Investigating the Use of Singular '*they*' across Two Social Contexts: A Comparative Study of Iranian and Polish EFL Students

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Abstract

With the increasing attempts to use gender-fair language, different studies have investigated this issue from different viewpoints. To find an epicene pronoun used as a third-person singular, some research has been conducted investigating them in various contexts, yet few studies have focused on cultural differences. Since how to use language differs among cultures, this study aims to investigate and compare the use of epicene pronouns (*he, she, he/she,* and singular *they*) among Iranian and Polish Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) of English with different cultures, social backgrounds, and L1s (in terms of gender markedness; Iran with a genderless-grammar language, and Poland with a grammatical-gender language). A survey containing sentences and questions was given to 64 university learners in 4 contexts (indefinite noun, feminine, masculine, and neutral connotations) to choose the most suitable pronouns while exploring the reasons for choices followed by the source of learning. The results revealed that singular *they* was the highest deployed pronoun in all four contexts, with no significant difference between Iranian and Polish learners. Furthermore, gender neutrality was mentioned most as the main reason for their selection of choices. Finally, roughly half the Polish students and about a third of Iranian participants had already heard about singular *they*, with private institutions and schools were respectively mentioned as their main sources of this knowledge.

Keywords: *Generic He, Singular They, Gender Neutral, Pronoun*

Introduction

Since there is no specific pronoun in English to be considered gender-neutral third-person singular, different pronouns are used by different people, which shows the ideology of that gender or group, resulting in permanent arguments to find the most appropriate choice. Some scholars agree that when a person's gender is not known, using generic *he* is a good option. They believe that not confusing generic *he* with third-person singular *he* is the same as not confusing between gasoline tank and military destruction tank while listening to a gasoline commercial (Mackay, 1980), and conclude that generic *he* will not be confusing, accordingly

can be a good choice. Some others have a different view believing that the pronoun *he* represents male images (Henley & Abueg, 2003) and should not be considered as a gender-neutral term since it is representative of a male-focused society (Speyer & Schleef, 2019). Generic *she* and *he/she* were other recommended options that failed to be used frequently since they were not frequently used (Abudalbuh, 2012).

 In the late 20th and 21st century, the usage of generic *he* decreased in favour of considering singular *they,* which caused some contradictory beliefs. Some scholars believe that using singular *they* is ungrammatical and might impede comprehension (Fowler & Aaron, 1983), while some others state that the singular form of *they* is separate from the plural form and they have different mental lexicons (Paterson, 2014); accordingly, the pronoun '*they'* can be used as an appropriate third-person singular pronoun.

Previous studies have compared and investigated generic pronouns in spoken or written contexts; however, since how to use language differs among cultures (Abudalbuh, 2012), and singular *they* is being used widely in L1 English while not much attention has been paid to it in the L2 context (Stormbom, 2020), this comparative study was conducted among Iranian and Polish non-native English learners to investigate the use of Epicene/Generic Pronouns by them.

Literature Review

Since generic *he* frequently appears as a pronoun to refer to a human with an unknown gender, investigating it from different viewpoints is of great importance. The related prescriptions started about 250 years ago and continued to be investigated for decades (MacKay, 1980). Some scholars believe that in contexts where someone's gender is not known, generic *he* can be used and will not be confusing (Mackay, 1980). Mackay asserts that based on the semantic-flexibility theory, word meanings are flexible, and the pronoun '*he'* represents a sex-indefinite antecedent without excluding women or adding new meaning.

The conflicting view towards using *he* as a gender-neutral term began by the feminist attack in 1970 (Bodine, 1975) by stating that considering *he* as a gender-neutral term reflects a male-biased society (Speyer & Schleef, 2019) and evokes male images (Henley & Abueg, 2003) which resulted in feminist linguists disagreement on considering it as generic (Stormbom, 2019). Accordingly, the APA and several commercial publishers changed their copy-editing policies to use neutral terms (Moulton et al., 1978) by considering generic *he* as an inappropriate substitute for a gender-neutral singular pronoun (Speyer & Schleef, 2019) and introducing singular *they* as an alternative (Enke, 2012; Speyer & Schleef, 2019).

Prior to being criticized by the prescriptive grammarians in the 18th century (Bodine, 1975), singular *they* was largely used between the 14th and 17th and in the late 20th and 21st, and its usage continued to increase in popularity (Speyer & Schleef, 2019) specifically in spoken English (Conrod, 2019), which could account for the growing disagreements against using generic *he,* but not all scholars accepted it by asserting that it is an ungrammatical form which might hinder comprehension (Fowler & Aaron, 1983).

Most other scholars have a positive view towards considering singular *they* as a third-person singular pronoun and believe that it can refer to any gender (Bradley et al., 2019), although it is still a new phenomenon in academic discourse (LaScotte, 2021). Borthen (2010)

stated that vague reference could be contributed to plural pronouns since their features (e.g. person and number) do not need to be matched with their interpretation and concluded that the pronoun *they* is a good choice to be considered in gender-neutral contexts. Consistent with him is Paterson (2014), who considered singular *they* separated from the plural form and believed that these two forms have different mental lexicons. Singular *they,* in the words of Paterson (2011), is not a new form and just has to be added to the mental lexicon (Speyer & Schleef, 2019), and is reported as a highly grammatical structure by almost all English speakers (Bradley et al., 2019). American Psychological Association's (2020) last edition also considered singular *they* both as a generic singular and identified individual.

Stormbom (2020), investigated 1003 research papers focusing on epicene pronouns and concluded that singular *they* was the most commonly-used pronoun followed by *he/she* and generic *he,* that appeared with the same frequency. Foertsch and Gernsbacher (1997) asserted that since generic *he* is considered gender-biased, singular *they* can be the right choice and is not problematic for most readers. They investigated the use of singular *they* in two reading experiments and concluded that singular *they* is an efficient substitute for generic s*he* or *he*, which is in line with Abudalbuh (2012), who states that English native speakers (NSs) use pronouns such as singular *they* and avoid using male or female-specific pronouns such as *he* or *she*. Abudalbuh believes that singular *they* is the most common generic pronoun used by NSs. Foertsch and Gernsbacher's study was later followed by Sanford and Filik (2007), who increased the sensitivity of their experiment in comparison with Foertsch and Gernsbache's experiment, and inferred that "plural pronouns are not mentally represented as hybrid plural–singular pronouns" (p. 177).

He/she has been adopted as another alternative for generic *he,* which in the words of Abudalbuh (2012), can be a good choice since it does not violate number agreement and signals both feminine and masculine references, but not much attention has been paid to it and has been rarely used in public contexts (Pauwels, 2001). Some criticisms have been levelled against using this structure, such as excluding the ones who are neither a woman nor a man (Bradley, 2020), eliciting more masculine images in comparison to the use of the generic *he* (Cole et al., 1983), and being comprehended similar to *he* by males (Gastil, 1990).

With the recent surge in the number of English speakers worldwide, investigating the use of English grammar among NNSs can be of immense value. Singular *they* is one of the topics that is worth studying since it is widely used among NSs and NNSs, and there have been different ideas about it. The sources for the increasing use of singular *they* also worth studying. In investigating the use of singular *they* among NNSs, the role of textbooks cannot be ignored since they indicate cultural and linguistic attitudes (Lee & Collins, 2010). Lee and Collins also believe that textbooks show social and linguistic realities. Research by Abudalbuh (2012) indicates that while singular *they* is the dominant generic pronoun by NSs, for Arabic NNSs, the pronoun *he* is the most common choice. He asserts that this difference may be due to the L2 input in the classroom rather than a conscious intentional choice of a strategy. Therefore, the sources where learners have heard about singular *they* is of great importance, which is the other focus of the current study.

The last focus of the present study is to seek the connection between gender, culture, and thought. According to the Sapir-Whorf (Whorfian) hypothesis, the structure of a language

influences how its speakers view the world, and different speakers are reported to experience the world differently (Wardhaugh, 2011). Wardhaugh also believes that in the Whorfian view, language acts as a screen to reality, which determines the speakers' perception of the world and helps the speakers to form a world-view that defines their experiences. Accordingly, This study was carried out to examine the differences between Iranian and Polish students in terms of using singular they, explore how indefinite pronoun, stereotypically feminine, masculine, and neutral nouns can affect their choices while searching for the reason behind their selections, followed by investigating the sources for learning this structure.

Method

Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study; the first group consisted of 20 Polish and 20 Iranian TEFL learners with C1 and C2 levels of English proficiency, which was determined by an OPT test provided by the Common European Framework of Reference. This group was asked to rate the English nouns as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. The other group was 31 Polish TEFL undergraduate and postgraduate students, including 8 males and 23 females, as well as 31 Iranian TEFL undergraduate and postgraduate students, with 9 being male and 22 female. The difference in male/female numbers is because of limitations in participation and level of English proficiency. All the participants were 20-30 years old at C1 and C2 level of English proficiency which was determined by an OPT test provided by the Common European Framework of Reference. Nine participants in each group were classified at a C2 level, and others were C1. All learners had some years of formal instruction in their hometowns.

Instruments

A list of English nouns, adopted from Speyer and Schleef's (2019) study, was given to the first group of participants, asking them to devote a number between 1 to 7 to each one to represent if the presented English personal nouns are typically-female, typically-male, or gender-neutral.

The second instrument was a survey with sentences containing English nouns (rated by the first group as feminine, masculine, and neutral) and sentences containing indefinite nouns. The participants of the second group were asked to underline the correct options among the presented ones *(he - she - he/she -singular they - all the options)* for each sentence. These sentences were presented in Speyer and Schleef's (2019) study, all of which were replicated material of Foertsch and Gernsbacher's (1997) research. Both of these studies conducted a reading experiment, but in this study, the sentences were given to participants, and they were asked to choose the best answer supported by a rationale. Furthermore, to have deep insight, learners were asked to assert the reasons for their choices followed by another question asking them where they have learnt about singular *they*, but in order for them not to be guided what option to choose, the last question was asked after they handed out the survey.

Data collection procedure

The first group of participants was given some English nouns, adopted from Speyer and Schleef (2019), asking them to devote a number between 1 to 7 to each noun; 1 for

completely female, 4 being neutral, and 7 being completely male. The nouns scoring a point between 1 and 2.6 were categorized as stereotypically female, 5 to 7 were categorized as stereotypically male, and 3.4 to 4.2 were considered neutral.

In the subsequent stage, the second group of participants was provided with sentences containing five choices in terms of pronouns (*he-she-they-he/she*-all the options). Sentences started with a clause containing a noun that is most likely to be perceived as feminine, masculine, and neutral, and an indefinite pronoun. There were no other details in the sentences implying the gender of antecedents. Modal verbs were used in all the sentences in order not to use 's' at the end of the verbs so that the option of 'singular *they*' could also be chosen. Subjects were asked to choose the most appropriate option to the best of their knowledge. Having selected the right answer, the students had to write reasons for their choices to make sure that their selections were rational rather than random and to explore their knowledge about using feminine, masculine and neutral pronouns as well as a singular *they*. Upon completion of the test, students were asked whether they knew that the pronoun *they* can be used for both plural and singular, and if their answer was 'yes', they had to explain where they had learnt it. The answers of the two questions asking the reasons for the choices and their knowledge about singular *they* were categorized into themes using coding strategies.

Results

To investigate the statistically significant difference in the percentage between Iranian and Polish participants in terms of their pronoun selection for the question with feminine connotation, the quantitative data was explored to determine some descriptive statistics. The observed frequencies and percentages of choices for Iranian and Polish participants are presented in Table 1. In addition, Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of choices for these two nationalities. As is clear from the tables, the choice '*they*' had by far the highest rate of selection between Iranian and Polish students, in context with a feminine connotation.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Selections in Question 1 with a Feminine Connotation for Iranian and Polish Participants

	Nationality		Total
	Iranian	Polish	

Question1					
	He	Count	3	2	5
		% within Nationality	9.4%	6.3%	7.8%
	She	Count	4	3	7
		% within Nationality	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%
	They	Count	18	18	36
		% within Nationality	56.3%	56.3%	56.3%
	He/She	Count	4	5	9
		% within Nationality	12.5%	15.6%	14.1%
	He/She/They	Count	3	4	7
		% within Nationality	9.4%	12.5%	10.9%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 1

Frequency Distribution of Selections in Question 1, with a Feminine Connotation, for Iranian and Polish Participants
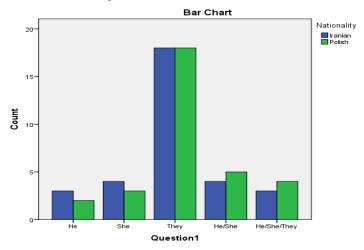

Table 2

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish participants' Responses for Question 1 with a Feminine Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.597	4	.963
Likelihood Ratio	.599	4	.963
Linear-by-Linear Association	.193	1	.660
N of Valid Cases	64		

To investigate whether there was a significant difference between Iranian and Polish participants based on their selection of choices, an analysis of chi-square was run. As the results show (Table 2), the observed p-value was 0.963 (>0.05), indicating no statistically significant difference between Iranian and Polish participants in their choices.

The same analysis was run for the other three questions. The results for the second question with a masculine connotation are shown in Tables 3 and 4, along with Figure 2. As is clear from the descriptive analysis, again singular *they* had the highest rate of selection between Iranian and Polish students. In addition, the results for the Chi-Square analysis show

no statistically significant difference between Iranian and Polish participants' responses (observed p-value = 0.796 > 0.05).

Table 3
Frequency and Percentage of Selections in Question 2 with a Masculine Connotation for Iranian and Polish Participants

			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Question2	He	Count	7	8	15
		% within Nationality	21.9%	25.0%	23.4%
	She	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	They	Count	14	12	26
		% within Nationality	43.8%	37.5%	40.6%
	He/She	Count	4	7	11
		% within Nationality	12.5%	21.9%	17.2%
	He/They	Count	2	1	3
		% within Nationality	6.3%	3.1%	4.7%
	He/She/They	Count	4	4	8
		% within Nationality	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 2
Frequency Distribution of Selections in Question 2, with a Masculine Connotation, for Iranian and Polish Participants
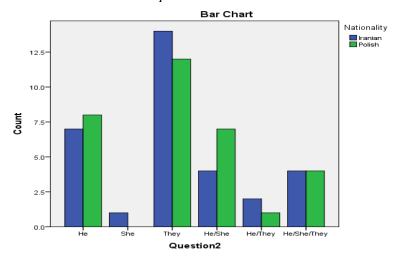

Table 4
Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish Participants' Responses for Question 2 with a Feminine Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.372	5	.796
Likelihood Ratio	2.775	5	.735

Linear-by-Linear Association	.003	1	.960
N of Valid Cases	64		

Descriptive and inferential statistical tests were run for question 3, where the connotation was neutral (Tables 5 & 6 and Figure 2). Similar to the previous questions, the pronoun *they* was the most frequently selected choice between Iranian and Polish participants, but as the observed p-value for the data is higher than 0.05 (0.623), no statistically significant difference could be inferred between Iranian and Polish participants' answers.

Table 5

Frequency and Percentage of Selections in Question 3, where the Connotation was Neutral, for Iranian and Polish Participants

			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Question3	None	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	He	Count	4	3	7
		% within Nationality	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%
	She	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	They	Count	22	21	43
		% within Nationality	68.8%	65.6%	67.2%
	He/She	Count	2	4	6
		% within Nationality	6.3%	12.5%	9.4%
	He/She/They	Count	2	4	6
		% within Nationality	6.3%	12.5%	9.4%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 3

Frequency Distribution of Selections in Question 3, with a Neutral Connotation, for Iranian and Polish Participants
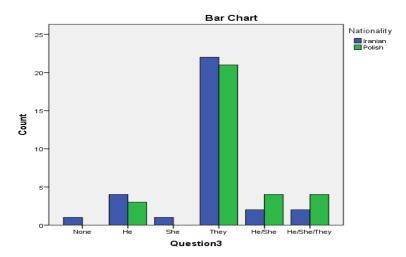
Table 6

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish participants' Responses for Question 3 with a Neutral Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.499	5	.623
Likelihood Ratio	4.298	5	.507
Linear-by-Linear Association	.880	1	.348
N of Valid Cases	64		

The results for question 4 were also similar, with the pronoun *they* having the highest frequency among the answers and no significant difference between Iranian and Polish participants' choices (observed p-value = 0.734) (Tables 7 & 8 – Figure 4).

Table 7

Frequency and Percentage of Selections in Question 4, with an Indefinite Pronoun, for Iranian and Polish Participants

			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Question4	He	Count	2	1	3
		% within Nationality	6.3%	3.1%	4.7%
	She	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	They	Count	22	26	48
		% within Nationality	68.8%	81.3%	75.0%
	He/She	Count	3	2	5
		% within Nationality	9.4%	6.3%	7.8%
	He/She/They	Count	4	3	7
		% within Nationality	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 4

Frequency Distribution of Selections in Question 4, with an Indefinite Pronoun, for Iranian and Polish Participants
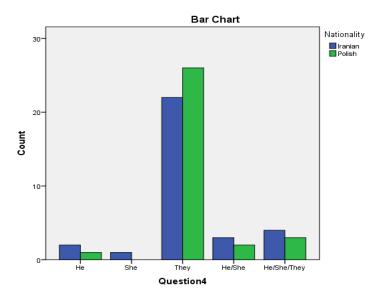
Table 8

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish participants' Responses for Question 4, with an Indefinite Pronoun

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.010	4	.734
Likelihood Ratio	2.405	4	.662
Linear-by-Linear Association	.175	1	.675
N of Valid Cases	64		

Table 9

Chi-square Analysis of Selections in each Question both for Iranian and Polish Participants

Nationality		Question1	Question2	Question3	Question4
Iranian	Chi-Square	26.437	20.875	63.625	48.312
	df	4	5	5	4
	Asymp. Sig.	.000	.001	.000	.000
Polish	Chi-Square	27.062	10.813	28.250	54.250
	df	4	4	3	3
	Asymp. Sig.	.000	.029	.000	.000

Finally, another Chi-Square analysis was run to test whether in each question, the selection of singular *they* was by chance. As can be seen from Table 9, the observed p-value from the Chi-square test for each question is below 0.05, indicating that the selection of *they* for each question, both for Iranian and Polish learners, was not random. Therefore, it can be said that there is a statistically significant difference in choices of singular *they* and other pronouns in contexts with feminine connotation, masculine connotation, neutral connotation, and indefinite pronoun for the participants in both countries.

To investigate the reasons participants had for their selection of choices, again descriptive analyses and Chi-Square tests were run for each question. The results are presented in Tables 10–17 and Figures 5–8. As can be clearly seen, for all four questions, Gender Neutrality was by far the most frequently mentioned reason by the participants. Furthermore, based on the results of the Chi-Square tests, as the observed p-value for all four questions is more than

0.05, no statistically significant difference can be inferred between Iranian and Polish participants in terms of the reasons for their selection of choices.

Table 10

Comparison of Frequency and Percentage of Reasons for Question 1, with Feminine Connotation, between Iranian and Polish Participants

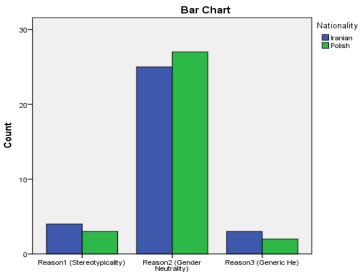|			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Reasons for Question 1	Reason1 (Stereotypicality)	Count	4	3	7
		% within Nationality	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%
	Reason2 (Gender Neutrality)	Count	25	27	52
		% within Nationality	78.1%	84.4%	81.3%
	Reason3 (Generic He)	Count	3	2	5
		% within Nationality	9.4%	6.3%	7.8%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 11

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish Participants' Reasons for their Selection of Choices in Question 1, with Feminine Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.420	2	.811
Likelihood Ratio	.422	2	.810
Linear-by-Linear Association	.000	1	1.000
N of Valid Cases	64		

Table 12

Comparison of Frequency and Percentage of Reasons for Question 2, with Masculine Connotation, between Iranian and Polish Participants
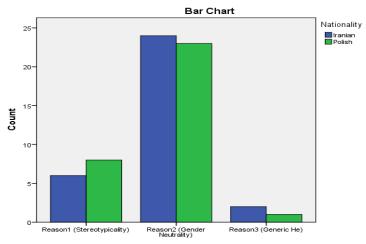
			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Reasons for Question 2	Reason1 (Stereotypicality)	Count	6	8	14
		% within Nationality	18.8%	25.0%	21.9%
	Reason2 (Gender Neutrality)	Count	24	23	47
		% within Nationality	75.0%	71.9%	73.4%
	Reason3 (Generic He)	Count	2	1	3
		% within Nationality	6.3%	3.1%	4.7%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 5

Frequency Distribution of Reasons for Selection of Choices in Question 1 with Feminine Connotation, among Iranian and Polish Participants

Figure 6

Frequency Distribution of Reasons for Selection of Choices in Question 2 with Masculine Connotation, among Iranian and Polish Participants
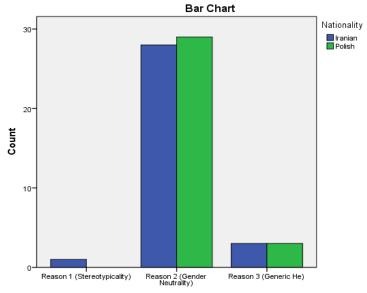

Table 13

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish Participants' Reasons for their Selection of Choices in Question 2, with Masculine Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.640	2	.726
Likelihood Ratio	.648	2	.723
Linear-by-Linear Association	.352	1	.553
N of Valid Cases	64		

Table 14

Comparison of Frequency and Percentage of Reasons for Question 3, with Neutral Connotation, between Iranian and Polish Participants

			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Reasons for Question 3	Reason1 (Stereotypicality)	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	Reason2 (Gender Neutrality)	Count	28	29	57
		% within Nationality	87.5%	90.6%	89.1%
	Reason3 (Generic He)	Count	3	3	6
		% within Nationality	9.4%	9.4%	9.4%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 7

Frequency Distribution of Reasons for Selection of Choices in Question 3 with Neutral Connotation, among Iranian and Polish Participants

Table 15

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish Participants' Reasons for their Selection of Choices in Question 3, with Neutral Connotation

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.018	2	.601
Likelihood Ratio	1.404	2	.496
Linear-by-Linear Association	.000	1	.998
N of Valid Cases	64		

Table 16

Comparison of Frequency and Percentage of Reasons for Question 4, with Indefinite Pronoun, between Iranian and Polish Participants

			Nationality		Total
			Iranian	Polish	
Reasons for Question 4	Reason 1 (Stereotypicality)	Count	1	0	1
		% within Nationality	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%
	Reason 2 (Gender Neutrality)	Count	29	31	60
		% within Nationality	90.6%	96.9%	93.8%
	Reason 3 (Generic He)	Count	2	1	3
		% within Nationality	6.3%	3.1%	4.7%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 8

Frequency Distribution of Reasons for Selection of Choices in Question 4 with Indefinite Pronoun, among Iranian and Polish Participants
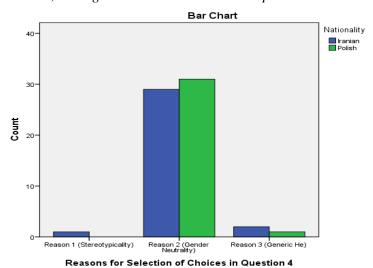

Table 17

Chi-square Analysis of Iranian and Polish Participants' Reasons for their Selection of Choices in Question 4, with Indefinite Pronoun

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.400	2	.497
Likelihood Ratio	1.793	2	.408
Linear-by-Linear Association	.340	1	.560
N of Valid Cases	64		

The other item studied after administrating the test was to ask participants whether they had been familiar with the term Singular *They* and if their answer was *yes*, they had to mention the source where they had learnt it. The results are presented in Tables18 and19 and Figure 9. As shown in Figure 9, 37% of Iranian students and 50% of Polish students had already heard about the Singular *They*. However, the p-value calculated from the Chi-Square analysis shows this difference between the participants in these countries was not meaningful (Table 19).

Table 18

The Crosstabulation Comparison between Iranian and Polish Participants regarding their Previous Knowledge of SingularThey

| | | | Nationality | | Total |
			Iranian	Polish	
Knew	No	Count	20	16	36
		% within Nationality	62.5%	50.0%	56.3%
	Yes	Count	12	16	28
		% within Nationality	37.5%	50.0%	43.8%
Total		Count	32	32	64
		% within Nationality	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 9

The Comparison between Iranian and Polish Participants regarding their Previous Knowledge of Singular They
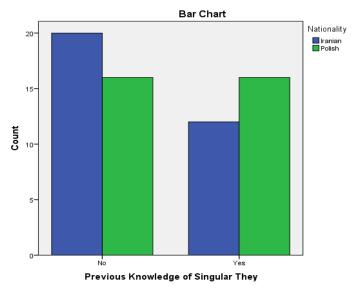

Table 19

Chi-square Analysis of the Comparison between Iranian and Polish Participants regarding their Previous knowledge of SingularThey

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.016	1	.313		
Continuity Correction	.571	1	.450		
Likelihood Ratio	1.019	1	.313		
Fisher's Exact Test				.450	.225
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.000	1	.317		
N of Valid Cases	64				

Lastly, based on the descriptive and inferential analyses run, the sources where participants had heard about singular *they* were different. According to the Chi-square test

presented in Table 21, the p-value is less than 0.05 and the difference in sources in these countries was statistically significant. Based on the absolute adjusted residuals of more than 1.96 in the crosstabulation matrix of Table 20, for Iranian students, the main source of knowledge for singular *they* was private institutions and university, whereas Polish learners had learnt about singular *they* mostly from school and media.

Table 20
The Crosstabulation Comparison between the Sources where Iranian and Polish Participants Had Heard about Singular They

			School	University	Private English Institutes	Media	School	Total
					Source			
Nationality	Iranian	Count	0	3	7	2	0	12
		% of Total	0.0%	10.7%	25.0%	7.1%	0.0%	42.9%
		Adjusted Residual	-2.4	.4	3.0	-.9	-.9	
	Polish	Count	6	3	1	5	1	16
		% of Total	21.4%	10.7%	3.6%	17.9%	3.6%	57.1%
		Adjusted Residual	2.4	-.4	-3.0	.9	.9	
Total		Count	6	6	8	7	1	28
		% of Total	21.4%	21.4%	28.6%	25.0%	3.6%	100.0%

Table 21
Chi-square Analysis of the Comparison between the Sources where Iranian and Polish Participants Had Heard about Singular They

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.469	4	.014
Likelihood Ratio	15.521	4	.004
N of Valid Cases	28		

Discussion

Results for the comparison in the use of different pronouns in four contexts (containing indefinite pronoun, English nouns with feminine, masculine, and neutral connotation) between two groups of learners with different cultural and social backgrounds were studied, Iranian (with a genderless language) and Polish (with a grammatical gender language), before moving on to the comparison among the reasons they had for their selection of choices, followed by the sources of gaining the relevant knowledge. The purpose of the first comparison was to search whether cultural practices in these two countries, as well as the effect of gendered grammar in their L1, would influence the linguistic practices in selecting pronouns; singular *they*, *he*, *she*, and *he/she* in sentences containing nouns with feminine, masculine, and neutral connotations and indefinite pronoun. The outcome was straightforward; contrary to the previous studies (Abudalbuh 2012; Lee & Collins 2010), which concluded that singular *they* is not very common among non-native speakers, the current study proved that the highest frequency of choices for pronouns in all the four contexts was singular *they* both for Iranian and Polish advanced English learners which are in

line with the findings of Stormbom (2019) for Swedish speaking university learners of English. It is worth noting that modal verbs were used in all the sentences in order not to use 's' at the end of the verbs so that the option of 'singular *they'* could also be chosen. Besides, one of the choices which was presented for the learners was '*all the options'*. The findings are discussed in each context as follows.

The first group of sentences contained nouns with a feminine connotation. The results showed that singular *they* was the most commonly used option by both Polish (56.3%) and Iranian (56.3%) English learners, and no significant differences were found among the two groups (Table 1). *He/she* with the rate of 15.6% followed by *she* (9.4%) were among the Polish learners' choices after singular *they*. For Iranian learners, *He/she* and *she,* with the same rate of 12.5%, were their next choices for both groups of participants.

In sentences containing nouns with masculine connotation, singular *they* was the most commonly used option by both Polish (37.5%) and Iranian (43.8%) English learners followed by generic *he* (21.9%) for Iranian learners and (25.0%) for Polish learners and still no significant differences were found among the two groups.

In investigating the results for the sentences containing the nouns with neutral connotation, it was revealed that in both contexts singular *they* was the most commonly used option, by both Polish (65.6%) and Iranian (68.8%) English learners, and no significant differences were observed among the two groups (table5). The pronoun *he* (12.5%) was Iranian learners' second choice while Polish learners chose *he/she* and all the options with the same rate of 12.5%. The rare usage of the pronoun *she* in a neutral context indicates that most learners do not consider it as being a generic pronoun to be used in neutral contexts.

In investigating the sentences containing indefinite pronouns, singular *they* was also the most commonly used option by both Polish (81.3%) and Iranian (68.8%) English learners, and no significant differences were found among the two groups (Table 7), which may not be surprising since this usage of singular *they* is focused on in grammar books (Speyer & Schleef, 2019). This is also in line with Bradley (2020), who stated that when we are referring to hypothetical unknown sex, using singular *they* is acceptable for the learners. For both Iranian and Polish learners, '*all the options'* was the second choice with the rate of 12.5% and 9.4%, respectively.

As the results indicated, it was proved that singular *they* appeared completely generic since it was the most common choice, not only in neutral and indefinite contexts but also in feminine and masculine contexts. It is also concluded that the learners in both countries do not have a sexist view, as their choices in feminine and masculine contexts were singular *they*.

Comparing the results of the study with Abudalbuh (2012), which was conducted nine years ago, reveals that during this period, the L2 learners' knowledge has changed, and singular *they* have spread during the time. Abudalbuh investigated epicene pronouns in two different contexts: Arab nonnative and English native speakers. In his research, English native speakers were found to use singular *they* for about half of the choices. In investigating it across different contexts, English native speakers considered singular *they* in a neutral context, generic *he* in masculine context followed by singular *they*, and generic *she* in feminine context followed by singular *they*. In investigating Arab English learners, they were

found to use generic *he* in neutral and masculine contexts, and generic *she* in feminine contexts. As Abudalbuh stated this result is due to the effect of L1, but as the results indicated in our research, Polish learners with gendered grammar language did not follow the same patterns as Arab learners did, while both have a gendered language. In comparison to his study, nonnative speakers seem to gain more knowledge in this area. Polish is a gendered language, similar to Arabic, but in all contexts, the Polish participants' most common choice was singular *they*. The reason for such change in L2 learners' knowledge may lie in textbooks, as according to Speyer and Schleef (2019), the textbooks which were published for NNS from 1997 to 2006 had not included singular *they*. This change in participants' knowledge was also seen in Stormbom's (2019) study who examined epicene pronouns usage since 1970 and concluded that the use of generic *he* has decreased while the use of singular *they* has increased that is due to the effect of feminist planning on language.

In investigating the reasons for choices, the answers were categorized and coded. All the answers were categorized into three groups: gender-neutral, stereotypical, and *he* as a generic pronoun. Gender neutrality was mentioned as the highest frequent reason behind students' choices, despite social and cultural differences that exist between these two countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). The reason might be due to the fact that none of the countries has a sexist view, generic masculine is falling out of favour in both countries, and singular *they* is becoming more popular among people as the gender-neutral singular pronoun, whether they have heard about it or not. Besides, the similarity in results for these two socially and culturally different countries showed a contrast with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the structure of L1 influences how its speakers view the world; Polish is a gendered grammar language; accordingly, they were expected to use the pronouns *he* and *she* in sentences with masculine and feminine connotation, but it did not happen, and their only choice in all four contexts was singular *they* similar to Iranian learners, and no significant difference was found across the reasons of choices in two groups.

In the third phase of the investigation, the learners were asked to present the source where they have learnt about the singular *they*. In categorizing the answers, all fell into four groups: schools (it was taught during the school time, either in the books or directly by their teachers), universities, media (book, movie, internet, game, article, dictionary, etc.), and private English Schools. The comparison between Iranian and Polish advanced English learners who had known about singular *they* showed a significant difference among the sources. For Iranian students, the main source of knowledge of learning about singular *they* was private institutes and universities, while Polish learners had learnt about this structure mostly from school and the media. The result was in line with the previous study by Lee and Collins (2010), who highlighted the influence of textbooks on linguistic and cultural practices since in schools, institutes, and universities, learners are presented with textbooks, although the role of educators is not negligible as well as the educational contexts. An important issue that is worth noting on the importance of educational contexts, teachers, materials, and curriculum developer is that in this study, the learners were presented with sentences with different pronouns and were asked to choose the most suitable one, and singular *they* appeared as the most common option. However, when it comes to production, this structure may be confusing for NNSs (Speyer & Schleef, 2019). To reduce this probability, an

important role of educational context is highlighted. As they are a source for students to learn about singular *they,* it is better to present it at the early stages of learning a language in order for the learners to have more exposure to this structure.

The difference in the source of learning about singular *they* may be due to many reasons. Firstly, it shows the difference between the educational environments of the two countries. Polish learners had learnt this structure at schools, but Iranians had learnt it in universities, which may reveal that Polish policies in terms of educating people consider school-age learners to start teaching foreign language and focuses more on all the details of learnings containing such structures. Although Iranian learners start to learn English in schools as well, it seems not much attention is paid to the details, focusing just on general rules. The reason might be due to the policymakers' or curriculum developers' idea in whether to consider English a necessary knowledge for learners of each country or not. Furthermore, the difference might lie in the old out-of-fashion books, which are being used for Iranian school-age students; since this structure is somehow new, it may not enter some English teaching books.

Secondly, the media was stated by Polish learners as another source, where they have learnt about singular *they.* This can be explained in two ways: (a) Polish media, similar to its educational contexts, consider the English language as an important means to gain knowledge; accordingly, they devote some channels and programs to educate people in this regard, (b) it may show that Polish learners of English are curious and eager to learn English more than what is presented to them in schools and educational environments so that they spend time to learn from different sources, e.g. watching English movies or specific educational programs, which might result in boosting their English knowledge and having an updated knowledge in comparison to Iranian English learners.

Thirdly, Iranian learners state that they have learnt this structure in universities and English institutes, showing that to have deep and novel knowledge and its details, Iranian learners have to seek for it, and it is not presented to them in general educational contexts such as schools. They have to enrol in English Classes as an example; otherwise, they will not have exposure to such structures in schools and the media.

Conclusions

Although novel pronouns are being proposed and used in English (Bradley, 2020), not much awareness has been seen in English-speaking contexts (Barron, 2010), including NNSs. Accordingly, it is of great importance to be updated on these reforms. As the results of the current study revealed, singular *they* appeared as a common structure, and most of the learners knew about it. For such a novel knowledge of a foreign language, with contradictory ideas about it, not only language learners but also language teachers, institutes, and curriculum developers must be curious, not just rely on the old materials.

This study had some limitations that can be developed for further research. Gender and different proficiency levels were not examined in the current paper; accordingly, further research may investigate the use of singular *they* across genders as well as different proficiency levels. Also, for further research, singular *they* may be searched in different contexts containing articles, published books, speeches, theses, etc., to investigate if this

structure is used as a third-person singular in native and nonnative contexts. Furthermore, for further research, native speakers may be compared to different nonnative English learners to investigate how similar each group of learners are to English native speakers. This study can also be advanced in another way; Some sentences containing singular *they* in different contexts (feminine, masculine, neutral) can be given to the learners, and they may be asked to find the grammatical mistakes to search whether using singular *they* as a third person singular pronoun seems problematic for them.

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