

CHANGES AND CHOICES: THE CASE OF GENDER AND ENGLISH

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Everything changes over time, even languages. Despite language teachers, grammar books, and O Level exams, there's no way to stop languages from changing. One aspect of language change of particular interest to members and supporters of AWARE is the ongoing shift from what some people call "gender-exclusive" English to "gender-inclusive" English. We will start this article by defining these two terms. Then, we will give you a brief report on a related study we conducted to find out the views and practices of a small group of English teachers from various Asian countries.

Gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive English

The term gender-exclusive refers to language in which words specifically referring to males only are used when both males and females are being discussed, for example, man (*Man has been on the planet for more than a million years*) chairman (*The chairman is responsible for conducting the meeting*), he/him/himself/his (*A student should be paid for his work*).

Some very strange instances of gender-exclusive language have been reported, including "*I believe abortion is strictly a matter between the patient and his doctor*" and "*Man, being mammal, breastfeeds his young*". Less amusing are these two examples of gender-exclusive usage: "*Around the world, man is happy*" and "*One man, one vote*". In contrast, "gender-inclusive", also known as "gender-fair" and "non-sexist" refers to language in which both men and women are included, for example, humanity, chairperson, he/she or their (*A student should be paid for his/her or their work*). [Please see Appendix for more examples of how to change from gender-exclusive to gender-inclusive usage.]

The issue of gender-exclusive/inclusive language is one of three key gender issues which need attention in classrooms. The other two issues concern:

- (1) Instructional materials - more frequent appearance of males and the presence of stereotyped images of females and males, for example, females as passive, males as active.
- (2) Classroom processes - lower participation by females in teacher-student and student-student discussions.

In 1995, Anthea Fraser Gupta and Phyllis Chew Ghim Lian conducted a very nice workshop on gender-exclusive/inclusive language at the AWARE office. They described how, because of social, political, and economic changes in the status of females, this change toward gender-inclusive English has been gathering strength.

In Western countries these days it is common for people to use gender-inclusive language. As noted British linguist David Crystal writes in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, published in 1995:

There is now a widespread awareness, which was lacking a generation ago, of the way in which language covertly displays social attitudes towards men and women. The criticisms have been mainly directed at the biases built into English vocabulary and grammar which reflect a traditionally male-oriented view of the world, and which have been interpreted as reinforcing the low status of women in society. All of the main European languages have been affected, but English more than most, ...

However, in Singapore and elsewhere in Asia users of English may have not adopted this change to gender-inclusive English to the same degree as in the West. Nevertheless, things are changing here in Singapore too. The TCS news on 27 October 1996 reported on the "salesperson" of the year awards even though the winner was a male. A look at school coursebooks also shows evidence that the times are changing. An example that the issue is at least being recognized comes from a document by Comfort CabLink which states at the bottom: "Words importing the masculine gender include the feminine and gender and references to any gender include any other gender".

Our study

A group of us who were studying and working at the Regional Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore support the use of gender-inclusive English. We designed a small study to investigate what our fellow teachers thought. The participants in our study - some of us were also participants - were 35 English language educators from nine Asian countries who were attending courses at RELC.

We collected data in three ways: questionnaires, interviews, and samples of participants' writing. The questionnaires were completed several days after we had given a presentation on gender-exclusive/inclusive English and had explained the purpose of our study. The interviews were done over the following two weeks. In contrast, the samples of participants' writing came from an examination some had taken a couple weeks before the presentation.

Our findings

Studying anything in depth always yields fascinating results, as the way we humans think and act is a source of never-ending amazement. First, we will share with you what the teachers told us about their experiences and their teaching practices, and what we found when we looked at the teachers' own writing. Next, we will report on what the teachers said about why they do what they do.

Almost all the 35 teachers reported that they had always been taught gender-exclusive English when they were students. The few who had been taught gender-inclusive usage by at least one teacher said that this occurred at university. One interviewee reported having an American lecturer at NIE around 1983 who vehemently demanded that only gender-inclusive be used.

Slightly more than half the participants indicated that they had heard of gender-inclusive language before coming to the course. Some who had not heard of it were aware of it but had not seen it given a name before. For example, one Filipino teacher noted that although gender-inclusive English was used in the handouts at courses for teachers which she had attended in her country, the topic had never been mentioned.

A majority, 19, indicated that they taught or wrote materials for students using gender-exclusive English before coming for the course. 15 indicated using gender-inclusive language, and one said "both". The number using gender-inclusive language was greater than we had expected. A Malaysian interviewee explained his use of gender-inclusive by saying that was what he found in the proficiency textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education.

In the samples of participants' own writing collected before the researchers' presentation on the issue, about 2/3 used gender-exclusive language. In contrast, a large majority of participants, 29, reported that in their future teaching and writing they would use gender-inclusive rather than gender-exclusive English.

Reasons for and against teaching gender-inclusive usage

Several reasons were given by those educationists who said they would not teach gender-inclusive English. These included:

- (1) the whole issue is not important enough to make the effort to change worthwhile
- (2) the concern that gender-exclusive is still felt by many people (possibly including those who mark national and international exams) to be the correct form
- (3) the tradition of using gender-exclusive
- (4) the belief that some gender-inclusive usage, e.g., *he or she*, is inelegant
- (5) the worry that the complexity of making students aware of two choices - gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive - can confuse and annoy them
- (6) a lack of materials in which gender-inclusive language can be found.

Some of the interviewees stated that were it not for reasons number 2, 5, and 6 above they would teach the gender-inclusive forms.

Among the reasons given by the educationists for using gender-inclusive English were that gender-inclusive usage:

- (1) is fairer to females
- (2) is the emerging world standard
- (3) avoids possible confusion about whether females are included
- (4) is used in instructional materials.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that the trend among Asian English language educators mirrors the trend toward greater use of gender-inclusive English in Western countries where English is the main language. However, just as researchers in the US context have discovered, the trend is not a homogeneous or a linear one. Further, even educators who support gender-inclusive English may not be able to implement their view due to situational constraints.

Implications

When examining how the issue of gender-exclusive/inclusive language impacts language teaching, we should look at:

- (1) the choice of coursebooks and other instructional materials (*do they show gender-inclusive usage?*)
- (2) the choice of grammar books and other reference works (*what do they say on the issue?*)
- (3) the language which educationists use when talking to and writing for students (*what usage models are students provided?*)
- (4) the feedback which students receive on their speaking and writing (*are students marked wrong for using gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive English?*)
- (5) the scoring of examinations and other assessment instruments (*what do the examiners expect on this issue?*)

However, the issue of gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive language is not just an issue for those of us who have selected education as our profession. All of us play a part because in the final analysis we are all teachers. Our actions - and this includes the words we speak and write - affect those around us. Putting it another way, language is a cause, not just an effect. So, if you agree with us that language not only reflects how people think but also affects how they think, then you will want to pay careful attention to this issue.

Conclusion

We are not saying that there should be language police who go around fining students and others for using gender-exclusive language. Rather, to borrow the title of this journal, we are advocating *Awareness*. In other words, we should help others become aware that English - and other languages too - is changing as society changes, that we have choices, and that these choices have important consequences.

Which sentence is 'correct' English: "The chairman is responsible for conducting the meeting" or "The chairperson is responsible for conducting the meeting"? We believe that everyone should make their own choice. We are not, however, advocating neutrality. Although we respect other people's right to make their own informed choices, we should also help them become aware of the informed choices we have made, the rationale for our choices, and the actions we have taken as a result.

This concept of informed choice leading to action is stated very eloquently by Australian linguist Jim Martin:

Conscious knowledge of language and the way it functions in social contexts then enables us to make choices, to exercise control. As long as we are ignorant of language, it and ideological systems it embraces control us. Learning about language means learning to choose. . . . Knowledge is power. Meaning is choice. Please choose.

APPENDIX

Alternatives to Gender-Exclusive English

Table 1 - Alternatives to Gender-Exclusive He/Him/Himself/His

Gender-Exclusive Usage	Technique for Changing	Gender-Inclusive Usage
A doctor should respect his patients' wishes.	Pluralize (<i>This is our favourite</i>)	Doctors should respect their patients' wishes.
Everyone loves his mother.	Singular "they" (<i>Be careful about this one on exams</i>)	Everyone loves their mother.
A student has to return his books on time.	Shift to first or second person	If you are a students, you have to return your books on time. We students have to return our books on time.
A good citizen does as he is told.	Use both female and male forms (<i>Some people criticize this as clumsy</i>)	A good citizen does as he or she (s/he) is told.
A government official must write his reports clearly.	Avoid the pro form altogether	A government official must write reports clearly.

Table 2 - Alternatives to Gender-Exclusive Man

Gender-Exclusive Usage	Gender-Inclusive Usage
One man - one vote	One person - one vote
Mankind continues to do terrible damage to the environment.	Humanity/The human race/People continue(s) to do terrible damage to the environment.
Hundred of businessmen attended the conference.	Hundreds of businesspeople attended the conference.