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What We Talk about When We Talk about Gender-Inclusive Language: Teaching and Learning the Singular "They" in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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Résumé de l'article

As interest in the singular "they" has burgeoned in scholarly venues and mainstream media over the past decade, writing studies scholars remain surprisingly absent from these conversations. I studied the impact, value, and challenges of teaching this gender-inclusive pronoun in three sections of my institution's first-year writing course. Prior to instruction on gender-inclusive language, students used the singular "they" liberally and were not aware of how gender-inclusive they were. After learning multiple gender-inclusive writing strategies, students indicated increased awareness of their own use of such language, interest and confidence in using it, and appreciation of its relevance. They preferred the singular "they" to other gender-inclusive writing strategies. But evidence of a disconnect between language use and ideological opposition to gender-inclusive language was also apparent in two (of 71) students' work. In addition to their work, students' self-assessments are therefore vital indicators of the value, impact, and challenges of teaching gender-inclusive language: the nexus of perceived use, interest, ability, and relevance drives whether students will transfer their learning to other contexts and reconcile the disconnect, if one exists, between their language use and ideological orientation towards such language. These findings may be relevant to teaching other forms of inclusive, bias-free language.

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Article

What We Talk about When We Talk about Gender-Inclusive Language: Teaching and Learning the Singular "They" in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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Abstract

As interest in the singular "they" has burgeoned in scholarly venues and mainstream media over the past decade, writing studies scholars remain surprisingly absent from these conversations. I studied the impact, value, and challenges of teaching this gender-inclusive pronoun in three sections of my institution's first-year writing course. Prior to instruction on gender-inclusive language, students used the singular "they" liberally and were not aware of how gender-inclusive they were. After learning multiple gender-inclusive writing strategies, students indicated increased awareness of their own use of such language, interest and confidence in using it, and appreciation of its relevance. They preferred the singular "they" to other gender-inclusive writing strategies. But evidence of a disconnect between language use and ideological opposition to gender-inclusive language was also apparent in two (of 71) students' work. In addition to their work, students' self-assessments are therefore vital indicators of the value, impact, and challenges of teaching gender-inclusive language: the nexus of perceived use, interest, ability, and relevance drives whether students will transfer their learning to other contexts and reconcile the disconnect, if one exists, between their language use and ideological orientation towards such language. These findings may be relevant to teaching other forms of inclusive, bias-free language.

The Rise of Gender-Inclusive Language and the Relative Silence of Writing Studies Scholars

In 2019, Merriam-Webster declared the singular "they" its word of the year (Flood, 2019; Locker, 2019; Merriam-Webster, 2020), having added it as a gender-neutral pronoun earlier that year (Locker, 2019). The American Dialect Society had already declared "they" the word of the year in 2015 and went on to declare it the word of the decade for the 2010s (Reuters, 2020). The singular "they" has a long history in the English language, has been embraced by authoritative style guides (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2020; Associated Press, 2017; Modern Language Association, 2020; University of Chicago, 2017), professional organizations (e.g., Linguistic Society of America, 2016; National Council of Teachers of English, 2018) and dictionaries (e.g., Merriam-Webster 2020; Oxford University Press, 2023), has been championed in major mainstream periodicals like *The Atlantic* (e.g., McWhorter, 2018), *The New York Times* (e.g., Manjoo, 2019; McWhorter, 2021), and *Harper's Magazine* (e.g., Fadiman, 2020), and has been the subject of a scholarly conference (THEY, HIRSELF, EM, and YOU: Nonbinary Pronouns in Theory and Practice, Queen's University, Canada, 2019); however, its small but vocal minority of opponents insist that it is ungrammatical and causes confusion in communication. See, for example, some of the letters to the editor published in response to John McWhorter's 2021 *New York Times* article, "Gender Pronouns Are Changing: It's Exhilarating." Unlike a descriptive approach to language use, which acknowledges that the singular "they" has been around for centuries and is increasing in use and value, these letters take an outdated prescriptive approach. As Nunberg (2016) points out, adopters of the prescriptive approach most likely use the singular "they" all the time—in sentences like the following: "Every customer should keep their receipt in case they want a refund"—a paradoxical situation that points to a significant and possibly deeply entrenched gap between language use and ideological opposition to gender-inclusive language.

Over the past decade, with discussions about the singular "they" sweeping through the English-speaking world, researchers in various fields have undertaken studies related to this gender-neutral pronoun, particularly in linguistics (Baron, 2020; Bjorkman, 2017; Burnett & Loder, 2024; Han & Moulton, 2022; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020; LaScotte, 2021; Moulton et al., 2020; Moulton et al., 2022; Sheydaei, 2021), but also in psychology (Bradley, 2020; Keener & Kotvas, 2023; Sanford & Filik, 2007), sociology and gender studies (Saguy & Williams, 2022), discipline-specific communication studies such as legal writing (Anderson, 2022) and editing (Mackiewicz & Durazzi, 2024; Mackiewicz,

Kraut, & Durazzi, 2024), English language teaching (ELT) (Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021; Tarrayo, 2024), and English as a foreign language teaching (EFL) (Ma, Wu, & Xu, 2022). Yet there has been surprisingly little involvement from writing studies scholars, even though we are also authorities on the issue and our students look to us for guidance, especially in our writing classes. Indeed, because writing courses are typically required for all first-year university students in the United States and, increasingly, in Canada, we teach students majoring in every discipline, unlike our colleagues in other fields, who teach only their own majors and students taking electives. We may therefore be important scholarly authorities on the singular "they" in the lives of virtually every student on our campuses. So why are we not formally studying and sharing our experiences teaching the singular "they"?

I have been teaching gender-inclusive language in my first-year writing courses for about ten years, before the singular "they" became Merriam-Webster's word of the year, but my students were using it even before I started teaching it. Most commonly, they used it to refer to indefinite pronouns, like "everyone" and "someone," and singular nouns with no known gender, like "the average student" and "every applicant." They routinely wrote and uttered sentences like "someone left their cell phone ringer on in class" and "every applicant should arrive for their interview on time." These sentences are gender-inclusive, but were students writing and uttering them this way in order to be gender-inclusive? Or were they simply not familiar with older grammatical injunctions to use what were long considered the only singular third-person possessive pronouns, "his or her," to accompany indefinite pronouns, which are grammatically singular, and to accompany singular nouns of unknown gender?

In 2018-2019, as interest in the singular "they" was rising meteorically, I set out to study the impact, value, and challenges of teaching it in my three 35-student sections of my urban mid-sized Western Canadian public undergraduate institution's required first-year writing course. I found that students clearly accept and use the singular "they," that they are typically not aware of how gender-inclusive they are in their writing and speaking, and that instruction can increase their awareness, in turn making them more interested in writing and speaking in gender-inclusive ways, able to do so, and cognizant of the importance of doing so in their own lives. I also found evidence of a disconnect between language use and ideological opposition to gender-inclusive language in the work and reflections of two students. Before presenting these results in more detail and reflecting on their significance to ongoing discussions about gender-inclusive language, I describe my study's design and contextualize its inclusion of grammar modules and quizzes within writing studies research on grammar instruction.

Study Design Overview

My study entailed a pre-quiz and a pre-survey prior to the grammar module on pronoun agreement, reference, and case (which included the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language), and a post-quiz and post-survey afterwards (both surveys were cast as in-class writing assignments), as well as a cumulative grammar quiz at the end of the semester, covering all grammar modules in the course. I was partly interested in ascertaining how many students were already using the singular "they" before instruction on the subject and how many would continue to use the singular "they" after being taught multiple gender-inclusive writing and revision strategies. But because I conceive the impact and value of teaching practice in terms beyond uptake, retention, and transfer, I was not interested exclusively in students' *use* of the singular "they." I also studied their self-assessments related to gender-inclusive language: how much and where students *thought* they were using it, how *confident* they felt in their ability to use it (in terms of having the language skills to do so), how *interested* they were in using it, and how *relevant* they thought it was to their lives.

The grammar module, which was offered after the pre-quiz and pre-survey, focused on three strategies for writing and revising sentences to be gender-inclusive: using the singular "they," pluralizing antecedents (and other parts of the sentence, accordingly), and revising the sentence to eliminate pronouns altogether. I wanted to offer clear endorsement of the singular "they" for three reasons: 1) Because the pre-survey revealed that students had been exposed to erroneous or conflicting information about the grammaticality of the singular "they." Of the 70 students who completed the pre-survey, 36 (51%) had been told or read or heard that the singular "they" is grammatically incorrect—and 30 (43%) that the singular "they" is grammatically incorrect *and* grammatically acceptable. 2) Because the sources of students' information about the ungrammaticality of the singular "they" were not necessarily authoritative, including parents (23%) and social media (21%). 3) Because concerns expressed in the public sphere about the singular "they" as a source of confusion in communication are overblown and almost certainly ideologically motivated. We practiced straightforward revisions of sentences in which the singular "they" inadvertently created confusion.

During the semester, students did not know anything about my study, which was approved, before the semester began, by MacEwan University's Research Ethics Board. On the last day of classes, after students submitted their final essays, an arms-length faculty member invited them to participate. I did not see the signed consent forms until after I submitted final grades. The number of participants in the study, 71, includes only those students who signed consent forms, not students who had

dropped the course, missed the consent process on the last day of classes, or opted not to sign the consent forms. I did not analyze any student work to look for trends until after I received the consent forms.

The Pedagogy of Grammar Modules and Quizzes for Teaching and Learning Gender-Inclusive Language

Before I turn to my results, lest my study's inclusion of grammar modules and quizzes makes me seem out of touch with decades of research in writing studies, I acknowledge this research and offer three salient qualifications. Summarizing her own and others' research, gathered for her influential book *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996), Constance Weaver notes that teaching grammar through stand-alone lessons does not result in the automatic transfer of grammatical knowledge to students' writing. Instead, "research confirms what everyday experience reveals: that teaching 'grammar' in the context of writing works better than teaching grammar as a formal system, if our aim is for students to use grammar more effectively and conventionally in their writing" (Weaver, 1996, "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing," p. 23). In addition to many individual articles on teaching grammar to students in high school and middle school, before they enter our university classrooms, the U.S.-based National Council of Teachers of English's *English Journal* periodically publishes special issues on the subject (1958, 1996, 2003). We keep asking the same questions— "What *is* grammar? *Should* we teach grammar? *How* should we teach grammar?"—but their import has expanded fruitfully over time. The first question, "what *is* grammar?," for example, has inspired important distinctions between traditional, formal, or school grammar, which is what many people assume we teach when they hear that we are writing instructors (Grammar drills! Red pens!), and other conceptions. My teaching of grammar and study of gender-inclusive language are informed by Laura R. Micciche's conception of rhetorical grammar (2004), which is rooted in Martha Kolln's work (1991; 1996) and is explicitly linked to "larger goals of emancipatory pedagogy" (Micciche, 2004, p. 717), including "critical thinking and cultural critique" (p. 717–718). This conception of grammar "takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interrelation between what we say and how we say it" (p. 718), making grammar an aspect of both, not something requiring attention only after we have got the words down on the page. Because the rhetorical conception of grammar requires attention to the relationship between language use and "cultural attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions" (p. 732), it is ideally suited not only to my own approach to teaching gender-inclusive

language but also to addressing more fundamental questions about grammar instruction: from "*What is* grammar? *Should* we teach grammar? *How* should we teach grammar?" to "*Whose* grammar we are teaching—and *to whom*, *why*, and *how*?" The latter is not simply a question of whether we are doing something that is worthwhile in and of itself or that transfers to students' writing; it is also a social justice question.

My goal in teaching the singular "they" through a grammar module with a pre-quiz and a post-quiz was not to assess retention and transfer based on quiz scores. Rather, my goal was to compare the choices students made on quizzes after learning multiple gender-inclusive revision strategies with their self-assessments to explore the nexus of their use and their *perceived* use, ability, interest, and relevance while the singular "they" was taking the world by storm.

I therefore offer three qualifications to my instruction of the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language through a grammar module despite research that calls into question the value of such modules and quizzes: 1) Research into the limitations of grammar lessons and quizzes demonstrates the folly of assuming transfer to students' writing, so I adopt Weaver's approach and spend far more time working through students' own writing and other samples of writing to teach grammatical principles (like subject-verb agreement) and grammar-related material (like gender-inclusive language) in context, focusing not only on identifying and correcting "errors" but also on identifying and appreciating clarity, economy, and variety in sentence construction. I agree with Mary Ehrenworth that teaching grammar even in the context of student writing does not work if we are simply hunting for errors, no matter how constructive and supportive we are (2003, 91). And I combine Weaver's approach with Micciche's: conceiving grammar as part of the intertwined thinking and writing process, not as something to be attended to only in fully drafted pieces. 2) In an institutional context with 35-40 students per first-year writing class, more than double the maximum recommended by the MLA's Association of Departments of English (2020), and with faculty members teaching between two and four such courses per semester, we use grammar quizzes to account for a small percentage of students' grades, seeing as quizzes take far less time to grade than essays and other writing assignments. In fact, during the period of my study, the master course syllabus, which sets out requirements for all sections of a course at my institution, included the statement that "a thorough review of grammar and sentence structure is a key component of this course." 3) Describing instruction about the singular "they" and other gender-inclusive writing and revision strategies as grammar instruction is something of a misnomer. I introduced this material in the grammar module on pronoun agreement, reference, and case simply because opponents of the singular "they" insist

that it is ungrammatical and causes confusion in communication, so it made sense to teach the material initially in a grammar- and clarity-focused context, when I could use terms like "antecedent noun" and "verb" while they were familiar to students. I followed up by addressing gender-inclusive language in my work with students' own writing and other samples of writing.

These three qualifications contextualize my introduction of the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language through a grammar module on pronoun agreement, reference, and case. My goal was never to assume uptake, retention, and transfer without the far more important work that occurs with students' thinking and writing, prioritizing what works over what does not work (error hunting). Indeed, the following account of my study demonstrates the importance of conceiving teaching impact beyond uptake, retention, and transfer to encompass students' self-assessments about ability, interest, and relevance.

Pre-Quiz on Gender-Inclusive Sentences

Knowing that many students were already writing and uttering gender-inclusive sentences using the singular "they," I started my study with a pre-quiz that would assess whether students could—and how students would—revise gender-exclusive sentences to be gender-inclusive, without being explicitly told to do so. Would they use the singular "they" or another strategy, like the ones I would go on to teach in the grammar module: pluralizing the antecedent (and other parts of the sentence, accordingly) or rewriting the sentence to eliminate pronouns altogether? At this point in the semester, students had already completed a grammar module and quiz on parts of speech, which included identifying pronouns. We used the term "pronoun" as necessary when we worked with students' writing and other writing samples, but we had not yet discussed gender-inclusive language or the singular "they."

The pre-quiz, written by 69 of the 71 students in my study, presented 10 sentences and the instruction: "Each of the following sentences contains one pronoun-related grammatical problem. For each sentence, locate and correct the grammatical problem." Only four of the 10 sentences featured problems pertaining to gender-exclusive language; the others featured different problems like ambiguous pronoun reference. Figure 1 presents the sentences requiring revisions related to gender-inclusive language, the number of gender-inclusive answers using the singular "they," the number of gender-inclusive answers using a different revision strategy, and the number of non gender-inclusive answers. The non gender-inclusive answers include sentences left untouched and revisions to different parts of the sentence, leaving the gender-exclusive constructions in place.
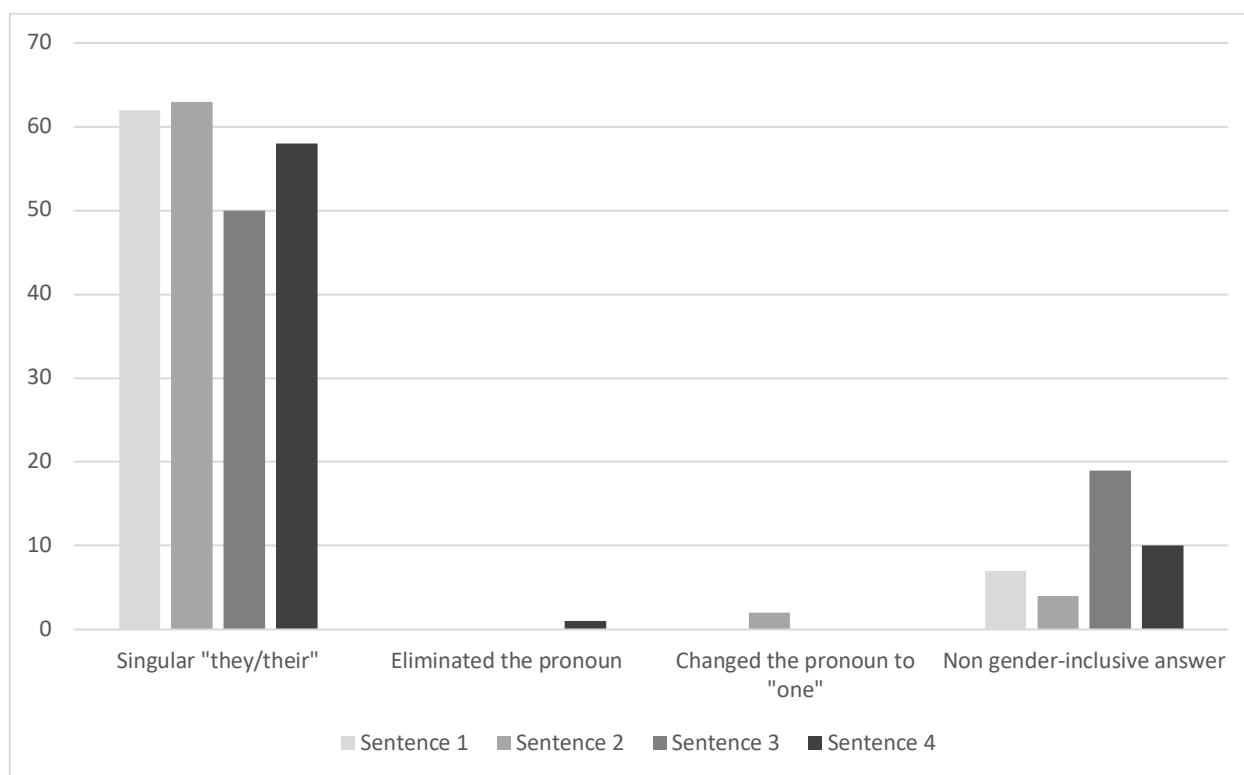
Legend:

Sentence 1: "The average student at this university cares deeply about the quality of his education."

Sentence 2: "When someone gets into a car accident, she should remain at the scene."

Sentence 3: "Ask any prospective voter to sign his or her name on the voting card."

Sentence 4: "Everyone who wants his seat upgraded should form a line in front of the counter."

Figure 1. Pre-Quiz Revision Strategies Per Question

Of the 62 students (90%) who offered gender-inclusive revisions for the first sentence, all 62 (100%) used the singular "their" to refer to a singular noun with unknown gender, "the average student."

Of the 65 students (94%) who offered gender-inclusive revisions to the second sentence, 63 (97%) used the singular "they" to refer to the indefinite pronoun "someone." The other two (3%) changed "she" to "one": "When someone gets into a car accident, one should remain at the scene." These responses do not really qualify as successful revisions, but because they removed the gender-exclusive construction, I have put them in their own column and counted them among the gender-inclusive revision strategies.

Of the 59 students (86%) who offered gender-inclusive revisions to the fourth sentence, 58 (98%) used the singular "their" to refer to the indefinite pronoun "everyone." The other one (2%) removed the pronoun altogether: "Everyone who wants an airplane seat upgraded should form a line at the front of the counter."

The results for the third sentence are striking. This sentence presented the standard gender binary long considered grammatically correct and inclusive. Significantly fewer students (50, or 72%) offered gender-inclusive revisions to replace the "his or her" construction relative to the number who replaced the singular "his" (62, or 90%, for sentence 1; 59, or 86%, for sentence 4), which is also in the possessive case. But the singular "they" remained the preferred revision strategy: of the 50 students (72%) who offered gender-inclusive revisions to the third sentence, all 50 (100%) used the singular "their" to refer to the singular noun "any prospective voter."

Comparing the number of gender-inclusive revision strategies for sentences using "his or her" as a gender-exclusive construction with those using "his" and "she" as gender-exclusive pronouns, there is a clear trend: the sentence featuring "his or her" saw a 72% gender-inclusive response rate, the two sentences featuring "his" saw 86% and 90% gender-inclusive response rates, and the sentence featuring "she" saw a 94% gender-inclusive response rate. Did students believe that "he/his" is more gender-inclusive than "she/her" and that "he or she/his or her" is more gender-inclusive than "he/his"?

Whatever the reason for the different gender-inclusive response rates for questions with different gender-exclusive constructions, the pre-quiz results clearly demonstrate that—prior to any discussion of the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language—students were doing two things: 1) revising gender-exclusive constructions with different degrees of success, depending on the type of gender-exclusive construction; 2) using the singular "they" as their preferred revision strategy. Indeed, of 276 possible responses across the pre-quizzes (69 students revising four sentences each), 236 (86%) were gender-inclusive responses. And of these 236 responses, 233 (99%) used the singular "they." These results differ from what Amanda Wray observed in students' communication a few years before my study: "In the professional writing classroom, . . . [w]e grapple with the challenge of unlearning a dominant practice in our communication, which is to gender individuals as he *or* she, thus failing to recognize trans* individuals and others who fit best in the liminal space of between" (2016, p. 68). While my students were clearly using the singular "they" liberally, I needed their self-assessments related to gender-inclusive language to determine whether they were doing so in order to be gender-inclusive.

Pre- and Post-Survey Self-Assessments Related to Gender-Inclusive Language

The pre-survey, distributed after the pre-quiz, was cast as an in-class reflective writing assignment and featured questions about other subjects in addition to the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language. The portion related to gender-inclusive language invited students' self-assessments of their use of gender-inclusive language in terms of frequency and context, as well as their previous exposure to ideas about the grammatical acceptability or incorrectness of the singular "they." Despite my sense that students tend to write and speak in gender-inclusive ways—either deliberately or because of lack of familiarity with older grammatical injunctions to use what were long considered the only singular possessive third-person personal pronouns, "his or her," to accompany indefinite pronouns and singular nouns of unknown gender—the pre-survey indicated that students do not see themselves that way. Of the 71 students who consented to participate in my study, 70 completed the pre-survey (see Figure 2). While the most common response to the question, "On the whole, do you use gender inclusive language?," was "most of the time" (31%), the second was "occasionally" (27%) and the third "often" (19%). Very few students (3%) believed they used gender-inclusive language all the time.
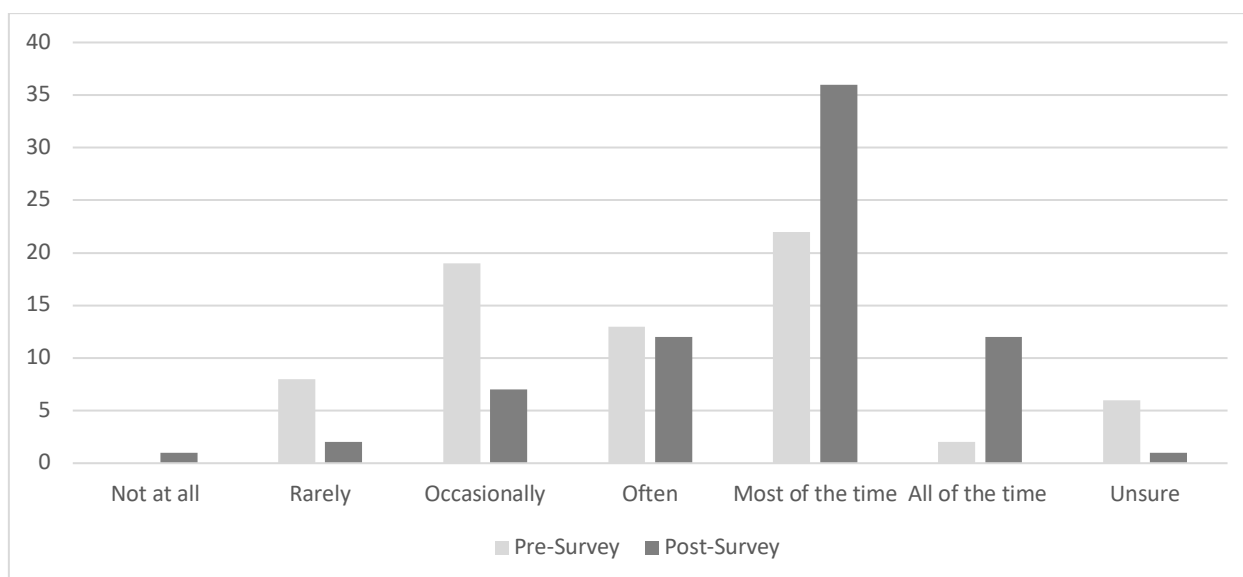

Figure 2. Pre-Survey v. Post-Survey: "On the whole, do you use gender-inclusive language?"

The pre-quiz and the pre-survey cannot be compared directly because one was asking for revisions to pre-written sentences without specifically mentioning the importance of the revisions being gender-inclusive, and the other was asking about students' self-assessments of their use of gender-inclusive language in general. But if the pre-quiz indicated that students were able, without prompting, to revise sentences that have different kinds of gender-exclusive constructions (to different degrees, depending on the type of construction) and overwhelmingly used the singular "they" to do so, the pre-survey does not really capture this trend. Indeed, the pre-quiz shows much greater facility with gender-inclusive language than students seemed to be aware of in their pre-surveys.

And the post-survey, written after the grammar module and again cast as an in-class reflective writing assignment with questions pertaining to other topics, confirms this: when asked the same question again, students' responses changed. All 71 students who consented to participate in my study completed the post-survey (see Figure 2). In response to the question, "On the whole, do you use gender-inclusive language?," the most common response was still "most of the time" but jumped from 31% of respondents to 51%. The percentage of students who responded "all the time" jumped from 3% to 17%, and the percentage who responded "occasionally" dropped from 27% to 10%.

Students' pre-survey and post-survey self-assessments about their use of gender-inclusive language (see Figure 2) reflect the trend towards increased recognition of their use, following instruction on the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language. Therefore, a significant impact of teaching the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language is showing students that they are, for the most part, already writing and speaking in gender-inclusive ways, but they are not aware that they are doing so.

Post-Quiz on Gender-Inclusive Sentences

The post-quiz revealed students' ongoing clear preference for the singular "they" as a gender-inclusive revision strategy and the more limited uptake of the other two strategies (see Figure 3). In addition to questions pertaining to other pronoun-related grammatical issues, the post-quiz featured four sentences related to gender-inclusive language. Students were asked to offer two revisions, using different revision strategies, for every sentence that had "(2)" written after it. They were also told that their revisions must retain each sentence's meaning.
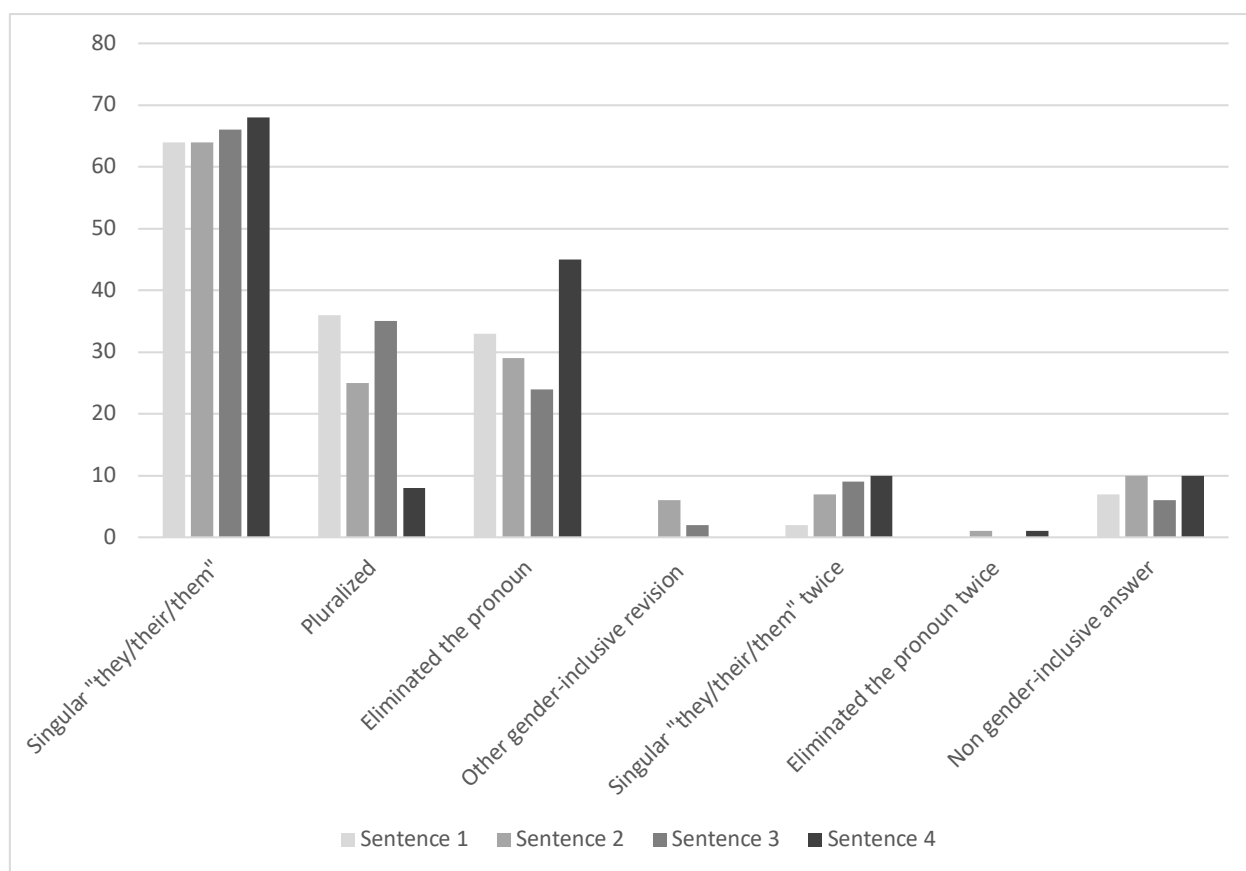
Legend:

Sentence 1: "A novice cross-country skier is likely to find his skills challenged on this new course."

Sentence 2: "Everyone who believes he is owed a refund for the defective product should call the customer service line within seven days."

Sentence 3: "Ask any caller to leave his or her number so I can call back tomorrow."

Sentence 4: "If someone comes by while I am out, tell her to come back later."

Figure 3. Post-Quiz Revision Strategies Per Question

The singular "they" emerged as the preferred revision strategy for every question by a significant margin. In fact, the singular "they" was so popular that some students used it twice in response to a single question, even though they were told to use different revision strategies to get two marks: 10% of participants re-wrote the second sentence twice and used the singular "they" both times, 13% did so with the third sentence, and 14% with the fourth sentence. The only other revision strategy that was repeated twice was eliminating pronouns: one student did so for the second question and one for the fourth question.

Students' use of the singular "they" to revise sentences to be gender-inclusive, already apparent in the pre-quiz, increased after the grammar module, as the post-quiz demonstrated. The rates of non gender-inclusive responses dropped from the 6-28% range on the pre-quiz (depending on the sentence) to the 4-7% range on the post-quiz (again, depending on the sentence). I am including in the non gender-inclusive responses those that were left blank and those that were incomplete (partial sentences), seeing as they do not fulfill the task of rewriting the sentences to be gender-inclusive. These figures are expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses per question for the pre-quiz and the post-quiz, respectively, because the total number of students remained more or less the same (69 for the pre-quiz and 71 for the post-quiz), but the total number of responses doubled (69 per question for the pre-quiz and 142 per question for the post-quiz, where students were asked to offer two revisions for each sentence).

But it is also worth noting that of the 33 (6%) post-quiz responses I have included in the non gender-inclusive grouping, only 6 (1%) actually used or retained a gender-exclusive construction. These six responses came from five students, as one student offered two such responses. All five of these students were absent from class on the day of the grammar module. Three of these six responses featured "his or her" or "his/her" constructions; one retained the "his" that was in the original sentence (sentence 1); one changed "everyone" to "anyone" and retained the "his" that was in the original sentence (sentence 2); and one inserted the name "Stella" and used the pronoun "her" to refer to Stella (sentence 4). The last one is arguably not gender-exclusive because the student invented someone and assigned her a pronoun in order to answer the question, but I put it in the non gender-inclusive category because the spirit of the task was to open the language up, rather than close it down. Beyond these six gender-exclusive responses, the other 27 were grouped in the non gender-inclusive category not because they were not gender-inclusive but because they were not successful as revisions: they were left blank, were nonsensical, or significantly altered the original meaning of the sentence.

The percentage of non gender-inclusive responses for the post-quiz question using the gender binary construction "his or her," which gave students the most trouble on the pre-quiz, dropped from 28% on the pre-quiz to 4% on the post-quiz (including the responses left blank and the incomplete responses). In fact, the sentence presenting the gender binary "his or her" was the sentence that students struggled with least on the post-quiz, in sharp contrast to their struggles on the pre-quiz, where it caused them the most difficulty.

Cumulative (End-of-Semester) Quiz on Gender-Inclusive Sentences

The cumulative grammar quiz, written at the end of the semester and covering all grammar modules in the course, revealed students' ongoing preference for the singular "they" over other gender-inclusive revision strategies (see Figure 4). Two of the 20 quiz questions related to gender-inclusive language. All 71 students who consented to participate in my study wrote the cumulative quiz.
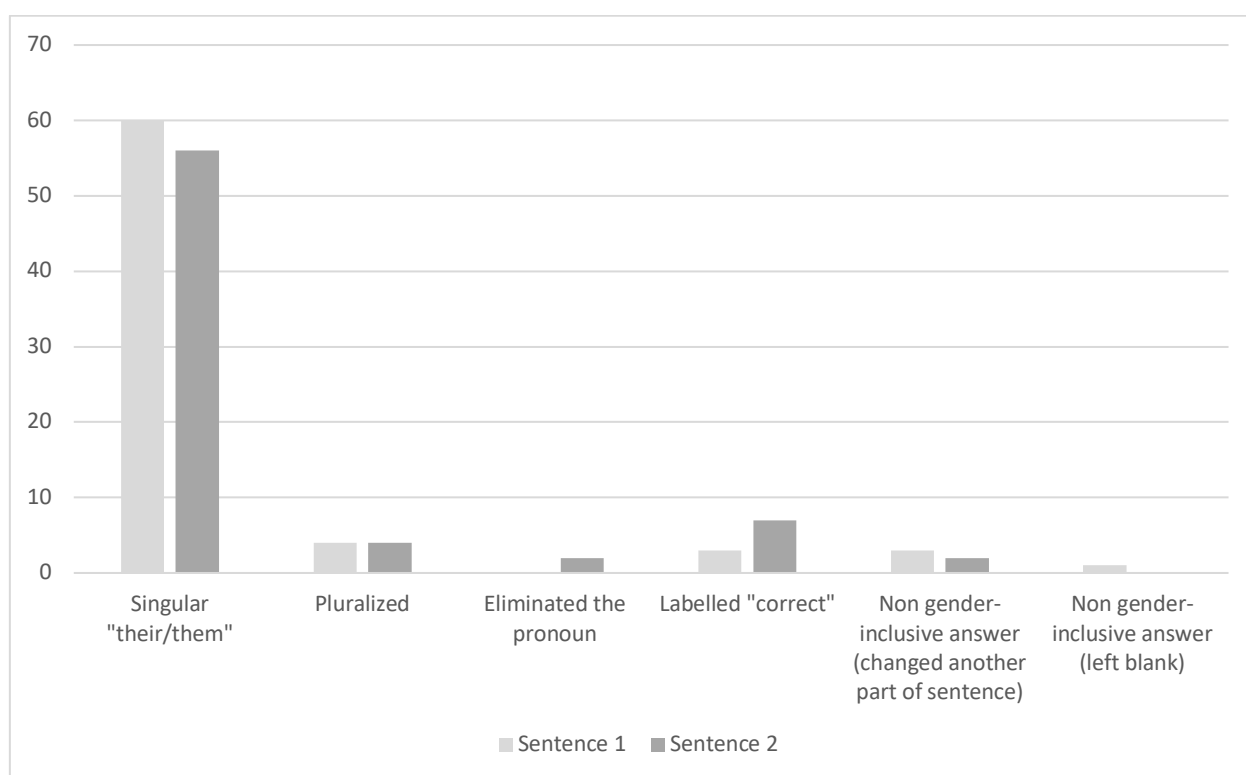
Legend:

Sentence 1: "Ask any restaurant patron to write his or her license plate number on this sheet to

prevent towing."

Sentence 2: "If a student comes by while I am out of my office, tell him to come back in five

minutes."

Figure 4. Cumulative Quiz Revision Strategies Per Question

For the first sentence, 64 students (90%) offered a gender-inclusive revision. As was the case in the post-quiz, the singular "they"—here the possessive "their"—was the preferred revision by a significant margin: 60 of the 64 gender-inclusive responses (94%) replaced "his or her" with "their." The other four pluralized "patrons" and used the possessive "their." Of the seven non gender-

inclusive responses, one was left blank, three changed other parts of the sentence but retained the "his or her" construction, and three labelled the sentence "correct." (Students were told to revise sentences requiring revision and to label as "correct" any sentences that did not require revision.)

For the second sentence, 62 students (87%) offered a gender-inclusive revision. Again, as was the case in the post-quiz, the singular "they"—here the objective "them"—was the preferred revision by a significant margin: 56 of the 62 gender-inclusive responses (90%) replaced "him" with "them." Four others pluralized "students" and used the objective "them," and two rewrote the sentence to remove pronouns altogether. Of the nine non gender-inclusive responses, two changed other parts of the sentence but retained "him," and seven labelled the sentence "correct." In retrospect, I recognize that this sentence was ambiguous, as it could imply that the professor expected a specific student whose pronouns were "he/him" and offered a colleague an instruction relative to that student ("tell him . . ."), rather than an injunction about what to do if any student came by (where the gender-inclusive "them" would have been appropriate).

A comparison of the questions featuring the "his or her" binary across all three quizzes reveals that 72% of students offered a gender-inclusive revision on the pre-quiz, 96% on the post-quiz, and 90% on the cumulative quiz. This trajectory constitutes a significant increase, following instruction, in gender-inclusive responses when faced with the "his or her" binary that was long considered gender-inclusive, and then significant ongoing use even at the end of the semester.

While comparing students' retention of skills in gender-inclusive revisions with their retention of other sentence-level revision skills was not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that the overall success rates of 90% and 87% for the two cumulative quiz questions pertaining to gender-inclusive language were much higher than the average score for the cumulative quizzes, which was 71% (14.25/20). Students retained their learning about gender-inclusive language more effectively than they did their learning about other sentence-level revision skills. Again, I make no claims about the transfer of this learning into their writing; I devoted far more class time to working with students' own writing and writing samples than to the grammar modules.

Post-Survey Self-Assessments about Gender-Inclusive Language in Terms of Interest, Ability, and Relevance

For a more meaningful indicator of the impact and value of teaching the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language, I conducted a post-survey, which set out to explore students' assessments of their own interest in gender-inclusive writing and ability to write in gender-inclusive ways (see Figure 5).
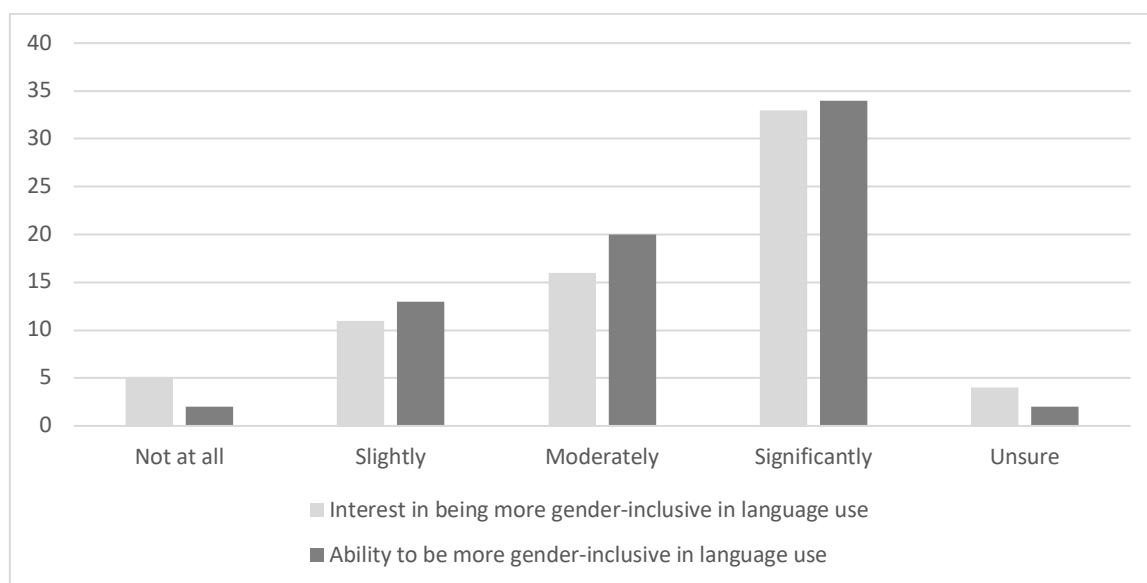

Figure 5. Post-Survey Self-Assessments of the Effect of Teaching on Students' Interest in and Ability to Write in Gender-Inclusive Ways

In response to the question about the extent to which learning about gender-inclusive language affected students' interest in being more inclusive in their language, the most common response, "significantly" (48%), and second-most common response, "moderately" (23%), reflected a high level of interest in being more inclusive. The total number of student responses counted here is 69, not 71, as one student circled the area between "moderately" and "significantly" on the survey, and another left the question blank. Of the five "not at all" (7%) responses, four wrote that they circled "not at all" because they were already using gender-inclusive language regularly.

In response to the question about the extent to which learning about gender-inclusive language affected students' ability to be more inclusive in their language (in terms of their acquisition of the necessary language skills), students' responses showed a very similar distribution, with "significantly" (48%) as the most common response, followed by "moderately" (28%). Of the two "not

at all" (3%) responses, both students wrote that they circled "not at all" because they already used gender-inclusive language regularly.

With caveats about the value of quiz scores as measures of student learning in mind, it is encouraging to see that, on the whole, students were interested in being and felt better equipped to be more inclusive in their language, following instruction about multiple strategies for constructing gender-inclusive sentences and revising gender-exclusive sentences. And, it is encouraging to see that the rates of interest and ability were closely aligned, as without ability, interest is far less consequential, and vice versa.

In response to the open-ended prompt, "explain your answer," that followed the questions about interest in and ability to be more gender-inclusive in writing, students most commonly wrote two things: 1) that learning about gender-inclusive language increased their awareness or their desire to be more aware of their own use of gender-inclusive language when writing and/or speaking; 2) that they found it beneficial to have multiple ways to write and/or speak in gender-inclusive ways. The next-most common responses, in decreasing order of frequency, were as follows: that they now felt more confident about their own use of language; that they already knew or now realized that they had been using gender-inclusive language all along; and that the strategy involving writing a sentence without pronouns (or rewriting a sentence to remove pronouns altogether) was particularly useful.

Findings about students' self-assessments of the relevance of gender-inclusive language to their own lives are an important complement to findings about their interest and ability. After all, if they are interested and able but believe they have no reason to use gender-inclusive language, what claims can we make for the impact and value of our teaching? In response to the open-ended prompt about whether and how using gender-inclusive language might be relevant to their lives, students most frequently noted that using gender-inclusive language was particularly important in university and/or work settings (most often both). They also noted that using gender-inclusive language helps to make people feel comfortable and to avoid offending people.

Just as the discussion of quiz scores as a measure of the impact and value of teaching gender-inclusive language was offered with the caveat that studies suggest test scores are not indicative of writing-skill transfer to other contexts, this discussion of post-survey self-assessments is offered with the caveat that casting the survey as an in-class writing assignment, assessed during the semester, may have made students feel obliged to write what they thought I wanted to hear, thus creating acquiescence bias: essentially, that my teaching made them interested in using gender-inclusive language, equipped them with the necessary skills, and made the issue seem highly relevant to their

lives. I mitigated that risk as much as possible by emphasizing that I was looking for thoughtful, organized, and stylistically polished reflections, not for specific answers, by burying the questions about the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language in the middle of the assignment, and by including questions that students might be more concerned with ("What participation grade would you assign yourself at this point in the semester? Why?" "What are your plans for participation in the remaining weeks of the semester?") and that might take more time to answer ("What feedback from your first assignment has been most helpful as you drafted your second assignment?" "What did you do to attend to this aspect of your writing in your second assignment?" "What are you most keen to learn about in relation to writing research essays?" "What is the purpose of using research sources in an essay, and how, exactly, might we bring research sources into our essays?").

What They (and We) Talk about When They (and We) Talk about Gender-Inclusive Language

My investigation into the impact and value of teaching gender-inclusive language indicates that students clearly accept and use the singular "they," that they are typically not aware of how gender-inclusive they are in their writing and speaking, and that instruction can increase their awareness, in turn making them more interested in writing and speaking in gender-inclusive ways, able to do so, and cognizant of the importance of doing so in their own lives. My study also indicates that even in-context grammatical work with student writing and writing samples, while clearly an improvement over grammar lessons and quizzes, might not be sufficient for retention and transfer. Students' self-assessments are an important complementary source of information when we are assessing the impact and value of teaching bias-free language, especially as the nexus of perceived use, interest, ability, and relevance drives whether students will transfer their learning to other contexts. While my investigation focused on gender-inclusive language, these findings may be relevant to teaching other forms of inclusive language as part of broader anti-bias writing studies frameworks and initiatives, such as efforts to expose and remedy anti-Black linguistic racism (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2020; Condon and Young, 2016; McMurtry, 2021; Suhr-Sytsma and Brown, 2011). Writing instructors who do not use grammar quizzes can offer students the opportunity to reflect on their own language use through written assignments; my pre and post surveys were cast as in-class writing assignments and asked students to reflect on other writing-related processes and issues, too. And, just as I taught gender-inclusive language in the context of students' writing (both individually and in the classroom)

and sample essays, writing instructors who do not teach grammar modules could embrace these and other opportunities for teaching gender-inclusive language.

My study provides a rich and detailed picture of learning in a Canadian university classroom as interest in the singular "they" was burgeoning. With threats to the rights and safety of trans, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people still rising, both in Canada and internationally, inviting students to make self-assessments about gender-inclusive language in terms of use, interest, ability, and relevance is valuable in and of itself, let alone in relation to the choices they make about how they revise sentences on grammar quizzes and how they write sentences in course-related and other contexts. I say this because, while what I have presented thus far describes the impact and value of teaching gender-inclusive language in a specific way (with self-assessments before and after), I also faced challenges. Indeed, in relation to two students, I long regarded the teaching upon which my study was based as a failure. This sense, alongside Covid-related interruptions, is why I have delayed in sharing my results. Only when I read Faye Halpern's article (2023) on the problematic preoccupation with redemption stories in the scholarship of teaching and learning did I realize that my challenges and sense of failure were valuable and worth sharing.

After students had written the pre-quiz, which made no reference to gender-inclusive language, I supplied them with the following definition of gender-inclusive language on the pre-survey:

> gender-inclusive language, also known as gender-neutral language, is language that is not biased towards a particular sex or gender. In English, using gender-inclusive language means using nouns that are not gender-specific to refer to roles or professions (e.g., 'firefighter' instead of 'fireman,' or 'server' instead of 'waitress') and avoiding gendered pronouns (e.g., 'he') to refer to people of unknown or indeterminate gender (e.g., 'The average student wants their final grades as soon as possible after their exams have ended' instead of 'The average student wants his final grades as soon as possible after his exams have ended').

In response to the pre-survey question about how frequently each student used gender-inclusive language, one student wrote:

> The reason I rarely use gender-inclusive language is primarily due to the fact that it can be very difficult to judge when to use it. If I am conscious of an individual who prefers certain pronouns, out of courtesy and politeness I will comply. However in most circumstances I do not view it as necessary to alter my form of speech, unless I risk offending someone. On a societal level I do not think it is necessary to enforce this use of language upon the majority of people in order to please a small minority of individuals.

When I cross-referenced this student's pre-survey and pre-quiz, I was surprised to see that they used the singular "they" for all four pre-quiz questions. (In the discussion that follows, I use "they" as a singular pronoun to refer to this student and one other student to protect their anonymity.) Because students were simply told to revise the sentences to address pronoun-related issues, with no mention of gender-inclusive language, I would have expected a student with concerns about or opposition to gender-inclusive language to revise the sentences differently, perhaps even retaining the gender binary "his or her" for sentence 3. Perhaps the student revised the sentences as they thought I wanted them to, using the singular "they," but I doubted this because we had not yet raised the singular "they" in class. Perhaps the pre-survey's in-class format meant less attentive reading of the definition, so the student was working with their own understanding of gender-inclusive language, not the one I had supplied. In that case, I believed my teaching would resolve this student's possible misconceptions about gender-inclusive language. And . . . I was wrong.

In response to the post-survey's questions about each student's ability to speak and write in gender-inclusive ways and their impression of the relevance of gender-inclusive language to their life, this student wrote:

> I will use gender-inclusive language when it seems the most natural in forming sentences. However I will not specificaly [*sic*] go out of my way to fix things if it seems unnecessary. . . . In my personal life I can not [*sic*] see it affecting my life all that much as I will use the language that comes most naturally to me. In university gender-inclusive language seems to be coming [*sic*] much more common, if it becomes standardised I will likely use it.

With this student's post-survey self-assessment in mind, I was baffled by their post-quiz responses. If writing in gender-inclusive ways did not come naturally to this student, then why did they use the singular "they" so much on the post-quiz that they actually lost marks for doing so? Why did they not choose the other revision strategies, like pluralizing the antecedent (and other parts of the sentence) or rewriting the sentence to remove pronouns altogether? Even if the student thought I wanted to see them use the singular "they" as much as possible—and this seems unlikely because we spent the same amount of time learning and practicing each revision strategy—why use the singular "they" twice for three of the four questions when the instructions required two different revision strategies per question? I doubt that the student was indifferent to their grades, which, up to that point in the course, were in the A and B ranges. I think using the singular "they" came so naturally to them that they unknowingly used it twice for three sentences. So what, then, was this student's conception of

gender-inclusive language, which made such language seem so unnatural and burdensome to them, and so irrelevant to the majority of people? I do not know.

Before I reflect on this paradoxical situation, I should note that a second student's work and self-assessments indicated the same contradiction. In response to the post-survey's questions about each student's interest in speaking and writing in gender-inclusive ways and their impression of the relevance of gender-inclusive language to their life, this student wrote:

> I don't feel that it will change the way I write mostly because I feel it is not needed. Unless the sentence turly [*sic*] makes no sence [*sic*] without it. . . . I would say that it could have an affect [*sic*] on my university studies if it becomes the standard, but nothing would change past that.

This student tied the other one for using the singular "they" more than any other student on the post-quiz (i.e., twice for three of the four questions), again when no one asked them to (they could have used the other two revision strategies) and when doing so meant losing marks.

These two students' self-assessments are important complements to their grammar quiz scores and chosen revision strategies because they highlight the ideological basis of the opposition to gender-inclusive language. Clearly, both students believed that gender-inclusive language is unnecessary and a burden on them, but the fact that they used the singular "they" more than any other student—when no one asked them to, when they had other options, and when doing so cost them marks—clearly demonstrates that they do not understand what gender-inclusive language is or realize that they are already using it. Throughout my instruction on this topic, I worked with various versions of the definition of gender-inclusive language I had offered on the pre-survey, but these students must have retained other ideas about what gender-inclusive language is—or no idea, that is, no specific idea, but simply an ideological opposition to the social-justice underpinning of it.

I naively thought that the easiest way to show opponents of gender-inclusive language that such language is neither ungrammatical, nor unnatural, nor burdensome would simply be to show them that they are already using it, naturally and unconsciously. I thought being told, "You use the singular 'they' a lot, which is great, but try practicing some of the other revision strategies for gender-inclusive language because they may come in handy in other situations," might lead to the realization, "Wow! I didn't know I used the singular 'they' so much! Maybe it's not a big deal/burden/unnatural after all." Thinking about these two students, I realized that learning to speak in gender-*exclusive* ways (e.g., by using "he or she" and "his or her" constructions) would, in fact, be unnatural and burdensome for them. Taken together, the post-quiz and post-survey indicate that the only students who voiced opposition to gender-inclusive language did not know what gender-inclusive language is, even after

my teaching, or recognize their own use of it. The students who used the singular "they" most, in ways that acknowledged that "the average student" or the "someone" referred to in my sample sentences could have a pronoun other than "he" or "she," said they did not think gender-inclusive language was necessary and said it was unnatural and burdensome to them.

My recommendations about teaching bias-free language (such as anti-racist and anti-ableist language) therefore need qualification: if we want to get at the ideological underpinnings of opposition and do real social justice work that will lead to more than speaking and writing inclusively—to different attitudes, intentions, and behaviours, as well as different words—we have to find out what students think "anti-racist language" or "anti-ableist language" means and address those misconceptions far more directly than I did with gender-inclusive language. I have already championed the pre-survey and post-survey—which can be offered as writing assignments and assessed on criteria we already use for student writing, like critical thinking, use of evidence, structure, style and mechanics, and so on—as valuable complements to teaching and learning, but now I also champion them for their potential to show us what I initially conceived as the limitations of my teaching and of my students' learning, but what I now realize is a significant, perhaps deeply entrenched disconnect between language use and ideology.

While I continue to teach the singular "they" in my first-year writing courses, I have not formally studied the impact of teaching and learning gender-inclusive language since 2018-2019. I am curious about whether, a few years on, there is even more evidence of the singular "they" before explicit instruction on gender-inclusive language and even more uptake of it after instruction. And I am curious about whether students' self-assessments have changed. But if I did it again, I would ask students what they talk about when they talk about gender-inclusive language: before, during, and after we talked about it, collectively.

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