PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR THE USE OF NON-GENDERED LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH, SPANISH, FRENCH, ITALIAN AND PORTUGUESE

LUCÍA MUÑOZ MARTÍN
Universidad de Burgos, España

1. CURRENT SITUATION OF THE MODERN LANGUAGES CLASSROOMS

In many languages, the grammatical masculine is considered neutral, while the feminine form is marked with a suffix to express female gender, therefore positioning women as a variation of the masculine (Criado, 2019), as can be seen in the English words "steward" and "stewardess", for instance. In other instances, the masculine form of the word encompasses women, as in "guys" in English or "todos" in Spanish, which is used even if there is a majority of females in a group.

This phenomenon normally stays unquestioned in modern languages classrooms, as it is assumed to be the correct grammatical structure without further reflection into its pragmatics or semantics. However, the prescriptive teaching of language as a monolithic entity, something which is rigid, homogeneous and does not change, can hinder its students, due to the silencing, either overtly or covertly, of not only cis women, but also other gender identities which differ from the norm, such as trans, non-binary or gender non-conforming people, as well as sexual-affective identities which differ from the heterosexual, such as homosexual, bisexual or pansexual individuals.

Thus, the learning of modern languages is inherently biased by the target language's culture, reflecting the native society's values, norms, beliefs and behaviours as normal and desirable, even if they are sexist, homophobic or transphobic. The use of discriminatory language not only without its questioning, but as the default correct and acceptable

semantic and pragmatic use of the words, can negatively impact those students who might result being discriminated against.

Language classrooms are inherently comprised of people with different backgrounds, many of whom will not match the patriarchal norms of being white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender and middle-class. In fact, as of 2021, only 29.5% of the UK's population matched this description (Henry and Ryder, 2021). However, classrooms still are overly cisheteronormative by only portraying normative[1] topics through the official and hidden curricula and teaching materials, such as through images in textbooks (Carpenter and Lee, 2010; Adu, Solomon and Korley, 2021; Moore, 2020), thus only representing a powerful minority of society.

Although the modern languages classroom has always been a place where many current social issues are addressed, from equity and equality to social justice (Freire, 2000), by including topics such as the environment, the living world, the world of sports, occupations, and many more, they are still a reflection of the society in which we live, which is not as tolerant as some laws prescribe. As a matter of fact, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) includes sociocultural awareness as one of its key competences, as learning a language intrinsically comes with a set of cultural values (Kim, 2020), which, according to the European Union, ought to be human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights, as defined in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007).

However, every modern language classroom has to follow the Educational Curriculum, a compulsory legal document in which the intentions, programme, objectives, contents and skills of the education are recorded (Mulenga, 2019). Although it provides the consensus on what concepts to teach at each educational level, it contains the androcentric bias of the society in which it is created. In addition, educational institutions indirectly transmit the teachers' values and beliefs through the hidden curriculum: an unofficial and unwritten

---

[1] "Normative" in this context refers to cisgender and heterosexual.

curriculum which encompasses all the daily interactions that take place in the classroom (Maxwell, Solomon & Korley, 2021).

These contents, once approved, are present in the textbooks used in the classrooms, which have been found to portray the male perspective as neutral, thus implicitly perpetuating sexist attitudes. In addition, many of these textbooks have been found to contain sexist language, together with illustrative images, which, more often than not, portray an overrepresentation of male characters, subliminally reinforcing their position of power in society (Alonso, 2016; Dominguez, 2003; Lewis, 2011; Stockdale, 2006).

This lack of appropriate materials results in the necessity for teachers to be committed to the representation of all learners in their English classes through cross-curricular supplementary material and careful use of the hidden curriculum as well as the language used in the classroom.

2. IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN THE MODERN LANGUAGES CLASSROOM

In Western thought, reality is often classified in binary categories (such as good/bad, pretty/ugly), creating an imaginary opposition between the two plausible alternatives, which, in turn, establishes hierarchies between them (Crawley et al., 2008).

Due to the current androcentric and patriarchal nature of our society (Bergara et al., 2010), this classification also applies to people, thus placing the male perspective at the core of cultural values, societal norms and even language, while relegating women to a secondary role. However, gender is not a fixed entity but a spectrum (Tharp, 2015), comprised of more identities than just the two normative ones (Oakley, 1972), nonetheless, these are often silenced in the hegemonic discourse, resulting in their stereotyping, leading to a higher chance of experiencing gender-based violence, homelessness, substance abuse and acts of suicide (Pawelczyk, 2014).

This poses a major social problem as it harms those students who do not follow the gender dichotomy, such as trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people, as they cannot see themselves represented in the discourse of the classroom, making it more complicated for them to succeed in learning the target language, which will undeniably have an impact on their educational outcomes.

In addition, trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people tend to be confronted more regularly with covert hate crimes, such as invasive questioning, misgendering or deadnaming (Bradley, 2020). This violence against trans[2] people is not only individual, but also institutionalised, by hindering their right to change legal documents, not implementing gender-neutral bathrooms in public spaces or not accepting them in certain programs (Grant et al., 2011).

Thus, the objective of this paper is to provide good practices to use in the modern languages classrooms for the use of non-gendered language in order to include all the students, regardless of their gender or sexual-affective identity, as, in order to include trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming students in our daily lessons, we, as teachers, should be aware of the language we use, as it can silence, invalidate and discriminate against certain students.

As, according to Bashir (2024), the most studied languages in the world are: first, English, studied by 1.5 billion people; second, French, studied by 82 million; third, Mandarin Chinese, with an amount of 30 million students; next is Spanish, studied by 14.2 million people; followed by Italian with 2 million students, Arabic with 4 million; Russian with 2 million and Portuguese with an amount of 1.8 million learners worldwide, in this article, the most commonly studied modern European languages will be accounted for: English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.

---

[2] Here the word "trans" acts as an umbrella term to cover all non-normative gender identities, such as non-binary or gender non-conforming.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper will follow a variety of methods, as its aim is twofold: on the one hand, it aims at providing good practices in relation to teaching strategies, and, on the other hand, it focuses on the specific linguistic resources to use in the classroom for the efficient inclusion of all the students.

Thus, first, the critical pedagogy and engaged pedagogy currents are followed, as they encourage teachers to incorporate diverse voices, experiences, and cultural contexts into the curriculum, thus going beyond the transmission of information and skills to foster a sense of agency, critical thinking, and social responsibility among learners. These pedagogies aim at challenging the status quo and strive to create educational experiences that contribute to a more just and equitable society (Giroux, 2001). Additionally, bell hooks (1994)'s engaged pedagogy aims at creating a greater sense of engagement, following Krashen (1980)'s affective filter hypothesis, from his monitor model, which states that there is a psychological barrier that can either facilitate or hinder language learning in a second language, based on the level of stress the students feel. Thus, the more open the teachers are towards their students' diverse identities, the more relaxed and at ease these students will feel in class, therefore improving their learning outcomes.

On the other hand, sociolinguist methodologies are also used in this paper, as it aims at analysing the language we use, as words can reinforce social attitudes towards non-normative genders, usually by silencing them into the generic masculine discourse. By using sociolinguistics, one can see the relationship between gender and language, and how biased a language is towards a specific gender, commonly the male, as it has been, and continues to be, the most powerful identity in our Western androcentric society.

4. GOOD PRACTICES FOR MODERN LANGUAGES TEACHING: HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

The first step in any classroom (be it language or any other subject) would be for students to introduce themselves to the teacher and their fellow students in order to state their identity as individuals. This is particularly important when taking into account trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities, as many times they use names which are different from the ones which appear in their legal documents. In addition, it is impossible to know based on physical appearance or legal names what pronouns a person uses to refer to themselves, thus, each student should introduce themselves on the first day of class by saying their name and the pronouns[3] which should be used to refer to them. It is advised that this introduction be initiated by the teacher, to provide an example of how to do it, especially in lower levels of language proficiency, where it may be recommendable to do so using the students' vehicle language instead of the target one.

Teachers must also be careful with the assumption of pronouns when correcting students' assignments, as sometimes what might look like a concordance mistake might not be it. For instance, assuming that it is a grammatical error when a student whose pronouns are feminine describes their partner with feminine pronouns, or vice-versa: when a student whose pronouns are masculine describes their partner with masculine pronouns. What could be seen as a grammatical mistake might just be an assumption of the heterosexuality of the students, thus, it is important for the teacher not to correct these pronouns without first asking the students for clarification with discretion in private. Furthermore, it is important to state as a rule in the class that people's pronouns will not be assumed, be it their classmates', other teachers' or even those of characters from the teaching materials, for instance, characters from listening or reading activities who do not state their pronouns.

---

[3] In this article, the term "preferred pronouns" will not be used because they are not a preference, instead, they are personal identity marks to reflect one's identity.

Thus, it will be essential to provide linguistic alternatives to the binary pronouns "he/she" to refer to people to whom we cannot ask for pronouns. For instance, in English we use the gender-neutral third person plural pronoun "they" (which encompasses he and she) as a singular in order to avoid the gender mark of the third person singular "he/she" ("them/their" for the object and possessive forms of the pronoun). Just like with the pronoun "you" (which is also singular and plural), there are ways to imply the plural sense of the pronoun, such as with "all" as in "you all" ("y'all") or "them all".

In Spanish, because the third person plural pronoun is marked with gender (*ellas/ellos*), we use the word *elles* to mark the neutral plural, instead of *ellos* (masculine) and *ellas* (feminine). The same word without the plural mark "-s" is used for the singular: *elle* instead of *él* (masculine) and *ella* (feminine).

In French we use the neologism *iel* as the neutral pronoun for the third person singular and *iels* for the third person plural instead of the masculine *il/ils* and the feminine *elle/elles*.

In Italian *ləi* is used as a way to merge the pronunciation of the third person singular masculine pronoun *lui* and the feminine *lei*. The plural stays the same (*loro*) as it is already used both for the masculine and feminine forms.

In Portuguese: the neologism *elu/elus* is used instead of the masculine *ele/eles* and the feminine *ela/elas*.

However, not all of these gender-neutral pronouns are consolidated in every language, for instance, in English it is more widely used than in the rest of the aforementioned languages. As a result, it is crucial to have a repertoire of strategies to include trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities in the language classroom, such as the use of gender-neutral vocabulary and gender-neutral grammar strategies.

Most modern languages use the masculine as the generic gender for most nouns and adjectives, however, that practice silences and invisibilises the rest of identities which comprise the population: feminine and neutral identities. It is important to include the gender-

neutral counterparts of the words to be learnt throughout the academic year, in addition to the traditional vocabulary provided in the teaching materials (such as student's books and workbooks). The vocabulary topics which usually need the most extra vocabulary are: the family, professions and descriptions. In some modern languages, it might be more difficult than others to find the gender-neutral counterpart of the generic masculine words, but it does not mean that it is impossible.

In English, for instance, many words are already neutral, adjectives do not have a gender mark ("tall") and many nouns are already neutral in nature ("teacher" or "doctor"). Although some words do have a gender mark, such as the "-man" compounds in relation to occupations, such as "chairman", "fireman" or "policeman", this suffix can be changed to "-person" as in "chairperson", or being replaced by another word altogether such as "firefighter" or "police officer". Regarding the family, we can use the word "sibling" instead of "brother/sister" or "parent" instead of "mother/father".

In Spanish, we can use the "/a" as in *alumno/a* to include women in the discourse, however, it does not include non-binary people. For them, the forms "@" as in *alumn@*, the "x" as in *alumnx*, or the "_" as in *alumn_*, can be used, instead of using the so-called neutral masculine ending "o" (*alumno*). Nevertheless, these strategies pose two problems: first and foremost, these words in Spanish are not possible to pronounce, and, secondly, even if we only use them in the written form, speakers still process them as masculine (Sánchez, 2020). For this reason, instead of using *los alumnos, los/as alumnos/as, l@s alumn@s, lxs alumnxs or l_s alumn_s*, it is more advisable to use collective plural nouns such as *el alumnado*, which although in this case it has a masculine article, is a collective noun, thus comprising everybody. When referring to individual non-binary or gender non-conforming people in Spanish, we can use the suffix "-e", which is used as a gender-neutral counterpart of the masculine "-o" and feminine "-a", as in *alumne,* or *alumnes* for multiple people.

In French, we can use "x", or "æ" as in *étudiantx* or *étudiantæ* instead of *étudiant/étudiante*. However, as it happens in Spanish, these words could not be pronounced in spoken language. On the other hand, we

can use "·e", "-e", "(e)" and "E" as in *étudiant·e, étudiant/e, étudiant(e) and étudiantE* in written form to include both males and females in the discourse. Nevertheless, in spoken language, the masculine generic would always be used in the plural form, as in *les étudiant(e)s*, due to the fact that the third person plural article *les* encompasses both genders, and the feminine form is usually marked in written form but not in pronunciation (*étudiant* and *étudiante* are homophones). Furthermore, these strategies do not include nonbinary people, as they focus on the portrayal of males and females. Then, in order to include them, we could make use of different strategies, for instance, we could use those gender-neutral words which already exist in the language, such as epicene[4] words i.e. *élève* instead of étudiant(e), or collective words, such as *le corps étudiant*.

In Italian, we can use "-u;","@", "*", "x" and , as in *alunnu, alunn@, alunn** or *alunnx* instead of *alunno/alunna* to avoid the use of the generic masculine (*alunni*), however, just as it happens in Spanish and French, these symbols cannot be pronounced in speech. An alternative could be "ə" (for the singular) and "3" (for the plural), as in *alunnə* instead of *alunno/alunna* and *alunn3* instead of *alunni/alunne*, which changes both written and spoken language at the same time. In addition, we can make use of collective nouns, such as *il corpo studentesco* or *la scolaresca*, not to disclose any genders.

In Portuguese, we can use the "@" and the "x", instead of using the so-called neutral masculine ending "o" (*aluno*). Nevertheless, these strategies pose the same problem as in the previously mentioned languages: they are not possible to be pronounced. For this reason, it is more advisable to use collective plural nouns such as *o alunado*. When referring to individual non-binary or gender non-conforming people in Portuguese, we can use the suffix "-e", as in Spanish, which is used as a gender-neutral counterpart of the masculine "-o" and feminine "-a", as in *alune,* or *alunes* for multiple people. However, in Portuguese we do not have a gender-neutral article, so it is recommended to omit it.

---

[4] Epicene words are those which only have one grammatical form to indicate both the masculine and feminine genders.

Although there are certain gender-neutral words which have a truly gender-neutral meaning, such as the words "parents" (EN)[5], *parents* (FR), *las familias* (ES), *genitori* (IT), and *as familias* (PT), some other words which are supposed to be gender-neutral have masculine or feminine connotations (Upworthy, 2016), such as "firefighter" (EN), *policía* (ES), *propriétaire* (FR), *l'elettricista* (IT), or *gari* (PT), which are often assumed to be masculine; or "nurse" (EN), *auxiliar* (ES), *secrétaire* (FR), *l'estetista* (IT), or *nutricionista* (PT), which are assumed to be feminine.

Thus, as teachers, we need to be aware of this and challenge the discourse using props such as memoirs of well-known women, men[6], non-binary or gender non-conforming people who have challenged the traditional gender roles, such as Marie Curie in science, Mary Shelly in literature, the Wachowski sisters in the filmmaking industry, Gianni Versace in fashion, Nicky Case in the video game industry, Rain Dove in modelling, and so on.

The last strategy is to provide grammatical counterparts to avoid using gendered language in those languages where grammatical gender is present in virtually every kind of word (pronouns, nouns, adjectives…). In Roman languages such as Spanish, French and Italian the use of gender-neutral vocabulary might be more difficult, although not impossible.

In Spanish, we can re-write some sentences to be able to use gender-neutral nouns or collective nouns. We can change the pronouns *el, los, aquel, aquellos* followed by the relative *que* for the neutral words *quien, quiénes* and *cada*. For instance: *Los que quieran salir* can be changed to *quienes quieran salir.* Another strategy can be to use the impersonal *se* and the passive voice: instead of saying *cuando el usuario solicite la información*, we can say *cuando se solicite la información*. Finally, we can also make use of gerunds and infinitive such as changing *es imprescindible que los interesados acudan personalmente* for *es*

---

[5] The abbreviations used for the languages are the following: for English, (EN); Spanish, (ES); French, (FR); Italian, (IT); and Portuguese (PT).

[6] Both trans and cis.

imprescindible acudir personalmente or even omit the subject in many sentences, as in *trabaja en la universidad* instead of *él/ella trabaja en la universidad*.

In French we can use inclusive pronouns such as *cellui, celleux* or *ceuxes* to avoid expressing a gender, for instance, *ceux/celles qui veulent sortir* would be changed to *celleux qui veulent sortir*. In addition, we could use the passive voice to avoid the subject, such as in *quand on veut une information* instead of *quand l'utilisateur veut une information*, or *Il est indispensable de se présenter* instead of *Il est indispensable que les intéressés se présentent*.

In Italian, we can avoid stating a gender by omitting the subject in most sentences, as in *lavora all'università*. We can also avoid using the masculine relative, such as saying *chi vuole uscire*, instead of *coloro i quali vogliano uscire*. Just like in the other two Roman languages, we can use the impersonal to avoid expressing a gender, for example, we can say *quando si richiedano informazioni* instead of *quando l'utente richieda l'informazione*. Lastly, we can also use the gerund and infinitive to be inclusive, as in *è imprescindibile intervenire in persona* instead of *è imprescindibile che gli interessati intervengano personalmente*.

In Portuguese, we can follow the same aforementioned strategies and change the pronouns *os/as* followed by the relative *que* for the neutral word *quem*, for instance, changing the sentence *os que queiram sair* for *quem queira sair*. In addition, we can also use the impersonal *se* and the passive voice: instead of saying *quando o usuário solicita a informação* we can say *quando se solicita a informação*, and gerunds and infinitive such as *é imprescindível acudir pessoalmente* instead of *é imprescindível que os interessados acudan pessoalmente*.

It is important to use the previous strategies for the use of gender-neutral language in a transversal or cross–sectional way throughout the whole academic year, not as just giving grammatical information in a traditional lecture, or by giving these grammatical resources as extra information or as fun facts, as only with its real and prolonged use will

students see them as an appropriate and acceptable way of using language, and not as an option to be used only in the classroom.

Thus, the use of non-gendered language can be encouraged in students' writings, presentations, day-to-day exchanges and even exams, thus showing them that inclusive language has a place in academic discourse, as well as in everyday life.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the modern European languages classroom is highly influenced by the target culture, language and, therefore, society. It reinforces the target language's values, beliefs and norms into the students, sometimes even hindering some students due to the clash between their own identity and how that identity is perceived by the target culture.

This is something that has been happening within the LGBTQ+ community, and that still happens when trans, non-binary or gender-nonconforming people go to a traditional classroom where the teachers are not familiar with inclusive language.

However, including inclusive language and non-gendered words not only helps trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming students feel represented in the classroom -which in turn will make them more interested in the subject, resulting in better academic results- but also women and non-heterosexual students, as its use can take off the male power often given to language and distribute such power among all the identities of the classroom, thus creating a more democratic classroom atmosphere.

In order to include such topics in the European modern languages classroom appropriately, teachers will need to be well-prepared, acquiring the necessary accurate knowledge, materials and methodologies in order to make this inclusion positive, dynamic and transversal for the benefit of all students, and, by extension, society in general.

Thus, this article has provided good practices on how to be inclusive towards trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming students and colleagues in the most commonly studied modern European languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese) through the use of strategies and linguistic resources such as gender-neutral pronouns, nouns and grammatical structures.

These strategies can be used, most importantly, in the first day of class with new students, in order not to assume anyone's genders; also evidently when a student asks to be referred to with non-gendered language or when knowing that there are non-binary or gender non-conforming students in the classroom; but even if there are no specific people who use non-gendered language for themselves in the classroom, inclusive language should be always used to refer to people whose gender we do not know, such as characters from the audio recordings, reading texts, grammar activities or any other resource that might be used in the class.

By following this approach, students will learn how to accurately and respectfully communicate with and address anyone in the target language, no matter their personal background, source culture or mother tongue.

Nevertheless, the authoritative sources which oversee and guide modern languages, such as dictionaries, guides or official exams, must also employ these strategies in order to actively and accurately depict the reality of non-normative individuals, thus transforming the hegemonic discourse of the society into an haven where everyone can be equally included, thus shaping the classroom discourse as a result.

6. AGRADECIMIENTOS/APOYOS

7. REFERENCES

Adu S. M., Solomon & Korley (2021). Hidden Curriculum Does it Matter? in ResearchGate

Alonso Torío, E. (2016). "El género y el sexismo en la clase de ELE" Publicaciones Centros, págs. 22-30

Bashir, S. (2024). "Top 10 Most Studied Languages In The World" Retrieved https://www.marstranslation.com/blog/most-studied-languages-in-the-world

Bergara, A., Riviere and Bacete (2010). Men, Equality and New Masculinities. EMAKUNDE-Basque Women's Institute, Manuel Iradier, 3601005 Vitoria-Gasteiz

Bradley, C. (2020). Transphobic Hate Crime Report 2020 The scale and impact of transphobic violence, abuse and prejudice. London: Galop

Carpenter, V. M. and Lee (2010). "Teacher education and the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity", Curriculum Matters, Vol. 6

Crawley, S. L.; J. Foley, and L. Shehan. (2008). "Creating a World of Dichotomy: Categorizing Sex and Gendering Cultural Messages." In Gendering Bodies. Reproduced with permission of Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. in the format Textbook via Copyright Clearance Center. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Grant, J. M., L. A. Motter, and J. Tanis (2011). Injustice at Every Turn. A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011.

Gygax, P., Ute G., O. Sarrasin, J. Oakhill and A. Garnham (2008). Generically intended, but specifically interpreted: When beauticians, musicians and mechanics are all men. Language, Cognition and Neuroscience 23(3) 464 - 485 DOI: 10.1080/01690960701702035 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01690960701702035

Henry, L. and M. Ryder (2021). Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond, Faber & Faber, EAN/UPC 9780571365128

Kim D. (2020). Learning Language, LearningCulture: Teaching Language to the Whole Student, ECNU Review of Education 3(1):209653112093669 DOI: 10.1177/2096531120936693

Moore, A. R. (2020). "Understanding heteronormativity in ELT textbooks: a practical taxonomy", ELT Journal, Volume 74, Issue 2, April 2020, Pages 116–125, https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz058

Nonbinary wiki (n.d.). https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Main_Page

Sánchez Sáinz, M. (2020). Pedagogías Queer: ¿Nos arriesgamos a hacer otra educación? Catarata, Segunda edición

Tharp, A. N. (2016). Gender Spectrum Theory. Forensic Science, Pre-Medical Biology, & English/Writing. Faculty Mentor: Randall Horton. the University of New Haven.

Oakley, A. (1972). Sex, gender and society. London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd.

Pawelczyk, J., Pakuła, Ł., and Sunderland, J. (2014). Issues of power in relation to gender and sexuality in the EFL classroom—An overview. Journal of Gender and Power, 1(1), 49–66.

Upworthy (2016). A Class That Turned Around Kids' Assumptions of Gender Roles! [Video] Youtube. URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3Aweo-74kY