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Creating a Gender-inclusive Learning Environment in Spanish Language Classrooms

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Creating a Gender-inclusive Learning Environment in Spanish Language Classrooms

Abstract

Non-binary speakers often struggle to describe themselves within the binary gender system of Spanish. This is even more of a challenge for learners of Spanish who are used to describing themselves in English without having to identify their gender. Our study investigates how we can create a more inclusive learning experience in our Spanish language classrooms. To answer our research question, we conducted a needs analysis through the distribution of an online survey and a series of 20-minute interviews with students and instructors of Spanish in Western Canada. Through these methods, we determined what participants already know about gender-neutral and inclusive language, and what they want or need to know to be able to use and teach inclusive language. Participants were also given the opportunity to share their suggestions and ideas as to how to create a more inclusive learning environment. The key findings indicated that both instructors and students need education and training, and access to teaching and learning resources to normalize the use of gender-inclusive language in the Spanish classroom, which in return will help foster a learning space that is inclusive of all students.

Les personnes non-binaires ont souvent du mal à se décrire elles-mêmes dans le système binaire de la grammaire de l'espagnol. Cette difficulté est encore plus grande pour les personnes qui apprennent l'espagnol et qui ont l'habitude de référer à elles-mêmes en anglais sans avoir à préciser leur genre. Notre étude porte sur la manière dont nous pouvons offrir une expérience d'apprentissage plus inclusive dans nos classes d'espagnol. Pour ce faire, nous avons procédé à une analyse des besoins en distribuant un sondage en ligne et en menant une série d'entretiens de 20 minutes avec des personnes qui, respectivement, apprennent et enseignent l'espagnol dans l'ouest du Canada. Ces investigations nous ont permis d'identifier ce que les individus savent déjà à propos du langage inclusif, non-binaire, et ce qu'ils voudraient ou devraient savoir pour être en mesure de l'utiliser et de l'enseigner. Les personnes ayant participé à l'enquête ont également eu l'occasion de partager leurs suggestions et leurs opinions sur la manière de créer un environnement d'apprentissage plus inclusif. Les principales conclusions indiquent que tant les personnes qui enseignent que les personnes qui apprennent l'espagnol auraient besoin de sensibilisation et de formation, ainsi que d'un meilleur accès aux ressources d'enseignement et d'apprentissage afin de normaliser l'utilisation d'un langage inclusif du genre dans la classe d'espagnol, ce qui, en retour, contribuera à l'inclusion de toutes les personnes étudiantes dans l'espace d'apprentissage.

Keywords

non-binary, gender-inclusive language, Spanish, language education, needs analysis; non-binaire, langage inclusif du genre, espagnol, enseignement des langues, analyse des besoins

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In language classrooms across Canada, students often engage in activities where they need to describe themselves or others using pronouns and adjectives. In a language with a binary grammatical gender system, such as Spanish, French or Portuguese, students will be required to “choose” between two gender options: masculine or feminine (Knisely, 2020; Nemi Neto, 2018; Parra & Serafini, 2022). Recently, however, students have begun to ask about inclusive language options in second or foreign language (L2) classes (Carter, George & Langevin, 2022a; Nemi Neto, 2018). In our study, inclusive language (IL) refers to the use of language that represents and makes visible groups and individuals who have been historically excluded and marginalized, such as members of the LGBTQ2S+ community (see Parra & Serafini, 2022 for a detailed explanation of several IL options in Spanish). To give a specific example, if a student uses the pronouns *she* or *he* in English, there are corresponding pronouns available in Spanish; but if a student uses *they* in English, they may look for an equivalent option in the L2, or they may choose to stay silent and try to avoid situations where they would need to use a pronoun or any adjectives with a gender-marked morpheme (Spiegelman, 2022). By creating inclusive learning environments, ideally students would not need to employ strategies of silence and avoidance, but instead would feel confident to be themselves and refer to others who may identify outside the binary. As queer-identifying educators and researchers, we are insistent on finding ways to ensure that all LGBTQ2S+ students are included and made visible in the classroom.

Students who have a sense of belonging in class feel socially connected and supported, they trust their peers, and they are motivated (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022). When students do not feel a sense of belonging or they feel invisible, there are serious negative consequences that affect not only their intellectual achievements, such as lower exam scores, for example, but also their health and wellness (Walton & Cohen, 2011). When students feel worried and isolated because of the uncertainty of belonging, they suffer from mental bandwidth depletion, a phenomenon that impacts “students [who] have been raised in conditions of economic insecurity and/or are members of a nonmajority group and have lived with discrimination and exclusion for their entire life” (Verschelden, 2017, p. 2). Mental bandwidth is essential for a variety of cognitive functions, such as the ability to pay attention, learn and make decisions (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). In a recent study of eight American engineering programs, Cech and Rothwell (2018) concluded that “LGBTQ students face greater marginalization, devaluation, and health and wellness issues relative to their peers, and that these health and wellness inequalities are explained in part by LGBTQ students' experiences of marginalization and devaluation in their engineering programs” (p. 1). According to a Canadian study by Veale, Watson, Peter, and Saewyc (2017), transgender youth are at higher risk of mental health disparities, such as psychological distress, self-harm, major depressive episodes, and suicide, than lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. In a local context, when compared with cisgender 14 to 18-year-olds in British Columbia (BC), transgender youth of the same age had five times the risk of suicidal thoughts (Veale et al., 2017). In the same study, three quarters of the transgender students reported self-harming at least once within the past year.

At the University of British Columbia, according to a university-wide survey of both the Vancouver and Okanagan campuses (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022), 27% ($n = 16,458$) of the total student population is lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) and 3% ($n = 15,15$) is transgender, non-binary or gender-nonconforming (TGNC; acronym from Knisely, 2021).¹ Each year, thousands of students enroll in language classes, and based on our own experiences as

¹ <https://pair.ubc.ca/surveys/surveys-current-students/> 58,462 students from Vancouver campus, 11,562 from the Okanagan campus, total of 60,890.

language instructors, we are aware that many of the students are LGBTQ/TGNC. It is therefore essential to critically examine and address the lack of inclusive representation in language classes and materials (Knisely & Paiz, 2021), so that we may create learning environments that are inclusive for all students, and “ensure that LGBTQ+ identities and lives are not rendered invisible and silent” (Paiz, 2019, p. 267). Otherwise, the failure to recognize the lives and lived experiences of all students could lead to a cascade of negative effects on student mental health, social well-being, and academic success.

One of the primary obstacles in language classrooms is the lack of inclusive representation in curriculum materials and mainstream textbooks (Gray, 2013; Nemi Neto, 2018; Paiz, 2015, 2020). LGBTQ and TGNC identities and experiences are avoided and thus rendered invisible (Camicia, 2016; Gray, 2013; Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Moore, 2020; Nelson, 2009; Paiz 2015, 2017; Sunderland, 2021). Heteronormativity, the idea that heterosexuality is natural and normal (Coda, 2018; Gray, 2013; Knisely, 2022; Paiz, 2020; Selvi & Kocaman, 2020), and gender normativity, the normalizing of binary gender identities, continue to be prevalent in language pedagogy (term from Miller & Endo, 2016). One may argue that teachers could adapt their own discussion topics and activities, but textbooks and materials that are mass-produced by commercial publishers are used widely by students and teachers. In Gray’s (2013) well-known study of LGBT invisibility and heteronormativity in English language teaching materials, the author examined ten mainstream textbooks from UK publishers and found that there was “no reference to same-sex sexual orientation in any of the titles” and there was “a blanket avoidance of any representation of clearly identified LGBT characters” (p. 49). Nemi Neto specifically analyzed the family unit in four L2 textbooks, each dedicated to a different romance language: French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese (2018). Nemi Neto confirmed that the family trees had only heterosexual representations. Furthermore, there was a lack of vocabulary that could help students express their gender identity and sexual orientation. Both deficiencies contribute to a heteronormative approach to teaching. A study of the representation of same-sex relationships and sexuality in francophone textbooks from Québec provides further evidence that textbooks are heteronormative (Temple, 2005). Findings showed that out of the pages that referenced sexuality or relationships, only 5% included same-sex sexuality or same-sex relationships. Out of the 5% of the references, 80% were in a negative context.

Nelson (2006), a pioneer and advocate in the field of queer inquiry and pedagogy, explains that “excluding queer perspectives and knowledges from our classrooms and our literature is, in effect, a way of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 7). We are then faced with the question: How do we make sure that queer identities are not excluded in our own classrooms? To lay the groundwork for meaningful and lasting change, it is necessary to “question and challenge dominant models in schools today so that favored groups are not the only ones visible” (Nemi Neto, 2018, p. 591). We can critically examine our own teaching pedagogy, curriculum materials and textbooks through a queer lens, to question whether LGBTQ+ and TGNC people are represented and valued (Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Paiz, 2020). According to Knisely and Paiz (2021), “Any successful pedagogical queering requires not only self-reflection, but must also meet students where they are, be locally relevant, and be accomplished in and through dialogue” (p. 33). In the same article, Knisely and Paiz (2021, p. 33) suggest using a self-inventory as a tool of reflection, which includes the following four questions:

1. What do you(r students appear to) know about TGNC lives and concerns in your home context(s)?
2. In your target context(s)?
3. In what ways have students already brought TGNC topics into the classroom?
4. In what ways do student practices and normative language use continue to passively ignore or actively squelch TGNC lives and concerns in your classroom?

Therefore, as a first step towards creating inclusive learning environments at our institutions, we engaged with Spanish educators and learners in BC and Alberta, Canada via an online survey and virtual interviews to ask them to reflect on their own experiences with IL pedagogy and curriculum in a local context. Of particular importance to the current study was whether the specific language being taught and used in Spanish classrooms is inclusive, meaning that options are provided for TGNC students who identify outside the binary. Based on the previous studies mentioned above (e.g., Coda, 2018; Parra & Serafini, 2022), we suspected to find that current teaching materials and Spanish textbooks used in BC and Alberta do not contain IL, such as gender-neutral neopronouns (new pronouns such as *elle*, *ellx*-3SG), suffixes (e.g., -e, -x, -@) or explanations on how to use inclusive vocabulary options as a strategy to include everyone (e.g., *las personas*, “the people”; see Carter, George, & Langevin, 2022b; Slemph, Heap & Díaz, 2019 for more examples). In addition to sharing their classroom experiences, the participants were given opportunities to provide suggestions as to how L2 classrooms could become more inclusive spaces.

Research Questions

As a result of our study, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are Spanish teachers and learners’ experiences with IL options in the classroom and/or in teaching and learning materials in BC and Alberta?
- How can we create a more inclusive learning experience in our Spanish language classrooms based on the needs expressed by teachers and learners of Spanish?

Method

To discover where the gaps may be in terms of IL options and educational resources for Spanish teaching and learning in BC and Alberta, we chose two methods of data collection: an anonymous online survey, and one-on-one virtual interviews over Zoom (see Hashemi, 2019 for a detailed account of mixed methods research in applied linguistics; also, Hubball & Clarke, 2010). These digital methods allowed us to collect data during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, while providing flexibility to recruit participants from multiple cities within two Canadian provinces without the need to travel. Interview participants were given a digital gift card of \$25 CDN. The survey, interview and participant recruitment methods were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the investigators’ respective universities. Prior to distribution, the survey questions were reviewed by advisors from an Equity and Inclusion Office.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a variety of methods, with the aim of recruiting Spanish teachers and learners from the provinces of BC and Alberta. Although the inclusion criteria were open to all Spanish teachers and students residing in BC or Alberta over 18 years of age, we wanted to ensure that we included TGNC participants in our study. The following recruitment methods were used: posters, emails sent to LGBTQ2S+ community groups, advertising through language teacher mailing lists, a recruitment notice in a teacher association newsletter, and contacting students registered in all levels of Spanish language classes at multiple universities. Participants were required to be over 18 years of age and be either a Spanish teacher or learner. At the end of the survey, there was an opt-in option for participants to check if they wished to participate in the follow-up interview. The opt-in did not affect the anonymity of the survey responses due to its set up in Qualtrics as an embedded distinct survey within the main survey. Given that the focus of the study was concentrated in two Canadian provinces and specifically for Spanish, our goal was to recruit approximately 50 participants.

Survey Participants

Forty-seven participants completed the online survey through Qualtrics; 32 were university students and 15 were Spanish instructors from K-12 ($n = 7$) and post-secondary institutions ($n = 9$).² Ninety-four percent ($n = 30$) of students were taking Spanish lessons at a post-secondary school, one was enrolled at a language school, and the remaining four (13%) indicated they had other experience with Spanish (e.g., from traveling or learning from Spanish-speaking parents). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 64; however, due to the higher number of student responses, over half (57%, $n = 25$) were between the ages of 18 to 24. Out of the 46 participants who answered the question: “*How do you identify?*”, 74% ($n = 34$) identified as female, 22% ($n = 12$) as non-binary, transgender, gender queer, gender fluid, or two-spirit, 15% ($n = 7$) as male, and one participant selected the option to not answer. These numbers reflect that the participants were able to select more than one gender identity. Participants were also asked to indicate the highest level of education they had either completed or in which they were currently enrolled. Twenty-nine participants had completed or were currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree, and 10 had completed or were enrolled in a graduate level degree program (Masters or Doctorate). Seventy-two percent ($n = 34$) of the participants grew up in Canada and 21% ($n = 10$) grew up in a Spanish-speaking country. Almost all the participants reported using English when consulting social media (96%, $n = 45$), whereas 40% reported using Spanish ($n = 19$). In terms of frequency of use, 66% ($n = 31$) spoke Spanish 4 to 7 times per week.

Interview Participants

Fifteen participants took part in a virtual one-on-one interview with the principal investigator on Zoom; 10 were university students and five were Spanish instructors. All 15 participants answered 100% of the questions. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 64; however, eight (54%) were between the ages of 18 to 24, all of whom were students. Twelve (80%) of the participants identified as female, two as male, and one as gender queer, gender fluid and non-binary. As with the survey, participants were able to select more than one gender identity. Ten

² One of the participants taught at more than one type of institution.

reported that they had personally known a student or classmate who identified as TGNC. The Spanish instructors had either completed some form of post-graduate degree (BEd, MA or PhD) or were in a graduate program,³ and the non-teaching students were enrolled in an undergraduate university program. Ten of the participants grew up in Canada, and four grew up in a Spanish-speaking country. Most of the participants reported using English when consulting social media (87%, $n = 13$), and 73% reported using Spanish ($n = 11$). Participants were also asked how often they speak Spanish. Forty-seven percent ($n = 7$) indicated daily, 47% ($n = 7$) responded a few days per week, and one participant selected a few days per month.

Survey

The first data collection method used in our study was an online survey created through Qualtrics, which was designed according to survey best practices (e.g., Fisher, 2020). The survey was open from September through December of 2021. It consisted of demographics questions plus 12 questions about IL use in Spanish classrooms, resources available for teaching and learning, and personal experience with IL (see Appendix). Ten of these questions followed a multiple-choice or Likert scale format (see Iwaniec, 2019 for an explanation of question types). The remaining two were open-ended and intended to elicit keywords or a brief text response. Given that successful surveys are typically short and do not require extensive input on behalf of the participants (see Survey Methodology & Compliance Best Practices, 2022), we aimed to limit the duration of the survey to five to 10 minutes. At the end of the survey, participants were offered an opportunity to give more elaborate answers in an interview setting with an investigator. The surveys were not linked to the interview opt-in responses so that the anonymity of the survey participants was maintained.

Interview

Structured interviews were used as the second data collection method, as they are an appropriate tool for exploring language practices and, according to Rolland, Dewaele and Costa (2019), are “the most common method of data collection in qualitative studies” (p. 279). The interviews lasted between 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the length of answers, and took place one-on-one virtually over Zoom with the lead investigator. For privacy reasons and to protect the confidentiality of the participants, they were not recorded. Participants were asked 10 questions (see Appendix), with slightly different wording depending on whether the participant was a teacher or student. For example, question 9 was changed from “*How do you think we could create an inclusive learning environment for all learners?*” to “*What do you think teachers could do to create a more inclusive learning environment for you?*”. The interview participants were asked the same demographic questions as in the survey, since the surveys were completed anonymously. The interviewer took extensive notes of the responses by hand, then transcribed the responses into a spreadsheet for analysis by the research team.

³ At universities in Canada, typically graduate students may be involved with teaching as graduate teaching assistants, either by assisting professors with labs, tutorials and seminars, or by teaching their own courses, depending on the policy of their institution.

<https://hr.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/UBCO%20BCGEU%202022-2025%20Collective%20Agreement-07070525v3.pdf>

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, surveys were examined for completeness. Only surveys with a completion rate of at least 95% for the closed-ended questions were included in the analysis. Given that mixed methods were utilized for data collection, the appropriate approach to data analysis was to apply both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. Measures of frequency were used to report the discrete values from our survey and interview questions for which the participants had to choose an option from a limited number of responses (Baffoe-Djan & Smith, 2019). The frequency distribution and relative frequency of each value were calculated for each variable.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was used to interpret the open-ended survey and interview responses (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Julien, 2008; Mayring, 2014; Selvi, 2019; White & Marsh, 2006). The responses were coded and grouped into themes by the lead investigator, then reviewed by the co-authors independently. Initially, there was 90% agreement among the researchers with respect to the themes and coding. After the researchers discussed the results and provided supporting arguments and justification for any differing views, there was 98% agreement.⁴

Results

Survey Results

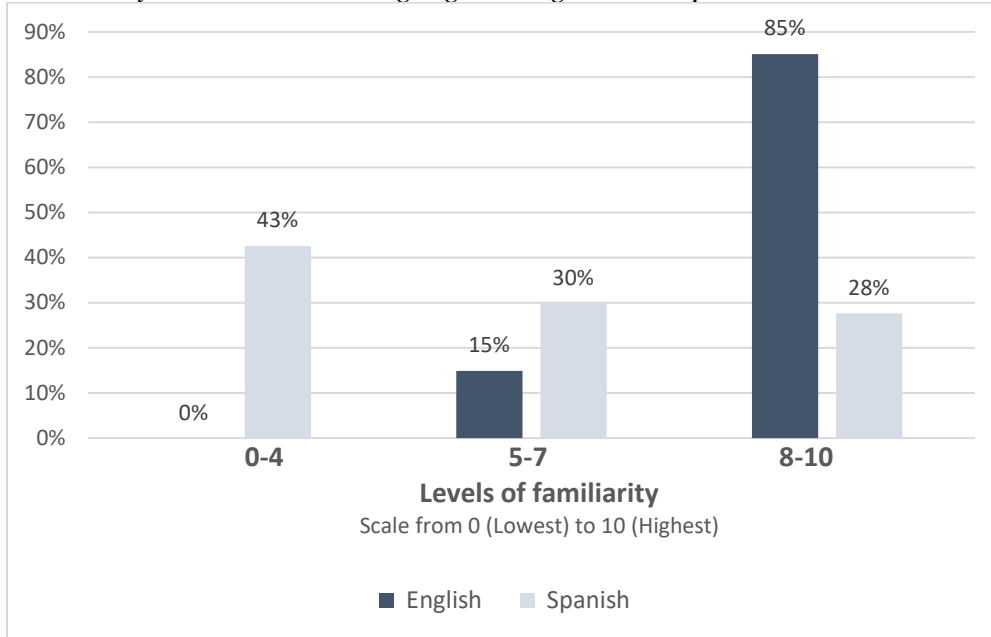
Figure 1 presents the responses to survey questions 3 and 4: “*How familiar are you with inclusive language in English?*”; “*How familiar are you with inclusive language in Spanish?*” Responses in Qualtrics were grouped according to three classifications: scores from 0 to 4, from 5 to 7, and from 8 to 10. For question 3, 85% ($n = 40$) of the participants gave a score of 8 to 10, meaning they were very familiar with IL in English. In contrast, for question 4, 28% ($n = 13$) of the participants gave the same score for Spanish. It should also be noted that none of the participants were unfamiliar with IL in English, whereas 43% ($n = 20$) gave a score of 0 to 4 for Spanish.

Participants were asked two questions associated with the importance of IL in teaching materials and resources (Figure 2): (6) “*Is it important to you that teaching materials (e.g. textbooks) include gender-inclusive options?*”; and (11) “*How important is it for you to have access to resources on inclusive language?*” The majority of the participants indicated that it was very or extremely important (74%, $n = 35$; 70%, $n = 33$, respectively).

Figure 3 presents the results from four questions that were designed to elicit responses about the frequency of use of IL in Spanish in four different modes: writing, speaking, listening, and viewing or reading. For all four questions, the majority gave a response of never or sometimes. Question 5 specifically asked how often participants had seen language options in teaching materials for transgender and non-binary students in Spanish. It should be noted that almost all the participants (96%, $n = 45$) indicated never or sometimes. In contrast, the results also showed that the participants gave the highest number of positive responses (i.e., most of the time or always) to the question about using IL when speaking (23%, $n = 11$), in comparison with the other modes of use.

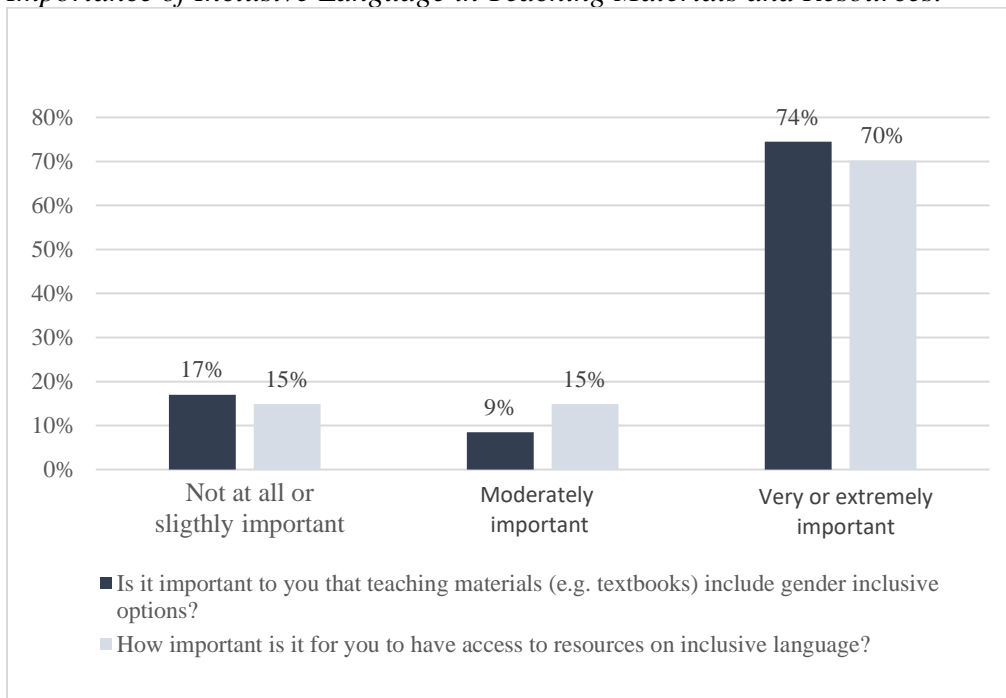
⁴ See Julian (2008): “In qualitative content analysis, a reliability co-efficient of .60 ... is considered acceptable” (p. 121).

Figure 1
Familiarity with Inclusive Language in English and Spanish.



Note. N = 47.

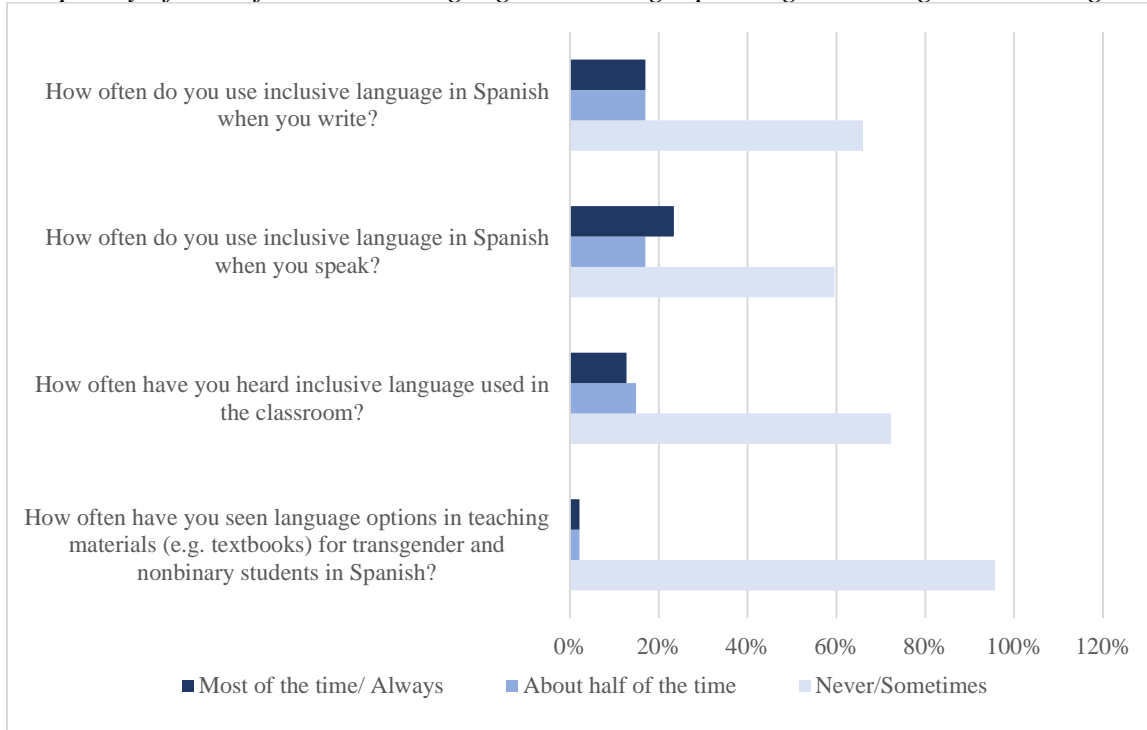
Figure 2
Importance of Inclusive Language in Teaching Materials and Resources.



Note. N = 47.

Figure 3

Frequency of Use of Inclusive Language in Writing, Speaking, Listening and Reading.



Note. $N = 47$.

In addition to the closed-ended questions, the survey included two open-ended questions that were intended to give an opportunity for the participants to offer ideas and suggestions, particularly for those who did not wish to participate in the virtual interview. Question 10 was presented only to the instructors and asked: “*What types of resources do you already have for teaching about inclusive language?*” Thirteen of the instructors provided a response to this question. Seven (54%) of the participants indicated that they had no resources. Three participants indicated that they created their own limited resources (e.g., a few slides, links to additional information). The remaining three participants had read articles, attended workshops, or listened to radio broadcasts.

The last open-ended question was presented to both instructors and students with slightly different wording: (12a) “*Using keywords, what would help teachers provide an inclusive learning environment for students?*”; (12b) “*Using keywords, what would help teachers provide an inclusive learning environment for students?*” From the responses to question 12a (Table 1), five clear themes were developed. *Education and training* was assigned to responses that contained references to any type of teacher education and training, such as workshops and conferences. *Practice activities* referred to practice activities for class. *Authentic or innovative materials* included mentions of songs, new readings, authentic documents, and innovative teaching materials. The theme of *understanding* was assigned if the participant discussed any form of understanding, for example, understanding the subject matter, and understanding why it is important. The last theme for question 12a, *general resources*, included several mentions of a variety of resources, such as books, videos, textbooks, and general unspecified mentions of materials.

Table 1*Instructor Suggestions on Providing an Inclusive Learning Environment for Students.*

Theme	Number of Mentions	Example of Response
Education and training	4	“Workshops, textbooks, conferences.”
Practice activities	2	“Practice activities, grammar presentations, vocabulary listings, videos.”
Authentic or innovative materials	3	“A new material that recognizes most options of life and not only and exclusively binary ways to speak about gender in Spanish, new pictures in our book, songs, new readings, and also symbols for teaching pronouns.”
Understanding	3	“Interest, commitment, open mind, respect, understanding the subject.”
General resources	6	“More resources.”

Note. $N = 12$. QCA of the responses for survey question 12a: [Instructors] “Using keywords, what would help teachers provide an inclusive learning environment for students?” Several responses were assigned multiple themes.

The themes that were developed from the student answers to question 12b (Table 2) presented a different perspective, although there was some overlap with the teacher responses. The three themes were: *teach inclusive language*, *use inclusive language*, and *education and training*. Overall, there were 12 responses that explained that the instructors should teach IL in class, show examples, and provide options for the students. Nine students stated that instructors should use IL themselves during class, and three responses indicated that the instructors should research or educate themselves about IL.

Table 2*Student Suggestions on How Instructors Could Create a More Inclusive Learning Environment.*

Theme	Number of Mentions	Example of Response
Teach inclusive language	12	“Teach the inclusive words. I’d use them so much more if I knew what they were and saw them used by others.”
Use inclusive language	9	“Include inclusivity resources, activities; use inclusive terms when speaking.”
Education AND training	3	“When teaching a language, they could research how inclusive language works in that language.”

Note. $N = 20$. QCA of the responses for survey question 12b: [Students] “Using keywords, what do you think teachers could do to create a more inclusive learning environment?”

Interview Results

All participants were asked identical interview questions, except for questions 6 and 9, which were slightly modified depending on if the participant was an instructor or student. Questions 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7 elicited a limited number of responses; therefore, the results are presented as counts or percentages. Questions 3, 8, 9, 10 were open-ended questions. The context analyses of the responses to these four questions are presented in Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8. Questions 2 through 8 were asked to find out about the participants' experience with IL in Spanish inside and outside of the classroom. The remaining questions were designed to answer the second research question: How can we create a more inclusive learning experience in our Spanish language classrooms based on the needs expressed by instructors and learners of Spanish?

At the beginning of the interview, once it was established whether the participant was a student or an instructor (question 1), participants were asked the following two questions: (2) *“Have you heard of inclusive language before?”*; (4) *“Do you know what gender-neutral means?”* For both questions, all but one participant answered yes. The remaining participant, a student, disclosed that during three years of high school Spanish, they had only ever heard the generic masculine being used to address the class as a group. Participants were also asked to provide examples of gender-neutral language in Spanish (Table 3).

Table 3

Knowledge of Gender-Neutral Language in Spanish.

Question	No	Yes	Examples of Affirmative Responses
Do you know of any gender-neutral language used in Spanish?	4	11	“e suffix for profesore, e suffix for nouns, x; lxs, and lx for clitic pronouns; @.”
Do you know an equivalent to the gender-neutral pronoun them or they in Spanish?	9	6	“elle and ellx.”

Note. $N = 15$. Responses for interview question 5a and 5b: *“Do you know of any gender-neutral language in Spanish?”* *“Do you know an equivalent to the pronouns them or they in Spanish?”*

Table 4

Recency of Exposure to Inclusive Language in Spanish.

Time Period	Number of Responses
Never	1
Within the year	4
2 to 3 years ago	1
4 to 5 years ago	3
5+ years ago	6

Note. $N = 15$. Responses for interview question 7: *“When was the first time you started hearing inclusive language being used in Spanish?”*

Table 5 presents the results from interview question 3: *“What comes to mind when you hear the term inclusive language?”* The responses were grouped according to five themes. The

first theme of *pronouns* was assigned to any mention of the word “pronoun” or actual pronouns. Responses that fell under the theme of *gender* included any reference to gender, non-binary, or gender fluidity. The third theme of *grammatical gender and gendered language* focused specifically on mentions of grammatical gender or Spanish as a gendered language. *Gender-inclusive language* referred to responses about non-binary pronouns, non-binary suffixes, and general statements about IL. *Diversity and inclusion* included responses such as making sure everyone is respected and represented and ensuring that there are no stereotypes and that prejudices are not being enforced.

The responses to question 8: “*Have you ever seen inclusive language being used or discussed outside of the classroom? If yes, please provide examples*” are shown in Table 6. The participants provided several examples of social media sources, TV shows, and print media, and they also indicated that they had personal experiences with friends and family. Interestingly, the participants had experience with inclusive language mostly in English.

Table 7 presents the QCA for the responses for interview question 9, which was slightly modified depending on if the participant was a teacher (9a) or a student (9b). This was a general question about how we could create an inclusive learning environment for all learners. The responses to question 9 were grouped into five themes: *pronouns, training and education, teach module or lesson, general resources, and respect and inclusivity*.

Interview question 10 (Table 8) provided an opportunity for participants to expand on their answers to survey question 12a (Table 1) and 12b (Table 2), which only asked participants to provide keywords. In the interview, participants provided more detailed examples and explanations in response to the question: “*Do you have any suggestions for the types of materials that could be developed to create a more inclusive learning environment?*” Responses were assigned six themes, some of which pertained to more than one theme: *visual, audio, authentic, context, practice and activities, syllabus*. *Visual* pertained to any material that was a video, image, text, or textbook, while *audio* classified mentions of podcasts and listening materials. The *authentic* theme was assigned to mentions of materials and resources from real life situations (e.g., *realia*), such as including lessons on historical figures (e.g., García Lorca) and stories of two-spirit Indigenous people from Latin America. Responses that were part of the *context* theme discussed ways of creating an inclusive learning space that were beyond teaching IL. *Practice and activities* included any mentions of exercises, lessons, worksheets, and examples. The last theme, *syllabus*, referred to the single student response that discussed ways to create inclusive syllabi.

Table 5
Ideas Connected to the Term Inclusive Language.

Theme	Number of Mentions	Example of Response
Pronouns	6	“Pronouns they/them, she/her, he/him.”
Gender	4	“Gender, the idea of how it is fluid.”
Grammatical gender and gendered language	5	“Growing up with Spanish and a gendered language it’s what I think of.”
Gender-inclusive language	8	“Language that doesn’t exclude anyone e.g. using ‘x’ instead of ‘a’ or ‘o.’”
Diversity and inclusion	5	“The possibility to include everyone, gender doesn’t matter...”

Note. $N=15$. QCA of the responses for interview question 3: “*What comes to mind when you hear the term inclusive language?*” Some responses were assigned multiple themes.

Table 6*Experience with Inclusive Language Outside of the Classroom.*

Themes	Number of Mentions	Examples of Sources Mentioned
Social media	8	Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.
News media and interviews	5	Online news articles, clips, El País.
TV	5	TV shows, The Owl House.
Family, friends, and coworkers	7	Personal experience, friends, extended family.
Mostly in English	5	
None	1	

Note. $N = 15$. QCA of the responses for interview question 8: “Have you ever seen inclusive language being used or discussed outside of the classroom? If yes, please provide examples.” Some responses were assigned multiple themes.

Table 7*How to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment for All Learners.*

Theme	Number of Mentions	Example of Response
Pronouns	4	“At the start of the school year, there should be inclusion, like a form that the teacher uses, ‘Please circle your pronouns’ instead of asking people to say it out loud in front of everyone.”
Training and education	3	“Have a conversation with faculty program members to explain options, and agree that we can all include them, that language is living and changing.”
Teach module or lesson	6	“For languages: have modules or lessons about inclusive language but go beyond and talk about the ‘why’ and the history of it.”
General resources	3	“Starts with the resources that we have. With the GTA/MA workload it's hard to juggle everything. Need to have pedagogy/resources available that naturally have inclusivity. Make it mainstream in the textbooks.”
Respect and inclusivity	6	“Have to make sure students feel comfortable. Respect students who identify differently from their assigned gender at birth.”

Note. $N = 15$. QCA of the responses for interview question 9a: [Instructors] *How do you think we could create an inclusive learning environment for all learners?* 9b. [Students] *What do you think teachers could do to create a more inclusive learning environment for you?* Some responses were assigned multiple themes.

Table 8
Suggestions for Inclusive Materials and Resources for Language Instruction.

Type of Material	Number of Mentions	Examples of Responses
Visual	8	“Photos. Representation is very poor. There is no diversity with respect to sexual orientation, cultures and abilities.”
Audio	5	“Real life clips and podcasts of people using the language so students can learn from listening.”
Authentic	7	“History of important people who have been instrumental in these changes. García Lorca was out during the time of Franco, and murdered. Knowing that this isn't something new. It's in our history already. Latin America: Indigenous people, like Two-Spirit identities.”
Context	4	“The most impactful would be some sort of personal connection, like a case study of a personal experience. Start a conversation, cultural study, why it's in the language.”
Practice and activities	10	“Worksheets, so learning while doing [online textbook platform] could include activities and examples. Make it a natural part of learning.”
Syllabus information	1	“Could be included in the syllabus, like how we have info about Safewalk, we could include info on gender-neutral bathrooms.”

Note. $N=15$. QCA of the responses for interview question 10: “Do you have any suggestions for the types of materials that could be developed to create a more inclusive learning environment?” Several responses were assigned more than one theme.

Discussion

According to our results, the participants are more familiar with IL in English than in Spanish. Since the majority of participants were students in Canada, this finding is unsurprising as they would generally have exposure limited to the language classroom unless they independently sought out other sources of Spanish language input. Participants had seen examples outside of the classroom in news media, on social media and TV, or they had personal experience with friends and family; however, they indicated that they predominantly used social media in English. In contrast, the majority of participants reported that they had never encountered uses of IL in Spanish class, and specifically had not seen representation or examples for TGNC students in course materials or textbooks. These findings support previous studies by authors such as Grey (2013, 2021), Nemi Neto (2018), and Paiz (2015), among others. Similar to these studies, the participants in our study believed it was important to have access to textbooks and other resources that include gender IL, such as audio, visual, and authentic teaching and learning materials. It is also important to provide context and opportunities for discussion about why classrooms should be inclusive and safe spaces for learning for all students.

Based on our findings, we propose a three-pronged approach to creating a more inclusive learning environment: education and training for instructors, creation of open-source and open-

access flexible teaching and learning materials, and immediate implementation of small but impactful and achievable changes in the classroom. Education and training could be made available at various stages of a career. Ideally, it would begin early on, either during formal education in a Bachelor or Master of Education degree program (Paiz, 2019, 2020; Saunston, 2017), or as a form of graduate teaching assistant training. The training could also be part of professional development, possibly provided by centres for teaching and learning that are often present at post-secondary institutions (e.g., Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022). It would be essential, however, to consult and include individuals with lived experience during the planning and design stages. As a result of the training, instructors could then pass along the knowledge to their students in class. Instructors could also research the topic of inclusion in language teaching, as suggested by the interview participants in this study. As a starting point, Knisely (2021) provides a “starter kit” for thinking about inclusion and trans representation in the French L2 classroom. Paiz (2019, 2020) offers suggestions and practical ideas for queering the language classroom. Although authors Knisely and Paiz focus on French and English respectively, their suggestions and advice can be applied to other languages. Parra and Serafini (2022) offer a list of Spanish-specific activities, appropriate for higher-level language or literature courses. It should be noted, however, that not all suggestions and activities are suitable for all classes or all levels, and a program-level discussion might be beneficial before implementation. Furthermore, these activity ideas may not be feasible in all parts of the world and will depend on the local context and learning environment. For example, although the BC provincial government⁵ and the Alberta government⁶ support the use of IL, many governments around the world are against it, as seen recently in the news regarding the ban of gender-neutral language in schools in Buenos Aires (Lankes, 2022). In fact, the *Real Academia Española* (Spanish Royal Academy) in Spain continues to openly and officially reject all gender-inclusive forms (Real Academia Española, 2020), despite its continued use in social media (Carter et al., 2022; Kalinowski, 2020) and “among queer speakers in different speech communities” (Papadopoulos, 2022, p.45).

The needs analysis presented in this article is the first step towards the ultimate goal of creating and contributing research-informed didactic materials that will be made publicly available. It is critical for instructors and teaching assistants to have access to free resources (open-access) that can also be revised and modified to suit different proficiency levels and teaching contexts (open-source). It is our hope that eventually mainstream textbooks will also begin to present more diverse content in terms of visual representation, practice activities, and any grammar explanations and examples. In the meantime, meaningful change can begin with the instructor in class. As suggested by the participants in this study, the instructor could openly state their pronouns in class as a sign that they are creating a safe and open space, and they could *privately* invite students to provide their pronouns in return (Knisely & Paiz, 2021). The instructor could use IL as a natural part of their speech, normalizing the language and in turn providing options and examples for the students. However, it should be noted that although this change in speech pattern will require practice and patience, it is an essential step in creating an inclusive language class. Instructors could also review their own examples and presentations, ensuring to include gender-neutral, inclusive, and non-heteronormative options. As a final suggestion, which may be used in any course subject, information should be provided in the syllabus. For example, there could be a statement about inclusivity and diversity, or information about the location of gender-neutral

⁵ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/careers/all-employees/working-with-others/words-matter.pdf>

⁶ <https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626737/91383-attachment-1-guidelines-final.pdf>

bathrooms near the classroom, and instructors and teaching assistants could include their pronouns alongside their names.

Future Research

To successfully design and create research-based didactic materials and resources, it is critical to consult with TGNC community members so that we can incorporate authentic and realistic linguistic data. Therefore, as a next step in our project, we are interviewing TGNC identifying participants from Spanish-speaking countries throughout the world in addition to analyzing the results of a second online survey that has been completed by over 200 TGNC Spanish-speakers around the world. Through consultations and surveys, we hope to have a better understanding of how we can not only normalize the use of gender-neutral and inclusive language in Spanish, as well as how we can re-imagine our classrooms as an inclusive space by changing attitudes towards gender expression and the binary grammatical gender system of Romance languages.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. You can answer this survey either as a Spanish language teacher or as a Spanish language student. What is your role?
- 2a. Where do you currently teach Spanish? Select all that apply.
- 2b. Where do you take Spanish lessons? Select all that apply.
3. How familiar are you with inclusive language in English? (e.g. they/them used as gender-neutral pronouns)
4. How familiar are you with inclusive language in Spanish? (e.g. todes, Latin@s, elle)
5. How often have you seen options in teaching materials (e.g. textbooks) for addressing transgender and nonbinary students in Spanish?
6. Is it important to you that teaching materials (e.g. textbooks) include gender-inclusive options?
7. How often have you heard inclusive language used in the classroom?
8. How often do you use inclusive language in Spanish when you speak?
9. How often do you use inclusive language in Spanish when you write
10. *[Teachers only]* What types of resources do you already have for teaching about inclusive language?
11. How important is it for you to have access to resources on inclusive language?
- 12a. *[Teachers only]* Using keywords, what would help teachers provide an inclusive learning environment for students?
- 12b. *[Students only]* Using keywords, what do you think teachers could do to create a more inclusive learning environment?

Interview Questions

1. Are you a Spanish teacher or a student?
2. Have you heard of inclusive language before?
3. What comes to mind when you hear the term inclusive language?
4. Do you know what gender-neutral means?
- 5a. Do you know of any gender-neutral language used in Spanish?
- 5b. *[Follow-up to 5a]* Do you know an equivalent to the gender-neutral pronoun *them* or *they* in Spanish?
6. Have you ever had a student or classmate who identified as transgender, nonbinary, or gender fluid?
7. When was the first time you started hearing inclusive language being used in Spanish?
8. Have you ever seen inclusive language being used or discussed outside of the classroom, e.g. in social media, on tv, on the internet somewhere?
- 9a. *[Teachers only]* How do you think we could create an inclusive learning environment for all learners?
- 9b. *[Students only]* What do you think teachers could do to create a more inclusive learning environment for you?
10. Do you have any suggestions for the types of materials that could be developed to create a more inclusive learning environment? What do you think the materials should include?