Gendered Pronouns in Chinese EL2 Speech: The Case of Epicene Pronouns

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Abstract

This paper presents an exploratory study on the usage of epicene pronouns in the speech of Chinese EL2 students, who were undertaking a Master's programme in the UK. The reasons for speakers' use or non-use of epicene pronouns is also explored to provide a fuller picture of the speakers' usage as well as their perceptions of gender-inclusive pronouns. An elicitation based speaking task was used to gather epicene pronoun usage. This was followed by a semi-structured interview utilizing stimulated recall techniques to gather data on the participants' reasons for use or non-use of epicene pronouns as well as their perceptions of gender-inclusive pronouns. The findings showed that singular *they* was the epicene pronoun used most often, with the reason being that the participants were imagining a group of people. The avoidance strategy employed most often by participants was usage of the pronoun *you*, and the participants' reasoning was that it made the response more personal for the listener. Regarding the different antecedent types, there was a higher number of avoidance strategies used with notionally plural antecedents. On the other hand, notionally singular antecedents were found to have a higher number of epicene pronouns used. For EL2 educators, these findings can inform the introduction of epicene pronouns to students.

Keywords: epicene pronouns, EL2, spoken English, singular *they*

Introduction

Language use reflects changes in both gender norms and stereotypes and can be used to reinforce (in)equality (Chew & Kelley-Chew, 2007; Stormbom, 2018). Language can be gender-exclusive, discriminating against and excluding some gender identities, or gender-inclusive, and inclusive of binary and non-binary identities. English has undergone a shift from gender-exclusive to gender-inclusive language since the 20th century as speakers have become more aware of sexist language and have shifted away from these forms (Baranowski, 2002). At the heart of these gender-inclusive language reforms is "the notion that changes in gender norms in

society are linked to changes in gender norms in language, and vice versa" (Stormbom, 2018, p. 4). The link between gender norms in society and language is relevant for both first language (L1) and second language (L2) speakers.

Epicene pronouns are third-person singular pronouns that are used to refer to an indefinite or hypothetical human antecedent whose gender is unknown or unspecified (Everett, 2011; Noll et al., 2018). The shift to gender-inclusive language in English has prompted a change in the prescriptive 'rule' of using generic *he* after sex-indefinite antecedents (Sunderland, 1992). This is especially evident in the use of epicene pronouns by both L1 and L2 speakers and has occurred, partially, because the formal gender agreement in English is limited to third-person singular pronouns like epicenes (Abudalbuh, 2012; Balhorn, 2004; Newman, 1992; Stormbom, 2018).

Current research on epicene pronouns tends to focus on English L1 speakers' written usage (see Baranowski, 2002; Meyers, 1990; Paterson, 2011). Studies focusing on English L1 speakers' epicene pronouns usage in speech (see Holmes, 2001) and comprehension (see Kennison & Trofe, 2003; Newman, 1992; Noll et al, 2018) are less common. Studies that investigate English L2 (EL2) speakers tend to only investigate written forms and do not address spoken usage. These include corpus-based projects (Stormbom, 2018; 2019), sentence completion tasks (Abudalbuh, 2012), and comprehension when reading (Speyer & Schleef, 2018; Sudo, 2007). Most studies investigate EL2 speakers from languages such as German, French and Swedish, and not a Chinese L1 background. There has been recent research on how Chinese EL2 speakers perceive epicene pronouns (Zhang et al., 2020), although there has been no investigation on how they use these pronouns in speech. Thus, this study is focused on EL2

speakers, and more specifically, Chinese EL2 speakers and their spoken usage of epicene pronouns.

Literature Review

All languages can be grouped into either grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, or genderless languages. Grammatical gender languages, such as Spanish and French, express gender as a formal category with agreement mandatory amongst all elements (Hellinger & Buβmann, 2002). Natural gender languages, such as English, do not have a formal gender class system but rather express gender semantically based on assumed gender through pronouns and gender-specific lexical items (Hord, 2016; Mills, 2008; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Tight, 2006). Genderless languages, such as Chinese, do not have a formal gender class system nor do they express gender semantically (Hellnger & Buβmann, 2002), rather, gender is expressed in gender-specific lexical items such as *woman/man* using gendered radicals (Ettner, 2002).

This study involves English, a natural gender language, and Chinese, a genderless language, and looks specifically at pronouns. Pronouns are a word class where gender-inclusivity is more easily signaled. Chinese pronouns, interestingly, are gender marked in the written form but are potentially gender-inclusive in the spoken form. This is because the written pronoun form in Chinese was historically devoid of gender until relatively recently and currently both *he* and *she* have the same pronunciation (Ettner, 2002). However, Ettner (2002) notes that there is an assumption that the person within a spoken generic context is male, an assumption that might influence the choices the Chinese EL2 speakers make regarding EL2 epicene pronouns.

Pronouns are small words that may not stand out in comprehension, but they can affect the mental representation and unconscious processing of the sentence (Newman, 1992; Paterson, 2011). The following sections discuss English epicene pronouns in more detail, strategies to avoid using an epicene pronoun and the factors that might influence a speaker's choice on which epicene pronoun option to use.

Epicene Pronoun Choices and Avoidance

The three most popular epicene pronoun options in English are: generic *he*, singular *they* and coordinate *he or she* (Biber et al., 1999). Generic *she* is the fourth option, though it is the least likely to be used. Some of these choices are more inclusive (e.g. coordinate *he or she*; singular *they*) than others (e.g. generic *he*; generic *she*). Each of the four epicene pronouns have a unique history and contexts where they are used. This study uses the term epicene pronoun to refer to both exclusive and inclusive forms, a decision informed by the literature which does not explicitly differentiate between forms. Additionally, all options are available to speakers to choose from and thus have been included in the study.

Generic *he* was the most frequently suggested epicene pronoun by prescriptivists in the 19th century on the grounds that it is inclusive of both men and women (Baranowski, 2002; Baron, 1981). However, generic *he* tends to produce a male only interpretation, excluding women and non-binary individuals (Noll et al., 2018; Stringer & Hopper, 1998). This creates a 'false' generic as it discriminates in relation to who is linguistically visible based on sex. Since the shift towards more gender-inclusive language, there has been a decline in usage of generic *he* among English L1 speakers (Baker, 2010). It is important to note though that generic *he* is often

the most common option selected by EL2 speakers in writing (Abudalbuh, 2012; Pauwels & Winter, 2004; Stormbom, 2018, 2019).

Today, a popular epicene pronoun option used by speakers is singular *they*. It is used in both speech and informal writing and seems to be the epicene pronoun of choice for L1 speakers (Noll et al., 2018; Paterson, 2011). Singular *they* has been in use since at least the 17th century, and benefits from being inclusive of both binary and non-binary identities (Balhorn, 2004; Bodine, 1975). However, it receives criticism for its inherent plurality as it might not agree in number with the antecedent (Baron, 1981). Paterson (2011) countered this criticism by suggesting that singular *they* represents an expansion of semantic meaning, similar to that of *thou* and *you*, and therefore agrees in number as it is semantically different from plural *they*. While singular *they* is one of the most commonly used epicene pronouns by L1 speakers, as Stormbom (2018) notes, this is not the case with L2 speakers. In the written context, singular *they* tends to be used less frequently by L2 speakers than L1 speakers. The lower frequency might be a result of several influencing factors such as the speaker's L1, lack of exposure, or unawareness of its acceptability.

The epicene pronoun option that is accepted by both prescriptive grammarians and feminist critics alike is the coordinate *he or she*. This tends to be used in more formal written contexts, however, its main criticism is that it is cumbersome to use repeatedly in speech (Adami, 2009; Baron, 1981). Overall, this pronoun choice tends to be used less frequently than generic *he* and singular *they* by both L1 and L2 speakers (Paterson 2011; Stormbom, 2018, 2019).

Finally, while generic *she* is also a pronoun option in English, most speakers tend to avoid using it (Abudalbuh, 2012). This is possibly because unlike generic *he*, it never received

prescriptive backing (Matossian, 1997) and is, therefore, vividly marked for gender. Additionally, using generic *she* may create a perceived female bias (Hekanaho, 2015). In the literature, both L1 and L2 speakers are unlikely to use generic *she*. It is important to note though, that some speakers might choose generic *she* to consciously to draw attention to the feminine or pair it with highly feminine social gender nouns, for example, *nurse*.

Speakers can also choose to avoid using an epicene pronoun by employing an avoidance strategy. These strategies include; pluralization, use of the passive voice, avoiding pronouns, or using other pronouns (*you, we, one*). Pluralization is the most commonly used strategy by speakers and involves recasting sentences so that the antecedent is plural and not singular, thereby avoiding the formal-gender marking that only occurs in the singular form (Adami, 2009; Baranowski, 2002; Stormbom, 2018). The passive voice strategy allows speakers to avoid using an epicene pronoun by employing a passive sentence structure (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Speakers can also use noun repetition to negate the need for a gender-marked pronoun, i.e. repeating 'student' instead of using 'she' (Adami, 2009; Baranowski, 2002).

Influencing Factors

L1 and L2 speakers are sensitive to influences such as the antecedent type regarding notional number and the social gender of the antecedent when choosing which epicene pronoun option or avoidance strategy to use (Baranowski, 2002; Stormbom, 2018). The antecedent's notional number can be classified as notionally plural or notionally singular, which refers to the conceptual schema that a speaker holds of a noun regarding how many people it includes. Words such as *everybody* and *anybody*, which are notionally plural, are likely to generate the mental

image of multiple people. Whereas words such as *teacher* and *student*, which are notionally singular, are likely to generate the image of a singular person (see Stormbom, 2018).

With notionally plural antecedents, it has been demonstrated that speakers are more likely to use singular *they* as it agrees in semantic number (Newman, 1992; Stormbom, 2018). Potentially, speakers choose to override the grammatical singularity of the antecedent in favor of the possible semantic plurality (Balhorn, 2004). With notionally singular antecedents, speakers often use generic *he* or the coordinate *he or she* as it agrees in both the semantic and syntactic singularity (Lee, 2015; Stormbom, 2018). This allows speakers to respect the inherent number agreement even if they are incorporating a salient gender. This study further classifies notionally singular antecedents as either definite or indefinite depending on the article that occurs in the noun phrase. This is in accordance with the literature which distinguishes between the two subtypes of notionally singular antecedents (see Stormbom, 2018).

Social gender is concerned with the assumptions and stereotypes associated with specific nouns and is another potential influencing factor on speakers' choices (Abudalbuh, 2012). For example, if an antecedent has a high social gender, speakers may choose gender specific pronoun options as their mental schema is also highly gendered (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). On the other hand, use of antecedents with a low social gender demonstrates a preference for a more gender-inclusive option suggesting less gendered mental schema.

Both the antecedent type and social gender of the noun can influence which options speakers use, for both L1 and L2 speakers. For L2 speakers, their L1 might also influence their choice. This influence could arise because their L1 is encoded and embedded within a specific sociocultural context and has strategies for using gender-inclusive language that may differ to those in English. The difference in language type between the L1 and L2, discussed at the start of

Section 2, provides another potential way the L1 could influence L2 usage. As the L1 might prove an influencing factor for speakers' choices, all participants in this study have a shared L1 of Chinese.

Study Design

This study aimed to provide information on how Chinese EL2 students use epicene pronouns when speaking English, information on the reasons why these students chose to use or not use epicene pronouns, and their perceptions of gender-inclusive pronouns.

Participants

Eleven participants took part in this study. They were aged 23 to 33 and undertaking a Master's programme at a UK university at the time of data collection. All participants spoke Chinese as an L1 and English as an additional language, which they had studied from the age of five. All participants were assigned a pseudonym for identification purposes[1]. As the participants were undertaking a Master's degree in the UK, which has a minimum English proficiency requirement of an IELTS score 6.0 with no skill below 5.5, it was estimated that the participants were at a similar proficiency level.

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[1] Pseudonyms were randomly assigned and used in accordance with the ethical approval for this study.

Data Collection Methods

The study consisted of an elicitation based speaking task to collect epicene pronoun usage followed by a semi-structured interview to ascertain participants' reasons for use or non-use of epicenes and perceptions of gender-inclusive language (see Appendix 1 for the guide used). The interview followed the speaking task to avoid priming participants' responses by asking about their perceptions of gender-inclusive pronouns beforehand.

The speaking task was designed to prompt the use of epicene pronouns using elicitation techniques that create specific contexts for the production of relevant data, while still keeping the communicative situation as close to natural as possible (Eisenbeiss, 2010). The task consisted of fifteen questions, nine containing non-gendered antecedents, four containing a gendered antecedent, and one open-ended question. Of the nine non-gendered antecedents, three were definite (e.g. *the CEO*), three were indefinite (e.g. *a teacher*), and three were notionally plural (e.g. *everyone*). An open-ended question was included to examine participants' responses when there was no prompted antecedent. The speaking task audio was recorded and later transcribed. All pronouns and avoidance strategies were noted during the task for query in the follow-up interview.

The interview utilized a semi-structured guide to allow data collection to be tailored while still allowing for the flexibility to pursue conversation threads in a natural way (Friedman, 2012; van Peer et al., 2012). It consisted of two parts to gather information about (1) the participants' perceptions of gender-inclusive pronouns and (2) their reasons for use or non-use of epicene pronouns. Both parts were recorded separately and then transcribed. In the first part of the interview, participants were provided with a small card, which contained an example of epicene pronoun options and some synonyms for gender-inclusive language (e.g. gender-fair,

gender-equal, gender-neutral, epicene, non-gendered). In the second part, participants were

provided with an audio recording of their speaking task to help stimulate recall.

Data Analysis Methods

The speaking tasks were transcribed and first examined for all epicene pronouns using

WordSmith Tools 7.0 (Scott 2016). Pronouns that specifically refer to someone of a known

gender, e.g. *she* paired with *actress*, were not included in the analysis. Usage of non-referential

they (e.g. *They say fortune favors the bold)* was also excluded from the analysis. Plural *they*,

however, was included as it is a possible avoidance strategy. Additionally, the usage of *you* was

disregarded when it occurred in the phrase *you know* as a conversational device to 'check-in'

with the listener. These procedures are similar to those used by Stormbom (2018), only differing

in the disregard of the pronoun *you* in the phrase *you know* and the inclusion of plural *they*.

Pronoun use with the three antecedent types was then examined to see whether the antecedent

influenced pronoun choice. Where multiple instances of the same pronoun occurred with one

antecedent, these were counted as a single instance. If the pronoun differed, however, they were

counted as separate instances. Avoidance strategies were also recorded when they occurred and

queried in the follow-up interview.

Each part of the interview transcripts was examined separately for any emergent themes

which were used to code the data. These themes were derived in a bottom-up process, from any

apparent themes in the data and not preconceived notions, thereby strengthening the validity of

the analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). These themes were developed by closely examining the interview

and looking for similarities between participants. Themes were compared to the findings from

the speaking task to see whether the perceptions and reasons provided for participant use or non-use matched (or did not match) the strategies utilized.

Results

Perception

Participants were asked about their familiarity with gender-inclusive language. Roughly half considered themselves either familiar with it (3/11) or had heard about it (2/11). Of the remaining participants, five stated they were unfamiliar with gender-inclusive language and a single participant was unsure whether they had heard of it. This division is reflective of the literature's representation of the change towards gender-inclusive language as a side issue in EL2 teaching (Sudo 2007).

When provided with an example and brief description of the gender-inclusive forms of epicene pronouns, most participants (10/11) felt that gender-inclusive pronouns were useful, with the remaining participant being indifferent regarding their usefulness. Three of the participants further specified that they had some reservations about gender-inclusive pronouns. Ming thought that they were useful as long as they did not cause too much hassle. Han reported a tendency to "avoid using these gender-inclusive pronouns" as "it's not formal in academic writing", suggesting awareness of potential influences of the formal register on gender-inclusive pronoun usage. Jiao felt that gender-inclusive epicene pronouns were useful but "prefer[s] to use he" as his "personal habit".

Participants were also asked whether they would choose to use gender-inclusive pronouns in English. Five indicated that they already used them. Fa, explained:

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because in my world I think the female are equal to the male and I respect everyone so I'm don't I respect what they do and not just because the gender so I think it's useful in my world. (Fa)

Interestingly, Fa indicated she was not familiar with gender-inclusive language although she used the forms despite being unfamiliar with the terminology. The participants' reported usage and willingness to use gender-inclusive pronouns found here are similar to the findings of Pauwels and Winter (2006). This suggests that L2 speakers may have a similar preference for using gender-inclusive pronouns to L1 speakers, but further research is needed.

Epicene Pronoun Usage/Non-Usage Overall

The participants used a variety of epicene pronoun options in the speaking task (see Table 1). Singular *they* was used most often comprising 70.6% of all instances. This contrasts with the previous literature; in which generic *he* is the most frequently used option (Abudalbuh, 2012; Stormbom, 2018). Interestingly, there were some occurrences of generic *she*, which comprised a similar percentage to the usage of generic *he*.

Table 1. Distribution of epicene pronouns in speaking task

	Number	%
They	84	70.6
He or she	18	15.1
He	9	7.6
She	8	6.7
	119	

Participants used a variety of avoidance strategies in the speaking task (see Table 2) with the pronoun *you* (35.4%) and pluralization (30.2%) accounting for over half of all instances. The

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high usage of the pronoun *you* seems to contradict the literature whereas the high usage of

pluralization is consistent (Baranowski, 2002; Stormbom, 2018).

Table 2. Distribution of avoidance strategies in speaking task

	Number	%
You	34	35.4
Pluralization	29	30.2
We	17	17.7
Pronoun omission	6	6.3
Repetition of noun	5	5.2
Specifying	2	2.1
I	2	2.1
One	1	1.0
	96	

The category of pronoun omission, where participants' responses did not include any

pronouns or the subject noun, was employed about as often as repetition of the subject noun. An

example from the data that demonstrates this strategy is listed below where "student" is the

subject noun:

(1) maybe follow the rule from the government and listen to listen to teachers' words.

(Tu, Q6)

The strategies used least often by participants were; providing a specific example (2.1%),

using *I* examples (2.1%), and the pronoun *one* (1.0%). In Examples 2 and 3 below, participants

avoid using an epicene pronoun by providing a specific example:

(2) I have a friend he is a actor. (Qi, Q3)
(3) I think that CEO always have a big picture for his company. (Shan, Q7)

Qi avoids talking about an unknown antecedent by providing a specific example that has a

specified gender within the same utterance. Whereas Shan's uttered pronoun might refer to a

specific antecedent indicated by the lead-up to the utterance when she spoke about her previous experience interning in a company. In both cases, specifying the antecedent allowed the avoidance of choosing an epicene pronoun.

Guo, also avoided using an epicene pronoun by providing a specific example referencing her own experience using *I* as in Example 4. Possibly due to her unfamiliarity with the topic, as she later says, "I'm not good at finance". Interestingly, only one participant used the pronoun *one* and did so with a notionally plural antecedent as shown in Example 5.

(4) maybe I will go to here I will not good here. (Guo, Q1)
(5) generally speaking one need to be not at least not bad in academic record. (Ming, Q11)

Here, Ming uses the pronoun to refer back to the antecedent *someone*. This single occurrence might be explained by his awareness of gender-inclusive language. Ming felt that using the pronoun *one* helped to generalize the answer. This does not concur with Biber et al. (1999), who indicated that *one* is restricted primarily to written prose and rarely used in speaking.

Epicene Pronoun Usage/Non-usage by Antecedent Type

For definite antecedents, which occurred with the article *the*, the most used epicene pronoun choice was singular *they* at 77.1% (see Table 3). A single instance of usage with generic *he* contrasts with Stormbom's (2018) suggestion that it would be the most frequently chosen epicene pronoun.

Table 3. Epicene pronouns distribution with definite antecedents

	Number	%
They	37	77.1
He or she	6	12.5
He	1	2.1
She	4	8.3
	48	

Participants used a variety of avoidance strategies, though these instances accounted for a lower number than epicene pronouns at 21 and 48 instances, respectively. Of those used, participants commonly pluralized the antecedent and used plural *they* to refer back (see Table 4). The next most common strategies were the pronouns *you* and *we*, with 19% of instances each. The remaining four strategies accounted for less than a quarter of all instances at 23.9%.

Table 4. Avoidance strategies distribution with definite antecedents

	Number	%
You	4	19.0
Plural *they*	8	38.1
We	4	19.0
Pronoun omission	1	4.8
Repetition	1	4.8
Specifying	1	4.8
I	2	9.5
	21	

The most common epicene pronoun used with indefinite antecedents, which occurred with the articles *a(n),* was singular *they* (59.9%) (see Table 5). Though there was a wider

distribution of epicene pronouns used here than with definite antecedents as can be seen with the fewer instances of singular *they* and greater instances of the coordinate *he or she*.

Table 5. Epicene pronoun distribution with indefinite antecedents

	Number	%
They	28	59.5
He or she	10	21.3
He	6	12.8
She	3	6.4
	47	

In a similar manner to the approach taken with definite antecedents, participants employed a variety of avoidance strategies with indefinite antecedents. There were about half as many avoidance strategies used in comparison to the epicene pronouns (22 and 47, respectively). The pronoun *you* occurred in over half of all instances (54.6%) (see Table 6).

Table 6. Avoidance strategies distribution with indefinite antecedents

	Number	%
You	12	54.6
Plural they	5	22.7
We	2	9.1
Pronoun omission	1	4.5
Repetition	2	9.1
	22	

Notionally, plural antecedents, such as *everyone*, tended to elicit a lower number of epicene pronoun instances than definite and indefinite antecedents (24 instances vs. 48 and 47). Of the epicene pronouns used, singular *they* was most common comprising 79.2% (see Table 7). Interestingly, the coordinate *he or she* was used as often as generic *he* (at 8.3%).

There was a higher number of avoidance strategies used (38 instances) with notionally plural antecedents than with definite (21) or indefinite (22) antecedents. Of the strategies employed (see Table 8), pluralization and the pronoun *you* were the most common, comprising 28.9% and 26.3%, respectively.

Table 7. Epicene pronoun distribution with notionally plural antecedents

	Number	%
They	19	79.2
He or she	2	8.3
He	2	8.3
She	1	4.2
	24	

Table 8. Avoidance strategy distribution with notionally plural antecedents

	Number	%
You	10	26.3
Plural *they*	11	28.9
We	8	21.2
Pronoun omission	4	10.5
Repetition	3	7.9
Specifying	1	2.6
One	1	2.6
	38	

Reasons for Epicene Pronoun and Avoidance Strategy Usage

Most participants (10/11) indicated that their reason for using singular *they* was because they were thinking of a group of people. Some of the additional reasons that participants provided were that singular *they* includes everyone and "ignores the gender problem". This suggests that most of the time when participants used singular *they*, they were thinking of multiple people or wanted to avoid specifying gender.

Participants provided a variety of reasons for their use of the coordinate *he or she*, including that it includes everyone, they had no personal image of what gender the antecedent should be, and that it is more comprehensive. Jiao, for example, said "because I don't know whether the teacher is he or she so then I use both rather than just use he or maybe she." This suggests that Jiao initially chose the coordinate as a precaution as the antecedent's gender was unspecified. Jiao also adds that repeatedly using the coordinate *he or she* made "the sentence quite complicated", which was one of the reasons he chose to switch to another option. This echoes the literature regarding the rejection of *he or she* by many speakers (Baron, 1981; Stormbom, 2018).

The reason supplied most frequently for using *he* was because participants had a strong male impression of the antecedent. This point is exemplified by Tu, whose reason for using generic *he* was that "lots of successful people are male". This was echoed by other participants, including Guo and Jiao. Similarly, the literature suggests that antecedents with a high traditional male social gender and association tend to prompt generic *he*. Further research is needed to determine the exact influence of social gender on speakers' reasons. When generic *she* was used, participants were unsure of the reasons for their choice. Ming and Han, indicated that they might have had an image of a woman. Han did explain that it could possibly be because she was also

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female. Again, social gender might have had some influence on choices, but further research would be needed to determine whether this is the case.

As mentioned, the most used avoidance strategy was the pronoun *you*. The most common reason participants provided for their usage was that they wanted to make the topic more personal, and to make the listener relate. This was illustrated by Lan, who indicated that, "I feel this thing is important or not and I want to make explain to you to understand me to talk about this problem." This suggests that the high instances of *you* might be influenced by the conditions of the speaking task. The one-to-one spoken context could explain why the pronoun *you* occurred more often than pluralization, which the literature had suggested was the most common avoidance strategy. When asked about pluralization, some participants provided their reason for using it as being "safer to refer in plural" (Ming).

When using the pronoun *we*, participants explained their reasoning as being they felt they were also included as the antecedent. This suggests that often the strategy was employed to speak from a group perspective that included the speaker. The reasoning for pronoun omission varied, though there was a general theme of emphasizing the qualities and characteristics more than referring to a specific individual. Participants used noun repetition for multiple reasons including as a way of providing time to think (Jiao), distinguishing between two characters (Han), and talking specifically about the occupation (Lan). Finally, Guo, who had both instances of *I*, said that she used it because she misheard the question and thought the question was directed at her specifically. This suggests that using *I* is not likely to constitute an avoidance strategy, however, future research is needed to clarify this point.

Discussion

Some interesting themes appear when comparing participants' usage of epicene pronouns with their reasons provided and with their perceptions of gender-inclusive language. For instance, while half of the participants indicated they were unaware of gender-inclusive language, all participants used singular *they* in at least one response. This could indicate that they have some passive knowledge of how to use gender-inclusive pronouns. Interestingly, most participants reported that they imagined a group of people when using singular *they*. This indicates that most participants were conceptualizing singular *they* in a similar manner to plural *they*. In contrast, half of the participants reported that they already used gender-inclusive pronouns. This is reflected in the high percentage of both singular *they* and coordinate *he or she* in the speaking task which supports the notion that participants know and use gender-inclusive pronouns deliberately, although they were unaware of the term 'gender-inclusive language'. It appears then, that participants were syntactically using singular *they* but their reasoning aligns their conceptualizing of the pronoun more closely with the semantic understanding of plural *they*.

Roughly half of the participants reported that they were not familiar with either the term epicene pronouns nor gender-inclusive language. When provided with a brief example of epicene pronouns, the majority of participants felt that they were useful and would choose to use them. Furthermore, five of the participants indicated that they already used epicene pronouns. It should be considered that, although the participants may be unaware of terminology and appear to have a contradictory concept of singular *they,* they do choose to use the coordinate *he or she* indicating some understanding of gender-inclusive language, at the very least, as a strategy to avoid incorrectly gendering an antecedent. Their reasons for this avoidance of incorrectly gendering an antecedent were not explored in this study nor was their specific concept of gender-

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inclusive language. Given the participants' usage and description of gender-inclusive language as "useful", we can conclude that EL2 students might be receptive to the introduction of epicene pronouns in a classroom setting, providing a rationale for teachers and educators to reconsider the change towards gender-inclusive language as a side issue (Sudo 2007).

The low frequency of generic *he* in this study differs from the findings prevalent in the relevant literature (Abudalbuh, 2012; Lee, 2015; Stormbom, 2018), and where it does occur, it is often paired with high social gender antecedents. The difference might be that this study looks at spoken use whereas the focus of the literature is primarily on written usage. There might also be influence from the participants' L1, as, as was mentioned earlier, Chinese has the same spoken form for generic pronoun usage but has a different written form.

Participants' reasons for using the avoidance strategy *you* included attempting to connect with the listener and to make their answer more personal. Again, this might be influenced by the spoken context as it was in a one-to-one situation that creates an environment where the speaker might be more inclined to speak directly to the listener. Holmes (2001) study of L1 speakers, indicated that speakers might switch to a second person pronoun for similar situational reasons. The usage of pronoun *you* then, might have the same motivation in both L1 and L2 speakers, but further research would be needed to confirm this.

Conclusion

The participants in this study used a variety of epicene pronoun options with singular *they* comprising the largest portion at 70.6%. The high usage of singular *they* aligns more closely with the L1 usage found in the literature (see Stormbom, 2018, 2019) than the predicted high usage of

generic *he* found in previous research (see Abudalbuh, 2012; Pauwels and Winter, 2004). One possible reason for the high usage of singular *they* could be because in Chinese, there is only one spoken form of generic pronouns. This would need to be explored further. When participants were asked about their reasons for using singular *they*, it was primarily because they were thinking of a group. This could suggest, as mentioned earlier (Section 5), that the participants have a conceptualization of singular *they* that aligns more closely with plural *they*.

The participants also used a variety of avoidance strategies, with usage of the pronoun *you* and pluralization accounting for 65.6% of all instances. The high number of instances of pluralization aligns with the literature (Adami, 2009; Baranowski, 2002; Stormbom, 2018). The high usage of the pronoun *you*, on the other hand, might be influenced by the spoken nature of the task. As mentioned in Section 5, this could be for similar situational reasons as those identified by Holmes' (2001). When the participants' stated reasons for using the pronoun *you* were to connect with the listener and make their answer more personal.

Reviewing usage by antecedent type (definite, indefinite, and notionally plural), differences emerge: With definite antecedents, the most commonly used option was singular *they* which accounted for 77.1% of instances. The participants used almost double the number of epicene pronouns with definite antecedents in comparison to avoidance strategies. The most common avoidance strategy was pluralization at 38.1%, whereas the pronoun *you* only accounted for 19% of instances. As in the case of the definite antecedents, the most commonly used epicene pronoun option with an indefinite antecedent was singular *they*. However, its usage only accounted for 59.9% of instances. This comparatively lower percentage shows that there was a greater variety of epicene pronoun options used with an indefinite antecedent in comparison to definite antecedents. There was about half the number of avoidance strategies used in

comparison with epicene pronouns, similar to the definite antecedents. Of the avoidance strategies used, the most common was the pronoun *you* at 54.5%. Finally, notionally plural antecedents tended to elicit a lower number of epicene pronouns than the two previous antecedent types. Unsurprisingly, the most common epicene pronoun used was singular *they* (79.2%) and the most common avoidance strategy was pluralization and the pronoun *you* (28.9% and 26.3%, respectively).

Finally, even though the participants in this study reported a low level of familiarity with gender-inclusive language, they all used it in at least one instance. This may suggest that even in cases where speakers do not know the precise terminology around gender-inclusive language, they may have an understanding of the concept. Several of the explanations provided by the participants for why they choose to use gender-inclusive language support this theory (see quote from Fa in Section 4.1). For EL2 educators, these findings can support informed discussions with future students. This in turn can help to increase understanding and more precise use of gender-inclusive language among EL2 speakers.

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Appendix 1 – Speaking Task Questions

Guide for Speaking Task

Procedures: Participants will be welcomed before beginning the task, with it being restated that they are welcome to leave at any time. Participants will be told that the research is interested in their language use, so not to create bias in their responses which would occur if the specific focus of the research was stated. Participants will be asked to complete the participant profile sheet in order to collect their background information (e.g. age, gender, etc.) before beginning the speaking task. The researcher will let participants know that they should speak as much as they want on each question, and that she will wait for the participants' full response before moving on. The researcher will ask each question aloud, and provide a synonym for any nouns that they might be unfamiliar with (ex. *CEO – head of the company*).

Prompt questions to be asked during the speaking task, where students will be asked to provide a brief response (1-2mins):

1. What should the accountant in a company do when there are financial problems? – Definite

2. What makes a good actress? – Female, Indefinite

3. Do you think anyone can be an actor? Why? – Notionally plural

4. How should the priest behave? – Male, Definite

5. How should a teacher act in class? Why? – Indefinite

6. What is something everyone should do? – Notionally plural

7. How should the CEO of a company act? – Definite

8. What skills should a famous actor have? – Male, indefinite

9. How important are first impressions? – Open ended

10. What are characteristics of a good leader? – Indefinite

11. How should someone prepare for university? – Notionally Plural

12. What makes the witch in a story evil? – Female, Definite

13. What are skills a journalist needs? – Indefinite

14. How should the inventor of a product market it? – Definite