A Scottish perspective on normalising gender inclusive languages education

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This article follows on from a webinar given as part of the 'Democracy and citizenship in the language classroom' themed professional learning offered by Fremmedspråksenteret in 2022.

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In the article, we outline the Scottish context, then present our rationale for gender inclusive languages education. Next, we problematise the issue and offer some practical ideas for normalising gender inclusive practice in languages classrooms.

SCOTLAND'S LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Scotland's main language is English, with Gaelic, Scots, British Sign Language and minority languages making up the country's other main language groups. A recent report (Scottish Government, 2022) recorded that 154 different home languages are used by children and young people in Scotland's schools. The top five languages used are English, Polish, Urdu, Scots and Arabic respectively.

The Scottish Government has responsibility for education that is devolved from the UK Government at Westminster. In 2012, Scotland embarked upon a decade-long implementation period for an ambitious languages policy inspired by the Barcelona Agreement (Council of the

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WHY FOCUS ON GENDER IN LANGUAGES EDUCATION?

In recent years, there has been significant societal change in many nations, relating to increased acknowledgement and visibility of diversity, equality and inclusion. These include issues such as race and ethnicity, disability and neurodiversity, religion, sexual orientation and gender.

These social changes have generated grassroots innovation in many languages, with the increasing use of vocabulary that allows people to communicate about those issues in ways that honour their own identities and those of others, in their varied linguistic repertoires.

Over the last decade in the Scottish education system, school improvement and inclusive practice have been the key policy drivers. Most relevant to this article, one notable strand has been the promotion of LGBT education (🔗 lgbteducation.scot/) and a radical update of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenting curriculum from age five (🔗 rshp.scot/) by the Scottish Government.

These developments happened in parallel with the implementation of the 1+2 approach to language learning. Since this period, and in response to grassroots demand from the profession, SCILT has become increasingly pro-active in creating safe spaces for professional dialogue around gender inclusive language, intersectionality and global citizenship education in the languages classroom.

European Union, 2002). The key entitlements encapsulated in the 1+2 Approach to Language Learning (Scottish Government, 2012) apply to all children, regardless of ability:

1. Home language (L1) respected and celebrated.
2. First additional language (L2) learned from the age of 5 – 14/15. Progression through primary school and lower secondary. L2 languages eligible for national qualification, exam in upper secondary. French, panish, Gaelic, German, Italian, Urdu and Mandarin Chinese.
3. Second additional language (L3) introduced no later than age 9. Progression to an exam pathway is

not essential. This supports the diversification of L3 languages taught in schools, so in some schools the L3 might be a different home or signed language.

These aspirations for languages education exist within the overarching context of a national curriculum with a strong focus on social justice, equity and diversity. The Scottish curriculum aims to nurture young people who are responsible citizens; successful learners; confident individuals and effective contributors. These four capacities are also reflected in the core values of the education and training and the principles for education and all-round development of the Norway Core Curriculum (2020).

This means that teachers can explore concerns, challenges and potential solutions to these issues in their practice.

Our stance regarding gender inclusive language is that we are faced with the challenge of developing new terms to discuss ideas around gender identity that still spark controversy among some groups of people. In France, for example, there was vehement opposition from MP François Jolivet and minister for education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, when Le Petit Robert included non-gender-specific neopronouns «iel/iels/ielle/ielles» into the latest edition of their dictionary. Yet such additions to dictionaries are not decided upon arbitrarily, rather they earn their place by being used frequently enough to merit inclusion.

Another barrier to progress lies in gaining acceptance of gender inclusive language by examination boards. In Scotland, the clear message from our qualifications authority is that consistency is key in terms of use of pronouns, adjective agreements and other gender markers in exam papers. While attainment is only part of the bigger picture in language learning, such assurances about consistency still fall short of the mark in giving teachers the confidence to encourage students to use neopronouns in their fullest expression. This may be something that colleagues in Norway can also identify with.

If we agree with Wittgenstein that the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, then we surely want both our language and our world to be as inclusive as possible. One aspect of accomplishing this is to stay abreast of target language developments in order to teach emerging terms; an equally important, complementary aspect is to challenge the use of out-dated language that perpetuates outmoded, discriminatory ideas about gender identity in the same way that we would challenge racist, sexist or homophobic language. Whether or not we identify as members of a group is not relevant. What is relevant is that our own language, and how we teach target language(s), convey the values that we want to model.

For that reason, wherever our starting point may be, we need to begin our journey in using and teaching gender inclusive language. As professional educators of people, not just of our subject, introducing colleagues and students to these developments helps them to expand their linguistic toolkit, creating a more inclusive environment where non-binary and gender fluid learners feel they belong. We would suggest that introducing these mechanisms, and the discussion surrounding them, from the start is key to normalising gender inclusivity in the languages classroom. Ultimately, the choices you make for your classroom will depend on both the language and the learners you teach. Inevitably, we will

make mistakes along the way – these are a chance to apologise, reflect, and learn. We will do better next time. We should be striving to normalise diversity of all sorts in our teaching in the language we use in our full language repertoire, and we should encourage and actively support our students to do the same. And it's not just about language – we have an opportunity to promote diversity across the board in the images that we use in our teaching resources. Let everyone be seen and recognise themselves reflected in our teaching.

A STARTING POINT

Arguably, as teachers of languages it is our professional responsibility to reflect on how we can engage ethically with communities to which we may not belong (Knisley, 2022). In this way, we can work towards normalising diversity of all types in our classroom, and ensure that our language learners have an informed understanding of current social and linguistic issues.

As a starting point, it is useful to reflect on how gender bias shows up in the language(s) that you teach, as well as in the language that you use in your own life, and the language that your learners use in theirs.

In many European languages for example, there are specific binary gendered pronouns for talking about people in the third person (he/she); often the language

[1] Neopronouns are a category of new pronouns used alongside traditional pronouns.

traditionally defaults to masculine plural for mixed groups of people or things; there are gendered nouns; adjectival agreements; binary honorifics, etc.

EXPLORING GENDER INCLUSIVE AND GENDER DIVERSE LANGUAGE

It may be worth taking a moment to explore the terms used in the table below:

- Gender inclusive: acknowledges more than just the male default.
- Gender diverse: acknowledges gender identities beyond the binary male/female options.

- Gender neutral: avoids specific reference to any gender.
- Binary: male/female options only.
- Nonbinary: inclusive of other gender identity options beyond male/female.

It is important to be aware that using only gender neutral language can risk make all genders invisible. By contrast, using gender affirming language, such as neopronouns, intentionally gives visibility to non-traditional gender types, thereby combatting stereotypes and promoting

diversity. This is reflected in the language that we use and also in our diverse choice of teaching materials.

The examples that follow, while not exhaustive, relate to some of the most commonly taught languages in Scottish schools. Where the first three strategies listed below - epicene alternatives, rephrasing and duplication– - can be applied in most languages in both written and spoken forms, the other strategies are specific to particular languages:

Language of exemplification	Strategy	Gender inclusive options (gendered, binary)	Gender diverse options (non-gendered, nonbinary)
German	Epicene (gender neutral) alternatives		die Lehrperson (sing.) die Lehrende (pl.)
	Rephrasing		die Studierende Leute, die studieren
	Duplication	Studenten und Studentinnen Studentinnen und Studenten	
	Forward slash /	Lehrer/-innen	
	Binnen-I	LehrerInnen	
	Brackest ()	ein(e) Lehrer(in)	
	Asterisk * Underscore _ Colon :		Lehrer*innen Lehrer_innen Lehrer:innen
French	Middot	les étudiant.e.s intelligent.e.s	
	Brackets ()	les étudiant(e)s intelligent(e)s	
Italian	Asterisk *		car* student*
	Schwa ə		carə studentə
Spanish	Neologisms (newly introduced words)	mi hij@	
			mi hijx mi hije

There are some important points for teachers of languages to bear in mind. Firstly, some of these proposed solutions have been criticised for being visually disruptive, not supportive of clear pronunciation and sometimes downright obscure. There is a long way to go before consensus is found, which is perhaps the biggest obstacle for languages teachers.

Also, not all of the strategies listed are accepted by the relevant linguistic gate-keepers. For example, the Real Academia Española does not include any of the three neologisms listed above. At the time of publication, they do not yet appear in any RAE dictionary. However, they are widely used by communities across the Spanish speaking world.

Such dichotomies plague teachers of many different languages. However, there are ways to broach this tricky subject.

SUGGESTED TEACHING ACTIVITIES

- Share examples of gendered authentic resources and ask students to make them more inclusive.
- Share examples of inclusive texts and discuss the impact of using gender inclusive language: What kind of language does the article use?: What does this tell us about the author/publisher?; How is this langua ge choice relevant in society?; What can the author/publisher do better? What can we do better?
- Compare a text written in a gendered way with the same text written with inclusion in mind. What impact does each text have?
- Look at more dated target language texts that default to the masculine and compare them to more up-to-date language. E.g., "a person may apply for residency once **he** has lived in the country for 5 years" vs "a person may apply for residency once **he/she** has lived in the country for 5 years" vs "a person may apply for residency once **they** have lived in the country for 5 years" vs "a person may apply for residency **after living** in the country for 5 years".
- Discuss instances where gender neutral/non-binary terms could be used in language. Examples in English include epicene words such as "police officer", "fire fighter", "salesperson", "spouse".
- Discuss the nuances between the terms 'gender neutral', 'gender diverse' and 'gender inclusive'.

The ideas above are complemented by others shared on the updated version of the padlet board created for the original webinar, which can be explored here.

A SUGGESTED WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

These lexical items will differ from language to language but there are some common steps that you can adopt to nurture diversity in your school.

1. Consider establishing **a gender inclusive strategy** for your classroom, department or institution. This might involve writing an intersectional equality and inclusion statement into your syllabus which could be part of a strategy commitment to wider

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diversity equity and inclusion.
Be explicit with your learners about this and build-in opportunities for people to signal their pronouns if they wish.

2. Encourage **gender equality** by thoughtfully selecting the visual and written materials that you use in your classroom. Reflect a diversity of cultural and historical perspectives in locations where the taught language is widely spoken.

3. Encourage students to **critically explore** their use of language and propose **inclusive language guidelines** for staff and students.

4. Present gender inclusive language in the target language as a **toolkit** that students can apply to their own language production.

5. Keep this toolkit **updated** as consensus on developing gender-inclusive language emerges.

6. Expect some resistance from students, colleagues, and parents/families/carers who may not agree with the use of gender inclusive terms over traditional, outdated ones.

7. **Share your work** with colleagues beyond your institution – spread the word, connect with like-minded educators.

CLOSING WORDS

In this article, we have presented some of the current issues and practices that positively and proactively address the ways in which gender manifests in the languages classroom. These demonstrably align with the assertion that the teaching of gender in language classrooms *'involves three aspects: (1) recognizing [languages] classrooms as social sites in which different gender meanings are produced; (2) problematizing discourses and practices that take place in the daily schooling routine and that normalize gender inequity; and (3) proposing situated actions to transform meanings of oppression, discrimination and domination.'* (Mojica and Castañeda-Peña, 2021: p.8).

The conversation around gender inclusive language is constantly evolving and has been the focus of much inquiry by academics, linguists, and journalists, as well as the subject of commentary on social media. If you are not sure where to start, rest assured that you are not in the minority! Although it is tempting to wish for definite, tractable solutions that would allow us respectfully to employ gender diverse linguistic items in our language teaching, it is worth bearing in mind that almost every evolution in language has taken place in response to a societal shift. Such debate has to take place before acceptable, concrete solutions can be found because it is this shift in awareness that is required to catalyse the development of the words that, as yet, we may not quite have. Such is the democratic nature of language evolution and progress is happening. We know that language can evolve quickly, or more slowly, but it does happen.

In closing, we would like to leave you with some words from British linguist, David Crystal: *"Language has no independent existence apart from the people who use it. It is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end of understanding who you are and what society is like."* (Lo Dico, 2010). What else is the normalisation of diversity in language teaching, and in the teaching of gender inclusive language, if not an attempt to better understand who we all are?

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