Degree Project
15 credits/högskolepoäng, Advanced level

“If I can capture the students in this way, no matter what subject, then it is worth all the effort!”
Using Telecollaboration for English Language Development and Intercultural Competence in Swedish K-3 settings

“Om jag kan fånga eleverna, oavsett i vilket ämne det än är, på ett sånt här sätt, då är det värt att göra det arbetet man ändå gör!”
Virtuella utbyten för engelsk språkutveckling och interkulturell kompetens i årskurs F-3

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Grundlärrarexamen med inriktning mot förskoleklass och grundskolans årskurs 1-3
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Preface

This study is conducted based on the goals and guidelines of the course Advanced Level Degree Project in the Major Subject (LL701G) at Malmö University. The guidelines state that the researchers involved should show the ability to present and critically value the results of their own research as well as draw conclusions from it. The researchers should also show their ability to argue and motivate their choice of adequate research methodology. Furthermore, the researchers should be able to show their ability to interpret and analyze collected data, as well as connect the findings of the study to previous research and provide suggestions for future research.

The composition of the literature review section was divided so that Frida was primarily responsible for accounting for previous research relevant to RQ1, whereas Emma was primarily responsible for RQ2 and RQ3, as these two are linked together. Emma also assisted with RQ1 by finding correspondence to the Swedish curriculum. Frida conducted the interviews with Teacher B and Teacher D whereas Emma conducted the interviews with Teacher A and Teacher C. In the analysis of the results, we listened to each other’s recordings of the interviews to validate the notes and interpretations of the utterances in the interviews. Close interaction between ourselves was crucial to generate the most out of the results.

For the results section, it was concluded that we would continue to work according to the division from the literature review, albeit still collaboratively and closely together. As RQ2 turned out to generate a significant amount of data relevant for the study, Frida also took partial responsibility of RQ3 to ensure a fair and effective writing process.

Despite the fact that we have been primarily responsible for different parts of the study, all editing of the text has been done together. Both of us have gone through the text multiple times and made minor changes both grammatically and structurally. Furthermore, to ensure that the entire study is representative for the both of us, we have thoroughly discussed the interviews and the interview notes as well as consulted translations of direct quotes.

We hereby confirm our equal involvement in the project:

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Abstract

This case study on telecollaboration focuses on Swedish practicing teachers’ attitudes and experiences with telecollaboration, i.e. an educational tool for communication between students in different countries to enhance foreign language development and intercultural competence. Four Swedish teachers with varying teaching experience were interviewed to share their experiences of telecollaboration in the earlier school years. The design and implementation of telecollaborative projects as well as the correspondence with the Swedish curriculum according to the interviewees will be presented and discussed along with possible beneficial outcomes and challenges that might arise in the design and implementation of telecollaborative projects. These aspects are also compared with findings of previous research on telecollaboration in educational settings. Finally, some suggestions for future research in the field is provided.

Keywords: foreign language development, intercultural competence, online intercultural exchange, primary school, Swedish educational setting, telecollaboration, virtual exchange
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1. Introduction

Technology is a vast aspect of our 21st century way of life as it makes the corners of the world easier to reach. Internet use is rapidly increasing and information has never been more easy to share. Learning a language in authentic situations has been shown to be an effective approach for students to fully comprehend the learning purpose and intended outcomes and accordingly, learn how to use language efficiently in everyday life (Barnes & Gruson, 2012; Liu, 2002; O'Dowd, 2011; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2014). For this reason, teachers ought to be trained in 21st century skills in order to effectively teach these skills to our future generations.

Despite the prevalence of English in Sweden, and despite the fact that Sweden is ranked third at English proficiency in the world (Education First, 2017), the teaching of English in Sweden is still highly traditional, particularly among the younger students. Furthermore, there are no knowledge requirements to reach by the end of grade three; therefore, it can be difficult for teachers to know in what grade English teaching should commence as well as what specific language skills to teach within grades K-3. For this reason, English teaching remains unstandardized.

Integrating telecollaboration, i.e. technology-based collaborative projects that aim to enhance language learning and intercultural competence, into English education will therefore contribute to language learning by providing unconventional, albeit clear and acceptable, manners of speaking English. It will also provide authentic learning situations that have proven to be effective in language learning (Barnes & Gruson, 2012; Liu, 2002; O'Dowd, 2011; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Thurston, Duran, Cunningham, Blanch, & Topping, 2009; Yang & Chen, 2014). Telecollaborative projects in Swedish grades K-3 are easily integrated in English teaching in correspondence with the Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre (Skolverket, 2011), continuously referred to as LGR11 or the curriculum, as well as the syllabus for English. A meta statement about the term telecollaboration and its variations will be made in the literature review.

In Leslie Payne’s (1991) interview with Louise Derman-Sparks, the conventional way of teaching English from a tourist perspective showing only visible forms of culture and typical generalizations is referred to as the “tourist trap” (p. 17). To move away from the “tourist trap”, it is important to identify less visible forms of language and culture, the characteristics that indeed define us as people (Kaser & Short, 1998, p. 185). Furthermore, it is crucial that
the educators utilize these emerging learning environments to promote authentic language acquisition and intercultural competence. Given the fact that we live in the 21st century, we are supplied with endless possibilities to use online-based learning materials and explore the English-speaking world in numerous different ways that previously did not exist.

From our previous experiences both as students and teachers within the Swedish school system, English teaching in primary school has often been based on different textbooks. Authentic English learning situations and materials are rare. One of us, however, took a semester to study abroad within the teacher programme at Malmö University and had the opportunity to work at a school in the Netherlands. The Dutch students were between 9-11 years old (similar to Swedish grades 3-4) and were participants of a telecollaborative project with a third grade class in Sweden. The English lessons consisted of recording video clips where the students taught each other words in the respective language as well as synchronous video calls via Skype and physical productions about the respective country to send to their peers in the other country. The Dutch students were very motivated to collaborate with their Swedish peers and they showed great excitement for this project.

This experience intrigued us to investigate the area of telecollaboration further. For our Basic Level Independent Project, we investigated several research studies that involved these kinds of projects in their research. However, we did realize that research on telecollaboration in primary school settings is limited. For this Advanced Level Degree Project, we will interview Swedish teachers and investigate their experiences towards telecollaborative projects and also discuss with them beneficial outcomes generated from telecollaborative projects as well as challenges and obstacles of conducting such projects.
2. Purpose & Research Questions

Unfortunately, the body of research on telecollaboration in primary school is limited, and contributing to the existing body of research by conducting a telecollaborative project in a primary school setting would require a significant amount of time. However, as there is quite a sufficient amount of research on telecollaboration with older students and in different parts of the world, an interesting approach would be to explore the possibilities to implement telecollaboration in English teaching, along with other subjects, in Sweden and in correspondence with the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2011) and particularly within grades K-3. From this perspective, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How can a telecollaborative project be designed to correspond with the Swedish primary school setting as well as the Swedish curriculum for grades K-3?
2. What possibilities can the implementation of telecollaboration bring to English teaching in Swedish K-3 settings?
3. What challenges arise when implementing telecollaboration into English teaching in Swedish K-3 settings?
3. Literature Review

In this section, a meta statement around the decided terminology will be made. Following the meta statement, the design and implementation of telecollaboration in previous studies will be described. Finally, two sections will describe the benefits and the challenges of telecollaboration in educational settings.

At the European COIL Conference on 2 December 2016, Robert O’Dowd held a presentation on COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) initiatives in university education (slide presentation found at https://www.slideshare.net/dfmro). In this presentation, he presented Jon Rubin’s statement that one problematic issue with COIL practices is that there are many names to call them by. COIL as well as telecollaboration, OIE (Online Intercultural Exchange), Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education, Virtual Exchange, eTandem/Teletandem, and eTwinning/ePals are all terms or platforms describing or encouraging online intercultural interaction and collaboration conducted with students in different cultural circumstances and geographical locations as an integrated part of the curriculum under the guidance of educators. All of the terms stated above are used in different settings but describe more or less the same phenomenon.

Although many of the studies investigated for this degree project use the term telecollaboration as well as online intercultural exchange, the term virtual exchange is, according to O’Dowd’s slide presentation, most commonly used within governmental bodies and is therefore also considered appropriate. Therefore, we will, throughout the project, therefore use telecollaboration and online intercultural exchange because of its utilization in previous research, and virtual exchange because of its utilization within governmental bodies, to describe the same types of projects.

3.1. Design and implementation of telecollaboration in educational settings

There are various different ways of designing online intercultural exchange projects. Some may focus mainly on language development (Barnes & Gruson, 2012; Liu, 2002; Thurston et al., 2009), whereas some may focus on promoting intercultural competence or intercultural awareness (Porto, 2015; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012). Nonetheless, the students’ language skills will be developed since the English language will be used to communicate with the other students in the project. This section will describe the versatility of the designs of different telecollaborative projects. Due to the limited amount of studies conducted in a
primary school setting, the majority of the explored studies are conducted in other educational settings; even so, these studies are still considered significant for our research study since the designs used for older students can be implemented in a primary school setting as well.

Robert O’Dowd (2011) introduces a telecollaboration design based on different stages of an online intercultural exchange. The first stage focuses on information exchange, where the participants exchange information about themselves and their culture and hence retrieve information about the other culture. Information exchange tasks can be designed either in an asynchronous model, including e-mails and wikis (websites or databases developed collaboratively by the participants), where it is not mandatory that the other participants are online at the same time, or in synchronous models, including video calls and online chats, where the recipient receives the message as it is composed. The second stage focuses on comparison and analysis, where the two cultures are compared through cultural products such as films, books and articles in order to spot similarities and differences between the two cultures. In the final stage, the collaboration, the two participant groups create a final product together to conclude and/or finish the project. O’Dowd’s model appears to be more or less accurate in most of the projects encountered for this study.

A similar design as the one suggested by O’Dowd (2011) is used in a sixteen-week long action research study by Richards (2012), conducting and examining an online intercultural exchange project between primary school students in Jordan and the United States. The telecollaborative project in Richards’ study, however, focused on developing a deeper and more profound relationship between the two target groups, and therefore put little or no emphasis on the two latter stages in O’Dowd’s telecollaboration design. Richards (2010) believed that promoting intercultural citizenship, which was the aim of the project, is unachievable unless that friendship bond is created first (p. 104). Relationship-oriented collaborations, according to Richards (2010, p. 84) provide authentic learning situations, where students are given the opportunity to interact with students of other cultures. These types of collaborations encourage students to explore and understand their own culture and ultimately increase the students’ understanding of others (Richards, 2010, p. 20). Online intercultural collaborations, moreover, contribute to authentic and meaningful learning situations and can increase students’ motivation to become intercultural citizens (Richards, 2010, p. 114).

A case study by Porto (2015) described an environmental project between two middle schools in Argentina and Denmark where wikis were used as a means of both asynchronous
and synchronous communication. The telecollaborative project contained comparison and analysis tasks and various collaborative tasks as described in O’Dowd’s telecollaboration design. It did not, however, seem to incorporate any communicative activities in which the goal was for the students to acquaint with each other. The goal of this project was, unlike Richards (2010) for example, to promote environmental awareness rather than intercultural awareness.

Theresa Schenker (2012) conducted a study with high school students in Germany and university students in the United States. The students used email interaction twice a week to promote their intercultural competence, i.e. increase their understanding of their own culture as well as their understanding of other cultures. Through pre- and post-study surveys, the students had the opportunity to self-assess their knowledge and perceptions of culture. Schenker’s (2012) study was six weeks long and focused solely on increasing intercultural competence among the students. In other words, there were no additional tasks for the students to complete in collaboration with each other.

Unlike Schenker’s (2012) study, whose online intercultural exchange only strove to increase the students’ intercultural competence, a quasi-experimental research study by Thurston et al. (2009) examined a telecollaborative project focusing only on the linguistic aspect. It was a virtual exchange project between primary school students in Scotland and Spain who reciprocally learned each other’s languages and peer-tutored each other through the use of e-mail. This peer-tutoring project is one of the few projects encountered that did not correspond to O’Dowd’s design in any way. There is no information exchange visible, no comparison and analysis tasks and no collaborative tasks. The focus is solely on language development. The findings, however, suggested that the online peer-tutoring project, in fact, did motivate the students because the communication was real, meaningful and in an authentic context (Thurston et al. 2009, p. 470).

In a one-year long action research study conducted by Yang & Chen (2014), three minor telecollaborative projects were conducted. One of the projects was an e-pal project, where the students were free to discuss with their peers anything they had on their minds. Allowing the students to freely choose their topics for conversation and providing them with sufficient amount of time to carefully think through what to write to their peers greatly increased the students’ motivation (Yang & Chen, p. 66), especially those who felt intimidated by synchronous communication. E-pal communication is commonly used in telecollaborative projects among younger learners (O’Dowd, 2012, p. 124) and they can easily be transformed
from asynchronous communication to synchronous communication such as videoconferencing through Skype if desired.

A qualitative study conducted by Whyte (2011) investigated the relationship between teacher cognition and learning opportunities through the impact of videoconferencing in French primary schools. The participants of the study were six primary school teachers and they were followed during a six months period. The project was constructed so that an experienced teacher within the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) field would collaborate with a teacher inexperienced with FL (Foreign Language) teaching whose students would receive FL instruction through whole-class videoconferencing. Some of the participants in the study observed their students taking control of the learning opportunity and therefore increased the learner participation (Whyte, 2011, p. 286). The findings also suggested mostly positive attitudes towards videoconferencing as a global learning tool and the participants were all intrigued to use videoconferencing later on in their teaching profession.

3.2. Incorporating the Swedish curriculum in telecollaborative projects

In the Swedish curriculum, it is stated that the Swedish school is a cultural and social meeting place where students should learn to appreciate cultural diversity and to empathize with the values and conditions of others (Skolverket, 2011, p. 9). Moreover, the curriculum states that the students should develop an understanding of their own reality in a global context as well as the tools to create close contacts across national and cultural borders (Skolverket, 2011, p. 12). These abilities can all be developed through online intercultural exchange projects with schools abroad since it involves authentic communication with students from other countries and cultures.

Furthermore, it is stated in the aims that the English education in Swedish schools should develop the student's’ knowledge of the English language and their ability to use the language for different purposes and in different situations (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32). Through English education, the students should also develop a knowledge of contexts and areas where the English language is being used (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32). Since the primary tool for communication is language, the knowledge of English will give Swedish students the opportunity to create friendships abroad as well as develop a greater understanding of the world they live in (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32). The increased use of internet, media and communication technology is a great tool to provide the students with authentic communication with students from all over the world. Implementing telecollaborative
projects in the teaching of English in grade K-3 will aid in the development of communicative language skills as well as the understanding of other areas where English is being used. In addition to incorporating the aims stated in the syllabus for English, telecollaborative projects will develop numerous skills listed in the core content for grades K-3. Through the asynchronous and synchronous communication involved in virtual exchange projects, the students will learn to write “simple descriptions and messages” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 33), understand “clearly spoken English and texts from various media” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 33) as well as developing an understanding of the daily life and ways of living in places where in English is used.

Moreover, virtual exchange projects will incorporate other aims and knowledge requirements stated in the Swedish curriculum for the earlier grades. Depending on what theme is chosen for the collaboration subjects including Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Technology, Music and Art can all be integrated into a virtual exchange project. For example, a telecollaborative project where the students work with understanding the effects of global warming in the two countries would not only include English and Science, but also Social Studies, Technology and Art.

### 3.3. Benefits of telecollaboration in educational settings

Allowing students to participate in online intercultural exchanges will allow students to authentically communicate and interact with students in other countries without leaving the safety of their own classroom (O’Dowd, 2011 p. 372). Research on the beneficial impact of telecollaborative projects in a primary school setting is limited (Liu, 2002; Porto, 2015; Richards, 2010; Thurston et al, 2009; Whyte, 2011); however, research indicates similar results as the ones suggested in studies with older target groups (Schenker, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2014). The numerous positive effects suggested in the studies mentioned above will be presented in this section.

Firstly, the authentic communication with students from another culture will allow the students to develop an intercultural communicative competence (Liu, 2002; Porto, 2015; Schenker, 2012; Richards, 2010; Yang & Chen, 2014). Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Byram (1997) as being able to fruitfully interact with people from different cultural backgrounds in addition to functioning effectively in both one’s own culture as well as other cultures. Furthermore, online intercultural exchange projects will enhance the
students’ collaborative and cultural understanding of each other (Yang & Chen, 2014 p. 67). Collaborating with students from another culture will not only develop intercultural communicative competence; it will also help the students recognize the value of intercultural friendships (Richards, 2012, p. 106). The study conducted by Porto (2015) on a telecollaborative project between an Argentinian and Danish primary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom and the study conducted by Richards (2010) on an online intercultural exchange project between a Jordan and an American primary classroom both suggest an increase in the students’ cultural knowledge as well as their communicative skills throughout the project.

Secondly, the students’ language skills will develop through the authentic communication with students from another country (Liu, 2002; Porto, 2015; Yang & Chen, 2014). Virtual exchange projects focusing on asynchronous communication through emails, blogs or wikis will develop the students’ writing skills and synchronous communication through videoconferencing or online chats develops the students’ oral language skills. In addition, the communication, both asynchronous and synchronous, will increase the students’ vocabulary in the target language (Yang & Chen, 2014 p. 67). Even though, the language level of primary EFL students’ might be limited, the use of English throughout the telecollaborative project will develop the students’ language acquisition. Furthermore, projects can be designed to develop the students’ critical skills. In a study made by Porto (2015) with the aim to develop the students’ intercultural and ecological citizenship, through a project focusing on the environment, critical skills were seen in both the Danish and the Argentinian students when reflecting on the similarities and differences between the countries.

Moreover, online-based telecollaborative projects develop the students’ knowledge and experience in the use of digital learning tools (Liu, 2002; Richards, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2014). In today’s 21st century classroom, where the access and use of digital learning tools is increasing, the knowledge of how to effectively use these tools at an early age will be of great value to the students (Richards, 2012, p. 107). Furthermore, online intercultural exchange projects help the teachers to develop their technological skills by allowing them to become proficient managers of the numerous digital tools used in the project – skills they can use to enhance other subjects as well (Richards, 2012, p. 106).

Lastly, the authentic communication with other students is suggested to be both stimulating and motivational for the students (Porto; 2015, Richards, 2010; Thurston et. al, 2009; Yang & Chen. 2014). Communicating with other students, in a classroom across the globe, gives the conversation meaning and creates a learning environment that engages the
students (Thurston et al., 2009 p. 470). In a study by Yang and Chen (2014), both the secondary classrooms preferred language learning through digital learning tools, since it allowed them to have authentic conversations with other students (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 65). Moreover, implementing virtual exchange projects in an educational setting will allow the teachers to gain valuable insights about their students that will keep them inspired and motivated in their future learning (Whyte, 2011, p. 291).

3.4. Challenges in the design and implementation of telecollaboration

In this section, challenges that may arise in the design and implementation of online intercultural exchange projects in a primary school setting will be accounted for. Addressing challenges connected to teachers’ required skills and competencies as well as time constraints, technological tools and project designs is important to be able to minimize the input of these challenges and create fruitful collaborations (Gouseti, 2015, p. 387).

Firstly, designing and implementing a successful online intercultural exchange requires numerous different competencies and dedication from the teachers involved in the project (Gouseti, 2015; O’Dowd, 2015; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2014). Teachers do not only need pedagogical and organizational competencies to organize telecollaborative projects in their classroom; they also need ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills and digital competencies to ensure that online based projects run smoothly (O’Dowd, 2015, p. 202). To ensure that all competencies are met, teachers can work together in teams, both with teachers from their own school as well as the partner school. Working closely with all teachers involved in the project is important to be able to create a suitable and realistic project (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 70). To avoid failed communication, leading to an unsuccessful establishment of a partnership between the students, it is important for teachers to ensure that the students stay motivated and stimulated throughout the process of the project (Schenker, 2012, p. 460). Similarly, the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs towards virtual exchange projects have a great impact on the online intercultural exchange (O’Dowd, 2015, p. 202).

Secondly, virtual exchange projects are time-consuming and require numerous hours spent on both planning and executing a fruitful project (Liu, 2002; Schenker, 2012; Thurston et al, 2009; Whyte; 2011; Yang & Chen, 2014). Tight planning is often necessary to meet time constraints, both connected to the teachers’ working hours but also to the time available for
the projects (Whyte, 2011, p. 287). In other words, organizing and executing a telecollaboration, while at the same time attending to other responsibilities is often seen as a challenge for many teachers. Time constraints are not only an obstacle for the partner classes’ teachers, but also for the students involved (Thurston et al., 2009, p. 470). If not planned properly, the time constraints may hinder the students’ full learning effect (Schenker, 2012, p. 461). Moreover, time difference as well as differences in semester schedules may complicate the organization of an online intercultural exchange and should, therefore, be considered in the design of the project (Schenker, 2012, p. 461). By mainly using asynchronous communication, where students communicate through emails or offline chats, instead of synchronous communication, where students communicate through videoconferencing or online chats, the impact of the time difference can be minimized.

Moreover, it is important that the students participating in the virtual exchange can communicate with each other; therefore, language skills have to be practiced beforehand to minimize the language barrier and ensure that the students will be able to understand each other (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 69). Furthermore, the teacher ought to be familiar with the students’ language level to ensure that the telecollaborative project is designed accordingly. Unfamiliar accents may cause confusion for the students; however, this is also an opportunity for the students to understand the different variations within the language (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 69).

Lastly, functioning technological tools as well as a substantial internet connection are essential to create successful online based virtual exchange projects (Gouseti, 2015; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Whyte, 2011; Yang & Chen, 2014). Due to technology's unreliability, teachers ought to be prepared for unexpected problems with the internet connection and/or technological tools to occur and have a backup plan for the task (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 170). However, it is suggested that, if planned properly, emerging problems could become learning tools for the students (Schenker, 2012, p. 451), for example by allowing the students to revise what they are planning to discuss with the partner class (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 70). Furthermore, there is no “one size fits all” to online communication (Gouseti, 2015, p. 387), and developing useful technological communication practices without any previous technology proficiency training can be challenging for many teachers (Richards, 2010; Whyte, 2011; Yang & Chen; 2014). Moreover, it is important to teach the students how to properly use the technical tools used in the virtual exchange project to avoid any learning problems connected to the tools used (Yang & Chen, 2014, p. 69).
4. Methodology

This part describes the methodological considerations for the research study. The methodological considerations include methods of data collection, process of data collection and the data analysis procedure as well as a description of the participants in the study. Furthermore, the ethical considerations for the methods used in the research study will be described.

4.1. Strategic Sampling

The participants in this study were strategically selected to ensure that they were familiar with telecollaboration in a primary school setting. Using strategic sampling is beneficial when the research questions require participants with knowledge and/or experience within a specific field (Alvehus, 2013, p. 27). Furthermore, strategic sampling allowed us to find teachers who would be able to provide answers based on their own experiences of online intercultural exchange.

Two different online learning platforms, ePals and eTwinning, were used to find suitable participants for the research study. Primary school teachers currently or previously involved in online intercultural exchanges were approached and informed about the purpose of our study. Furthermore, two recognized researchers within the field of telecollaboration, Melinda Dooly and Robert O’Dowd, were contacted over email for recommendations of teachers who might be interested in being interviewed as a part of our study as well as ways to get in contact with primary school teachers around the world. The recommendation received in the email reply from O’Dowd was to use an online learning platform; in this case, ePals was suggested for getting in contact with teachers relevant to the study.

A message explaining the background of the study as well as the interest in the teacher’s own experience and attitudes to virtual exchange projects in primary school classrooms was sent to Swedish primary school teachers with experience within the field (see Appendix A). On ePals, 28 teachers were contacted, of whom one responded. On eTwinning 10 teachers were contacted, of whom two responded. In addition to the teachers responding through ePals and eTwinning, one teacher contacted us after hearing about the project from one of the teachers contacted on eTwinning.

Even though the main goal of this study is to explore the possibilities of using telecollaboration in K-3 settings, three of the four teachers interviewed work in grades 4-6.
One of the reasons for this is that there are few teachers working with virtual exchange projects in K-3 settings in Sweden and therefore, the target group is limited. For this reason, we decided that teachers in grade 4-6 would be contacted as well. Furthermore, as ePals and eTwinning are international online platforms, the teachers are not divided into grades but into ages. The teachers registered on the platforms are able to choose an age span in which they work; thus, it is not possible to determine in what grade they actually work only by observing their user profile. Accordingly, there had to be some sort of reciprocal communication with the teachers contacted to find out what grades they were teaching. In order to collect a sufficient base for our research, as many teachers as possible were contacted to make sure that at least some of them responded to our request.

4.2. Participants

Four practicing teachers were interviewed regarding their previous experience with online intercultural exchange projects. The teachers have varying teaching experience, from 40 years of experience to recently graduated. Teacher A works at the same school as Teacher B; however, they have different teaching experiences and work in different classes; therefore, their interviews are somewhat different and are therefore interesting to compare. The teachers are from schools in different provinces of Sweden, except for the two teachers working in the same school.

Teacher A teaches Mathematics, Science and Swedish in grade 5 and 6, however, the project he is currently working with is in English and will therefore develop the students’ language skills alongside mathematics and programming skills. He is recently graduated and has worked at the school for one and a half years. He is currently enrolled in his first virtual exchange project together with teachers from Spain, Germany, Portugal, Greece and Poland, as well as with his colleague in the same school. The Erasmus+ project is a project where the goal is to develop the students’ and teachers’ technology proficiency through programming and coding. Representatives, including both teachers and students, from the six schools involved in the project will meet three times throughout the three and a half year long project.

Teacher B teaches a grade 2 and is responsible for all subjects for her students except Physical Education and Art. She has around 20 years of teaching experience, both in Sweden and in Thailand. She has experience of two virtual exchange projects. One of the projects was a Comenius project with a Spanish and a French school, where the Spanish and French
students travelled to Sweden and some of the students in Sweden travelled to Spain and France to visit the partner classes. Moreover, Teacher B is currently enrolled in the same Erasmus+ project as Teacher A, where the goal is to enhance teacher proficiency in programming.

Teacher C is the mentor of a grade 4 and teaches Swedish and English in the fourth grade and English in the fifth grade. She has 31 years of teaching experience. Her previous experiences with online intercultural exchange projects include a teacher exchange with teachers in Uganda as well as a one year long Nordplus Junior project with a Finnish class that she organized together with a personal contact at the school, focusing on sustainable development in the two schools and their cities. Representatives from both the Finnish and the Swedish class travelled to visit the other school where they stayed with the families of the students involved in the online intercultural exchange. Teacher C is currently the coordinator of another Nordplus Junior project, focusing on student influence and student democracy, together with schools from Teneriffä, Italy and Bulgaria. Moreover, Teacher C has different class-to-class telecollaborative projects implemented in her teaching of English; however, these projects do not involve any real life visits.

Teacher D teaches year 4 and 5 and has over 40 years of teaching experience. He is mainly responsible for teaching English and IT. By participating in an intermediate course about ten years ago, he was introduced to the secure educational platform ePals.com where he since 2006 has organized pen pal exchanges with schools from Europe, America and Australia. After his encounter with ePals, Teacher D has completely changed his way of teaching English. From teaching English using traditional teaching materials such as textbooks and workbooks, he has now removed textbooks from his English classroom completely and solely focuses on conducting epal exchanges with schools in different parts of the world instead.

4.3. Procedure

As this research study attempts to provide authentic results of the use of telecollaboration in education, a conclusion was made that a case study methodology was the most relevant for complying data. A case study is a study describing and analysing a specific setting; however, the single case will often be used to illustrate a more general aspect of the setting. Methods of data collection may include observations, interviews, questionnaires and/or experiments. Case studies are claimed to be realistic (Nunan, 2003, p. 78) in the way that they are interpretable in accordance with the particular instance that encounter the study. Case studies
are, moreover, highly appropriate in the subject of second language acquisition as there is already a significant body of research on language acquisition conducted with case study methodology (Nunan, 2003, pp. 78-79).

4.3.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The primary method of data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews with teachers’ who had either current and/or previous experiences with telecollaborative projects conducted in a primary school setting. The interviews were semi-structured to create a more natural dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee (Hammond & Wellington, 2013, p. 92). Furthermore, having a semi-structured interview allows questions to be asked based on the interviewee’s answers which will allow the interviewee to elaborate on certain issues and topics that are relevant for the study (Nunan, 2001, p. 149). However, semi-structured interviews will require the interviewer to listen more actively to be able to ask follow up questions relevant to the interviewee’s answers (Alvehus, 2013, p. 83). Before conducting the interview a sheet containing different themes, as well as some open-ended questions, was created to ensure that all the necessary topics were discussed during the interview (see Appendix B). Furthermore, the interviews were recorded to allow us to analyze the answers more in depth (Walliman, 2011, p. 100).

4.3.2. Context of Interviews

The estimated time for the interviews was 30 minutes and all of the interviews were kept within that time frame. The participants of the interviews had the opportunity to choose either Swedish or English for the interview to be conducted in, depending on what language the interviewee felt most comfortable with. Ultimately, three of the interviews were conducted in Swedish and one was conducted in English.

Moreover, all of the interviews were supposed to be conducted using Skype. However, technical difficulties arose with one of the participants and therefore, the interview was conducted via telephone instead. Two of the interviews were audio-recorded using the Voice Memos application for iPhone and one was recorded using the Voice Recorder application for Android phones. The telephone interview was recorded using an audio-recording tool from a website called https://online-voice-recorder.com/. However, the audio recordings from
the website had a maximum length of ten minutes; thus, the interview was divided into two parts. The audio files were later downloaded to the computer and saved together with the other recordings. Prior to the interviews, all interviewees agreed to being recorded and for the files to be stored until the end of the research project.

The interviewer began by introducing the interviewee in the audio-recording and proceeded by going through the four themes of which the interview was based on. After that, the interview could commence.

4.3.3. Interview Details

The first interview was with Teacher B and the interview took place on Friday the 10th of February 2017 at 11:50 AM. The interview was conducted in English and lasted for approximately 25 minutes.

The second interview was with Teacher A and the interview took place on Tuesday the 14th of February 2017 at 09:15 AM. The interview was conducted in Swedish and lasted for approximately 20 minutes.

The third interview was with Teacher C and the interview took place on Tuesday the 21st of February 2017 at 08:15 AM. The interview was conducted in Swedish and lasted for approximately 28 minutes.

The last interview was with Teacher D and the interview took place on Tuesday the 21st of February 2017 at 09:00 AM. The interview was conducted in Swedish and lasted for approximately 21 minutes.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations recommended by Vetenskapsrådet (2012) were considered when conducting the research. All participants were thoroughly informed about purpose of the research as well as what was expected of them as participants. Moreover, the participants were informed that their participation was both voluntary and anonymous and that none of their names or identities would be presented in final study, unless this was approved by the interviewee. This was made clear in both the waiver of consent (see Appendix C), which all the interviewees received and signed a copy of, as well as at the start of each interview.
Furthermore, the participants were informed that they could retract their consent at any time if they so wished.

4.5. Analysis of Data

There were several steps in the analysis of the data collection. Firstly, the notes from the interviews were discussed with the other researcher in connection to the interviews to ensure that the memory of the interview was still fresh (Alvehus, 2013, p. 85). Since the researchers conducted two interviews each, the researcher that did not conduct the interview had a chance to listen to the interview once it was finished. This was to ensure the validity of the interviews.

Secondly, the interviews were transcribed into textual form. This was done through partial analysis (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 249) where the recording was listened to twice, once to take notes and once to add more detailed notes or quotes from the interviewee. Lastly, the coding process started. Coding the data collection by dividing it into different themes and groups was necessary for the analysis of the data collection (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 250). The coding process started by highlighting the similarities and differences in the interviewees’ answers in order to be easily identified for the upcoming grouping of the data material (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 250). Once the coding was done, the data material was divided into different topic groups used for the analysis of the data collection. The topic groups were based on the research questions and the answers from the different interviewees were color coded to be able to distinguish who said what.

Finally, the translation process started. Direct quotes in Swedish were translated as neutrally as possible into English by both researchers, and to ensure the validity the quotes both the original quote in Swedish and the translated quote in English were included at all times in the study. The notes were kept in its original form in the initial process for validity and only translated if necessary. As some parts of the interviews were used to describe the projects as well as beneficial outcomes and challenges encountered by the interviewees, these were translated in the writing process.
5. Results & Discussion

This section will provide a discussion of the results generated by the four interviews. In the first component, the designs of the different online intercultural exchange projects organized by the interviewees will be presented and discussed in correspondence with the Swedish curriculum and in connection to previous research. The telecollaborative projects’ relevance to Swedish K-3 settings will also be discussed. The second component will describe how telecollaborative projects generate beneficial outcomes for students, teachers and schools involved. A third and final component of this section will describe and discuss the challenges that arise in the use of telecollaborative projects in the English classroom in Swedish educational settings.

5.1. Designing telecollaboration for K-3 students in correspondence with the Swedish curriculum

This section will seek to provide an answer to Research Question 1: How can a telecollaborative project be designed to correspond with the Swedish primary school setting as well as the Swedish curriculum for grades K-3? It will describe the design of the different projects as described by the interviewees; it will also state in what ways the virtual exchange projects corresponds to the Swedish curriculum. The section will also describe in what ways the projects relate to previous research.

According to all the teachers interviewed in the study, online intercultural exchange projects are easily implementable to correspond to the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). Teacher A explains that the Erasmus+ project that he is enrolled in incorporates English as well as Mathematics, and Science; moreover, the students are given the opportunity to enhance their knowledge about programming through the use of digital media and digital solutions in everyday life. Teacher A continues that exploring new technology as well as finding new ways to work with mathematics were parts of the goal with the project. Through exploration of these areas, the students also had the opportunity to see how different schools in Europe work in comparison with their own as well as having the opportunity to enhance their language development in English. For now, the students do not communicate personally; however, some of the students will join Teacher A and Teacher B on a trip to Portugal in the summer and on this trip, they will get the chance to meet some of the students from the other countries involved in the project.
Teacher B explains, like Teacher A, that Mathematics and programming are major cornerstones of the Erasmus+ project. She also points out other aspects of the project such as conflict management and inclusion, which corresponds well with the overall goals and guidelines in LGR11. She does however claim that the Erasmus+ project focuses more on the teachers involved rather than the students. The students are of course welcome to partake in the project, but the main focus is teacher training. In the Comenius project in which Teacher B was previously enrolled, the students were more involved. The goal of the Comenius project was for the students to eventually meet; before their gatherings, the students communicated nonverbally via Skype. The students exchanged songs, plays, books, texts and other cultural artifacts from each of the countries involved. They also created a book about their respective country to share with the partner classes. O’Dowd’s (2012) model of telecollaboration, especially the stages of information exchange and comparison and analysis, is similar to the approach of Teacher B’s Comenius project.

The first online intercultural exchange project organized by Teacher C was a Nordplus Junior project with Finland where the overall theme was sustainable development, environment and recycling, similar to the environmental awareness project in Porto’s (2016) case study between Argentina and Denmark. These themes correspond with the curriculum (2011) and the core content for Social studies, which states “environmental issues in relation to pupils’ everyday life, such as those involving traffic, energy and food” (p. 191). Furthermore, the core content for Science studies in years 4-6 states “people’s dependence on and the impact on nature and what this means for sustainable development” (p. 107). The fundamental values stating an environmental perspective providing “opportunities not only to take responsibility for the environment in areas where they themselves can exercise direct influence, but also to form a personal position with respect to overarching and global environmental issues” (p. 12) was also implemented into the online intercultural exchange. This statement also incorporates opportunities for the students to adapt their ways of living to create sustainable development. The Finnish students in the Nordplus Junior virtual exchange project were eager to develop their skills in the Swedish language; thus, the language for communication was Swedish. The online intercultural exchange aimed to compare the school lunch and recycling habits in the Swedish and the Finnish schools as well as recyclable articles in grocery stores.

The second project coordinated by Teacher C is an ongoing Nordplus Junior virtual exchange where the eTwinning platform was used to find collaboration partners. The schools enrolled in the virtual exchange are in the Canary Islands, Bulgaria and Italy, involving one
The teachers involved in the virtual exchange have varying experience with telecollaborative projects. The project involves student democracy and student influence and how these two can be improved in schools. Other aspects of this project are plans for equal treatment and gender awareness. The project will involve exploring other ways to deal with class councils and other ways to involve students to ensure that they are aware of the fact that they can contribute to the development of the schools. Awareness of different policy-making organs within a democratic organisation stands clear in the syllabus for Social studies for years 1-3 whose core content states the implementation of “how meetings, such as class councils, are organised and carried out” (2011, p. 152). The theme is also represented in the overall guidelines stating that students should be given the opportunity to increasingly exercise “greater influence over their education and the internal work of the school” (2011, p. 17).

Teacher D has since 2006 organized online intercultural exchanges through ePals. Because of his over forty years of teaching experience, his English teaching has for a long time been very traditional, using textbooks and workbooks. He explains that his current English teaching does not involve any kind of teaching materials made specifically for education. Through e-mail interaction, his students communicate with real-life participants in other countries, such as Schenker’s (2012) study where high-school students communicated through e-mail. Teacher D explains that the first stage of a collaboration begins in a whole-class situation where they tell the partner class about their own class and their surroundings. After that, Teacher D would give his students some sort of theme to discuss, for example what their lives are like; then, the students were free to contact their peers and start using and practising the English language according to the theme. In the beginning of Teacher D’s experience with virtual exchange, the e-mails written by the students went through Teacher D’s draft folder for approval before being sent to the peer. Due to the fact that these folders were often too full for more e-mails to reach the partner teachers, a cloud service was created, making it easier for media to be shared with all teachers and students involved.

According to Teacher D, the curriculum is closely related to these types of online intercultural exchanges. A common aspect from both the curriculum from 1994 and the one from 2011, Teacher D explains, is that the students should develop their knowledge of “social relations in different contexts and areas where English is used” (2011, p. 33). The Swedish Curriculum for compulsory schools, Lpo94, states that the students should develop “their understanding of other cultures” (1994, p. 12). Through these virtual exchange projects, Teacher D argues that “det [förståelsen] har vi fått i mycket högre utsträckning än vad några
the students have received this understanding in a much higher extent than what a few chapters in a textbook would convey” (personal communication, 21 February 2017). He also describes how the virtual exchanges correspond well with handling photography, film and other multimodal tools through digital communication, as described in the overall goals and guidelines stating that every student completing compulsory school “can use modern technology as a tool in the search for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning” (2011, p. 16). Like Schenker’s (2012) study, Teacher D has strived to make his projects focus as much as possible on getting to know each other and develop intercultural competence and friendships rather than language development. Furthermore, Teacher D explains that the different tools that should be taught according to the curriculum, such as grammar, are taught more explicitly in traditional education; through online intercultural exchange, however, he argues that grammar is taught in an authentic context and during actual language use.

5.2. Beneficial outcomes of telecollaboration in Swedish K-3 settings

This section will seek to provide an answer to Research Question 2: What possibilities can the implementation of telecollaboration bring to English teaching in Swedish K-3 settings? All four interviewees agreed that their experience with virtual exchange projects in a Swedish educational setting had beneficial outcomes for all the parties involved: the students, the teachers and the school. In this section the benefits and possibilities suggested by the interviewed teachers will be introduced and discussed in connection to the previous studies introduced in the literature review.

5.2.1. Beneficial outcomes for the students involved

The teachers interviewed all agree that the students find telecollaborative projects both stimulating and motivating. Teacher D, who although teaches somewhat older students than grades K-3, explains that throughout his paradigm shift from traditional English textbook and workbook teaching to online intercultural exchanges through teacher-supervised e-mail interaction, his students have in fact shown great increase in motivation. The students are now interacting with a real-life recipient and therefore, their acquisition of English is used
in authentic contexts and not only for educational purposes. The syllabus for English in LGR11 (Skolverket, 2011) states that students should be able to “reflect over living conditions, social and cultural phenomena in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (2011, p. 32); Teacher D suggests that this ability is better achieved through authentic communication than from a textbook. Teacher D (personal communication, 21 February 2017) claims the following:

Verkliga kamrater som berättar vad de faktiskt gör och tänker smäller högre än läroboksförfattares formuleringar och generaliseringar. Att vi sedan fått samma inblick i några europeiska länder kan väl inte vara en miss!

Real-life peers who say what they actually do and think seem more relevant than textbook authors’ formulations and generalizations. The fact that the students also get a glimpse of a few European countries couldn’t possibly be a bad thing either!

Furthermore, Teacher C explains that working with virtual exchange projects is beneficial on numerous different levels, and that projects with other students abroad will not only increase the motivation and dedication from the students, but also create an authentic communication setting with other students outside of the school. Teacher C also suggests that working with intercultural exchange projects where the students get to travel and visit each other will also develop the students on a personal level and allow them to grow as a person. Moreover, Teacher B suggests that virtual exchange projects are a great opportunity to develop the students’ feeling of being European citizens, not only Swedish citizens. Teacher B claims that one of the aims with virtual exchange projects is to give the students an opportunity where “they can feel that Europe is theirs - Europe, that’s where I can study, that’s where I can live, that’s where I can work!” (personal communication, 10 February 2017).

Previous studies conducted in both a primary school setting (Porto, 2015; Richards, 2010; Thurston et. al, 2009) and in a middle school setting (Yang & Chen, 2014) all suggest similar results; that the authentic communication with other students in telecollaborative projects is both stimulating and motivational for the students. Even though the majority of the teachers interviewed for the study work in a grade 4-6 setting, the suggested increase in motivation can be argued to apply to K-3 students as well.
Moreover, previous research on telecollaborative projects in both primary school and middle school settings suggests that the students develop both their language skills (Liu, 2002; Porto, 2015; Yang & Chen, 2014) as well as their knowledge and experience in the use of digital learning tools (Liu, 2002; Richards, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2014). This is particularly argued by Teacher D, who claims that foreign language development and intercultural awareness occurs simultaneously in a student-to-student virtual exchange. Since the project Teacher A and Teacher B are working with is not yet including communication between the students, no foreign language development has appeared yet; however, Teacher A suggests that this will happen once the students meet face to face this upcoming summer. The main focus of the project is developing the students’ knowledge within the field of coding and programming; therefore, the students’ knowledge of digital learning tools will significantly increase throughout the project. In addition, the students involved in the virtual exchange project together with Teacher A and Teacher B, will develop subject specific knowledge within mathematics of how to solve mathematical calculations that occur in while coding and programming. Even though the virtual exchange project Teacher B is currently working with has not yet included communication between the students, her previous project allowed the students to improve their English skills both through communication with the class abroad, and by singing songs and dramatizing plays using videoconferencing.

Moreover, Teacher D explained that working with virtual exchange projects changed his way of teaching English. Instead of teaching the students specific tools, including grammar and vocabulary, without a significant use of the actual language, the students will learn how to communicate by using English in an authentic setting and learn the different tools throughout the process. Having a recipient outside the classroom also increased the students’ motivation and stimulated the students’ language development. Furthermore, Teacher C explains that virtual exchange projects are engaging for the students, and emphasizes that whatever subject is chosen for the project will become more interesting and even something as easy as a videoconference call between two classrooms will be exciting for the students. When discussing her experience with intercultural exchange projects, Teacher C (personal communication, 21 February 2017) argues the following:

*Det är lättare att få ett större engagemang. Man har en mottagare för det man arbetar med som inte är en klasskompis. Det är också väldigt*
It is easier to achieve higher commitment. One has a recipient for what one is working with, a recipient that is not a classmate. That is also very valuable. Somehow it becomes more real when it reaches a location outside our building!

The students involved in the Swedish-Finnish project organized by Teacher C used an online platform to communicate; alongside the communication on the online platform, email communication was used between the students and their host families for the trip to the other country. Through this communication the students developed 21st century skills including how digital tools can be used to communicate with others outside of Sweden.

The beneficial outcomes for students involved in telecollaborative projects suggested by the interviewed teachers were in correspondence with the ones argued in studies including Liu (2002), Porto (2015), Richards (2010) and Thurston et al. (2009), exploring the impact of similar projects in a primary school setting around the world. Even though the students in the majority of these projects were in grade 4-6, many of the beneficial outcomes including increased motivation and commitment from the students as well as knowledge development and language development can be expected in a K-3 setting as well. The largest difference between the implementation of telecollaborative projects in grade K-3 compared to grade 4-6 is the students’ level of English; however, the project can be designed to correspond with the students’ current language level and develop their English throughout the telecollaborative project.

5.2.2. Beneficial outcomes for the teachers involved

Virtual exchange projects are not only beneficial for the students involved, but also the teachers. All interviewed teachers agreed that working with telecollaborative projects have been beneficial for themselves as teachers, something that also was argued by Richards (2010) and Whyte (2011). Teacher A (personal communication, 14 February 2017) expressed how motivating it is to work with telecollaborative projects and how the connections made with other teachers help him develop as a teacher:
Teacher C also discussed how the contact with other teachers in the telecollaborative projects is beneficial for her as a teacher. Furthermore, she stressed the importance of being curious and exploring how things work in other schools across the globe. Teacher B (personal communication, 10 February 2017) expressed similar experiences from virtual exchange projects:

> It is astonishing to realize that we as teachers, in so many different countries, have so much in common. When we discuss, we discover that we think so much alike and do so many things in a similar way even though we work in different spots of Europe. At the same time, you discover things that are so different, which is equally interesting!

Teacher B argues that the virtual exchange projects she has been a part of have worked as collegial learning programmes, where her communication with other teacher colleagues in other countries developed her knowledge within the field. Knowledge development is also discussed by Teacher A, who explains that he has learned a great deal from the teachers from Germany and Greece, two countries that are far ahead in the teaching of technology and programming. Furthermore, Teacher C express how the contact with other teachers involved in different projects helps in keeping an open mind, and that the influences from other teachers are rewarding and positive on numerous different levels.

Moreover, Teacher D explains that he has developed a personal relationship with the teachers involved in the intercultural exchange projects, where they discuss their classrooms and working environments, and he has even visited some of the teachers he has been in contact with over the years. Finally, Teacher D express how working with online intercultural
exchange projects is both motivating and rewarding for him as a teacher, and how he wishes that more teachers implemented virtual exchange projects in their English teaching.

Both Teacher C and Teacher D are experienced with numerous telecollaborative projects and they both intend to keep implementing projects in their teaching. Teacher A is currently working on his first virtual exchange project and he got started with the project in his first year as a teacher. Despite the increased workload Teacher A expressed his encouragement to implement virtual exchange projects in his teaching by stating the following: “Om jag kan fånga eleverna, oavsett i vilket ämne det än är, på ett sånt här sätt, då är det värt att göra det arbetet man ändå gör! / If I can capture the students in this way, no matter what subject, then it is worth all the effort!” (personal communication, 14 February 2017).

5.2.3. Beneficial outcomes for the schools involved

All the interviewed teachers agreed that virtual exchange projects, in addition to being beneficial for themselves as teachers and their students, are beneficial for the schools involved. Firstly, Teacher D suggests that implementing virtual exchange projects in the English classroom will develop the teachers which will consequently be beneficial for the school. Since Teacher D has numerous years of experience with online intercultural exchange projects, he also helps other teachers at the school to get started with ePals to implement similar projects in their classrooms. Teacher C, moreover, is currently working with engaging more teachers for an upcoming telecollaborative project where she is the coordinator, to ensure that the teachers feel involved from the start. Teacher A and Teacher B get time from their headmaster to present the virtual exchange project they are currently involved in at the monthly workplace meetings. This gives them an opportunity to spread the word about the project and inspire other teachers to participate as well. Teacher B (personal communication, 10 February 2017) expresses the following regarding the aim of discussing the project with other teachers:

We’re trying to spread the ideas and I think we’ve managed to do so with at least a couple of colleagues. We also have a sister school, which is another school with the same headmaster, where we also aim to spread our ideas. We have plans to spread the information about the project to the whole [region]. We don’t want it to be just a little
private thing for fun, but we try to make it bigger!

Furthermore, Teacher A explains that the telecollaborative project he is currently working with together with Teacher B is beneficial for the school since it portrays the school as innovative and positive to new ideas as well as making the school more visible in the area. Teacher C also express that international collaborations are beneficial for the school and that those projects are often put forward as positive examples of what the school is working with. Lastly, Teacher C explains that online intercultural exchange projects are beneficial for the school and that “gensvar från elever och föräldrar är väldigt positivt / the feedback from the students and the parents is usually very positive” (personal communication, 21 February 2017) since the cooperations with students abroad create both excitement and curiosity among the students.

5.3. Challenges in the implementation of telecollaboration in Swedish K-3 settings

This section will seek to provide an answer to Research Question 3: *What challenges arise when implementing telecollaboration into English teaching in Swedish K-3 settings?* It will account for the challenges of designing and conducting a telecollaborative project in Swedish educational settings as described by the interviewees as well as in connection to previous research.

The issue of time in one way or another is mentioned by all interviewees. This problematic aspect is also accounted for by Liu (2002), Schenker (2012), Thurston et al. (2009), Whyte (2011) and Yang & Chen (2014). Teacher A explains that it is difficult to make time to carry out the project as much as desired. Since there is much work to be done with online intercultural exchange there is also an increasing need for more time. Similarly, Teacher D explains that incorporating telecollaborative projects, whether it be e-pal exchanges or more collaborative tasks, places an immense work load on the teachers. He explains further that correcting the same page in a workbook does not in any way reflect the amount of work needed to provide feedback of nearly thirty emails written freely by the students. Teacher C finds the time issue most relevant for applying for the project. She explains that writing the application in order to be verified as a participant in the project takes a significant amount of
time. The time necessary to construct the application is not included in the working hours and therefore needs to be done in the teachers’ free time.

Finding interesting tasks for the students to work with during online intercultural exchange projects can be a challenge according to Teacher D. He describes that he, along with his fourth grade class, just dispatched their first email to their partner class, where they have described themselves and their interests. The framework within which to communicate is to be defined in the following stage, which can be challenging due to all students’ individual needs and experiences.

Teacher D also explains the challenge of finding a collaboration partner whose level of ambition corresponds with one’s own, something that is also mentioned by Yang & Chen (2014). Teacher D’s experience as a teacher and as an ePal exchange coordinator indicates that he has encountered partners with different levels of ambition. Finding a partner teacher who is as ambitious as oneself is the key to make everything work, according to Teacher D. Similarly, Teacher C finds challenges with the eTwinning platform. She explains that there are numerous requests for collaboration through eTwinning and these are not always considered reliable or relevant. Reading all these requests takes time and may not yield as much positive outcomes if many of the requests seem unreliable or irrelevant.

Teacher B expresses that language and culture barriers can be challenges between teachers involved in the projects. None of the teachers enrolled in the projects that she is experienced with had or have English as their first language and therefore, it can be a challenge to express oneself in a way that does not offend or intimidate anybody. Teacher B explains further that “[c]ultural things like politeness can come across as being shy or too much forward” (personal communication, 10 February 2017). However, Teacher B mentions the following:

The Spanish teacher in the [Comenius] project was prepared that there would be misunderstandings online and therefore insisted that we all meet in real life as well as online. It’s really important to see each other in real life because you can see the person as well and observe their facial expressions. In writing there is more room for misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Challenges regarding different types of administration is mentioned by Teacher C. If the project has been funded by a larger organization, such as Nordplus Junior or Erasmus+, there is a significant amount of follow-up and accounting to do after the project. The coordinators
have to make sure that everything is included in the final reports; Teacher C claims that what should be included in these reports are not always clearly stated and can therefore be difficult to establish. Teacher B also mentions the funding and administrative part of conducting a telecollaboration; however, she does mention that Universitets- och Högskolerådet (UHR, Swedish Council for Higher Education) are supportive and helpful if problems occur. Even though there is quite a significant amount of money to handle once the grant is approved, Teacher B states, the teacher enrolled in the projects are allowed to make mistakes.

Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C express challenges in motivating their colleagues to conduct similar projects, since motivation among the teachers is crucial for a successful online intercultural exchange according to O’Dowd (2015). Teacher C is the coordinator of a Nordplus Junior virtual exchange project; she has been a part of it from the initial stage and observed its development from idea to reality. From previous experience she learned that it is easier to engage other teachers that are involved even in the initial stage of the projects; therefore, she is currently trying to get input from her colleagues to ensure that they feel more involved in the depth of the project and not just the surface. As Teacher A and Teacher B are enrolled in the same Erasmus+ project and also work at the same school, they experience similar challenges. Once a month, they are assigned with ten minutes of a workplace meeting (APT, arbetsplatsträff), where they are allowed to show their colleagues what the project is about and what the progress looks like. This way they hope to motivate their colleagues to join the project. “We’re trying to spread the ideas and I think we’ve managed to do so with at least a couple of colleagues” (personal communication, 10 February 2017), explains Teacher B. She further declares that there are some colleagues that support the work they do and are very interested in the project, while others are not as interested at all but still support their work in other ways such as taking care of their students while Teacher A and Teacher B are away for project meetings.

Technological issues, as described by various researchers (Gouseti, 2015; Richards, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Whyte, 2011; Yang & Chen, 2014), are also merely accounted for by Teacher A and Teacher D. Teacher A explains that there are no particular challenges in technology so far; however, he declares that “det skulle inte skada med fler datorer och mer utrustning” / “it wouldn’t hurt with more computers and more equipment” (personal communication, 14 February 2017). Teacher D dismisses technological challenges as substantial. Being specialized in IT, Teacher D acknowledges the fact that he is responsible for possible solutions if technological issues would occur, similar to Yang & Chen (2014).
stating the importance of teachers being prepared for such obstacles. Furthermore, Teacher D expresses great interest in finding solutions to potential technological challenges.

Despite the challenges encountered by the interviewees regarding time management, administration, language and culture barriers, colleague motivation and technology, the interviewees would all like to conduct similar projects in the future. They all describe online intercultural exchanges as challenging, but still very rewarding for all instances involved.
6. Conclusion

In this section, there will be a summary of the findings revealed in this study on teachers’ experiences with telecollaborative projects in Swedish educational settings. A second component will present the limitations of the study including the limited time frame of this degree project. Finally, suggestions for future research will be made.

6.1. Summary

This study revealed that implementing online intercultural exchange projects in Swedish educational settings corresponds well with the contents of the fundamental values and syllabuses for English as well as other subjects stated in the Swedish Curriculum for grades K-3. Telecollaborative projects in English education can be implemented in different age groups; even though the language level might be lower among the younger students, the projects can be designed to correspond with Swedish K-3 students’ language level. Through the authentic communication with a class abroad, students will not only develop their language skills, but also an intercultural understanding.

Implementing telecollaborative projects in Swedish educational settings generates beneficial outcomes for everyone involved, including students, teachers and schools. Among the students, motivation to learn and practice English is increased with being in an authentic learning context. Furthermore, intercultural understanding increases at the same time as digital competencies are practiced. Even though the virtual exchange projects included in this study were implemented in Swedish grades 2-6, the same beneficial outcomes are argued for implementing virtual exchange projects in the teaching of English in Swedish grades K-3. Teachers expressed increased inspiration and motivation from the communication with teachers in other countries; through this teacher-to-teacher communication, the teachers develop their knowledge within the field as well as learning about the organization of schools in other countries. Through virtual exchange projects the students and teachers develop their linguistic and intercultural competence; consequently, increased competencies among the teachers and students impact the development of the school. Moreover, the school is pictured as innovative and can therefore be considered inspirational for other schools and the outside surroundings.

Some of the challenges encountered in telecollaborative projects include technological issues, motivating colleagues to engage in similar projects, time management and
administration, organizing projects to fit all students’ individual learning styles, language and culture barriers as well as level of ambition between the teachers involved in the project. Despite these challenges occurring for the teachers interviewed for this study, they all express a will to conduct similar virtual exchange projects in the future. The beneficial outcomes yielded by implementing online intercultural exchange projects into their English teaching outweigh the challenges that might occur.

Implementing virtual exchange projects in a Swedish educational setting has proven to be an effective learning tool while at the same time being motivating and stimulating for the students in their English language acquisition. Teaching English in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century demands ICT skills as we live in a globalizing world where the use of the internet has brought the corners of the world closer. Teaching English to young English language learners in Sweden with the help of authentic learning contexts has indicated to be an effective approach of teaching as the students experience their learning as relevant for their future as global citizens. There are various different online platforms to use for conducting online intercultural exchanges and it is important for teachers in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century to be aware of their existence, as well as the opportunities these virtual exchanges bring to the English language classroom.

6.2. Limitations of the study

The study was conducted as a single case study where the primary data collection was based on interviews with Swedish teachers that have experience in working with virtual exchange projects in Swedish primary school and middle school settings. The reason for including teachers working in grade 4-6 and not only teachers working in grade K-3 was, as explained in the methodology, due to the limited number of teachers in K-3 with experience in implementing virtual exchange projects in their teaching. Even though this could be considered as a limitation of the study, the results indicate that both the suggested outcomes and the suggested challenges encountered are still considered relevant for students in grades K-3. Using the case study methodology was necessary due to the limited time frame for conducting this study. In the end, four teachers with varying teaching experience and from different regions in Sweden were interviewed to contribute to the validity of the results. However, it is important to be aware of the fact that using case study methodology limits the possibility to draw empirical conclusions from the results of the study.
Furthermore, the interviews were conducted over either Skype or mobile phone, and not face to face. Only one of the interviews was conducted using video, the other three were based on just the voice of the interviewer and interviewee, which could be a limitation since the facial expressions of the interviewees might have added something to the statements. In addition, three out of the four interviews were conducted in Swedish and then translated into English while writing. Even though the translation was done as objectively as possible and all the quotes were included in its original language, it could still be considered a limitation.

6.3. Suggestions for future research

It has been revealed that telecollaborative projects are strongly underrepresented within the early years of English education, especially among students that do not have English as their first language. Future research on implementation and suggested beneficial outcomes of telecollaboration among young English language learners is therefore strongly encouraged. Case study methodology, as mentioned above, limits the possibility of drawing empirical conclusions from the results of the study. Therefore, we suggest conducting more research within the field of telecollaboration in educational settings, particularly among younger students. Furthermore, the research should include young English language learners in Sweden as this group of students is underrepresented in previous research.
References

Barnes, François & Gruson, Birgitte (2012). Case study investigation of CMC with young

Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.


Appendix A: *Email sent to relevant teachers on eTwinning and ePals*

Dear [name of teacher],

Our names are Frida Johansson and Emma Reimer and we are both in our last year of our degree in primary school teaching at Malmö Högskola. We are currently writing our bachelor thesis on the implementation of online intercultural exchange projects in Swedish primary schools. Furthermore, the project will be focusing on the teachers’ perspectives; therefore, we are currently looking for teachers to interview regarding their experiences and attitudes towards such projects.

We would really appreciate if you would be willing to give us 30 min of your time to conduct an interview over Skype about your experiences in this field. The interview can be done in either English or Swedish, whatever language you feel most comfortable with. If this sounds interesting to you or if you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to message us. We look forward to hearing back from you!

Best wishes,
Frida Johansson & Emma Reimer
**Appendix B: Interview Guide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Background and emerging interest** Bakgrund och växande intresse | Please tell us about what grades/subjects you currently teach.  
*Berätta om vilka årskurser/ämnen du undervisar.* |                                                                      |
|                                                 | How long have you been a practicing teacher?  
*Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?* |                                                                      |
|                                                 | What made you interested in doing online intercultural exchange projects?  
*Vad väckte ditt intresse för att organisera interkulturella projekt?* |                                                                      |
| **Previous experience with online intercultural exchange projects. Tidigare erfarenheter av globala samarbeten i klassrummet** | How did you get in contact with a teacher abroad?  
*Hur fick du kontakt med en lärare i ett annat land?* |                                                                      |
|                                                 | What was the project about?  
*Vad handlade projektet om?* |                                                                      |
|                                                 | What were your aims/goals with the project?  
*Vad hade ni för mål med projektet?* |                                                                      |
|                                                 | How did the students communicate with each other?  
*Hur kommunikerade eleverna med varandra?* |                                                                      |
<p>|                                                 | What grade were the participating students in? |                                                                      |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>I vilken årskurs gick eleverna?</em></td>
<td>How many students participated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hur många elever deltog?</em></td>
<td><em>Hur många elever deltog?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What country was the other class/classes from?</em></td>
<td><em>Varifrån kom partnerklassen?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits and opportunities with online intercultural exchange projects</td>
<td><em>Fördelar och möjligheter med globala samarbeten</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fördelar och möjligheter med globala samarbeten</em></td>
<td><em>Vilka fördelar kunde du identifiera när du genomförde projekten i din undervisning?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… for you as a teacher?</td>
<td>… för dig som lärare?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… for your students?</td>
<td>… för dina studenter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… for the school?</td>
<td>… för skolan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and/or obstacles in the design/implementation of online</td>
<td><em>Utmaningar och/eller hinder</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>intercultural exchange projects</em></td>
<td><em>Vilka utmaningar mötte du under projektets gång?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vilka utmaningar mötte du under projektets gång?</em></td>
<td><em>Vilken typ av stöd fick du av skolledningen?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What support did you receive from the school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Letter of Consent

Dear [name of participating teacher],

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Emma Reimer and Frida Johansson from the faculty of Teaching and Society at Malmö Högskola. The purpose of the study is to investigate the implementation of global collaborations in Swedish primary schools as well as the challenges and benefits of these projects from the teacher’s perspective. You were selected since you have experience with global collaborations in a Swedish setting. Below you will find more information about the procedure of the interview. Please read through the statements and contact us if you have questions.

- The interview is voluntary and we expect the interview to last approximately 30 minutes. You have the right not to answer any question and you are allowed to disrupt the interview at any time for whatever reason.

- Unless you give us permission to use your name, title and/or quote you in our degree project, the information you tell us will be confidential.

- We plan on audio-recording the interview so that we can use it for reference while processing with this study. We will not record the interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for this interview to be recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission and/or end the interview at any time.

The project will be completed by the 26th of March 2017. All interview recordings will be stored in a secure work space until or grades have been marked, and following that the audio-recording will be destroyed.

Please check all boxes that apply before signing.

[ ] I understand the procedures described above, and I agree to participate in this study.

[ ] I give permission for this interview to be recorded.

[ ] I give permission for the following information to be included in publications resulting from this study: [ ] my name [ ] my title [ ] direct quotes from this interview

Name of Subject: [name of participating teacher]

Signature of Subject _____________________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Investigators ___________________ & __________________ Date ____________

Please contact Emma Reimer at emmareimer@hotmail.com or Frida Johansson at vivalafrida.johansson@gmail.com with any questions or concerns.