Gender differences in young learners’ English skills in Swedish schools

A study of perceived and actual gender differences in skills, attitude towards and interest in the English language

Sara Sabra

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Supervisors: Iulian Cananau, Jessika Nilsson
Examiner: Marko Modiano
Abstract

This study examined gender differences in young learners of English in terms of skills, attitude and interest, and teachers’ perceptions of potential gender differences. To examine potential gender differences in skills, a three-part test was conducted with two third grade classes in a school in Sweden. A survey was conducted in the same third grade classes to map the students’ interest and attitude, and structured interviews were conducted with six different teachers to investigate their perception of potential gender differences in skills and interest and attitude. The results revealed that boys’ and girls’ skills were almost equal, although boys at an average acquired a slightly higher level of points in listening and reading comprehension, while more girls wrote at a higher level than boys in the writing assignment. Boys and girls were not equal in their attitude towards and interest in the English language, as girls were more positive towards the language while boys were more confident in their English skills. Teachers perceived no gender difference in interest and attitude, and most perceived none or slight difference in skills.

Keywords: English, gender differences, primary school, second language
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Introduction

In today’s increasingly equal society in Sweden and other countries, there is still at least one area where the results are not gender equal: and that is in school achievements. It is stated clearly by the National Agency for Education in the *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Recreation Centre* that:

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

This clarifies the goals of and the expectations on teachers and other staff working in Swedish schools, in regards to gender differences and gender equality. Yet it has been long a well-known fact that in Sweden, as well as in other countries, girls tend to achieve better than boys of the same age. No doubt, there are differences in achievements not only generally in summative terms, as in overall grades and exam results, but also in specific subjects. Boys are traditionally believed to excel at practical subjects such as physical education, and certain theoretical subjects such as math, physics and chemistry. On the other hand, girls are generally believed to perform better at languages; not only the native language Swedish, but also the second language English, as well as third languages studied in school.
In Sweden, studying English as a second language begins as early as the first years of elementary school. Schools decide when their pupils start studying English. In some Swedish schools, English as a subject is taught even as early as in preschool class. In grade 6, Swedish students have their first national test in English, and these national tests also recur in the 9th grade as well as in upper secondary school. Consequently, based on the results from these three national tests, statistics are conducted and conclusions can be drawn about the knowledge and performance of both male and female students of different ages in the English language in Sweden, but mainly in regards to students from grade 6 and upwards. These results will be further explored in greater detail in the background chapter of this thesis.

As previously mentioned, grade 6 is not the first year in which the students have been taught English as a second language at school. On the contrary, by grade 6 Swedish students have already had English as a school subject for at least 3 years beforehand. Therefore, it would be of interest to examine whether any differences in gender language skills and performance also occur amongst the youngest learners of the English language in Swedish schools, already during the primary years. Furthermore, since there seems to be a lack of studies made by the Swedish government regarding gender differences in English in grades 1-3, the result might be that teachers form their own personal opinion on the matter. The teachers’ perceptions might be influenced by several issues, such as their experience working as teachers, or the traditional gender roles and views on how boys and girls usually behave and perform in school. Therefore, it would also be of interest to study if the teachers’ views on potential differences between boys and girls in English correlate with the students’ actual performance in tests.
1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine perceived and actual gender differences in young learners’ English skills in Swedish schools, as well as in their attitudes towards the English language, and to lastly see if there are any correlations between the different factors. The subject will be examined from different perspectives. Firstly, interviews will be conducted with teachers to examine what their personal impressions and views are on the gender differences of their students. Secondly, the students’ different skills in the English language, will be tested. Thirdly and lastly, the students’ individual attitudes towards and interest in the English language will be examined through questionnaires, in order to later examine and analyze if there is any correlation between boys’ and girls’ attitudes and interests and their achievements in the subject, as well as the teachers’ views.

Thus the research questions of this study are as follows:

- What are the teachers’ views on any potential differences between the genders in regards to the English language?
- How do the boys and the girls perform in tests, and are there any differences between them with respect to their skills in English?
- What are the students’ individual attitude toward and interest in the English language?
- Can there be any correlation found between the students’ performance and their attitude and interest, and also the teachers’ views?
2. Background

2.1 Sex and gender

As Coates (2004) describes it, sex refers to the biological difference, while gender refers to the socially constructed categories that are grounded on sex. The coining of the term gender created opportunities to compare men and women culturally, and also the relationship between them as groups, according to Edlund et al. (2007). Furthermore, Holmes & Meyerhoff (2003) describe gender as being something which evolves over time, through interaction with others. A major part of interaction is naturally language, and language can be used according to Holmes & Meyerhoff (2003) to execute different parts of an individual’s social identity. Coates (2004) mentions how during childhood, children learn to identify with either men or women, and to show their identification, they adapt their use of gender-appropriate behavior, which also includes linguistic behavior.

Since this study aims to examine differences in boys’ and girls’ language at a school age, the boys and girls in question have undoubtedly had time beforehand to be impacted socially in regards to their gender roles. However, since there are some differences between boys and girls that also influence their language abilities and performances biologically, these differences will also be mentioned in this background chapter, but then clearly the term ‘sex’ will be used. As for the majority of the rest of the thesis, the term ‘gender’ will be used.

2.2 Gender differences in language and school achievements

As Coates (2004) states, it is fairly recently that children’s acquiring of language started to be examined. When children acquire a language, they not only learn the formal aspects of language such as grammar, but also how to appropriately use language
culturally and socially. According to Coates (2004), since women’s and men’s roles are marked in all cultures, this also means that it can be assumed that children when learning to speak also learn the cultural role that is attached to their sex. As girls and boys gradually learn what gender to identify with, they consequently also learn the gender appropriate linguistic behavior.

From the biological perspective on differences between the sexes, scientists found through recent scientific studies that there is a gene connected to the development of vocalization and language that is more active in girls than it is in boys. They found that in girls, this gene produces more protein than in boys, suggesting that it could explain why young girls, in their first years, learn language at an earlier and quicker pace than boys. Nevertheless, some scientists have cautioned about drawing any vital conclusions about sex differences in language based on these findings (Balter, 2013).

There are however other well-known biological differences between the sexes that can have an impact when learning languages. These differences include for instance differences in the shape of the brain, the brain’s cognitive organization and maturity, and the hormonal impact on the brain. Boys mature later than girls; girls’ brains are at their largest size by the age of 10-11 while boys’ brains are largest at the age of 14-15. Girls enter puberty earlier than boys, and in connection to puberty, the development of girls’ and boys’ brains is also impacted (SOU 2010:52). Rutter at al. (as cited in SOU 2010:52) mentions that in schools, more boys than girls are deemed to have issues with inattention and reading disabilities. According to SOU (2010:52), an explanation to the difference between boys’ and girls’ school achievements could be the fact that since girls mature earlier than boys, consequently their working memory also develops earlier than the boys’ does, which makes it easier for girls to achieve better in school. As for spatial skills, however, there is a clear difference between the sexes as boys acquire
better results in tests where the spatial skill is tested (Masters & Sanders, as cited in SOU 2010:52).

In the earliest language learning, there are differences found between boys and girls, in that the girls are superior to boys in acquiring speech, and also have a larger vocabulary. Coates (2004) mentions that even at 18 months old, the number of words that are known to girls tends to be higher than the number of words boys know. Hence girls acquire linguistic skills more quickly than boys do. Beal (as cited in Wucherer & Reiterer, 2018) argues that one of the reasons why girls speak more than boys at an early age is because parents speak more to their baby girls than their baby boys, and converse longer with them and in a more complex fashion. In addition, Balter (2013) also mentions that it has been difficult to conclude whether the language differences between boys and girls are a result of nature or of nurture. Nevertheless, continuing into the pre-school age, girls remain ahead of boys in this area. But as time passes and the children reach the early school years, there is no evident difference between boys and girls (Maccoby & Jacklin, as cited in Coates, 2004).

As for verbosity, Smith and Connolly (as cited in Coates, 2004) came to the conclusion that young girls are more talkative and fluent than boys before the age of 4. After the age of 4, there is not so much of a difference between the verbosity of girls and boys anymore. Regarding mixed conversations in environments where both boys and girls are together, such as the classroom, more recent research made by Swann (as cited in Coates, 2004) suggests that boys, not girls, dominate the conversations and not girls. It is not only the students themselves who contribute to maintain the male dominance in the conversation; not only do the teachers give boys more attention, but the teachers also encourage boys to talk more than girls. According to Coates (2004), this is problematic especially since it is now an accepted fact that “children learn
through talking and that every child has a right to an equal voice in classroom activities” (pp 194).

2.3 Gender and second language acquisition

Payne & Lynn (2010) conducted a study where the aim was to investigate sex differences in second language comprehension. The results showed that amongst 11 to 14-year-olds, girls performed better than boys in second language ability. However, in first language ability, the girls did not perform better than the boys. The results also showed that girls have a stronger mental faculty than boys to learn a second language. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Wucherer & Reiterer (2018) the male students performed better than the female students in phonetic speech imitation ability (pronunciation). Nevertheless, females outperformed males in grammar learning.

Feery (2008) summarizes the current perspective on the role of gender in second language acquisition in her paper. One of the points Feery (2008) mentions is that several studies made in European countries showed that girls in most cases (though not in all) outperformed boys in second language tests; both at a primary and a secondary level. The reasons why there are differences in the performance could according to Kettemann et al (as cited in Feery, 2008) be the following three: what their general attitude towards learning a foreign language is, how popular languages in school are amongst girls versus boys, and what learning strategies girls and boys use. Furthermore, Ludwig (as cited in Feery, 2008) discovered that there are also differences in regards to boys’ and girls’ motivation for learning a foreign language. Girls choose a foreign language out of interest, whereas boys choose it for more practical reasons. In regards to their attitudes toward learning a foreign language, Kettemann et al (as cited in Feery, 2008) found that females were more positive than males were. Also Schröder (as cited
in Feery, 2008) detected that girls were more positive towards learning foreign languages, that they had a greater desire to do so and also to better their previously acquired knowledge of the foreign language.

2.4 Gender differences in school achievements in Sweden

In Sweden, The Government’s Public Reports, SOU (2009:64) conducted an investigation in 2009 to examine gender equality in Swedish schools. Amongst the subjects that were considered in the investigation were boys’ and girls’ conditions, attitudes and achievements in the society and in school from the the year 1990 and onward. The investigation also broached on scientific research on the subject of gender equality in school.

SOU’s (2009:64) investigation showed that most Swedish students are happy at school, although girls are rather happier at school than boys are. It is also more common amongst the girls to feel stressed over schoolwork and expectations. In general, boys talk more than girls in the classroom and are also given more attention by teachers and other pedagogues. Most students find going to school meaningful, but girls score higher on enjoying school and on engaging more in school work, in all three age categories (grade 4-6 and 7-9 in elementary school, and the three years in upper secondary school).

In regards to tests and grades, the investigation (SOU 2009:64) revealed that girls in Swedish schools in general acquire higher grades than boys on an average. At the end of elementary school, girls’ merit-value points are 10% higher than boys’. However, in terms of tests in specific school subjects, girls did not always achieve better than boys. Girls did achieve better than boys in the national tests in Swedish and English, but in math, boys and girls acquired the same results. SOU (2009:64) also mentions a study made by the Swedish National Agency for Education, Skolverket, in 2006, where grades of boys and girls in elementary school were compared, both as to the current
grades at the time but also as to the development of the different grades from the end of the 1980s up until then. Skolverket’s (2006) study revealed that in elementary school, boys acquired higher grades than girls only in physical education. The largest difference between the grades of boys and girls in elementary school were found in subjects such as Swedish, modern languages, religion and domestic science. In addition, in the subject of English, the study showed that during the ten years that the grades were examined, boys were slowly but surely catching up with the girls’ grades in English.

In fact, there are other studies made in Sweden that show a possible explanation to why boys might have improved their English skills during the last years. In 2009, a dissertation was written by Pia Sundqvist on how out-of-school English impacted the oral proficiency and vocabulary of Swedish ninth graders. Sundqvist (2009) found through her study that there was a correlation between extramural English (i.e. English outside the classroom walls) and oral proficiency and vocabulary. The more time spent on different extramural English activities, the more impact and improvement was made on their oral proficiency and vocabulary in English in school.

The correlation between extramural English and vocabulary was however more distinct than the correlation between extramural English and oral proficiency. Boys were more sensitive to the correlation between extramural English and oral proficiency and vocabulary than girls, and boys also spent more time on extramural English activities which later on were shown to have the most impact on proficiency. The extramural English activities which had more impact on the students’ proficiency were for example reading books, playing computer and video games, communicating with other people online, and surfing the net. Other common activities such as watching TV, movies and listening to music in English did not have as great an impact on the proficiency, and girls more commonly spent time on these activities. The students who
used to regularly play games where they had to use English were without exception boys.

In addition, a more newly conducted research by Sundqvist & Wikström (2015), also showed that digital gameplay outside of school helped teenage boys in Sweden improve their English vocabulary. The boys who often played computer games outside of school also achieved better on test and acquired higher grades than the ones who did not, and they used more three-syllable words in their essays. Also, the Swedish Media Council has more recently performed several statistical investigations in order to research and map children’s and youth’s media and internet usages. The Swedish Media Council found that particularly during pre-puberty and puberty, boys play computer games much more than girls.

Considering the results found by The Government’s Public Reports (SOU 2009:64), they remark that gender differences in school achievements do not automatically implicate that there is a gender equality issue. The Delegation (SOU 2009:64) points out that research on gender differences in school achievements and attitudes offer several possible explanations or hypotheses, some based on the social environment. Some of these explanations are that it might not be seen as “masculine” to achieve well in school, and that girls’ subordinated position in society might force them to be better achievers in school. Furthermore, the Delegation (SOU 2009:64) points out that neither boys nor girls can be immune to the culturally based expectations that surround them, and that school in many ways reflect the values that exist in the surrounding society. The Delegation (SOU 2009:64) also remarks that according to some research, the gender differences in school might also have its basis in biological sex differences, as previously mentioned in this thesis.
3. Method

3.1 Structured interviews

In order to examine what views the teachers have on potential differences between boys and girls in regards to early English learning in Sweden, interviews were chosen as the most suitable method. In this case, the interviews were structured, which meant that the teachers received a questionnaire which was prepared beforehand (Bryman, 2011).

There are several advantages in choosing a structured interview as opposed to a survey for instance. Bryman (2011) states that a structured interview with pre-determined questions facilitates that the respondents’ answers can afterwards be compared and juxtaposed, which is needed for the aim of this thesis since the teachers might be of either different or similar views.

Before the interviews were conducted, the questionnaire for the interviews was read and approved by the supervisor. In accordance with Bryman’s (2011) advice to put general questions before specific in the questionnaire, a question about differences in boys’ and girls’ performance and knowledge in English in general was put first. The subsequent question dived into more specific details about differences in specific areas such as listening comprehension, reading comprehension and so on.

In total, six teachers were interviewed for this thesis, whereof one was interviewed in person and the rest by email. Bryman (2011) emphasizes the value of describing the aim of the study to the participants before conducting the interviews. All the participant teachers were told beforehand of the purpose of the thesis, and also had the opportunity to contact me if they had any questions, both before and after conducting the interviews. As for teacher A, who was interviewed in person, she had known for some time about the subject of the thesis and hence had more time than the others to reflect on it and
potentially pick up on any differences between boys and girls in English in the classes
she teaches.

An advantage of interviews is the opportunity to be able to clarify any questions or
misunderstandings that the respondent might have. This advantage is even greater when
the interview is conducted in person compared to through email, as it enables the
interviewer to directly clarify any questions or put additional questions to follow up on
any answer that might need more clarifying (Bryman, 2011). On the other hand,
interviewing by email gives the respondent more time and opportunity to think through
the questions before answering, and also the opportunity to go back and change any
answers before finally sending it in.

The interviews were all conducted during April 2018. All interviews were
conducted in Swedish, in order to make sure that the respondents would be able to
express themselves as fully and easily as possible. The interview with teacher A, which
was carried out in person, was conducted in an empty and quiet room at the school
where she works and at a place where the least disturbance as possible could be made. It
was recorded with a phone app, in order to make sure that none of the answers would be
missed or forgotten afterwards, and the interview was transcribed afterwards.

3.2 Tests

To increase the reliability and relevance of the tests and results, the test was constructed
by combining two different resources made for teachers to map Swedish third grade
students’ knowledge in English. The first source is from the Swedish National Agency
for Education’s Assessment Portal that offers several different types of tests to help
teachers map students’ knowledge in different subjects and in different grades. From the
Assessment Portal, a listening activity and a writing activity was chosen, intended for
third grade students. The second source is additional mapping material from the
Consequently, the test consisted of three parts: a listening activity to test listening comprehension, a reading activity to test reading comprehension, and a writing assignment to test writing skills. These three parts are meant to give an overview of students’ language proficiency. In the first part of the test called Where Are They, the students listened to different short conversations in English and then had to answer what place they thought the conversation took place at. The second part of the test consisted of a matching exercise where the students were asked to match questions with answers in English. The students were also asked to pair up English sentences with the Swedish translation. Lastly, in the third part of the test, called “Who Are You?” the students wrote about themselves in English.

3.2.1 Assessing the written texts

In Skolverket’s (2013) assessment material and teacher guide for their English tests, aimed at assessing Swedish students’ proficiency in English in grades 1-6, they have authentic examples of texts produced by students taking the same test that was used in this study. Moreover, they also offer detailed guidelines on how the texts can be assessed. Based on these guidelines from Skolverket (2013), an analyze will be made of the written texts that were produced by the participating students in the third part of the tests, which consisted of a writing assignment called “Who Are You?” taken from Skolverket’s assessment material. In this assignment, the students are given a piece of paper with a drawing of a boy and a girl that they are meant to write a letter to. In the
letter, they were told to write about themselves. The students are also given a mind map with various questions, meant as suggestions on what to write about themselves: their name, their age, where they live, their family, what they like. Lastly, they are also encouraged to tell more about themselves besides the given suggestions.

The examples given in the guidelines by Skolverket (2013) are intended to show different qualitative levels in students’ writing. They have divided their examples into three different “categories”. In the first category which consists of example 1, they show a student’s first attempt at writing about themselves, where the student for example answered very briefly and did not use all the suggested questions, and used Swedish words amongst the English ones. In the second category, consisting of example 2-5, Skolverket (2013) shows examples of texts showing the ability and will in students to express themselves more in writing, but where the students are still limited by a narrow vocabulary and lack the ability to intelligibly express themselves. The third and final category consisting of examples 6-9 are texts that show how students have written in an intelligible manner, where they have connected clauses. These texts also begin to have fluency and to be longer and richer than in the previous categories.

Based on Skolverket’s (2013) own examples and definitions of the qualitative levels that they have found and exemplified in students’ texts, an attempt will be made to do the same with the texts written by the participant students in this thesis. A look will be made at the qualities and strengths and weaknesses of the text and exemplify the different attributes. Then, they will be analyzed and categorized further to see whether some of the qualities were more common in the texts written by boys or girls. In order to anonymize the texts, all names will be replaced with an X, both personal names and names of specific areas where the students live. Besides those alterations, the texts will be presented as they were originally written by the students. In this study, the three
different qualitative levels that Skolverket’s (2013) example texts are divided into, will be called the following:

1. **Category 1** will correspond to example 1 in Skolverket’s (2013) assessment guide. This category will include texts where the students have not adequately answered the questions about themselves according to the instructions of the assignment. In this category, there are texts where the student has omitted answers and might have used Swedish words instead of English.

2. **Category 2** will be corresponding to example 2-5 in Skolverket’s (2013) assessment guide. This category will include texts where the student has answered all or almost all the questions in a fairly intelligibly way, but with some structural and grammatical issues and a rather limited vocabulary.

3. **Category 3** will be corresponding to example 6-9 in Skolverket’s (2013) assessment guide. This final category includes texts that are more fluent and that show a richer vocabulary, and are more imaginative and expressive and sometimes longer than the other texts. These texts contain less grammatical and structural issues, and contain additional information written by the students that was not necessarily amongst the suggestions in the instructional page’s mind map.

3.3 Surveys

In order to examine another one of the aims of this essay, concerning the students’ personal attitude towards and interest in the English language, a choice was made to conduct surveys. In total, the survey consisted of 11 questions that together amounted to three pages. Included in the survey were at first questions on what the students’ favorite subject was, what they thought of English, if they would like to have more
English in school, and if they thought that English was important to learn. In addition, it included questions on where/how they came in contact with English outside of school. The reason for including these questions is the previously mentioned research on older boys in school improving in English due to computer games and such, and using English there. Even though these students are younger, it might also be of interest in this case further ahead in the results and analysis of this thesis.

Lastly, the final questions of the survey dived deeper into what the students’ attitude toward the different aspects of English is, such as listening, speaking, watching and writing in English. These questions were included in the survey for three reasons. Firstly, to know more in detail about what the students find fun/easy versus difficult/boring since their answers might indicate what might make English problematic for them, in addition to facilitate comparing the answers of boys and girls in the different areas. Secondly, these more particular questions were included considering that the tests to be conducted later on with the same students would also include different aspects of the language. Thirdly, the teachers were asked in their interviews about similar areas and about their impression on the differences between boys and girls in those areas.

An advantage of choosing surveys instead of interviews is that it saves time, since it would take much more time to conduct interviews with each and everyone of the students, compared to letting them answer a survey. Consequently, surveys also facilitate reaching out to a larger amount of students. In addition, Bryman (2011) mentions that surveys are easier than interviews to administrate and analyze afterwards. A disadvantage of a survey is according to Bryman (2011) that it leaves out the opportunity to ask more questions or clarify any misunderstandings, as is possible in an interview.
Since the survey is dependent on the respondents to read and answer the questions by themselves, it is crucial according to Bryman (2011) that the questions are especially easy to understand and to answer. Accordingly, an attempt was made at making the questions as clear as possible and also reinforced by adding simple pictures to all the answer alternatives, since the respondents in this case are children. In addition, the aim was to make the answer alternatives as clear and few as possible, in order to not confuse the students. There were lines put in between the questions to separate them more distinctly to avoid any confusion.

The survey only contained close-ended questions, as it was only that type of questions and answers that were needed for the aim of the thesis. According to Bryman (2011), there are several advantages of close-ended questions, one being that they facilitate the process of analyzing the answers afterwards and comparing the answers. In addition, Bryman (2011) mentions that one of the disadvantages could be that the respondents find that there is no answer alternative that suits them; hence the alternatives were aimed at being suitable for everyone, without making them too many.

3.4 Participants

3.4.1 Interviews with teachers

For this study, six different teachers working in different schools and with varied work experience were interviewed. The criteria for selecting these teachers were that they all should be currently teaching English in third grade in Swedish schools.

Teacher A was the only one interviewed in person. She works at the same school and also teaches the same students that participated in the tests and surveys. She is 44 years old and has worked as a teacher for 12 years, teaching English during all of those
years. She is the school’s English teacher and teaches English in the school from grade 2 and upwards. Before working in this school, she has mostly taught English in higher grades such as intermediate school and upper secondary school.

The rest of the teachers selected, here referred to as teacher B to F, were contacted online and interviewed by e-mail. Teacher B is 41 years old and has taught English for 10 years. Teacher C is 30 years old and has been a teacher and taught English for less than a year. Teacher D is 53 years old and has been a teacher for 12 years and also taught in English during the same amount of years. Teacher E is 50 years old and has worked as a teacher for 20 years, and taught in English at junior level for 3 years and at middle school for 5 years. Teacher F is 42 years old and has been a teacher for 10 years. She has taught in English for 4-5 years.

3.4.2 Students’ tests

The tests were conducted in third grade classes, in order to ensure that the students’ participating in them would have developed their skills in English as far as to be able to be tested on different areas in the language. The tests, as well as the surveys, were conducted in the same two third grade classes, in the same school that teacher A - a respondent in the interviews - works at. The school is an elementary free-school located in a suburb of a large city and has 370 students, with grades ranging from preschool class up to ninth grade. In this school, students begin to have lessons in English once a week as early as in preschool class. Many students in this school have foreign ethnic backgrounds and Swedish as a second language. In total, 39 students took all the three parts of the test, as some students were absent during the time that the tests were taken. Of the 39 students, 20 were boys and 19 girls.
3.4.3 Surveys with students

The grade chosen for the surveys as well as the tests were third grade, in order to ensure that the students participating would have had time to have English lesson for at least one whole semester, which then would enable them to form an opinion about the subject. Also, the older the students are, the easier it will be for them to read the survey and understand the questions, hence minimizing the risk of misunderstandings or unnecessary confusion. In total, 38 students answered the survey, as some students were absent at the time when the survey was conducted. Out of the 38 students, 19 were boys and 19 girls.

3.5 Method discussion

The conductor of the survey was present in the classroom when the survey was conducted, and explained to the students what they were going to receive, why, and what they were going to do. Because the conductor of the survey was present, it reduced the potential impede of surveys, which is that the respondents are not able to ask any questions, since they could in fact do so directly to the conductor. Yet a few of the students for instance misunderstood the lines in the survey to mean that they needed to elaborate more on their answers and write something above the lines. Consequently, even though the survey was thought through closely while forming it, there were some aspects of possible misunderstandings or difficulties that were difficult to foresee.

Other drawbacks that were found was that some of the students were in a hurry to finish answering all the questions as quickly as possible, and some were also influenced by the fact that their friends had finished, which made them hurry up to finish earlier. A
consequence of hurrying to answer the survey questions can be that the students who
did so did not read through the questions properly or did not think through their answers
thoroughly. In retrospect, there might have also been some confusion due to the
answering alternatives of the last four questions, where the students could choose either
easy/fun, difficult/boring or don’t know/varies, in answer to how they find specific
skills in English. Easy does not necessarily equal fun, and likewise difficult does not
always equal boring. However, the choice was made to put the two alternatives together
in order to simultaneously know more about the students’ attitude and self-perceived
skills. If the alternatives had been split up, then four more questions would have to be
added to the survey and yet an additional page, which would contradict the aim of the
study being as short and concise as possible to keep the students as focused as possible
throughout it.

Concerning the tests, since there were three different parts of the tests, two separate
lessons were needed for each class to be able to finish them. Some of the students that
participated in the first part of the test were absent during the other parts and vice versa.
Because there was no opportunity for to go back afterwards and re-do the missing parts
with those students that were absent when the rest of the students conducted all the
tests, the choice was made to not include the results of the students that had only
finished one or two parts of the test. This choice meant that the number of participants
decreased somewhat which is unfortunate.

Furthermore, there were also some disadvantages to the outline of the reading
comprehension. The first part of the reading comprehension consisted of 16 different
phrases in English and 16 phrases in Swedish. The students had to draw a line between
the English phrase and its Swedish counterpart. As the students drew the lines, it was
difficult for the students to discern whether they had chosen an equivalent to all the
sentences or not, resulting in that some students might have missed that they did not
pair up all the sentences. Naturally, this mistake led to these students missing out on potential points, since the student might in fact have known the correct answer. Drawing lines between that many sentences also made it more difficult if the student wanted to correct a line after realizing that it was wrong, since erasing one line might mean that several lines are erased at the same time, complicating the matter further. In order to minimize any possible confusion during the tests, the students were given an thorough explanation of the parts of the tests, yet these two problems were unforeseen and thus not explained to the students beforehand. In retrospect, after going through all the students’ tests and correcting them, it turned out that some parts of the format of the reading comprehension test was not ideal for the purpose, as the confusion probably had an effect on a few of the students’ results. However, in order to construct a suitable reading comprehension test, one is required to have experience and knowledge in the area, which made it more reliable and easy to choose an already pre-made test.

An advantage of all the parts of the tests was that they consisted of topics and vocabulary that are normally well-known to Swedish learners of English in third grade. For many students though, the most challenging part of the tests was the writing assignment, as they were not used to writing freely in English and several of the students complained that they were very unsure about spelling. It had been clarified to the students that they should not mind the spelling, the important thing was that they wrote as much as they could, even if it was misspelled.

Finally, the tests would have been more comprehensive and useful had there also been a part that tested the students’ oral proficiency, especially considering the fact that when students are as young as in 1-3 grade, much of the learning and lessons in English is focused on speaking, rather than for example reading and writing. However, examining the students’ oral skills would have needed much more time than was in the scope of this thesis.
4. Results

4.1 Interviews with teachers

4.1.1 Differences in interest in and attitude towards English

Before being asked the questions concerning the potential gender differences, all the interviewed teachers were asked about their age and for how long they had been teaching in English. After that, the first question was whether they perceive any difference between boys’ and girls’ interest and attitude towards the English language. The answers given by the respondent teachers were univocal, as they all answered no. A few of the teachers gave more detailed explanations in addition to answering “no”. Teacher A explained that she felt that the interest and attitudes differed from class to class and did not depend on gender or sex, and that what seemed to affect the students’ interest were other factors such as background and interests in general, and not their sex.

Also teacher B pointed out that there are differences amongst the students regarding their attitude, interest, knowledge and motivation - but that in her view, the differences are not based on gender or sex. Teacher C added that sometimes, because the boys in her class are louder than the girls, it is also their protests and sighs that are heard more than the girls’ when there is something in the English lessons that they do not like.

4.1.2 Differences in knowledge in English

The following question pertained to whether the teachers perceived any difference in boys’ and girls’ knowledge in the English language. Here, teacher A also emphasized that to her, the difference was more based on the actual classes she taught than based on gender or sex. Teacher B, C, and D did not perceive any difference between the
genders’ knowledge, other than that teacher C mentioned that sometimes the boys are louder and perhaps get opportunities to speak more in class.

Teacher E answered that in general she does not perceive any differences, but that in regards to her newly arrived immigrant students’ there is a difference as the girls have somewhat more knowledge in English than the newly arrived immigrant boys. Lastly, teacher F mentioned that the boys that lack interest and struggle in Swedish perform much better in English. As for those boys, they perform better than the girls in English. She also mentioned that there is a boy in her class who lacks motivation in every other subjects but shines in English.

4.1.3 Differences in knowledge in English in specific areas

After that, more specific questions about particular areas in English followed. These areas were: oral skills, writing skills, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and vocabulary. Three of the six teachers, B, C and D answered that they did not perceive any difference whatsoever between the boys and girls in any of these areas, and as teacher C answered, it seemed to be dependent on the student’s personality and learning ability rather than sex.

However, teacher A who had previously stated that she did not perceive any difference in boys’ and girls’ knowledge in general, was now able to come up with some differences she had noticed. As for oral skills, she perceived that boys’ are a little stronger than girls, as they use more words and better vocabulary than girls when speaking English. In writing skills, girls are a little better at spelling than boys. She perceives no difference in their listening comprehension, and as for the reading comprehension no clear difference either, other than that the girls might be able to see the words in a context which helps their reading comprehension. According to teacher
A, boys’ vocabulary is only better than girls’ orally, not in writing. Also, teacher E perceived that girls were better at spelling and sentence structure than boys, but equal in the other areas. Teacher F considered boys to be better in all areas except in writing skills, but especially stronger in vocabulary.

4.1.4 Reasons behind differences in English

The last question was of a different type as it pertained to what the teachers think might be the reasons behind potential differences between boys’ and girls’ knowledge, interest and attitudes towards the English language as a school subject. Teacher A repeated that she has not personally discerned any difference, but that since she has seen differences from class to class, there might perhaps be classes where the boys are used to dominate the classroom more than girls, while the girls might be better at doing their homework and because of that perform better than boys in other areas in English.

Teacher C supposes that perhaps girls can be more shy in regards to trying to speak English in front of their classmates. Teacher E thinks that it could be because girls are quicker to perceive new knowledge and boys take longer to find the purpose of learning English. According to her, boys often need to understand why they should learn something while girls learn new things because it is exciting and fun. Teacher F, the same teacher who finds that boys are stronger than girls in most areas in English, describes that parents to her students have told her that the boys learn a lot of English through YouTube and video games.
4.2 Students’ tests

4.2.1 Part 1: Listening comprehension

The listening comprehension test consisted of 6 questions, meaning naturally that the students could have a total of 6 correct answers. As the diagram demonstrates, more boys than girls answered all the questions correctly. The most common amount of correct answers for boys was 6 out of 6, and for girls 4 out of 6. In addition, the mean value of correct answers for boys was 5.05 and for girls 4.84.
4.2.2 Part 2: Reading comprehension

In part 2 of the tests, the reading comprehension, the maximum score was 30 points.

The most common amount of correct answers was 28-29 for both boys and girls. Only 2 boys and 1 girl had a full score, 30/30. The mean value for boys on the reading comprehension test was 26.6, and the mean value for the girls was 25.8.
4.2.3 Compiled results of part 1 and 2

A compilation was made of the results from the listening comprehension and reading comprehension, where the total score was 36 points. As the diagram displays, a majority of the boys had 32-33 correct answers, and a majority of the girls had either 32-33 or 34-35 correct answers. Only 2 boys and 1 girl had a full score at 36 correct answers. As for the mean value of the two genders, boys here had 31.6 correct answers and girls 30.7 correct answers.
4.2.4 Part 3: Writing assignment

4.2.4.1 Analyzing the students’ texts

Category 1

There were not many of the students’ texts that qualified into this category; perhaps because the students were encouraged to write as much as they could, before turning in the test.

*Example 1 – Girl*

| My name is X. I'm ten |

This student struggled with even putting down these few words and thought it was very challenging to have to write this way in English. However, the few words that were written down were clear.

Category 2

Most of the students’ texts fall under this category.

*Example 2 – Girl*

| My name is X.  
A am 9  
My name is X  
A like swimming and catt wi ar 9 i famyly Aj am Aj am de only gurl and 6 brader. Aj liv i X i X. |

In this text, the girl has in fact answered all the suggested questions and told the reader some things about herself. However, the spelling made it partly unintelligible, especially as she did not know how to spell the essential word I, and writes “A” and
“Aj” instead. Yet most words are English words and not Swedish, except for the Swedish “i” instead of English “in”.

Example 3 – Girl

My name is X. I am ten years old, and I like ice-cream. My family is 10. I live in Sweden. I like cat and bunnys.

Example 4 – Boy

My name is X. I am ten years old. I live X. I am 2 brothers. I like mobile.

Here are two examples of two texts where the students have answered all the questions about themselves shortly and concisely and in a fairly intelligible way. However, both texts as well as several other student texts not exemplified here, contains a common mistake that Skolverket (2013) mentions. Skolverket’s (2013) example text number 3 (p. 38) demonstrates a text that contains sentences where the student has answered the questions, but used the contracted form “I’m” incorrectly, which is also recurring in these examples texts.

Example 5 – Boy

My name is X. I am nine years old and I am living in X and I have two big brothers and two title brothers and we are seven in the family and I like pizza.

Example 6 – Boy

My name is X. I am ten years old. I am from Swedish. I have 2 brothers 1 sisters and 1 mother and 1 father. I have a 5-7 friends. My favorite food is hamburger and pizza. I don't like smoking.
Example 5 and 6 are two of several cases where the students have answered all the suggested questions in a coherent way. In the first example, the boy has done so without any major grammatical errors, although he seems to make punctuation and spelling errors at times. The first time he wrote the word brothers, he spelled it without an h but not the second time, indicating that he probably knows the right spelling of the word. In the second example, the boy did not know how to translate “surströmming” into the correct English word (fermented herring) and chose to guess what the word might be in English, which would not be understandable to someone who does not know Swedish. This text contains a few more language errors than the preceding example, such as “swedish” and “a 5-7 friends”.

Category 3

Example 7 - Boy

My name is X-X. i’m 9 years old. i live in Sweden. My famile is really nice and awsome. I like sports socker basket and i like to play outside.

This example text was written by a boy, and is similar to example text number 6 (p. 39) in Skolverket’s (2013) guide. Even though the text only consists of 5 sentences, the student still has answered all the suggested questions in an intelligible way, with a beginning fluency in the text. There are no structural or grammatical issues, and he used “I” correctly (not writing for instance Im) though without capitalizing it. He shows that he is able to express himself with additional adjectives when he describes his family as “really nice and awsome”.
Example 8 - Girl

My name is X and i am going to be ten in June 25th but now i am nine. I live in swiden with my syster X and my mom X and my dad X. I like to traval to ather contris and swim with my familj. And I like to play out sid with my friends.

Here is another example of a text, this one written by a girl, that suggests a flow in writing and a larger vocabulary than the basic one of the two first categories. This student even knows how to write dates correctly in English, and shows that she knows how to bind together two clauses (using “and” and “but now”). The student also uses “I” correctly, without the contracted form, although she misses to capitalize it twice.

Example 9 – Boy

My name is X and i’m 9 years and i’m living in sweden. I like to play with my friends and play fotball. In my family i have a mother and father and two brother but my mom gonna born a sister. I going to scholl att five day but saturday and sunday.

This text, written by a boy, has similar qualities to the preceding example, example text 8. This student also uses “I” correctly except for not always capitalizing it, and uses “but” twice to bind together clauses. Here, the student gives additional information when describing what days he goes to school. In this text, there is also an example of trying to explain that his mother is pregnant or having a baby. Instead of writing it in Swedish, he tried to describe it with his own words in English, which still makes sense – this is something that Skolverket (2013) explains indicates that the student has a strategy for rephrasing when he does not know the correct word.
This final example is a text written by a girl. It is mostly equivalent to example 9 (p. 41) in Skolverket’s (2013) guide, which, similarly to this text, demonstrates a text where the student has come a long way in her writing skills. Not only did the student in the example above show an awareness of the recipient shown by no other student in the study, and which is evident especially at the end of the letter – but the student also wrote with great fluency, with few grammatical errors. She used idiomatic expressions such as “cool, right?” and showed that she has an extensive vocabulary in English for someone her age. At some places, she capitalized “I” while at others not, indicating that she nevertheless knows that it should be capitalized. She gave additional information besides the suggestions in the mind map. Overall, the language in this text is very expressive and imaginative.
4.2.4.3 Comparing boys’ and girls’ texts

First, the boys’ and girls’ texts have been compared in very general terms, that is to say how many of the boys’ and girls’ texts were sorted into category 1, 2 and 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of boys</th>
<th>Number of girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>0/20</td>
<td>1/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>17/20</td>
<td>12/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>3/20</td>
<td>6/19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Comparing boys’ and girls’ texts*

The results show that only 1 student text was categorized as category 1, a girl’s text. Category 2 on the other hand contains the most texts from both genders. Out of the boys’ 20 texts, 17 were considered to be sorted into category 2, and out of the girls’ 19 texts, 14 were considered to be placed in the same category. Lastly, for category 3, 3 boys and 6 girls had written texts that were placed in that category.

4.3 Surveys on attitude and interest

The outcome of the survey answered by the students will be presented in bar graphs, question by question, where the differences between the boys’ and the girls’ answers are made more clear and are more easily compared and contrasted. The questions in the original survey were in Swedish, but here they are translated into English.
Question 1: Which subjects do you like the most of the following: English, Swedish, Math, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences

In answering this question, few chose English as their favorite subject; however, out of those who did, the boys were in a majority. 26% of the boys chose English and only 5% of the girls, while the rest chose one of the other subjects listed.

Question 2: Do you like English?

Figure 5; 1. Which subject do you like the most of the following...

Figure 6; 2. Do you like English?
The second question aims to be introductory and very general. Here, 26% of the boys and 42% of the girls chose yes. As for the rest, 42% of the boys chose no and 31% that they do not know, while 15% of the girls chose no and 42% chose that they do not know.

**Question 3: What do you think about English?**

![Figure 7: 3. What do you think about English?](image)

This question was similar to the previous one, but this aimed to focus more on how the students experience English as a school subject and if their impression of it is that it is fun or boring/tiresome. A majority of the boys, 47%, chose that it is boring, while 47% of the girls chose the alternative that they don't know or that it is neither fun or boring. More girls chose that it is fun at 36% compared to boys at 21%.
Question 4: Do you think that English is easy or difficult?

On the question regarding the difficulty or easiness of English, 68% of the boys chose easy, while 31% of the girls chose easy. A majority of the girls, 52% chose that they do not know or that it is sometimes difficult and sometimes easy. Only 10% of the boys answered that they find it difficult, as well as 15% of the girls.
Question 5: Would you like to have more of English in school than you have now?

Both boys and girls answered in majority that they would not like to have more English at school. 31% of the girls answered yes, compared to the 21% of boys who answered yes.

Question 6: Do you think it's important to learn English?
No boy nor girl were unsure about whether it is important or not to learn English, and most were positive. 89% of the girls answered yes, and 84% of the boys.

**Question 7: Do you hear/read/speak English outside of school?** Check off the choices that show where you usually hear/read/speak English outside of school.

This question was the only one where the participant students could answer with multiple answers. Most students checked off more than one box. Amongst the boys, the two most common areas in which they come in contact with English outside of school was YouTube and games such as computer games, video games or apps. As for girls, their two most common areas were books and games. 57% of the boys chose games,
while 31% of the girls chose the same.

A larger gap is seen in choosing YouTube. 21% of the girls chose YouTube while 57% of the boys chose it. Another large gap was in choosing books, where 47% of the girls chose it and only 15% of the boys. The least common way to come in contact with English outside of school for boys were books, and for girls TV. An equal number of boys and girls chose songs, 26%.

**Question 8: How is it for you to...**

**A) Listen and understand what someone is saying in English?**

![Bar chart showing percentage of boys and girls who find it easy or difficult to listen and understand someone speaking in English](image)

*Figure 12: a) Listen and understand what someone is saying in English?*

Most boys, 57% of them, find it easy to listen and understand what someone is saying in English, while 47% of the girls do not know or think it varies.

**B) Watch English videos, TV-shows or movies?**
Figure 13; b) Watch English videos, TV-shows or movies?

Most students find it easy and fun to watch English videos, TV-shows or movies. Especially 78% of the boys, but also 57% of the girls.

C) Speak English?

Figure 14; c) Speak English?
A majority of the girls, 42%, chose that they do not know or that it varies whether it is easy/fun or difficult/boring in regards to speaking English. A majority of the boys, 57%, chose that it is easy and fun.

**D) Write in English?**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of boys and girls who find writing in English easy, difficult, and don't know/varies.](image)

*Figure 15; d) Write in English*

Lastly, most of the boys, 63% to be more precise, chose that it is easy and fun to write in English while most of the girls, 47%, instead chose that they don't know or that it varies.
5. Discussion

5.1 Result discussion

5.1.1 Teachers’ impressions on gender differences in young learners of English

Most of the teachers interviewed for this study seemed to feel that the differences between boys and girls in English are not very distinct, or even nonexistent. In fact, what was recurring through the interviews was that several of the teachers completely rejected the idea that there was any difference at all based on gender or sex. It may be because they are not used to adopting this perspective when teaching their students, which some of the teachers even expressed themselves. Furthermore, rather than focusing on whether the student is a boy or a girl, they seem to focus on their classes and students’ individual skills and needs. Hence in terms of the students’ different skills, weaknesses and strength, the teachers seem to be very conscious of them, and consequently they show that they are very perceptive in general.

5.1.2 Gender differences in English skills

As was previously mentioned in the background chapter, there is according to Maccoby & Jacklin (as cited in Coates, 2004) no evident difference between boys and girls after they have reached the early school years, and before they have reached puberty. All things considered, the results from the listening comprehension and the reading comprehension in this study are in quite in accordance with their research, as it showed that the boys’ and girls’ results were almost even. However, one of the genders did perform slightly better at an average than the other, and that was the boys. The mean
value of the boys both in regards to the listening comprehension and the reading comprehension was slightly higher than the girls.

As for the writing assignment, comparison there was not as easy as with the other two tests as there were no points nor correct/wrong answers to be marked out. However, after categorizing each text into one of the three categories, a few more of the girls’ texts fitted into category 3 than did the boys’, demonstrating that more girls than boys showed more developed writing skills in English.

5.1.3 Gender differences in interest in and attitude towards the English language

Attitude could according to Kettemann et al (as cited Feery, 2008) mentioned in the background chapter be one of the factors that affect students’ performance and skills in a second language. Considering the apparent importance of attitude, the results from the survey showed some differences in the genders’ interest and attitude. More boys than girls chose English as their favorite subject; however, despite that, more boys than girls answered that they do not like English. It is possible that the same boys who did not choose it as their favorite subject are the same that then afterwards chose that they do not like it. But even though more boys disliked English than girls, there was interestingly enough still more boys that replied that English is easy compared to the girls.

The girls on the other hand are more of the opinion that English is fun than the boys, and are more positive towards having more of English in school. But it was more common for girls to choose the undecided choice in the questions that had that choice; i.e. that they did not know or that it varied. This ambivalence was especially present in the last questions, pertaining to specific skills in English such as listening, speaking and
writing. There, girls tended to choose do not know or that it varies at a larger extent than boys, who seemed more confident in their own skills.

The boys and girls were the most similar in their answers to the question on whether English is important or not to learn. As for the areas where they come in contact with English outside school, boys seem to do so more through YouTube and different types of games than girls, who on the other hand are more in contact with English through books than boys.

5.1.4 Correlations between teachers’ views, surveys and tests

All the interviewed teachers agreed that they do not perceive any difference between girls’ and boys’ interest in and attitude towards the English language. Yet the surveys conducted showed that they are not equal in their interest and attitude. In general, more girls were more positive than boys towards English and answered that they like it and that it is fun. Despite these positive feelings, fewer girls than boys described English as easy, which shows a lower language confidence. A majority of the girls chose that they do not know whether it is easy/fun or difficult/boring, or that it varies, concerning listening, speaking and writing in English. Only in regards to watching something in English did the boys and girls have equal answers, where 78% of both answered that it is easy/fun. In the other three areas, a majority of the boys chose that it is easy/fun.

Linking the students’ answers in the survey to the test results, it is evident that the test results are more even and equal, than the opinions displayed in the survey answers. However, even though boys seemed rather confident in their writing skills and girls more uncertain, more girls wrote at the highest level than the boys. The result from both the survey and the test, as well as a few of the teachers’ answers, indicate that girls are more interested and positive towards learning English, but that their self-perception and
self-confidence might hinder them from assessing their own abilities realistically. Most of the boys, on the other hand, seemed to be certain and confident about their answers, whether it was a yes or a no, and to a much lesser extent chose the alternative that they were unsure whether it is easy/fun or difficult/boring or that it varied. The fact that the girls are more positive towards learning a language even at this young age is in accordance with previous research mentioned in the background chapter.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern how much the boys’ and girls’ attitude and interest actually affect their performance in the tests, as the test results showed few differences. If a student is confident in what he or she is doing, then that will most probably make him/her less hesitant and instead allow for more risk-taking, which can be a good thing when learning foreign languages, where much is new to the student. On the other hand, if a student is positive towards learning new languages and to having lessons in it, then he or she will be motivated to learn and perform in that language. In other words: both boys’ apparent confidence and girls’ apparent positive attitude probably help them perform better in English, though in different ways.

An additional point to be made on the correlation between the teachers’ experiences and views, and the genders’ different level of confidence, is the fact that some teachers mentioned that boys tend to dominate the classroom, by for instance talking more and being louder. This was also examined in the background chapter, with previous research stated that reveals that boys dominate the mixed conversations in the classroom. According to that research, it is not only the students who contribute to uphold the male dominance in the conversation but also the teachers. Teachers do so by giving boys more attention and encouraging boys to talk more than girls.

It is not possible to know to what extent this is in accordance with the habits of the teachers interviewed for this thesis, even more so since the research where this is originally mentioned was made in another country and some years ago. However, it
does raise the question whether teachers give more attention to and opportunities for boys to talk than they do to girls, though the teachers themselves might be completely unaware of it. If that is the case, then it would not be surprising if boys are more confident and better skilled at speaking English, since they are given more opportunities for it. A couple of the teachers did mention that girls might be more shy to try to speak in English and that boys are somewhat stronger than girls at speaking in English, which would support that idea. Gender roles might also have had its impact on the fact that more girls wrote at a higher level than did boys. It is not known whether the girls did so based on actual richer vocabulary or better writing skills than the boys, or because of prevailing gender roles impacting the boys to be more unwilling to write more than necessary.

Teacher F was the only teacher who expressed the opinion that boys are better than girls in all areas in English except for writing. Interestingly enough, the results of the tests conducted for this thesis in essence proved her opinion to be closest to the truth. The same teacher also mentioned an important and seemingly deciding factor that has helped improve the boys’ English skills, which was games. Video and computer games are recurring factors throughout this study: its influence on language is first mentioned in the background chapter; it returns in the answers to the survey especially amongst boys, but also for girls; and it is found in an interview with a teacher.

As was presented in the background chapter, more recent research made in Sweden by Sundqvist (2009) and Sundqvist & Wikström (2015) found that there is a correlation between time spent on English outside of school and the student’s oral proficiency and vocabulary in English in school. Digital gameplay was one of the factors that made boys achieve better on tests and acquire higher grades, as well as improve their vocabulary. This research was conducted with older students, teenagers and ninth graders, while the students for this thesis were only in third grade, which made it seem as if there is no
similar correlation in this current study. However, many of the boys and as well as the girls answered that they come in contact with English through video games/computer games/apps, and also shared more about it in a spontaneous way during the conductor’s visits to the classes to conduct the tests. Consequently, it might be a deciding factor in improving both the skills of boys and girls that participated in the tests, and may also have helped some of the boys to catch up with the girls.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, and to answer the original research questions of this study: the results show that teachers in general do not perceive any difference at all between the genders in respect to their interest in and attitude towards the English language. As for differences in their skills in different areas in English, most of the teachers find none or only slight differences. The results show that when tested in listening, reading and writing skills, boys and girls were almost equal in listening and reading comprehension, although boys performed slightly better at an average. However, in regards to writing, a few girls more wrote at a higher level than boys. The results showed that boys and girls are not equal in their attitude towards and interest in the English language: girls are more positive towards English, while boys are more confident in their English skills.

The correlations between the students’ performance, their attitude and interest, and the teachers’ views are not very clear. To determine exactly which factors influence the students’ skills and attitude and interest in English is not an easy matter. It is difficult to separate all the possible influencing factors from each other, in order to determine what is essentially based on gender. Most likely, it can be a mixture of many factors, all that have been touched upon in some way or other in this study. Biology, gender roles, how the teacher acts as well as the teacher’s expectations, the structure of the classroom
culture, and of course: the individual student’s personality, background, abilities, interest and attitude - all these various factors probably play some role or other. But to draw further conclusions, a much larger study and more research would be needed, performed all over the country at a much larger scale.

However, in this study, several important issues have been raised that could be beneficial to conduct further research on. Firstly, the issue of whether or not teachers treat boys and girls differently in the classroom in terms of who acquires more attention and talks more, and how that could affect either boys’ or girls’ learning. It is especially important considering Swedish schoolteachers’ obligation to treat boys and girls equally, as well as all Swedish schools’ obligation to provide boys and girls with an equal education, as is stated in the curriculum. Secondly, even though some research has been made in Sweden on extramural activities and their correlation to students’ performance in English in higher grades, it would be of interest to also conduct research on how younger students are affected by the same, and especially the correlation between boys and video/computer games and English. Even though both boys and girls evidently spend time on playing video/computer games, as was concluded both through this study’s survey as well as previous research by the Swedish Media Council, both researches also showed that boys play more than girls. It is a contemporary and modern topic, as internet and screen usage becomes more common even for younger children in this decade, and is likely to become even more common.

Every now and then, headlines in Swedish newspapers declare that boys are falling behind girls in Swedish schools. In the background chapter, this was covered in greater detail, as previous results and statistics were mentioned that showed that girls achieve better grades and results than boys in most subjects. There are, as previously mentioned, boys that do better in English than in other subjects in school, such as Swedish. A possible cause could be that English has become associated with their hobbies and what
they do in their free time, which motivates them more and makes them feel more confident when they come to school and have lessons in English, compared to other subjects. From this, a vital conclusion can be made for teachers - not only English teachers but teachers of all subjects - that the more confident, interested and motivated your students are in the subject, and the more relevant they find it, the more motivated they will be, and the more able they will be to develop their skills and knowledge, and lastly achieve.
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Appendix 1 Interview questionnaire

Intervjufrågor

1. Hur gammal är du?

2. Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?

3. Hur länge har du undervisat i engelska?

4. Märker du någon skillnad mellan pojkar och flickors intresse och inställning till engelska som skolämne, i åskurserna 1-3?

5. Märker du någon skillnad mellan pojkar och flickors kunskaper i engelska i åskurserna 1-3? Om ja, hur isåfall?

6. Märker du någon skillnad mellan könen mer specifikt vad gäller:
   a) Muntlig förmåga
   b) Skriftlig förmåga
   c) Hörförståelse
   d) Läsförståelse
   e) Ordförråd

7. Vad tror du att eventuella skillnader mellan könen i kunskap och inställning/intresse till engelskan som skolämne kan bero på?
Appendix 2 Student Survey

Enkät om engelska i årskurs 3

1. Vilket ämne tycker du mest om av dessa?

Svenska  Engelska  Matematik  NO  SO

2. Tycker du om engelska?

Ja  Nej  Ibland/Vet inte

3. Hur tycker du att engelska är?

Roligt  Tråkigt, jobbigt  Vet inte, varken roligt eller tråkigt

4. Tycker du att engelska är lätt eller svårt?

Lätt  Svårt  Vet inte/Ibland svårt och ibland lätt
5. Skulle du vilja ha mer engelska i skolan än du har nu?

Ja

Nej

Vet inte/Kanske

6. Tycker du att det är viktigt att lära sig engelska?

Ja

Nej

Vet inte/Kanske


Sånger/Låtar

YouTube

TV

Datorspel/TV-spel/Appar

I böcker

Pratar med släktingar eller andra på engelska
8. Hur tycker du att det är att:

a) Lyssna och förstå vad någon säger på engelska?

Lätt/Roligt  Svårt/Tråkigt  Vet inte/Olika


b) Titta på engelska videor, TV-program eller filmer?

Lätt/Roligt  Svårt/Tråkigt  Vet inte/Olika


c) Prata engelska?

Lätt/Roligt  Svårt/Tråkigt  Vet inte/Olika


d) Skriva på engelska?

Lätt/Roligt  Svårt/Tråkigt  Vet inte/Olika