Celebrating LGBT+ history and inclusivity in languages

WHAT IS LGBT+ HISTORY MONTH?
LGBT+ History Month was started in 1994 to teach people about the history of the gay rights movement and to celebrate the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities*. It is celebrated in different months in different countries. For example, in the UK it is celebrated in February, but in the US, it takes place in October.

Ask yourself: Why do you think there are many countries that do not yet mark LGBT+ History Month?

WHY SHOULD WE LEARN ABOUT LGBT+ HISTORY IN RELATION TO LANGUAGES?
Part of learning a language is understanding different cultures. Many languages also have gender built into their grammar (e.g., masculine and feminine words). In this resource, you can find out about how LGBT+ History Month is celebrated in different French-, German-, and Spanish-speaking areas. We’ll also look at how LGBT+ activism and awareness is changing the way we use language itself, and how this translates into French, German and Spanish.

Ask yourself: Have you ever thought about how the words we use in different languages can help to create a more inclusive society?

June 17, 2019, Greenwich Village, New York. Commemorative street signs at the intersection of Gay and Christopher Street display alternative gender identities for Stonewall 50 – WorldPride.

* Some people prefer to use the acronym LGBTQI+ to represent a diverse range of sexualities and gender identities.
**Task:** Choose from these English translations to complete the last column of the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Français</th>
<th>Deutsch</th>
<th>Español</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>le mois</td>
<td>der Monat</td>
<td>el mes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l’histoire</td>
<td>die Geschichte</td>
<td>la historia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la fierté</td>
<td>der Stolz</td>
<td>el orgullo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l’égalité</td>
<td>die Gleichstellung</td>
<td>la igualdad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la diversité</td>
<td>die Vielfalt</td>
<td>la diversidad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la sensibilisation</td>
<td>die Sensibilisierung</td>
<td>la sensibilización</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le vivre-ensemble</td>
<td>das soziale Zusammenleben</td>
<td>la convivencia social</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l’initiative</td>
<td>die Initiative</td>
<td>la iniciativa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>les droits</td>
<td>die Rechte</td>
<td>los derechos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la langue</td>
<td>die Sprache</td>
<td>la lengua</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>les paroles</td>
<td>die Wörter</td>
<td>las palabras</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le genre</td>
<td>das Geschlecht</td>
<td>el género</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ask yourself:** What similarities or differences do you notice across the three languages when you look at the vocabulary in the table above?
HOW IS LGBT+ HISTORY MONTH AND GAY PRIDE CELEBRATED AROUND THE WORLD?

France and French-speaking countries

LGBT+ History Month is not officially marked in France. However, in Paris, there is a calendar of LGBT+ events that take place throughout the year, including the Festival des cultures LGBT+ in January and the Marche des Fiertés LGBT+ (gay pride parade) in June.

Many other countries in la Francophonie (the French-speaking world) do not celebrate LGBT+ History Month. For example, in countries where same-sex relationships are still taboo for religious, social or cultural reasons, it may be difficult or dangerous to celebrate the LGBT+ community openly.

Germany

LGBT+ History Month is celebrated in Berlin in May and is known as Queer History Month. It includes free educational and cultural events, encouraging young people to get involved by creating their own projects on LGBT+ history, diversity and civil rights.

Berlin Pride (CSD Berlin) is one of the biggest pride events in Europe and takes place in July each year.
Spain and Spanish-speaking countries

Madrid celebrates diversity and promotes equality during Gay Pride Week, with concerts, contests and events, including *Madrid Orgullo* – a huge parade with floats and music.

LGBT+ History Month is not currently officially celebrated in Spanish-speaking Latin-American countries – although Queer History Month is marked each June in Brazil (where Portuguese is spoken). However, there are many Gay Pride events across Latin America, such as the one in Mexico City each June, attended by around half a million people each year.

Across *el mundo hispanohablante* (the Spanish-speaking world), there have been important legal advances to protect LGBT+ rights - although discriminatory laws do remain in some countries. The complex social, religious and political situation in each country does vary considerably across the Spanish-speaking world and there is still much to be done.

Task: Find the five facts that interest you most from the information above.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.
GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN THE FRENCH-, GERMAN-, AND SPANISH-SPEAKING WORLDS

Evolving languages
Languages evolve as society changes – think of all the new words that have been created to enable us to talk about digital technology, for example. In the early 21st century, the rapid social changes around gender identity are now reflected in how we use language. In English, for example, people often use ‘they/their/their/ them’ as singular pronouns instead of ‘she/hers/ her’ or ‘he/his/him’ to refer to a person who does not identify as either male or female.

Ask yourself: What pronouns do you, your friends and your family prefer to use?

Gendered languages
It’s easy to use non-binary language in English, but what happens in a grammatically gendered language? In French, for example, the words for ‘they’ are either masculine or feminine – ils or elles. French adjective endings also generally require you to choose from binary options – you are either sportif or sportive. You may also need to add endings to past participles – je suis allée.

Ask yourself: Can you think of any other examples in a language that you speak at home, or are learning at school, where there are masculine and feminine forms built into the grammar?
Language activists

Some people who speak these kinds of binary languages and who want to support gender-neutral forms of expression are getting creative. It’s often young people, like Natalia Mira in Argentina, who are becoming language activists by breaking away from the accepted forms in the dictionary and in grammar books. For example:

- They are inventing different pronouns, such as *iel* in French, *xier* in German and *nosotres* in Spanish.
- They are coming up with alternative adjective endings, such as *petit.e* or *heureuxe* in French or *latinx, latine* or *latin@* in Spanish.
- They are coining brand new words like *xadres* or *mapadres* to replace the gendered terms *madre/padre/padres* (mother/father/parents) in Spanish.

Some governments also support the use of these forms of gender-neutral language in certain contexts. For example, in Germany, where nouns also have specific genders, the Federal Ministry of Justice said in 2014 that all state bodies should use gender-neutral language in official documents.

Inclusive language

Sometimes it can be easy to choose expressions that are inclusive. For example:

- French: *les droits humains* rather than *les droits de l’homme*.
- German: *Lehrende und Studierende* rather than *Lehrer/Lehrerinnen und Studenten/Studentinnen*.
- Spanish: *la gente* rather than *los hombres / las mujeres*.

**Ask yourself:** What are the pros and cons of inventing new words and new endings for grammatically gendered languages?
You won’t find these kinds of sentences in your textbooks (yet – this may change in the future), but some native speakers do use language in this way.

**Task:** Translate these gender-neutral sentences.

**French**
Mes ami.e.s sont heureuxes parce qu’iels vont voir le nouveau film ce soir.

**German**
Meinx bestx Freundx ist Lehrer*in.

**Spanish**
Mi amigue es alte y elle vive en Londres.

**WHO DECIDES?**

**Task:** You have 100 points to allocate to the ten groups below to show who you think should influence the evolution of language most. You can give no points or any number of points you want to each group to show how much influence you want them to have - as long as your total adds up to 100!

1. Tradition and established usage. [ ] points
2. The media. [ ] points
3. Writers of dictionaries and grammar books. [ ] points
4. Teachers and schools. [ ] points
5. Governments and politicians. [ ] points
6. Academics and university language experts. [ ] points
7. Computer programmes that analyse how people use language. [ ] points
8. Anyone who is a native speaker of the language. [ ] points
9. A selected panel of different people across all these categories. [ ] points
10. Other (please specify: ). [ ] points
Lots of people don’t agree that languages should be changed in this way to make them more gender-neutral, especially if it means changing spellings, punctuation use or grammar rules. Here are some examples:

**France**

The *Académie française*, the official authority on the French language, considers inclusive writing (using gender-neutral forms) to be a ‘mortal danger’ to French.

The introduction of inclusive writing in some French textbooks (for example, using *ami.e.s* instead of *amis*, to make the word ‘friends’ cover both genders) prompted the prime minister to ban this usage in all official government documents.

The French government recently directed schools across the country to stop using gender-neutral spellings of words, labelling them as ‘harmful’ to the practice and understanding of the French language.

**Germany**

The *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache* (GfdS) is the official Association for the German Language. It has criticised the trend for using a ‘gender star’ or asterisk at the end of nouns as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘nonsense’. An example of this is *Freund*in (friend) which is a new, gender-neutral, form that some German speakers have adopted.
Spain
The Real Academia Española (RAE) is Spain’s official institution which exists to preserve the stability of the Spanish language. Its motto is limpia, fija y da esplendor (it purifies, it fixes, and it dignifies). It remains inflexible when it comes to gender-neutral forms like ellx and ells (they).

Ask yourself: Should languages stick to the established rules of grammar books and dictionaries, or should they change and evolve?

Task: What five facts have you remembered from what you have read so far on this topic?
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
The power of words

Words are powerful things. They can be used to hurt and exclude people – sometimes unintentionally - but they can be used to heal and include everyone too.

**Ask yourself:** When have you witnessed examples of words being powerful?
Think of three examples at a local level (e.g., in school) and/or at a global level (e.g., international politics).

1.

2.

3.

**Task:** Choose 3-5 of these questions to discuss with a partner or in a small group, according to what interests you most. Then give feedback on the discussion to the class or your teacher.

- How much did you know about what we’ve covered in this resource before today’s lesson?
- Why is it important to learn about LGBT+ history across the curriculum?
- How does learning about LGBT+ History Month and gendered language impact on students like you and your classmates today? What about the impact on wider society?
- Some countries and governments officially recognise LGBT+ History Month and/or the use of gender-neutral language and others do not. What is your response to this?
- How important is it that countries and governments officially recognise these things?
- LGBT+ History Month is celebrated at different times in different countries. Is there a particular month in the calendar which you feel is most suitable? Why?
- Do you think that LGBT+ history should be included in the curriculum all year round, not just in one month? Why / why not?
- Do you think that more needs to be done to acknowledge and celebrate LGBT+ history in Europe and/or in the wider Spanish-, French-, and German-speaking worlds?
- How do you feel about languages that you speak changing to include gender-neutral forms? Do you think this should be made official? Why / why not?
As an awarding organisation, Pearson wants to lead the way in removing barriers to trans, non-binary and gender-fluid candidates. If native speakers of a language support gender neutrality in a particular way, by using new pronouns for example, then Pearson languages examiners will accept these when used by a candidate correctly – even though this usage may not always be recognised by some of the languages’ ‘Academies’ in certain countries.

If you would like to find out more about gender identity and the use of language, Stonewall provides detailed guidance on creating an inclusive curriculum, using language sensitively and stepping up as an ally to non-binary people.

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/creating-LGBT+-inclusive-secondary-curriculum

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

https://nationaltoday.com/LGBT+q-history-month/
https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking and https://www.rainbow-europe.org/

French
https://www.inter-LGBT+.org/marche-des-fiertes/
https://news.trust.org/item/20171122133351-1lp8a/

German
https://queerhistory.de/
https://geschicktgenern.de/

Spanish
https://www.madridorgullo.com/en/
Sheena Newland is the Languages Subject Advisor at Pearson, supporting teachers with Edexcel language qualifications. Her role also includes delivering training, promoting language learning and advising on MFL-related matters and developments.

She is an experienced MFL teacher with 17 years of secondary classroom experience teaching French and Spanish. She studied French and Italian at university and has spent time living in both countries, including several years working at Poitiers University in France.

Sheena also has a background in digital publishing and spent eight years working for Teachit, first as Languages Editor and then as Senior Content Lead.

Recently she’s been working to provide guidance on the use of gender neutral (or non-binary) language in Pearson’s MFL assessments, ensuring that they are inclusive and relevant for all learners.

- Guidance on using gender-neutral language in assessments.
- Explore the rest of our diversity and inclusion collection.