



eTwinning in the EFL Classroom - Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This literature review provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities with eTwinning from teachers' and students' perspectives. eTwinning is a part of the Erasmus+ program that supports school collaboration across the EU. Two of the eTwinning program's aims are: 1) to provide an opportunity for cultural exchange, and 2) to enhance language learning. The eTwinning platform helps schools in the EU to establish contact with each other to be able to collaborate on different projects. In addition, through the eTwinning platform, teachers can take part in online learning events, such as workshops and seminars. In 2015, 301,944 teachers were registered on the platform and 40,205 projects completed. These numbers motivate an overview of eTwinning. One of the findings of this literature review is that eTwinning support foreign language learning, but this finding is based on self-reported data. This finding, therefore, indicates that there is a lack of studies that test if there is a language development or not because of eTwinning. Furthermore, there are few eTwinning studies conducted in Sweden, and especially, from a student perspective which indicates a need for further investigations.

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1 Introduction

One of the primary goals for second language learning is to be able to communicate with other people who do not share the same first language or mother tongue as oneself. In Swedish schools teaching a foreign language such as English, your students will probably share one language already, namely Swedish. This fact might make a student in the process of learning a foreign language feel that it is intended for a later time in life and not for the use here and now. There are of course schools that are involved in cultural exchange programs, but it is both time-consuming and expensive to travel with a school class across the world. Since information and communications technology (ICT) entered the scene, the prerequisites have changed. With the use of ICT, you can now actually have a virtual cultural exchange with other schools all over the world and without even leaving the classroom.

In 2005, the European Commission's main action in their eLearning program was *eTwinning*, and since 2014 it is a part of the Erasmus+ program. This branch of the Erasmus+ aims to support school collaboration across the European Union (EU) with the aid of ICT. Other aims of the eTwinning project are to promote language learning and cultural exchange across the EU. The eTwinning platform helps schools in the EU to establish contact with each other to be able to work on different projects together. Teachers can also take part in online learning events, such as workshops and seminars (European Commission, n.d).

The aim of this literature review is to provide an overview of the literature that has been written about the implementation of the program in Europe. I will critically review the literature, to provide an overview of issues with eTwinning, as well as success stories with eTwinning in the classroom from both teachers' and students' point of view. Thus, the research question is: what are the challenges and opportunities of eTwinning from a teacher and a student perspective?

1.1 The eTwinning program

eTwinning creates an opportunity for both students and teachers to use and practice a foreign language, as well as their ICT skills. From the EU's point of view, eTwinning creates an opportunity for students to develop multicultural awareness. The strengths of the program are said to be the lack of formalities to register and launch a project, as well as teachers' possibility to run a project that they and their students are interested in (Crawley, Gilleran, Scimeca, Vuorikari, & Wastiau, 2009). On the eTwinning platform, teachers can create a

profile and look for other teachers that are interested in the same type of projects as themselves. An eTwinning project can be integrated into many different school subjects, for instance, math, social studies, chemistry, etc., even though most of the teachers that are registered on the platform teach foreign languages. In 2015, 301,944 teachers were registered on the platform and out of the 40,205 projects completed, 52% were in English (Cassells, Gilleran, Morvan, & Scimeca, 2015). Probably, this high percentage use of English is because it is utilized as a *Lingua Franca*, that is, employed when participants in a project do not share the same mother tongue.

Even though the number of teachers involved in eTwinning may seem fairly big, in 2014 when the project consisted of 250,000 members, Voulrikari, Kampylis, Scimeca, and Punie (2014) counted that this is only around 4% of the teaching population in the EU. From this number, you can draw the conclusion that the eTwinning network has an even bigger potential for influencing students and teachers in the EU in a couple of years from now. The growth of eTwinning that Voulrikari et al. (2014) point out motivates an overview of eTwinning since both a high number of teachers and students are engaged in the network.

When starting a new project, the teachers and the students participating are granted access to their personal collaborative space, called *Twinspace*. There they can create projects, where other countries can join and participate in a virtual exchange, through the aid of ICT. Project participants are not forced to use *Twinspace*, so they are free to choose other tools outside the platform. They can for example use *Skype*, *Wikis* and other tools available online. In some projects, there is not only two but several schools involved (Crawley et al., 2009).

So why should teachers then use the eTwinning platform when there is an abundance of other tools available to them? The answer to this question is that the eTwinning platform is intended to be a safe platform for teachers and students to meet and collaborate with other countries. It is funded by the European Commission and is a part of the Erasmus+ program. In the participating countries, the ministers of education are responsible for the eTwinning program. The platform is coordinated by the Central Support Service (CSS) and managed by the European Schoolnet, and then the National Support Service (NSS) is there to support teachers on a national level (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2015).

1.2 Why get involved in eTwinning?

Colonization, migration of English-speaking people across the world, and the Industrial Revolution have transformed English to the most widely spread language across the world

(McKay, 2002). Nowadays, many countries have English as a part of the curriculum to gain access to the global market, and Sweden is no exception. Through the English education in Sweden, “Students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011, p.1). Considering the many areas of the world where English is used, this can seem like an impossible task from the teachers’ point of view. Since two of the main goals of eTwinning are cultural exchange and promotion of language learning, eTwinning could be a potential program to aid teachers of English to fulfill this aim.

Another reason for getting involved in eTwinning is that English is a common official language in international organizations (McKay, 2002), and the EU is no exception since one of the EU’s official languages is English. To give our students a chance to participate in international organizations, the teaching of the English language is crucial. Learning a language is not only about knowing words, phrases, and grammar but learning about culture as well. eTwinning aims at developing students’ intercultural awareness, that is, to develop their understanding of other people’s cultures and the diversity of the European society (Council of Europe, Council for Cultural Co-operation, Education Committee, & Modern Languages Division, 2001).

In eTwinning, to talk with other real students gives the language use authenticity. They use language for what it is intended, namely communication. Many times, you can involve several of the competencies that teachers of English aim to develop in their students. Some of these competencies involve improving and enhancing: 1) interactions among the students, 2) their production of written and spoken language, and 3) their receptive skills. However, as for all newly launched projects, it is important to evaluate them, so that schools and teachers can learn from the mistakes committed by others who have worked with the program. eTwinning has now been running for approximately ten years, and quantitative studies have been done, articles have been written, and empirical studies have been conducted, and these lead up to the need for an overview of the research field.

2 Research into eTwinning

In the following two sections, findings will be presented from the teachers' and students' perspectives on eTwinning, since these two perspectives can add up to a broader one and provide a more nuanced picture of eTwinning. However, many studies have mainly targeted teachers and not students. Hence, the students' perspective will not be as broad, but hopefully provide some insight into eTwinning from their students' point of view. The following statement could be an explanation to this; "Pupils have not so far been targeted directly in order to comply with national pupil safety standards and because it is presumed they will be targeted effectively through the teachers" (European Commission & Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2013, p.99). Hence, the section concerning students' perspective is mainly from case studies and not from quantitative research. The major part of the reviewed studies has either had a quantitative approach with the use of questionnaires or a qualitative approach by conducting case studies.

2.1 eTwinning from the teachers' perspective

In 2008, an online survey was carried out by the Central Support Service (CSS) in cooperation with the National Support Service (NSS). The results of the study were published in the report: *eTwinning Beyond School Project - A Report on eTwinning 2008-2009* by Crawley et al. (2009). The majority of the respondents were teachers, and more than half of them were foreign language teachers. Since the survey was released in many different countries within the EU, it was translated into 23 languages, and there were both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The results indicate that the biggest obstacle when getting involved in an eTwinning project seems to be time, in second place were issues with ICT equipment at the school level, and in third place was finding a partner. Less than 10% of the 1308 respondents stated that it was difficult to integrate eTwinning in the curriculum. A positive result was that at the school level, teachers' responses to the survey indicated that the students' motivation was increased. The study also concluded that 21.7% of the respondents had not started an eTwinning project. The two main reasons were because teachers were unable to find a partner for an eTwinning project as well as a lack of time (Crawley et al., 2009).

The report provided by the EU, is not the only one stating that time is seen as a troublesome area when it comes to eTwinning, Gouseti (2013) also reveals time as an issue

when working with eTwinning. She provides several aspects linked to time and why it could be an obstacle. One issue is to find time for eTwinning within the curriculum, another is to find time for online meetings, and a third is to motivate students to stay after school hours to participate in the project. Then there are practical issues such as time difference, schedules of lessons, and different holidays and exam schedules that almost make it impossible to arrange real-time conversations between the schools. These findings are from a qualitative case study of two different schools in the UK and Greece involved in eTwinning carried out by Gouseti (2013) between the years 2009 and 2010. The data was collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and email interviews with the teachers in partner countries. Two focus group interviews with students in Greece and the UK were carried out. Data was also collected through online observations of the project. A majority of the students involved in the project were in upper secondary school, while a minority went to secondary school. In one project an old version of the collaborative space called *Twinspace* was used, while two projects used the new version of *Twinspace* and a fourth project used *Wikis*.

Gouseti (2013) also had a focus on collaborative aspects. In her study, she noticed that collaboration was an issue. The article states that there was little cooperation among students in the two different schools. In addition, students also had trouble with collaborative work within the school. This finding was valid for all four projects, so the use of a newer version of *Twinspace* did not improve the collaboration between the partner schools. The instructions from the teachers were not formed in a way that demanded collaboration among students, so a reason for the low rate of collaboration can be linked to poor instructions. According to Gouseti (2013), there is also a teaching practice in place which favors individual work instead of collaborative group work, which is another explanation for poor collaboration among students.

Similar findings were discovered in the report, *Study of the Impact of eTwinning on Participating Pupils, Teachers and Schools* by the European Commission et al. (2013). The report evaluated the impact on teachers' professional development, as well as an investigation of both success components and enablers in eTwinning. Both a survey and 24 case studies were conducted. In the case studies, two research visits took place; the first one was between May and September 2011 and the second one was between February and June 2012. The case studies were selected based on country, the number of registered *eTwinners*¹ and schools, the number of projects registered before and after 1st of June 2010, and the number of closed and

¹ Registered users on the eTwinning platform are called *eTwinners*.

active projects. Out of the 24 case studies, two of them were conducted in Sweden. In addition, a survey was made, which was translated into 25 languages. The questionnaire was an online survey that was open from the 3rd of October until the 10th of April. The survey had 5,946 valid responses and 49% out of the respondents were currently involved in an eTwinning project. The report found that the most common form of collaboration was between students in the same class and there were few instances of collaboration between the students in the partner schools. This result was because of time, different timetables and different time zones, as well as the access to ICT and how well the broadband functioned. However, the report provides an example of a successful case study in Belgium that was involved in an eTwinning project with Sweden and Greece. It was a project about human rights and the students participating in the project created a questionnaire, which they discussed the results of using various ICT tools such as, video conferencing, chat rooms and email (European Commission et al., 2013).

An action research study was carried out by Holmes (2013), in order to enhance collaboration in eTwinning. The research had a focus on collaboration when investigating different web 2.0 tools and applications to analyze their usefulness when eTwinning. The study was divided into two cycles, one running over a period of 11 days whereas the second ran over a period of 34 days in 2010. Both cycles were evaluated by using questionnaires consisting of both open and closed questions. The reason for dividing the cycles into two separate ones was so the researcher would have a chance to modify and improve the second cycle if needed. In the first cycle, 82% out of the 156 participating teachers responded to the questionnaire whereas in the second cycle 58% out of 142 teachers participating answered the questionnaires. In the first cycle, Holmes (2013) found that the participants increased their awareness of web 2.0 tools used for collaboration, but the collaboration in itself was rather unsuccessful. Instead of addressing the entire online community and participating in discussion groups, many teachers formed relationships with just one person. Holmes (2013) modified the conditions before the second cycle and created a so-called virtual staffroom. The virtual staffroom had the effect that the teachers involved in the action research used it for reflection, and to see other teams' progress, as well as sharing emotions. However, the discussions in the staff room died out quickly after a learning event took place. Thus, the steering of the project seems to be important in order to increase collaboration among students and teachers (Holmes, 2013). The study was rather small seeing to the number of the participants. However, the teachers who participated worked in different countries in Europe and therefore it is a relevant study (see Holmes, 2012).

Crawley et al. (2009) came to a conclusion that many schools have different technology related issues with eTwinning at the school level. Gouseti (2013) also found this result in her study. The registration of students on the site was in some cases troublesome and did not work at all with the school network, so the students had to use the teacher's account in order to be able to access the eTwinning platform. In one of the schools in Greece, the students had only access to two computers in the library (Gouseti, 2013), which of course is a hindrance when a school is involved in a project that has its base using ICT. Since the research took place in 2009, the access to ICT tools in the classroom has probably increased which would eliminate some of the problems concerning technology but probably not all of them.

Another result linked to technology was that teachers in the study thought that the students' ICT knowledge was enough and that they would transfer their out-of-school ICT competence to in-school use and have the knowledge of how a *Wiki* worked or how you wrote a blog. Gouseti (2012) found that many students mainly used computers at home to access social networks, listen to music or to do their homework. In other words, many students did not know how to write a blog or how a *Wiki* works and therefore did not know what was expected of them (Gouseti, 2012).

In contrast, the study by the European Commission et al. (2013) provides a different picture concerning students' ICT skills. A majority of the teachers who participated in the survey and who had an expectation that their students' ICT skills would improve through eTwinning also stated that students' ICT skills were improved. According to respondents, it was not only the students' ICT skills that were improved, but 60% of the respondents perceived one of the advantages with eTwinning to be that they improved their ICT skills or acquired new ones.

In the same survey, other positive findings were related to motivation, foreign languages, and increased knowledge about European cultures. Over 60% of the participants had expected and stated that: 1) their students' motivation to learn increased, 2) their students' knowledge of European culture improved, and 3) their students' foreign language skills were enhanced. In addition, 54% of the teachers thought that their foreign language skills were improved through eTwinning. Among the responses, the top advantage with eTwinning was making new friends and networking with other teachers in Europe. The report also does a comparison of perceived advantages of eTwinning between teachers involved in a project and those who are not. The teachers in a project rate all the advantages higher than teachers who

were currently not in a project. Similarly, teachers who started with eTwinning earlier on or were the most experienced *eTwinners* rated their fulfillment of expectations of eTwinning higher in all categories than teachers who had fewer years of experiences of eTwinning. However, in this case, it should be noted that most teachers in the survey have started with eTwinning between the years 2009 and 2011 (European Commission et al., 2013).

In the aforementioned survey, participants were asked what their expectations of eTwinning were and whether or not these expectations had been fulfilled. The top 3 categories that were both fulfilled and expected when joining eTwinning were: 1) an enhancement of personal skills, competencies, and knowledge, 2) their students' knowledge of European cultures was developed, and 3) they gained new ideas for their teaching practice. These previously mentioned categories, approximately 70% of the respondents answered that these expectations of eTwinning were fulfilled. However, among the least fulfilled categories are: 1) how easy it was finding a project partner, and 2) how easy it was to join someone else's project. In the survey, 50% of the respondents stated that these two expectations were fulfilled and around 30% of respondents answered that these expectations were unfulfilled. These numbers agree with previous findings and comments from case studies that stated it was difficult finding a project partner (see Gouseti, 2012; Crawley et al., 2009).

In the report by the European Commission et al. (2013), there is a table that summarizes the disadvantages with eTwinning. Time pressure is ranked as the biggest disadvantage of eTwinning, followed by lack of funding available for projects work. In third place is a lack of commitment from project partners and in the fourth lack of support and recognition from the school. Around 20% of all the teachers who participated in the survey see barriers created by ICT as a problem. In this study, they have made a comparison of teachers' experienced barriers in eTwinning between teachers involved in a project and teachers not involved in a project. Time constraints and funding of the project both groups agree are the two biggest problems. However, among teachers participating in a project, a lack of commitment from the partner school and ICT issues come in third respectively fourth place while teachers not involved in a project rate difficulties of finding a partner and integrating eTwinning in the curriculum in these two places (European Commission et al., 2013). In the case studies, the inflexibility of the curriculum is stated as a reason for not starting an eTwinning project. An inflexible curriculum often leaves teachers with no other option than doing an eTwinning project as an extra-curricular activity, which implies that they have to use after school hours and their own time. In addition, when eTwinning is an extra-curricular

activity, students must be motivated to stay on after school hours (European Commission et al., 2013).

The newest publication on eTwinning provided by the Central Support Service of eTwinning (CSS) and European Schoolnet (EUN Partnership AISBL) has investigated how teachers' professional development has been affected by eTwinning. In September 2014, an online survey was available to *eTwinners* during nine weeks. The survey consisted of 42 closed questions and translated into 25 different languages. To motivate participation in the survey, participants had the chance to win a tablet. 6000 valid answers were obtained after removing *eTwinners* who had not taken part of any eTwinning activities or projects, as well as removing the surveys that were not completed and those who did the survey several times. The majority of the respondents had more than 11 years' experience in teaching and the most common taught subject among the respondents was foreign languages (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2015).

The top skill that teachers reported was that eTwinning had had a moderate or large impact on was the ability to teach cross-curricular skills such as problem-solving and teamwork. Moreover, in a shared second place came the development of foreign language and project teaching skills. Further down the list, around 80% said that their collaborative skills and working with other teachers had improved. However, when the participants were asked how frequently they shared their eTwinning practices with other school staff, 3% of the respondents stated that they never did this and 32% reported that they did this occasionally. When teachers answered to what area eTwinning had had no impact, the improvement of their technology skills was rated highest (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2015), which is interesting since eTwinning promotes the use of technology. If we study what activities teachers carry out more frequently because of the participation in eTwinning, they rate teaching according to the examination requirements in the bottom. Kearney and Gras-Velázquez (2015) provide a hypothesis that eTwinning goes beyond the national exams requirements and therefore this is least associated with eTwinning.

In this survey, teachers have also answered questions concerning their students' development. 72% of the respondents reported that students were working in small groups in order to come up with a joint solution and this because of eTwinning. More than 85% of the teachers also said that eTwinning had increased students' motivation and promoted them to work collaborative (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2015).

Between May and November 2010, the eTwinning National Support Service carried out 24 case studies in 17 different countries involved in different eTwinning projects across

Europe. In 50% of the case studies the teachers teach in primary education and approximately one-third of them teach foreign languages. Across the case studies, teachers highlight the positive aspects with eTwinning such as the authenticity of eTwinning, the impact on students' language skills and motivation, as well as their self-esteem. They also describe some of the obstacles with eTwinning, which are mainly related to technology, language issues, time and collaboration (Wastiau, Crawley, & Gilleran, 2011).

In the study by Wastiau et al. (2011), teachers also reported on the benefits of eTwinning projects. The teachers said that a benefit was that students were motivated by talking to real students in other countries in Europe. The aspect of talking to other students, made them feel that they were using their language skills for a real purpose. One teacher commented that the question why should I do this, never appeared and took this as a sign of motivation. Another teacher reported that the students got more involved in the project and came with suggestions of topics to discuss. Then since the project often is in a foreign language, students also stated that their language skills were improved and that they were more confident to speak and communicate in a foreign language. The teachers also reported that the students realized the importance of knowing a foreign language and this motivated them to continue studying a language.

In the previously mentioned report, teachers also discussed obstacles with eTwinning. Many times there are some issues with technology, for example in one case the school network did not allow the chat function. Then sometimes the partner schools have different access to technology, so using a particular tool might not work, because the partner school does not have access to the same tool. In addition, there are schools, where the ICT infrastructure is not well developed, and there is limited access to computers which is an obstacle. Then there are other problems related to ICT, to provide an example, a Finish school used cell phones in an eTwinning project; the intention was to send texts to the students in the partner schools. However, this project idea did not work because the students could not send text outside of Scandinavia. Other obstacles that appeared in the case study were related to language proficiency level and deficient commitment from the partner school. It was reported by teachers that too low proficiency level in a foreign language is a hindrance to participation in eTwinning. Moreover, in some cases, the partner school did not reply, or one partner felt that the other one was not committed and/or did not put enough effort into their work (Wastiau et al., 2011).

Two obstacles that appear in the report by Wastiau et al. (2011) as well were teachers that had to do eTwinning as an extra-curricular activity and that the school was too focused on

exams. Then some teachers felt the lack of support from colleagues and missed cooperation and collaboration in the project. One teacher thought that other teachers were reluctant to eTwinning because it is time-consuming and there was no time to do the project during school hours (Wastiau et al., 2011).

2.2 eTwinning from the students' perspective

In Gouseti's (2013) qualitative case study, the students expressed a lack of engagement from the partner schools in some projects. It often happened that one group of students was more engaged in the project than the other, which was because replies from the partner school either came too late or not at all. To not receive any responses or late ones resulted in frustration and disappointment among the students who were more engaged in the project. A student expressed that it was like talking to herself and since the other students did not reply she said it was easier to discuss the project with her classmates in school instead of online.

Another result was that the projects' success was dependent on the language skills of the students. The UK students who did an eTwinning project with a school in Greece thought that it was a bit tedious to read too many posts that almost looked the same. The Greek students had to work a lot with translation from Greek to English, and they thought that some words probably got lost when the words were translated into English, or the texts were interpreted the wrong way (Gouseti, 2013). In a different case study between a school in the UK and Germany, there was not only a difference in proficiency but also an age difference. In the focus groups interviews, some of the older UK students thought that their partners in the eTwinning project were a bit childish because they still watched TV shows such as *Hannah Montana* and *Sponge Bob*². The UK students thought that they did not have that many interests in common with the students from the partner school (Gouseti, 2012).

By examining, Gouseti's (2012) doctoral dissertation where the original research took place, further insight to this issue can be gained. Her case study is one of the few that have had interviews with the students involved in eTwinning projects. In her doctoral dissertation, there are more comments from students and their perspective on eTwinning. The teachers were not the only ones suffering from the issues with technology. As previously mentioned, some of the students were not able to access the platform at all. According to one student in the study, they were not able to change their passwords, and the passwords were arduous to

² *Hannah Montana* is an American TV show and *Sponge Bob* is a cartoon.

remember. Thus, this was a reason why the teacher had to reset the passwords and as a result valuable project time was lost (Gouseti, 2012).

In the report *Study of the Impact of eTwinning on Participating Pupils Teachers and Schools* by European Commission et al. (2013), further insight into eTwinning's impact on students can be gained. In the 24 case studies conducted for this report, in most of the cases, the researchers asked students to rank ten different statements on a scale of 0 to 10, where a ten was the most positive. The result of this survey indicates that most students in the case studies show a positive attitude towards eTwinning since the students answered that they would like to continue working in eTwinning projects by given this statement approximately an eight. The statement concerning foreign language development was also ranked high, given a six. The students ranked their ICT skills to have been least improved through eTwinning. Thus, the students' responses do not agree with the teachers' responses, since over 60% of the teachers answered that their students' ICT skills were improved due to eTwinning (European Commission et al., 2013).

A primary motivation expressed by the students for participating in eTwinning projects was the possibility to engage in conversations with students from another country. However, in the focus group interviews, many of the students were disappointed in the lack of instant online communication, since the time difference inhibited them from using the chat function. Hence, the two groups were never online at the same time and therefore could not chat. They had to use the forum instead. A similar experience occurred in another case between a school in Germany and a school in the UK. The students thought that an improvement could be to use *Skype*. The school in the UK also experienced a lack of responses from the school in Germany or late responses to what they had written. More or less all the 4 case studies point out the lack of replies as a reason for disappointment and a decrease in motivation to continue with the project (Gouseti, 2012).

Another study also indicates that the frequency of communication between students impacts the project outcome. This study also confirmed that very little instant or synchronous work was happening within eTwinning. This was mainly because aspects of time such as time difference and different timetables which is in agreement with Gouseti's (2012) findings. An additional reason for little instant communication was the ICT infrastructure at the different schools, so email was by far the most common channel for communication. In one of the case studies, the school's network did not support the chatrooms and therefore, the students had to chat at home. However, the teacher in this project was afraid that the students would write something inappropriate, so she was present in the chatroom too. On the other hand, she

thought her presence lead to that the students did not feel comfortable chatting with the other students. The teacher thought that the project was rather unsuccessful and after this project, she lets her students exchange emails (European Commission et al., 2013).

In accordance with the teachers, students also felt that they did not have time for eTwinning but for a different reason than the teachers. In several of the case studies, eTwinning was an extracurricular activity and was therefore not assessed. Due to this fact, students said they prioritized other assignments which were assessed instead of putting too much effort into eTwinning which was not assessed. In addition, many of the students expressed a lack of instructions and guidance from the teachers (Gouseti, 2012).

In an eTwinning study conducted in 2010 by Palovaara Nasi (2012), a success factor for collaborative work was instructions that demanded cooperation among students. It was a small quantitative and qualitative study. The study investigated what knowledge was acquired through eTwinning from a student perspective. Sixteen high school students who were between 17 and 18 years old participated in a survey which consisted of eight closed questions and one open question. Five students participated in a focus group interview. The eTwinning project used French as a mediating language and was a project between a Swedish and a Slovakian high school. To summarize the project, students explored and contrasted traditions in the respective countries by constructing PowerPoint presentations and discussing the project by using forums and chat functions. The chatting was restricted to after school hours because the two partner schools did not have lessons scheduled at the same time.

In the survey, the majority of the students agreed that they improved their writing skills, as well as their oral skills. Palovaara Nasi (2012) was surprised that a majority expressed their oral skills to have been enhanced by eTwinning because the Swedish students only communicated through written texts with the Slovakian students. Her explanation to this result is that chatting is similar to oral communication, in the sense that texts need to be produced quickly, and therefore the students practice a skill which is also required for oral communication. Both in the survey and the focus group interview, students expressed that chatting was challenging and that they needed more support from the teacher and other students when doing this activity. The general opinion of eTwinning was that the language use was authentic because it was used to communicate with students who did not have Swedish as a mother tongue. In the focus group interview, one student said that if an assignment would not be done in time, it would have been embarrassing to have nothing to present to the partner school. Another student expressed that the retention of the language is

better when it used for a real purpose, instead of doing exercises in a course book (Palovaara Nasi, 2012).

Palovaara Nasi (2012) considers the ethical aspects when the participants in the study are teenagers that are underage. She decided that the parents' permission was not needed since the survey was anonymous and did not concern anything that could be perceived or experienced as sensitive to anyone. To participate in the survey was voluntary. The students who participated in the focus group interview were all overage and therefore, no permission from the parents was needed. The principal was informed about the study, and all the gathered information was treated confidentially.

3 Discussion

This literature review's intention was to provide an overview of challenges and opportunities of eTwinning from the teachers' and students' perspectives. The studies reviewed reveal both benefits and obstacles with eTwinning. The two primary benefits mentioned in the studies are increased motivation among students and improved foreign language skills. The most frequently mentioned issues with eTwinning were related to collaboration, time, ICT, partner schools, and language proficiency.

Overall, teachers' views of eTwinning are that it has a positive impact on students' motivation (see Crawley et al., 2009; European Commission et al., 2013; Wastiau et al., 2011). However, the issue with these studies is that they are all from the teachers' perspective and seldom bring forth the students' views of eTwinning. The absence of students' views of eTwinning might be because of students' safety standards in Europe (see European Commission et al., 2013), which could make it difficult to directly target students without any permission from a guardian. Still, one might think that the students are the ones best suited to assess whether they feel motivated because of their involvement in eTwinning or not. There could perhaps be other factors influencing why teachers think that their students' motivation increase because of eTwinning, such as they are the ones grading them and students are keen to show their interest in activities suggested by the teachers. However, in the report by the European Commission et al. (2013), the students took a small questionnaire in most of the case studies, which reflect their opinions of eTwinning. This survey indicated that students would like to keep on doing eTwinning projects, but the study by itself is too small to draw any general conclusions of whether students' motivation is increased by eTwinning or not. Moreover, Gouseti (2012) provides some evidence that students are motivated by the thought and idea of eTwinning, because of the possibility to talk with students from a different country. However, in her case studies, there has been a problem with decreased students' motivation along the way and this was because there was a lack of communication between students in the partner schools. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the results of studies concerning students' motivation and eTwinning, therefore investigations within this area that directly target the students are needed.

Furthermore, a re-appearing finding throughout many studies is that students seem to be motivated to keep on studying a foreign language. In case studies by Wasiau et al. (2011), teachers said that students realized the importance of knowing a foreign language and a similar finding was done by Palovaara Nasi (2012). One reason behind language learning was

that the language use was real because they presented their work to real students. The students also realized the importance of knowing a foreign language. Other positive findings concerning foreign languages were that both teachers and students improved their language skills through eTwinning (e.g. European Commission et al., 2013; Kearney, & Gras-Velázquez, 2015; Wastiau et al., 2012). However, a problematic aspect when surveying the results from these studies are that many are self-reported and not confirmed by any pre- and post-testing of students' foreign language skills. Hence, a test of their foreign language skills is therefore needed to validate or invalidate the previously mentioned results.

An additional fact that seems frequent throughout the research is related to collaboration among teachers, as well as among students. Some studies suggest that there is a positive effect on collaboration among students and teachers, while others suggest the opposite. Kearney and Gras-Velázquez (2015) report that teachers believe eTwinning has had a positive impact on their collaboration with other teachers. However, in the same survey, a rather big percentage of teachers reported that they only shared their eTwinning practice occasionally with colleagues. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this report is based on self-reported data by the teachers. Hence, teachers might think that they do one thing more frequently than they actually do, but this needs to be investigated by other means than through self-reported data. The studies by Holmes (2013) and Gouseti (2012) reported that there is a lack of collaboration between teachers within eTwinning, which is a result that contradicts the results found by Kearney and Gras-Velázquez (2015). In Holmes (2013) collaboration among teachers online was increased in the second cycle, but still rather unsuccessful. He suggests that better steering of a project would increase collaboration among teachers. Gouseti (2013) found that there was a lack of collaboration among students and this was due to insufficient instructions from the teacher. To conclude, there is a discrepancy between the results from case studies and quantitative studies concerning whether eTwinning improve collaboration between teachers and students or not.

An area which can be related to collaboration is ICT. Technology at school level could be a hindrance for instant communication since some school networks do not support chat functions (see Wastiau et al., 2011). In addition, students in the study of Gouseti (2012) expressed a lack of instructions from the teacher. In this case study, the teacher thought that students would transfer their ICT skills from outside school to inside school use, but the students were no able to do this. Thus, a good advice would be to have clear instructions for an eTwinning project. Furthermore, in one of Gouseti's (2012) case studies, the students only had access to two computers. These previously mentioned obstacles were a hindrance for

running a successful eTwinning project and took up valuable time. Time is also the most significant barrier to instant communication (e.g. Crawley et al., 2013; European Commission et al., 2013; Gouseti, 2012; Palovaara Nasi, 2012). The lack of instant communication is concerning because case studies conducted by Gouseti (2012) mention that the primary motivation for joining eTwinning for students is to be able to talk with real peers living in another country in Europe. The students in Paavolova Nasi (2012) study also missed instant communication with project partners during school hours. The aforementioned study is a BA dissertation, but the result from this study should not be discarded since Gouseti's (2012) case studies indicate a lack of instant communication as well. The knowledge that can be gained from these two studies is that an optimal solution would be to plan the project ahead to ensure that the partner schools are able to have lessons at the same time.

Another aspect concerning technology is that technology can either be the success factor in a project or restrain a project. In a case study in Finland, they wanted to use cell phones to send texts to the partner school. However, this was not possible because they were not able to send texts outside of Scandinavia. The research states that access to technology varies in different countries. One study (see Gouseti, 2012) has pointed out that there have been problems with registration on the eTwinning platform and that the constant re-registration of students led to time loss. Problems with registration on the eTwinning site could have been adjusted since the case study took place in the academic year 2009-2010. Moreover, the students felt that their ICT skills developed and improved least through eTwinning. The teachers, on the contrary, stated that there was an improvement of their students' ICT skills because of eTwinning (see European Commission et al., 2013). A possible explanation could be that teachers can better see the development of their students, while their students do not notice that they have improved and developed their ICT skills but further investigation is needed to tell why there is incoherence between them.

Many of the challenges with eTwinning can be connected to time. Several studies suggest that it is time-consuming to find a partner. In the report by the European Commission et al. (2013), one of the results suggested that finding a partner was difficult. In addition, to not being able to find a partner was also one of the reasons for not starting a project, which one could see as a natural explanation. One of the main aims of eTwinning is to be an easy way to do an exchange project; therefore it is concerning that a reoccurring result in reports is that it is hard to find a project partner. When eTwinning, some teachers and students have experienced that the partner school is not as engaged in the project as they wished they were (e.g. Gouseti, 2012; Wastiau et al., 2011). One contributing factor according to students in

Gouseti's (2012) study was that in some projects eTwinning was an extra-curricular activity and was not assessed, therefore, students said that they prioritized other assignments over eTwinning. On the other hand, students in the BA dissertation by Palovaara Nasi (2012) expressed that it would be embarrassing not to hand in work in time because the partner school did their assignments in time. In the later study there seemed to be a positive impact related to group processes, but further investigation is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

The reviewed literature, also indicates that too big of a difference in language proficiency is a hindrance when eTwinning. In Gouseti's (2012) case studies, students stated that it was tedious to read too many entries that looked alike. The European Commission et al. (2013) also state that too low language proficiency has a negative impact on eTwinning. In addition, if there is an age difference, students can experience that they do not share any common interest and in the case study by Gouseti (2012) students in one school thought the other students were too childish. To do an eTwinning project where there is an age difference is not recommended, but since the curriculums vary in different countries, the language proficiency might be a better match even though there is an age difference between the students. Thus, other aspects to consider before getting involved in an eTwinning project is students' age in relation to proficiency and that both these factors should be a good match for a fruitful cooperation.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, the findings indicate that there is a lack of research on students' participation in eTwinning. Several studies have primarily focused on the teachers' perspective and not the students' perspective. This could be related to regulations in Europe, which could make it difficult to target students because the majority of them are underage. Swedish teachers have participated in many of the quantitative studies summarized in this review. However, there has not been one study explicitly dedicated to investigating the Swedish teachers' opinions of eTwinning, which would be interesting because the prerequisites for teaching differ depending on the country. Several of the findings in this literature review might not be true in Sweden, such as the curriculum being too inflexible for eTwinning during lessons but this needs further investigations to confirm. In addition, the studies have reported that students develop their foreign language skills, because of eTwinning. However, this finding is mainly from self-reported data from the teachers, and therefore, a test is needed to state whether students' foreign language skills are developed through eTwinning or not. Moreover, the studies reviewed in this report do not agree on if collaboration between students and teachers are strengthened because of eTwinning or not. In this review, there is also incoherence between students' and teachers' responses of whether students' ICT skills are developed through eTwinning or not.

Finally, some advice that can be gained from the research is: 1) plan ahead to ensure that the partner schools have lessons at the same time, so there is a possibility to engage in instant communication with the partner school, and 2) try to find a partner school where there is a good match between the students' language proficiency and not too big of an age difference. Hopefully, in the near future, eTwinning will be revisited, and further insight into students' perspectives of eTwinning will be explored.

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