

Embracing Inclusive Language in the Classroom: Activities for English Teachers to Cultivate Gender-Neutral Communication

Imagine a scenario with a pilot and a flight attendant. How do you picture them? Now read the following anecdote:

Sandra, an airline pilot with years of experience, was preparing for her flight while chatting with Mike, a flight attendant who had just joined the crew. Some of the passengers were surprised to see Sandra confidently taking control of the cockpit, while Mike, with a warm smile, provided the safety instructions.

In this example, what may surprise some people lies in the reversal of traditional gender roles. Sandra, as the experienced pilot, challenges the assumption that pilots are typically male. Mike, on the other hand, as a flight attendant, challenges the expectation that flight attendants are primarily female. Although these departures from traditional gender roles are becoming more and more common, they continue to defy some people's stereotypical assumptions. The possible misconception here is based on the fact that *pilot* and *flight attendant* are gender-neutral or gender-inclusive job titles that are not specifically associated with one gender.

THE PHENOMENON OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Inclusive language practices promote a culture of respect and understanding, and they foster

awareness of the diversity that exists among people. According to Baxter-Read (2024), "Inclusive expressions don't presume to know someone's gender or imply biased or prejudiced ideas . . . in relation to ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, or any other personal characteristic." This means using language in a way that avoids causing offence or perpetuating stereotypes or prejudices, particularly those related to social and cultural identities. Using inclusive language involves being aware of how words or actions may affect others and making efforts to promote inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives.

It is essential to note that implementing gender-neutral language comes with differing views and varying levels of acceptance in different societies. Some suggest that language policies alone may have limited impact on

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addressing broader issues of gender inequality (Mallinson and Inscocoe 2020). Others state that gender-neutral language excessively emphasizes gender as a defining aspect of individual identity (Stein 2021). Some assert that using gender-neutral language can result in clumsy and unaesthetic language, making a text more difficult to understand, especially for people with dyslexia and for language learners.

Proponents of gender-neutral language, on the other hand, believe that language plays a role in shaping our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and that gender inequality can be addressed by adopting gender-neutral language policies. They also feel that gender-neutral language helps create a more inclusive environment for women and acknowledges individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms (Elsesser 2020). It also helps avoid making assumptions about someone's gender based on their appearance or name, thus reducing the risk of misgendering.

PROTOTYPE THEORY AND COGNITIVE PRIMING

Linguistic expressions and biases are often considered to be rooted in cognitive processes that shape our perception of gender. Prototype theory and cognitive priming are two fundamental concepts that explain how we think about gender.

According to prototype theory, people categorize concepts based on typical examples within a category, which often reflect common cultural and societal norms. These typical examples frequently match specific gender-related traits or behaviors, shaping how we view gender roles and identities (Mahr 2024). For instance, the concept of “mother” is often associated with nurturing, caring,

and domesticity, while “father” is linked to authority, providership, and assertiveness. Whether these prototypes are accurate or not, they can form our expectations and influence how we perceive individuals who do not conform to these stereotypes.

Cognitive priming is a psychological phenomenon where exposure to a stimulus influences a person's thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions, often without their awareness. This process involves the activation of certain mental representations or schemas, which then affect how an individual responds to later stimuli and can lead to the unconscious activation of stereotypes, biases, and attitudes (*Psychology Today* 2024).

An example of a potential source of cognitive priming from an early age is the 1964 edition of *My First Dictionary: The Beginner's Picture Word Book* (Oftedal et al.), which aimed to introduce reading to children. In this illustrated dictionary, professionals are predominantly referred to as men, with terms such as *fireman*, *policeman*, and *mailman*, except when only a gender-neutral term is available—for example, *doctor* or *dentist*. The illustrations in the text similarly are limited to a male representation, with the sole exception of nursing, which shows a woman. The word *rocket* is accompanied by a sample sentence as follows: “A man can go up in a rocket.”

Such stereotypical representations in children's literature and schoolbooks provided certain role models and probably influenced children's perceptions of gender roles and career choices. In recent years, a growing number of educational publishers have become aware of this issue and have started depicting men and women in diverse roles and occupations.

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IMPLEMENTING GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Various English-speaking countries have adopted gender-neutral language policies. In Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and parts of the United States, both public and private institutions have taken steps to incorporate gender-neutral language into their policies, guidelines, and even legal frameworks. For instance, “several US states now mandate the use of gender-neutral language in all official documents and forms” (Cohen et al. 2023). Gender-neutral language has also become an increasing global trend in communication, as many institutions and international organizations like the United Nations (n.d.) have policies embracing it.

Being aware of gender-neutral language can make a positive difference in students’ communication skills. When speakers of English are aware of gender-neutral language, they are less likely to misinterpret or misgender someone; doing so may lead to unintentional offence or discomfort. In addition, somebody who is familiar with gender-neutral language might feel more confident communicating in diverse settings,

such as international business meetings or academic conferences.

In English, gender-neutral language and an awareness of it can be implemented in a number of ways. For example, gender-neutral job titles such as *flight attendant* and *firefighter* can be used instead of gendered terms like *steward/stewardess* and *fireman*. Another step is to avoid using the term *man* as a generic reference to all humans. A more equitable and respectful representation of all individuals can be achieved by replacing *man* with more-inclusive terms (Dea 2019). Examples include *mankind* (*humanity* or *human beings* can be used instead), *manpower* (*human resources*), and *man-made* (*synthetic*).

When someone is referring to an individual whose gender is unknown or irrelevant, the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as *they* or *them* is recommended instead of gender-specific pronouns like *he* or *she*. There is also the gender-neutral pronoun *ze*, whose use varies depending on the context and the people involved. While some people may be familiar with *ze* and use it as a gender-neutral pronoun, it is not as widely recognized or accepted as are established gender-neutral pronouns such as *they*. The University of South Carolina Aiken (2024) provides an overview of the use of the pronoun *ze* (see Figure 1).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities help raise students’ awareness and allow them to practice using gender-neutral language terms.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive Pronoun
ze	zim	zir	zirs	zirsself

Figure 1. Use of the pronoun ze and related forms (University of South Carolina Aiken 2024)

Introduction

Start by asking students to describe what they imagine a pilot and a flight attendant might look like and invite them to share their ideas. You might also ask them to draw a pilot and a flight attendant. Then tell them the anecdote at the beginning of this article. If students initially imagined the pilot as a man and the flight attendant as a woman, encourage them to discuss their reasons for these assumptions. Next, play the two-minute video “A Class That Turned around Kids’ Assumptions of Gender Roles!” (Upworthy 2016), which highlights early gender stereotyping by children. The video illustrates how, from a young age, children typically associate professions like firefighters, surgeons, and pilots with males.

Following the video, lead a class discussion to explore why the children in the video tend to associate these professions with men. This phenomenon can be attributed to the scarcity of female role models in these fields, which, in turn, may be rooted in deep-seated cultural and societal biases about traditional gender roles. Tell students that language can play a role in promoting stereotypical notions (see cognitive priming) and provide them with the following explanation of gender-neutral language:

Gender-neutral language is a way of speaking and writing that avoids the use of gendered pronouns and terms (e.g., *he* or *she*), job titles, and expressions by using terms that do not refer to a particular gender, such as *pilot* and *flight attendant*, in order to make the terms more inclusive and to avoid gender stereotypes.

Next, ask the students to complete the quiz in Figure 2. It gives examples of gender-neutral terms and checks students’ awareness of the topic.

Language practice

Now look at the following examples of pronoun use. What do you think of the choices? Are all options gender-neutral?

Gender-Neutral Language Quiz

- Which of the following terms is considered gender-neutral?
 - chair or chairperson (= a person in charge of a meeting)
 - policewoman
 - fireman
- What are accepted gender-neutral alternatives to the word *mankind*?
 - men and women
 - human beings or humanity
 - people
- Servers* is a gender-neutral job title for
 - waiters and waitresses
 - salespeople
 - stewards and stewardesses
- What is a gender-neutral alternative to *grandmother* or *grandfather*?
 - grandparent
 - grandma and grandpa
 - granny
- Which job title is gender-neutral?
 - stewardess
 - actress
 - flight attendant
- Which of the following are gender-neutral job titles?
 - policemen and policewomen
 - firefighters instead of firemen
 - salesperson instead of salesman
- Which pronoun should be used when referring to a person whose gender is unknown?
 - he
 - she
 - they
- What does the word *sibling* mean?
 - mother or father
 - brother or sister
 - uncle or aunt
- Which word is an alternative to *secretary*?
 - girl or man Friday
 - administrative assistant
 - personal assistant (PA)
- What does *spouse* mean?
 - husband or wife
 - brother or sister
 - mother or father
- What is an example of gender-neutral language in addressing a group of people informally?
 - “Hey, guys!”
 - “Hello, boys and girls!”
 - “Hello, everyone!”
- Which pronoun is sometimes used as a gender-neutral alternative to *he* or *she* when referring to a specific person?
 - ze
 - it
 - we
- What is the gender-neutral word for a person whose profession is acting on stage, in films, or on television?
 - actress
 - actor
 - player
- What is an example of gender-neutral language when referring to a group of mixed genders?
 - “Dear ladies and gentlemen”
 - “Dear guys”
 - “Dear all”
- What terms can be used instead of *congressmen*?
 - representatives
 - congresspeople
 - members of Congress

Figure 2. Gender-neutral language quiz

KEY: 1. a) chair or chairperson; 2. b) human beings or humanity and sometimes c) people; 3. a) waiters and waitresses; 4. a) grandparent; 5. c) flight attendant; 6. b) firefighters instead of firemen and c) salesperson instead of salesman; 7. c) they; 8. b) brother or sister; 9. c) personal assistant (PA); 10. a) husband or wife; 11. c) “Hello, everyone!”; 12. a) ze; 13. b) actor; 14. c) “Dear all”; 15. a) representatives and c) members of Congress

Being aware of gender-neutral language can make a positive difference in students' communication skills.

- The student has to pay his fees by September 30.
- The student has to pay his or her fees by September 30.
- The student has to pay their fees by September 30.
- The students have to pay their fees by September 30.

The above options offer different approaches towards gender-neutral language. *The student has to pay his fees* assumes a generic or default male gender, which is not considered inclusive. Replacing *his fees* with *his or her fees* acknowledges both genders but can be considered cumbersome. Meanwhile, *their fees* is a more inclusive and widely accepted gender-neutral option, although it lacks traditional grammatical correctness. The last option, *The students have to pay their fees*, refers to multiple students and, among these examples, is the best gender-neutral choice.

Proceed by asking students to complete the exercise shown in Figure 3.

Finding examples of gender-neutral language on the internet

Have students read guidelines on how to avoid gender bias in job postings on the job-search platform Monster (Monster Worldwide 2024). Next, ask them to browse through job listings for traditionally male-dominated or female-dominated professions and evaluate whether the listings are inclusive of all genders.

Rewriting a text to make it gender-neutral

Show students the text in Figure 4 and elicit from them that it contains outdated and stereotypical ideas and language, making assumptions about traditional gender roles that are no longer valid in many countries.

Tell them to rewrite the text to eliminate these stereotypes and promote a gender-neutral perspective. (Figure 5 shows one of many possible rewrites.)

Discussing gender-neutral language

Prompt students to discuss the following questions in small groups and subsequently share their ideas with the entire class as a way to reflect on gender-neutral language:

1. In your opinion, how important is it for individuals and institutions (such as schools, workplaces, and governments) to adopt gender-neutral language? Provide reasons for your viewpoint.
2. What challenges or problems might arise when adopting gender-neutral language? How can these be addressed?

Make these job titles gender-neutral (the first one has been done as an example):

1. policeman – police officer
2. fireman –
3. stewardess –
4. mailman –
5. congressman –
6. businessman –
7. foreman –
8. anchorman –
9. repairman –
10. garbageman –
11. salesman –
12. chairman –
13. craftsman –
14. spokesman –
15. weatherman –
16. actress –

Figure 3. Exercise for practice with gender-neutral job titles

KEY: 1. policeman – police officer; 2. fireman – firefighter; 3. stewardess – salesperson or sales representative; 4. mailman – mail carrier; 5. congressman – representative; 6. businessman – businessperson or entrepreneur; 7. foreman – supervisor; 8. anchorman – anchor or news anchor; 9. repairman – repair technician or repairperson; 10. garbageman – waste-management professional; 11. salesman – salesperson or sales representative; 12. chairman – chair or chairperson; 13. craftsman – artisan; 14. spokesman – spokesperson; 15. weatherman – weather forecaster or meteorologist; 16. actress – actor

Some Tips for Housewives

Being a housewife and mother can be a daunting task, but here are some simple tips to help make your life easier.

Firstly, make sure to prioritize your household chores. A daily routine can help keep your home tidy and organized. Ensure dinner is prepared on time. This shows you've been thinking about your husband and care about his needs. Let him speak first and listen to him.

But don't forget to take care of yourself. Being a wife and mother can be physically and emotionally exhausting, so make sure to take some time for yourself each day.

Last, don't be too hard on yourself. Being a housewife is a noble profession. Remember that every wife is doing her best to support her hard-working husband, and that's something to be proud of.

Figure 4. Sample text for exploring gender-neutral language

1. In your opinion, how much can inclusive language influence real social conditions and relationships?
2. Is gender-neutral language commonly used in your first language? If so, how is it implemented? If not, what might be the reasons for its absence?
3. Can you think of any examples where gender-neutral language has positively or negatively impacted communication? Share your thoughts and experiences.

Creative writing: Write an inclusive fairy tale (for intermediate level and above)

This task is a free-writing activity that allows students to actively use gender-neutral language and practice their general writing skills.

Fairy tales often promote certain stereotypical ideas that were prevalent in their time. These include gender stereotypes that tend to portray women as frail and weak, frequently in need of rescue by strong, heroic men. Leading female characters are often beautiful and virtuous, while stepmothers or witches embody negative female traits. The stories also reinforce traditional gender roles, with men generally portrayed as providers and protectors and with women frequently seen as caregivers. Characters who do not conform to these roles are often portrayed unfavorably.

James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, published as a second edition in 2012, is a collection of retold fairy tales that poke fun at political correctness. In these stories, traditional fairy tales are given a modern twist to address issues such as diversity, gender equality, and stereotypes.

A fun, thought-provoking activity is to ask students, individually or in pairs, to rewrite a fairy tale they know. The instructions can be given as follows:

1. Think of a well-known fairy tale, such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," or "Hansel and Gretel" (or any other traditional tale). Focus on its key elements and characters. Your task is to create an inclusive fairy tale that retells this classic fairy tale and makes it less stereotypical.

One way to foster a more inclusive environment is to avoid using traditional gender-specific terms like *wife*, *mother*, *housewife*, and *husband* when describing individuals in domestic roles. Instead, opt for language that is more neutral and inclusive, such as *caregiver* or *household manager*, along with gender-neutral pronouns when referring to these roles.

Tips for Managing Household Responsibilities

Managing household responsibilities can be a challenging task, but here are some simple tips to help make life easier.

Establish a daily routine to keep the home tidy and organized. This helps ensure that all necessary tasks are completed efficiently.

Plan and prepare meals in advance to accommodate everyone's schedule and dietary needs as a way to show consideration and care for the whole family.

In conversations, practice active listening and let your partner share their thoughts and experiences. This fosters open communication and mutual respect.

Don't forget to take care of yourself. Managing a household can be physically and emotionally demanding, so make sure to set aside some time each day for self-care and relaxation.

Be kind to yourself. Managing a household is a significant and valuable responsibility. Remember that every caregiver is doing their best to support their family, and that's something to be proud of.

Figure 5. Possible rewrite of the text in Figure 4

Example of an Inclusive Fairy Tale: "Strength and the Seven Artisans"

Once upon a time, there lived a teenager named Strength (formerly known as Snow White, but that name was considered inappropriate because it focused only on Strength's appearance). Surrounded by natural wonders, Strength loved exploring this biosphere, forming deep bonds with the animals, communicating with the trees, and sharing personal impressions as an influencer on social media.

Meanwhile, in the castle was the spouse of the current ruler, who had become Strength's substitute parent when the ruler had remarried after the death of Strength's biological mother. The substitute parent was overcome by jealousy after learning of Strength's social media success with hundreds of thousands of followers and Strength's popularity throughout the monarchy. Finally, this proved too much for the substitute parent, who sent Strength into the depths of the forest, hoping that Strength would get lost forever.

But, wandering through the forest, Strength found solace in the companionship of woodland creatures and the whispering trees. Each step brought Strength closer to a remote cottage where there lived seven skilled artisans who made sustainable wooden products.

The artisans received Strength warmly and without prejudice. They immediately formed a strong bond and supported and uplifted each other. Strength's natural ability to bring harmony increased their sense of belonging to this diverse community, while the artisans' talents furthered Strength's creativity, and a close friendship developed among the inhabitants of this simple cottage.

One day, a messenger arrived at the cottage, bringing an invitation from Strength's substitute parent, who had undergone therapy for overcoming jealousy. It was an invitation to a great festival, a chance for forgiveness and bonding. Strength, who was compassionate by nature, agreed to return to the castle.

Amidst a crowd of diverse individuals, Strength's ability to inspire love and acceptance made the festival a huge success. The substitute parent, deeply embarrassed, approached Strength and asked for forgiveness. Together, they decided to eradicate stereotypes and help create a fairer society where all people would be equal, and everyone's unique talents would be celebrated.

2. The new fairy tale should reflect the values of diversity and inclusion. Avoid gender-specific pronouns when referring to a group of people or when a person's gender is unknown or irrelevant.
3. Be creative with language; for example, use descriptive adjectives and comparisons to make the story vivid. You can also invent your own gender-neutral words.
4. Maintain the essence of the original fairy tale. It is important to retain some recognizable aspects of the fairy tale to connect with readers.
5. After completing your rewritten fairy tale, take time to review and revise your work. Check for any gendered language or assumptions that may be included and change them.
6. Share your fairy tale with your classmates and teacher.

The sidebar on page 18 shows an example of a rewritten fairy tale called "Strength and the Seven Artisans."

CONCLUSION

The increasing adoption of gender-neutral language across various sectors in the United States and other English-speaking countries highlights its importance and relevance for effective communication in English. Although overcoming systemic inequalities requires broader social reforms, English teachers can play a role in promoting social change by incorporating gender-neutral language into their daily practice and teaching materials. By consistently using gender-neutral language in communication, reviewing materials for gendered language, and integrating gender-neutral language into classroom activities, teachers can help students develop a more inclusive understanding of language and prepare them for interacting in international environments.

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