

Non-native pre- and early-service English teachers' perceptions of neopronouns in both English and their native language

Argentina and Germany

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01

Some background

On “gender neutral” and “non-
binary” (neo)pronouns





Pronouns are suddenly sexy.

They're in the air, on the news, all over social media, generating discussion pro and con. Or at least one pronoun is: the third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun.









(Baron 2020:1)



Some background

Gender Neutral Pronouns

Gender-neutral pronouns are not firmly established in any language, but in some, the following variants are becoming more and more recognized:

Relatively Common	 English they	 Swedish hen	Neo-pronouns
Gaining Traction	 French ille/iel	 German sier/xier	
It's Complicated	 Italian	 Portuguese	
Only One Pronoun	 Indonesian dia	 Turkish o	

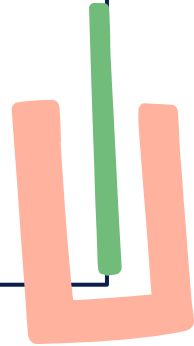
+Babbel

What is sexy about this?

- Opening of a “closed” class
- New agreement patterns?
- A new sociolect?



**We witnessing
language change!**




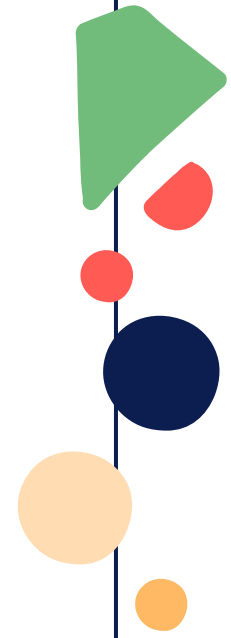




02

My study

Acceptability judgements of
(neo)pronouns and attitudes
towards the LGBT+ community

- 
- **Type of study:** Experimental syntax. Acceptability judgements of non-standard gender-neutral 3rd person pronouns. Comparative study.
 - **Precedents:** sg. they (Severin 2006, Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly & Cowper 2020 and Moulton et al. 2020); yo in Baltimore, MD (Stotko and Troyer 2007); neopronouns (Hekanaho 2020).
 - **Gap in the literature:** Previous studies focused on L1 speakers' use of the language. LX speakers have been completely disregarded or have a secondary role.
 - **Participants:** 60 trainee English teachers @ Universität Regensburg  & Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata  ; highly proficient ($\geq C1$), advanced sts. + recent graduates.
 - **Data collection:** Acceptability judgements L1 + English & attitudes towards LGBT+ community. Online questionnaire.
 - **Data analysis:** Mixed methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative analysis. Pattern finding. Group comparisons.
- 

Acceptability Judgement Task – Factorial Design

- ◆ A factorial design works at sentence level in a similar way that minimal pairs/sets work at a phonological level.
- ◆ The conditions in a factorial design are lexically matched to the extent possible, so that any differences found can be attributed to the factors being tested, rather than to random lexical differences across conditions
- ◆ A factorial design lets us measure each of the two factors on their own and detect any interactions between them.

Goodall (2021:11)

If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, **they** should retake the exam.

If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, **he** should retake the exam.

Condition Group 1:
General referent

If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, **she** should retake the exam.

If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, **ze** should retake the exam.

This is Cheng-Hua.
They are a new student here.

This is Cheng-Hua.
He is a new student here.

Condition Group 2:
Specific referent

This is Cheng-Hua.
She is a new student here.

This is Cheng-Hua.
Ze is a new student here.

* If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, **what** should retake the exam.

* This is Cheng-Hua. **What** is a new student here.

Attitudinal Questionnaire

based on the EANT (Alonso-Martínez et al 2021) and ONBG (Molin et al 2020)

Conceptions about gender

1. Gender is limited to the two categories of men and women.
2. Sexual organs don't necessarily have to match gender.
3. Gender refers to a deep conviction.
4. There are a large number of gender categories
5. It's possible to not identify with a gender.
6. It is possible to identify with several gender categories at the same time.

Interactions with trans* individuals

16. Sharing a bathroom with a transgender person makes me feel uncomfortable or repulsed.
17. Working with a transgender person makes me feel uncomfortable or repulsed.
18. I would feel disgusted or uncomfortable if a person I initially felt attracted to turned out to be transgender.
19. I not interested in becoming friends with a transgender person.
20. I would like to avoid having to work with a transgender person.

Feelings about (non) gender conformity and trans* and non-binary individuals

7. A person's gender can change over the course of their life
8. If I notice that a person is transgender or non-binary, I will use the pronouns corresponding to their assigned sex at birth.
9. If someone tells me that they prefer a pronoun other than "he" or "she", I will still use "he" or "she" to refer to said person.
10. I dislike or feel uncomfortable around men who dress in women's clothing.
11. I dislike or feel uncomfortable around women who dress in men's clothing.
12. I dislike or feel uncomfortable around people who dress in clothing that does not allow me to distinguish their gender as male or female.
13. I feel discomfort or rejection towards masculine women.
14. I feel discomfort or rejection towards feminine men.
15. I feel discomfort or rejection towards androgynous people (people with both masculine and feminine characteristics).

Rights of trans* and non-binary people

21. I believe that homosexual or transgender people should have the right to marry legally.
22. I believe that homosexual or transgender people should have the right to marry in a church.
23. I believe that homosexual or transgender persons should have the right to adopt.
24. I believe that transgender and non-binary people should have the right of choosing their preferred gender on their government ID.
25. I believe that there should be laws put in place to avoid discrimination towards homosexual and transgender people.

03

Argentina vs. Germany

Some preliminary results





Argentina vs. Germany



Number of participants: 30

- **Students:** 18
- **Recent graduates:** 12

Median age: 27.5

Youngest participant: 22 y.o.

Oldest participant: 39 y.o.



Number of participants: 30

- **Students:** 16
- **Recent graduates:** 14

Median age: 24

Youngest participant: 21 y.o.

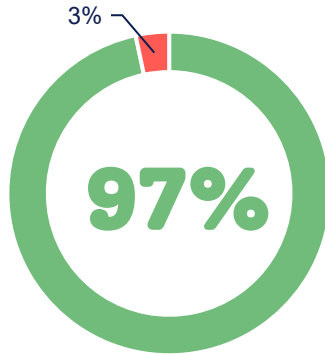
Oldest participant: 33 y.o.

Participants

Note: 89% of Argentinian students had teaching experience (other than required teaching practices), mostly in the private and public school system, whereas only 38% of German students had teaching experience, mostly as tutors.

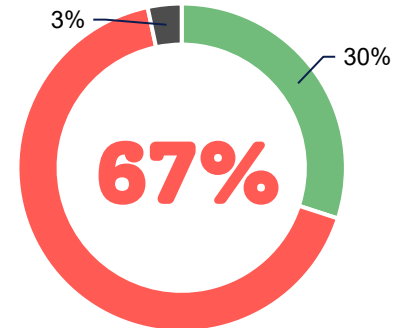


Neopronouns in L1



■ Yes ■ No

had heard about the use of 'neopronouns' in their L1 (Spanish) before participating in the survey *



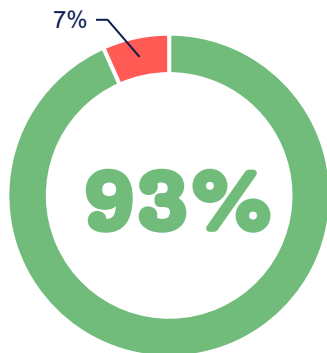
■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure

had **not** heard about the use of 'neopronouns' in their L1 (German) before participating in the survey.

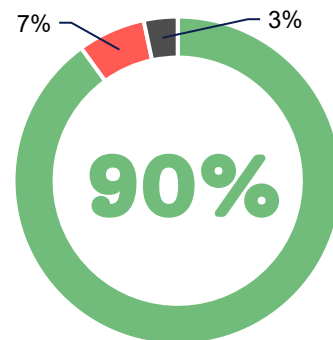




Singular *they*



■ Yes ■ No



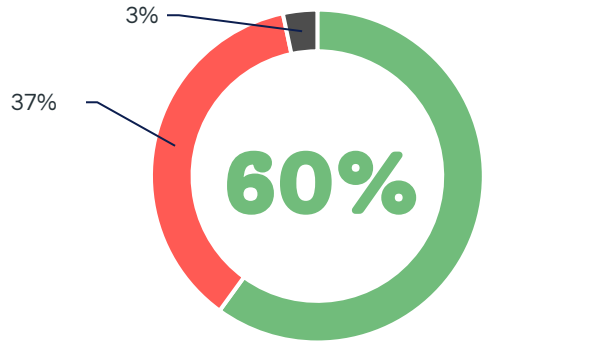
■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure

had heard about the use of 'singular they' in English
before participating in the survey



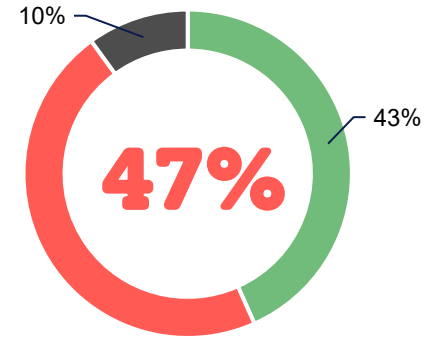


Neopronouns in English



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure

had heard about the use of 'neopronouns' in English before participating in the survey *



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure

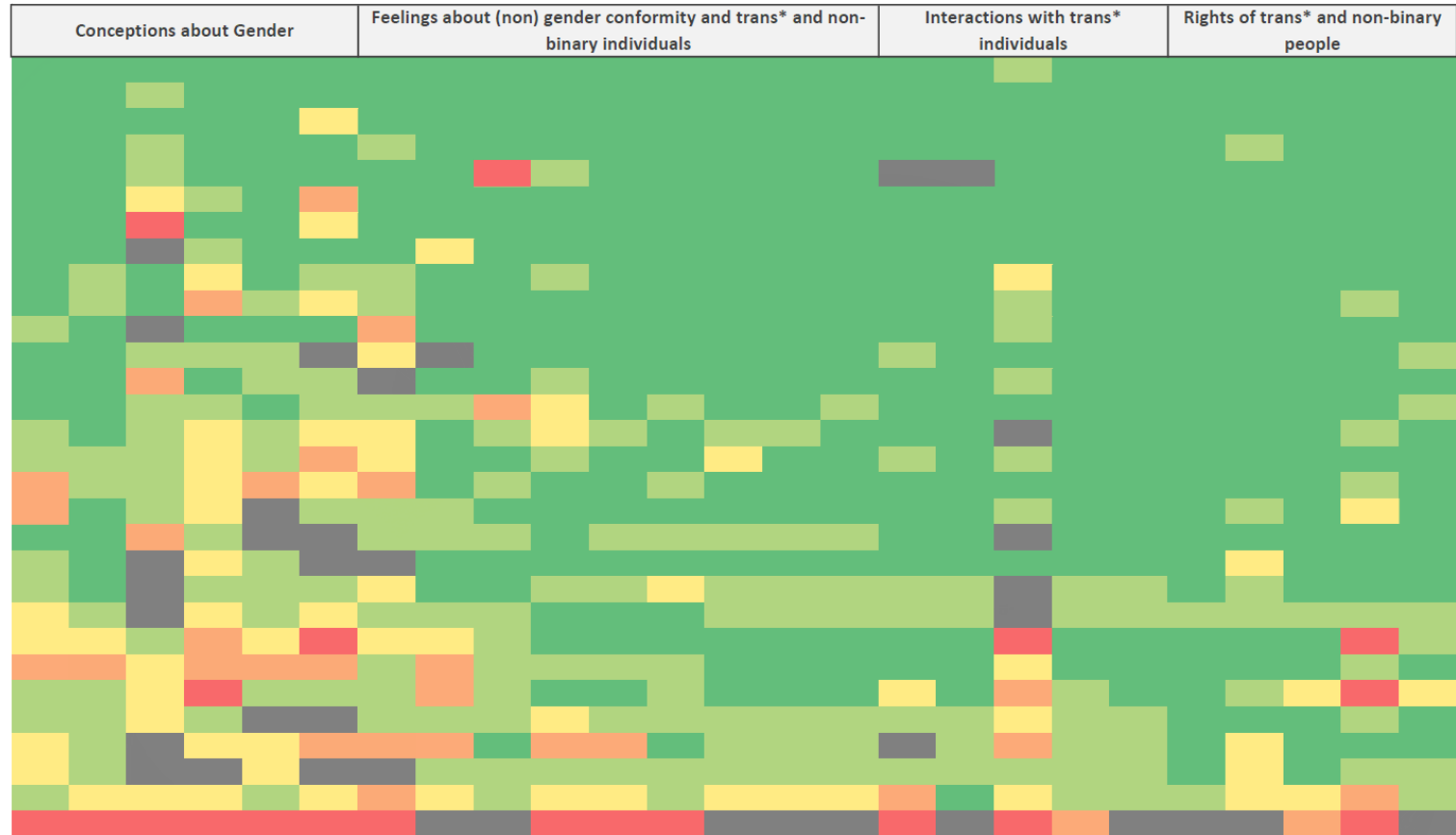
had **not** heard about the use of 'neopronouns' in English before participating in the survey.



Argentinian Responses



German Responses



Acceptability Judgement Task - Samples

How acceptable are these sentences?

Please rate the following sentences according to their acceptability in everyday speech.

Click anywhere on the line to mark your answer with a cross.

You can slide the cross to adjust your rating.

Note: If you are completing this survey on your phone, please use your phone in landscape mode (horizontal) in order to see the items correctly. The ratings go from completely unacceptable (left) to completely acceptable (right).

This sentence is...	completely unacceptable	completely acceptable
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, she should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, ze should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, they should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, he should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, what should retake the exam.		

In a few words, justify your choices.

they: completely acceptable because it is already commonly used as a gender neutral pronoun he and she: also very acceptable but as students could be male or female not the best option what: is normally not used as a personal pronoun and sentence sounds incorrect ze: completely new word that functions as personal pronoun, but sentence is still understandable and ze could be used as a gender neutral pronoun. However: it would still irritate people in everyday speech

I don't want to provide justification.

Judgement Sample #1

German participant. Positive attitudes towards LGBT+ community

How acceptable are these sentences?

Please rate the following sentences according to their acceptability in everyday speech.

Click anywhere on the line to mark your answer with a cross.

You can slide the cross to adjust your rating.

Note: If you are completing this survey on your phone, please use your phone in landscape mode (horizontal) in order to see the items correctly. The ratings go from completely unacceptable (left) to completely acceptable (right).

This sentence is...	completely unacceptable	completely acceptable
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, they should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, what should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, he should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, ze should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, she should retake the exam.		

In a few words, justify your choices.

The student who fails the exam is either a male student or a female student, so the personal pronoun has to be he (if the student is male) or she (if the student is female). Furthermore the noun "student" is singular, therefore a singular pronoun (he or she) is used.

I don't want to provide justification.

Judgement Sample #2

German participant. Negative attitudes towards LGBT+ community

How acceptable are these sentences?

Please rate the following sentences according to their acceptability in everyday speech.

Click anywhere on the line to mark your answer with a cross.

You can slide the cross to adjust your rating.

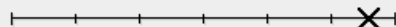
Note: If you are completing this survey on your phone, please use your phone in landscape mode (horizontal) in order to see the items correctly. The ratings go from **completely unacceptable** (left) to **completely acceptable** (right).

This sentence is...

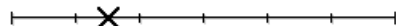
completely
unacceptable

completely
acceptable

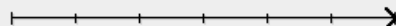
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, she should retake the exam.



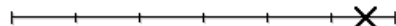
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, ze should retake the exam.



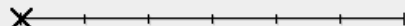
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, they should retake the exam.



If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, he should retake the exam.



If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, what should retake the exam.



In a few words, justify your choices.



they: completely acceptable because it is already commonly used as a gender neutral pronoun he and she: also very acceptable but as students could be male or female not the best option what: is normally not used as a personal pronoun and sentence sounds incorrect ze: completely new word that functions as personal pronoun, but sentence is still understandable and ze could be used as a gender neutral pronoun. However, it would still irritate people in everyday speech

I don't want to provide justification.

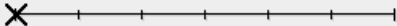
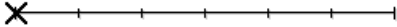
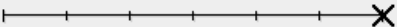
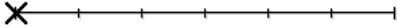
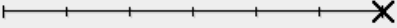
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If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, what should retake the exam.		
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If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, ze should retake the exam.		
If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, she should retake the exam.		

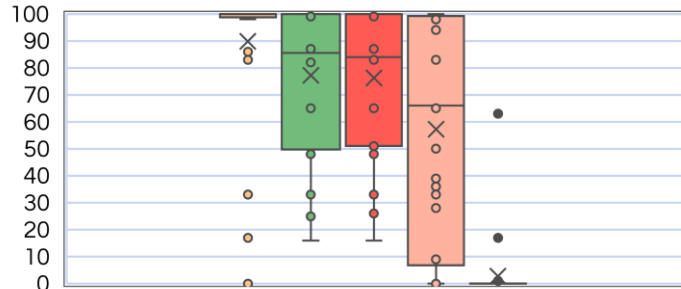
In a few words, justify your choices.

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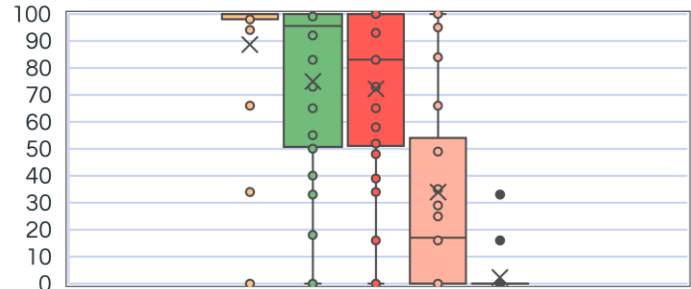
I don't want to provide justification.

Results – English (General Referent)

If a student fails to obtain a passing grade, _____ should retake the exam.



they he she ze what*

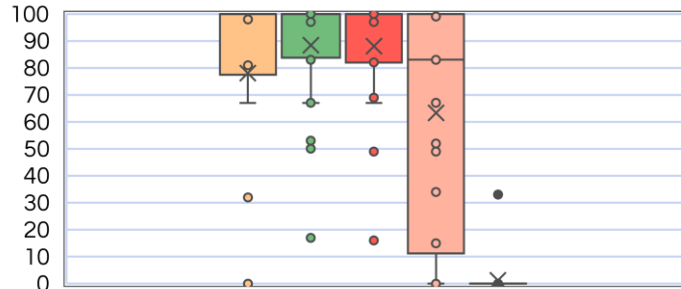


they he she ze what*

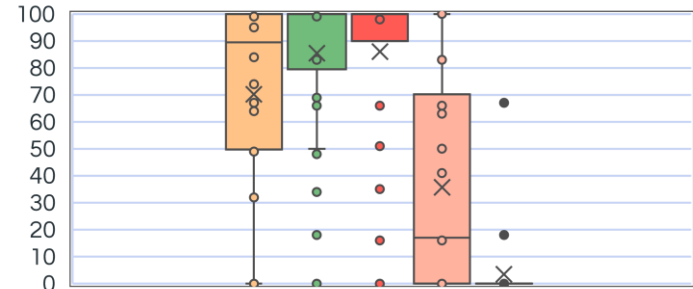


Results – English (Specific Referent)

This is Cheng-Hua. _____ are a new student here.



they he she ze what*



they he she ze what*

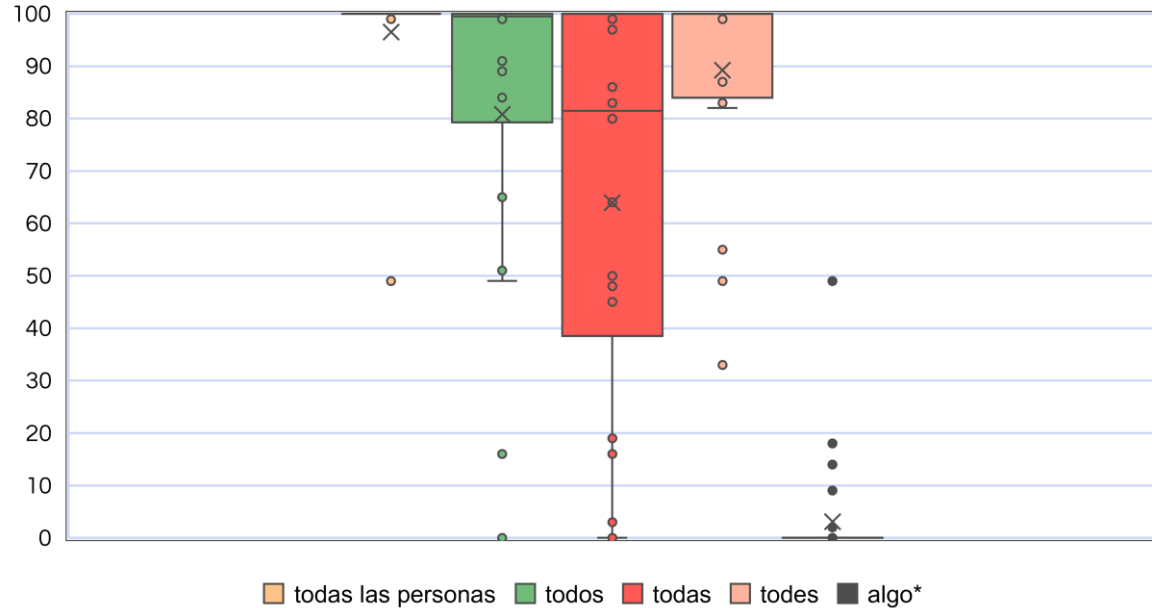




Results – Spanish (General Referent)



La limpieza de la ciudad nos concierne a _____.

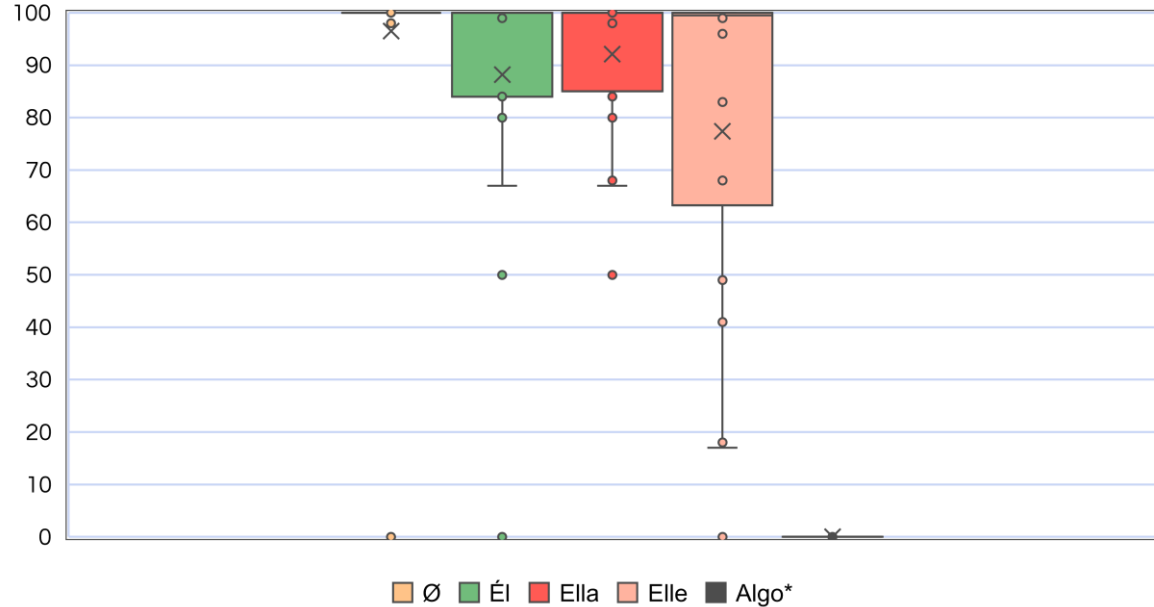




Results – Spanish (Specific Referent)



¿Conocés a Ale? _____ cursa Francés conmigo.

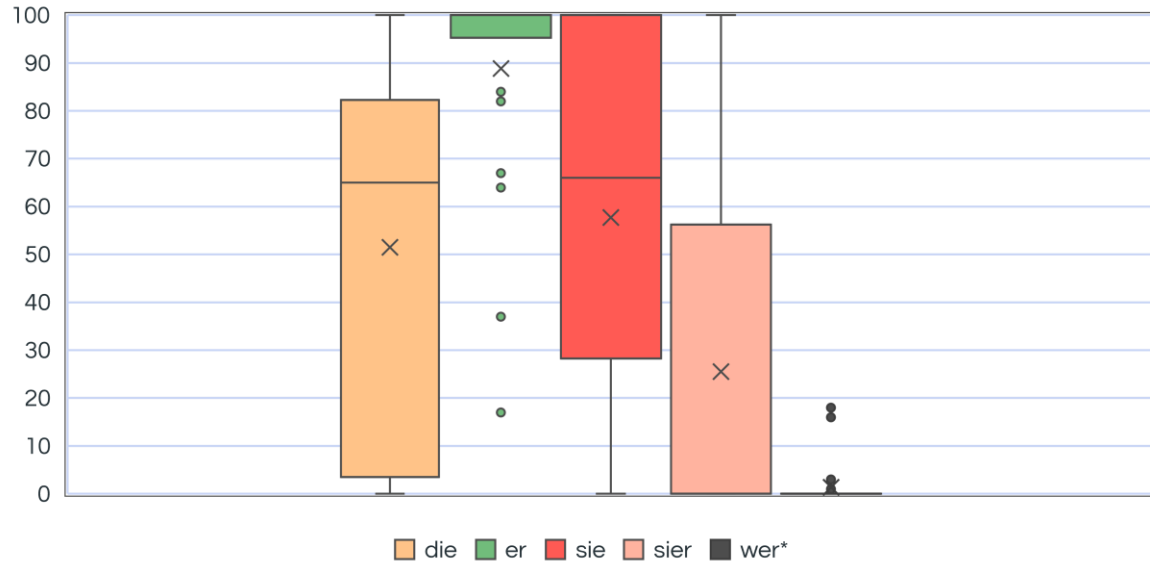




Results – German (General Referent)



Falls jemand den Kurs nicht bestanden hat, müssen ___ ihn wiederholen.

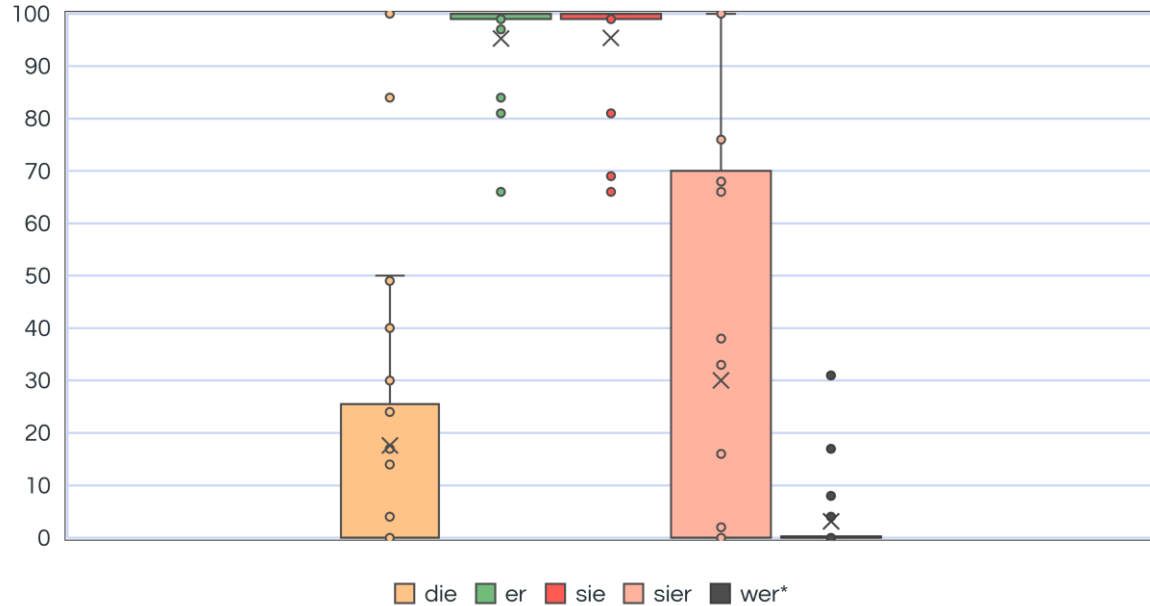




Results – German (Specific Referent)



Das ist Alex. ____ [wohnen/wohnt] in der Nähe von der Uni.





04

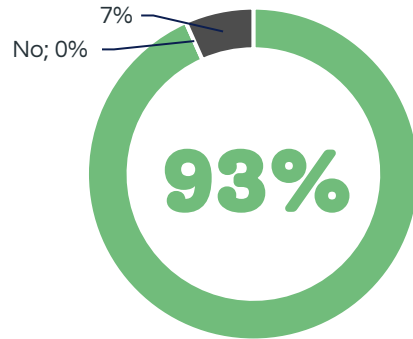
Outlook

Implications for EFL teachers

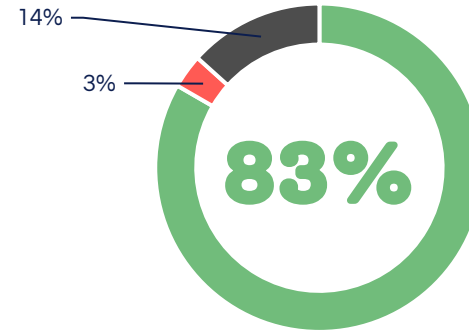




Teaching singular *they*



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure



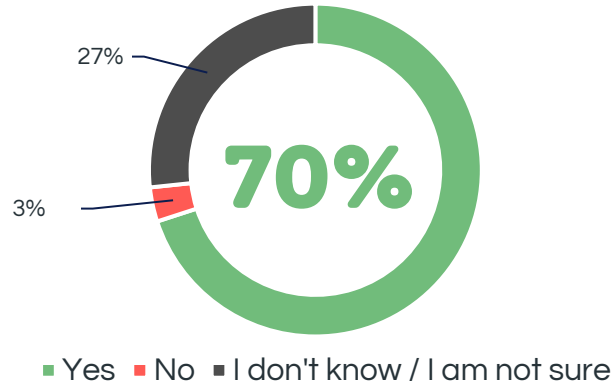
■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know / I am not sure

would teach their (future) students about the use of
'singular they'

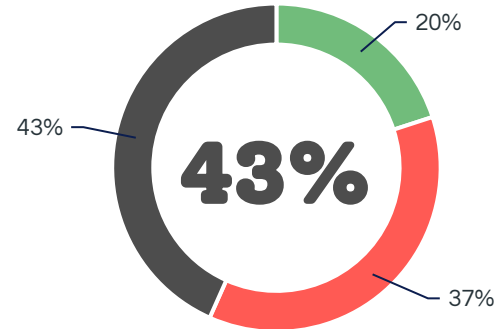




Teaching neopronouns



would teach their (future) students about the use of neopronouns in English



are not sure if they would teach their (future) students about the use of neopronouns in English and **37%** would **not** do it.

Some things to take into consideration

- This presentation focused on quantitative data!
- A qualitative analysis of their justifications will provide some valuable insight into EFL teachers' knowledge and acceptance of gender-neutral forms in both their L1 and English as well as their willingness to teach these forms in class.
- We cannot conclude that German teachers' doubts or unwillingness to teach neopronouns, compared to Argentinian teachers' willingness means that German teachers = bad/ Argentinian teachers = good! (or the other way round).

A final reflection

To be honest... The Lehrplan doesn't leave much room for neopronouns. Plus, I feel that 'they' is the most widespread and commonly used in everyday English

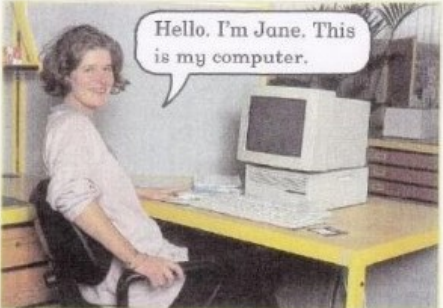
Since I am teaching in elementary school, teaching them about neopronouns or singular they would be too hard to comprehend for them.




A final reflection

If you can do this activity with your students...



6 Read



1 This is Jane. She's an office worker.



2 This is Bill. He's a doctor.



A final reflection

Why wouldn't you be able to do this as well?



Hello, I'm Dua. I'm a singer and an actor.

This is Dua Saleh.
Xe is a singer and an actor.

Hello. My name is Sam. I am a singer-songwriter.



This is Sam Smith.
They are a singer-songwriter.



Thanks!

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