



CULTURE, LANGUAGES AND MEDIA

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**Teachers' experiences regarding
digital and multimodal writing tasks**

Lärares erfarenheter av digitala och multimodala skrivarbeten

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Abstract

The evolving technologies used for communication has made an impact in the educational system as digital tools are becoming more common. With the digital tools of today, it is possible to create multimodal texts in which different language expressions are combined. The new possibilities for presenting content creates higher demands on today's learners as they are faced with challenges both as receivers, and users of language. This study aims to examine teachers experiences and perspectives regarding the planning of multimodal writing tasks, with use of digital tools. The study also sets out to explore how teachers perceive the use of multiple modes in such tasks, and how the growing technologies may affect their teaching of English in year 4-9. The results shows that the planning of multimodal writing tasks commonly includes images, the use of digital tools and oral presentations. In the described projects, the multiple modes were used either as a support for the writing production or seen as an equal part of the assignment. Furthermore, all participating teachers agreed on that multimodal writing tasks can be beneficial for students communicative skills, and in creating students motivation. However, the results also shows teachers challenges when conducting multimodal writing tasks, as in support for learning new digital tools, the connections to the syllabus and possible difficulties regarding students IT knowledge. The results imply that much of the competence needed to successfully conduct multimodal writing tasks, comes from the teachers own ambition to learn and administrate such tasks.

Keywords: Teacher perspective, multimodal writing, digital tools, multiliteracy.

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	7
3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	8
3.1 TERMINOLOGY	8
3.2 LEARNING BY A MULTIMODAL APPROACH.....	9
3.3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....	10
3.3.1 <i>The different values of multiple language expressions</i>	10
3.3.2 <i>Using a multimodal approach to promote students motivation to write</i>	11
3.3.3 <i>Possible challenges of multimodal writing tasks</i>	13
4. METHODOLOGY	15
4.1 THE PARTICIPANTS	15
4.2 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	16
4.3 INSTRUMENTS USED FOR DATA COLLECTION	16
4.3.1 <i>Semi-structured interviews</i>	17
4.4 PROCEDURE	18
4.5 ANALYSIS	18
5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	20
5.1 TEACHERS EXPERIENCES FROM PLANING MULTIMODAL WRITING TASKS WITH USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS	20
5.1.1 <i>Teachers examples of planning multimodal writing tasks</i>	20
5.1.2 <i>Teachers beliefs regarding the benefits and challenges of multimodal writing tasks, using digital tools</i>	22
5.2 THE VALUE OF MULTIPLE MODES IN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS	23
5.2.1 <i>Teachers perceptions on the use of traditional- and multimodal text tasks within the educational context</i>	23
5.2.2 <i>Teachers perceptions regarding students knowledge of multimodal writing tasks and use of digital tools</i>	26
5.2.3 <i>Teachers perception regarding the use of multiple modes</i>	27
5.3 TEACHERS PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY WHEN CONDUCTING WRITING TASKS	28
5.3.1 <i>The possibilities and challenges when using digital tools</i>	28
5.3.2 <i>Teachers support for using digital tools</i>	30
6. CONCLUSION	32
6.1 LIMITATIONS	34
6.2 FURTHER RESEARCH.....	34
REFERENCES	35

1. Introduction

This study takes an interest in teachers perceptions regarding a multimodal approach to writing in the subject of English with the use of digital tools. Lundhal (2014) argues that all communication presupposes the use of texts and is therefore central to the use and development of language. However, the definition of what a text is can be acknowledged in different ways. One definition is to see texts as traditional, in which text is viewed as a communication tool that stands on its own. It does not include the use of any other linguistic expressions, except from illustrations which may be seen as a support for the text. In contrast, a text may also be defined as any form that unifies a whole through written, spoken or electronic modes. These texts can be seen as multimodal texts, as they include additional language expressions such as images, video, drama or sound (p. 51-52).

The ways in which the written word may be used is constantly changing as the tools of communication in our digital era are ever evolving. As our culture has become more digitized, so have the ways in which we use and create texts. Olthouse (2013) argues that the literacy of today has become multimodal as the tools used for communication are constantly evolving (247-248). Godhe (2014) states that the progress of technology is making digital tools more common in the educational system. These tools may enable the creation of multimodal texts in which different language expressions are combined (p. 7).

Mills (2011) states that language taught by the use of different language expressions creates potential for students to develop reflective thinking skills, as the different modes are compared and transformed. Compared to traditional writing tasks, multimodal writing also offers students more than one way to express their knowledge (p. 64-65). Lanter and Winters (2013) argues that this is especially beneficial for ESL (English as a second language) students as it provides multiple entry points to a task (p. 253). Godhe (2013) describes how a variety of language expressions can be useful for expressing key ideas and as a support for the writing process. At the same time, the writing task must have a tension between the different modes in order to make it productive and meaningful for the students. There is then a difference in how the additional language expression is used as it could be seen as a support, or as an equal carrier of meaning alongside the written word (p.109-112).

Lundhal (2012) argues that the Swedish syllabus for English has a narrow definition of what a text is. The author claims the definition suggests that the written and spoken abilities may be

divided into two sections as the phrase “spoken English and texts” is reoccurring. This may be seen as promoting the traditional use of texts in schools. However, possible connections can be made to motivate a multimodal approach. These connections can be found in the core content for listening and writing, as it states that students should be able to understand a variety of text types that includes other linguistic expressions (Lundhal, 2012). From the overall goal that states that students should “develop their ability to [...] adapt language for different purposes, recipients and contexts”, it is also clear that the use of traditional writing alone will not suffice for English language learning (p. 32-33). Even so, my personal experience from teacher practise is that multimodal writing tasks are used less frequently, compared to traditional writing tasks.

Skolverket (2014) describes how working with digital tools may come with possibilities as well as challenges for teachers. Around half of the teachers participating in a survey by Skolverket, claimed they were in need of additional education in how to use digital tools as a part of their teaching (Skolverket, 2014, p. 47). Godhe (2014) argues other challenges concerns time, knowledge and assessment forms used for multimodal activities. With this thesis I am interested in how these challenges may affect how teachers perceive creating and assessing multimodal writing tasks in English as a second language. I am also interested in how a multimodal approach to writing may be affected by the use of digital tools. As many of the teachers I have tried to interview, claim that they do not use digital tools in English for year 4-6, I also find it interesting to see if this may affect teachers working in year 7-9.

2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers perceive the challenges and possibilities when planning a multimodal writing task in English. The study aims to see how digital tools are used when creating multimodal texts, and what difficulties and strategies teachers use in order to stay in line with the demands of using new technology. Furthermore, this study aims to see what value additional language expressions may have in the overall assignments of multimodal texts, conducted with adolescent pupils. The study aspire to answer the following questions:

1. How do the teachers interviewed plan the activity of a multimodal writing task in teaching English, using digital tools?
2. How do the teachers interviewed perceive the value of multiple modes in writing assignments?
3. How do the teachers perceive the use of digital technology when conducting writing tasks?

3. Theoretical background

This section will define the theoretical framework of this degree project by defining its key words and concepts. It will start with explaining how the terms of technology, traditional text and multimodal texts will be used in this study, as well as the terms of medium and mode.

This section will also discuss how multimodal writing tasks may be connected to a sociocultural view of learning. Secondly, this section will summarize previous research concerning how multimodal writing tasks may be used in order to promote students communication skills and motivation for writing. Finally, this section will end with discussing what possible challenges teachers may find when working with multimodal writing projects in order to better understand the interviewed teachers in this study.

3.1 Terminology

Säljö (2010) states that human learning has always been a matter of interacting with technology and artefacts. In traditional activities of the past, this would include the mastery of a range of instruments and tools that would help the human to survive such as knives, bows, arrows and different utensils for cooking. In more recent times, this concept has developed into also including books, paper, pencils, calculators and eventually even the digital technologies of today (p. 58). The term *technology* can be defined as associated with computer technology, electronic communication and digital audio and video tools. The definition also includes machine-hardware such as scanners, servers and printers, and software which include educational applications used for multimedia presentations and online discussions. Vaish and Towndrow (2010) argues that this definition of technology is the one most used by students and teachers, and will because of this be the definition used when referring to the concept of technology in this study (p. 319-320).

In the early age of education, teachers taught by using texts for reading and writing. In such traditional texts, the text itself is seen as the main carrier of knowledge. This type of writing was and may still be used as a way to give back what has been presented in terms of definitions, grammatical rules and text passages (Säljö, 2010, p. 58-60). However, a text may also be defined as multimodal. Vaish and Towndrow (2010) states that texts used in today's classrooms are likely to be a projected web page and may include both typographical text and other elements such as images, sounds, animations or colours that contribute to the meaning

of the text itself (p. 320). Kress (2010) defines how a multimodal text is designed by the use of different modes, images, colour, layouts and writing in order to present relations for a specific audience. The term *multimodal texts* will be referred to when discussing texts that include more than one language expression (image, video, drama, sound). Furthermore, texts that only depend on the written word for expressing meaning will be referred to as *traditional texts* (Lundhal, p.51-52, 2012).

When speaking of multimodal texts, it is important to know the difference between the term *medium* and *mode* as they tend to get confused. Medium refers to how technology presents the different parts of the text. For instance, this could be through a printed book, a computer application or a CD-ROM. Modes refers to forms of meaning-making as in sound, gesture, colour or print. In a multimodal text, all modes that interact with each other are a part of creating meaning in symbiosis with the typographical word (Vaish and Towndrow, 2010, p. 321).

3.2 Learning by a multimodal approach

Skolverket (2011) defines language as “the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating and learning” (p. 32). Wedin (2011) describes how literacy can be seen as a concept which describes how language is learnt in various contexts and situations. The language skills then depend on identity as well as previous experiences, making each individuals language skills unique (p. 78-80). However, the tools used for communication are constantly evolving which affects the literacy practises of our society. Olthouse (2013) argues that technology has changed the ways in which we communicate and that the literacy practises of today has become multimodal, as language can be understood as more than the spoken and written word. In a multiliteracy pedagogy, various literacy skills are combined to teach students how one skill can be translated into another. This may enable students to generate abilities to understand and take part of different communication contexts as well as preparing them for future communication challenges in society (p. 248-249).

The ability to adapt one's language skills in different contexts is referred to as communicative competence by Lundhal (2015). The author states that the will to learn a language comes from a desire to be a part of a social context and that social interaction is the starting point when learning a new language. To be able to interact with others through dialogue and cooperation,

it is thereby important to be able to adapt ones skills for different contexts, purposes and recipients (p. 32).

From a sociocultural perspective of learning, Klerfelt and Qvarsell (2012) argue that three key aspects are important when learning a language. The first aspect is to account for students previous language knowledge. This can be done by understanding what literacy skills each student has in order to build on that knowledge. Secondly, language should be learnt in a collaborative way as it is important for students to be able to discuss language in order to understand it. Finally, these methods can be combined with giving students opportunities to learn and show their understanding in various ways. In regards to multimodal writing tasks, students may benefit from this as a multimodal text combines traditional text with other language expressions such as speaking, drawing and playing in different contexts. Multimodal text instructions creates possibilities for students to show their knowledge in various ways. Lee (2014) argues that ESL learners thereby can benefit from a multimodal approach, as they are often hindered in the linguistic mode of communication (p. 61).

3.3 Previous research

3.3.1 The different values of multiple language expressions

Multimodal writing tasks may promote students communication skills with different results depending on how the additional language expressions are used. In this sense, the additional expressions may be used either as a support or as an equal carrier of meaning in a text. One example of this difference is the comparison between two studies which included a multimodal approach to writing. In the first study called *Fracturing Writing Spaces*, Lenters and Winters (2013) studied how a multimodal writing project could progress through a storytelling workshop. In the writing process, fifth grade students were guided through different modes of representation as they created fractured fairy tales. By working with illustrations, drama and video, the written stories were created by transmediation through the different modes (p. 235). Mills (2011) defines transmediation as when one mode changes into another and argues how it can be used as a tool for developing generative thinking, and reflective skills. This can be possible as students are given the opportunity to discuss the tension between the different modes by explaining its similarities and differences. Furthermore, this may also promote meaning-making in students work (p. 59-61).

In the second study called *Using an arts-integrated multimodal approach to promote English learning*, Lee (2014) studied how images could be used as a support for promoting struggling students writing skills. As students wrote digital texts they were also allowed to express themselves by using images when they felt their language skills were not enough to express their knowledge. Lee (2014) concluded that the images helped the students in their writing process as it gave them opportunities to observe, relate, develop and discuss language for concepts they otherwise would find abstract. By using images, the student felt more motivated to continue writing and they were also more engaged in the task. This helped the students gradually work towards only communicating by typographical word, which was the aim of the project (p. 61-62).

In the two mentioned studies, multiple modes were used in combination with traditional texts but with different purposes. In the first example, the multiple modes served as an equal carrier for meaning in contrast to the second example where the multiple mode was merely used as a support for the written word. Godhe (2013) describes how these two different approaches to multimodal writing may affect the benefits of students communicative competence. The use of multiple modes can be useful to help students to express something of equal value to the written word, for developing ideas and as a support for the writing process. However, the author argues that the true potential lies in that the task provides a tension between the different modes as this will make the task more meaningful and productive for the students (p. 132-133).

3.3.2 Using a multimodal approach to promote students motivation to write

Lighbrown and Spada (2013) argues that the definition of what motivation is depends on the individual. However, motivation is always connected to a feeling of success. In this sense, motivation depends on the individuals personal goals. It could come from getting high results on tests, from a personal interest or something that makes the task itself feel meaningful and relevant. If the student feels involved, has power over their own learning and is motivated by a topic that interests them, they are more likely to be motivated.

Gallagher (2014) describes how an individual's interest can depend on different aspects and that the concept of what creates an interest can be divided into two categories. These are defined as personal interest and situational interest. In the first definition, interest is argued to

come from a deep personal level of engagement for the task. This interest may come from getting attention or recognition, but may also be based on memories. If a student has positive memories from similar tasks or is able to connect to the task on a personal level, this may promote the interest and motivation for writing. In contrast, the second definition is defined as situational interest which describes how interest comes from gaining new experiences. In a writing task, this can be connected to motivation as students want to write in order to gain a certain knowledge. Furthermore, Gallagher (2014) states that students must feel as if they have the ability to complete a task in order for it to be meaningful. In the higher grades this may become a problematic issue for some students, as the required skills for writing increases (p. 10-12).

Darrington and Dousay (2015) state that many students who struggle with writing in English have problems concerning general literacy and writing skills. In these cases, only scaffolding the writing progress will not be enough to increase their motivation to write. The researchers found that traditional paper-based writing projects tended to be less motivating for students as the tasks were often unrelated to the students' personal experiences. Writing projects where students use multimedia and multimodal outputs have the potential to increase struggling students motivation to complete writing tasks because they create relevance to students lives. Another difference between the traditional writing and the multimodal approach is the audience. When the audience is imagined, the feedback also becomes small or non-existing, and for many students, this may make the task feel meaningless. The authors argue that multimodal writing projects are more likely to have real audiences which makes the writing experience similar to a performance, where the writer has to adjust the work in order to meet the needs of the receiver (p. 29-33).

The Swedish results in the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) showed that a lower level of knowledge exists in writing comprehension in English, compared to the level of measurements for reading and hearing comprehension (Skolverket, 2011b). Why the results were lower for the writing comprehension is not acknowledged in the study but similar comparisons can be made among other countries participating in the survey. Darrington and Dousay (2015) state that many students struggle with writing because they do not have the motivation to write. The authors argue that these students may find motivation if they are allowed to create texts that combines the written word with other language expressions such as drawings, images, sound, drama or videos (p. 32-34). Lee (2014) describes how multiple

modes creates possibilities for motivation as students are given the opportunity to express their knowledge in more than one way. This can encourage students to continue writing as they find new ways of constructing meaning to their work. The use of multiple modes can because of this be seen as a support for creating motivation in writing tasks (p. 73-75).

In summary, multimodal writing tasks can be used in order to promote students' motivation to write. However, Darrington and Dousay (2015) also states that motivation can never be forced by the teacher. In order to help students feel motivated in a task, the learning environment therefore must be conducted by creating opportunities for students to find it themselves. The authors point out that such an environment is based on four key aspects. These include: that the students have control over their learning environment and value it, that the task is in level of the students skills, that the task feels relevant for the student and that it is possible to express knowledge in more than one way (p. 30).

3.3.3 Possible challenges of multimodal writing tasks

Darrington and Dousay (2015) describes how students often perceive multimodal texts as a creative experience as they encounter these types of texts in their free time, and see it as a normal part of their life. However, writing experiences from students daily lives may not always be compatible with writing tasks conducted in the school settings as the authors argue that the main focus tends to be on traditional writing. Texts that uses multiple modes of expression can be far more complex than traditional texts and this may become a problem if students do not master the platforms they use. The authors concludes that if the technologies makes the project overly challenging, it will tend to make the students results less successful (p. 29-32).

Furthermore, Godhe (2014) states that issues concerning the success of multimodal projects also lies with the teacher who needs time and knowledge in order to prepare it. A multimodal approach to writing demands administration and evaluation throughout the project and managing the time and tools needed can be problematic for many teachers. Projects in which digital tools are used also requires teachers to be able to adapt their tasks to the constantly evolving technologies. However, if the opportunity to try and experiment with multimodal tasks are few or non existing, students will not feel comfortable and motivated to learn from

such tasks leading to a decrease of the communicative competence students will need in their future lives (p. 128-129).

Lanters and Winters (2013) state that teachers must provide students spaces in which they are allowed to express themselves through different forms of communication representations as each form may create its own meaning and show its own assemblage of skills. However, the authors argues that many teachers of language tend to stick with the print-based practises as it is considered to better prepare students for tests. The demands on results and grades are increasing for learners of elementary schools and as a result, teachers may feel it is to time consuming to use a multimodal approach to promote skills in writing (p. 227-228).

Godhe (2014) points out that reading and writing typographical texts has, and still is more emphasised in language education compared to multimodal texts. As a result, students feel more familiar to traditional texts as a learning activity within the school context. When creating meaning, students tend to orient towards these familiar actions. For a multimodal project to then be meaningful for students, it has to rely on the norms and disciplines of the school context. In this case, the multimodal texts must relate to the established practises of writing typographical texts. Furthermore, language teachers are often more comfortable and trained to assess traditional writing than they are in assessing other modalities. This also reflects on the students as they become more used to having their traditional writing assessed. Students may have no experience from being assessed on other features and, as a result, they cannot relate to any former assessment as a point of reference when their multimodal texts are evaluated (p. 128-129). Burnett et al. (2013) argues that both students and teacher must have a common understanding of how the criteria is related to the assessment for the task to be meaningful. Otherwise, student may find it pointless to use any multiple modes when creating texts (p. 64-66). However, Godhe (2013) state that many teachers are uncertain of how such assessment should be conducted as the current curriculum mainly provides support for assessing the speaking, writing and listening skills of language. In order to support teachers in the assessment of other representations of language, the author thereby suggests that the curricula has to adapt so that it can support the new literacy practises in the ever evolving digital age (p, 137).

4. Methodology

The following section will start with introducing the participants of this study and its ethical considerations. Secondly, it will continue with an description of the method and instruments used for the data collection as well as a discussion of the procedure. Finally, this section will end with the analysis of the data collection.

4.1 The Participants

This study involves three English teachers that have voluntarily chosen to take part in the project. To give the project a broader view of teachers perceptions about the topic of multimodal writing tasks, teachers teaching in different age groups were selected (See table 1). As shown by the table below, many of the teachers profession include a wide range of grades making the participants experiences valuable to get a greater understanding of possible benefits and challenges in multimodal writing tasks. In order to gain different opinions regarding the subject of multimodal writing tasks and the use of digital tools, the teachers selected all have different experiences working with such projects. The different teachers all teach English in the south of Sweden and work in different municipalities. These represent one larger municipality and two smaller ones. However, the names of the schools, municipalities and participants will be kept anonymous in regards to the participants integrity. Furthermore, the teachers will be described in the order that they were interviewed.

Table 1: Participants of the study.

Teachers	Profession	Year they currently teach	Professional experience whitin the school context
Teacher 1	Elementary School Teacher, year 4-9	Year 9	20 years of teacher experience.
Teacher 2	Elementary School Teacher, year 6-9	Year 7-9	13 years of teacher experience including experience as an IT representative.
Teacher 3	Elementary School Teacher, year 1-7	Year 5	22 years of teacher experience including 7 years as a school headmaster.

The first teacher teaches the subjects of Swedish and English in grades 7-9. She is an educated English teacher for grades 4-9 and has twenty years of work experience. Currently, she teaches in grade 9 at a school for year 7-9. In her classes, she teaches between seventeen to twenty-five students. The first teachers approach to working with multimodal text tasks, using digital tools, is that she sees it both as an opportunity and a challenge. She believes that she has a greater experience from working with traditional text tasks compared to multimodal writing tasks.

The second teacher teaches English, history and German at a school that includes pre school and grades up to year 9. She is an educated teacher in English for grade 6-9 and is currently teaching in grades 7-9. Her profession also includes that she is an IT (instructional technology) representative at her school, and she has worked as a teacher for 19 years. In her classes she has approximately twenty-seven students. The second teachers attitude to digital tools and multimodal writing tasks is positive, and she is used to adapting different approaches in her teaching.

The third teacher teaches the subjects of English, Mathematics, Swedish and Social studies. He is educated to teach in year 1-9 and is currently teaching grade 5. He has worked as a teacher for fifteen years and also has experience from working as a headmaster. The third teacher states that he believes in a variation when it comes to writing tasks in English, and is positive to both multimodal- and traditional writing tasks with use of digital tools.

4.2 Ethical considerations

According to Vetenskapsrådet (2002), there are four concepts for conducting research. These include the requirement of information, consent, confidentiality and usage. To follow these directions, all participants have been contacted by e-mail which contained information about the study, and how the final data would be used only for the purpose of this degree project. In accordance to the consent and confidentiality requirements, all participants were anonymous and participated by their own choice. The consent for the participation of the study was made orally.

4.3 Instruments used for data collection

This study relies on a quantitative approach. According to Alvehus (2013) such an approach intends to get a deeper understanding of a problem, based on meaning rather than statistic

measurable results. In order to gain an insight in teachers perspectives and personal experiences about multimodal writing tasks and digital tools, interviews were chosen as the main method for this study. Initially, the study aimed to also include observations. However, in the lack of opportunity and time for such a method, interviews became the one method used. Alvehus (2013) argues that a quantitative approach may benefit from using more than one method as it creates a higher validity. At the same time, it may also create a more complex and less clear image of the research problem (p. 73). In this sense, the data collection of this study can be seen as one sided, but may at the same time result in one clearer view of the topic.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

One of the most common methods for quantitative research is by conducting interviews. This method was chosen because it has the benefit to give the respondent opportunities to affect the content and to express emotions and motives about the topic (Alvehus, 2013). This study relies on semi- structured interviews with English teachers. The main questions in the interviews were created beforehand as well as some being made on site, depending on the respondents answers. In order to get an understanding of the teachers experiences regarding the topic of multimodal writing tasks and digital tools, the questions were divided into three themes. The first regarded personal information and teacher experience in the subject of English. The second was about how the teachers perceived multimodal writing tasks, how they planned such activities and in what way they feel it connected to the swedish syllabus for English. In the final part, the questions aimed to get an understanding of the teachers beliefs regarding possible benefits and/or challenges when using technology and digital tools.

Alvehus (2013) argues that a risk with semi-structured interviews is that open questions requires the interviewer to be a careful listener, and that respondents may leave the topic if too much freedom is given for the answers. However, giving the respondent the chance to speak freely might also give additional information that can be valuable (p. 20). Because of this, the final stage of the interview gave each respondent the opportunity to add something that they personally felt was important regarding the topic, if they felt they had not already expressed it. Some respondents choose to use this part of the interview to add something extra or to emphasize an issue that we had already discussed.

4.4 Procedure

I started the search for participants by contacting thirty schools in the south of Sweden. At first, my wish was to find four teachers who were active in year 4-6, but as it proved difficult to get response from only such teachers, I had to change my approach. I decided to give the study a bigger range and choose participants who worked in both the younger and older age groups. I also used personal connections who I knew could help me get in contact with more teachers in order to wider my search. Because of this, the participants became active teachers in both year 4-6 and 7-9. However, many of the teachers are educated for both the younger and older years, making their combined experiences valuable in order to get an overview of what multimodal writing, and the use of digital tools, could look like in a progression.

The interviews were made with the teachers in their respective schools. However, some interviews were also conducted by phone calls as this was facilitated for many of the participants in regards to time and the possibility to meet in person. The time for the interviews were set to thirty minutes but this varied depending on the follow-up questions and the fact that each participant had a different amount of experiences and perceptions to share. In order to save the data, each interview was recorded. I then used two different recording devices on my phone to be able to record audio for meetings in person, as well as the interviews done by phone calls. The choice of recording the interviews was made as it made it easier to double check the data as well as helping me focus on the respondent during the interview, instead of focusing on making notes.

Alvehus (2013) states that in order to be a good interviewer, it is important to be a good listener and to be able to encourage the respondent to elaborate their answers (p. 84). As some of the interviews were done by phone, I experienced a difference in my role as an interviewer. I was not able to read any body language and it was also more difficult to notice when time should be given for the respondent to think. This might have affected the progression of the interviews, as I noticed that the data became less from such situations.

4.5 Analysis

The interviews of the participants were recorded and then transcribed. I then continued with reading the data several times in order to find similarities and differences within the answers. The data was then structured into different categories which answered to the main questions

of the study. Finally, these categories were connected with the theoretical background and previous research in order to present the final result.

5. Results and discussion

This section will present and discuss the collected data from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the three teachers of the study. The included quotes from the interviews have been translated from Swedish to English by me. In order to discuss the results, it has been related to the previous research and the theoretical background of this study. This has been done in relation to the following questions: How do the teachers interviewed plan the activity of a multimodal writing task in teaching English, using digital tools? What value do the multiple modes have in the writing task and its final assessment? And, how do the teachers perceive the use of digital technology when conducting writing tasks?

5.1 Teachers experiences from planing multimodal writing tasks with use of digital tools.

5.1.1 Teachers examples of planning multimodal writing tasks

The first teacher described how the planning of a writing project could be based on different steps and how the tasks usually were based on a theme or topic that the text would be about. Commonly, the teacher would start the project with letting the class create an example of a text together which later would lead to the students working on texts, either individually or in pairs. In this second step, students were left to choose something of their own interest within the topic that they felt they wanted to write about, and any additional modes used would depend on how the students wished to present their text. The teacher explained how the students have been given opportunities to learn different ways of creating texts in their earlier school years and that they now, in year nine, are given more freedom to compose their texts as they please. The teacher states that when composing a text the students "can choose what they feel comfortable with, or if they like, try something new".

The teacher described how the multimodal part of the writing task would often come in the end of the writing project as the students were asked to present their texts. The text would then commonly be presented as a combination of images and text, as videos or in digital form with use of a combination of written words, colours and shapes. In the end of the writing projects, students were also asked to share their texts with the rest of the class orally, supported by a power-point presentation.

The second teacher gave an example of a multimodal writing project in which the class worked together with a school from the US. In the project, the students were asked to write children's books with use of a digital platform that the countries shared equally. The task would begin with the students working in groups. As a support for the task, some parts of the assignment would be given to the students, such as the conflict in the story and the baseline which described what should be included in the different parts of the text. In the project, the students were asked to use images and the written word in order to share it on the platform. In the end on the project one goal would also be to transform the texts into audio files, creating another opportunity for using an additional mode of expression to the stories. When the texts are finished, the teacher also described how the class is planning on reading their stories to the younger students in their school.

Hasset and Curtwood (2009) argues that one of the most important aspects of a multimodal approach is the social activity of the task, and how a real audience of a multimodal text creates opportunities for students meaning-making (p. 280-281). In the teachers example, students are given this opportunity as they are collaborating with students from a different country as well as having the younger students as a receiver for their final results. The teacher also stated that the students were used to discussing the different elements within their multimodal writing assignments. When the relationship between images and texts are discussed, as well as the transmediation stage of such a multimodal project, students generative thinking and reflective skills may also be supported (Mills, 2011).

All three teachers shared the same starting point when designing writing tasks as they start their planing with choosing a topic or theme which can connect to students personal experiences or interests, as well as the goals of the curriculum. This seems like a logic starting point for any learning activity as the curriculum states that the content of communication should surround “subject areas that are familiar to the pupils” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 33). However, the third teacher found it difficult to give an example of a multimodal writing project conducted in the subject of English, and instead referred to a writing project which had been done in the subject of swedish and social studies. The task had then started with students conducting research on the topic, in groups or in pairs. With instructions of what the different parts of the text should obtain, the students then wrote and illustrated images to create the content of the text. The final result was then presented orally to the class with help from the illustrations in a digital presentation.

One reason for the third teacher to have less examples to describe, concerning the subject of English, could be that he recently started working as an English teacher. He stated that he previously worked as an English teacher but recently had a break, and worked with other subjects. The teacher also described how the students were used to work with a digital textbook in their assignments, which could influence the use of multimodal writing tasks depending on what instructions the textbook would offer. Säljö (2010) states that the material for English to be learned within the school settings is often limited to the textbook and its particular selection of information (p. 58). If the textbook does not bring up any multimodal writing tasks, it could be another reason for it not to be used, and as a result the teacher may have less experience from such tasks in the subject of English.

5.1.2 Teachers beliefs regarding the benefits and challenges of multimodal writing tasks, using digital tools.

Even though all teachers had more or less experience teaching multimodal writing tasks, all seemed to agree that the approach could benefit their students. One teacher argued that the biggest benefit was that the use of multiple modes created a variety in the different tasks, and that the students found it motivating to be able to express themselves in more than one way. As students are given different options on how to create the content of a text, it is likely that they feel in power of their own learning which Lightbrown and Spada (2013) argues to be a key aspect in motivating students to learn.

To use different digital tools and mediums to present the texts were also believed to be appreciated by many students as it could be familiar to social activities which students were engaged in on their free time. This concurs with the research made by Darrington and Dousay (2015) as they state that multimodal writing tasks often have the benefit of connecting to students daily life experiences (p. 29). Another belief that the teachers shared was that the multiple modes, such as images, often helped the students in understanding words or concepts which otherwise would have been abstract. As English is regarded to be a second language in Sweden, one teacher stated this to be especially important. Lee (2014) argues that ESL students are often hindered in the linguistic mode of communication and can be helped by the use of images in regards to understanding difficult words.

However, the teachers also believed that some students were not motivated by using multiple modes to express themselves. One teacher described how some students would think that it would be “a nice vacation” to only work with traditional writing tasks. This was believed to be because the students found it difficult to use more than one mode. When students worked in groups, this was also considered to be a problem as these students tended to make use of other students abilities instead of learning themselves. The teachers believed that this problem could regard both the additional modes of expression, as well as the digital tools used for the task. One teacher concluded this by stating that there will always be students who will “let someone else do the job”. Darrington and Dousay (2015) argues that students may find multimodal writing projects over challenging if they do not master the platforms they use.

5.2 The value of multiple modes in writing assignments

5.2.1 Teachers perceptions on the use of traditional- and multimodal text tasks within the educational context

The three teachers of the study all had different opinions of how they preferred to conduct writing tasks in the subject of English. The first teacher claimed she was more comfortable with creating traditional writing tasks as she felt that it was easier to cover the learning requirements of the curriculum with such a method. Godhe (2013) argues that teachers may find it difficult to assess multimodal writing tasks as the current framework in the Swedish curriculum for English mainly recognizes the writing, speaking, listening and reading skills of language. Another issue mentioned by the author is that working with multimodal writing tasks is a practise that is relatively new for many teachers. The interviewed teacher described how her opinion might not only be based on how the curriculum is written, in regards to the use of multiple modes, but could depend on her previous experiences as a teacher who has worked for many years. She stated that “maybe it is me as a person, I feel more confident in the assessment by using more traditional methods”.

In contrast, the second teacher argued that the curriculum shows support for the use of a multimodal approach to writing. She found these connections to be in the communication parts of the syllabus for English, and described how it can be used to practise different ways of communication, in how to deliver a message and in the fact that it gives the learning activites a variety. The teacher also stated that she could find connections to a multimodal approach in the first and second chapter of the syllabus. One of these examples can be found

in the section describing the guidelines for teaching knowledge as it states that “teachers should provide scope for pupils to exercise their ability to create and use different means of expression” (Skolverket, p. 16).

I believe that the teachers perception of what a language is can be crucial for how the core content of the syllabus is interpreted. Olthouse (2013) defines language as interaction that includes not only speech and writing, but also gestures, audio, art and digital media. In today's society it is common to interact with others by using more than only the written and spoken word. I argue that the way we use different language expressions depends on the context in which we are interacting. To combine different language expressions can be seen as a language strategy to make oneself understood (Lee, 2014). Furthermore, multiple modes can be used to express meaning and content in communication (Lundahl, 2012). This can be connected to the core content for speaking, writing and discussing in regards to “Language strategies to understand and make oneself understood when language skills are lacking [...]” and “Language strategies to participate in and contribute to discussions, such as [...] expressions to confirm understanding” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 34). To use digital tools and multiple modes can also be connected to “Presentations, instructions, messages, narratives and descriptions in connected speech and writing” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 34) as it creates opportunities to express knowledge in more than one way (Hassett and Curtwood, 2009). In regards to why language should be considered to exist of more than the spoken and written word, Kress (2010) states that it is “no longer possible to understand language and its uses without understanding the effect of all modes of communication” (p.337). By these findings I believe the combination of different language expressions can be assessed in a writing task as language and text can be defined as more than the spoken and written word. In the knowledge requirements of year 6, students should be able to express themselves and be able to use strategies to improve their interaction. Students should also be able to “choose texts and spoken language of simple nature and from different media [...] use selected material in their own production and interaction” (Skolverket, p. 35). However, as earlier mentioned language can be defined in different ways which makes these connections possible, but dependent on one's definition of language. Godhe (2014) argues that the current curriculum mainly provides support for assessing the speaking, writing and listening skills of language. In order to further support teachers in the assessment of multimodal texts, the author thereby suggests that the curricula has to adapt (p, 137).

The second teacher believed that the knowledge requirements for the subject of English were easy for the students to achieve, and because of that she feels free to explore different methods of teaching. She stated that “it is relatively easy to achieve the learning demands of the curriculum for English, it is not much which is expected from the students in order for them to get high grades. This gives me freedom to go beyond, and do more. I think English is the subject in which one is least controlled [by the Syllabus]”. However, she also stated that it is important to do multimodal tasks as well as traditional tasks in order to prepare her students for different types of tests and assignments. This concurs with the third teachers answers as he also argued for the use of both traditional- and multimodal writing tasks in order to create a variety of learning activities. Lenters and Winters (2013) argues that one reason traditional writing tasks still tends to be high valued in education is because it is considered to better prepare students for tests, and especially those which are statewide (p. 227). Furthermore, it is my experience that higher education tends to emphasize more traditional writing tasks in order to reproduce knowledge. Fernando (2018) states that higher education tends to prioritise the product of a written text, rather than the writing process (p. 63). In order to prepare students for a academic future, one could thereby argue that traditional texts still has a great importance and value in the educational system.

Based on my own experiences from teacher practise, I have seen more multimodal writing projects conducted in the subject of Swedish compared to the subject of English. When asking the teachers about how they had worked with the tension between different modes, one teacher stated that “we probably worked with it the most in Swedish, not so much in English”. Another teacher argued that there could be reasons for the difference in designing writing tasks for the subject of English, compared to the subject of Swedish. She stated that one of these reasons could be that English is considered to be a second language, and that teachers are less confident in their students abilities to express themselves. The teacher also believed that it could depend on that many English teachers were uneducated, or had a smaller amount of education in the subject of English. The law of teacher identification was introduced in Sweden in the year 2011 (SFS 2011:326) in order to improve the amount of educated teachers working in swedish schools. This could be one factor which will promote more educated English teachers in the future. However, in regards to my own personal experiences from the current teacher education at Malmö University, not many students choose English as their main subject for teaching in grade 4-6. In my class, which started with around one hundred students, only five has chosen English as their main subject. This means that most students

graduating from Malmö University in the year of 2019 will have less knowledge regarding the subject of English compared to other subjects. How this will influence the teaching of English in the grades of 4-6 is hard to say without conducting further research. However, it is my impression that the teacher might be right in her assumptions.

5.2.2 Teachers perceptions regarding students knowledge of multimodal writing tasks and use of digital tools

The three different teachers had different backgrounds as English teachers and all taught in different grades (see table one, p.15). Their combined professional competence included a range from grade 1-9. This gave me an opportunity to ask the teachers about what knowledge they feel the students had of multimodal writing activities, and the use of digital tools in the different grades. The first teacher, teaching grade 9, argued her students were easily learned and motivated by the use of digital tools. She stated that they had tried different modes and tools to create text in their earlier school years, which now made it easy for her class to be creative in their writing tasks. However, she also believed that there was no pressure on the students to learn different digital tools in the younger ages.

The second teacher described how they had worked with multimodal writing projects in her school as an overall assignment. This had contributed to that even the younger students in grade one to three were used to combining different modes of expression. The third teacher described how he feels he got an overview of the progression of the digital competence when he worked as a headmaster. He believed that the students had gained more knowledge regarding the use of digital tools during recent years. He argued one reason for it was that it has become more common for students to now have their own computers and padlets in school. He stated that in his previous years teaching, students had to share one computer which meant that less time was given to explore different ways of composing digital texts. He argued that he now could see a clear difference in the students digital competence, and gave an example of how even the youngest students in grade 1 were confident in creating digital presentations.

Skolverket (2014) states that the access to personal computers and padlets has increased in Swedish schools during the last ten years. An investigation made by Skolverket (2014) in year 2012 also showed that swedish students feel confident in using computers to write, search for information and create presentations for school tasks (p. 5).

5.2.3 Teachers perception regarding the use of multiple modes

The three teachers all gave examples of how they had worked with different modes when conducting writing tasks in English. The additional mode that all three mentioned as common in their teaching, was the use of images and illustrations. However, the perception of what value the additional mode would have in the writing task was different among the teachers. I interpreted that two of the teachers used additional modes in order to support the writing task for the benefit of the text production, rather than as a tool to show knowledge that would be equally valued through out the task. When describing how the class would work with text and image relations, one teacher stated that the image “becomes a support for the dialogue in order to speak about, and retell the content”. Lee (2014) argues that images are useful for helping students understand content and different concepts as it can provide opportunities for students to observe, relate and discuss the language (p. 61).

The third teacher described how the final steps of the task would usually be an oral presentation. He argued that one part of the final result would include the use of images, and that another part would be the presentation itself as the students often used power-point presentations in order to share their knowledge to the class. In the writing task, the written part of the text would be the first priority and any additional modes would be added after the written parts were done. Godhe (2014) states that the additional modes of a multimodal project may be used as a support. However, if the additional modes does not create a tension between the different modes, the task will risk becoming less productive and meaningful for the students. The power of using transmediation as a tool for learning is that the tension created can show similarities and differences between the different representations of language (Mills, 2011, p. 59-61). If the additional mode is only included in the final steps of the writing task, or merely used as a support for text production, one could thereby argue that the true learning potential of a multimodal writing task may be lost. Furthermore, it is my belief that the use of any additional mode must depend on what the aim of the task is, and teachers may have a different approach to multimodal writing tasks depending on this.

In contrast to the previous mentioned beliefs regarding the value and use of multiple modes, the second teacher stated that “There is no use in including something additional if it is not supposed to contribute to the end result”. The teacher believed the additional modes to be a part of the overall assignment and not only as a support for writing. In her class, the students were used to discussing the tension between different modes. For example, her students had

looked at children's books and how the content of the text depended on the relationship between the illustrations and the written word. The students had then created comics in small groups, which focused on these aspects. I believe this makes a good example of how the tension of the different language expressions can be made visible for the students. Lanters and Winters (2013) argues that active approaches to language which use both literature and expressions of art are beneficial to disrupt dominant pedagogias that tend to only privilege the printed form. If the task includes multiple semiotic resources and social collaboration it is also especially beneficial for ESL students, as it provides multiple entry points to the task (p. 235).

5.3 Teachers perspectives regarding the use of digital technology when conducting writing tasks

5.3.1 The possibilities and challenges when using digital tools

All teachers of the study agreed in that they found it positive to use digital tools in their teaching. The teachers stated that the different technologies and tools provided them with possibilities to create a variety of tasks in their teaching. They all believed that this made teaching more fun for both themselves and for most of their students. Two of the teachers mentioned that they found it practical to have a school platform in which the students could save their work. This made it easy to collect student material and was mentioned as a good way to get an overview of students tasks. One teacher also argued that it was positive to have the textbook in a digital format, as he believed this stimulated the students and contributed to a calm learning environment in the classroom. The three teachers also agreed on that the use of digital applications were especially easy to use in English, as most applications and instructions on the internet are explained in English. In this way, the teachers saw no significant obstacles in using digital tools in the subject of English compared to other subjects.

However, the use of digital tools in the subject of English is claimed to be less compared to the subject of Swedish (Skolverket, 2014, p. 5). In comparison, this has also been my impression as two of the teachers seemed to have more experience teaching multimodal tasks with use of digital tools, in other subjects than English. Furthermore, the perception of what differs between a mode and medium can be confused. Two of the teachers say they use multiple modes with digital tools, but the digital tool itself can not be seen as a mode but is rather the medium of the text. In this sense, using a digital tool (for example a power-point

presentation) does not necessarily mean that the text becomes multimodal. As earlier mentioned a mode refers to forms of meaning-making and in order for a text to become multimodal, all modes must interact with each other in symbiosis with the typographical word (Vaish and Towndrow, 2010, p. 321). Even though teachers plan multimodal tasks and use digital tools in order to support the text, one could thereby argue such a text to be less of a multimodal text than a text where the use of different modes are of equal value.

All teachers stated that the main tool used for writing digital texts in their classroom were computers. For some, this was all that was provided by the school. However, some of the teachers used both computers, padlets and other digital tools in order to create multimodal texts. Hasset and Curtwood (2009) argues that the multimodal approach is not about what tool teachers choose to use in their teaching, but rather how the tool is used in social practises. The authors argue that the main issue for teachers is how the tools are used in order to connect students minds with social activity, the world of meaning-making and the world of the text. By doing this students can progress in understand the ever-evolving communication of the digital media in our society (p. 280-281).

Skolverket (2014) states that the digital tools used in schools includes computers, padlets as well as students own personal equipment. One teacher argued that the use of digital tools sometimes can become an issue in regards to the risk of spreading the students material, and in how the material is collected in a safe and legal way. This can be referred to the new law regarding the regulation of data protection (GDPR) that was introduced in Sweden in year 2018, as it provided new guidelines in how students personal data should be managed within the educational settings. The teacher argued that the new guidelines requires knowledge which many teachers may still not feel confident in, and that this could reflect on the choice of using different types of digital tools and applications.

Another risk that one of the teachers had experienced was that using digital tools can be distracting. As students work on computers, the internet is not far away and sometimes it is easy for students to fall into doing something else than they are supposed to do. Using additional modes, such as drawings, may also lead to students concentrating more on making “a perfect image”, rather than focusing on all parts of the task. As earlier mentioned, motivation can be a key aspect for students work to be productive. If students feel motivated to finish a task, distractions might become less of a problem. However, Darrington and

Dousay (2015) states that motivation can never be forced by the teacher. Instead, the students must find it themselves by being provided opportunities to explore it within the learning environment (p. 30).

5.3.2 Teachers support for using digital tools

The first teacher stated that she had support from her workplace in regards to her own progression in working with digital tools. She gave examples of how time was set to discuss digitalization with her colleagues, and how teachers of her school could attend courses within the municipality. The third teacher explained how his situation was similar, but that the courses were few and sometimes too expensive. Overall, he found the support to be small and argued that it was his own responsibility to find sources for learning new digital tools. The second teacher had a different experience since she worked as an IT representative at her school. She described how she was her own support and that a part of her job was to share her own knowledge with others. Skolverket (2014) states that three out of four teachers believe that they need more pedagogical support in order to integrate IT in their teaching, and the educational activities. Furthermore, another issue can be that the IT equipment is non functional in the classroom which makes it problematic to use (p. 5). One teacher agreed with this as she described how the power outlets in her classrooms often were few, that she sometimes needed special cords that she did not have in order to teach, and how the connection to the internet sometimes could be lost.

Even though all teachers had different experiences regarding the support from their workplace, they all agreed on that much knowledge came from sharing with other colleagues. Two of the three teachers also argued that they learned new tools on their spare time, instead of learning it during their working hours. However, one teacher believed that it was part of planning her teaching and described how it, in the end, would make her job more fun. She stated that “the time for planning will not suffice if you are ambitious and want to do new things” and “it does not take that long when you are sitting in the couch in the evening”. Godhe (2014) claims that the success of multimodal writing tasks needs support for the teacher as the tasks demands skills and time for preparation. Managing the time and tools needed for a multimodal project can thereby be an issue for many teachers. It is my impression that even if teachers may have some support from their work environment, the result in their digital competence might depend on their own ambition, and the time they are

given, or take themselves, to learn new things. In the end, this may reflect on how teachers chose to conduct multimodal writing tasks with use of digital tools.

6. Conclusion

This section starts with providing a summary of the results made in this study. After presenting the summary, the limitations of this study will be addressed. Finally, this section will end by giving suggestions for possible future research.

This paper describes three teachers experiences from working with multimodal writing tasks, using digital tools. It also describes how the teachers perceive the value of the multiple modes in such a task, and the use of technology when teaching the subject of English. In summary, the teachers planned their multimodal writing projects by using a theme or topic for the task. The multiple modes used in the tasks would differ depending on the wanted result, but a similarity was found in that images and digital presentations were a common part of the projects. What also became evident was that most of the examples given by the teachers included that the project would include group tasks, and would end with the text being presented orally. This was done as the text was being transformed into an audio file or given as an oral presentation with digital support. The multiple modes used in the writing tasks were either seen as a support for the writing itself, or as an equal part of the overall task. There was also a difference in the teacher's answers about if a multimodal approach was advocated by the syllabus. The first teacher felt unsure about the connections to the syllabus. The second thought it could be found in regards to that it created a variety in the teaching. However, the third teacher was certain about the connections which made it possible for her to give concrete examples of how she worked with the syllabus when conducting the multimodal writing tasks. The different perceptions of the importance of multimodal writing project was also evident in the fact that only the third teacher used multiple modes as an equal part of the text assignment, while the other two mainly included such features as a support for the writing progression. In order to further support teachers in conducting multimodal writing tasks, one key finding was that the curriculum has to adapt in order to support more than the written, spoken and oral representations of language.

All teachers of the study agreed that a multimodal approach to writing could benefit their students in regards to motivation and communicative competence. However, all also had experiences of issues regarding using multiple modes and digital tools. These issues included that some students found it difficult to use more than one mode for communication, that the digital tools could be challenging, and that the digital tools sometimes could be distracting.

One concern was also how the digital tools could spread the students material and how this could become problematic in regards to legal safety.

The participating teachers all had a wide professional range which included grade 1-9. Their experience from teaching different grades in English was that students are confident in using digital tools from an early age. However, examples were also given to show that students may be more used to a multimodal approach in other subjects than English. This conclusion is supported by the facts from Skolverket (2014) as well as from two of the teachers as they described how they had done more multimodal projects in other subjects. One teacher also believed this was an issue that depended on that many English teachers were uneducated or felt less free in their teaching of English compared to other subjects.

In regards to support for teachers learning new digital tools and technologies, all teachers found that they had some support from their workplace. However, these answers differed. The first teacher stated that she had support, the second claimed he had little support, and the third argued she was the main support herself as she was a IT representative in her school. What was similar was that all teachers found it to be their own responsibility to learn new digital tools, and two out of three found the only opportunity to do so to be on their spare time.

As stated by Godhe (2014) the planning and implementation of multimodal writing tasks, with use of digital tools, demands time and support in order to become successful. However, the benefits of multimodal writing tasks creates opportunities for students to explore how to best communicate an idea, and is beneficial in order to disrupt dominant pedagogias which only tend to privilege the printed form. To include multiple modes of expression, and social collaboration also provides a supportive literacy environment which is especially important for ESL students (Lenters and Winters, 2013, p. 235). Furthermore, Skolverket (2014) argues that digital competence is necessary in order to become what is considered to be literate in today's era (p. 1-2). By teaching with a multimodal approach, students abilities to move fluidly among different types of communication contexts can be promoted (Olthouse, 2013).

In regards to the results of this study, my conclusion is that multimodal writing tasks with use of digital tools should be valued in the educational system, as it can help students prepare for future communication challenges in society.

6.1 Limitations

The study has a qualitative approach and its aim has merely been to understand the experiences and perceptions of its participants. In regards to this, the study is limited as it is not possible to draw any major conclusions about multimodal writing tasks in the subject of English. It is also important to address that the answers of the participants may or may not have been influenced by me, and the situation in which the interviews were held. The result may also depend on my own impressions and conclusions. The fact that I only did interviews and not also observations may also have limited my results regarding how multimodal writing projects were planned and conducted.

6.2 Further research

One thing that was occurring throughout the study was that there seems to be a difference in the learning approach towards teaching the language of English compared to the language of Swedish. As for further research, this would be interesting to explore. One teacher mentioned that it could have to do with how English is seen as a second language compared to Swedish which is usually seen as the first language. However, the theoretical background of this study argues that a multimodal approach to language is especially beneficial for second language learners. It would be interesting to further explore if and why this difference exists, and what reasons may lay behind it. In regards to the topics of this study, it would also be interesting to explore students beliefs regarding multimodal writing assignments as this was not a part of the current investigation. Furthermore, the understanding of multimodal texts can also be addressed by the reading skills of the syllabus. I believe the reading and writing skills are connected, and by this it could also be a valuable field to further research.

In regards to the result, one issue that came to light was how the teachers education could influence the teaching of English. One possible field of future research could be to explore how the teacher education for the subject of English has changed over time, and in what ways these changes are visible in the English classroom.

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