Chapter 2
Young Learners: Communication and Digital Tools

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes a project aiming at investigating Swedish and Russian 12-year-old learners’ use of ICT. They communicate in English on three shared blogs. Their exchanges and contributions are analyzed with a focus on mediating tools, modes of communication, and motives for collaboration. Ongoing activities are studied through classroom observations, interviews, and a research circle. Results show that ICT plays a vital role as a mediating tool and a motive for collaboration. Results indicate that Russian and Swedish learners manage to interact in authentic communication in English with the help of digital tools. Opportunities to explore a variety of digital tools resulted in new forms of representation. International collaboration through ICT indicates that conflicting issues and developmental opportunities may challenge the current education system.

INTRODUCTION
Today globalization plays a significant role in everyday life. People regularly meet cultures in geographically distant settings. Modern man is a partner in an international and multicultural community. We are exposed to media from a rich variety of sources and we are expected to contribute to a global community. ICT is supposed to bridge geographical distances and provide collaboration, transformation and learning in what Nardi calls “placeless organizations” (Nardi, 2007, p. 5).
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There are ethical considerations about personal and private communication; e.g. is the use of ICT appropriate in young learners’ communication in educational environments? We carried out a project in cooperation between Uppsala University Campus Gotland, schools in Gotland, Immanuel Kant Federal Baltic University in Russia and schools in the Kaliningrad region. Six classes were involved in the project and ongoing activities supplied data on three blogs.
BACKGROUND

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provides opportunities for learners to document their learning processes in efficient and interactive ways. By using ICT learners provide accounts of their achievements at school. They share information with learners in geographically distant areas. The reported project investigates young learners’ use of digital tools in international communication. English is the lingua franca in the Baltic region. It is taught and learnt as the first foreign language at school. Successful communication in English on ICT-platforms lies in reach owing to daily interaction and communication. Exchanges can be achieved without significant obstacles or geographical distances. Furthermore, English tends to be used in the learners’ free time in ICT-contexts. Opportunities to use the English language outside class, described as Extramural English, correlate positively with the pupils’ level of oral proficiency and the size of their vocabulary in a study among Swedish 16-year-olds (Sundqvist, 2009, p. 204). In successful teaching and learning, it is essential to develop the learners’ awareness of progress, and encourage them to assess their interaction and production. Motivation is a challenge and a key word for the successful learner. It is necessary to motivate the learners to produce and interact in contexts which relate to their everyday lives. According to Gärdenfors (2010) the use of ICT can support motivation in informal as well as formal learning situations. Teaching and learning at ICT-platforms can be organized as assignments for individuals or groups of learners. Their learning process includes collecting material in portfolios where documents such as X-media productions illustrate progress. The learners’ motivation for documentation can be strengthened if the material is published in social media, making communication real and authentic. Leffler and Lundberg (2012) claim that projects with a focus on increased cooperation with schools abroad, offer opportunities for increased meaningfulness, connection with real life and motivation in the learners’ language studies.

Curricula provide a framework and concrete guidelines for the teachers’ work. There are several similarities in Russian and Swedish curricula, for example descriptions of learners’ skills and their expected levels of proficiency. The difference lies in focus on interaction, strategies and confidence in the Swedish curriculum. In the Swedish curriculum there are descriptions at a general interactive and communicative level. The Russian curriculum contains detailed descriptions in terms of phonetics and structures. In the Swedish curriculum there are overall goals and guidelines and the use of ICT is directly addressed. Schools must ensure that pupils can use ICT in their search for knowledge and communication, creativity and learning but also to communicate in spoken and written English. An international perspective is emphasized in the Swedish curriculum and the learners should be able to understand their reality in a global context and prepare for a society with contacts across cultural and national borders (Skolverket, 2011). In the Russian curriculum a sociocultural component is emphasized where the learners have to know basic information about culture, traditions and aspects of modern life in English speaking countries. As regards stipulated goals of ICT in Russian schools, descriptions of student competence in the use of ICT is left outside the curriculum (Budarina, 2012). However, in both countries teachers should encourage the learners to develop interest in languages and culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework of activity theory, developed by Leontiev, and extended by Engeström focus on the relationship between human, the environment and activity plus needs and motives that lead to changes in an activity. Today variants of activity theory are used in a variety of disciplines, including education and cultural studies (Kaptelinin, 2013).