

**SINGULAR AND NONBINARY *THEY*:  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INCLUSION OF  
GENDER-NEUTRAL ENGLISH PRONOUNS IN  
OFFICIAL FINNISH NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION  
AND EFL TEXTBOOKS**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Englanninkielinen sukupuolineutraali 3. persoonan yksilön pronomini (<i>they</i>) on historiallisesti ollut kiistanalainen akateemisissa ja englannin opetuksen konteksteissa. Se on silti osa käytettyä ja elettyä englannin kieltä. Pronomini on saanut myös viime vuosina mediahuomiota muunsukupuolisen väestön englanninkielisenä persoonapronominina, sillä perinteisesti maskuliiniset tai feminiiniset 3. persoonan pronominit eivät välttämättä kuvaa heitä.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus analysoi englanninkielisten sukupuolineutraalien 3. persoonan yksilön pronomien sisältämistä englanti vieraana kielenä -oppiaineeseen suomalaisessa julkisessa opetuksessa. Tutkimusaineistona oli englannin kielen opetusta johdatteleva dokumentaatio, eli <i>perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet, lukio-opetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet</i>, sekä <i>eurooppalainen kielitaidon viitekehys</i>, joista tutkittiin sukupuoliäiheita ja englannin oppiaineen tavoitteita; toisena aineistona olivat englannin oppikirjat <i>High five! 3, Go for it! 6, On the Go 3, Elements 1+2</i> ja <i>Elements 4</i>, joista tutkittiin englanninkielisiä 3. persoonan pronomineja.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että muunsukupuolisuutta ei käsitellä dokumentaatioissa, vaikka tasa-arvoa ja inklusiota pidetään tärkeinä arvoina suomalaisessa koulutuksessa. Neljä viidestä oppikirjasta sisälsi sukupuolineutraaleja 3. persoonan pronomineja, mutta ne olivat määrällisesti merkittävästi vähäisempiä kuin perinteisesti maskuliiniset tai feminiiniset 3. persoonan pronominit. Maskuliinisia 3. persoonan pronomineja löytyi huomattavasti enemmän kuin muita. Sukupuolineutraaleja 3. persoonan pronomineja ei myöskään käytetty muunsukupuolisissa konteksteissa. Tässä valossa Suomen englannin kielen opetus ei sisällä sukupuolineutraaleja 3. persoonan pronomineja tarpeeksi niiden merkitysten ja käyttötapojen ilmenemiseksi kielen opiskelijoille.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

There are few grammatical structures in the English language that have been made a topic of contemporary discourse to the extent of *pronouns*. Specifically, the use of and necessity for *gender-neutral pronouns* have historically been discussed in both academic and non-academic circles, with arguments for and against having ebbed and flowed in time. As of the time during which this thesis was written, the question whether or not *gender-neutral 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns* (GN3Ps) such as singular *they* are acceptable in English was solidifying towards their acceptance in certain contexts of meaning.

However, the approval of GN3Ps has not yet translated directly into their inclusion in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning contexts. One reason for this is the relative newness of the academic spread of GN3Ps. However, linguistic decorum is not the only sphere of argumentation for the rejection of GN3Ps, as they also prominently touch on gender discourse. GN3Ps relate particularly strongly to the chosen modes of representation of certain gender minorities, which gives reason for some groups to oppose their acceptance. Specifically, *non-binary* people popularly request singular *they* to be used to refer to themselves, and those who do not accept nonbinary people reject GN3Ps in turn.

Nonbinary gender identities remain an under-researched phenomenon in most human culture (Richards 2016: 98). This is despite apparent societal progress towards the wider inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. Understanding and awareness of these demographics has grown notably during the current and past decade, which is reflected in social and legal movements and, for example, academic attention to the subject. The state of attitudes towards the representation of these minority groups have been researched in a few university student -led theses. However, the attention given specifically to the nonbinary demographic remains relatively low both internationally and in Finland.

It is for this reason that this thesis seeks to spread understanding of nonbinary identities as well as the notion of gender as a *cultural construct* where the choice of language is part of gender expression. In this light, gendered pronouns hold meaning for linguistic interaction and the identity construct of a person, giving them both social and personal relevance. Therefore, the possible cultural and personal implications of pronouns deserve academic analysis to better establish their nature in special cases such as with the nonbinary demographic. Unless educators and authorities are made aware of the realities that affect gender minorities, it is illogical to expect educational frameworks to be built to accommodate their special circumstances.

In addition to the themes of gender, GN3Ps especially touch on a lot of past and on-going discourse as an item of English grammar, so there is reason to analyze their place in EFL education. This can be done in part by conducting analysis on the official guidelines on education, such as the Finnish national core curricula: since they set the basis for education, documents like the core curricula inevitably contain attitudes toward EFL content, be they conveyed explicitly or implicitly. This is also the case for what the documentation has to say on the topic of gender in society and education, and whether nonbinary gender is included within its diversity. This research analyzes official documentation from these perspectives.

In order to make deductions on the possible inclusion of GN3Ps in classroom practices, it is important to also scrutinize EFL learning material, namely EFL textbooks. The representation of ethnic, sexual, and gender demographics in learning material are a popular topic for research, but so far less so when it comes the nonbinary gender minority. The topics of nonbinary gender and English grammar overlap meaningfully in GN3Ps. This thesis thereby approaches textbooks with focus on how pronominal grammar directly affects representation.

To clarify, this current research aims to explore the matters of gender diversity and standard English pronouns through the analysis of data gathered from official Finnish educational documents and the pronominal data from a pool of five EFL textbooks. These two types of data and their subsequent analyses were intended to showcase what sort of grammatical and gender discourse makes up the framework of Finnish EFL learning. The study thereby illustrates the gender-markedness of learning content, and from there conjectures can be made over whether official national gender inclusive ideology is met in practice. The topic was chosen in congruity with contemporary discourse over gender inclusion in education in Finland. A central goal of

the research is to spread awareness of the singular 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun *they* through elucidating its properties and status in current EFL education.

The thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 covers the theoretical background of the topic, going over the purpose of pronouns as a grammatical class and the specific meanings of GN3Ps such as singular *they*. This includes illustration of how GN3Ps relate to the nonbinary gender construct. A following section discusses the framework of the Finnish education system, specifically the vital role textbooks play in EFL practices. Chapter 3, in turn, describes the research design of this current study, including the analytic tools and choice of data to be analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the whole of the analysis, with close reading on official national documentation and descriptive statistical analysis of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns (3PPs) discovered in the data. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with a final discussion on the findings and their applicability for educational discourse and further research.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The use and variance of pronouns

Pronouns, as they are understood, are a grammatical classification of words that are present in all currently known and academically recorded languages in use. Pronouns are by nature referential in that they *replace* nouns or noun phrases in sentences while denoting something of their nature, such as number or social rank (Mühlhäusler et al 1990: 9).

The process by which the human mind understands the linking of pronoun and target noun contains much psycholinguistic depth, but in simple terms pronouns represent persons, objects, and ideas conceptually (Simon & Wiese 2002: 1, 4). They are thereby also crucial for efficient language use. An example of this process of replacement and representation in English can be illustrated as the following:

*Elise found Elise's book report in Elise's backpack where Elise had left it previously.*

This sentence is without pronouns, and as a result, the proper noun “Elise” must be repeated for the full content of the sentence to be conveyed: Elise is both the agent in the sentence as well as the owner of the mentioned objects. However, this form looks and sounds awkward as an instance of English, since this degree of repetition of the same noun in a single sentence is extremely rare in common parlance. By introducing personal pronouns into the mix, the unwieldy repetition is eliminated:

*Elise found her book report in her backpack where she had left it previously.*

Here, the possessive 3PP *her* and subjective 3PP *she* have replaced the proper noun “Elise” where it had previously been repeated. Since the context surrounding the example sentence does not present any other possible active agent or owner for the objects, it is still “Elise” who presumably fulfills these roles in the sentence structure. Therefore, this sentence carries the same respective meaning to the mind of its reader as the previous example, but without repetition, making it an instance of more natural-sounding English.

Pronouns work in a more-or-less similar fashion of representation and replacement in languages other than English, but there are certain language-specific pronominal features that deserve note. For one, a language will always contain its own unique connotation in its words that may or may not be translatable to other languages in an uncomplicated manner, and this is the case for pronouns especially. While pronouns are fairly easy to detect in a language and up for linguistic comparison, “[t]he sets of pronouns differ enormously” between languages (Mühlhäusler et al 1990: 9, 11). Since pronouns are linked to how a language user conceptualizes persons, objects, and ideas, they have a critical role regarding social relations, which are inevitably always specific to a given culture.

For example, in Japanese, personal pronouns contain a multitude of connotations about the age, rank, and position of a person as well as intimacy between speakers, making the correct choice of pronoun crucial for acceptable social interaction (Panagiotidis 2002: 184). In Sinhala, certain 3PPs are part of normal conversation in one context while denoting disrespect in others (Premawardhena 2002: 71, 79). These two systems differ from English notably in the paradigmatic depth and severity of choice. However, even English pronouns have certain features that are informed by recognition of and respect towards a person, notably in the concept of *gender*.

According to Simon and Wiese (2002: 2, 4), pronouns often distinguish characteristics of a person in gender, which may correlate with the physical *sex* of a person or else some other, conceptual understanding of gender. Mühlhäusler et al (1990: 69, 74) note that pronouns include gender as a characteristic even in genetically unrelated languages, making gender a highly prominent feature in pronominal grammar. Stahlberg et al (2007: 163) state on the topic: “The importance of the social category sex is also reflected in the grammatical structures of most, if not all, languages“. However, while gender in language is admittedly quite prevalent in human cultures, this is not the case for all languages across the board. Indeed, gender is likewise an

area where cultural distinctions and concepts guide how one uses language, as there are “large differences between languages concerning to what extent gender pervades words, grammar and syntax” (Bäck et al 2015: 72).

To delve into this topic, a distinction must be drawn between the *natural gender* of real-world entities such as animate, living beings and linguistic, *grammatical gender* which is used to communicate grammatical relationships between words and linguistic structures (Mühlhäusler et al 1990: 69). Linguistic, grammatical gender is predominately a method for noun categorization, as certain languages such as German and French add a qualifier of masculine, feminine or neuter even to inanimate objects (Curzan 2003: 13, 16). While this system of grammatical gender may be argued to be wholly arbitrary as a social and linguistic construct, there is more often some systematic pattern in the semantics of it (Curzan 2003: 12, 17). Nonetheless, this current thesis focuses rather on the former set of gender within language, i.e., *natural gender* that recognizes characteristics of living beings and demands use of pronouns thereof.

In natural gender languages, the language a person uses to refer to others is chosen according to what is known of their gender. As a result, natural gender languages that lack gender in noun categorization still retain gender-specific pronouns and thereby, gender as a relevant and frequent reference in both speech and text form (Stahlberg et al 2007: 164, 165). Natural gender languages such as English and Swedish have gender-specific 3PPs, distinguishing male pronouns (e.g., *he; han*) from female (e.g., *she; hon*) (Bäck et al 2015: 72).

In contrast to this highly gendered language use of both linguistic grammatical gender languages and natural gender languages, there are also *genderless* or *gender-neutral* languages, where there are no gender-specific pronouns whatsoever, such as Finnish and Turkish (Stahlberg et al 2007: 164; Bäck 2015: 72). Nevertheless, this lack of gender in pronouns does not in itself eliminate gender as a social category in these languages, since as Abbou and Baider (2016: 9) observe, they still contain words for different genders. Also, for example, words for certain professions have gender-specific variants in these languages. Most recorded cultures have recognized gender as significant enough to distinguish it by language, whether on nominal or lexical level.

However, as was mentioned previously, language is highly tied to cultural notions, which change and evolve historically. The contrast between gendered and genderless languages

“provides an understanding of gender complexity in language” (Abbou & Baider 2016: 9), and this includes how gender may change as a category or concept within a culture. These changes subsequently affect language as well. Worth mention is the fact that some languages have lost gender as a characteristic in pronouns and lexical words. As particular example of this is English, which lost grammatical gender in noun categorization, leaving Modern English with gendered pronouns for only animate beings – as a clear exception among Indo-Germanic languages to which English belongs. (Curzan 2003: 16, 20). In history, an object that was previously interpreted as masculine rather than feminine on a linguistic level could, in time, change into something different in the minds of language users.

This process of change in language also touches on how words relating to animate beings, such as pronouns, may change in history or else according to a situation. Stahlberg et al (2007: 163) state: “[T]he way female and male persons are referred to in a language is affected by the ‘gender belief system’”. In natural gender languages, then, gender is believed to be quite vital as a characteristic. However, even in such languages where referral to the gender of a person is built into the common linguistic scheme, a situation may arise where gender is irrelevant to or unavailable in the given context. This, too, logically guides the choice of 3PPs in a given situation.

In the case of English, singular 3PPs are the only grammatical form to maintain the gender system on the linguistic level. According to Curzan (2003: 2, 20), popular thought recognizes the singular pronouns of *he*, *she* and *it* as reflecting a triple-gender system in English with male, female and neuter forms. Although the pronoun *it* may be used to refer to animate beings as well as objects, it is commonly used only for not-human animate beings, such as animals. Jones and Mullany (2019: 337) fairly point out that sociolinguistic discourse has brought up the need for neutral pronouns to refer to human beings as well. *It* does not fulfill this need adequately, meaning that there must be another way to refer to a person without making a case on gender in English. This resulting need, in its part, aptly represents how the spheres of culture, language, and gender coincide particularly in the form of pronouns.

## 2.2 The uses and controversies of singular *they*

In addition to the traditionally masculine *he* and feminine *she*, English has a gender-neutral 3<sup>rd</sup> singular pronoun in *they*. The popular English dictionary Merriam-Webster (2020) lists four distinct meanings of singular *they* as follows:

- a. used with a singular indefinite pronoun antecedent.
- b. used with a singular antecedent to refer to an unknown or unspecified person.
- c. used to refer to a single person whose gender is intentionally not revealed.
- d. used to refer to a single person who is nonbinary.

Of these four, meanings a. and b. both have *they* function together with an *antecedent*. An antecedent is a word that is referred to with a pronoun within a sentence or utterance, which in this case is the singular *they*. For these two meanings, *they* is tied to an indefinite nature, where the person referred to in the sentence is somehow obscured, impossible to quantify, or else irrelevant. For meaning a., *indefinite pronouns* are pronouns that replace nouns or noun phrases in a sentence, but in a manner that obfuscates them, e.g. words such as *anyone*, *everyone*, *someone*, *nobody*.

Consider the following example sentence:

“Help *someone*, and *they* will help you in return.”

In this sentence, *they* refers to the antecedent singular indefinite pronoun “someone”, which does not qualify anything about the person in question. The pronoun instead refers to a possibility of a person instead of any definite, real-life or else specific human entity. This lack of specificity continues in meaning b. with the following example sentence:

“The *culprit* knew what *they* were doing.”

Here, *they* refers back to the noun “culprit”. The person assigned the word culprit is kept unknown to the reader, meaning that their gender can not be indicated through only the masculine *he* or the feminine *she*, leaving *they* as the correct singular pronoun of choice. This would also be the case if the supposed gender of the culprit in question was wholly irrelevant to the meaning conveyed. As such, in situations where there is need for a singular pronoun to refer to multiple possible persons, or else encompassing all people regardless of gender, singular *they*

is commonly used in English parlance (Hekanaho 2020: 14; Stormbom 2022: 878, 889). In this manner, singular *they* functions as a *generic*, or else *epicene*, pronoun as a gender-neutral way to discuss a conceptual prototype of a group or a person whose gender is unknown. Consider the following sentence:

“A *student* will keep *his* things in an orderly manner.”

In the case of this sentence, the word *student* does not refer to any single individual in a setting, but the concept of a single student in a whole group of students. This conceptualization of a student as necessitating the masculine possessive 3PP *his* is not incorrect in itself, but it is highly dependent on the surrounding context of the sentence. If this sentence was to be uttered in a co-ed school, there is a chance that it would not encompass the female population of the students. Compare this effect to that within the following example:

“A *student* will keep *their* things in an orderly manner.”

Here, by substituting the masculine pronoun *his* with the gender-neutral *they*, the prototypical concept of a student includes both male and female individuals, or else does not deny either as the possible target of reference. This is the essential function of singular *they* as a generic or epicene pronoun: it encompasses people without outright limitation based on gender, making it a convenient grammatical tool for certain situations.

However, in the discourse surrounding linguistic decorum in English, singular *they* is not the indisputable choice for contexts that necessitate an epicene or generic pronoun. While there notably exist earlier records of singular *they* in use than singular *you*, in time singular *they* came to be considered a faux pas due to it sharing a form with the plural 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun *they* (Baron 2018; Curzan 2003: 71-72). The argument in its barest essence is that it is incorrect or else confusing to have the same word refer to both singular and plural cases. In this line of thinking, singular *they* is not seen as an appropriate option for generic or epicene contexts, or any context at all. Arguments over this supposed grammatical complication have taken place in both academic linguistics and commonplace discourse, and they are still ongoing in some circles (Curzan 2003: 58, 71).

Looking at the matter historically, there are clear observable trends in the acceptance and use of singular *they* in English. Curzan (2003: 72) describes how Old English had both *he* and *they*

as a pronoun for generic cases, and both moved into Modern English where they have been in frequent use up to current day. But there are differences in their estimation, as Mühlhäusler et al (1990: 231, 232, 240) explain that English academia has historically tried to promote generic *he* above generic *they* in standardized style guides.

However, just as there is argumentation against the use of *they* as a generic pronoun, the surrounding rhetoric took a turn after the year 2000, when a gender-political view started to gain traction on the topic (Curzan 2003: 79). Criticisms of sexist language included the case against gender bias in the choice of pronouns: while widely used, generic *he* could not refer effectively to something that relates to both male and female genders (Julé 2008: 13). According to this argument, generic *he* does not represent the populace realistically, skewing the view into a male-dominated, misogynistic direction where the female is aberrant (ibid.). Non-sexist alternatives for a generic pronoun have been researched empirically, and these include *he or she* – or vice versa, *she or he* –, but this expression often becomes too unwieldy for natural English use (Stalhberg 2007: 174; Curzan 2003: 79).

Feminist thought has still had a clear influence on this topic, leading to further awareness of singular *they* as a natural option for a generic pronoun; its use has subsequently become more far-spread and accepted in both academia and common English, surpassing that of generic *he* (Stormbom 2020: 195; Stormbom 2022: 883, 891) Jones and Mullany (2019: 338) recount that singular *they* is accepted in multiple English-speaking countries as a legitimate option for generic pronoun and endorsed in dictionaries, the press, and linguistic circles. While there has been research into the nuances in the process of choice in generic pronouns, *they* has most often come out as the most neutral option. Singular *they* is quite simply more inclusive of all possible people and seamless to use than other currently offered alternatives for a generic, epicene pronoun. Even academic circles currently use singular *they* for generic epicene contexts more than other pronouns, although this choice has been more individually defined rather than according to standardized style guides (Stormbom 2020: 198, 200, 202).

Stormbom (2020: 195; 2022: 880, 889) affirms that while gender-inclusive and progressive perspectives have had a far-reaching impact on the use of GN3Ps, a degree of gender stereotyping may still affect the choice in generics in English parlance. Strict elimination of other, traditionally gendered pronouns as an option is unattainable and, therefore, not purposeful.

Rather, it is important to be open to and aware of the meanings and uses that singular *they* offers to the English language. As singular *they* has become more accepted by English-speaking people and certain linguistic authorities, such as prominent dictionaries, its place in the language has been affirmed.

### 2.3 Language as a code in the *nonbinary* gender construct

In order to expound further on the meanings of singular *they* that require its acknowledgement as a legitimate grammatical form, more must be made of the uses listed by Merriam-Webster (2020). The fourth use therein is described as follows:

d. used to refer to a single person who is nonbinary.

A *nonbinary* person is one whose *gender identity* does not adhere strictly to the male-female binary that is traditionally thought to form the basis of biological human sex. Nonbinary identities are conceptualized as being somewhere between the male-female binary without confinement to only one end of the spectrum, or else outside the binary entirely (Motmans 2017: 119).

Nonbinary identities are considered part of the *transgender* category of gender identity. Transgender people are defined by a will or need to change their gender expression from the sex that was assigned to them at birth (SETA 2020a; SETA 2020b). In contrast, those whose gender experience and expression reflect their assigned sex are labeled as *cisgender*. Motmans (2017: 119) explains that while people who identify as nonbinary are considered a small demographic when compared to the whole of the human population, nonbinary genders have historically existed universally in many distinct cultures across the world.

Academia has begun to acknowledge this historical continuity and its modern equivalents, as the term for nonbinary gender was established in discourse in earnest and subsequently made legitimate as a critical research topic (Melanen 2019: 1). This, too, reflects the growing acceptance of transgender demographics in the cultural zeitgeist. However, despite this discernible wave towards further inclusion, people in the nonbinary demographic are marginalized alongside its wider transgender community and are at risk of discrimination and harm worldwide (ibid.; Huuska 2010: 155). This risk of rejection and physical, mental, and social abuse is well documented in autobiographical material by nonbinary people (Holma et al 2018).

Research into the challenges faced by nonbinary people is quite uniform in their results. The *Hyvinvoiva sateenkaarinuori* (translated as "The healthy rainbow youth") research project cataloguing the wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals in the 15–to–25 age range in Finland found that of the nonbinary – and other trans – demographic, many had experienced direct harassment (Taavetti 2015). Appropriately, the participants had a clear fear of parental and institutional rejection based entirely on their chosen gender expression.

A study by Taylor et al (2019: 198, 199) into the life experiences of nonbinary people found that they had to hide their gender identity in many public situations in order to avoid potential discrimination, and that this discrimination was partially due to lack of awareness of nonbinary identities as real and valid. This lack of awareness is in line with beliefs present in other studies on gender minorities, as Fiani and Han (2019: 187, 190) illustrate powerful systematic challenges that touch on nonbinary people in a lack of media representation, safe access to public spaces, and overt discrimination as well as pressure to conform to the cisgender population. Additionally, negative attitudes and statements of non-acceptance from cisgender people towards the nonbinary and trans demographics are present strongly in the media and in many a study, including that of Hekanaho (2020: 151, 167). This *cis-* and *heteronormativity* cause an atmosphere of intolerance within a culture, which in turn leads people to acts of hate and exclusion towards those from gender and sexual minorities.

However, modern medical perspectives that strive for the acceptance of transgender people have started to acknowledge nonbinary identities as valid and argue that "[m]ental health professionals should not impose a binary view of gender" on people (World Professional Association for Transgender Health 2011: 1, 9, 16; Richards et al 2016: 95, 96). Simply put, nonbinary people exist and deserve respect towards their chosen mode of gender expression. The Finnish organization for LGBTQ liberation SETA (2020a; 2020b) and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2011: 9) recommend that visibility in the media and open, gender-sensitive treatment would promote the wellbeing of the nonbinary demographic.

Inherent to understanding the concept of genders outside the traditionally rigid division of male and female is the theory of gender as a *social construct*. During the 1970's, notable feminist influence Anne Oakley articulated the distinction of biologically and physically determined *sex* from that of *gender*, which in turn is compiled from acquired social characteristics and

behaviors (Julé 2008: 5). In these terms, gender is socially conditioned by the surrounding culture as repeated performances of presentation, which are then institutionalized into common-sense understanding of gender roles (Julé 2008: 5, 6; Melanen 2019: 5).

According to the social construct theory of gender, it is dangerous to simplify gender to merge uniformly with biological sex, as this *biological determinism* may be used to restrict rights and social mobility of certain demographics (Julé 2008: 7). For example, the thought that women are by rule the weaker sex has historically been used to justify their exclusion from certain professions and social circles, which again, are defined socially. Likewise, the presupposition that women are the better maternal influence in the life of a child may be used to deny the rights of a father in any given situation, or else narrow the accepted range of emotional expression of men.

If one is to believe in the equal rights of people to pursue happiness in freedom, sex should not be permitted to restrict the ways people express themselves socially. Another fact that supports this view is that gender has historically been a mutable category, where gendered expression and roles are dependent on the given time and context (Curzan 2003: 29). This thesis thereby subscribes to the notion that gender is a social category which includes trans- and nonbinary genders as just as natural as the cultural constructs of male and female.

Language especially greatly influences how performances of gender are defined. For one, language creates the basis on which humans conceptualize things around them: language labels the categories for humans that are created within a culture, and it is by those labels, i.e., words, that humans communicate or else identify. Without words, it is difficult if not impossible to communicate complex meaning between people, and social categories such as gender are notably complex as social constructs. Language is an institution in itself, and it carries notable authority over how different kinds of people are evaluated (Melanen 2019: 5). Since gender is recognized socially and culturally, the words by which genders are described especially define their boundaries within a culture (Julé 2008: 4-5).

The study of the relationship between gender and language was begun, again, in feminist theory, which birthed the field of *feminist linguistics*. Feminist linguistics, in turn, includes the study of sexist language and how language choices imply attitudes and values towards genders (Julé 2008: 8, 13; Curzan 2003: 58). For example, in a feminist point of view, a scenario where

people have different emotional reactions to different gendered variants of occupational words may imply an individual or collective judgement on the value of one or more genders within that field of occupation. Language, therefore, reflects gender as a cultural construct.

According to Julé (2008: 15), during the 1990's, approaches to studying the relationship between gender and language started to take the performance view of gender into account in earnest, and, subsequently, that speech acts were *part* of gender expression: how one speaks does not only reflect gender, but actively contributes to the creation of the construct of their gender. Gender is performed and mediated socially and culturally, and this process of mediation involves language to a high degree (Curzan 2003: 26, 29). For example, if a language adopts more descriptive words for genders, that may logically broaden the cultural prototypical images of gender available for the users of that language (Rossi 2010: 21). How a language offers these conceptual components for gender constructs logically includes the variety of pronouns available to its users.

As was mentioned in Chapter 2.1., pronouns are used to denote the gender of a person or persons in many languages. They are, thereby, a part of the process by which gender is recognized socially, culturally, and conceptually by language users. Since gender is understood to be a fundamental component of human identity in most cultures, the role of the choice of pronouns should not be trivialized (Hekanaho 2020: 72). Jones and Mullany (2019: 337) state:

“More than 20 years of empirical evidence into the complex relationship between language, gender, and sexuality has shown that, across a range of cultural contexts, pronoun choices are intrinsically linked to the expression and realization of (trans)gendered identities.”

The mention of transgender identity is apt for the aims of this current thesis. It also has a clear connection to *queer linguistics*, which is in many ways a successor to feminist linguistics. According to Lorber (as cited in Kang 2019: 15) academic *queer theory* “resists all the conventional notions of gender, sex and sexuality” through questioning the styles of speech acts that contribute to the constructs of gender and sexuality. It seeks to increase social mobility for minority people by critically analyzing the preexisting gender and sexual hegemony and their effects on minorities. To consider the two-way relationship between pronouns and the gender construct of nonbinary people as worth legitimate linguistic analysis is to partake in queer linguistics.

While the relationship gender minority people have with language has been researched irregularly in Finland and elsewhere, the approach to minority study tends to be predominantly autobiographical. This is akin to feminist approaches, which have lifted autobiographical texts of heterosexual, lesbian, and religious minority women for analysis. According to Huuska (2010: 156, 158), for the longest time Finland did not have systematic, consistent research into the many facets of the life and culture of transgender people, only rather some qualitative studies on their self-understanding. This lack of academic attention is partly due to the relatively new interest in the experiences of the transgender community.

While there are some cultural and research journals focusing on queer themes published in Finland, a notable one in the open access online journal SQS, the studies on these themes remain somewhat marginal in academic circles at large. There are certain modern Finnish publications that delve deeper specifically into the topic of nonbinary identity. Fitting to the predominantly autobiographical approach mentioned before, a book by the name of *Näkymätön sukupuoli: Ei-binäärisiä ihmisiä*, a collection of autobiographical accounts by Finnish nonbinary people was published in 2018. Its name reflects the experience of many nonbinary people: “Näkymätön sukupuoli” translates from Finnish into English as “The invisible gender”. While the stories of the people represented in the book are by nature unique, there are some themes that go repeated from account to account. The content is very much in line with the few studies into nonbinary identity that were available for synthesis in this thesis.

One theme that unifies many an experience of nonbinary people is the lack of insight of their own gender – that they had not known or understood the possibility of nonbinary genders, even though they would later find a cornerstone for their identity from therein. This lack of understanding, that may grow to frustration for many nonbinary people, is a logical result of a lack of *representation* of nonbinary gender as a possibility. As Melanen (2019: 12) argues in her survey on the experiences and linguistic practices of nonbinary people, in most cultures there is no normative model for nonbinary gender in the way there are for male and female. This means that there is no pool of performance to which nonbinary people can compare their experience. While they may legitimately understand their sense of gender to be different from their assigned sex, having no terms to describe it in the cultural mainstream leads to confusion for many (Melanen 2019: 34).

The nonbinary participants in a survey on transgender people by Fiani and Han (2019: 187) brought up similar experiences of lacking a “frame of reference” in which they could find guidance into their gender. “Lack of information was particularly pronounced in non-binary narratives” (ibid.). This was understood to have also contributed to participants’ difficulties in finding the mode of gender expression right for them – as well as their fears that they would be misunderstood or discriminated upon in a society that predominantly believes in the gender binary as the sole correct option.

The same frustration over wanting insight and the fear of misunderstanding were very much reflected in the interviews of nonbinary people in the UK by Taylor et al (2019: 198):

‘Exacerbating this experience of invisibility was a sense that “*there was no language or model outside the binary for me to make sense of myself*”, with this leading to it being “*so hard to vocalise what you want*” as “*you have to give them a word that means something, but it might not mean you*”. This lack of language would then lead individuals to rely on negation[.]’ (emphasis in original)

The *negation* mentioned here refers to nonbinary people identifying as *not* binary; as outside the understood gender binary, rather than being a distinct, third *positive* option alongside the male and female models of gender. Contemporary nonbinary gender, therefore, is a unique category, where people must essentially figure out their own sense of expression individually, without the guidance of sedimented cultural traditions of gender, such as there are for male and female. To openly *communicate* about the possibilities of nonbinary identity, then, is key to alleviating some of the possible personal hardships nonbinary people may go through in their individual journeys of gender exploration.

Nonetheless, there is a modicum of uniformity to the expression of nonbinary gender, as the expression and performance of nonbinary gender are *exceptionally* tied to language and language acts. In essence, because there is no normative model for nonbinary gender, the only conclusive way to express nonbinary gender is to “explicitly verbalize it” (Melanen 2019: 13). A nonbinary person might, in order to communicate their gender, state that: they are nonbinary; they are something under the nonbinary umbrella, like *agender* or *bigender*; they are not male nor female; their pronouns are such and such (if in a gendered language). In a gendered language such as English, proper pronoun use is understood to be in the core of transgender experience, as Hekanaho (2020: 7) asserts: “For many transgender individuals, being pronounced [sic] correctly is crucial as it signals that their identity is recognized by others; misgendering,

in contrast, sends the opposite signal [...] With nonbinary pronouns, using a person's correct pronouns signals support and acceptance of nonbinary identities”.

As such, the topic of gender-neutral singular 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns (GN3Ps) emerges again. Nonbinary respondents to surveys have been in general agreement that singular *they* is the preferred 3PP of most nonbinary people. While some do identify stronger with *neopronouns*, there is consensus in that singular *they* is easier, more widely accepted, and familiar to both native and nonnative users of English; identifying with singular *they* is more accessible as a gender-concurrent pronoun for nonbinary people (Melanen 2019: 18; Jones & Mullany 2019: 338-339; Hekanaho 2020). However, although singular *they* is somewhat understood as the chosen pronoun of nonbinary people, there are still barriers to its open use. Melanen (2019: 18) and Hekanaho (2020) both report resistance stemming from native and nonnative users of English who either were not aware of nonbinary people or outright dismissed the validity of their gender identity.

This difference in openness towards nonbinary *they* is not all that surprising, since singular *they* itself has not been systematically considered a worthy topic in most EFL education. In addition, the use and teaching of nonbinary *they* is currently considered a case of political and ideological debate, as certain parties do not wish for nonbinary people to be accepted in society at large. For one, Hekanaho (2020: 39) notes contrast in the acceptance of singular *they* based on age groupings, as young people are far more receptive to its use than older demographics. She adds that the spreading of cultural awareness of both singular *they* and nonbinary *they* correlate with their growing use. This is concurred by Stormbom (2022: 891) in that public discourse over nonbinary people has had a clear effect in the use of singular *they*. There is ever-growing understanding that nonbinary people are real, and that their chosen pronouns deserve recognition for both linguistic and civil reasons. As Baron (2018) states: “People who want to be inclusive, or respectful of other people's preferences, use singular *they*”.

## **2.4 Language as part of the inclusive ideals for education**

Language matters for the construction and expression of cultural and individual identity, including gender; therefore, its support or constraint reflects current social power (Julé 2008: 15;

Hekanaho 2020: 49; Curzan 2003: 180-181). The findings of Stahlberg et al (2007: 182) suggest that social cognition and behavior may be meaningfully affected by using gender-neutral language over sexist language. Education especially affirms ideas over gender by molding cultural values, both through explicit instruction and implicit ideology through the representation of people: how people are depicted establishes ideas about them, which directly affects how they are regarded, which in turn leads to the spreading of the same ideas (Naskali 2010: 278; Paasonen 2010: 41, 45). Therefore, to allow GN3Ps and thereby nonbinary identity into educational content is practical and meaningful *inclusion* of transgender people.

Finland, for one, has somewhat recognized the significance of inclusion and how its insufficiency affects people severely. The Finnish law on parity (Yhdenvertaisuuslaki 1325/2014) states in its section 1 § that parity and the prevention of discrimination are legal priorities. Its sections 5 § and 6 § notably concern the actions of civil servants and educators respectively, in that they have a duty to promote equality between demographics. In addition, the law on equality between women and men (Laki naisten ja miesten välisestä tasa-arvosta 1986/609) contains segments 3 § and 6 c § on preventing discrimination based on gender identity, which includes people whose gender is not unambiguously either male or female.

Gender equality has been incorporated into national guidelines as a central goal of education based on official statements of UN and EU on the topic (Lahelma & Tainio 2019: 2-3). The Finnish National Agency for Education has likewise released material on the protocol concerning gender in education for educators. One of such guidebooks is *Tasa-arvotyö on taitolaji: Opas sukupuolten tasa-arvon edistämiseen perusopetuksessa* (from now on referred to as *Tasa-arvotyö*), which affirms that gender is *diverse* – i.e., not limited to the male-female binary. According to the guidebook, gender and gender identity are diverse in that they are determined through socialization and learning in addition to biology (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 9). This perspective very much calls for the outright inclusion of nonbinary people in education and society at large.

While this official statement and those like it are admirable, they on their own do not guarantee that the Finnish education system meets these ideals in practice. Even *Tasa-arvotyö* affirms this view, stating that while basic education has an unambiguous mission in promoting gender equality and inclusivity, there are still serious gender-related struggles present in Finland

(Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 7, 9). An essential part of the work that goes into correcting these struggles takes place in schools, but therein lies a notable problem: access to gender-related topics and themes are dependent on the teachers that are responsible for the practical activities and atmosphere in school. Kang (2019: 48, 13) lists some logical problems present in Finnish schools in that teachers may not challenge heteronormative discourse or recognize diversity in sexual orientation or gender. This is concurred by Lahelma and Tainio (2019: 8), whose inquiry into LGBTQ topics in Finnish schooling showed that students did not consider issues on gender and sexuality to be discussed to an adequate degree, whether it be in amount or depth of understanding.

Teachers are inevitably agents of social influence, but conscious, goal-oriented social justice demands both a desire to act and competency in the given sphere of topic. A lack of understanding of gendered themes or confidence to speak up on them are unfortunate but understandable, because as Pantić and Florian (2015: 333) note, teacher education may not assuredly develop these skills in teachers. Teachers have reported that they may avoid discussing gender issues exactly because they feel like they do not know enough to avoid gender stereotypes (Lahelma & Tainio 2019: 9). However, this type of avoidance does not eliminate gendered discourse by teachers since silence on issues contributes to the spreading of hegemonical ideas. Pantić and Florian (2015: 345, 346) continue, stating that if teachers are to be agents for social justice, it must be reflected in the level of classroom practices. In order to avoid othering minorities, they should be included in the educational content in a visible, meaningful way.

This current thesis, again, takes part in the discourse on the content of Finnish schooling and offers an approach in which language education may include genders outside the binary. As was mentioned in the beginning of Chapter 2.3, the transgender community – which includes nonbinary people – have historically faced and, therefore, fear social and institutional rejection for their gender identity. For many, this notably includes rejection in school environments as well. Gender does not vanish as a lived experience or a collective cultural construct in school or its classrooms, so it may as well be included in educational content. If the goals for social justice are to be realized in schools, what better way is there than to incorporate issues such as those touching on gender *into* different teaching topics (Kang 2019: 58). This conclusion is likewise arrived at in *Tasa-arvotyö*, where it is stated that the promotion of gender equality and

the diversity of gender must be taken to account subject-wise in the design and implementation of teaching (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 40).

For one, gender and the different possible constructs that it presents for people in different cultures is a prime topic of discussion in foreign language education. Kumpumäki (2020: 21) notes that ideology is easily and often inevitably incorporated into language education, because it practically represents cultural constructs and discourse between characters. Since the ways of being a person are discussed in foreign language education, there should be space for the representation of people from gender and sexuality minorities as well. *Tasa-arvotyö* takes this notion even further: it explicitly includes the knowledge of gendered grammar and lexicon as a goal of foreign language learning, and that *the teaching of personal pronouns should include those for nonbinary gender* (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 41, emphasis added). There should, therefore, be no obstacles to discussing nonbinary gender and the pronouns that come with it in EFL education.

## 2.5 The practical framework of foreign language education in Finland

The content of systematic, national school education in Finland is guided by certain ideological and practical factors, as was noted in the previous chapter. While teachers do the actual teaching in effect, the carrying out of this practice itself is informed, aided, or restricted by official national guidelines as well as material matters.

As stated by the Finnish National Agency for Education (n.d.), the *national core curricula* form the basis for education in Finland: the core curricula are divided between that of *basic education* and *upper secondary education*, both with their own respective documents. These extensive documents carry the ideological goals and aims for learning content and practices in Finnish schooling, which are then realized locally according to the needs and resources of any given local school in basic or upper secondary education. While each school has to carry out its own teaching according to their respective circumstances, the national core curricula are meant to provide “a uniform foundation for local curricula, thus enhancing equality in education throughout the country” (Finnish National Agency for Education). This uniformity is stated in

the Finnish law for basic education (Perusopetuslaki 1998/682), where section 3 § stipulates that local education is to be conducted according to set national foundations.

Therefore, the core curricula present the most significant collective understanding of what education should include in Finland. As such, if something is *excluded* in them, there is no conceptual, documented base for expecting its inclusion in practice. While some of the content expected to be included *is* documented in the curricula, they also leave quite a lot up to interpretation and to be realized *materially* by local teachers. The core curricula may be cited to argue for why something should be practiced, but they do not offer learning content in themselves. Whatever content is deemed fitting must be procured and carried out by schools and their educators.

In Finland, foreign language education is most often based on procured and contrived learning material. Such material is then used in mediated learning practices by students according to the guidance and parameters set by the school or individual teachers. *Textbooks* form the bulk of this material in Finland. Moate (2021: 6, 7) investigated the role of textbooks in learning, explaining that textbooks are used in Finland to a significant degree and that in a learning context, they offer stability for both educators and students. Discourse over the depth of this stability and its possible constraints on learning has been explored to a degree in Finnish research settings. Ahlgren (2018: 20, 21) conducted a small-case interview of EFL teachers and teacher-trainees on their attitudes towards teaching material. Textbooks were generally accepted as a base for the classroom curriculum, but participants were also aware of different shortcomings on the part of textbooks: one concerned the *contrived* nature of textbooks, where a lack of *authenticity* in the presented language might lead a teacher to use alternative material. In these cases, certain textbook content may be excluded and other included based on the choices of the teachers.

Vanha (2017: 26, 27, 32) interviewed six EFL teachers from different school levels, ending with similar rhetoric regarding traditional textbooks. The notion on textbooks structuring teaching was echoed here as well, as interviewees agreed that textbooks may become a self-evident part of the classroom curriculum. However, textbooks were seen as potentially restrictive as well. According to the interviewees, elements outside the textbooks could be added to the learning activities as needed, but this would demand more time and effort on the part of the

teacher. Blomquist (2017: 14, 20) interviewed two upper secondary school EFL teachers and arrived at similar points on the positive sides of textbooks as reliable structure for both teachers and students.

Traditional, material textbooks are in wide use in Finland and considered dependable, but teachers do not unequivocally see them as offering enough or suitable content in certain circumstances. Since teachers are not always able to add to the textbook material, what is there on the page seems to matter greatly for the practical learning outcomes. This is the also the case with *representation* of gender, which was covered in Chapter 2.4. *Tasa-arvotyö* (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 21), again, states that the content found in learning material, including textbooks, have a strong effect on spreading ideas of gender, gender roles and society to learners. There has accordingly been some research in Finland into the cultural and gendered content of language textbooks.

For one, cultural and gendered representation are a popular topic of analysis for many university theses as the effects of demographical representation have become more widely understood. Among a few recent studies, Kumpumäki (2020) investigated the representation of sexuality in nine EFL textbooks, finding no LGBTQ topics or sexual or gender minority characters in the data. Koskinen (2022) closely inspected English and Swedish lower secondary school textbooks from the 1980s and 2010s for the representation of gender and its diversity. Her results affirm that the diversity of gender was not considered in language learning material for the longest time, as all of the textbooks in her data included heavily gendered content strictly divided between male and female genders. At that, male gender was generally more prominent throughout her data, emphasizing the traditional skew towards male overrepresentation in learning material and media at large. Salonen (2019) followed a similar vein of thought and analyzed the gender representation and the possible biases therein from a single EFL textbook, finding that male characters and voices outnumbered female ones in dialogues and were more visible in the illustration of different occupations.

Based on theses like these and wider research on language learning material, textbooks and their content can generally be presumed to carry a *cis-normative* and male bias. As was mentioned in Chapters 2.3 and 2.4, these choices in content may imply explicit and implicit learning outcomes for language learners, where genders are not equally visible and minorities go

unacknowledged. Naturally, a given EFL textbook can not logically cover any and every topic in human culture due to the narrowing of focus that is necessary to make content comprehensible in learning contexts. However, certain topics and grammatical structures are important to be conveyed and subsequently learned in national education due to their social and cultural importance. In the case of GN3Ps, if they are not included in learning material, then according to the argumentation presented in Chapter 2.2, realistic Finnish EFL learning trajectories do not reflect the current understanding of 3PPs in standard English.

Finnish counts among genderless languages while English is, as stated, a natural-gender language. Learning to distinguish gendered 3PPs presents a new linguistic structure for Finnish EFL learners, which may understandably be challenging for certain learners. Presenting a challenge, however, does not in itself imply that a topic or structure should be flat-out ignored in education. If learning suchlike structures are not supported comprehensively in the material, set learning outcomes may become unrealistic. This is especially the case for GN3Ps, which while used in standard English, have not been taught systematically.

In conclusion, the volume of EFL classroom learning is in practice defined by the chosen textbooks, but the content therein might be lacking when it comes to the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. Male bias seems to be an ever-present aspect of gender in learning material. Teachers are essentially allowed to utilize whatever material they consider applicable to the set learning goals, but there is no given guarantee that they do and will. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the ideology of inclusion that is legible in many official national documents is met in Finland. The absence of minority presence in learning material should carry weight in this perspective, and it is why this current study was embarked upon.

## 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 Research questions

This thesis investigates how gender diversity is approached in the framework of Finnish EFL education. In more detail, whether nonbinary themes and the teaching of singular GN3Ps are present in the official Finnish national guidelines for EFL education and the learning material used therein to any degree. This investigation delves into how GN3Ps (e.g., singular *they*) might be systematically overlooked in the teaching material in comparison with the other 3PPs (traditionally masculine *he* and traditionally feminine *she*), which are more generally known and accepted in English and EFL education.

To this end, this current study poses two primary research questions which contain three supplementary sub-questions:

1. How is gender discourse incorporated in the official national guidelines for education?

sub-question 1a: Is teaching GN3Ps included in the official guidelines for EFL education in Finland?

2. Are GN3Ps included in English textbooks in Finland?

sub-question 2a: How do GN3Ps appear comparatively to *he* and *she*?

sub-question 2b: Do GN3Ps show in a nonbinary context?

Although Finnish local, practical teaching is built upon likewise locally made decisions, there are certain official national guidelines that form the conceptual basis for the learning goals of language education in Finland. Decisions on learning material and activities are informed by these guidelines, and they are, thereby, applicable for analysis. To answer the **first research question** and **sub-question 1a** set by this thesis, these official documents were scanned for segments relating to gender inclusive education as well as segments on the teaching of pronouns, i.e., pronominal grammar in EFL education. Segments pertaining to the former of these themes would set the groundwork for acknowledging nonbinary gender identities in systematic school education, which would in practice demand acknowledging nonbinary pronouns in language education. One logically can not respectfully acknowledge a hitherto overlooked group of gender identities without discussing them, which in the case of English calls for inclusive pronoun use in classroom practices. One would then expect some official guidelines to go over this subject in the framework of national education.

Research question one investigates the ideology and pedagogical aims in EFL education. To form a more substantial understanding of the role of GN3Ps within the current EFL education, there was reason to also investigate the material basis for the learning practices that may take place in EFL classrooms. To construct an extensive groundwork for this investigation while simultaneously keeping its scope appropriately narrow for a thesis, the current study arrived at analyzing the English textbooks used in Finnish EFL learning. As noted in Chapter 3, this choice is fitting since the actual learning material forms a kind of foundation for classroom practices in many school subjects, but especially foreign language learning. If GN3Ps are considered worth learning and expected to be taught in Finland, they should be included in the learning material. Therefore, **research question two** of this thesis asks if English textbooks reflect the growing understanding of the roles of GN3Ps by including them in the learning content.

**Sub-question 2.a** relates to the appearance of singular GN3Ps in textbooks specifically in numerical comparison to *he* and *she* in all of their cases. *He* and *she* are unquestionably in more open use in EFL education than any context in which singular *they* may appear, but this fact may contain nuance. Using only *he* or *she* as the possible choices for 3PPs, or using them primarily, indicates some measure of the current status of GN3Ps in EFL education; this

illustrates if and how nonbinary identities are considered to be worth inclusion in current Finnish schooling.

**Sub-question 2.b** relates to the multiple meanings of singular *they* which were explained in Chapter 2.2. Since singular *they* is in notable use in epicene and generic contexts in standard English, if it was to be included in EFL education, it is in these contexts that singular *they* is predominately expected to show. However, as was explained in Chapter 2.3., *they* has grown exponentially in use as a pronoun of and for nonbinary persons. To fulfill the aims of this current study, whether the ensuing instances of GN3Ps were in a nonbinary context was analyzed as well.

The discourse surrounding GN3Ps as elaborated in Chapter 2.4. makes case for their inclusion in education. However, the same discourse gave reason to expect their non-inclusion in the data, since GN3Ps are contested and often overlooked. Therefore, the research within this study was conducted with the baseline expectation that GN3Ps would not be present in either class of data: not the guidelines nor English textbooks.

## 3.2 Choice of data

As referred to in the research questions, this thesis sought to analyze two classes of data. The first of these were the official national guidelines for EFL education in Finland: this includes the national core curriculum for basic education (from now on referred to as OPS), the national core curriculum for general upper secondary education (from now on referred to as LOPS), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (from now on referred to as CEFR). The OPS and LOPS state the general principles and subject-relative priorities for systematic primary and upper secondary school education in Finland, making them crucially relevant to this thesis which focuses on educational content. Additionally, since upper secondary language education in Finland is currently based on the definitions of the CEFR, its contents were considered relevant for analysis as well.

CEFR is an instrument to describe language learning goals launched by the Council of Europe in 2001 which has since been updated and kept in use widely. Most importantly for this study, it presents among its content a table consisting of six levels of language proficiency which are

defined through *can-do* descriptions of language skills and subskills, which can be divided further by educators depending on local needs. The organization of user proficiency as offered by the CEFR progress as follows: Basic (A1–A2), Independent (B1–B2), and Proficient (C1–C2). These level descriptors were formulated to be applicable to any language learning. In Finland, these proficiency tables are explicitly incorporated into the LOPS as is, making them essential for upper secondary learner evaluation and, therefore, demonstrating what national education pursues in language learners.

In the case of this study, the documents in question were procured digitally through official channels. The past and current OPS and LOPS are offered freely for download in PDF-form on the website of the Finnish national agency for education (from now on referred to as OPH), and information about and tables of the CEFR can be found on the website of the European Council. As mentioned before, the CEFR tables are incorporated directly into the LOPS, and they are also introduced and expounded upon on the website of OPH. Due to the smaller scale of this current research, the data concerning the CEFR tables were retrieved for analysis from the LOPS, since it is logically the closest foundation for the application of CEFR in Finnish EFL education.

The documents are in Finnish; the sections applicable for analysis were analyzed in their original form, but they were translated into English for subsequent examination within this study.

The second class of data of this research is comprised of a pool of English textbooks used in Finnish EFL education. This was to answer research question 2 and its sub-questions on the pronominal content of learning material. The textbooks were scanned to locate all instances of 3PPs, i.e., *he*, *she*, and singular *they* as well as their situational cases, because they likewise mark gender in English grammar.

Finland has multiple publishing houses, but of these only three are considered major school textbook publishers. Of these three, textbooks were selected for analysis from two: Otava and Sanoma Pro. This selection process was guided by ease of access, and these two houses have textbook series which were written to be in line with the current national Finnish curricula, i.e., OPS 2014 and LOPS 2019. While digital EFL learning material does exist and is arguably in use in Finland, the scope of this study was limited to physical print books due to research

logistics as well as the fact that print books are still in popular use in Finland, as was noted in Chapter 2.5.

In this study, textbooks were selected to form a pool that represents linear Finnish EFL learner progress from primary education to the near end of upper secondary education.

Primary school is the level where English is introduced as a foreign language for most Finnish students, and it is the point where most English personal pronouns are first delved into; it is, therefore, worth investigating whether GN3Ps are included among all the other pronouns. Its absence would indicate how relatively difficult and relevant GN3Ps are considered to learn. Otava's *High five! 3* (published in 2021) was chosen to represent grade 3 of primary education, while Sanoma Pro's *Go for it! 6* (published in 2018) was chosen to represent grade 6. Grade 3 is the level on which Finnish EFL education begins to densify the lexical and grammatical content for learning, making it highly applicable for this research.

Lower secondary school textbooks are represented with Sanoma Pro's *On the Go* -series, of which the textbook for grade 9, i.e., *On the Go 3* (published in 2018) was chosen for analysis. Grade 9 is the final level for compulsory basic education in Finland, which, as denoted by Finnish law, should leave the graduating student with adequate foreign language skills. Therefore, the contents of any national English textbook of this level carry implications for the collective understanding of EFL education in Finland.

Finnish upper secondary school is designed and carried out as course-based, where subjects comprise of courses of which some are compulsory and others elected. These courses are designated in the LOPS by thematic and topical modules that make up their learning content and goals. This study includes English coursebooks from Sanoma Pro's *Elements*-series. By the division of the modules in the current LOPS, modules 1 and 2 of English are bound as a single coursebook, and books from module 5 onwards were not yet published at the time when this study was conducted. Modules 1 and 2 are intended for basic compulsory EFL learning, and their coursebook would, therefore, include common grammar. Module 4, in turn, is concerned with political themes, to which sexual and gender identity politics are popularly considered to belong. While the study was conducted with the baseline expectation that GN3Ps would not show in the textbook data, it was at this point where they were considered to appear at the latest.

In total, 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun data was gathered from five English textbooks: *High five! 3*, *Go for it! 6*, *On the Go 3*, *Elements 1+2* (published in 2021), and *Elements 4* (published in 2022). All of these were published after the implementation of the most current national curricula. While the textbooks for primary education were designed to be paired with exercise books, the exercise books were not included to keep the scope of this research manageable. Most of the relevant lexical and grammatical content was expected to be found in the textbooks rather than the exercise books, to some degree justifying their absence in this current study.

The collection stage of 3PPs into data deserves some clarification here. As it happens, there was cause for close inspection over whether the word *they* and its cases present in the textbooks were in fact singular; this was due to GN3Ps being homographs with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronouns in English: compare the form of singular *they* with that of plural *they*.

To exemplify this inspection process, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *Go for It! 6* included an activity for verb conjugation according to a given pronoun, among which the word *they* was present in three instances (page 43). Further analysis gave reason to categorize these three instances as plurals, discounting their inclusion in the number of GN3Ps in the data. The activity contains simple pictures of individual drawn characters performing an act to illustrate the intended verb. Although the word *they* is connected to a depiction of a single actor, notably plural pronouns were likewise depicted with single actors. There was no substantial reason to expect the word *they* to serve as a singular GN3P in this case.

The pronoun *they* was discussed as a special case as a way to address people or institutions as an equivalent for passive voice in *Elements 1+2* and was presented in such a context in *On the Go 3*. In a sentence such as “they print money” (*On the Go! 3*: page 36), *they* does not refer to any individual or plural persons, but the whole institution responsible for the printing of currency. While this kind of target of referral is quite vague and formless, an institution is not conceptualized as any kind of individual human on the level of language, which is what singular *they* is used for in all its meanings. Likewise, the pronouns used in these kinds of passive equivalent sentences can not be substituted with gendered 3PPs *he*, *she*, or else the generic *he or she*. As such, these kinds of utterances present in the textbooks do not fit the meaning of GN3Ps and were subsequently disregarded in the study.

### 3.3 Analytic methods

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis on the framework for the teaching of GN3Ps in EFL education in Finland. Since the research concerns two distinct and differing classes of data, they had to be collected and analyzed slightly differently.

The data from the documentation (OPS, LOPS, and CEFR) consists of textual guidelines over the grammatical and gendered content of teaching. This text illustrates the ideology and understanding that directs the teaching language content in Finnish EFL education, which inevitably includes pronominal content. After the documentation data was located through the original text documents, it was analyzed qualitatively with *close reading*, which is a method for detailed interpretative analysis of texts.

While close reading may come off as easy to understand as simply reading with attention, as a method close reading demands linking knowledge to knowledge – such as the connotation of words – with grounded techniques (Ransom et al 2003: 2; Lemov 2016: 60; Brummett 2018: 40). These techniques include the logical transition from looking at meaning of singular words into the analysis of the structure and syntactic form (McClennen 2001). Close reading considers both the content and form of a text because the form will inevitably have a rhetorical effect on its reader, guiding attention and judgement. One example of coding attitude into text is the insidious manner in which discrimination can be done through absence of mention (Brummett 2018: 46, 64). As such, in order to closely read texts, one must consider its varied qualities. Such attentive-to-form, meaning-seeking reading is natural to some, but in research settings a researcher must do it with intention and awareness without allowing bias to come to play (Brummett 2018: 26).

Therefore, close reading allows one to both identify and analyze relevant textual material. The texts of the OPS, LOPS and CEFR direct educators both explicitly and implicitly, and this research seeks to find out how the notions of gender and GN3Ps are conceptualized and incorporated in the guidelines set by these documents. Close reading was also a very fitting method in the case of the current study since some of the applicable units of text from the documentation were more transparent and precise on the relevant topics of grammar and gender than others.

The textbook data in turn was collected by counting and categorizing each 3PP present in the chosen pool of English textbooks using *descriptive statistical analysis*. This method of analysis was chosen because there is no other pronominal data to which to compare the results of this study – therefore, simply showcasing the data has merit. Descriptive statistics present the data as numbers and this data may add credibility to a given argument (Torchim 2006; Line et al n.d.). In the case of this study, simply counting the uses of GN3Ps in comparison with the other 3PPs shows how little attention they may get in the framework for current education.

In more detail, instances of the following 3PPs were counted for the research:

*they / she / he* (i.e., subjective case)

*them / her / him* (i.e., objective case)

*themselves / herself / himself* (i.e., reflexive case)

*their, theirs / her, hers / his* (i.e., possessive case)

The present pronouns were counted within these case categories for clarity and the organization of data.

Myers et al (2010: 20) state that “[t]he first step in describing a data set is to get an overall view of the data by graphing the distribution of observations”. Following this, the current study utilizes different descriptive graphs to showcase various features within pronoun choice in English textbooks. The instances of 3PPs – including their variant situational cases – were categorized by their full quantity into six units based on the area of appearance in the textbooks: **prose**, **activity**, **grammar**, **glossary**, **illustration**, and **index**.

**Prose** in the case of this study consists of long-form, composed text sections of the textbooks, such as contrived narratives, the exploration of a topic or theme in an essay, and personal or character bios. Language textbooks popularly have their prominent lexical and grammatical content featured in relatively natural-sounding form in these prose sections. This content is then most often subsequently illustrated with more detail in other, following sections of the textbook.

**Activities** likewise contain a multitude of possible iterations in which language use is enticed. These include songs, which are both listened to and sung in class, games, and more traditional

exercises. For this study, relevant pronominal content was expected to be found in the description, instructions, illustration and possible answers of the exercises. What the student *might* fill in any given exercise calls for too much speculative work for the scope and focus of this study, so only what was printed on the page was considered for analysis.

**Grammar** includes all sections that explain the functions of grammar, such as the classification of words as nouns, articles, adjectives etc., their use in and structuring into sentences and syntax. These sections might take form as end-of-textbook-chapter passages, or else all explanations of grammar might be designated in a separate unit at the end of the entire textbook. For particular note, pronouns often demand explicit attention in early EFL education, and the presence of 3PPs in grammar sections was expected in this study.

**Glossaries** involve sections that list words to explain and exemplify their lexical meanings, often in the form of direct translation into the native language of the classroom: in the case of this study, Finnish. Prose sections are often followed by a glossary that holds the words from the prose that are considered new and relevant for the language learner. In addition, some textbooks include a long-form glossary at the end of the book that serves as a practical dictionary of the lexical content of the textbook.

**Illustrations** are sections that involve both visual and text, such as the backgrounds of prose chapters, which popularly include some form of illustration of the topic in question. These background elements often showcase characters engaged in an activity and discussing it in the form of speech and thought bubbles. Text may be allocated fully into such speech bubbles, or else as descriptor cards for people, animals, objects, places, and activities shown in the given illustration.

**Table of contents** as a category means the comprehensive lists of content found at the beginning of any textbook. These show the content of the book in a condensed order of topics for easy page-to-page navigation, and at times the given titles therein might include pronominal content.

The total data is displayed in the results section as tables and figures to show different manners of pronominal distribution concisely, since the possible inequalities in gender representation indicate the current state of gender discourse in EFL education. Although descriptive statistical

analysis is used purely for showcasing data as is, qualitative evaluation was carried out on the contexts in which GN3Ps were discovered, which was intended to create further understanding of the properties of GN3Ps. There are possible qualitative differences in content based on whether GN3Ps are presented in, for example, prose or grammar sections, justifying their inclusion as category.

## **4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This section of the study presents analysis on the data collected according to protocol covered in the previous section. The analyses progress from that on national documentation to that on the EFL textbooks.

### **4.1 Analysis of official national documentation**

This chapter inspects official national documentation to answer research question 1, which read: “How is gender discourse incorporated in the official national guidelines for education?” In addition, sub-question 1a, “Is teaching GN3Ps included in the official guidelines for EFL education in Finland” was answered through the inspection of the same set of data. While GN3Ps relate strongest to grammatical content in topic, they are heavily tied to discourse on gender and inclusivity as was described in Chapter 2.3. Hence, it was considered prudent to analyze the ways in which gender and its diverse nature are incorporated into the priorities of the documentation – if at all.

Passages making reference to gender and inclusion were located and retrieved for analysis, from which most relevant excerpts are illustrated in this study. While certain chosen passages did not make explicit reference to matters of inclusion, they were seen as relevant for building a holistic image of the kinds of societal values education aims for. Only through a holistic image could judgement be made about how the documentation approaches these themes. Close reading was conducted to determine repeated themes and to glean explicit and implicit attitudes towards the notion of inclusion on the matters of gender and its incorporation into teaching. Data was lifted unevenly from the pool of documentation both due to the differing lengths and

formats of the documents. Both OPS and LOPS contain extensive textual content to sufficiently describe the structure of national education, whereas the CEFR that is integrated into LOPS is comprised of, in comparison, of a few text tables. The CEFR has a much narrower focus in describing centralized EFL learning goals than the OPS and LOPS, and as such, is naturally much shorter in length. This is reflected in the data gathered.

Themes having to do with the principles directing gender inclusion were discovered in the OPS and the LOPS, but for the sake of clarity of their purpose and place within the documents, this analysis starts with their more general goals and moves towards further details in the specific values and EFL framework. Notable themes and topics were boldened for legibility.

#### 4.1.1 General goals and values

The OPS and the LOPS are documents whose shared central objective is to set the groundwork for systemic national school education, and in order to serve this function effectively, they must first outline and illustrate their interpretation for the goal of education itself. Both documents include sections that describe the aims of their respective levels of education: In the OPS which concerns basic education, in section 2 it is said that basic education creates the groundwork for the general knowledge of students (page 14). In a similar vein, the LOPS states that the mission of upper secondary education is the reinforcement of general knowledge (page 16). Here, national education is considered an institution to pass **knowledge and skills necessary for the upkeep of Finnish society**. The notion is repeated throughout the documents in different statements with added concepts on the central values of education.

One of such concepts is **the development of humane values in students**, which is discernible in multiple sections going over the goals of education in both the OPS and the LOPS. The OPS outlines that according to Finnish law, education and upbringing must support the development of students into balanced individuals that possess a healthy self-esteem (page 19). This also centrally involves respecting life, other people and nature as well as human rights and the democratic values of the Finnish society (ibid.)”. Basic education is seen as advocating growth into “knowing, respecting and defending human rights” (page 18).

The LOPS follows these lines of thinking as well, although in a much shorter form: concerning the foundational values of upper secondary education, it states that the foundation of upper

secondary education is respect towards life and human rights as well as the integrity of human dignity (page 17). Empathy is also stated as belonging to these values. The LOPS sees these humane values as a basic part of common knowledge and civilization. The language of the OPS and the LOPS extensively push the notion that Finnish education heavily emphasizes the value of human life and the necessity of both respecting and protecting it. This language is not up to interpretation but stated repeatedly in clear terms.

What these two core curricula consider part of human rights and dignity is likewise expounded upon. Due to preestablished understanding of Finnish law and the part this documentation serves, the research framework included the expectation that they would include **equality** as a core value. The OPS met expectations in listing among the goals of basic education the promotion of equality and the prevention of inequality and marginalization (page 18). While the lived education itself must be impartial towards students, the content therein must impart these values as well: “All activities must strengthen educational equality and parity” (page 19). It is also mentioned that the members of the community are met and treated as having equal value independent of any characteristic having to do with the person. Having equal value does not mean sameness (page 28). In this study, *characteristics having to do with the person* are interpreted to imply demographical traits, such as gender, economic status, race etc., which have commonly and historically limited movement in society. Equality is commonly advocated as a value explicitly in relation with such demographical features.

The effects of demographics also come up in the documentation as touching on **discrimination**: The OPS and LOPS both state that violence, racism, or other kinds of harassment and discrimination are unacceptable (OPS page 27; LOPS page 22, 280).

Equality is also mentioned repeatedly in the LOPS, with less definition than in the OPS but nonetheless mentioned. Just as in the OPS, the LOPS states that the members of the community are heard, met and treated as having equal value. Experiences of justice, safety and acceptance create trust and promote wellbeing (page 22). The view on school community in the LOPS is accepting of individuals and their needs (ibid.). **Acceptance** is thereby included in the concept of equality in these documents. The statements on equality include language touching on the development of students into **social and political agents** within the Finnish society: societal know-how is included in the common goals of upper secondary education, which is defined as

understanding of the principles and structures of a society based on equality and parity (page 64). Ethical and responsible action is mentioned as well (page 58).

The notion of **gender equality** is emphasized to a particular degree. The OPS and LOPS state that teaching must be conducted in a **gender-aware** fashion (OPS page 28; LOPS page 22). The OPS also states that education promotes the equality of the genders (page 18), which is repeated many times in the LOPS as well (pages 17, 22 and 27). Both documents also subscribe to the notion that students' personal and social **identities** form substantially throughout their education (OPS 18; LOPS 16, 22, 58) Among these, the OPS distinguishes **gender identity** relevantly as one that develops during basic education (page 28). The OPS mentions that the values and attitudes towards gender present in the school community may carry to the students, which is why educators must strive to be aware of the possible effects of their actions (page 26).

On the notion of gender, both core curricula affirm gender to be **diverse**. The OPS describes among its developmental aims that basic education increase knowledge and understanding of the diversity of gender (page 18). As was discussed extensively in Chapters 2.3 and 2.4, this means that gender is understood to be a construct that is not constricted only to the binary of male-or-female. The LOPS mentions the same and adds the concept of sexuality onto the topic in stating that understanding the diversity of gender and sexual orientation creates prerequisites to gender aware education (page 58). These documents, thereby, recognize the diverse nature of gender and that it is heavily tied to the growth of personal identity. When the previous and following segments on equality, parity and human rights are taken into consideration, a case can be made for these documents' advocacy on protecting gender minorities.

However, these two mentions are not repeated in the documents in the way equality as a general value is. On top of what has already been acknowledged on the topic of gender, both documents discuss the possible **limiting effects of gender roles** on the choice of school subjects. The OPS suggests basic education equally encourages girls and boys in studying different subjects (page 18), and that the school community likewise encourages students to make choices untied to traditional gender roles (page 28, 219). The LOPS makes very similar remarks (page 22). From this, it can be stated that the documents acknowledge how gender roles have traditionally been constrictive and that actions should be taken to mitigate this.

#### **4.1.2 Aims of language education and EFL**

From here on there will be a closer focus on the content and learning aims for EFL education as outlined by the national documentation. Both the OPS and the LOPS have clear chapter sections that go over each school subject in relative detail, including that of different foreign languages. As the OPS covers different stages of basic education distinguished as primary and lower secondary education, it has specified chapters for certain groupings of school grades: for grades 1–2 and 3–6 for primary education and grades 7–9 for lower secondary education. Since the data survey of this study covers textbooks only from grade 3 upwards, the section covering grades 1–2 were discounted. Sections relevant to the aims of this current study were brought up and are analyzed followingly.

The OPS distinguishes the goals for EFL education, the areas of topic related to them, as well as priorities for evaluation. For primary school grades 3–6 the goals include guiding students to observe phenomena that connect and separate different languages, which while vague, can be taken to involve learning in both lexical and structural aspects of languages (page 219). Topics at this stage, then, cover mainly themes having to do with oneself, family, school, and free time. The criteria for evaluation focus on interaction with English material, communicative competence and language production which are listed as can-do skills, which in turn include spoken and written English (page 219–225). However, there are no guidelines that outline content having to do with specific structures in grammar or the topic of gender.

For lower secondary school grades 7–9 in the OPS, the EFL guidelines are communicated likewise in a general way. At this stage, goals include growing understanding on different cultures and the role of English as a lingua franca. According to the OPS, linguistic concepts are used to compare languages, which can be interpreted to include grammatical topics (page 349). Evaluation emphasizes understanding cultural circumstances and language production. Again, there are very few specifics in the guidelines, least so when it comes to topics on grammatical structures. Nor is there mention of gender as a topic in cultural, lexical, or grammatical domains in EFL.

The LOPS also distinguishes learning goals for EFL as a subject. The document mentions transversal learning among the purposes of EFL: studying foreign languages is understood to facilitate students' growth in societal know-how (page 175). This includes perspectives on

democracy, equality and topics relating to language politics. The LOPS lists topical themes for each course module: Modules 1–2 build on a general view on English as a lingua franca and examines cultural and linguistic diversity; module 4 covers democratic action and views surrounding contemporary media. Human rights questions and equality are mentioned among its central topics of content. No themes are specified further within that domain.

Evaluation in upper secondary school EFL is based directly in CEFR, which distinguishes five skills under three skill categories: interaction in different situations, use of communicative strategies, and cultural applicability of communication are listed under the skill to act in interaction; the skill to interpret texts; and the skill to produce texts. None of these directly touch on grammatical structures as criteria for evaluation or a learning goal.

In conclusion, the national guidelines of the OPS and the LOPS mention humane values extensively, from which they both emphasize equality of people and genders as well as respect. They both also acknowledge gender as diverse – although in short terms. Yet neither document offers materials by which educators can discuss gender and its diverse nature. Inclusivity is undeniably set up as a core value of national education in Finland. However, educational approaches to gender minorities are left unclear aside from a general rejection of any forms of harassment. Likewise, gendered topics or grammatical structures are not mentioned in the learning goals or content of EFL as a subject at any given stage of education.

## **4.2 Analysis on pronominal content from EFL textbooks**

The analysis conducted in the previous chapter demonstrated that national guidelines do not go into depth on 3PP or GN3P as a learning topic in EFL. As such, as was discussed in Chapters 2.4 and 2.5, it is left up to the individual educators and language learning material to include and accommodate gender minorities as a theme in EFL. In that vein, this chapter presents analyses on the 3PP data gathered from learning material, i.e., the five EFL textbooks outlined in Chapter 3.2.

### 4.2.1 Analysis of the 3PPs

Through the systematic count and categorization of 3PPs in the data, this chapter seeks to answer sub-question 2a presented in Chapter 4.1, which read: How do GN3PPs appear comparatively to *he* and *she*?

Statistics compiled from the data were transformed into descriptive tables and figures to chart comparison between 3PPs by the category of gender and by textbook, as well as the areas of appearance within textbooks.

Table 1: 3PP totals

Pronoun	High five! 3	Go for it! 6	On the Go 3	Elements 1+2	Elements 4	TOTAL PER CASE	TOTAL PER GENDER	% out of gender
<i>he</i>	51	42	240	71	73	477	818	58%
<i>him</i>	2	8	41	16	13	80		10%
<i>himself</i>	0	0	4	9	3	16		2%
<i>his</i>	9	25	122	55	34	245		30%
<i>she</i>	37	38	111	76	21	283	480	59%
<i>her</i>	3	10	21	23	5	62		13%
<i>herself</i>	0	0	2	4	0	6		1%
<i>her(s)</i>	3	22	66	19	19	129		27%
<i>they</i>	0	7	8	10	6	31	54	57%
<i>them</i>	0	1	2	2	2	7		0
<i>themselves</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
<i>their(s)</i>	0	0	3	6	7	16		30%
TOTAL						1352		

The study recorded a total of 1352 displays of 3PP usage present in the data gathered (see table 1). The amounts of specific 3PPs differed noticeably (see figure 1). The 3PP with the highest number of accounts was the base case masculine *he* with 477 accounts, while the lowest was the reflexive case gender-neutral *themselves* with zero appearances in the data. Among each grouping of gendered pronouns, base cases represented the highest amount: With 477 accounts,

base case *he* made up 58 % of all masculine 3PPs; With 283 accounts, base case *she* made up 59% of all feminine 3PPs; and with 31 accounts, base case *they* made up 57 % of all GN3Ps. All three base cases, thereby, counted for over half of appearances of their respective gender. Reflexive cases were the least represented group overall, with them making up at most a very low percentage of their respective gendered 3PPs: Reflexive case *himself* made up 2% of all masculine 3PPs; reflexive case *herself* made up 1% of all feminine 3PPs; and as mentioned, reflexive case *themselves* was not present at all in the data, making for 0% of all GN3Ps.

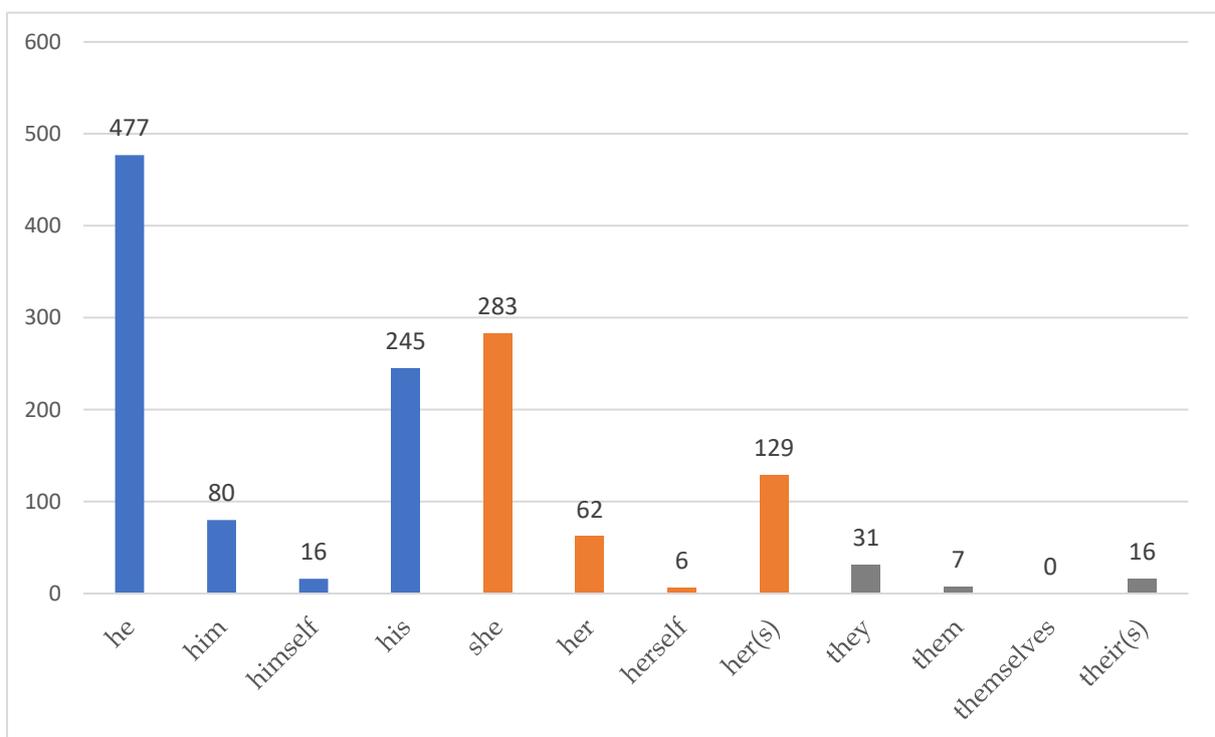


Figure 1: 3PP totals according to case

There was a clear difference in the total amounts of 3PPs by the category of gender. Masculine gender was by far the most represented in the data, taking the lead on subjective, objective, possessive, and reflective cases (see figure 1) Masculine pronouns covered 60% of all 3PP content, while feminine and neutral pronouns covered 36% and 4% respectively (see figure 2). While it was expected in the research framework for masculine and feminine pronouns to show in more equal numbers, the apparent discrepancy is not particularly surprising considering past

and present gender discourse. The over-representation of men in the media and masculine pronouns in academic settings was explored in Chapters 2.2 and 2.5. Likewise, the fact that GN3Ps number so few in total in comparison with the other 3PPs was expected due to similar discourse-related reasoning.

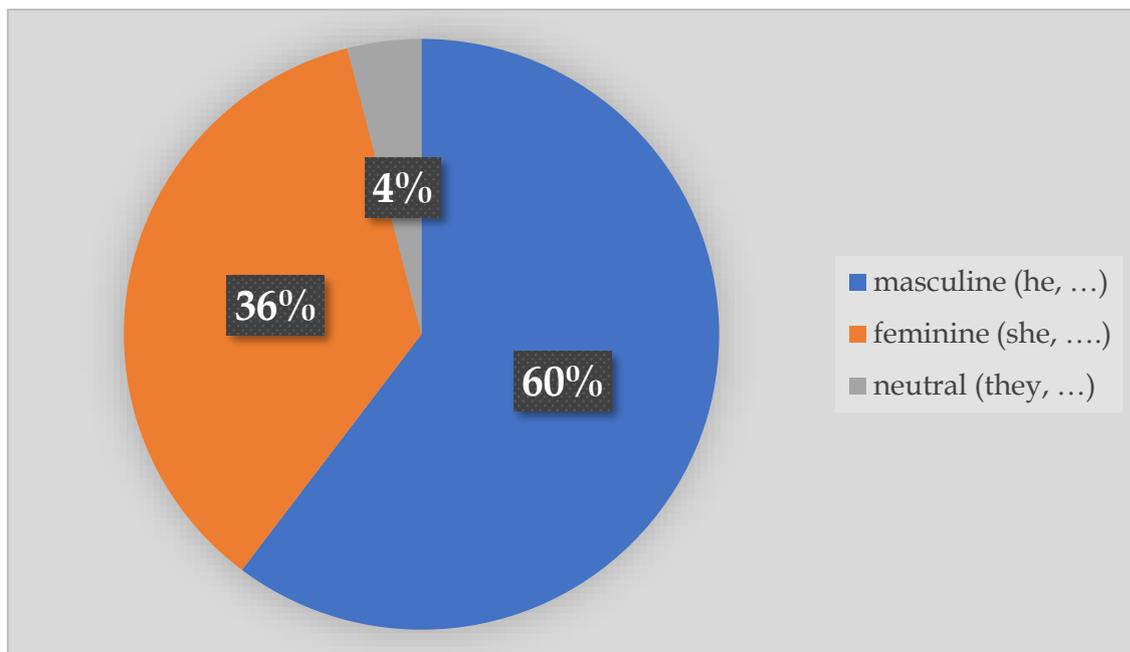


Figure 2: 3PP gender percentage

The 3PP data was also categorized for comparison by individual EFL textbooks, as the amount of 3PPs in each book differed from each other greatly as well.

Firstly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade textbook *High five! 3* showed 105 instances of 3PPs, which grew into 153 instances present in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *Go for it! 6* (see figure 3). This growth appeared linear and consistent given the increase in lexical and grammatical complexity in EFL content between grades in primary education. The single highest amount of pronominal 3PP content was recorded in *On the Go 3*, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, with 620 displays of 3PPs. This high amount can be rationalized with the design of the textbook, where whole units or sections can be left out of the curriculum; not all of the extensive pronominal content may be covered in the school year. From thereon into upper secondary EFL textbooks, there was an unexpected decrease in the number of 3PPs: 291 accounts in *Elements 1+2*, and 183 in *Elements 4*.

This seeming discrepancy in number can be explained with the differences in the design and purpose of textbooks: as was elucidated in Chapter 4.2, the current Finnish upper secondary education is built on a module system, with mandatory and independent courses. As such, a single, constant upper secondary EFL textbook is principally meant for use in a single course that does not cover the whole school year. This is in contrast with textbooks in basic education, which are intended to cover a whole grade year, logically making for textbooks with longer page counts than those in upper secondary schooling in most cases. As such, the pronominal content of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *On the Go 3* being higher in number makes sense. Likewise, the fact that *Elements 1+2* is intended to cover two EFL courses together explains its higher amount of 291 3PP instances over the 183 of *Elements 4*.

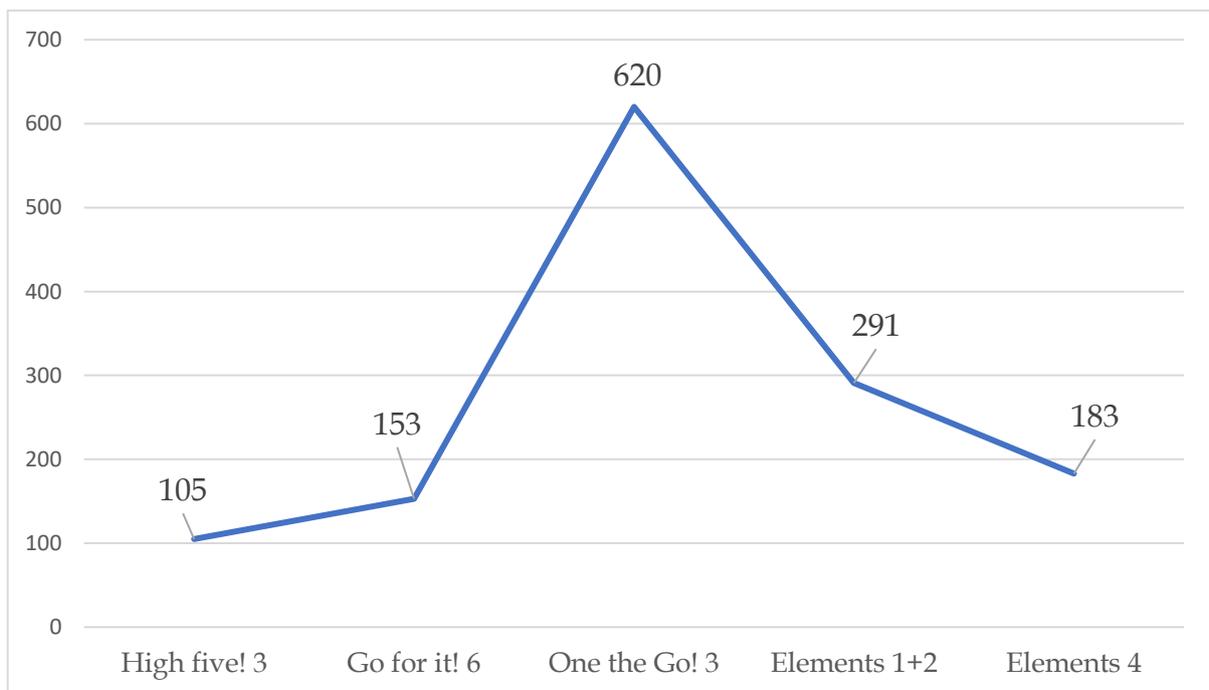


Figure 3: 3PP totals according to textbook

The distribution of gender in the amount of 3PPs also varied between textbooks. This variance is analyzed followingly.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade textbook *High five! 3* included 62 accounts of masculine 3PPs and 43 accounts of feminine 3PPs. Masculine and feminine 3PPs were closest in amount in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *Go for It! 6* with 75 masculine 3PPs and 70 feminine 3PPs; making for 49% and 46% respectively of the total of the textbook (see figure 4; figure 5). The number of feminine 3PPs increased comparatively more than masculine when the two basic education textbooks are compared. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *On the Go 3* the discrepancy between masculine and feminine 3PPs grew to a significant degree. It presented 407 instances of masculine 3PPs against 200 instances of feminine; 66% masculine versus 32% feminine. While masculine 3PPs were consistently more represented in the data, the discrepancy in *On the Go! 3* was skewed due to certain prose chapters in the textbook, which recount narratives focusing on male persons, that in turn logically require masculine 3PPs.

The difference between masculine and feminine 3PPs lessened in transition to the upper secondary school textbook *Elements 1+2*, which had 151 accounts of masculine 3PPs versus 122 feminine; 52% masculine versus 42% feminine. Surprisingly, the greatest contrast was found in *Elements 4*, with 67% masculine content and 25% feminine 3PPs. There was no clear systematicity in the choice of 3PPs in *Elements 4* to explain this contrast, so in lieu of deeper analysis, it may be accounted to further masculine bias.

As for GN3Ps, their amount was found to be consistently greatly lower than the other gendered 3PPs in each textbook. Percentagewise, GNP3s accounted for 4% of all 3PPs in the data (see figure 2), and they remained consistently under 10% of the 3PP content of each book (see figure 5). GN3Ps counted exceedingly few and stable in growth in comparison with the variation in the number of masculine and feminine 3PPs. From the five textbooks in the data, GN3Ps grew from 0 to 8 to 13 to 18 and decreased into a final 13 in *Elements 4* (see figure 4). The highest amount of GN3Ps was found in *Elements 1+2* with a total of 18 cases of appearance. While *Elements 4* did not have the highest numerical amount of GN3Ps in the data, it did percentage-wise, concluding at 8% - which is not that high on the whole. As such, GN3Ps were undeniably passed over in the textbook content in favor of the other 3PPs.

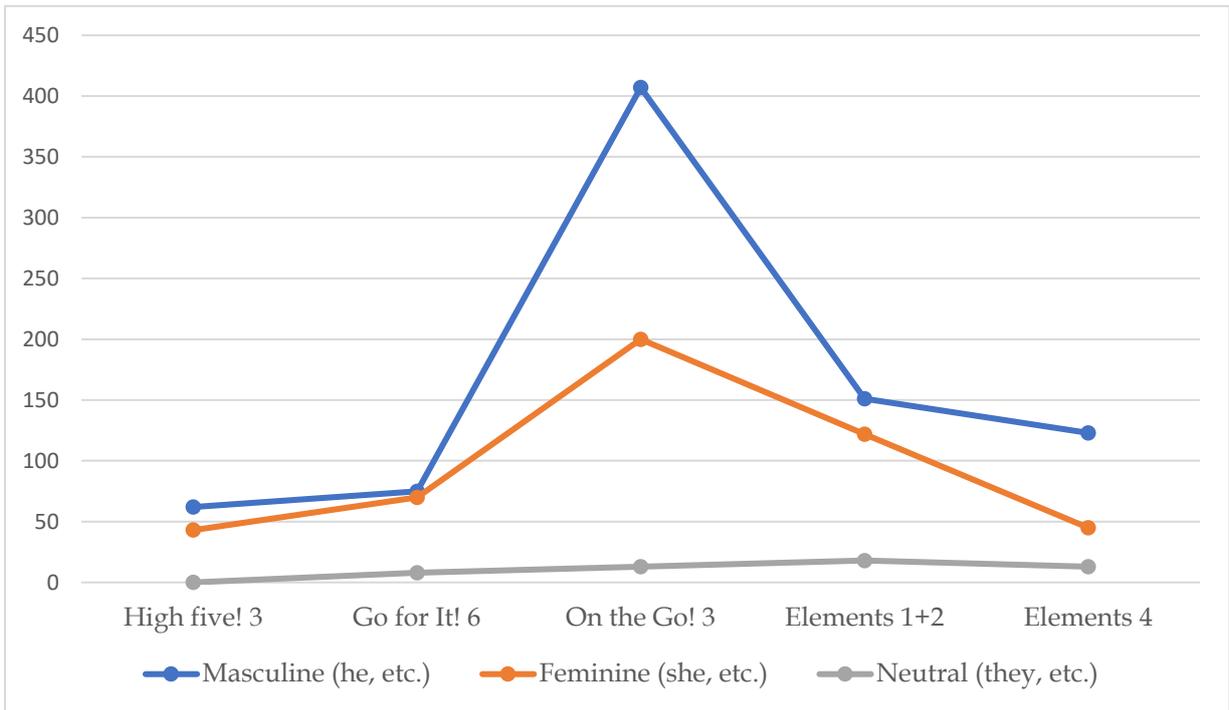


Figure 4: Amount of gendered 3PPs according to textbook

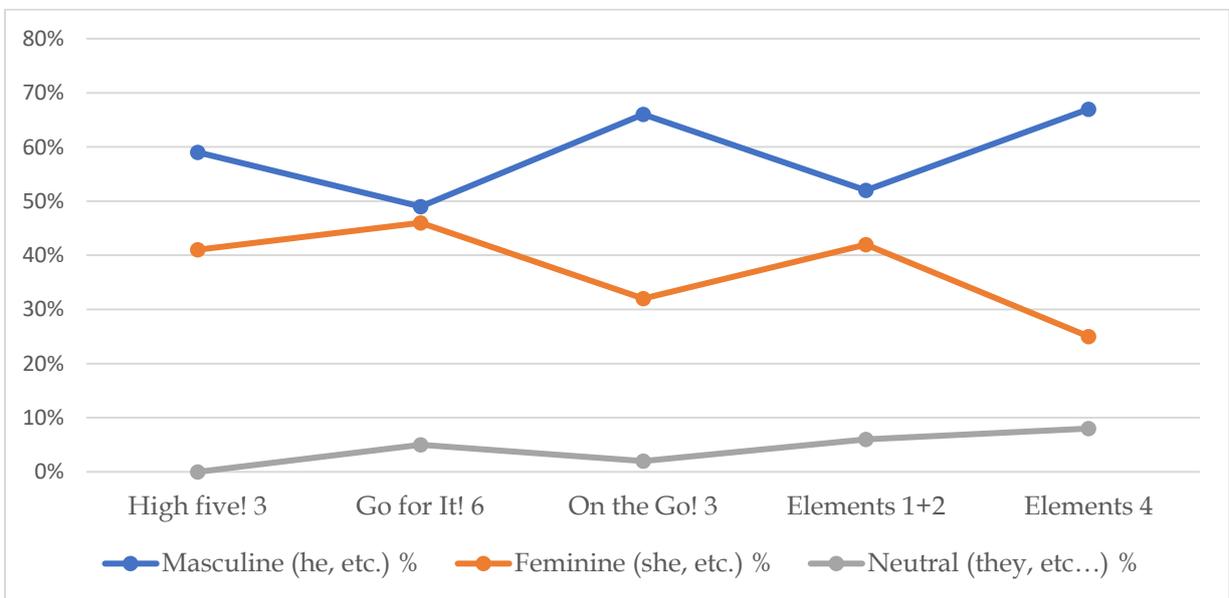


Figure 5: Distribution of gendered 3PP percentage according to textbook

The research design included note on the *area of appearance* of 3PPs, which signifies the distribution of 3PP content in the textbook data.

Most 3PPs were encountered in the Prose sections of the textbooks, with a total of 858 displays, making the Prose category account for 63% of all 3PP displays (see figure 6). This result is in line with the structure of EFL textbooks, as they contain stories and articles in contrived full prose text, which most often represent persons or characters that require the use of 3PPs.

Likewise, the Grammar section coming up second highest is logical, as grammar may firstly include explicit instructions over the correct use of 3PPs and other pronouns. Secondly, grammar instructions demand example sentences to showcase any given grammatical feature. Such sentences may also include pronominal content, explaining the relative prominence of the Grammar section in this study.

The least amount of 3PP content was found in the Table of contents category, with a total of 4 accounts, all masculine, and all counted in *High five! 3*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade EFL textbook. There is no uniformity for how pronominal content may be compiled in textbook indexes, as that depends on the structure of the book, and the titles given to the sections therein.

The distribution of 3PPs across the areas of appearance was not equal in terms of gender. The Prose category, again, offered the largest divergence according to gender, while the other categories had 3PP displays closer in number to each other. Feminine 3PPs numbered higher in total than masculine 3PPs in the Activity, Glossary, and Illustration areas. Notably for the focus of this study, the instances of GN3Ps were much more equal between areas of appearance than either masculine and feminine 3PPs, with a mean of 9 against median 10. This was against masculine 3PPs with 136.3 mean and 37.5 median, and feminine 3PPs with 80 mean and 54.5 median. However, the relative equality present in GN3P appearances across the areas is most logically the result of the overall low number of GN3Ps in the data.

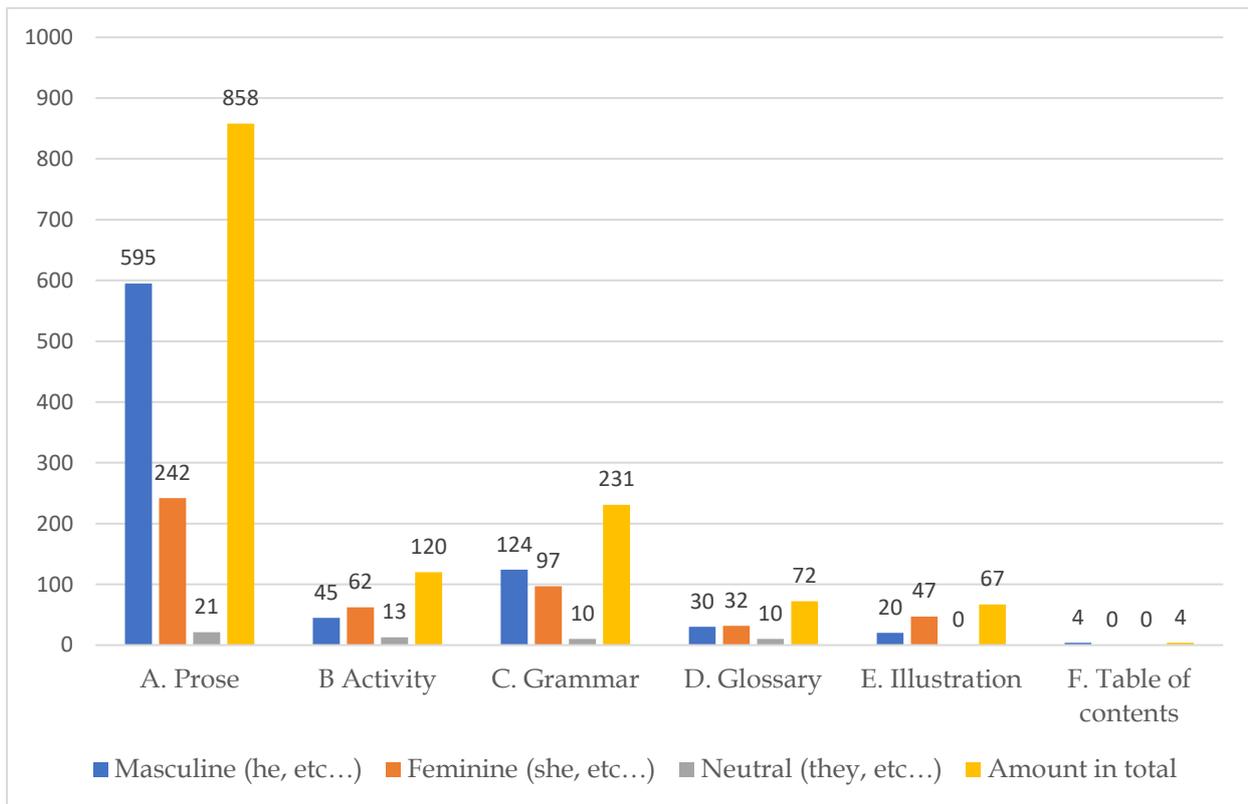


Figure 6: Distribution of 3PPs according to area of appearance

In conclusion, singular *they* and its cases were present in four of the five select textbooks, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade *High five! 3* excluding GN3Ps wholly. Masculine 3PPs were the most prominent in the data in near every category of organization, clearly diverging from both feminine 3PPs and GN3Ps (see figures 1, 2, 4, 5). Only in the areas of appearance category did feminine 3PPs ever overtake masculine 3PPs (see figure 6). While feminine 3PPs numbered fewer in total, their distribution made them more visible in certain areas than masculine 3PPs. The divergence between masculine and feminine grew most notable in the grade 9 textbook *On the Go 3*, which lessened in upper secondary school textbooks but ended up further from each other than in lower basic education textbooks. The amount of 3PPs fluctuated strongly from book to book, but GN3Ps remained extremely few in amount throughout the data. The EFL textbooks included in the data of this current study did not present many instances of singular *they* or its varied cases, but even the low amount found exceeded research expectations.

## 4.2.2 Analysis of the GN3Ps

This chapter consists of analysis on the meanings and qualities of GN3Ps present in the data to answer sub-question 2b, which read: Does singular *they* show in a nonbinary context?

As was reported in Chapter 4.2.1, very few instances of GN3Ps were discovered in the data, totaling in 54 accounts (see table 1). However, this relatively low number provides ground for close analysis on them and the surrounding contexts in which they emerge. What meaning of GN3Ps do the 54 instances of use represent? Some specific examples from this pool were chosen to be spotlighted here according to research interest.

To answer the research question in concise terms, none of the 54 accounts of singular GN3Ps exemplified a nonbinary context. Nonbinary gender was not explicitly represented in the textbooks, nor was the nonbinary context of use illustrated in any segment of any textbook. Instead, the accounted singular GN3Ps clearly presented *generic* and *indefinite* contexts, the nature of which were discussed in Chapter 2.2. Some of these accounts are exemplified below.

Both the sixth grade *Go for It! 6* and the ninth grade *On the Go 3* contained accounts of singular *they* and objective case singular *them* despite not having any explicit grammatical or lexical acknowledgment of GN3Ps and their uses. The accounts in these two textbooks served in a *generic* context. In *Go for It! 6*, a page contains descriptions for different types of friends in sentences such as: “This is someone you met a long time ago, maybe in kindergarten. *They* know you quite well so you can feel relaxed with *them*” (page 47, emphasis added). To add reason to categorize these instances as generic GN3Ps, some sentences instead contain *he* or *she* where *they* could otherwise fit.

In a similar vein, an activity in *On the Go 3* lists team roles with singular titles such as “[t]he chairperson” or “[t]he explorer” (page 105). The titles are followed with singular verbs in phrases such as “[t]he organizer *is* eager to get the job done” (ibid., emphasis added). The subsequent descriptions contain only *they* for pronouns. Since types of friends and roles in a team are listed here as more indefinite concept than concrete persons or characters, the GN3Ps *they* and *them* used to describe them clearly hold generic meaning rather than nonbinary.

As was expected during the setup of the research design, singular *they* was present in the upper secondary school textbooks. *Elements 1+2* as well had GN3Ps that held a generic meaning

similarly to what was exemplified before. There were also instances of what was listed in Chapter 2.2 as meaning *a.* of singular *they*: that *they* and other GN3Ps are used with singular indefinite pronoun antecedents. Such pronominal content was discernible in *Elements 1+2* in cases such as the following phrase:

“In many South American cultures, maintaining constant eye contact while **someone else** is speaking can mean one of two things: that you strongly disagree with what **they** are saying, and wish to argue; or that you are romantically interested in **them**” (page 13, emphasis added)

Here, the singular indefinite pronoun *someone else* serves as an antecedent to which the two following GN3Ps *they* and *them* refer to. This is a straightforward example of current and widespread GN3P use in English.

*Elements 4*, in contrast, was the first of the textbooks to truly include and illustrate GN3Ps in its grammar section. It covers indefinite pronouns and in concurrence that GN3Ps are used to refer to them. A note of interest, however, can be found in the explanation for this use: “These [indefinite] pronouns are referred to with *plural forms of they-pronouns*” (page 130, emphasis added). Here, the singular nature of GN3Ps goes unrecognized even though indefinite pronouns may themselves be in singular form and are still referred to with *they* and its variant forms in English.

This kind of flawed explanation can be hypothesized as resulting from either the textbook writers’ own ignorance of English grammar, or, more reasonably, an intentional choice to forego the singular meaning of *they*. Reasons for this choice may be numerous, but a possible one was discussed in Chapter 2.2: singular *they* is academically considered a grammatical complication in linguistic decorum often due to its shared homograph with plural *they*. As was cemented in the data of this very study, English textbooks do not include GN3Ps to the same degree as 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronouns *they* etc. at all – or even explicitly acknowledge them as a grammatical option in most. While indefinite antecedents may have been considered applicable to upper secondary school EFL learners due to their wide usage in standard English, the singular nature of GN3Ps in cases such as nonbinary contexts might still be seen as too abstruse.

In conclusion, the textbooks chosen as data in this study included 54 instances of GN3Ps that can be easily categorized as either generic or as referring to indefinite antecedents. As such, these instances of singular *they* etc. exemplify only half of their possible meanings: there was

not a single account of GN3Ps that could be categorized as carrying *nonbinary* meaning. Consequently, nonbinary genders were not represented in these primary or upper secondary school English textbooks.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to elucidate the nature and place of GN3Ps such as singular *they* in Finnish EFL education. This kind of narrow focus on a singular grammatical structure was new in the field of Finnish academia, and the results were thereby somewhat difficult to tie to applicable preexisting studies, of which there are very few in Finland. The research framework was built in spite of this with the understanding that there was clear merit in studying this topic, as it touches directly on relevant and on-going political discourse relating to the state of the English language and gender minority demographics.

The nonbinary demographic conveys their gender meaningfully *through* the use of GN3Ps in English and similar natural gender languages. While nonbinary people exist and deserve respect for their chosen mode of gender representation, their existence remains heavily politicized and challenged. Therefore, there are benefits in discussing topics that touch on their life in society, such as the modes of language by which they perform their gender. Research like this study can have a normalizing and educational effect, which is still necessary for the better inclusion of minority people who are susceptible to discrimination on both personal and institutional levels.

National education, for one, is a context where the inclusion of nonbinary people has been found wanting according to both nonbinary people and advocates for educational progress. According to past research, teachers may not approach the subject confidently or else dismiss it entirely (Kang 2019: 48, 49, 52; Lahelma & Tainio 2019: 8, 9; Pantić & Florian 2015: 343,

345). Learning materials as well are often considered lacking any meaningful minority representation (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 21; Kumpumäki 2020). In addition, GN3Ps are *undeniably* a part of standard English with historical grounds and defined uses. This study was conducted with the understanding that if GN3Ps are not taught among the other 3PPs in Finnish EFL education, that such a situation would not be value-neutral. Whatever reasons there are to neglect GN3Ps in education, they should at least be worth transparent evaluation and debate.

The study itself was limited in its small pool of textbooks to analyze, which was in part intentional to limit the scope of the research. However, while the collected data was analyzed with different criteria as to pronominal number, growth, and areas of appearance, full academic generalization was not possible in its current state. One possible angle for more encompassing future research would be to include more textbooks in subsequent evaluations, consider more school grades for the illustration of linear growth in EFL content, or else pick more textbooks from different Finnish publishers. Nonetheless, there are still some applications for the current set of data and their concurrent analyses. In practice, this study sets a vantage point to gauge the development of the pronominal and gender diversity topics in EFL education. There is reason to research future EFL learning material in the same analytical framework to see whether their content will have been made to better reflect standard English and gender diversity.

The first part of the analysis of this study focused on the official national documentation that guides the ideological framework for EFL education in Finland. The text therein puts forth the image of Finnish education system as very cognizant of humane values, among which the concept of *equality* is emphasized particularly. Equality in this case covers gender equality as well as openness towards people no matter their demographical status. Both of the national core curricula that comprise this documentation describe gender as *diverse* – in a single mention without further clarification in either book. All forms of discriminations are renounced while improving and protecting societal and individual wellbeing are stated as among the goals of systemic national education. These statements give reason for the inclusion of gender minority people in education and their representation in learning material.

When it comes to the goals of EFL education, the national core curricula do not specify grammatical or gendered content in the learning goals or criteria for learner evaluation. The learning of GN3Ps or other 3PPs are not stipulated upon at all. While there is text going over the

importance of communicative skills and language production, the role pronouns play in these processes is not stated. This was, in part, expectable due to the purpose and format of the core curricula. The core curricula do form the basis for education, but quite a lot of the practical dimension is left up to collective and individual educators to deduce and decide. The content of classroom practices is mostly not defined, with topics such as lexicon and grammar described in very light terms without specifics. GN3Ps are not made a special case of mention among them, which can be argued to be fair.

Previous research into the view of educators on EFL content implies that learning material specifically plays a vital part in setting the direction of EFL classroom practices. As such, if a highly contemporarily discussed and somewhat controversial linguistic item such as GN3Ps is not included in educational guidelines for the subject, it is ultimately left up to learning materials to offer suitable content. This, in part, justified the analysis of learning material in five distinct EFL textbooks.

The textbook chosen for analysis presented very few GN3Ps in their content, which in itself still exceeded the research expectation of zero accounts. The GN3Ps classified in the data illustrated generic and indefinite antecedent use. There were no instances of GN3P use in a non-binary context in any of the textbooks. In contrast, the traditionally binary masculine and feminine 3PPs were extensively present; masculine pronouns especially plainly overshadowed the rest, which reflects current understanding of masculine bias in English learning material and historical linguistics (Koskinen 2022; Salonen 2019; Curzan 2003; Julé 2008: 13).

Important to note, however, is that while the results of this study imply a male bias, they are counted purely from pronominal data; the representation of male and female genders may be more equal when it comes to other elements of the textbooks, such as character dialogue or the illustration of agents demonstrating actions. Representation on that level was outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, male bias has been observed on such levels in previous research into EFL textbooks, meaning that the high number of masculine 3PPs here exemplify yet another facet of the confirmed male bias.

Returning to the GN3Ps, since they numbered few in comparison to other 3PPs and there were almost no instructions for their use, the textbooks do not seemingly offer sufficient repetition of GN3Ps as a linguistic structure for learners to firmly grasp them. If a linguistic feature is not present in the learning content to an ample degree, there is little pedagogical support for

students to learn it. In this light, a case can be made that a feature of standard English grammar has not been covered in current EFL education.

EFL as a subject inevitably contains gendered structures since it concerns English, a natural gender language which has gendered 3PPs. There is historical justification for the inclusion of GN3Ps among this content, since GN3Ps such as singular *they* currently are and have long been in wide-spread standard English use in both spoken and written domains. *Tasa-arvotyö* fittingly notes that the comparison of gendered structures can easily be fitted into foreign language education (Jääskeläinen et al 2015: 41). This is especially the case for the comparison of Finnish, which as a genderless language has 3PPs closer in meaning to the English GN3Ps. The absence of GN3Ps in EFL education implies dismissive or else ignorant attitudes on the part of educators toward the part that GN3Ps play in linguistics.

These attitudes carry severe consequences when one considers the standing of gender minorities in contemporary discourse. The demonstration of traditionally masculine and feminine 3PPs alongside GN3Ps shows how stacked the current structure of EFL education is against discussing nonbinary identity in earnest. EFL is considered a subject in which personal and cultural identities can be built or conveyed through learning and using language. The current state of affairs in schooling, thereby, denies support for gender minority people to do the same. In lieu of explicit guidelines on inclusion or material content, nonbinary people are left with no structures to discuss their realities in English as a school subject.

This thesis subscribes to the inclusive ideology laid out in the Finnish core curricula, and it covers gender minorities. There is ample research on the positive effects of representation of marginalized minorities in normative environments, which include national schools. Therefore, it would be very meaningful to include nonbinary people in education and to convey ways to learners to include them as well. One of such ways would be the explicit examination of gender as a construct, and as it happens, gendered linguistic structures such as pronouns are prime content by which to illustrate it. The normalizing effect offered by the national school system could carry notable impact, especially since contemporary discourse and sociopolitical movements clash over the rights of gender minority people to exist.

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