



Non-gendered language: how to teach it, should we teach it?

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Learner examples....



CollegeDegrees360 - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/83633410@N07/7658298768>



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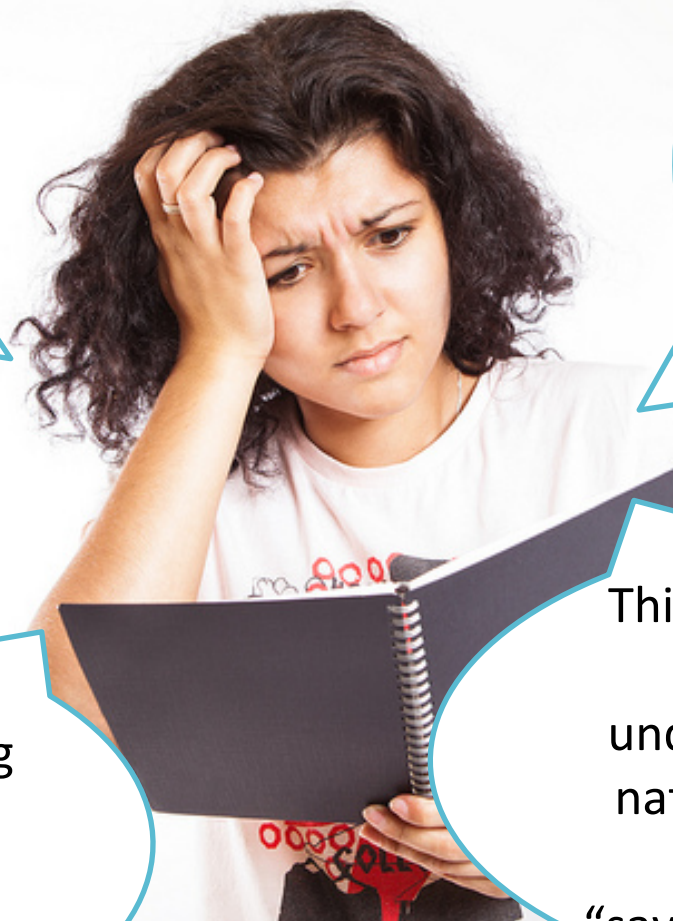
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Institutional example (!)

Could the teacher with his teaching activities improve your language skills? (applicable only if the teaching language differs from the main teaching language of the secondary school)



Explanation... (?)

German and Italian - grammatical genders: all nouns are masculine, feminine or neuter (for German).

Job titles tend to be default masculine or interpreted as masculine

English	Italian	German
the scientist	lo scienziato	der Wissenschaftler
the astronaut	l'astronauta	der Astronaut
an English native speaker	un madrelingua inglese	ein englisch Muttersprachler
a child	il bambino	das Kind
the teacher	il professore	der Professor



L'astronauta...

- Google results show all men...



L'astronauta...



NASA/Robert Markowitz -

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nasa2explore/12778323243/>

www.britishcouncil.org/englishagenda



What is sexist (or gendered) language?

- Using generic “he” , “his” or “him” to refer to both men and women
- Including gender in job titles:
business**man** – (air) host**ess** – police **woman** –
male nurse – **female** doctor



Titles and addressing people

- Using the titles *Mrs* Smith or *Miss* Smith (particularly in professional contexts)
- Using the generic *Dear Sir* when writing to unknown people:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/21/why-address-your-letter-to-a-sir-we-have-a-female-editor-now>



And think about this:

Male “firstness”:

- men and women
- male and female
- sons and daughters
- brothers and sisters
- uncle and aunt
- boys and girls
- the descendants of Adam and Eve





“Equivalents”

Semantic derogation: female less prestigious or with sexual connotations

- He is a master of the intricacies of academic politics
- Mary declined to be John’s mistress, and so returned to her husband.

- *She is a mistress of the intricacies of academic politics
- *Harry declined to be Jane’s master, and so returned to his wife.



“Equivalents”

John is an eligible bachelor

*Mary is an eligible spinster





What is sexist (or gendered) language?

It is language whose “use creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes”

(Vetterling-Braggin, 1981)

It also emphasises and perpetuates

“the historical patriarchal hierarchy that has existed between men and women where one (man) is considered the norm and the other (woman) is marked as other – as something quite different from the norm”

(Jule, 2008: 13)



What is sexist (or gendered) language?

Put simply, using generic masculine terms tend to exclude women or render them invisible.



Current situation – linguistic reform

Legislation against sex discrimination in the workplace has generated gender-neutral occupational terms (e.g., chairperson, firefighter) that are used in job advertisements, descriptions and contracts.

Inclusive or non-sexist language has been introduced in educational materials for children due to concerns about the effects of sexism.



So what's the situation in ELT?

Over the years there have been various studies on gender imbalance in coursebooks (see for example: Hartman & Judd 1978; Sunderland 1992; Aydınoğlu 2014; Hall 2014)

Main critical issues (content):

- poor representation of female characters
- stereotyping of personality traits
- stereotyping of professional roles

Mainly been addressed in mainstream coursebooks



So what's the situation in ELT?

And from a linguistic perspective?

“instructional materials generally serve as the basis of much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom” (Richards 2001: 251)



So what's the situation in ELT?

Tomlinson (2013):

“Materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use”

“materials should... reflect the reality of language use”



So what's the situation in ELT?

Most teachers make use of a coursebook in class:

65% “always or frequently used a coursebook” (British Council 2008)

92% “used a coursebook regularly” (Tomlinson 2010)



So what's the situation in ELT?

So coursebooks – especially coursebooks that are used with advanced students who are likely to want to continue studying in an English-language institution, or who might be seeking a job in a company in an international or English-language context where sexist language is not acceptable – provide language input to help learners deal explicitly with using non-sexist language, an important feature of modern English, right?



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Wrong!



Why is this an issue?

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Why is this an issue?

“instructional materials generally serve as the basis of much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom” (Richards 2001: 251)

especially when

- local language uses gender differently to English
- lack of awareness from instructors



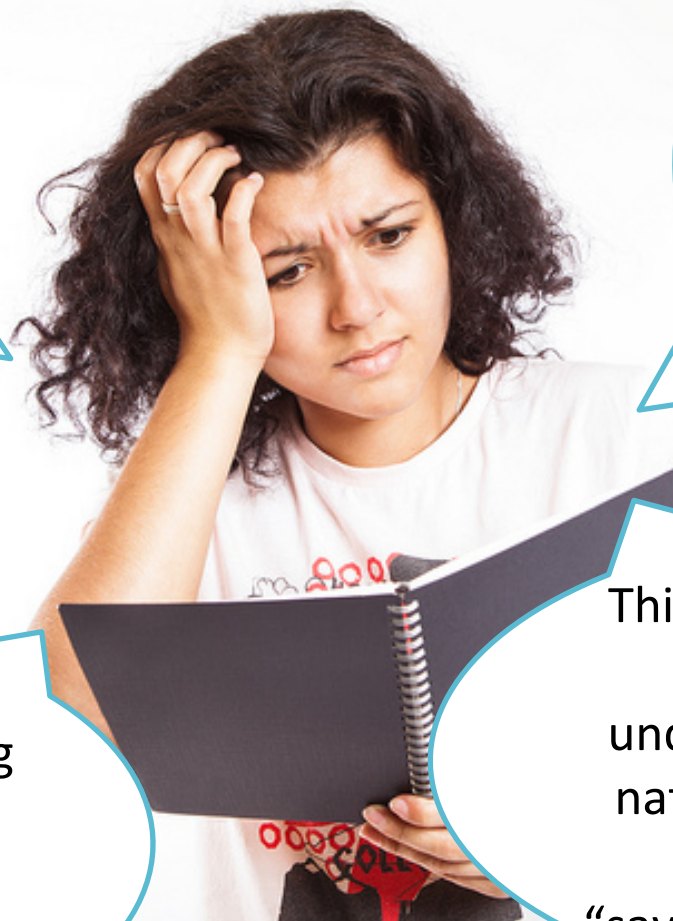
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This may cause problems when it comes to understanding an English native speaker who uses different words or “sayings” of his home town.





Testimonial

It happened during my second week in New York. We were discussing something, and I said, “An advanced computer user knows what he needs...”, and this female colleague suddenly interrupted, “Are you saying women cannot be advanced computer users?” I thought she was joking and laughed, but then realised I was the only one laughing, and she was looking at me as if I were her personal enemy.

(Sudo, 2007: 13)



How to teach it...



How to teach it...

From chapter on gender equality by Jemma Prior and Tessa Woodward in

Alan Maley & Nik Peachey (eds) *Integrating Global Issues in the Creative English Language Classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. London: The British Council.

Published in the next month or so...



Teaching activities... 1

Elicit or teach general words for people in roles connected with the scenario you choose to use. For example:

What do you call a person who....?

- rides a bike (**a cyclist**)
- rides a motor bike (**a motorcyclist or biker**)
- travels to work regularly (**a commuter**)
- walks in a town (**a pedestrian**)
- walks past when an accident happens (**a passerby**)
- sees what happens (**a witness**)



Teaching activities... 1

Provide the class with a “scenario” to discuss in pairs.
The groups should come to an agreed position on what to do in the situation.

An example might be:



Teaching activities . 1

A pedestrian sees a cyclist lying on the road after having had a road accident. There are other people around. What action should the pedestrian take?



Teaching activities... 1

Students discuss the scenario. Once they have agreed on what to do, a spokesperson from each group summarises the group's findings to the rest of the class. Groups then discuss the suggestions.

The pronouns students used to refer to the “pedestrian” and “cyclist” will often tend to be masculine (e.g. ‘We think the pedestrian should check whether the cyclist is breathing and then he should phone for an ambulance...’).



Teaching activities... 1



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-in-street-during-daytime-160614/>



Teaching activities... 1



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-in-street-during-daytime-160614/>



Teaching activities... 1

By showing a picture where the pedestrian and/or cyclist is a woman, you can bring the (inaccurate) assumption of male gender to the students' attention. Discuss how prevalent the assumption is and why it might be harmful to women and girls.



Teaching activities... 1

Next, display a number of grammatically correct sentences referring generally to the action decided upon:

- If you find an injured cyclist, you should check his breathing.
- If you find an injured cyclist, you should check his or her breathing.
- If you find an injured cyclist, you should check her or his breathing.
- If you find an injured cyclist, check if s/he is breathing.
- If you find an injured cyclist, you should check they are breathing.
- If you find injured cyclists, you should check they are breathing.

Ask pairs or groups of students to discuss these correct sentences. Which versions do they prefer and why?



Teaching activities... 1

Feedback from students on the sentences might mention that some versions are more inclusive, more cumbersome, harder to pronounce, more old-fashioned etc. than others.



“If the English language had been properly organised ... there would be a word which meant both 'he' and 'she', and I could write: 'If John or May comes, heesh will want to play tennis,' which would save a lot of trouble.”

A. A. Milne



Teach singular “they”

Singular “they”: “now increasingly accepted even in formal usage”

The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (1985)

2015 Word of the Year – American Dialect Society

“the only sensible solution to English’s lack of a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun.”



“If everybody minded their own business,” said The Duchess in a hoarse growl, “the world would go round a deal faster than it does”.

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

“There's not a man I meet but doth salute me./As if I were their well-acquainted friend”.

(Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*)

“A person can't help their birth”.

(Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*)



Teaching activities... 2: generic “man”

- The brotherhood of man
- “...to boldly go where no man has gone before” .
- Man’ s best friend
- No man is an island
- An Englishman’ s home is his castle
- Reason is what distinguishes man from other animals.

Render them gender neutral



Teaching activities... 2: generic “man”

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Render them gender neutral **go on, try it!** 😊



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

The whole class brainstorms job titles, for example:

policeman / doctor / nurse / actress / salesman /
nurse / teacher / postman / fireman / builder /
pilot / secretary / engineer / midwife/ architect etc.

!!! Make sure some of the words marked as feminine
come up by eliciting them, such as:

actress / stewardess / waitress / barmaid



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Students work in small groups or pairs and are asked to put the words into two groups according to whether they are job titles for men or for women.

This will certainly cause confusion and discussion especially with the words marked as female (a man can't be a barmaid!). But will students be happy with the idea of a woman being a policeman?



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Once the students have grouped them, compare as a whole class. Discuss which words are appropriate only for men and which only for women and which are appropriate for both (i.e. gender neutral).

!!! midwife

= the person who is *with* (mid) the *woman* giving birth (wife)

= gender neutral!



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Ask the students whether women work in the police / put out fires / fly aeroplanes and whether men work as nurses and midwives.

As the answer is yes, give students a prepared list of job titles and ask how they can change the job titles to be more inclusive (this could be done as a dictionary or internet search).



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

sexist job title	neutral job title
policeman	
salesman	
actress	
postman	
fireman	
businessman	
waitress	



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

sexist job title	neutral job title
policeman	police officer
salesman	sales representative
actress	actor
postman	postal worker
fireman	firefighter
businessman	business executive
waitress	waiter/server



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Focus students' attention on the gender neutral words such as pilot, doctor, nurse, teacher, secretary and in pairs ask them to do a visual web search for these job titles, e.g. with Google.

Ask them to compare in groups the images found according to how many depict men and how many women.



Doctor...



Nurse...



Pilot...



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Whole class discussion:

Why do men figure more as doctors and pilots and why do women figure more as nurses and secretaries?

Discuss issues related to perceptions of men and women in the workplace and assumptions held in students' own cultures.



Teaching activities...3: job stereotypes

Finish with this story to illustrate how ingrained sexist assumptions are:

A father and his son were involved in a tragic car accident and the father was killed. His son was taken to hospital and, when he was wheeled into the operating theatre, the doctor exclaimed: “Oh no, that’s my son!” Why did the doctor say this?



The doctor, of course, was the son's mother.



Should we teach non-gendered language?

The total invisibility of explicitly referencing non-gendered language in modern ELT coursebooks...

- exemplifies modern myth that equality has been achieved
- does not reflect language in use
- could cause learners serious difficulties when using language in real life



Should we teach non-gendered language?

Therefore it is up to us individual teachers to make sure non-gendered language is integrated into classroom teaching.



Therefore ...



<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535413>



Remember

Changes in language reflect social change but can also create social change:

Anti-feminists are fond of observing that eliminating generic masculine pronouns does not secure equal pay. Indeed it does not – whoever said it would? Eliminating generic masculine pronouns precisely eliminates generic masculine pronouns. And in so doing it changes the repertoire of social meanings and choices available to social actors.

(Cameron 1990: 90)



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