

## What Goes on Beyond the Closed Doors: Voices from LGBTQ EFL Students

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### Abstract

This study examines LGBTQ undergraduate students' perceptions of their English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom climate. With a snowball sampling technique, the researchers went into one university in Thailand and gathered data from 12 self-identified LGBTQ students to learn about their perceptions of their EFL classroom atmosphere in terms of their EFL teachers, their classmates, their subject matter, and their classroom environment. Findings revealed positive classroom climate perceptions for these participating LGBTQ students and showed significant relationships between classroom climate and their EFL teachers and classmates. Nonetheless, some participants did not feel as safe in a university. They reported their experiences of some forms of bullying such as name-calling and disapproving stares. Their concerns provided evidence for university officials to potentially designate a space particularly for LGBTQ students.

## Introduction

Despite the 1969's Stonewall Uprising and protests calling for equal rights for LGBTQs, LGBTQ students still persistently face bullying, discrimination, and violence at schools. A report by Human Rights Watch (2016), *Like Walking through a Hail Storm*, noted that compared to other students, LGBTQ students in America found schools more unwelcoming for them. Their school experiences were often marred by bullying, discrimination, lack of access to LGBTQ-related information, and, in some cases, physical or sexual assault. In Europe, 54% of more than 17,000 surveyed LGBTQ students aged between 13 and 24 admitted that they had been bullied at least once based on their sexual identity (UNESCO, 2020). A report by UNESCO (2015) similarly indicated that the majority of LGBTQ students in Asia-Pacific had also experienced some forms of bullying or violence at schools.

In recent years, the problems of bullying and discrimination against LGBTQ students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms have also become more prevalent. Mindful of this, English language teaching (ELT) researchers and educators have begun to tackle such issues. Several studies have identified patterns for LGBTQ students' exclusion, isolation, marginalization, and suggested inclusion of more LGBTQ-related topics and perspectives in EFL classrooms. Doing so would not only empower LGBTQ students but also essentialize their sexual identity (De Vincenti et al., 2007; Gray, 2013, 2021; Gray & Cooke, 2019; Kappra & Vandrick, 2006; Kaiser, 2017; Moore, 2016, 2019, 2020; Nelson, 2009, 2010, Ruiz-Cecilia, et al., 2020). Similarly, Barozzi and Guijarro Ojeda (2016), Barozzi and Ruiz-Cecilia (2020), and Paiz (2019) used their findings to call for more training to prepare EFL teachers to meet the demands of their future LGBTQ students.

The status of LGBTQs in Thailand is no different despite the country's being coined as "the LGBTQ paradise." Thai LGBTQs have prevalently experienced bullying, discrimination, bigotry, and violence based on their sexual orientation and sexual identity (Newman et al., 2021; Suriyasarn, 2015). Newspapers in Thailand have often reported of employment discrimination against Thai LGBTQs. Kang (2019) – a journalist of *People Matters* - reported that in Thailand LGBTQs were more likely to be excluded from higher-status and higher-paying job, compared

to heterosexual. Because of their sexual identity, they were either not hired for these jobs in the first place or denied professional advancement. The Thai transgender community, in particular, has often been denied access to employment (Salvá, 2016; UNDP, USAID, 2014; US Department of State, 2020; Winter et al., 2019). LGBTQ teachers and students in schools in Thailand have been persistently bullied and discriminated (Boccagno, 2015; Chulalongkorn University, 2019; Lin et al., 2020; Mahavongtrakul, 2019; Plan International, UNESCO, Mahidol University, 2014; Thi Do, 2020; UNDP, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). Domestically, these studies have highlighted the issues of homophobic bullying and discrimination in Thailand in recent years. However, little is known about LGBTQ university students' perceptions of their classroom climate. In order to fill this gap, the researchers of this current study conducted interviews and classroom observations, and collected reflective journals and written documents and artifacts aimed at documenting and depicting LGBTQ students' perceptions of EFL classroom climate in terms of their EFL teachers, their classmates, their subject matter (e.g., teaching materials), and their EFL class environment.

### Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical notions of student voice underpin the current study. In a broader view, student voice refers to the input that students offer to describe what happens within a school and a classroom in terms of their teachers' teaching techniques and behaviors, their classmates, their subject matter (e.g., teaching materials and other related class-activities), and their classroom environment (Gina & Melinda, 2012; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

Student voice, according to Cook-Sather (2006), is centralized around three premises: (1) rights, (2) respect, and (3) listening. Rights alleviate inequality in a school. In other words, they depower authoritative figures such as teachers or principles, but empower students. To do so, students must be given "the rights to express views freely on all matters affecting them, to be heard directly or through a representative during proceedings that affect them, and that their views are given due weight, according to their age and ability" (Lodge, 2005, p. 127). At schools, students should acquire a more active role. That is, they need to be more involved in tasks and responsibilities related to teaching and learning such

as decision-making, planning, or curriculum design and development (Rudduck, 2007).

Respect is a dynamical relationship between authoritative figures (teachers and other stakeholders) and students. It requires those people with power to honor the dignity and the distinctiveness of the students by respecting students' ideas, opinions, and desires. When respected, the students would not only feel welcomed in the school, but also become more engaged with teaching and learning (Levin, 1994).

Listening de-silences students. It urges those in power to attend to students' ideas and opinions about teaching and learning. By listening to student voice, teachers could create positive classroom culture, improve their teaching, and enrich teacher-student relationships. As students are able to express their concerns and ask questions related to teaching and learning, they could invest more in their learning. They could eventually thrive (Cook-Sather, 2009; Demetriou, 2019; Garcia, 2021).

The potential and the challenges of student voice tempted the researchers of the present study to go into one university in Thailand and to give voice to a group of LGBTQ students about their status quo in their EFL classrooms. These voices would provide a useful contextual overview of classroom life in a Thai university for LGBTQ students, by depicting their constant interactions with teachers, classmates, subject matter, and environment. More importantly, this research represents a pivotal step in the exploration of the experiences of LGBTQ students in one Thai university, which could be used to inform concerned stakeholders when either making decisions or drawing policies involving LGBTQ students.

## Mode of Inquiry

### Participants

With approval from Ethics Committee of *the University of Papyrus* (a pseudonym), the researchers went into the university and recruited 12 self-identified LGBTQ undergraduate students enrolling in Foundation English for University Students courses with a snowball sampling technique (Johnson, 2014). To explain briefly, snowball sampling technique is basically defined as a sampling method in which one participant gives a researcher the name of at least one more potential participant (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Etikan et al., 2015; Heckathorn, 2015; Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017; Johnston & Keith,

2010; Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Patton, 1990). Following such the technique, the researchers first contacted one student who openly embraced his sexual identity. Then the researchers asked the participant to refer them to other potential participants with similar characteristics.

Of the 12 participating students, five majored in Arts, three from Business and Commerce, and one each from Engineering, Medicine, Performing Arts, and Public Health. All participants were in their late teens. (See Table 1 for more details.)

## Data Collection Tools

### *One-on-one Interviews*

The researchers followed and adapted the notions of a semi-structured interview, and conducted one-on-one interviews with all the 12 student participants. Each interview was conducted at the researched university (but a place selected by the participants themselves) and lasted approximately 45 minutes. During interviews, the researchers built rapport with the participants, which, in turn, allowed for better interaction and meaning clarification (Blaikie, 2000; Harrell & Bradley, 2009). With permission from the participants, interviews were audio-taped. These data were later transcribed for further analysis.

### Table 1

#### *Research Participants (N = 12)*

<b>Name (Pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Field of Study</b>	<b>Age</b>
Brook	Arts	18
Cade	Arts	18
Cindy	Arts	18
Cynthia	Arts	18
Dave	Arts	18
Jessie	Business and Commerce	19
Lucas	Business and Commerce	19
Michelle	Business and Commerce	18
Prescott	Engineering	18
Rafael	Performing Arts	18
Samantha	Medicine	19
Sully	Public Health	19

### *Classroom Observations*

Following O’Leary’s (2020) notions of classroom observations, the researchers observed each of the participants three times while they were in their EFL classes. (Before the observations, the researchers requested permission from all the parties involved. To do so, the researchers had visited these EFL classrooms prior to observations to secure consent.) During classroom observations, the researchers recorded the participants’ interaction with their classroom climate in the form of narrative data into a classroom observation protocol borrowed from Hongboontri and Jantayasakorn (2016). These recorded data were, for example, participants’ gestures and moods in their classrooms, who said what, what was said, and what was written on the board, to name only a few. These data were further analyzed.

### ***Reflective Journals***

The researchers also asked the student participants to keep a record of their experiences in their EFL classrooms in their journals. By keeping journals, these students were able to express their thoughts and their feelings relating to their learning experiences in their EFL classrooms (Numrich, 1996). During the process of data collection, these student participants were requested to write and submit four journals. The researchers collected 45 journal entries, which were later carefully read for further analysis.

### ***Written Documents and Artifacts***

Throughout the process of data collection, the researchers collected various written documents and artifacts considered valuable additions to phenomena under investigation (Bowen, 2009). These included, for example, curriculum and syllabus, teaching materials, and supplementary materials. They were later read, analyzed, and used as a complement to other research methods employed in the present study.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was twofold. The researchers followed open, axial, and selective coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and analyzed their transcribed data. In general, open, axial, and selective coding allows a researcher to construct a deeper understanding of his/her gathered data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Vollstedt, 2015; Williams & Moser, 2019). At its best, this method of coding provides a researcher with nuanced access to study research participants' feelings, thoughts, perspectives, and reactions to a phenomenon under an investigation. In essence, it enables a researcher's analysis of his/her gathered data in accommodating to "what they [*research participants*] do, how they do it, and why they do it interacting in the research setting" (Charmaz, 2008, p.408, italics added). Each phase of coding serves different purposes. At the open phase, gathered data are broken up into discrete parts; these parts are, in the axial stage, arranged into categories in terms of their relationships; and finally at the selective phase all categories are put under one central theme that could connect all categories (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

The researchers also heeded to Mathison's (1988) notions of triangulation and compared and contrasted all the four data sources in terms of consistency, inconsistency, and contradictory. In doing so, the reliability and the validity of research findings could be augmented.

## Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of Research Ethics in Social Science, Ethics Committee of *the University of Papyrus*. All protocols were approved prior to the commencement of the research. All the participants were assured of their rights and privacy, and gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Study Context

The participating university, *the University of Papyrus*, is located in the central region approximately 20 kilometers further west of Bangkok, Thailand. It specializes in arts and technology and comprises 14 faculties and 7 institutes. The university has a student population of about 40,000.

Foundation English for University Students is a compulsory English curriculum for non-English majors in their first and second year of university study in this researched university. The curriculum is divided into four levels from I to IV. Similarly, each level aims to enhance students' four English language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and heavily focuses on grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

## Findings and Discussion

Data analysis focused on interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals of 12 self-identified LGBTQ student participants that were interspersed throughout the study. The categories developed from the analysis are used to present the data in this order: (1) EFL teachers, (2) classmates, (3) content of subject matter and teaching materials, and (4) classroom environment. Quotations used to illustrate these themes are drawn from gathered data.

### Perceptions of their EFL Teachers

The participants' perceptions of their EFL teachers were rather positive. They commended their EFL teachers for their unconditional acceptance and their continuous inclusion of LGBTQ students into their classrooms. Such acceptance and inclusion were attributed to teachers' friendliness toward LGBTQ students and their fair treatment of all students (including LGBTQ students). These responses were reminiscent among all the participants. For example, Samantha remarked; "My teacher never shows any sign of hatred toward homosexuals. She never once bullies, teases, or harasses LGBTQ students." Rafael agreed, noting; "My English teacher is very fair and very queer friendly. I don't think she really cares about students' sexual identity at all." Prescott's response was similar to the other two students. "My English teacher never judges me for being gay. She never mentions anything about it. Nor does she ever make me feel discriminated or inferior to any other students in the classroom." The other two participants associated teachers' friendliness toward LGBTQ students with their motivation. The friendlier the teachers were, the more they wanted to attend their EFL classes. Cade said; "My teacher never says something like; 'You're gay. I am not going to teach you.' This makes me want to come to class more." Brook insisted; "My English teacher is really



queer supportive. She treats every student the same whether they are straight or gay. She makes me want to come to class.”

Similarly, journal entries from the participants were also laden with compliments on EFL teachers’ acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ students into the classrooms. Cindy’s journal entry read:

Like I said in the interview, I do not notice any different treatment given by my English teacher. Whether the students are gay or straight, the teacher treats us all the same. In the classroom, I never feel that she is giving extra attention to me, other gay students, or other straight students.

*Lance’s* journal entry resonated with that of Cindy. He wrote:

I never once witness my English teacher behaves badly toward any LGBTQ students in the class. She is very friendly; she is very fair. I experience neither the teacher’s injustice nor special treatment of any students in the classroom.

In addition, four participants shared with the researchers during their interviews of the treatment they had received prior to their coming to *the University of Papyrus*. *Sully* never experienced any maltreatment from any of his teachers since his coming out. He said; “I was never bullied by any teachers ever since I came out. All of my teachers understood me and accepted my gayness.” The other three students, however, were not as fortunate as he was. *Cade*, *Lucas*, and *Prescott* were constantly bullied by their high school teachers as they recalled their experiences of being bullied by their teachers. These bullies affected them in various ways. *Cade* became uncomfortable with this sexual identity and hated himself for being gay.

My religion teachers in high school always said that being gay was wrong. ‘Gay people are sinners.’ I was so uncomfortable in these classrooms as every student was staring at me like they were blaming mw for being gay. I hated my sexual identity. I hated myself for being weak and unable to stop myself from being gay.

Both *Lucas* and *Prescott* were infuriated with bigotry and teased based on their sexual orientation they had received from some of their

high school teachers. *Lucas* felt annoyed and complained; “Some of my high school teachers often bullied and teased me for wearing fashionable clothes. I felt rather annoyed by their comments and did not understand why I could not wear what I wanted.” Teachers’ teases disgusted *Prescott*. “One of my high school teachers often teased me with my sexual identity. He repeatedly made fun of me and laughed at me. This made me feel sick to my stomach.”

### Perceptions of their Classmates

Evident in the interviews and journal entries of the majority of the participants were their overwhelmed feelings of their classmates’ acceptance of their sexual identity. These participants felt that their classmates were friendly as well as supportive towards LGBTQ students. *Cade* felt accepted and belonged to his EFL class as he was neither bullied nor discriminated by his classmates. He noted; “Most of my classmates are very open about this. They never bully me. They never make me feel excluded or discriminated. I feel part of the group.” *Cynthia* emphasized; “None of my classmates treat me or other gay students differently or badly. Nobody talks s\*\*t about me being queer. I never felt that I was either excluded or discriminated.” *Cindy* rated her classmates “10 out of 10. They never bully, tease, or harass me.” *Prescott’s* classmates, he said, “never have any problem with my being gay. One even encourages me to be myself and never lets anyone bring me down just because I am different.” *Dave’s* journal complimented his classmates for their friendliness and acceptance of LGBTQ students. He wrote; “My classmates are nice and very queer friendly. I feel warm and welcome. They’ve included me in every class project despite my sexual identity.”

On the contrary, several participants found that not all students were friendly to LGBTQ students. They confirmed with the researchers during the interviews that they had experienced some homophobic remarks, jokes, and banter from some of their classmates in their EFL classes. Nonetheless, these students never allowed these to belittle them. Still, they chose to embrace their sexual identity fully and openly. *Rafael* felt uncomfortable when being called a faggot by some of his classmates. “Some of my classmates call me ‘a faggot.’ This is a bit annoying and makes me feel awkward as I have no idea how to respond to this remark.” Despite this, *Rafael* refused to closet his sexual identity. He asserted; “I wouldn’t

hide my gayness. Everybody looks at me and they know what I am.” *Sully* was also aware of resentment from some of his classmates based on his sexual identity. This, however, did not much bother *Sully*. He still followed up with actual manifestation of his gayness.

Some of my classmates look at me from head to toe like they do not understand why I have to dress and wear make-up like this. Sometimes, they would make a comment like, ‘You wear too much makeup today. It’s so gay.’ I also receive a dead glare from some classmates when I speak loudly in the class. I am a loud person naturally. There’s one girl in my class; I sense that she doesn’t like me. There’s one time that I spoke quite loudly with other classmates. She rolled her eyes at me. This girl never explicitly bullies or harasses me though. She never speaks to me at all.

Later, he continued; “I do not really care though. It is my style. It is who I am. Nobody could control how I dress and how I put my makeup on. This is the point. I want to show the whole world that I am gay. I am a queer.”

In contrast, Lucas kept his sexual identity to himself. Unlike *Sully*, *Lucas* never witnessed any maltreatment toward LGBTQ students from his classmates. He, however, decided to suppress his homosexuality as he doubted whether his classmates would fully accept his sexual orientation.

I never see any students in my class bully, tease, or harass any openly gay students in the class. Overall, I would say, they appear to be very gay-friendly and supportive. However, I do not think I am ready to let my classmates know that I am gay. I am worried that my coming out would change the group dynamic. They might either treat me differently or, at worst, stop talking to me. I don’t want to risk that.

## Perceptions of their Subject Matter

Drawn from students’ interviews and journal entries were students’ mixed perceptions of their EFL syllabi and their teaching materials. Three participants were strongly dissatisfied with the omission of any representation of LGBTQ people or any LGBTQ-related issues from both the syllabi and the teaching materials. *Prescott* noted that this made him

feel excluded to some extent despite his positive perceptions toward his teachers and classmates. He complained:

Never once does textbook mention or the teacher talk about LGBTQ-related issues. One unit in the textbook focuses on 'Relationship,' but it focuses alone on heterosexual relationship. When we went over this, the teacher talked about different types of relationships. She said, 'Homosexuality is a romantic attraction between people who have the same sex.' That's it. I wanted to know more. I wanted to discuss this with the teacher and my classmates. But we didn't. I felt like an outcaste at the time.

*Dave's* criticisms of the exception of LGBTQ-related issues from both his syllabus and textbook were equally vociferous.

I see nothing about LGBTQ in either my English course syllabus or in the textbook. In fact, we never talk about this in our class. I am furious. These topics need to be included; they need to be mentioned. Our English teacher should talk about these. Students should be able to discuss about them freely.

*Cade's* complaints of a lack of LGBTQ-related issues from both the syllabus and the textbook resonated with of the other two students. "There's no sexual diversity in either my English course or the textbook. The world has changed; there're a lot of gay people out there. The content of our English course needs to change as it does not correspond to the today's society."

The other seven participants were well aware of the missing of LGBTQ issues from their EFL course syllabi and textbooks. They, however, believed that this exclusion was a normal practice. Hence, they never questioned such the normativity. For example, *Cindy* said:

To be fair, I don't think I have ever studied about homosexual in any of my English class. For me, this is not a big problem at all. I am used to the fact that the topics of gay people would never be included in the English course. I grew up with this and I am comfortable with it.

*Rafael* agreed, asserting:

As long as I could remember, I don't think I ever see anything about LGBTQs in my English textbooks. Hardly ever are these topics mentioned in my English classes. Such the practice is normal; and I am used to it. It is not a big deal at all. I feel fine.

Further, when asked whether they agreed with the inclusion of LGBTQ-related issues in their English courses, all the participants supported this. Such the inclusion, the participants opined, would raise self-awareness and self-esteem of LGBTQ students. More important, it could readjust a skewed picture that heterosexual students might have of LGBTQ students. *Prescott* explained; "By reading about successful LGBTQs, students could learn about us and have a better understanding of LGBTQs. They could learn how to treat us properly and how to interact with us." *Sully* added; "The inclusion would benefit everybody. It could raise people's consciousness and understanding about LGBTQs. Being gay is not a choice; we are born this way." *Lance* insisted; "This would help the society to better understand sexual diversity and LGBTQs. LGBTQs are normal. There's nothing wrong with us; we don't need to be cured." *Lucas'* journal entry, at its best, summed up the necessity of such the inclusion. He wrote:

Both EFL courses and textbooks need to give LGBTQs some space. This would raise the recognition and the acceptance of gay people. It would also create a safe space for gay students to speak up and share their knowledge with their friends in the classrooms. It could also make other students understand that gay should be equally treated and gives the same rights.

## Perceptions of their Classroom Environment

While reading the participants' interviews and journal entries, the researchers deeply felt the participants' positive perceptions of the environment in their EFL classrooms. Most importantly, this safe and friendly classroom environment allowed LGBTQ students to explore their sexual identity in privacy and safety. For example, *Cynthia* felt secured to

“to talk about queer-related issues in my English class. Nobody in my class really pays attention to my sexual identity.”

More than quite a few participants observed that the queer-friendly classroom environment was mainly attributed to the EFL teachers. *Cade* said; “I would give 9 out of 10 for the classroom environment. I feel safe in my English class. I credit my EFL teacher for this.” *Prescott* maintained; “My English teacher devotes herself to make this English class safe and enjoyable for every student including us. I don’t need to worry about being attacked, threatened, or bullied in the classroom. As I feel safe, I could really be myself here.” *Samantha* reinforced; “I think my English classroom is great in terms of safety for LGBTQ students. I am neither bullied nor attacked. And I think we do won this to our English teacher.”

Three participants attributed the positivity in their EFL classrooms to both their teachers and their classmates. *Rafael* felt that; “this is a very friendly classroom. Both my teacher and my classmates make this English class safe and enjoyable for me and the other gay students. I feel comfortable and belonged.” Two other participants offered similar comments. *Michelle* said; “I never sense any resistance from either my English teacher or my classmates. Never once do I need to worry about my safety since I believe that everyone is open and supportive.” Though the safe and friendly atmosphere in his EFL classroom was not enough to convince *Lucas*, a closeted LGBTQ student, to come out, it motivated him to come to class. He said; “I feel free all the time in my English class; I sense security in the class. I have never been bullied. I never feel not wanting to come to the English class.”

The researchers’ classroom observational fieldnotes of these participants also portrayed the safe and friendly classroom atmosphere. In their English classes, *Cade* and *Prescott* were often seen interacting and exchanging conversations with both their teachers and their classmates. They had no trouble working with other students. When required, they teamed up with other students to complete an in-class assignment. When asked, other students showed no sign of reluctance to join their student groups. In their classes, neither *Cade* nor *Prescott* hid their sexual identity. The researchers recorded no sign of homophobic remarks or mockeries.

Interesting, in response to a question about their EFL classroom environment, the participants also talked about the environment of *the University of Papyrus* for LGBTQ students. Their perceptions were clearly divided. More than half of the participants found that the university’s

environment safe and friendly for LGBTQ students; three participants had some concerns about their safety as they chose to fully embrace their sexual identity.

Six participants (*Cindy, Dave, Lance, Michelle, Prescott, and Samantha*) similarly found *the University* friendly and safe toward LGBTQ students as they never encountered any forms of bullying, discrimination, or harassment within the university compound. *Cindy* felt safe in the campus. "I will give *the University* environment 8 out of 10. I have never had any bad experience since I first came to this *University*." *Prescott, Michelle, and Lance* affirmed the safety for LGBTQ students within the *University*. *Prescott* contended; "No one here teases or bullies other students just because they are different." *Michelle* was adamant; stating; "I have never been bullied either in or outside of the classrooms, Nobody here abuses me because I am queer." *Lance* felt safe enough to assert his sexual identity at the *University*. "I am comfortable to walk around the campus without having to hide my sexuality in order to blend in. I have freedom here to say what I want, to dress how I wish, and to do whatever I want to." *Dave* felt welcomed, noting; "I think most people at the *University* are very accepting of LGBTQs. They treat us with respect and equity."

Such the feelings, however, were not shared by all the participants. Three participants (*Rafael, Sully, and Jessie*) vocalized their concerns of safety for all LGBTQ students in *the University of Papyrus*. Though *Rafael* felt safe and welcomed in his EFL classrooms, he did not feel as safe "on the campus ground. *Papyrus* is still a conservative university and does not really open its door to fully welcome LGBTQ students. Some people stop and stare because I wear make-up. Some male students would get up and walk away when I sit next to them." *Sully's* experiences of bullying and harassment were as unpleasant. "This *University* is still very conservative. Lots of people here still do not accept gay people. People still stare at me and laugh when they see me with make-up or in a bra and a dress. On the commencement day, I was told to either chop off my hair or bundle it up to look like a boy." *Jessie's* embracement of his sexual identity landed him with the same dilemma. "This *University*, in general, is not safe for LGBTQ students. People point, stare, and laugh. This makes me feel really uncomfortable. I feel like a freak!" A little later, he continued; "*The University* should enforce regulations to promote gender equality. Space should be specifically designated for LGBTQ students."

## Conclusion and Suggestions

This current study focused on the experiences of 12 Thai LGBTQ EFL students in their EFL classes in one university in Thailand. It attempted to depict the conditions of these LGBTQ students in their classroom climate in terms of these students' perceptions of EFL teachers, classmates, subject matter (curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials), and classroom atmosphere.

What could be learnt from these participants' experiences? Most broadly, these participants had strong satisfaction with the climate in their EFL classrooms. They all felt that their EFL teachers held a rather positive and compassionate perspective toward LGBTQ students. So did most of their classmates who were supportive and friendly to LGBTQ students. Their perceptions toward their subject matter that excluded all LGBTQ-related issues were divided. While the majority of the participants regarded such omission as a customary practice of English language teaching, the rest vocally voiced their strong dissatisfaction with the overwhelming heteronormativity in both their English language course syllabi and textbooks. Surprisingly, despite such a division, all the participants agreed that there should be LGBTQ representation in both English language course syllabi and teaching materials. This inclusion would not only raise self-awareness and self-esteem in LGBTQ students but also help situate a better understanding of LGBTQs in heterosexual students. Given their confrontations with homophobic-remarks and banter in their English class, all the participants still found their classroom atmosphere safe and LGBTQ friendly. The same feelings were evident in some participants' responses regarding their university environment. In contrast, some participants found *the University* environment to be homonegative as they themselves had experienced some forms of discrimination and bigotry based on their sexual identity.

Consistent with earlier studies, this study confirms the connection between LGBTQ students' perceptions of their classroom climate (comprising teachers, classmates, subject matter, and classroom environment) and their experiences in the university (Arimori, 2020; Hanson et al., 2019; Tran-Thanh, 2020). The more sympathetic perceptions teachers have of LGBTQ students, the more LGBTQ students would feel safe and included (Herman-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019; Mojica &



Castañeda-Peña, 2021). The more inclusion of LGBTQ-related issues in curriculum and teaching materials, the more self-awareness and self-esteem LGBTQ students would have of themselves, the better understanding students would have of LGBTQ students, and the less homophobia directed toward LGBTQ students there would be (Fox, 2021; Gray, 2013, 2021; King, 2008; Liddicoat, 2009). As a result, schools' climate overall would become safer and more supportive for LGBTQ students (Grimwood, 2017; Rankin, 2005).

In closing, the findings of this present study address three facets attributing to the status of LGBTQ students in a higher education institute; that is, (1) visibility of LGBTQ students, (2) campus climate for LGBTQ students, and (3) LGBTQ students' identities and experiences (see also Rankin, 2005; Renn, 2010). They reveal that many of the LGBTQ student participants feel safe enough both in their EFL classrooms and in the *University* to share their sexual identity. Yet, several LGBTQ student participants still struggle with both their classroom and their university climate resulting from heterosexism and homophobia perpetuated on campus. Such feelings make these students reluctant for these students to embrace and accept their sexual identity. Additionally, such feelings make it more difficult for these particular students to integrate fully into university life and to benefit both socially and emotionally from attending a university.

Though the current study has increased the visibility of LGBTQ students in both classrooms and on campus, there are other people considered part of higher education systems, such as educational faculty and staff, and students. Hence, to address the challenges facing LGBTQ students on campus more successfully, there is a need to explore the nature of heterosexism and homophobia that exist on a campus, the causes of heterosexism and homophobia rooted in educational faculty and staff and students, and the possible effects heterosexism and homophobia would have on such the people. These questions need further investigation. Finding answers to these questions attends to salient issues that assist clarification and explanation. Most importantly, they would create the conditions for possible change. Such change would enhance LGBTQ-friendly and inclusive classrooms and develop further a campus climate inclusive of LGBTQ students.

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### Completing Interest

The authors reported no potential conflict or interest.

### About the Authors

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