The Benefits of Explicit Vocabulary Teaching in the EFL Classroom

Fördelarna med explicit undervisning av ordkunskap i klassrummet för engelska som främmande språk

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Abstract

For students of English as a foreign language (EFL), a certain level of knowledge of vocabulary is required for successful communication to occur. Based on personal experiences in the classroom which have shown that students often lack language variation, accuracy, coherence and descriptiveness, this paper deals with the issue of teaching vocabulary in a more conscientious and focused way to help ensure that students will become more competent in using the language effectively. The Swedish curriculum for English, LGR11, is built up around the ideology known as communicative language teaching (CLT). This entails that as long as a learner is exposed to a foreign language, and has sufficient opportunities to use that language, the learning of the language will occur. The results of this paper suggest that we cannot only rely on a pure form of CLT for students to reach higher ability levels, but that a certain amount of focused vocabulary teaching, in context with classroom activities, is also necessary.

Key words: Foreign language vocabulary acquisition, intentional vocabulary teaching, communicative language teaching, language development.
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1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Sweden, as in many countries all over the world, has a focus on function as opposed to form. The functional approach is known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and its primary objective is for students to increase their overall ability to communicate in the target language.

The CLT approach to language teaching in Sweden is clearly defined in commentary support material for the English syllabus published by Skolverket (2011b). It states that the relatively new syllabus for English, LGR 11, has a functional and communicative ethos with regard to language learning (p. 6).

It is a fact that students in Sweden have a lot of contact with the English language outside of school through various media, not least Internet (Skolverket, 2011b p. 10). Therefore, it must be assumed that much of what students learn with regard to communicative ability takes place outside of school rather than in the English classroom. However, in my own teaching of English within the classroom environment, I very often see a lack of language variation, accuracy, coherence and descriptiveness from students due, in part, to a lack of vocabulary.

Whilst teaching English as a foreign language in the Swedish school system, questions have arisen between my colleagues and I about the importance of vocabulary and how it can be taught and learned effectively in context. Mirroring one vocabulary researcher’s opinion that vocabulary has been a difficult area to deal with (Schmitt, 2010, p. 15), I too have also personally felt a lack of understanding of how to incorporate effective vocabulary acquisition into my own teaching within my role as an English teacher within the Swedish compulsory school system. All of this has led me into wanting to investigate recent research which has studied areas of explicit vocabulary teaching in foreign language teaching and learning.
1.1 The Curriculum and Steering Documents

CLT can be defined as being a teaching approach based on meaning, where the stress is put on using language for meaningful communication with a focus on the “message and fluency rather than grammatical accuracy” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 14). Harmer (2001) explains that CLT is the term used for an ideology that re-examined what to teach, and with a changed emphasis on how to teach (p. 84). With regard to what to teach, he writes that “the communicative approach stressed the significance of language functions rather than focusing […] on grammar and vocabulary” (p. 84). With regard to how to teach, he states that CLT is linked to the notion that “language learning will take care of itself” where sufficient contact with language and many opportunities to actually use it are important (p. 85). The term Communicative Language Teaching, hereafter referred to as CLT, appeared after the arrival of a communicative competence approach to language teaching in the 1970s, which is linked to the move away from a more grammar oriented approach for the study of language (Leung, 2005, pp. 121-122). CLT can be summarized as being made up of four areas of competence which arose out of theoretical work and articles by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain during the 1980s (Leung, 2005, pp. 123-124). These four areas of competence are known as grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. As can be seen below, they can be directly linked to the syllabus for English with supporting steering documents, thus not only highlighting how these documents relate to the functional and communicative ethos of language learning, but also displaying that CLT forms the foundation of teaching EFL in Sweden.

1.1.1 Grammatical Competence

Quoting Canale and Swain’s articles from the early 1980’s, Leung (2005) explains that grammatical competence can be defined as the “knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology” (p. 123), and that this kind of understanding and proficiency will enable a student to comprehend and correctly produce the “literal meaning of utterances” (p. 123).
Under the heading of *Aims*, the commentary support material for the English syllabus states the following:

the communicative ability also includes an increasing level of language correctness. This means that as far as is possible, students should understand the form of the language, that is to say vocabulary, phraseology, pronunciation, prosody, spelling and grammar. The aim of this is to develop the complexity and the precision in the students’ language. With knowledge about the language’s form, the students can develop the ability to express themselves and communicate in more advanced and demanding contexts. (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 9, my translation)

Under the heading of *Core Content* in the syllabus itself, with regard to the receptive skills, reading and listening in years 7-9, it reads:

Language phenomena such as pronunciation, intonation, grammatical structures, sentence structure, words with different registers, as well as fixed language expressions pupils will encounter in the language. (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 35)

Regarding the production and interaction skills, speaking, writing and discussing in years 7-9, it reads:

Language phenomena to clarify, vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions, grammatical structures and sentence structures. (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 35)

Without sufficient levels of grammatical competence, accuracy and correctness will suffer. If the levels are too low, this could lead to a complete breakdown in communication.

1.1.2 Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence can be defined as knowledge of the appropriateness of language in any given setting and context. With regard to this aspect of communicative competence, the commentary material for the English syllabus states that “the teaching of English shall provide the students with an opportunity to develop an all-round communicative ability. Within such ability there are to be included social, inter-cultural and language aspects” (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 8, my translation). It goes on to say that:
The social and inter-cultural aspects entail that students can adapt their language to different situations, purposes and audience. Within a social and inter-cultural ability, students should, as far as is possible, know about and use the cultural codes and language which is needed to be able to communicate in both formal and informal situations. It can be about word choice, language features for politeness, how I begin a letter or an E-mail, how I act in different social contexts, or how to thank someone and say no. (pp. 8-9, my translation)

The Core Content section covering receptive skills in Lgr11 reads, “Different types of conversations, dialogues, interviews and oral communications” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 34) and “How texts and spoken language can be varied for different purposes and contexts” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 35). In the same section with reference to production and interaction skills it reads, “Different ways of working on personal communications to vary, clarify, specify and adapt them for different purposes” (p. 35).

All of the above demands that a student is capable of being flexible and adaptable with regard to language use. Knowing what to say and how to say it can help a student in many ways when communicating for different reasons in different situations and environments. Without this knowledge, it can be very easy to be misinterpreted and that can lead to all manner of challenging situations with resulting communication breakdowns.

1.1.3 Discourse Competence

Discourse competence covers the area that deals with cohesion and coherence. This competence “deals with the knowledge and skill required to combine grammatical forms and meanings to produce different types of unified spoken or written texts, e.g. oral and written narratives, business reports and so on” (Leung, 2005, p. 123). For example, writing in different genres requires different skills. An argumentative essay necessitates a certain use of language and connecting structure if the reader is to be able to easily understand and interpret it in the way the writer intends.

However, there is not such an array of text in the steering documents that can be related to discourse competence, at least not in a direct way. Of course, discourse competence can be affected through the carrying out and completion of various reading, listening, writing, and oral classroom tasks. This may be taken to mean that discourse competence is to be achieved through exposure to various aspects of language, including language use itself, in line with the CLT ethos of the curriculum. Discourse
competence is apparent though in the Core Content section covering receptive skills in Lgr11. It reads “How connecting words and other expressions are used to create structure and linguistically coherent entities” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 35). Other than this, there does not appear to be any further direct reference to this competence area in the curriculum.

This area of competence demands more advanced language skills on the part of the students. Examples are the knowledge of, and the ability to apply linking words and phrases like also, however, on the other hand, firstly, secondly, furthermore and so on. These are skills that facilitate communication in, not least, more formal settings or writing like discussions and presentations amongst other things, but even in less formal situations also.

1.1.4 Strategic Competence

Leung (2005) uses Canale’s earlier definition from the early 1980’s to define strategic competence, namely:

mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two main reasons: (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication (e.g. momentary inability to recall an idea or grammatical form) or due to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas above; and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g. deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect). (p. 124)

Under the heading of Strategies to Support Communication, the commentary material for the English syllabus states the following with regard to strategic competence:

Sometimes situations arise where we try to get a message across but feel that we do not succeed in reaching the person who is listening. In other situations, it can be difficult as a recipient to understand a message. This may be to do with word choice, problems with pronunciation and prosody, the ability to formulate or the ability to adapt to different situations and recipients. Then we need to be able to compensate for all of this by way of, for example, reformulations, synonyms, questions and body language. One aim of the teaching of English therefore is that the students should develop and be able to use different strategies and approaches so that they overcome these barriers in communication. (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 9, my translation)
All of the above is also clearly defined in the curriculum itself. Under the heading of *Aim*, it states that students should develop an ability to “use language strategies to understand and make themselves understood,” and that “Communication skills also cover confidence in using the language and the ability to use different strategies to support communication and solve problems when language skills by themselves are not sufficient” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 32).

Having a limited vocabulary range here would hamper a student in the situations listed above. Equally important is that a student would need to have an ability to adapt the language to fit the situation. Even a need to have an ability to make decisions regarding word choice in given settings is important, as well the ability to formulate questions, talk around words and use different strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication are important skills that are required.

### 1.2. Aim and Research Question

In this research synthesis, I will carry out a review of research on explicit vocabulary teaching and learning in the EFL classroom. Although it is stated in the commentary material for the English syllabus (2011b) that students should gradually increase their understanding of language structure, the main focus is on functional and communicative language learning (p. 6). It is my aim to establish if there are any specific methods of explicit teaching of vocabulary which could ultimately enhance the overall communicative ability of students of English between the years of 7 to 9 within the Swedish compulsory school system. Explicit vocabulary learning can be defined as being a conscientious and focused effort to learn words (Schmitt, 2000, p. 116). In this study, I aim to answer the following question:

What practical pedagogical methods of explicit vocabulary teaching are relevant to teaching EFL in a Swedish educational context within the framework of communicative language teaching (CLT)?
2. Literature Review

Nation (2001) makes the point that the teaching and learning of vocabulary make up just part of any language course and it is therefore important that it is kept in perspective (p. 1). He speaks about “four major strands” that he believes should form a balanced course of study in approximately equal amounts, namely “meaning-focused input” (listening and reading), “meaning-focused output” (speaking and writing), “fluency development” where learners become more fluent in what they have already acquired, and lastly, “language-focused learning,” where there is a focus on form and the category in which explicit vocabulary teaching fits (p. 2-3). These four strands appear to fit in quite well with the curriculum for English in Sweden and its CLT approach to language teaching in that there is much meaning based content.

2.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary can be defined as being “all the words that someone knows or uses”, “all the words in a particular language”, “the words that are typically used when talking about a particular subject” and “a list of words with explanations of their meanings, especially in a book for learning foreign languages” (The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003, p. 1843). However, Schmitt (2000) explains that the term word is not specific enough to cover the complexity of vocabulary and to capture different aspects of lexis. Single words, phrasal verbs and idioms can all carry the same meaning, for instance. A few examples that Schmitt uses are “die” (single word), “pass away” (phrasal verb) and “kick the bucket” (idiom) (p. 1). The meaning of all of these is to die, but different words and combinations of words are used in each case. There are numerous other examples which highlight the complexity of vocabulary, such as how base words are manipulated to affect their meanings to greater or lesser degrees, or even completely change their original meanings. Examples of these come under the heading of morphology and include affixes, suffixes and different verb tenses. Other examples
are words which are the same, but belong to different word classes, such as the verb permit and the noun permit. Base words are manipulated here also as the noun permission and the adjectives permissive and permissible show. This list of examples highlighting the fact that vocabulary is so much more complex than just words could go on. In this paper, I use the term vocabulary to mean any word or combination of words (such as collocations, phrasal verbs and idioms) in any form that is taught/learnt, both implicitly and/or explicitly within the realm of the curriculum for English for years 7-9 in the Swedish compulsory school system.

Schmitt (2000) discusses how vocabulary has been treated in various teaching approaches through the years. He talks about how methodology in language teaching “has swung like a pendulum” and that a repeated trend is that most ideologies have not known how to deal with the issue of vocabulary (p. 15). CLT does not offer much in the way of direction either, he writes, apart from support vocabulary for functional use. He goes on to say that there is now a realization that just by being exposed to a language with practice in its functional use will not guarantee an adequate level of vocabulary and that current teaching practice should include “both a principled selection of vocabulary […] and an instruction methodology that encourages meaningful engagement with words over a number of recyclings” (p. 14).

2.2 Acquiring Vocabulary

What affects how learners in the EFL classroom acquire vocabulary ensures that it is very difficult to pinpoint any specific theory which can be used to determine just how we acquire L2 vocabulary. Factors such as what mother tongue a student has, the age of the student, cultural background, levels of motivation and how much contact the student has with the target language are all variables that affect the learning of vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000, p. 116). These variables are important considerations for any language teacher with regard to teaching in the classroom and what pedagogical methods to use.

It can be assumed perhaps that from a CLT perspective, vocabulary learning occurs primarily through communicative and meaningful input, meaningful output and meaningful interactions involving reading, listening, speaking and writing. However, according to Newton (2013), not much research has been carried out on incidental
communication tasks, although he states that it is probable that unfamiliar words will be frequently encountered by students during various communication tasks (pp.164-165). Of course, it is quite usual that the understanding of some unfamiliar words in the context with which they are written or said can be achieved. Just by reading on or continuing to listen, a basic meaning of a word can actually become apparent. For example, a student may not be familiar with the word *galaxy* when first reading it in a text or hearing it in speech. Further on, the student may read or hear something like, *and all the stars which make up the galaxy*, thereby receiving an explanation in round about terms. This is one example of what is meant by implicit vocabulary learning, where a meaning is acquired while the focus has been on reading and understanding a text as a whole.

2.3 Implicit Vocabulary Acquisition

Although this paper deals with if there are any particular pedagogical methods of *explicit* vocabulary teaching which are relevant to EFL in a Swedish educational context, it is important to include some background on what is meant by *implicit* vocabulary acquisition because the learning of new words can and does occur this way. Implicit vocabulary acquisition can be defined as learning and acquiring vocabulary without a specific focus on it. This means that it is acquired *incidentally* during exposure to the language. Incidental vocabulary learning is defined as being acquisition “through exposure when one’s attention is focused on the use of language, rather than the learning itself” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 116). This fits in well with the definition of the word *incidental* in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) which reads; “happening or existing in connection with something else more important” (p. 822). In other words, incidental vocabulary acquisition within the framework of CLT means that a student acquires vocabulary through the mere use and exposure to the language while focusing on the more important aspect of communicative language ability.

According to Nation (2001), learning incidentally by way of guessing the meaning of words in the context in which they are written or spoken is more important than any other source with regard to vocabulary learning (p. 232). He goes on to say, however,
that many learners “do not experience the conditions that are needed for this kind of learning to occur” (p. 232). He states that to be able to guess words in a text, “at least 95% of the running words need to be already familiar to the learners […]” (p. 233). Mohammad Mohseni-Far (2008) makes the point that for reading to be an efficient source of incidental vocabulary acquisition, where word meaning can be secured, learners must have regular exposure to a lot of contextualized text which is comprehensible to them (p. 130). To put this in perspective, Nation (2001) suggests that to learn vocabulary from context, a second language learner would need to read approximately one graded reader at an appropriate level per week (p. 238). Graded readers are defined as being “books written with a controlled vocabulary and limited range of grammatical structures” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 150). In addition to reading at a rate of one book per week, Nation (2001) writes that “second language learners should not rely solely on incidental vocabulary learning from context” and that there is a need for “judicious attention to decontextualized learning to supplement and be supplemented by learning from context. Direct vocabulary learning and incidental learning are complementary activities” (p. 238).

2.4 Explicit Vocabulary Acquisition

The Longman dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) defines the term *explicit* as being “expressed in a way that is very clear and direct” (p. 549). The following definition of explicit vocabulary acquisition is short and concise; “explicit learning through the focused study of words” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 116). Therefore, in contrast to implicit vocabulary acquisition, where there is no particular focus on any specific words, explicit vocabulary acquisition can be defined as being a way of learning vocabulary in a clearly defined and intentional way. This fits in well with the dictionary’s definition of the term, *intentional*, which reads, “done deliberately” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003, p. 847). Therefore, rather than assuming that a learner will acquire vocabulary as a bi-product of exposure to, and use of, a language, an explicit approach entails a conscientious and deliberate focus on specific vocabulary during different aspects of classroom study. For example, this could entail students actively looking up words in a dictionary that are not understood or a
teacher spending time in the classroom working with high frequency words in a given
text that students will read, are reading, or have read.

This paper has thus far established that the main pedagogical focus which lies behind
the teaching of English in the compulsory school system in Sweden is on functional and
communicative language learning. Indeed, the commentary support material for the
English syllabus makes the point that research shows that we learn languages most
effectively by way of expressing ourselves and trying to understand and communicate,
not by studying separate building blocks in the language (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 6).
However, the focused teaching of vocabulary, or explicit vocabulary teaching, is one of
these building blocks and, as Nation (2001) states, the teaching and learning of
vocabulary make up just part of any language course and it is important that it is kept in
perspective (p. 1). Therefore, as a timely reminder to the reader, the aim of this paper is
only to establish if there are any particular pedagogical methods of explicit vocabulary
teaching which are relevant to teaching EFL within the framework of CLT, and which
could ultimately enhance the overall communicative ability of students of English
between the years of 7 to 9 in accordance with the curriculum for English within the
Swedish compulsory school system.
3. Method

This research synthesis matches and compares research that has been carried out within foreign and second language vocabulary acquisition to explore what it tells us about how more focused teaching of vocabulary within the framework of CLT can enhance the communicative ability of students in the Swedish compulsory school system in line with curriculum requirements. A research synthesis “pursues a systematic (i.e., exhaustive, trustworthy, and replicable) understanding of the state of accumulated knowledge” (Norris and Ortega, 2006, p. 6). By comparing any patterns and contradictions which may exist in the research sources, this paper attempts to establish if there are any specific pedagogical methods of explicit teaching of vocabulary which could ultimately enhance the overall communicative ability of students of English between the years of 7 to 9 within the Swedish compulsory school system. To reiterate, the term vocabulary in this paper means any word or combination of words (such as collocations, phrasal verbs and idioms) in any form that is taught/learnt, both implicitly and/or explicitly.

After reading through the searched research studies, it became apparent how often vocabulary acquisition through reading appears. Even in studies which did not necessarily have their main focus on the link between reading and vocabulary acquisition, researchers often quoted examples of other research in this area, using them as examples in their own studies. However, we expand our vocabulary through talking and/or listening to other people in the target language also, either directly or through various media such as television, film and the Internet. Therefore, it was somewhat surprising that the area of vocabulary acquisition through speaking and listening in the studies that were searched for was so rare. Despite this apparent imbalance, the studies are placed into different categories in the Results and Discussion section of this paper with a view to making the task of matching and comparing them more practical and easier to break down.

It also became apparent that some research studies can be linked to more than one single category. As a result, these are used and discussed under different category headings where appropriate. For example, de la Fuentes study, Classroom L2 Vocabulary Acquisition: Investigating the Role of Pedagogical Tasks and Form-focused
Instruction (2006), incorporates the effects of a focus on form, but this is done based on the core of the pedagogical tasks. As a consequence, this study is referred to not only in the Form Focus category, but also in the Pedagogical Tasks + Explicit category below in the Results and Discussion section.

As there is such an abundance of vocabulary acquisition studies, the search parameters are narrowed down to more recent studies from the beginning of the year 2000 and up to the present day. Schmitt (2000) and Nation (2001) provided a springboard to further reading at the outset of this paper as they themselves are leaders in their field in foreign and second language vocabulary acquisition. They also refer to other research carried out in the area of vocabulary learning and acquisition. I therefore deemed this to be a very solid starting point for this study. The choices of sources to use are based on the relevance that each study has to the research question. The following search terms were applied; Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition, Second Language Vocabulary Instruction, Incidental Vocabulary Teaching, Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Implicit Vocabulary Acquisition, Explicit Vocabulary Acquisition, Explicit Vocabulary Teaching, Explicit Vocabulary Learning, Second Language Vocabulary Learning and L2 Vocabulary.
4. Results and Discussion

Either not so much research in specific areas other than the link between reading and vocabulary acquisition has been carried out or because the search parameters used in this paper were not broad enough to find them. At a first glance, the former appears to be confirmed in a study which acknowledges that the bulk of research on incidental vocabulary acquisition at least has been based on input through texts (Eckerth and Tavakoli, 2012, p. 228). This is mirrored in the results and discussion section below, where Reading + Explicit is the largest area represented, while other areas are less represented. The categories are as follows:

1. Reading + Explicit
2. Pedagogical Tasks + Explicit
3. Incidental Vocabulary Learning
4. Form Focus

4.1 Reading + Explicit

This section covers research carried out on vocabulary that is learned through reading which is complemented by explicit instruction and learning by the teacher and the students respectively. The various studies here cover the importance of repeated exposure to words, the effects of how many classes per week students may attend may have on retention, the subsequent demands put on students to take more responsibility outside of the classroom, needs of struggling readers, the role of the teacher in explicit vocabulary teaching, and the role of the students.

A study that compared the learning of vocabulary incidentally through reading only with learning vocabulary that is supported by explicit teaching of word meanings found that although incidental lexical gains are made through reading alone, explicit vocabulary teaching after reading, which they call “Read-Plus,” is more effective than a “Read-Only” approach with regard to vocabulary acquisition (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010, p. 257). This can be matched to another study on reading and explicit vocabulary
acquisition, which found that by getting students to intentionally learn target words during reading and informing them that they will be tested on them led to an increase in the learning of word forms compared to students who only read for meaning (Barcroft, 2009, p. 97).

With regard to meaning recognition, one study showed that students who were supported by explicit vocabulary teaching after reading achieved a score of 52 per cent in a meaning recall test one week later, while those who did not achieved 38 per cent (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010, p. 257). However, in order to maintain levels of gain, the authors make the point that repeated exposure to the vocabulary is very important, otherwise “the initial learning may all be in vain” (p. 257).

The above point is also highlighted in another paper which reviews and evaluates research on second language reading vocabulary. The authors state that students who only have one or two English classes per week will have to wait between their first contact with new vocabulary and the first review of it, suggesting that retention will be limited by the students (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 31). As a result, they believe that learners would need to take more responsibility for reviewing new vocabulary outside of the classroom environment (p. 31). This is similar to my current teaching situation where my students only have one English class per week. Although the idea of students taking more responsibility outside of the classroom is an attractive one, we must accept that less motivated individuals from many varying backgrounds and levels of support may not gain anything at all. In fact, the authors go on to say that “Short, frequent study sessions spread out over time are most efficient” with regard to vocabulary acquisition and give an example by stating that two half hour sessions would be less effective than six sessions of ten minutes (pp. 30-31). Again, this seems like an attractive idea with regard to the recycling of vocabulary, but the practical pressures on time and spacing of lessons put on Swedish schools by the curriculum itself make this a difficult solution to implement.

Despite these points regarding the practical feasibility of optimising lesson schedules and students taking more responsibility outside of the classroom, Feezell (2012) offers some positive ideas which may work in practice in his article, Robust Vocabulary Instruction in a Readers’ Workshop. The article discusses the idea of students taking newly encountered words out of the classroom by actively looking for the words chosen from texts that are read and used in various activities in class in settings outside of the school environment (p. 234). He also adds that “Student choice is perhaps the single
defining feature of workshop teaching” (p. 234), where students have autonomy in deciding which books to read, and also which words to learn, thereby creating a “sense of ownership”, while helping the students develop metacognition in the process (p. 234). This can be taken to mean that teaching in this way has positive effects on student motivation levels, and as a result, it is possible to get students to actually carry out what is asked of them outside of the classroom environment.

A brief explanation of what metacognitive reading strategies are is given in a study that looks into what pedagogical implications they have for teachers of EFL. The author writes that metacognitive reading strategies can be categorized into three separate groups, namely “planning (pre-reading), monitoring (during reading), and evaluating (post-reading) strategies” (Iwai, 2011, p. 3). An example of a planning strategy is “activating learners’ background knowledge to get prepared for reading” (p. 2). Monitoring strategies come into play during the reading process itself, and these include the understanding of vocabulary and/or reflection over whether students comprehend what has been read up to now (p. 2). Finally, the third strategy concerns evaluation after the reading of a text where the students “may identify with the author, a narrative, or main character, and may have a better perspective of the situation in the book than they did at first” (p. 3). These points highlight the demands on teachers to not just be able to plan suitable and effective tasks, in this case reading, but also manage them in a way which will lead to students acquiring vocabulary effectively. Hopefully, this would make it possible for students to attain what is previously mentioned in this paper as generally lacking, namely a greater level of language variation, accuracy, coherence and descriptiveness.

Returning to the aspect regarding the importance of repetition and continuity in order for students to acquire vocabulary, this is again included in an article called Using Explicit Instruction to Promote Vocabulary Learning for Struggling Readers. The authors write that vocabulary instruction should “be embedded before, during, and after the reading of texts and the introduction of concepts” (Taylor, Mraz, Nichols, Rickelman & Wood, 2009, p. 208). As well as acknowledging previous research that students do learn vocabulary incidentally during reading, the authors make the point that struggling readers in particular would typically need the added benefit of explicit teaching to support them in their learning (p. 208). In addition, and contrary to what a CLT purist may believe (that learning will occur as long as a student has sufficient contact with a language and opportunities to use it), the article lifts the role of the
teacher in affecting and aiding explicit vocabulary acquisition; that is to say that “explicit vocabulary instruction involves the teacher, who must go beyond naming or providing a long list of words to be learned by students in a unit of study and instead provide appropriate instruction to facilitate learning” (p. 207). To this end, the article offers some concrete strategies that teachers could use in practice in the classroom. One example of these is a “Vocabulary Self-Awareness Chart” (p.216) which allows a student to write down a definition and an example of any given word, thereby showing a teacher clearly where that student may have gaps in knowledge of any given area. Another example is the use of “Vocabulary Cards” (p. 217), which show the word, an example of the word (possibly in picture form), and a definition. In their conclusion, Taylor et al. (2009) state that these strategies entail a need for students to engage with the words more deeply than if they had just looked them up in a dictionary, thereby helping them in the understanding of texts as a whole (p. 218). In addition, the authors claim that this would help students in the development of their own learning strategies in the future (p. 219).

Anh Tran (2006) also suggests different strategies with a view to helping learners gain basic vocabulary so as to be able to read effectively. One thought-provoking point she makes is a catch twenty two situation whereby a student needs a suitable vocabulary to be able to read effectively, but to acquire vocabulary, the best way is through reading (p. 157). Tran argues that this can be partly resolved by the combination of basic vocabulary expansion with lots of reading (p. 157) and that gaining this basic level of vocabulary can be achieved through the following approach:

the identification of the most basic vocabulary, the appropriateness of simplified materials, the benefits of extensive reading, the strengths of explicit instruction in vocabulary and the importance of using word notebooks and dictionaries. (p. 157)

Vocabulary acquisition in accordance with this approach should be accomplished through modified reading, she states (p.157), and suggests the use of graded readers or other reading resources that are written especially for learners of English (p. 158). In a similar vein to Taylor et al. (2009), Tran’s paper (2006) also lifts the role of the teacher and concludes that for this approach to be successful, it will require the teacher not only to make the correct pedagogical decisions in pinpointing target vocabulary and choosing suitable materials, but also to be active in the explicit teaching of vocabulary. In
addition to this, it will require an active role and effort on the part of the students as well (pp. 160-161).

Another recent study on vocabulary acquisition through reading, states that previous research in this area has claimed that repeated exposure to unfamiliar words helps in the learning of them (Eckerth and Tavakoli, 2012, p. 227). In the same breath, the authors mention that other preceding research has also claimed that the “elaboration of processing these words facilitate word learning” (p. 227). The ‘Elaboration of processing words’ requires time of course, and with regard to this practical aspect, this study also takes up other researchers’ points about the classroom being generally too constrained to offer sufficient opportunities for the explicit learning of words (Hunt and Beglar, 2005, p. 228). However, the two variables, namely incidental vocabulary acquisition through repeated exposure to words and the explicit learning of words through processing them, have only been investigated in isolation up to now (Eckerth and Tavakoli, 2012, p. 227). They write that their study is intended to help narrow this gap in research (p. 227). Referring back to Eckerth and Tavakoli’s (2012) acknowledgement that the bulk of research in incidental vocabulary acquisition at least has been based on input through texts, they go on to suggest that a possible explanation for this is that because students “seem to be in control of the pace of their reading, and can take time to notice unfamiliar words in the input” (p. 228), this may have led to it becoming deemed to be a richer area of research than that based on aural input” (p. 228).

4.2 Pedagogical Tasks + Explicit

Maria de la Fuente (2006) makes the point that earlier research has separated the definition of tasks, stating that on one side there is the research perspective, and on the other lays the pedagogical perspective (p. 264). In this section, the term tasks is related to the cognitive side, namely specific learning activities which may lead to students developing their vocabulary knowledge in the target language. These can be specific reading methods and the use of dictionaries, including students developing their own learning strategies. De la Fuente (2006) believes that more research is needed on vocabulary teaching during the actual classroom tasks in a more natural setting, thereby
forming the necessary links “between research, methodology and classroom, task-based vocabulary instruction” because up to now, research in this area does not mirror general pedagogical second language classroom practice (p. 270). With regard to the design of vocabulary tasks, de la Fuente (2006) talks about the importance of being aware of something she names as a “receptive-productive continuum involved in learning a word” which involves “two different types of cognitive processes” (p. 270). On the one hand, there is “receptive processing”, which is related to comprehension and is based on meaning, and on the other lies “productive processing”, which, as the name suggests, is related to production of language and is based on form (p. 270). As already mentioned in the introduction section in this paper, it is common amongst students to show a lack of language variation, accuracy, coherence and descriptiveness, and this is perhaps explained somewhat by an absence of learning vocabulary forms like affixes, suffixes and different verb tenses, to name just a few. Other examples are words which are the same, but belong to different word classes.

Extensive reading is perhaps the main way that learners of EFL increase their reading vocabulary to a higher level, and that a balance between explicit and implicit classroom activities leads to “the most effective and efficient lexical development” for L2 learners (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 23). They suggest that “EFL teachers and administrators adopt a systematic framework in order to speed up lexical development” (p. 23). This framework is made up of two methods; one which encourages explicit vocabulary teaching and learning strategies such as using dictionaries to look up words, and another which encourages implicit vocabulary teaching and learning strategies such as narrow reading where much exposure to a limited number of authors or genres at any one time provides a student with repeated exposure to particular text types and vocabulary (p. 23). Although they draw their own conclusion in their study that a mixture of tasks incorporating explicit and implicit methods is the most effective route towards EFL vocabulary acquisition, they also make the point that more theory based on empirical evidence is needed in the future to shed more light, and thus help teachers, on more efficient and more effective teaching methods in this area (p. 39).

In his article, Instructed second language vocabulary learning, Schmitt (2008) appears to confirm the lack of connection between research and classroom practice by saying that the research that has been carried out has been sluggish in working its way into “mainstream pedagogy” (p. 330). The primary reason for this paper being written is because of a lack of understanding of how to incorporate effective vocabulary teaching
in practice, and Schmitt (2008) goes some way to explain this lack of understanding by stating that “the best means of achieving good vocabulary learning is still unclear” and therefore “perhaps not surprising that teachers and learners have often been unsure of the best way to pursue it” (p. 329). One of the main reasons for this, he adds, is the lack of clear descriptions and guidelines in textbooks and in the syllabuses themselves (pp. 329-330). This is certainly true of the syllabus for English in Sweden, LGR 11, which only states what students are expected to be able to do to reach varying levels, nothing about how and what teachers can do or how they can help students to achieve it (p. 32-38).

With a view to trying to encourage theory and empirical research in the field of second language vocabulary acquisition, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) talk about a “task-induced involvement load” (p. 8) as being the introduction of a “construct of involvement with motivational and cognitive dimensions: Need, Search, and Evaluation” (p. 1). Need is based on motivation when, for example, a student experiences a need to understand a word during a reading task so as to be able to comprehend the text (p. 14). Simply put, Search entails that the student then tries to find out the meaning of the word, and Evaluation requires the comparing of a particular word with other words to ensure that it is suitable to use and is in context (p. 14). The teacher’s input with regard to the design of student tasks can have a bearing on how effective a particular task is, the authors contending that more involvement on the part of a student while processing words during tasks will result in more effective vocabulary acquisition (p. 15). The authors explain this by writing that if a teacher provides too much information about a particular word, the involvement required on the part of the student will be less, and hence, the need to search and evaluate becomes unnecessary, thereby reducing the chance of longer term retention (p. 15). This point is very relevant to active classroom practice, as the pressure felt by teachers, and I am no exception, to move the lesson along, sometimes leads to giving quick on-the-spot explanations to students to enable them to complete a given task within the originally planned timeframe. If the findings of Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) are correct, it means that helping students in the way mentioned above actually amounts to doing them a disservice and should be avoided.

In a study which claims to test Laufer and Hulstijn’s task-induced involvement load hypothesis, Keating (2008) questions whether it is relevant to the teaching of students who are not at an advanced level (pp. 370, 371). Most students who study English
between the years of 7-9 in the Swedish compulsory school system cannot be deemed to be advanced, even if some may be quite advanced for their age. This study also makes the point that earlier research had only dealt with the outcome of task-induced involvement on students’ receptive knowledge of words, making the point that nothing is known about how productive recall of newly learned words is affected (p. 371). A third aspect that this study questions is that task time is not taken into consideration by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), making a valid point that from a teaching perspective, for a task to be effective in practice, and thereby relevant to teaching EFL in a Swedish educational context within the framework of communicative language teaching (CLT), considerations must be given to how long a given task may take (p. 371). He adds that “Some evidence suggests that the benefits associated with more effective tasks are negated or not realized when completion time is taken into account […]” (p. 371).

Keating (2008) does conclude, however, that the findings of his study suggest that less advanced learners do benefit from more involving tasks, and that tasks that are designed with greater involvement load also result in greater gains in not only receptive word knowledge, but also productive word knowledge (p. 382). Therefore, this makes it an interesting relevant area for practicing teachers to consider.

Much research referred to in this paper has noted the importance of repeated exposure to words, follow up work and recycling, as well as suggestions and beliefs that a greater number of shorter lessons per week would be more effective than one or two longer lessons per week regarding the longer term retention of vocabulary. However, a question that is raised by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) in their study concerns the comparison between quality and quantity with regard to word exposure. They ask whether retention is dependent on how students work with a word instead of how much exposure students have to a word (p. 22). This is interesting bearing in mind the earlier point made in this paper that students in Sweden have a lot of contact with the English language outside of school through various media, not least Internet. It is possible that, despite all of this exposure, students do not actually acquire and retain the necessary vocabulary to attain higher levels of competence in English because they do not work with it at a deeper level. As a consequence, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) suggest that future research could look into comparing the retention of vocabulary from two perspectives: “varying involvement loads and varying the number of exposures to the investigated words” (p. 22). Tran (2006) explains how frequently occurring vocabulary has been identified by researchers who recommend that language teachers make it an
important part of classroom activities (p. 157). The issue of time constraints in the classroom is yet again highlighted by Hunt and Beglar (2005), who argue that it is important for teachers to prioritise what different kinds of vocabulary knowledge should encompass an explicit focus in accordance with the curriculum at any given time in a student’s development (p. 9). Their study offers the following advice:

knowledge of spelling, word formation through affixation, collocations and lexical phrases, and secondary and abstract meanings are essential if EFL learners are to become highly proficient readers. If these four types of knowledge are developed for the high frequency and general academic words of English, learners will be in a better position to deal successfully with texts from a wide variety of disciplines. (p. 9)

4.3 Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The aim of this paper is to establish if there are any specific methods of explicit teaching of vocabulary which could ultimately enhance the overall communicative ability of students of English between the years of 7 to 9 within the Swedish compulsory school system. Therefore, the inclusion here of incidental vocabulary acquisition may appear a little odd to the reader. However, during my own search for relevant research for this paper, and the subsequent work with it, it has become clear that learning words incidentally forms a very big chunk of how students learn within the framework of CLT through the mere use and exposure to the language while focusing on the more important aspect of communicating in the target language. This is even made clear in various studies which are based on, and argue for, more explicit vocabulary teaching. There also appears to be a development within vocabulary acquisition research which is moving away from the two separate entities of studies, namely the incidental learning of words and the explicit learning of words respectively. As a consequence, it is of relevance to this paper to include this section.

A study by Bruton, López and Mesa (2011) argues that the term, “Incidental L2 Vocabulary Learning” is unpractical (p. 759). The authors make the point that even if students are not asked to learn specific words intentionally during reading tasks, they may actually do so anyway, whereby “some readers might stop and pay special attention to some words, some to others, and some to none at all” (p. 762). The same principle applies in reverse also, they add, stating that “even when participants are supposedly
induced to learn some items intentionally while reading an L2 text, they do not necessarily do so, again with individual variations [...]” (p. 762). This appears to show that it is possible that research in these areas of vocabulary acquisition could provide distorted results, and therefore be less useful for teachers in practice.

Pulido (2003) seems to have detected a similar phenomenon in an earlier study with regard to incidental vocabulary acquisition. One question the study wanted to answer was which factors had big effects on incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition through the reading of narratives (p. 245). One of these factors is the idea that incidental vocabulary acquisition will be greater if texts that are read by students are already familiar to them (p. 262). The study found, in line with previous research in this area, that even if initial gains by students who read familiar texts appear higher compared to those who read less familiar texts (p. 261), the longer term retention is less impressive, stating that there was a big drop off with regard to memory over a period of four weeks (p. 262). Pulido (2003) suggests that one possible reason for this is that more cognitive effort is required from students with regard to identifying target words in the stories which are not as familiar to them (p. 262), and thus implying that there is more input from students as a result. This is also an important consideration for practicing teachers like myself, who often work with familiarizing students with texts, and even choosing texts to work with based on students’ interests and previous experiences. Pulido’s (2003) findings could be taken to mean that practicing teachers should not assume that a given student acquires new vocabulary only because a text in which words are first encountered are familiar to that student.

Another study undertaken that looked into how vocabulary is acquired incidentally during communication tasks argues that it is probable that students will meet unknown words while working with various texts, and through the materials that are used during tasks, including oral input from their peers during group work (Newton, 2013, pp. 164-165). It found that students who worked together on various communication tasks did learn the meaning of words that were not familiar to them beforehand without having to rely on any outside source to look them up or check the meaning (p. 184). This appears to fit in with the ethos of CLT also. The author adds that “While words that were negotiated for meaning showed a better chance of retention than other words, many more words were learnt that had not been negotiated” (pp. 164- 165). This mirrors related findings by earlier research which has argued that too much focus on negotiation to establish meanings of words can negatively affect discussion between students.
attempting to solve difficulties with communicating, and that “co-operative interaction” is also important with regard to understanding new vocabulary (p. 184). This relates to Nation’s (2001) “four major strands” model that he believes should form a balanced course of study in approximately equal amounts, namely “meaning-focused input” (listening and reading), “meaning-focused output” (speaking and writing), “fluency development” where learners become more fluent in what they have already acquired, and lastly, “language-focused learning” (p. 1). As already mentioned, these four strands appear to fit in well with the curriculum for English in Sweden and its CLT approach to language teaching in that there is much meaning based content. However, Newton (2013) does acknowledge that this study is limited because of the size of the sample used in it (p. 184), and that research into how incidental vocabulary acquisition is achieved through communication tasks needs to be investigated further in the future (p. 165).

4.4 Form Focus

The pedagogical approach of form-focused teaching can be seen as a modification of CLT as a way of rectifying evidence that L2 learners failed to reach higher levels of competence through meaning-centred instruction only (Laufer & Girsai, 2008, p. 694). They explain that the term form “includes the function that a particular structure performs” (p. 694) and exemplify this by saying that “attention to the ‘form’-ed subsumes the realization that -ed signals an action performed in the past” (p. 695). Form-focused instruction, they continue, can be made up of two kinds, one being a pedagogical approach which attracts students’ focus to linguistic units during classroom communicative activities, and the second kind which deals with a more traditional approach where the teaching of “discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons in a sequence determined by syllabus writers” occurs (p. 695).

De la Fuente (2006) writes that most research on L2 vocabulary acquisition has focused around simple word meanings only through students’ identification of written or spoken words (pp. 269-270). She goes on to say that identification of word meanings alone does not show if the forms of words were learned effectively and that if this is the case, it could affect students’ productive ability; that is to say an ability to apply
language in real life settings with regard to the productive activities, speaking and writing (p. 270). Referring back once again to the point made in the introduction of this paper about how students often lack of language variation, accuracy, coherence and descriptiveness due, partly at least, to a lack of vocabulary, it would seem that De la Fuente (2006) goes some way to offering valid reasons and explanations for why this may be the case.
5. Conclusion

This research synthesis set out to identify what practical pedagogical methods of explicit vocabulary teaching are relevant to teaching EFL in a Swedish educational context within the framework of communicative language teaching. What affects how learners in the EFL classroom acquire vocabulary ensures that it is very difficult to pinpoint any specific theory or method which can be used to determine just how we acquire vocabulary in a foreign language, and therefore which methods may be relevant in any given classroom situation. Studies on the link between reading and vocabulary acquisition appear to far outnumber studies on the link between vocabulary acquisition through other means.

Although vocabulary acquisition occurs incidentally through reading, communicative activities or other tasks, the general consensus amongst researchers is that supporting this learning with explicit teaching of vocabulary increases the effectiveness of acquiring vocabulary. Increased levels of processing not only leads to a greater depth of understanding of a word beyond the basic meaning level, it also appears to increase retention rates over longer time periods. Barcroft (2009) found that by getting students to intentionally learn target words during reading and informing them that they will be tested on them led to an increase in the learning of word forms compared to students who only read for meaning (p. 97). This may be of benefit to some motivated students, but caution should be heeded as other students may become stressed over such tests. Other research makes the point that in order to maintain levels of gain, repeated exposure to the vocabulary is very important (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010, p. 257). This can also be matched to what other research says about students who only have a limited number of English classes per week in that they will not have sufficient repeated exposure, suggesting that retention levels can be negatively affected (Hunt and Beglar, 2005, p. 31). They believe that this would necessitate a need for students to take more responsibility for reviewing new vocabulary outside of the classroom environment (p. 31). This may be an impractical method to use bearing in mind different students with varying motivation levels and support they receive in the home. However, Feezell (2012) found that students who are given autonomy in deciding which books to read, and also which words to learn, creates a “sense of ownership” (p. 234). This can have positive effects on student motivation levels, resulting in students actually carrying out
what is asked of them outside of the classroom environment. If a teacher takes too much responsibility and does not allow enough autonomy on the part of the student, this may lead to what Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) suggest, namely the need to search and evaluate vocabulary becomes unnecessary, and this could also reduce the chance of learning and longer term retention (p. 15). This point is very relevant to active classroom practice, as the pressure felt by teachers to move the lesson along can sometimes lead to giving quick on-the-spot explanations to students to enable them to complete a given task within the originally planned timeframe, and therefore should be avoided. It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of their own role in explicit vocabulary teaching, as well as the role of the students they come into contact with.

The needs of struggling readers highlight the importance of teachers making correct pedagogical decisions in identifying target vocabulary and choosing appropriate materials. Working with a limited range of genres at any one time is also a valid idea to enable such students to engage in manageable chunks of study, allowing them to become familiar with new vocabulary before moving on. All of this highlights the demands on teachers to not just be able to plan suitable and effective tasks, but also manage them in a way which will lead to students acquiring vocabulary effectively.

It is also suggested that one reason for why teachers appear to lack knowledge in how to teach vocabulary effectively is because research is slow to reach the classroom and that this gap needs to be addressed. Hunt and Beglar (2005) argue that “researchers and educators will need to work simultaneously on two fronts” to improve vocabulary acquisition and to find effective ways of ensuring that research does find its way into foreign language classrooms (p. 18-19).

This paper shows that although a certain degree of explicit vocabulary teaching as a complement to CLT appears to be effective in language development, it also highlights the importance for teachers to be aware of the risk that too much explicit teaching of vocabulary, which entails that the student engages more with words, can result in less incidental vocabulary acquisition through various tasks because it is time consuming focusing on specific areas of vocabulary. This would leave less time over to such do tasks, and would therefore not be relevant to teaching EFL in a Swedish educational context.

It also appears that it is becoming more and more apparent that research is moving away from the two separate entities of studies into vocabulary acquisition, namely the incidental learning of words and the explicit learning of words respectively. Future
research should perhaps look towards seeing the two entities as one whole where they each complement each other.
References


