

# Él Ella Elle Language, Teaching, and Inclusion

\_ STORY BY \_  
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*Abelardo Almazán-Vázquez is a Spanish teacher at Putney who regularly presents about inclusivity in the classroom at regional and national conferences. Below is an excerpted version of a longer text he shares in those presentations.*

*This testimonio was written in Spanish about five years ago, slightly before the pandemic. I've brought this story to you in English as an act of love and resistance directed toward my past, current, and future non-binary students and colleagues.*

DURING MY STUDIES for an undergraduate degree in teaching Spanish as a second language, I vividly remember one of my college professors telling me, “The first 15 minutes of your first class will determine how the rest of the year will go for you.”

I waltzed into the Putney classroom on a cold morning in September. I had a triple shot espresso in an insulated mug, ready for the warm-up activity before starting the classes. Introductions, names, likes, dislikes—you know the drill: small talk here and there, finding out who they are and where they're from. Where is home for you these days? Why did you choose this school, perched on a hilltop in the middle of nowhere, Vermont? Why are you taking Spanish? Then, it was their turn to speak.

This person was actually a bit late. I remember their dark outfit, complemented by a stunningly beautiful and colorful handwoven scarf. They had short, dark hair, and you could quickly notice something different in their eyes. There was fear and anxiety. The student noticed the only empty spot left and quickly sat down. We looked at each other for a moment, and I asked the first question:

“Hola, ¿cómo te llamas?”

The student said their name and proudly said: “...y mis pronombres son elle/elles.”

That was the first time many students had heard someone using the singular “they/them” alternative in Spanish! It reminded me of my journey of learning, unlearning, and relearning during that exchange.

I'm a Mexican national, an immigrant, cis-gendered and heterosexual—very much the stereotypical Latino portrayed in the media, according to many of my white colleagues. I arrived in this country at 23, not knowing how to speak or write the language. I learned English out of necessity. I was given a full scholarship to pursue my master's degree at a school in Ohio.

My adolescent years were filled with stereotypes and jokes that would earn me a free pass to the famous circles in my hometown in Cuernavaca, Mexico. To be the cool guy often meant cracking a sexist joke or making fun of anyone who didn't look or sound like you. I used to buy recorded tapes with hours and hours of stand-up comedians in the “fayuca”—the black market. Consciously and subconsciously, my mind absorbed hours and hours of those sexist, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic jokes. I didn't know it back then, but those stand-up comedians were making fun of minorities, underrepresented groups, and racialized people who didn't fit their standards of normalcy.

Back to the classroom and the student introducing themselves in Spanish. At that moment, I said out loud to them:

“I want you to know this is a safe space for you. As you know, Spanish is a highly gendered language. Even if the Real Academia Española does not accept the singular ‘they/them’ in Spanish, and even if there are many linguists and educated voices making fun of or dismissing alternatives like ‘elle/ellx,’ as long as I'm a teacher in this place, you and everybody else should feel completely empowered to use the ‘-e’ whenever you feel it necessary. If he is ‘alto’ and she is ‘alta,’ you can say you are ‘alte.’ If he is ‘bueno’ and she is ‘buena,’ you are ‘buene.”

The students clearly understood in those first 15 minutes that the class would be a safe and affirming space for all identities present.

Believing in a completely “pure” Spanish language is not realistic. Attempting to maintain linguistic purity is an impossible task. It is better to focus on expanding our understanding of language by recognizing the importance of idiolect, gelect, and dialect. If gender-neutral language is already used in English, why can't



we apply the same approach to other gendered languages such as Spanish and French?

This individual, and many other students, had the chance to hear, in Spanish class at Putney, more stories about folks who have defied for centuries the gendered norms and the binary constructs in a small town in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. These communities existed long before the Spaniards arrived and colonized what we now call México. Additionally, listening to stories from Lukas Avendaño, a Muxe\* anthropologist, and seeing the cover of *Vogue Mexico* featuring a Muxe model, Estrella Vazquez, was not only a powerful and affirming moment for this non-binary student, but for every person who still held onto the idea that Mexico was reduced to stereotypical tropes depicted in many classroom materials such as piñatas, mariachis, and sombreros.

Representation is crucial in our classrooms today. As a teacher, we must continue actively working to create safe spaces and oases. Let us view using affirming and validating identities and pronouns for trans or non-binary individuals as an act of love rather than a grammatical error. Putney has taught me that in my 12 years of teaching here. This is much more than just another ending to the masculine and feminine adjectives. Es un acto de amor y de solidaridad.

*\*In Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca (southern Mexico), a muxe is a person assigned male at birth who dresses and behaves in ways otherwise associated with women; they may be seen as a third gender.*

## Es un acto de amor

examples of pronoun  
treatment options:

él / ella / elle  
[spanish]

il / elle / iel  
[french]

ele / ela / elu  
[portuguese]

he / she / they  
[english]

<< Abelardo, right, teaches a “Genderless Latin Dance” evening activity during the school year. Here, he leads the same activity at Reunion 2023.

## y de solidaridad.