



Queering EFL Teaching:  
Opportunities and Challenges According to  
Preservice Teachers

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## **Abstract:**

This study examines how preservice teachers reflect upon queer pedagogy in relation to their future profession as English teachers. The purpose is to find out if preservice English language teachers consider queer theory to be important in their future profession, and if they do, find out what aspects they think are important, and what aspect could be challenging. Focus group interviews conducted with preservice teachers from Västra Götaland showed that queering English language teaching deemed important to encourage critical thinking, question norms and promote normalization of queer topics and acceptance of others. Results suggest that queer theory should be implemented in a natural way in order to avoid othering. The major concerns of the participants can be summarized as fear of being uninformed, and offending or differentiating students without meaning to. Moreover, many found it challenging to engage in the process of ‘queering materials’ as there are no clear guidelines or instructions, the responsibility placed on the individual teacher. In conclusion, preservice teachers would benefit from more queer theory courses related to their subjects, and opportunities to actively ‘queer’ and evaluate materials during their undergraduate teaching programs. This could provide confidence when working with and implementing queer theory in the classroom.

Key words: *Queer theory, Queer pedagogy, Teacher education, ELT, Focus group interviews, Preservice English teachers*

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# 1. Introduction

Can you walk down a corridor with your partner's hand relaxed in yours? Can you wear the clothes you like without worrying about what others might think about you? Our experiences shape who we are and what we bring to any social interaction. Consciously and subconsciously, norms of today's society frame how we as teachers understand and interact with students, how we choose material, plan lessons and what perspectives we share. The English teaching classroom includes many different people interacting. Therefore, strategies for making education more inclusive has been central in the English language teaching (ELT) practice. One such endeavor can be seen in the emphasis on legitimizing non-conforming sexual identities, a notion that has been criticized by queer theory (Nelson, 2002 p. 43). As sexual identities are discursively constructed, such practices risk maintaining heteronormative discourses and thus suppress language learners. Queering the ELT classroom rather aims to engage students in critical pedagogies that facilitate inquiry and deliberately problematize and intervene with a production of normalcy, and the upkeep of discourses maintaining all social identities (Paiz, 2018 p. 265).

For this reason, queer pedagogy has had a growing scholarly interest in English language education. Topics concerning queer pedagogy in ELT are extensive and some have studied the usefulness of queering the ELT classroom (Nelson, 2002, Paiz 2018), the harmful effects of maintaining heteronormativity (Yep, 2014), different methods to engage in queer pedagogies (Kumashiro, 2002) and how ELT teachers feel about including LGBTQ topics in their classroom (Rhodes, 2017). However, as the importance of practicing queer pedagogy in the English language classroom is still a rather new concept, research concerning the Swedish educational context is not as extensive. Queer pedagogy has been discussed in different studies, mostly in the context of what teachers do, feel and think about it, and what should be done to deal with current issues regarding the topic (Björkman, 2010, Åkesson, 2016, Brade et. al., 2008). Little attention has been paid to the perceptions of preservice teachers in Sweden especially. For this reason, the aim of this paper is to learn about how preservice EFL teachers reflect upon queer theory pedagogy in relation to their future profession as English teachers.

## 2. Previous Research

This section includes previous research about queer theory and why it should be applied in the English language classroom. The first part, *Background*, more specifically positions the need for queer theory in education as it discusses the Swedish educational plan for upper secondary school and the English subject curriculum in relation to queer theory. The second section, *Theoretical framework*, first describes contemporary understandings of what queer theory is and then goes on to describe how this theory can be applied in educational contexts through the concept of queer pedagogy. The theoretical section also describes some of the learning advantages practicing queer theory brings to the ELT classroom specifically. Lastly, the section *Research on queer theory in ELT* outlines perspectives in recent studies about queer pedagogy in ELT globally and in a Swedish context.

### 2.1. Background

In the Swedish educational plan for upper secondary school, it says:

No one in school should be subjected to discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion or other belief, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age or disability, or other offensive treatment.

Queer pedagogy is not explicitly mentioned in the educational plan for upper secondary school. However, this statement shows that Swedish schools are aware of the complexity of gender identity and sexual orientation and need to recognize these students. The educational plan further states that school has a responsibility to promote respect, understanding and compassion for all humans as well as be grounded on values of equality between men and women. The focus is on equality, but it also states that students should be encouraged to develop their interests without concern of what is considered feminine or masculine. By mentioning gender identity and expression as something separate from sexual orientation, it also shows an awareness that the educational plan, in fact, is influenced by queer theory.

According to the curriculum for upper secondary school, English as a subject is supposed to give the students new perspectives on the world around them and a greater understanding of different ways of life. One of the subject's purposes is to discuss and reflect upon different

social, political and cultural issues and phenomena where English is used. The curriculum for English 5 and 6 states that students should communicate about thoughts, opinions, experiences, ideas and emotions, as well as relationships and ethical questions. Moreover, they should learn about different attitudes, values, traditions and ways of life in different English-speaking countries. The curriculum for English 7 in addition also mentions social, cultural, and political issues as well as ethical and existential questions in different contexts where English is used. Thus, there are many good reasons to work with queer pedagogy in the English classroom. Working with queer theory is also relevant outside ELT as it helps create a welcoming, safe and inclusive classroom environment. Moreover, the students can have an opportunity to reflect more deeply about topics such as gender identity or sexual orientation, and how it relates to themselves, and the cultural values and norms associated with it (Rhodes 2017, p. 100).

## **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.2.1. Queer Theory**

Defining the word “queer” is not easy. Originally, the word had a derogatory meaning, however, it has recently been claimed and re-appropriated by the same people it was used to offend, to describe people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, questioning or in other ways different because of one's sexual identity or sexual orientation (Kumashiro, 2002 p. 10). “Queer is a category in the process of forming and becoming without predetermined or final borders; it is conceptually elastic, unrestrained, and open-ended” (Yep, 2014 p. 37). This means that the word queer can also be used to describe people who possess physical or behavioral qualities that go against the norm of their gender in society. It is not only about sexual orientation it is as much identification as it is identity, what we do and what we are (Kumashiro, 2002 p.10).

The term queer, signifying non-normativity, is also used in popular culture and academic discourse. Queer theory is a relatively new academic and cultural phenomenon created in the 1990s (Yep, 2014 p. 37). It is a theory that problematizes the social construction of gender and identity. Dichotomous oppositions such as hetero/homo are questioned and heteronormative social ordering, privileges and hierarchies are challenged. The idea that some lifestyles and bodies are privileged and represented as natural and desirable, while others are seen as deviant and less agreeable is what constitutes heteronormativity according to Bromseth (2010, p. 30).

Normalization is the primary force sustaining heteronormativity making it a site for violence, for example, its compulsory nature results in women overlooking the oppression and subordination relationships in a patriarchal institution can mean for them (Yep, 2014 p. 20). Also, it causes men to live with harmful “real-man” ideals to manhood and contributes to internal injuries on all individuals who deviate from norms (Yep, 2014 p. 21).

In order to fully interpret the key concept of queer theory one can consider why the term was coined in the first place. According to Nelson (2002), queer theory was initiated as a response to the mistreatment of homosexuals, thus the gay liberation movement was facilitated by the uniting notion of homosexuality seen as something innate in the 60s. In the 70s and 80s, critical structuralist theories recognized that homosexual identity was in fact socially constructed. However, as the gay movement included many diverse and conflicting sexual preferences contemporary understandings of identity changed according to Nelson (2002 p. 46). In other words, a result of how theoretical understanding of identity changed, queer theory developed from post-structuralism in combination with lesbian and gay activism, as well as many other intercultural and political threads. One should, therefore, note the difference between queer-theory and gay and lesbian studies. Queer theory originates from conventional homosexual activism yet has a distinctively different goal. Queer theory critiques the gay-affirmative model of homosexuality which understands sexuality as an identity since it is against any kind of classification, categorization or labels, based on sexuality (Yep, 2012 p. 12).

A central part in the foundation of queer theory is poststructuralism and Michel Foucault’s work regarding discourse, power and knowledge. In short, Foucault’s work describes what is regarded as true is inherently related to power and created through discourse (Börjesson & Rehn, 2009 p. 50). Foucault’s poststructuralist perspective on power/knowledge signifies that the only way to apprehend reality is by gaining an understanding of power structures and discourses in our society (Bromseth, 2010 p. 40). When power is institutionalized it becomes normative, and it is thus through discourses our perception of reality and social order is constructed, which in turn influences individual acts, attitudes and feelings (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 48). Regarding how queer theory is founded upon a poststructuralist view, this means that varying stories of reality have different political implications. For instance, some people are understood as privileged, while others are disfavored (Börjesson & Rehn, 2009 p. 47). Another example of how power is manifested through discourse is the concept of oppression. According to Björkman

and Bromseth (2019), “oppression is formed through hegemonic discourses and is created through repetition” (p. 55). As discourses have the power to influence how people think, feel, act and interact, repetitive harmful discourses can result in oppression (Kumashiro, 2000 p. 40).

### **2.2.2. Queer Pedagogy in ELT**

The field of ELT has changed drastically over the last decade regarding the field’s understanding of transgender issues. English language teaching was a presumed mono-sexual word until queer applied linguistics literature caused acceptance of the facts that we must question our knowledge and problematize issues of sexuality (Paiz, 2019 p. 266). Consequently, scholars connected and situated contemporary queer theory in an educational context, and the academic field of queer pedagogy was developed. Queer pedagogy thus is an approach to educational practice drawing on ideas from the field of queer theory and critical pedagogy (Sörensdotter, 2010).

In relation to ELT, teachers must accept that sexual identity is an important topic because it influences learning and acquisition processes (Paiz, 2019 p. 226). According to Nelson (2002, p. 43), educational practices have thus come to accept that ELT needs to have the ambition to include a more gay-friendly and inclusive pedagogy, what in Swedish context is known as tolerance pedagogy. This strategy, which for a long time has been the appropriate way to respond to diversity issues has recently started to become widely criticized, resulting in further insights into the need for queer theory in ELT. The problem with tolerance pedagogy is that working with equality and inclusion from a perspective where the deviant “other” is tolerated, only reinforces existing power structures between us (the norm) and the “other” (the deviant) (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 24). As teachers, it is not enough to promote inclusion and tolerance of the “other,” but to “disturb and challenge norms” (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 57). Education and schools can be understood as an arena where especially norms about heterosexuality, are produced and reproduced (Bromseth, 2010 p. 29). Contributing to the upholding of heteronormative order is positioning non-heterosexual identities as something problematic in need of tolerance (Bromseth, 2010 p. 32). Nelson states that the underlying concept that subordinate sexual identities is in need of legitimization, undermines the very goal of tolerating others and thus such practices have been challenged by queer theory whose aim she instead identifies as: “not to accomplish inclusion but to facilitate inquiry - that is, to investigate the



ways in which sexual identities are negotiated through day to day social interaction” (Nelson, 2002 p. 43).

The necessity of queer pedagogy in the ELT classroom is to some measure a response to the fact that current educational practices are based on a heteronormative discourse. Queer theory is especially relevant for ELT teachers and ELT teacher students alike, as they are and will be responsible for teaching and curricular practices that have the power to construct images and definitions, and the choice of including or excluding LGBTQ topics and voices. Which stories are dominating and which are marginalized depend on the power relations that exist in our society, however, these are not constant, but unstable and fluid (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 49). Queer pedagogy examines how the school’s narratives are created through the power structures in our society and aims to pose critical questions regarding the ethical consequences for the people who are stigmatized by this or who are made invisible (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 49).

When students feel represented in the material used in class, for instance in the texts, films, pictures or tasks presented, students might gain an increased motivation for the subject and a sense of security which they normally would not experience under the same circumstances in school (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019 p. 295). Moreover, queer pedagogy can have a positive effect on the classroom environment in general, as bringing in different narratives and queer perspectives can create openness and increased understanding and knowledge. A broader representation in class might lead to less offensive jargon, bullying and decreased mental illness within marginalized groups, because something that is included in the class discussion in a completely normal and ordinary way, is less likely to be the focus of negative attention (ibid).

### **2.2.3 Intercultural Communication Competence**

In the previous section the importance of queer theory in education was highlighted. This section will regard the relevance and learning benefits queer pedagogy might offer the ELT classroom by providing learners with inter-communicative skills.

Over the 20th and 21st century social changes related to the world’s globalization and internationalization have led to increased interaction between people with different languages (Byram, 2008 p.4). Due to these interactions, the significance of foreign language learning has

changed as well as the emphasis of its educational aims (Byram, 2008 p. 7). The purpose of ELT is no longer characterized by the acquisition of communicative competence defined as the ability to use language in sociolinguistic appropriate ways (Byram, Holmes & Savvides, 2013 p. 351). Rather, communicative competence has submitted to a cultural turn and has been shaped by intercultural competence (ICC) understood as “the ways in which people of different languages - including language learners themselves- think and act, and how this might impact on successful communication and interaction” (Byram et. al. 2013 p. 351). ICC teaching entails more than the teachings of the four skills of writing, speaking, listening and reading in order to develop a native-speaker competence, but also adds the dimension of understanding behavioral patterns (Corbett, 2003 p. 2).

By focusing on how to do things with language one risks neglecting cultural aspects important to effective communication. In order to understand a community’s language use to improve communication, it is first necessary to understand the community. Corbett provides a good description of how the aspect of a community's culture connects to communication competence. Corbet explains that a society constructs beliefs, values and presumptions which tend to be regarded as common sense, influence the group's behavior and assert its identity and values (2003, p. 20). The language of society is thus what constructs and maintains a group’s identity and organizes its experiences. The author further states that foreign language learners should thus attempt to understand these practices and beliefs in order to fully comprehend the language produced by the target culture as “ language is more than the transfer of information – it is the assertion, negotiation, construction and maintenance of individual and group identities – that has led to the development of an intercultural approach to language education” (Corbett 2003, p. 20)

Effective cross-cultural communication has been identified to originate from certain competences. Michael Byram has invented a model of this which encompasses five groupings or *savoirs*: certain sets of knowledge and skills used to understand what abilities students need to communicate efficiently. The first competence suggested by Byram’s model is *attitude*. A precondition for intercultural interactions is an attitude of openness and rejection of judgement towards people with different meanings and beliefs (Byram 1997, p. 34). Byram discourages stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes towards others as they almost always have a negative impact on interaction (Byram, 1997 p. 34). The second factor, *knowledge*, includes the

knowledge one has of themselves and others which is brought into an interaction. *Knowledge* thus entails knowledge about social class, ethnicity and shared beliefs, which relates to national cultures and identity (Byram, 1997 p. 35). The third factor is *skills of interpreting and relating*, which refers to how our general frames of knowledge are grounded on often taken for granted facts about our environment, which allows us to interpret texts. A related concept is the fourth factor, *the skill of discovery*. Lastly, Byram describes *political education* as knowing how to engage with the political consequences of education; being critically aware of cultural behaviors (1997, p. 36).

The importance of ELT engaging with how language learners themselves think, act and understand behavioral patterns cannot be stressed enough for successful communication and interaction to take place. The identities of conversational partners are thus an important consideration in second language learning. Identities influence aspects of social identity, language learning and interactions seeing as human sexual identities are socially constructed and unstable (Paiz, 2018 p. 350). Queer issues in the ELT classroom involves questioning all sexualities and heteronormative pedagogies that may enable negative biases to regulate the space and body of language learners in order to create a welcoming classroom that facilitates and encourages language learning (Paiz, 2018 p. 349). Nelson points out the importance of culture when practicing queer-theory in ELT classrooms as it “unmasks aspects of social interaction that might be unfamiliar to people who are not accustomed to that culture” (2002, p. 47). This means that increased knowledge of the Othered decreases misunderstanding during communication. Nelson further states that queer pedagogy with its understanding of identity as “culturable readable acts rather than inner, universal essence” makes it possible to explore linguistic and cultural patterns which constructs sexual identities, which is crucial for gaining an intercultural understanding (2002, p. 47).

### **2.3 Research on Queer Theory in ELT**

Queer theory is still a new academic and cultural phenomenon receiving increasing attention and entering different fields of disciplines. The theoretical construct of identity has received more interest from scholars with a focus on queer applied linguistics (Paiz, 2019 p. 266). This section

will attempt to highlight some perceptions of queer theory in recent studies in order to enhance understanding of its gaining position in the ESL classroom.

A recent American study by Rhodes (2017) examines how 26 English language teachers feel about the inclusion of LGBTQ topics and materials into their lesson plans, examining beliefs, practices and challenges regarding their teaching by using a web-based survey. The result of the study shows that English teachers' focus on sexual identities is limited, and when identity is discussed, it is often racial identity that is the focus of discussion. The lack of attention to sexual identity leads to the continued privileging and normalization of traditional, heterosexual identities, which can be problematic as learners should be able to increase their cultural awareness and linguistic proficiency in English class (Rhodes, 2017 p. 100). Even though many of the participants in the study wanted to include topics and materials with LGBTQ representation in their English language class, very few of them were successful in doing so, because of different obstacles such as institutional sanction and lack of encouragement, lack of materials, conservative student culture and perceived irrelevance (Rhodes, 2017 p. 102). So, according to this American study, it is clear that English teachers can see a benefit for their students in practicing queer pedagogy, but they are uncertain how it can be successfully accomplished.

A similar study also interested in the perception of teachers was conducted by Curran (2006) who interviewed a teacher practicing queer theory in ESL teaching. Results showed that students' questions like "Are gays born that way or is it because of the environment?" (p.91) were answered using a didactic information model to teaching motivated by a desire to illustrate the complexity behind such remarks. The author however analysed issues related to this approach as absolving the students from responsibility by providing them with the answers. Moreover, the author states that students, in the positions as listeners, can easily ignore the teacher's knowledge and do not develop any speaking competence nor contribute with their understanding of normative discourse which may result in assumptions and values being untouched (Curran, 2006 p. 19). So, the fact that students were not critically engaged to examine the questions they were asking enabled them to continue to think in normative ways. Curran concludes that what the teacher understands as troubling, need not result in students questioning the heterosexual hegemony as students' previous knowledge of the matter was intact (2006, p. 94).

Kumashiro writes on the topic of anti-oppressive curriculum and pedagogy, where he states that schools are paradoxical in nature in the way that they promote equal educational opportunity, but at the same time uphold various social hierarchies (2002, p. 1). Kumashiro discusses different methods that can be used to avoid this kind of oppression. Teachers should constantly question their pedagogies by asking questions such as: “whom does this pedagogy miss or silence?” (2002, p. 38). Moreover, the material that is used in class should be analysed in a way that applies critical thinking skills, which will in turn, give students knowledge about oppression (2002, p. 46).

Rather than ask, what does this novel tell us about, say, Native Hawaiians? Teachers might ask, what questions does this novel raise about Native Hawaiians? Which stereotypes of Native Hawaiians does this novel reinforce, and which ones does it challenge? What is not said in this book about being Native Hawaiian, and how do those silences make possible and impossible different ways of thinking about Native Hawaiian peoples and experiences? (2002, p. 43).

Kumashiro uses the example of Native Hawaiians to describe how “facts” that are reproduced and repeated, hinder critical thinking and can lead to oppression. He also criticizes the canon that is religiously taught in English classrooms, as it is biased based on class, race, gender and sexuality, and most of the characters represented are white, middle- class or wealthy, male and heterosexual (2002, p. 55). When students only learn about certain privileged social groups and perspectives, they cannot learn about other perspectives, experiences and identities of those who are Othered and silenced. For those students who already have prejudice about certain types of people, they never have the chance to critically think about and question their “misknowledge” (ibid). Moreover, he argues that teachers who nevertheless choose to work with the canon, can ask questions such as “what is not said in this novel about, say, queer youth, and how do those silences make possible and impossible different ways of thinking about queer youth... about the reader's own sexual identities, and about change?” (2002, p. 62).

Furthermore, Kumashiro argues that school has to embrace Otherness, so that students who identify as different also can have role models and have their voices heard in class (2002, p. 34). Having a theme day once or twice a year where this topic is exclusively addressed, does not have a good effect, and Kumashiro suggests that teachers should rather integrate topics about the Other throughout the curriculum (2002, p. 41). The reason why this is important is that the first kind of oppressive knowledge is, according to Kumashiro, when only the “normal” and

normative is represented, and Otherness is portrayed to be a deviation or a contrast to the norm. The second kind of oppressive knowledge is spreading distorted, misleading and prejudiced information based on myths and stereotypes (2002, p. 40).

Paiz (2019) has similarly written about the importance of the queer perspective in curricular materials in the ELT classroom. As a teacher, it is possible to queer the ETL classroom by discussing its materials. Queering is a term understood as engaging students in pedagogies which criticize and questions all identities and how they are presented in discourse. Paiz argues that heteronormative discourse enters the ESL classroom through textbooks by only making available certain identity options to students (2019, p. 353). Issues related to textbooks regards the underrepresentation of LGBTQ identities and stereotypical presentations of non-heterosexual identities in language material effectively silencing LGBTQ voices (2019, p. 353). Textbooks contributing to heteronormative classrooms may not seem like a major problem considering teachers can make sure their curriculum is inclusive in other ways. However, Paiz states that teachers sometimes simply do not have the time to review and update teaching materials to make lessons more inclusive (p. 352). With this in mind, the author proposes a possibility to trouble commercial textbook materials which involves developing classroom activities that enable students to question presentations of sexual identity available in the textbooks (Paiz, 2018 p. 360). In other words, using all opportunities to engage in a queer-reading: reading the text with a lens of queer- inquiry. Instead of using the text as a provider of information and new lexical structures, it serves as a source used to address heteronormative discourse allowing the creation of a more welcoming environment. Some believe this is not a big concern as classroom textbooks only serve as a starting point towards inclusive teaching. Paiz, however, argues that textbooks provide early-service educators with much-needed support and structure in their lesson planning. Even after teachers are ready to stray from commercial textbooks, they might replicate lesson plans based on them so that the textbooks impact teachers' professional development due to the scaffolding role they play early in their career (Paiz, 2019 p. 270)

Little attention has been given to queer/LGBTQ issues in the syllabi of ESL teacher preparation courses, which means that students must later engage with LGBTQ- topics without necessarily being prepared (Paiz, 2018 p. 356). Preparing ESL teachers for queer practices should, therefore, include providing queer theory and methodology courses. The author proposes that such courses should firstly engage preservice teachers in conversations with the objective to

interrogate social constructs (Paiz, 2018 p. 356). Secondly, teachers in training should practice creating lesson plans that address queer-issues together with a modelling graduate educator. And lastly, the graduate educator can engage preservice teachers in reflective activities with a focus on linguistic practices lifting latent heteronormative bias, for example teacher questions regarding whether a female student has a boyfriend instead of saying partner (2018, p. 358).

Conclusively, studies have shown that schools do not engage in sexual identity enough due to “lack of materials and presumed irrelevance” (Rhodes, 2017, p. 102). Additionally, one teacher attempting to practice queer theory finds it difficult as issues regarding sexual identity need complex answers. However, evidence of the relevance of queer pedagogy has also been studied as well as possible ways to work with textbook materials available at the school and different approaches to queer education.

### **2.3.1 Queer Pedagogy in Swedish ELT**

Swedish research on queer pedagogy has amongst other things focused on how norms can be criticized, with a focus on the language tutor’s role. The Swedish scholar Björkman writes that the teacher’s own experiences influence how teaching is designed, as no one is unbiased or unaffected by norms (2010, p. 155). In other words, only by asking how one’s cultural background and experiences influence one’s choices and understanding of education is it possible to change. The author states that teachers might feel worried and angry when they realize that they have reproduced harmful norms in their previous practice, or feel as if they do not know enough or have time to engage in this endeavor (2010, p. 158). However, concerning these issues Björkman points out the need to view mistakes as a potential to evolve (2010, p. 159). To do this, the author calls attention to the importance of being humble when engaging in education about norms. The authority of the teacher cannot be to always know best in these practices, as they must learn with their students (Björkman, 2010 p. 160).

In contrast, Henriksson takes a problematizing stance towards norm critique and states the norm critical subject needs to be emotionally flexible and have the capacity to handle negative emotions as it “needs to have certain emotional distance from itself and its normative notions” (2017, p. 163). Even though norm critique is resistant towards norms it can unintentionally introduce implicit norms about the emotional ability of its practitioners that can

be harder to see (Henriksson 2017 p. 150). Skolverket's article *who am I and what do I bring to work?* also reflects on the current Swedish discourse that teachers have a great responsibility in what materials they choose, the perspectives they have, and how they plan their lessons, whether it is consciously or subconsciously (Åkesson, 2016 p. 3). The article explains that teachers should strive to have a norm critical perspective in their work, to reflect upon their own experiences and values and how they shape pupils in their professional role (ibid).

Brade et al state that bullying, discrimination, sexism, racism and homophobia are closely linked to too narrow norms of how people are supposed to be, which creates a line between what is normal and what is deviant (2008. p. 14). Because school is a reflection of society, it is also a place where norms are reproduced (ibid). Brade et al. propose that teachers use double strategies, which is to expose the categories that are usually made invisible, and include them in lessons naturally, and at the same time expose and criticize the norm (p. 16). The authors further argue that norms and stereotypes have to be questioned constantly, the same way we would question what we see or read about in media (p. 24).

To conclude, Swedish studies talk about queer theory in the context of norm critique and show that a risk with practicing queer theory is that it introduces implicit norms regarding the emotional competence of the people practicing queer theory. In contrast, other research shows that it is important for people practicing queer pedagogy to realize that no one is an expert and to view the practicing of queer theories as an ongoing learning endeavour teachers and students take on together. Similar to other research, Swedish studies show that the material used in class, and more importantly how it is used, plays a big role in queer pedagogy. The responsibility to be critical of norms and have an inclusive classroom lies on the individual teacher, as there still are no concrete guidelines on how queer pedagogy should be put into practice. Because little attention has been paid to the perceptions of preservice teachers in Sweden especially, this essay aims to learn about how preservice EFL- teachers reflect upon queer theory in relation to their future profession as English teachers.



### **3. Aim and Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the way in which preservice EFL- teachers reflect upon queer pedagogy in relation to their future profession and classroom practice

In support of this aim, we formulated the following research questions:

- Do preservice English language teachers consider queer theory important to work with in their future profession, and, if so, what aspects do they think are important and what aspects could be problematic or challenging?

### **4. Method**

#### **4.1 Qualitative Interviews**

As the aim of this study was to learn about how preservice EFL-teachers reflect upon queer pedagogy in relation to their future profession and classroom practice, qualitative interviews with preservice teachers were used to shed light on these issues. Questions in the qualitative interview can among else serve the purpose to inform researchers about respondents' opinions and attitudes (Mckay 2006, p 51).

The type of interview chosen for the research was a semi-structured interview. However, an unstructured interview was also considered. According to Wibeck (2010), an unstructured interview is one where there is no clear goal as to where the discussion is going to end up, and the discussion itself is the most important aspect (p. 75). On the other hand, a semi-structured interview includes pre-prepared open-ended questions in an interview guide which regulate discussions and provide direction, which suited our purpose. Moreover, the interviewer is also free to deviate from questions and follow up issues raised in the conversation to encourage elaborations on issues when this feels appropriate (Mckay, 2006 p. 51). A qualitative approach using questionnaires was also considered but refuted as this approach might provide superficial answers given that one cannot give follow up questions or write elaborate responses. The semi-structured interview is suitable when one does not want pre-made response categories that can limit the depth and breadth of the interviewee's answers (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 136).

The interviews were conducted using focus groups; a method aiming to obtain qualitative material in a group interview centred on predefined themes by a researcher (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013 p. 65). The aim of this method is to focus on the dialogue between participants. The questions of how many participants a focus group should have differs in literature. Some sources claim six to eight is enough (Mckay, 2006 p. 52) others write four to six participants (Esaiasson Gilljam, Oscarsson & Wängnerud, 2012). Justesen and Mik-Meyer state that there are plenty of rules regarding the work with focus groups, as this is used for industrial purposes as well as science, however, when it is used in academic research theoretical reflections and consideration should have a prominent role (2013, p. 66). With focus groups with too great a number of people, sub-groups might occur where participants included only talk with each other, and in contrast, with too few participants the conversation might cease altogether (Esaiasson et. al., 2012 p. 322). With this in mind, the purpose with focus group interviews is to enable a conversation between participants so they can hear each other's statements on topics and broaden the conversation by offering their view on the topic (Esaiasson et. al., 2012 p. 319). Data generated using this approach thus shows the participants' thoughts and values on a phenomenon as a group (Esaiasson et al., 2012 p. 319).

An advantage with this type of interview is that participants may feel more comfortable with sharing their opinions in a situation where they can have a conversation with others (Esaiasson et.al., 2012 p 320). A group dialogue might reduce feelings of anxiety one might feel in the one-to-one interview. Also, the interviewer's directing role is not as pronounced, making the conversational dynamics ideal for more reflections and impulses to flourish (Esaiasson et al., 2012 p. 319). On the other hand, Mckay highlights two risks with focal groups (Mckay, 2006 p. 52). Firstly, the individual might get fewer chances to offer his or her opinion due to others dominating the conversation. Secondly, the researcher can never know whether the answers given are reliable or simply produced in order to fit the group dynamics.

## **4.2 Interview Preparation and Selection**

The participants of this study were selected for their similar backgrounds as undergraduate preservice teachers who were about to graduate in one or two years from English language teaching. In focus group interviews the selection of participants must be related to the aim of the

study (Esaiasson et.al., 2012 p. 320). For this reason, participants reflected the profile of having previous formal education of queer pedagogy and being able to provide data about queer pedagogy issues from their previous experiences from teacher education and lessons they have participated in as observers or taught as interns.

Focus Group	Participants	Gender	Age	Year in Program	Second Subject
<b>Group 1 (G1)</b>	Kurt	M	31	3	Social Science
	Anna	F	24	3	Social Science
	Rakel	F	24	3	Social Science
<b>Group 2 (G2)</b>	Natalie	F	30	5	Swedish
	Rita	F	29	5	Swedish as a second language
	Helene	F	27	5	Swedish
	Gustav	M	31	3	History
<b>Group 3 (G3)</b>	Greta	F	24	5	Swedish
	Nadina	F	26	5	Religion

*Table 1:* The table identifies participants in the focus group interviews. Gender is expressed as M for male, and F for female. The names are fictitious.

In order to find participants, we reached out to personal contacts determined to be relevant for the study. Unfortunately, on the day of the interview, one participant from group three dropped out right before the interview started. This means that the group that was supposed to have three participants now only had two. The same thing happened with group two, where one person did not show up, so group two was left with four participants instead of five.

The groups were homogenous as all the students came from the same university and most of them were classmates and knew each other from before. A problematic aspect with participants in focus groups already knowing each other according to Esaiasson et.al (2012, p. 323) is that participants might have established roles or norms associated with the group. Interpersonal interaction between the participants can be highly affected by the expectations of how the other participants are going to react to what they say (Wibeck, 2010. p. 30). In other words, it is possible that participants said what was expected of them to say as preservice teachers or that they refrained from deviating from perceived group values.

According to Wibeck (2010), homogenous groups can have a positive effect on the participants, as it can make them more comfortable and relaxed when discussing sensitive topics (p. 64). However, a more heterogeneous group would perhaps create more interesting discussion because there could be opposing views, different perspectives and arguments. Another factor which could have a possible effect on the outcome of the results is that we knew the participants from before, which might affect the interviewees consciously or subconsciously. It is important that we “highlight the baggage” that we as moderators bring to the focus group, as it affects the outcome of the interview (Garton & Copland, 2010 p. 548). Garton and Copland argue that the effect of cocategorical incumbency, which in our case is belonging to the same teaching program, is going to affect the interaction (p. 535). Furthermore, they argue that the concept of neutrality of the interviewer is false and that the interviewer will play an active role in creating meanings, even though this is something we are striving to avoid (p. 534).

The focus groups were held in group activity rooms booked at the university, and interviews were for the most part conducted in English. At the beginning of every interview session, participants were given a consent form to sign (see appendix 1) and afterwards were asked to read a brief summary of queer-theory and the queering of ELT (see appendix 3). The information leaflet containing the summary was conducted using our translation of a webpage established and founded by the Swedish county council called *UMO* - a social advice and guidance centre for young people between years 15-25. The source was deemed suitable as the language used was informative, to the point and easy to understand. After that participants watched a 6-minute long TED- talk (Amer, 2019) about the challenges and advantages of talking about queer theories with children. The TED-talk and information leaflet served the purpose of being stimulus material, something which Wibeck (2010) encourages during focus groups, as it initiates the topic and opens for discussion (p. 11). Both of these supplementary materials aimed to remind and familiarize participants with the context. Queer-issues are still an emerging field in ELT and preservice teachers may not have many courses involving this subject. The aim of presenting reading- and audio-visual materials in the interview sessions were thus to promote informed discussion on queer-issues in ELT. Also, a pilot interview was held with a preservice English teacher over the phone to examine if questions were perceived as intended. Pilot studies are not essential in quantitative research since they do not rely as much on research instruments, this does not mean that there is no use in trying out certain techniques (Dörnyei, 2013)

Depending on how the dialogue developed during focus group interviews, the order of questions was changed. Some questions were left out and different follow-up questions were given. When the content of the questions changes between interviews it gains a lower level of standardization (Esaiasson, 2012 p. 229). However, the fact that standardization had a limited validity between interviews is not a problem as the aim of this method is to let participants direct discussions (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013 p. 72). Another aspect which might affect the reliability of the result is whether questions were leading (Kvale, 1997 p. 145). To avoid this, we tried to formulate questions in a way as to not shape the respondent's answers.

### 4.3 Transcribing and Data analysis

The time of the interviews, not including the time spent watching the TED- talk, reading the information leaflet and discussing its content, was 41 minutes for the first group, 1 hour and 14 minutes for the second and 49 minutes for the third group. Interviews were recorded using mobile phones, and the audio was later transcribed. One concern with the transcription process is the loss of information seeing that words cannot capture reality (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 246). Body language like shrugs and gestures from the original communication are lost when recordings are transformed into words. However, as this is not a conversational analysis, a loss of some details is not a problem. When the form of the verbal data is not in focus but rather the content, the linguistic surface phenomenon can be omitted, according to Dörnyei (2007, p. 247). Dörnyei further states that the structure of spoken and written language is different, and the convention of transcription used affect how it is interpreted. Therefore, one must try to create the feel of the originally spoken communication in writing (2013, p. 247). According to Wibeck, writing strategies can be applied to create an oral feeling in text (2010, p. 94). In order to translate the language as realistically as possible language strategies were applied.<sup>1</sup> The fact that transcription is a question of interpretation is especially clear when the quality of a recording is bad and when the person transcribing cannot hear what is being said (Kvale, 1997 p. 150). With regards to the

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<sup>1</sup> Explanation of language strategies for transcriptions according to Wibeck (2010, p. 94)

<i>Cursive</i>	Emphasis
--	Speech interrupted or fading out
.	Speech paus, counted in seconds
<u>Underlined</u>	simultaneous speech

reliability of the transcriptions, both transcribers listened to the problematic parts of the audio recording in order to decide what was being said and thus ensuring a higher quality of transcriptions.

Analysis of the qualitative data was done through a thematic analysis: where patterns or themes are identified and analysed using coding (Braun & Clarke, 2008 p. 79). The theme thus houses the information of the data which is related to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2008 p. 82). Coding involves identifying and labelling certain extracts of the transcribed data so that they can be grouped and retrieved easily (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 250). According to Richards, “coding generates new ideas and gathers materials by topic” (2015, p. 103). In order to do this, the coding process was initiated by reading the transcript and taking notes of our thoughts and responses in the margin. Reflecting and taking notes from the transcript while reading and re-reading helps one to formulate and make sense of thoughts and first impressions in the text (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 250). These notes serve as pre-coding reflections that help to find ideas that lead to the identification of themes in the texts. As we had three different transcripts, we tried to “see *across* the data and *above* the individual documents” to find themes and ideas that were shared between the three interviews (Richards, 2015 p. 103).

After the pre-coding process, parts of the electronic transcript were highlighted in different colours representing different initial codes. Codes are the simplest parts of the raw data that can be identified as important to the phenomenon studied (Braun & Clarke, 2008 p. 88). The content of the raw data composing the codes were chosen with theory in mind. This way of approaching data is known as theory-driven and serves the function of answering specific questions to identify limited aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008 p. 89). Transcripts were read several times and coded and recoded. A result of revisiting data repeatedly is that salient content categories might emerge (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 251). Then, all the individual coloured parts of the transcript indicating patterns or themes were copied into a separate document and a few were chosen to demonstrate the code. After this, the list of codes constructed from our original transcript was inserted into a table so that themes could be constructed more easily. When searching for themes, the different codes were sorted into groups and different combinations of codes are considered in order to form themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2008 p. 89). One criterion used to analyse the quality of research is reliability. A reliability check that can be used in qualitative research is having another coder separately code parts of the transcript (Dörnyei,

2007 p. 57). To ensure a high reliability a majority of the transcript was coded independently and then all codes were compared and parts different discussed.

#### **4.4 Ethics**

In order to ensure all participants felt comfortable with sharing their opinions and thoughts on the topics discussed in focus group interviews all names have been made fictitious. Also, before interviews began, students were given consent forms stating the aim and purpose of this study as well as the fact that participating is voluntary so that they could at any moment during or after the interview choose not to be included in the study. Before each interview participants were asked to sign a consent form (see appendix 2).

### **5. Results and Discussion**

In this section, we present the results from our focus group interviews. Four themes emerged from our coding. The first theme is the *purpose* of queer theory in ELT, which is about the relevance and purpose of including queer theory according to the opinions of the participants in the study. The second theme is the *implementation* of queer theory in ELT, where the participants discuss how to work with queer theory in ELT, what to avoid and what to consider. The third theme is about *challenges* of working with queer theory in ELT, where the participants express different concerns regarding the teaching of queer theory. The fourth and last theme is about using *materials* to queer ELT, where the participants discuss what materials can be used, and how to work with them in class.

#### **5.1. The Purpose of Queer Theory in ELT**

A central theme in discussions in all focus group interviews regarded the reasons why queer theory should be implemented in ELT. Four different aspects were highlighted in discussions comprising identity work, acceptance, critical thinking and effective communication.

In all focus groups preservice teachers expressed a belief that queer theory might be necessary for education to support the students who identify as non-heterosexuals or non-binary. Schools were identified as an arena where students might come across different sexualities for the first time as well as a place housing students in the process of learning and developing their personality and identity. Correspondingly, Sörensdotter writes that norms about gender and sexuality shape how you perceive yourself and others (2010, p. 139). In other words, how one identifies or disidentifies with norms. Preservice teachers also argued that varying sexual identities are common in the classroom, as well as in the world and therefore a part of students' everyday life and something teachers need to practice in order to support students' identity work and personal development. Education about queer theory was therefore seen as a necessity to students who identified as something other than heterosexual to provide facts for normalization and reassurance.

**Anna (G1):** I think that we as teachers could be the only ones that support these kids, and I think it's important to show that we *do* support and, cuz if everyone in their life tells them that they are wrong, including the teacher, they *will* grow up and think that something is wrong with them.

In this case, Anna expresses a worry that students who do not conform to norms might incorporate a negative self-image as a consequence of not meeting the expectations of the surrounding environment and hence experience negative consequences of being perceived as different. Following this, Yep writes about the violence with heteronormativity and mentions the internal injuries people who deviate from norms might gain (2014, p. 20). The teachers' role in supporting these students is also highlighted as particularly important for those who have no one.

Participants in two groups similarly viewed queer theory as necessary in education to foster acceptance and empathy towards all people. To promote these traits students are claimed to need information about non-normative people in order to gain an understanding which would lead to an acceptance of people seen as others:

**Kurt (G1):** It's important to have kids encounter various cultures, various peoples, various thoughts, various ideologies, various sexual identities, to create empathy. And empathy creates acceptance. That's the core idea I think that, you want them to be accepted, but for them to be accepted you have to have empathy for the situation, and you can't have empathy without understanding.



Kurt's statement shows how students need to acquire information about people's differences to understand them and accept them. This can be interpreted as an ambition to create inclusion through tolerance. The strategy of focusing on the other through tolerance strategy serves the function of showing that the other is someone to sympathize with and whose differences require acceptance.

Queering ELT was also deemed important due to its association with the development of critical thinking. Students argued that all people are responsible for sustaining the problematic concepts of queer theory unless they become aware of their role in the upkeep of harmful norms. For this reason, queer theory was expressed as fundamental for students to engage in to develop critical thinking in a constructive way, for instance through literature.

Students further state another reason for doing this is due to the advantages it generates in students' communicative ability. Nadina argued that the purpose of English education is learning to communicate effectively with people with varying backgrounds and cultural belonging and states "but I'm thinking like the purpose of English is learning to communicate. Especially with people all around the world and the more open and respectful you are, the easier the communication would be". Competences of effective ICC invented by Byram involves cultural awareness, being open and abstaining from prejudice (Byram 1997, p. 34). Similarly, Nadina expresses the importance of the ability to recognize that others might have other ways of perceiving the world around them and keeping an open mind. With knowledge about others, it becomes easier to be sensitive to cultural differences that might affect how we communicate with each other. The student referred to this ability as cultural sensitivity, a skill comprising openness and respectfulness which would lessen misunderstandings and risks of one being perceived as offensive.

In summary, preservice teachers proposed different reasons as to the purpose of queering ELT. The aspect of personal development and teachers' role in supporting identity work was seen as central. Moreover, two groups spoke of the ambition of queering ELT as promoting and fostering acceptance and empathy for all. The importance of developing critical ability was also mentioned in groups and one preservice teacher spoke of this ability in relation to developing pupils' inter- communicative competence through queer theory.

## 5.2 Implementation of Queer Theory in ELT

How queer theory should or should not be applied in education was a central theme in the focus group discussions. Tolerance pedagogy and explicit discussions of queer theory were things that the participants agreed should be avoided, moreover, they discussed how to deal with labels and gender pronouns in ELT. One of the groups discussed if queer theory could give the benefit of personal growth.

All of the focus groups unanimously expressed concerns regarding the practice of tolerance strategy when working with queer theory, as they have experienced it to make a division between “us,” the norm and “them,” the deviant. Natalie explains how it is problematic to arrange theme days to cover these topics that are considered to be “different” to try to explain that they are “just like us,” which in fact only works against its purpose, as it draws a line between “us” and “them.” On the topic of tolerance strategy, Greta further points out that a mistake teachers’ often make is acting as if queer people are not in the classroom but “out there,” which as a result makes it something strange. In addition to Greta’s remark, Nadina states “*There are gay people, but they are also human beings with feelings. ‘We should accept them’*” (Nadina). Nadina imitates her experience of teachers talking about LGBTQ topics in class, and her statement builds on Greta’s point and furthermore indicates that people belonging to the norm have the power to “accept” and “tolerate” people that are different. The dialogue between Greta and Nadina for instance shows how they strongly feel tolerance pedagogy is not the way to approach queer theory in ELT.

All participants found queer theory to be important in education, however, they agreed that queer theory is not something which should be taught explicitly. These reflections agree with Kumashiro’s statements that dealing with the topic exclusively for instance through theme days, does not have a good effect and that teachers have to integrate queer theory throughout the curriculum instead (2002, p.41). One of the reasons why queer theory needs to be included in context according to Rakel, is that the way you introduce the topic and include it in other contexts makes the students “willing to take it in” and make it easier for them to understand new perspectives. Rakel says that “I really think it belongs...to bring people together, and to speak about it like in a context, if it’s used in a context.” Another reason, which most of the participants discussed, was that including queer theory naturally in other contexts and discussions, normalizes it. Anna, for instance, says: “We as teachers are supposed to teach them

about the world, and life, and that's a normal part of the world and life and we should bring it up, just as we bring up everything else." Moreover, Natalie similarly describes the word queer to be something beyond sexuality, but acceptance for all. "I mean no matter what country you come from, or if you're in a wheelchair, if you have three dads."

Other participants also discuss how queer people should not be pointed out and separated from other topics as something different and special. Rather than doing so, Kurt suggests naturally including the topic in the conversation, and that forcing a topic is "probably worse than not saying anything at all". Also, on the topic of not differentiating queer people, Anna says that queer people should not be highlighted as queer as it should not be what defines them as people, but that teachers should strive to include queer people in texts, for instance. She further says that teachers should "not make it stand out or special or, oh now we are gonna talk about homosexuals." What the participants are actually suggesting is that queer theory should be implemented in everyday tasks and lectures by using small activities such as asking questions to show different perspectives when discussing something and having the students reflect upon it, or perhaps problematizing materials the students are given, and not having a whole lecture or theme day dedicated to queer theory, as that would have negative effects.

Gustav expressed a dislike towards using labels in education due to their differentiating effect. Avoiding categorization is a central theme in queer theory as it "is conceptually elastic, unrestrained, and open-ended" (Yep, 2014 p. 37). Gustav's reasoning for not categorizing and putting labels is that "if queers are like everyone else, you should not have to put queer theory in it." He further explains that, if queer people should be normalized, their label such as gender or sexuality should not be relevant at all when being discussed in class. "But if we replace the word men with *author* then it doesn't matter what gender they have because we don't know what gender Shakespeare identified as." This is an interesting statement because removing the author's gender from the discourse still does not remove the fact that it is a white man's perspective. If including authors from different backgrounds and cultures is not on the teacher's agenda because labels are not important, it could mean that only the experiences and perspectives of privileged social groups are represented. This would also mean that those who are othered and silenced, their identities, perspectives and voices are not heard (Kumashiro, 2002 p. 55). Gustav's reasoning is not supported by the rest of the group, as they see his arguments as a way of sweeping issues regarding gender inequality and discrimination under the rug. The

other participants argued that labels are actually needed in order to discuss and criticize discourses and events in contemporary, and historical society. Natalie says in response to Gustav's argument about labels:

**Natalie(G2):** We can't just like talk about authors because it's not just authors. Umm.. it's a reflection of how society was and it still is today...we need to be aware of what kind of authors we bring into the classroom and we have to have an agenda of some sort. Because we cannot just call them authors because then we are minimizing the whole struggle that has been and that is.

Natalie further explained how labels are necessary when students reflect upon their and others' identity. She says that when some of her acquaintances found the word *bisexual* it felt reassuring to know that there is a name for it and it is something that exists, and something that can be claimed as a part of one's identity. She concludes her argument by stating: "So the labels are something that not only defines but adds something to the picture as well. So, I think it's hard to talk about queer-theory and completely avoid labels."

Gender-neutral pronouns were also discussed in focus groups. Kurt said that "queer people are just normal people with the only difference that "some might prefer other pronouns maybe." He also said teachers have to make active choices in their education such as saying, "they went down the street" instead of saying "John went down the street," to include gender-neutral pronouns. His suggestion is an example of what Björkman and Bromseth would call "disturbing and challenging norms", even if it is something as simple as changing a pronoun (2009, p. 57). A seemingly small thing like a pronoun representing only heterosexual couples in examples in class, can be a part of producing and reproducing norms, which can be problematic as the students that identify as queer are not represented or may feel unaccepted (Bromseth, 2010 p. 32).

Many participants recognized queer theory to be relevant in ELT, especially as the syllabus of English in upper secondary school states that students have to work with different values, experiences, feelings in different social contexts, and different cultures, historical, political and social relationships in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used (Skolverket, 2011). However, one of the focus groups (G1) agreed that queer theory as a subject was not needed in English education. Explicit knowledge of queer theory was identified as belonging to other subjects such as biology or social science. Also, the personal aspects, such

as students asking questions and information, was described to belong outside the English classroom as hallway talk due to the intimacy of the questions and the language barrier. Rakel says that in the hallways you can speak Swedish with the students and therefore it is easier to talk about personal and sensitive topics and “they might have questions and want to speak about other things that is not the sonnet of Shakespeare”.

**Rakel (G2):** But I think in the classroom you are more like to talk about certain topics, like you have to speak about literature and you have to speak about this and this... Outside of the classroom you could speak about other things as well....there is not like I have some manuscript that I have to talk about, then it's easier to connect with the students on a personal level.

This statement shows that Rakel might see English education as being limited to reading Shakespeare's sonnets and being bound by a “manuscript” that prevents her from including queer theory. Queer theory could be included when analysing Shakespeare's 18th sonnet simply by asking who was this written for? Is it written for a man or a woman, or what would be the difference?

Similar to Rakel's idea, Kurt from the same group says:

**Kurt (G1):** I mean, it's harsh to say but we as English teachers we have a job which includes teaching our students to communicate in English, also in certain ways to teach aspects of democracy and equality. So, those are the constraints we work within.

Kurt mentions constraints instead of possibilities when it comes to working with queer theory in the English classroom and seems to think queer theory has nothing to do with language learning. When asked about the possibilities of queer theory in ELT Kurt says that there are no positives or negatives when it comes to language learning, other than perhaps learning different gender-neutral pronouns. This reasoning means that English as a subject is reduced to productive and receptive skills. However, according to the syllabus, there are many aspects that teachers should have in mind when working with these skills such as what and how a material is used in class, social, political and historical aspects in English speaking countries, and so on.

Everyone in the first focus group agreed that there are really no pros or cons of teaching queer theory in the English classroom, except for the more general and personal benefit of

personal growth. What is meant by personal growth is developing empathy and becoming better human beings, according to Kurt. He thinks that this will be accomplished through being exposed to “different ideologies, sexual preferences and sexual tendencies.” Rakel responds that she agrees, and that queer theory has many opportunities for personal growth “but perhaps not for learning the English language.”

To summarize, the participants agree that there are many things teachers need to avoid and be considerate about when working with queer theory, such as using tolerance pedagogy or pointing out queer people as different. Two of the groups feel that queer theory should be implemented in other contexts in ELT and not taught explicitly, or simply that a queer perspective should be included when analysing materials or discussing different topics in order to normalize it. All of the groups agreed that teachers should work with gender-neutral pronouns but disagreed on the meaning of labelling and its implications. Lastly, one of the groups agreed that queer theory had nothing to offer ELT except for the benefit of personal growth.

### **5.3 Challenges of Working with Queer Theory in ELT**

This part concerns focus group interview discussions regarding things participants thought might be challenging in their future role as teachers and the practice of queering ELT. Firstly, in all focal group interviews, the subject of previous experience of queer theory was mentioned. Participants expressed an uncertainty towards whether they ever had engaged in learning about it in their own schooling but also pointed out that they might have forgotten. They claimed to have quite poor previous experiences of anyone practicing queer pedagogy in their education. Their limited experiences include speaking about queer issues in biology and sex education, individual teachers presenting facts about LGBTQ identity and theme days with RFSU representatives. From this, one can conclude that queer theory was not something brought to attention in every subject nor in a continuous fashion. In line with this, Rhodes states that lack of attention to sexual identity in education may lead to less of cultural awareness in students (2017, p. 100). Natalie expressed how she felt about her previous experiences of queer education as:

**Natalie (G2):** I think what you said was really really good. What kind of education we have experienced or we have we are going to give our students in some kind of way. I mean we have talked about this at högskolan some ways but it is theory, a lot of theory. And we have not seen it

practiced which at least makes me nervous. That I will end up in- that I by mistake say they or we. And that is the worst thing.

In relation to limited experiences of queering education, participants further related this to issues with knowing how to implement it in practice. Natalie and others mentioned that they believe that they might use previous knowledge from their own schooling to produce their lessons. However, seeing as they have little previous experience from their own elementary schooling and feel ill-equipped to practice queer theory due to the theoretical nature of their undergraduate education, this is problematic. According to Piazz, the minimal attention paid to queer theory in undergraduate teacher program courses leaves preservice teachers unprepared (2018, p. 356). Curran similarly describes how an ESL teacher struggled to apply queer theory into pedagogical practice regardless of his extensive knowledge of queer theory (Curran, 2006 p.90).

Moreover, Natalie expressed a worry to “say they or we” which can be interpreted as a fear of unintentionally engaging in teaching about sexual identity through othering. She says this would be the worst thing, indicating herself trying to mean well and yet ending up excluding and hurting students by mistake. Björkman similarly writes that it is common that teachers feel stressed and worried about doing the wrong thing while trying to engage in norm critical work (2010, p. 158). This notion was also highlighted in every focus group. Participants spoke about the issues of trying to include all people and in doing so risking excluding others anyway:

**Natalie (G2):** I think it's also that there are a lot of norms, for gays as such, but we do have a lot of sexuality that we don't talk about like pansexual, transsexual, asexual, transgender. There are so many things that is the danger with labels. As well that we say there are these, these and these and then we are kind of closing the doors and not letting people to be exactly- like some people don't want to use labels. Some people do. Some create new labels. So, I think it's when you talk about like queer theory. it's easy to get a heterosexual and a homosexual. And that's not exactly what it is about.

Natalie's statement can be interpreted as voicing a worry that the many varying ways to express identity today make it easy to unintentionally exclude some or simply end up in a discussion about what is most common or comfortable for the teacher to speak about like, homosexuality versus heterosexuality. As mentioned in the previous part, preservice

teachers had firm beliefs of what damaging strategies to educate about sexual identity were like and contrasted and saw them as opposed to the aims of queer pedagogy. In this and the previous statement one can interpret preservice teachers concern of unintentionally engaging in harmful teaching strategies.

Participants also seem to have mixed feelings about using labels in the classroom due to their limiting and changing nature and indicate that there is also an intersectional perspective to have in mind when speaking about issues surrounding sexual identity. Natalie's statement shows that there are multiple aspects a teacher can consider when queering education something others also expressed as challenging. Greta for instance, states: "We have to be very informed as well. That's a challenge. I try to keep up with all these different topics, but I say stupid things without realizing it". This indicates that students feel like there are many aspects to learn concerning queer theory and that it is a challenge that the field is always changing as new discourses arise which they have to keep up to date with. The vast amount of knowledge needed to engage in queer pedagogy was thus seen as a problem because of the consequences it might have in the lives of their pupils.

Also mentioned as a challenge in all focus groups was the aspect of time management. Students felt that preparing and including aspects of queer theory in their English teaching might be time-consuming:

**Helene (G2):** Do I really have the time to make this..eh. discuss this. what do I mean. cut down on time. The it's a big problem for a teacher because well in.. high school they have nationella proven and that takes a lot of time to prepare the student for them.

From this, one can understand that working with queer issues might be viewed as separate from other tasks and something that maybe should be done but which may come second when one must prioritize.

Participants also spoke about all people, including themselves, living and growing up with taken for granted norms which they would later integrate into their teaching practice through for instance choice of material and topics of discussion. Natalie voices this concern as "I am the norm. Sorry but sometimes it's hard for me as a teacher to see that." They realized that teachers ethnic background, gender and experiences, would make them view things from a personal perspective so that teachers might think that they were progressive and yet bring their



prejudice to class. In other words, preservice teachers were concerned with how them being oblivious to their own privileges might influence their teaching. Comparatively, Henrikson states that a challenge for the subject practicing queer theory may be that they need to be emotionally flexible and rise above the beliefs they themselves might have, something which is more easily said than done (2017, p. 163).

Another challenge participants in all focus groups agreed on was the difficulty in handling students who voiced opinions opposite of their own. Preservice teachers expressed a belief that some students were more prone to react negatively towards practicing queer theory. They mentioned it might depend on the program and specified male-dominated programs, like the construction program, as places where students were more likely to react badly. They spoke about these students as more inclined to use labels to describe sexual identity, such as gay, as a curse word without understanding or caring for their explanations about the harmful aspects of doing that. Another group of students identified as challenging was religious students:

**Gustav (G2):** Like some students are really Orthodox Christians and their religion says that gay is not okay. Is it up to us to tell them that their belief is wrong...That's not my place. But I need to handle the thing like.. *yeah* we should respect each other. I don't know if you're Christian, black or like Manchester city. We need to accept them as human beings. But their belief is okay. Like gay is wrong. That's your belief but we can't force our belief.

Gustav's statement indicates that it is problematic when teachers value and criticize religious beliefs, perhaps due to the freedom of religion, but also every student's core values. Darj writes that it is common that teachers have assumptions regarding what types of people are in extra need of learning about queer theory and further mentions ethnically non- Swedish people, teenagers and working-class men as some (2010, p. 122). Additionally, Curran states that ESL teachers found it inappropriate to discuss queer sexuality because they thought students with ethnic and religious beliefs to be homophobic while others were seen as lacking skills to discuss the topic (2006, p. 87). However, the aspect of students having opinions of people identifying as other than heterosexual as not equal was also highlighted as critical and something teachers must manage. The problem was thus pinpointed to how this is practically done in a respectful manner as core values are hard to approach in a constructive way.

**Rita (G2):** I'm mostly working as a SVA teacher. And when we come across something with sexuality a lot of my students are really negative. And then we have what you're talking about. *That I'm not supposed to change their beliefs* and that is very difficult as a first-time teacher. And I think that is very scary- How do I do this in a good way. And not like *you can not say this and you must believe in what I believe*, and still. Just trying to have the respectful environment.

Rita speaks about a bad way to handle students with opposing values as simply telling them that they are wrong. Even though she is negative towards this approach she believes it's something novice teachers might do. In this statement, it is clear that approaching students with opposing values is something they felt was hard. They were thus of the opinion that there must be a more constructive way of approaching the matter but seemed unsure of how that could be done. Despite not knowing how to handle these situations an equally important aspect to mention is that participants were unanimous on the fact that students were not allowed to voice opinions that were in direct contrast to the basic principles in school which could hurt other students and claimed that a classroom must have some rules regarding what opinions one is allowed to say.

Another point important not to overlook in regards to the discussion about students with opposing opinions is that one student spoke out against the other participant of the focus group where this discussion was held and indicated that the concept of speaking about this challenge might be unnecessary and even unfruitful.

**Anna (G1):** I think it's also quite important to remember that quite a lot of studies have shown that it's mainly because the teacher comes in with an attitude that this class won't accept this, and that that really affects the class.

Anna speaks about how the teachers' attitudes and beliefs of their students might influence their teaching. She explained that teachers also have prejudice towards their students which may not necessarily be true, but which make teachers modify their classroom teachings accordingly. If teachers fear that students might react badly, they might modify their behaviour due to their expectation of student behaviour. A teacher might, for instance, believe that students are not mature enough to discuss queer issues in a constructive way and therefore choose to omit or avoid discussions on those topics in order to keep the peace. Avoiding difficult topics would affect students so that they would still carry out problematic behaviours without realizing it and hence affect the classroom environment.

Moreover, preservice teachers in two focus groups spoke about the challenge of

practicing queer theory as speaking about something which they did not have any personal experience of. They felt that they might leave important aspects out and feared that their perspective as normative people might be a hindrance when discussing issues with breaking norms. Participants mentioned that teachers with experience of knowing or identifying as queer themselves might be better equipped to talk about for instance feelings of being seen as other and how to guide students who did not identify as heterosexuals in their identity work. Furthermore, one student states:

**Gustav (G3):** Because you are not black and have not been in the situation. The same thing goes with homosexuality. You cannot talk about a subject you have never been exposed to. If we need to implement that we need to talk about queer or HBTQ society the teachers need to experience it in order to talk about it. I can talk about WW2. But I cannot talk about the feelings because I was not there and that's the challenge.

This statement indicates that there are some things a teacher without personal experience of queer issues cannot speak about. Gustav only states that teachers cannot talk about feelings, but from previous discussions, it became clear that it was beneficial to have personal experience of being or knowing someone who identified as queer in most work related to queer issues.

To conclude, preservice teachers firstly mentioned a challenge with their future practicing of queer theory as not knowing how to implement it in practice. They felt like a risk with trying to queer ELT might be that they in doing so might do it in a bad way for instance when speaking with students with opposing opinions. They also mentioned the aspect of not being very well informed as a hindrance. Lastly, it was mentioned that it may be a challenge to talk about queer issues without having personal experience of being or knowing someone queer.

#### **5.4 Using Materials to Queer ELT**

The challenges and potentials of using materials in ELT were frequently discussed throughout the interviews. One thing participants agreed on as a potential way to practice queer theory was through literature, which they also connected to the syllabus. For instance, Anna discussed how queer theory relates to the syllabus:

**Anna (G1):** Here it says, in the education the student should meet different kinds of spoken and written English and be able to relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge, and I think that is what it is cuz we always have kids in our class that are queer, and then that is their experience, they need to learn how to express themselves. Based on their experience (laughs) And then their experience... is to be homosexual, transsexual, yeah...whatever it might be.

When the participants were asked to look at the syllabus for English 6 to see if they could find anything regarding queer theory or how to work with it, they all said that it was possible, but only if the teacher chose to interpret the curriculum that way. For instance, Kurt said: "I mean, it doesn't say explicitly, like it doesn't it just overall goes, so, you have to kind of interpret." Based on this, working with queer theory would be voluntary and completely up to the individual teacher. Some participants also argued that queer theory absolutely belongs in ELT, as there is evidence for this in for instance the discrimination law, the school law and so on. These rules and laws apply for all subjects in upper secondary school, and therefore also English. Natalie's example of how to actually work with this was "you could for example just think about what text you are going to give them."

Results also showed that participants in all groups agreed that the material teachers have to work with in class is not good enough when it comes to dealing with queer theory. Kurt for instance, says it is challenging to find good material that explains or exemplifies queer theory or different perspectives. This means that teachers gain little support in finding materials and might have a hard time doing so unless they have a personal interest in the matter. Additionally, Natalie said that many English textbooks are stereotypical in their representations of relationships, gender and so on, which makes it very hard for the teachers to work with. In response to Natalie's comment Helene says:

**Helene (G2):** I'm thinking about finding good materials that brings it (queer theory) up to work with.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of any?

**Helene (G2):** Well, not really. It's like Natalie said. Most literature is about boy meets girl. I think it's a big challenge.

Because queer theory or queer perspectives are not explicitly represented or exemplified in the syllabus or school material, it is up to the individual teacher to find good material to use in class. As we can see from the discussions between the participants, it is difficult to do so if one

does not have lots of knowledge about queer theory or a personal interest in such literature, films and other material that could be used in class. It seems like these participants find it burdensome that the responsibility to interpret and find good material should lie on them personally when it comes to queer theory.

One of the other groups discussed how including material from queer writers could be used to show different perspectives.

**Anna (G1):** Yeah, I think what you can do with this is that you incorporate the books and literature and movies made by queer people. And, thereby you get a different perspective than what they are used to, you don't only have to listen to these white cis men that you have been reading about and learning about all your life. So, that could give you a new perspective in the world. I think.

Anna states that including queer writers or generally a broader spectrum of writers that differ from the norm is a good idea. Having student read works by different authors is one way of working with inclusions. However, material written by a queer person does not necessarily have a queer-related topic, and the participants do not discuss further how this would actually be incorporated into ELT. Another discussion related to the inclusion of queer topics in literature was how this could become a problem if teachers only advised particular students to read such literature. Gustav from the second group describes an incident that happened to him in upper secondary school in Swedish class, where the teacher recommended that he read a book by Jonas Gardell because the author was gay, and she knew Gustav was bisexual. "But why should I read a book by Jonas Gardell? *Because you are gay.* Right...ehh. That's not how it works...Way to single me out teacher." Gustav's example shows that teachers perhaps have the right intention, but not the knowledge of how to really incorporate these ideas in a good way. The teacher perhaps thought she had found a material that could benefit Gustav personally, but instead singled him out and made him feel different. Gustav further says that teachers saying "I found a gay author" is very problematic, as it really does not give the students anything concrete to work with, but rather has a negative effect as it is being represented as something different. Thus, inclusion of non-normative authors was seen as something good as long as teachers did not single some students out to read them.

Some participants gave many examples of how ELT could be queered - how literature could be analysed, criticized, and problematized from a queer perspective. Greta, for example,

explained that even if the material is bad, racist, misogynistic, sexist, etc., it can be discussed. “If you don't have queer material, you can analyse the material you have critically.” This means that the material does not necessarily have to include queer topics or be by queer authors in order to be analysed from a queer perspective. Moreover, Natalie said that literature can be world-changing, as it has the power to make you see different perspectives and learn about different experiences, while “working as a platform to formulate your own thoughts, ideas and feelings.” Lastly, Gustav mentioned that the teacher could ask “would it be okay if this book was called *Romeo and Steve* instead of *Romeo and Juliet*.” Just to make them think about the norms and what they implicate. This kind of reasoning is really what queer theory is about and often focuses on. Kumashiro writes a lot about how materials in class should be analysed in a way that applies critical thinking skills so that the students are made aware of harmful norms and oppression (2002, p. 46). Furthermore, Kumashiro gives examples of how teachers can ask such critical questions, for instance, what questions are raised about Native Hawaiians? Which stereotypes are reinforced, which are challenged? What is not said about being Native Hawaiian and “how do those silences make possible and impossible different ways of thinking about Native Hawaiian peoples and experiences?” (2002, p. 43).

To summarize, the theme of materials used to queer ELT showed that participants agreed that the representations that are available in media and other materials are scarce and often stereotypical. All participants agreed that the material available to teachers in ELT is not good enough when it comes to working with queer theory. As there are no clear guidelines in the English syllabus, the participants found it burdensome that the responsibility of the inclusion of queer theory in ELT lies solely on the individual teacher, and many of the participants were unsure how to actually use the material to incorporate this. One suggestion was including queer writers, and only one of the groups had concrete suggestions of how to queer the material used in class by analyzing, criticizing and discussing from a queer perspective.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers' thoughts and reflections regarding practicing queer theory in their future ELT classroom. In order to shed light on these perceptions, attitudes and beliefs a research question was formulated to find out whether preservice teachers

considered queer theory to be important in education, if so, secondly what aspects they found important, and what aspects they found problematic or challenging.

In the results from focus group interviews, four themes emerged from preservice teachers' discussions. The themes identified from qualitative data were the *purpose*, *implementation* and *challenges* of working with queer theory in ELT as well as what *materials* can be used to queer ELT. Results showed that most preservice teachers considered queer theory to be important and relevant to practice in ELT. In relation to the theme of *purposes* it becomes clear that preservice teachers' saw many benefits with using queer theory in ELT. Discussions focused on the role queer theory played in providing normalisation of different sexual identities as well as in supporting students' identity work. Moreover, the inclusion of queer theory was seen as an opportunity to develop understanding, critical thinking skills and the ability to see things from different perspectives. The participants also connected queer theory to the part of the syllabus about learning to communicate with different people from different kinds of background and cultures, so called intercultural communicative competence.

In relation to the theme of *implementation*, the participants agreed that it was very important to avoid tolerance pedagogy and to avoid explicitly working with queer theory, but rather naturally implementing it in other parts of English teaching as that would normalize the topic and not make it something "special" or different. Using gender-neutral pronouns was something that all the groups agreed should be implemented by teachers as a way to represent queer people and support queer students.

The theme of *challenges* showed that there are numerous aspects preservice teachers fear and feel worried about. Some aspects mentioned were not knowing how to implement the theory in practice, implementing strategies of othering unintentionally, feeling of being uninformed and not having enough time to prepare lessons and as a result exclude important aspects. Regarding the topic of *materials*, there was no unanimous conclusion as to how this should be implemented in class. The participants found it very challenging to work with the material, as the material provided to teachers is not queer-friendly and it is up to the individual teacher to find good material. One suggestion was including queer writers, and another was to analyze, criticize and discuss material from a queer perspective.

## **7. Didactic Implications and Future Potential**

In this part the implications of the results of preservice teachers' thoughts and reflections on practicing queer theory in their future ELT classroom will be discussed. In regard to the many challenges, possibilities and thoughts of preservice teachers presented in the results, this part will attempt to discuss the parts of the results that are of the most interest to future teachers engaging in practicing queer pedagogy. All discussions regard hypothetical situations that might be demanding for teachers and therefore regard issues that may not actually happen in their future teaching. However, results imply that there are problems related to queering ELT that may need to be addressed in order for preservice teachers to feel secure in their profession and are therefore highly relevant.

### **7.1 Educating Future Teachers - Including More Norm Critical Aspects in the Teacher Education Program**

Firstly, one interesting aspect of results was the reason stated to queer ELT in order to create acceptance and empathy. This is somewhat troubling seeing that this is essentially the aims of tolerance strategies. Results indicate that preservice teachers might include the use of tolerance strategies in their future ELT classrooms. Sörensdotter states that pupils rather learn about easy-going subjects, for instance feeling empathy for others, instead of challenging their own privileged position (2010, p. 142). In light of this, preservice teachers' ambition to centre on acceptance and empathy might be understood as a more comfortable and well-known choice. Secondly, the knowledge of the usefulness of queer theory among participants varied. While everyone agreed that queer theory had advantages in education generally, some said there were no positive or negative contributing factors for language learning and its relevance in relation to communication skills was mentioned by a single participant. With this in mind, preservice teachers are unaware of one of the most compelling evidence as to why they should engage in queering their subject, and therefore may not be as motivated to teach it or be able to explain its relevance and motivate their future students to learn about it. Moreover, these students seem less likely to engage in queer theory in their ELT classroom.



In conclusion, even though participants had engaged in formal education about norm critique in their undergraduate programs, results imply that preservice teachers may not have fully understood what queering ELT practically means and have limited knowledge of its advantages in their subject. For this reason, we propose that undergraduate teacher programs need to include more queer theory and/or norm- critical perspectives. These courses also need to be related to individual subjects if teachers are going to realise the possibilities it holds in their subject. Without this support, students' do not feel secure with queering ELT and thus may not commit to the task at all or do it in a harmful way. Additionally, Paiz states that teachers early in their career base lesson plans on commercial materials they later reproduce and thus have an impact on teacher's professional development (Paiz 2019, p. 270). Surely, the same can be said about the formal education teachers receive. Formal education on queer theory is the very ground lesson plans are based upon in new teachers' careers which might also be used in future lessons. Therefore, it is essential that teachers are well prepared from the beginning through previous education as the knowledge teachers bring to their classrooms early in their careers influence their future practices as well.

## **7.2 Getting Comfortable with Queer Theory**

Preservice teachers were worried about how to implement queer theory into ELT practice as they feel worried about engaging in harmful practices such as reproducing othering unintentionally. Moreover, they mention a fear of handling discussions with students who might have opposing values in a non-constructive way. Simply put, teachers do not want to offend their students and feel that they might do just that when trying to queer education. With this in mind, we propose that participants need to actively engage in practicing queer theory in order for them to experience similar situations so they can feel secure in how to handle them. Obviously, as one of their greatest fears is to offend students this should not be done when they are interns at schools for the first time. Norm critical courses should rather include practical activities where students have the time to engage in queering teaching materials and make lessons in order to evaluate, compare thoughts and discuss problems and further development so that they feel more safe in doing this in their own ELT classroom. When learning together with other teacher students they can learn from their mistakes and maybe realize that mistakes enable development. Having a humble mindset is crucial when queering ELT as the authority of the all-knowing

teacher must come second, as they learn with and from their students (Björkman, 2010 p. 160).

If future and practicing ESL teachers refrain from trying to include queer theory in their teachings because they are worried about their competence, students may never actively problematize and critically examine their own knowledge of normative discourse and continue to think in normative ways. Without an awareness of their own responsibility in the upkeep of normative ordering, the harmful consequences of heteronormativity and Othering like bullying, alienation, etc. are allowed to persist, damaging both learning environment and students inside lives.

### **7.3 Making an Effort to Work with Queer Theory**

Some preservice teachers did not see the potential in using the *materials* that were available to them, or generally saw materials as an obstacle as they failed to represent queer people or did a poor job in doing so. Some of the students also complained that there is no time to work with queer theory, an argument that was also presented by participants in other similar studies (Paiz, 2018 p.352). However, this does not necessarily have to be an obstacle, as there are many ways to work with queer theory in materials that the teacher has already planned to use in lessons. Materials should not be read as facts that are reproduced and repeated, because this approach hinders critical thinking and the students never get a chance to question the material they are presented with (ibid). Paiz has written a lot about how the ELT classroom can be queered through discussing its materials. Not being presented with ideal materials can give the students the opportunity of queer reading: reading the text with a lens of queer- inquiry (Paiz, 2018 p. 360). The author further states that the text should not be viewed as a source of information, but as a source to engage in heteronormative discourse. In other words, books can be used as starting points for further discussions and inclusive teaching.

Of course, the material that is available for teachers today is problematic and there is room for improvement, as many of the participants have argued. Kumashiro has also criticized the English canon that is taught in English classrooms as it is “biased based on class, race, gender and sexuality, and most of the characters represented are white, middle- class or wealthy, male and heterosexual” (2002, p. 55). It is problematic that only certain identity options are available for the students (Paiz, 2019 p. 353). However, teachers need to see possibilities instead of obstacles when dealing with these issues. Teachers could learn to work with different kinds of

material from a queer perspective, and always have a norm critical perspective. The books preservice teachers perceive as queer may not always be available, therefore it is necessary for them to learn how to work with what they have at hand. One problem is that ELT students need to either have a personal interest in such material so that the interest transfers to their ELT or have some kind of education to deepen their knowledge about it, to realize the potential of available material. In order to understand how to work with materials which at first glance may seem impossible to work with from a queer perspective, we propose that these kinds of texts should be included in the English literary canon and further actively read from a queer stand point. If teachers lack experience of reading books which are not obviously queer, they cannot be expected to know how to read and criticize books from a queer perspective with their students in the future.

## **8. Limitations and Further Research**

When talking about the quality requirements for research, two important concepts are validity and reliability. Differences in the results due to variations in circumstances leads to unreliable results. In qualitative research, two major sources of variation are the individual researcher and the individual respondent (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 27).

Moderating a focus group is challenging as the moderator has multiple responsibilities, such as making sure everyone has a say and preventing group thinking. The individual researcher plays an important role in the results as analysis are based upon the experience, subjective and sensitivity and training of the researcher (Dörnyei, 2007 p. 28). In other words, the reliability of results might vary depending on how good we are at moderating the discussions. Moderators are not traditional interviewers, because the purpose of a focus group interview is that the participants discuss with each other (Wibeck, 2010 p. 11). However, there is a risk that we as moderators have ask too many questions or failed to involve all the participants so that not all voices are heard.

Some of the limitations of this study are regarding the participants. One of the limitations was the number of participants we had, and the fact that we only managed to have three focus group interviews. How many participants a focus group should have varies in literature. However, because we were two moderators during the interviews, focus groups might have been more fruitful with more than three participants per group, as the moderators probably would have

been less involved. Another limitation regarding participants was the fact one teacher did not have English as a subject at all, but Swedish. Due to miscommunication we became aware of this when it was too late to organise another focus group interview. Another limitation was the fact that due to a last-minute drop out one focus group only held two people instead of three and thus instead had the nature of a semi-structured interview. Because this group only had two participants, it might affect the results of the study, as the group might have come to different conclusions if there were more people present to discuss with.

Another aspect that could be seen as limiting our study is the choice of participants. As all the participant groups were very homogenous, it would affect what kind of discussions emerged, which in turn affects the result. If he had more variety in our focus groups in terms of participants, perhaps we would have had different results to our study. However, having homogenous groups is also recommended by Wibeck as she claims homogenous groups can make people more relaxed and comfortable when discussing sensitive topics (2010, p. 64).

Using an interview guide during all of the focus groups ensured that all the participants discussed the same themes and conversations are equivalent. However, one might understand questions differently based on how they are formulated. The risk with having an interview guide and pre-prepared questions is also that they will affect the answers from the participants and guide the discussion, even if this is something we wish to avoid. If we had had different questions, we might have received different answers, arguments and discussions, which is why it is important to note that the questions themselves can create limitations for the collection of the material. A pilot interview was also held to evaluate the interview guide. However, the pilot interview was held with one participant over the phone due to the hardship in finding suitable willing participants for a pilot interview. Graduate students learning other languages were considered, but as an understanding of the English subject is central to the aim of this essay one single participant with the exact same profile as the participants in the focus groups was deemed superior to the alternative. The change in setting and numbers of participants may not be so critical in regard to the aims of the pilot interview.

Considering future research, the results of our study could be compared to similar studies with practicing teachers as participants instead of preservice teachers, in order to examine if the results would be similar, or what other ideas and results would perhaps emerge. It would be particularly interesting to find out if teachers ideas and beliefs change in the early stages of their

careers, perhaps because they find themselves in a particular practice context, for instance that the school administration where they work does not encourage queer theory. A similar result emerged from Rhode's study where teachers said they did not work with queer theory with their students because of institutional sanction and lack of encouragement from the administration (2017, p. 102). Another aspect that could be of interest is to what degree teachers are affected by their teacher colleagues with different views and practices.

Moreover, as indicated in this study, the education preservice teachers receive from undergraduate teacher programs is crucial for their future practicing of queer theory. Therefore, future research could also be concerned with how norm critical courses are taught, what they include and how much time norm critique are entitled in the teacher education program. Rhodes discusses in the results of her study that teachers' insecurity, discomfort and lack of knowledge related to queer theory can be mitigated through professional development (2017, p. 104). Thus, it would be much more convenient to educate preservice teachers before they start to work as teachers, but it could also be interesting to see what options exist for professional development for teachers as well.

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## Appendix 1

### Förfrågan om deltagande i gruppintervju

Hej

Vi heter Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin och studerar vår sista termin till gymnasielärare i engelska på Högskolan Väst. Som avslutning i vår utbildning skriver vi just nu examensarbete II med didaktisk inriktning. Vår forskning handlar om att få mer kunskap och förståelse för hur lärarstudenter förhåller sig till normkritisk pedagogik/ queer teori. Queerteori går kort att sammanfatta som olika teoretiska perspektiv som problematiserar den sociala konstruktionen av kön och identitet, samt ifrågasätter heteronormativa sociala ordningar, hierarkier och privilegier. Vi anser att detta är viktigt för blivande lärare att reflektera om, då de har ett stort ansvar kring vilka perspektiv, röster och bilder som målas upp i klassrummet samt relaterar till skolans värdegrundsuppdrag.

Vårt syfte är inte att reda ut frågor om "rätt" eller "fel". Det övergripande syftet med vår studie är att genom intervjuer ta reda på hur lärarstudenter i engelska ämnet tänker kring queer pedagogik, men också undersöka vilka eventuella möjligheter, svårigheter och utmaningar som tänkas uppstå i samband med applicering av queer pedagogik i undervisningen.

#### Genomförande

För att samla in material till studien skulle vi vilja bjuda in er om ni vill medverka i en fokusgruppsintervju, dvs. en gruppintervju på 4-6 personer, som kommer vara ungefär 1 timma. Innan intervjun startar kommer ni få läsa en kort sammanfattning eller artikel om ämnet, eller eventuellt titta på en kort video. Och vi bjuder självklart på fika

Intervjun kommer vara **Tisdag 18/02 kl 10.00** på Högskolan Väst, **grupprum E137**

**Hantering av data och sekretess** Genomförande av uppsatsen är reglerad av etiska riktlinjer för tystnadsplikt och därför kommer all insamlad information att koda och behandlas på ett

konfidentiellt sätt, vilket innebär att det bearbetas, analyseras och redovisas så att ingen enskild person kommer att kunna kännas igen. Intervjun spelas in så att vi kan transkribera materialet, och sedan kommer det raderas efter projektet är färdigt. Materialet kommer inte att användas till något annat än den egna analysen och den färdiga anonymiserade uppsatsen kommer att publiceras i DiVA.

**Frivillighet** Att delta är helt frivilligt. Om du av någon anledning under studiens gång vill avbryta ditt deltagande meddelar du bara oss detta och du behöver inte uppge något skäl till varför. Ansvariga för projektet är Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin, Högskolan Väst.Handledare är professor Alastair Henry, Högskolan Väst.

Om du har några frågor, synpunkter eller tankar, kontakta oss gärna på mail:

nora.stimjanin@student.hv.se

[alvina.bertilsson@student.hv.se](mailto:alvina.bertilsson@student.hv.se)

Alastair Henry: [alastair.henry@hv.se](mailto:alastair.henry@hv.se)

Med vänlig hälsning, Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin

## Appendix 2

### Informationsbrev

Hej

Vi heter Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin och studerar vår sista termin till gymnasielärare i engelska på Högskolan Väst. Som avslutning i vår utbildning skriver vi just nu examensarbete II med didaktisk inriktning. Vår forskning handlar om att få mer kunskap och förståelse för hur lärarstudenter förhåller sig till normkritisk pedagogik/ queer teori.

Det övergripande syftet med vår studie är att genom intervjuer ta reda på hur lärarstudenter i engelska ämnet tänker kring queer pedagogik, men också undersöka vilka eventuella möjligheter, svårigheter och utmaningar som tänkas uppstå i samband med applicering av queer pedagogik i undervisningen.

Vi skriver detta brev för att be om ert medgivande för användandet av data insamlad i samband med den fokusgruppsintervju du medverkat i vår studie.

Genomförande av studien är reglerad av etiska riktlinjer för tystnadsplikt och därför kommer all insamlad information att bearbetas, analyseras och redovisas så att ingen enskild person kommer att kunna kännas igen. Intervjun spelas in för att underlätta transkribering men sedan raderas ljudfiler. Materialet kommer inte att användas till något annat än den egna analysen och den färdiga studien kommer att publiceras i DiVA. Att delta är helt frivilligt. Om du vill avbryta ditt deltagande någon gång, även efter material insamlade meddelar du bara oss detta och du behöver inte uppge något skäl till varför. Ansvariga för projektet är Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin, Högskolan Väst.Handledare är professor Alastair Henry, Högskolan Väst.

Om du medger att vi får använda material insamlat vid fokusgruppsintervju skriver du under här:

*namn*

*datum*

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Med vänlig hälsning, Alvina Bertilsson och Nora Stimjanin

## Appendix 3

### Queer theory

Queer can be a concept that can have many different meanings, and mean different things for different people. Therefore, it is hard to define the word queer in one way.

#### *Queer can be personal*

Queer can be a way of showing that you feel like you do not fit in what is commonly called the heteronorm, the norm that says that the “normal” is to be heterosexual. For example because you feel you want to be with more than one person at the same time, or want to be in a family with more than two parents, or because you define yourself as asexual. Queer can also be a gender identity, meaning people who don't define themselves as strictly men or women, or who in other ways go against the norm of gender.

#### *Queer can be political*

Queer can also be that you want the society to change regarding how most people view gender and expectations regarding that. No matter how you view yourself, maybe you want to show that it is up to each individual how one wants to be described. Queer can also be a perspective, which means that you question why some looks or way to be are viewed as normal, while others are not. It could be about how you are supposed to be or look as a man or a woman, why there are not more than two legal genders, or why someone thinks it is more normal to be in love with or want to have sex with someone with a different gender than their own. Some people call what they create queer, such as movies, music, art, text or something else. It means that the art represents people that live outside the heteronorm or that it questions the heteronorm.

#### *Queer can be about research*

There is also research that is called queer theory. This kind of research investigates why certain bodies, genders or identities are viewed as more normal than others. Queer theory questions what is natural, and shows power relations related to norms of sexuality for example. Queer research can e.g help show how and why LGBTQ is discriminated against.

### *Queer pedagogy*

Queer-pedagogy, or what in Sweden goes under the concept of *normkritisk pedagogik*, basically deals with paying attention to all norms that might influence education. Even the teacher's own personal experiences may influence their professional role. Knowledge that we consciously or unconsciously lean on in our work, influence how we mediate social interaction with students, what material we choose and what perspectives are highlighted in that material, as well as how we plan lessons and what kind of leaders we are. In the queer- pedagogic viewpoint it is the teacher's job to engage students in pedagogies which criticise and questions taken for granted norms and all identities and their discursal maintenance.

## Appendix 4

### Intervjufrågor:

**Öppningsfrågor:** Depending on the composition of the group, ice - breaker question.

**Introduktionsfrågor:** används för att introducera det ämnet som ska diskuteras. kan ge möjlighet att reflektera kring egna erfarenheter

- A. What is your experience with the practise of queer-theory in your VFU
- B. Do you think queer-theory belongs in ELT, why/ why not ?
- C. In your opinion, what is the teacher's mission in relation to practicing queer-theory in ELT ?
- D. What do you think about the practise of queer-theory in English education in general ?

### Övergångsfrågor:

ska medverka till att deltagarna ser ämnet i ett större perspektiv och blir medvetna om hur andra betraktar det.

- A. How do you think students might react if you introduce/ not introduce queer-theories in English class?
- B. What are your thoughts about the syllabus of English in relation to queer-related work ?**
- C. As a future English teacher, do you think it is your responsibility to create a safe environment for all students to explore their sexual identity?**

### Nyckelfrågor:

ska vara mellan 2 till 5 stk, och mer tid ska tillägnas dessa. Ställs efter 1/3 av tiden har gått.

- A. What potential do you think practicing queer-theory might bring in ESL classrooms ?
- B. What challenges do you think practicing queer-theory might bring in ESL classrooms ?
- C. How would you relate to your students, how you refer to them (what are your pronouns and how do you identify)
  
- D. What potential do you see in materials used in class, e.g. literature and films?

**Avslutande frågor:** (moderater gör en kort sammanfattning av huvudpoängen..)

Have we missed anything? Does anyone want to add anything?