DEPT. OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

CONSTRUCTING GENDER IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

How Swedish Upper Secondary School Students Perform Gender in Oral Communication

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Essay/Thesis:	Interdisciplinary Degree Project, 15 hp
Program and/or course:	Teacher Education Program, EN1321
Level:	First Cycle
Semester/year:	St 2015
Supervisor:	Larisa Oldireva-Gustafsson
Examiner:	Joseph Trotta
Report no:	

Title: *Constructing Gender in the EFL Classroom: How Swedish Upper Secondary School Students Perform Gender in Oral Communication*

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to examine if, and in that case how, Swedish upper secondary school students perform gender in power-related ways in oral communication in a foreign language in a classroom setting. The material used consists of transcriptions of audio-recorded semi-authentic interaction between 25 young learners of English. The method is mainly based on quantitative analysis in which four specific variables are examined, but relevant instances that illustrate gender-specific power-related patterns are analyzed qualitatively. The results of this study show the same tendencies as findings of previous research: the male students adapted a more dominant conversational style, whereas the female students were generally more cooperative in their interactional style.
Keywords: EFL, gender, conversational styles, power, interaction, interruptions, questions, minimal responses, verbal space

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1. Introduction

Language and gender is a sociolinguistic field of study that has been engaging researchers for many decades now. A great amount of research has been conducted when it comes to gender differences and language associated with adult speakers, especially after Robin T. Lakoff's (1975) research on women's speech in the 1970's. During the last decades even adolescent speakers and gender have in a slightly smaller scale been a focus of research, but only an insignificant amount of research has been done about gender and adolescent/child speakers communicating in a foreign language.

Gender, in contrast to the biological sex of a human being, is seen as socially constructed and performed. The creation of our gender begins often before we are born, and we learn how to differentiate femininity from masculinity from early childhood. This means that we learn from an early age how to behave like men and women, we divide ourselves into two different kinds of social beings. One of the most important tools that let us do this kind of differentiation is language and the way we use it (Jule 2008:7f).

The majority of the linguistic research conducted in this field of study maintains that male speakers dominate in mixed-gender discourses, even though girls often achieve better results in subjects like English (Salomone 2004:12). One of the first places we start taking part in and practicing different kinds of discourses is at school and researchers continue describing school settings "where language and gender are intricately intertwined despite 30 years of gender-equity programs and a whole sea-change in social attitudes towards women" (Salomone 2004:12). Therefore, it is of importance to be aware of how students produce and perform gender in this context. According to the Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school (2013), all teaching should "actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men" and that "students should be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice to gender differences" (Skolverket 2013:5). Since only a limited amount of research has been conducted when it comes to gender in foreign language learning and teaching, this study aims to examine how upper secondary school students perform gender in oral communication in a foreign language, namely English.

1.1 The role of interaction in the language classroom

During the recent years, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a trend in the language classroom. The focus of CLT is on the collaborative nature of making meaning in all

communication; language learners create language knowledge by communicating with each other either in speaking or writing (Savignon 2001:15, Brown 2007:49). The most important goal of language teaching is thus to teach learners to communicate in the target language (Celce-Murcia 2001:8). Interaction is one of the most important concepts within CLT. To communicate is to interact, and the best way to learn interaction is through interaction itself (Brown 2007:212). The role of interaction is even apparent in the syllabus for the courses English 5, 6, and 7 where it is stated that language teaching should give students chances to participate in oral and written interaction in different situations and for different purposes in the classroom (Skolverket 2011).

According to Brown (2007), working in small groups can offer many advantages when learners are practicing interaction in the classroom: it increases the individual practice time when it comes to student-initiated talk in the classroom and lets students practice interaction without the fear of perceiving criticism or rejection. In their turn, students have to take more responsibility for their learning in smaller groups; all the members must cooperate in pursuing common goals set for them in the process of teaching (Brown 2007:225). Even Hedge (2000) states the importance of group- and pair-work in the EFL-classrom: learners of English must practice producing a comprehensible output in classroom settings, and interaction in groups pushes them to produce more accurate and appropriate language; at the same time they provide input for other students (Hedge 2000:13). But to interact with others requires conversational skills; students must follow the underlying principles when it comes to opening and closing conversations, sharing speech time with others, taking turns and contributing appropriate longer and shorter turns, attending to and responding to one's interlocutor in an appropriate way, and interrupting (2000:261f). These rules apply to any interaction in native contexts, but when it occurs in the classroom, learners must be even more sensitive to each other's needs as meaning must be negotiated, and all learners must develop strategies such as paraphrasing, asking questions, speaking slowly, and repeating oneself to make themselves understood (Hedge 2000:261f, 13).

The learning and using of interaction-related strategies in free discussion might take time for learners of English, which makes it important that all students are given the time they need while using and practicing these strategies during oral classroom activities, so that comprehensible output can be produced. If power-relations between the sexes are imbalanced, and male students take up more space in the classroom than female students as previous research in this field maintains, female students are unlikely to get the time they need to practice their oral skills in the classroom. That is why this study intends to investigate the

power-relations between the two genders in language classroom interaction; it is of vital importance for successful language teaching that activities in which students take part are equally available for everyone.

2. The statement of research issues

The aim of this research project is to examine if, and in that case how, Swedish upper secondary school students perform gender in power-related ways in oral communication in a foreign language in a classroom setting. Because of the scope of this essay, only four variables will be examined: minimal responses, questions, interruptions and verbal space. The research questions I intend to answer are:

- Is either one of the sexes more dominant in oral communication during a discussion exercise?
- Are gender-specific features of conversational styles associated with power-relations manifest in foreign language classroom discussion and which of them are most distinct?
- What pedagogical implications are provided by the results of this study?

3. Previous research

In this section previous research is presented. Because there is only a scarce amount of research conducted on the field of gender and foreign languages, I will start by presenting studies that are based on conversational power and adult native speakers of English. After this, some research focusing on power in classroom settings is presented, both in English-speaking communities and in Sweden. Finally, some observations on gender and power in L2-settings will be mentioned.

3.1 Adult native speakers and power

The purpose of this study is to shed some light on how Swedish adolescent speakers perform gender in a foreign language. A great deal of research has shown that, when it comes to native

speakers of English, there are differences in the way women and men speak. These studies have been based on adult speakers, and they present a list of tendencies that associate with women and men's respective conversational styles. In the 1970s, Lakoff (1975) claimed that females, unlike men, tend to speak in a way that indicates uncertainty and hesitation. According to her, this is something that female speakers are trained to do from early childhood and this style of conversation denies them an access to power. In contrast to empirical research, her research is based on her own informal observations and intuitions about women's language use.

More empirical data-based studies have been since then conducted to support Lakoff's thoughts about gendered language and power. For example, in a study on interruptions, silences and delayed minimal responses in conversation by Zimmerman and West (1975), the researchers recorded 31 conversations in public and private areas at a university community and collected authentic examples of both mixed-sex and single-sex conversations. The aim of the study was to collect data on women and men's conversational styles, the focus of the study being on interruptions, silences and support of the conversation partner in the development of topics. Another aim was to examine the supposed male dominance in interaction.

The results showed that male speakers tended to interrupt female speakers more in mixed-sex conversations, and that the males also showed a tendency to contribute to the topics chosen by females by delayed minimal responses. These two tendencies caused the women to be more silent in mixed-sex conversations, which led the male topics to be more successful in the conversations. Zimmerman and West speculate that these results might suggest that women became silent after these two types of instances because they had to reorganize their thoughts after an interruption, or that they felt uncertain about the listener's interest in the conversation topic. The males thus used interruptions and delayed minimal responses as control mechanisms to bring the current topic to an end or restrict the other person's right to contribute to the development of the topic by signaling non-support to their conversations partners, and in this way practicing an asymmetrical right to control topics by denying women's status as equal conversation partners (Zimmerman & West 1975:125).

Fishman (1978) found, in the analysis of authentic conversations between three couples, that female speakers did more conversational work than their male partners. Her analysis showed that the women under study tended to give more *conversational support* in the form of questions and supportive minimal responses; the women asked three times as many questions as the men and gave supporting and encouraging minimal responses throughout the conversations. The men used minimal responses as well, but similarly to Zimmerman and West's (1975) results, they used them in a non-encouraging way at the end of each remark,

which, according to Fishman, showed a lack of interest in the conversation topic. Instead of asking questions to keep the conversation going, the men produced twice as many statements as the women and almost always got a response, whereas the women did not. Fishman claims that the nature of these statements was that "it will be understood, the statement is of interest, there will be a response" (Fishman 1978:402): the men thus assumed that the statement would be successful, and they didn't need to engage in supportive strategies to keep the conversation going. The women then, Fishman hypothesized, had to use strategies such as asking questions and showing interest in the conversation topics by using minimal responses to keep the conversation going, especially if the topic under discussion was of their choice. Still, the topics raised by men were the ones most likely to be a success and dominate the conversation, and the women themselves contributed to this by showing more interest in these topics chosen by men.

The findings that women are bound to do more of interactional work in conversations mirrors, according to Fishman, the way the hierarchical power relations are maintained between men and women. The woman's role is to support men in their control over interaction, and this serves to give power to men and keep it from women. To try to gain power as a woman is socially unacceptable, and those women who try to do this, for example in interaction, are perceived as unfeminine and deviant (Fishman 1978:405).

Why do women and men seem to have such different conversational styles? Maltz and Borker (1982) analyzed material available in scholarly literature on women and men's speaking patterns, and claim that these differences exist due to cultural differences between men and women. They argue that all individuals learn rules about appropriate behavior in different contexts, and this is done during different periods in life. The rules for friendly conversation are learned from peers in the age of 5-15, which is the age when girls and boys mainly interact in same-sex groups. This means that they are socialized into different types of gender-specific cultures when it comes to interaction with peers of equal status in different contexts. Maltz and Borker claim that the differences between female-male language-use can be traced back to socialization patterns; girls and boys grow up to women and men in different linguistic subcultures where different culture-specific rules for conversation exist. So, when females and males try to engage in a friendly conversation, there is a great risk of their conversation resulting in cultural miscommunication.

One example of these cultural differences is the use of minimal responses (Maltz & Borker 1982:201f). According to Maltz and Borker, women use such responses when they want to show that they are listening, while men use them to show that they agree with what just has been said. Since in conversation, a person listens more than agrees with what is said, women

use more minimal responses. This can lead to misunderstanding: women might think that men are not listening to them, and men might think that women are agreeing on everything they say. This hypothesis would then explain two "common problems" in female-male communication: men think that it is impossible to know what women think because they seem to be agreeing with everything that is said; women get upset since they think that men are not listening to what they say. According to this gender-as-culture theory, the conversational differences between males and females are not related to power but are a result of misunderstanding (Maltz & Borker 1982:200).

This view is criticized by Henley and Kramarae (1991) who claim that the cultural differences in female-male language use are not random and "innocent", but related to a perspective of an unequal power relationship and dominance between men and women. Henley and Kramarae agree on that men and women may have different views on the use of minimal responses, but point out that men still speak more when women encourage them with minimal responses; moreover, men themselves actually use delayed minimal responses "politically" to discourage interaction (Henley & Kramarae 1991:28). Henley and Kramarae summarize their critique of Maltz and Borker's gender-as-culture theory by stating that women's style of interaction can be seen as appropriate for friendly conversation, whereas men's style seems uncooperative as it disrupts conversational interaction (Henley & Kramarae 1991:29). If these differences were purely cultural differences, they would not indicate dominance or power.

Hannah and Murachver (1999) conducted a study on speech style and gender as predictors of conversational behavior. Relying on previous studies on women and men's speech styles, they trained female and male confederates to use facilitative and non-facilitative speech styles. The facilitative speech style included features most commonly linked to female speech behavior; thus the confederate would use frequent and appropriately timed minimal responses, infrequent or no interruptions and frequent eye contact. The non-facilitative speech style would instead include features usually linked to men's speech: delayed or reduced minimal responses, frequent interruptions and looking away while listening. The trained confederates would then interact with a randomly assigned person of different sex participating in the study; half of the participants would interact with a confederate with a facilitative speech style, half would interact with a confederate with a non-facilitative style. The results of the study showed that the speech style of the confederate could more accurately predict conversational behavior than the gender of the confederate, even though slight gender differences were also found. Both sexes accommodated their speech style according to the confederates' speech style: women gave more minimal responses across all conversations than men. The minimal responses that men

produced varied with confederates' speech styles, but only when the confederate was a female. Both sexes interrupted their conversational partner more if the confederate had a non-facilitative speech style and therefore interrupted the participant more often. Females were more affected by the speech style of the confederate; if the speech style was facilitative the women spoke more, the males did not.

3.2 Gender and power in classroom settings

Researchers focusing on the language of adult speakers of English thus agree that there are asymmetrical power relations in discourse between the sexes, males being the dominant sex. Davies' (1998) study on classroom discourse in an English comprehensive school shows the same tendencies. Her data consists of conversations recorded during an authentic classroom activity where students worked in both mixed- and single-sex groups during an English lesson. Davies' results show that in single-sex conversations, the girls' linguistic strategies were characterized by "hedging their individuality, avoidance of being overdominant and a tendency to reflect equality within the group" (Davies 1998:16). The boys' way of conversing was more competitive, every boy striving to represent himself as a powerful speaker and directing the discussion. In mixed-sex groups, the male speakers' utterances tended to block other's turns while females used more cooperative strategies. This led to the girls' speaking turns becoming shorter and giving the boys an opportunity to produce longer turns; even the more quiet boys became more confident in mixed-sex groups. Also, the girls' utterances seemed mainly occur as reaction to the boys' linguistic behavior. These differences in language use, according to Davies, might equip the students for different roles in society.

Rennie and Parker's (1987) findings show the same tendencies as Davies' results. In a study conducted in 18 year-5 classes in Australia, girls and boys were observed while working on a science assignment in single- and mixed-sex groups. The aim of the study was to raise awareness of the male dominance in physical sciences among teachers and to help them develop strategies to arrange their teaching in a way that was more suitable for both sexes. The 18 participating teachers were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was educated on the science topic they were going to teach during the study and on non-sexist approaches to teaching science. The control group was only educated on the science topic. After these sessions all the teachers and their classes were observed during a science lesson where students were allowed to work in mixed- and single-sex

groups. In some classes the students were allowed to choose their partners, in others the teachers formed the groups.

The results of the study showed that in the control group, girls in mixed-sex groups spent their time mostly watching and listening instead of actively taking part in the assignment. In the experimental groups, the hands-on task-time was more equally distributed, but even in this group the girls spent more time listening and watching than the boys did. Another result of the study was that the children worked in a more cooperative manner when they were allowed to choose whom to work with. One pattern that the researchers also noted was that in the teacher-formed mixed-sex small groups, the boys were often the first ones to take up the science equipment required to finish the assignment without sharing them with the girls. All the groups received only one set of equipment, so the girls started to work with them after the boys had finished, but in most cases did not have the time to finish their work during class time. In sum, the teachers' awareness of non-sexist teaching practices was an important factor when it came to girls' and boys' equal participation in the science assignments: when given the chance, the boys were the more dominant gender in the classroom.

That boys have more power in the classroom is not only typical for English-speaking contexts. Holm (2010) conducted a more recent longitudinal study on 13-16 year old students' perceptions of gender, future expectations and classroom hierarchies in Sweden. In her study, she analyzes three questionnaires from 1974, 1992, and 2005. Her results show that girls through all three decades are perceived as more helpful and responsible students than boys, while boys are more often seen as conductors of disruptive behavior. In 2005, these perceived differences had become less dichotomous than during the previous decades. When considering their future, girls in 1992 and in 2005 valued social relationships more than boys. When it came to career and occupation, girls put more emphasis on the importance of a successful career and a high salary in 2005 compared to 1992. The boys' responses on these aspects did not change over time.

Holm maintains that this result might imply that sex roles in the Swedish society have changed over time, females not seeing family and social relationships as an opposite to a successful career anymore. The response patterns concerning power relations between girls and boys and women and men changed slightly over time, the male status seen as more powerful by both girls and boys. The results thus paradoxically imply that even though girls and boys in 2005 are perceived more equal in the classroom, the overall picture of male dominance has strengthened over the years. According to Holm, this might be an implication of females

actually acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations between the two sexes, especially in adult life (2010:264).

Holm's results only reflect the student's own perceptions of gender and power, and they do not tell us anything about the actual situation in the classroom, or in what way the power is divided between students. A few studies have, however, been conducted on students' linguistic power-related strategies in Swedish classrooms. Hultman and Einarsson (in Hultman 1990) examined verbal space and interaction in year-1 and -5 classrooms in Sweden. The aim of their study was to determine how the Swedish school system prepares girls to become fearless and active attendants in the public discourse in their adult age. After observing and audio-recording 100 lessons Hultman reached the conclusion that the school system did nothing. Of the verbal space that the students themselves took up during lessons only one third was taken up by the girls. Boys dominated the classroom interaction by shouting out answers and comments without asking permission as well as interrupting the teacher. In most cases the teacher did not react to this disruptive behavior.

Rooswall (2000) examined cooperation and competitiveness in Swedish year-9 students' interaction in a problem-solving situation. During a Swedish lesson, the six participating groups received an instruction to write a poem together; four of these groups were single-sex groups and two mixed-sex groups. Her results showed that girls in all of the groups used more task- and group-oriented conversational styles than boys. Asymmetrical and dominant styles were used by both sexes to the same extent, but girls' conversational styles aimed at finishing the task in hands more often than it was the case with the boys' styles of interaction (Rooswall 2000:179).

3.3 Gender and Power in L2 classroom-settings

In first language settings it seems that males are the more dominant gender, but as only an insignificant amount of research has been conducted on mixed-sex group discussions in L2 (second/foreign language) speaking and gender, it is not clear whether the same gender-related tendency characterizes this type of interaction. The small amount of studies that have been conducted in L2 settings mainly focus on teacher-student talk and verbal space in the language classroom. Decke-Cornill (2007:79f) refers to eight different quantitative studies in which researchers found that in most cases, but not in all, male students dominated in the classroom. However, the linguistic nature of this type of classroom discourse as well as the possible male dominance, have not been analyzed, which is why this particular study aims to examine the

interaction between students in a foreign language classroom setting from a gender-specific perspective.

4. Material and Method

4.1 Participants and material

As this essay intends to investigate gender-related patterns in language produced by young learners of English, the participants chosen for this current study were upper secondary school students. 25 students from two different upper secondary schools and four different classes voluntarily chose to participate. These students, of which 12 were girls and 13 boys, were all currently studying the English 6 course and were between 17 and 18 years old. Two of the students had a non-Swedish background, but spoke Swedish fluently. I did not gather any information on the students' socioeconomic backgrounds, but all the students attended a higher education preparatory program, which implies that many of them have good chances of proceeding towards higher education after upper secondary school. The reason I chose students with this particular background was because I wanted the students to be on a relatively high level in their language proficiency so that it would be possible to investigate the possible gender-related patterns in their oral communication. If the level of the participants' proficiency in English had been too low, the power-related tendencies could have been more difficult to discern and interpret.

The data analyzed in this study consists of transcriptions of four audio-recorded sessions of semi-authentic student talk. I label the recorded discussions as semi-authentic as even though the students received three topics to discuss in a school environment, they were freely allowed to discuss them without further instructions or interruptions on my part. As these sessions were conducted during a period before the national tests in English, the teachers labeled them as "discussion exercises" as a way of preparing the students for the oral exams. The students were not informed about the specific aims of the current study. Each session lasted between 25 minutes and 57 minutes, which resulted in 2 hours and 50 minutes of transcribed material.

Due to the small amount of participants and data collected for this study, the results have a low generalizability when it comes to young learners of English in Sweden.

4.2 Ethical considerations

Before conducting each of the conversation exercises, the students and their parents were sent a permission slip notifying them of the study. Only students who had returned the permission slip, or who were over 18 years old, were allowed to participate. The participants were notified of their participation being completely voluntary, and that they were allowed to quit whenever they wanted. They were also allowed to withdraw their consent at anytime, even after the recorded session (McKay 2006:25f). None of the participants did so.

The participating students will remain completely anonymous throughout the whole essay, and all the names used to refer to certain students are fictional.

4.3 Methodology

This study was conducted during lesson time for each of the four groups, and the participating students stepped out of the class to take part in the conversational exercise that I had designed. In each group there were six or seven students, at least three of each sex. The students were given three different discussion topics that they were allowed to discuss in the order of their own choice. The topics for the discussion exercise were chosen from areas to which, I believe, all the students regardless of their sex could easily relate: popular culture, meat consumption, and Internet and social media (to see the whole instruction, see Appendix 1). I chose to examine controlled small-group discussions to ensure that the participating students would communicate in English and not in Swedish, as they often tended to do during class time according to their teachers. Also, as Davies (1998) suggests, small-group discussions are often used as classroom activities, and even in classes where this isn't the norm, "in whole class discussion, boys' and girls' linguistic behavior retains many of those characteristics evident within the small group arena" (Davies 1998:12).

Before the discussion exercise, each group received their instructions in English, and all four groups got the same topics to discuss. Even though all the conversations were audio-recorded, I stayed in the room to observe the students. This was done for two reasons: observations were of help in transcribing recordings and they ensured that the students indeed communicated in English during the whole exercise. Naturally, the fact that I stayed in the room observing the participants might have had an effect on how the students interacted with each other in the situation, and this has to be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the study. In other words, the students might have used different, perhaps more formal and polite,

conversational strategies than usually because they were observed for academic purposes (Labov 1972:19). Other variables that might influence the results of this study are the students' different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, but due to the scope of this essay, they are disregarded in the analysis and discussion of the data.

4.3.1 Transcriptions and analysis

The audio-recordings of the four sessions were transcribed and then revised to minimize incorrect transcriptions. I chose to transcribe all the recorded material to be able to find certain patterns in the participants' speech that stood out as power-related (Nagy & Sharma in Podesva & Sharma 2013:237). 120 pages of transcriptions were then analyzed. The method used to distinguish power-related patterns in mixed-sex discussions is based on a quantitative analysis, but relevant examples, which illustrate these patterns, are analyzed qualitatively. All the four sessions are quantitatively analyzed as one entity as this provides slightly more generalizability. As individual differences between speakers' conversational styles, whether they are girls or boys, are likely to occur, this study only aims at examining whether the instances of linguistic variables under study agree with gender-specific features of interaction described in previous research.

Because of the scope of this essay, the script used for the analysis of the linguistic patterns provided only information on turn taking and types of utterances produced by the participants. Pauses and unclear fragments of speech were thus disregarded, the analysis being mainly quantitative.

The transcriptions were analyzed by taking note of each occurrence of minimal responses, questions and interruptions. As the two sexes produced different amounts of words, the frequencies of these variables' occurrences in utterances of each of the sexes are related to the total number of words produced by the respective sex. To secure the comparability of data provided by different totals, the formula below adopted from Renner (cit. in Roth 2014:16f) was used to calculate the proportional frequency per 100 words in the respective sex' total amount of words in the transcripts.

$$\frac{\text{X linguistic variable} * 100}{\text{Y total number of words in transcript}} = \frac{\text{proportional frequency freq/100}}{\text{100 words in transcript}}$$

4.3.2 Taxonomy of the analyzed linguistic variables

Verbal space

In this study, the variable verbal space includes the amount of words and turns produced by each sex during the four discussion exercises. The time that the students take to produce their turns is thus disregarded, even though this might be a relevant variable associated to language and power to examine in future research. In the analysis, the turn-taking model created by Sacks et al. (in Zimmerman & West 1975:107) is used to calculate the turns that take place. According to this model, a turn can consist of single words, phrases, clauses or sentences. When a speaker starts his or her turn, he or she has an initial right to produce a whole turn.

Minimal responses

Utterances analyzed as minimal responses consist of short lexical units uttered during another speakers' turn or after it. Examples of this kind of responses are *mm, yeah,* and *mm-hmm.*

Questions

In this analysis, only questions requesting for information are analyzed. These types of questions grant the other speaker more speaking time and are thus related to the power-relations in conversation. In other words, a speaker directing a question to another speaker is showing interest in the topic at hands as well as will to "share the power" in conversation, thus making the power-balance in the discourse more equal (cf. Fishman 1978). However, due to the limited scope of this essay, questions requesting for clarification or asking the interlocutor to the previous utterance are disregarded, even though they might be interpreted as indicators of a cooperative conversational style.

Interruptions

An interruption occurs when a speaker violates the basic rules of conversation and starts his or her turn before the current speaker has finished their turn, if there is more than one lexical unit left in the person's utterance (Zimmerman & West 1975:123). If a speaker starts his or her turn right before or during the last lexical unit of the previous utterance, their turns are considered as overlapping (Zimmerman & West 1975:114). Due to the scope of this essay, and because overlapping is not as strongly connected to power-relations in conversation as interruptions, they are disregarded in this analysis.

The interruptions analyzed in this study are divided into three different categories; conversation-building interruptions, topic-changing interruptions, and attempted interruptions. The first category includes interruptions in which the interrupter continues speaking on the same topic as the previous speaker and in that manner developing the current topic together with the other speaker. The second category of interruptions includes instances when the interlocutor changes the currently discussed topic by introducing a new one, and the third failed interruptions where the current speaker keeps the floor.

5. Results and discussion

In this section the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses will be presented for each linguistic variable: minimal responses, questions, and interruptions and verbal space. In the last section the results will be summarized and discussed to determine if any gendered power-related patterns can be distinguished.

5.1 Verbal space

Table 1: Words and turns produced by the students

	Female students	**Male students**
Words	15,174	12,567
Turns	1,321	848
Content-bearing turns	816	700
Average length / turn	18 words	18 words

As shown above in Table 1, the girls produced a total of 15,174 words during the four discussion sessions. The calculations showed that the female students took a total of 1,321 turns and of this total, 505 consisted of minimal responses, thus making the total of "content-bearing" turns 816. The average length of these turns was 18 words/turn.

The male students produced a total of 12,567 words during the sessions. The number of turns taken by the boys was 848. Disregarding the turns consisting only of minimal responses, the boys took 700 turns in total. The average length was calculated to be 18 words/turn.

The results of the quantitative analysis thus show that the females were the wordier sex during the discussion exercises, taking slightly more speech time than the males. However, the average length of the both sexes' turns was equal.

5.2 Minimal responses

Table 2: Minimal responses produced by the students

	Female students	Male students
Minimal responses	505	148
Incidence/100 words	3,33	1,18

As Table 2 illustrates, the results of the quantitative analysis of the discussion sessions showed that the females produced a considerably larger number of minimal responses than the males. As mentioned above, the girls produced a total of 15,174 words during the four discussion sessions. Of this total amount of words, 505 can be classed as minimal responses, making the frequency 3,33 per 100 words. Of the 12,567 words that the boys produced 148 words could be classified as minimal responses, making the frequency 1,18 per 100 words.

The females produced thus almost three times as many minimal responses as the males during the four sessions.

5.3 Questions

Table 3: Questions produced by the students

	Female students	Male students
Total	109	78
Incidence/100 words	1,25	0,62
To girls	26	18
To boys	47	32
To the whole group	36	28

The quantitative observations reported in Table 3 show that the female students asked half as many questions during the discussion exercises as the male students did (1,25 vs. 0,62 incidence per 100 words). Interestingly, both sexes distributed their questions in a similar

pattern: all the students directed a majority of their questions to the males or the whole group, the girls receiving the smallest amount of questions. Figure 1 below presents these results in a graph which shows the percentual distribution of questions and their receivers in relation to gender:

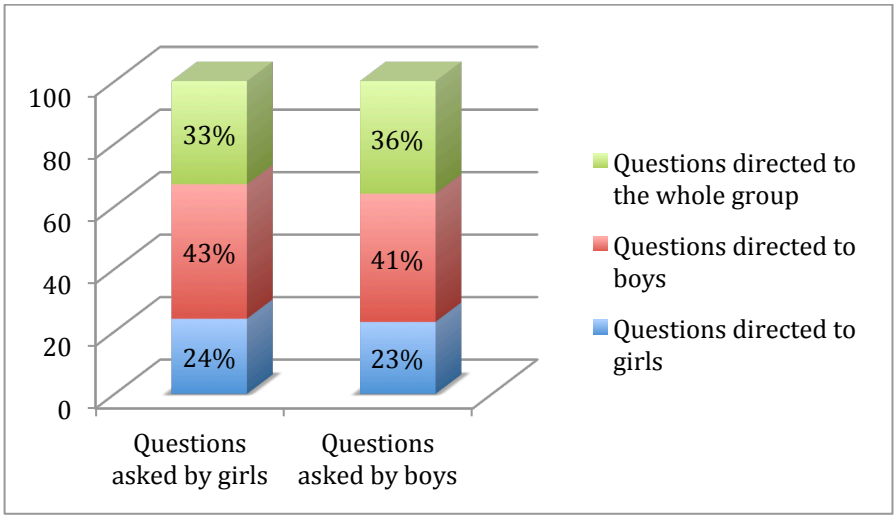

Figure 1: Distribution of questions

5.4 Interruptions

The quantitative results of the study showed that the girls were interrupted considerably more often than the boys. The girls also interrupted or tried to interrupt others less often than the boys. Tables 4 and 5 below show how interruptions were distributed between the two sexes.

Table 4: Interruptions made towards each sex

	Female students	**Male students**
Total	60	29
Incidence/100 words	0,4	0,23
Topic-changing	16	7
Topic-building	44	22

Table 5: Interruptions made by each sex

	Female students	Male students
Total	37	52
Incidence/100 words	0,24	0,41
Topic-changing	4	19
Topic-building	33	33
Attempts	6	17

The findings of this study show, as illustrated in Table 4, that the girls were interrupted a total of 60 times during the 2 hours and 50 minutes of discussion, which amounts to 0,4 incidence per 100 words. Of these 60 interruptions, 16 were topic-changing interruptions and 14 of them were made by the boys. The boys were interrupted 29 times during the discussion sessions, which makes 0,23 incidence per 100 words. Only 7 of the total amount of interruptions were topic-changing, 5 of them made by other boys.

The girls interrupted other speakers 37 times (0,24 incidence per 100 words), but only four of these interruptions were topic-changing. The girls attempted and failed to interrupt their fellow speakers six times. The boys interrupted other speakers 52 times (0,41 incidence per 100 words), 19 of these interruptions being topic-changing. The total of boys' attempts at interruption was 17.

5.5 Summary of the quantitative results and qualitative analysis

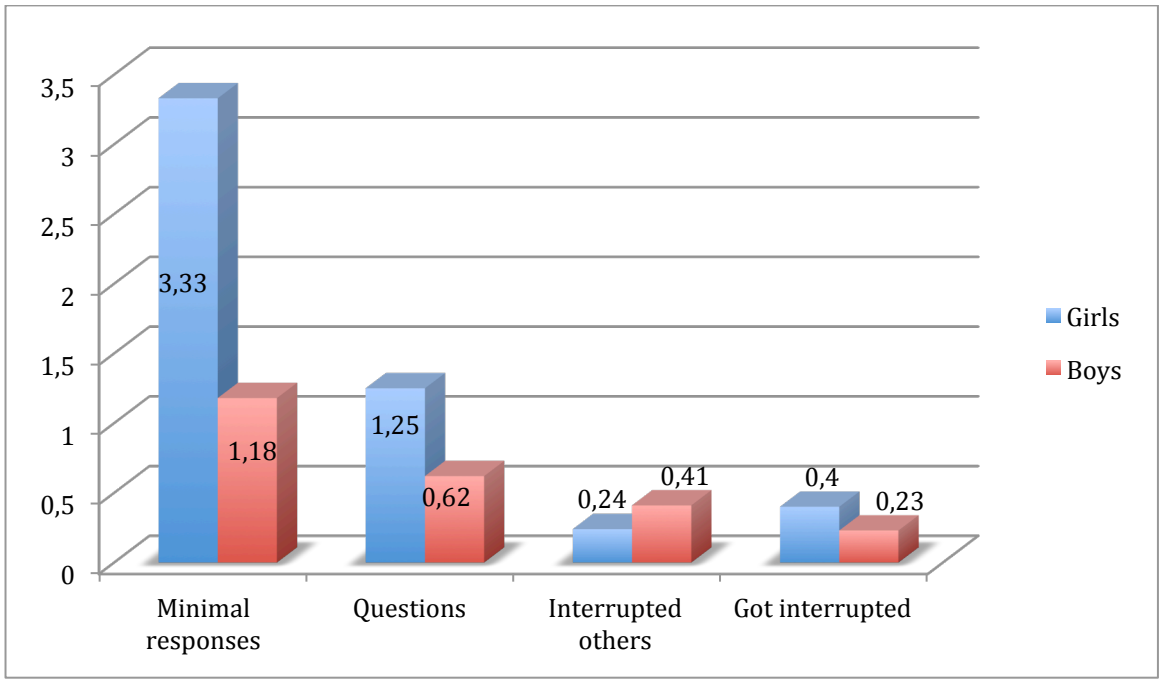

Figure 2: Frequencies of reported variable instances per 100 words

Figure 2 above illustrates the frequencies of three of the four variables analyzed in this study: minimal responses, questions, and interruptions. In this section, these three variables will be qualitatively analyzed. Since it is difficult to comment on the variable *verbal space* in terms of qualitative analysis, it will be discussed alongside other variables in the discussion section.

The quantitative results presented in Figure 3 clearly show that the girls produced a considerably larger amount of minimal responses than the boys did. However, at a closer analysis of minimal responses, it becomes apparent that the both sexes used such responses in a similar way, even though the girls used them more often. The gender-related differences in the use of minimal responses seem to be of quantitative rather than qualitative nature. Below follows two extracts from the transcriptions that illustrate the both sexes' similar use of minimal responses:

Extract 1: Minimal responses produced by the female students

Johan: *…that's, I actually can recommend something, for a few years ago, I had a wonderful hobby of mine in which I'd go home and I'd daydream*

Lisa: *yeah*

Johan: *you should try that because it's almost like watching a movie except*

Lisa: *yeah*

Johan: *you create the story and*

Marie: *mm*

Johan: *it does, it might be a bit boring at times and it might be difficult first but if you actually, if you're actually good at it you'd be surprised on the adventures you can go on.*

Lisa: *yeah*

Extract 2: Minimal responses produced by the male students

Lisa: *It's like, one sort of judgment that I find acceptable and that is the judgment of abilities if*

Jonas: *mm*

Lisa: *you get like constructive criticism on something.*

Jonas: *yeah*

Both Extract 1 and 2 show how minimal responses are produced during the current speaker's turn and immediately after it. Still, as minimal responses are considered to be turns that show interest in what is said and encourage the current speaker to continue speaking and developing the current topic (Zimmerman & West 1975:108), a clear power-related pattern, similar to those established in previous research (Zimmerman & West 1975, Fishman 1978), can be distinguished in the conversational styles of the respective sexes: the female students tended to encourage the current speaker considerably more than the male students did, leaving the females to do more interactional work in the discussions.

As already mentioned in the previous research section, asking questions is another way of showing interest, encouraging and engaging fellow speakers in a conversation. The nature of the questions asked during the discussion exercises did not differ between the two sexes, but as already stated in the results section 5.3 on questions, the girls asked half as many questions as the boys did. These results seem to show some imbalance when it comes to the power-relations between the two sexes as, in spite of the fact that girls asked a larger quantity of questions, both sexes directed their questions mainly to the boys or the whole group. It seems then that the girls make more efforts in trying to keep the conversation going by asking others, especially boys, questions. One can only speculate why this is the case, but one way of explaining this may be the fact that since the boys showed a tendency to show less interest in the conversation in general as they produced a fewer amount of minimal responses and asking questions, the girls

tried to compensate this lack of encouragement by asking questions to the boys and trying to engage them in discussion (cf. Fishman 1978:405). Since the girls already support others more in discussion, they might not feel the same need to try to encourage each other to the same extent.

It is also clear that the girls interrupted and attempted to interrupt other speakers less often than the boys did, and the nature of their interruption-patterns was different that of the boys'. Thus the absolute majority of the interruptions produced by the female students were cooperative, or "conversation-building". In other words, the girls interrupted the other speakers by continuing to speak about the same topic, developing it together with the current speaker and at the same time practicing interaction-related strategies. The extract below illustrates the cooperative nature of the girls' interruptions:

Extract 3: Cooperative interruptions

Maja: *There's so many different communities uh like*

Caroline: (interrupts) *like they have, like this Supernatural fandom and Sherlock fandom and like they*

Maja: *mm*

Caroline: *have everything fandom, like there's so many*

Maja: (interrupts) *Tumblr is the biggest, uh, blog…*

Caroline: *yeah blog*

Maja: *blog community*

Caroline: *yes, in the world*

Maja: *in the whole world, so it's not so weird then to have so many people on it*

Caroline: *no*

Maja: *like there's probably adults and then there is*

Caroline: (interrupts) *yeah there's like teachers*

Maja: *yeah*

Caroline: *who blog like tips for school and*

Maja: *mm*

Annika: *hmm*

Caroline: *and there's those geniuses who creates master lists of like things you can…*

In Extract 3, Maja and Caroline are talking about the social media site Tumblr and describe it to the rest of the group members. Maja starts by stating that there are many communities on Tumblr, and Caroline interrupts her by starting to list different communities that actually exist on the social media site. When she finally concludes that there are indeed many different communities on the specific website, Maja interrupts her by stating that Tumblr is the biggest blog community in the world. The girls thus interrupt each other by supporting each other's turns and developing the description of the Internet community together.

The boys also interrupted in a cooperative manner, but even a great deal of their interruptions tended to be topic-changing. This alone does not make the distribution of power in mixed-sex conversations unequal, but the fact that a clear majority of the boys' topic-changing interruptions were directed to girls does. The example below serves to illustrate the nature of the boys' topic-changing interruptions:

Extract 4: Topic-changing interruptions

Mattias: *nothing's 100% meat, I mean if you eat kebab*

Louisa: *no*

Mattias: *and such things, maybe 60 or 70% are meat, the rest is something else, maybe soya and mill and other stuff.*

Louisa: *yeah, but a lot of cheap things like especially in America I think, like you can have Tacobell for a really cheap, really cheap and that's because they have so many different things in that is not meat and they just call it meat I mean*

Erik: (interrupts) *just thinking about meat, this alone is a topic that I'm very frightened of speaking about because I'm very afraid of being ignorant you see, it is in our nature to eat meat but at the same time*

Milla: *mm*

Erik: *we are no longer a part of the nature as we usually were, we have grown so much as humans that we no longer can look in the world and say "it's in our nature why shouldn't we do it for our survival?", we have become so big that we have to change the way we think, we can no longer think what is in our nature and what do we want to do, that's why…*

In Extract 4, Mattias and Louisa are discussing the topic pure meat and its price when Erik interrupts Louisa while she is developing her thoughts on the current subject. Erik continues to talk about meat consumption but on a totally new perspective that is not related to the topic that

Mattias and Louisa were discussing: whether the meat that is sold cheap is pure meat or not. This type of interruption is common to the boys throughout the four sessions; instead of developing the subject under discussion they take up a new perspective within a more global topic, leading the conversation to change its focus and leaving the old one behind. The boys thus tend to use a relatively subtle way to direct and control conversational topics considerably more often than the girls do. The extract below illustrates further how this particular topic was developed:

Extract 5: Topic-changing interruptions - development

Milla: *mm*

Erik: *I feel that while it is alright for us to eat meat, I'm not quite sure that it's fine for us to eat as much as we do today and I'm,*

Milla: *mm*

Erik: *I do not believe that I want to make up an opinion on that because I, it, honestly I don't feel that I, well not, I'm not well enough educated in that area.*

Milla: *mm*

Louisa: *But I think we're over-consuming everything and that is also included meat so I think if we just eat less of it, but, I mean I don't eat meat because I think it's, well… I don't*

Erik: (interrupts) *are you a vegetarian?*

Here, Erik continues his turn discussing the meat-eating topic while Milla supports him by producing minimal responses. When he finishes even Louisa, whom Erik initially interrupted, continues to develop the topic introduced by Erik. The fact that Erik did not obey the basic rules of a conversation, that a speaker has a right to finish his or her turn, is thus ignored (Zimmerman & West 1975:107). The group lets him shift the topic without objecting, which makes the conversation take a turn in a new direction. This pattern is rather common in responses to topic-changing interruptions from male speakers in this study; the fact that the topic is being changed abruptly does not raise any objections or comments from other speakers, making the boys successful in taking the conversational power in their own hands.

5.6 Discussion

The results of this particular study indicate that there are power-related patterns associated with the use of minimal responses, questions and interruptions in boys and girls' respective conversational styles even though these conversations are classroom group discussion in a foreign language. Similar to the results reported in section 3 on previous research (Zimmerman & West 1975, Fishman 1978, Rennie & Parker 1987, Davies 1998), the male students in this study tended to adapt a more dominant style of conversation: they seemed to use interruptions as a strategy to control conversation topics, and they gave females and each other less encouragement by producing only few minimal responses throughout the conversation. Furthermore, the questions produced by males were mainly directed to other males or the whole group. By contrast, the females' conversational style was generally more cooperative; they encouraged other speakers by producing a larger amount of minimal responses and questions and by interrupting less.

These findings seem to support Maltz and Borker's (1982) gender-as-culture theory: the boys and girls under study showed a tendency to follow different patterns of communicating with each other. However, to draw any conclusions about whether this is the case because the boys and girls have during their childhood been socialized into the specific conversational behaviors they displayed during the study would require more data concerning their social life and conversational behavior during previous periods in their lives (Maltz & Borker 1982:203). Because the results show specific patterns related to power and dominance in conversation, it is difficult to say if the boys' dominant conversational behavior is linked to culture-specific rules as Maltz and Borker (1982) suggest, or their will to dominate, as Henley and Kramarae (1991) put it.

Interestingly, as presented in the results section 5.1, the girls still spoke more during the four sessions than the boys did, regardless of the boys' more dominant style of conversation. Unlike the female participants in Zimmerman and West's (1975) study, the girls in this particular study were not silent after being interrupted. Instead, they continued to speak, developing the current topic further with their classmates. Zimmerman and West hypothesized that the females under their study might have become silent after being interrupted because they had lost their trace of thought and needed time to refocus on the current topic under discussion (Zimmerman & West 1975:124). That the girls continued to talk after interruptions might have to do with the topics under discussion; they evidently engaged both the male and female students into conversation and all the participating speakers had their own clear

opinions on the subjects in hands, which might have made it easier for the girls to trace their thoughts after an interruption and continue speaking. That English is traditionally labeled as a "female" subject might also play a part in the distribution of the verbal space (Salomone 2004:12). If girls generally have a higher level of proficiency in the language, it is not strange that they succeed in taking up more verbal space even though they are not being encouraged by boys. Also, as the teachers labeled the discussion sessions as a way of preparing the students for the coming exams, it might be that the female students consciously tried to attain more verbal space in the conversation to be able to practice their oral skills. It could also be that the topics I had chosen for discussion simply were slightly more relatable for the girls, engaging them more in the discussion than the boys. However, it must be acknowledged that the majority of the interruptions made during the discussion exercises were actually cooperative, making it easier for the students to continue taking part in the discussion afterwards.

It could be useful to consider the results Rennie and Parker (1987) obtained in their research: the students under their study seemed to use more cooperative strategies in solving their science assignments when they were allowed to work with a partner of their own choosing. It is difficult to say anything about the specific classroom structures or the participants' relationships with each other, but it might be the case that the female and male students participating in this study might have been already quite familiar with each other, allowing the girls to take up more space in the classroom making the power-relations between the sexes more equal, and making the communication more cooperative in general. Two other possible reasons could be that the students were observed and wanted to display a certain behavior in that specific situation, or individual differences; the students participated willingly and this might reflect their will to interact with others in different situations.

The fact that the girls actually took up more verbal space in the group discussions reflects Holm's (2010) results on perceived gender roles; the females in her study which was based on the data from 2005 seemed to perceive themselves as more powerful in the classroom than during the previous decades. Thus the fact that according to the results of this study, the girls defy the traditional gender-related hierarchy in classroom talk might indicate that they are aware of the gradual changes in sex roles characteristic of present-day Swedish society, where powerful females are no longer considered as deviant or "unfeminine" as they were before, at least according to Fishman (1978:405). To perceive oneself as a female who has the same chances in life and career as any male would make it easier for the girls to ignore the boys' more dominant conversational-style and speak more even without receiving sufficient encouragement from boys.

Another way of interpreting the distribution of verbal space between the sexes is Fishman's (1978) hypothesis of gendered interaction: the girls might have spoken more because they had to do more interactional work than the boys. In this case one could argue that the boys' silence could actually be seen as another way of discouraging interaction and showing a lack of interest in the topics being discussed by the girls – instead of politely taking part in the conversation, they objected by being silent, which in turn resulted in girls speaking more, filling the silences, and doing more interactional work in an attempt to engage the boys in the discussion (Fishman 1978:405). The fact that the female students were interrupted more often than the male students could be another indicator of the girls taking up more space in the conversations being power-related: the girls must indeed have started more turns, as presented in section 5.1, as they were not allowed to finish their turns as often as the boys.

As suggested by Hannah and Murachver (1999), the speech style of the fellow interlocutors might also have an effect on the speakers' conversational behaviors. The supportive and "talkative" behavior of some female students might have had a positive effect on all the students, restricting the male students' dominant behavior at the same time as it empowered the females' cooperative speech style, allowing them to take up more verbal space in the conversations.

All in all, the findings of this study can be interpreted in different ways, and to obtain more generalizable and reliable results, further research must be conducted in the field of gender and L2. The present results can only point out certain tendencies that manifested in four conversations between 25 students. Moreover, the personal factor should be taken into account as the gendered differences provided by a relatively small group of speakers might also account for individual differences.

6. Pedagogical implications

The results of this study show that there are some gender-specific differences in the conversational styles of young female and male Swedish learners of English, at least when it comes to the students who participated in the four analyzed discussion exercises. If teachers are to encourage students to develop their interests without prejudice to their individual gender and actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for men and women (Skolverket 2013:5), they should be are aware of power-related processes that might take place in the classroom.

In the Curriculum for upper secondary school, The Swedish National Agency for Education (2013), clearly states that education should impart and establish fundamental democratic values, and that Swedish schools should be open to different ideas and encourage their expression and emphasize the importance of these ideas. Students acquiring education in Sweden should also be able to express these ideas freely and receive support in doing this (Skolverket 2013:4f). Therefore it is of importance that all teachers, even those teaching foreign languages, should enable their students to interact freely in the classroom. Both boys and girls should learn how to cooperatively take part in conversation and show respect to the views, ideas and opinions that their classmates and others express. It might also be a good idea to educate teachers on the topic of sexism in school, as this was a variable which, in Rennie and Parker's (1987) research, had a positive effect on balancing the power-relations between the sexes in the Australian classrooms under study (Rennie & Parker 1987:71f).

Furthermore, the Curriculum for upper secondary school states that "education should support the development of students into reasonable persons who actively participate in and contribute to professional and societal life" (Skolverket 2013:6). Even though this study did not examine whole-class discussion, it can be assumed that boys and girls use similar conversational styles in discussions in whole class as they do during group work (as suggested by Davies 1998:12). Hultman and Einarsson (1990) studied whole class discourse in Swedish schools and similarly to the male students in this study, the boys under their study also displayed dominant behavior in classroom discourse. According to the researchers, this led to most of the girls being ignored during classroom discussions and thus not being prepared to participate in public discourse. If teachers are not aware of the type of disruptive behaviors that their students might display, such as interrupting, which often steal their own attention in class, it is difficult to make sure that all the students get the time they need to express themselves and therefore receive relevant feedback from the teacher.

This especially applies to the teaching of English as a foreign language, as students might be unable to produce spontaneous speech quickly enough to participate in classroom discourse before they are interrupted. According to the syllabus of English in upper secondary school, the students should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills in the classroom (Skolverket 2011). For many students, English lessons at school are the only place where they can practice their oral skills in English. If students are constantly being interrupted or ignored, they will not get the same chance of producing comprehensible output as some of their classmates. Furthermore it might even discourage them from trying to communicate in class.

How can teachers prevent disruptive conversational behavior in the classroom? The Swedish National Agency for Education in agreement with researchers findings suggest that teachers should together with students develop rules on how to take part in interaction and work in groups (Skolverket 2013:11, Hedge 2000:267). Considering the results of this study, foreign language students should at least be advised to show respect to each turn taken in conversations, listen to what the current speaker has to say and then, if allowed, take the floor. The activities that students take part of can also be structured in a way that ensures that all the participating learners take part in the communication; this can be done by phasing the activity with careful instructions, giving the students time to brainstorm before the activity, re-organizing groups, or by assigning the students with different roles in the interaction, for example (Hedge 2000:278). Finally, it should be underlined that a conversation, as Zimmerman and West state, involves both active speakership and listenership (Zimmerman & West 1975:108). Rules of this type would, at least to some degree, ensure that all students get a chance to participate in purposeful classroom discourse thus making different communicative classroom activities available for everyone; and as a result, a greater amount of students, especially girls, would be prepared to take part in different types of public and even global discourses.

7. Concluding remarks

The aim of this essay was to investigate gender-related power-relations in verbal communication in the language classroom and to find out whether either of the sexes used certain linguistic strategies to achieve dominance in a communicative situation. After analyzing four discussion exercises, the following conclusion can be drawn: similar to findings from previous research based on native speakers of English both in and out of similar classroom situations, male students participating in this study tended to use more dominant conversational styles by means of minimal responses, questions, and interruptions, whereas females were more cooperative in their conversational styles. At the same time, the girls took up more verbal space in the conversations by producing more words and turns. These results might indicate that even though males appear to be more dominant, the female students are able to cope with this and can continue interacting in mixed-sex groups in spite of insufficient encouragement on the part of the boys. However, one must bear in mind that due to the number of participants and the relatively small amount of data under study, the results are not statistically significant and have

a low generalizability when it comes to young Swedish learners of English. Nevertheless, since the findings of this study succeeded in revealing patterns related to gender-bound dominance and power manifest in students' conversational interactions, it could be of relevance to conduct a study on a larger scale to investigate if there indeed are gender-related trends in conversational interaction in the context of second language acquisition and in that case, where these different trends originate from.

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Appendix 1: The discussion exercise

Please discuss these following topics

1. Describe your favorite

Describe your favorite TV-series / film / computer game / book / etc. and tell the rest of the group why it is your favorite. Does anyone else in your group share your opinion? Is there someone that does not? In that case, why?

2. Is it all right for us humans to eat meat?

Anyone can buy a cheeseburger for 10kr at McDonalds nowadays. Why do you think that it is so cheap? Do you think that it is ok for us to eat as much meat as we do today? How much meat do you eat? Are there any other options?

3. Internet and social media

Talk about the role that social media and Internet play in our lives today. Take a few minutes to discuss this topic. You can use the following questions to start up your conversation:

- What do you think people usually do on Internet? What do you usually do when you log on?
- How do Internet and social media affect our everyday lives?
- Can you trust everything that is published on Internet and social media sites?
- Is it ok to write anything online? What are the up and down sides when it comes to anonymity on Internet?