

# Teaching gender neutrality to beginner English learners

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*Summary: This article explains the importance of teaching gender-neutral vocabulary and the singular “they/them/their” pronouns. It highlights the rise of gender-nonconforming individuals and our cultural response to it. Additionally, the writer shows real life lesson ideas they have taught that are effective for even the lowest of English language users.*

*Keywords: LGBTQ+ advocacy, teaching methodology, gender-neutral, inclusiveness*

In February 2020, I was approached by a student of mine at our Adult English Immersion Program. They asked me to not refer to them as “she” or “her” in class, but to rather call them by their name. I did as they asked. I thought a lot about it when I did not see them again after we went into Covid lockdown. In truth, I don’t know for sure why they asked to be called by their name. From what I do know about them, I believe it is because they do not conform to the gender binary. Regrettably, I realized that I never taught the gender-neutral they/them/their pronouns. They were a student that certainly had the language to understand pronouns. I still reflect on how they should have had the opportunity to learn more pronoun options, so that it could match more accurately with their identity.

Gender is an important part of identity, so being able to identify others correctly is part of our cultural responsibility as teachers. As we learn more about the cultures of our students (and of our own cultures) it becomes clear that gender is a rapidly changing concept. Rajunov & Duane (2019) note that gender is no longer a dichotomy. Gender is highly unique and individualized, as are the intersections of other identities (Rajunov & Duane, 2019, p. xix).

One way to accurately represent fellow human beings who do not fall on the female or male binary is by using the gender-neutral “they/them/their” pronouns. Additionally, some individuals use neopronouns—which are newer, less often used pronouns, such as “ze/zer”. Neopronouns may be an interesting grammatical and cultural point to teach in higher levels of English instruction. *The New York Times* reported that 4% of gender-nonconforming individuals surveyed use neopronouns. Most individuals who identify other than male

**When students read and write with, in, and for their communities, the values and goals undergirding literacy practices change.**

or female are largely using the “they” singular subject pronoun (Marcus, 2021). Shown in multiple surveys from PEW Research Center, the community of gender-nonconforming individuals is growing (Minkin & Brown, 2021). In response to this, Merriam-Webster added “they” as the pronoun to use for “a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary”. On the other hand, many gender studies experts and those who are gender nonconforming may not fully agree with this definition. This is because “they” is used by a broad spectrum of individuals (not just those who identify as nonbinary). This includes but is not limited to those who are genderqueer, genderfluid, intersex, transitioning genders, and so on. The Associated Press also updated their definition in 2017 establishing “they” as their official gender-neutral pronoun. According to Ryle (2019), before the Associated Press updates were done, the German and Swedish languages had already introduced their own gender-neutral pronouns as well (p. 161). Up to 57% of languages have no gendered pronouns. More so, some languages have no gendered nouns, pronouns, or markers, like Chinese, Estonian, Finnish (Wade, 2014). All of this is to highlight how our linguistic and semantic world is inching further and further away from gender binaries. As this happens, teaching the accurate language to others is increasing in priority.

For English learners with advanced proficiency, there are many ways one can introduce the spectrum of gender to the classroom. Being able to use more accurate and appropriate language allows for both the teacher and student to communicate the different perspectives of gender. Often, this brings up the LGBTQ+ influence and how this community is fighting for a new perspective and language to portray that. For teachers and learners in lower English proficiency classrooms, there are more language barrier challenges to the teaching of gender-neutral vocabulary and pronouns. For this reason, let’s focus on environments of lower language proficiency and ways to inclusively adapt and support both students and those they interact with.

When teaching gender-neutral vocabulary and concepts, I have three key tips: first, normalize the concept. Do so with your tone, your posture, and refrain from laughing or other clues that this does not deserve respectability. Students often replicate the attitudes of their teacher when learning things about their new culture. In other words, if you act like it is odd, they will be more influenced to think that it is odd. Second, be consistent in the curriculum. If you teach gender-neutral terms like “spouse” and “sibling” in the family unit, teach gender-neutral terms in all units when it is applicable. Look for those opportunities. The third tip is to focus more on the language and less on the people using gender-neutral vocabulary. Since they are still learning the building blocks to express their questions and to clarify concepts, it may be more confusing to focus on the culture. Focus on the language and their exposure will come in time. When it does, they will already have the language to accurately interact with gender-nonconforming individuals. This means focusing more effort on teaching “they,” and less effort on explaining the individuals who use “they.” If they ask questions, answer confidently and calmly. This goes back to tip number one: normalize the concept. When the concept is normalized, the culture is normalized. For English teachers in classrooms with more emergent language proficiency, some may find it perfectly appropriate to bring up and answer questions about gender-nonconforming individuals. There is no doubt it could be an interesting aspect of US (or globalizing) culture for students to learn and talk about.

I often teach classes thematically. When I teach the “Family” unit (in one of the first weeks), I introduce the class to gender neutrality. Two big things happen this week during these series of classes—I introduce subject pronouns and I teach family vocabulary (e.g., brother, wife, children). This often helps them talk about their family, like “I have two brothers”

and talk about their classmate’s family, like “He has a wife.” I teach all subject pronouns: I, you, he, she, it, they, we. Even though most grammar resources found in textbooks and on-line limit “they” to plural, I explain it can be one or more than one. If the students have very limited English, sometimes I say “Boy? Girl? I don’t know! They.” while covering my eyes. This helps their English brain begin to track two different patterns that are true about the they/them/their pronoun: in a story or situation, if the gender of the subject is not known, use “they” and if gender cannot be established, use “they.” This helps to plant a crucial language seed in their brains. (Of course, not all gender-nonconforming individuals appear androgynous, but it may help our students to avoid mis-gendering others by defaulting to the “they” pronoun.)

My favorite way to do this is to show a picture of a dog. I ask, “He? She?” Sometimes students say “It,” which seems valid because many feel that subject pronouns are reserved for humans. Because many people use gendered pronouns for their pets, I explain that I have a female cat that I refer to as “she.” Then I ask again using a Google image of a dog, “He? She?” Because the gender of a dog can only be confirmed by looking between its legs, and because we cannot do that with this Google image, I remind them “Boy? Girl? I don’t know! They.” That language seed is watered and nurtured yet again in this moment.

As I teach the family vocabulary, I put the words into three categories to better help them to conceptualize the differences. I teach the gendered words and then in the third category I show non-gendered words. For female, I draw the ubiquitous bathroom sign of a person in a dress, and for male, without a dress. Again, it is not the most contemporary way to showcase gender, but it is the method I have found most globally understood (see Table 1).




		
Man / Boy	Woman / Girl	X
Father	Mother	Parent
Husband	Wife	Spouse
Son	Daughter	Child
Brother	Sister	Sibling

Table 1: Example of Gender Binary with Aligning Gender-Neutral Terms

What helps them to

use the terms correctly is asking clarifying questions. To get to this stage, they must have been introduced to plurality. For example, I ask, “How many sisters do you have?” and they may answer, “I have two sisters.” Following that, I ask the same student, “How many brothers do you have?” and they may answer, “I have one brother.” To conclude, I ask, “How many siblings do you have?” and that is when they combine sisters and brothers to answer, “I have three siblings.” This happens with all words that fall into three categories. It helps clarify understanding for both gender neutrality and for each vocabulary word.

Remember, one of the tips is to focus on the language. On the other hand, there are ways you can show real life examples of gender-neutral concepts and people. I have many ways I like to do this, but the most effective way to introduce it has been when I teach learners how to fill out a sample “Information Form.” This is something I teach all lower levels. Filling out forms is something they all do when they go to any kind of appointment, so it is always a good thing to teach or ensure they are doing correctly. On every form there is a prompt: Gender or Sex. Sometimes, they must write in the answer, but other times there are boxes to be checked. In those boxes, the gender-nonconforming option could read, Other, Decline to answer, Non-binary, or the most common one I’ve seen

is Prefer not to say. On a driver’s license, the symbol “X” is being used for individuals who don’t limit themselves to the gender binary. I like to show multiple drivers’ licenses to help answer the questions on these forms. I show them what First Name is and Height and Address, and so on. Many of them have either drivers’ licenses or state identification cards. This is when we compare their card to my examples. I always show three different gendered examples of drivers’ licenses: a male, female, and a gender-nonconforming individual. In 2019, *The Seattle Times* showed an example of that third category (Sex/Gender is labeled: “X”) from their article “Washington drivers’ licenses could soon offer nonbinary gender choice” (Contreras, 2019).

To reiterate tip number two: focus on the objective of the lesson and the language. Additionally, answer questions as they come. Answer confidently and calmly. Explain as best you can that individuals who are not man or woman are perfectly normal people in our society. Talk about how they will likely interact with these individuals. Talk about the importance of respect. I find that when I bring up kindness and respect, most students say that they want to be kind and respectful. Validate that by saying this is a way to show kindness and respect to people in our culture. Kindness and respect have a ripple effect, and they could start with more inclusive lessons.

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