Examensarbete
10 poäng

Speaking in the English Classroom
A Gender Related Study

Att tala i det engelska klassrummet
En genusrelaterad studie

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Lärarexamen 180 poäng
Moderna språk med inriktning mot undervisning och lärande i Engelska
2007-01-17

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Abstract
The main purpose of this study is to investigate students’ perceptions and experiences of speaking in the English classroom in second language acquisition. The investigation has been carried out with a focus on gender diversity, using qualitative interviews. The aim is to explore the mechanisms that make some students verbally active and others not, such as group dynamics, gender norms, teacher approach and students’ view on spoken English. I have also chosen to present the teacher’s viewpoint as it provides a more complex understanding of the topic. The results of the study imply that the boys in the English class are more verbally active than the girls, but particularly among the girls there are great variations regarding classroom interaction. One obstacle for oral practice among the girls is fear of making errors, which is aggravated by the large size of the group. The verbal activities also seem closely linked to the prevailing normative femininity and masculinity in this class.

Key words: English, verbal activity, gender, normative femininity, normative masculinity.
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1 Introduction

A crucial factor when students acquire a second language is getting opportunities to use the language in its spoken form in the learning environment. In my teaching practice I have noticed great variations in the extent to which different students speak during English lessons; some speak a lot whereas others hardly ever practise any spoken English. Since I have made the assumption that limited oral practice of spoken English may have negative consequences for language acquisition, I have become interested in the mechanisms that make some students speak and others not. I am aware that some students are shy and others are more extrovert, which of course has an impact on their verbal performance. Nevertheless, there are presumably other determining factors, for instance linked to the teacher’s approach, group dynamics and gender. My impression concerning gender in the classroom is that there are more boys than girls that are verbally active.

According to the Swedish curriculum for the Compulsory School, Lpo 94 (1994)

School should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for men and women. The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school as well as the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contribute to their perception of gender differences. The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender roles and should therefore provide pupils with the opportunity of developing their own abilities and interests irrespective of their sexual identity. (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 1994, p. 6)

Furthermore, the Swedish Education Act touches upon the same issue:

2 § All children and young people should, regardless of gender/…/ have equal access to education in the public educational system./…/Those working in school should in particular promote gender equality.

Tallberg Broman (2002) argues that Sweden is considered more progressive than other nations regarding gender equality, which has the consequence of bringing gender issues out of focus (p. 11). It is my conception that teachers are also faced with issues like a heavy workload of planning lessons, meetings, documentation and other social problems that tend to take over, and hence gender questions do not seem to be given priority in many schools.
However, given the steering documents, the teachers have a responsibility to bear the
gender perspective in mind. To have insights and awareness of the students’ differing
conditions, possibly gender-related, is the first step in the process.

The question to bring to the fore is whether all girls and all boys respectively can be
generalized into one homogenous group related to gender, or if the individual
differences between for instance different girls may be even more salient. From my
investigation, I hope to gain insights of students’ view on gendered identities and how
they incorporate their view in their own behaviour and verbal performance in the
English classroom.

2 Purpose and focus of research
The aim of my investigation is to gain insights about students’ learning conditions in the
subject of English, concentrating on attitudes and experiences among students in school
year nine as well as their teacher to the issue of verbal space, approached within a
gender diversity framework. The focus of the study will be on the students’ outlook on
gender identity, how they experience the English lessons both regarding group
dynamics, patterns of dominance, teacher’s treatment, their general view of spoken
English and how they feel about speaking in the classroom. I will also investigate the
teacher’s view on classroom interaction, gender and the reason for using certain
methods in the English classroom.

The analysis will be highly contextual, and in the investigation I will try to find
discernable patterns that can be linked to the research discussed. What do the power
relationships and group dynamics look like in the ninth grade English class that I have
taught? Are there actually distinct differences between how girls and boys interact in the
classroom based on for instance the normative femininity or masculinity of that context?
Or are the differences between students rather based on individual characteristics than
on gender differentiation? And what is the teacher’s role in upholding these group
dynamics? Through this investigation I hope to gain better knowledge about girls’ and
boys’ conditions and opportunities to speak in the classroom situation.
3 Literature Review

To accentuate the difference between biological and cultural sex, there is a general distinguishing between sex (kön) and gender (genus). Gender is a notion which is used for understanding and discerning the conceptions, ideas and actions that altogether form the social sex of human beings. The notion was introduced in the early 1980s (Nationalencyklopedin, 2006).

Feminism has always had a theoretical or philosophical orientation as well as a political one. Baxter (2003) discerns three chronological waves in the history of feminism: pre-modernist or “first wave” feminism, modernist or “second wave” feminism and postmodernist or “third wave” feminism (p. 4). In recent years, with postmodernist or “third wave” feminism, research has changed its focus from binary gender differences to a diversity of gender identities and gendered practices.

Cameron (2005) explains this shift as not just a “theoretical fashion, but also linked with real world changes in the social relations of gender and sexuality” (p. 7). She claims that a person’s identity in today’s western society is a matter of choice and effort, and that gender is no longer taken to be fixed and unalterable (p. 8). There has been an obvious shift also in the labour market, where in some spheres workplace linguistics are being feminized, i.e. there are new demands of symbolically feminine character on interpersonal and linguistic levels. The mechanisms reproducing inequality in contemporary public contexts are today more complex and subtle than previously (p. 13).

In my view, these more subtle mechanisms can be a reason for many teachers not giving priority to gender questions – there may not be an obvious gender power relationship.

To a greater extent than in previous gender studies, the notion gender is used by “third wave” feminists as a tool for studying the conceptions of what is perceived as masculine/feminine, fluctuating over time and space (Cameron, 2005, Table 1).

“Third wave” feminism contains the view of gender diversity and is characterized by a post-structuralist perspective, which is not specific to one single academic discipline. It is rather constituted by a plurality of theoretical positions. But the common starting point within post-structuralism is language as a “site” for the construction of social...
meanings (Baxter, 2003, p. 6). “Third wave” feminism is identified by the presupposition of diversity and multiplicity of women’s identities, a performative nature of gender, a focus upon context-specific gender issues. A particularly important concept is co-construction, meaning that identities are negotiated and constructed through social interactions, power as an ever changing phenomenon, whereby powerlessness is not a feature of all women any more, and finally female resistance to, and reinterpretation of, stereotyped subject positions (p. 4-5). One aspect of post-structuralism is hence, that you become who you are because of how you act and perform. Gender is from this standpoint an effect of different actions that we perform on a daily basis; gender identities and gendered behaviours are hereby produced ongoingly. Ambjörnsson (2003) points out that postmodernist feminist criticism of a dichotomized view of gender holds that there is a risk of preserving gender positions as separate by forming and determining them (p. 26-27). Cameron (2005) claims that “masculinities and femininities are produced in specific contexts of “communities of practice”, in relation to local social arrangements” (Table 1). From this viewpoint there are no assumptions that the same patterns will be found universally. Rather, gender patterns must be seen in relation to the historical, cultural, social and political context where they are produced. Cameron claims that “masculinities and femininities come in multiple varieties, inflecting and inflected by all the other dimensions of someone’s social identity – their age, ethnicity, class, occupation ...” Furthermore, gender identities may contrast more with other versions of the same gender than with the other gender (p. 5).

However, R. W. Connell (2002) states that the dichotomized gender symbolism in the Western society is very strong. He mentions that physical differences and social effects are often seen as connected. There are prevailing assumptions about what characterizes a man or a woman, such as the symbolically “feminine” features to be caring, talkative, emotional, intuitive and sexually loyal, in contrast to the symbolically “male” features to be aggressive, quiet, rational, analytical and promiscuous (p. 58). Connell furthermore points out that much research with focus on personal characteristics indicates no differences at all between men and women. Nevertheless, it seems to be the norm to characterize children from birth into two contrastive groups regarding personal qualities, merely based on their biological sex. Accordingly, the conception of gender in Western society still seems to be a dichotomy between male and female, masculine and feminine.
But still, what is considered to be masculine or feminine in one context; social, cultural or geographical, does not necessarily symbolize masculinity and femininity in another context. The fact that we live in a changeable world, characterized by globalization and individualization, offering multiple choices for ways of living, makes the norms of femininity and masculinity somewhat fuzzier. At the same time there is often a norm of what may be desirable and ideal in a specific context, related to gender. Ambjörnsson deals with the concept of normative femininity. She investigated the diversity of gender roles among girls in two programmes in a Swedish upper secondary school. She states that the normative femininity of this school, i.e. what was considered desirable and somewhat superior for girls was to be nice, happy, kind, soft and tolerant. Femininity was linked to qualities such as moderateness, control, tolerance and ability to empathize. It was particularly salient for the girls in the programme preparing for higher education, but also in the more practical-oriented programme the girls were aware of which kind of femininity was considered superior. They, however, revolted against this very ideal, by behaving symbolically more masculine – cursing, being loud, rude and sexually provocative. Sandquist (1998) refers to an investigation made at a secondary school, where the teachers had the view that girls from the working class distinguished themselves negatively by being disturbing or uninterested in the classroom. These girls accordingly broke the rules of normative femininity (p. 39).

The normative femininity referred to above has, from a historical perspective, been closely connected to the white middleclass woman, which for instance has led to working-class women feeling that they deviate from a norm, which for them is unattainable (Ambjörnsson, 2003, p. 57). This might explain why the girls in the practical programme revolted against an ideal, which for them was out of reach.

Graf, Helmadotter & Ruben (1991) write about how boys are acting out much more than girls in the classroom, how they insist on getting the teacher’s attention by breaking the classroom rules and making themselves heard in various ways, and hence they stand out as individuals to a higher degree than girls do (p. 49). This seems to correspond to the prevailing normative masculinity of schools of the western world. Tallberg Broman relates to this theme by referring to experiences that teacher students have from the school world, where boys dominate, get more help and attention, but also are described as socially more immature than girls. The girls, on the other hand, tend to talk with each other more privately in the classroom (p. 96, 109).
Einarsson and Hultman (1984) mention that the teacher on average takes up 2/3 of the total speaking time in a lesson. The remaining third is dominated by the boys with 2/3, whereas girls’ share of the speaking time is 1/3 of the remaining third. Einarsson & Hultman state that the conditions for girls are very unfavourable if one sees school as a preparation for a verbally active life as adults. The authors point out that girls learn that boys have an obvious precedence to the spoken word, and that what boys say is worth listening to (p. 82). The authors furthermore claim that the greater part of what girls say in the classroom is reproductive (p. 83). Additionally, Hjort (1984) first and foremost categorizes the silent girls in two groups: working class girls and the ones who are embarrassed by their physical appearance. They fear to speak in public being scrutinized by the others (Tallberg Broman, 2002, p. 107). This is, however, not in accordance with what Ambjörnsson and Sandquist have reported on working class girls. One can assume that the discrepancy between the different studies is based on the different time perspectives; Hjort’s investigations were carried out in the 1980s, as were Einarsson & Hultman’s, whereas the latter ones are of more recent dates.

Tallberg Broman states that “The discourse of boys dominating is strong, but maybe to the extent where it surpasses reality”. The pattern of dominance needs to be seen in relation to the context, in which it takes place (p. 92). Presumably, the 2/3-thinking can not be generalized to all group constellations, classrooms, subjects etc. But is it even at all a prominent issue of today’s schools? In Ambjörnsson’s study, the 2/3-talking related to Einarsson & Hultman, was only partially valid. She found that girls and boys were talking equally much, but in different ways and contexts. The boys tended to speak without being asked, whereas the girls gave answers with short sentences to concrete questions. It was also depending on what topic was being dealt with. But generally the girls were more unobtrusive and corresponded more to the normative femininity in the mixed gender-group than among peers of their own gender-group (p. 58-61, 67).

Baxter has made an analysis of boys and girls in the English classroom. She points to the importance of having access to the public voice. The British syllabus for speaking and listening in English has been revised from a model of collaborative small-group talk to a more public performance-based talk. This, according to Baxter, is also a shift to speech stereotypically associated with males, and thus the girls may be disadvantaged (p. 82). She states that “access to ‘the public voice’ is vital if women are to be as successful as men in the public arena.” (p. 83). It is true that my study involves students in second
language-acquisition, whereas the English students in Baxter’s investigation have English as native language. But still, in the syllabus for English of the Swedish school there is likewise an emphasis on public performance talk, in the sense
to actively take part in discussions/…/express their own thoughts in English/…/to use English orally in different contexts in order to relate, describe and explain, as well as give reasons for their view… (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2002, p. 1).

At my partner school I have experienced discussions of how to promote boys in essay writing and helping them improve their grades in relation to girls who are generally high-achieving and good at writing. But if access to the public voice is a crucial factor for a successful working life there may be reasons for discussing how to promote oral skills as well.

Baxter discusses how the discourse of gender differentiation intersects with the discourse of peer approval. She states that even in quite a homogenous group regarding age, ethnicity, class and culture, there can be a range of masculinities and femininities being constructed by and for individuals. Notwithstanding, she states that “what constitutes male popularity does not appear to be the same as what constitutes female popularity” (p. 94). Thus girls and boys are positioned differently regarding peer and teacher approval. Baxter claims that it is crucial for social acceptance as well as for academic success to have a peer-approved gender identity, and that it is therefore very difficult to resist our culture’s prevailing gender norms (p. 94, 98). Her study shows that English teachers value the symbolically masculine ability to ‘take command’ in group discussions, but also symbolically feminine values of collaboration and sensitive listening. The most positively assessed pupils, therefore, tend to be boys whose performance combines a measure of personal authority with a degree of interpersonal sensitivity. Pupils, who display too much “masculine” dominance or “feminine” deference, are less well-rewarded and assertive girls may be negatively assessed because of the gender expectations. According to Baxter this assessment is not merely on behalf of the teacher, but rather also has negative interactional consequences among peers (p. 123-127).

Although the gender norms may not be as well defined today as they used to be, there still seem to be certain rules of conduct to adjust to. One can say that normative femininity or masculinity in a given context makes some identities natural and others less possible.
Karlson (2003) mentions that in recent years some girls are stronger positioned than previously in the classroom situation. She refers to a study by Öhrn (1998) which puts forward that girls as well as boys offer resistance to their subordination in relation to the teacher, but they do it in less obvious ways, by not paying attention or not participating – only more discrete (p. 27). In connection to the same issue, Tallberg Broman discusses the *private zone* that girls have to exclude the teacher and others, by having private conversations without interfering with the classroom activities. She describes this as a form of silent resistance, a way to obtain power (p. 108-109). Furthermore, Baxter claims that individuals for instance in the classroom are rarely powerful all the time across all discourses, such as gender differentiation, approval and collaborative talk. They can be simultaneously powerful and powerless (p. 9). As mentioned before, the norms and rules of conduct in a specific context, say for instance the classroom, can vary. Apart from societal, cultural, geographical factors and so forth, this is certainly dependent on which teacher is in charge and the current group constellations. Berge (1997) refers to Harding (1987), who claims that we live in complicated historical contexts of class, racial and cultural memberships, although gender classification probably is the most essential categorization human beings make of each other. However, she continues, we cannot predict what the gender power relationships look like in different situations, different classrooms and so forth (Nordborg, 1997, p. 25).

**4 Method**

The investigation was carried out through group interviews with students in an English class in year nine as well as with their teacher. Additionally, it can be mentioned that I had made observations in class before the interviews to gain more a complex view of the situation. However, the observed activities in class were not conflicting with the outcome of the interviews, hence I have chosen not to include detailed impressions of my observations.

The students have varying backgrounds; working class as well as middle class. 20 % of the group of 25 are children of immigrants, such as Croatian, Moroccan and Vietnamese.

Although my starting point in the study was from a gender diversity perspective, I chose to carry out the interviews by dividing the students into two groups based on their biological sex. I mainly based this decision on whom the students presumably would
feel comfortable discussing with, judging by what I previously knew about them. The reason for interviewing the students in groups instead of individually was on the one hand a question of limited time and on the other hand for the students to feel relaxed among fellow students. The student interviews went on for about 90 minutes each, whereas the teacher interview took approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Swedish in order to facilitate communication and enable the interviewees to easily express their opinions and experiences. In the investigation, I focused on students’ views on gendered identities and how they incorporated their views in their own behaviour and verbal performance in the English classroom. The interviews were qualitative and the questions were open and aimed at giving room for students’ personal opinions and experiences (Johansson & Svedner, 2001, p. 24). I hesitated about how to introduce the discussion about gender identity, and chose to approach it by asking the students about typical boys/girls and what is typically feminine and masculine. I am aware that this approach might have biased them in certain directions during the discussion. The students and the teacher were informed beforehand about the focus of the investigation. The parents received information about the interviews, including my phone number where they could reach me if they had questions or objections. All interviewees are anonymously represented in the analysis.

4.1 Selection
The class consists of approximately 50% girls and 50% boys. I chose to interview 5 girls and 4 boys as well as their English teacher in my partner school, a small secondary school located outside one of Scania’s larger cities. I have been teaching these English students during my teaching practice and know them quite well, which I thought was an advantage when getting the students to open up. I tried to select students with varying backgrounds, styles and classroom behaviours, but simultaneously I paid regard to the aspect of who would presumably be willing to talk, which had the result of including two very verbal boys. This might have influenced the outcome of the interview in ways that it would not have with other interviewees.

Below I will present the interviewees with their fictive names:
The girls: Emma, Cissi, Nina, Jasmine, Andrea.
The boys: Emil, Anton, Max, Viktor.
The teacher: Eva.
5 Interview guide

Initiating the student interviews, I mainly had four discussion topics in mind. For each topic I provided questions for the students to answer and discuss:

- **Gender Identity**: What is feminine/masculine? Are there typical girls/boys?
- **Group dynamics**: What is the English group like? Who is more dominant? Who is quiet? How? Why?
- **Teacher’s treatment**: What does the teacher value? What are her strategies and methods?
- **Speaking English**: How do you feel about speaking English? Why?

During the teacher interview I aimed at gaining insights about her view on gender and on the English group as well as her lessons:

- **Gender Identity**: What is your view on gender – personally as well as among your students?
- **Group dynamics**: What makes a successful student? What patterns of dominance and variations can be discerned in the group?
- **Methods in the classroom**: What is your outlook on spoken English regarding the design of lessons and the assessment of students? What can you tell me about the verbal interaction with your students?

6 Results

6.1 Girl Interview

6.1.1 Gender Identity

Nina defines the typical girl as very interested in fashion and shopping, and too concerned with her looks. She simultaneously accentuates that she is not one of those:

People say that I’m like a guy to hang out with. I can sit by the computer for days. Most girls hate doing that. I visit a lot of concerts. They [boys] say “you’re so different from all other girls I know”. I don’t want to be like other girls, I don’t like girls.

But Cissi replies that boys as well as girls care about how they look, only in different ways.

All interviewed girls emphasize that they are no typical girls, and clarify this by explaining for instance how they all rejected typical girl toys when they were younger.
Jasmine likewise says that she always has been a tomboy and continues: “People think that I look like a typical swot, but when they get to know me they call me djävel.”

Emma thinks that people get the impression of a typical girl when they see her because she wears certain clothes or makeup, but she states that it is the wrong impression. The girls agree that a girl should not be too bitchy; she should be cheerful and kind. They all think that good self-esteem comes from making other people happy. Nina adds that knowing that other people think you look good gives confidence, and to her, a successful girl has nice hair, a pretty face and a flat stomach, whereas a successful boy should be up for lots of fun and have dreadlocks. Jasmine defines good self-esteem as not doing what everyone tells you to, and she emphasizes that she herself goes her own way. But at the same time there are things she cannot do because of her culture, such as associating with boys or dating. She, however, points out that this is not a problem for her.

When it comes to boys Emma says: “He shouldn’t be macho like most guys, he should be more normal. He shouldn’t treat girls like shit.”

Cissi continues:

> Hip hoppers, which means that they are *blattar*, immediately say *jävla hora* if you do something they don’t like. Grow up!

Emma and Andrea think that language use is a matter of maturity. Emma:

> I think that language use is a question of maturity. Guys in the second year of upper secondary are on the same level as we [Emma refers to girls in the ninth grade]. I don’t use cursing and sexually degrading words. But boys do. However, I think that using degrading words is much more an issue at larger city-schools.

Nina, on the other hand, says that differences in language use are due to different styles (subcultures), and not a question of gender.

### 6.1.2 Group Dynamics

Nina states that there are a lot of divisions in the group, based on what styles and interests people have. Emma adds that at the end of the day the group still sticks together: “As a group […] we dare to stand up for our rights.”

According to the girls, the boys in general are more dominant in the classroom. Cissi:
“The girls are a bit quieter than the boys in the English lessons. Some girls talk, but not many of us.”

Emma continues on the same subject:

The boys are very talkative but there is also an individual difference. The placing tells a lot about who likes to talk; the talkative ones sit in the middle. If the whole group would be here, we wouldn’t dare to talk this much. Though, I probably would.

The girls claim that the people who talk the most in class are Max, Anton – and Emma. They all agree that the quietest ones in the English group are two girls and one boy. Cissi says that the atmosphere is not all through good, since if you make an error when speaking, there is always someone laughing at you.

6.1.3 Teacher’s Treatment

The girls think that the teacher values students who are quiet, who do their homework and never complain. But at the same time Cissi explains: “The teacher likes Max, in spite of the fact that he raises objections. She often gives him the questions, because he knows.” Andrea continues: “I think that the teacher probably approves more of the ones who are dominant and dare to speak.”

Emma is of the opinion that teachers require a lot more from girls than from boys. The other girls agree. Emma:

[…] we have to be much more well-behaved and mature. If girls talk with each other the teacher reprimands us much more than boys who talk. Teachers expect girls to be mature. One of our male teachers picks on us in the back of the classroom all the time. The boys can behave as badly as they want, but as soon as we say something he immediately exclaims: “Quiet down there!” He is a lot harsher on us.

Nina feels that she gets the most negative attention from the teacher in the group. She says that she tries to avoid drawing attention to herself: “[…] but I and Sara always get picked on when we talk, although no one else is disturbed.”

6.1.4 Speaking English

Everyone agrees that it is more important to be able to speak good English than to write well. This, since speaking is how you primarily communicate and what you need if you for instance go abroad, which the majority of the girls plan on doing after graduating
from upper secondary school. They, however, all think that speaking as well as writing is difficult. They also all think that the teacher evaluates their spoken English as poor. The problem in the English lessons, as the girls see it, is that the group is much too large. They all feel that they would dare to speak more in a smaller group. Andrea comments: “It’s much easier to get to speak and feel secure in smaller groups. If someone is more dominant in a group, like in the English class, I become quieter.”

On the one hand they feel that they do not get enough oral practice in lessons, but on the other hand Emma says: “But even if the teacher says that we shall increase the oral practice you don’t want that in such a large group.”

The girls think that the teacher has great demands on them to speak grammatically correct, and all of them fear being criticized in front of the whole group. For Cissi the problem is even bigger:

I hate speaking English and giving answers to the teacher’s questions. I’m not good at English and I’m very afraid of making errors. I never say one word during English lessons. I fear walking into the English classroom.

Emma gives her view of oral examinations:

If we had had more oral exams from the start, we would all have improved. […] But I don’t like oral exams where you are tested individually, it should be in pairs, otherwise you lose your self-confidence! It should be together with a friend, otherwise you can’t develop you oral ability.

Andrea explains why she thinks that girls in general are quieter than boys in lessons:

We [referring to the girls in general] are more moderate and quiet in the classroom, because we are two years ahead of the boys when it comes to maturity.

6.2 Boy Interview

6.2.1 Gender Identity

The boys think it is very important for them to look good. Especially Emil and Anton emphasize that they think a lot about what clothes to wear. Emil says that he is probably a typical boy, as he sports a lot and curses. Max, Anton and Emil say that they all use a coarse language, which is both sexist and racist when talking to each other. However, they claim that it does not mean anything else than just cursing – a tough jargon.

Max says that there is a difference in how boys and girls communicate:
Two boys curse to each other’s faces while two girls curse with their backs against each other [meaning: more crap talking about other girls]. But the vocabulary is the same, the same cursing. Though, some girls never curse, but most of them do.

Anton states that the notion typical boy or man is not as distinct as it may have been previously:  
For instance, I wouldn’t put makeup on…although you never know when I get older, maybe foundation or something. But there are guys with makeup, alternativare. But they are not considered typical guys.

Max continues:  
Although there is no such thing as a typical guy, there are rockers, hip hoppers, alternativare. There is no typical girl either. But girls are more insecure about how they look. I don’t think that there are different rules of conduct for girls and boys. We live in a unisex society. But there are certainly more guys, who are like us [the boys think that they represent the norm].

Emil, Anton and Viktor think that a girl should not be too cocky or outgoing; rather she should be kind and dress well. Max agrees that it is important for a girl to be good-looking, but he also says: “[…] she should be outgoing and stand up for her opinions.”

Anton seems to disagree, as he sees a difference between how boys and girls should be:  
A boy doesn’t necessarily have to be kind, but there has to be good ‘chemistry’, we must enjoy spending time together. A girl should be kind and not so outgoing.

The boys agree that the most important thing for a boy is that he is liked by the persons he wants to be liked by, who for them are the peers of the same gender.

The boys discuss the difference between self-esteem and self-confidence, and Emil states that self-confidence can be linked to for instance feeling secure speaking English because you know you do it well, whereas self-esteem is on a deeper level and is connected to whether you go your own way in life or not. All the boys say that they have good self-confidence in the English classroom, but Emil states that his self-esteem is quite poor. Viktor fills in that he often tends to listen to what others say. Max, on the other hand, says he is very confident and secure.
6.2.2 Group Dynamics

Anton describes the English group as very divided because of all the different styles of the students. Max continues by describing the great variations between different girls in the group: “[…] some talk a lot, but most ‘whisper’, a couple just shut up; they just answer when spoken to.” Max says that all the boys in the group dare to speak out: “That’s the way things are in all lessons.” Anton fills in by saying that boys are more self-confident than girls: “[…] everyone knows that, it’s what all studies show, too. We believe more in ourselves.”

Max continues:

It’s not hard getting the teacher’s attention. Guys talk more [are more heard] than girls because we have louder voices, for the rest it’s the same. Girls “whisper”. Girls giggle more and they are quieter. But there is no obvious dominance from us boys. Though, we dare to speak more. There are only three girls in class; Emma, Cissi and Anna, who dare to speak. It’s easy to see just by the placing in the classroom which ones will talk a lot and which ones are silent. The ones in the very back don’t want to talk [the back row consists merely of girls]. The loud ones sit in front in the mid-section.

Emil thinks that the teacher should place the quiet students in front to even out the speaking time.

The boys all agree that there is a good atmosphere in the English group – a good balance. Max: “There is no mocking laugh in class […] well, ok if someone says something really funny.”

6.2.3 Teacher’s Treatment

Anton states that the discipline in the English lessons is strict. He, however, admits that he and Max often talk a lot about things unrelated to the activities in class: “[…] but we can handle doing both: talking and working. Unfortunately there are others in class joining in, who can’t handle it as well as we can.” Max is of the same opinion and continues: “[…] we [Max and his friends] can handle talking and working at the same time, that’s why she doesn’t reprimand us.”

Anton thinks that the teacher favours the girls:

[…] she doesn’t correct them as much. I think it’s unfair that a silent girl, who doesn’t speak too good English, gets an MVG just because of the written part. In practice, on the labour market,
the quiet ones who get their grades “for free” will not do so well or at least they will be faced with more problems.

Max fills in:
The silent ones — the girls — get their good grades without effort by just going along, they just do the things they are forced to do. But I think that the teacher tries to get more students than just the boys to speak. There are different kinds of “good” students. Maria and Linn never raise their hands but they do well on the written test and tasks.

**6.2.4 Speaking English**
All the boys in the group consider spoken English to be more important than written. They all agree that English will be relevant for all parts of working life, regardless of profession.

Although Emil thinks that the teacher puts too heavy demands on speaking British English, and all the boys say that they feel the teacher’s requirements concerning speaking grammatically correct. But this aspect does not make them feel nervous or anxious about speaking in the English group. In fact, Emil, Anton and Max say that they never feel nervous about speaking in class. Viktor says that he does not speak that much in the lessons: “Sometimes I don’t feel comfortable with speaking, I sometimes stutter. But I think that the teacher thinks I’m good at speaking English.” Everyone fills in that they think, or rather know, that the teacher estimates their spoken English as very good.

**6.3 Teacher Interview**

**6.3.1 Gender Identity**
Eva, who has been working as a secondary school English teacher for 30 years, describes her personal characteristics by stating: “I, as a person, am not caring woman, I can say no and I don’t do as I’m told to. I bring nothing but my pedagogical work home.” She thinks that the typical female teacher is understanding and does not set boundaries. But she develops her statement by saying:

[…] there are many male teachers in this school that are typical females […] I don’t think that there is such a thing as a typical male teacher. ‘Male’ and ‘female’ seems to symbolize something else than biological sex. ‘Male’ can be a description of ways of being and behaving. Sometimes you can hear: “We need more male teachers.”, in the purpose of having more discipline, from male teachers who they themselves can’t get their students straight.
6.3.2 Group Dynamics
A good student, in Eva’s opinion, does his/her homework, has a nice attitude in the classroom and does not mock other students – in combination with responsibility and willingness to work.
At first, Eva states that the boys are louder in the classroom — they take up more space both verbally and physically. But then she modifies it, by saying that there are great variations within the gender groups.
And girls can take up much space as well, especially regarding results. They are very anxious about getting it right; they want to double-check with me. I have to correct the boys more concerning conduct.
Eva does not see any gender-based differences in who raises their hands; it seems to be more individually based, she says.
To her, there are no obvious differences between an English class today and thirty years ago, except for maybe the use of a coarser jargon among the students when they talk with each other. “That probably doesn’t mean anything else than the jargon used previously. It goes for both boys and girls.”
The students who have a high status in the group are, according to Eva, Max, Anton, Emma and Cissi. “The girls because they are pretty and have fancy clothes. Max and Anton are tough, cool and verbal.”

6.3.3 Methods in the Classroom
Eva does not consider a gender focus in teaching to be of significance. She claims that she has the same expectations of everyone, regardless of gender or other characteristics. However, she says, she does not treat them in the same way, since it would not work:
I have a rougher attitude towards some boys, not because they are boys, but for them to toe the line. It’s a pedagogical instrument to make things work. And I quite enjoy wrangling a bit with them. I use irony to make them drop a brick sometimes, because they can take it.
Regarding the spoken English, Eva says that she cannot have that much oral practice with such a large group. When students get to speak freely, she does not correct them grammatically, at least not in an obvious way. Eva thinks that the difference between what students achieve in writing and speech usually is not very big – it is no contrasting
relationship. “But if a student has a very quiet personality, it isn’t fair to assess him/her negatively just because of that.”

7 Summary and Interpretation

7.1 Student Interviews

7.1.1 Gender Identity

At first, neither the girls nor the boys seem to be of the opinion that there are typical girls and boys. But further into the discussions it appears that there are certain features that make up the norm of a girl and a boy. The girls dissociate themselves in an obvious way from the “female” qualities that for them define a typical girl. These qualities, such as caring too much about how you look and going shopping - seem to have negative associations. But judging by what Nina, for instance, defines as desirable characteristics for a girl, features like a flat stomach and nice hair, it appears that looks are very important. Still she rejects being like “other girls” and claims she is more like a boy. Ambjörnsson (2002) discusses the multiple ways of seeing, which means that girls are aware of the normative femininity, they are critical towards it but they still adjust to it. (2002: 67-68) For the girls, normative femininity seems to be linked to physical appearances, such as clothes and makeup, but also to personal characteristics such as kindness and moderateness. This is in accordance with the normative femininity of the upper secondary school in Ambjörnsson’s study (2002: 57). The boys view of how a girl should be is not much different; good-looking, kind and not too cocky was their description, although Max added that a girl should be outgoing and stand up for her opinions. Ambjörnsson writes about the changing expectations on women, who in today’s Scandinavian welfare states should “be independent, active and clever” Kleven 1992:53 in Ambjörnsson 2002: 64).

Anton says that a boy does not have to be kind, but he should be fun to spend time with. The most important thing for a boy, according to the boys, is to be liked by the peers of same gender. The girl group thinks that a boy should be fun and not be too macho like most of them are, in the girls’ opinion. The boy group thinks that boys in general are more straightforward and honest when communicating with each other. They claim that girls talk behind each other’s backs. The boys think that there is no obvious gender difference in vocabulary use, whereas some of the girls claim that boys have a more immature language with lots of cursing. Tallberg Broman refers to Rensfeldt’s (1998)
study, in which girls think they have more manners and maturity (2002: 109). This seems to go for the girls interviewed here as well.

7.1.2 Group dynamics
All students interviewed say that the English group is divided because of students differing styles and interests, but that they still stick together. Both interview groups name boys as well as girls as the quietest and the most talkative students. Max says that there are greater variations within the girl group than the boy group, as according to him, all the boys in class dare to speak out. Among the girls in the classroom, some talk a lot, most of them “whisper” and a couple never speak unless they have to, according to the boys interviewed. Karlson mentions that girls ‘tittle-tattle’ in the classroom instead of participating in class discussions, which they supposedly do because they have a strong focus on personal relations instead of public conversations (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1991 in Karlson 2003: 53). Einarson & Hultman claim that there usually is a small group in every class, first and foremost consisting of girls, which never say anything during lessons (1984: 83). In the investigated class this small group consists of one boy and two girls.

Everyone agrees that there is a male dominance, but that there are differences within the gender groups as well. Ambjörnsson discusses the fact that girls as well as boys in her study talked in class, only in different ways and contexts. The boys often spoke without being asked and the girls raised their hands and gave shorter answers to the teacher’s questions (2002: 59).

Both groups discuss that the placing in the classroom shows who talks a lot and who does not. The whole back row consists of fairly quiet girls. This can be linked to the private zone – a form of quiet resistance from the girls, which Tallberg Broman mentions (2002: 109). According to the girls there are students in class mocking others who make errors, whereas the boys do not experience that.

7.1.3 Teacher’s Treatment
The female and the male interviewees’ experiences of the teacher’s treatment of them differ. The girls think that the teacher requires more from them than from the boys, particularly regarding behaviour; they feel that they have to be more well-behaved and mature, and that they get stronger reprimands. Tallberg Broman states that teachers
often have a view of boys as socially more immature than girls (2002: 96). This can also be found in Ambjörnsson’s school, where the expectations of girls were to be mature and responsible 2002: 61).

The girls seem to be uncertain about what behaviour is most approved of by the teacher; whether it is to be quiet and never complain, or to be dominant and speak a lot. Nina feels that the teacher focuses most negatively on her in the English group if she talks with her peers. Furthermore, Cissi says that the teacher likes Max, although he raises objections. Baxter points out that students who are powerful in all three classroom discourses, which in her study are gender differentiation, peer approval and collaborative talk, are most successful and approved of by the teacher (2003: 123). It appears that this is an accurate description of Max.

The boys, on the other hand, think that the teacher favours the girls, especially the silent ones, who “get their grades without effort”, as Max claims. However, the boys say that the teacher tries to make everyone speak in class. When the boys mention the silent ones in class they refer to the girls, which is interesting, since they themselves have named both talkative girls and quiet boys in the English group. When I ask them to clarify this, they say that they refer to the majority of the girls. Anton says that in working life the silent ones will have difficulties with using their English. In fact, this is what Baxter designates as access to the public voice: students who achieve well in written examinations but never talk in the classroom are not used to speaking in public, and hence have more difficulties to become successful in working life (2003: 83).

7.1.4 Speaking English

During the interviews, the two discussions are very different concerning the view of speaking English. All the students consider spoken English to be more important than written, since it is the primary means of communication. They also all think that the teacher puts heavy demands on speaking grammatically correct English. That has great consequences for the girls’ confidence to speak, but not for three of the boys’. The girls also presume that the teacher evaluates their spoken English as very poor, whereas the boys are certain that the teacher thinks they speak very well. Sandquist mentions that girls tend to underestimate their skills, whereas boys tend to overrate them (1998: 88). It can be mentioned that none of the interviewees are low-achieving students in the subject.
of English. Cissi even goes as far as saying that she never opens her mouth out of fear of making errors, and she even fears walking into the classroom.

Another problematic aspect that the girls point out is the size of the English group. It is much too large for them to feel confident to speak. They acknowledge that they would need more oral practice, but they still do not want it. The girls have strategies of avoiding the teacher’s questions. But they also think that the boys are louder and more talkative because they are more immature than the girls. This, again, can be referred to Rensfeldt (1998) in Tallberg Broman, where the girls describe the boys as more loud and immature, whereas the girls have more manners and do not shout out (2002: 109).

In the boy group the attitude to speaking in the classroom is quite the opposite. Most of them enjoy speaking in front of the whole group and are very confident about their skills. Only one of them says he is sometimes uncomfortable about speaking English in class, but he states that the teacher probably thinks he is quite good at it.

7.2 Teacher Interview
7.2.1 Gender Identity
Eva does not define herself as a typical female teacher, but at the same time she claims that there are many male teachers with symbolically feminine features and vice versa. For her, the supposedly female and male characteristics are nothing but symbolical, and are not linked to sex.

7.2.2 Group Dynamics
For Eva, a good student works diligently and has a nice attitude in class, something which includes not mocking peers. Her spontaneous comment is that the boys are more dominant, both verbally and physically. Thorne (1993) claims that the variation easily vanishes, as we tend to pay attention to what is most obvious in a group – some girls’ and some boys’ become the stereotypes of the whole gender group (Tallberg Broman 2002: 27). Eva, nevertheless, adds that girls to a higher extent require her attention for checking their work, in order to get it right. Graf, Helmadotter & Ruben refer to Einarsson & Hultman (1984), mentioning that girls tend be more anxious about their results than boys (1991: 49). But Eva also emphasizes that the variations within the gender groups are large. Nevertheless, she says that she corrects the boys’ conduct more often. This connects with what Tallberg Broman points out: that boys are more often
criticised and corrected and described as more immature (2002: 96). Graf, Helmadotter & Ruben discuss how this contributes to making boys become clearer individuals than girls in class (1991: 49). Furthermore, Eva states that the popular boys in the group are tough and verbal, whereas the girls’ popularity seems to be more linked to physical appearances. Baxter establishes that what constitutes male popularity is not the same as what constitutes female popularity, and therefore boys and girls may not be positioned on an equal basis regarding peer approval (2003: 94). Baxter furthermore states that a peer-approved gender identity is a critical factor in gaining social acceptance, and additionally in achieving academic success (2003: 98).

7.2.3 Methods in the Classroom
Eva acknowledges that she has a rougher attitude towards some boys, but not towards all of them and not towards the girls. She says that this is a tool to make things work in the classroom. Berge mentions teachers serving the boys’ needs to avoid chaos (Nordborg 1997: 20). However, it does not seem to be the needs of the boys that are crucial for Eva, as she herself likes wrangling with them, as she claims.

The fact that the writing dominates the English lessons, she explains by the group size. She furthermore says that she does not make obvious corrections of grammatical mistakes when students speak. She also adds that students with quiet personalities should not be punished with bad grades, just because they do not dare to speak.

8 Analysis
8.1 Normative Femininity and Normative Masculinity
During both student interviews one gets the impression of a normative femininity which implies moderateness, kindness, softness and maturity. But it seems like these features have to be combined with a certain physical appearance in order to generate female popularity. The normative masculinity in this context seems to be linked to independence, toughness and verbal skills, but also immaturity, according to the girls and presumably the teacher. The connection between the normative femininity/masculinity and the verbal activities in class appears to be highly relevant. There seems to be a strong connection between male/female popularity, i.e. peer-approved gender differentiation, and a verbally active behaviour in the classroom.
The teacher represents a female variety that maybe most people would not consider normative, as she herself claims. In that sense she, as a role model, counteracts traditional roles, in accordance with the steering documents, through her personality rather than consciously. Eva herself claims that she has a rougher attitude towards some boys but that she treats students equally for the rest, although she says that she reprimands boys more often concerning behaviour. Perhaps the fact that she has a symbolically more masculine approach has the consequence that some female students may have more difficulties than the boys identifying with the teacher, and hence become more moderate in class.

8.2 Access to the Public Voice
The interviewees state, that two boys and one girl are the most talkative ones, whereas two girls and one boy are the most quiet ones in class. But they also say that more girls than boys are quiet in the English group. The girls view, that moderateness is a matter of maturity, which they claim to have and the boys not, can certainly be one factor contributing to the difference. It can be assumed, that in this context, most of the boys are better prepared for speaking in public – to obtain access to the public voice – in working life. Still, one has to bear in mind the variations within the gender groups.

8.3 What the Teacher Values
The girls’ uncertainty about which behaviour is most approved of by the teacher – deference or dominance – seems to illustrate the discrepancy between what they feel is expected of them as females and the (more teacher-approved?) normative masculinity. Another factor that presumably hinders four out of five girls from speaking is their fear of making errors and being corrected in class, which they say is aggravated by the group size. Although they state that the spoken English is the most important, they do not want to speak. This is not a problem for most of the male interviewees. The interviewees’ view that the teacher has too heavy demands on grammatical correctness is not confirmed by the teacher.

The girls think that the teacher favours some boys, in spite of the fact that they raise objections, whereas the boys are of the opinion that quiet girls are favoured and do not have to make an effort. The fact that silent students can receive an MVG based on written examinations, Eva explains by stating that it is unfair to assess quiet personalities negatively, hence she in that sense has an understanding approach towards
different learners. Furthermore she, according to the boys, tries to make everyone speak in class.

9 Conclusion
The results of my study are highly contextual, as they are linked to one particular English group at a small school. What is valid in the investigated situation may not be valid in another context. However, bearing the purpose and focus of the study in mind, which involves particular students’ perceptions and experiences, it is not possible to make the results generalizable to all other Swedish school settings. Considering the students’ as well as the teacher’s openness and willingness to speak during the interviews, the validity of the study is high for this specific environment, in my opinion. The long discussions were rewarding and interesting. Perhaps the outcome would have been different with other group constellations during the interviews, but I still feel that many different views were made plain.

Referring to the outcome of my interviews, there are more girls than boys that do not speak much in the ninth grader English class. Nevertheless, talkative and quiet personalities can be discerned in both gender groups. One factor that seems to contribute to preventing the girls from speaking is their fear of making errors, of being corrected in public and being mocked by peers.

Although there seems to be a range of masculinities and femininities in class, the boys seem more homogenous, as the vast majority of them are verbally active in class. Among the girls there are greater variations; some are talkative, a larger group speaks sometimes and a few never speak. This shows the diversity in the gender group and may also symbolize a change of the normative femininity.

Still, the normative femininity, that implies e.g. moderateness and maturity, as well as the normative masculinity implying toughness and verbal skills, seems to have great impact on the verbal activities in class. The normative femininity/masculinity also seems to be closely linked to peer-approval, which presupposes that the normative femininity has to include particular physical attributes. There are signs that the gender norms for boys and girls are alterable, given the variations within the gender groups – dominant girls as well as quiet boys - and for instance the boys’ discussion of possibly wearing makeup and living in a unisex society.
It is my impression that the teacher, in spite of her view that gender issues are unimportant, makes up a good role model, if the purpose is to change old-fashioned gender patterns.

In conclusion, it can be assumed that more boys than girls in the group have access to the public voice, which may help them become successful also later in life. The girls emphasize that they have no problems speaking in smaller groups, and a suggested teaching strategy is to enhance the amount of small-group discussions and to gradually increase the students’ practice of speaking English in public.
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