

## BACHELOR THESIS



# English Teaching and the Influence of Gender

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## **Abstract**

Equal opportunities for boys and girls are mentioned as important in all steering documents for the Swedish school system. Despite this, there are indications that gender inequalities exist. The aim of this study is to look at gender patterns in connection with the teaching and learning of English as a second language and how these might create inequalities between boys and girls, especially with regard to learning and results. The empirical material used for this study is based on interviews with five English teachers and questionnaires answered by 128 students in an upper secondary school in the province of Norrbotten, Sweden. The main focus is on teachers' and students' experiences and thoughts about gender-related issues in the teaching and learning of English. Although the study is limited, it nevertheless gives an indication of what reality looks like. The results show that there are gender differences in attitude as well as in behavior in relation to English as a school subject. The main findings are that girls find the subject more interesting, the material more appealing and put more effort into studying while boys are more self-confident and value their own knowledge higher. These gender differences are likely to have affects on learning and results.

## **Foreword**

For me learning is essential. This essay will close a chapter of my studies as a degree in teaching becomes reality. Nevertheless, my thirst for knowledge has not been quenched. I will continue to learn by reading and studying but most importantly, I will learn from my future students. I would like to thank all the teachers and fellow students who have made this possible. I would especially like to thank the students and teachers who participated in this study. I am furthermore grateful for all the help that my supervisor Cathrine Norberg has provided me with. Special thanks also to Robert Ricken for his comments. Finally, but most importantly I would like to thank my family and especially Marco and our children for their infinite patience.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Equal opportunities for all students are one of the main goals of the Swedish school system. Everybody should have the same right to education, and nobody should, for any reason, have to experience discrimination. Girls and boys should have equal rights to learn and succeed. However, reality does not always correspond to the goals.

According to *The global gender gap report* (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2009) there is no country in the world that has obtained equality between the sexes. Men are advantaged in all of the 134 countries examined. In the report, the gap between men and women is examined in regard to four fundamental categories: *economic participation and opportunity*, *educational attainment*, *political empowerment* and *health and survival*. In the report it is stated that: "While no country has yet achieved gender equality, all of the Nordic countries, with the exception of Denmark, have closed over 80% of the gender gap and thus serve as models and useful benchmarks for international comparisons." (ibid: 16) Sweden is ranked as number four, although there are still some areas that are unequal. The main differences between men and women in Swedish society are connected to economic participation and opportunity and to educational attainment. Men have higher wages than women for similar work and more powerful positions in society at the same time as more women than men participate in higher education. (ibid)

Equal rights and opportunities are mentioned as important in all the steering documents for the Swedish school system, from international agreements to the *Educational act* and the *National curriculum*. Nevertheless, many researchers have shown that there are gender differences and that they are defined at an early age. Swann (1992:1) maintains that: "Girls and boys have different experiences of education, even when they go to the same school, play in the same playground, and take part in the same lessons, they will behave differently, and they will be treated differently by others." Research has also shown that boys are more dominant in school in many ways, especially verbally. They express themselves more freely in the classroom, they speak more than the girls and they take more of the teachers' attention. (See, for example Hultman, 1990 and Einarsson & Granström, 2002) On the other hand, statistics show that girls generally achieve better grades than boys.

It is important to discuss equal opportunities for girls and boys in school and understand that both girls and boys can be advantaged or disadvantaged in different situations. It is easy to focus on one gender as underprivileged, but when it comes to education and the school environment, it is neither possible nor fair to make such a distinction. It is for instance a paradox that girls are often described as subjugated by the boys at the same time as they achieve better school results. The teacher has a very important role when it comes to creating a learning-environment that enables both girls and boys to do their best and enjoy learning. The teacher should for no reason treat girls and boys differently or give them different opportunities.

In this essay, equal opportunities are considered in connection to English teaching and learning. Gender patterns at upper secondary school in Sweden are studied from the viewpoint of students and teachers of English. The starting point for this study was a report from The National Agency for Education (NAE, 2009a) about the results in the national assessments in a range of subjects at upper secondary school. A discrepancy between the results in the national assessments and the final grades of English had been observed. According to the report, boys have achieved higher grades than girls in the national assessments for a number of years but when it comes to the final grade the situation has been the opposite. (NAE, 2009a) Important findings are put forward in this report, but as the research for this study advanced, it became obvious that conclusions about inequalities can not only be drawn by looking at grades and results. Many different aspects have to be taken into consideration and by studying gender patterns it is possible to gain more insight into the actual situation.

Several earlier studies have been conducted on gender interaction in the classroom (see, for example Einarsson and Hultman, 1984 and Einarsson and Granström, 2002) and studies have also focused on language differences between girls and boys (Swann, 2003). Gender issues in connection to English teaching and learning constitute relatively unexplored areas of study. This essay has educational and didactic relevance since there is a connection between gender equality, the role of the teacher, and the steering documents.

## **2. AIM**

The aim of this study is to look at gender patterns in connection with English teaching and learning and how these, might create inequalities between boys and girls, especially with regard to learning and results.

### **2.1 Main questions at issue**

The main questions at issue for this study concern students' and teachers' thoughts and experiences of English teaching. They are:

- How do female students, male students and teachers experience the classroom interaction during English lessons?
- Do female and male students generally have different approaches to English as a school subject? How do they think about their own abilities and the effort they put into studying?
- How do teachers view girls and boys in a learning environment? How is teaching adapted to meet differences within the group and how do teachers relate to grading and the results on the national assessments?

### **2.2 Scope and material**

The empirical material used for this study is based on interviews with five English teachers and questionnaires answered by 128 students in an upper secondary school in the province of Norrbotten, Sweden. The main focus is on teachers' and students' experiences and thoughts about gender-related issues in the teaching and learning of English.

## **3. BACKGROUND**

In this section, some facts, theories and results from earlier studies are presented. Initially, some information about the upper secondary school in Sweden is given, as well as some information about English as a school subject and a section about the steering documents and the role of the teacher. There is also an introduction to language didactics and theories about second language learning and a section about gender, biological differences between women and men and language differences between girls and boys. Finally, there is a section about classroom research and gender differences in school performance.

### **3.1 Upper secondary school in Sweden**

In Sweden there is a nine-year compulsory school after which it is possible to continue to upper secondary school. All students who finish compulsory school are offered the opportunity to go to upper secondary school in their home municipality. The upper secondary school is optional and free of charge. During the nineties, some major changes affected the upper secondary school. All previous study programs were modified to include a number of core courses to guarantee to all students the possibility of continuing to higher education. All programs also became three years long. The previous normative grading system changed to a goal and knowledge related grading

system. Today there are 17 national programs and also some specially designed programs. (NAE, 2009b) The National Agency for Education (NAE) was established by the government to support and monitor the quality of education and grading. The national curriculum that regulates the upper secondary school is the *Curriculum for the non-compulsory school system*, Lpf 94. (NAE, 2009b)

### **3.1.1 English at upper secondary school**

The English language has an important role in the Swedish upper secondary school since it is the official language in many countries and the dominating language for international communication.

There are three English courses at upper secondary school, English A, B and C. English A is one of the core courses that is obligatory for all students. English B is obligatory at some programs and optional at other programs. The most advanced level, English C is always optional.

In English A and B, as well as in other subjects, there are national assessments. At upper secondary school all students who take the same course take these tests at the same time. The aim of these assessments is to test the students' general knowledge of English, independent of where, when and how it has been obtained. (NAE,2009a) The assessments are based on the national curriculum (Lpf 94) and on the specific course plans for English A and B. The assessments consist of four parts: *Focus Reading*, *Focus Listening*, *Focus Writing* and *Focus Speaking*. (NAE,2009a) Teachers are supposed to consider the results of these tests when they grade their students but they also have to look at other assignments that have been handed in during the year. The test result does not alone decide the grade.

In a European study on students' knowledge and conception of English, the Swedish and the Norwegian students came out with exceptional results in comparison to other countries. They were better at reading and listening comprehension but also at writing. 92 percent of the Swedish students also stated that they had a positive or very positive conception of English as a school subject. (NAE, 2004)

## **3.2 Steering documents and the role of the teacher**

Equal rights and opportunities are explicitly mentioned as important in all the steering documents for the Swedish school system, from international agreements to the *Educational act* and the *National curriculum*. To begin, the *Convention on the rights of the child* is an international agreement that concerns children and therefore also education. In *Article 2* which describes how the states should treat children and their rights, it is stated that no one should for any reason be discriminated.

States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in this Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. (Convention on the rights of the child, article 2:1)

In *Article 29* which specifically concerns education, attention is given to the equality of the sexes. "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: [...] The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin." (Article 29:1) Equality is also mentioned as a basic prerequisite for education in the Swedish *Education act* (1985:1100) which regards all education in Sweden from pre-school classes to upper secondary school. In the second paragraph of the education act it is stated that "All children and young persons shall irrespective of gender, geographic residence and social and financial circumstances have equal access to education in



the national school system for children and young persons.” (Education act:1) The equality of the sexes is further emphasized in *The curriculum for the non-compulsory school system* (Lpf 94) that regulates the upper secondary school. It is stated that: “The school shall actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Pupils shall be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice as to gender differences.” (Lpf 94:4)

The current curriculum, Lpf 94, includes a vision of knowledge, students and evaluation that differs from earlier curriculums. Therefore, the role of the teacher has changed. (Carlgren 2005:259) Today, the teachers’ task is not only to teach but so much more. They should be able to create an environment where all students are encouraged to learn. The teacher should not only provide the students with information but help them to actively look for information themselves and help them analyze and assess this information. (Carlgren 2005:264) Teachers do no longer have an authoritarian role as earlier but a more democratic relationship to students. (ibid:265) Teachers of today have more freedom but they also have many obligations. The main obligation is that teachers have to respect and base their work on the steering documents and the values that these documents are founded on.

According to the Swedish *Education act* (1985:1100), the fundamental values and tasks of the national school system should be based on democracy. The Act stipulates that: ”all school activity shall be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and that each and everyone working in the school shall encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as for the environment we all share.” (Chapter 1, §2 and §9) It is also stated in the national curriculum (Lpf 94) that: “The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall represent and impart.” (Lpf 94:3)

The role of the teacher is complex but it is obvious that equality between the sexes is one of the fundamental values that all school activities should be based on. Work for gender-equality is not optional or something outside the teachers’ role but one of the basic responsibilities. It is furthermore stated in the national curriculum that: “The teacher shall: ensure that all students, independent of social background and regardless of gender, ethnic belonging, religion or other belief, sexual orientation or disability, have real influence in the work methods, work structures, and educational content.” (Lpf 94:15) Not only the educational content has to be based on democratic values but also the work methods and structures have to have the same base.

### **3.3 Language didactics**

In school, English teachers are given an important task; at the same time as they should impose democratic values, they are there to assist the students in acquiring a second language. In upper secondary school the majority of the students are very skilled but they have to take their knowledge of English to a higher level when it comes to correctness and content. The students’ everyday language also has to evolve and improve. There are many different aspects that have to be considered to reach the expected goals. Because of this, language didactic studies may include many different areas. In this case, gender patterns are studied to understand how they might affect the teaching-learning situation. Generally, all language didactic studies are aimed at investigating the present processes of teaching and learning. To understand the complexity of language didactics, different theories on how second languages are learned are presented in this section.

#### **3.3.1 Theories of second language learning**

Theories that can be used to explain second language acquisition are linked to first language acquisition theories. The main difference between first and second language acquisition is that everybody who is brought up in a social environment learn their first language automatically.

When it comes to second language acquisition, the situation is different. Some people tend to acquire a second language very easily while others find it more difficult. The learning conditions for a second language can also be rather different. A child who learns a second language in an informal environment is in a completely different situation than a child or a student in a language classroom. An adult who learns a second language, is also in a different situation. The theories that are presented in this section are taken from secondary sources in which they are presented from a language didactic viewpoint.

### 3.3.1.1 Piaget and Vygotsky, behaviorism and Chomsky's innatist perspective

Some of the main theories that have been used to explain learning and language acquisition are the ones presented by Piaget and Vygotsky as well as the behaviorist theory and the innatist perspective put forward by Chomsky. The thoughts of Piaget and the behaviorist theory are not very relevant today to explain language acquisition, while Vygotsky's ideas about social interaction and the innatist perspective are still important to explain some aspects of learning processes.

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget proposed that children's language depends on their cognitive development. He saw language "as one of a number of symbol systems that are developed in childhood". (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006:20) According to Piaget, a child's language represent what she has learned by interacting with the environment. Lev Vygotsky also studied child development, but he, on the other hand, concluded that language develops from social interaction. He argued that children advance their language when they are in social situations with other children and adults. In Vygotskian theory, greater importance is given to interaction and conversations than to internal processes. (ibid)

The behaviorist theory explains learning in terms of "imitation, practice, reinforcement (or feedback on success), and habit formation". (ibid:34) This theory was not only used to explain language learning, but all kinds of learning. Second language teaching was influenced by the behaviorist theory, especially between the 1940s and the 1970s. A teaching method that developed from this theory is the *audio-lingual* method. Classroom activities focused on imitation and memorization and the students had to learn sentences by heart. Since language acquisition is seen as a "habit formation" this would suggest that structures that are present in a person's first language would easily be transferred to the second language while structures that are not present would be difficult to learn. However, it has been shown that second language acquisition is more complex than this and that it cannot simply be explained as a transfer of habits. By the end of the 1970s researchers started to find other ways to explain second language acquisition. (Ibid)

Since the behaviorist theory as an explanation to language acquisition started to be rejected, Noam Chomsky and other researchers began to look for other possible explanations. According to Chomsky all humans have an innate knowledge of a *Universal Grammar*. This knowledge allows all children to acquire the language of their environment. (Ibid) Chomsky maintained that all languages are innate and that universal principles lie beneath all of them.

Children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the same way that other biological functions develop. [...] The environment only makes a basic contribution-in this case, the availability of people who speak to the child. The child, or rather, the child's biological endowment, will do the rest. (Ibid:15)

In support of this theory, Chomsky claimed that all children learn a complex system of vocabulary and grammar at an age when they would not be expected to learn anything as complicated. There is no available input, to the child, of each and every form of a language that would allow them only to repeat. There must be some innate mechanism or knowledge that allow the child to generalize and construct sentences from the fragments of language that they learn. (Ibid)

The idea of a *Universal Grammar* is often connected to the *Critical Period Hypothesis* which is a hypothesis that humans and other animals are biologically programmed to learn a certain skill or obtain a certain knowledge in a specific period of their lives. When the critical period has passed it becomes more difficult or even impossible to acquire the same abilities. (Ibid) Chomsky never made any claims about how his theory could be adapted to second language learners but some other linguists argue that it is possible to use this theory to explain second language acquisition. There are also linguists who find the theory difficult to adapt to second language learning especially for learners who have already passed the critical period. (ibid)

As the views of language acquisition changed, partly because of Chomsky, the *audiolingual* method was replaced by teaching methods that focused more on meaning, generally these are called *Communicative Language Teaching* methods. (Ibid)

### **3.3.1.2 Current psychological theories**

Research about second language acquisition has since the 1990s focused mainly on psychological theories. Cognitive and developmental psychologists argue that general theories of learning can be used and that there does not necessary have to be a specific module in the brain for language.

Some cognitive psychologists see language acquisition as a “building up of knowledge that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding”. (ibid:34). Following this view the learners have to “pay attention” to the language they try to understand or produce until certain features become automatic. When parts of the language are automatic, the learner “pays attention” to other features. The information has to be *processed* to become accessible. This way of looking at learning is not seen as an exclusive feature of language acquisition. (ibid)

The connectionist theory is one of many psychological theories. Language acquisition is according to this theory regarded as a “gradual build-up of fluency through practice”. (ibid:40) Some changes in language use are nevertheless difficult to explain in this way. Changes might occur that can be explained only in terms of “restructuring”. A learner can all of a sudden seem to just “put it all together”. (ibid:40)

The cognitivist theory is another theory that is rather close to the connectionist theory. Connectionists nevertheless tend to attribute greater significance to the environment and mental networks of connections between different linguistic features. They agree with the cognitivists that the learners gradually build up their knowledge but they also believe that the learner develops a network of connections between different elements. (ibid) This would for example explain mistakes of *overgeneralization* such as using the regular past tense ending -ed also for irregular verbs, which is a rather common mistake. “I putted it on the table” can be heard both from children who learn English as their first language and second language learners.

### **3.3.2 Factors that affect language learning**

There are many different theories that aim to explain second language acquisition and different methods have been proposed as ideal to teach and learn a second language. It is nevertheless difficult to determine what the best way to promote language learning in a classroom situation is. The different theories are often contradictory and just because a teacher knows much about second language acquisition, it does not guarantee a good result. Lightbrown and Spada (2006) emphasize the complexity of second language learning and teaching. According to them, factors that affect learning are: “personal characteristics and experiences of the learner, the social and cultural environment both inside and outside the classroom, the structure of the native and target languages, opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language, and access to correction and form-focused instruction.” (ibid:194)

The social and cultural environment in the classroom is important and this factor is also

discussed by Lundahl (2009). He discusses the importance of an equity pedagogy and states that: “An equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievements of students from diverse racial, cultural and social-class groups. This includes using a variety of teaching styles that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles within various cultural and ethnic groups.”(Lundahl, 2009:87) He further states that girls and boys can be defined as belonging to different cultural groups. The flexibility and competence of the teacher is hence essential for the students’ results .

### 3.4 Gender

In this essay the term *gender* is used to denote the cultural or social constructions of masculinities and femininities. The term is colloquially often used as a synonym to sex but in some contexts the term is used to indicate something that is not necessarily biological. (see Fenstermaker and West, 2002, for example)

Very much of what is considered male or female is socially constructed or achieved rather than biologically predetermined. From the day we are born we are categorized as girls or boys and this will affect how we are treated by adults and how we are socialized to become women or men. It is, nevertheless, very difficult to clearly distinguish what is biological (sex) and what is achieved or socially constructed (gender). (Fenstermaker & West, 2002) Stereotypical views and prejudices on what women and men are and on what they are supposed to be and do color our way of thinking. But by looking at the expectations of male and female behavior from a longer time perspective it is possible to gain more insight into the issue. Traditionally, women have had a lower status than men in a large number of cultures. The role of women has been to take care of children and the household and not to interfere with other supposedly more important tasks. (Hirdman, 2001) In many societies women have, as time has passed, gained more rights and been given more opportunities to participate in traditionally male activities. The division of labor into typically male or female activities could therefore be seen as a social construction and not as something biologically predetermined.

Boys and girls are early socialized to become different. They wear different clothes, are given different toys and are responded to differently by adults. Certain interests and behaviors are expected from girls and boys respectively, and they often adapt easily to the pattern. (Swann, 1992) The creation of gender is constant from early childhood well into adult life. Fenstermaker & West, (2002:126) for example maintain that: “Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.”

It is remarkable how early children become aware of gender roles and start to associate different objects, activities and behavior with feminine or masculine traits. Research by Einarsson and Hultman (1984) shows this clearly. In a study conducted by them, 164 children aged 5-6 participated. The participants were asked to associate different words with feminine or masculine traits or neither of the two. All the children had 24 words read to them. The result shows that children, to a very high extent, associate *doll* and *lipstick* with female. It also shows that phrases like *talks in a nice way*, *likes small children*, *sings* and *sits quietly*, are associated with women. Other words and phrases like *swearwords*, *fight*, *compete*, *dirty*, *speaks loudly*, *map* and *over* are associated with masculine traits. The girls but not the boys associate *helps the teacher*, *inside*, *small* and *wait for your turn* with women. The boys but not the girls associate *in charge* and *reunion* with men. These answers show that at a very early age children already believe that boys and girls have different tasks to perform and that they also behave differently. These children have already been categorized and know what is expected of them as girls or boys.

Ambjörnsson (2007) conducted a study about how girls at upper secondary school in Sweden do gender. She followed two different classes, a *social science* class and a *child and recreation* class for one year. In both classes the girls knew what was expected of them as girls but Ambjörnsson found that one group, the social science students, adapted much more to the pattern while the other group more easily questioned and broke stereotypical patterns. One example of this is how they behaved in school when they were not in the classroom. The social science students' behavior was restrained and soft. They were often seen massaging each others' shoulders, hugging or fixing each others' hair, which corresponds to the image of how girls are supposed to be. The other group of girls behaved differently. They spoke out loud or screamed at each other and deliberately behaved "gender inappropriately". (Ambjörnsson, 2007:86) This example shows that there are differences within each gender category. All women and men are not the same only because they belong to one or the other category.

### **3.5 Biological differences between women and men**

In the context of education and language, the question of biology might seem strange since both are fundamentally social processes. Nevertheless, biology is often given as an explanation for the differences between the sexes and such justifications might lead to the conclusion that nothing can be done to make a difference. Teachers who want to challenge stereotypical behavior and work for equal opportunities might encounter many difficulties.

As well known, there are differences between women and men. Some biological differences are obvious but in many contexts differences in behavior are also argued to be *natural* or *biological*. In a collection of research articles called *Doing Gender, Doing Difference*, Fenstermaker and West (2002) discuss issues connected to sex and gender. They state that a very common view in Western societies is that "things are the way they are by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women- a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioral and social consequences" (Fenstermaker and West 2002:5). They further argue that there are biological differences but that it is not just as simple as that. Biology plays a part but so do numerous social situations.

In her book *Girls, boys and Language*, Swann (2002) presents some biological factors that might explain certain differences in behavior between the sexes. She argues that one biological factor is the level of the hormone testosterone which is usually seen as the "male" hormone. High levels of testosterone are associated to aggression and given that women have low levels of the hormone they are less aggressive. It is noteworthy that even young boys (before puberty) are found to be much more aggressive than young girls even if their level of testosterone is very low. In the same study Swann presents another biological explanation to the differences in behavior between the sexes. In this case the differences are attributed to the way female and male brains are organized. Generally, the two hemispheres are more specialized for specific tasks in the male brain and less so in the female brain. This means that both hemispheres are equally active during different activities in the female brain, while it has been found that one or the other hemisphere is usually more active during, for example physical activities or reading, in the male brain. The way the female brain is organized has shown to be to some extent connected to higher verbal ability. (ibid)

Biological research, such as studies about the human brain, will surely give us more clues about some of the differences between men and woman. Nevertheless, whenever biological explanations are given it is important to remember that all individuals are biological creatures as well as products of socialization. We are the result of the society that we live in, where an important classification is female and male.

### **3.6 Language differences between women and men**

Girls and boys learn to speak and behave differently in many social situations they encounter. When they start school they already speak *as* girls or *as* boys and the school environment reinforces this. A number of studies focusing on gender and language in school have been conducted. See, for instance those presented in Edlund *et al* (2007). Research has since the 1970s documented the differences between girls' and boys' language use and also the consequences of these differences. It has for example been observed that girls and boys communicate in different ways. The way boys talk often make them dominate in classroom situations. Girls and boys also have different writing styles and tend to choose different topics for written assignments. (ibid)

Swann (1992) presents examples of gender differences in language use that have been identified in different international studies. Some of the main features are:

- Male speakers tend to interrupt more than female speakers. In mixed-sex talk, female speakers receive interruptions from male speakers.
- Male speakers use more "direct speech" than female speakers; for example, they make direct rather than indirect requests.
- Female speakers give more conversational support than male speakers, they use "minimal responses" such as "Mmh", "Yeah" and "Right" to encourage another speaker to continue and questions that enable another speaker to develop their topic.
- Some studies have suggested that female speakers, more than male speakers, use features that indicate tentativeness, such as "tag questions"("that's good, isn't it?"), hedges ("I wonder, "sort of", "I guess"), and other expressions that make them sound hesitant or uncertain.

(Swann 1992:28)

The differences in language use are important to consider since we mainly communicate by spoken or written language. When girls and boys study English in school, they already have a certain way of using their native language and these characteristics might influence the use of the second language and therefore also the results.

### **3.7 School performance and the classroom hierarchy**

The paradoxical situation is that girls do better when it comes to results even though they often are described as subjugated by the boys. In this section a comparison between the boys' and the girls' results will be presented. Furthermore some research on the structure of power in the classroom will be presented as well as some possible explanations to differences in school performance.

#### **3.7.1 Gender differences in school performance**

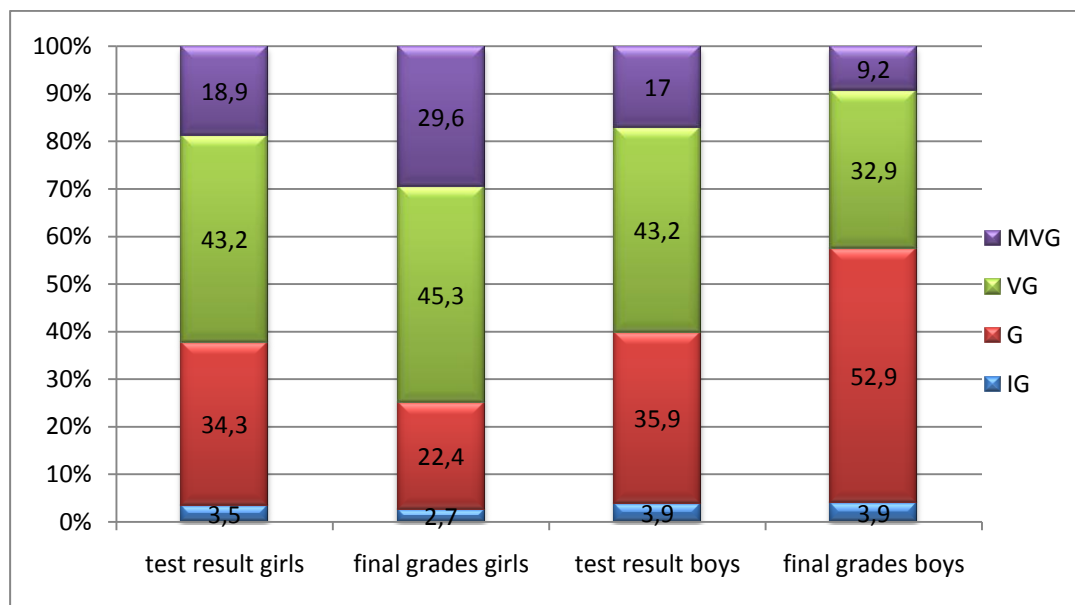
School traditionally used to be a predominantly male world with male students, male teachers and male headmasters. The situation today is completely changed. This is pointed out by Molloy (in Baude, et al. 1998) who describes the Swedish school of today as a female world. There are more headmistresses than headmasters and predominantly female teachers from kindergarten to upper secondary school. Molloy also points out that as women have entered the profession, men have started to look for other occupations and the social status of teachers has decreased. Female students do better in primary school, secondary school and upper secondary school. The annual report from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (SNAHE) also shows that more women than men enter higher education:

The year of 2007/08 a total of 42,700 students were awarded their first higher education qualifications and 64 per cent of them were women. The award of qualifications to more women than men is not in itself surprising, given the gender ratio among students, but during the last ten years the imbalance has increased.” (SNAHE, 2009:55)

Girls do better in school in many OECD-countries, but in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland the differences in results are even greater than in the other countries. (Björnsson, 2005) Female students have for years continued to achieve higher average grades than male students when they leave the Swedish nine-year compulsory school. In 2008 girls had an average score of 220.6 points and boys an average score of 198.5 points out of a maximum of 320. This means that boys had about 90% of the girls’ grades. (NAE, 2009c, statistics 1) In upper secondary school the situation was very similar. In 2008 girls had an average score of 14.7 as a final grade and boys an average score of 13.3 out of a maximum of 20. This means that the boys had about 90% of the girls’ grades. Girls have better grades in all subjects except physical education. (NAE, 2009b)

When it comes to English, the pattern is similar; girls have better grades when they leave compulsory school as well as in English courses in the upper secondary school. Girls also generally achieve better grades in relation to how they score in the national assessments, while boys generally obtain lower grades in relation to the result of the national assessments, as diagram 1 shows.

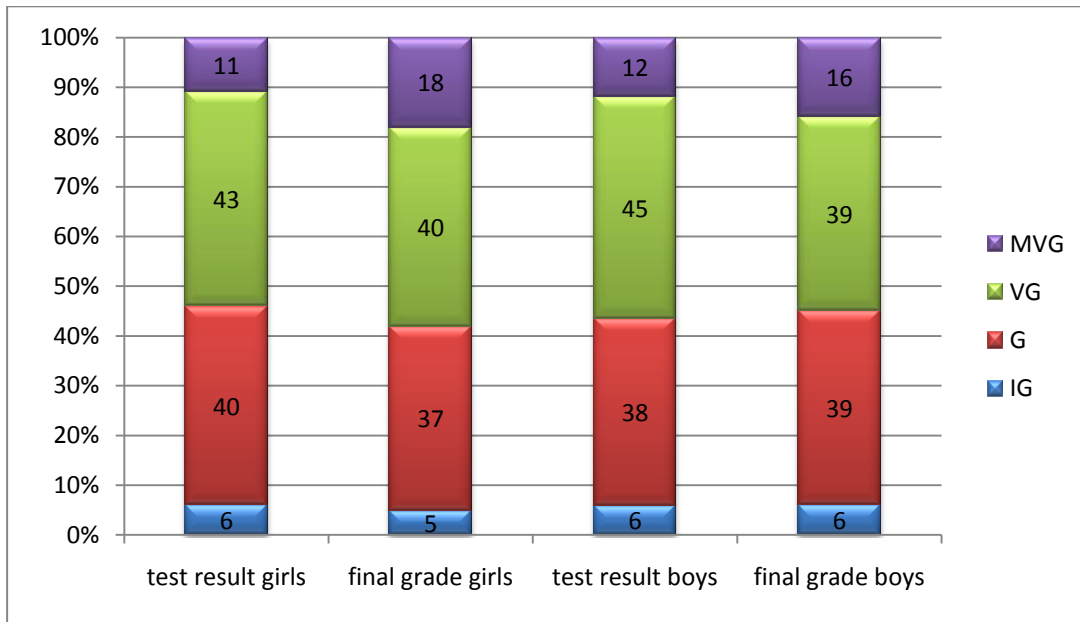
**Diagram 1 Differences between test result and final grade in English for girls and for boys, year nine, compulsory school, spring term 2008**



(NAE, 2009c)

The girls achieved slightly better test-results than the boys, but the difference is not remarkable. In contrast, the difference in final grade is very notable. When it comes to the highest grade in test results, there is a difference of less than 2% between the girls and the boys. When it comes to the final grade the difference is more than 20%.

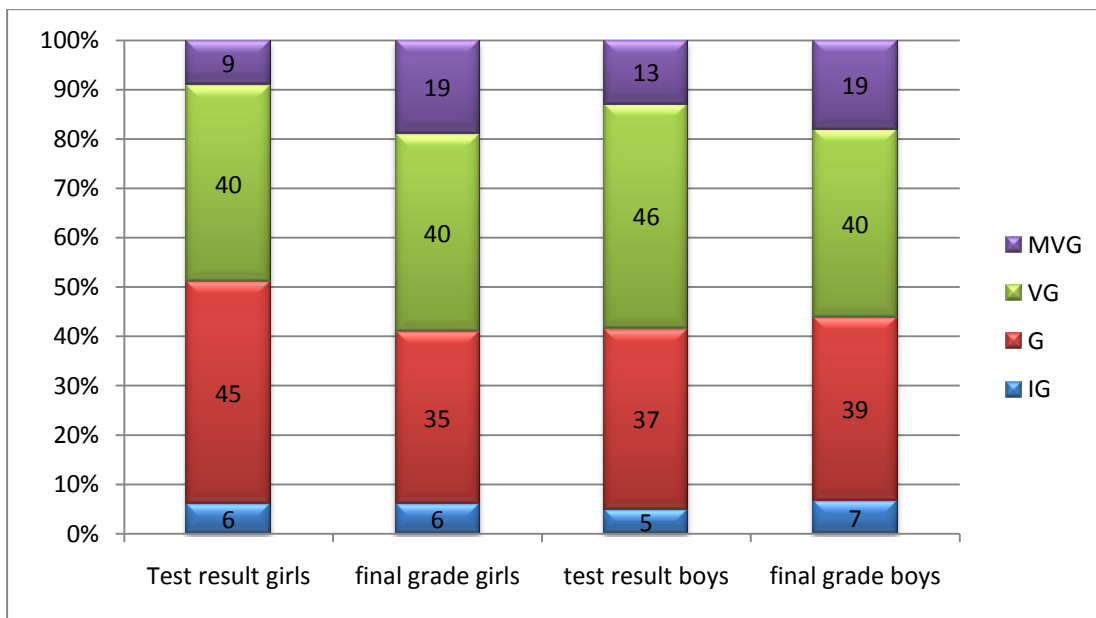
**Diagram 2 Differences between test result and final grade (English A) for girls and boys, upper secondary school, spring term 2008**



(NAE, 2009a:27, diagram 18)

Diagram 2 shows that the boys scored better than the girls in the test, but that the girls received better final grades in relation to how they scored.

**Diagram 3 Differences between test result and final grade (English B) for girls and for boys, upper secondary school, spring term 2008**



(NAE, 2009a:34, diagram 20)

Diagram 3 shows that the boys scored better than the girls in the test but that the girls again received better final grades in relation to how they scored.



### **3.7.2 The classroom hierarchy**

As mentioned in the introduction and the section about language differences, research shows that there are gender patterns in the classroom that enable boys to be in an advantaged position. Recent research confirms these patterns even if there are great variations within each gender category and large differences between different subjects. A study that was conducted by Einarsson and Hultman (1984) shows that there are clear differences in language and behavior between girls and boys and that as a consequence of this, boys dominate in the classroom. They are more active during discussions and they attain more of the teachers' attention. The study also shows that there are usually a few students who always speak more than the others in the classroom. At the same time a large number of the students are quiet or almost quiet during most lessons. When it comes to speaking time, the teacher generally talks two thirds of the time. Of the one third that is left, two thirds are taken by boys and one third by girls. (ibid) The researchers studied the classroom interaction during many different lessons where different subjects were taught and conclude that girls tend to be more active during Swedish and English lessons and that they even dominate occasionally during English lessons. (Ibid) Girls are described as "spectators rather than actors in the classroom show" (Ibid:202) but as successful ones since they do well when it comes to results. Although this study is very significant and many recent studies have shown similar patterns, it is important to keep in mind that more than twenty years have passed since it was conducted. Society changes constantly and so do institutions such as school and relationships between people.

### **3.7.3 Possible explanations to differences in school performance**

There are many different ideas about why boys achieve inferior results. Research on power structures in the classroom could easily explain an opposite situation; girls who achieve inferior results. Since the explanation is not as obvious as a question of power, many different explanations are possible.

The fact that boys as a group are less successful in school than girls, has been explained in terms of maturity. (Svensson, 1971, Emanuelsson and Fischbein, 1986, Levander, 1994 and Rosén, 1998) Boys generally mature later than girls mentally and physically. The mental maturity affects the results directly while the physical maturity might affect the results indirectly. Above- mentioned researchers claim that boys have a greater need of physical activity and that they often find it more difficult to concentrate. They underline that the immaturity is temporary and that boys usually mature and become more successful later in life.

The National Agency for Education (2006) present some other explanations to the differences. According to them, it has been shown that the teaching situation is very much adapted to the boys' conditions. Despite this, the boys achieve inferior results than the girls. While boys are considered to be privileged when it comes to material and teaching methods, girls, on the other hand, are privileged when it comes to judgment and grading. The girls are also considered to adapt more to the official curriculum and also to the "hidden curriculum". (NAE, 2006) The official curriculum emphasizes collaboration, independence and student initiative among many other things. There is also a "hidden curriculum" that regulates the students' and the teachers' interaction to a large extent. Unwritten rules and demands on the students make up this "hidden curriculum". (Edlund, 2007)

The gender gap in school performance has also been studied by Nycander (2006). She gives possible explanations to why girls generally achieve higher grades than they have scored in national assessments. She has found that boys are disadvantaged and that this could partly be explained by how the national assessments are constructed. The national curriculum also focus very much on communication which is seen as a disadvantage for boys. According to Nycander, a possible explanation might be that the girls are compensated in some way since they are

considered to be disadvantaged in classroom situations. The girls might, according to her, also be rewarded for their good behavior in class.

Some researchers point out that school and school assignments are incompatible with masculinity and that the boys' inferior results are signs of resistance and protest. There is a contrast between stereotypical male behavior and the manners requested in school, which are closer to stereotypical female behavior. (Wernersson, 1977, Phoenix, 2004)

The fact that school has become more dominated by women teachers has been pointed out as a possible explanation for the differences in performance. Female teachers might relate easier to girls as well as male teachers to boys. In *Is the gender gap in school performance affected by the sex of the teacher?* (Holmlund and Sund, 2005) the authors conclude that they do not have any strong support for their initial assumption that the sex of the teacher would affect student outcome. They have studied classes with male and female teachers and found that the teachers do not tend to give same-sex students better grades. Nevertheless, it is not only a question of how single teachers grade but a question of how boys and girls are affected by an entire school system from kindergarten to upper secondary school dominated by women.

To conclude there are certainly many different factors that have an effect on school performance. Different explanations might be appropriate and apply to different situations and individuals.

## **4. METHOD**

There are different ways of collecting data for a study. In this case interviews and questionnaires were used. The aim with research is to get a picture of reality in relation to a specific issue. In this case students' and teachers' experiences and opinions about the impact of gender in English teaching. A common way of doing this kind of research is by taking a sample, a small group is selected to represent a larger whole. (Svenning, 2003)

The two methods for collecting data that were used for this study, both include the asking of questions. In questionnaires, the questions that are asked are the same for all respondents, which allows the answers to be sorted into categories and confronted. (Stensmo, 2002) Interview questions can on the other hand vary more. It is possible to have an interview with multiple choice questions where the respondent is provided with a set of possible answers and is asked to choose the most appropriate option. It is nevertheless more common to use open-ended questions in interviews since it allows the respondent complete freedom to reply. (Keats, 2000)

The choice to use a questionnaire to get an idea of the students' opinions was made since it is easy to study a larger group in this way. The choice to interview teachers was on the other hand made to allow more freethinking answers and thereby get a more profound understanding of how they reason. It is not possible to say that one method is better than the other, only that they serve different purposes.

### **4.1 Questionnaire**

Questionnaires are very often used in research. The questionnaire as a measuring instrument can be quantitative or qualitative depending on how it is designed. If the data collected can be counted, as in this case, the survey is quantitative; but according to Trost and Hultåker (2007) most social-science studies are also qualitative to some extent. Since the data collected for this study is based on thoughts and experiences rather than facts, there is a qualitative aspect of the countable data.

When a questionnaire is designed it is important to try to ask questions in line with the aim of the study. It is important to ask clear and simple questions in a logical order. It is essential to avoid strong words or complicated questions to make the questionnaire easy to understand and answer. (ibid) In this case the questions were asked in English to Swedish students after consulting some teachers about whether they thought that the language of the questions was too

difficult. They all agreed that it would not be a problem for the students to understand the questions.

The questionnaire used for this study was constructed by multiple choice questions where the respondent was provided with a set of possible answers and asked to choose the most appropriate option. By using questions with fixed answers it is easier to interpret the answers of the respondents. According to Trost and Hultåker (2007) it is better to avoid open-ended questions in questionnaires since the answers might be very difficult to interpret and since many respondents choose not to answer at all if they have to write themselves.

The first questions of the questionnaire that were used for this study were classification questions, to enable a comparison between the answers of different groups. The questions were constructed with answers that can be graded. The answers were graded on a four-step scale, rather than on a five-step scale as in the original *Lickert scale*. The neutral step was removed to oblige the respondents to express a positive or negative standpoint. (Stensmo, 2002) The respondents were also asked questions about how they perceive of girls' and boys' knowledge and behavior. The set of answers to these questions are -girls, -boys and -no difference. To end the questionnaire, a final open-ended question was asked, to invite the respondents to express any opinions or communicate anything that had not been said through the answers of the other questions. (Trost and Hultåker, 2007)

#### **4.1.1 Respondents and anonymity**

The respondents are in this case 128 Swedish students studying English. They attend different English courses and represent different programs. 55.5 percent of the respondents are women and 44.5 percent are men. They all attend the same upper secondary school in Norrbotten, Sweden.

A questionnaire can be anonymous or confidential. If a questionnaire is anonymous there is no name, number or other information that can identify the respondent. If the questionnaire is confidential the respondent is asked to fill out name or other identifying data, but this information is only available to the researcher. (Patel and Davidsson, 2003) The questionnaire used for this study is completely anonymous. When the questionnaire was handed out, the respondents were informed that all answers are anonymous.

#### **4.1.2 Drawing a representative sample from the population**

The term *population* is used to denote all those who fall into the category of concern. In this case the population is all English students of the Swedish upper secondary school. The best way of ensuring a representative sample from the population is by means of a completely random sampling method. (Oppenheim,1992) In this case this would mean that all English students of the Swedish upper secondary school would have the same possibility to be selected as respondents. Since this study is limited it is impossible to make such a selection. There is nevertheless a modified sampling method which is called the *quota sampling method* that can be used as in this case. (ibid) Some characteristics of the whole population are selected as essential to be represented in the sample. In this case the sex ratio and the division of students between different upper secondary programs were selected as characteristics. Different teachers were contacted to come in contact with different classes on diverse programs but the differences in number between the classes still make the sample not completely representative. The sample can characterize the population to some extent even if it is rather small and not completely representative.

### 4.1.3 Reliability and validity

The concepts of reliability and validity are necessary to assess how well a question or a group of questions measure what they have been aimed to measure. Oppenheim (1992) describes the terms in this way:

Reliability refers to the purity and consistency of a measure, to repeatability, to the probability of obtaining the same results again if the measure were to be duplicated. Validity, on the other hand, tells us whether the question, item or score measures what it is supposed to measure. For instance a clock is supposed to measure “true” time and do so continuously. If it were sometimes slow and sometimes fast we could call it unreliable. It is possible to have a measure that is highly reliable yet of poor validity; for instance, a clock that is precisely eighteen minutes fast consistently. (ibid:145)

When it comes to questions that are not factual, as the questions used in this case, it is more difficult to determine the reliability. People do change their ideas and their thoughts about different issues. In a questionnaire, the reliability can improve if several similar questions are asked to investigate a certain aspect from different perspectives. The questionnaire also has to be designed in a simple way for the respondents to answer the questions and for the researcher to analyze the answers as accurate as possible. It is also important that the people who register the answers are objective and interpret the answers in the same way. (Troost and Hultåker, 2007) These aspects were considered during the design of the questionnaire and during the analysis of data.

When it comes to the question of validity the aim was to include essential questions. An initial version of the questionnaire was tried out on a group of fourteen students and after studying how they had answered and by asking them what they thought about the questions some weaknesses of the questionnaire were identified. The supervisor of this project also looked at and gave feedback on the initial version. The second version became the final one.

The validity can also be threatened by the fact that the sample is limited. It is not possible to see the sample as representative of all English students in the Swedish upper secondary school. The result of this survey must therefore be seen as an example of what the situation might look like. (Svenning, 2003) A factor which always has to be considered is that the respondents interpret the questions and answers differently depending on their previous experiences. The fact that the questionnaire is in English might also make it more difficult to understand and answer the questions.

### 4.1.4 Method of data collection

Different methods can be used to collect data in social research. When it comes to questionnaires the collection can be administered in various ways. The main administration methods are *mail questionnaires* (distributed by post or e-mail), *standardized interviews* (for example over the phone), *self-administered questionnaires* and *group-administered questionnaires*. Each method has advantages and disadvantages and is more or less adapted to different situations. In this case the questionnaires were group-administered and this is a suitable method when it comes to asking questions of students. The respondents assemble in a classroom and are thereafter asked to fill out a questionnaire after an introduction from an administrator. The benefits of this method are that the respondents are able to ask questions and there is also generally a high response rate. There might be absent students but present students rarely refuse to answer the questions. Contamination through copying, talking and asking questions is seen as a constant danger and disadvantage of this method. (Oppenheim, 1992)

### **4.1.5 Missing data**

It is important to consider how to deal with missing data. Missing data can be caused by respondents who have missed a question or maybe an entire page. It can also be invalid data as in cases when respondents have added additional answers that are impossible to use. There can also be *non-respondents* who have not answered the questionnaire at all. (ibid) In this case a total of 23 students were absent. It is not possible to consider how they might have answered. When it comes to single answers that are missing or invalid, they are simply not included in the result of that specific question.

### **4.1.6 Processing and analyzing data**

Questionnaires with “closed” questions lend themselves to quantitative forms of analysis. It is easy to code the different answers and present them in tables or diagrams. (ibid) In this case, an initial processing that aimed to get an overview of the material was followed by the coding of answers. These codes were further inserted into tables and subsequently transformed into diagrams.

The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Blaxter (1996:194) states that “many small scale research studies which use questionnaires as a form of data collection will not need to go beyond the use of descriptive statistics and the exploration of the relationships between pairs of variables.” It is sufficient to say that a certain proportion of the respondents answered given questions in a particular way.

To make the presentation of the results as clear as possible the answers are made visible in staple diagrams where a distinction is made between the girls’ and the boys’ answers. The final open-ended question would have been analyzed separately but no respondent chose to answer it. The diagrams are presented in the *results* section.

## **4.2 Interview**

The interview method is used to collect data that is difficult to access by observations or questionnaires. There are many different types of interviews, for instance: job interviews, press interviews and therapeutic interviews. The kinds of interviews that are used for research are nevertheless different from these. There are essentially two kinds of interviews used for this purpose:

- *Exploratory interviews*, depth interviews, or free-style interviews.
- *Standardized interviews* such as used, for example, in public opinion polls, market research and government surveys. (Oppenheim, 1992:65)

A semi-structured *exploratory interview* method was used for this study. The interviews almost took the form of a discussion but some specific questions were also asked. The purpose of an exploratory interview is to try to understand how the respondents think and feel about the topic and not to gather facts. Oppenheim (1992) explains the task of the depth interviewer in this way: “The job of the depth interviewer is thus *not* that of data collection but *ideas* collection.” (ibid:67)

### **4.2.1 Respondents and confidentiality**

Five English upper secondary school teachers were contacted and asked if they would like to be interviewed, all of them consented. The teachers all work at the same school. Four of the five respondents are women. They are all experienced teachers and are called Teacher A, B, C, D and E in the results section.

Interviews are most often confidential and not anonymous. The interviewer has to get in contact with the respondent in some way and that includes knowing his or her name. The interviewer also meets the respondent face-to-face at the actual time for the interview unless it is a phone interview. The identifying data is nevertheless only available to the researcher. (Patel and Davidsson, 2003)

When the respondents are described as above, it is important not to make the information about the person so detailed that he or she can be recognized. In this case, the name of the school has not been inserted since that would rather easily identify the teachers. There is, for example, only one male English teacher at this school. All respondents were informed that the information is confidential.

#### **4.2.2 Drawing a representative sample from the population**

As mentioned above, the best way of ensuring a representative sample from the population is by means of a completely random sampling method. (Oppenheim, 1992) This is, as mentioned above, not possible since this study is limited. The number of teachers is so limited that the sample cannot be seen as representative of the whole population but only as an example of what reality may be like. Nevertheless, the teachers have different working experiences and all contribute to the study in different ways.

#### **4.2.3 Reliability and validity**

The term reliability has been explained earlier in this essay and in relation to interviewing, it refers to the degree of consistency that the interview has for the respondents. The question to ask is if the same interview could be repeated with the same responses or if the same responses could be obtained by asking the same question in a different form. In research interviewing the reliability of the interviewer or interviewers is of critical importance. Is the single interviewer able to keep to the questions and does a team of interviewers use the same approach when they interview? Recording the interviews and interview training help improve the reliability. (Keats, 2000)

In this case, all the research interviews were recorded to improve the reliability. The main questions that were asked were the same but since the respondents answered differently, the probing questions differed.

When it comes to validity the aim was to ask essential questions. It is nevertheless initially important to ask some more general questions to establish a relationship between the interviewer and the respondent. The validity is vulnerable since the sample is small. Contamination is also possible since the respondents are colleagues and were not all interviewed at the same time.

The choice of analyzing approach was made considering the validity of the study. Large amounts of transcribed material from the interviews are included in the presentation of the results for this reason.

#### **4.2.4 Method of data collection**

When it comes to interviews there are two main ways of collecting data or *ideas* as stated earlier. These are either by taking notes or by recording the interview. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with both of these strategies. If a recorder is used the interviewer only has to concentrate on the process of the interview since there will be an exact record of what has been said. Recording can on the other hand make respondents uneasy and unwilling to reveal sensitive information. Recordings also take a long time to transcribe. Note-taking gives the interviewer an instant record of what has been said. It can, however, be very distracting to take

notes and information may therefore unintentionally be left out. (Blaxter, 1992)

All the interviews that were conducted for this study were held at the respondents working-places. The interviews took between 25 and 45 minutes and the interviews were recorded on a computer with an external microphone using the software Zen Organizer Creative Media Source.

#### 4.2.5 Processing and analyzing data

The data obtained from interviews can be analyzed in many different ways. Since the data is not countable the analysis is qualitative. The main approaches to qualitative analysis are: *case studies*, *content analysis*, *discourse analysis* and *multi method approaches*. (Keats, 2000)

In this study, the *content analysis* approach was used since the other types of analysis require a great deal of experience of the researcher since they are closely connected to different types of *interpretation*. (ibid) The content analysis approach is described by Keats (2000:28) in this way: “Content analysis considers the nature of the verbal communication. The level of analysis can be directed to words, phrases or themes. Responses to the interview questions are transcribed into textual form and then categorized according to the unit of measurement selected”. Following the *context analysis* approach, the recordings were initially transcribed and the statements and phrases were divided into different categories. The answers are presented under different headings in the *results* section and also commented.

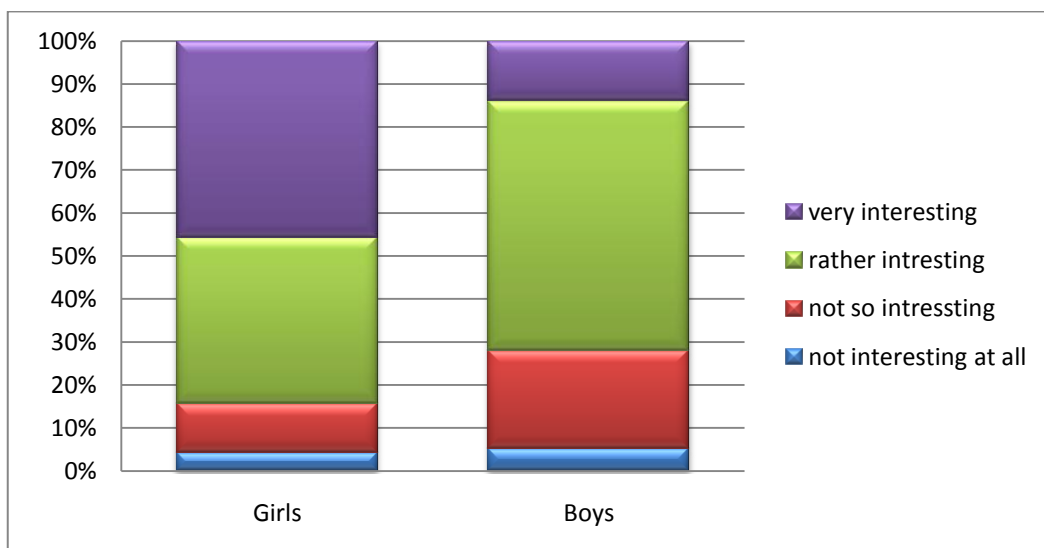
### 5. RESULTS

In this section the results from the questionnaires and the interviews are presented. The answers from the questionnaires are presented in diagrams where the girls’ and the boys’ answers are presented separately. The transcribed answers from the interviews are presented in different categories.

#### 5.1 Questionnaire results

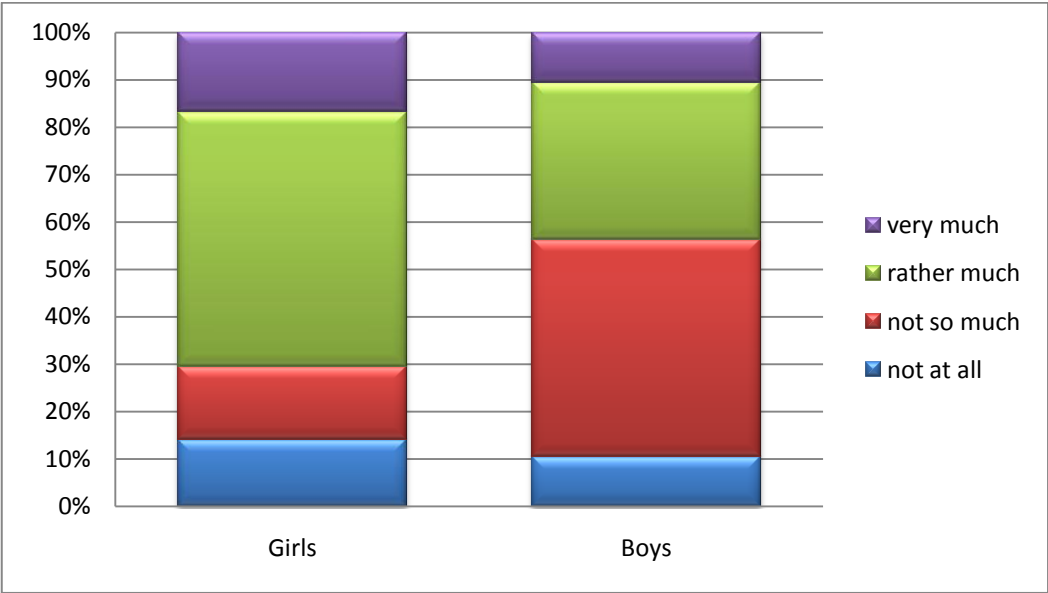
**Diagram 4 The students’ perception of English as a school subject**

There is a difference in how female and male students conceive English as a school subject. Only about 15% of the boys find it very interesting while more than 40% of the girls find it very interesting. Almost 30% of the boys do not find it so interesting or not interesting at all. The corresponding number is just over 15% of the girls.



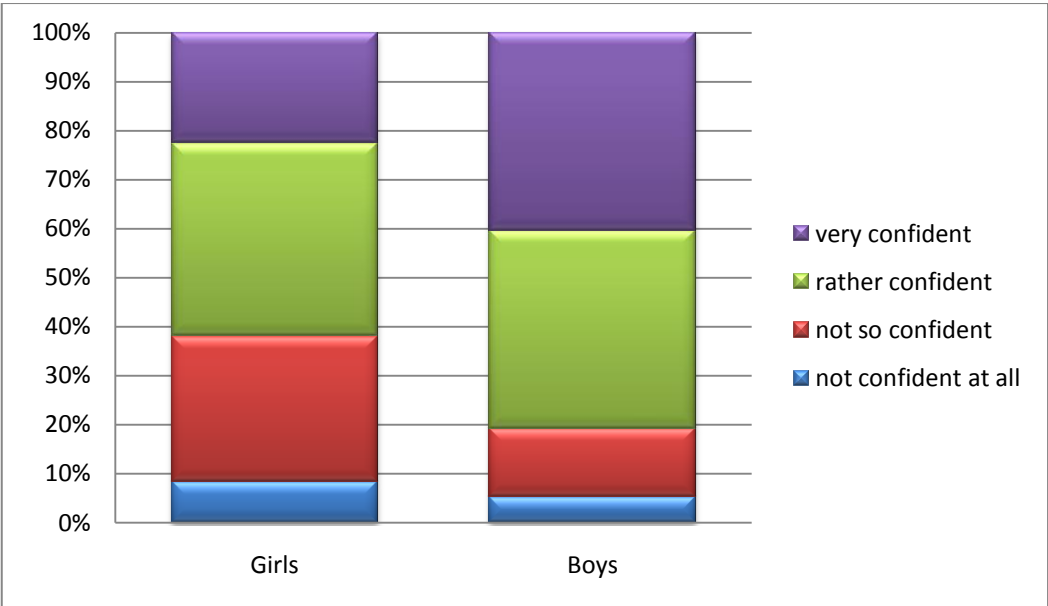
**Diagram 5** How appealing the students find the material (books, films, articles etc.) that is used for the English course

There is also, as shown in the diagram, a difference in how female and male students find the material that is used for the English course. About 70% of the girls find it very or rather appealing, while the corresponding number for the boys is about 45%. This means that more than half of the boys find the material not so appealing or not appealing at all.



**Diagram 6** How confident the students feel about speaking English in front of people

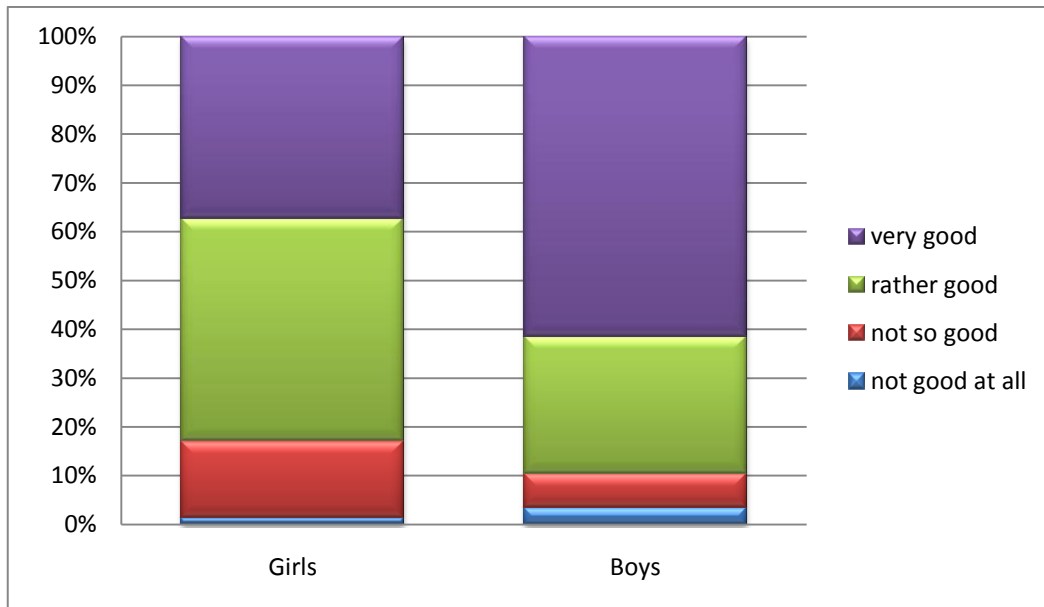
Male and female students feel differently about speaking English in front of people. More than 40% of the boys feel very confident while the corresponding number for the girls is just above 20%. Almost 40% of the girls do not feel so confident or not confident at all.





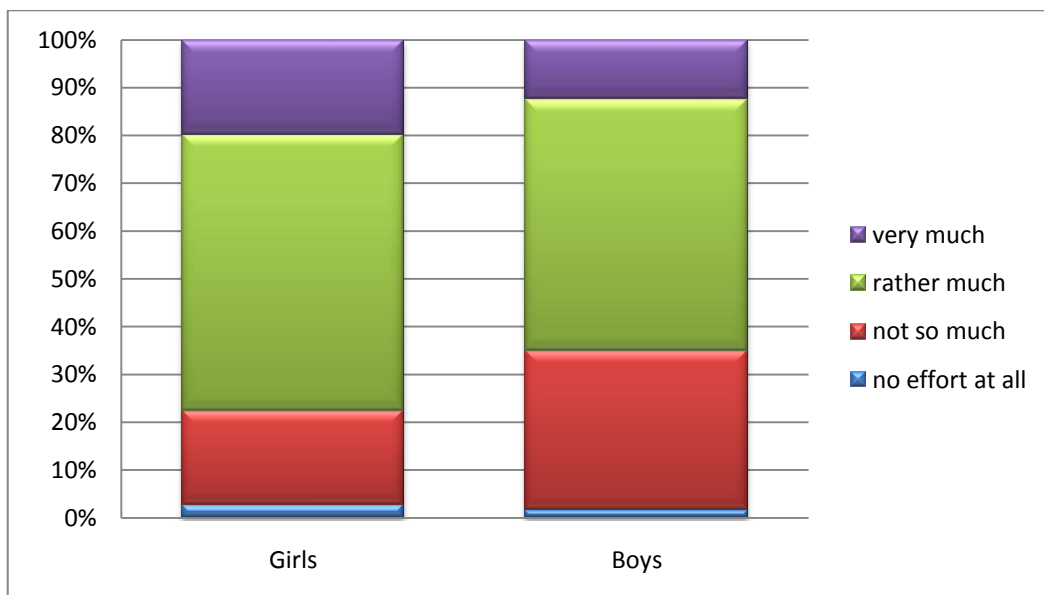
**Diagram 7      How the students value their own knowledge of English**

Male and female students value their own knowledge of English differently. More than 60% of the boys value their own knowledge as very good, while the corresponding proportion of the girls is a little less than 40%. Overall, more than 85% of the students value their knowledge as rather good or very good.



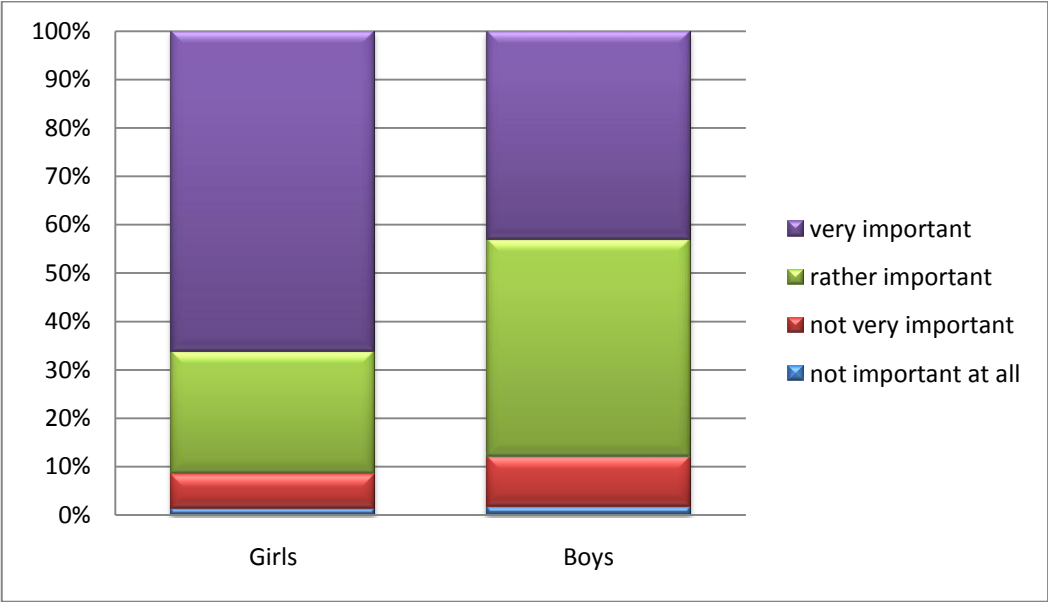
**Diagram 8      The students' estimations of their own study efforts (English)**

The female students value their own effort higher than what the male students do. Almost 80% of the girls say that they put rather much or very much effort into studying English while the corresponding number for the boys is about 65%.



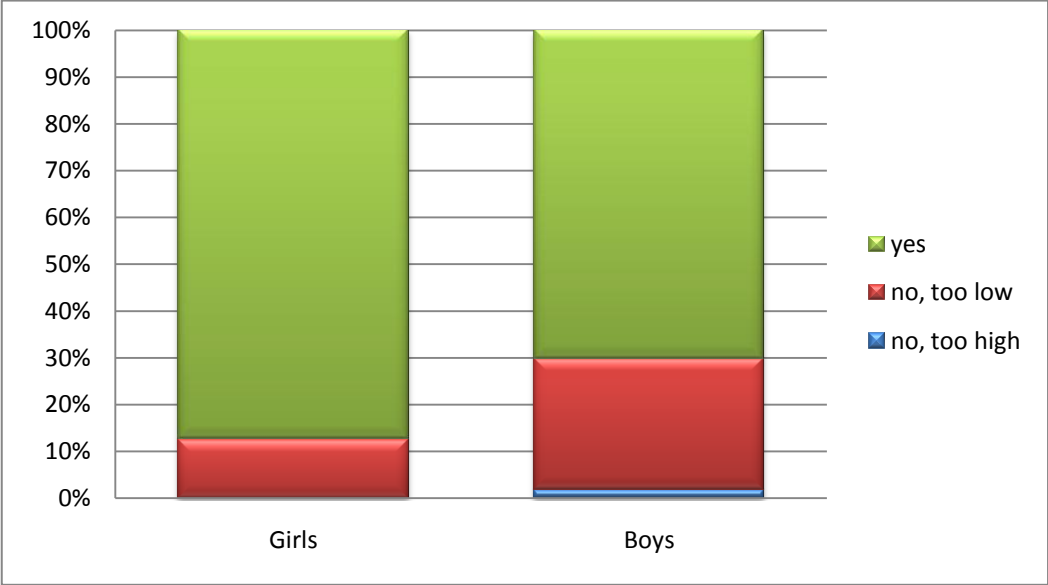
**Diagram 9 How important the students find it to achieve a good grade in English**

The female students find it more important to achieve a good grade in English than the male students do. More than 65% of the girls find it very important while about 45% of the boys find it very important. Overall, less than 10% of the students find it not very important or not important at all.



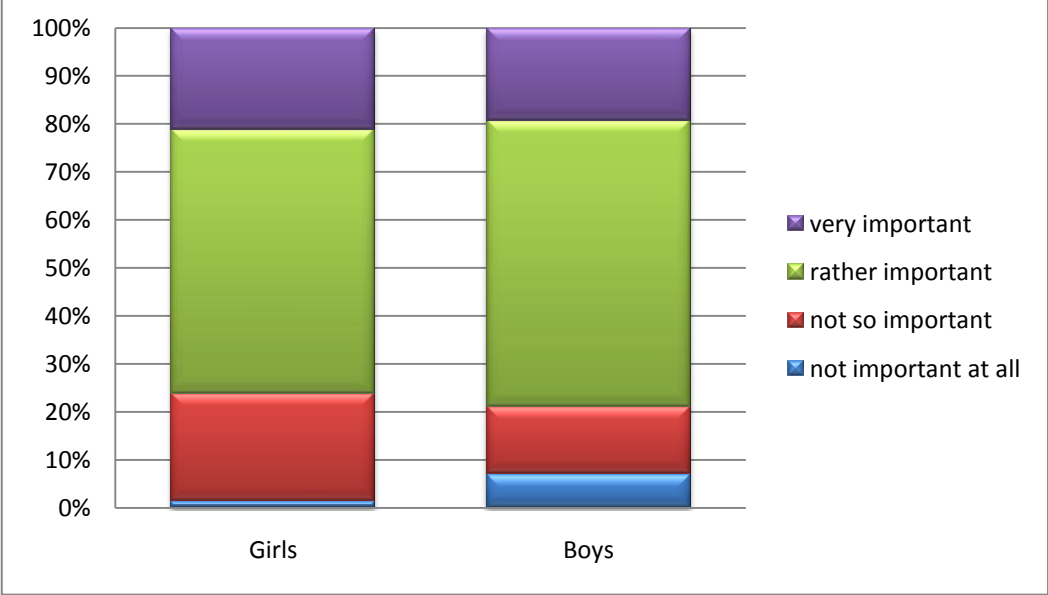
**Diagram 10 Whether the students feel that they have been justly graded**

The female students feel that they have been justly graded to a higher extent than the male students do. About 30% of the boys feel that they have been given a lower grade than they have deserved while the corresponding number for girls is just over 10%. Only one respondent answered that he was given a higher grade than he deserved.



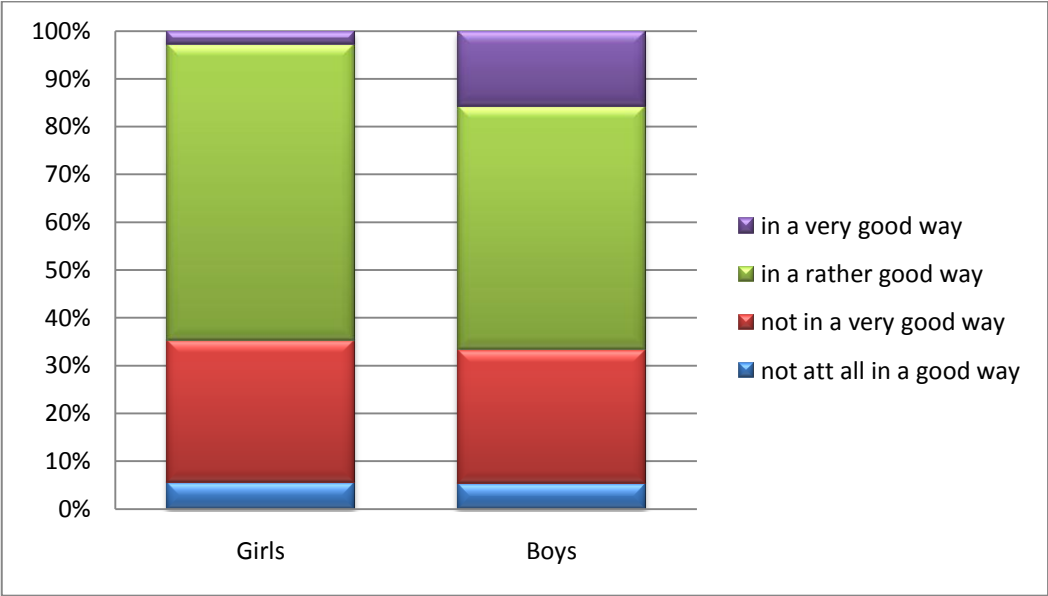
**Diagram 11 How important the students think that the national assessments are for their final grade**

The male and female students have about the same ideas about how important the national assessments are for the final grade. Overall, about 80% of the students think that the national assessments are very important or rather important.



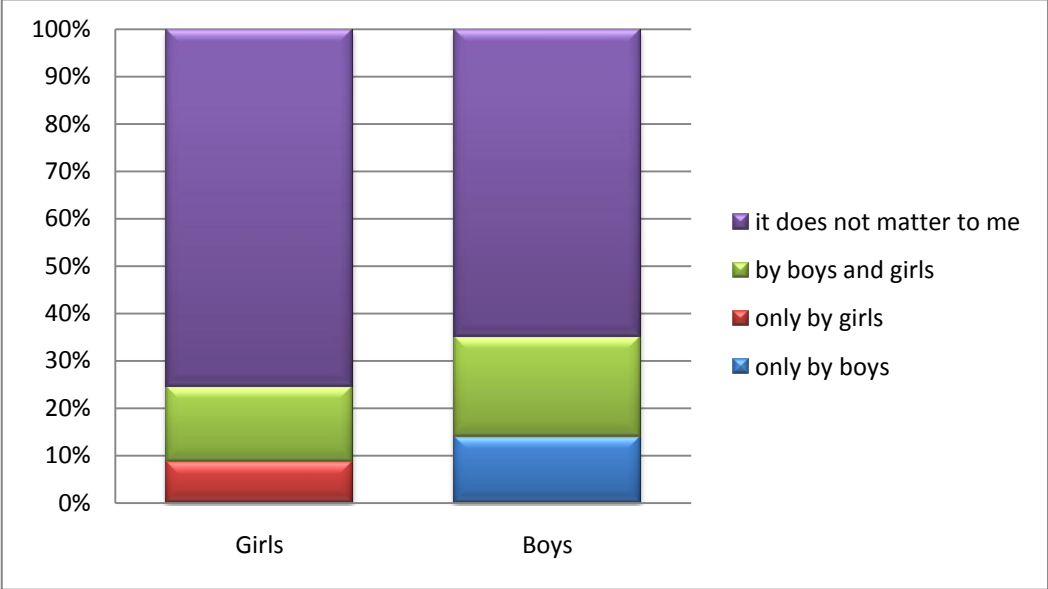
**Diagram 12 How the students feel that the national assessments measure their knowledge of English**

As shown here and in Diagram 11, the male and female students have very similar ideas about the national assessments. A larger proportion of the boys feel that the national assessments measure their knowledge in a very good way but the difference is marginal.



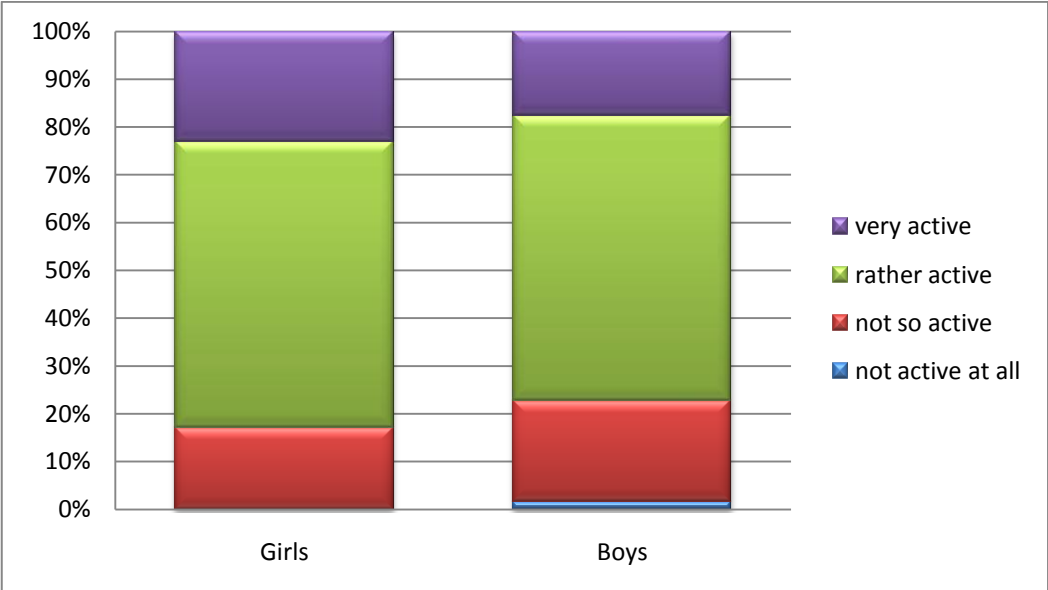
**Diagram 13 How the students prefer the group to be put together if there is a group assignment**

The majority of the students do not find it important how their group is put together if there is a group assignment. A little bit less than 10% of the girls state that they would prefer to be in a group with only girls and a little bit more than 10% of the boys state that they would prefer to be in a group with only boys.



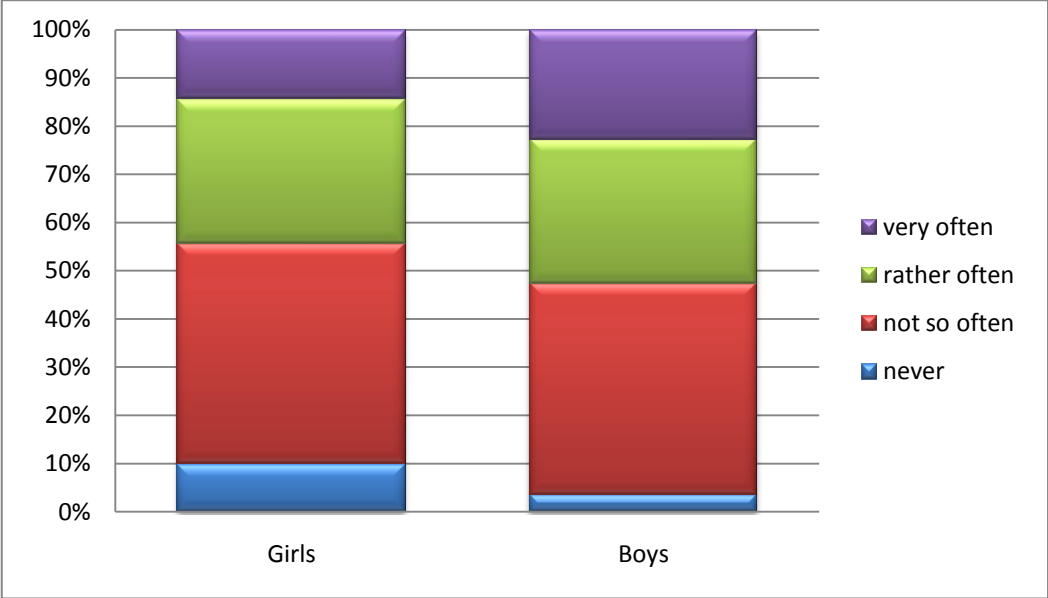
**Diagram 14 How active the students consider themselves to be during English lessons**

The female students and the male students value their own level of activity in similar ways. The girls value themselves to be a little bit more active in respect to how the boys value themselves, but the difference is small.



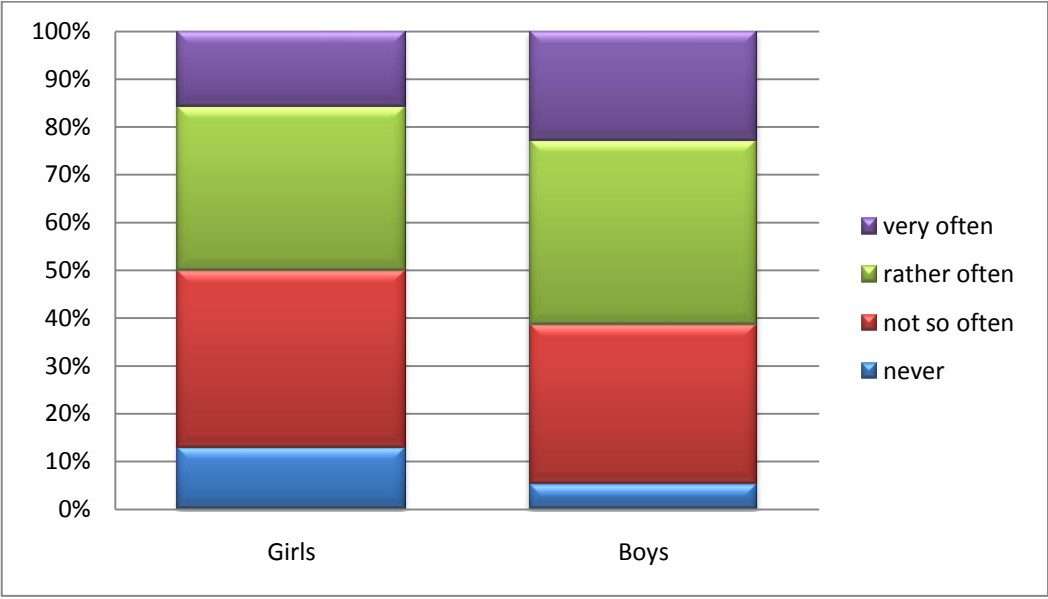
**Diagram 15** How often students consider themselves to answer questions asked by the teacher during English lessons

The male students consider themselves to answer questions asked by the teacher more frequently than the female students consider themselves to do. Almost 25% of the boys claim that they answer questions very often while the corresponding number of the girls is 15%. Noticeable is also that about 10% of the girls claim that they never answer questions asked by the teacher.



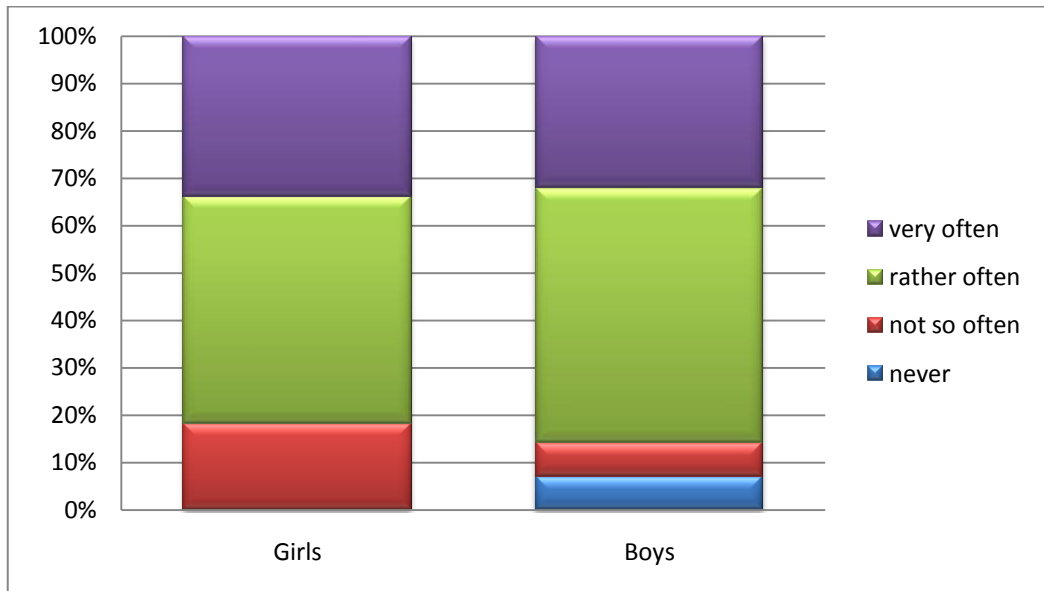
**Diagram 16** How often students consider themselves to participate spontaneously in classroom discussions during English lessons

The male students also consider themselves to participate spontaneously in classroom discussions more frequently than the female students view themselves to do. Almost 25% of the boys claim that they participate very often while the corresponding number of the girls is just above 15%. More than 10% of the girls claim that they never participate spontaneously.



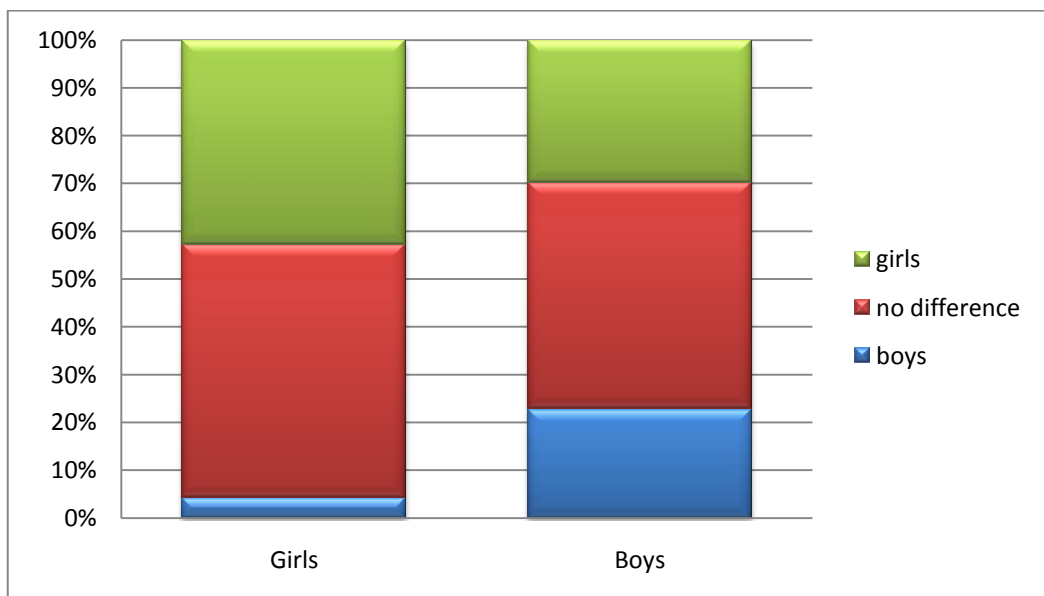
**Diagram 17 How often the students feel that they get enough attention from the teacher**

More than 80% of the students consider that they get enough attention from the teacher very often or rather often and the pattern is the same for boys and girls. No girls believe that they never get enough attention while a little more than 5% of the boys find that they never get enough attention.



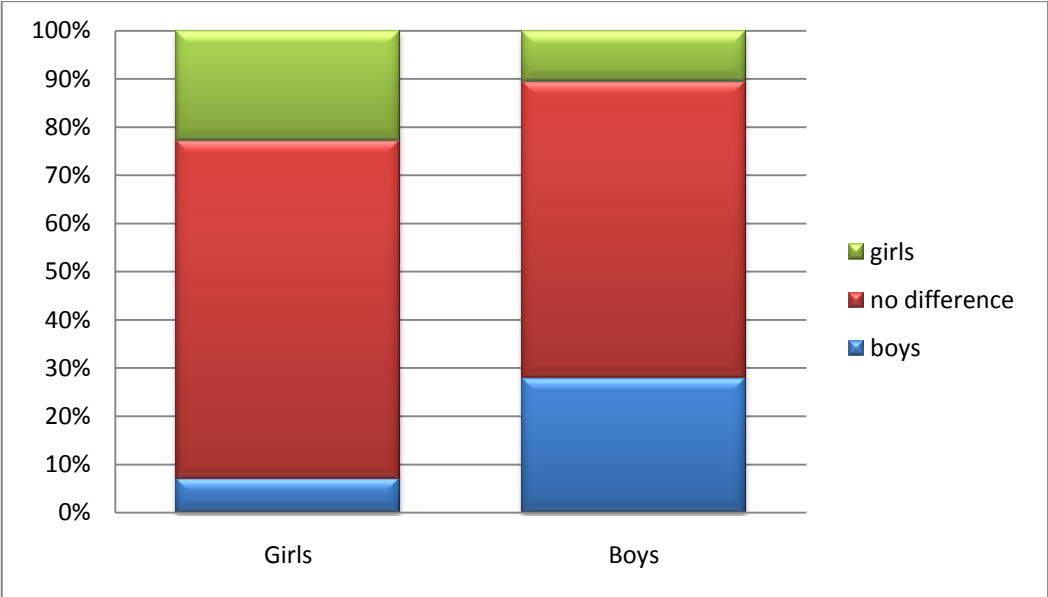
**Diagram 18 Who the students think are more active during English lessons**

About 50% of the female and male students, find that girls and boys are equally active during English lessons. Of those who think that one sex is more active, there is a difference in how girls and boys reason. The majority of the girls find that girls are more active, while about one half of the boys find girls more active and the other half find boys more active.



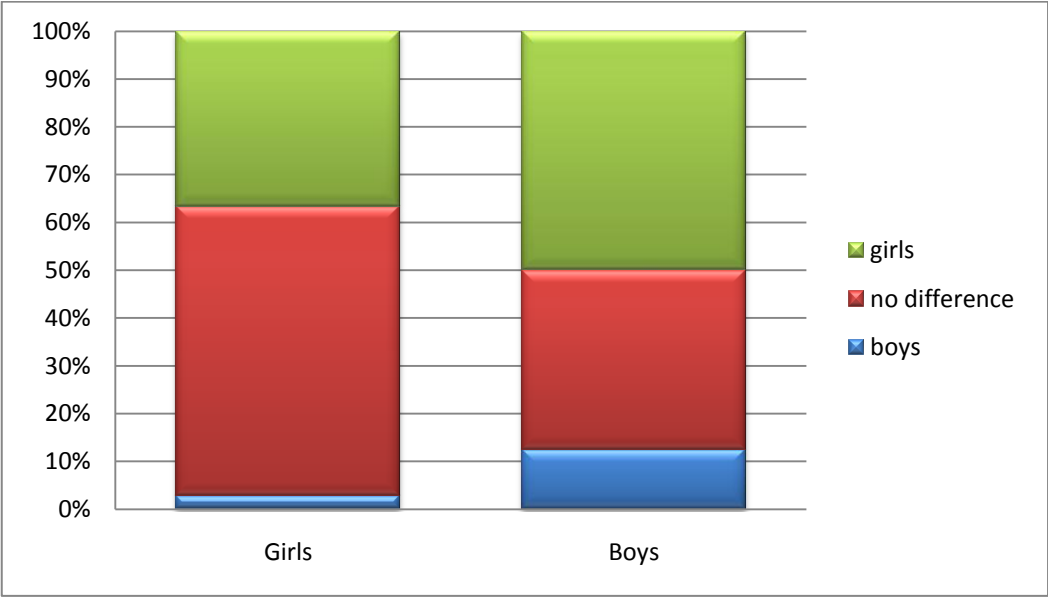
**Diagram 19 The students' perception of who is better at English**

About 70% of the female students and 60% of the male students find that boys and girls are equally good at English. It is further interesting to note that of those who think that one sex is better, they most often opt for their own sex.



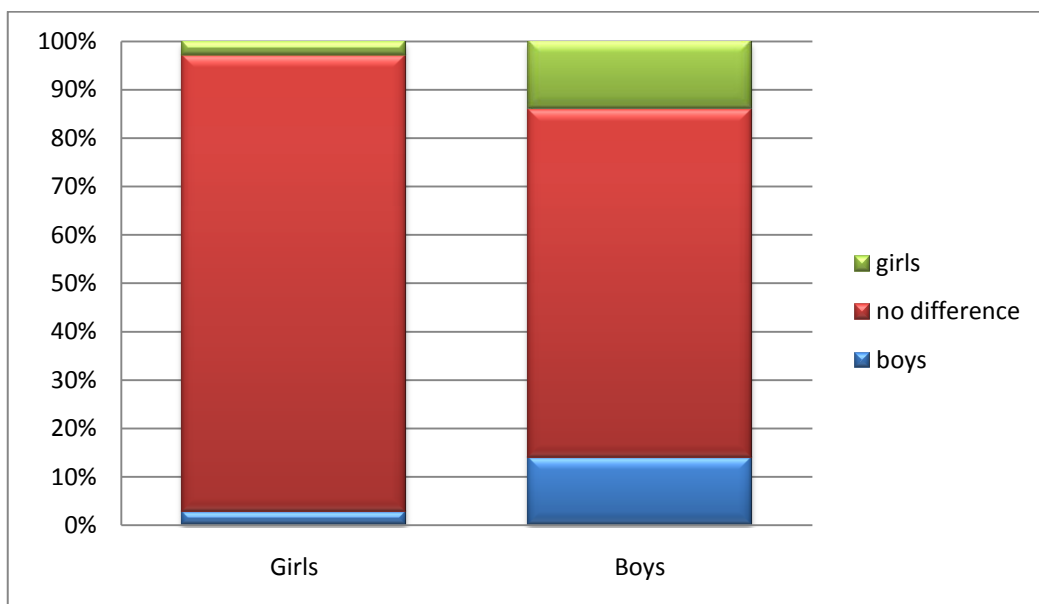
**Diagram 20 The students' perception of who achieve higher grades in English**

About 60% of the female students believe that there is no difference in grades between boys and girls while the corresponding number for boys is less than 40%. Almost 50% of the boys believe that girls achieve better grades while more than 35% of the girls reason in the same way. Just over 10% of the boys believe that boys attain better grades while less than 4% of the girls believe that boys achieve better grades.



### Diagram 21 Who the students feel obtain more attention from the teacher

Almost all the female students feel that there is no difference in the amount of attention that the girls and boys get from the teacher. About 15% of the boys feel that girls get more attention, while another 15% of the boys feel that boys get more attention.



## 5.2 Interview results

In this section the results from the teacher interviews are presented. The teachers' answers and comments are listed under the topics: classroom interaction and gender differences in behavior, grades and attitudes to grades, lesson preparation and material, assignment preferences, national assessments and girls and boys opportunities.

### 5.2.1 Classroom interaction and gender differences in behavior

When the teachers were asked to describe the interaction in their English classes and if they could see any gender differences in behavior, the teachers generally described the atmosphere in their classes as overall good and friendly. Nevertheless, they often described the differences in behavior between girls and boys as rather stereotypical, with girls who are afraid of speaking and boys who are more confident.

“Even if there are only four or five boys in a class, it is the boys who determine the classroom atmosphere. Even if they are very few, you note them more. They are not better at answering questions or superior when it comes to knowledge, it is more about other comments and how they behave. They make more noise during the lessons than the girls do.” (Teacher B)

“Of course they behave differently, they are boys and girls. I am aware that I notice the boys first, I always know the boys' names first. They are individuals from the first second and not a group as the girls are. Boys generally occupy more space, they make themselves heard. They are not so concerned about what other people think of them, while girls are often very concerned about how other people see them. They are afraid of making a fool of themselves, afraid of saying the wrong thing, afraid that somebody might laugh.” (Teacher E)

“Generally many girls are afraid of making themselves heard, some do not have the courage to open their mouths at all during the lessons, not even if they work in small groups, while that is unusual among boys.” (Teacher B)



“In one of my classes, where there are only girls, there are more girls who have the courage to speak, while in the mixed class, more girls are shy and afraid of speaking. In the mixed class there are a few girls who speak a lot, while in the class where there are only girls they all speak more.” (Teacher B)

“There is always a group of quiet girls, in my English C group, I have about four or five boys who enjoy to speak their mind and at least three girls who never let an opportunity to speak slip them by, but there is a large group of quiet girls.” (Teacher E)

“In the “all boys” group they use coarse language, more swear words, different nick names and so on, and in one group the atmosphere is a bit, you know, not that serious.” (Teacher D)

Some teachers also pointed out that there are exceptions. In some English classes the girls are more active or the boys are really soft and well behaved. One teacher pointed out that the classroom interaction is different between programs. According to her experiences, girls are generally more active at the social science and the natural science programs. Another teacher had classes where the stereotypical pattern is broken and girls are allowed to be more masculine while boys are allowed to be more feminine.

“At the moment, I teach a second year social science class where the girls are extremely active. They make themselves heard and give each other space, while the boys are in the background. The boys are also active as boys always are but in this case it is the girls who run the show.” (Teacher E)

“It happens that the boys form a group and isolate themselves in social science classes but usually there is a good understanding and atmosphere between girls and boys. At the natural science program the girls are usually very active and make themselves heard. At the hotel and restaurant program where there is a mix of boys and girls, the girls are usually more withdrawn while the boys are more active.” (Teacher E)

“The boys that I teach now are really nice, I almost get tears in my eyes, they are really well-behaved. It’s difficult to generalize, how you behave depends on who you are as an individual. I have met girls with a completely messed up view of social behavior but also boys who behave perfectly. It has to do with personality and not your sex.” (Teacher C)

“We have many tomboys, girls who are quite masculine, but there are also some boys who are really soft, some boys that are not at all “tough guys”, there is a mix. I was a tomboy when I was younger. These girls play a lot of sports, make their voice heard in the classroom, they are easy and straight forward and they often hang out with the boys. It doesn’t matter to them if their friends are girls or boys but there is no fuss, they don’t put on makeup in the classroom or fix their hair.” (Teacher C)

### **5.2.2 Grades and attitudes to grades**

When the teachers were asked about whether boys and girls have different attitudes to their grades in English and about what explanation they would give to the fact that girls generally achieve better grades, their answers were rather similar. They generally thought that girls care more about their grades and that they also work harder to reach their goals.

“Girls maybe tend to care a bit more, if I were to generalize, at least they show me more involvement when we talk about grades, and so on. They can seem happier or more disappointed. It might only be that they show their emotions in different ways. Boys might be just as happy or as sad but perhaps they don’t show it in the same way.” (Teacher D)

”I think girls generally strive harder for good grades even though my boys care about their grades as well.” (Teacher A)

“Girls are often more ambitious and they are well aware of the fact that it is important to speak during the lessons.” (Teacher E)

“The girls are more anxious about their grades, they come to me and ask: “what can I do to achieve an MVG?” (Teacher B)

“My first thought is that, well girls have shown more interest during the course. They have made more of an effort, I think.” (Teacher D)

“The girls are “hungrier”, but maybe I have that idea because I teach more girls.” (Teacher C)

“Most students care about their grades and they are aware of what is requested of them.” (Teacher C)

Some explanations that are given to explain why girls care more about their grades and also work harder are that they are more mature and think about the consequences of what they do. Another explanation is that the girls feel a need to be seen and recognized that can be fulfilled by attaining good grades.

”They usually say that the girls mature before the boys do and that might be a factor. Girls might look further into the future, at least when they come to upper secondary school. They have a goal and they know what they want to do in their lives, what kind of job they want and all of that, while boys don’t have that in the same way. Boys are like “now I do this and we will see what comes out of it” while girls have more long-term plans as “I want to be a psychologist so I need good grades.” (Teacher A)

I don’t know why really, it might be a question of maturity, that the girls mature earlier and realize that they have to do this for their future while guys enjoy the moment and say “ahh, it’s going to be alright.” (Teacher B)

“I think girls have a need to be acknowledged more than boys do in some way; that “I am good” while boys can say “I’m fucking great at this!” and mean it. When does a girl say that? Guys have a different attitude to themselves; girls are more “that went quite well” and not like “that went really great!”. But I don’t know if it’s true or not.” (Teacher A)

Some of the teachers also believed that girls conform to school more than boys and that this could explain why they get higher grades.

“Girls want good grades. It is very important to them, so they stick to the rules. I also teach several guys who are “outside the box” who will get better grades than girls who always stay “in the box”. But it might pay off to conform in the long run.” (Teacher E)

“The girls conform to the school system, they are very sensitive to what the teachers want while the boys are “free agents”.” (Teacher E)

“I think girls adapt more to the unwritten rules, but there is not a big difference. I think that it has to do more with the personality and the individual, but I can see sometimes that girls are a bit more well-behaved.”(Teacher D)

“The girls are raised more to fit into the school environment, they want to obey the teachers and do what they are asked to do.” (Teacher B)

The teachers generally did not think that the fact that there are many women teachers would have an influence on the grades and the results. In any event, some teachers pointed out that boys might be more interested if there were more male teachers and that female teachers might understand girls better. Many respondents believed that both girls and boys would benefit from having female and male teachers throughout the school system.

“I believe that boys always need male role models, as well as girls need female role models, but generally I think that both girls and boys need male *and* female role models. If I think about my own son, he started kindergarten this year, and the joy when a male teacher arrived... the boys screamed of happiness...and I’m talking about boys aged 3-5.” (Teacher A)

“The power that women often don’t have, but men do... I think it would be good if there were more male teachers. They are more respected. Women are often seen as nagging or gossiping if you look at language differences while men ”tell it right like it is”. I think it would be good for the boys who have a hard time in school if there were more male teachers. If a man would say “now we are going to do this...” they might do it more happily than if a woman says the same thing.” (Teacher B)

“It might be that women teachers understand girls better but I don’t think girls get higher grades because there are many female teachers.” (Teacher B)

“It might be, that you can relate to the teacher and so on. You might be a bit more interested in what the teacher presents in terms of assignments and so on. I have noticed that some boys have negative attitudes towards women in general. They feel that they can act in a certain way around women, but they can’t act in the same way around men.” (Teacher D)

### 5.2.3 Lesson planning and material

When the teachers were asked if they gave any consideration to gender differences when they planned their English lessons or prepared material for their courses, the spontaneous answer was most often “no”. After some reflection some of the teachers pointed out that they thought about choosing material, especially books and films, that both boys and girls could find interesting. Some stated that they tend to choose gender-neutral material or work with themes or “free” assignments where the students are able to choose by themselves what material to use.

”No, I don’t, absolutely not.” (Teacher A)

“No, I don’t think about that at all, but maybe... sometimes I might, if they are to read novels I make sure that there are some novels that might attract the boys as well. And even when I choose films I might choose a “war movie” so they might at least like something *once in awhile*. But generally I have very “open“ assignments so that the students can choose what they are interested in. I had a boy who read a typical “book for girls” recently and it was interesting to see his reaction. He came to me several times to point out that it was a “book for girls” but I could see that he actually liked it.” (Teacher B)

“No, I don’t think I work quite that way, I tend to choose a film or something, and then when I start the assignment, I might reflect “oh this is way too much *all boys* stuff”, but it doesn’t happen that often. I remember that during my education and internship I used to think about it a lot more. Maybe I unconsciously pick material that is not directed to girls or boys specifically. I try to be neutral, but you know...” (Teacher D)

“I usually think about a theme and then that theme can be discussed both from a female and male perspective. Recently we have been studying Shakespeare and the analysis made from a group of boys or a group of girls can look really different. Boys tend to look more at facts even though they also are more independent in their conclusions. Girls try to find the “right” answers and are more afraid of drawing their own conclusions.” (Teacher E)

“When I plan a lesson I don’t think about if there are girls or boys in the class but for example when we read literature they often ask “is this a book for girls or boys”. Then I think very much about what books I recommend, especially to boys since they tend to read less, at least most of them. I really want to encourage them so I want them to read something they might like. Not easier books but books with more “action”. I would not recommend...oh no...that sounds really prejudice.” (Teacher C)

“I would not give a typical “girls book” to a guy that doesn’t like reading. I would not come across to him in that way.” (Teacher C)

## 5.2.4 Assignment preferences

The teachers had different ideas about what kind of assignments or working methods were preferred by boys or girls. Some mentioned that girls are more happy to do written assignments while boys prefer to talk, this was, nevertheless not a general idea.

”The boys are really good at speaking, they learn a lot from films and video games and they usually have a good vocabulary. They find it hard to write and produce a text though. They have really interesting thoughts but find it hard to get it down on paper.” (Teacher A)

“Generally girls are better at writing than boys are, boys find it more difficult to get what they have in their heads down on paper. I also think that boys are better at oral assignments, or that they prefer speaking to writing anyway. This is all generally speaking, some boys are really good at writing and do not like to speak at all.” (Teacher B)

“The attitude can shift towards different assignments. With some assignments I expected that girls would receive them with more enthusiasm, but it was just my prejudices since the reactions were not those that I had expected. I think that differences in attitude have to do with your personality and not with your sex.” (Teacher D)

“Whatever I present some students have to complain and mumble a bit, and then they go: “ok, well then” and they go ahead and do their assignment really well. I think it has to do with who they are, their personalities, some just have to be “a bit negative” and then they do what they are supposed to anyway while others get started straight away.” (Teacher A)

“the boys are happier to do group assignments while the girls prefer individual assignments, that’s something that I’ve noticed, especially in one class.” (Teacher C)

“Generally they all find it difficult to make a presentation. They find it really hard and some refuse to speak in front of the others. I don’t find that there is a difference between boys and girls when it comes to this. Maybe the boys find it a little bit less embarrassing .” (Teacher C)

## 5.2.5 National assessments

The teachers were asked how they use the English national assessments and how important they regarded them to be. They were further asked if they could see any gender patterns in results in comparison to the results of other assignments and final grades. Most teachers found the national assessments very useful and agreed that they measure a general knowledge of English in a good way. Nevertheless, many teachers, valued classroom participation and results on other assignments as more important.

“They play a part but I tend to focus more on the performance in the classroom, on my tests and so on. The national assessment, of course it is important but I don’t find it exceedingly important. It’s like 60/40 or something like that.” (Teacher D)

“The national assessments are good since they are exactly the same for all students. It’s nevertheless a dilemma every year, we have talked about this many times at teacher reunions, how to look at the results and how to make a fair judgment. I do not at all think, that four tests, in any way, can decide the grade that I should give my students.” (Teacher C)

“I always know how my students will do on the national assessments. Don’t ask me how, but I am rarely wrong. If you teach a student for a whole term or longer you know their level of English. I would never dream of failing a student who has passed the national assessment even if he or she hasn’t done much during the year. I only grade what is stated in the criteria which is knowledge. I prefer quality to quantity.” (Teacher E)

”I usually think like this: for a VG or a MVG a student has to be able to perform well on this kind of “general test”, since they check the students’ general knowledge of English, what they understand, their vocabulary and so on. On the other hand, we all know how pressure, anxiety and those kind of things can affect the test result, so I bear that in mind too.” (Teacher A)

"It's like, if they haven't done anything during my lessons and then they score MVG in the national assessment, they are not going to get an MVG as their final grade." (Teacher A)

A pattern that had been noticed by some teachers was that some boys who were seen as rather passive during lessons and failed to do or to hand in their assignments could score very well in these exams while some girls who really made an effort and studied did not succeed as well as they could have been expected to do.

"What has struck me many times is that boys, or many boys at least, are often really good at English but they have not shown me this during the lessons. They are a bit lazy and don't have the energy to do anything but when it comes to the national assessments they might perform really well. But for me it isn't very important, I usually say that it is a test among many other tests, so even if they achieve a VG grade in the national assessment but they haven't done much during the past semester, or only achieved the grade G at other assignments the final grade will be a G. They have to show during the year that they are able to act responsibly, and take responsibility for their own education." (Teacher B)

"Girls generally know less about the world. They know less about English speaking countries where the texts or listening exercises are taken from. It makes the national assessments more difficult for them. Boys on the other hand have a general idea of the world that is much wider and that helps them a lot." (Teacher E)

"Some girls who really try hard and study can have difficulties when it comes to the national assessments while it is often the opposite for boys. Some boys who haven't done anything during the year score really well. It's difficult to decide the final grade in these cases." (Teacher C)

"I don't think boys get as stressed as the girls do." (Teacher A)

"Boys are better in unprepared tests. Not all, but in many cases it is like that. They have the knowledge to get an MVG grade but they can't make it anyway because they mess up their assignments during the rest of the course. The girls who achieve an MVG are those who really put an effort into it, study, show their abilities during the lessons and are always motivated. That is what make a difference, they might have the same knowledge but the boys don't have the energy to do it while the girls are motivated." (Teacher B)

## **5.2.6 Girls and boys opportunities**

When the teachers were asked if they thought that girls and boys had the same opportunities in the English classroom and in school in general, all but one hesitated long before answering. After reflecting most of them expressed that they believed or hoped that girls and boys had the same opportunities.

"I'm not sure, I hope so. That's the way we want it to be anyway, but whether it is like that, I don't know. I think it has a lot to do with personality as well, how active and extrovert you are, but then again it comes back to us as teachers, to help and support the shy or insecure students, so that they can make themselves heard." (Teacher A)

"Yes, I do think so. It's difficult for me to say. I tend to see them as individuals and not as girl or boys and treat all individuals in the same way. I think boys sometimes are disadvantaged because they are regarded as lazy but I try to push and help all my students in the same way. I think that it is very easy to forget about the boys who are shy, those who sit in the back of the class and don't make themselves heard. Anyway, I would say that boys don't have the same motivation and that's why there are differences in results. They have the possibilities and the potential but they don't have the motivation. Why that is, I really don't know. Girls are more structured while boys care more about what they do in their spare time. Friends, computers, sports and parties are more important than school. Girls care about those things as well but they make sure that they have time to study as well." (Teacher B)

"I definitely think they have the same opportunities, girls don't have better opportunities only because they have better results. I think boys are generally given higher grades in relation to the

effort they make. The grades might say whatever they like but I still believe that the boys are advantaged in society.” (Teacher E)

“I think they do have the same opportunities, but, I have noticed that I do pay more attention to the boys, they “grab my attention”, so to speak. They take hold of it and they don’t easily let go.” (Teacher D)

“I think you have to start earlier than at upper secondary school if you seriously want to encourage non stereotypical behavior and really give them the same opportunities.” (Teacher C)

“I generally think that they are just as good at English and have the same opportunities, they use English very much out of school, chatting, playing computer games, watching films and most students have an American pronunciation because that is what they hear.” (Teacher B)

## **6. DISCUSSION**

Firstly, the reliability and validity of this study is discussed in this section. Secondly, the questionnaire- and interview results are analyzed and commented on. The results are considered in relation to some of the research that has been presented previously in the essay.

### **6.1 Reliability and validity discussion**

The reliability and validity of the questionnaire answers presented in this study are difficult to determine since the questions are not factual. If the students were to answer the same questions again it is not obvious that the result would be the same, since people may change their ideas and thoughts about different issues over time. According to Trost (2007), for a questionnaire to be reliable, it is important that the questions are simple to interpret and answer. Despite the fact that the questionnaire was tried out on a group of students and that several teachers felt that it would not be a problem for the students to answer questions in English, it is still possible that the use of English made the questions more difficult to understand and interpret than if they had been in Swedish which is the respondents mother tongue. This is a threat to the reliability. With hindsight it is possible to come to the conclusion that it would have been better if the students had answered the questions in Swedish.

Regarding the validity of the questionnaire study, the aim was to include essential questions. An initial version of the questionnaire was, as mentioned, tried out on a group of fourteen students and after analyzing their answers and by asking them what they thought about the questions some weaknesses of the questionnaire were identified. The supervisor of this project also gave feed-back on the initial version. During the elaboration process it nevertheless became obvious that some questions were less relevant. The answers to these questions are, nevertheless, included in the results.

The students were selected using the *quota sampling method* as described by Oppenheim (1992). Some characteristics of the whole population<sup>1</sup> were selected as essential to be represented in the sample. In this case the sex ratio and the division of students between different upper secondary programs were the characteristics. The differences in number between the classes still make the sample not completely representative. According to Oppenheim (1992), the validity is threatened if the sample is limited, as in this case. It is not possible to see the sample as representative of all students of English in the Swedish upper secondary school. The result of this survey must, therefore, be seen as an example of what the situation might look like. All teachers and students who participated in this study work or go to the same school. The validity would have improved if the samples had been taken from different schools.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case: all students of English at Upper Secondary School in Sweden.

According to Keats (2000) the term reliability in relation to interviewing refers to the degree of consistency that the interview has for the respondents. The question to ask is if the same interview could be repeated with the same responses, or if the same responses could be obtained by asking the same question in a different form. Keats also states that the reliability can be improved, as in this case, by recording the research interviews.

The aim of the interviews was to ask essential and open questions in as simple and impartial a way as possible following the recommendations of Trost (2005), Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Keats (2000). Generally, the interviews went well, but during the transcription of the interviews it became clear that some of the probing questions might have been formulated in a different or more clear way to obtain more complete answers. This affects the reliability and validity of the study. Keats (2000) describes how important it is to make the respondent relaxed and comfortable during an interview, in order to make him or her answer in an open and honest way. Some respondents initially showed signs of uneasiness, especially since the interview was recorded, but they soon relaxed. The respondents' nervousness may have influenced the validity and reliability of the study to some extent.

As mentioned before, the recording of interviews improves the reliability. Nevertheless, important information might be lost during the transcription of a recording. When spoken language is turned into written language, mistakes might occur. It is up to the transcriber to interpret and analyze the material in a correct way. (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009)

Contamination is also possible since the respondents are colleagues and were not all interviewed at the same time. It was obvious during one interview that the teacher had discussed the questions with another teacher that had been interviewed the previous day. Nevertheless, it is difficult to know how the teacher might have answered without discussing the questions beforehand.

The choice of analyzing approach was made to improve the validity of the study. The *content analysis* approach is according to Keats (2000) a good alternative for inexperienced researchers since the focus is on the meaning of words, phrases and themes. Large amounts of transcribed material from the interviews were included in the results section, in line with this approach, which improves the reliability.

## **6.2 Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that there are gender differences in attitudes to English as a school subject and in classroom behavior. These differences might seem small in comparison to the situation of inequality found in many other countries. However, they are important to take into consideration if the goal is equal opportunities as mentioned in the steering documents for the Swedish school system.

According to this study, girls generally find English as a school subject more interesting than boys do and they also find the material used for the course more appealing. Furthermore, the girls estimate that they put more effort into studying and they find it more important to get a good grade. Boys, on the other hand, feel more self-confident about speaking English in front of people and also value their own knowledge higher. These differences in attitude are specifically connected to English as a school subject and the results are in line with earlier, more broad-spectrum school research, as for example the study made by Einarsson and Hultman (1984) and research presented by Einarsson and Granström (2002). The teachers that were interviewed for this study confirm the students' answers to a large extent. There are, according to them, differences in classroom behavior and attitudes between boys and girls. Boys are more self-confident than girls are and they are not afraid of speaking their mind. The teachers also describe some girls as shy and quiet. Nevertheless, the teachers also depict a situation that is varied. The stereotypical pattern is sometimes broken. The differences between boys and girls described by the teachers are similar to those identified by Ambjörnsson (2007) who found a great behavioral

variation within the female gender-role of girls at upper secondary school in Sweden.

The fact that boys are generally more self-confident than girls can be related to the way they have been socialized to become boys and young men. It is part of their gender-role. This pattern has been identified in several gender studies as, for example, by Fenstermaker and West (2002). Swann (1992) maintains that certain interests and behaviors are expected from boys and girls respectively and that they often adapt easily to these expectations.

The results of this study also suggest that at the same time as boys are more confident, they are less interested in the course material and in their own results. This attitude might be explained by some of the theories presented to explain differences in school performance. For example, it might be that the boys find school assignments incompatible with their masculinity, as described by Wernersson (1977) and Phoenix (2004) or that the material has been chosen predominantly by women teachers who might have other interests than the boys. The attitude might also be explained in terms of maturity as suggested by Levander (1994) and Rosén (1998).

If we regard the factors that affect learning that are presented by Lightbrown and Spada (2006), it is obvious that girls are advantaged by the fact that they find English as a school subject more interesting and also by the fact that they find the material used for the course more appealing. Additionally, if they also care more about their grades and study more it is not surprising that they receive better results. Lightbrown and Spada (2006) underline that personal characteristics such as motivation are very important for language learning.

There is, nevertheless, a big learning obstacle for girls that is connected to the social and cultural environment in the classroom, which is also regarded as crucial for learning. (ibid) They are less confident about speaking English and that can be connected to the female gender-role and a lower self-esteem. As research has shown, there is a classroom hierarchy where the girls are subjugated by the boys and therefore, to some extent, deprived of learning possibilities. (See, for example Hultman, 1990 and Einarsson & Granström, 2002). Interaction is essential for second language learning according to Vygotsky, Chomsky and current psychological theories about language acquisition. (Lightbrown and Spada, 2006) The courage to speak is obviously essential for interaction and thereby also for learning.

On the issue of lesson planning and choice of material, most teachers interviewed initially stated that they did not consider differences between boys and girls. Nevertheless, after some consideration, a few teachers pointed out that they tried to choose gender-neutral material or a selection of material that both boys and girls would find interesting. According to the teachers, girls generally find the material more interesting. One teacher stated that she might choose a “war movie” for a film assignment so that the boys might like something at least *once in awhile*.

When it comes to grades and attitudes to grades, all teachers tended to agree that girls care more and also work harder to achieve good results. Also notable was how the teachers explained the gender gap in school performance. In previous research the aim has often been to understand why boys achieve inferior results. The teachers interviewed for this study all explained the gender gap in school performance from the girls’ perspective. The girls’ success was mainly attributed to maturity and a tendency to conform to the school system. Biology in terms of maturity as well as the social construction of gender can hence be seen as the explanations to the differences in school performance. The teachers did not believe that the fact that there are many women teachers would affect student outcome. However, most agreed that there is a need for both male and female role-models.

The students’ answers to the questions regarding classroom activity were to some extent ambiguous. About 80% of both girls and boys viewed themselves as rather active or very active during English lessons. Over 40% of the female students and about 30% of the male students believed that girls are more active than boys during English lessons, while the majority of the remaining students did not believe there was any difference. Moreover, the boys felt that they more frequently answered questions asked by the teacher and also considered their spontaneous participation as higher. The ambiguity is that boys and girls valued their own level of activity



almost in the same way, at the same time as a large proportion of the male and female students stated that the girls are more active. Furthermore, male students estimated that they were more active answering questions and participating in discussions. To understand these answers it is necessary to consider that *classroom activity* can have different meanings. The boys felt that they spoke more, but that does not mean that they believe that they were generally more active than girls. Other assignments are surely considered to be taken more seriously by the girls. An explanation for this can be found in a study by Einarsson and Hultman (1984). According to them, boys are often shown to lead the classroom situation during many lessons whereas girls are more active during English and Swedish lessons. If male and female students are used to classroom situations where the boys are more active, a change in supremacy and activity caused by the subject, may give the students the idea that the girls are more active. It might only be that they are more active during English lessons than during other lessons.

This study suggests that female and male students have very similar ideas about the national assessments. Girls and boys find the tests equally important for their grades and more than 60% of the students find that the assessments measure their knowledge in a very good or rather good way. The teachers agreed that the national assessments are important and that they measure the general knowledge of English in a good way. Nevertheless, many teachers stated that classroom participation and other assignments completed during the year are more important for the final grade than the tests. As noted in the report on the results of the national assessments by the NAE (2009a) there is a discrepancy between the results of the national assessments and the final grade. Girls and boys generally get higher grades in comparison to how they score in the national assessments but there is a bigger difference for the girls. This picture is mostly confirmed by the teachers who reported that girls generally work harder and show their knowledge more during the year, which pays off when it comes to the final grade. The structure of the national assessments is given as an explanation for the gender gap in school performance by Nycander (2006). According to her, the tests are structured in a way that disadvantages the boys. This statement regards the national assessments in general and not the specific assessments of English. However, the teachers interviewed for this study were of a different opinion. They expressed that the assessments usually correspond to how the students perform during the year, but that some boys unexpectedly achieve better results than they usually do, at the same time as some girls do not perform as well as expected. The grading system for the upper secondary school is goal and knowledge related. To achieve a certain grade the student has to have a certain knowledge of English. By studying the answers given by the teachers about how they relate to the national assessments and grading, the teachers view of the students' knowledge can be questioned. The general opinion was that the national assessments are useful and measure the students' knowledge in a good way. Nevertheless, a student who scores higher than expected in the test will not likely get the higher grade. On the other hand, a student who scores lower than usual, will most probably keep the higher grade. These exams are not supposed to determine the grade but they are nevertheless important. Male students felt that they have been given lower grades than they deserved to a higher extent than female students did. This might be because they valued their own knowledge and abilities as higher than they actually were. It might also be that they felt that the teacher has valued their knowledge incorrectly. It might be a coincidence that boys score higher than expected, or it might be that things, other than knowledge are included when it comes to grading.

The teachers expressed their hopes that girls and boys have equal opportunities but they were not completely convinced that this was the case. The differences within each gender category were pointed out as significant. All boys, for example, do not have the same opportunities merely because they are boys. All students have different personalities and different social conditions. One teacher thought that boys are advantaged in society even if their school results are inferior and another teacher believed that if girls and boys really should be given the same opportunities, the work for equality has to start earlier than in upper secondary

school.

To conclude, the major gender differences that have been found in this study reflect the present situation in society. As mentioned in the introduction, the main gender differences in Swedish society are according to *The global gender gap report* (2009) connected to economic participation and opportunity and to educational attainment. Men have more powerful positions in society and they have higher wages for similar work performed by women. At the same time, more women than men participate in higher education. A similar pattern can be seen in the results of this study. Boys are more self-confident in the classroom at the same time as girls care more about their results and work harder. A feeling of power and more self-confidence can often lead the way to powerful positions or higher wages, while good results and a positive attitude to studies can lead the way to higher education, but not necessarily to powerful positions and higher salaries after the studies. Only a small amount of the students' time is spent in the English classroom. Nevertheless, every moment can be considered precious. It is not only a possibility but a duty for teachers to work for equal opportunities if the steering documents for the Swedish school system are to be followed. All students, regardless of gender, should have the same opportunities to improve their English and achieve good school results. Teachers have an important role to play when it comes to offering equal opportunities for boys and girls. The social and cultural environment in the classroom is very important for language acquisition and teachers have to modify their teaching in ways that can help students from different cultural groups to succeed. It is not an easy task to make girls feel more confident or make boys more motivated and interested, but it is, nevertheless, a challenge that is important to take on. The insight into the existence of gender differences is important, while it is also essential to remember that there are variations within each gender category.

### **6.3 Suggestions for further research**

Equal opportunities for boys and girls are important and further research is necessary to obtain a more in depth picture of how gender patterns influence language learning and teaching. In this study, the methods of collecting data have been interviews and questionnaires. The results are based on teacher's and student's thoughts and experiences. A different perspective could be obtained by a gender study based on classroom observations. Further research could also focus more specifically on one of the main areas where differences have been identified in this study. For example, the significance of motivation for learning or the importance of self-confidence could be examined in greater detail.

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## APPENDIX 1

### English teaching and the influence of gender

This questionnaire is part of the research for an essay on English teaching and equal opportunities for girls and boys at upper secondary school in Sweden. It would be very helpful if you could take some time to answer these questions. All answers are anonymous.

Thank you for your collaboration!

/Eva Fjällström, teacher student, Luleå tekniska universitet

Please answer the questions by ticking the box.

Male

Female

**1. How do you find English as a school subject?**

- Very interesting
- Rather interesting
- Not so interesting
- Not interesting at all

**2. Does the material (books, films, articles etc.) that is used in the course appeal to you?**

- Very much
- Rather much
- Not so much
- Not at all

**3. Do you feel confident to speak in front of people in English?**

- Very confident
- Rather confident
- Not so confident
- Not confident at all

**4. How would you grade your own knowledge of English?**

- Very good
- Rather Good
- Not so good
- Not good at all

**5. How much effort would you say you put in when it comes to English as a school subject?**

- Very much
- Rather much
- Not so much
- No effort at all

**6. How important is it for you to get a good grade in English?**

- Very important
- Rather important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

**7. Do you feel that you have always been given a fair grade in English?**

- Yes
- No, too low
- No, too high

**8. Do you believe that the national assessments (nationella prov) are important for your grade?**

- Very important
- Rather important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

**9. Do you feel that the national assessments measure your knowledge of English in a good way?**

- In a very good way
- In a rather good way
- Not in a very good way
- Not at all in a good way

**10. If you have a group assignment, how do you prefer your group to be put together?**

- Only by boys
- Only by girls
- By boys and girls
- It does not matter to me

**11. How active are you during the English lesson?**

- Very active
- Rather active
- Not so active
- Not active at all

**12. How often do you answer questions asked by the teacher?**

- Very often
- Rather often
- Not so often
- Never

**13. How often do you participate spontaneously in classroom discussions?**

- Very often
- Rather often
- Not so often
- Never

**14. Do you feel that your teacher gives you enough attention?**

- Very often
- Rather often
- Not so often
- Not at all

**15. Who would you say are more active during your English lessons?**

- Girls
- Boys
- No difference

**16. Who would you say are better at English?**

- Girls
- Boys
- No difference

**17. Who do you think get higher grades in English?**

- Girls
- Boys
- No difference

**18. Do you feel that the teacher gives more attention to girls or boys?**

- Girls
- Boys
- No difference

**19. Would you like to add any other comments?**

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**Thank you for your time!**



## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Interview questions**

How would you describe the classroom interaction in the classes that you teach at the moment?

Do you think girls and boys have the same possibilities to make themselves heard in the classroom?

Is there a difference when it comes to gender interaction in the classroom between different programs?

Are there any differences in attitude between boys and girls?

Do you consider gender differences when you plan lessons or choose material?

Are there any specific assignments that attract boys or girls more?

How do you relate to the national assessments? Are they good? How important are they for the final grade?

Do girls and boys care about their grades in the same way?

What do you think the reasons are for the gender differences in school results?

Do you believe that boys and girls have equal opportunities in school?