

# Japanese University Students' Exposure to and Attitudes toward Singular They

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## Abstract

Singular they (ST) is the use of *they* as an epicene pronoun; that is, a pronoun with a singular, genderless antecedent. ST is a well-established part of the English lexicon and is the epicene pronoun of choice by native English speakers in many contexts. However, its use and acceptance among L2 English speakers varies more widely, influenced by factors such as the amount of exposure to natural English, the socio-linguistics of the L1 language and culture, and the relative emphasis placed by the L1 culture on accuracy and rules.

This exploratory study examines the exposure to and attitudes toward ST by 55 Japanese university students of low-intermediate English proficiency. Results indicate that although participants believed ST to be useful, they also held negative perceptions of it, which seemed to stem mainly from lack of exposure and from grammatical beliefs that conflicted with ST. Despite this, 74% said they wanted to try using ST more. These results point to a need in Japanese EFL classrooms and textbooks to incorporate ST instruction.

Keywords: singular they, epicene pronoun

## Literature Review

### *Epicene Pronouns*

An epicene pronoun is a third-person pronoun that refers to a single person without specifying that person's gender. Because English lacks a specific epicene pronoun, one traditional remedy was to use so-called "generic he," meaning using *he* and claiming it was gender-neutral. Although this remained common for many years, by the 1970s feminism was pushing for the more inclusive *he or she*. This was an important shift, because as extensive research has confirmed (see, e.g., Noll, et. al, 2018), most people actually comprehend generic he as being male, not in fact, as generic.

However, while formulations such as *he or she* and *s/he* may help a text become more gender-neutral, they can be difficult to use, particularly in spoken

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English where it is not possible to say *s/he* or *(s)he*. Some style guides labeled these formations clumsy and cumbersome (Newman, 1998) and they can become confusing in long phrases such as, “If he or she wants to do it himself or herself, he or she should bring his or her own book.” Another problem is that *he* or *she* leaves out people who identify as neither he nor she, such as non-binary or gender fluid people.

One solution that is rapidly gaining traction is the use of singular they. Singular they (ST) refers to the word *they* (or any of its associated forms, like *them*, *their*, or *themselves*) used as an epicene pronoun. ST is commonly used in several specific ways. The most common use is to refer to a singular indefinite pronoun antecedent, such as somebody, anyone, or everyone, as in the sentence, “Everyone should bring their own pencil.” A second, similar use employs ST to refer a noun (N) or noun phrase (NP) antecedent that is nonspecific and non-gendered, as in the sentence, “If a student comes, please give them a handout.” This category includes antecedents like “each person” or “every parent.” A third use is to refer to a specific person whose gender is either not known or not revealed. An example of this use of ST includes: (after hanging up the phone) “They had the wrong number.” A fourth, more recently developed, use of ST is to refer to a specific individual whose gender is either irrelevant or is neither male nor female.

ST has been in use for centuries (Balhorn, 2004), and in recent decades it has become the most common epicene pronoun in many contexts (Gerner, 2000; LaScotte, 2016; Paterson, 2014; Pauwels, 2001). ST causes little to no processing difficulty or slowdown for native speakers (Brown, 2018; Foertsch, & Gernsbacher, 1997), and despite some prescriptivist protests, research shows that native speakers tend to find the use of ST to be grammatically acceptable as well as more socially acceptable than generic he (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997; Noll et. al, 2018). Indeed, recent research has confirmed that ST does not impart the androcentric bias of generic he, and is interpreted as equally likely to refer to a person of any gender (Bradley et. al., 2019).

Style guides and dictionaries reflect this growing use of ST. Most style guides accept ST in at least some contexts, particularly in spoken English, and the influential APA style guide endorsed it in its most recent edition for written English as well (APA, 2019). In the past several years, dictionaries such as *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* also have accepted ST.

### Singular They in L2 Contexts

In the L2 English education and outer-circle English spheres, research into ST use is limited but points to a wider variety of acceptance levels toward ST.

Several factors seem to influence the use of ST. The first factor is exposure. Stormbom (2019) found that advanced level speakers in Europe used ST at the same level as native speakers, whereas lower-level speakers tended to use generic *he* as their epicene pronoun of choice. Stormbom attributed this difference to the advanced learners having more exposure to authentic English. Possibly for a similar reason, Lee's (2007) study of epicene preference by Hong Kong young adults, who generally have advanced English skills, showed that ST and *he or she* combinations were selected over generic *he*.

Another possible factor influencing use of ST involves socio-linguistic influence from the L1 language and culture. Stormbom (2019) found that learners with heavily gendered L1s such as Italian and Russian favored generic *he* over ST at a higher rate than speakers of non-gendered languages, while Abudalbh (2012) found that generic *he* was the most commonly used epicene pronoun by Arabic L2 English learners, possibly due to the influence of their heavily patriarchal society. In India, ST use seems to be a part of the women's rights movement, with young people and women using it much more than older people and men, who relied on generic *he*, and to a lesser extent, *he or she* (Loureiro-Porto, 2020).

A third factor affecting ST use is the degree of importance placed by learners on grammatical accuracy. In China and Korea, which like Japan tend to place high value on rules and grammatical accuracy, studies found that although many students are familiar with ST, generic *he* and the combination *he and she* are still much more widely used than ST, and in fact ST is not well accepted (Kim, 2011; Zhang & yang, 2021; Zhang, et. al, 2020). As Zhang and Yang (2021) note, Chinese English education often over-emphasizes structural accuracy, to the detriment of socio-linguistic competence.

### ***ST in Japan***

Although there is a gap in the literature regarding Japanese L2 English learners, we can expect that the above factors might influence them in similar ways. In Japan, English exposure tends to be limited to the classroom for many students. EFL textbooks, however, have been slow to embrace ST, and many still omit any mention of it. In Japan, MEXT-approved textbooks for junior high and high schoolers label *they* as a strictly plural pronoun, and even in conversation and critical thinking books that are popular in Japanese universities and conversation schools, ST is rarely incorporated. This lack of input is likely to negatively affect students' attitudes toward ST.

As for gendered language and culture, Japanese language has gendered elements, but does not rely on gendered grammatical structures or pronouns to a great extent. On the other hand, gender issues in society may provide a bigger

influence on ST. As discussions of gender equality have increased, including on university campuses, students may have become more accepting of ST as a gender-neutral option. Conversely, Japanese education's traditional emphasis on structural accuracy and prescriptivist teachings may negate these changes.

## **Methods**

This exploratory study examined whether lower level students at a private Japanese university were familiar with ST and how they felt about its use. The study took place in two parts, separated by six weeks.

### ***Participants***

The participants were 55 first-year students ages 18-19 (F=27, M=28) at a mid-level private university in eastern Japan. All the students belonged to the Faculty of International Studies and most were majoring in English. The students were of low-intermediate (A2-B1 CEFR) level and took several English classes during the semester.

### ***Aims and Procedures***

This study was conducted during a mandatory 15-week oral communication course and was divided into two parts: Part 1 during the fourth week and Part 2 during the 10<sup>th</sup> week. The purpose of Part 1 was to acquaint students with the various uses of ST; each use was introduced individually by providing a small amount of spoken and written input and a short explicit instruction; students were then given an opportunity to practice it in pairs. The entire time devoted to ST study was approximately 30 minutes. All input and practice activities were integrated into the topic of the textbook unit that students were studying at the time.

Part 2 of the study followed the same procedure, with the goal of refreshing students' understanding of ST, and at the end of this practice time, students were given a questionnaire regarding their study of and attitudes about ST. Students filled out the questionnaire during class time.

This questionnaire was designed to explore the participants' level of familiarity with and attitudes toward ST. It consisted of two questions prefaced by the following definition of ST: "Singular they' = 'they/them/their' to mean one person," followed by two examples of ST taken from the day's lesson. Following this explanation, Question 1 asked whether they had learned about ST prior to this lesson; if they answered yes, they were asked to say where they had learned about it.

Question 2 explored participants' attitudes towards ST by instructing them to rate their agreement with four statements on a Likert scale of one to five,

where one meant strongly disagree and five meant strongly agree. The four statements were chosen to reflect the most common reactions of students in the introductory ST lesson. The questionnaire included two statements that were positive toward ST and two that were negative, to avoid influencing students' reactions. They were instructed to circle the number that reflected their opinion for each statement, and they were invited to write their reasons for their rating in either English or Japanese.

The four statements were as follows:

- 1) ST is useful.
- 2) ST is strange.
- 3) ST is confusing.
- 4) I want to try using ST more often.

The questionnaire was distributed in the last 15 minutes of the class. Students were informed at the start that this was a research project and they should write their opinions as honestly and clearly as they could without discussing their answers, and that there were no right or wrong answers. Students were encouraged to ask the teacher if they did not understand a question, and several did so. The surveys were collected before students left the classroom, and the results were collated and analyzed.

## Results and Discussion

All but one of the 55 students answered the questions in full. The remaining student did not respond to Question 1 but fully answered all items of Question 2. Of the 54 students who completed Question 1, only seven (13%) reported that they had previously learned about ST. Three of these students recalled having studied it in the same course (in Part 1 of this study), two reported having studied it in another university course, and one reported having studied it in junior high school.

It is interesting how few of the students recalled having encountered ST before, when all had in fact taken the first ST lesson just six weeks prior. However, although ST was covered in both listening and speaking activities during that lesson, the total duration of instruction was only about 30 minutes. In addition, there was no mention of ST in the textbook or on any handouts, and it was never included in any test. Furthermore, although the teacher regularly uses ST in appropriate oral situations, she had not given any additional explicit instruction on ST between the first and second lessons of this study, nor had she encouraged, guided, or reminded students to use it. Thus, with only one brief instance of explicit ST teaching during the course, and apparently little to no exposure to ST in the students' six years of junior high and high school, it is perhaps not surprising that students would forget having studied it. This result

reinforces the need for repetition and review of ST, and can be seen as a good argument for in favor of including it in textbooks from early.

For Question 2, the participants' ratings for each item were tallied by gender of participant as well as in total, and are shown in Table 1. The average rating for each category is also shown.

Table 1. Item ratings divided by participants' gender and in total.  
(n=55; F=27, M=28)

What do you think about using "singular they?"	1 strongly agree	2	3	4	5 strongly disagree	Average rating
1. It's useful.						
<i>Female</i>	2	5	4	5	11	3.6
<i>Male</i>	1	2	3	12	10	4.0
Total Responses	3	7	7	17	21	3.8
2. It's strange.						
<i>Female</i>	9	2	6	8	2	2.8
<i>Male</i>	5	3	7	11	2	3.0
Total responses	14	5	13	19	4	2.9
3. It's confusing.						
<i>Female</i>	2	3	5	12	5	3.5
<i>Male</i>	1	2	6	12	7	3.7
Total responses	3	5	11	24	12	3.6
4. I want to try using it more often.						
<i>Female</i>	0	3	6	7	11	3.9
<i>Male</i>	0	3	2	9	14	4.2
Total responses	0	5	8	16	25	4.0

Most students found ST to be a useful construction; the average score for Item 1 ("It is useful.") was 3.9, and 19 students gave it a rating of 5 (strongly agree), whereas only three gave it a rating of 1 (strongly disagree). Many students appreciated ST's potential for enabling gender-free speech; in fact, this was the top reason given by those who scored this item three or above. As one student wrote, "[ST] will be an opportunity to eliminate gender discrimination." Ten students appreciated the fact that ST can be used in a variety of situations, such as when one is referring to an indefinite person who could be any gender, when one doesn't know or want to reveal gender, or when the referent is a non-binary person. The third most common opinion shared was that ST is a succinct and efficient pronoun, less cumbersome than other options such as repetition of the noun or combination formulations such as *he or she*.

Table 2. Comments for each item (with the number of comments in parenthesis)

Item	DISAGREE	AGREE
1. It's useful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's not necessary./ I haven't used it before. (7)</li> <li>• It's confusing/difficult. (5)</li> <li>• It's might be useful but I forget to use it. (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't need to worry about/know the gender./ It promotes gender equality. (15)</li> <li>• It can be used in many situations. (10)</li> <li>• It's easy to say/ short and simple. (6)</li> </ul>
2. It's strange.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We shouldn't need to always refer to gender./ There is no good gender-neutral alternative. (7)</li> <li>• I can easily understand it. (3)</li> <li>• It's a common rule that I learned before. (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I thought <i>they</i> was only for plurals/ shouldn't be used for singular. (16)</li> <li>• I've never learned/ heard of it. (6)</li> <li>• I don't understand how/ when to use it. (5)</li> <li>• If I write it on a test I may be marked wrong. (1)</li> </ul>
3. It's confusing.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can't easily understand its meaning/ use./ It's different from what I learned before. (30)</li> </ul> <p><i>(Note: This comment was found at all levels of agreement from 2-5)</i></p>
4. I want to try using it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't yet understand how/ when to use it./ It's difficult. (4)</li> <li>• It's not necessary. (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's convenient/useful/ simple. (12)</li> <li>• I want to increase my knowledge/ skills./ It's commonly used in English. (10)</li> <li>• I can use when I don't know the gender/ to promote gender equality (4)</li> <li>• The more I use it the easier it will become for me. (2)</li> </ul>

Only ten students disagreed or strongly disagreed with Item 1. Among them, seven noted that it did not seem necessary; they had never used it before and thus could apparently communicate successfully without it. Another five were of the opinion that it was too difficult or confusing to be useful. It seems that these students interpreted the question in terms of whether ST was immediately useful for them personally, and were not commenting on its usefulness in English speech in general. It is also possible that they confused the word "useful" with "convenient" or "easy to use," which sometimes have the same translation as "useful." If this is the case, it may be that students' actual perceptions of the usefulness of ST is higher than it appears. Future studies can avoid such uncertainties by having bilingual questionnaires.

On the other hand, most students found ST to be confusing. Thirty-six students (65%) gave Item 2 a rating of agree or strongly agree, and all 30 comments, by students of all levels of agreement from two to five, reflected the idea that it was a different construction or meaning than they had previously learned, and they thus found it difficult to distinguish when "they" was being used in the plural sense and when in the singular sense. One commenter noted, "I'm not used to it, so it seems difficult to use;" other typical comments for this

item include, “I thought ‘they’ could only be used for plurals,” and “I have never learned about ST,” and “If I hear ST I might think it is talking about a plural noun and get confused.”

The comments also were spread nearly evenly between genders, with males and females expressing similar comments regarding ST’s usefulness in removing gender bias as well as the confusion brought about by its novel grammatical application. In many cases, students’ reticence to accept ST seems to stem not from a belief that it is unnecessary, but rather from a lack of exposure to ST which then leads to confusion over its meaning and use. Confronted with a usage of *they* that defies the rules of grammar they have learned until now, it is not surprising that many find ST strange and confusing. Students expressed unease at encountering a use that seemed to flout the grammatical rules they had long been taught to obey.

While 21 out of 28 of the comments saying ST is strange refer to its grammaticality, the remaining seven state that the writer has never studied ST before. Comments such as “I can’t get used to it because I never learned it before,” were common. On the other hand, most of the comments arguing that ST is not strange (seven out of 11) point to its practical use in creating gender-free language. Only one student reported having learned about ST before university. This student gave a rating of “2” (disagree) to Item 2 (“It’s strange”) and in the comment section wrote, “It isn’t strange. It’s common rule. I often use it.” This finding reinforces the notion that increased and early exposure can increase students’ acceptance of ST.

## Conclusion

In Japan, where English learners typically do not receive much English input outside of English classes and textbooks, the omission of ST from textbooks can put students at a disadvantage, leading to potential processing problems, confusion, and even inadvertent social blunders. However, teachers need not wait for ST to be included in a textbook; they can incorporate it into their speech and lessons on a regular basis.

Acquisition of ST was beyond the scope of this study and is a topic for further research. However, the results of this study do suggest that the more exposure students have to ST, the less likely they are to perceive it as strange or confusing, and the more likely they are to begin using it. As use of ST grows globally, students will need to grasp not just its meaning, but its socio-linguistic importance. As J.D. Brown (2007) notes, gender-inclusive language is a key factor in communicative competence, and teachers should be helping to foster it.



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