1 The Context

Sexual health campaigns to tackle the rise in sexually transmitted infections in England are at the core of sexual health charities’ and grassroots organizations’ work. In multi-ethnic and multicultural societies such as the UK, it has become increasingly necessary for these campaigns to be made available in a variety of languages, and not just English, in order to cater for the needs of various communities as well as to address inequalities in access to sexual health information and care. Since these campaigns rely predominantly on online dissemination and high impact, it is important to be able to retain these features in their translated versions too. In the study that follows, a sexual health campaign originally integrating inclusive language was assigned to the author’s undergraduate translation students as part of a simulated translation project management module. The students worked in groups mimicking the dynamics of a translation agency and, at the end, they were asked to reflect via a questionnaire on their experience of translating sexual health materials and having to deal with sex-related terminology. The discussion surrounding these topics was underpinned by queer pedagogy approaches and the contextualization of the practice of translation, as will be explained in the ensuing sections, which make the case for wider embedding of queer pedagogy approaches into the translation curriculum.

2 What Is Sexual Health?

Sexual health has become an increasingly used phrase and debated topic since the early 2000s. Defined by Richman Davidow (2018), amongst others, as encompassing a wide range of attributes, from identity and body image to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), to consent, gender, and sexual orientation, it is at the centre of prevention campaigns and education efforts. Although definitions of sexual health have changed since its original 1975 World Health Organization (WHO) definition and in the knowledge that human needs are becoming more and more holistic, the definition that will underpin this case study will be the current WHO working definition of sexual health, namely:

a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (WHO, 2006, p. 5)
A pre-Covid-19 report by Public Health England (2019) provides a snapshot of sexual health services and infections without being affected by the disruption that occurred as a result of the pandemic. It acknowledged a rise in STIs, notably chlamydia and syphilis, due to increased condomless sex activity; this rise has prompted the launch of more direct and impactful sexual health campaigns by sexual health charities and grassroots organizations on top of nationally directed programmes. Sometimes these campaigns may present issues in the way they address their intended audience, either by being too specific – and therefore excluding certain other members of the public – or by employing unintentionally biased language. In an effort to draw attention to the language used in these campaigns due to the bias that could be conveyed implicitly when talking about a disease or a condition, it has been suggested, for example, that when dealing with HIV, people-first language should be used (The Well Project, 2021), meaning that one should describe what a person has rather than what a person is and, therefore, ‘person with HIV’ should be used instead of ‘HIV patient’. In this way, stigma is avoided in communication and effective education about diseases, infections, conditions, or groups of people can happen (The Well Project, 2021).

Sexual health is essential to the development of healthy and nurturing relationships that are the foundation of successful futures both personally and professionally. To ensure the importance of these aspects of sexual health in language communities (e.g. culturally diverse settings), it is necessary to translate sexual health materials using culturally responsive and culturally sensitive language that extends beyond the language of heterosexuality and the gender binary, thus preventing people’s sexual needs from being diminished and their identities ‘otherized’. The failure to recognize the importance of language in translating the sexual health needs of transgender and non-binary individuals, for example, has consistently impeded access to healthcare services and positive sexual health outcomes across all continents and has historically determined a costly gap in multicultural health promotion due to a lack of culturally effective, motivational, and multicultural health promotion resources (Ji et al., 2020). In the next section, the role of translation will be highlighted and outlined as a pedagogical instrument to convey socially relevant messages which contribute to students’ co-creation of meanings in specific contexts.

3 Translation as an Interdiscipline for Change

Translation as both an academic discipline and a professional occupation can be defined as ‘a set of practices and processes crucial to communication within and between cultures’ (Malmkjær, 2022, p. 1) involving the transfer of a message from one language to another; it is ‘a communicative event which is shaped by
its own goals, pressures and context of production’ (Baker, 1996, p. 175). The communicative element of translation is core to its nature and often results in a ‘socially mediated and ideologically constructed practice’ (Spurlin, 2014b, p. 202). Socially mediated means that it relies on an exchange, outward-facing contact consisting of interactions involving translators, project managers (PMs), clients and other agents, depending on the type of translation product involved. These stakeholders are expected to abide by certain standards of practice and codes of conduct which regulate these exchanges (ATC, 2019; CIOL, 2017; ITI, 2013) or at least to acknowledge and implement industry-recognized practices. Ideologically constructed means that ‘translators use translation for ideological purposes that are overtly aligned with the organizations and political and cultural movements they represent’ (Baker, 2010, p. 260). Translation can be seen as the ultimate form of intercultural transfer, making a source text available to readers and speakers of a different language and culture (Munday, 2007). As part of this transfer and as stated by Hatim and Mason (1997), the translator’s activity may show ideological traits which may be imbibed in the translations themselves regardless of genre (translation of ideology) or which may elicit an ideological interpretation on the part of the translator (ideology of translation). This can happen regardless of genre and text typology, hence affecting a wide spectrum of potential translation products, such as literary texts, political texts, news reports, medical documents, and websites. Ideology here will be understood as ‘the voicing and stance of the translator’ (Tymoczko, 2003, p. 183) whereby language expressions and linguistic devices are employed as tools through which ideology can be articulated both in the original text and in translation, including: the experiential representation of reality (e.g. the way one uses the passive voice, nominalizations, or patterns of transitivity); evaluation (i.e. the way one uses adverbs to convey or colour expressions); and overall textual coherence (i.e. whether a text holds up by itself and the links across its subunits) (Munday, 2007). Translation therefore cannot be divorced from ideology, which is frequently inscribed in language use; hence ‘translation that engages in a transfer from one language into another language is selected as an effective tool of ideological operation’ (Shih, 2010).

Through their translation acts, translators delicately balance degrees of interference (consciously or unconsciously) with the text and act as ‘agent[s] of linguistic and cultural alienation’ (Venuti, 2017, p. 307) in a constant tug of war between submission and resistance:

Every step in the translation process – from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of translation strategies to the editing, reviewing, and reading of translations – is mediated by the diverse cultural values that
circulate in the target language, always in some hierarchical order. The translator, who works with varying degrees of calculation, under continuous self-monitoring and often with active consultation of cultural rules and resources (from dictionaries and grammars to other texts, translation strategies, and translations, both canonical and marginal), may submit to or resist dominant values in the target language, with either course of action susceptible to ongoing redirection. (Venuti, 2017, p. 308)

This constant tension in the exchanges and negotiation of interest between the source system and the target system, where ‘system’ here includes both the language and the culture, is at the heart of every translation-mediated transfer requiring human agency (Bassnett, 2011; Carlson & Corliss, 2011), where ‘shifts’ occur brought about by ideology or mere style preferences (Munday, 2014). The aforementioned tension manifests itself in the application of the translation act to queer sexuality, whereby translation can both erase or highlight the queer experience and its understanding to otherwise ill-informed audiences (Baer, 2021). The role of the translator can therefore be regarded as that of a gatekeeper, that is, a controller of the quantity and quality of information transferred during the translation process on the basis of the perceived or effective needs of the target text receivers but also on the basis of the instructions that they may have received and/or, more generally, their own ideology.1

As such, translations can be recognized as an art form as well as a laborious practice and, most importantly, as a tool used in combination with language ‘for legitimizing the status quo or for subverting it’ (Castro, 2013a, p. 6, original italics). This may introduce elements in the translation which may not have been present in the source material.

As observed by Xie (2018, p. 80) in relation to the liminal space occupied by translation:

one of the most significant events that has happened in translation studies is the change of translation from its role as a passive, invisible, neutral transmitter of messages to its new role as an active, free, creative participant in the production of meaning … Over the past few decades what has been most productively discussed of translation is its ethical and political agency in the age of globalization and the role it plays in vindicating and rehabilitating marginalized and mistreated ethnic/cultural Others; increasing awareness of cultural and lingual diversity . . . .

Because of the nature of their role, translators can be ‘submissive to or subversive of the original text and its author’ (Lee, 2022, p. 6), whereby the translation resulting out of this dynamic process can be defined as a performative act where

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1 As Castro (2013b) points out, depending on the translation workflow, this role may also be adopted by proofreaders, copy-editors, editors, clients, patrons, publishers, and so on.
‘translating [is seen] as “doing”, doing something to the target reader’ (Robinson, 2003, p. 16, original italics). It is therefore vital to acknowledge that using translation as a pedagogical tool to recognize the performative nature of the translation act, as well as its transformative and transgressive power, allows students to learn by doing, to feel empowered in their communication skills. The underlying and inherent dynamics at play in each culture and language may produce a situation whereby subverting the original is not an option and, as a matter of fact, the act of subversion affects the target language instead, so that ‘what seems resistant in the space of English may be reactionary in the space of the original language’ (Spivak, 1992/2012, p. 319).

Translation as a pedagogical tool has a long history of revitalizing sociocultural fields of knowledge (see, for example, Laviosa, 2014a, 2014b; Pym et al., 2013) and investigating interlingual modes of knowledge transfer and communication (e.g. audiovisual translation and language learning). As Floros (2020) states, in order for translation teaching to be effective in strengthening communicative competence, as is required in language teaching and learning today, it is necessary to introduce exercises that emphasize translation as a communicative activity, simulating the communicative conditions, including the relevant technologies, that students find in real life. Effective pedagogy involves understanding the needs and interests of learners, creating a positive and engaging learning environment, using appropriate teaching methods and materials, and providing feedback and assessment to support learners’ progress. Pedagogy also involves critical reflection and ongoing evaluation of teaching practices to ensure that they are effective and responsive to the changing needs of learners and society. It is specifically this latter aspect which will be examined in the case study proposed here. The pedagogy of translation, however, has its challenges too, which are mostly aligned with the challenges of pedagogy as practice, namely keeping students engaged and motivated to learn, balancing the demands of curriculum requirements with the need for creativity and innovation in teaching and adapting to changing educational practices, amongst others (Markey et al., 2023). The need to introduce and foreground exercises focusing on communicative activity is paramount to framing translation as a pedagogically transformative discipline and act: the impact that a finished and published translated product can have on the relevant target communities and consumers can be life-changing, as is often the case with sexual health campaigns that directly impact (and save) people’s lives. For students to realize and fully acknowledge their role in this process is greatly empowering and it prepares them for the challenges ahead in the translation industry, be it on the commercial or the editorial/literary side of things, as well as confronting them with ethical and moral issues with which they would otherwise not be faced.
In an effort to break away from the heteronormative implications of language, applying a queer perspective and queer practices to the act of translation, therefore, seeks to reclaim power through changing the way we conceptualize language itself. Within translation studies, the concept of queering translation has recently come to the forefront of the discipline. It stems from the reappropriation of the slur ‘queer’ – originally identifying gays and lesbians – which ‘refers to that which is not aligned with any particular identity and resists categorisations’ (Sauntson, 2008, p. 272). It refers to its application to a field of knowledge which has been historically open to methodological experimentations (Zanettin & Rundle, 2022). Building on gender studies and feminist studies, queer translation here will be intended as translating sexuality, or the sexualization of translation, which involves the application of strategies aimed at inclusivity, transparency and an appreciation of the complexities/nuances of queer identity and culture.

Because of the need to disassociate biomedical knowledge from prevailing heteronormative ideas of sexual health and rights, new queer approaches to public health have been adopted (Spurlin, 2019), in particular a shift in the way sexual health agencies translate their information in order to better serve the LGBTQ+ communities. By queering perspectives on health and sexual education, it is possible to learn how to make healthcare more inclusive and what changes need to be made to reach this goal. When used in combination with translation, it allows the latter to fully realize its potential as a pedagogical tool and to foreground the translator as an ideological mediator who has to negotiate a double ethical responsibility. One is their responsibility towards the source (con)text, to convey the content of a previous text in the most thorough and convenient possible way. The other, their responsibility towards the target (con)text, which includes paying attention to the cultural and linguistic changes in vogue in the target society so as to be able to produce an ‘updated’ translation in accordance with them – without preventing the target audience from getting to know how the source text was addressing its source audience. (Castro, 2013b, p. 40)

The translation of queer sexual health information is therefore a feminist act (Kincheloe, 2008): it concedes that knowledge is inherently relational and social, not just in terms of how we learn new things, but also how we define them. In order to respect audiences, their needs must be honoured; students must become aware of what they are doing and tutors must allow themselves to learn alongside their students, rather than expecting everyone to be at the same starting level. Non-LGBTQ+ students may never have had these conversations with friends or family members and can feel left out of conversations that are pertinent to their lives and future. Educators have an obligation to prepare...
students for a world in which they will encounter people who think differently from them on all kinds of issues, including gender, race, sexuality, and social class. Tutors must be prepared to provide their students with opportunities to reflect on their own biases as well as those of others. This exchange of knowledge through difference is at the heart of queer practices of learning which imply some level of negotiation of meanings (Luhmann, 1998).

Queer pedagogy, which will be further explored in Section 4, offers students a safe space to learn and to be open to what they have to say. Queering sexual health translation involves the employment of queer theoretical and methodological perspectives in rendering materials available in a variety of languages, bearing in mind their potential reach beyond the geographical borders in which they are originally conceived. This implies a conscious effort and attention to nuances and an acknowledgement of difference (Britzman, 1995), as well as between cultures and people speaking the same language but belonging to different countries or being located in the same country of production of the original sexual health material. This ties in well with translation as a discipline whose meanings are expressed both at the textual and the cultural/transcultural level (Spurlin, 2014a).

Queer sexual health recognizes all forms of sexuality, including non-binary and non-traditional expressions of sexuality, identity, and body. Translating this into public health efforts, such as sex education and sexual health promotion, means embracing an inclusive definition of sexual health and providing information that supports the health needs of all people, regardless of their gender or sexual identities. As explained by Carcelén-Estrada (2018, p. 254), ‘translation as a poetic, political act plays the ambiguous role of creating borders between native and foreign languages and peoples while opening spaces for alternative modes of thinking that seek to redraw and even erase these same borders’. Accepting or promoting dominant ideologies or systemic practices, without questioning their truth value, may harm marginalized communities, such as transgender or non-heterosexual individuals; by querying such information instead, there exists a chance to critically alter the way people think about things like sex, sexual orientation, or even just health education models in general. New theories are also introduced that may be more helpful than those offered through traditional gendered epistemologies when dealing with issues involving sexual education, thus empowering alternative forms of knowledge that may help people who traditionally suffer under normative ways of thinking. These new understandings can then be spread within certain communities, depending on who should receive that information. As a pedagogical tool, therefore, translation acts as a catalyst for the promotion of intercultural communication. An effective pedagogy of translation involves providing learners
with clear objectives, appropriate materials, and constructive feedback, as well as encouraging resourcefulness and reliance on prior learning and knowledge, in order to inform their practice and to help them develop a well-rounded set of skills (linguistic or otherwise). The integration of queer-centred discourses into translation activities is a way of creating a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment for all students, and of fostering respect and empathy for diverse perspectives and experiences. The next section will provide an overview of queer pedagogy as an instrument for social justice and will frame it as an ‘added-value tool’ within the interdisciplinary nature of translation.

4 Queer Pedagogy and Translation

Queer pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that challenges heteronormative assumptions and addresses issues of social justice and inclusivity for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other marginalized identities. It aims to create a safe and affirming learning environment for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and to promote critical thinking and dialogue about social issues related to gender and sexuality. Queer pedagogy can involve incorporating queer themes and perspectives into course content, using inclusive language and terminology, creating opportunities for open discussion and reflection, and recognizing the diversity of identities and experiences within the classroom. Queer pedagogy is at the intersection of critical pedagogy and queer theory. It ‘seeks to both uncover and disrupt hidden curricula of heteronormativity as well as to develop classroom landscapes and experiences that create safety for queer participants’ (Thomas-Reid, 2018). Through the application of a queer pedagogy in a sexual health translation context, one not only disrupts knowledge, but also insists on challenging norms. Queerness is inherently transgressive and disruptive because it exposes the possibilities of sexualities (O’Driscoll, 1996). Queer pedagogy puts into practice what critical pedagogy has been postulating for years, that is, ‘teaching students how not only to think but to come to grips with a sense of individual and social responsibility, and what it means to be responsible for one’s actions as part of a broader attempt to be an engaged citizen who can expand and deepen the possibilities of democratic public life’ (Giroux, 2013). It stands to critique mainstream education. The involvement of students in a live project that provides socially useful tools and information for sexual prevention represents the ultimate example of a critical approach to classroom life and reframes the classroom as a ‘site of resistance’ (McLaren, 2003, p. 78) by awakening students’ critical consciousness and helping them transform their world (Freire, 1993) through a process of emancipation.
Queer pedagogy makes us stop and consider things outside of a normatively heterosexual gaze by encouraging alternative ways of knowing and being (where queerness itself can be associated with anti-assimilation politics). Consequently, we need queer theory because knowledge creation is always partial (Foucault, 1972), especially since our goal as educators should be to promote critical consciousness by using whatever method we have at our disposal. This is partially because it is true that everyone sees things differently, but also because what seems self-evident to one person may not be for another.

Queer theory has a place in sexual education whether or not we personally identify as LGBTQ+ because challenging dominant ideology using alternative perspectives (whether one agrees with them or not) is a beneficial act. Including queer perspectives allows educators to learn different ways of seeing things, which may include seeing things previously unseen at all. In many ways, it offers representation for people otherwise being ignored and wanting access to education on topics relevant to their life experiences in an effort to be heard.

It could be argued that queer pedagogy is, in essence, more about people rather than a specific methodology or technique. It is centred around the study object of its own analysis. It is a transformational approach about creating ‘norm-exploding pedagogies, programmes and people who refuse to conform to erasures based on the pervasiveness of rigid normalising categories’ (Quilty, 2017, p. 108). In order for this to happen, tutors must be committed to challenging the categories and topics which normally imbue academic syllabuses by allowing marginal voices and/or practices to be amplified, to take centre stage in a context which would otherwise prevent those voices from existing in traditional teaching, with the exception of dedicated originally queer-/gender-/feminist-oriented courses.

Queer pedagogy and queering pedagogy are therefore acts of courage and belief. They are about a hands-on commitment to equality and social justice, in a way. They provide an opportunity to conceive a different type of academia and permit students to participate in the creation of disruptive ways of going beyond academia (Quilty, 2017) simply by participating in such activities. Queer theory also plays a role in sexual health pedagogy because it inherently challenges heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality as normal. For many students, getting married or becoming parents is not necessarily a life goal; therefore, framing sexuality outside of traditional sexual reproduction narratives prevents them from being misinformed about sex. In queer theory, one of the primary goals is to challenge heteronormativity – that is, our conception of sexuality and sexual identity as normative. To do so, a postmoderist methodology could be employed that examines assumptions about heterosexuality in order to question them. In particular, we can look at how heteronormativity plays out in our
sexual health curriculum. These kinds of interactions need to be debated critically in a global education classroom and open up opportunities for more inclusive discussions around safe sex practices. In the specific context of translation, it should be emphasized that translations always involve compromise and that different languages reach different audiences and goals across time (Fishman, 1991). Having an awareness of multiple viewpoints gives room for exploration and growth. While teaching is inherently political, if we do not examine ourselves critically, then it is hard to effect real change because doing so requires action on our part (both personally and professionally). It involves asking ourselves tough questions about the biases, beliefs, or assumptions we may have without feeling guilt or a fear of being labelled.

By simply bringing queerness into our classrooms and looking critically at how we teach students about sexuality (in translation) in a heteronormative world, anyone could find themselves empowered. Although in the context of the translation projects discussed here, the classroom is predominantly translation based and not centred around sexual education per se, these considerations extend and apply to the current context as well, as will be seen in the discussion of the translation projects that follows.

5 Localizing Sexual Health: Premise, Prospects, and Products

The projects in question involved second-year (Level 5) BA Translation students at London Metropolitan University (UK). The BA Translation course is centred around education and training with a strong emphasis on social justice as encapsulated in the university’s Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF).²

The projects being discussed as part of this Element took place in the 2019–20, 2020–1 and 2021–2 academic years following a collaboration with PrEPster/The Love Tank (2019–20, 2020–1) and, subsequently, Preptrack (2021–2).³ Students were asked to translate multilingual sexual health campaigns as part of a simulated project management task provided for in module TR5057 ‘Managing translation’. In this module, students deal with aspects of managing the translation process from the perspective of various agents in the translation workflow. They cover the types of work available in the translation industry and what skills they need to develop in order to succeed, for example


³ The Love Tank is a not-for-profit community interest community (CIC) that promotes the health and wellbeing of underserved communities through education, capacity building, and research (The Love Tank, 2022); Preptrack is a not-for-profit that develops technology for sexual health (The Preptrack Foundation, 2020–2).