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Raising Gender Awareness in the EFL Classroom Using Fiction

A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review aims to give the reader information about how fiction can be used to raise gender awareness in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. Gender roles can be found throughout history, and some of them are heavily portrayed in gender stereotypical fiction. When fiction is later used in a didactic setting, it can affect how language is processed and categorized, which in turn can change social gender norms. The challenges of raising gender awareness in a language classroom are brought to light in the following studies through feminist approaches and critical literacy, as well as masculine, feminine and queer perspectives.

Many of the studies show that male students tend to show reluctance towards gender awareness, while female students tend to read fiction in a different manner than the male students. Other studies show that many factors are relevant when planning how gender awareness can be raised effectively. These findings are put into a more holistic perspective in the discussion. Finally, this literature review tries to point toward future research areas, such as the need for genderqueer perspectives, or how we can further improve our understanding of the connection between gender issues, the EFL classroom and fiction.

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1 Introduction

For quite some time, ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) researchers have encouraged ESL/EFL teachers to view fiction less as a source for learning grammar and vocabulary, and more as a medium to teach what Hudson (as cited by Chi, 2012) called ‘true communication’. In other words, fiction should be used as a springboard for language use and knowledge acquisition in general. By showing how characters act in various intersectional settings through fiction, the readers are also provided with information that they can use to shape their own subjectivities. Fiction also tends to spark the reader’s imaginary abilities and evoke certain contextualizing skills that help the reader understand the language better (Ebadi & Bakhshi, 2016). It also gives the readers tools to communicate and understand cultural patterns in their surroundings.

The ideas of teaching the relation between language learning and culture to help students shape their own identity, to use material relatable to the students and to create a more diverse representation of people and roles in educational materials, are all primary parts of Swedish education (Skolverket, 2011a). However, there are challenges in discussing identity in the language classroom. Bourdieu (1991) explains that language used in a social setting not only shapes subjectivity, but also introduces and establishes power relations between social groups. These social groups tend to be produced and reproduced throughout a sociocultural matrix, and are divided along different characteristic traits. Some of the strongest matrixes divide the male and female hegemonies, i.e. the dominant gender discourses (Bourdieu, 1991). These discourses may be hard to challenge, and the teacher must therefore use didactic tools in order to successfully raise gender awareness in the language classroom.

Gender is a societal and cultural topic and thus, fiction might help as a didactic tool to raise gender awareness in the EFL classroom. This review will highlight what research has been carried out on how we instead of regenerating gender norms, can use fiction to raise gender awareness, and how this contributes to the EFL classroom didactics. There is a substantial need for more prominent alternative gender perspectives when looking at what literature has been popularized in the EFL classroom today. In Germany for instance, the ten most popular books read in the EFL classroom are written by males, and discuss predominantly male topics (Volkman, 2007). Moreover, a study also shows that books written by male authors tend to be overrepresented compared to books written by female authors, when looking at many of the major British and American publishing companies

(King, 2011). These imbalances have attracted some criticism, and many different suggestions on how gender awareness can be raised in the EFL classroom have been put forward.

Partly due to the lack of research that has been carried out on critical literacy in the EFL classroom (Hayik, 2016), this review also includes research made in ESL and L1 (First Language) English settings. However, this content may be just as relevant to understand how to raise gender awareness in the EFL classroom, as it sometimes offers useful perspectives as well as insight into what teaching strategies are compatible or incompatible with the EFL setting. At the end of this report, some examples of how and within what field future research could be conducted will be suggested.

2 Background

Several terms in this literature review have multiple definitions, and are directly connected to the field of gender studies. Therefore, this section serves to navigate the reader through the definitions used here, by showing how it has been used in previous literature. It also explains why it is important to investigate what research there is on using fiction to raise gender awareness in the EFL classroom.

2.1 What is Gender and why is it relevant?

‘Gender’ is a fairly new term, and it was not until the late sixties that the word truly became separated from the word ‘sex’ (Simmonds, 2012). As stated in Simmonds (2012), Stoller introduced a model in 1964 that was based on four concepts: “sex, gender, gender identity and gender role” (p.1). Here, Stoller separated the biological aspects of sex and the societal aspects of gender. The concepts of gender, gender identity and gender role were adopted by many renowned feminists, and the practice of distinguishing between sex and gender have grown and changed ever since. A more modern definition of gender is “the social and cultural overlay that exaggerates and builds on presumed biological differences between males and females” (Kennelly, Merz & Lorber, 2000, p. 598).

Yet there are others who have gone further, claiming that our sex has little to do with our behavior, and instead define gender as a traditional way for humans to categorize other people through language and cultural expressions (Flax, 1987). Post-cultural and queer feminists sometimes criticize the gender division used by more traditional feminists for being too assuming, i.e. that they assume that the word ‘male’ is the antithesis of the word ‘female’,

which to some extent exclude genderqueer and non-binary discourses (Flax, 1987). However, in return, post-structural definitions of gender have also been criticized, where the agitators claim that they deconstruct the very meaning of woman and man, making the feminist discourse impossible (Hoff, 1994). In the current literature review, gender is mostly defined according to Kennelly et al.'s (2000) interpretation.

2.2 What is Gender Awareness and why is it relevant?

The United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) defines 'gender awareness' as: "the ability to view society from the perspective of gender roles" (UNIFEM, 2006). This perspective may indicate, to a certain extent, that critically analyzing gender roles may give the individual a larger insight to why and how their own identity is influenced by normative rules and popular culture. As for the EFL classroom, the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011b) states that:

the education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and human rights, covering the inviolability of people, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, gender equality and solidarity between people. (p.10)

Additionally, Kuruvilla (2014) claimed that teachers need to practice gender awareness to raise gender awareness in their students. However, if teachers have limited or no gender awareness, the task of introducing this to his or her students will be difficult. This paper could perhaps be of some help to those teachers, as it contains several examples of how gender awareness could grow in a language classroom setting.

2.3 What is Critical Literacy and why is it relevant?

There is no singular definition of what 'critical literacy' is, but McDaniel (2004) reviewed some of the many meanings that the term has taken throughout the years. For instance, critical literacy can be viewed as something more than reading, as it also involves questioning the material. This critical stance usually has a goal, for instance "the transformation of self or one's world" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 474). This becomes clearer when put into the context of this review and the language classroom. When stereotypical fiction is read and understood, it is important to question the normative messages as well as why and how they have changed

the reader and his or her gender awareness. According to McDaniel (2004), it is our duty to change our behavior when we realize that something is unfair or unequal, which is why critical literacy is used in most of the reviewed studies.

2.4 What is Fiction and why is it relevant?

‘Fiction’ can be defined in many ways, where different fictional reading materials is either included or excluded in the definition. For instance, Abrams (1999) defined fiction in two ways:

In an inclusive sense, fiction is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened. In a narrower sense, however, fiction denotes only narratives that are written in prose (the novel and short story), and sometimes is used simply as a synonym for the novel. (p.94)

Some of the reviewed studies used the broader definition of fiction, while others did instead rely on the narrower definition. At the same time, this review aims to look at readable non-factual material which can be used in the EFL classroom. With that in mind, picture books as well as novels are regarded as fiction in this review.

3 Review results

Kollberg (2015) investigated how the raising of gender awareness in an EFL classroom is perceived from a teacher’s point of view. Through six semi-structured one-on-one interviews with six upper secondary school teachers, Kollberg’s sought to investigate “how teachers of English at upper secondary schools in Stockholm, Sweden reflect on issues of gender equality in their teaching” (p.2.). However, Kollberg explained that the results of the study did not necessarily display what methods and strategies that the teachers later actually used in the EFL classroom, but instead only what approaches they thought could raise gender awareness in theory. All the teachers were EFL teachers and none of them were native English speakers.

Several of the teachers believed that using fiction to raise gender awareness was a good idea; however, there were some differences in how they wanted to use it. While some teachers seemed to prefer to teach their students about male and female gender roles

through fiction, others appeared to believe that using queer theory and feminism could enable students to critically read fiction independently. Some teachers also thought that critical reading skills and gender awareness were more interactive, where critical literacy skills could be the tool that helped students become better readers as well as more attentive to gender issues. Thus, the relation between critical literacy and the gender awareness were perceived differently among the teachers. Some believed that critical literacy skills could raise gender awareness, others believed that gender awareness led to better critical literacy skills, and some found that the two terms affected each other positively.

The interviews also showed that the teachers used different focuses when choosing appropriate fiction in terms of gender equity. Some teachers found that the biological sex of the author often determined what gender perspective the story adhered to, which led these teachers to try to use as much female-written fiction as fiction written by men. In the teachers' experiences, this focus often resulted in critical classroom discussions about the author's perception of gender, which could raise gender awareness. Meanwhile, other teachers tended to choose non-normative literature, without regards to the sex of the author. Here, the content rather than the author became the central topic for critical discussion. A few teachers used both focuses. Lastly, two of the teachers stretched the importance of having experience in how to successfully use fiction to raise gender awareness. In the past, both teachers had felt some reluctance among some students toward gender equality issues. However, they believed this could lead to some interesting discussions, and could thus be used productively and add to the critical discourse if controlled.

Iverson and Murphy (2003) claimed that teachers could also affect students differently depending on their own gender awareness. In their study, two British L1 classrooms containing ten tenth-grade students were asked to write three novel introductions, with their knowledge of how novels were structured in mind. The students were allowed to write within whatever genre they pleased. Meanwhile, the two classrooms were constructed very differently, where the first classroom (A) consisted of average and over average performing male students and the second classroom (B) consisted of mixed performing male and female students. One of the goals of the study was to detect how differently the teachers' perceptions of the students and the study material became due to their environment and their own gender awareness.

Notably, the results showed that the students in classroom A did not challenge their perceptions of gender-roles to any larger extent, but still got positive feedback from the

teacher. Their way of writing fiction and their genre choices were stereotypically male and since the masculine way of writing went unchallenged, it never became critically analyzed. Meanwhile, the teacher in classroom B chose to highlight the romance genre as an equivalent to “a successful reconstruction of English knowledge as a piece of creative writing” (Ivinson & Murphy, 2003, p.97). This further benefitted high-performing female students in the group, since many of them had based their writings on the romance genre. Meanwhile, male students also tried to write a romantic novel introduction, partially due to the teacher’s glorification of the genre.

However, since the teacher and the students saw the romance genre as feminine in nature, some of the boys’ novel openings were deemed as ‘pornographic’ and ‘extreme’. Ivinson and Murphy (2003) explained that this could have been because of the masculine perspective of romance and that it did not fit within the teacher’s scope of what romantic ideals were. Overall, the teachers did not seem to approve of the male students’ attempts to write romance novel openings, and therefore did not encourage them to further challenge the gender norms associated with the genre.

Another study, made by Pace and Townsend (1999), also discussed how teachers can affect the raising of gender awareness. In their study, they tried to investigate how gender awareness in the classroom was affected by fiction-related teaching methods. The study followed two first-year L1 college literature classes consisting of both male and female students in the United States, and their thoughts and discussions on extracts from *Hamlet*. The goal of the study was to see how the same gender-related fiction could evoke different feelings and critical thoughts in the two classrooms and why this was the case.

In the first classroom, the study found that when the instructor was perceived as the source for information, the students tended to accept her/his point of view as the truth. This led to a situation where both the teacher and many of the students criticized characters in the story based on their actions in relation to their gender. Furthermore, this did not lead to the humanization of other characters than the ones that the instructor self-related to. Nor did this lead to an awareness of queer gender perspectives, but rather to the gender stereotyping of the characters and the solidification of gender expectations.

Meanwhile, in the second classroom, the teacher did not claim the truth to the same extent and encouraged the students to think and evaluate for themselves. This ‘safe-to-speak atmosphere’ led to raised gender awareness:

In the second class where stereotypes were refuted and no single perspective was naturalized, students grappled with human complexity and saw that human beings can and do choose to act, that actions have consequences, and that our relationships with others matter. (Pace & Townsend, 1999, p. 47–48)

Furthermore, the students developed a queer discourse in which gender norms were put in contrast to the biological sexes.

However, other studies look at the issue of using gender in the EFL classroom from a different angle. Instead of focusing on the classroom environment, Chi (2009) investigated gender issues in the fictional works themselves and how these affected students. She used female-centered fiction alongside fiction written by women in her study. Five female students and five male EFL students attended the course *Gender Reading* in which the study took place. They all had similar cultural heritage and previous knowledge of the English language. The students were given fiction regarded as ‘feminist’, that offered alternate views on males and females and that took on new perspectives in classroom discussions, where female discourse was put in the center. The students were also encouraged to write their reflections in journal-form for Chi to be able to follow their thought processes with ease. Semi-structured interviews were also used to find out how the students reacted to the material, their peers and the classroom discussion. The provided fiction was chosen based on three criteria: the literature had to be unknown to the students, it had to focus on gender equity, and it had to be flexible in terms of interpretation.

The results showed that the male students tended to be more unwilling to discuss topics that did not relate to their personal situation, and they tended to focus more on the story rather than on the emotions that it awoke. The female students on the other hand leaned more toward not only emphasizing the emotions of characters, but also reflect upon certain passages and identify them as ‘feminist issues’. According to Chi, the lack of gender knowledge and perception of diversity that many male students showed could lead to a denial stance, which could be harmful to the attempt of raising gender awareness. On the other hand, she argued, when male students do learn to respect diversity, alongside some basic knowledge of gender studies, real gender awareness can grow in the EFL classroom. However, Chi recognized that the study may not have been very valid, due to the number of students that participated.

Hayik (2015, 2016) had a different approach in her project from 2010. Instead of using material that was previously unknown to the students, she used classical and reconstructed

fairy-tales to display gender issues in fiction. The study took place in an Israeli/Palestinian middle school. Seven fourteen to fifteen-year-old female students and three male students of the same age were voluntarily opting to take part in the study during their summer break. However, due to outside factors, only three females and one male attended the full course. Hayik used three different picture books based on *Cinderella* to contrast and compare the different versions from a gender point of view. The first version was the traditional ‘disneyfied’ version of the story. The other two versions portrayed a Cinderella that did not follow traditional gender norms (*Cinder Edna* by Jackson in 1994, and *Piggybook* by Browne, 1986). Hayik (2015, 2016) encouraged her students to read the three stories with critical eyes, answer questions and participate in writing tasks connected to the stories. All sessions were recorded.

The project generated two studies, both performed and documented by Hayik. The first one, made in 2015, discussed how and to what degree of success the non-traditional versions of *Cinderella* helped raise gender awareness and give the students the possibility to reshape and deepen their understanding of gender roles. It also contained a writing exercise, in which students could write their own fairytale version of *Cinderella* while using a critical lens. Through these methods, Hayik (2015) found that the students to a large extent saw *Cinder Edna* as a refreshing and norm-challenging novel. The writing exercise had helped some of the students to develop gender awareness. However, the texts showed that the critical reflections of gender roles were inconclusive, where some students simply explained what the story was about. This was particularly common among the male students. The students may have showed a mild interest in further developing their critical gender perspective, but this was also considered inconclusive.

Much like in Chi’s (2009) study, Hayik’s (2015) study showed that disagreements between the males and the females arose during discussions about gender roles. One such conflict regarded household work, where the men held a conservative view and the females held a more progressive view. Hayik also recognized that the small size of the study made these results less reliable. The second study that came of the project was produced in 2016. Unlike the 2015 study, this study focused on how the gender stereotypical version of *Cinderella* was received, and how and to what extent critical discourses about the content were created.

The results of this study showed that students became fairly synchronized in their opinion that men benefit more than women from the status quo, i.e. the situation where gender

issues are not questioned nor studied. Not only did they note how stereotypically the main (female) character in the traditional fairy-tale was portrayed, but also how some of these traits created obstacles. Comments such as “They cannot take care of themselves” (Hayik, 2016, p.413) and identification of negative traits, such as ‘naive’ and ‘nonopinionated’ showed a tendency in the students to disposition themselves from these attributes. However, the queer idea of a ‘feminine male’ seemed to be more tabooed and the concept may have been harder for the students to grasp. Hayik (2016) interpreted this as partially being due to the middle-eastern society, in which she hinted that the man is expected to follow the masculine hegemony.

As shown in some of the previous studies in this literature review (Chi, 2009; Hayik, 2015), some of the male students seemed reluctant to the idea of exploring what lies outside the traditional gender roles. Instead, these students produced arguments and self-dictated reasons to why the gender roles are the way they are, and in some instances, why they should be the way they are. While a few male students expressed a degree of hesitation toward this counter-critical perspective, the male discourse in general was critical of the gender approach that Hayik (2016) wished to make use of. The female students believed to some extent that the critical thinking that was used when working with fiction would come to be a positive element in their progression toward critical thinking as individuals. By being able to disconnect from their earlier idolization and self-identification with stereotypically feminine characters, they discovered other, more constructive, female discourses.

Meanwhile, Eriksson-Barajas (2008) wanted to investigate gender from a naturalistic point of view, which in her case meant using fiction in which gender occurred naturally. Her study was part of a larger, Swedish ethnographic study, in which literature was presented and discussed in book-clubs. These clubs consisted of twenty female and twenty male students who ranged between ten and fourteen years old. The students were divided into five equally sized groups. The book-club sessions were led by one male and four female teachers. One goal was to explore how students were affected by reading and talking about naturally occurring gender issues in fiction. Over a period of six book-club sessions, the conversations were recorded, transcribed and reviewed in search for sequences in where any aspect of gender was discussed.

The results showed that the groups’ negotiations of meaning regarding gender, also known as the “coconstruction of gender” (Eriksson-Barajas, 2008), were present both between students and between teacher and students. These, Eriksson-Barajas explained, could

lead to greater gender awareness, but also to the solidification of existing gender stereotypes. Much like in some of the previously mentioned studies (Chi, 2009; Hayik, 2015, 2016), the present study showed somewhat of an unwillingness among the male students to discuss femininity in male characters. Further, the results indicated that the students' self-identifications with the characters of the story were largely binary, which led to some obstacles in raising gender awareness in the EFL classroom. According to Eriksson-Barajas, the reason behind these obstacles might have been that male students were not as used to reading in a gender-transgressive fashion as their female counterparts, largely due to most authors being male.

A similar study made by Lloyd (2006) found similar reluctant behavior among adolescent boys. The participants in this study were male and female twelfth-grade students in the midwestern United States. Only two students claimed to be "frequent readers", while the rest of the students did not read voluntarily to any larger extent. The four teachers included Lloyd herself, along with 3 teacher colleagues. The goal of the study was to unveil to what extent gender could affect students' fictional reading practice. Therefore, Lloyd divided the students into two book-clubs and let them read some fictional works and discuss these from a gender perspective.

The results showed that, when faced with the classmates' perspectives on characters or other issues, some boys quickly disregarded them and kept their own discourse of thoughts going. It was also suggested that the male students were less inclined to critically analyze and discuss gender issues than their female counterparts, which in the mixed-gender book clubs led to the feminine discourse often being disregarded in favor of more traditional projections. However, when discussing masculine issues, the boys showed tendencies to question and evaluate whether the traditional hegemony was natural. This was not consistent though. At other times, the male students condoned the traditional masculine values while the female students questioned it with a critical feminist lens.

It is also worth mentioning that some of the male students expressed a negative view toward reading in general. Lloyd hinted that this might happen when the boys see reading as an act of femininity. The male categorization of reading as something feminine was also signaled by William Brozo (as cited in Lloyd, 2006), who believed that reading young adult novels could be used to reconstruct masculine identities, and thereby raise gender awareness.

In 2002, Brozo, Walter and Placker conducted a study in which socioculturally and socioeconomically exposed students in a U.S seventh grade class were encouraged to read

Scorpions, a book written by Walter Dean Myers in 1988. Topics such as violence, as well as second amendment rights and incarceration were discussed in the book, and served to be relatable to the students' own environment. The novel was then discussed through a masculinity lens, in which the teachers tried to change the students' perception of what was regarded as masculine, and thereby hegemonic.

The results indicated that many of the students felt mistreated in society and without option regarding aggressive behavior, which led them to believe that being aggressive was a natural part of being a man. This resulted in a classroom dialogue in which non-violent solutions to the students' self-experienced injustice were coconstructed. When the study ended, the students had showed signs of an ongoing process toward becoming more peaceful and aware of their gender roles.

A study made by Dutro (2002) also explored socioeconomically disadvantaged students and their connection to gender issues in fiction, but had a slightly different approach. While masculinity remained in the spotlight in this study, the goal was to investigate how and to what extent masculinity affected and correlated with femininity and fiction, and how this affected the classroom discourse. There was also an ethnographic angle to the study, from which Dutro wanted to compare gender relations to race relations. The study took place in the United States, and the participants were twenty-six African American fifth grade students, of which fourteen were girls and twelve were boys. The students were asked to read novels based on their own interests while being observed through interviews and transcribed dialogue.

The study noted how the choice of feminine and masculine books not necessarily correlated to the sex of the reader, even if this was the case in general at first. The male students tended to choose books by male authors, where the content entailed what they regarded as masculine topics. However, later, when the students had coconstructed respect for the feminine fiction, the male stigma that previously had been associated with it decreased. In a conversation that started with the male students finding feminine fiction 'stupid', the teacher in cooperation with the students managed to ease up the stigmatization to such an extent, that many of the male students wanted to read feminine literature. They were then made aware of their transition of stance, which provided some alternatives to the hegemonic masculinity, and raised some gender awareness.

As a conclusion, it was suggested that the boys could challenge traditional masculinity norms and become more aware of their gender roles if they were given a safe

environment, in which they did not have to fear stigmatization. The safe environment also tended to be important for the boys whose masculinity was less hegemonic, although some boys found it harder than others to become more self-aware.

While a few of the previously reviewed studies (Brozo, Walter & Placker, 2002; Dutro, 2002; Lloyd, 2006) sought to investigate how gender awareness and fiction correlated to male students and masculinity, Kokesh and Sternadori's (2015) study instead investigated how gender awareness through fiction was connected to female students and femininity. The goal of the study was to see to what extent popular fiction created and affected the gender identity of the female reader. At the first stage of the study, ten popular books were thematically analyzed, based on how gender stereotypical and female prototypical they were. This was done to recognize the most common feminine stereotypes that occurred in popular fiction.

At the second stage, fourteen U.S. female students between the age of thirteen and eighteen were interviewed about their own favorite books, in order to see to what degree they had adopted the "stereotypical portrayals of women" (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015, p.144). The books that the female students read were not necessarily the books that were analyzed in the first part of the study, but similar stereotypes could nonetheless be found. By comparing the stereotypes found in the popular fiction and the stereotypes that the students expressed after having read their favorite fiction, conclusions could be drawn.

For example, the results showed that much of the popular fiction tended to portray gender stereotypes rather than break free from them. While there were some exceptions to this rule, much of the popularized fiction seemed to reproduce intersectionally hegemonic female characters, i.e. they tended to be white, rich, skinny, express a passive behavior and so on. Many of the students felt that they developed some sort of identification with a character throughout the text. This was true especially with the younger students, who also reported that they learned life lessons from the lives of fictional characters. Meanwhile, the personal identities of the older students were less influenced by the fictional characters, even though they also found personal connections like: "Characters my own age understand what I'm going through [...]" (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015, p.152).

Some of the books tended to solidify gender norms while not necessarily mirror the students' behaviors. For instance, some students mentioned that the main character functioned as a role model rather than a mirrored version of themselves. These characters were often hegemonically female. This phenomenon was relatively common among the younger students

as well as the older students. However, the older students may have been more inclined to see the content of the books as less realistic. In other words, while the study showed that the students to various degrees connected with the characters, it also showed some critical thinking developing, at least among the older students.

The students' definition of 'good womanhood' varied, from traditional gender stereotypes to independent characters who dared to speak their own mind. Meanwhile, the students tended to be less critical of their own opinions on female characters who stepped out of their gender role, and adopted masculine traits. These characters were instead, aligned with gender stereotypical ideals, seen as 'bad women'. Kokesh and Sternadori suggested that this might have been because the students' definitions of independence varied.

Taber, Woloshyn and Lane (2013) underlined the importance of using a critical approach when working with fiction to raise gender awareness. They argued that while some books might seem gender critical at first glance, they might still convey a gender normative message. In their study, four students with reading disabilities who ranged between fifth and seventh grade, discussed gender normative behavior in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, a book series which according to the researchers were viewed by many as feminist and gender-aware in nature. Four book club meetings were held to empower the girls to read as well as to empower their critical thinking. The book club sessions included discussions about chapters of the book, as well as role-playing, popular culture comparisons and other themes. The goal of the study was to empower the female students to become more independent readers and give them tools to build their own identities based on critical thinking.

The results showed that the girls did not sympathize with female non-normative characters. For instance, in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, when the main character was fighting an oppressive power by using violence, almost all the girls in the study opposed this by either discarding violence as something masculine or avoid the problem altogether. This, according to Taber, Woloshyn and Lane, could have been a representation of the girls' own self-images, which may have lacked a sense of power to act outside the individual sphere. For instance, the coconstruction of gender were stereotypically forged by peer pressure and a fear to be penalized if one stepped outside the group's collective opinions.

When discussing the 'masculine female' main character of the book trilogy, the group tended to accept and relate to her only once she also showed signs of femininity. While the masculine traits were viewed upon as irregular and strange, the feminine traits were highlighted. When the group discussed the queer phenomenon of an 'effeminate male'

character, the feminine traits were viewed as unfitting and negative, which led the students to become frustrated over the character's passiveness and inability to perform masculine acts. As a conclusion, the students showed a reluctance to critically review their own identity through fiction.

4 Discussion

The main aim in this report was to review research carried out on raising gender awareness by using fiction. Some patterns seem to be recurring throughout the reviewed studies. For example, boys tend to be reluctant towards gender awareness, and teachers need to adapt the gendered approach to whatever setting he or she is teaching in. Female students tend to have greater critical literacy skills, and tend to be more open to reading in general. Further explanations of these and other results are presented below.

4.1 Raising male students' gender awareness through fiction

As previously mentioned, many of the boys that participated in the studies tended to be reluctant toward accepting and welcoming new ideas put forward through class discussions and critical reading (Chi, 2009; Dutro, 2002; Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Hayik, 2015, 2016; Lloyd, 2006). The reason given for this obstacle in raising gender awareness was explained in several different ways.

In Hayik's (2016) study, many of the male students actively tried to counter the gender perspective with their own, more traditional agendas. In this case, they tried to justify why gender roles have their current hierarchical structure. It might be possible that the students felt threatened, and that they needed to defend their identity. Since they, according to Hayik (2015, 2016), lived in a society which was conservative and were part of the patriarchal structures, they might not have been motivated to change. For instance, when the students were supposed to discuss household work in fiction from a critical point of view, the boys tended to claim that it was not their job to take care of the house (Hayik, 2015). In short, it is possible that the boys failed to see what they could gain from gender equality, and therefore labeled it as negative.

Hayik also believed that the male reluctance to become more aware of gender issues was due to the conservative culture in Israel/Palestine, where her study took place. On the other hand, since many other studies from many parts of the world show similar results (Chi, 2009; Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015; Taber, Woloshyn & Lane, 2013) it

might not be the only reason. Also, the four participants that attended the course regularly might not be enough to consider the study fully valid.

Moreover, some of the boys in Chi's (2009) study tended to be unwilling to discuss topics that did not relate to their personal situation in general, regardless of gender. Chi believed that this 'denial stance', was a result of the boys' lack of respect for diversity. Presumably, this could be harmful to the raising of gender awareness in an EFL setting, partially due to the difficulty of trying to teach an unwilling student about something he/she does not wish to learn, in a language that he/she does not master. It might also be problematic to challenge students' perception of gender by expressing their educational gaps to them. Instead, motivational and inspirational messages might be more helpful to signal inclusion and stimulate the boys to further challenge their own ideals. However, seeing as Chi's study involved only 10 people, these results may be less valid than studies with more participants.

Lloyd (2006) approached the male reluctance from another perspective. Some of these boys had little experience regarding gender issues, and therefore Lloyd thought that they needed to start with what they found most relatable, namely masculinity. However, she suspected that the male students tended to see reading itself as something feminine, and therefore reject the action rather than take part in what the fiction actually portrayed. Presumably, the adoption of feminine traits among the male students might have been hindered because of peer pressure and the classroom hierarchy. It might also be possible that the students rejected the texts because their lack of reading experience, seeing as only two students were frequent readers. In either case, this resistance tended to slow down or disable the gender awareness discourse.

This issue was, in a sense, partially avoided in Dutro's (2002) study. When the male students and masculinity were separated from femininity-focused feminist influence, the study displayed how male students challenged the idea of what hegemonic masculinity entailed in fiction. When they were asked what character they found most interesting in the books that they had read, one boy responded with a female character. He was ridiculed and peer pressured into reformulating his statement with a masculine reason to choose a female character. This could presumably show how deep the gender norms are rooted. Since the boys claimed that they felt pressure on them to act masculine, where was this pressure coming from? Dutro (2002) claimed that the students felt pressure mainly from governmental authorities such as the police, perhaps due to bad experiences with the justice system. However, it might be possible that the pressure also came from their classmates. At the same

time, after having read fiction with relatable topics dealing with masculinity, the students' reactions suggested that they had revalidated their view of hegemonic masculinity, and thus, how they wanted to shape their own identities. Less violent, more gender aware masculine discourses rose because of this study (Dutro, 2002). However, seeing as the study also included an ethnographic angle, it is difficult to tell whether the gendered approach or the ethnographic approach contributed most to the attitude change.

However, Pace and Townsend's (1999) study suggested that teacher influence was a major factor in the coconstruction of gender. In the first classroom where they discussed *Hamlet*, the instructor tried to steer the conversation of the fiction, and many students complied and adapted to the viewpoint of the teacher. Since the instructor self-identified with Hamlet and, by extension accepted his negative views as fact, those views were moved into the classroom and became what were regarded as 'normal'. The standardized viewpoint resulted in gender stereotyping, among male as well as female students. In a more general sense however, this problem could possibly be even harder to avoid with male students, as they according to Eriksson-Barajas (2008), tend to lack transgressive reading skills. Male students could therefore possibly perceive a male teacher's binary standpoint as a confirmation of their own binary self-identifications, and thereby discard critical literacy further.

So why do boys not possess transgressive reading skills to the same extent as girls? One theory might be that because a majority of the fiction used in EFL classrooms is written by binary male authors, the male students have not had to learn to read around gender as much as the female students. Adding to that, students reading in a foreign language might have even a harder time to read transgressively, as the language itself may pose as a problem, as well as the fact that the culture in the story may not match their own.

4.2 Raising female students' gender awareness through fiction

Throughout most of the reviewed studies, the female students' behaviors were portrayed very differently from the male students. Unlike the male students, who to a large degree tended to be reluctant in their attitude toward raising gender awareness in the classroom, the female students were inclined to be more compliant with the introduction of gender studies and critical thinking (Chi, 2009; Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Hayik, 2015, 2016; Lloyd, 2006; Pace & Townsend, 1999). While their opinions often were looked down upon and silenced by the

male students, they appeared overall interested in learning how to think critically through the aid of fiction.

Unlike their male counterparts, the female students often self-identified with the characters in fictional stories. For instance, Kokesh and Sternadori's (2015) study showed two different scenarios of this, one where the female readers self-identified with characters that mirrored themselves, and one where they perceived characters as role models. While this possibly could give female students unrealistic goals, the study showed mixed results in exploiting role models to raise gender awareness. To use this approach might perhaps be a little risky. It is possible that some students may not want to think critically about characters that are so closely connected to themselves. If that is the case, reading about gender stereotypical characters might become counterproductive. Meanwhile, the study compared the stereotypes in popular fiction to the stereotypes in the books that the students read and talked about, but it might be possible that the students' preferences did not always correlate with that of popular fiction. If this was the case, it could make the results harder to analyze, and it is unclear whether or not Kokesh and Sternadori took this possibility into account.

Similarly, in Taber, Woloshyn and Lane's (2013) study, the versatility of fictional role models was explained. While the girls tended to accept some of the characters' traits as relatable and mirrored versions of themselves, other traits were more ambivalently perceived. For instance, some independent and active behaviors were perceived as feminist and thereby something they could adopt, while other similar behaviors were seen as masculine, and therefore not adoptable.

So, can one assume that gender awareness has been raised in the classroom if the male and female students only gained knowledge within the sphere of their own respective gender? Perhaps, gender awareness can only truly be raised if males and females gain knowledge not only about themselves and their own gender, but also each other's gender and way of thinking. Additionally, it is possible that respect for the genderqueer perspectives also is necessary to become more aware of gender norms and the versatility of how gender can be portrayed. For example, the students in Taber, Woloshyn and Lane's (2013) study accepted femininity in a female character, but degraded it when it was displayed by a male character. These categorizations might signal that the gender awareness was not raised more than within the traditional categorizations of male and female.

One of Hayik's (2016) studies discussed this phenomenon to some length, where she indicates that gender awareness can be raised by critically discussing fictional character traits.

However, perhaps this approach only applies to the EFL classroom if the character shows traditional or gender-stereotypical behaviors, as it otherwise possibly could lead the students to further discard and look down upon genderqueer ideals. It may also be more difficult in an EFL setting than in an L1 classroom, as the characters could use a different version of English and adhere to different cultural ideals than the reader, which perhaps makes it harder for the students to self-identify with the character.

While self-identifications with characters were largely binary, the female students tended to be better at transgressive reading overall than the male students. This often meant that they could also develop better critical reading skills, with which they questioned the gendered behaviors linked with femininity and masculinity. Feminist angles where the link between females and feminine hegemony was questioned were especially adopted (Chi, 2009; Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Hayik, 2015, 2016; Pace & Townsend, 1999), which raised gender awareness to some extent in the classrooms.

4.3 Teacher perspectives

Some of the studies showed that the teachers influenced the students' ability to become more aware of gender (Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Kollberg, 2015; Pace & Townsend, 1999). For instance, in Kollberg's (2015) study, it became clear that different teachers preferred different methods to raise gender awareness through fiction. Some of the teachers saw gender awareness as a tool, with which the students could improve their critical reading skills. Meanwhile, other teachers thought that critical reading skills were necessary to notice gender issues. While these speculations may seem somewhat conflicting, it is possible that both statements are somewhat true, and that they are symbiotic. Meanwhile, seeing as Kollberg's study only addressed the theoretical approach that teachers tend to have towards gender awareness and fiction, it is also possible that the results revealed very little of how teachers actually act in a practical setting.

The teachers in Kollberg's (2015) study disagreed with each other on how to choose fitting fictional material for a gender awareness project. Some teachers indicated that they often chose fiction based on what gender they thought that the content would appeal to. While this way of choosing popular fiction might raise the motivation of the students (Brozo, Walter & Placker, 2002; Dutro, 2002; Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Lloyd, 2006; Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015; Taber, Woloshyn & Lane, 2013), it could also possibly force the teacher to make assumptions regarding stereotypical connections between gender and sex. These assumptions

may cause some issues, according to Pace and Townsend's (1999) study. Here, the instructor's gender assumptions led the students to see gender roles as something natural, and further solidified gender stereotypes. Additionally, much of the popularized fiction may have a feminist culture built around it without offering a very feminist context (Taber, Woloshyn & Lane, 2013). Therefore, it might not be too far-fetched to argue that the teacher's choice of what literature is to be used in the classroom must be well-examined.

However, if a teacher chooses fiction that was specifically created to raise gender awareness (Chi, 2009; Hayik, 2015, 2016) for a project, other problems could possibly arise. For instance, without enough motivation, the students might not value the critical input as much, and by extension not bother to explore what lies beyond their reality, as was the case in both Chi's (2009) and Hayik's (2015, 2016) studies. Meanwhile, Iverson and Murphy (2003) focused on the importance of motivating students to further look beyond their gender perspective. They claimed that the teacher plays a major part in this motivation procedure. It could therefore be argued that teachers need to continually learn more about gender issues, in order to eliminate faulty attempts to raise gender awareness, as well classroom inequalities.

5 Conclusion and guidelines for further research

As presented in the reviewed studies, raising gender awareness in the EFL classroom is not always an easy task. Many different aspects of the classroom setting must be taken into consideration, such as type of fiction, type of students, whether or not they possess certain reading skills, where the class is taking place and in what context.

Meanwhile, the studies share some common ground. For instance, all studies indicated in one way or another that ignoring gender stereotypes prevent students from developing critical reading skills. Furthermore, most of the studies point out students as unwilling to learn about feminist and gendered ideals, albeit mostly true among male students. Teachers should make sure that the classroom functions as a 'safe-to-speak environment', and try to motivate the students to keep evolving their identities while being critical toward traditional gendered fiction. This insight makes it even clearer why gender issues need to be discussed and reflected upon in an EFL setting, where the language itself may become an issue for the students to understand and by extent be critical toward. Additionally, most of the studies agreed that male and female students read fiction differently, and hence different methods are deemed effective to teach gender awareness.

The validity of some studies is higher than that of other studies. For instance, few participants, careless preconceptions of student preferences and behaviors, and lack of student motivation are all issues that lower the validity of some of the studies in this review. Validity issues could also occur in future studies, unless these issues are carefully analyzed and taken into consideration. The issue of having few participants could be solved by collaborating with other researchers and ‘share’ participants between studies. Old-fashioned preconceptions, such as when teachers assume that students act according to their gender hegemony, can be thwarted by arranging gender studies for teachers, where they can get an update on recent research on gender and how it should be treated in a classroom. Motivational issues can be solved by using popular fiction to raise gender awareness, or to find a way to show the students how they can benefit from a raised gender awareness.

However, many of the studies seem to forget the queer angle. There might have been several students throughout the studies that defined themselves as non-binary. These students have had no representation in the research, but have instead been assumed to be binary, and the results have shown their possible input according to a binary structure. This assumption may have skewed the results to portray the students as more divided between the sexes than what is really the case. Therefore, perhaps further research on this topic with a non-binary lens might be in order. For instance, Ivinson and Murphy’s (2003) study could be followed up on, to see why some of the male students chose to start performing femininity.

Lastly, while there are plenty of studies that explore the connection between critical literacy and L1, there are very few regarding critical literacy and EFL by comparison. Presumably, this might be due to the problem of teaching students to be critical about a language that they may not understand fully. Another explanation could be that EFL students perhaps learn English in a different way than L1 learners. EFL students might focus more on grammar and vocabulary and less on the social aspects of the language, considering that EFL students normally do not use English in their social life. Both hypotheses could be future research targets, as they pose a problem: How can we teach social gender functions to EFL learners, if they do not use English in authentic social settings? This research could possibly be done by exploring the differences between language cultures in the EFL classrooms, or why identically gendered fiction appears to give different results depending on the teacher’s and the students’ FL knowledge, or how EFL classrooms work with fiction in comparison to L1 classrooms.

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