

Opening linguistic spaces in the gendered language classroom: The gender-just teacher toolkit

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Abstract

Introducing gender-just linguistic practices in language education fosters the creation of a learning environment that is respectful and attentive to the diversity of language classes. In this paper, we provide an overview of existing terminology and main research studies on the thematization of gender-just language in the language classroom. We then propose a pedagogical framework in the form of a toolkit with conceptual principles and linguistic strategies and examine its practical applications. Our aim is to orient the pedagogical and linguistic choices of teachers of gendered languages in the complex task of giving linguistic visibility to gender diversity.

L'introduzione di pratiche linguistiche inclusive di genere nell'educazione linguistica favorisce la creazione di un ambiente di apprendimento rispettoso e attento alla diversità delle classi di lingua. In questo contributo forniamo una panoramica della terminologia esistente e dei principali studi sulla tematizzazione del linguaggio ampio di genere nella classe di lingua. Proponiamo quindi un quadro pedagogico sotto forma di un toolkit con principi concettuali e strategie linguistiche ed esaminiamo le sue applicazioni pratiche. Il nostro obiettivo è di orientare le scelte pedagogiche e linguistiche di insegnanti di lingue con genere nel complesso compito di dare visibilità linguistica alla diversità di genere.

Keywords: inclusion; gender pedagogy; language education; gender justice; gendered language teaching

Parole chiave: inclusione; pedagogia di genere; educazione linguistica; giustizia di genere; insegnamento di lingue con genere

1. Introduction

In the context of ongoing debates about gender-just language use (see e.g., Sczesny et al., 2016; Sulis & Gheno, 2022), there has been a recent focus on the pedagogical implications of teaching and learning gendered languages, which present linguistic challenges in representing individuals who do not fit into traditional binary gender categories (e.g., Lesniak, 2023; Peters, 2020). As language learning involves a process of identity reconstruction (Norton, 2013), introducing teaching practices that consciously support students in developing meaningful language to express a variety of gender identities is crucial to gender-just language education.

As Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) note, gendered languages like Italian, French and Spanish assign a grammatical gender to all nouns and their modifiers (e.g., adjectives, articles, etc.). When nouns refer to human beings, grammatical gender usually conflates with the gender identity of the referent, but this is not always the case (see e.g., Sulis & Gheno, 2022). For this reason, gendered languages present more challenges in addressing and expressing the identity of gender-nonconforming individuals, whose gender identities do not fit into the binary feminine – masculine paradigm. Additionally, these languages tend to give the masculine form more visibility as the dominant default form, for example when referring to mixed groups, a phenomenon which has been found to create ambiguity and gender representation biases (see e.g., Sczesny et al., 2016; Stahlberg & Sczesny, 2001). Because of these challenges, speakers of gendered languages have been exploring ways to make them more inclusive of all gender identities.

While there is a growing body of literature on gender-just language use in the classroom (e.g., Knisely & Russell, 2024; Lacar, 2021; Peters, 2020, see section 3 for an overview), there remains a scarcity of structured pedagogical frameworks that provide language practitioners with principles and strategies for integrating gender-just language into their teaching practices. Our study aims to address this gap by developing a comprehensive, non-language-specific framework that offers practical principles and strategies for educators to incorporate gender-just language into curriculum design and classroom practices. By connecting available research and teaching practice, this article aims to support teachers in opening new “linguistic spaces”, a metaphor used by Manera (2021) to highlight the need of giving voice to those excluded or underrepresented in current linguistic practices. This study is informed by our dual perspective as academics in applied linguistics and as university language teachers in an English-dominant context with very diverse student populations (Peters, 2020). Teaching in a context where students speak English, a language where gender is expressed through pronouns and where speakers have adopted the singular “they” to include non-binary identities, means that students often ask how to use similar practices in the languages that they are studying. Therefore, to meet our students’ communicative needs in this context, we have sought to identify pedagogical and linguistic tools that can facilitate a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

This paper opens with a reflection on the terminology around gender-just language and a review of the available literature on gender-just pedagogies. It then presents a pedagogical framework in the form of a toolkit for supporting teachers to make informed decisions in the teaching process through a series of principles and linguistic strategies. We conclude by examining the applicability of the toolkit in the classroom.

2. Navigating linguistic inclusivity

Due to the extensive scholarly output on gender and language, various terms have been introduced over time. A selection of these terms is presented in Table 1 with a short definition.

Table 1. Key terminology used in the literature focusing on gender and language

Gender inclusive language	Language that avoids discrimination and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes.
Gender neutral language	Language that avoids marking grammatical gender. It can be seen as “gender-blind” and potentially obscuring identities through neutralization.
Gender-just/Gender-fair language	Language that aims to represent all genders equitably, avoiding bias.
Broad language (linguaggio ampio) / Extended language (lingua estesa)	These terms promote the notion of expanding language use to recognize diverse gender identities, allowing flexibility. It highlights the plurality and multiplicity of co-existing gender identities and differences.
Representative/Self-representative language (linguaggio rappresentativo/ autorappresentativo)	It focuses on empowering individuals to define their own identities through language.
Gender-conscious language (Geschlechterbewusste Sprache)	It emphasizes awareness and sensitivity to gender, promoting equality through language.

Terms such as gender-just (Knisely, 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; Lesniak, 2023) or gender-fair (Koeser et al., 2015) are gaining traction in the debate, focusing on the notion of social justice in the space of the language classroom. In some literature, the term gender neutral (e.g., Díaz et al., 2022) is preferred, sometimes used as a synonym of gender inclusive (Peters, 2020). However, in some disciplinary spaces, the adjective neutral is perceived in a negative way, as it “reflects a gender-blind ideology” (del Río-González, 2021, p. 1018; see also Smith & Bamberger, 2021) which tends to make gender identities invisible. The term gender inclusive is also commonly used in the Anglophone scholarship to indicate language “that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes” (United Nations, n.d.). Although this term is current in several languages, the notions of “inclusiveness” and “inclusive language” have come under scrutiny. Some scholars and activists argue that it expresses the idea that someone in a position of power includes by defining or “labelling” someone in a less powerful position (Gheno, 2022, 2023; Gümüşay, 2020). Therefore, new terminology has emerged. For instance, the term “lingua estesa” (Manera, 2021; extended language, auth. trans.) which suggests openness towards a more variable and expendable use of the language; or “linguaggio rappresentativo o autorappresentativo” (Gheno, 2023, p. 63, representative or self-representative language, auth. trans.), which refers to the empowerment of individuals in defining their own identity. Borrowing from Acanfora’s (2020) notion of “convivenza delle differenze” (coexistence of differences, auth. trans.), Gheno (2022, 2023) proposes the use of the term “linguaggio ampio” (broad or open language, auth. trans.) which she prefers for its features of “costante allargamento” (Gheno, 2023, p. 62, steady expansion, auth. trans.). The notion of “steady expansion” places emphasis on the fact that speakers can expand the way their language is used to create new spaces for different gender identities through new linguistic practices without excluding

consolidated and in-use linguistic forms or prescribing new ones. Her position, as ours, is to “aprire”, “problematizzare” and “proporre” (opening, problematising and proposing, auth. trans.) rather than “chiudere”, “normare” and “imporre” (closing, regulating, imposing, auth. trans.) (Gheno, 2023, p. 64).

Within this debate, we believe that the German term “Geschlechterbewusste Sprache” (GEW, 2016; gender-conscious language, auth. trans.) is also relevant for our discussion. The notion of gender-conscious language is particularly effective as it emphasizes the importance of being aware of how language can influence perceptions of gender and reinforce gender stereotypes or biases (Sczesny et al., 2016). Gender-consciousness implies a need for active reflection and change in the way language is used. It encourages individuals to think critically about their language choices and to make adjustments to promote gender equality.

We argue that discussions on gender justice can benefit from the integration of the approaches underpinning “broad language” and “gender-conscious language”. To integrate these approaches, one could adopt a gender-conscious mindset through the use of linguistic practices that extend current linguistic norms. This means being aware of the impact of language on gender perceptions (gender-conscious language) and also being open to adopting inclusive language forms that reflect a broad spectrum of gender identities (broad language). By combining these approaches, language users can promote gender representation and equity without prescribing a single way of speaking or writing, allowing for a more nuanced and reflective engagement with the language (see also Knisely, 2022d; Knisely & Russell, 2024) with the final goal of promoting gender-just linguistic practices. In fact, languages are not inherently sexist or gender-unjust; rather, it is the linguistic practices of their speakers that may reflect these biases (see Sulis & Gheno, 2022, p. 156 for a discussion on this).

As others before us (see Knisely, 2022a versus Knisely, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d), we moved from a reflection on inclusiveness to using the term gender-just, motivated by the idea of opening linguistic spaces in a conscious way. In our vision, a just use of the language emphasizes respect for individual choices and promotes a positive tension towards creating social justice both within and beyond the classroom.

3. Literature review

3.1 *The need for and the benefits of a gender-just pedagogical orientation*

As noted previously, language teaching and learning is a space for identity (re)construction, where students not only develop linguistic skills but also shape their identities (see e.g., Norton, 2013). This consideration has led to approaches that consider students’ evolving identities, including gender identities, within language curricula, textbooks and classroom practices (Hagen, 2023; Lacar, 2021; Lesniak, 2023; Osborne, 2024), with the aim of challenging the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities in the classrooms and of promoting equity, access and representation (Liddicoat, 2009).

Research conducted on the experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals within educational settings has shown that educational institutions and teachers are often unprepared to address their distinct needs (see e.g., Goldberg et al., 2019; Knisely, 2022d). An important way of addressing them is through the implementation of gender-just pedagogies. This brings new challenges, particularly for teachers of gendered languages, who navigate the complexities of teaching languages based on a binary grammatical gender while also enabling individuals that do not fit within those systems to fully express their identities (see e.g., Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Peters, 2020). While complex, it is essential for teachers to enable their students to use gender-affirming language (e.g., Knisely & Russell, 2024; McLemore, 2015) and to avoid the consolidation of male biases in mental representations associated with the use of masculine forms as generic forms (Sczesny et al., 2016; Stahlberg & Sczesny, 2001).

It should be noted here that gender-just language education is an ethical choice that enhances the learning experiences of all students, not just of those who identify as gender-nonconforming. As Knisely (2022a, 2022d)

observes, reflecting on gender-just language enables all students to better understand language as a complex, evolving system that adapts to speakers' needs and interacts with identity and power dynamics. This exploration offers valuable insights into linguistic variation and societal norms, helping learners appreciate the broader context in which languages operate (see also Knisely & Paiz, 2021). Moreover, gender-just pedagogies provide all students with essential skills for navigating a diverse world, such as intercultural competence: students exposed to gender-just approaches tend to exhibit improved skills and attitudes towards diverse cultures and practices and become more adept at discussing gender and identity issues intersectionally (Knisely, 2022c). Additionally, there is evidence that engaging with gender-just linguistic practices enhances linguistic proficiency (Knisely, 2022b). In essence, gender-just pedagogies lead to more informed, empathetic, linguistically proficient and socially aware speakers.

3.2 Key studies on gender-just language education in the classroom

There are several resources available for educators of any teaching area interested in exploring gender-just communication and/or gender-just education. A useful general resource, for instance, is UNESCO's (2020) *Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Toolkit*, which is designed to help educators integrate gender equality into teaching and learning processes. The toolkit includes practical activities, case studies and guidelines for promoting gender-sensitive language and interactions in the classroom. There is still, however, a scarcity of publications offering resources for teachers of gendered languages. Indeed, as Knisely (2022d) observes, despite the recognized importance of gender-just pedagogies, there has been minimal attention given to gender diversity within language curricula, textbooks, research, teacher training and pedagogical approaches.

Recent studies have tried to reverse this trend by proposing practical approaches, strategies and adaptable lesson plans to promote diversity-affirming pedagogies (see e.g., Knisely, 2022a; Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Lacar, 2021; Merolla, 2024; Osborne, 2024; Parra & Faria, 2024), on the assumption that the adoption of gender-just strategies is not only an ethical choice to promote equity, representation and social justice, but also a way to foster student engagement and critical thinking about social issues. This body of literature rests on the foundation that teachers are active agents in the creation of equitable learning environments. As Knisely and Paiz (2021) observe, self-reflection is the starting point of a gender-just pedagogical orientation and teachers should conduct regular self-inventories to assess their understanding of gender-just issues, so as to consider how their own knowledge, biases, and positionality might impact their teaching. This scholarship also points to the importance of integrating gender-just topics throughout the curriculum and of promoting inclusivity through modelling gender-just language practices in the classroom. This includes drawing upon linguistic strategies that give visibility to different identities (visibilization) or neutralize gender (neutralization, see e.g., Knisely, 2022a and Peters, 2020 for French; Merolla, 2024 for Italian; Osborne, 2024 for Portuguese; Díaz et al., 2022 for Spanish). Knisely and Paiz (2021) also recommend that teachers interested in implementing gender-just pedagogies seek institutional support, look for allies and connect with external organizations for overcoming challenges and fostering a supportive environment for gender-nonconforming individuals.

Our study builds upon this body of scholarship and aims to provide a structured framework that language educators can use to systematically implement gender-just pedagogies in their teaching practices. While existing research and resources offer valuable insights and strategies, they sometimes provide foundational guidance without a comprehensive approach that can be easily applied by teachers (see, however, Knisely, 2022d). By developing a non-language-specific framework, our study seeks to complement and expand upon these scholarly contributions, offering principles and strategies for educators to integrate gender-just language into their curriculum design and teaching practices.

4. Pedagogical framework: The gender-just teacher toolkit

Having clarified the potential benefits of incorporating gender-just practices into language education, this section aims to provide a pedagogical framework in the form of a toolkit that can connect current research with teaching practice. In this section, we first describe the purposes of the toolkit and then outline some principles and linguistic strategies. We conclude by reviewing how teachers can develop a pedagogical stance drawing from the toolkit to make informed pedagogical decisions.

4.1 Purpose of the toolkit

Creating a toolkit for broad and gender-conscious language is a complex task, as it requires a level of prescriptivism and standardization that is at odds with the emerging and dynamically changing nature of gender-just linguistic practices. There are many challenges: innovative forms remain largely unstandardized, are often limited to specific communities and lack formal mainstream recognition (see e.g., Knisely, 2022a). However, we believe that the toolkit can be a useful guide for teachers navigating this complex landscape.

The toolkit is a summary of pedagogical principles and linguistic strategies applicable to Romance languages and potentially adaptable to other gendered languages. It can also be used as a tool for pedagogical reflection, offering teachers opportunities to introduce their students – but also colleagues, school leadership and the broader school community – to the potential of gendered languages to be used in gender-just ways. Looking beyond the rigidity of a binary grammatical structure, the toolkit provides strategies to go beyond the dichotomy masculine-feminine and the dominance of masculine forms by offering more diverse options. It explores ways to express gender identities through an informed use of traditional grammar and consolidated linguistic resources as well as through innovative forms that are surfacing in the use of gendered languages in particular contexts (e.g., queer communities) and are more disruptive of existing language rules. In providing these choices, we strongly support the notion of expanding and broadening linguistic options (see discussions on “broad language” in section 2) without setting prescriptive rules or excluding mainstream practices. On the contrary, we acknowledge the complexity of these challenges and promote the notion of linguistic choices as related to personal, pedagogical and contextual conditions. We are also aware that these choices influence the way each language evolves. Expressions and forms that may not be fully in use now may become predominant – or lose traction – in the future. As this process is influenced by language users, supporting teachers in adopting and introducing more gender-just forms to their students may influence language evolution and change toward more gender-just practices. In other words, teachers can be active agents in supporting gender-conscious linguistic practices.

4.2 The toolkit: principles and key linguistic strategies

In developing the toolkit, we reflected on the challenges that teachers may encounter in introducing gender-just practices in the language classroom, also in light of previous scholarship (see section 3.2). As can be seen in Figure 1, the toolkit consists of six principles and four linguistic strategies that teachers can draw from to make informed pedagogical decisions.

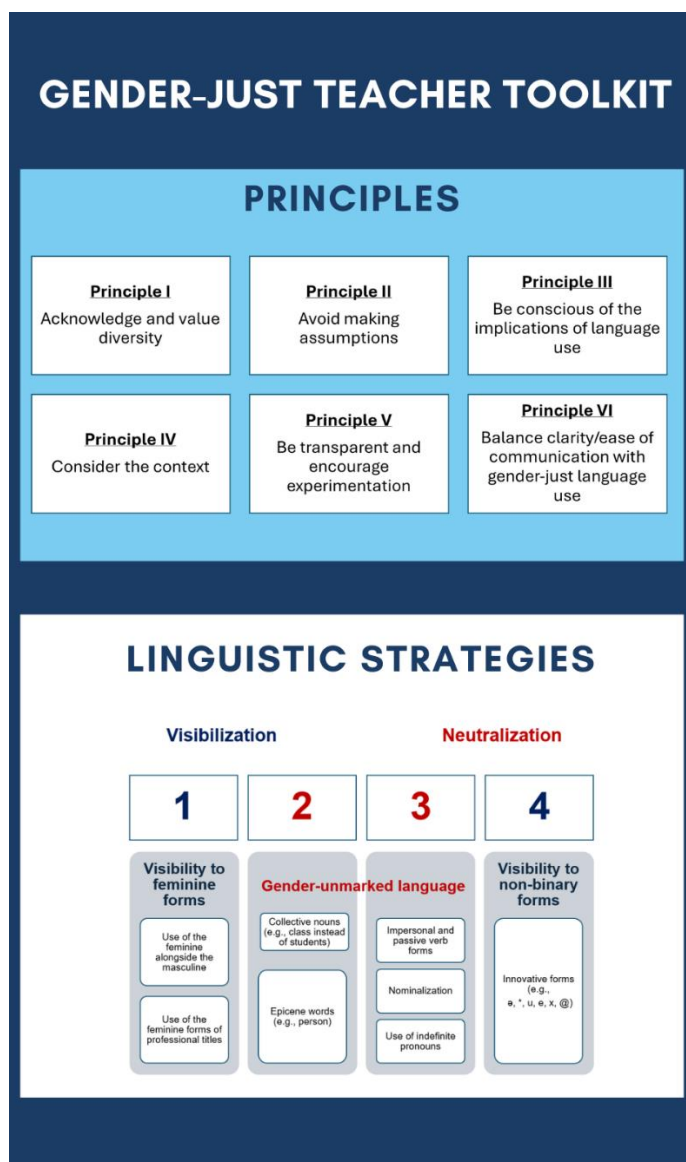


Figure 1. The Gender-just teacher toolkit: an overview

Principles

The principles range from raising awareness of differences to exploring gender-just options to express a variety of gender identities.

Principle I - Acknowledge and value diversity

Teachers are aware of the importance of acknowledging diversity in the classroom. We refer to the “coexistence of differences” framework (see section 2, Acanfora, 2020; Gheno, 2023) based on which acknowledging differences in the language class means opening a space for linguistic choices that recognise, respect and make gender identities visible (Manera, 2021). For example, challenging the prevalent use of the generic masculine.

Principle II - Avoid making assumptions

In order to make identities visible, we propose to model attitudes toward individual expression of identity that avoid assumptions based on physical appearance, ways of speaking and interacting.

Principle III - Be conscious of the implications of language use

Research indicates that language affects self-perceptions and mental representations (see McLemore, 2015; Sczesny et al., 2016; Stahlberg & Sczesny, 2001). For example, choosing to make visible one or multiple genders or choosing to neutralize altogether gender may impact the way individuals are perceived and perceive themselves. Teachers need to be aware of these implications and take them into consideration when making linguistic choices in the classroom.

Principle IV - Consider the context

Language teaching and learning do not occur in a void but in a space inhabited by people (e.g., students, teachers, school staff, families, etc.) and their differences. Teachers need to investigate and become aware of their context in order to make more conscious linguistic choices in the teaching process.

Principle V - Be transparent and encourage experimentation

It is crucial for educators to foster open and honest discussions with students on the issue of gender justice. Educators should highlight that many non-binary linguistic forms are still developing and may not yet be widely recognized or fully integrated into mainstream usage. This, however, does not mean that they are less valid, and students should be free to experiment.

Principle VI - Balance clarity/ease of communication with gender-just language use

It is essential to recognize that achieving clarity/ease of communication and making sensible pedagogical decisions sometimes require a delicate balance with the imperative of using gender-just language forms. This balancing act can involve choosing when to prioritize the use of traditional/less gender aware forms and when to opt for more gender-just alternatives. Teachers can explain the rationale behind their language choices to students and signal their stance towards gender-justice even when using traditional binary forms. Arguably, teachers' stance-taking and demonstrated openness to the issue of gender-justice through discussions with students is more significant than the systematic use of gender-just forms, which may not be systematically employed for communicative clarity, contextual and pedagogical reasons.

These principles constitute the premises on which teachers make informed pedagogical decisions on the use of gender-just linguistic practices. As reflective practitioners with agency in the pedagogical process, teachers are therefore well positioned to support gender-just practices in teaching the language.

4.3 Linguistic strategies

Following previous research (e.g., Díaz et al., 2022; Sczesny et al., 2016; Sulis & Gheno, 2022), we have identified two approaches to fostering gender-just language: visibilization and neutralization, each serving a distinct purpose. These approaches lead to four strategies, arranged in a sequence from the simplest (1-2) to the most complex (3-4).

Visibilization includes overt strategies that make underrepresented identities visible (strategies 1 and 4). These strategies are, to some extent, overtly disruptive of existing language practices. Feminization (strategy 1) focuses on making the feminine form more visible in languages where the masculine form traditionally dominates. This

can be seen as a feminist response to the pervasive use of the masculine as the default (e.g., Sulis & Gheno, 2022). When employing feminization, speakers use both the feminine and masculine forms. This strategy draws from existing linguistic resources to give visibility to women and challenge the inequitable use of the masculine as a catch-all (Sczesny et al., 2016). Strategy 4 aims to make gender-nonconforming identities visible through the use of emerging linguistic innovations used by nongender-conforming communities, e.g., the schwa (ə), “*” and “u” in Italian (Sulis & Gheno, 2022), the final “e”, “x” and “@” in Spanish (Díaz et al., 2022) and Portuguese (Zandomenico & Fernandes, 2024), the midpoint in French (e.g., Knisely, 2022a).

Neutralization, on the other hand, pursues the opposite goal of fostering linguistic practices that do not give any indication about gender identities. This approach is particularly useful when the gender(s) of the people being addressed are unknown and can also be used by non-binary individuals. Neutralization draws on covert strategies: it utilizes language features that already exist and therefore are not disruptive of prescriptivist language norms. Some are presented in Figure 1. For instance, speakers rely on the use of collective nouns, i.e. nouns that are used to name a group and do not give any indication of the gender(s) of the people being referred to, or they may decide to use epicene words, i.e. terms that do not vary their grammatical gender in accordance with the gender of the person they refer to (see e.g., Sczesny et al., 2016). Other strategies include the use of impersonal and passive forms, nominalization and the use of indefinite pronouns (see e.g., Merolla, 2024 for Italian; Knisely, 2022d and Peters, 2020 for French; Díaz et al., 2022 for Spanish, Zandomenico & Fernandes, 2024 for Portuguese). Neutralization strategies are arguably the most versatile, as they can be used by both gender-conforming and non-binary people to speak or write in a way that does not make gender salient. Pedagogically speaking, we believe they should be introduced to non-binary students as first options as they enable them to learn and practise linguistic forms that are widely accepted (e.g., gender agreements) and used.

In earlier works on the toolkit (see Amorati & Pirovano, 2024), we had included strategy 4 under the approach “neutralization”. However, upon further reflection, we argue that “neutralization” falls short in describing strategies for addressing gender diversity for two key reasons. Firstly, the term neutralization implies that non-binary individuals are somehow “neutral”. This framing fails to capture the complexity and diversity of non-binary identities (e.g., Knisely & Russell, 2024). Secondly, the term neutralization does not arguably disrupt traditional binary norms but rather reinforces them by positioning non-binary individuals in an intermediary “neutral” state within the polar opposites of masculine and feminine. In contrast, visualization captures the goal of challenging and disrupting existing gender norms rather than simply inserting a “neutral” option within the binary framework.

We should note that while strategy 4 is the one most clearly associated with non-binary identities, not all non-binary individuals may decide to use it. The same observation can be made for women who choose to use the masculine form of professions to refer to themselves (see e.g., Gheno 2023; Sulis & Gheno, 2022). Some studies have shown that some non-binary people may decide to use binary pronouns and forms of agreement, sometimes alternating between them (see e.g., Knisely, 2022a; Prunotto, 2023). Knisely (2022a) observes that in order to respond to the need for providing students with non-binary forms, teachers can refer to empirical research on the linguistic forms used by non-binary speakers (for French, see e.g., Knisely, 2022a; for Italian, see Sulis & Gheno, 2022) or engage directly with them (Osborne, 2024). In the interim, we argue that neutralization strategies can be an effective way to enable students to move beyond the grammatical binary in the target language while also following mainstream linguistic norms.

4.4 Developing a pedagogical stance

Aligning with other pedagogical positions in this space (e.g., Knisley, 2022b), the toolkit is not conceptualised as a pre-packaged, one-for-all solution on how to use gendered languages in more just ways in the classroom. We believe that effective gender-just teaching cannot be reduced to a series of strategies to be implemented independently from teachers' linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. On the contrary, we argue, borrowing Scarino and Liddicoat's (2009, p. 5) words, that "teachers come to the act of teaching and learning with their own dynamic framework of knowledge and understanding of their own personal, social, cultural and linguistic make-up and that of their students". This knowledge, which changes and adapts through personal experience and professional reflection, influences their pedagogical choices.

For language teachers, in addition to other personal and professional knowledge, the pedagogical stance is also influenced by their connection with the language they teach, which depends, for example on the way they learnt the language, the context in which they use it and the contact they have with communities of speakers. For example, teachers may be more or less open to challenge mainstream linguistic norms depending on their exposure to discussions about gender justice and their connection to non-binary communities.

Other two key factors, essential in guiding teacher's pedagogical choices in relation to gender-just linguistic practices, are the curriculum and the specific school context, which include the students, the school and the wider community. Teachers are required to follow a curriculum as well as to respond to expectations in terms of outcomes and assessment practices. Even if the curriculum does not explicitly include references to gender-just linguistic practices, it provides teachers with a set of skills and knowledge descriptors as well as goals and topics that can lend themselves to activities raising awareness about gender diversity and gender-just language use. These opportunities may influence the way teachers position themselves toward gender-just language in the teaching space. For instance, language curricula often include descriptors on supporting students to make conscious linguistic choices based on the context and the people being addressed, to understand how languages change over time, or to develop intercultural skills (in our context, see ACARA, n.d.). Language curricula also encompass topics that provide opportunities for discussions on language and gender, e.g., thematic areas such as family and occupations. Therefore, teachers can be supported by their curriculum in making pedagogical decisions on the introduction of gender-just language in their teaching practice.

Another factor that influences teachers' stance is the specific contexts in which they work, and, most of all, their students with their challenges, their needs, their wishes on how to acknowledge, express and make visible their individual and diverse gender identities; and then the wider school community which includes teachers, staff and leadership as well as families and the broader community with its cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious expressions. For example, in a school where some students identify as gender-nonconforming and have voiced the desire for more representation in the language classroom, teachers may feel compelled to integrate regular discussions about non-binary identities into their lessons. This not only validates the identities of those students but also educates their peers about diversity. Conversely, if the school and broader community hold conservative views on gender identity, teachers may face pushback from parents or community members, which could lead them to approach the topic with more caution.

Based on these factors, teachers make decisions on how and when to introduce gender-just options to their students. This decision process is neither straightforward nor linear, but rather complex and messy; it builds through constant adjustment to the context with the final goal of developing more just linguistic practices in the language classroom.

5. The toolkit in practice: teaching, resources, assessment

Once teachers have reflected on their stance, the strategies provided in the toolkit support them in making decisions around how to use and teach gender-just linguistic practices. By reviewing the grammatical structure of their language and expanding the options of language use in a gender-just way, teachers can in fact exercise their agency. Based on our experience as language teachers and teacher educators, we explore practical examples in which the toolkit can support teachers of gendered languages in: (1) finding strategies to get a sense of gender diversity in the classroom in a sensitive and respectful way; (2) making decisions on how/when to introduce gender-just language in the classroom, (3) using gender-just language in assessments.

5.1 Getting a sense of gender diversity in the classroom

Getting to know students is a fundamental principle of pedagogical knowledge. Therefore, taking a genuine interest in the diversity of gender identities in the classroom is essential for understanding them and designing lessons that address students' needs and challenges. Principles I (Acknowledge and value diversity) and II (Avoid making assumption) can guide the introduction of strategies to explore gender identities in the classroom. The toolkit provides all the marked and non-marked linguistic options (from strategy 1 to 4) available to teachers when starting conversations about gender-justice with their classes. As this is a very sensitive topic (e.g., Knisely & Paiz, 2021), teachers could possibly face tensions between different needs of their learners. On the one hand, some students may be very conscious of their gender identity and expect others to acknowledge it, for example they identify as non-binary and expect both to be addressed in an appropriate way in the target language and to be introduced to non-binary options available in the target language to be able to talk about themselves. On the other hand, other students may be exploring their identities and prefer not to discuss them openly, even though they are interested in learning about linguistic options related to gender diversity.

The toolkit can support teachers to manage this tension and identify potential solutions for their specific contexts (Principle IV). For example, in the first instance, it could be valuable to have strategies to explicitly ask students what their pronouns are and how they prefer to be addressed in the classroom or in individual conversations with the teacher. A sensitive approach might include asking students to add their pronouns next to their names in written work, a practice also used in professional spaces, or administering a questionnaire with some questions on gender identity in addition to other demographic or more generic questions (see e.g., Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Peters, 2020). Osborne (2024) suggests that teachers should make conscious efforts to give visibility to their own chosen pronouns, for example using them in their email signature, on the school learning platform, etc., so as to signal their stance and normalize the practice of pronoun sharing. In the second instance, the toolkit can support teachers in making decisions on when and how to use, and possibly explicitly teach, non-binary (strategy 4) or neutral forms (strategies 2 and 3) within the curriculum, for example when introducing personal pronouns, grammatical gender and adjective agreement.

5.2 Introducing gender-just language in classroom practices

Often teachers are uncertain about when to introduce gender-just forms, worrying about grammatical complexity or cognitive overload especially in the early stages of the learning process (see e.g., Lesniak, 2023). Despite these concerns, there is evidence that introducing non-binary forms alongside traditional forms from the very beginning can be effective and also signals teachers' stance on the acknowledgement and valuing of diversity to students (e.g., Kosnick, 2021; Lesniak, 2023; Osborne, 2024).

The toolkit also provides linguistic options to limit the use of the generic masculine in the classroom as the only option to address a group of mixed gender people, for example in greeting or giving instructions to the class. For instance, strategy 1 and 4 suggest linguistic forms that can be used to greet and make visible each different gender identity – by explicitly using the masculine, feminine and non-binary forms – whilst strategies 2 and 3 indicate options to neutralize gender identities altogether – for example by using an impersonal verb or a collective noun. These same strategies can be regularly applied when giving instructions to the class or posing questions. Depending on their stance, teachers may be more or less explicit about the implementation of these strategies. In any case, their use helps to normalize them and set a model and expectations for students (see e.g., Osborne, 2024).

In agreement with other scholars (e.g., Gheno, 2023; Knisley, 2022d), we suggest prioritizing forms that use traditional grammar to neutralize gender references (see the progressive structure of the toolkit, from neutralization strategy 2 to visibilization strategy 4) and use innovative forms for two main purposes: (1) signalling a pedagogical stance or (2) encouraging students to explore language change. To signal a pedagogical stance, teachers could decide to greet the class using non-binary forms alongside traditional forms, so as to show students their openness to acknowledge and value all identities (Principle I: Acknowledge and value diversity). For ease of communication, however, they may decide to mostly use periphrases or collective-epicene expressions whenever possible in classroom interactions (Principle VI: Balance clarity/ease of communication with gender-just language use). Students could be asked to explore the emergence of innovative forms (strategy 4) as part of a school project aimed at having them reflect on language change. Promoting student agency in exploring language variation can support the development of critical skills as well as cultivate dialogue and discussions on ongoing linguistic experimentations in the target language (Principle V: Be transparent and encourage experimentation, see also Knisely & Paiz, 2022; Osborne, 2024).

Following the same principles, it is also possible to use the toolkit to identify and adapt teaching materials that reinforce stereotypical roles for males and females and/or underrepresent gender diverse identities (Knisely, 2022d; Knisely & Paiz, 2021). As noted previously, referring to strategies 1 to 4 can help to be mindful of the use of the generic masculine and compensate its use by including a broader range of linguistic forms (Principle IV: Be conscious of the implications of language use). For example, vocabulary lists in textbooks (e.g., adjectives) are often presented in the masculine form only. Teachers can refer to the toolkit to choose different ways of presenting adjectives that can include feminine forms (strategy 1), non-binary forms (strategy 4) and forms that neutralize gender (strategies 2 and 3).

5.3 Using gender-just language in assessments

As for assessment strategies, we have identified three options that teachers can choose from, based on their context, students' levels and individual preferences. The first option available to non-binary students is the use of visibilization (strategy 4) and/or neutralization strategies (strategy 2 and 3) when writing or talking about themselves in assessments. This option is more appropriate for students at higher levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, these forms can be complex and challenging, and will likely necessitate individualized approaches from the teacher to support non-binary students in confidently using them in assessment tasks.

A second option, more easily applicable at any level of proficiency, is a “random choice” strategy (see e.g., Peters, 2020; Knisely & Paiz, 2021). Students choose grammatical gender randomly in different tasks and only need to be consistent in gender usage and grammatical agreements within each task. This approach mirrors the linguistic usage of some non-binary speakers, who are found to alternate between different grammatical genders (see e.g., Knisely, 2022a for Francophone non-binary speakers) and can be suitable for students who may find the use of

neutralization strategies challenging, either due to limited proficiency in the language or perceived complexity. To mitigate potential discomfort for non-binary students, it is advisable to include activities that normalize the use of varied grammatical genders by the whole class (see also Osborne, 2024). This could be achieved through activities such as role-playing exercises where students assume different identities.

A final option is what we labelled “implied meaning”. Students could use a specific binary gender for their exams in line with traditional linguistic usage and briefly explain their choice of gender. For instance, speakers of Romance languages might say that they use the feminine form as they imply a reference to themselves as a “person” (an epicene noun of feminine gender) or might use the masculine form as they imply a reference to the word “individual” (an epicene noun of masculine gender). This would enable them to practise an established binary form but also feel empowered by their decision. It is important to be transparent with students (Principle V: Be transparent and encourage experimentation) and discuss how this is a fairly artificial way of approaching the issue, proposed to navigate gender within the limits of current linguistic norms. Teachers should note that as students’ proficiency in the language develops, they will be better equipped to employ more appropriate strategies, such as neutralization and visibilization forms, consistent with their gender identities. This third option serves to accommodate students’ current level of language proficiency while preparing them for high-stakes assessments and exams (e.g., language certifications), where demonstrating proficiency in traditional grammar forms is expected.

These three assessment options align with the principles of gender-inclusive practices by encouraging students to express their identities through varied grammatical forms (e.g., Principle I: Acknowledge and value diversity). Compromise options, i.e., “random choice” and “implied meaning”, are in keeping with Principle VI (Balance clarity/ease of communication with gender-just language use), allowing students to use traditional forms while validating their individual identities.

6. Conclusion

This paper has offered practical guidelines for language teachers interested in integrating gender-just language in their classes. The toolkit we have presented prompts language educators to reflect on the impact that their word choices and linguistic practices can have on perceptions of gender and encourages them to actively choose language that respects and includes all identities. We trust the toolkit to enable teachers to make more informed decisions on how to use the language in different contexts and for different purposes, raising awareness of their role and influence as speakers and passing this agency onto their students. By providing strategies, language forms and principles based on which they can adapt language use in their context, we believe that teachers can become agents of change in the language classroom. Due to the limited research available to date on teachers’ experiences with gender-just language in the classroom, we recognise the importance for future empirical studies to focus on collecting data directly from language practitioners regarding their attitudes towards gender-just language, current practices as well as their needs and challenges.

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