

Developing Multilingual Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines for Teaching and Assessment

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Abstract: In an increasingly multilingual and socially conscious society, gender-inclusive language (GIL) represents an active field of research, and its implications for teaching and learning have become a significant focus for educational institutions in the UK and beyond. This update paper investigates the efforts of a cross-language working group tasked with creating institutional guidelines for the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University. The group was formed to reflect on the question of GIL and notably, how female and non-binary students can express themselves in the languages taught in the School. This paper discusses the practical guidelines we are currently developing, by synthesising these diverse perspectives. Our work underscores the importance of an intercultural approach in addressing the nuanced and dynamic challenges posed by the integration of GIL in educational settings. This paper starts by reflecting on the importance of GIL for (language) educators. It then outlines our pedagogical approach to developing guidelines, including language-specific practical examples. The update paper concludes by summarising the outcomes of the project so far and its relevance to our pedagogical practices.

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Introduction

In an increasingly multilingual and socially conscious society, gender-inclusive language (GIL) represents an active field of research, and its implications for teaching and learning have become a significant focus for educational institutions in the UK and beyond¹. This update paper investigates the efforts of a cross-language working group tasked with creating institutional guidelines for the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLaC) at Durham University. The group was formed to reflect on the question of GIL and notably, how female and non-binary students can express themselves in the languages taught in the School. Our research explores the intersection of linguistic, political and societal developments across the languages and cultures represented in the group, alongside the internal workings of our School, to develop comprehensive and context-sensitive guidelines pertaining to our interaction with students, as well teaching and assessment. Our team comprises language specialists in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish, each language presenting unique challenges and opportunities in the context of gender inclusivity. Our research focuses on the use of GIL in the classroom as an instrument for (inter)cultural exploration for both language learners and educators.

This update paper discusses the pedagogical rationale and process behind practical guidelines we are currently developing, by synthesising these diverse perspectives. The outcomes of this project will not only contribute to the academic discourse on

¹ GIL has received sustained attention among researchers and educators in the UK and beyond in recent years. Recent initiatives in the UK context include the International Research Network *Language and Gender: Academic Research and Practical Implementation* convened by Dr Falco Pfalzgraf at Queen Mary University of London.

GIL, but it will also provide an impetus for other institutions aiming to engage in a similar process and navigate the complexities of gender inclusivity in a multilingual and multicultural context. Our work underscores the importance of an intercultural approach in addressing the nuanced and dynamic challenges posed by the integration of GIL in educational settings. We will start by reflecting on the importance of GIL for (language) educators. We will then turn to the guidelines and explore some language specificities, outlining some the convergences and divergences we discovered while we were developing them. We will conclude the paper by summarising the outcomes of the project so far and its relevance to our pedagogical practices.

GIL and language pedagogy

Linguists have shown the ways in which language shapes our understanding of the world we live in. In the context of gender (in)equality, linguists have demonstrated that language “subtly reproduces the societal asymmetries of status and power in favour of men as evidenced by a number of cases wherein feminine terms are usually derived from corresponding masculine forms” (Vizcarra-Garcia, 2021, p. 110). According to the Gender-Neutral Language Guidelines of the European Parliament (2018), the use of GIL is more than a matter of political correctness. Not only does it help reducing gender stereotyping and promote social change, it also contributes to achieving gender equality. Gender equality, as a fundamental human right, is included as the fifth of the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has the specific mission to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (SDG 5). Higher education (HE) institutions should exemplify gender equality, both in principle and in practice, cultivating an environment in which women’s voices and ideas, as well as those of trans and non-binary people, are actively valued (Mott 2022). Morley (2006), however, argues that societal gender biases still often make their way into HE’s hidden curriculum, through the unconscious prejudices of educators and students alike. Pedagogy thus needs to

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openly recognise this hidden curriculum, in order to tackle any such biases in teaching and learning spaces and to encourage students to reflect critically on these issues.

As part of a broader systems approach to addressing gender inequality in education, gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) provides a framework for fostering inclusive learning environments (Mlama *et al.*, 2005). GRP refers to “teaching and learning processes that pay attention to the specific learning needs of female and male students” (Chapin and Warne, 2020, p.1) as well as to other gender expressions in the classroom. It requires teaching staff to be gender-responsive and to embed gender awareness within their course planning and delivery, whilst also regularly reflecting on and adapting their practices to foster students’ development as gender-aware citizens (Chapin and Warne, 2020). The GRP framework in HE focuses on seven teaching and learning spaces that educators can utilise to facilitate a transition from gender blindness to gender awareness in teaching (see Chapin and Warne 2020; Chapin *et al.* 2020). One of these spaces in particular, the language used in class – both between educators and students, and amongst students themselves – is a key area that needs to be examined, as the linguistic dimension has a crucial role to play in developing an inclusive and gender-aware learning environment, and in turn promote gender equality in the classroom. GIL is then particularly relevant to language educators and poses various challenges according to the language taught/learned, its grammatical structure and the cultural traditions that are attached to it.

GIL in language pedagogy is a rapidly developing field of scholarship that intersects linguistics, education and social justice. Researchers have notably investigated the representation of gender in textbooks and learning resources (Malici, 2024; Zheng & Han, 2024); students and teachers’ perceptions of GIL (Vizcarra-Garcia, 2021; Preseau, Spino & Tracksdorf, 2024); the ways gendered languages have adapted to

the need to be more inclusive, including the study of new pronouns (Gustafsson Sendén, Renström, & Lindqvist, 2021; Zsombok & Tarjanyi, 2023); and how to teach language in an inclusive way (Carlini Versini, 2021; Kosnick, 2021; Knisely, 2022; Carter, George & Langevin, 2024). Preseau, Spino and Tracksdorf (2024, p. 91) have noted that recent scholarship on GIL in the language classroom encourages some innovative pedagogical practices such as: “a) creating opportunities to share pronouns while still protecting privacy (Knisely, 2020), (b) supporting students with various pronouns and accords (Privitola, 2019), (c) exploring and sharing pronouns used in TGNC [trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming] communities in the target language (Knisely, 2020) and (d) identifying ideologies and attitudes related to inclusive languaging (Parra & Serafini, 2022)”. Our project echoes and builds on this scholarship from a multilingual perspective.

Developing multilingual GIL guidelines

The MLaC cross-language working group on GIL was first established to ensure that female and non-binary students can fully express themselves in the target languages they study in our School. The group provided members with a forum to discuss challenges and strategies encountered in language-teaching across different languages, as well as to identify key areas of pedagogical practice where GIL is relevant, in particular communication with learners outside of the classroom, during the delivery and development of educational material and in assessment practices. Our research and discussions led to the development of cross-language guidelines for key areas of pedagogical practice, detailed below, which we presented at the School Away Day in June 2023. The guidelines drew on similar initiatives conducted in other university and school settings, in particular, the Gender Inclusive Language Guide compiled by Jessica Aiston, Dr Federica Formato, Dr Kate Wind, and Dr Mandy Yu at the University of Lancaster and the Guidance on the use of gender neutral (or non-binary) pronouns and adjective agreements in Pearson speaking and writing assessments for languages qualifications. They help foster a more inclusive

classroom environment by recognising the challenges posed by gendered language and offering practical solutions to empower and enable educators to address these challenges.

Developing multilingual GIL guidelines for teaching and assessment involves paying particular attention to cultural differences while finding some common ground. Among the seven languages represented in the group, some languages and cultures have developed multiple gender inclusive and non-binary forms of expressions, whereas in others, these discussions are relatively new. Moreover, gender inclusion can mean different things in different cultures. What is inclusive in one language may be controversial or misunderstood in another. As a result, establishing unifying guidelines that can be applied across languages is a challenge. Our strategy to tackle some of these difficulties was to adopt an approach that fostered dialogue between cultures and recognised diversity. The list below highlights some of the main recommendations of the guidelines and includes culture-specific examples:

- introducing students to the gender bias present in each language and explaining its historical background, whilst also emphasising progressive concepts in the corresponding contemporary culture. For example, Chinese is grammatically gender-neutral but the language exhibits its own forms of gender bias and linguistic sexism from the morphology of Han characters, to pronouns, vocabulary, word order, idioms and proverbs (Tso, 2014; Ettner, 2002). While inclusive language guidelines for Chinese exist, some sexist expressions are deeply embedded and cannot be entirely avoided in modern usage. Examples include negative female-related characters (e.g. 嫉 'jealous') or idioms (e.g. 红颜祸水 'a beautiful woman is a source of misfortune'), male-first word order (子女 'sons and daughters'), some newly invented derogatory phrases online (娘炮 literally, 'feminine gun', a derogatory label for men who

are perceived as effeminate), etc. Guiding students to explore the cultural origins of these characters and expressions and encouraging discussions about the evolving relationship between language and societal values can foster their critical engagement with the words they use, particularly in terms of inclusivity. A further example in the School is that one of the seminars of a French module taught at the language centre focuses on the feminisation of professions and titles and discusses the historic influence of the conservative and androcentric Académie française on French language.

- using teaching resources that include diverse gender roles and reflect contemporary values, as well as teaching equitable forms of expression wherever possible. In French, a widespread gender-inclusive strategy is the double flexion, which involves both masculine and feminine formulations (e.g. *les étudiantes et les étudiants* = the [female and male] students), while a more controversial one is the middot, a typeface used to write a masculine and feminine word at the same time (e.g. *l'étudiant·e* = the male/female student). Both strategies are used by educators in the School in oral and written communication with students.
- highlighting how gendered language is expressed through different grammatical and pragmatic features in each language, including pronouns, morphology or sentence structure, and encouraging students to reflect on the socio-cultural implications of these features. For example, in Japanese, a wide range of first-person pronouns, such as *watakushi*, *watashi*, *boku*, *ore*, *atashi* and *uchi*, reflects different nuances of gender, formality and interpersonal dynamics (Ide, 1997; Nakamura, 2007, 2021). Learners often encounter informal forms like *boku* or *ore* through anime and other media, occasionally adopting them inappropriately. Teaching can draw on media representations – such as Hermione speaking in “women’s language” in the

Japanese translation of *Harry Potter*, or Matsuko Deluxe, a well-known cross-dressing TV personality, using stylised *atashi*, to discuss how gendered language in Japanese is constructed, performed, and sometimes stereotyped. These examples help students critically reflect on the complexity and cultural specificity of gender expression in Japanese.

- encouraging students to compare gender expressions across different languages to enhance cultural understanding. For example, members of the GIL working group organised a student-focused session ‘Global Perspectives on Gender-Inclusive Language’ to encourage critical discussion between language learners and users across Durham University. Roundtable discussions enabled visiting students to share their perspectives of GIL in a UK context, while home students in the final year of their degree in Modern Languages and Cultures offered critical discussions of GIL, comparing perspectives across cultures and contexts. The session also foregrounded student research into GIL, with presentations from undergraduate and postgraduate students in French Studies.
- avoiding using content with a gender bias in assignments and examinations, and ensure that assessment criteria are free from gender discrimination.
- encouraging learners to think critically, notably about the nature and the arbitrariness of language, and to question linguistic authorities (Knisely, 2022). For example, as the implementation of GIL in the grammatically-gendered German language is a process in flux, characterised by a lack of consensus in both usage and in orthographic form, level 1 German language learners are introduced to GIL through translation exercises that necessitate critical engagement with the ongoing debates and connotations behind GIL. One such example is translating a piece into German aimed at specific HE institutions. Many HE institutions in German-speaking countries have adopted GIL in internal and external communications and published institution-specific

guidelines. These include, for example, using the substantiated adjective as a gender-neutral plural instead of the “neutral” masculine plural form and unifying the use of recent more controversial orthographic developments such as using an asterisk, colon or underscore within words to emphasise gender inclusivity (see for example Goethe Universität, 2020). HE institutions in certain German federal states, for example Bavaria, are however subject to a contentious ban on such gender-inclusive orthographic changes in written communication in educational settings. Through a translation task, German language learners encounter the debates and connotations behind GIL terminology as essential steps towards enabling critical and reflective language learning. Rather than focusing on “correct”/ “incorrect” usage, this example of teaching GIL in German encourages critical reflection on the impact of language and the influence of linguistic authorities.

Conclusion

The process of designing these guidelines involved rethinking our teaching and learning methodologies and activities (e.g. focusing on transformative learning through interaction and critical evaluation); teaching and learning materials; classroom management, set-up and interactions (e.g. facilitating gender-equitable interactions within the class) and assessment (e.g. reflecting on how teachers’ biases regarding their students’ gender may influence their assessment practices, adopting GIL-specific marking guidelines) (Chapin *et al.*, 2020). As a School of Modern Languages and Cultures, it is also a careful negotiation between cultures, that seeks to guarantee that there is space for the cultural specificities of our School to be expressed, while insuring parity between languages for our students.

The future development of our GIL project will prioritise the enhanced implementation of guidelines within language classes. As the School undergoes curriculum review, it is crucial to integrate GIL into the language programme at all levels. Student participation, through focus groups, is therefore vital to ensure that

diverse perspectives are considered, and the guidelines meet student needs. Although the guidelines have gained some recognition among language educators in our School, engaging research-focused academics is equally important to foster interdisciplinary collaboration. As the School works to integrate language and cultural modules, raising awareness of GIL among academic researchers will help bridge the gap between pedagogical practice and theoretical studies. Additionally, providing educators with more support in the assessment process is essential to maintain consistency and fairness, and avoid disadvantaging learners using GIL in assignments. Furthermore, we plan to disseminate GIL guidelines to other departments, to assist colleagues and international students alike in addressing intercultural issues. In conclusion, our project has underscored the evolving landscape of research in languages and cultures, emphasising the need for greater intercultural collaboration and the inclusion of all student gender identities, ensuring their voices are heard.

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Generative AI and/or AI-assisted technologies have not been used at any stage of the manuscript's writing and preparation.

Ethics

This research did not involve any human subjects and was therefore not required for ethical approval by the University's ethics review board.

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