Gender Equality in the English Classroom

Teachers' Attitudes Toward Incorporating Gender Equality in Their Teaching of Upper Secondary School English

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to attain a deeper understanding of how English teachers approach the incorporation of gender equality in their English teaching, and the challenges and successes encountered in their pedagogical method. The study takes a qualitative approach, where the research examines the attitudes, teaching strategies and practical experiences of English teachers through semi-structured interviews. Six upper secondary English teachers were interviewed, and the results show a positive attitude towards including gender equality into their teaching. The results also present several ways to include gender equality in English teaching, emphasizing common discussions in the classroom. Some challenges were also identified, including the management of strong opinions, navigating cultural differences, limitations in language skills and long term-impact. The conclusions are that English teachers show a positive outlook towards including gender equality, highlighting the importance of collaborative dialogue in the classroom. The challenges mentioned by the teachers are addressed through open communication, and students are engaged through approaches such as games and audiovisual media, connecting language learning with learning about gender equality.

Keywords: English, ESL, gender equality, upper secondary school, Sweden, teaching
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1 Introduction

Sweden is ranked the most gender-equal country in the European Union, according to the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a). However, according to recent reports from the School Inspection Authority in Sweden (Skolinspektionen, 2023), female pupils have a more negative experience from school, compared to male pupils. The result from the reports showed that girls, compared to boys, feel less safe in a school environment, and they had a more negative experience when receiving the help they needed to manage schoolwork (Skolinspektionen, 2023). This reveals that even though we are ranked at the top of the index, there are still challenges and differences between genders, especially in school.

In Sweden, values regarding equality between boys and girls have, for a long time, been stated in the school curriculum as a fundamental aspect of the educational task. However, gender equality has traditionally been viewed by teachers as a matter that you treat on the side of teaching (Heikkilä, 2019, p. 12). In the previously mentioned reports from the School Inspection Authority, they also reviewed 30 Swedish schools and found that the level of integrated teaching related to gender equality in the subjects of social sciences and biology was concerningly low (Skolinspektionen, 2023). To achieve concrete outcomes in gender equality, school development initiative must be closely integrated with efforts promoting gender equality in school (Heikkilä, 2019, p. 13).

The curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden was revised for the fall term of 2022 and The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2022a) added several new terms to align with the Swedish school’s work with social and ethical values. The term gender equality has now been formalized as a separate term, and efforts towards gender equality have been clarified and strengthened. It is since then clearly stated in the curriculum that teaching and working with gender equality is now a responsibility of the entire school (Skolverket, 2023a).

English teachers in upper secondary school not only teach the use of language but also have the responsibility to include and educate students about gender equality. However, they may face the challenge of not prioritizing the inclusion of gender equality into their teaching due to a lack of support, time, and professional demands (Rung & Bäckström, 2022, p. 14).
It is the obligation of every English teacher to incorporate gender equality into the classroom. The focal questions are whether teachers prioritize this in their teaching and how it functions in practical terms. This essay explores how English teachers include gender equality in upper secondary school by investigating teachers’ insights on their choices of approaches of teaching gender equality and the influence of teachers’ perspectives on gender equality in the English classroom.

1.1 Definition of terminology

In this section, the use of terminology regarding the topic of the essay will be explained for clarity.

1.1.1 Gender

In this essay, the term gender will be used. The essay will use the definition by Bradley (1996), who has an extensive background of gender studies. Bradley explains the concept as “the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity” (as cited in Bradley, 2013, p. 205).

1.1.2 Gender equality

Within this essay, the term gender equality will be used. Gender equality in a Swedish context is explained by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023a) as the equal rights, possibilities and obligations between men and women. It is described as an ongoing process of the relationships between boys and girls, men and women and non-binary individuals, concerning both adults and children (Heikkilä, 2019 p. 13). The process is explained as an ongoing, constantly changing conversation, where we decide and figure out what gender means to us on a daily basis (Heikkilä, 2019, p. 13).
1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this essay is to receive a deeper understanding of English teachers’ attitudes towards including gender equality in the ESL classroom, their teaching approaches to addressing this topic and their practical experience in the English classroom.

Research questions

1. How do English teachers perceive the task of including gender equality into the English subject, and what impact do they believe it has on their teaching of English as a second language?

2. In what ways do teachers incorporate gender equality into their English teaching, and what challenges or successes have they faced in their pedagogical approach?
2 Background

In this section, background literature and previous research will be presented. The initial segment will provide an overview of gender equality in Sweden to contextualize the central theme. Thereafter, a description of how gender equality is articulated in the curriculum and the changes that have occurred will be presented. Subsequently, a section will cover how gender equality is expressed in the subject curriculum for English in upper secondary school and then, a background section on how social topics can be integrated in English teaching will be provided. Lastly, previous studies regarding gender equality in English teaching will be presented.

2.1 Gender equality in Sweden

Sweden has traditionally been at the forefront of gender equality work. According to the most recent gender equality index provided by the European Union, Sweden claims the top position in gender parity, with a score of 82.2 % (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a). The gender equality index serves as a tool to assess and highlight areas requiring improvement in gender equality across the EU, supporting policymakers in designing more effective measures (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024b). Since the late 1960s, gender equality concerns have been a fixture in Swedish political discussions and as a policy domain, the issues have shuffled between various governmental fields and ministerial portfolios (Rönnblom, 2011, p. 35). The main political objective is to empower individuals of every gender, allowing them equal influence in shaping both society and their personal life (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023b).

The political goal with gender equality in Sweden consists of six intermediate goals that was determined in 2016 (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023b). These goals aim to achieve equality within education, health, finance, decision making and power, equality within the household and aim to end domestic violence. In Sweden, opportunities regarding access to education are considered relatively equal, whereas in terms of health, home and regarding domestic violence and such, women are facing disparities (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten,
Despite Sweden’s leading position in the realm of gender equality initiatives, there are areas that require continued effort, and opportunities for further enhancements persists.

One of the ways Sweden is working to strengthen gender equality is through the educational system. The government has, through the Swedish Ministry of Education and the Education Act 2010:800, mandated comprehensive efforts for gender equality in Swedish schools (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2011, p. 1). These include initiatives for competence development, sex education support, addressing honor-related issues and enhancing student’s language skills (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2011, p. 1).

The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2021, p. 5) states that its primary commitment in achieving gender equality policy goals is to contribute to an equal education, a balanced distribution of power and influence, and gender-equitable health. The National Agency underlines the importance of knowledge about these aspects as inequality can lead to health issues at different stages of individuals’ lives (Skolverket, 2021, p. 5).

An enhanced focus on topics such as gender equality in school has positive effects for adolescence by raising awareness of issues related to gender and sex (Skolverket, 2023b). This claim is grounded in research by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZga, 2015), in collaboration with the World Health Organization, who has conducted research in sex education where topics such as gender were included. They write that this focus “can empower young people to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships” (BZga, 2015, p. 2).

### 2.2 The revised curriculum

In Sweden, working from a gender equality perspective has long been a part of the educational system. Before the curriculum revision, gender equality was mentioned through the section regarding the school’s mission for an equivalent education. In the previous version of the curriculum, and it persists today, it is stated that:

> The school shall actively and consciously promote students’ equal rights and opportunities, regardless of gender identity. The school also bears responsibility for
making visible and opposing gender patterns that restrict student’s learning, choices, and development … the school should structure education in a way that allows students to collaborate, work together, explore and develop their abilities and interests with equal opportunities and on equal terms, regardless of gender identity (Skolverket 2011).

In 2022, the curriculum was revised, and this previous quote is still present; however, the term gender equality has now also been printed and is mentioned in a separate passage. It is stated in the section about the school’s task of promoting and teaching students the fundamental values and teaching them to think critically (Skolverket, 2022a). Gender equality work is now stated in the curriculum as:

The school shall actively work towards gender equality, embodying and conveying equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities for women and men. Through education students will develop an understanding of gender patterns and their impact of life choices and conditions. The school aims to empower students to critically examine how norms, values, and structures, may limit individuals’ power to shape both society and their own lives (Skolverket 2022a).

The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2023b) also provides guidance for how schools could work with gender equality. It is stated that the work should be divided into three parts. The first part revolves around subject integrated teaching, which is described as the base. This is where the teacher integrates gender equality within their subject teaching in different ways. The second part is described as the everyday work, where if there is a moment when a question is asked or a situation occurs, the teacher should take the opportunity to educate their students. The last part is regarding the school’s ability to plan certain days or lessons together surrounding themes of topics such as gender equality.
2.3 Gender Equality in Upper Secondary English

The English curriculum states that the English subject should generate knowledge of language use, as well as awareness about the social world (Skolverket, 2022b). The English subject should give the students communicative skills to feel secure when speaking English in different situations. It is also stated that through the English subject, students should develop an understanding of living conditions, social issues and cultural context in various settings and regions where English is spoken (Skolverket, 2022b).

The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2023c) presents educational support material for teachers to develop teaching methods regarding gender equality. It is stated that different approaches could be used in the English classroom. The first example mentioned is to organize discussions and conversations about gender equality where the teacher can provide knowledge on how to express opinions and emotions about the topic. Another suggested approach is to teach the class about living conditions and social relationships in areas and contexts where English is used. Reading literature with a perspective or theme of gender equality is also mentioned and the final approach is to perform writing assignments about the topic (Skolverket, 2023c).

2.4 Teaching social responsibility in the ESL classroom

Connecting the school’s task of working with social and ethical values in the English classroom has often been perceived as separate from subject teaching, but the values mentioned in the curriculum should inherently influence language education, according to Lundahl (2012, p. 124). Combining language learning with learning about social and ethical topics is called critical pedagogy (Brown, 2007, p. 513). Critical pedagogy means to teach pupils to develop critical thinking about social, moral, political, and ethical issues (Brown, 2007, p. 515). This part of language teaching aligns with the teacher’s social responsibility, reflecting a teacher’s commitment to create a positive impact on the world (Brown, 2007, p. 512). According to Brown (2007), a language classroom offers an ideal setting for learning about important topics related to the students. Complex topics “can become the focus of intrinsically motivating content-based language learning” (p. 515).
There are multiple ways to include social and ethical values into the English classroom. One approach is to encourage students to respect diversity by teaching them discourse strategies and appropriate phrases to use in English. Brown (2007) writes that “[d]iscourse structures such as ‘I see your point, but...’ are explicitly taught and used in classroom discussions and debates. Students learn how to disagree without imposing their own beliefs or opinions on others” (pp. 515-516).

Another approach could be to read literature. Rosenblatt (1995) writes that teachers have a responsibility to contribute to the creation of social and democratic ideals, and that literature can be used to fulfil that purpose (p. 172). Through reading literature, students will be given perspectives of others and develop an understanding of them (p. 176). Rosenblatt emphasizes that reading literature enhances imagination and fosters a deeper understanding of social and political laws, and theories that are related to humans (p. 261). Language teachers hold a significant role in teaching students to self-reflect and think critically about literature, according to Rosenblatt (1995) who writes that: “Students should be actively helped to develop criteria based on democratic assumptions about the freedoms and responsibilities of individuals, men and women creating a shared future” (p. 296).

2.5 Previous research

Research regarding the topic of gender equality in education can be found in studies covering various fields. However, there is currently no study aiming at the upper secondary level specifically focusing on English teaching in Sweden that explores teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of gender equality in their teaching. Instead, three studies from Sweden will be presented, one from upper secondary school, one at compulsory level and one at preschool level. International studies will also be introduced in this section with research related to teaching English as a second or foreign language.
2.5.1 Teaching approaches

Previous studies have shown that gender equality can be included in English language teaching, through the reading of literature, through linguistic discussion by applying critical literacy as well as using oral presentations.

In a degree project in Sweden, Östman (2006) investigated how upper secondary teachers interpret the management documents and their strategies for promoting gender equality. In the present study, interviews were conducted with teachers, and certain responses from these teachers are directly associated with the teaching of the Swedish language. Given that this subject represents another language discipline, the teaching approaches demonstrated by these instructors are assumed to share notable similarities applicable to teaching English. The teachers in the study, prioritize promoting gender equality through their teaching methods predominantly using texts and instructional materials. They actively select materials with a gender equality perspective, featuring diverse voices including female authors and in literary history. Discussions encompass both historical and contemporary gender roles with an emphasis on women's experiences (Östman, 2006, p. 29).

In a study by Kraver (2007), a pedagogical model is presented for teaching literature with a specific focus on gender equality in secondary education. Using a model called the Literature Response Model, the research explores a five-step approach to engage students in critical thinking about gender related themes in literature. This study provides practical examples and methods, and it demonstrates how gender equality concepts can be integrated into English language studies. One example of this is to have students choose a male or a female character from the literature and analyze if the narrative reinforces or challenges gender stereotypes (p. 72). Kraver emphasizes that reading literature will not serve as a solution to the social problems in the world, but it provides a solid foundation for classroom discussions (p. 73).

In a degree project conducted in Sweden by Brodin (2017), the author investigated the attitudes of EFL compulsory teachers towards gender bias and their efforts to promote gender equality in their classroom. The interviews revealed that the teachers use various strategies to counteract gender bias by diversifying materials, promoting critical discourse, ensuring equal talking time, and randomizing student selection and seating arrangement in the classroom (pp. 37-38).
In an action research project in Italy by Sara Lewis (2011), the author analyzed the outcome of teaching an EFL class with a gender perspective through linguistic discussion. The teacher used different worksheets that contained vocabulary of different job titles such as the use of policeman or police officer, creating a discussion about using gender neutral terms, compared to only using the ones with male suffixes (p. 15). Through this conversation, the students engaged in discussion about sexism in language use and learned that there are more correct ways than one to express oneself. The result from the study showed that students comprehend the diverse use of gender-associated words (p. 18). The findings also indicated:

the importance of language courses in which teachers use materials that promote gender equality (or confront and deconstruct gender stereotypes in materials that do not) and apply approaches that encourage students to be informed, critical thinkers so that they may make empowered linguistic choices (Sara Lewis, 2011 p. 19).

In a study in Hong Kong by Cho and Johnsson (2021), the authors interview a teacher regarding his experience with EFL teaching, applying critical literacy and incorporating student presentations of social topics, such as gender equality. The teacher instructed the students to research a social topic and prepare for a presentation. According to the teacher in the study, the students preferred to choose a topic that is considered sensitive and controversial (p. 183). A strong belief of the teacher in the study was to create trust between the students and the teacher, and for the students to take charge of their own learning, and to think critically about the information given to them (p. 181). The teacher in the study emphasized the importance of dialogue in the classroom and to listen to others’ perspectives (p. 182).
2.5.2 Challenges in the language classroom

Discussing sensitive topics in the classroom could provide a set of challenges. Previous research has shown challenges tied to culture. In the study by Östman (2006), the teachers responded that they feel the need in promoting gender equality more with immigrant students because of differences in culture (p. 27). Another challenge related to culture identified by Cho and Johnsson (2021), is parental resistance. When interviewing the teacher, it was revealed that the cultural background of a student’s family had resulted in complaints to the school about the topics discussed in the ESL classroom (p. 184). The teacher explained that he felt the support from colleagues and the school administration to maintain teaching classes this way.

Another challenge identified by Sara Lewis (2011) is the dilemma for a teacher to remain neutral in the classroom (p.10). The teacher did not have the intention of forcing personal opinions on the students, however she conveys, “I cannot say I was completely objective or neutral […] in my teaching” (Sara Lewis, 2011, p. 10).

A previous study has also revealed that teachers lack education about gender equality. Fine-Davis and Faas (2014) researched and compared teachers and students attitudes towards equality, as well as diversity, in six different European countries. In the study, results showed that teachers identified a lack of training in handling issues related to equality and diversity in the classroom (p. 1331). The teachers also answered that their primary training did not contain any aspects of how to address such matters and the majority had not been given any further training. The teachers in the study answered that they believe they would benefit from additional training (p. 1331).

An additional challenge presented in a study by Vu and Pham (2022) is that teachers do not prioritize making time to address the topic in the English classroom. In the study, English teachers in Vietnam were examined about their use of textbooks with gender-related content. The results of this study showed that the English teachers did not always recognize or address the gender perspectives in the textbooks and focused more on language skills. The study suggests that teachers need to be more aware of gender issues and encourage critical thinking (p. 23).

In a Swedish study, the challenge of insufficient prioritization has been identified as well. In research by Tallberg Broman (2007), the author investigated the implementation and
impact of gender equality and democratic principles in Swedish preschools and primary schools. The author explores the experiences of preschool teachers and primary teachers on implementing gender equality in childcare. The results indicated that, despite clear mandates in the curriculum regarding the incorporation of democracy and gender equality, implementing these principles in practice proved to be challenging. The findings suggested that, in general, these aspects were not given high priority among the preschool teachers (Tallberg Broman, 2007, p.8).

Another challenge identified in a previous study is how to approach pronouns. In the study by Brodin (2017), the findings revealed that the teachers had contrasting views on generic pronouns in the classroom. One teacher sees it as generally unproblematic, emphasizing flexibility for students in choosing terms and expressing skepticism about the stability of gender neutral-terms due to changing political climates. In contrast, the second interviewed teacher view the use of generic pronouns as significantly damaging and that it reinforces male dominance in language. Both teachers emphasized the importance of engaging in discussions with students about gender-related language choices and their implications (pp. 28-29).

Some potential challenges with bringing up gender equality in the classroom have also been mentioned in the support material from The National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2023a). These include that there could be students who might be unwilling to participate in discussions about gender. Other challenges are potential criticism from parents regarding the school’s work with values, or regarding schools’ ability to address harassment fairly and consistently (Skolverket, 2023a).

2.5.3 Teacher’s role and positive engagement

Previous studies have revealed that when bringing up sensitive topics in the language classroom, the teacher’s dedication is of the essence for a successful outcome. In most of the studies found, the results have presented a positive approach from the teachers when it comes to including gender equality into the English classroom (Cho & Johnsson, 2021; Kraver, 2007; Sara Lewis, 2011; Östman, 2006). A committed teacher is key in literature discussions about gender equality (Kraver, 2007, p. 73) and creating a safe space for the students to
express their beliefs and opinions is crucial for learning to think critically (Cho & Johnsson, 2021, p. 196). In the study by Sara Lewis (2011), she expresses her conclusion about the importance of developing both linguistic and cultural skills, along with critical thinking, which she states are crucial for promoting gender equality in language education (p. 9).

3 Method and material

To be able to answer the research questions, a qualitative approach has been applied. This section provides a more detailed description of how the process of gathering data has been conducted.

3.1 Data collection

This study takes a qualitative approach through interviews with the aim to find out the attitudes, approaches, and experiences from English teachers. Interviews emerged as the preferable method of choice because interviews generate the most significant responses when a researcher wants to investigate complex and subtle topics (Denscombe, 2017, p. 186). It is an appropriate method to use when investigating opinions, experiences, and complex issues (Denscombe, 2017, p.186).

The interview method does not come without limitations. Denscombe (2017) lists a few impediments, such as the validity of the data, in which he suggests that in interviews, participants may say what they want to say, not necessarily what they do, and this might not reflect the truth (p. 202). Establishing the reliability of the data becomes challenging due to the impact of the specific context on both the data and the informants. Denscombe also mentions other drawbacks, such as the method being time-consuming and the possibility of the informants experiencing personal offense from the questions (p. 203). These disadvantages have been taken into consideration in this study.

In this research, I have chosen to use semi-structured interviews, where I used a prepared sheet of questions, with follow-up questions asked when necessary. The method is
described as flexible, where the interviewee was allowed to explore ideas and express
themselves more broadly (Denscombe, 2017, p. 186). To construct the best possible
interview, I have taken Denscombe’s recommendations into consideration, such as being
attentive, tolerant, and non-judgmental in my approach in the interviews (p. 192).

3.1.1 Participants
In this study, ten Upper Secondary School English teachers were contacted and asked to
participate, and ultimately six agreed to take part. The teachers were initially contacted
through email and given the contact letter (see appendix 2) with the information about the
study. The participants work at two different schools in a medium-sized city, in Sweden. Two
teachers are employed at one school, and four at the other one. The age of the teachers ranges
from 34 to 45 and five of the teachers are female and one is male. The years of teaching range
from four to 12 years. Besides being teachers of English, three of the teachers are teaching
Swedish as their second subject, two of them are teaching Swedish as a second language, and
one is a teacher of their native language, Persian. These factors have not been applied in the
analysis of the data but serves as background information.

3.1.2 Interviews
The interviews were scheduled based on times that were convenient for the teachers and were
carried out at their schools. The informants were asked nine prewritten questions (see
appendix 1) and on some occasions, follow-up questions were asked to the informants to
receive a deeper understanding. The interviews took place in a group room or an empty
classroom and were recorded on two devices at the same time, on one computer and on one
smartphone, to reduce the risk of technical problems. The recorded answers were transcribed
using the dictation tool in Microsoft Word; however, the transcriptions needed some editing
due to the tool’s occasional errors.
3.2 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was analyzed by exploring common themes and differences from the interview transcriptions, using Denscombe’s (2018) recommended thematic analysis (p. 212). In the analysis of the data, similar topics and perspectives have been explored in the material and have been compiled into codes. These codes were found reading the transcriptions repeatedly and carefully. When a code was identified in a transcription, a color was used in Microsoft Word to mark the sentence. The answers were then summarized into main themes and sub-themes (See Figure 1 in Results).

3.3 Ethical consideration

In this study, the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017), have been considered. All participants have been thoroughly informed about the purpose of this research, their participation, and the procedures of the study. This information has been conveyed in the letter sent to the participants and verbally communicated during the interviews. Participants have been made aware that they can choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All participants in this research have been anonymized, both their identities and their school of employment.
4 Results

In this section, the results from the interviews will be presented. The informants are coded with numbers 1 to 6 which are based on the sequence of their interviews. Three main themes have emerged from the material. All interviews were conducted in English, and as a result, no translations have been applied to the quoted content. Below, Figure 1 is presented, depicting the codes and themes that have emerged in the analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Teachers as guides in expanding perspectives</th>
<th>Theme: From diverse methods to collective conversations</th>
<th>Theme: Including it is easy, making a difference is harder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Are we just checking a box?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive views</td>
<td>Discussions as a method</td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Easy inclusion</td>
<td>Importance of discussing it together</td>
<td>Long-term effect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on gender equality in the curriculum</td>
<td>Good for oral practice</td>
<td>Not making a real difference</td>
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<td><strong>Subtheme: Planting ideas and bringing a global perspective’</strong></td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Using audiovisual media</strong></td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Managing strong opinions</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perspective expansion</td>
<td>Perspective expansion</td>
<td>Media as a tool</td>
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<td>Global perspectives</td>
<td>Global perspectives</td>
<td>Video discussion</td>
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<td>International vocabulary</td>
<td>International vocabulary</td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Reading literature</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Subtheme: Guiding students in sensitive discussions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Guiding students in sensitive discussions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
<td>Long-term effect</td>
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<td>Teachers’ role</td>
<td>Teachers’ role</td>
<td>Persistence in dialogue</td>
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<td>Sensitive subject</td>
<td>Sensitive subject</td>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Limitations in language skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating a safe space</td>
<td>Creating a safe space</td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
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<td>Language as a limitation</td>
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<td>Weakness in discussion quality</td>
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<td>Imbalance in the classroom</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Subtheme: Navigating cultural differences</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Culture as a challenge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition of different values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1:

Themes and Subthemes in Teachers’ Perspectives on Gender Equality Integration in English Teaching
4.1 Teachers as guides in expanding perspectives

Most of the teachers in this study expressed positive views on the emphasis on gender equality in the curriculum and all the teachers found it easy to include gender equality into their English classroom. Teacher 3 says that “now we have to include it and I think that's a positive push in the right direction” and she utters that “teachers can't hide away from it [...] and say that it is not a significant thing now when the curriculum is clearer”.

Teacher 4 expresses that gender equality is “a well-fitting topic to bring into English teaching” and Teacher 2 emphasized that including gender equality in her teaching is easy, asserting that “it's not a problem, it doesn’t interrupt the rest of the curriculum, the subject plan for English”.

4.1.1 Planting ideas and bringing a global perspective

The teachers answered that they believe that English as a subject could give the students a wide perspective when learning about gender equality. Teacher 4 expresses that “my role is to offer new perspectives, plant ideas and open up horizons for people about this topic”. They also expressed that they could teach the students vocabulary that makes them understand the history of gender equality and its context in other countries. Teacher 3 says that “we can bring that international global perspective on it. We can compare ourselves to other countries [to] help us to see structures”.

4.1.2 Guiding students in sensitive discussions

The teachers expressed a common perception about the belief in the importance of the teacher when introducing gender equality as a topic in the classroom. This is because it is considered a sensitive subject, and the teachers are careful and attentive because students’ opinions can show significant variation. Teacher 4 says that “My role is to create a safe space where you’re able to talk about sensitive topics”. Teacher 6 sees his role as a guide when the students are discussing gender equality, in which he says he needs to “just listen and try to get their opinions, sum up what they say, moving them along making them interact with each other and of course I need to be sort of a referee if it goes sideways”.

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4.2 From diverse methods to collective conversations

The interview findings revealed several different strategies for including gender equality within their teaching of English. When questioned about their approaches to teaching gender equality, what became apparent was that all methods ultimately converge into a discussion. The dialogue and the act of listening to each other’s perspectives are regarded as essential components in the process of learning about gender equality. Teacher 3 says that “it’s important to have someone else to talk to about this and to listen to other people’s perspectives, that’s when we really learn from each other”.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 communicated that they believe the topic works well for the students to practice their communication through oral discussion. Teacher 1 says that “I think that these topics were a good way for the students to practice their oral skills”. Teacher 5 explains that sometimes the students struggle with using correct language; however, discussions about topics such as gender equality work well for language practice. She says that “they can get so passionate and want to say it with emotion, and they do try their best, so I think it just pushes them to keep practicing”.

4.2.1 Using audiovisual media

Another approach to start a discussion about gender equality in the classroom was to use audiovisual media. Teachers 3 and 4 both used different YouTube-videos. Teacher 3 used a video displaying a scenario where a young boy receives more candy than a young girl, which created a discussion about wage gaps between genders. Teacher 4 conveyed that she used a documentary about the Suffragettes to bring historical knowledge about women’s rights. She expresses that:

I think for young people today it is important to show that people before them, hundreds of years ago, actually had to die for the opportunity for women to be able to vote today, and I think that's an important historical context for a young person to have.
4.2.2 Reading literature

Some of the teachers use literature to engage in discussions about gender equality. Teacher 1 preferred to use literature, in which the class would read a book and then have discussions about what they have read. She continues to say that “I think both parts here are equally important so we're using literature, to sort of get that starting point, but then I think where the real knowledge […] comes is when we have our discussions”. Teacher 2 says:

I try to mix it into what we're reading, and have some sort of literature discussion about it, so when we read stories or books, I make sure to choose texts that show different roles for girls and boys, and we talk about the characters and themes from that angle.

4.2.3 Games & challenging questions

Another approach to engage the students in discussions about gender equality was to use games and challenging questions. Teacher 4 answered that she organized a game about privilege, known as the “privilege walk”, where the teacher would ask questions and the students took a step forward based on their experience. Teacher 4 said that this exercise was very successful and led to discussions about gender differences.

Teacher 5 mentioned a game she used where she would ask questions about gender inequalities which made the students think creatively about different unconventional solutions. She says that “this game made the students think outside the box and made them a little bit uncomfortable, but it was fun and at the same time, I really would like to actually do that again”.

4.3 Including it is easy, making a difference is harder

The teachers all agreed that adding gender equality to their English lessons is considered a simple task and can be executed in various ways. Despite this collective perception that the connection to language teaching is easy, they also answered that it comes with certain challenges tied to incorporating this topic in the classroom. These challenges will be presented below.

4.3.1 Are we just checking a box?

The teachers expressed concerns about the long-term effect of teaching gender equality in the English subject. Teacher 5 conveyed that discussing gender equality in the classroom could be somewhat redundant to the students and she says that “it's not so easy to actually be very effective, to know that you have actually made a difference”. She continues to express her perspective stating, “It can turn into a very general thing and the students can feel like they already know about it. Is it good that it’s there [in the curriculum]? Definitely. But the question is, should we explore it more deeply?”

Teacher 2 raised a similar concern, in which she says that talking to students about gender equality often makes them agree that society needs a change, but she expresses that “In class, everyone is nodding their heads, saying it’s an important topic and changes in society needs to happen. But once we’re out of that classroom, things can take a different turn, you know?”. Teacher 5 says that “sometimes it feels like we’re just checking a box, yes we need to bring this up, yes it’s important, but what do they really learn about this?”.

4.3.2 Managing strong opinions

Another challenge that the teachers presented in their answers was to manage students with strong, controversial opinions. Teacher 5 described an instance where a student expressed homophobic views and was initially resistant to engage in discussions about gender equality. Teacher 5 said that this was difficult to navigate; however, by acknowledging the student’s perspective while actively encouraging an open dialogue, they were able to discuss it in class. “He said: I'm homophobic, I don't want to talk about it, but then we ended up talking about it” (Teacher 5).
Teacher 3 had a discussion with a student about pronouns, where the student did not agree with using inclusive ones. She says that “the student told me that he was against it, and we had a good discussion, but I could not get through to this student and in the end, you can't convince everyone”. Teacher 3 mentions that at times, it can feel very challenging to get through to students with strong opinions. She says that “changing people's views is so hard, it almost feels impossible sometimes”.

4.3.3 Limitations in language skills

A limitation highlighted by the teachers in this context is the deficiency in student’s language skills. The teachers expressed that it becomes a challenge when students are lacking proficiency in the English language, as it impedes the ability to engage in deeper discussions about gender equality. Teacher 1 expresses that “the challenge is that some students don’t have enough vocabulary or language skills in English to be able to express themselves about these kinds of topics and it makes the discussion a bit weak”. She also answered that this creates an imbalance in the classroom between the students where “some students will be really good at these sorts of things, they might have a lot of knowledge or they'll be politically engaged in certain questions, and then we have those who are not interested and can’t express themselves very much”.

4.3.4 Navigating cultural differences

Several teachers acknowledged challenges related to cultural differences. Teacher 1 mentioned the diversity of students and how this can affect the discussion in the classroom. She expressed that “these things can be sensitive and there have been students who don't want to talk about things like that or don’t want to accept it because of their different culture from home”. She says that this can be difficult to navigate; however, she encourages students to share their experience and views about gender equality regardless of their different cultural background.

Teacher 4 has encountered students who have experienced arranged marriages within their family. “In Sweden, we talk about arranged marriages as a bad thing but, however these
students are of a perception that it is completely normal, so you need to be open to the fact that your students could have very different values from yourself”.

5 Discussion

In this section the method and the results from this study will be discussed. First, the method will be evaluated. Subsequently, there will be a discussion of the results in relation to my research questions, background, and previous studies.

5.1 Method discussion

The chosen method is perceived as successfully achieving the intended goals of this study. However, there are some considerable limitations to this research.

This study’s findings might be limited because of the specific chosen English teachers and the low number of examples. A larger number of informants, from different cities and different schools, would have generated more data, allowing for a more generalized conclusion. This study has also not examined the responses based on identity factors such as gender and age and these factors may have had an impact on the teachers’ perception and practices related to gender equality.

The answers from the informants could also have been affected by what Denscombe refers to as responding to their intentions instead of their actions (2017, p. 202). Given the sensitive nature of the topic gender equality, the teachers may have felt a need to reply in a way that is morally acceptable. The concept of gender equality could also convey separate interpretations among the participants which could have affected their responses.

Some limitations have also been identified in the interview questions, after the interviews were conducted. The question of how the teachers create an inclusive classroom proved to be challenging for the teachers to respond to and did not produce any substantial insights for this study. The question about whether they perceive any difference in their approach to gender equality in their other subject compared to English, also did not generate
any responses of interest for this study. The reason for this could be because all the participants had another language as their second subject, therefore the approach was considered somewhat similar.

Combining the interviews with classroom observations would have been beneficial to observe the teachers executing these approaches, considering the risk mentioned by Denscombe (2017) where participants might express their desires, rather than their actual behaviors (p. 202). This was, however, not possible due to the teachers’ lack of time and because the teachers had different plans for their last lessons of the semester.

5.2 Result discussion

In this section the results will be discussed in relation to the previous research, the aim of this study and my research questions. The aim of this study was to receive a deeper understanding of English teachers attitudes towards including gender equality in the ESL classroom, how they include it in their teaching, and their experiences in their practice. This was executed through the answering of the following research questions:

1. How do English teachers perceive the task of including gender equality into the English subject, and what impact do they believe it has on their teaching of English as a second language?
2. In what ways do teachers incorporate gender equality into their English teaching, and what challenges or successes have they faced in their pedagogical approach?

5.2.1 Including gender equality in ESL teaching

Sweden, as a nation, has a long history of being at the forefront of gender equality work (Rönnblom, 2011; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a). The educational system mandates and defines the term, urging teachers to include and teach gender equality in their various subjects (Skolverket, 2023a). The results from this study present English teachers that are aligned and supportive in actively supporting these efforts, resonating with the curriculum directive. The results from the interviews presented an overall positive attitude from the teachers towards including gender equality into their teaching of English in upper secondary
school. The teachers see the impact on their teaching as positive, in which they view themselves as guides towards broader perspectives, enriching students’ vocabulary, and imparting knowledge of the international context through a perspective of gender equality. This result indicates that English teachers are motivated to address and teach about gender equality in comparison to the subjects of social studies and biology, as revealed in the reports from the School Inspection Authority (Skolinspektionen, 2023).

The positive approach towards teaching English and conveying knowledge about gender equality aligns with the results from previous studies (Cho & Johnsson, 2021; Kraver, 2007; Sara Lewis, 2011; Östman, 2006) which show positive attitudes regarding the connection between perspectives on gender equality with English language teaching. This result shows that English teachers believe that gender equality is important and integrates well in the English subject.

The study’s findings show that the teachers are actively engaged in critical pedagogy (Brown, 2007) by using diverse teaching methods, encourage discussions about sensitive topics, and address challenges related to cultural differences and strong opinions. While not explicitly articulated as critical thinking or pedagogy, the practices and perspectives described in the results suggest a commitment to engage the students in critical thinking and exploration with social and ethical issues in the ESL classroom. This aligns with Brown’s (2007) definition of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes teaching pupils to develop critical thinking about social, moral, political, and ethical issues. The teachers in the study view gender equality as an important part of their work to create a positive impact on societal norms and values.

As in the study by Cho and Johnsson (2021), the teachers highlight the importance of their role in guiding students in sensitive discussion and creating a safe space for students to express their perspectives about gender equality. The teachers believe that their commitment is important when teaching sensitive topics such as this one. What also emerged from the results is that sometimes teachers needed to act as a referee to prevent the discussion from deviating. This indicates that the teacher’s role is not only about creating that safe space, but also having to act as a mediator among different opinions that emerge in the classroom.

Teaching gender equality within the English subject was considered easily attainable. This aligns with the curriculum’s expectation that gender equality should be integrated within
subject teaching (Skolverket, 2023b). Their approaches, including discussions and reading literature, resonate with the English curriculums goal of developing communicative skills and cultural awareness (Skolverket, 2022b). Each teaching approach mentioned by the teachers in this study led to some form of discussion about gender equality. The teachers emphasized that all different opinions and perspectives are allowed to be expressed and it is important that many voices are heard. Collaborative discussions about gender equality are also recognized as important in previous research (Cho & Johnsson, 2021; Kraver, 2007; Sara Lewis, 2011). As in the earlier research by Sara Lewis (2011), the teachers in this study believed that gender equality was an effective topic to use for practicing speaking English.

In the study, the teachers responded that they use literature to create discussions about gender equality. This mirrors Rosenblatt's (1995) argument that literature could be used by teachers in education for the creation of social and democratic ideals. Previous research also identifies the presence of gender equality themes in literature readings (Kraver, 2007), and in the choices of literature (Östman, 2006). This study demonstrates that literature is applied by some teachers as a tool for engaging students in discussions about gender equality, using various literature with different perspectives on gender, aligning with the result from Östman (2006). Notably, there was no evidence of using a method such as the five-step approach, as in the research by Kraver (2007) and the teachers were not giving much detailed information on how they use literature.

The use of games and audiovisual media as starting points has not been explored in previous research, and in this study, teachers describe how these approaches have served as an effective entry point to prompt students to contemplate and engage in discussions about gender equality. A possible explanation for this result could be that teachers have experienced watching audiovisual videos and playing games creates a curiosity from the students and is perhaps close to the students’ interests today.

The teachers in this study did not reflect on the aspects mentioned in the study by Brodin (2017) such as ensuring equal participation, turn taking, and randomizing seating arrangements in the classroom. One possible explanation for this could be the differences in the students’ ages, as Brodins study is at compulsory level, where it might be more crucial to focus on such aspects in the classroom.
5.2.2 Challenges faced

The challenges identified by the teachers include concerns about long term-impact, managing strong opinions, limitations in language skills and navigating cultural differences. Some of these challenges align with the challenges found in previous research.

The challenge of handling strong opinions and cultural differences are challenges that were also identified in the study by Cho and Johnsson (2021) and in Östman’s study (2006). Comparing Östman’s study with the results in this study, shows a variation in addressing gender equality and cultural challenges. While Östman emphasizes a general need in students with an immigrant background, this study’s result highlights the importance of teachers being aware of different cultures and students sharing their views. In resonance with the teacher in Cho and Johnsson’s study (2021), the teachers in this study considered discussing gender equality to be still important despite differences of opinions. They believed in open communication in which the teachers acknowledged the student’s perspective which sometimes led to productive discussions, while sometimes it felt challenging and hard to make a difference with certain opinions. Although the findings of this study indicate that teachers believe in promoting open discussions about controversial and cultural perspectives, it would be valuable to conduct further research into the actual action of teachers when navigating these challenging conversations.

Making a real difference was also acknowledged as a challenge where the results presented that the teachers experienced a sense of ineffectiveness, perceiving that their efforts might not bring any meaningful change and that the process could feel redundant. This shows the complexity of the task where teachers find it important to include gender equality in the classroom, but at the same time, worry that it could be ineffective. However, the research by Federal Centre for Health Education (BZga, 2015), in collaboration with the World Health Organization, has found that education about topics such as gender equality leads to the development of improved relationships. This could indicate that teachers need to engage in recent research about the topic to create more meaningful teaching.

None of the teachers indicated a lack of prioritization or attention towards including gender equality in their English teaching as mentioned in previous research (Vu & Pham, 2022; Tallberg Broman, 2007). This could be due to the teachers’ positive attitude towards the subject and the perception that it is easy to integrate into the English subject. This result can
also be understood by considering that Swedish curriculum expressly mandates teachers to address this subject, which may not be the case in Vietnamese curriculum. The absence of comparable results to Tallberg Broman’s study (2007) might stem from the fact that her study was conducted before the curriculum alteration that have similarly transpired in preschool curriculum. These changes could potentially have impacted teachers’ perspectives on gender equality in education.

The teachers also did not report any indications of feeling insecure about addressing topics about gender equality in the classroom as the teachers in the study by Fine-Davis and Faas (2014). Given Sweden’s long history of proactive gender equality work, English teachers in Sweden may not share these concerns observed in the six European countries that were examined in Fine-Davis and Faas study. However, the teachers in this study might not have felt comfortable sharing such concerns in an interview, particularly given their explicit mandate from the curriculum to include these perspectives.

A similar finding from Brodin’s (2017) study, is the issue of pronouns where in his study language teachers express varying views on language choices related to gender and emphasize the importance of engaging students in discussions about these choices. This resonates with the current study, where Teacher 3 recounts a discussion with a student held opposing views on inclusive pronouns. The teacher expressed difficulty in persuading the student, which raises the question: Is it within a teacher’s responsibility to actively convince students about linguistic choices, particularly when faced with strong opposition? Given the identified contrasting views between teachers in Brodin’s study and the specific example in this study involving a teacher and a student discussing pronoun differences, there appears to be a necessity for establishing a consensus on pronoun usage. It could be argued that additional education might be essential for teachers, to empower teachers in linguistic discussions.

Language limitations were expressed as a challenge in discussions about gender equality, but also as a mechanism to encourage students to enhance their communication skills and learn to experiment with new words. This further emphasizes the importance of discussion and dialogue for both learning about gender equality and practicing and improving linguistic proficiency.
5.2.3 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out the attitudes of English teachers regarding the inclusion of gender equality in their English teaching, their approaches, and experiences of addressing this topic in the English classroom. This study revealed a positive attitude among teachers in which they welcome gender equality into their teaching of upper secondary school English. Aligned with Sweden’s history and political approach of prioritizing gender equality, the mandated and clarified inclusion in the educational system resonates well with English teachers.

Their positive attitude agrees with teachers in previous research, showing that connecting language learning and learning about gender equality is a viable concept. The teachers in this research emphasized the importance of their own role in creating a safe space and making sure that discussions do not escalate, mediating different opinions and perspectives. Their teaching approaches are diverse and reflect critical pedagogy, and the emphasis of knowledge lies in collaborative conversation and discussions in the classroom. The use of games and audiovisual media as starting points for discussions about gender equality is described as an effective strategy for student engagement.

This research has revealed several challenges that affect the teaching and learning about gender equality such as concerns about long term impact, managing controversial opinions, language limitations, and navigating cultural differences. The teachers conveyed that these challenges can be addressed through open communication and through shared discussions, allowing different perspectives to be expressed. Concerns were expressed about the possibility of ineffectiveness of teaching about gender equality; however, none of the teachers indicate a lack of prioritization or lack of education, as in contrast to previous studies (e.g., Tallberg Broman, 2007; Fine-Davis and Faas, 2014). The teachers in this study connect language limitations as an opportunity for students to improve language proficiency.

This research raises questions on English teachers’ responsibility of convincing students about linguistic choices when it comes to pronoun usage. The recommendation for additional teacher education aims to establish a consensus on this matter. Further research could explore effective strategies to enhance inclusive language and its influence on creating a more gender equal environment in school.
This study has identified an interest in teachers to engage students in embedding discussions on gender equality into English teaching. This essay has also identified a need for teachers to engage in current research about the positive effects of including gender equality in teaching. This knowledge is crucial for empowering teachers to limit the feeling of redundancy and ensuring their sustained motivation to keep organizing classroom discussions.

This study has not examined its results from a gender perspective when it comes to the informants. Given the topic of gender, this study could pave the way for further studies to examine teachers through a gender viewpoint, to see if there are differences in male and female teachers’ attitudes. Building upon the findings of positive engagement among the teachers, further research could also delve deeper into teachers’ attitudes exploring this idea further, possibly from a cross-curricula perspective.
References


Appendix 1: Interview questions

Interview questions: **Gender Equality in the English Classroom**

Background information:

- Age
- Gender
- Years of teaching
- Subject combination

**Question 1**: What are your views on the fact that the emphasis on gender equality is now clearly stated in the school curriculum?

**Question 2**: Do you have experience of including gender equality into your English teaching? How?

**Question 3**: Do you find it easy to incorporate gender equality into your English teaching?

**Question 4**: Are there methods that work better than others in teaching it effectively, in your opinion?

**Question 5**: How do you perceive your own role in teaching about gender equality?

**Question 6**: Do you have examples of strategies that you use to create a gender-inclusive classroom?

**Question 7**: Are there any difficulties with including gender equality within English teaching? Have you encountered challenges in your experience?

**Question 8**: Are there any differences in teaching gender equality in the English subject compared to your other subject?

**Question 9**: Do you have any expectations regarding the outcome of teaching English with a gender equality perspective? Do you believe teaching this will have an impact on matters of inequality?
Appendix 2: Letter to the participants

Information about the study:” Gender Equality in the English Classroom”

My name is Johanna Ly, and I am pursuing a degree in education at Mälardalens University. I am now writing my degree project which is about including gender equality in the English subject in Upper Secondary School. The aim of my study is to find out how English teachers include gender equality in their classroom. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

This is an interview study where I will ask you questions which will be recorded and transcribed. The interview will take about 20-30 minutes of your time. Your participation is anonymous, where your name and your school will not be mentioned. This interview is completely voluntary, and you are free to discontinue at any point of the research process. The final product of this study will be presented in an essay that will be published at the database DiVA.

If you have any questions regarding this project or your participation, please contact me or my supervisor.

Thank you for your participation!

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