GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE USAGE IN ACADEMIA: EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The utilisation of gender-inclusive language, aimed at promoting equal treatment between men and women, has sparked both positive and negative reactions in Spanish society. Consequently, it has evolved into an ideological issue that transcends linguistic boundaries. This study examines the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the use of non-sexist language in the academic environment. Specifically, it analyses the current level of usage and acceptance among the study population, while also investigating the correlation between the language of instruction (Spanish vs. English) and participants' stance on this matter. Given the ongoing debate surrounding its usage, it is essential to identify the factors that influence the opinions of student teachers. Ad hoc questionnaires were administered to a non-probabilistic sample of 348 undergraduate students from Spain. The results indicated widespread adoption of inclusive language, with most participants considering it necessary in daily life and academia. Non-biased linguistic forms were notably prevalent in the L1 context, and nearly half reported using them to enhance academic performance. Age and academic year did not significantly influence these perceptions, as confirmed by Spearman's correlation analyses. However, gender and university degree emerged as critical factors, with female participants showing a stronger inclination toward its use for academic purposes.

Keywords: equity; language instruction; non-sexist language; student teachers; teacher training

Introduction

Inclusive language (henceforth, IL) can be defined as a linguistic register aimed at avoiding any kind of discrimination against social groups traditionally marginalised, such as women, the LGTBIQ+ community, Black people, and disabled individuals, among others (Mañoso-Pacheco & Sánchez-Cabrero, 2023; Parra & Serafini, 2021). Thus, IL is another tool in the current social fight for equality. Though not new, according to Taheri (2020, p. 152), "in the late '70s, the term Politically Correct (PC) entered the public lexicon" with the purpose of not offending any social group with language or behaviour. From that moment on, and especially in the last decade, IL has become a social matter, provoking controversy between those who consider it a key element in the fight for equality and those who believe that language plays a secondary (even an irrelevant) role in that fight. From a strictly linguistic perspective, those in favour of IL highlight the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (Wolff & Holmes, 2011), claiming that language shapes our thought and, therefore, the way we represent reality. Considering this, a change in language may lead to a change in society. The effectiveness of IL, however, has been questioned by some factions within the discipline of gender studies, asserting that it has not produced "concrete results", such as the eradication of violence against women, closing the gender salary gap, or altering the mindset of the population in the pursuit of gender equality (Gasparri, 2019).

Although IL affects any minority group, it is often misunderstood and primarily associated with gender issues, especially the binary division of "male-female" (Papadopoulos, 2022). Regardless of the discrepancies in the conceptual definition of IL, the literature has portrayed women as one of the factions in society that have experienced higher levels of discrimination (Sánchez-Cabrero et al., 2023). Evidence indicates that women are still excluded from certain public activities and decision-making processes, and that they are commonly underrepresented in the media discourse (Billy et al., 2022; Mañoso-Pacheco, 2018). In light of the above, this research focuses on the use of IL to address the exclusion of women in discourse and, consequently, in social life.

In the Spanish language, various solutions to avoid sexist language have been proposed. According to Slemp (2021), during the 80s, doublets were used (*el profesor y la profesora*), but this approach contradicts the principle of language economy. With the widespread use of personal computers, the "at" sign (@) to include both men and women became popular. However, it posed two problems: it was unpronounceable, and it did not represent non-binary individuals. To avoid the exclusion of non-binary groups, the -x morpheme was suggested, though it encountered the same pronunciation problem. Therefore, a fourth option was proposed: the creation of a new morpheme, -e (instead of -o and -a, which commonly represent male and female genders, respectively). This new morpheme does not pose any pronunciation problem and is inclusive of non-binary individuals. Slemp's (2021, p. 67) research on Twitter language concluded that "the most popular inclusive marker was -e" (*les niñes*, instead of *los niños y las niñas*).

As mentioned above, this new linguistic reality provokes controversy between those who believe that language is a tool for social change and those who

do not. The latter claim that using IL does not raise awareness; instead, it is seen as a superficial gesture aimed at demonstrating political correctness without leading to real social change. Moreover, they assert that the proposed solutions are either unpronounceable (@, -x) or imply a deeper transformation of the Spanish grammar. The creation of the -e morpheme results in morphological, syntactical, and semantic modifications that must be analysed and regulated. Indeed, The Spanish Language Academy (2020, para. 5) issued a statement stating that "*este fenómeno (IL) es puramente gramatical y no es consecuencia del acuerdo expreso de una institución, sea política o cultural, antigua o contemporánea, española o extranjera*" [this phenomenon (IL) is purely grammatical and not the result of an explicit agreement by any institution, whether political or cultural, old or contemporary, Spanish or foreign].

Comité Editorial (2020) of Signo y Seña conducted a survey involving 13 scholars, focusing on three items: the influence of language on reality and *vice versa*; the possibility of developing a non-binary morphology in Spanish; and the feasibility of regulating language use while maintaining intelligibility as a key factor. Although the responses were diverse, these three items helped summarise the problem from a linguistic-scientific perspective. These are the topics that academics should delve into deeply, enabling the language of science to adapt to social reality.

Despite linguistic differences between languages such as Spanish and English (e.g., gender markers are more prevalent in Spanish grammar compared to English grammar), we encounter similar polarised positions. For example, the "use of the singular 'they' annoys some grammarians who argue that 'they' should only be used to refer to plural nouns" (Taheri, 2020, p. 155). Other examples of non-inclusive language in English include pronouns and possessives (he, she, his, and her) and nouns such as chairman, fireman, manmade, or manpower. Taheri (2020) suggests gender-neutral substitutions: chairperson, firefighter, manufactured, and human resources, respectively. However, due to the grammatical flexibility of English, it seems to be a better candidate for linguistic inclusion than Spanish (which has more gender markers), as "English is a malleable language that is open to shifts in vocabulary and usage" (Schulzke, 2014, pp. 235-236).

Research shows that women and non-binary individuals (especially youngsters) are more prone to use IL (Jiménez-Rodrigo et al., 2011; Parks & Roberton, 2005; Royo et al., 2021; Slemp, 2021; Taheri, 2020). Pesce and Etchezahar (2019) conducted research on the use of IL based on age (18-70-year-olds) and gender (346 females, 256 males, and 11 non-binary individuals) with 613 Argentinian participants. They found that women had a more positive attitude towards IL and claimed to use it more frequently. Interestingly, the youngest group (18-23-year-olds) and the eldest group (50-70-year-olds) did not view IL as positively as the 24-49-year-olds. Banegas and López (2021) emphasised the need for developing sociolinguistic awareness to raise consciousness about the use of IL. According to Banegas and López (2021, p. 345), "for various reasons, educational authorities may lack updated sociolinguistic arguments to guide discussions within educational communities, and instead, they rely on internal theories, personal beliefs, and purely prescriptive conceptions of language education". This idea can be extrapolated to the general population.

In the academic context, codes of practice to avoid language stereotyping are currently common at universities (Kalajdžisalihović, 2021). However, "the new

terminology has not yet been officially adopted into the language and is barely known beyond the gender non-binary community within that language. Moreover, most language textbooks and teaching materials are not yet incorporating these new linguistic developments" (Djavadghazaryans, 2020, p. 270). Indeed, Parra and Serafini (2021) asserted that while many teachers are interested in using IL, some penalise their students for using IL. These authors also argued for the need to develop sociolinguistic and transcultural competences to equip students with the skills to adapt to real-time requirements and the diverse reality of the classroom.

García-Holgado et al. (2021) conducted research on the teachers' gender perspectives at the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain). They discovered that 70% of participants agreed with using gender-differentiating marks (-x and @); 57% affirmed using IL in their written discourse, but only 35% used it orally. Nonetheless, 88% of the respondents considered it important to incorporate IL into university teaching. Similar results, reflecting a positive attitude of teachers from the College of Teacher Education towards IL, were also found by Vizcarra-Garcia (2021) in the Philippines.

A study conducted by Tangen and Beutel (2017) explored the pre-service teachers' perceptions in Australia regarding their roles as future inclusive educators. The study concluded that these teachers did not have a uniform understanding of inclusion. The authors also observed that pre-service teachers, who embraced a broad view of diversity and were inclined to implement inclusive practices, including the use of IL, were in the early stages of recognising the importance of such practices. Similarly, Cutler et al., (2022) examined the emotional experiences of a group of pre-service teachers working with LGBTIQ+ students. These students required adjustments in language to avoid non-sexist language and to deconstruct past learning experiences. Despite the willingness of study participants to create inclusive environments through their communication, using non-gendered language was perceived as challenging and problematic.

Studies concerning students showed that the usage of IL was still generally poor (Kalajdžisalihović, 2021; Sauntson, 2018). Sauntson (2018) interviewed 20 LGBT+ identified students aged 13 to 25 from schools and colleges in the United Kingdom. These students reported experiencing more exclusion than inclusion and considered teachers' roles crucial in fostering inclusion. Additionally, they viewed English as a subject with higher potential for promoting IL. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Kalajdžisalihović (2021) analysed 158 responses from 45 university students in response to five sentences. These students were asked to identify exclusive language and suggest alternative sentences. The results indicated that students were "unsure about the usage of language that is considered inclusive, especially when it comes to gender-neutral/IL in contemporary English" (Kalajdžisalihović, 2021, p. 86).

While there is extensive research on attitudes towards IL, examining perspectives across various social groups in different countries (Cutler et al., 2022; Kalajdžisalihović, 2021; Slemp, 2021), there is a shortage of research that explores the attitudes of prospective teachers towards IL. Furthermore, no previous studies analysed the correlation between the beliefs of pre-service teachers and variables such as gender, university degree, or the language of instruction. Our study therefore offers novel contribution, and our result can open up new avenues of inquiry.

This study examines the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the use of non-sexist language in the academic environment. The objectives of the study are to: (1) analyse the current level of usage and acceptance among the study population; and (2) investigate the correlation between the language of instruction (Spanish vs. English) and participants' stance on this matter.

By exploring these issues, the authors aim to deepen the understanding of IL and shed light on how the polarisation that has emerged in Spanish society about IL might affect the academic environment. The authors hypothesise that IL may be commonly used by prospective teachers, although this population may exhibit a lower sensitivity towards sexist language in English-medium instruction.

Materials and Method

Participants

The population for this study were trainee teachers in pre-primary and primary education programmes in Spain, which included those enrolled in the dual degree in pre-primary and primary education programmes. For this research, 348 prospective teachers from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain) were selected, with ages ranging from 18 to 37 years and a mean age of 20.14 years (SD= 2.16). The majority of participants identified themselves as women, with the final sample consisting of 291 women (83.6%), 54 men (15.5%), and three (0.9%) who identified as either non-binary or preferred not to label themselves as male or female.

The sample was obtained using convenience sampling. Data were collected through voluntary participation, and informed written consent was obtained from the participants. The study participants were enrolled in the subjects "English as a Foreign Language I" and "English as a Foreign Language II" during the 2021–2022 academic year. Figure 1 displays the distribution of the sample concerning gender and age in a population pyramid. The population pyramid's composition excludes participants who chose not to identify themselves as either female or male as the objective is to depict the distribution of the two primary gender categories.

Figure 1
Population Pyramid Depicting Gender (Male and Female Only) and Age of the Participants in this Research
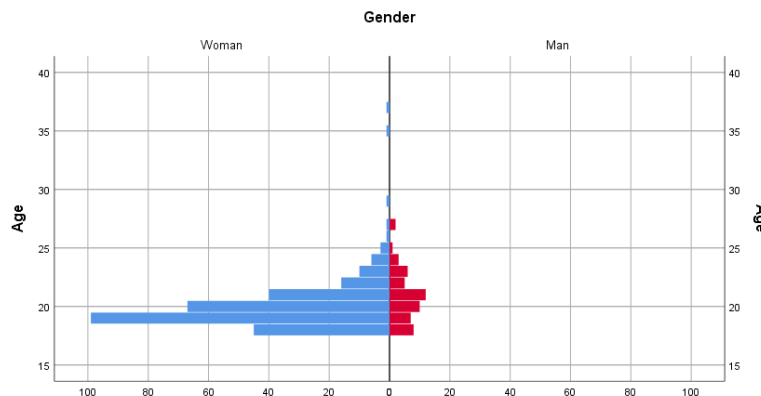
The gender imbalance (with over 80% of participants being female) illustrated in Figure 1 is a notable characteristic of the study population. This observation aligns with historical and current data from the Ministry of Universities of the Government of Spain (MUE). According to their report, in the 2021–2022 academic year, 62.7% of students in the arts and humanities degrees were female, as opposed to 37.8% male students (Ministerio de Universidades, 2023). Although the sample is representative of the overall population in this context, its gender disproportionality may significantly affect the perceptions, use, and/or acceptance of IL by trainee teachers.

Table 1 presents the distribution by frequencies (N) and absolute percentages (%), considering the variables of *university degree* and *academic year*.

Table 1
Sample Distribution by Degree and Academic Year

University degree	N	%
Pre-primary education	70	20.1
Primary education	189	54.3
Dual degree in pre-primary and primary education	89	25.6
Academic year	N	%
First	24	6.9
Second	204	58.6
Third	92	26.4
Fourth	25	7.2
Fifth	3	0.9
Total	348	100

As shown in Table 1, primary education was the most prevalent university degree. Most participants in the sample were in their second year of studies. The fifth year applied exclusively to dual-degree students, who could also be considered pre-primary and primary education students simultaneously, as their programme covers both areas.

Study Variables

This study analysed the impact of four attributive variables on the opinions of the study participants regarding IL, as described below:
- Gender: Nominal variable with three levels (male, female and non-binary or prefer not to say), determining whether the participant identifies with a specific gender category.

- Age: Discrete quantitative variable determining the age of the study participant.
- University degree: Nominal variable with three levels (pre-primary education, primary education, and dual degree in pre-primary and primary education), defining the participants' academic studies.
- Academic year: Ordinal variable with five levels (first, second, third, fourth, and fifth), defining the stage of academic development.

The concept of IL is characterised through several items related to the following seven variables concerning the use and perceptions of IL by the participants:

- Use of IL: Nominal and dichotomous variable (used or not used) determining whether the participant employs IL in a given context.
- Scope of IL: Nominal and dichotomous variable (everyday life or academic setting) concerning the context in which the IL can be applied.
- Need to utilise to IL: Nominal and dichotomous variable (awareness of the necessity or lack thereof) determining whether the participant considers the use of IL as necessary in a given context.
- Perception about IL: Nominal variable with three possible levels (negative, neutral, and positive) reflecting rejection, indifference, or acceptance of IL use in a given context.
- Role employing IL: Nominal and dichotomous variable (student or teacher) regarding the role of the individual using IL.
- Language of instruction for IL: Nominal and dichotomous variable (English or Spanish) concerning the language in which the subject is instructed.
- Evaluation of future IL use: Nominal and dichotomous variable (awareness of the need to use the IL in the future or not, and awareness of the need as a teacher to guide future learners in implementing IL or not), determining the participant's prospective evaluation of IL.

Evaluation Instrument

This study collected data using a questionnaire. The first part focused on assessing attributive information and defining the characteristics of the sample. It included the mandatory written informed consent form, as recommended by the World Medical Association (2013). In full compliance with the Research Ethics Committee regulation from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, the administration of surveys and questionnaires fell outside the scope of the application of Article 1.2. This research adheres to a non-interventional approach, guaranteeing participant anonymity, in accordance with the Spanish Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5th, on Data Protection and Guarantee of Digital Rights.

Following this, the questionnaire was divided into three main sections consisting of 12 closed-ended items. Section 1 (items 1-6) enquired about the participants' use and perception of IL in an academic context. Section 2 (items 7-10) addressed the participants' perception of IL use by professors. The final section, Section 3 (items 11 and 12) explored the participants' intention to use IL with their future students. The questionnaire exhibited satisfactory reliability, as measured by

the Cronbach's Alpha *test* (α= 0.645). The relatively low number of items (12) and the limited number of response options (two or three, depending on the question) decreased this index considerably (Vaske et al., 2017).

The questionnaire demonstrated excellent validity and goodness of design as assessed by expert judgement. Prior to its implementation, three qualified university experts in the field of gender and education validated the questionnaire in July 2021. These reviewers were tasked with determining whether the items were adequate, relevant, and sufficient, and that they did not contain any errors, such as biased questions or misleading response options. The questionnaire underwent piloting and revision before distribution, involving a reference group of 15 student teachers.

To encourage participation, the questionnaire was administered in the participants' native language (Spanish) and hosted on the private server of *encuestafacil*, a web-based platform for conducting online surveys. This platform used the respondents' IP addresses as a filter to prevent multiple replies from the same computer, always ensuring the anonymity of the participants.

Research Design

This study utilised an ex post facto, cross-sectional, and descriptive research analysis of the use and perceptions of IL by pre-service pre-primary and primary teachers in Spain. For the descriptive analysis of the results, the distribution of frequencies and standard deviations of the scores were employed as indicators of central tendency (Sánchez-Cabrero et al., 2018).

In terms of inferential analyses, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was initially employed to assess whether the data followed a normal distribution and to justify the use of parametric tests (Arigita-García et al., 2021). The results from the K-S test (K-S= .109) indicated a non-normal distribution (p= .000), rendering the use of parametric tests unsuitable. Consequently, contrasts of mean differences were conducted using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test for independent samples to compare the results of the attributive variables, university degree and gender.

The non-parametric Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test for paired samples was applied to evaluate differences related to the language of instruction. Additionally, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between the general items on IL and the variables age and academic year. This non-parametric technique was also utilised to compare the paired scores evaluated via the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test.

A minimum significance level of 95% (α= .05) was employed for this study. The *Bonferroni correction* was applied to adjust the significance level for comparisons involving categorical variables with more than two levels.

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of each item of the questionnaire related to the participants' general perception of IL.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Questionnaire Items Concerning the Participants' General Perception of IL (N=348)

	No		Not sure		Yes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Generally speaking, is it necessary to use IL in everyday life?	53	15.2	48	13.8	247	71.0
2. Generally speaking, is it necessary for students to use IL in the academic field?	53	15.2	44	12.6	251	72.1
3. Have you ever used it to make a better impression on your professors and/or obtain better academic results?*	164	47.1	25	7.2	159	45.7
4. According to your view, is it necessary for your professors to use IL in the academic field?	59	17.0	43	12.4	246	70.7
5. In the future, do you think you will need to use IL in academia when you work as a teacher?	33	9.5	42	12.1	273	78.4
6. In the future, do you think you will guide your pupils to use IL to communicate orally or in writing?	42	12.1	72	20.7	234	67.2

*For this item, the Not Sure option is replaced by Do Not Remember

From the results, it appeared that IL has been widely implemented and accepted among the population of trainee teachers in Spain. Seventy-one percent of the study's participants considered its use necessary in everyday life, and 72.1% of the research sample viewed it as necessary in the academic field for students. In the same vein, 70.7% of the participants believed that professors should use it in the academic field. Furthermore, a significant percentage (78.4%) claimed that they would need to use it in the future when working as teachers, and 67.2% would even recommend its use to their future students. It is also noteworthy that nearly half of the sample (45.7%) acknowledged that they had resorted to IL to make a better impression on their professors.

The high acceptance of IL use by trainee teachers was evaluated in consideration of the different attributive variables. Table 3 shows the distinct correlations measured with Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. In this analysis, the authors compared ordinal variables with each other, as well as with the quantitative variable age and the ordinal variable academic year.

The results clearly indicated that neither the age nor the academic year variable had a significant impact on pre-service teachers' perception of IL. Consequently, it can be concluded that the perception and use of IL were independent of the learners' age and the academic year in which they were enrolled.

Table 3

Correlations of the Questionnaire Items Regarding the Participants' General Perception of IL with Age and Academic Year

Item	Age	Academic year
1. Generally speaking, is it necessary to use IL in everyday life?	0.067	0.119
2. Generally speaking, is it necessary for students to use IL in the academic field?	0.055	0.076
3. Have you ever used it to make a better impression on your professors and/or obtain better academic results?	0.044	0.079
4. According to your view, is it necessary for your professors to use IL in the academic field?	0.037	0.029
5. In the future, do you think you will need to use IL in academia when you work as a teacher?	0.062	0.045
6. In the future, do you think you will guide your future pupils to use IL to communicate orally or in writing?	0.041	0.043

Regarding the variables gender and university degree, as they are nominal variables, the authors conducted an analysis using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test for independent samples, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Significance of the Kruskal-Wallis Test for the Questionnaire Items Related to Participants' General Perception of IL Based on Gender and University Degree

Item	Age	Academic year
1. Generally speaking, is it necessary to use IL in everyday life?	0.000**	0.015
2. Generally speaking, is it necessary for students to use IL in the academic field?	0.000**	0.014
3. Have you ever used it to make a better impression on your professors and/or obtain better academic results?	0.687	0.002*
4. According to your view, is it necessary for your professors to use IL in the academic field?	0.001**	0.016
5. In the future, do you think you will need to use IL in academia when you work as a teacher?	0.023	0.002*
6. In the future, do you think you will guide your future pupils to use IL to communicate orally or in writing?	0.001**	0.002*

* = Significance greater than 95% (0.01) after applying *Bonferroni correction*.

Gender was a highly influential factor in the participants' perception of IL. Women exhibited a significant tendency to consider IL necessary in all aspects, including the language of instruction provided by their professors and its future use with their students. When it comes to the participants' university degree, pre-primary education students were significantly less inclined to use IL to influence their professors compared to their counterparts. In the case of primary education students, the findings indicated that they were significantly less likely to use IL in the future when working as teachers.

Table 5 shows the results for the correlation between participants' perception of IL and the language of instruction. The findings included the level of significance resulting from the comparison of responses to the items depending on whether the subject was taught in English or Spanish, the contrasts of means using the non-parametric Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney (WMW) test for paired samples, and the correlations between the paired variables using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rho).

Table 5

Parametric Test Results Regarding Item Responses by the Language of Instruction (English Vs. Spanish)

Item	Age	Academic year
1. Do you use IL to communicate orally in class or in writing with your professors?	0.3**	-10.593**
2. According to your view, what impression do students leave with their professors when they employ IL?	0.692**	-1.535
3. Has a professor ever made a comment, directed at you or your colleagues, about the use of IL?	0.023	-12.787**
4. Do your professors take into account the use of IL to communicate orally in class or in writing with their students?	0.413**	-8.818**
5. What is your impression if a professor does not use IL in writing?	0.838**	-1.029
6. What is your impression if a professor does not use IL to communicate orally?	0.842**	-2.263

** = Significance greater than 99% (0.01) after applying *Bonferroni correction*.

The results revealed that the language of instruction made a difference. There were significant differences in the participants' perception of IL for communication in class and their assessment of its use by their professors depending on the language of instruction. In all instances, the scores were notably higher when participants were

taught in the participants' mother tongue (Spanish) compared to when they were taught in a foreign language (English).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study analysed the perceptions of 348 undergraduate students regarding the use of IL in the academic field. To address the first research objective, which is to describe the degree of IL usage and acceptance among pre-service teachers of pre-primary and primary education in Spain, the findings indicated a high degree of acceptance of IL within the study group, both in academic and non-academic settings. The results further suggested that a large majority of the surveyed trainee teachers intended to utilise IL when they become teachers. The participants also expressed their commitment to promoting the use of non-sexist language in the classroom, guiding their future students in its implementation.

These findings did not align with prior research in the field, where pre-service teachers did not exhibit such a high level of acceptance toward the practice of IL (Cutler et al., 2022; Tangen & Beutel, 2017). It is important to note that 82% of the sample comprised female participants. If the authors had analysed the perceptions of a more proportionate quota sampling of males and females, the high levels of acceptance regarding IL might have been different. This assumption is based on the results obtained by Pesce and Etchezahar (2019). In their study, women were found to be more inclined to employ the IL as they held a more positive attitude toward it compared to their male counterparts. The high number of females in this study might have resulted in the high level of IL acceptance.

Another factor that needs consideration is the fact that nearly half of the research sample reported using IL to please their professors and/or to achieve better academic results. This finding indicated a possible lack of awareness on the part of participants regarding the necessity of employing IL in the academic field. It appears that their use was driven by personal interests rather than a deep commitment to addressing social inequalities through language.

Regarding the correlations of the distinct variables measured using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, neither the age of participants nor the academic year had a significant impact on pre-service teachers' perception of IL. However, the gender factor did influence their perception of non-sexist language. The results suggested that female students found IL more relevant than their male counterparts in various aspects of life. These findings aligned with the fundamental nature of IL, i.e., reducing discrimination against traditionally marginalised groups, such as women (Papadopoulos, 2022; Parra & Serafini, 2021). As mentioned, IL seeks to neutralise terms referring to individuals and eliminate gender bias from language for the sake of promoting gender diversity (Slemp, 2021; Taheri, 2020). Women, being historically excluded, clearly benefit from IL, as they have often faced personal discrimination (Billy et al., 2022). It is not surprising, therefore, that female participants in this research perceived it as more necessary to avoid gender bias in the academic setting compared to males. This finding is consistent with previous studies in the field, which have reported that female university students tend to have a

greater awareness of the importance of IL compared to their male peers (García-Holgado et al., 2021; Parks & Roberton, 2005; Royo et al., 2021).

In addition to gender, the university degree was another significant variable in shaping pre-service teachers' perception of sexist language, a factor not previously reported by researchers. Participants pursuing a pre-primary education degree were less likely to use IL to please their professors than others, and students studying primary education were less inclined to incorporate IL into their instructional language when working as teachers. These findings suggested that pre-primary education students were more convinced of the need to use IL in the academic field, whereas the rest instrumentalised IL for their own benefit. In contrast, primary education students admitted that they resorted to IL to please their professors to a greater extent than others but were less willing to continue the practice in the future. There was internal consistency of the participants' responses to the questionnaire items as they likely assumed that being a student inherently involves the evaluation of academic progress, while working as a teacher does not entail such constant supervision.

In relation to the second research objective, which is to determine the impact of the language of instruction on pre-service teachers' beliefs about IL, the results indicated that IL was not as extensively used in subjects taught in English as it was in the students' mother tongue. Proficiency in the language likely influenced their use of gender-neutral language, as using non-gendered forms in English requires a high level of language proficiency (Kalajdžisalihović, 2021). Another factor that might influence students' use of IL is having their professors as role models. According to the participants, most professors used non-sexist forms in Spanish as their usage was more prevalent than in English. Demonstrating ways to convey neutral referents undoubtedly contributed to expanding the students' language skills. The ongoing polarised debate regarding the use of IL in the Spanish media likely served as another source of role model for students.

The research findings contribute to a better understanding of IL in the academic field from the perspective of pre-service teachers. It highlighted the fact that pre-service teachers mostly favoured the daily practice of IL. However, the study participants seemed to be driven by a goal-oriented incentive, namely, achieving better academic results, rather than by the desire to use language to change social reality. The limitation of the sample's lack of proportionality, that is, the low number of male participants, hindered the authors from drawing more robust conclusions about the perception of IL among trainee teachers in academic settings. While male underrepresentation is common in degrees related to arts and humanities (Ministerio de Universidades, 2023), it is essential to conduct a prospective analysis of the true significance of IL for male pre-service teachers.

Additionally, further exploration of the correlation between *university degree* and students' views on IL, especially the differences in perspectives between pre-primary and primary education students, is warranted. Although language is said to reflect reality, it has not yet been scientifically proven whether IL can change reality, as proponents of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis claim. Thus, another potential research avenue could involve investigating whether IL helps in preventing gender stereotypes among the university population.

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