, how they feel, what they do as practitioners and the impact that this may have on their profession and relationship with their employers and clients.

### 3. Conclusions

Designing and delivering training courses in such a way as to consider the diverse needs, experiences, and perspectives of learners based on their gender is what

large world organisations (for example UN, UNESCO) call “gender-responsive training”. Trainers/educators using a gender-responsive approach in curriculum design also care about the kinds of professionals that students will become after they leave the university, and how they will behave in the workplace and in their society. Therefore, by consistently adopting a gender-responsive approach in the curriculum, educational institutions help to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that empowers all learners to reach their full potential, as well as to develop sensitivity to – and responsibility for – everyone’s needs.

This urge to equip students with such awareness is felt strongly by some Translation Studies scholars who, whether supported by their institutions or not, in recent years have bravely attempted to make their curriculum as gender inclusive as possible. The rationale behind the integration of gender-inclusive teaching practices is that translators are active agents in transferring languages usages. Therefore, the earlier trainee translators are exposed to the idea of equal treatment, equal sharing of responsibilities and respectful use of language, the more instinctive for them will be using translation strategies which discourage sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and racist languages patterns and attitudes.

The two introductory sessions of the postgraduate module *Gender-responsive practices for translators* described above are given as an example of the factors which should be considered when designing the objectives, the content, the activities, and the tools to be used in a (physical or virtual) translation classroom. Tutors can decide what subsequent topics to develop depending on the programme into which their module fits, the aims set at the outset and the qualification level of the course (undergraduate/postgraduate) in which this training is offered.

While the scope of this article is still limited due to the “work in progress” stage of the project, this is envisaged to turn into a useful framework which can be easily adapted to individual institutional settings and, above all, become one of the transformative actions which directly contribute to the 2030 global goals. It is easily, but wrongly, assumed that equality and diversity concerns are topics which only political decision-makers can tackle, but each of us plays a role in determining the life we live and in shaping the society in which we live. In this respect, this project embraces the UNICEF’s appeal that as educators we “have the power to channel students’ positive energies and help them believe that they are not powerless, that change is possible, and that they can drive it” (UNICEF 2020: 11).

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