THE IMPACT OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE ON EFL LEARNERS' COMPREHENSION: A STUDY ON SINGULAR "THEY" AND INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of gender-inclusive language reforms on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' understanding and clarity. The research focuses on the effects of singular "they" and gender-neutral pronouns on learners' ability to grasp standard English grammar, an area that has garnered significant attention in recent years. A structured questionnaire was administered to a group of EFL learners to capture their perspectives on the about inclusivity and maintaining grammatical stability. The findings indicate that while language evolution is crucial for eliminating gender bias and promoting social justice, changes that compromise grammatical clarity can lead to ambiguity and hinder EFL learners' language acquisition. The study reveals that learners value linguistic precision and clarity, and that overly complex or ambiguous language structures can impede their progress. This research contributes to the ongoing prescriptive-descriptive debate, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to language reform that prioritizes both inclusivity and linguistic precision. The study's insights have implications for language teaching, learning, and policy-making, emphasizing the importance of considering the needs of diverse learners in language reform initiatives. By examining the intersection of language, inclusivity, and clarity, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex issues surrounding gender-inclusive language reforms.

Keywords: Gender-inclusive language, feminist linguistic reforms, singular 'they', linguistic ambiguities, prescriptive grammar rules , descriptive grammar rules, gender-neutral pronouns.

Introduction

Language is a system of communication which is used as a medium of communication between individuals. Language defines, molds and expresses and portrays the notion and principles of a given society. This is a unit that is not rigid but rather changes from time to time as a result of certain changes in the society. Over the past few years, the English language has experienced a change through the feminization of English with help of new gender sensitive words. These changes have seen such terms as 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman' and 'firefighter' instead of 'fireman' as well as use of 'human-made' instead of 'man-made'. Feminism and the movements supporting gender and women's rights are the driving forces in language. This is because there is need for reform in the vocabulary with regard to gender in a language.

Researchers and feminist linguists debate that language itself is gendered. As Lakoff (1975) advocated, language is not merely an instrument of communication but a force that forges our cognition. She aligns with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which supports the idea that language influences how we perceive and categorize the world around us. Butler (1997, p. 8) states that language is the name of our doings and its consequences that disclose the idea that language is not a passive medium of instruction but an active one that is described as a performative process_ It is something that we actively do. According to Curzan (2009), language is the

building block of our communities through which we proclaim our identities and measure other individuals based on language. For instance, if a person says "aks" instead of "ask", Curzon (2009) describes him as "ignorant". This reveals that wherever we go, we interact with people, using language as a tool, and the language consists of genders, and we are gendering in almost every situation. Teixeira (2021-22) writes that we simply cannot avoid gendering because it is embedded in our society. These ideas brought feminist linguists, who had been campaigning for gender equality in almost every stratum of society, to the forefront. They began to advocate for the use of gender-inclusive language in every sphere of life. Because they believe that language is a reflection of our society that shapes our ideas, and the traditional language makes women invisible.

The English language has also historically been shaped by patriarchal norms, often depicting women as subordinate and invisible through its lexical and grammatical choices. For instance, the use of masculine pronouns when referring to an unknown gender. For example, traditional forms say, "Every student must come with his register", presuming "his" refers to both male and female students. However, feminist linguists criticize this, referring to it as a male-centered language. They argue that this makes women's identity invisible. As a result of this, many writers now use "they" as a singular pronoun to promote inclusivity. Apart from this, some people prefer newly coined non-binary pronouns such as ze/zir/zirs or xe/xem/xyrs, which go beyond traditional gendered structures altogether. However, these pronouns face challenges due to their unfamiliarity in widespread usage.

There are two perspectives to studying language: prescriptive grammar rules and descriptive grammar rules. Prescriptive rules are the rules that direct how a language should be written or spoken. These rules direct the language users on what to say and what not to say, what is right and what is wrong, underlying clear rules that must be followed by all language users. These rules are taught in schools and encouraged by linguistic authorities. On the other hand, descriptive rules are the rules that everyday users use. They believe that language is a dynamic process and that spoken language always deviates from formal rules. The waves of feminism have redefined language, which aims to promote inclusivity, but these have also contributed to grammatical ambiguities that cause a lack of clarity, particularly for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Rushaidi (2020) states that these grammatical ambiguities have arisen due to the marginalization of prescriptive rules that are intertwined with standard English, which is imparted and taught in formal institutions to foreigners.

While much has been written on the positive side of gender-inclusive language, there is little debate on the other side of the coin about how these changes impact grammatical clarity. This study aims to examine the grammatical ambiguities that arise from accepting gender-inclusive pronouns influenced by feminist reforms. The study takes prescriptive rules by stating that while vocabulary can be modified to eliminate gender bias, the foundational grammatical rules should be followed by all to ensure clarity, especially for EFL learners.

Statement of the problem

Feminist reforms have brought about certain linguistic changes, such as singular "they" and the use of indefinite pronouns such as "everyone", "nobody", and "anyone" with plural agreement_ taking plural pronouns 'they/their' in place of singular ones 'he/she, his/her', to avoid gendered language. These changes aim to encourage gender-inclusive language. However, little attention has been paid to the practical consequences of such reforms on EFL learners who heavily rely on the established rules for effective acquisition and communication. These reforms obstruct language acquisition and create additional difficulties for learners. This study examines how gender-inclusive language affects EFL learners,

investigating whether these changes contribute to grammatical ambiguities by analyzing how learners perceive the use of gender-inclusive pronouns, their comprehension, and the writing patterns of learner and educator responses.

Research Questions
    1) How does gender-inclusive language create ambiguities for EFL learners?
    2) How are gender-neutral pronouns ambiguous for EFL learners?
    3) How can prescriptive grammar rules help eliminate these ambiguities?

Research objectives
    1) To examine the ambiguities that gender-inclusive language causes for EFL learners.
    2) To analyze unclear references caused by gender-neutral pronouns for EFL learners.
    3) To evaluate how prescriptive grammar rules can reduce these ambiguities.

Literature review

Lakoff (1973) notes that Language is not an instrument of communication but a way of perceiving the world. Language reflects social changes and attitudes and shapes social norms such as gender and power. She argues that language plays a crucial role in sustaining gender structures. She states that men and women speak differently, and this is the basis of gender disparity, which makes women subordinate because women's language shows powerlessness. There are innumerable stereotypes in society about how a woman should speak, and when a woman follows these instructions, the gender disparity begins. Lakoff (1973) expresses deep concerns about the use of language and suggests that addressing gender bias in language is significant for feminist reforms.

Teixeira (2021-22) states that gender is embedded in our society; wherever we go, we interact with different genders, so we cannot avoid gendering in almost every situation; this is unavoidable. This highlights the importance of language in forging social identities.

Curzan (2009) illustrates that language creates and maintains our communities; with the help of language, we claim our identities. Language shows the power dynamics of the time. For instance, Curzan explains, till the 1980s, the pronoun "he" was generally prescribed as the guide, but now there is a consensus that "he" is sexist. However, since the emergence of feminism, prescriptive grammar rules have been threatened by descriptive grammar rules, which have sparked debate among scholars about language usage.

Bodine (1975) observes that prescriptive grammar rules are influenced by society and social norms. She believes that such rules are not neutral but rather socially constructed. She criticizes the rejection of "they" as singular by prescriptive grammarians, stating that such opposition comes from societal norms and values rather than grammatical correctness. However, Leonard's jury-based investigation explored the historical acceptance of "he" as a sex-indefinite pronoun, accepting it as gender-neutral in English usage. However, this has been challenged by feminist linguists over time, underlining the ongoing conflict between prescriptive practices and rising language reforms.

Crystal (2006) analyzes these linguistic variations while citing William Caxton, who founded the first printing house in England and struggled to manage the conflicts between these two approaches. Bodine (1975) mentions that once feminists have rejected the use of "he" as a sex-indefinite pronoun, a reversal to it is impossible. This shows the intensity of reforms, which will be permanent rather than temporary, emphasizing the lasting impacts of feminist linguistic reforms.

Swan (2005), in his book "Practical English Usage", gives a clear explanation of language learning through prescriptive grammar rules. He instructs the use of "they" strictly as a plural

pronoun, reflecting the traditional approach of prescriptive grammar. Swan's book, along with other widely-used grammar texts such as Wren and Martin (2022) and English Grammar in Use by Raymond murphy (2012) and A Communicative Grammar of English by Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (2013), reinforce the instruction of prescriptive grammar rules to EFL learners. These texts advocate for "they" as a plural pronoun and reject its singular usage, demonstrating the broad acceptance of prescriptive norms in English language teaching.

Al-Rushaidi (2020) states that this language shift toward descriptivism has led to several issues. The most alarming of them is the confusion among English learners. For instance, learners struggle with subject-verb agreement disorder, pronoun reference confusion, and misinterpretation in written text. He argues that these confusions arise when prescriptive grammar rules are isolated while teaching, which is necessary for accuracy. Prescriptive grammar is taught at the institutional level, where learners are encouraged to use the fundamental grammar rules for efficient communication.

In this case, Denham and Lobeck (2013) notes that such rules are backed by the society and for one to negate them can be regarded as creating confusion. The growing trend of using gender-neutral language including the use of singular 'they' and other indefinite pronouns that take the plural verb agreement are some of the factors that complicate S/VA and pronoun reference for the EFL learners. As English has become an important language to communicate with people all over the world, maintaining clarity is highly important. These difficulties are evident when there is no direct instruction on the use of the English language and show that prescriptive grammar is important for learners of EFL.

Theoretical framework

The debates between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language form the base of this study. Prescriptive linguistics prescribes how people should use language; on the other hand, descriptive linguistics follows language as it is used by native speakers, accepting changes even if they create ambiguities (Al-Rushaidi, 2020). By using the work of Al-Rushaidi (2020) in "Is the linguists' View of Prescriptive Grammar Reductionist?" as a theoretical foundation, this study will investigate how the use of gender-neutral pronouns and the use of indefinite pronouns with plural agreement affects learners' understanding and grammatical accuracy. His investigation highlights that language modifications should not undermine grammatical clarity. His study analyzes that the marginalization of prescriptive grammar poses several threats that need to be addressed, and prescriptive grammar is connected with Standard English that is taught to English learners, and used in formal institutions.

Methodology

Research design

This study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the effects of gender-neutral language on EFL learners. The reason for using the mixed method approach was to analyze both numerical trends and gain a profound understanding of students' perceptions. A survey was organized among the EFL learners to collect data, allowing them to freely provide their opinions, thoughts, and perceptions regarding gender-inclusive language. It was flexible and comprehensive and covered various factors of gender-inclusive language.

Investigating Gender-Neutral Language Effects
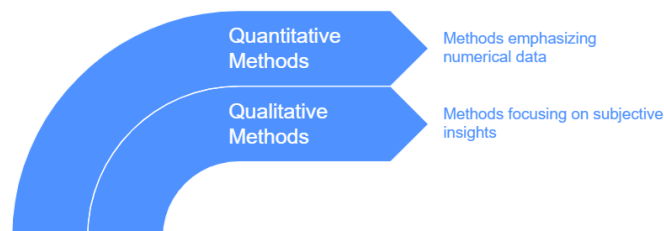
This research focused on how EFL learners interpret indefinite pronouns (e.g., someone, anyone) and the singular "they". As prescriptive grammarians reject the singular "they", claiming it to be ambiguous in language usage and encouraging the usage of "he/she", this study investigates whether EFL learners accept or reject the linguistic change.

Participants
The participants of the study comprised EFL learners of different semesters. There were a total of 106 students from the ages of 18 to 23, who belonged to different social and cultural backgrounds. Among them, 66% were female, and 34% were male. The participants in the study were voluntary, and they were provided the information about the research objectives like what parts we are covering in the research.

Gender Distribution of EFL Learners
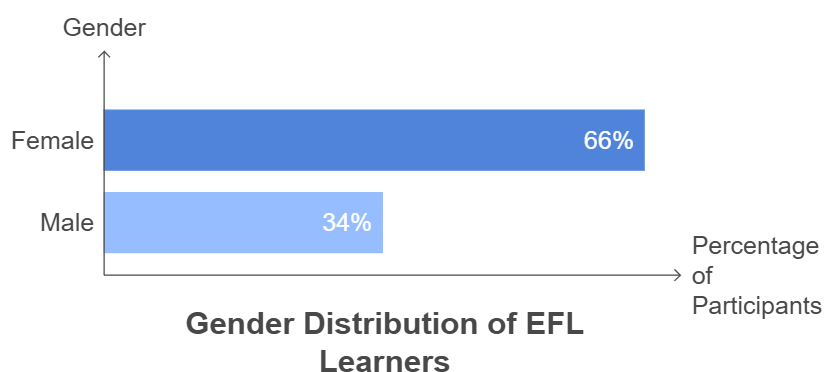
Data collection methods
A structured questionnaire was designed, consisting of both Likert scale and open-ended questions to explore the views of EFL learners related to gender-inclusive language. It was designed to capture opinions related to gender-inclusive language and its impacts. The questionnaire covered key aspects of gender-inclusive language, including its influence on EFL learners, their knowledge about gender-neutral pronouns, and their attitudes toward replacing traditional pronouns.
 Quantitative component:
• The Likert-scale section allowed students to accept or reject the gender-inclusive language in every context. The responses ranged from strongly agree to disagree, which made the

statistical analysis applicable. For instance, the response was collected on the use of the singular 'they' in the language.

• Multiple-choice questions explored the students' frequency of using gender-neutral pronouns and their attitudes toward those pronouns.

Qualitative component:

• Students were encouraged to put forward their opinions with the reason of supporting particular details.

• Open-ended questions allowed students to share their thoughts and insights about gender-inclusive language openly. Their responses were collected, and it was observed how learners look upon the gender-neutral language and how it is interpreted by them.

Key focus areas of the questionnaire

• Awareness and familiarity: Are the learners aware of the singular they and do they use it?

• Perception of indefinite pronouns: What are the perceptions of learners in using indefinite pronouns?

• Resistance and justifications: What are the main reasons for accepting or rejecting gender-neutral language?

Understanding Gender-Neutral Language in EFL
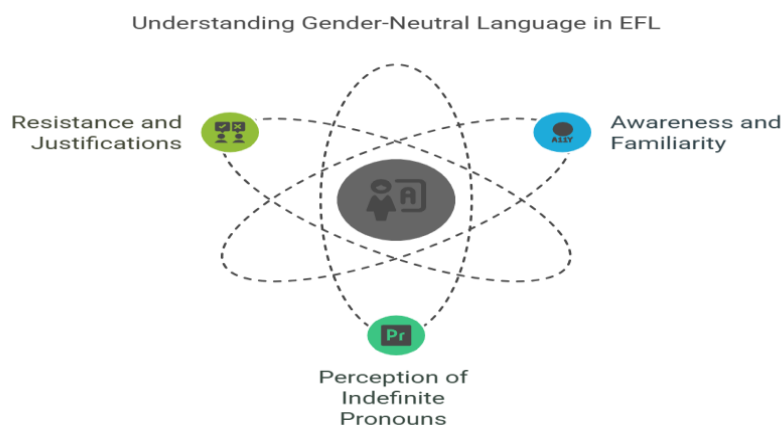
Data analysis

Quantitative data: The data was collected and analyzed through the statistical method to explore the acceptance or rejection of gender inclusive language. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the response of the EFL learners.

Qualitative data: Through open-ended questions, the views and perspectives of students were collected. This method helped to classify the responses into broader patterns.

Ethical considerations

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines to ensure the integrity, honor, and safety of all the participants. The participants' privacy was strictly maintained. They were allowed to withdraw from the research at any time.

Findings

The detailed analysis of the responses given by the EFL learners through the questionnaire gave a noteworthy perception of gender-inclusive language, the indefinite pronouns, their usage, and their acceptance or rejection. The results were categorized into three main sections:

1. Perception of singular 'they' and its impacts

75 % of the participants considered 'they' as the plural pronoun, rejecting it as the singular despite its presence in the modern language. This finding matched with the traditional or prescriptive grammar rules, which accept "they" as a plural pronoun.

Perception of Singular "They" Among EFL Learners
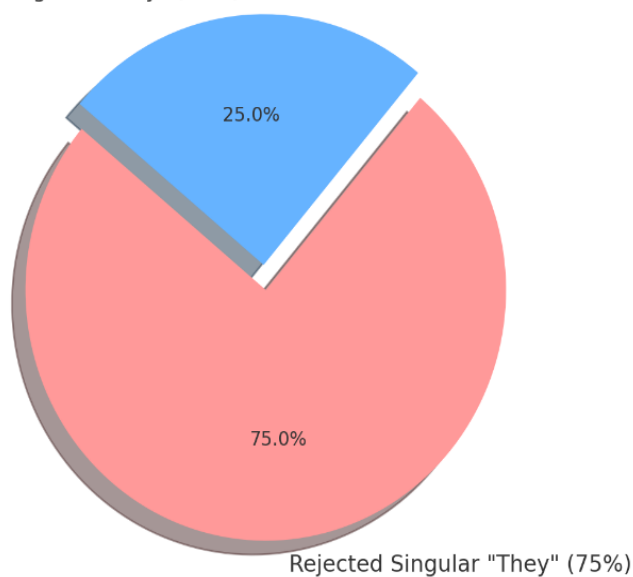
Negative impacts:

Most EFL learners were exposed to confusion while reading 'they' as a singular pronoun, and this caused ambiguity in their learning process and comprehension.

- Grammatical irregularity: Some of the participants claimed that the usage of singular 'they' causes ambiguity in sentence structure and destroys the verb agreement.
- Ambiguity: In spoken or written language, whenever 'they' is used as a singular pronoun, it causes ambiguity for EFL learners.
- Academic resistance: Some of the students do not use the singular 'they' as they fear it will be marked incorrect by the professors.
- Prescriptivism: Learners are also hesitant to use "they "as a singular pronoun because of prescriptive grammar rules, which are often taught to them.
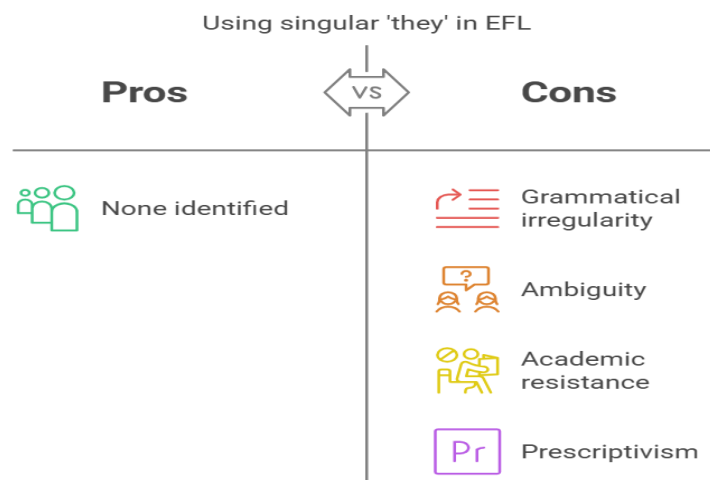
Only 25% of the participants agreed on the usage of the singular 'they', mostly those who are exposed to the language used in media, literature, etc. Most learners consider 'they' as a plural pronoun and use it as a plural.

2. Lexical choices

This section of the survey explores the learners' familiarity and understanding of gender-inclusive lexis such as chairperson, police officer, firefighter, etc. Unlike the usage of the singular 'they,' learners accepted the gender-neutral vocabulary widely.

Usage: 61% of learners encouraged the usage of inclusive vocabulary in spoken and written language in daily life as well as formal settings, while 35% of learners were more comfortable with the lexis that is in use, and 4% learners were fine with the both.
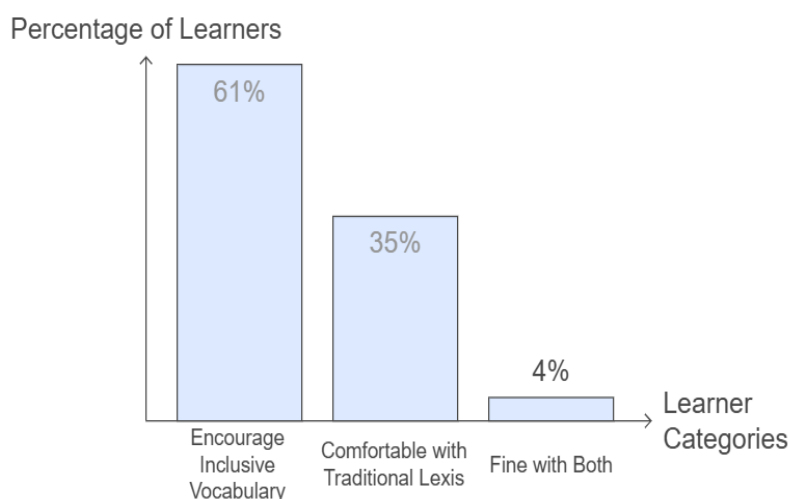
**Learners' Acceptance of Gender-Inclusive Lexis**

Preference: 35% of students still prefer the old words like "chairman" and "policeman" instead of "chairperson" and "police officer" in their language usage since they are not exposed to the innovations in vocabulary, but some have adopted the new words because this seems synonymous to the traditional words.
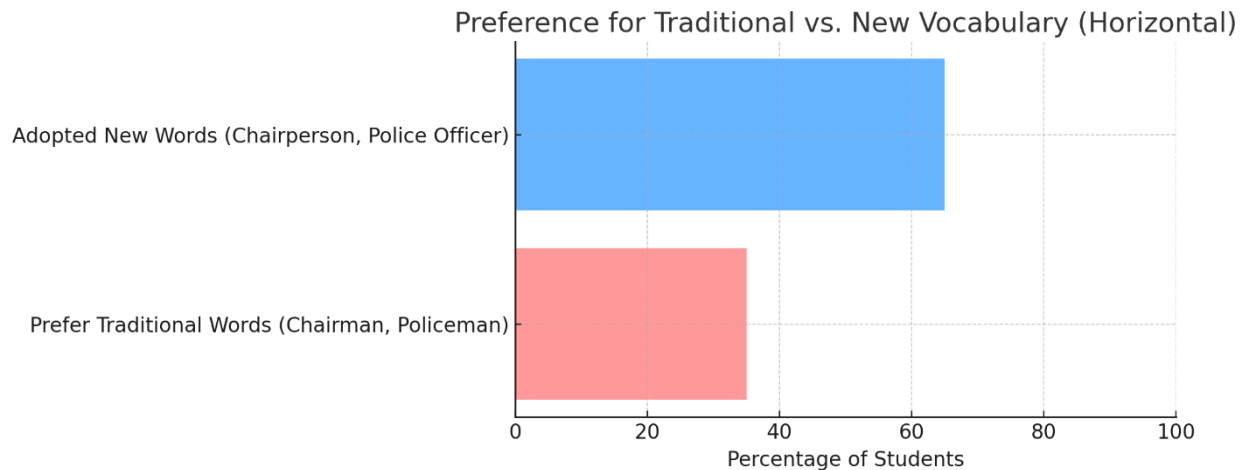
EFL learners acknowledge the use of inclusive words in the language as it is convenient to shift the word usage instead of grammatical change.

3. Preference for indefinite pronouns

The survey also highlighted the acceptance or rejection of indefinite pronouns in gender-inclusive contexts by EFL learners. It was observed that 80% of participants adhered to indefinite pronouns paired with single 'he' or 'he/she' rather than 'they'. Participants felt 'he/she' clearer than 'they'. This highlights the prescriptive grammar approach of the students. 20% of participants showed interest in pairing the indefinite pronouns with 'they', which is a very low percentage.
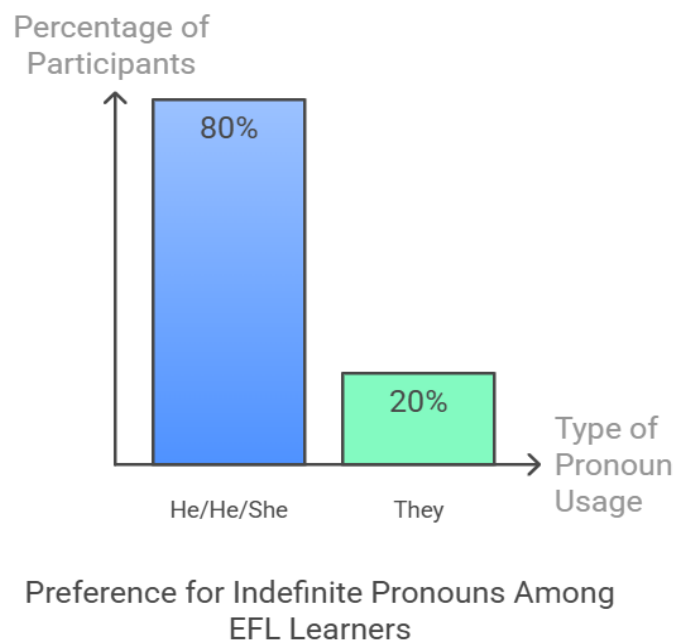
4. Attitudes of EFL learners towards gender-inclusive language

This section of the research suggested a divided response of EFL learners on gender-inclusive language. Whether gender-neutral language is properly accepted or rejected by EFL learners and how gender-inclusive language is viewed by them. 72% of the participants were of the view that there should be no change in language regarding gender, as it is ambiguous for them to interpret sentences based on the grammatical changes in language due to gender. Findings suggest that language grammar should remain the same as it was. There should be no such change that causes difficulty for EFL learners to adopt the language.
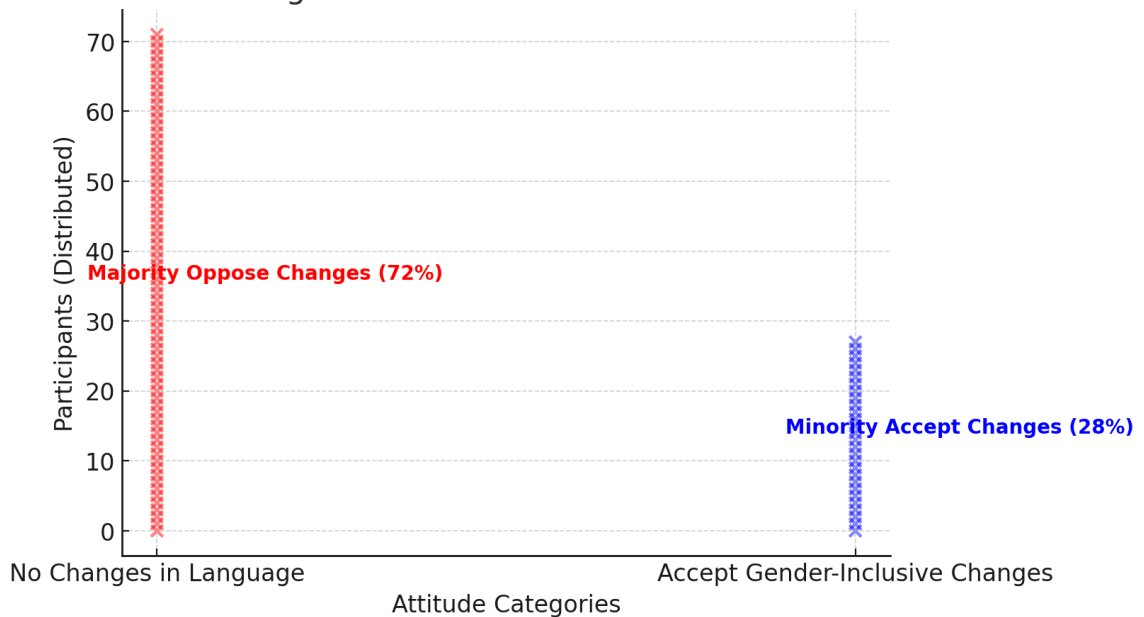
Findings suggest that language grammar should remain unchanged to avoid ambiguity for EFL learners.

Discussion

The study examined the impacts of gender-inclusive language on EFL learners, focusing on the grammatical ambiguities created by gender-neutral pronouns such as the singular "they" and indefinite pronouns ("everyone," "nobody"). The findings indicated serious concerns about EFL learners facing challenges created by gender-inclusive language and adhering to prescriptive grammatical rules for linguistic clarity in English as lingua franca. The results revealed that EFL learners are unfamiliar with the singular "they," and learners face difficulties in interpreting sentences using the singular "they", particularly in differentiating between singular and plural meanings. The results correspond with prescriptive grammar rules, highlighting the importance of fixed rules for effective communication. The study highlights significant issues for EFL instruction: while inclusivity in the vocabulary is acceptable, it should not come at the cost of grammatical stability. The English language requires consistent rules that facilitate rather than disrupt learning.

Recommendations:

The study is limited in its size and scope, as it focused on a specific group of EFL learners. Future researchers should explore how pedagogical strategies can mitigate these ambiguities and whether the same challenges arise for native speakers.

Conclusion

This study explores the impact of gender-inclusive language on EFL learners, the perception of singular 'they' and how they interpret indefinite pronouns. The findings indicated the complex relationship between the changing linguistic values and prescriptive grammar. Learners widely rejected the use of 'they' as a singular pronoun and the usage of gender-inclusive language. However, it was also revealed that learners accepted the changes in vocabulary. This research highlighted the challenges faced by EFL learners due to gender-inclusive language. Their ambiguity towards the singular 'they' is not only because they are the students of prescriptive grammar rules but also because of the way language is taught to them. This research observes that EFL learners face cognitive load while being exposed to inclusive grammar. As they have already learnt prescriptive grammar, evolving linguistic norms cause ambiguity for them. Moreover, gender-inclusive language is not natural, it is something imposed onto the learners. Conclusively, this study underscores that there can be vocabulary adjustments, but shifting EFL learners from prescriptive grammar rules to evolving linguistic norms remains challenging.

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