Gender Equality in the EFL Classroom

A Qualitative Study of Swedish EFL Teachers’ Perceptions of Gender Equality in Language and its Implementation in the Classroom

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Abstract

The Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school states that teachers should “ensure that teaching in terms of content and its organisation is typified by a gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9). Considering that there is no further information regarding what a “gender perspective” means in reality, this sentence could be interpreted in many different ways. This study aims to explore how EFL teachers deal with linguistic gender equality, and which strategies they use to maintain a gender inclusive language in their classroom. Six interviews were conducted with EFL teachers at upper secondary schools in Stockholm, Sweden. The results indicated that the teachers thought this was an important issue to consider in teaching, and that they had well-reasoned strategies for maintaining a gender perspective. The most prominently discussed strategies were encouraging reflection and discussion on these matters, and choosing appropriate literature that either would show a variety of different perspectives, or else would question the social norm. However, concerning their own language production, some of the teachers lacked explicit strategies for maintaining a gender inclusive language, which could derive from a lack in knowledge. Thus, this essay proposes that gender inequality in language needs to be more explicitly explored, both in teacher education and in further education for employed teachers. The teachers displayed an ambition to maintain a gender equal language teaching; and would benefit from more explicit tools to realize that.

Keywords

Gender, gender inequality, gender bias, sexism, language, teaching, textbooks.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The notion of gender is constantly present in our everyday lives. It is so decisively manifested in our beliefs, actions and desires that it appears natural. There are endless ideas and ideals about gender. It influences everything from what kind of humour men and women should have, to their interests, food preferences and even how they drive a car (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet 2013, p. 1). Nevertheless, gender is not biological. It is not something we are born with, but rather something that we perform and reinforce every day (Butler 1990). Consequently, it is important not to view gender as a given part of society, but to question how it influences our lives and the effects on social structures and institutions.

The concept of gender and how it influences society, as well as individual lives, is especially important in a profession such as teaching, where you deal with young people who are struggling to position themselves within society. The language that teachers choose to address students with, and the language presented in learning materials, may actually influence how students understand their environment. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests the possibility that speakers’ perception of the world may be conditioned by the language that they use and are continually exposed to (Trudgill 2000, p. 13-15). Undeniably, this hypothesis has been widely debated. A modified interpretation of the hypothesis maintains that although language may affect how speakers perceive their environment, it is possible to learn to interpret the implications of language and to extricate oneself from its restrictions (Gagnestam 2005, p. 13). Consequently, teachers may need to question how gender inequality in language can affect students, as well as employ strategies for how to aid students in detecting and interpreting linguistic inequities.

However, the question of how teachers reflect on gender equality issues in language and in their teaching remains, as of yet, relatively unexplored. Studies have been conducted in the past regarding sexism in textbook materials (Hartman & Judd 1978; Porreca 1984; Ghorbani 2009), as well as observations of teachers’ work in the classroom (cited in Sunderland 2000, p. 155-156), but qualitative studies regarding teachers’ perceptions and strategies remain scarce. This could be seen as detrimental considering that the Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school states that teachers should “ensure that teaching in terms of content and its organisation is typified by a gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9), without further explanation of what “a gender perspective” entails in reality or how it should be implemented in the teaching. Hence, the statement could be read and interpreted in various ways depending on the school, teacher and the topic taught. The aim of this study is thus to explore how teachers of English at upper secondary schools in Stockholm, Sweden reflect on issues of gender equality in their teaching. It seeks to find out which strategies the teachers employ to ensure gender inclusive language
in their teaching, but also to discover approaches that enable students to be critical against language and the stereotypes that it may manifest. The addressed research questions are:

1. How do English teachers of upper secondary school reflect on issues of gender equality in their language teaching?

2. How do they interpret the Swedish curriculum’s directive that all teaching should be “typified by a gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9), and how is this realized in the classroom?

3. Which strategies do they adopt in order to maintain a gender inclusive language in their teaching and teaching materials?

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Gender equality in language

In order to explore how teachers work with gender equality in language, a definition of the concept is essential. Lakoff (1973, p. 66) points to several commonly used linguistic features that she sees as discriminating to women, and indicates a gender bias in language. For example, she mentions the different connotations that words denoting women and men may have. She contrasts the word bachelor with the female equivalent spinster. Denotatively, the two words mean the same thing. However, bachelor is seemingly a neutral term, whereas spinster connotes an undesirable woman who is not eligible to marry. Romaine (2000, p. 107) brings up a similar linguistic issue: the word maiden, which could be understood to mean ‘not yielding results’. A racehorse that has not yet won a race is generally referred to as a maiden horse. Thus, the double meaning of the word could be seen as indicating that women need to marry in order to be successful. Correspondingly, Lakoff (1973, p. 68) mentions the unfair use of titles for men and women. Women are referred to differently depending on their marital status, Miss and Mrs, whereas males’ titles stay the same, Mr. This, she says, shows that women’s social status depends on their marital status, rather than on their own accomplishments. In other words, women are continually described in relation to men, whereas men are described as individual human beings. Evidently, these implicit linguistic features seem to signal that unmarried women are failures, which in turn deprives women of their right to make decisions about their own lives.

Another linguistic feature that Lakoff (1973, p. 74) sees as discriminating to women is the use of the male pronoun ‘he’ in a generic sense. Cheshire (2008, p. 9) maintains that the generic use of the masculine pronoun forces people to think in terms of males. Such claims are strengthened by experiments where subjects have been asked to read texts that use the generic male pronoun, and then make drawings of what they have read. Generally, the subjects tend to draw males. Evidently, women feel excluded when ‘he’ in a generic
sense is used, which indicates that the structure of language can affect the way we perceive and understand our environment (Romaine 2000, p. 121).

In these ways, language can be seen as biased against women. Harrigan and Lucic (1988) write that linguistic research during the 1970s identified language as casting women in a secondary position compared to men. This is especially evident in phrases such as *Adam and Eve, boys and girls, husband and wife* (Romaine, 2000, p. 105). Furthermore, Harrigan and Lucic (1988) maintain that language was seen as characterizing “women as invisible, less familiar, and less active” (p. 129). Hence, gender bias in language could be seen as a paramount issue for gender equality. Language teachers thus need to be aware of this bias in order to avoid reinforcement of outdated values. Nevertheless, as will be explained in the following paragraphs, gender biased language can be found in textbooks designed to aid teaching, which may pose a problem for teachers when selecting and working with the material in class. Thus, for this research, it becomes of interest to find out how teachers work with textbooks and to what extent they find them reliable.

1.2.2 Gender equality in textbooks

Many studies have been conducted in the past concerning gender equality in textbooks. One of the first studies on this issue was Hartman and Judd (1978), which found that ESL materials conveyed a distorted image of gender and gender roles. Porreca (1984) conducted a similar study five years later, and found that little had changed. Her study was a quantitative analysis of linguistic sexism in textbook materials. She found that nearly all of the fifteen analysed books displayed discrimination against women. Ghorbani (2009) conducted a more recent study, which examined EFL textbooks used in Iranian schools. The data collected indicated that textbook materials still presented sexist views and stereotypical gender roles.

Recent studies on Swedish EFL textbook materials are scarce. However, studies on textbooks in other subjects have been published. Berge and Widding (2006, p. 30-31) conducted an analysis of textbooks in biology, history, religion and social studies intended for use in secondary and upper secondary schools in Sweden. They sought to find out if there was an equal representation of women, men and transgendered individuals in the texts and pictures, as well as how they were portrayed and in what contexts. The most striking result was a vast underrepresentation of transgendered individuals in texts and pictures, which imposes heteronormativity. Furthermore, they found that boys and men were represented significantly more often than girls and women. In the books, men and women were typically depicted as being able to do the same activities and labours, yet men were more frequently represented. As a conclusion, women are still significantly invisible in many textbooks, which indicates that men are viewed as the social norm; and women as the deviant gender.

Whether or not textbook materials convey sexist language and stereotypical gender roles becomes of interest considering that, in Sweden, there is no higher authority guaranteeing
their quality (Calderon 2015). Consequently, teachers are responsible for ensuring that the material used in class remains gender inclusive, both in terms of language and content. Regardless of the types of materials teachers choose to work with, they need to be aware of gender bias in language, as well as make well-reasoned decisions for which types of materials to use.

1.2.3 Teaching and gender equality

Because there is no quality audit of the textbooks, the current status of gender equality in the material is of interest to any teacher who wishes to maintain a gender inclusive teaching. Nevertheless, it is not the only variable. Sunderland (2000, p. 158) argues that “a bias free textbook will not of itself mean bias free teaching”; a progressive text can always be undermined by the treatment of teachers as well as students. Similarly, she maintains that “gender biased text […] does not have to mean gender biased teaching” (p. 159). Sunderland writes that it is not “about the texts themselves”, but rather about how they are used in teaching. To deal with gender bias in texts, Sunderland proposes analyzing and discussing the material, suggesting alternative ways for expressing ideas and opinions, and to reverse traditional gender roles in dialogue. As a conclusion, gender equality in teaching is dependent on how the materials are used and which questions they evoke.

There are many suggestions for how teachers can or should use textbooks in order to counteract gender bias in language (Sunderland 2001, p. 254). Willeke and Sanders (1978) discuss possible strategies that teachers can adopt in order to raise students’ awareness of gender stereotyping in language. For example, they suggest that teachers should complement textbooks with reading materials that show a balance between genders, as well as prepare study questions designed to increase students’ critical awareness about gender stereotyping. Similarly, Zografou (cited in Sunderland 2001, p. 254) maintains that teachers may use texts that show gender inequity in order to question and counteract outdated values and assumption. Together, Zografou says, teacher and students should discuss and analyse language and content in texts and challenge the myths about gender. Evidently, there are many prescriptions for how linguistic gender inequality can be dealt with in class. Nevertheless, little is known about how this is realized by teachers in the classroom (Sunderland 2001, p. 255).

The questions of how teachers work with gender bias in language becomes essential considering that the Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school states that “The school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men.” (Skolverket 2011, p. 5). Consequently, teachers need to be aware of how notions of gender and language can implicate inequality in their teaching. In order to comply with the aforementioned guidelines, they must actively and consciously oppose explicit as well as implicit gender inequality. Nevertheless, this can be implemented in
various ways in the teaching. Hence, the purpose of this essay is to explore how EFL teachers reflect on and deal with issues of gender equality in their language teaching.

2. Methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework

This project primarily has two theoretical frameworks. First, it draws on the concept that discourses have the ability to create, as well as manifest, power relations in society. Foucault contended that discourses reinforce power relations by fabricating acts and behaviours as common sense (cited in Eckert & McConnel-Ginet 2013, p. 40). Correspondingly, within Critical Discourse Analysis, language is seen as “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned” (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, p. 448). In this sense, language and society are constantly interacting. As a consequence, society and social interactions could be seen as dependent on the language that we speak. For this reason, the question of how teachers reflect upon gender equality and how they work with these issues in the classroom becomes essential. The students need to learn to interpret the implications of language and be able to make well-educated decision regarding their own language use.

The question of how to aid students in interpreting language and making decisions concerning language use is, nevertheless, not self-evident. One possible framework that teachers may adopt is Critical Literacy, which is the second framework for this essay. According to Bergöö and Jönsson (2012, p. 24-25), the purpose of Critical Literacy is to develop language learning in such a way that students learn to adopt a critical stance toward texts, in order to understand, as well as influence their environment. In this framework, reading is not just about being able to decode letters and sounds, but also to be able to interpret how language, syntax and style may affect the content and meaning of a text. It is about deciphering what values guide a piece of writing, what the text wants to convince the reader of, what interests the text may want to convey and which interests are neglected and silenced in the text. An advanced reader should be able to see that texts are never neutral, but represent a certain view the world. Thus, teachers need to help students unveil the perspectives that have been marginalised in a text, in order to see power relations such as social class, gender and ethnicity implied in the text (Bergöö & Jönsson 2012, p.24-25).
2.2 Data and sample selection

Data was collected through six interviews with teachers of English at upper secondary school in Stockholm, Sweden. The interviewees were selected through a combination of convenience and purposeful random sampling. For this study, this meant that I contacted teachers randomly through e-mail, but also contacted teachers that I had a connection to prior to the interview. I found that the teachers were more likely to accept my interview if they knew who I was, or if I could refer to someone who had recommended them. Of the teachers interviewed, four were males and two were females. The reason for interviewing fewer female teachers solely depended on the availability of the teachers; many female teachers disregarded my inquiry, most likely due to busy schedules. The teachers were of various ages and with varying teaching experiences.

The interviews were conducted in English, and used a semi-structured approach, which enabled elaboration into topics brought up by the interviewees. To ensure that all the relevant information was retrieved, a number of prepared questions guided the interviews (see appendix A). First, the questions concerned the teachers’ understanding of gender bias in language, how they interpreted the Swedish National Agency for Education’s request for a “gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9) in teaching and if they had any general strategies for ensuring gender inclusive teaching. Subsequently, the questions revolved around strategies that the teachers used to ensure gender neutral language in learning materials, as well as in their own written language, for example in worksheets, tests and assignments. Lastly, the interviewees were asked if they thought that they had or were provided with sufficient knowledge about this topic by the school, and how or if they thought that gender bias in language might affect students, their learning and individual development. Apart from that, each interview was unique and touched upon varying topics. In my view, this was inevitable considering that all teachers work differently and have their own pedagogical convictions and ambitions.

It is also worth mentioning that the interviewees were not told the specific topic of the interview in advance, but were asked to participate in an interview concerning certain “linguistic and didactic matters”. This was a decision based on two concerns. First, if the interviewees knew the topic of the interview beforehand, they might have discussed it with colleagues prior to the interview and thus would not have presented exclusively their own thoughts and opinions. Second, there would also have been a greater risk that only those who were already interested in this issue would accept the interview, which would have provided a biased image of the situation.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed to obtain a material that more easily could be analysed. For confidentiality reasons, all teachers will be referred to in the results and discussion sections using pseudonyms: Teacher A-F. Furthermore, when quoting the teachers, voiced pauses and incomplete sentences have been eliminated to achieve coherent and readable quotes. Because this essay focuses on what the teachers mean rather than how they express it, this could be done without changing the gist of the quotes. It also enabled a more comprehensible analysis of the interviews.
2.3 Method for analysis

The chosen method for analysis was an inductive content analysis. The inductive analysis consists of unveiling “patterns, themes and categories” from the data (Patton 1990, p. 453). Discoveries arise through extensive interaction with the data, as opposed to deductive analysis, where data is analysed with regard to a specific framework. According to Patton (1990), the inductive content analysis is used to “identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 463) in vast amounts of data. The first step consisted of reading the transcribed interviews and making note of everything that might be relevant in answering the research questions. The data were examined to find terms, concepts and practices that could assist my understanding of the teachers’ work. Subsequently, the material was organized into different topics and categories. The emergent patterns were labelled and classified into a number of different categories, which are presented as separate sub-headings in the result section. For comparability, matrices were made where the separate quotes were labelled under specific categories. Hence, the quotes could be easily compared and analysed. The categories were then thoroughly analysed for convergence within the categories, to ensure that each quote was understood correctly. This content analysis enabled a transparent categorization of the data, and decreased the risk of disregarding significant evidence. In addition, it facilitated a cohesive presentation of the material.

The inductive approach to analysis can, of course, be questioned since it does not have the same focus on objectivity as more deductive methods may have. Because inductive analysis does not have a specific framework for analysis, it might not render as an objective interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, this is consistent with the theoretical perspective that this project assumes. Because the research is dependent on a critical framework, this inevitably directed both interviews and interpretation of data. Patton (2002) writes that orientational qualitative inquiry often begins with a certain theoretical perspective, which will determine the focus of the research, as well as influence both fieldwork and analysis of findings. Hence, “orientational qualitative inquiry eschews any pretence of open-mindedness” (p. 129) and objectivity, as it is dependent on a certain perspective or standpoint. This research, and the research questions, are dependent on the assumption that linguistic gender equality is indeed an important factor to consider in teaching, which is supported by the aforementioned previous studies on language and gender, as well as by the guidelines provided by the Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school. Considering this standpoint, objectivity could be seen as unachievable. Therefore, the inductive method can be considered reliable in answering the research questions for this study.

To conclude, my research is to be viewed as a sample of reality. It does not venture to make any assumptions or generalizations about the Swedish teaching staff as a whole. Rather, it provides examples of how one can reflect on these issues, and might function as a collection of strategies for gender inclusive language teaching.
3. Results

3.1 Gender bias in language

The interviewed teachers had many different reflections about what gender bias in language is. One of the most prominent linguistic features that surfaced was that the generic default in English is typically masculine. Teacher C described gender bias in language as using words referring to men “to describe things that are general, instead of using neutral words.” As an example he mentioned “when a text says man for human” (author’s italics), which he said poses a problem when teaching as it is not gender inclusive. Teacher D also mentioned words such as mankind, and said that in these ways English could be seen as a “male dominated” language. Similarly, many of the teachers acknowledged that English does not have a gender-neutral pronoun, and said that this poses a problem since not all students can identify within the binary gender system. Thus, they said that this question nowadays not only includes gender differences in terms of male/female, but also concerns the fact that “gender is not binary” (Teacher C).

Furthermore, teacher F recognized that English “is targeted at the male audience.” As an example, he mentioned that often when addressing a group of people, even if the majority of them are women, “you refer to them as guys” (author’s italics). Simultaneously, he acknowledged that “if I was to say girls, then I’d be excluding the males in that group” (author’s italics). He said that this shows that “culturally and socially, girls are expected to make that connection and to be able to identify within that word”, but the opposite is not expected from boys/men. In his teaching, he explained that he tries to refrain from using such generic expressions. Nevertheless, he said that because these expressions are so commonplace, it is hard to stop using them. Instead, he would try to acknowledge the fact that these words are gender exclusive and make the students aware of their implications.

Teacher E mentioned further examples of gender inequality in English, such as word endings ("waiter/waitress, steward/stewardess"), that women change their titles depending on marital status and men do not, and that certain words only collocate with one of the genders: “Men are handsome, women are beautiful, guys are cute, girls are pretty, who is sweet?” She said that, certainly, “there are gender indicators” in the English language, but “not all indicators show bias. It is how we load [sic] those words that creates the bias.” Sometimes, she said, these connotations are advantageous in writing because they help create a picture or set a mood. For her, when teaching, she was not so concerned about presenting gender-neutral texts, but rather she wanted to “show a balance of the biases so that they [the students] then get the full spectrum.” In other words, she wanted to teach the students how language can be used for different purposes and for different outcomes.
Many teachers acknowledged difficulties in presenting a gender-neutral language in their teaching. Teacher C said that gender bias in language is difficult in teaching because no matter his personal opinions, he “need[s] to stand and explain that this is the way English works. It’s generally used like this, and you might have opinions about it, but it’s hard for us to change it.” Teacher A also acknowledged difficulties in teaching. She said that although she tries to teach her students to write gender-neutrally, she also needed to “realize that they [the students] are not at university level yet”, and thus “tone that down a bit.” In conclusion, the ambition may not be as easily realised in the teaching.

3.2 The binary system of gender

In one way or another, all of the teachers mentioned that their students are “trying to construct their identity” (Teacher A) and that they sometimes struggle to conform with the binary gender system. Teacher B, C, D and F all said that they have or have had students who identify as “nonspecific gender”, or that they “are about to change sex or are changing sex.” Naturally, this has a linguistic consequence since English does not have a gender-neutral pronoun. Teacher C explained that there has been a “big pronoun discussion” at his school, and that he struggles to find a gender-neutral pronoun in English. They, he said, is grammatically problematic. As a conclusion, the binary gender system established in this culture and reflected in the language is a complex issue that teachers need to bear in mind when they address students.

Furthermore, the binary gender system involves many implications for both individual students and group constellations in education. Both Teacher C and D recognized that it at times is “difficult to bring up and read texts that touch upon this, because it is so sensitive for some of the students.” In addition, Teacher C said that students who realize that they cannot conform to the binary system “deal with so many problems regarding that, that when they finally speak out in class, it can become really hostile.” Nevertheless, Teacher D thought that when students finally do speak out about their gender identity “that makes everyone aware, in a very good sense.” Thus, when teachers find strategies for how to approach these matters and create a permissive environment among the students, it can have very positive effects on the group and ultimately the teaching.

3.3 Opinions about working with gender equality in language

All of the interviewed teachers maintained that they thought that gender equality in language was an important issue to consider in teaching. What differed, however, was their motivations for why they thought so. Many had similar motives that derived from the idea of teaching the students to interpret their environment and to see matters from different perspectives. Teacher A said that she thought this was important “because at the end of the day, us teachers, we ultimately teach these students how to approach society and how to interpret their environment.” Similarly, Teacher F maintained that “as an
adult, and as a teacher in particular, it is my responsibility to show them [the students] that there is a bigger world out there.” Teacher E also reasoned along the same lines. She said that “there are many more stories to be told than the traditional white, male story […] and that by seeing the breadth and richness of people’s stories, other perspectives that they are written from, that it creates a much more interesting view of the world.”

In contrast to the other teachers, Teacher D used the particular group constellations that he works with to motivate the importance of working with these questions. He said that these issues cannot be ignored because “the groups and the classes look like they do now, with many students having problem with their gender identity and are openly gay, etcetera. You can’t just pretend that it’s not there, because it’s there in the group, too.” In other words, if the teachers did not bring these questions up for discussion, it would affect the dynamics of the group in a negative way.

To conclude, for various reasons, all of the interviewed teachers expressed that they found these issues important to consider in teaching. Furthermore, as will be shown in the following sections, this is also reflected in how they organize and plan their teaching. Naturally, whether or not teachers find these issues important to consider will ultimately shape their approaches and strategies for teaching.

3.4 Ensuring that teaching is “typified by a gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9)

3.4.1 Encouraging reflection

For the interviewed teachers, perhaps the most prominent strategy for ensuring gender equality in language teaching was to encourage reflection and raise students’ awareness. Teacher D maintained that this was “the only way you can do it. To raise the questions and […] create an awareness of how the language is masculine.” Similarly, Teacher F said that he encourages his students to “think about things differently” through reflection and discussion. Not surprisingly, there were many different strategies for how this could be implemented in teaching.

One strategy for encouraging reflection and raise awareness about gender equality in language was to teach feminism as a literary theory. Teacher F maintained that he would encourage his students to think “about their book with a feminist perspective.” Similarly, Teacher D said that he would create study questions such as “What role in society do women have?”, “How are they portrayed by the narrator?”, which encourage the students to think about texts from a different perspective. Teacher A explained that when introducing theories such as feminism and queer theory, “[the students] are forced to think about these things.” Teacher C also thought that “it becomes a good method for teaching literature […] because it makes you question what you are reading.”
Another strategy was to incorporate these discussions in the everyday work with the students. Teacher B said that he tries to “think of it as being just part of my smorgasbord.” For example, he explained that he had used “Power” as a theme for a series of classes, where “It seems like we talked about, or touched upon these things constantly.” Similarly, Teacher E explained that she would encourage her students “to think outside the box”, when doing exercises. For example, she mentioned that she would do role-playing with her students and that it was not uncommon to have “gay couples up there who just adopted a child”, without any of the students thinking it was strange. This, she said, was because they had “looked at all these types of texts” and “discussed the role of family”, which had created an acceptance among students.

A third strategy that many of the teachers discussed was to attempt to contextualize what they read in class. Teacher E said that she saw it as her responsibility “to show context to a piece of text” and “put it into an historical perspective.” She also said that she wanted to encourage students to be critical and reflect upon their choice of literature. Correspondingly, Teacher B said that certain things are important to discuss even though “it is 2015 and everything is free now and we are all gender inclusive”, because this was not the reality that authors faced in the past. Teachers A and F reasoned along the same lines when saying that they thought it was important to talk about that “what society determines as great literature is dominated by men, both male authors and male protagonists. Females are severely underrepresented in both fields.” When talking about canonical writers, Teacher A said that she would encourage the students to reflect over questions such as “Where are the women writers? Why is it that we consider the fathers of English literature? Why do we not have any mothers?” In these ways, the teachers show context to what the students are reading and help them understand why authors write in a specific way depending on culture and history.

3.4.2 Choosing literature

Another strategy that the teachers adopted to ensure gender equality in their language teaching was to choose appropriate literature. Within this strategy, there seemed to be two main lines of reasoning for choosing literature that could fulfil the purpose, both in terms of language and content. Either, the teachers would intentionally choose texts written by authors of both genders, and show a variety of different perspectives, or else they would explicitly choose texts that question the social norm. Some teachers maintained both strategies.

The main reason for choosing texts that question the social norm seemed to be to generate a discussion and increase students’ awareness. Nevertheless, there were several different reasons why the teachers said that it was important to choose literature written by both men and women. Teacher A acknowledged that because “there tends to be a focus on male writers, especially in the canons of English literature” she thought it was important to also “bring in women.” This, in turn, would then open up a discussion of “a feminine language” and whether men can “write in that type of language as well”, which she
thought was an important aspect to consider and discuss with the students. Teacher B said that he thought it was important to choose “stories written by men and women”, as well as “from various epochs”, both classics and current literature, because it is part of the curriculum for English at upper secondary school. Furthermore, Teacher E expressed that she thought that “most literature has a bias”, and that it was her responsibility to show “a balance of the biases so that they [the students] then get the full spectrum.” As a conclusion, showing many different perspectives and presenting literature from many different social groups, seemed to be an important strategy.

3.4.3 Students’ awareness and resistance

Promisingly, most teachers mentioned that their students seemed to have a great awareness concerning gender equality in language and thought that it was an interesting issue. Teacher B said that his students were “really on their toes” when it came to gender and that they would always point it out to him if he made mistakes. Teacher D also expressed there was an “awareness among the students of gender equality.” Teacher E maintained that if “you create this open environment”, the students will “have fun testing limits and going outside of what people might think is the social norm.” In other words, the teacher can influence how the students will approach these matters by creating a permissive environment and encouraging critical thinking.

Unfortunately, some teachers also mentioned that among certain students they had experienced a certain resistance toward these issues. Teacher D said that his students sometimes have “problems with the texts that I want them to read,” and that they at times were “really upset about the fact that they are supposed to treat girls the same as they treat boys” and expressed opinions such as “all gays should be put in prison.” Nevertheless, he thought that this created “an interesting discussion,” where the students could see the issue from a different perspective. In the end, however, there had been times when he had to tell the students that “this is not accepted in Sweden and in Swedish schools,” in order to comply with the curriculum for upper secondary school. Teacher F also mentioned that he had had students with “stricter beliefs,” which he thought was a positive thing as it created interesting discussions where the students could see things from various perspectives. As a conclusion, the fact that some students show a resistance toward gender equality issues can, if utilized by the teacher, enrich the class discussions and enable students to see things from new perspectives.

3.4 Gender equality in textbooks and learning materials

Another interesting factor that inevitably will come to influence this research significantly was that most teachers did not use textbooks. Only one teacher said that he uses textbooks on a regular basis; three teachers said that they generally did not use textbooks but that
they might borrow a page or a specific exercise; and two teachers said that they did not use textbooks at all in their teaching.

There were many different reasons for why the teachers chose not to use textbooks in their teaching. Teacher B said this was “a mixture of not finding […] good books that I would like to dedicate my time to, and also keeping […] me interested, and hence hopefully the students.” He thought that most books were “sort of childish” and “belittling.” Similarly, Teacher F said that he preferred to “approach things in my own way; let my own creativity come through a little bit more.” Teaching would thus become more varied and hopefully more interesting.

For Teacher E, not using textbooks was a matter of not wanting to let the textbook companies “direct the curriculum of the course.” She said that “I do not want one publishing company to direct what is happening in my classroom from page 1 to page 215.” Doing so would mean that “you are not tailoring your work to your classroom. Your class has different needs. I am teaching two [parallel classes], but I do not teach them the same things, because they need different things.” Correspondingly, Teacher F said that he does “not want to rely on” textbooks in his teaching. In other words, because teachers are responsible for the teaching, they wanted to design their own methods, in order to be able to alter the teaching depending on the situation and group of students.

Another reason for not using textbooks was provided by Teacher C. He said that

the problem with textbooks [is] that it [sic] becomes [sic] a filter between the students and reality, and that filter becomes the truth. Then, it is problematic when they do certain stereotypes, whereas if you go to the actual sources and there are stereotypes, then you can discuss that.

Furthermore, he acknowledged that an important part of the new curriculum from 2011 is source-criticism. For him, this meant that “I do not really need to feel that the sources I use is [sic] something I need to believe in one hundred percent.” Rather, it was more important for the students to learn to be critical toward different sources and language.

Many of the teachers also acknowledged that much textbook material is not gender inclusive. Teacher A questioned whether “there are textbooks out there that […] are more gender inclusive”, and said that this was not something that she had ever “come across.” In her experience, “the textbooks that normally are floating about schools at the moment are quite old.” She thought that this was a problem because older textbooks “portray a greater gender bias”, and recognized that this is a fairly new concern for textbook writers. She said that older textbooks “demonstrate an older way of thinking, which needs to be updated.” Similarly, Teacher E also recognized that textbooks typically would portray stereotypical family constellations, and questioned why they, for example, would not portray a “gay couple, male or female, adopting a child.”

Teacher D, who was the only teacher who regularly used textbooks, also recognized that there would be stereotypical gender roles in the books. He said that “of course it is like that if it is a fictive text”, but as a teacher, you then “have to contextualize it”, and ask
appropriate questions that provides a different perspective to the text. He also said that he thought it was “a responsibility of” the textbook writers to choose appropriate texts and provide study questions, which he thought they usually did. Nevertheless, he also said that if appropriate study questions were not provided in the book, “one should, as a teacher, contextualize”, and help the students to be critical of what they read. This, he said was “extremely important […], otherwise one would not be able to read anything, except what is politically correct.” As a conclusion, even though teacher D seemed to put a lot of trust in the textbook publishing companies, he also recognized that the teachers have the ultimate responsibility for what students read and learn in class.

3.5 The teachers’ own language production

Concerning the teachers’ own language production, teacher A, B and D said that they did not have any specific strategies for ensuring gender equality in language. Teacher D said that he would “read through” what he writes to look for gender discrepancies, but expressed no other explicit strategies. Teacher B confessed that he did not consider gender equality so much in his language production because his main priority was “to be understood” by the students, and that was what he was struggling with at the moment.

In contrast, Teacher E said that although she did not do much of her own writing, when she did, she would try to think about varying her pronoun use and to “break up the norm.” For example, she would try to question the traditional gender constellations and what is considered as acceptable in the social norm. Furthermore, she would count her examples: “Okay, four men, do I have that many female? […] How many do I have that are men and women together? Do I have equally number that are man and man and woman and woman?” Similarly, Teacher C said that he would “think about my examples”, and try to “use gender-neutral names” as well as “avoid only talking about men.” Teacher F also maintained that he tried to be as “culturally and as gender diverse as possible when giving examples.” As a conclusion, there seems to be an equal division between those who had found explicit strategies for how to write inclusively, and those who had prioritized other matters.

3.6 Education and further education regarding gender equality

Many of the interviewed teachers seemed to feel that they needed more education regarding linguistic gender equality. Teacher A said that although she had much knowledge about this from a theoretical perspective, she needed help “implanting that in a pedagogical way”, because this was never addressed in her pedagogic education. Furthermore, although her school had discussion forums designed to help develop teaching, gender equality had “never been addressed as the biggest focus.” Teacher D had a similar case: although the school had discussion forums and further education, gender equality in language had never been addressed. This, he said was because “there is so
much else” that needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, if something happened he said that the teachers would “help one another.”

In contrast, Teacher C said that he felt that he had support from discussions with his fellow teachers, and that the school had provided further education. Similarly, Teacher B said that, at his school, there was an ongoing discussion among teachers regarding gender equality, and the school had brought in lecturers to talk about this. Even so, Teacher B thought it was such an important issue that “we need more, definitely.”

Teacher E also said that her school had provided further education regarding this. However, she also acknowledged that schools employ new teachers on a regular basis, which means that the new teachers were not present for “training that happened two years ago.” Thus, “there is always a group untrained teachers within an organization.” In her view, this needs to be “ongoing work, and something you have to think about very much and discuss.”

Furthermore, Teacher C acknowledged that teachers approach this differently, “because of different educations and age.” Similarly, Teacher F said that, unfortunately, “those who are the blindest are the ones who need it the most.” In other words, because teachers have different backgrounds and educations, they deal with this differently. Thus, the schools need to be clear about their stance regarding these matters, and provide further education so that teachers can work unanimously.

### 3.7 Effects on students’ learning and individual development

Most of the teachers were unanimous in thinking that gender equality in language matters for students’ learning and individual development. Teacher B even went as far as to say that he thought “it affects their lives all together.” Teacher A was a little more restrictive, but said that gender bias in language can “manifest stereotypes that are already there.” She explained that the students encounter these stereotypes every day, by commercials and everything else. So I think if that is reflected in our teaching as well, we just manifest them. Whereas if we had a more gender inclusive learning environment, that could be a contrast to what they get outside of school. And perhaps that would also then provoke certain questions.

Furthermore, Teacher C explained the danger in manifesting stereotypes:

There are tests that show that when women are told that women are bad at math, they perform worse on math tests. On the other hand, if they are then told, before the test, that it is not true, I have heard that they also perform better. It is obvious that how we describe people affects you, at least in a negative way. So I think it is important to get away from anything that labels you as being something. It is the same thing with racism, when we say that this group of people are like this, then it becomes true.

In other words, stereotypes affect how people view themselves, which will influence how they act in certain situations.
Teacher D, on the other hand, was rather indecisive. First he said that “in English, since it is a foreign language, I do not think it is going to hurt them, or influence them that much”, but then he changed his mind: “Although, I do not know, they use it so much, these days, so maybe…” Still, considering how much the students are exposed to English, he thought that “teaching English twice a week, there is not much I can do in terms of this, […] other than just bring it on the table and discuss it with them.” Apparently, the teacher felt disempowered in relation to how much the students encounter language outside of school, which made him question how much influence he really possessed. Yet, it is important to remember that students are in school every weekday. Hence, if all teachers work unanimously with these issues, regardless of subject or spoken language, they possess greater influence together.

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion

As the results convey, all the interviewed teachers see themselves as actively reflecting on issues of gender equality in their language teaching. All the teachers stated that they consider this to be an important issue that influences their teaching. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that their efforts are realized in the classroom. Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (2013) maintain that stereotypes and non-semantic associations with words, ‘conceptual baggage’, might be hard to detect and becomes embedded in our everyday way of speaking and acting. They state that “even those who might consciously reject certain assumptions often draw on them in their talk without even noticing” (p. 165), unconsciously keeping them alive. These hidden presuppositions may implicitly make us act in ways that conscious reflection would oppose. Regardless of our explicit opinions and values, we remain subjects to the conceptual baggage that a culture imposes. Hence, teachers may not always be aware of how they manifest stereotypes in their language.

This was also something that one of the interviewed teachers mentioned as problematic, “I do [sic] my mistakes, don’t I? Which we all do. […] it happens all the time when I do [sic] mistakes, I say stupid things.” Nevertheless, the teacher also acknowledged that his students are sufficiently aware of these issues to “point it out” whenever he falters. In accordance with theories about Critical Literacy, this indicates that if students are encouraged to reflect on these issues and receive guidance in understanding the implicit gender inequalities in language, they can adopt a critical stance toward language and notice unconscious presuppositions. In this way, an interplay is created between student and teacher that is beneficial for both parties. This, in turn, could be seen as an effective strategy for dealing with implicit conceptual baggage and gender bias in language.

Although all the interviewed teachers actively reflect on gender equality in language, it was interesting to find that only half of the teachers had explicit strategies for their own
language production. As stated above, the teachers surely had the ambition to maintain gender equality in their language teaching. However, they might not always possess the convenient tools. This was quite clearly indicated by Teacher A when she said that she has “no specific strategies”, but that she “would love to learn some.” As seen in the results, the teachers’ professional opinion was that linguistic gender inequality is an important issue that may influence students’ learning and individual development. Correspondingly, many of the interviewed teachers requested more education regarding these issues. Thus, in order to aid teachers in maintaining a gender inclusive language production in their teaching, these issues should be further explored both in teacher education and in further education provided by the schools for employed teachers.

Furthermore, this work needs to happen continuously. As Teacher E acknowledged, because schools employ new teachers on a regular basis, “there is always a group untrained teachers within an organization.” Hence, this needs to be “ongoing work.” Similarly, Teacher B said that because society is always changing, teachers need to “keep on track.” In other words, teachers need to continually update their knowledge concerning linguistic gender equality, and the schools can aid in that work by providing further education and forums for discussion among teachers regarding these issues.

4.2 Suggestions for further study

There are many possibilities for further research into this issue. First, since this project investigated how the teachers reflect on gender equality in language and how they perceived themselves as working with these matters, it would be interesting to see how they actually deal with it in reality. One suggestion for how to investigate this might be to interview teachers and ask them to find possible gender biases in texts, as well as suggestions for how they might work with this particular text in class. As a complement to this, the researcher might observe the teachers while teaching, and see if the way they perceive themselves as working with these issues is realized in the classroom. However, this would require much more time and effort on the researcher’s part, and is thus perhaps more suitable for a larger project.

Another suggestion could be to go through each teacher’s lesson plans for an entire semester. The researcher would then look at which texts are being studied and which approaches the teacher intends to have toward the texts. This would, indeed, be very interesting in light of the fact that most teachers in this study claimed not to be using textbooks in their teaching. With no textbooks, teaching will be very diverse depending on the teachers’ individual preferences and interests. Studying lesson plans would thus provide a greater depth to the question of how the teaches deal with these issues and in which ways they approach it.

Furthermore, comparisons of how teachers in different programs, schools and areas of Sweden work with these issues could further deepen our understanding of the problem.
and whether a change in teacher education as well as further education for employed teachers should be advised.

5. Conclusion

All of the interviewed teachers seemed to be actively reflecting on questions of gender equality in language. They expressed that they thought this was an important issue to consider in teaching, which was also reflected in their strategies for encouraging reflection and discussion regarding these issues in the classroom. They expressed that they made active decisions in choosing literature that shows a variety of perspectives and questions the social norm. They wanted to tailor their teaching to each group of students, their individual needs and interests, which was also a reason for why many did not use textbooks. Rather, they liked to design their own themes, classes, activities and exercises.

Nevertheless, some of the teachers seemed to lack explicit strategies for how to ensure equality in their own language production. Considering the teachers’ professional opinion that linguistic gender equality is an important question that influences students’ learning and individual development, this is of consequence. It brings forth a suggestion of more education regarding this in teacher training, which was also requested by many of the teachers. In order for schools and teachers to comply with the Swedish curriculum’s goals that teaching should be “typified by a gender perspective” (Skolverket 2011, p. 9) and “further equal rights and opportunities for women and men” (p. 5), this needs continuous consideration. Hence, schools and employers may be advised to provide further education and discussion forums where this can be addressed.
6. References


Appendix A

Interview Guide

Name:
Age:
Teach English: 5 6 7 Other:
Years of teaching:
Education:

1. In your experience and knowledge, what is gender bias in language?
   - Facts/knowledge
   - Personal experiences
   - Implications in teaching

2. One of the guidelines stated in the Swedish Curriculum for upper secondary school is that teachers should “ensure that teaching in terms of content and its organisation is typified by a gender perspective” (“se till att undervisningen till innehåll och upplägg präglas av ett jämställdhetsperspektiv”) (Skolverket 2011, p. 9). How do you understand this statement? How would you say that this is implemented in your teaching?
   - Understanding of a gender perspective
   - Content studied
   - Language used in class
   - Language used in textbook materials

3. Do you reflect upon issues of gender bias in your language teaching?
   - Reflections
   - Experiences
   - Difficulties
   - Reactions

4. Do you think that this is an important issue?
   - Alterations in teaching
   - Alterations in habits

5. Do you have any strategies for ensuring that your teaching remains gender inclusive?
   - Policy document made by the school
   - Support from fellow teachers
   - Support from principal
   - Gender inclusive lectures
   - Film yourself when teaching
- Increase students’ awareness (discussions, exercises)
- Use students’ ideas for creating a gender inclusive classroom

6. Do you have any strategies for ensuring that the textbook and learning materials that you use are not gender biased?
   - Content (Representation, occupational roles, gender stereotypical activities, degradation)
   - Language (firstness, generic he, adjectives describing gender, nouns denoting gender, verbs associated with males, females, structures of dialogues)

7. When creating your own tests, exams, worksheets etc., do you have any strategies for ensuring gender equality?
   - Content
   - Language

8. Do you feel like you have sufficient education/knowledge about these issues?
   - Education
   - Experiences
   - Personal interest

9. How do you think gender bias affects students, their learning and individual development?
   - Thoughts
   - Experiences

10. Do you have anything further that you would like to add?