



Video 7 – Real Grammar: he, she or they?

“Which pronoun should I use?”

This is a question English language learners often ask themselves, especially when they want to refer to a person in the singular, but they don't know the person's gender, or don't want to specify it.

Using either 'he' or 'she' might cause confusion or offence, while using the expression 'he or she' is a bit of a mouthful, and it doesn't sound very natural.

But what about using the all-inclusive pronoun 'they'?

Take a look at these two examples:

“We should give everyone a chance to say what he or she thinks.”

“We should give everyone a chance to say what they think.”

Both sentences are correct, but corpus evidence shows that the second one - using “they” - is far more common. And it's the same with “their”, too, in a sentence like:

*I think someone has left **their** umbrella* (rather than “I think someone has left his or her umbrella”).

The use of the expression “he or she” is something you might find in very formal texts, for example in an official government publication or announcement. But in most other contexts, whether spoken or written, it's better - and more natural - to use “they” or “their”.

If you'd like to know more about this topic or other real grammar questions, have a look at the Macmillan Dictionary Blog.