

Gender Performance in Talk During Study Abroad

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Abstract

Based on the concept of gender as a social construct, enacted through behaviors, discourse, and attitudes, this study investigates how a non-binary and Queer Spanish L2 learner performed their gender identity during a study abroad (SA) program. The qualitative analysis of conversations between the participant and their interlocutor, and their reflections on their daily experiences revealed that the learner performed their gender identity through linguistic forms (e.g., non-binary language), stances, and the expression of ideologies related to gender and social issues. The study concludes with recommendations for educators who organize SA programs and suggests ways to better support LGBTQ+ L2 learners.

1. Introduction

Gender identity is expressed and performed through various linguistic choices, such as the use of specific words or the expression of ideologies and practices [1]. When participating in study abroad (SA), language learners are exposed to new social contexts in which gender might be constructed and performed differently in their own culture [2]. For instance, in some cultures, masculinity may be linked to the use of aggressive language, while not so in other cultures [3].

With the overall premise of gender as socially performative and encompassing linguistic forms, ideologies, and attitudes, the current study explores how a Spanish L2 learner, “Avery” (who identifies as Black American, non-binary, and queer; pronouns they/elle – non-binary, third person singular in Spanish) performs and co-constructs their gender in conversation during SA in Spain. As such, the study seeks to contribute to the limited literature on LGBTQ+ L2 learners in SA [5] by exploring the participant’s expression of their gender identity in interaction with Spanish native speakers in the SA context.

This investigation is relevant to language practitioners and SA program designers because it illustrates the types of experiences in the target language that LGBTQ+ learners encounter during SA that can either foster or derail their learning goals and general well-being. The study concludes with insights and recommendations for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ learners in

SA programs.

2. Literature Review

To begin, the literature review provides an exploration of the concept of grammatical gender in the Spanish language, examining its structure and use. Following this, the review presents existing research on LGBTQ+ learners, focusing specifically on their experiences and challenges in the context of SA programs.

2.1. Binary and non-binary gender in Spanish

Spanish is an inherently gendered language, where grammatical and social gender intersect [8]. Grammatical gender is determined by the noun's gender, and also reflected in other lexical elements like adjectives, articles, and pronouns [6]. Nouns are typically classified as masculine or feminine, with biological gender applied to people and some animals (e.g., *presidenta* for a female president) and arbitrary gender assigned to inanimate objects (e.g., *mesa* for table).

Gender distinctions appear through heteronyms (e.g., *hombre* [man] and *mujer* [woman]), affixes (e.g., *tigre* [tiger] and *tigresa* [female tiger]), or gender-marked articles (e.g., *el/la estudiante* [the student]). Adjectives and articles must agree in gender and number, with some exceptions. Pronouns, including subject, object, and prepositional forms, also vary by gender in singular and plural [7]. Table 1 summarizes Spanish pronouns, with gender-marked forms denoted by an asterisk.

Over the past two decades, LGBTQ+ communities have advocated for more inclusive language practices, prompting changes like replacing masculine and feminine endings with the neutral “-e” (e.g., *niñas* [girls] becoming *niñes* [children]) [9]. This neutral ending is also applied in pronouns, supporting non-binary individuals and fostering inclusivity [10]; non-binary subject pronouns are summarized in Table 2.

Navarro-Carrascosa [9] investigated the adoption of inclusive language in Spain, the location of the SA program reported in this study. The author, utilizing interviews, social media analysis, and survey data, found that the majority of individuals in Spain do not incorporate gender-inclusive forms into their language. Those aged 18 to 25 are the most likely to

use these forms, while individuals over 46 are the least likely. These results indicate that non-binary language usage remains relatively uncommon in Spain.

Table 1. Binary pronominal forms

Singular	Subject	Object	Prepositional
1 st person	yo	me	mí
2 nd person	tú /vos	te	ti/vos
3 rd person	*él ('he' - sing. masculine) *ella ('she' - sing. feminine)	*lo *la le	*lo *la le
Plural			
1 st person	*nosotros/ nosotras ('we' – masculine/feminine)	nos	*nosotros *nosotras
2 nd person	*vosotros / vosotras ('you'-plural masculine/feminine) ustedes	os *los *las les	*vosotros *vosotras ustedes
3 rd person	*ellos / ellas ('they' – plural masculine/feminine)	*los *las les	*ellos *ellas

Table 2. Pronominal subject forms for non-binary gender

	Singular	Plural
1st person		nosotres
2nd person		vosotres
3rd person	elle	elles

This section presented a summary of grammatical gender in Spanish, and concluded with a description of current non-binary linguistic uses in Spain. The next sub-sections review prior literature on gender identities performed in interaction.

2.2. Gender identity in SA

Research on learner identity and LGBTQ+ learners is scarce. Studies on gender in SA that inform the current investigation are Gao [5] and Michl et al. [11]. Gao [5] investigates how six Chinese learners performed their gender and sexual identities in classroom interactions during SA in the UK. The author identified several themes in classroom talk such as teacher-student talk about gender and sexuality and the discussion of queer topics. Gao found that the classroom served as a space for exploration and expansion of learners' conceptualizations of matters related to gender and sexuality during a SA program.

Michl et al. [11] researched the experiences of transgender and/or gender expansive learners

(individuals who are not confined to one gender identity) in SA. Data for the study included a questionnaire, a focus group discussion, and an interview, which were qualitatively analyzed. The analysis revealed various themes such as the gender identity journey, threats and violence, and others' assumptions about identity. Findings from Gao [5] and Michl et al. [6] underscore the experiences and challenges that LGBTQ+ language learners experience in expressing their gender identity, and how these can affect the SA experience.

In terms of gender performance, Blackwood [12] described the linguistic practices of *tombois* (masculine females who identify as men) in Indonesia. This ethnographic study included the analysis of interviews, observations, and field notes, which revealed the linguistic strategies employed by the participants. Such strategies include the use of masculine pronouns, e.g., *wa'ang*; adopting coarser styles of speech associated with masculinity, e.g., insults and other confrontational language; and the use of kinship terms and terms of endearment, e.g., girlfriends call their tombois partners *papi* ('daddy'). Blackwood observed how these strategies allow participants to index their gender in interaction. Although this investigation was not set in a SA context for language learning, the description of gender identity performance is relevant to the current investigation. Another study that focuses on gender performance in interaction is Diao [13]. The author used surveys, audio-recorded conversations, and interviews to study how L2 Mandarin learners learned gendered linguistic practices in their interactions with Chinese roommates. Participants adopted (or not) the use of sentence-final particles depending on the gender identities that they wished to project. The study highlights how gendered discourses are learned and adopted through socialization during SA.

As noted before, few investigations have explored how LGBTQ+ learners perform their gender identities while participating in SA. Thus, the current study seeks to contribute to the study of gender identities in SA by investigating this question:

How does a non-binary and Queer L2 learner perform their gender identity in interaction during SA?

With a wide focus on learners' identities regarding gender and L2 learning, the next section introduces poststructuralist notions of identity as the theoretical approach to this investigation.

2.3. Poststructuralist approaches to identity in L2 learning

Norton's [14] poststructuralist definition of identity examines how individuals perceive their relationship with their surroundings, and the potential that they see for interacting with others within these contexts. This study adopts a poststructuralist

approach to identity, focusing on how language shapes gender relations and influences the dynamics of language learning and usage [1]. Understanding this intersection of gender and language necessitates examining how learners' gendered identities, performances of gendered acts, and linguistic expressions of gender are negotiated in conversations with others [1].

3. Methodology

Participants

The participant, Avery (pseudonym), was part of a larger cohort of US students in a SA program in a small town in central Spain. Avery is a young Black American student, aged between 20 and 28, who identifies their gender as non-binary and embraces the use of inclusive pronouns, specifically "they/them" in English and "elle" in Spanish. Their sexual identity is Queer. Avery was identified as a participant for this study based on their self-identification as non-binary and Queer.

The main purpose of the five-week SA program was language learning. The program included language classes, homestay, excursions, and service-learning. The participant's language competence in Spanish was advanced, as determined by the language school's placement exam.

Data collection

The participant engaged in conversations with their host mother as part of the data collection process, which they audio recorded. These conversations occurred during the second (C1) and last week (C2) of the program and lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.

The participant also met with the researcher twice during the duration of the program for interviews (RI 1 and RI2) in which they described their daily encounters with the locals, including individuals from their service-learning site or from the language school where they took classes, and reflected on their experiences.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis of the transcribed conversations was modeled after Pavlenko and Piller [1]. In their study, the authors identified 'references' in talk where participants created spaces for gender performance and transformation. Such references include language where the individual explicitly speaks of their identity, and language samples that illustrate a connection between language and gender.

4. Results

In their first recording with their host mother,

since they were still getting to know each other, Avery and their host mother discussed commonalities, e.g., they both lived alone and liked traveling. In this first exchange, Avery used non-binary language where they replaced traditional feminine -a and masculine -o endings in Spanish with -e. For instance, they explained that they own their own place in the US and live by themselves, saying "*soy dueña, yo vivo sola*" ['I am the owner, I live alone'], thus using the neutral -e ending for the noun 'owner' and its modifier 'alone'.

Excerpt 1, from their second conversation, also illustrates the use of non-binary language. Use of non-binary language is highlighted in bold.

Excerpt 1 (C2)

12. Avery: *A veces no me siento, como, a veces te he dicho y [...] pero que la gente siempre me está mirando y yo sé que ustedes creen que es porque soy **bonite** pero a veces no sé. Creo que algo más y si es solo eso pues no me gusta porque solo quiero caminar, sabes, es que todos me están mirando y me dan muchísima ansiedad. No me siento **cómode**.*

[Sometimes I don't feel, like, at times I've told you and [...] but people are always looking at me and I know that you think it's because I'm pretty but sometimes I don't know. I think it is something else, and if it's just that, I don't like it because I just want to walk, you know, it's that everyone is looking at me and it gives me a lot of anxiety. I don't feel comfortable.]

Excerpt 1 exemplifies Avery's use of the non-binary -e ending in the adjectives 'pretty' '*bonite*' and 'comfortable' '*cómode*'. Besides the use of non-binary language, Excerpt 1 illustrates how Avery felt being part of the community of practice offered by the SA experience.

Overall, Avery felt disturbed by people staring at them in the streets and noted that this was probably due to them (Avery) being '*bonite*' ('pretty'). In reply, the host mother noted that people stared at them because Avery presented many features that are considered beautiful. It is also possible that Avery attracted attention because of other features, such as their skin color, although this is unclear from the data. Thus, for Avery, some of the intrusive behaviors observed in the community might have been caused by their racial identity in addition to, or perhaps instead of, their gender identity as perceived by others. In the service-learning context, Avery was a teacher in a day care where she worked 10 to 12 hours a week. In the first interview with the researcher, Avery recounted how, when addressing a coworker, they used "*nosotros*" ('we' – masculine and plural form) to refer to themselves and another female coworker at the day care. The coworker corrected Avery saying "*nosotras*" ('we' – feminine and plural

form), thus suggesting that Avery should have used the feminine pronoun to refer to both themselves and the female coworker. Avery also recalled that, at first, they did not react to the coworker's correction, but later decided to talk to the coworker and explain that they (Avery) had not been mistaken when using the "nosotros" pronoun and that they had used the subject pronoun 'we' in its masculine form because they are transgender. Avery described this conversation with the coworker as being "easy and positive." As Avery reflected on the experience with the researcher, they maintained a positive perspective of this event and noted that they felt grateful for recognizing their own gender identity and being able to live in a time where there is acceptance and words to express their identity.

Avery also recounted in this interview an event at the language school, where they were misgendered by a school administrator.

Excerpt 2 (R1)

"[Administrator's name] was using the wrong pronouns, and [name of classmate] said something to her, in front of everyone. She [classmate] told her respectfully and just as a reminder. [Administrator's name] seemed uncomfortable and didn't stop misgendering me, but it meant a lot to me that a friend would stand up for me."

In Excerpt 2, Avery described how when being misgendered, their classmate kindly reminded the school administrator of her error. Despite the discomfort of the situation, Avery noted that they remained positive and were grateful for a supportive classmate.

Although Avery worked hard to find the positive side of every experience in SA in relation to their gender, toward the end of their time abroad, they felt tired, as seen in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3 (R2)

"Es difícil hablar con la 'e' y siento que tengo que explicarme todo el tiempo. Estoy cansada de hacer esto, y no quiero y sé que no tengo que hacerlo, pero a la vez quiero que entienda la gente como quiero compartirme, quiero ser, como soy, pero a veces es difícil"

[It is difficult to speak with the 'e' and I feel like I have to explain myself all the time. I'm tired of doing this, and I don't want to, and I know that I don't have to do it, but at the same time I want people to understand how I want to share myself, I want to be, how I am, but sometimes it's difficult.]

In sum, Avery's experiences highlight the complexities and challenges of navigating gender identity in a new cultural and linguistic environment.

Through their interactions with their host mother, coworkers, classmates, and administrators, Avery actively used non-binary language to express their identity, despite facing misunderstandings and moments of misgendering. Their consistent use of linguistic tools to perform their gender identity and their willingness to educate others on their linguistic choices demonstrate their determination to be true to themselves. However, while Avery found moments of support and validation in their interactions in SA, such as the positive conversation with a coworker and the advocacy of a classmate, they also faced emotional fatigue from having to repeatedly explain and assert their gender identity.

5. Discussion

Taking a poststructuralist definition of identity [14], the current study examined gender performance by a non-binary and Queer L2 learner in SA. This research question guided this investigation: how does an LGBTQ+ Spanish L2 learner perform their gender identity in interaction with Spanish-native speakers in SA. Findings are discussed in this section.

Avery expressed their gender identity through their use of non-binary language, opting for neutral gender forms ending in -e instead of the traditional feminine -a or masculine -o endings in Spanish [9]. It is important to note that non-binary language in Spain, the location of the SA program, is not widely used [9]; thus, it is unlikely that Avery had exchanges with their host mother or other Spanish native speakers, who used non-binary language themselves or at least used it consistently. Consequently, although Avery used non-binary language throughout their time in Spain, it is unlikely that they had much input from their community of practice abroad.

Although Avery maintained a positive and patient attitude, and stayed firm in their goal of using non-binary language in performing their gender, it was at times frustrating and taxing to have to explain their linguistic choices. Avery's linguistic choices might have been perceived as linguistic errors by native speakers not familiar with non-binary language, who perhaps felt the need to correct Avery since they knew that they were in Spain to improve their Spanish.

Additionally, Avery expressed feeling unsettled by the way people in the community stared at them. However, it is unclear whether this reaction is linked to Avery's gender identity, racial identity, or a combination of both. Previous research has highlighted the challenges faced by African American students during SA, including encounters with racism [11]. In Avery's case, their gender and race intersect, complicating the understanding of their experiences.

These findings describing Avery's experiences in performing their gender in SA highlight the need for interventions that can support LGBTQ+ learners participating in SA. First, creating comprehensive

resources and providing training for host families and educators, who are part of the SA program, about non-binary language and inclusive practices can foster a more affirming and understanding environment in SA. Such efforts could include workshops on LGBTQ+ identities and resources on how to engage respectfully with learners who use non-binary language. Although it would not be possible to train every individual that learners will encounter during their stay abroad, providing training for those who are most closely involved in the program could create more allies for LGBTQ+ learners during their sojourn. Second, equipping LGBTQ+ learners with tools and strategies to navigate potential cultural and linguistic challenges, such as dealing with misgendering or lack of familiarity with non-binary forms, can empower them to advocate for themselves and navigate challenging situations more effectively. Finally, fostering peer support networks and connecting LGBTQ+ learners with others who share similar experiences or identities can provide a sense of community and solidarity during SA. Addressing these gaps is crucial for ensuring that SA experiences are inclusive and enriching for all participants, regardless of their gender or sexual identities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this investigation captured ways in which Avery, an LGBTQ+ Spanish L2 learner, performed their gender during SA. Through analysis of audio-recordings and interviews, findings reveal how Avery used non-binary language and maintained a firm stance on expressing their identity in their interactions, even when this proved to be tiresome and frustrating.

Pedagogical implications from this study include the need for additional training and preparation for both students and individuals that make up the SA experience in order to ameliorate the SA experience for LGBTQ+ language learners.

7. References

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