Gender bias and teachers in the EFL classroom in 4-6

Genuspartiskhet och lärare i engelskundervisning i 4-6

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Abstract

In the curriculum for the compulsory school it is stated that teachers should provide gender equal environments free from gender bias. Furthermore, some researchers suggests that the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom in particular is an important place for the regulation and production of gender. As a result, I decided to explore some EFL teacher’s attitudes towards gender bias and how they work with gender equality in their classrooms. To do this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two 4-6 EFL teachers. Prior research on the subject suggests that EFL teaching materials often contain gender biased depictions. Despite this, some researchers do not consider this a problem since teachers should be able to work around these types of issues. Instead, looking at research on how much attention boys and girls receive in the classroom, boys often come out on top. However, this is likely due to the teacher more frequently telling the boys to not disturb their classmates. When it comes to students own attitudes, some research claims that boys undermine girls in the classroom and consider femininity as something negative. Shifting focus to the consequences of gender bias, research proposes that it may result in passivity and lack of self-esteem for the victim. Lastly, according to research, some strategies for counteracting gender bias includes teachers having students reflect on the problems with gender bias, changing the gender of characters in texts and alternating between boys and girls when asking questions to ensure a gender equal distribution of talking time. Through the two interviews I conducted, I learned that both teachers have seen consequences of gender bias similar to those described in the research. They also agree that there are norms affecting student’s behaviors that may restrict their participation and learning. The male norm is brought up as something particularly bad. To discourage these norms, and gender bias in general, the two teachers suggests several strategies. This includes complementing traditional teaching materials with more nuanced sources, encouraging a critical stance in terms of discourse, making sure that every students is active and placing their desks strategically.

Keywords: EFL, ESL, Gender bias, Gender equality, Teaching materials, Strategies, Talking, Distribution, Discourse, 4-6.
# Table of contents

1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 5

2 Purpose and research questions ............................................................................................ 7
   2.1 Purpose ............................................................................................................................ 7
   2.2 Research questions .......................................................................................................... 7

3 Background ............................................................................................................................ 8
   3.1 Keywords ......................................................................................................................... 8
       3.1.1 Generic pronoun ....................................................................................................... 9
       3.1.2 Stereotyping .......................................................................................................... 9
   3.2 Gender in theory .............................................................................................................. 11
       3.2.1 Gender in EFL materials ......................................................................................... 11
       3.2.2 Criticism against studies on gender biased EFL materials ..................................... 13
       3.2.3 Gender bias in distribution of talk .......................................................................... 14
       3.2.4 Gender bias in students’ attitudes ........................................................................... 15
       3.2.5 Consequences of gender bias ................................................................................ 16
       3.2.6 Strategies for avoiding gender bias in the classroom ............................................. 18

4 Methods ................................................................................................................................ 21
   4.1 Participants ..................................................................................................................... 21
   4.2 Semi-structured Interview ............................................................................................. 22
   4.3 Procedure of the interview ............................................................................................ 22
   4.4 Ethical considerations .................................................................................................... 23
   4.5 Analysis of data ............................................................................................................. 24

5 Results and discussion ......................................................................................................... 26
   5.1 Attitudes towards gender bias in the classroom ............................................................. 26
       5.1.1 Opinions on students with gender biased attitudes ................................................ 26
       5.1.2 Opinions on the use of generic language ................................................................. 28
   5.2 Strategies for avoiding gender bias in the classroom .................................................... 30
       5.2.1 Complementing traditional teaching materials ....................................................... 30
       5.2.2 Taking a critical stance ........................................................................................... 32
       5.2.3 Distributing talk effectively .................................................................................... 34
       5.2.4 Placement of students’ desks ................................................................................ 35

6 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 37
   6.1 Limitations of the study ................................................................................................ 38
   6.2 Further research ............................................................................................................. 39
7 References.................................................................................................40
8 Appendices...............................................................................................45
1 Introduction

The focal point of this degree project is how teachers relate to gender bias in the EFL/ ESL (English as a foreign/second language) classroom. My interest in the matter stems from coming across several EFL textbooks that felt very gender biased and unjust in terms of their depictions of, in particular, women. This made me interested in researching more about gender bias and the EFL classroom and how teachers relate to it. To specify, my use of the term “gender bias”, in this degree project, is based on the definitions found in the Oxford and Macmillan dictionaries. These define it as “unfair difference in the treatment of men or women because of their sex” (2017) and “inclination towards or prejudice against one gender” (2017). Examples of these types of unfair treatment involve the promotion of stereotypes such as only women being able to become teachers or hairdressers and men being strong or aggressive.

When it comes to gender equality in schools, the national curriculum states:

   The school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, and the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contributes to their perception of gender differences. The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation (Skolverket, 2011, p. 10).

This sentiment is also present in the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (UNICEF, 2009) in article 29: “The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes” (p. 28). Lastly, if we look at §8 in chapter 1 in the Swedish “School Law” we will also, here, find a similar stance about giving both sexes equal opportunities (SFS 2010:800).

These overarching guidelines apply to all subjects and the English subject is no different. In fact O’Loughlin (2001) considers the EFL classroom to be an “important site for the production and regulation of gender” (p. 37). O’Loughlin bases much of this claim on Butler's
(1988) thoughts on performativity in regards to gender. Butler suggests that our perception of femininity and masculinity is created through repeated performance of acts that establish certain behaviors as either feminine or masculine (1988). What this means is that gender is not static, rather it is continually re-constructed and upheld through discourse and cultural norms. In other words, Butler (1988) says that our actions form our concept of gender rather than it being the other way around. However, this does in no way mean that an individual's concept of gender is changed easily. Because, even though discourses based around specific ideas may be possible to affect, societal and cultural norms often take a very long time to change due to being accepted by so many. However, discourse we encounter on a daily basis is still very important and ridding it of gender bias is a first step in a more gender equal society. With this in mind, it is not hard to see the connection with gender and the English subject when you consider the amount of discourse from different sources that students encounter here. Furthermore, specifically looking at the curriculum for English, one of the aims involves providing “pupils with opportunities to develop knowledge about and an understanding of different living conditions, as well as social and cultural phenomena in the areas and contexts where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32). This means exposing students to a plethora of different texts that may, or may not, give insight into gender norms in other cultures and societies.
2 Purpose and research questions

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this degree paper is to explore EFL teacher’s attitudes towards gender bias and how they work with gender equality in their classrooms. The discussion will revolve around how teachers create a gender equal classroom environment with, or without, specific teaching materials. I have deemed the inclusion of both the analysis of materials as well as oral dialogue necessary because they intertwine. For example, texts in EFL materials are often read aloud and discussed orally in the classroom.

2.2 Research questions

My research questions are:

- What are some EFL teacher’s attitudes towards gender bias?
- What are their strategies for working against gender bias in the classroom?
3 Background

The aim of this section is to provide relevant information on gender bias in regards to the purpose of the degree project. Furthermore, the information gathered here will be crucial for constructing appropriate and investigative interview questions.

I will begin by explaining two keywords that may facilitate the understanding of the research presented. These two terms are stereotyping and generic pronoun. Then, I will look at gender bias in the classroom, and the role of the teacher, from different angles through the use of theories pertinent to the study. Consequently, I will first look at the prevalence of gender bias in EFL teaching materials. This information may help teacher become aware of gender bias in EFL materials and become more critical of the materials they use. Studies on this topic are arranged chronologically which emphasizes the progression made since late 70s up until 2014. This will illustrate why gender bias is such a big problem and what teachers can expect from teaching materials in the near future. Furthermore, I will also present research criticizing this tendency to focus on whether teaching materials used in the classroom are gender biased or not. Secondly, I will talk about gender bias in terms of how teachers distribute talking time in the classroom. I will also here, present criticism of these types of studies for added nuance. Lastly, I will present research on what teachers can expect regarding students’ own attitudes towards gender norms. Following this, is a sections explaining the possible consequences gender bias may have on students, so that teachers know which signs to look out for. Then, last of all, I will look at different strategies teachers can use to promote understanding of equality, as well as to discourage gender bias.

3.1 Keywords

I will, in the following two sections, explain the definitions of generic pronoun and stereotyping. Additionally, I will explain why they are relevant to EFL teachers and the EFL classroom.
3.1.1 Generic pronoun

Extensive use of generic pronouns can cause gender bias by, for example, giving one gender less exposure. It is therefore important as a teacher to be able to recognize it. Taking a closer look, the use of generic pronouns, involves using pronouns such as “she” or “he” when speaking about an object or person with an unidentified gender. In a study on gendered language in Chinese classrooms, Lee (2015) exemplifies this with the phrase “if someone comes, please ask him to wait” (p. 24). However, this does not only concern objects or persons, but also occupations, Lee (2015, p. 27) states. A few examples are surgeon, astronaut, judge and similar high status professions being pronomilised with “he”. Conversely, occupations stereotypically regarded as feminine, such as nurse or secretary, are often pronomilised with “she”. Continuing, Lee (2015) says that “deviations from such assumptions often lead to gender marking, either with adjectival premodification (e.g. female astronaut, woman doctor, male secretary), or with the feminine suffixes -ess/-ette (e.g. actress, goddess, millionairess, waitress, usherette)” (p. 27). Some more well-known examples are the use of “man” in “fireman” and “policeman”.

This area appear relevant due to several reasons. For example, it has been prioritized and deemed relevant by a number of prior studies on EFL materials and EFL teachers. It was also included in one of the first studies in the field by Hartman & Judd in 1978. It was found here to be a recurring problem in many of the examined textbooks. Moreover, there are also recent studies confirming that this area needs to be improved upon. An example is a study by Lee (2015) who observed a large amount of teachers using “he” as a generic pronoun. Additionally, two other studies by Pauwels & Winter in 2006 in Australia and in 2004 in Singapore were conducted. The study from 2006 showed very few instances of the use of “he” as a generic pronoun and also revealed that most teachers would attempt to correct students doing so. On the contrary, the 2004 study found the use of “he” as a generic pronoun to be a recurrent theme although the use of the more gender including “he/she” was considered to be increasing.

3.1.2 Stereotyping
As with generic pronouns, stereotyping is also sometimes found in EFL materials in the classroom, and may also cause gender bias. Having basic knowledge of the term would therefore help teachers avoid or counteract it. Continuing, the meaning of the word stereotyping, is “portraying one set of people exhibiting one set of values, behaviors and roles” (Ndura, 2004, p. 146). This often entails men being strong, authoritative or aggressive and women being vain, weak or emotionally fragile. In regards to occupations, this could be observed as only men being doctors while every nurse is a woman.

As with the area of generic pronoun, this area was also included due to it being thoroughly examined and appearing in a number of studies. Furthermore it also appears to be an area the researchers often found problematic. One of these studies involved teachers answering a survey on their awareness of stereotypical language (Grey and Leith, 2004). According to the results, teachers do their best to not promote gender differences but sometimes they still do it unintentionally. Similar findings were made by Lee when she interviewed teachers about their relation to gender bias. Furthermore, some teachers blamed EFL materials they themselves had been subjected to as students for occasional instances of gender bias in their language (Lee, 2014, p. 33). Another study, made by Lewandowski in 2004, examined older and more recent EFL materials and came to the conclusion that the newer books showed less stereotypical depictions. However, it was also clarified that there were still instances of men not showing emotions and having higher status occupations. Along the same lines, Ndura (2004) also found a number of stereotypical depictions in EFL materials. The most common ones were house chores being presented as feminine and the primary activity for women. Conversely, men were seen exercising a wider range of activities including manual labor. Additionally, men could be seen in the role of saviors and the women the ones being saved. Lee (2009) also found similar stereotypes in her analysis. This includes women being passive, quiet and appearing in less social and physical activities compared to men. However, she also came to the conclusion that the teachers were aware of the importance of gender inclusive language. On the contrary, a study by Yang (2011) revealed women and men to be quite equally represented with only rare occurrences of stereotyping such as only women being teachers. Lastly, in another study by Lee (2014) it was found that even though main characters were not stereotypical, the same could not be said about the supporting cast.
3.2 Gender in theory

As I mentioned in the introduction to this background section, I will here first look at research on gender bias in EFL materials used in classrooms. This may help teachers realize that teaching materials does not always promote equality, which needs to be taken into account when one uses them. Then, I will look at criticism against these types of studies, explaining why teachers should not be afraid of gender biased EFL materials. Thirdly, I look at gender bias in the way teachers distribute talking time. After that I present research about teachers’ experiences with gender bias in student’s attitudes. Second to last, I present consequences of gender bias to help teachers see the signs. Lastly, I will show some strategies teachers can use to avoid gender bias in the classroom.

3.2.1 Gender bias in EFL materials

As a teacher, one may sometimes take for granted that the teaching materials provided by the school promotes equality instead of gender bias and feelings of inferiority. However, research suggests that this may not always be the case. It is therefore important that all teachers are aware that the teaching materials they use may contain gender bias. Below I will present research on the topic. I have decided to use research from three different periods. This will illustrate the progression that has been made which, in turn, will reveal the severity of the problem as well as give a hint at what teachers may expect in the near future when it comes to gender bias in EFL materials.

Beginning with some older studies by Hartman & Judd (1978), Kalia (1980) and Porecca (1984), one is given the impression that EFL materials from this period were riddled with gender bias. Stereotypical depictions such as women being very emotional or passive were found in all three studies (Hartman & Judd, 1978; Kalia, 1980; Porecca, 1984). The way occupations were assigned was also very stereotypical. Examples include women working as stewardesses and nurses, and men as pilots and doctors (Hartman & Judd, 1978). Additionally, Hartman & Judd (1978) and Porecca (1984) observed that “he” was frequently used as a generic pronoun. Furthermore, looking at the sheer number of appearances in texts, men outnumber women by a staggering amount (Hartman & Judd, 1978; Kalia, 1980;
Besides outnumbering the women, Kalia (1980) found that men had 75% of
the leading roles (p. 211). These frequent occurrences of gender bias is something the all of
the authors considered very concerning and Kalia (1980) even went as far as suggesting that
the EFL materials she analysed were obsessed with displaying male superiority (p. 223).

Continuing with a number of more recent studies, this time by Sakita (1995), Poulou (1997),
Jones & Sunderland (1997), Rifkin (1998) and Ma (1998), substantial progress appears to
have been made in terms of gender bias in EFL materials. However, this does not mean that
gender bias has been eradicated. For example, in Sakita’s (1995) study, several instances of
stereotypical depictions, such as women having less prestigious occupations and being more
passive, were found. Additionally, like in the older studies, men generally outnumbered
women in texts (Sakita 1995). Similar results were found in the study carried out by Poulou
(1997) who additionally concluded that men had more lines of dialogue. On the contrary,
looking at the results of the other three studies, other EFL materials finally shows
considerable signs of equality. The EFL materials studied by Jones & Sunderland (1997), for
example, was generally gender inclusive and, this time around, several examples of female
characters in leading roles could be found. Signs of gender equality was also found in the
studies by Rifkin (1998) and Ma (1998). However, men still received slightly more attention
overall in the analyzed EFL materials. Nevertheless, significant progress have been made
compared to results of previous studies.

Lastly, examining three even more recent studies, by Lee & Collins (2009), Yang (2011) and
Lee (2014), we, yet again, see that progress has been made. Although, some problems seem to
linger on. In the study by Lee & Collins (2009), male characters have more appearances, are
depicted as more violent and active, and appear in stereotypical roles such as heroes, villains
and law enforcers. Women on the other hand, are primarily depicted as passive, caring and in
activities connected to reproductive labor (Lee & Collins, 2009). However, the language is
often gender inclusive and only few instances of “he” used as a generic pronoun could be
found (Lee & Collins, 2009). But, in the study by Yang (2011) it was instead the women who
received slightly more attention throughout the texts. Despite this, Yang (2011) concludes that
the materials she studied were fairly free from gender bias although the clothes worn by the
characters could be seen as somewhat stereotypical (p. 86). Likewise, Lee (2014) found an
almost equal number of characters and appearances in the texts she investigated. In contrast
though, Lee (2014) found a few stereotypical depictions in terms of occupations and
characteristics. Nevertheless, compared to older materials, Lee (2014) still sees these results as a huge improvement and a step in the right direction (p. 371).

Looking at the progression of gender bias in EFL materials above, it becomes apparent that we have come a long way since the late 70s and 80s. However, even though substantial progress began to occur during the 90s we can still see clear examples of gender bias in the most recent studies made less than a decade ago. This suggests that the problems, related to gender bias, we may encounter in current EFL materials are nothing new. Furthermore, looking at how gender equality has progressed, these problems may persist for quite some time. Therefore, as a teacher, there is no point in waiting for a textbook completely free from gender bias. However, as the research above shows, teachers still need to be aware of the materials they use in their classroom and be able to recognize gender bias in them, perhaps by using the same methods as the authors of the studies above. Because, as the research below suggests, EFL materials containing gender bias can still offer learning opportunities.

3.2.2 Criticism against studies on gender biased EFL materials

Looking at the research about gender biased materials and how texts can influence students, one might get the impression that teachers should completely avoid gender biased EFL materials to not harm students’ perceptions of gender. However, Sunderland (2000) and O’Loughlin (2001) claim that this may not help teachers solve the problem of gender bias in the classroom. Furthermore, according to Sunderland (2000) and O’Loughlin (2001), using gender biased materials does not have to be detrimental. To start with, Sunderland (2000) questions whether materials should be more progressive than society itself and says that portraying a society as having greater gender symmetry in teaching materials compared to in real life misleads students (p. 152). Sunderland (2000) even suggests that focusing too much on looking for gender bias makes one lose focus of the actual purpose of these teaching materials which is language learning and to some extent knowledge about cultures were the language is spoken (p. 153). This does not mean that Sunderland (2000) disregards the idea that gender bias may negatively affect language learning, but she also mentions that it is something that is hard to prove (p. 153). Most important to remember though, is that it is next to impossible to know how any given text is interpreted and used in the classroom.
This is not only because teachers may or may not choose to have students discuss gender biased extracts, but also because each and every student is a unique individual who will interpret the text in different ways depending on numerous background factors (Sunderland 2000, p. 153). Therefore, there is no guarantee that stereotypical texts turn girls into passive members. Of course it is a possibility, but there is also a chance that they, on their own, question what they read and become more critical of texts in the future (Sunderland, 2000, p. 153). Furthermore, focusing too much on how gender bias in texts influence pupils gives the impression that they already are passive subjects without any agency. On the contrary, Sunderland maintains that students themselves play a big part in shaping their gender identities (Sunderland, 2000, p. 167). Consequently, teachers cannot force students into deciphering the text exactly as they intend but they can still create tasks that have students notice bias and then explain why it is problematic. This means that even texts riddled with stereotypes and inequity can be used as pedagogical tools (Sunderland, 2000, 155). The teacher being such an important factor unfortunately also means that gender inclusive materials most likely will not convey equality in the hands of a gender biased teacher (Sunderland, 2000, p. 158).

In conclusion, Sunderland (2000) and O’Loughlin (2001) does not say that gender bias in EFL materials is irrelevant. On the contrary, they are firm believers in that gendered texts and social practices can shape gender identities. O’Loughlin (2001) even states that EFL/ESL textbooks in particular “remain powerful blueprints of what gender identities are acceptable in English speaking countries” (p. 40). However, in the end, the most important factor is how teachers choose to work with these materials since they have such a big influence on what learning opportunities students are presented with. Moreover, this suggests that it is the teacher who has the biggest impact on whether the classroom is gender biased or not.

**3.2.3 Gender bias in distribution of talk**

It is important to note that gender bias is not only confined to EFL materials. Instead, studies have shown that gender bias in the form of dialogue, writing practices and distribution of talk often can be observed between teachers and students. For example, in her study from 2000, Chavez researched girls and boys behavior in the classroom during EFL lessons. Doing this,
she noticed that girls were more likely to feel self-conscious and anxious as well as being more critical of their own performance. This was also the case in a study by Blair (2000) the same year who came to the conclusion that boys were more dominant and commanded most of the public speaking while the girls was considered submissive and not receiving enough space. The same results was achieved two years later in a study by Julé (2002) in Canada. Julé (2002) used the term “linguistic space” when describing the amount of talk produced and reported that boys commanded as much as 88% of the public talking time available for students (p. 45). She also stated that boys received more questions from the teacher and gave longer, more elaborated answers (Julé, 2002, p. 47). Lastly, besides agreeing with boys being more dominant in the classroom, Sadeghi, Ketabi, Tavakoli, & Sadeghi, (2012) adds that girls tend be more careful and including, meaning that they do not mind sharing the linguistic space.

Concerning this research showing that boys have more public talking time and get more attention in the classroom from the teacher, Sunderland (2000) argues that the focus is on the wrong areas. Having conducted similar research, Sunderland (2000) also came to the conclusion that boys as a group received more attention from the teacher. However, this was entirely due to the boys being told, by the teacher, to not disturb their classmates, more frequently (Sunderland, 2000, p. 162). Moreover, Sunderland (2000) quickly realized that it was actually a small group of boys who received most of this attention. Looking at the results again but this time excluding the two most active boys, the boy group and girl group suddenly received an equal amount of attention (Sunderland, 2000, p. 165). Sunderland proposes that this may be the case in many classrooms and that it is therefore important to not only look closer at specific students and at the amount of talk, but rather what is being said during this time (Sunderland, 2000, 165). Additionally, Sunderland also suggests that some girls being unusually silent may not mean that they are not learning. Instead they “may rather be consciously attending to and learning from the teacher’s answers to the boys’ questions” (Sunderland, 2000, p. 170). However, it is still the teacher’s responsibility to make sure that everybody feels involved and that this unusual silence is not just a sign of lack of motivation or a feeling of marginalization.

3.2.4 Gender bias in students’ attitudes
Looking further into what teachers can expect when it comes to how students themselves emit gender bias, studies have found signs of boys undermining girls. An example of this can be found in Jett-Simpson & Maslands (1993) study in which students had to construct a story of their own with the help of pictures. The pictures were baseball related and resulted in stories where the premise was that a girl wanted to join a group of boys for a game of baseball. When continuing the story, girls had a tendency to end the story with the girls joining because that is only fair and because girls can be as good as boys at baseball (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p. 105). Boys on the other hand had a tendency to tell a story where the girl got to play not because it is the right thing to do but because she upon rejection went and practiced and became good or because she offered something in exchange such as her hat (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p. 105). Boys having a tendency to undermine girls like this is also supported by Sunderland (2000) who discusses the rigidity of masculine identities. Sunderland suggests that girls tend to be more okay with roleplaying as boys while it would be considered very embarrassing for a boy to role-play as a girl (2000, p. 168). However, she emphasizes that although this gives the impression that girls are freer to act like to want, it can also be interpreted as boys thinking that femininity is bad or inferior (Sunderland, 2000, p. 168). With this in mind, it is important that teachers explore these attitudes and create discussion around the problems of undermining others.

3.2.5 Consequences of gender bias

To make certain that everybody is treated as equals in the classroom, it is important as teacher to be aware of the negative consequences of gender bias. Knowledge about how gender bias manifests itself in the classroom, ensures that teachers will be able to act as quick as possible to counteract it. Consequently, looking at research on the consequences of gender bias, there several different theories. Sadker (1989) for example, uses the term “invisible members” (p. 5) to describe what can happen to girls who are exposed to prolonged gender bias involving depictions of females being subordinate and passive. Basically, this would mean that those affected has very limited interaction time with not only the teacher but also with other students. Furthermore, this means not contributing to discussion or asking critical questions and therefore not getting any feedback on what to improve upon. This will then result in
unfavorable conditions for development of reflective or argumentative abilities. Additionally, Sadker (1989, p. 5) argues that stereotypical portrayals of women in teaching materials may give female students the impression that stereotypical social roles and occupations are their only options. Additionally, Sadker (1989) proposes that this type of skewed depictions also may cause lack of self-esteem in students (p. 119). Burr (1998), another author who has researched the effects of gender bias, agrees with the thought that discourse can influence how we perceive the world around us (p. 119).

Gender bias causing low self-esteem and lack of confidence is a sentiment shared by the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1992) in their report about girls being short changed in schools. Additionally they also state that it can result in so called “learned helplessness” (AAUW, 1992, p. 119) which in turn affects their ability to commit to school. Consequently, it may even lead them to not continue their studying altogether (AAUW, 1992, pp. 120-121). Furthermore, the AAUW (1992) suggests that the way schools sometimes undermine girls may develop hostility towards them, possibly resulting in sexual harassment (pp. 127-128). However, this toxic environment not only affects girls, instead it also fosters boys into non-responsible citizens (AAUW 1992, p. 144). Lastly, the AAUW (1992) emphasizes that correcting these problems is not an easy task since gender bias is hard to notice due to many evaluations of schools and its pupils primarily assess these pupils as a group and not as girls and boys (pp. 3-4). The problem here is that not distinguishing between the sexes effectively hides gender-related concerns.

Continuing with the effects of gender biased language, Briere & Lanktree (1983) studied the effects of masculine pronouns and nouns on a group of 72 women and 57 men. These men and women were divided into three groups and then presented with different texts describing professions to gauge their reactions to varying degrees of masculine pronoun use (Briere & Lanktree, 1983, p. 627). In the text the first group were presented with, “he” was used as a pronoun to address the characters (Briere & Lanktree, 1983, p. 627). In the second text, handed out to the second group, “he or she” was the only pronoun used (Briere & Lanktree, 1983, p. 627). The third and final group received a text where the pronouns were switched, compared to the second text, no reading “she or he” (Briere & Lanktree, 1983, p. 627). Results showed that the choice of pronoun has great effect on the perceived attractiveness of the job for the women surveyed. When “he” or “he or she” was used for example, many
women saw the described profession as less attractive and also considered themselves less likely to recommend the profession to other women (Briere & Lanktree 1983, p. 630).

Another study with use of generic pronouns as a focal point was conducted by Vainapel, Shamir, Tenenbaum & Gilam in 2015. In this study, questionnaires were handed out to men and women and contained question related to their attitudes towards school and their level of motivation. As in the last study, this one also used three texts with varying pronouns. One with “he” as the only pronoun, one with “she” and one with gender neutral pronouns. Again, similar results revealing that the use of “he” affected women negatively. For example, women who were presented with the version using “he” as the pronoun, reported having less motivation and being less capable in regards to school work. Men on the other hand, answered similarly regardless of which pronoun was used. Commenting these results, the authors acknowledge the language role as a social structure influencing our perception of ourselves and the need to abandon gendered generic pronouns in favor of gender neutral alternatives (Vainapel, Shamir, Tenenbaum & Gilam, 2015, p. 1517).

3.2.6 Strategies for avoiding gender bias in the classroom

It should by now be obvious that the teacher plays an important role in the creation of a gender inclusive classroom environment. Therefore, I will now look at suggested strategies for promotion of equality and avoidance of gender bias.

For a gender equal classroom, Hall & Nelson (1990) suggests that teachers should begin with teaching students that the use of gender biased language is unprofessional, as well as train students in noticing it as this is a requirement for correcting it (p. 74). Moreover, teachers should be able to construct thought provoking questions for discussion and reflection (O’Loughlin, 2001, p. 42). Conversely, activities based around these questions need to require active participation so that all students feel engaged (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 511). They should also be taught that what teachers suggest may not be the only option and that students therefore always remain critical and consider the context influencing others opinions (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 506). Furthermore, teachers have a responsibility to help students understand that the project that is gender equality requires commitment from both boys and
girls to work (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 507). Additionally, understanding can be facilitated by drawing upon students own experiences and basing tasks around interests students share (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 507). In order for these discussions on gender bias to happen in the first place, it is of outmost importance that teachers do not shy away from discussing controversial questions (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 509). This may hold true for a lot of topics but especially in regards to gender bias, teachers should not be afraid of imposing new gender roles on students and change the ones they have from home (O’Loughlin, 2001, p. 42). O’Loughlin (2001) claims that this will only result in leaving their students with bland, one-dimensional and impoverished” (p. 42) portrayals of women’s and men’s situation in contemporary society. Furthermore, he states that it “radically underestimates the capacity of our learners to shape their own social identities” (O’Loughlin, 2001, p. 42). Hall & Nelson (1990) adds that although it is important to inform students of sexism that they may encounter now and later in their lives, it is also essential that teachers do this in a way that does not discourage them (p. 72).

In addition to these general guidelines, there are also some more specific methods and exercises that can be utilized in the classroom. For example when students read in mixed pairs, boys often read what is said by male characters and girls what is said by female characters. This will be a problem if one gender speaks more than the other since one students then have less time speaking. However, a simple solution to this problem is to have the students read the text two times, alternating roles (Sunderland 2000, p. 154). Moreover, Sunderland (2000) suggests that dialogues where one gender is speaking more can even be the basis of discussion in itself with students reflecting on what this may say about their relationship (p. 154). Also the themes and topics can be the beginning of a discussion. Teachers could for example ask how the story would unfold if the gender of the protagonist was changed (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p. 107). Another good exercise, to help students recognizing gender bias, is having them compile lists of stereotypes found in text (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p. 107). Then, when they get better at it, the teacher can ask them to rewrite stories so that they are less gender biased. Examples would be changing policeman, chairman or actress to gender neutral variations (Hall & Nelson 1990, p. 73). Another example would be changing generic pronouns such as “he” and “she” to “they” (Sunderland 1992, p. 83). By continuously doing these revisions in regards to gender bias in texts, students will eventually see it as a natural step in the writing process, similar to correcting grammatical errors or spelling mistakes (Hall & Nelson 1990, p. 74).
Although the above methods and tasks are based around the teaching materials, some strategies can be based on the students’ own opinions and experiences with gender norms. Students can for example reflect on and then discuss what femininity and masculinity means to them and how it can be noticed in their behaviors in the classroom, and outside of it (O’Loughlin 2001, p. 41). However, when it comes to discussions in group, Jett-Simpson & Massland (1993), claims that a problem that may occur is that boys tend to dominate these discussions (p. 106). A way to get around this though, is to assign a student to monitor and make sure that everybody participate (Jett-Simpson & Massland, 1993, p. 106). Another effective approach, which can make it easier for teachers is simply alternating between boys and girls during discussions or when asking questions (Sunderland, 2000, p. 168). Additionally, teachers can observe colleagues and how they work to gain better insight into what works or does not work for others (Sunderland, 2000, p. 169).

For teachers looking for more tips on working with gender equality, Sue V. Rosser (1989), has compiled a list of exercises students can to get better acquainted with the subject. One of these exercises asks students to write down their definitions of sexism and why they think it creates a bad classroom environment (Rosser, 1989, p. 8). Then, the teacher reads their comments and have a group discussion based on them (Rosser, 1989, p. 8). In another exercise, titled “Pronouns as power”, the teacher reads a passage familiar to the students but change all the masculine pronouns and nouns to feminine alternatives (Rosser, 1989, p. 9). Students are then asked whether the meaning of the story changed to them. Commenting on this exercise, the author, claims that women often answer that they feel empowered and included while boys feel more distanced (Rosser, 1989, p. 9). This is done to, as the title suggests, show students the power pronouns have in influencing the reader. Building on the last exercise, the last one is constructed to show gender differences in experiences with sexism. This is done by students taking stances to different claims regarding how they are treated in different situations (Rosser, 1989, p. 9). Also here, the author states that the answers differ depending on gender and therefore effectively illustrates differences between genders (Rosser, 1989, p. 9).
4 Methods

As mentioned earlier, I interviewed two 4-6 teachers about their attitudes towards gender bias and what strategies they use in the classroom for minimizing gender bias. Consequently, in this section, I will present the methods I used to gather and analyze this information. I will also give insight into which guidelines I have followed. This will be done by first giving a general idea of the two teachers I interviewed without revealing their identities. Secondly, I will explain the use of semi-structured interviews in combination with an interview guide. Then, I will go into detail about how the two interviews I conducted proceeded. After that, I will explain the guidelines I followed in regards to ethical considerations. Additionally I will briefly comment on the implications of such a small sample size. Lastly, I will explain how I transcribed the interviews and then analyzed the information by dividing it into different sections.

4.1 Participants

As mentioned, I have only interviewed two teachers for this project. I am aware of that this may be a small sample size. However, this is still in line with what Hesse-Biber claims when she says that “the logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually involves working with small samples” (2007, p. 119). Furthermore she mentions that “the goal is to the look at a “process” or the “meanings” individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 119). Therefore I would argue that the small sample size is not a problem and especially considering that this is a relatively small scale project.

When choosing the participants, the only two requirements the teachers had to meet was that they were 4-6 teachers and taught EFL to some extent. Furthermore, the two teachers I interviewed were chosen out of convenience and not from a random sample. They are teachers I know personally but I do not believe this affected our interaction, or rather, the answers they provided. Despite this, the two teachers teach at very different schools which at least adds a bit of nuance to their backgrounds and therefore the answers they provided. The
first teacher works in a bigger city at a school with many high-performance students. On the contrary, the second teacher works in a suburb at a school which has had quite a few problems in recent memory. Additionally, this is in an area less well off from a socioeconomic perspective.

4.2 Semi-structured Interview

As I said before, I used interviews to gather the information I needed for this project. An important reason for this is that interviews, according to Widerberg, is the preferred method when one wants to explore people's understanding of different phenomena (2002, p. 17). Seeing as I want to investigate teachers understanding of gender bias and how they think it can be remedied, I consider this method to be appropriate. To be a bit more specific, these interviews were semi structured and aided by an interview guide. This means that I had topical areas and questions written down that I needed to ask, however, the order in which I asked these questions was not important as long as I covered them all (Hesse-Biber, 2007, 115). This can make the interview flow more naturally and by not sticking to a script, one will also be able to ask follow up questions or ask the interview person to elaborate (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 115). As suggested by Hesse-Biber (2007) the interview guide was constructed by “first focusing on broader, more abstract areas of inquiry and then creating a series of interview questions” (p. 121). Using this method also helps me get to the bottom with what information I am actually after by narrowing down to specific questions. Furthermore, the interview guide was constructed in conjunction with the theory section of this paper. This means that they are often formulated in a way that asks the interviewee to compare and contrast their own experiences compared to research findings. A concrete example of this is that research I have gathered suggest that gender bias can be found in many teaching materials (Lee & Collins, 2009). So I then asked the interviewee if they have noticed any gender bias in the teaching materials they use. As far as the type of these questions I asked, I have decided upon both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. Additionally I asked follow up questions to explore the teacher’s attitudes further.

4.3 Procedure of the interview
I began by sending e-mails to teachers who I thought would be appropriate to interview. In the email I explained that I would like to ask questions about their perception of gender equality in the classroom. Looking back, I could have included the specific questions but at the same time I did not want them to think out their answers beforehand since I was afraid that this would make them just tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. This would probably make them less likely to reveal their own potential biases. However, I cannot imagine that the two teachers I interviewed would do such a thing so perhaps it was a flawed notion. Furthermore, if I had sent out the questions from the beginning, it would have given the teachers more time to think about concrete examples or situations to demonstrate their thoughts. Then, after they agreed to do the interview, I let the teachers suggest the location so that they could be interviewed in a place they felt comfortable with. This resulted in the first interview taking place in a coffee shop and the second one at the school of the second teacher. Additionally, both interviews were conducted in Swedish and audio recorded. The reasoning behind the decision to interview in Swedish, despite the project being written in English, is simply because I am more comfortable with Swedish. Moreover I believe that elaborating is easier in one's native language. Continuing, while interviewing, I attempted to first ask about their own attitudes, then the students' attitudes and lastly, how they view their teaching materials. This was meant to provide structure to the interview but as it was a semi structured interview, questions pertaining to an area not currently discussed would be thrown in if they were brought up by the interviewee. There were no interruptions during these interviews and they took roughly 31 minutes each. Upon finishing the interviews, I went home and transcribed the full interview.

4.4 Ethical considerations

In regards to ethical considerations, I decided to follow the guidelines set by the Swedish research council (2011), as well as some suggestions by Widerberg (2002). This includes providing information, receiving consent, respecting the interview person’s integrities and guaranteeing anonymity.
As suggested by the Swedish research council (2011, p. 21), the interview persons were provided with information about what the degree project is about before the interview. This means that I explained that I was writing about equality in the classroom and how boys and girls are treated and depicted in the classroom in general as well as in teaching materials. I also told them that the questions I would ask revolved around their attitudes towards gender equality, and lack thereof, during English lessons. Additionally, I said that I wanted to know more about how they ensure gender equality and discourage gender bias. Moreover, I ensured that their names, names of the students, names of the schools or any other personal information would be anonymized (Swedish research council, 2011, p. 21). In addition, I explained that they would be able to skip questions or even end the interview if they did not feel comfortable answering the questions. After this, the interview were conducted and to respect their integrity, I followed Widerbergs (2002) advice which was to not be pushy when something sensitive was discussed even though this may have resulted in “more” information (p. 40). Lastly, after the interview was conducted, the interview persons were given the opportunity to add information or perspectives that they felt was not covered during the interview (Widerberg, 2002, p. 40).

4.5 Analysis of data

Both interviews were transcribed shortly after they were finished. This made the process easier since I still remembered much of what was said, enabling me to write down their words without having to listen to sections more than 1-3 times. Still, there are a few words I could not make out. They were therefore written as “xxx”. Additionally, I would like to point out that these missing words did not have any negative effects on the project. More personal information, in particular names, were also mentioned during the interviews. To not reveal any identities, these were therefore marked as “zzz”. As for the names of the two interviewed teachers, these were labeled T1 and T2. Then, after the transcription was done, I divided the text into different sections. The sections were based on prevalent and recurring themes. Some examples are “strategies”, “student’s attitudes” and “generic pronoun”. These sections were then translated and adjusted, or further divided, into the sections found in “Results and discussion”. Consequently, whenever I cite or paraphrase this information provided by the
interviewees, it is my own translation and interpretation of what was said. Nevertheless, I did my best not to alter the meaning of what was said in the interviews.
5 Results and discussion

In this section, I will present the results gathered from the interviews as well as discuss them in relation to the research I have gathered. I have decided to divide the results into two main sections derived from my research questions. As stated, these research questions are as follows: “what are some EFL teacher’s attitudes towards gender bias?” And “what are their strategies for working against gender bias in the classroom?” These two sections are then divided into several smaller sections to organize the teacher’s answers in a cohesive manner. In these subsections, I will first present what the teachers had to say about the specific topic. I will then discuss their answers in relation to the literature.

5.1 Attitudes towards gender bias in the classroom

This section is dedicated to shedding light on the two teachers’ feelings towards different aspects of gender bias. This includes their opinions and experiences with students with gender biased attitudes and with the use of generic pronouns.

5.1.1 Opinions on students with gender biased attitudes

When it comes to gender bias among students, both teachers are certain that their students hold views about gender roles. In T1’s experience, the girls tend to be quiet while the boys are often seeking attention. Additionally she states that these behaviors are habitual and are partially something the students “have with them from home”. Another cause, according to her, is that the class teacher before her “was not very equal” and saw the boys as “mischievous” while the girls were her “angels”. This is something T1 noticed in the beginning when the boys were completely in shock from witnessing her scold the girls. According to T1, the boys exclaimed that “this never happened with the other teacher”. Upon hearing this T1 explained that “it does not matter whether you are a boy or a girl, if you do something wrong, I have to correct you”. Despite the lack of equality in the past, T1 suggests that it is something the students will learn to embrace since they are still young and their
behaviors are not internalized yet. Furthermore, T1 mentions that her students are already going against some of the more typical norms. For instance, when constructing a task which would have the students accessorize guinea pigs, T1 was worried that this would not appeal to the boys. But, as it turned out, the boys were just as eager to make their guinea pig cute as the girls were. Furthermore, T1 has observed that girls often are as active and energetic as the boys when they are alone with the teacher. Shifting focus to T2 and his experiences with students and gender bias, there are many similarities. Also he, has noticed that the boys are more active than the girls. Moreover, he explains that some of the boys occasionally undermine the girls by imposing norms on them. This often involves treating the girls as if they were “inferior” and needed to abide by strict gender norms. An example from T2 involves his students being condescending to an Arabic speaking girl who refused to wear a headscarf. Another example is students at several occasions calling girls “whore” or other offensive terms. Asking T2 if he believes that the students would be okay with playing parts of the opposite gender during role-plays, he answers that it would probably “not work for the boys”. Furthermore, he says that even if the boys agreed to something like this, they would most likely do it in a “demeaning and not very serious manner”. Girls being more okay with such a task is due to the “man-norm”, he suggests. Donning a male-role is therefore easier since it is seen as more natural and superior. Female-roles on the other hand, are considered foreign and too much of a departure from the norm to be taken seriously, he adds.

The “man-norm”, boys being more active, and boys viewing femininity as something inferior is something also found in several studies. Teaching materials, for example, have a history of giving more attention to male characters as well as having them outnumber their female counterparts. This can even be seen in older studies such as the ones by Rifkin (1998), Poulou (1997) and Sakita (1995) to name a few. Male pronouns being more frequent than female or gender neutral ones have also been observed by researchers. Two examples are Lee (2015) and Pauwels & Winter (2006) who studied use of generic pronouns in textbooks and in classrooms. Looking at these two studies though, it is important to acknowledge that the amount of male pronouns are not comparable to what was found in older studies such as the one by Hartman & Judd (1978). However, male pronouns still outnumber female pronouns enough to give the impression that men are the norm. Disregarding teaching materials, research has also showed that boys are the norm in terms of the amount of attention distributed in the classroom. So T1 and T2s experiences seems to coincide with the results gathered by authors such as Blair (2000) & Julé (2002).
As mentioned, T1 and T2 have also observed students abiding to certain gender roles as well as promote them. This is something also described by Jett-Simpson & Masland (1993) in their study on students’ perceptions of gender norms. In this study, the authors discovered that boys saw intense physical activity as something girls are inferior at. To join the boys for a game of baseball, the boys often suggested that the girls had to offer something in return or prove that they are capable by being as good as the boys. This perceived notion of boys being superior is as mentioned something, in particular, T2 has experienced. As I also mentioned, a result of this is that boys often will not even agree to play female roles. The reason I even asked him the question in the first place is because something similar was concluded by Sunderland (2000). For this reason, I was very intrigued to hear him raise similar arguments. For instance, much like T2, Sunderland (2000, p. 168) suggests that it may feel embarrassing for boys to play female roles while girls are completely okay with playing male roles. Moreover, though Sunderland (2000) proposes that it can be seen as positive that girls are freer to act like they want, she agrees with the notion that the underlying cause may be hostility towards femininity (p. 168).

5.1.2 Opinions on the use of generic language

In terms of the use of generic pronouns in the classroom and the problems it may cause, T1 and T2 have quite different experiences and opinions. T1 states that the use of generic pronouns is not something she considers “particularly problematic”. She explains that different terms depending on gender, like actor/actress is not something she considers a problem other than it forcing students to learn an additional variation and its meaning. Additionally she does not view terms ending with “man”, such as policeman, as a problem as long as “the origin is explained” and that students “are made aware that girls also can be policemen”. She also does not recommend students using alternative terms. Instead, one should “let them decide for themselves which term they want to use”. However, this does not mean that she does not see a purpose with gender neutral terms. Instead, she explains that the reason she does not force students to use them is because she considers many of them to “not be established” and only “temporary”. She further explains that these terms depend on the political climate which changes every few years. Consequently, she suggests that using words may not be relevant in a few years only complicates language learning which in turn
“confuses the students”. T2 on the other hand, sees use of generic pronouns as far more damaging. He even goes as far as calling it “indoctrination” that normalizes the male pronoun and male’s dominance in general. He claims that it has become a “natural part of the way we speak and write”. Furthermore, he states that it “puts women at a disadvantage and conveys that their words are not worth as much”. He also proposes that it can cause feelings of inferiority which in turn leads to passiveness. This, he suggests, may then lead to one being less active during lessons leading to fewer opportunities to learn since “social contexts facilitates learning”. Moreover, although he tries to pay attention and remedy this imbalance as much as possible, he admits it is something that easily goes undetected. He states that this has to do with him not growing up with gender equality as a priority and being subjected to the man as the norm. Still, he sees the future as bright since the fight for equality “has come a long way in the last ten years”.

Comparing these views with research on generic pronouns, I see many similarities. For starters, the way T2 describes the effects of prolonged use of generic pronouns, and gender bias in general, looks a lot like Sadker’s (1989) description of what he calls “invisible members” (p. 5). Much like T2, Sadker (1989, p. 5) and Burr (1998, p. 119) also claim that gender bias may result in feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem and that this in turn leads to passiveness and therefore fewer learning opportunities. This type of undermining of girls is also brought up by AAUW (1992) which states that it may also create hostility towards girls (pp. 127-128). Other studies painting the use of generic pronouns in similar ways includes those by Briere & Lanktree (1983) and Vainapel, Shamir, Tenenbaum & Gilam (2015). In the study by Briere & Lanktree (1983) the authors concluded that “he” as a generic pronoun can cause women to perceive certain activities as less attractive and appropriate for women. In the other study, by Vainapel, Shamir, Tenenbaum & Gilam (2015) results showed that “he” as generic pronoun negatively affected women's sense of motivation. Consequently, it is safe to say that T2s views on the negative effects caused generic pronouns is in line with prior research. As for T1s more lenient stance towards generic pronouns it is important to note that she still suggests discussing generic pronouns with the students, although she does not seem to be very fond of some of the current gender neutral terms due to them not being “established”. Lastly, other than the negative effects, T2 also delved into one of the things that makes generic pronouns especially hard to combat. This had to do with him growing up with “he” as the preferred generic pronoun and therefore having a hard time not registering it as natural. Interestingly enough, this is also something that has turned up in studies. One of the
authors who encountered similar tendencies is Lee (2014). The teachers in this study even responded in a similar way, painting teaching materials from their childhood as the culprit (Lee, 2014, p. 33). This goes to show that old habits die hard when it comes to gender bias, partially explaining why it is still a problem in developed countries.

5.2 Strategies for avoiding gender bias in the classroom

In this section I will provide the strategies, for avoiding gender bias in the classroom, recommended by the two teachers I interviewed. The strategies are divided into sections so that they are more accessible. The first strategy details how and why one should complement traditional teaching materials with additional sources. The second strategy emphasizes taking a critical stance towards discourse. The third strategy gives tips on how to involve every student by distributing talking turns efficiently. The fourth, and final strategy, involves the placement of students’ desks and how it creates a better environment.

5.2.1 Complementing traditional teaching materials

When it comes to strategies for avoiding gender bias in the classroom, there are quite a few similarities between the two teachers I interviewed. For example, T1 states that students need to be exposed to diverse information and “not only what is shown in media”. A reason for this may be that Sweden's high placing on global equality lists receives wide coverage and may give the impression that Sweden is already “sufficiently equal”. Furthermore, T1 suggests that one should use information found on for example, the internet to complement what is written in the teaching materials since these materials often only offers a “basic summary of the information” while there are so much more to be found through other sources. Furthermore, this information found on the internet does not have to be strictly text based as T1 also makes use of web series about current issues aimed at younger audiences. Topics brought up can also result in “further discussion” and “student participation”, she adds. Conversely she also sometimes uses this complementary information found on the internet to compile worksheets which she then hands out to the students to use in conjunction with primary teaching materials for added perspectives. Similarly, T2 agrees with the sentiment
that one should look for information from different sources. He especially recommends this approach when working with historical figures. This has a lot to do with what he describes as “a male dominated narrative”. As a result, he says that this is often especially apparent in texts about historical female figures whose importance is often understated. Looking for additional “scientific” and “accurate” information is therefore a must according to him. Additionally, he states that one should be particularly attentive when using older teaching materials where inaccuracies are more common, compared to newer ones.

There are a number of connections to be made between these strategies, mentioned by the two teachers, and research in the field of gender bias. I will begin by commenting on the notion that many teaching materials do not always provide the most “accurate” and “scientific” information. One sign of this is boys or girls being depicted in stereotypical ways. As mentioned, this entails “portraying one set of people exhibiting one set of values, behaviors and roles” (Ndura 2004, p. 146). Stereotyping has been observed on teaching materials by for example Yang (2011), who, for instance, noticed that most girls were portrayed as having wardrobes only containing skirts or dresses (p. 86). Another example of stereotyping in teaching materials can be found in a research paper by Lee (2014). The problem there was that boys and girls often were separated and confined to different sections of the textbooks. Whereas texts about crime or police work mostly had male characters, sections about fashion or baby care almost exclusively involved female characters (Lee, 2014). The same type of stereotyping is, as mentioned, something T2 has encountered. The example he used was the abundance of male historical figures in teaching materials. Even if female versions were given attention, this attention was only a fraction of what the men received. Giving men wore attention effectively gives the impression that they are superior and more important. The stereotype of men being more important is also not only something encountered by T2. On the contrary, some studies have concluded that male characters often receives more attention and even outnumber women quantitatively. Examples include studies by Rifkin (1998) and Lee & Collins (2009). Lastly, T2 claims that one have to be especially cautious when using older teaching materials as they often are less progressive than newer ones. This is also supported by prior research. This can be exemplified by comparing the study by Sakita (1995) with the one by Yang (2011). While Sakita (1995) saw several signs of stereotyping, like passive or vain women, Yang (2011) came to the conclusion that the teaching materials she analyzed did not contain a significant amount of gender bias. However, this is of course not always the case as research from the exact same year can result in very different results, see for example
Poulou, (1997) and Jones & Sunderland (1997). Of course, what country the study was carried out in also matters greatly. Nevertheless, it is not farfetched to say that we have seen great progress in terms of gender equality in our society in the last twenty years or so. Logically then, this should be reflected in teaching materials.

5.2.2 Taking a critical stance

As seen, information provided by the internet can be crucial for showing different perspectives, according to both teachers. However, this does not mean that one should not take a critical stance to the information found here, and elsewhere for that matter. On the contrary, T1 emphasizes criticism of the sources and being mindful of where information is found and by who it is written. This applies to all classroom discourse and T1 personally considers her to pay a fair amount attention to stereotypical depictions encountered in materials. For example, she mentions an example in a textbook she thought “did not feel right”. The culprit here was a big picture of a party where the girls were portrayed very stereotypically and the ratio of girls to boys was very off, in favor of the girls. T1 explains that “even the students reacted negatively to this image” due to the characters “not being relatable and almost parodies of themselves”. To remedy this, T1 took the opportunity to discuss the problem with the students. This critical approach is another strategy T1 shares with T2, who agrees that it is important to bring up and discuss unequal treatment based on gender with his students. In the past, he has for example, asked the students to reflect on why male figures often get more exposure than female figures and how certain texts could be rewritten in more gender equal ways. T2 also suggests discussing what the term gender equality means, as a starting point. Additionally, he emphasizes that teachers should “lead by example” when it comes to gender equality in the classroom. This is especially important to do around younger children who are still in an early stage and have “not yet formed their perception of the world”, he adds. Furthermore he claims that even if women only play a minor parts in a particular text, it can still be educational to reflect on their position and “relation to the male characters”. Conversely, T2 strongly proposes that when books do focus on female characters, or important historical female figures, it is important to really “let it take as much time as it deserves” and not just rush through it. Continuing with how one can work with gender biased teaching materials, T2 suggests that one can “change the genders of the
characters” when reading a text or dialogue in the classroom. For example, he details how he would change the genders of the pigs in “the three little pigs”. Meaning that he sometimes told it with two male pigs and one female pig, and sometimes two female pigs and one male pig, for example. The main point being that switching it up from time to time may remove some of the gender bias. Trying to even out gender imbalances is something T2 does in other instances to, as seen when he describes the process of constructing a writing task which involved writing a newspaper segment about sports. This is an area often falling victim to gender bias since people may perceive it as a male activity, due to men's sports receiving much more exposure than women's. Consequently, T2 thought “why not have a woman?” and decided that the students should write about Swedish skier Charlotte Kalla to show that there also are “impressive and talented women”. Showing that there are no activities only appropriate for men or for women, teaches students that there are “no reason to routinely exclude one gender” when discussing a subject, “like some gender biased depictions try to perceive”, he adds.

Also this motto of always being critical of the discourse one comes in contact with, is in line with research on gender bias. Norton & Pavlenko (2004), for example, consider this crucial and adds that if teachers encounter skewed portrayals or other controversial topics, they should be discussed with the students (p. 509). Furthermore, it is important that teachers are able to construct questions that are both engaging and thought provoking (O’Loughlin, 2001, p. 42). Consequently, this is something T1 and T2 puts much effort into, according to themselves. Looking at T1, she brought up an example where a textbook depicted women in a very stereotypical way. Both she and the students felt that there was “something off” with the picture which lead to a discussion about why they felt this way and why some portrayals look like this. Also T2 shared similar experiences when he felt like male figures received more attention than their female counterparts. As a result he asked students why they think men and women sometimes are depicted differently. Moreover, he asked them to reflect on what equality actually means which relates to Rosser's (1989) study which emphasized the importance facilitating discussion by first defining important terms (p. 8). Another strategy T2 shared was changing the genders of familiar characters such as the three little pigs to show that boys does not always have to be the protagonists. A similar method is described by Hall & Nelson (1990), although they take it a step further and suggests that students themselves should attempt to rewrite texts while changing the genders (p. 73). A third occasion when T2 applied a critical stance was when he constructed a writing task about sports. As he felt that
men are overrepresented in reports about sport, he made a conscious decision to have the students write about a female athlete. Considering that prior research by, for example, Sakita (1995) and Lee (2009), confirms this to be true to a certain extent, this seems like a sound decision. Furthermore, “counteracting traditional gender patterns” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 11) is also something that is stated in the curriculum. Lastly, both T1 and T2 states that even gender biased teaching materials can be used as long as the contents are discussed and reflected upon. Similar views were expressed by both Sunderland (2000) and O’Loughlin (2001) who both claim that as long as long as the teacher understands why gender bias is problematic and is able to convey it to students, a gender biased textbook should not be a problem in itself.

5.2.3 Distributing talk effectively

Another possible source of gender bias in the classroom lies within the teacher’s distribution of turns when it comes to answering questions or sharing opinions. Furthermore, both T1 and T2 explains that the boys are usually the loudest and therefore automatically “gets the most attention”. However, as both teachers explain, it is primarily a small group of boys who act like this. They also explain that the added attention this group receives is due to being told to quiet down and not necessarily because they are asked more questions. However, this type of behavior can still be very problematic and cause other students to feel uncomfortable. T2 has found that when this happens it helps “focusing on these students by asking them questions” about the topic discussed so that they are distracted from inappropriately speaking with their classmates, for example. Consequently these boys may sometime receive more learning opportunities, and although T2 does not consider this optimal, it is at times the only solution. Nevertheless, it can still be helpful to have a system ensuring that no one is left out of discussions. Therefore T2 uses “sticks to decide who gets to speak”. “Each stick has one of the students names written on it and are picked randomly”, T2 explains. This ensures that each and every students will be asked to talk eventually. T2 clarifies that he does not always use this technique, but says that it works especially well when asking for the students’ opinions on different topics or in discussions. However, even with the sticks, it can sometimes get very “male-dominated” in terms of speaking, according to T2. To counteract this, he often tries to actively “encourage the girls” and give them praise as often as possible to put them in the spotlight and become more active. To facilitate this, he sometimes first focus on the girls
who are more talkative “to get them going” which in turn enables the other girls to also “take initiative”. In regards to giving girls this added attention, T2 admits that this approach may appear “unequal towards the boys”. Despite this, he still believes that it is a necessary evil to get the girls who are passive involved when the boys become too dominant. On the other hand, he proposes that girls being passive may also be a sign that the “activity is not adapted towards the girls”. Therefore it is important to take note of how girls and boys act during different activities to be able to construct situations where both girls and boys feel involved. Nevertheless, it can still be hard for teachers to decide whether a student feels involved through just observation. Therefore, to know for sure, he advocates constructing questionnaires with questions about how well students think the school offers a gender inclusive environment and if, and how, it can be improved.

Looking at the research on distribution of talking in different classrooms, there are many similarities to what the two teachers I interviewed had experienced. To start, they have both reflected a fair amount on differences in willingness or ability to participate among the students. Furthermore they realize the importance of having everyone participate during lessons which is also supported by, for example Norton & Pavlenko (2004, p. 511). The method T2 uses with the sticks is a great way to do this as it ensures that every students are given the chance to talk. Additionally, they have both experienced an imbalance with boys taking more space than girls in the classroom. Looking at the studies, this appears to be a prevalent issue not only in the two classrooms described. On the contrary, several studies have come to the conclusion that boys receive far more attention than girls and tend to dominate discussions in the classroom (Blair, 2000; Julé, 2002 and Jett-Simpson & Massland, 1993). However, as research also shows, this does not mean that all the boys act like this (Sunderland, 2000). Instead, much like T1 and T2 clarifies, it is only a small group of boys who receives an unproportioned amount of attention. However, as T2 describes, this is sometimes done on purpose and seen as a necessary evil when one lacks other resources. On the other hand, when girls are particularly quiet, T2 instead focuses his attention on them to make them more involved. Therefore, boys and girls may still receive the same amount of attention in the end.

5.2.4 Placement of students’ desks
Another seemingly important component for equality in the classroom, brought up by the interviewees, was how the teacher decides to arrange the students’ desks. By making a few small adjustments, T1 saw a huge difference in her students’ behaviors. When she arrived, a small group of loud boys sat very close to each other. Consequently, they often talked to each other at inappropriate times and bothered the other students. This prompted T1 to change the placement and not have these students together. This immediately decreased the number of interruptions. It also improved the environment overall so that less talkative students felt more comfortable and “opened up” in terms of speaking, as T1 describes it. Moreover she feels certain that placing the students so that the desk groupings contain both boys and girls is highly beneficial. But, as she explains, “this is not possible to do completely in this class because the boys outnumber the girls”. However, T1 suggests that the most important thing is that students get the opportunity to engage with students with different opinions compared to themselves, whether they are of the same gender or not. This is because they then are offered a chance to “look at things through different perspectives by discussing with someone with different views”. Shifting focus to T2, he has also experimented with different solutions in regards to desk placements. He too mixes it up every now and then so they are continually exposed to new individuals and ideas. However, to his own dismay, he has realized that boys paired up with girls often “does not work in this class”. The reason for this is a bit unclear but they basically seem reluctant and a bit shy to the idea of working with the opposite gender.

Looking at the studies I have gathered, I did not find anything in particular that focuses on desk placement while I researched gender bias. Nonetheless, some of the theories are still somewhat applicable in my opinion. For example, having students consistently sit and collaborate with others ensures that they are constantly exposed to new opinions and perspectives. Realizing that everybody is different ties in with avoiding gender bias since one learns to see people as individuals and not as static stereotypes. This interaction with others is important considering that teaching materials sometimes contain inaccurate depictions (Lee, 2014 and Yang, 2011). Furthermore, it is an effective way to get students acquainted with each other. Perhaps this creates a more inviting environment which in turn facilitates student participation. As mentioned earlier, active participation is important for grasping important concepts such as equality (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 511).
6 Conclusion

In this section I will present the conclusions I have arrived at. After doing this, I will ponder upon the limitations of the study in regards to the methods and what could perhaps been done better. Lastly, I will give suggestions in terms of further research into matters concerning my findings, and reflections, on the subject of gender bias in a school context.

From the results gathered I am confident in that I can now answer my two research questions. As a reminder these questions were “What are some EFL teacher’s attitudes towards gender bias?” and “what are their strategies for working against gender bias in the classroom?”

Starting with the first question, I have learned that T1 and T2, in general, find gender bias problematic. They also state that their students are exposed to it on a daily basis through, not only teaching materials, but also through media and people. However, whereas T1 does not consider the use of generic pronouns to be a substantial problem as long as it is discussed, T2 sees it as something very problematic that may influence the students. In addition, T2s suspicions is supported by the literature. Shifting focus to students with gender biased attitudes, this is something both T1 and T2 have encountered and try to combat. Research confirms that this problem is not only confined to these two teachers’ classrooms.

In regards to the second question, and strategies teachers can use to counter gender bias and promote gender equality, both teachers have several suggestions. One of these strategies is complementing traditional teaching materials. This is done to get a more nuanced and accurate impression of important matters. Research pointing out the prevalence of gender bias in teaching materials supports this notion. These additional sources can be everything from articles on the internet and other teaching materials to news shows dedicated to younger audiences. Another strategy suggested by these teachers, and supported by research, is to be critical of discourse encountered, and discuss its trustworthiness. This involves paying attention gender bias and realize when one group gets more attention than the others. Moreover, it requires the teacher to teach their students to also be critical. This can be done by asking thought provoking questions and regularly discuss inequalities. Yet another strategy recommended is distributing the talking equally between students to facilitate active
participation. Active participation is according to the literature, and the teachers, crucial for learning. To do this, T2 advises the use of sticks containing all of the students names and to pick these sticks randomly to decide who gets to talk. A final strategy that has worked for the two teachers is mixing up where and with whom the students sit with. The purpose of this is having students continually change who they collaborate with to expose them to different ideas. This in turn helps them develop understanding and tolerance towards others, according to the teachers. Although I did not find anything specifically about student’s placements in the classroom in the literature, theories on the benefits of socialization in general could possibly be applied.

The relevance of these results is that they not only show what teachers can expect in terms of gender bias in the EFL classroom, but they also give insight into how teachers can counteract it. Moreover, these results being in line with the literature, suggests that theories and strategies based on results in other countries may also be applicable in a Swedish context. The significance of this is that it shows that even though Sweden is considered to rank fairly high in terms of gender equality, it does not mean that specialized or particularly context sensitive strategies are needed for teachers in order to create equal classroom environments.

6.1 Limitations of the study

There are of course several limiting factors decreasing the significance of the results. One of them are that I only interviewed two teachers. I can therefore not make any generalizations or draw any conclusion about the general population. This is due to the time constraint and the fact that I had trouble finding teachers who both fit the requirements and were willing to participate. On the other hand, qualitative interviews are not meant to be the basis of generalizations as I mentioned in the methods section. With this said, an additional quantitative method, such as a survey, could have improved the validity of the study. This would be an easy way to ask a large amount of teachers if they have encountered gender bias in teaching materials or elsewhere in the classroom. This way I could also list strategies recommended in the literature and have the respondent's mark which strategies they use. Continuing, I also believed that preparing the teachers more thoroughly for the interview could have helped. For example, revealing the questions for the teachers prior to the interview
could have enabled them to reflect on more specific areas brought up in the interview. But, since they already had to sacrifice time, that could be spent planning lessons, to fit in the interviews into their schedules, I did not feel like bothering them more than what was necessary.

6.2 Further research

Building upon the areas and themes presented in this project, I have a few suggestions for further research. For instance, looking into how the principal ensures that the teachers at their school counteracts gender bias would be interesting since the principal is the one responsible for making sure that guidelines are being followed. This would also mean looking further into what kinds of resources that can be offered to individual teachers who struggle with gender bias. Furthermore, it could also be worth looking into how parents can be included in the promotion of equality. This would make sure that students are reminded of the importance of equality both at school and at home. Additionally, as I stated throughout this project, language and word use can influence students greatly. It could therefore be useful to do more research about the implementation of gender neutral language. Another area of interest could be the teacher program and how it prepares future teachers for working in gender biased environments. Moreover, former students of the teacher program could be interviewed about how well they believe the program prepared them. Additionally, as a complement to the interviews with teachers, students in 4-6 could also be interviewed to explore how they themselves perceives gender bias and equality. Getting this type of insight into how students feel could help shedding light on particularly problematic areas according to them. Lastly, it would be interesting to look further into the importance of students’ placement in the classroom and how this could be done to facilitate learning and understanding of others.
7 References


SFS 2010:800. *Skollag*.


8 Appendices

Interview guide

I klassrummet

- Hur många killar/tjejer?

- Frågor om elever - vilka pratar mest? Vilka är tystast? Vilka blir oftast tillsagda? (stor/liten grupp?)

- Hur gör du för att gynna både killar och tjejer?

- Hur är eleverna mot varandra?

I material

- Vilket material använder du?

- Har du valt det själv?

- Är du nöjd med det? varför/varför inte?

- Tycker du att den följer LGR 11?

- Ger den en rättvis bild av män o kvinnor överlag? (t.ex. utseende, jobb, roller)

- Särskild strategi när du använder materialet? Hur skulle du göra om det förekom något stereotypiskt i materialet? Kommentera det?

- Generic pronoun? - “he”, policeMAN, actress, businessman
• Ta upp normbrytande exempel (män som hjälper till i hemmet) - hade läraren belyst detta?

Egna attityder

• Vad innebär jämställdhet i klassrummet för dig? Vad leder avsaknad av det till?

• Vilken betydelse tror du språket som används i klassrummet, texter som läses o illustrationer har för elevers bild av könsroller?

• Förberedde lärarprogrammet dig för att skapa en jämlik miljö i klassrummet för att kunna ge båda könen samma möjligheter? Stött på några svårigheter?

• Hur länge har du jobbat som engelsklärare?

• Vem har ansvar för att det är jämställt i klassrummet? vem kan påverka mest?