

“*They* is the best solution.”
**Insights into pre- and early-service EFL teachers’
acceptability judgements of non-binary pronouns in
English and their native language**

Sol Tovar

Abstract: Discussions around the use of gender-neutral language, with all the different strategies that it entails, have extended beyond academic contexts to permeate everyday life. It has become a contentious topic in many countries, regardless of their language. While existing research predominantly focuses on the usage of gender-neutral language by native (L1) speakers, little attention has been given to non-native (LX) speakers. The present article explores the perceptions of non-native pre-service and early-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Germany and Argentina regarding the use of singular *they* and neopronouns in English. Additionally, it investigates their views on analogous structures in their native languages (German and Spanish) and compares the degree to which these forms are integrated into their linguistic repertoire. Based on their acceptability judgements of English, German and Spanish sentences, as well as on their justifications of their judgements, this study aims to discern whether differences exist in how non-native EFL teachers evaluate the acceptability of gender-neutral or non-binary forms in both language pairs (English-German and English-Spanish). A qualitative analysis of their justifications offers valuable insights into the knowledge and acceptance of gender-neutral forms in both their L1 and English as well as their willingness to teach these forms in class.

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The use of 3rd person gender-neutral or non-binary pronouns has become a contentious issue, challenging established beliefs about identity, language, and power in many countries and in different languages. Despite the historical use

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of non-binary pronouns in English, interest in them has grown significantly over the last two decades, expanding from early studies on non-sexist language to a focus on singular *they* in the early 2000s. While recent research has addressed gaps in understanding the acceptance of non-binary pronouns, these studies primarily involve L1 English speakers, often neglecting the perspectives of L2 English speakers. This essay seeks to address the existing gap in the literature by exploring the status and acceptance of English non-binary pronouns among 60 pre- and early-service English teachers in Germany and Argentina. The study delves into their attitudes towards these forms in both English and their first languages (Spanish and German), while also considering their perspectives on teaching these forms in the classroom.

On pronouns and gender

As a grammatical category, pronouns have proved difficult to define and delimit, as noted by Bhat (2004: 1). Biber et al. (1999: 328) define third-person pronouns as “function words which make it possible to refer succinctly to the speaker/writer, the addressee, and identifiable things or persons other than the speaker/writer and the addressee”. While this definition provides a useful starting point, Bhat (2004: 1) observes a multifaceted usage of the term *pronoun* across linguistic domains, encompassing “personal pronouns, demonstratives, interrogatives, indefinites, relatives, correlatives” and more. This all-encompassing linguistic understanding contrasts sharply with a prevalent folk conception, particularly within the discourse of conservative circles, where *pronouns* are often narrowly perceived as linguistic forms exclusively utilized by the LGBTQ+ community and its allies to refer to non-binary and transgender individuals, exemplified by claims such as “[t]here are no pronouns in the Bible” (Spicer, 2022 in McClain, 2023: 1).

Gender is also a troublesome concept, due to the polysemous nature of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines it as “each of the classes (typically masculine, feminine, neuter, common) of nouns and pro-nouns distinguished by the different inflections which they have and which they require in words syntactically associated with them” (i.e. *grammatical gender*), “[m]ales or females viewed as a group” or “[t]he state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one’s sex”.

These definitions are not neutral, and no conceptualization of gender will ever be, as they are invariably imbued with a particular set of values or ideologies (Kustatscher, 2020: 812). The definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), for instance, view gender as “a classification of two categories, man and woman, as distinct, non-overlapping, and opposite from each other

[...] [and w]ithin this construct, one could not be [...] both or neither at the same time” (Kedley, 2022: 179). Viewing gender through a binary, cisnormative lens neglects the fact that many people express and experience their gender in ways that deviate from conventional male and female classifications (Davies / Hoskin, 2022: 183 f.). This, in turn, affects how we interpret gender as a linguistic category.

When it comes to English pronouns, it is often claimed that “pronominal gender agreement (he, she vs. it) [is] based on ‘natural’ (biological) criteria” (Wagner, 2003: 479), though not without causing controversy. McConell-Ginet (2013: 3) contends that English is characterized not by a “‘natural’ gender system but [...] [rather] a ‘notional’ gender system”, in line with Nevalainen / Raumolin-Brunberg’s (1993) conceptualization of grammatical gender. That is, that the choice of third-person pronouns hinges not solely on biological sex but also on the associated concepts and ideas related to it. McConell-Ginet highlights that

[i]n languages with grammatical gender linked to sex, it is often the case that inanimates for which sex is irrelevant can be assigned to the same gender classes as sexed humans (or, for that matter, that nouns designating sexed humans can on occasion be assigned to the ‘wrong’ gender class). (McConell-Ginet, 2013: 4)

This phenomenon is evident in languages like Spanish and German, further diminishing the connection between grammatical gender and sex or social gender.

Considering their semantics, personal pronouns are much like names, in that “they describe their referents as something that is uniquely determined in the given situation” (Löbner, 2016: 287). In logical semantic terms, the meanings of names and pronouns can be articulated as follows:

- (1) ›Alex‹ ιx (person(x) \wedge name(x) = Alex)
“the unique x such that x is a person and x’s name is Alex”
- (2) ›she‹ ιx (person(x) \wedge female(x))
“the unique x such that x is a person and x is female”

However, English, German and Spanish do not currently feature a standardized pronoun to refer to “the unique x such that x is a person and x is neither male nor female”. This creates a “grammatical gap” (Collyer, 2017: 20; Pires, 2020: 112) in those languages. As can be observed in figure 1, English speakers navigate this void using non-binary language strategies like singular *they* or emerging neopronouns such as *ze* and *xe*. German and Spanish, with their own complexities, exhibit different challenges and proposed forms in integrating non-binary pronouns. All three languages draw on strategies that either use resources within the language (e.g. using existing pronouns with a new form of reference, as with singular *they*) or add new resources (e.g. neo-

pronouns) to bridge this gap. This study explores the acceptance and usage of non-binary pronouns, focusing on English *they* and *ze*, German *die* and *sier*, and Spanish indirect non-binary language (INBL) and morpheme {e}.

	English	German	Spanish
Gender System	Has a “pronominal gender system” (Corbett, 2007).	Both have a “gender system” where gender is a way in which nouns are classified and this “is reflected beyond the nouns themselves through agreement” (Corbett, 2007: 241).	
Standard Pronouns	Third person singular pronouns are masculine, feminine or neuter. Neuter pronoun <i>it</i> rarely has human reference.	Third person singular pronouns are masculine, feminine or neuter. Neuter pronoun <i>es</i> may have human reference.	Third person singular pronouns are masculine, feminine or neuter. Neuter pronoun <i>ello</i> only used to refer to clauses or nominalized verbs.
Non-binary pronouns	Singular use of “they” (though generally keeping plural agreement). Multiple “new” pronouns like <i>ze</i> , <i>co</i> , <i>xe</i> , <i>ey</i> ...	Dialectal use of “die” (with plural agreement). Multiple “new” pronouns like <i>sier</i> , <i>xier</i> , <i>dey</i> , as...	Possibility to “remove gender” using indirect non-binary language (López, 2020) and use of {e} as a non-binary neomorpheme.

Fig. 1: Brief summary of the characteristics of English, German and Spanish regarding their gender system, standard pronouns and non-binary pronouns

Study design and data collection

The study involved 60 participants who were either studying to become teachers of English as a Foreign Language or had recently completed their studies at the University of Regensburg (UR) in Germany and the National University of Mar del Plata (UNMDP) in Argentina. All UR participants were native German speakers, while all UNMDP participants were native speakers of the Rioplatense Spanish variety.

Both groups were highly proficient in English, having achieved at least a C1 level during their studies. Figure 2 provides an overview of their demographic data. Participants were recruited through online announcements, and the study was conducted asynchronously. Non-probabilistic sampling methods were employed, with efforts made to ensure representativeness.

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		Germany	Argentina
Number of participants	Total	30	30
	Students	16	18
	Recent graduates	14	12
Age	Median age	24	27.5
	Youngest participant	21	22
	Oldest participant	33	39
Gender	Female	18	26
	Non-binary	0	2
	Male	12	2
Teaching experience (students only)	With experience	6 (38.5%)	16 (89%)
	Without experience	10 (62.5%)	2 (11%)

Fig. 2: Demographic information of the participants

The study used a mixed methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods from the beginning, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon. The mixed methods design involved four steps: designing and collecting data for both quantitative and qualitative strands, analysing data, merging results, and interpreting merged results.

Data was collected through an online survey which included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The survey focused on understanding acceptability judgments of trainee English teachers towards non-binary language strategies. It was divided into four sections: demographic information, an acceptability judgment task (AJT), an attitudinal questionnaire (AQ), and final reflection questions.

The AJT used a visual rating scale to measure acceptability of different sentences. The sentences were measured against each other and followed a factorial design (see Fig. 3) inspired by Goodall (2021), in which the structure of the sentences remained as similar as possible across the options and only one factor varied: pronoun choice. This resulted in a set of six tasks per language in which participants had to rate the acceptability of sentences that included different pronouns or gender-neutral strategies with either a specific or a general referent. All tasks included a control item, which would always be considered unacceptable and ungrammatical.

The AQ assessed attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, with items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with the extremes being “completely agree” and “completely disagree” and included an opt-out option to maintain the neutrality of the middle point and distinguish between participants with no formed opinion and participants with a neutral stance towards the statement. It replicated in part a questionnaire from an earlier study (Tovar, 2021), which incorporated Billard’s (2018) *Attitudes Toward Transgender Men and Women*

(ATTMW) scale, and took some elements from Alonso-Martínez et al.'s (2021) (EANT, "Escala de Actitudes Negativas hacia las personas Trans") and the *Openness towards Non-Binary Gender* (ONBG) scale (Molin et al., 2021). In addition, a sub-score of the attitudinal questionnaire was calculated for the items corresponding to openness towards non-binary gender.

This sentence is...	completely unacceptable	completely acceptable
Das ist Alex. Wer wohnt in der Nähe von der Uni.		
Das ist Alex. Sier wohnt in der Nähe von der Uni.		
Das ist Alex. Die wohnen in der Nähe von der Uni.		
Das ist Alex. Er wohnt in der Nähe von der Uni.		
Das ist Alex. Sie wohnt in der Nähe von der Uni.		
In a few words, justify your choices.		
<input type="checkbox"/> My opinion about these sentences is...		

Fig. 3: Acceptability judgement task in German

After a 90-day data collection period, incomplete responses were excluded, and the data was pre-processed and coded. Quantitative data was analyzed using Excel for descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. The study aimed to merge and interpret these results to better understand the participants' acceptability judgments. This essay will discuss part of the results of the main study, focusing on the differences in the acceptability judgements of both groups and the implications of the study in the field of English language teaching.

Cross-linguistic differences in the acceptability judgements of non-binary pronouns

This section will discuss the differences in acceptability judgments of non-binary pronouns observed across the two participant groups. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that some participants were unaware of neopronouns in English and in their own language, as illustrated in Figure 4.

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	Germany			Argentina		
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No
Had you heard about the use of ‘singular they’ in English before participating in this survey?	27 (90%)	1 (3%)	2 (7%)	28 (93%)	0 (0%)	2 (7%)
Had you heard about the use of neopronouns in English before participating in this survey?	13 (43%)	3 (10%)	14 (47%)	18 (60%)	1 (3%)	11 (37%)
Had you heard about the use of neopronouns in your language before participating in this survey?	9 (30%)	1 (3%)	20 (67%)	29 (97%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)

Fig. 4: Previous knowledge of singular they and neopronouns in English and participants' L1

The results of the English AJT will be presented using boxplots. In addition, the ratings will be classified as acceptable, borderline, or not acceptable considering the following values:

Acceptable: Rating over 60 points.

Borderline: Rating between 40 and 60 points.

Not acceptable: Rating under 40 points.

Responses will then be grouped according to these categories, showing whether there is a general tendency to find certain forms (un)acceptable, or whether there are two marked groups with opposite judgements. The tasks discussed in this section are only a subset of all the tasks the participants performed.

The first task aimed to assess the acceptability of non-binary pronouns in English with a general referent. The German responses (Fig. 5) show that 90 % of participants rated singular *they* as acceptable, with a median rating of 100 points. However, when it came to neopronoun *ze*, the majority (63 %) of the ratings were negative, with the neopronoun obtaining a median rating of 17 points.

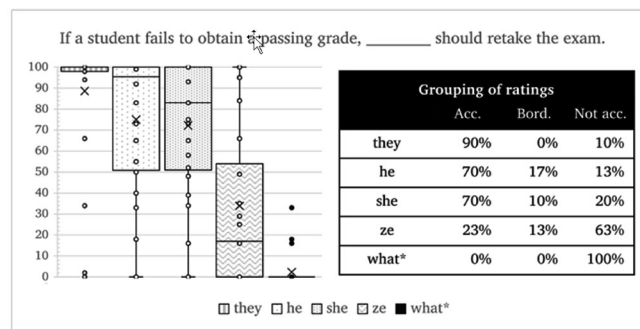


Fig. 5: L2 English (General Referent) German Responses

In their justifications, German participants who gave *ze* a negative rating would note that they did not consider *ze* a pronoun (or even a word) in English: “*ze* is just no word, you need a pronoun so *she* or *he*” (DE-555-M32).¹

However, those who rated *ze* positively would actively point out their knowledge about the form: “*ze* seems to be a neopronoun” (DE-144-M24).

Some participants who provided a borderline rating did so because they were not familiar with the form: “I don’t know anything about the *ze* as pronoun, I’m unsure, what to do with it” (DE-547-F21).

When analyzing the Argentinian responses (Fig. 6), we see that 90 % of participants found singular *they* as acceptable, also obtaining a median rating of 100 points. Interestingly, the ratings of neopronoun *ze* were divided in two marked opposite groups: 53 % of participants found *ze* acceptable, whereas 40 % found it unacceptable, resulting in a median rating of 66 points.

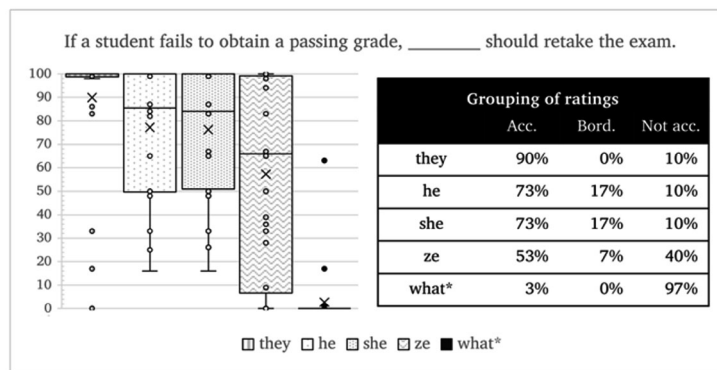


Fig. 6: L2 English (General Referent) Argentinian Responses

In this group, we can once again observe how the absence of prior exposure to the form impacts the ratings: “I’m not familiar with the word *ze* so I consider it unacceptable” (AR-105-F24).

Notably one participant remarked that her low rating was not linked to her own knowledge of the form, but to other people’s familiarity: “I am aware of the existence of *ze* but have never heard it in a conversation and I don’t think everyone would understand what it means” (AR-328-F23).

When it came to a specific referent, it can be observed in Fig. 7 that the most notable difference in the German group is the broader range of ratings for *they*. While it is still generally regarded as acceptable, a higher number of participants found it to be unacceptable or borderline acceptable when compared to its use with a general referent. Although the median rating remains

¹ Participants will be identified here by country code (AR or DE), participant number, gender (M for male, F for female and NB for non-binary) and age.

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high at 90 points, the average rating decreased to 70 points. *Ze* is predominantly viewed as unacceptable, and its distribution closely resembles that of its use with a general referent (as in Fig. 2)

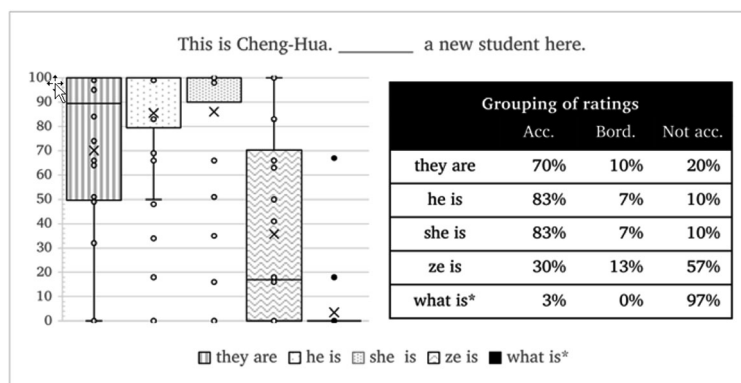


Fig. 7: L2 English (Specific Referent) German Responses

The challenge of assigning a specific gender to a name influenced participants' choices and revealed their conceptions of gender. Some associated pronouns with certain gender identities: "I don't know whether Cheng-Hua is male/female/non-binary" (DE-080-F27).

Those who found singular *they* or the neopronoun *ze* acceptable understood them as encompassing genders beyond the female-male binary. However, it is worth mentioning that not all participants followed this pattern. Some participants connected the use of *they* to scenarios where the gender of the person was uncertain, showing the belief that the only viable options were *he* or *she*, when the person's gender was known: "I would use *he* or *she* if I knew their gender. If I didn't, I would rather use *they*" (DE-540-F27).

Furthermore, participants who gave *they* and *ze* a low rating believed that the name could only refer to a male or female person: "I don't know if this name is male or female, but it definitely is one of them" (DE-139-M27).

Just as observed in the German group, it becomes apparent that the type of reference has an influence on the ratings within the Argentinian participants. There is evident variation in the ratings of pronouns when used with a general referent compared to a specific referent. In the case of a specific referent (Fig. 8), the ratings for *they*, *he*, and *she* are prominently clustered at the top of the scale, each with a median rating of 100 points. Notably, the median rating for *ze* increases to 83, indicating a higher level of acceptance when *ze* is applied to a particular individual.

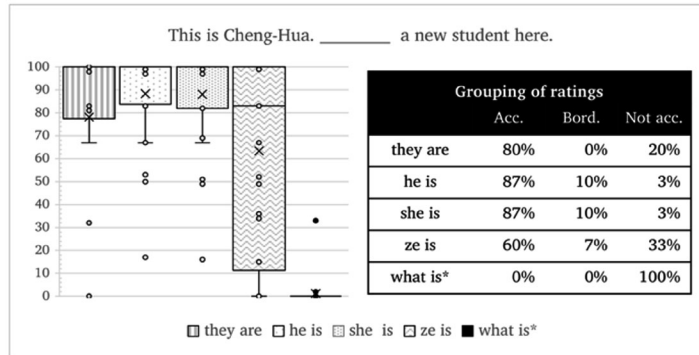


Fig. 8: L2 English (Specific Referent) Argentinian Responses

Furthermore, the concept of *preferred pronouns* surfaced in Argentinian responses as a rationale for rating all forms as acceptable, except for the control item *what*: “I don’t know who Cheng-Hua [is] or which pronouns this person prefers” (AR-191-F24).

Notably, a few participants highlighted the importance of seeking out an individual’s preferred pronouns and expressed their readiness to inquire about which pronoun to use: “I would ask Cheng-Hua what pronoun they prefer to be called” (AR-253-NB36).

When one observes the ratings of non-binary forms in both German and Spanish, it becomes clear that German speakers are more open to using these forms in English, rather than in their native language.

	die/denen/deren		sier/siem/siese	
	General	Specific	General	Specific
Acceptable	48%	32%	22%	26%
Borderline	16%	7%	3%	1%
Not acceptable	37%	61%	74%	73%
Median rating	51	14	0	1

Fig. 9: Percentage of acceptable, borderline, and not acceptable ratings for *die/denen/denen* and *sier/siem/siese* with specific referent and their overall median rating

As can be appreciated in figure 9, neither the form *die* nor *sier* obtained an acceptable median rating. In contrast, one can observe in figure 10 that all non-binary forms received a median rating of 100 points in the case of Spanish. It is worth noting, though, that the strategy of utilizing INBL is part of the standard language.

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	INBL		elle/le/le	
	General	Specific	General	Specific
Acceptable	98%	99%	87%	87%
Borderline	2%	0%	4%	2%
Not acceptable	0%	1%	9%	11%
Median rating	100	100	100	100

Fig. 10: Percentage of acceptable, borderline, and not acceptable ratings for INBL and elle/le/le with specific referent and their overall median rating

What lies behind the (non)acceptance of non-binary pronouns

By fragmenting, conceptualizing, and integrating data from participant justifications in the Acceptance Judgment Tasks (AJTs) following Strauss / Corbin's (1998: 3) analytical process, insights into the underlying dynamics of non-binary pronoun acceptance were uncovered. The investigation focused on the reasons participants provided, revealing a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and personal factors that shape attitudes towards non-binary language use.

A key theme that emerged from the data was the role of prescriptivism and grammatical correctness in shaping opinions. Only German participants (as observed in Fig.11) cited strict adherence to traditional grammar rules as a basis for rejecting non-binary pronouns: "I'm sure that you are aware of gender in German grammar. *Jemand* is masculine singular, so we have to use *er*" (DE-227-M23). "The sentences with *ze* and *they* don't appeal to grammatical and pragmatic standards" (DE-548-M23).

This perspective was particularly evident in the frequent references to the generic masculine form in German. Justifications rooted in prescriptivism highlighted a strong inclination towards maintaining conventional grammatical structures, viewing non-binary language forms as incorrect or ungrammatical. This underscores the significant influence of prescriptive linguistic norms on the acceptance of gender-inclusive language.

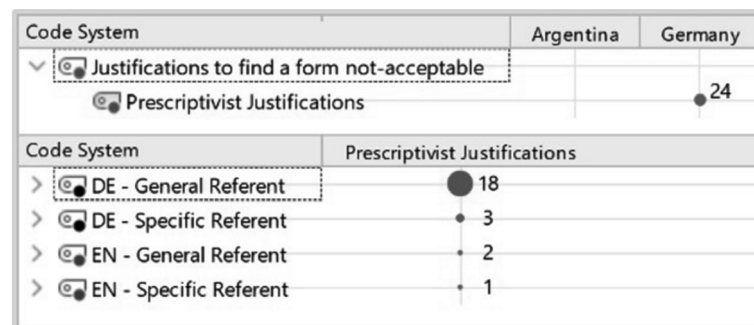


Fig. 11: Distribution of prescriptivist justifications

These answers are not surprising considering the German context, as there seems to be a pronounced inclination towards prescriptivism, evident in the substantial support for a petition on the website *Linguistik vs. Gendern* (Payr, 2023), which opposes gender-fair language (*gendergerechte Sprache*) and has attracted over a thousand signatures, many of them from linguistics professors at German universities. This clearly exemplifies what Papadopoulos (2022: 27) describes as the weaponization of linguistic theory against feminist and gender-inclusive language practices. What is more, despite teacher trainees' early introduction to the concepts of prescriptivism and descriptivism in their teaching programs, "German ELT teachers react in a very prescriptive way to certain non-standard features" (Jansen et al., 2021: 74). This highlights the need for a shift in language education towards accepting language as a dynamic and evolving tool, continually reinterpreted by its users (ibid.: 72).

In the discussion surrounding the acceptance of non-binary forms, two distinct perspectives come into play: inclusivity and neutrality. Although these viewpoints often align with each other (Darr / Kibbey, 2016), it is essential to draw a clear distinction between them. Inclusivity in language is about more than just avoiding gender-specific terms; it's about actively incorporating forms that represent and acknowledge the spectrum of gender identities (Smith / Bamberger, 2021: 442; Del Río-González, 2021: 1018). In contrast, neutrality tends to adopt a more gender-blind approach. This perspective often manifests in the use of non-binary language as a means to avoid gender specificity, rather than to explicitly recognize and include diverse gender identities. The neutrality viewpoint, while seemingly progressive, often overlooks the importance of visibly acknowledging and representing the full spectrum of gender identities in language.

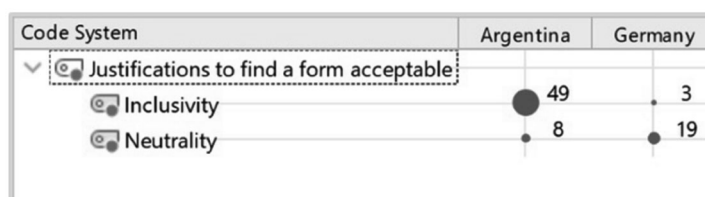


Fig. 12: Distribution of justifications citing inclusivity and neutrality

It is worth pointing out that most justifications which addressed the topic of inclusivity were provided by participants from Argentina, while German respondents gave justifications that centered on the concept of neutrality (as shown in Fig. 12). The differences between these two approaches can be observed.

On the one hand the following examples show a more inclusive understanding of non-binary pronouns, also acknowledging non-binary views of

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gender: “My opinion on the choice of pronouns is that we should accept those that are more inclusive and reject gender-biased ones” (AR-342-M39). “*He or she* both suggest a binary view of gender, and even though they are grammatically correct, there is more to the message than that” (AR-174-F28).

On the other hand, the next two examples show that neutrality is commonly linked to binary conceptions of gender, as their justifications for finding *they* acceptable was because of its neutrality but not their inclusivity of non-binary gender: “*They* is the most acceptable option, because the statement is too general to be able to decide between a male or female teacher” (DE-210-F22). “*He or she* would be acceptable, but it sounds a bit clumsy and it’s not listed as an option. Only *he* and only *she* assumes gender, therefore, it’s not great either. *They* is the best solution” (DE-080-F27).

Implications in the field of Foreign Language Teaching

Upon completing the survey, participants were queried about their willingness to introduce singular *they* and neopronouns in English to their students, with an option to provide comments on their responses. Figure 13 illustrates that most participants in both groups expressed a willingness to teach singular *they*, with no objections from the Argentinian group and only one dissenter in the German group. This inclination aligns with the positive ratings for singular *they* in the Acceptability Judgment Tasks, suggesting that higher acceptability correlates with greater openness among trainee and early-service teachers to teach this form.

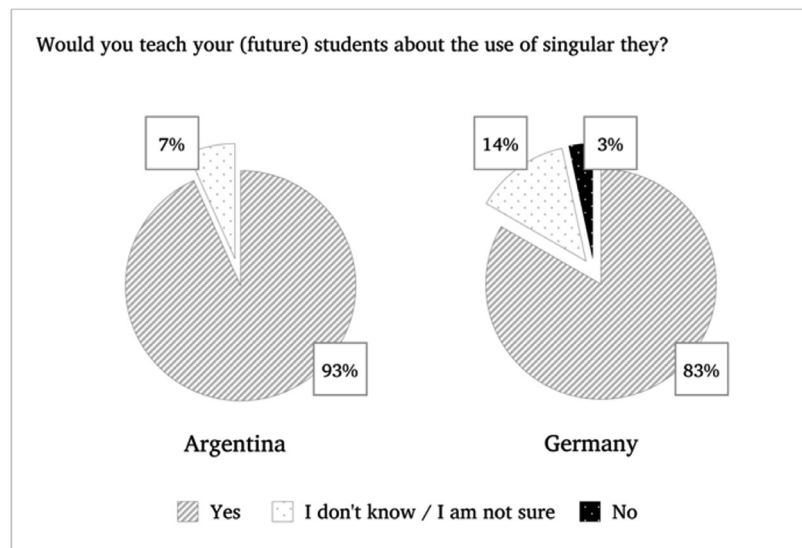


Fig. 13: Argentinian and German participants' willingness to teach singular *they*

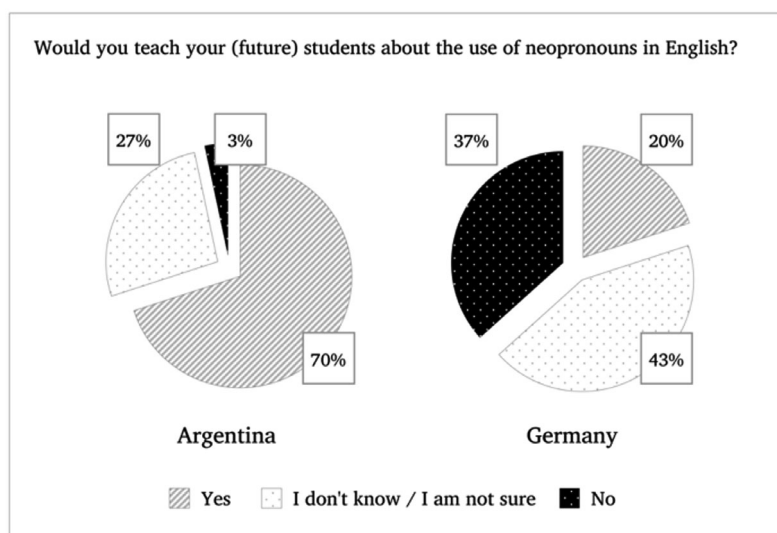


Fig. 14: German and Argentinian participants' willingness to teach neopronouns

Figure 14 reveals a notable contrast between the responses of Germans and Argentinians regarding teaching neopronouns. A substantial majority (70 %) of Argentinians expressed interest in integrating these forms, while only 20 % of Germans displayed a similar inclination. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that only one Argentinian participant opposed teaching neopronouns entirely, whereas 37 % of German respondents were against it. This disparity appears to parallel the varying ratings given to neopronoun *ze* in the AJT by both groups. The negative general rating among German participants implies a lesser willingness to teach this form, while the positive rating among Argentinian participants indicates a greater readiness to do so.

Eleven respondents (five from Germany and six from Argentina) shared their perspectives on the reasons behind their choices regarding their willingness to teach singular *they* and neopronouns in class. Notably on person illustrates that one of the arguments against teaching singular *they* and neopronouns was the age of their students: "Since I am teaching in elementary school, teaching them about neopronouns or singular *they* would be too hard to comprehend for them" (DE-450-F24).

Additionally, example (20) showcases another participant's extended thoughts on the subject, explaining their decision not to teach neopronouns to their students: "I feel (a) that ideologies should never be written down to the children [...] Children cannot make up their minds on complex things like gender as it is also very difficult and challenging for adults" (DE-264-M27).

With this example in mind, it becomes evident that pronouns, gender, and identity are intricately linked, and the idea of specific linguistic forms being tied to a particular *ideology* becomes apparent.

Some participants would not teach neopronouns due to curricular limitations: “To be honest... The *Lehrplan* [syllabus] doesn't leave much room for neopronouns. Plus, I feel that *they* is the most widespread and commonly used in everyday English” (DE-205-M26).

Others point to the lower prevalence of these pronouns in comparison to singular *they* as their rationale or to their own lack of knowledge about the topic: “I would teach the use of neopronouns if it became more widespread” (DE-316-F30). “I don't know enough about neo pronouns to teach about it at school, but I'm interested to look it up” (DE-080-F27).

Five Argentinian participants who would teach both singular *they* and neopronouns and one participant who shared that she was unsure about teaching them also opened up about their reasons. The participant who was unsure explained that she would like to teach these forms, but feels that she is not prepared to deal with the reactions of her students and has no access to appropriate resources: “I feel like in Argentina, many of my adult students still find the inclusive language a ‘joke’ and I still cannot find pedagogical material that's updated” (AR-298-F24).

Three participants who were previously unaware of neopronouns before taking the survey mentioned their intention to educate their students about them and also provided some insights on the subject: “I feel I have learned a lot by completing this questionnaire. As I mentioned in one of the tasks before, I had no idea about the use of *zel/zem/zir* or any other neopronouns in English” (AR-389-F35). “Thank you for giving me the chance to reflect upon my own use of pronouns in both languages and for introducing me to neopronoun”. (AR-174-F28). “It is really important to raise awareness about these uses in the language” (AR-390-F26).

A noteworthy result of this survey is that it piqued the interest of some participants who were previously unaware of the existence of neopronouns, motivating them to explore and potentially incorporate these pronouns into their classes: “I will do more research on them in the future, not just for my own use, but also to expose my students to them” (AR-174-F28). “It's not just about mentioning these ‘new’ pronouns to them, but explaining also the meaning behind them, what they entail and so on” (AR-390-F26)

What is more, other participants were already teaching these forms: “As regards singular *they*, whenever I have the opportunity to teach it, I do so” (AR-389-F35).

Those with prior knowledge of neopronouns who were willing to teach them alongside singular *they* reflected on how crucial this subject was to them:

“I think that this topic is very interesting. Languages are constantly changing. As teachers, we cannot avoid talking about these changes with students” (AR-304-F31).

“I have already tried to make my classes more inclusive, and I have taught about the use of singular *they*. For my non-binary students, I know that they see themselves and their identities validated thanks to me and their classmates using these pronouns to refer to them. Now I will try to incorporate the topic of neopronouns in my classes as well. It might be a little hard to teach singular *they* or neopronouns in some schools, like catholic schools that are constantly imposing their very conservative ideologies, but I think it’s an important topic and can be addressed within ESI [Educación Sexual Integral, i.e. Comprehensive Sexual Education] in either primary or secondary school.” (AR-544-F29)

Interestingly this example brings up the subject of ideology once again, this time in reference to individuals who oppose the use of non-binary pronouns, describing them as *very conservative*. This indicates that, for some participants, the acceptance or rejection of non-binary pronouns is somewhat linked to specific ideologies, political stances, and worldviews.

In light of this, it becomes apparent that multiple factors influence participants’ willingness to teach singular *they* and neopronouns. For example, some teachers may struggle to find an appropriate place in the curriculum to introduce these topics or lack access to suitable teaching resources. The age of the students also plays a role, with some educators believing that younger students may not grasp the concept or that it may promote a particular ideology. However, those educators who are open to teaching about non-binary pronouns emphasize the importance of addressing the topic with students of all ages, even when faced with opposition from conservative religious groups.

The findings revealed that several factors influence educators’ willingness to teach students about singular *they* and neopronouns. These factors include syllabus constraints, access to appropriate materials, and differing beliefs about students’ readiness for such discussions. However, some educators recognize the importance of addressing these topics across all age groups, even in contexts where resistance exists. The lack of inclusive materials in English language teaching also hinders progress in this area, with the burden often falling on teachers to create their resources.

On teaching materials and language policy: a final reflection

EFL textbooks have a well-documented history of lacking diversity and exhibiting gender bias, with a persistent presence of heteronormativity² (Paiz, 2015). Additionally, commercial textbooks have been found to underrepresent the LGBTQ+ community, leading teachers to create their own resour-

² It is worth remarking that heteronormativity is intrinsically linked to cisnormativity and hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. Marchia and Sommer (2019) offer an interest-

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ces (ibid., 2018). Consequently, it is not surprising that educators encounter challenges in locating materials addressing the use of non-binary language strategies in the English language. This can be seen as detrimental for students because

[b]y not teaching English learners that singular they [or other non-binary language strategies] can be used to refer to singular, genderless antecedents [i.e., people whose gender identity does not align with the man/woman binary], educators are neglecting an important aspect of descriptive language. (LaScottie, 2016: 76)

Fuentes / Gómez Soler (2022: 16 f.) highlight that it is key for students to “be aware of the full repertoire of options available to native speakers” as they “have the right to incorporate these options if suitable for them as well as to understand them and reply to them in a respectful manner”. For that reason, it is crucial that teachers understand that they can seamlessly integrate non-binary pronouns into existing lessons. Non-binary language strategies involve incorporating elements both from within and outside the standard language. The inclusion of these elements alongside standard language use does not necessitate significant additional effort. Likewise, the introduction of neopronouns doesn’t require an extensive explanation either. The decision to include or exclude them in the curriculum is where ideology becomes a factor. As highlighted by Hekanaho (2020: 4), there is an ideological motivation behind the utilization and acceptance of such pronouns. Ultimately, addressing gender diversity in English classrooms should be supported by educational policies to ensure all students have access to these important linguistic aspects, rather than relying solely on the intrinsic motivation of teachers to teach these forms to their students.

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