# EXAMENSARBETE

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# Acquiring English Vocabulary in Swedish Upper Secondary Schools

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# Abstract

This thesis reviews the most effective and suitable methods for learning English vocabulary in Swedish upper secondary schools, with particular focus on the different advantages and disadvantages of direct learning compared to learning from context methods. The results are mainly based on current research in the fields of linguistics and the psychology of language acquisition, complemented by a questionnaire distributed to upper secondary school English teachers. The findings include support for the use of extensive reading, watching TV shows and movies subtitled in English and making use of word cards during class.

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# 1 Introduction

Although second language acquisition (SLA) may not have been as thoroughly researched as first language acquisition (FLA), it is of course an area of enormous interest to language teachers. Personally, I find the subject of vocabulary acquisition particularly fascinating, and as an aspiring upper secondary school teacher I am naturally concerned with providing my pupils with the best possible means of expanding their vocabulary. While I am convinced that most of my own English vocabulary comes from extensive reading of novels rather than anything that went on in the classroom, this is probably not true for most people. According to a study by Gu and Johnson (Nation 2001: 225) on vocabulary learning strategies employed by advanced learners of English, so called "Readers" – while constituting the most proficient group – accounted for less than 6% of all students. My own penchant for reading aside, is it feasible or even desirable to require upper secondary school students to read extensively?

This question touches upon an old debate among SLA vocabulary scholars, between adherents of *incidental learning (learning from context)* and adherents of *direct learning* (*rich instruction*), where the first largely corresponds to FLA and the second to classroom instruction[1]. Extensive reading falls into the first category, as does watching movies and participating in authentic conversations in English, whereas, for example, teacher instruction in grammar and rote learning of word lists fall into the second.

Intuitively people might react against rich instruction, but it does have its proponents. Nation (2001:302) – a leading authority on second language vocabulary acquisition – makes a good case for rich instruction methods, particularly the use of word cards. On the other hand, he does not consider rich instruction superior to incidental learning, but rather an expedient and practical classroom alternative to be used in conjunction with context based methods. The main problem with rich vocabulary instruction is that of scope; how are appropriate words to be selected, which particular meanings and collocations are most important, etc.

Personally, I find that it is almost impossible to predict what words are new to pupils at the upper secondary school level. For some, a passage in the textbook can be difficult to understand while the same text is almost ridiculously easy for others. Naturally, this problem is central to all education and there are no simple solutions, but in regard to learning foreign words it might be of interest to investigate what happens outside the classroom. According to a large study in eight European countries (Bonnet 2002:69), Swedish 9th-grade students are comparatively much better at English than their Spanish and French equivalents. This is largely attributed to our much higher level of exposure to English rather than our educational system (Bonnet 2002:129). Being exposed to a language or, even better, immersed in a language seems to be an extremely effective way of mastering it. For children and adolescents this is especially true, as shown by the highly successful language immersion programs in Canada (Cummins & Swain 1986).

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[1] I.e. the teacher instructing the pupils on aspects of the language.

## 1.1 Aim

This aim of this thesis is to review the most effective and suitable methods for learning English vocabulary in Swedish upper secondary schools, with particular focus on the different advantages and disadvantages of direct learning compared to learning from context methods. A secondary aim is to find ways for teachers to take advantage of the incidental learning that occurs outside school.

## 1.2 Method and material

When it came to choosing research methods, I could either elect to conduct my own studies or to rely on the work of others. While conducting classroom experiments would no doubt have been fascinating, I could never have hoped to match existing studies made over dozens of years, involving thousands of pupils and teachers. In reality, the number of high quality studies already published on the subject of SLA did not allow for much of a choice. Cost and time gains, access to high quality data, and possibilities for new interpretations are some of the chief advantages of *secondary analysis* as a research method (Bryman 2001:197-199). This thesis is thus primarily based on secondary analysis, but with its own, hopefully fresh, angle. I went through the great wealth of research material specifically in order to:

1) Find the most effective and scientifically well-founded methods and theories for second language vocabulary learning.
2) Consider how practical the theories are for the purposes of upper secondary school classroom education.
3) Investigate how well these methods and theories comply with the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum, syllabus and the national test system (*nationella proven*).

According to Patel and Davidson (1991:55), the choice of literature should be made in order to get as complete a picture as possible. That is, so that the items investigated are examined from more than one viewpoint. Furthermore, Patel and Davidson stress the importance of not only choosing material that supports your own theories, but also to look at opposing views. While I always try to keep an open mind, I had to consider my own bias carefully when selecting my sources, which basically meant finding reliable proponents of both direct and incidental learning methods.

One of my primary sources is Paul Nation[2]. His specific focus on vocabulary acquisition, coupled with his balanced views on incidental and direct learning, made him an ideal authority. Other important sources include leading experts on the Canadian immersion programs, like Jim Cummins and Merrill Swain[3], whose long and direct involvement with the immersion programs made them excellent primary sources.

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[2] Professor in Applied Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
[3] Professors in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto.

My secondary analysis of the existing research material is decidedly qualitative rather than quantitative. I briefly considered doing a quantitative comparison between many different studies of SLA methods, but it would hardly have been scientific considering the varying circumstances of these studies. Instead, I decided on a qualitative, hermeneutic analysis of some of the largest and most reliable studies and sources available.

In order to compare my findings with the current educational reality in Sweden, I also decided to e-mail a questionnaire (see Appendix) to twelve upper secondary school English teachers. Kylén (2004:10) recommends the use of questionnaires when it would take too long to perform interviews with all the respondents. Likewise, Kvale (1997:100) mentions limited time for the project as an important factor when choosing between interviews and questionnaires. In this case, I also believed (perhaps erroneously as it turned out), that the respondents would be more prone to answer if they did not have to make an appointment for an interview with yet another bothersome undergraduate student.

The questionnaire contained twelve open, non-leading questions regarding the teachers' opinions and experiences on the matter of vocabulary acquisition. Open questions work well for a qualitative analysis, which in this case was preferable to a quantitative analysis since I was not after statistics[4].

According to Kylén (2004:53), the respondents should find the questions meaningful and easy to understand. With this in mind, I strived to make the questions as interesting and understandable as possible. Even so, the response was poor. Only four of the teachers chose to respond with complete answers. Although this was disappointing, the answers from the teacher questionnaire were only supposed to provide a context, or contrast, to the findings of the secondary research analysis. The answers are neither numerous nor reliable enough to use for scientific purposes.

## 2  Background

### 2.1  Short History of Teaching Methods

Second language teaching methods can be traced back to antiquity, but one of the oldest methods still in use is called the *classical method* or the *grammar-translation method* (Cook 2001: 201). The method, which heavily emphasizes explaining grammatical rules, memorizing lists of words and translating texts, was the norm in the nineteenth century. It is a perfect example of a rich instruction method, and for a long time it has been frowned upon, especially in lower grades, but it is still considered suitable at academic levels. Indeed, Cook also calls it the *academic style* (2001: 201). The method came under fire in the late years of the nineteenth century and was eventually mostly replaced by the *direct method* (not to be confused with direct learning*). The direct method was inspired by FLA

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[4] Jan Trost (1997:16, 1994:22) argues for a qualitative approach to questionnaires if you are not after answers to questions like "how often" or "how many", but rather seeking patterns in the way people reason and react.

and emphasizes oral communication in the second language. In essence, it dominates classrooms today (at least in most Western nations.)

In the 1960s, the concepts *immersive learning* and *language immersion* were coined in Canada, when an experimental French immersion program was launched for English speaking children in St Lambert, Quebec. The rationale, building upon experiences with the direct method, was an intuitive feeling that children should be able to pick up a second language much like children learning their first language. The experimental education, where all subjects in the curriculum were taught in French from grade 1 to 8, proved highly successful, and was soon followed by so called late immersion programs for pupils in grades 5-9 (Cummins & Swain 1986:88). There is also a similar program in a French-speaking region of Canada where they practice a type of learning from context called the *just listen* method on eight years and older francophone pupils. There is no oral practice or interaction in English at all. Teachers do not "teach" but provide technical and organizational support (Lightbown & Spada 1993:89). Patsy Lightbown and Randall Halter investigated this program and found that the pupils

> learn English as well as (and in some cases better than) learners in the regular program. This is true not only for their comprehension skills but also for their speaking skills. This comes as something of a surprise since the learners in the innovative programs *never* practice spoken English in their classes (Lightbown & Spada 1993:89.)

The Canadian immersion programs have had limited impact on foreign language education in Sweden, but the direct method now seems to be the norm, at least according to the pupils (Bonnet 2002:156). However, rich instruction methods are not uncommon in Swedish upper secondary schools, in the form of certain textbook exercises and teacher instruction on English grammatical rules. Thus, traces of the grammar-translation method still live on.

## 2.2  Current Situation in Sweden

Many students of English in Swedish upper secondary schools are used to working with one or two textbooks. While these books differ from school to school, the general disposition is usually the same: the main book contains a number of articles and texts followed by various questions and exercises, and there is often a second booklet which focuses on grammar. Certain words in the texts are sometimes considered especially important by the author and are highlighted or included in the exercises and listed in the appendix. The extent to which the textbooks are used is up to the individual teachers; neither the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum nor the specific syllabus for English requires that English education be structured in this way. (Interestingly, college level courses in English are typically not.)  However, one of the potential problems with relying too heavily on pre-made textbooks is their limited ability to expand the vocabulary of the pupils. Even assuming that a great deal of thought has gone into selecting appropriate texts, it is simply beyond the scope of any textbook to provide pupils with varying contexts, collocations or even meanings of the highlighted words. (The problem of scope is in fact one of the main arguments against any kind of rich instruction.) Another problem is that textbooks can take no account of the ever increasing

exposure of the pupils to the English language outside the school environment and the resulting differences in their vocabulary.

Aside from textbook exercises, it is common for pupils to work with each other in pairs or groups during class, both for short and long-term projects. Assuming that most pupils have a rather limited and partially incorrect English vocabulary it is doubtful how suitable and effective such methods actually are for improving and expanding upon their vocabulary, disregarding the many other benefits. The same criticism can be leveled against so called "teacher talk". Most teachers of English in Sweden are themselves Swedes and do not possess quite the level of fluency and understanding a native speaker would. Furthermore, it has been shown that even most native English speaking teachers use a rather unnatural language in conversing with their students. Cook claims that "[t]here is a falseness about much language teaching that does not exist in other school subjects because language has to fulfill its normal classroom role as well as be the content of the class" (2001:144). Moreover, according to him, teacher talk is "[…] not only simplified in terms of syntax and confined in vocabulary, but also tidied up in terms of discourse structure" (2001:146). In short, the English that is typically spoken during class is artificial and different from authentic communication. Naturally, this has implications for the learning of vocabulary.

In 2002, eight European countries conducted a large scale study in order to compare pupils' skills in English in the different countries. In reality it was seven countries since the Germans did not fully participate. More than 1,500 pupils were tested in four different English skills (oral comprehension, linguistic competence, written comprehension and written production) in each country, and their teachers were also prompted to fill in a questionnaire from their perspective. The pupils all attended the last year of compulsory (lower secondary) school, meaning that the Spanish pupils' average age was 16, the same as the pupils from Finland and Norway. The average age of the rest of the pupils was 15. Although an upper secondary school study would have been preferable for this thesis, the difference between the last year of lower secondary school and the first year of upper secondary school must be regarded as slight.[5]

The current (or nearly current) situation for Swedish 9th-grade students in regard to immersion and learning methods is summarized well in the Swedish section of this study, labeled *The Assessment of Pupils' Skills in English in Eight European Countries*:

> Learning other subjects through English is not common. However, in the questionnaires students claim that teachers speak a great deal of English during lessons and that students are encouraged to use the language actively. The same information is given in the teacher questionnaire. In the pupil questionnaire, students are asked to indicate how they think they have learnt English: the mean values are 55 percent through English as a subject in school, 31 percent through media and 14 percent through other contacts, such as traveling. (Bonnet 2002:156)

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[5] In Sweden, upper and lower secondary school teachers receive the same pedagogical education.

Judging by the report, proper immersion is rare in Swedish schools. However, teachers seem to favor the direct method in that English is primarily spoken in class. 55 percent of the pupils believe that they have learnt English in school, which is a surprisingly high figure, but one should keep in mind that these are 9th-grade pupils expressing their beliefs. That is, memories of their early, basic education in English are still fresh in their minds, and they are unlikely to have a well developed metacognition. Furthermore, the question itself is uncompromising in that it requires an absolute answer. Considering all this, 45 percent still think they have "learnt English" outside of school; a very high figure, as confirmed later in the report:

> The answers in the pupils' questionnaire confirm what is already well known: people in Sweden in general, and young people in particular, are exposed to lots of English. In spite of this, however, it is worth noticing that the students with the poorest results do not at all seem to be less exposed to English than the rest. Thus, exposure can only be one of the factors explaining students' achievements, obviously interacting with many other variables. (Bonnet 2002:159)

Why the Swedish researchers would expect an equal level of exposure to make all pupils equally good is anyone's guess. A more relevant conclusion is that the poorest Swedish students still perform better then the poorest French and Spanish students. The divide between the "dubbing" countries and the "non-dubbing" countries is obvious in all of the tested skills in the study, but clearest for written production (see Figure 1 below.) The French themselves attribute their poorer results to lack of exposure and to the lower interest in the English language among French pupils – which is indirectly related to the level of exposure and usefulness of English in society (Bonnet 2002:129). The Spanish researchers have a similar view: "This lack of practice of the English language out of the school time could be considered as an important fact with a big influence in the Spanish pupils' achievement" (Bonnet 2002:152).
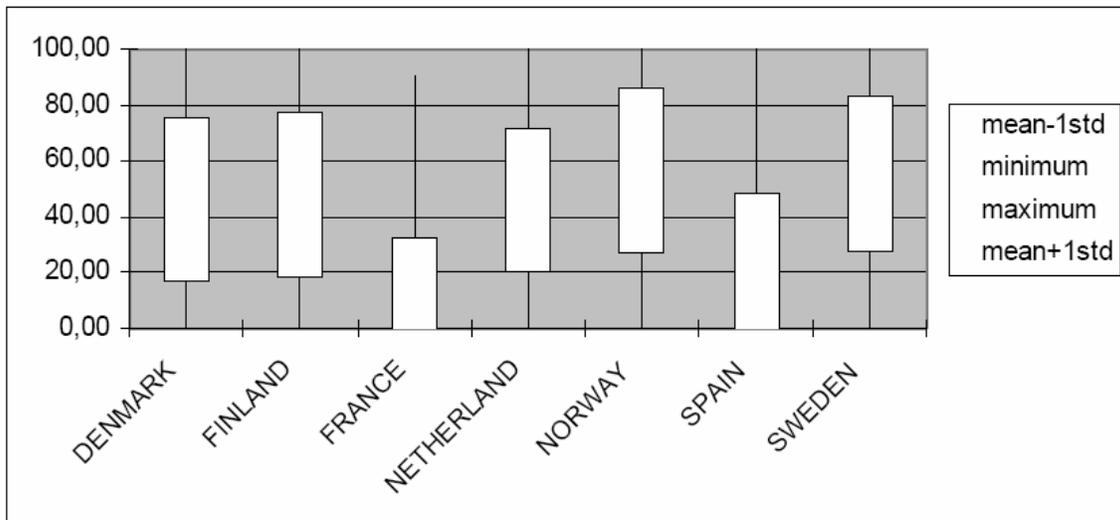


Figure 1. Written Production Test Results (Bonnet 2002:72).

Table 1. Written Production Test Results.

|  | Mean | Std Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| DENMARK | 46.17 | 29.33 | 0 | 100 |
| FINLAND | 47.70 | 29.47 | 0 | 100 |
| FRANCE | 14.55 | 17.81 | 0 | 90.48 |
| NETHERLAND | 46.04 | 25.67 | 0 | 100 |
| NORWAY | 56.30 | 29.69 | 0 | 100 |
| SPAIN | 23.41 | 25.50 | 0 | 100 |
| SWEDEN | 55.39 | 28.04 | 0 | 100 |

Bonnet 2002:72

The written production test required the students to fill in 21 blank words and sentences in two texts. Figure 1 shows the span of the results in the different countries, with each of the seven bars centered on the mean value and extending above and below it by the standard deviation. 100,00 is 100 percent correct answers. 0,00 is 0 percent correct – see Table 1 above. Note that in France, none of the pupils achieved a perfect score.

Of the four tests, the written production one is the most relevant in regard to vocabulary, since the pupils had to know the appropriate words well – both semantically and syntactically – in order to answer correctly. It is worth noting that Finland, with a first language so different to English, still achieved much better results than France and Spain. Clearly then, the different results cannot be attributed to the Germanic/Romance language rift.

The results of the teacher questionnaire in the European study are also interesting. In particular, this quote from the summary by the researchers of the questionnaire results in Sweden:

> Also, more individualised teaching methods will have to be found, to better meet the needs of all students. An important factor here is to make use of all the English that students come across outside school, i.e. to optimise—in the teaching and learning process—the large exposure to English typical of today's Swedish society. (Bonnet 2002:159)

This is clearly important. If students acquire a large, if not the major, part of their English outside of school, then how can this significant body of knowledge be integrated into their education? This question will be explored in the results part of the thesis.

Of course, it is problematic to compare seven countries with different educational systems. English education starts at an earlier age in some countries than in others, and the weekly time allotment to English also differs. The French typically begin proper English education around 11 years of age and have 3 hours of English classes per week.

In total, this is almost exactly the same number of hours as in Sweden (480)[6]. However, in Spain, since 1990, pupils begin studying English at 8 years of age (the students participating in the study were among the first to benefit from this) and also spend 3 hours per week learning English. The Spanish children thus receive more education in English than Swedish children, and also spend more time on English homework (144 minutes per week, compared to 110 in Sweden according to the pupil questionnaire.)

## 2.2.1 Curriculum

The Swedish curriculum for the non-compulsory school system (Lpf94) is goal-oriented and leaves methodology mostly to the teachers. There are, however, some general guidelines that – in the context of SLA – provide support for a mixed (both rich instruction and learning from context) approach:

> Knowledge is a complex concept which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. Education shall not emphasise one aspect of knowledge at the cost of another. (Skolverket 2006a)

While the connection to rich instruction and learning from context is somewhat tenuous, a reasonable interpretation is that facts and understanding in the above quote roughly correspond to rich instruction and learning from context, respectively. Lpf94 lends further support to the concept of varied methods by stating that "[e]ducation shall be objective and encompass a range of different approaches" (Skolverket 2006a). The curriculum also emphasizes the need to adapt methodology to individual pupils: "Account shall also be taken of the varying circumstances, needs and knowledge of pupils as well as the fact that there are a variety of ways of attaining these goals" (Skolverket 2006a). It is quite possible that some pupils might not desire learning from context and might in fact benefit more from rich instruction.

While the curriculum clearly states that teachers should vary their methods, it provides no specific support for rich instruction. However, a number of passages encourage learning from context:

> Pupils shall develop their ability to take initiatives and responsibility and to work and solve problems both independently and together with others.
> […]
> It is important to have an international perspective to be able to see one's own reality in a global context in order to create international solidarity and prepare pupils for a society that will have closer cross-cultural and crossborder contacts.
> […]
> The teachers shall make sure that pupils acquire knowledge of books and libraries. (Skolverket 2006a)

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[6] English is compulsory in Swedish schools from grade 4, but each school/municipality can choose to start teaching as early as in grade 1, or even in pre-school. The total time allotted to English in Swedish compulsory school (grades 1 to 9) is 480 hours.

Even more unambiguously, Lpf94 acknowledges the fact that school cannot "impart all the knowledge that pupils will need" (Skolverket 2006a), and that:

> Consequently it is essential that the school creates the best combination of conditions for the pupils' education, thinking and acquisition of knowledge. The school shall thus make use of the knowledge and experience that is available in the surrounding environment and which pupils have acquired from working life. (Skolverket 2006a)

For second language vocabulary acquisition, this means that teachers should encourage pupils to, for example, read books and watch movies and TV programs in English. Of course, this requires an awareness of the type of words and expressions that are common in the entertainment domain, so that the teaching methods can be adapted to provide contexts and meanings for words that are uncommon in those media. Exercises during class can also be designed to take advantage of the pupils' interests and particular language skills.

## 2.2.2 Syllabus for English A & B

There are three levels of English courses in Swedish upper secondary school: A, B and C. All upper secondary school pupils study the first level, some also have to take the second one, but the third level is optional and will not be analyzed here. The syllabi contain goals to attain and goals to strive for, but have even less to say about methodology than the curriculum.

For English A (Skolverket 2006b), the goals to attain are quite rudimentary. Upon finishing the course, pupils should be able to understand different dialects of clear spoken English if the subject matter is somewhat familiar. They should also be able to read and understand texts with varying subject matters, but particularly those that are somehow connected to their main area of study. They should also be able to read most fiction. Perhaps most interestingly, they should be able to use and evaluate different ways of effective learning.

For English B (Skolverket 2006b), pupils should be able to understand long sequences of clear speech, even if the subject matter is unfamiliar. They should not just be able to read more complex fiction, but also be able to review and comment on it. They should also have mastered the jargon and technical terms of their main area of study and future profession.

The impact of the syllabi on the choice of second language vocabulary acquisition methods seems negligible, but extensive reading does get some support. Furthermore, it is worth noting that words from the pupils' vocational domain are clearly of special interest.

## 2.2.3 National Test System

National assessment is available for English A and B. The national tests aim to "[b]y collating results, indicate the extent of goal attainment (monitoring)" (Skolverket

2005:20). The tests are divided into subtests for oral interaction, receptive ability (read and listen) and written production. The written production subtest is the most relevant regarding vocabulary. It seems natural to analyze the national test criteria in order to look for specific word domains and other features that could impact the choice of teaching methods, but doing so is in fact discouraged: "The national test system shall not […] [i]nfluence the choice of teaching content and teaching methods (since this should be determined by teachers and students)" (Skolverket 2005:21).

In light of this, it can be assumed that the national tests are specifically designed in such a way as to only test the most central domains and aspects of the English language. The test designers claim that "[t]he general policy is to use texts and tasks which are as authentic as possible" (Göteborgs universitet IPD 2006). Upon examination of various example tasks and past tests, it appears that this is correct. The vocabulary necessary for passing the written production test mostly consists of common functional words. However, it does require a broad contextual understanding of many words. For example, the word *sense* might be missing in the sentence "[s]he has a great _____ of humor." This is a common collocation that may be difficult to learn from word cards or lists, instead requiring the pupil to have encountered the word in similar contexts. Daring the wrath of the policy makers, I would say that the current national test system seems to favor learning from context methodology, due to its authentic, core domain texts and tasks.

# 3  Results

## 3.1  Methods for Learning from context

According to Nation "[i]ncidental learning via guessing from context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning" (2001:232.)  There is an overwhelming body of evidence for this statement; most importantly from the obvious connections to FLA:

> The strategies observed to be used and found to be effective for adult second-language learners are derived from, and in some cases identical to, the strategies used by children when mastering their first language. The more language the learner knows, the more possibilities exist for the system to be flexible and to adjust itself to meet the demands of the learner. What one must teach students of a language is not strategy, but language. (Bialystok 1990:147)

Research into so called "chunking" probably provides the next most weighty argument. The theory is that the brain does not typically store words separately in a huge dictionary[7] and then put together sentences from these words by applying separately stored grammatical rules. Instead, the brain stores whole chunks – combinations of words that often occur together (collocations). According to Ellis and Schmidt, "[a] lot of language learning can be accounted for by associations between sequentially observed language items. That is, without the need to refer to underlying rules" (cited in Nation 2001:321).

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[7] The rarer the word, the more likely it is to be stored as a separate "bit" of information.

At heart, learning from context is all about exposure. A toddler cannot learn to speak without constantly being exposed to language. Likewise, the philosophy states, pupils should be exposed to their foreign language of study as much as possible. The pedagogic methodology, therefore, is largely concerned with how this can be achieved in class, what kind of homework should be given and what extracurricular activities should be encouraged. Another important question concerns what *type* of exposure teachers should focus on in order to both take advantage of as well as complement the learning that occurs naturally outside of school.

So, how can teachers help their pupils learn from context? Nation lists the following ways in order of importance:

1. helping them to find and choose reading material of appropriate difficulty
2. encouraging them to read a lot and helping them gain a lot of comprehensible spoken input
3. improving their reading skills so that they read fluently and with good comprehension
4. providing training in guessing from context (Nation 2001:250).

Clearly, reading is extremely important!

### 3.1.1 Reading

As mentioned in the introduction, "readers" appear to be the best foreign language learners, and Nation stresses the importance of reading for incidental learning. Not only is it the best way for learning from context, it has affective benefits as well: "Success in reading and its associated skills, most notably writing, helps learners enjoy language learning and value their study of English" (Nation 2001:156). There can be no question that pupils should be encouraged to read as much as possible, and to read *appropriate* material.

Liu and Nation recommend texts where at least 95% of the words are familiar (Nation 2001:254). Otherwise, successful guessing from the context may become too hard. Selecting appropriate books for individual students is obviously no easy task, but teachers should be familiar with a wide range of books and try to approximate their suitability. If possible, books with highlighting or glossing of difficult words are preferable, since it has been shown in several studies (Nation 2001:251-253) that drawing attention to unfamiliar words helps the learning process. However, when selecting books, teachers should take care not to let their own personal tastes interfere, because suitability also has a lot to do with student motivation[8]. Maybe teachers cannot instill the joy of reading into their pupils, but they should at least be allowed some freedom in the book selection.

From the start, the pupils should be made aware of *why* it is so beneficial to read, and how they should go about confronting unknown words. Carnine, Kameenui and Coyle recommend a simple rule: "When there's a hard word in a sentence, look for other words in the story that tell you more about that word" (Nation 2001:250). If the word cannot be understood from the context, the reader should look it up in a dictionary.

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[8] In practice, motivation is the key to SLA according to Lightbown & Spada (1993:112).

It should be stressed that reading one or two books in English per semester is really not enough. Nation recommends "large quantities of interesting reading. Large quantities for second language learners means something like a graded reader of a suitable level every week" (Nation 2001:238). It should at least be possible to convince pupils who read a lot in their first language to switch over to the rich body of English literature. However, for pupils who absolutely hate reading, there are immersive alternatives, such as television.

### 3.1.2  Television

All of the researchers in the European study (Bonnet 2002) mentioned the influence of television on English learning in their respective countries. In Spain and France, there is virtually no television programming in English. Foreign movies and TV shows are dubbed. The contrast with countries like Sweden – where some content[9] is not even subtitled – is sharp. Neuman and Koskinen investigated the effects of television on SLA contextual learning (Nation 2001:247). Comparing subtitled television to television alone and reading alone, they found subtitled television superior to the other conditions[10]. They also found that learners of higher English proficiency learned more words than those of lower proficiency. In other words, the higher the level of education, the more appropriate it is to use television for SLA.

Although it might feel cheap or lazy, teachers should not be afraid of using television during class sometimes as an effective and appreciated way for pupils to learn new words. Tempting as it might be to show a play by Shakespeare, the same rule applies for listening as for reading; 95 percent or more (Nation 2001:114) of the words should be familiar to the pupils. However, since adolescent pupils are likely to watch certain types of entertainment programming at home, it might be appropriate to choose different types of movies and shows.

### 3.1.3  Music

Most upper secondary school pupils listen to music frequently, but perhaps with a limited understanding of the lyrics. Some might not even pay particularly attention to the lyrics at all. Teachers should ask their pupils to make a habit of trying to discern all words in the songs they listen to and to ponder the meaning of the lyrics. The inventive teacher can easily come up with interesting classroom exercises and homework related to songs and song lyrics.

### 3.1.4  Oral Interaction

Speaking tasks in class are not usually thought of as having vocabulary learning goals, mostly because it seems difficult to plan vocabulary learning using activities that are productive, unpredictable and dependent on the people in the groups. This is not necessarily true however: "As teachers, we frequently overlook how much students learn from their peers" (Rivers 1987:4). According to Rivers, "[i]n interactive language

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[9] For example, many commercials, even nationally produced, feature English without subtitles.
[10] Another study, by Li (Nation, 2002:247), found reading more efficient than listening for learning words from context.

teaching, comprehension and production retrieve their normal relationship as an interactive duo. To achieve this we need an ambiance and relations among individuals that promote a desire for interaction" (1987:8). However, this rather Vygotskian view[11] is not undisputed. The just listen method has already been covered in the background of this thesis, and it does have some prominent champions among language scholars. H. S. Straight claims that "[t]he best way to acquire a language is to acquire the skills needed to comprehend it fluently, and… everything else will follow, if not automatically, at least far more easily and effectively" (in Rivers 1987:6).

Whatever the case may be, interactive tasks still have their place in the classroom due to the many other advantages, such as building confidence in conversing in a foreign language. Even vocabulary can be gained from pupil conversations with their peers, especially if the tasks are appropriately organized by the teacher. Nation (2002:136) recommends Read & Retell (pupils read a short text and then have to retell it to their friends) and various types of role play, often tied to some text. When preparing written instructions for any task, it is also justifiable to intentionally throw in some words with which most pupils are probably unfamiliar. That way, spontaneous discussions about their meaning will arise among the pupils.

### 3.1.5  Exchange programs and travel

Exchange programs are certainly one of the best ways of acquiring a foreign language. This is not in doubt as far as the empirical evidence goes, but is hampered by other factors in practice. First of all, students must want to participate freely. The second problem has to do with logistics. If, for example, all European upper secondary school pupils were to participate in exchange programs to learn English, there would not be enough English speaking pupils to switch with (not to mention that these might not be interested in going to Sweden or other countries with a minor language.) Thirdly, there are political issues that have to do with language prestige, and lastly, there is of course the problem with funding. Even so, teachers should be aware that if exchange programs can be arranged, they are an ideal form of SLA.

## *3.2  Rich Instruction Methods*

Nation (2001:95-96) presents the following arguments *against* rich instruction:
- There are too many words to teach. Even by the most conservative estimate, native speakers know tens of thousands of word families. Direct teaching could only have a very trivial impact on such knowledge.
- There is too much to learn about each word, too many complex and compound forms.
- To have an immediate effect on vocabulary knowledge, substantial time (perhaps as much as 15 minutes) has to be spent on teaching each word.
- There are other ways of increasing vocabulary size which require less teacher effort and classroom time, and which have numerous other benefits.

Even so, "[i]n general, rich instruction is appropriate for high-frequency words and words for which the learner has special needs. […] The aim of rich instruction is to establish the

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[11] According to Vygotskij, learning is first and foremost a result of social interaction (Imsen 2000:191).

word as an accessible vocabulary item" (Nation 2001:95).  Lightbown and Spada likewise see the value in direct teaching, arguing that "second language teachers can (and should) provide guided form-based instruction and correction in special circumstances. For example, teachers should not hesitate to correct persistent errors which learners seem not to notice without focused attention" (1993:105).

Krashen, in his famous monitor theory (Klein 1986:28-29, McDonough 1986:125), distinguishes between *language learning* and *language acquisition*, where the latter is the mostly subconscious process of acquiring language from context and the former is the conscious attempts of a person to learn a language. According to the monitor theory, language which has been learned (as opposed to acquired) constantly requires a "monitor", that is, a conscious effort to control and self-correct. "The monitor can become effective in a communication situation only if (a) there is enough time to operate it, (b) the speaker is concerned with the correctness of his speech production, and (c) the speaker knows the correct rule" (Klein 1986:28).

However, the monitor theory is controversial, especially Krashen's insistence that "it is a contradiction that the eventual state of learned knowledge may be the same as the store of acquired competence" (cited in McDonough 1986:127). Furthermore, the theory applies more to grammar than vocabulary.

### 3.2.1  Word Cards

Nation is very fond of word cards as a form of intentional vocabulary learning: "Learning from word cards is a very effective way of learning the underlying concept. Meeting words in context makes learners aware of how this concept changes to suit particular contexts and the range of contexts in which the word can be used" (Nation 2001:301). Word cards are superior to lists and dictionaries due to the way memory works.

There are two rules to remember when choosing words. Firstly, *learn useful words*. As mentioned earlier, direct learning is most justified for high-frequency words and words in a domain of specific interest, such as the pupils' vocational domain. Secondly, *avoid interference*. That is, words that are similar, near synonyms, near opposites, or belong to the same lexical set should not be learned together[12] (Nation 2001:303).

Nation (2002:303-305) recommends putting the word on one side and the meaning on the other in order to encourage recall. The meaning can be presented in the context of a sentence or not, as appropriate, but it should be translated into the first language. Pictures should be used when possible. Extensive research shows that recall benefits from the combination of pictures and translations. The cards should be stacked in numbers corresponding to their general difficulty, if the words are difficult[13], it is better to have fewer cards in each stack.

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[12] Nation's view on interference is controversial, since it contradicts other research on language acquisition.
[13] Difficult here means several things: the time available for study, the aim (recognition or recall), and the nature of the words themselves (pronunciation, spelling, length, etc.)

The cards should be used first receptively, then productively. That is, the learner should first go through the cards "face down", seeing the word, then turning the card over to see the translation. Subsequently, the learner should turn the cards "face up", and do the reverse. The preferred focus (receptive or productive), depends on the intended use for the words. If the words are to be used for speaking or writing, recall will be better if the cards were processed "face up", and if the words are to be used for listening and reading, the opposite is true (Nation 2001:306).

Learning from word cards involves making connections, particularly between form and meaning. Therefore, the learner should keep changing the order of the word cards ("shuffling the deck") in order to prevent the formation of erroneous associations in memory between words on different cards. Another interesting aspect of memory is that items in the beginning and end of a list (or stack in this case) are learned better. These effects are called the primacy and recency effects. Thus, it might be beneficial to put difficult words first or last in the deck.

The learner should speak the words aloud or at least mouth them silently. N. Ellis presents evidence which shows that putting items into the "phonological loop" helps their transition into long-term memory (Nation 2001:307).

Lastly, it might be helpful to put words into context, and to process them deeply; in essence to reflect about their meaning for awhile.

### 3.2.2 Morpheme Studies

Derivational affixes are common in English, especially for words borrowed from Latin or Greek. When determining if it is worthwhile to study morphemes it is interesting to note that of the thousand most common English words, only 570 are of Germanic origin. For the rest of the words in the English language, only around 360 per thousand are of Germanic origin. Latin and French words make up around 510 per thousand of those less common words (Nation 2001:264). In all, Italic and Hellenic words average around 60% of the English vocabulary. Instructing pupils in the common affixes therefore seems reasonably justified, and will help learners when trying to guess the meaning of unknown words.

Studies of word parts should begin with learning to recognize English affixes. Suitable exercises can be designed for this, where pupils are required to break words apart into stems and affixes. The pupils also need to know (at least to some extent) what the affixes mean, which partially overlaps with instruction on grammar – even if the inflectional affixes are not included.

## 3.3  Results of the Teacher Questionnaire

Four teachers answered the questionnaire (see Appendix). They are all active upper secondary school teachers with many years of experience teaching English.

### 3.3.1  Direct vs. Incidental Learning

Three of the teachers were of the opinion that pupils learn more English words outside of school. However, the fourth was more doubtful, since her pupils learn around 25-30 words from various school exercises every week. Three of the teachers thought that incidental learning adds great volume to the pupils' vocabulary, but at the cost of precision. That is, pupils might have a good idea what many words mean, but are still unable to come up with exact translations. However, one teacher was of the opposite opinion, saying that pupils only gain common, everyday words outside of school, and that school textbooks provide pupils with a wider selection. Judging by their answers, none of the teachers associated extracurricular reading of English literature with incidental learning outside the school milieu.

### 3.3.2  Lexical Domains

All of the respondents believed that there are significant differences in the type of words (domains) learned in school and outside of school. According to them, pupils tend to gain informal – typically American – English outside of school. This occurs not only through watching TV, reading, and listening to music, but also through the Internet. Chatting on the Internet was mentioned as a source of compacted word forms. One teacher described the type of words the pupils gain on their own in negative terms, as being curses, drug-related and violent words. Notably, her experience was mostly of teaching boys.

The question about there being a "central" vocabulary in school elicited a number of different answers. One teacher mentioned the vocational vocabulary that is used in the English education in different upper secondary school programs, and that this is not in fact sufficient to pass the national tests! Another claimed it was British, formal English. The third believed that English teachers might tend to focus on English words of Germanic origin, while forgetting about the great number of Romance language loan words. The last teacher was of the opinion that the lexical domain in school is very broad in nature, spanning both informal and formal words.

### 3.3.3  Methodology

On the subject of textbooks, all of the respondents used them a lot in their education. Three were relatively happy with them, but one teacher claimed that the textbooks have become progressively worse, and that the texts fail to engage the pupils. One teacher was very positive of word lists and rote learning; one was negative, saying that if they are used, the words must be placed into context. The other two teachers were somewhat ambivalent. None mentioned word cards.

Only two of the teachers were really positive towards exchange programs, but they all believed that they can be valuable. Above all, they saw the value of increased confidence in speaking English, increased fluency, and pupils finding ways of expressing what they mean even if they do not know a word. One teacher mentioned a potential problem with some forms of exchange programs and class trips, in that the pupils might try to stick together and continue speaking mostly Swedish.

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Films and television were not very popular as teaching aids among the respondents. One teacher went as far as saying they should not be used in the classroom since pupils watch enough TV at home anyway. If used, the material should either lack subtitles or be subtitled in English, and there should be accompanying tasks.

One teacher was unreservedly positive towards group activities in relation to vocabulary acquisition. The others were more guarded, since in their experience it is hard to get the pupils to vary their language and actually get them to converse in English at all. One teacher recommended controlled debates, where the teacher can introduce new vocabulary in advance.

All of the teachers were positive towards extensive reading, but one was of the opinion that it must be combined with word lists (pupils must select and remember words from the book they have read.) Three teachers mentioned the importance of selecting books that are appropriately challenging, but the fourth said that it does not matter which types of books they are as long as they get read.

## 4   Discussion

The main aim of this thesis was to discover the best methods for teaching English vocabulary in Swedish upper secondary schools. The methods covered above have all been proven to be highly effective. The remaining questions are how well they correspond to the Swedish curriculum and in what proportions and situations the methods should be used. Different scholars have different views on the latter question, usually depending on where they stand in the direct vs. incidental learning debate. Nation positions himself somewhere in the middle of the scale: "Learning vocabulary from context is often seen as something opposed to the direct and intentional learning and teaching of vocabulary. This is an unfortunate view […] they are complementary activities, each one enhancing the learning that comes from the other" (Nation 2001:232). He recommends a varied approach, breaking a course down into what he calls the "four strands" (2001:2). They are: *meaning-focused input*, *form-focused instruction*, *meaning-focused output* and *fluency development*. The first two are mostly receptive in nature and correspond to learning from context and direct learning, respectively. The other two are productive and involve writing and speaking. Each strand should take up roughly 25 percent of the vocabulary efforts of a foreign language course (2001:3). Nation's model is particularly interesting since it complies extremely well with the Swedish curriculum and syllabi. However, he might be overestimating the importance of the productive aspects of *vocabulary* learning, considering how well the just listen method has proven to work. In his presentation, Nation does make the distinction between the vocabulary part and other parts of a foreign language course, but explicitly states that his four strands only apply to the vocabulary part. I would argue that his two productive strands also have much to do with, for example, grammar, spelling, intonation and pronunciation. Therefore, when aiming to facilitate vocabulary acquisition, teachers should probably focus more on receptive tasks.

When a teacher wants to focus on aiding vocabulary learning, it is my conclusion that, in the absence of exchange programs, home assignments are most suitable for learning by

context. These would primarily consist of reading appropriate books, but could also include watching movies[14], and, for example, analyzing song lyrics or poetry. Teachers should not underestimate the value of incidental learning, and, as shown in the background part of this thesis, it has a lot of support in the curriculum, syllabi, and even the national test system.

For direct learning, carefully prepared decks of word cards are best. As mentioned above, this method should be limited to words of specific interest: core domain words and vocational domain words. The rudimentary study of word parts and morphemes is also appropriate, but a deeper analysis is not justified from a vocabulary standpoint (though it might overlap well with instruction in grammar). Textbook use for vocabulary learning purposes is not particularly recommended, for several reasons:

- Lists of words are inferior to word cards according to mnemonic research.
- Textbooks are too limited in scope to be of much value for learning words from context.
- The texts are often arbitrary in nature, and, while usually authentic, fail to engage the pupils. It is better to let them read texts of their own choice.

A serious problem with direct learning is that it is, simply put, dull – at least in comparison with some learning by context methods. Therefore, teachers may want to experiment with role play, games, controlled debates and similar, ideally making use of word cards.

The secondary aim of this thesis was to find out how teachers should adapt their teaching in order to take advantage of pupils' out-of-school incidental learning. The scholars appear to have less to say about this, but the need is there according to the findings of *The Assessment of Pupils' Skills in English in Eight European Countries* study (see 2.2). While there is precious little specific advice on the subject, teachers should make note of their pupils' word usage, their weak and strong areas, and their general interests. Adaptation can then be tailored to suit individual pupils. Indeed, that is how it must be. Peter Strevens (Rivers 1987:172) urges teachers to encourage their pupils to seek out interaction outside the classroom. This can then be used as a basis for various assignments. Among other possibilities for interaction, he mentions pen-pals, telephone friends and the local business community. Considering that this was written in 1987, the advent of the Internet had not yet happened, but of course, Internet multiplayer games and chats are most excellent opportunities to interact with native English speakers.

So how do the findings of this thesis differ from current practice in Sweden? This is hard to say with any certainty, but judging by the Bonnet study and the results of the teacher questionnaire, extensive reading might not be as common as it should be. Neither is there any mention of word cards, and television appears to be used rarely. It is also possible that many teachers are not aware of how their pupils are using English outside school, and are not tapping into this potentially huge educational resource.

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[14] The school could easily keep DVD movies lacking Swedish subtitles in a movie library. Ideally, they would be of a type highly interesting to the pupils, but still not readily available with Swedish subtitles.

## 4.1  Validity, Reliability and Generality

Validity is difficult for an author to judge – did I actually study what I set out to study? In many ways this is up to the reader to decide, for example by comparing the aim of the thesis to the actual results. For this thesis, it might also be of interest to examine the questionnaire and the secondary research analysis separately and in some detail. For the latter, validity is a question of how correctly the source material is interpreted. Bryman (2001:200) lists the following risks and limitations with the secondary analysis research method: lack of familiarity with data, complexity of the data, no control over data quality and absence of key variables. I have tried to compensate for these problems[15], but I can only hope that this thesis is relatively free of misunderstandings. That said, validity might be lower where the Swedish curriculum and syllabi are concerned, simply because they allow for such a wide range of interpretations. Another warning flag can be raised in relation to the Bonnet study, since there might be other plausible explanations for the differences between countries than the ones I have suggested. My other sources are easier to interpret with a high degree of confidence since they are expressly about SLA. As books written by respected language scholars they should also have a high internal level of validity and reliability, especially when different authors refer to the same study and interpret it in similar ways. With this in mind, I only want to mention that, while still good, Nation's research into words cards has lower reliability compared to, for example, the findings presented here on extensive reading.[16]

As for the questionnaire, it can be argued that questions 7 and 8 are (unintentionally) leading, which lowers the validity of those answers (and the reliability of the whole questionnaire). Patel and Davidson (1991:85) present three rules of thumb regarding validity and reliability. Rule number two states that "low reliability gives low validity", which emphasizes how important reliability is. However, reliability concerns standardization and the elimination of chance and other unintentional variables, chiefly when conducting a *quantitative* study of some kind. In fact, Trost (1994:58) says that the idea of reliability is based on making quantitative studies, on measuring, and on providing concrete values for variables for each unit. According to him, this is something different from trying to understand how someone thinks, feels or acts. Still, things like dishonest or sloppy answers, unintentionally leading questions and other errors in the questionnaire will affect the reliability of even a qualitative study. Few as my questionnaire respondents were, their answers were generally good and seemed honest. Still, I would hesitate to call the reliability high.

A third important factor in social research is generality, or general applicability. That is, the level of confidence that the findings are true for the sampled group. This factor applies to the questionnaire. Since only four teachers answered, the generality of my analysis of the questionnaire is very low. It would have been rather low even if all twelve

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[15] Options are limited, but analyzing the data carefully and also studying the meta-data is important. E.g. finding out the reasons and limitations of a study and how it was conducted.

[16] Nation stands relatively alone as a champion of word cards and is relying heavily on his own studies. Some of his views on direct learning methods are slightly controversial. However, he has not been heavily criticized, and his findings seem sound on the whole.

teachers had responded. For this reason, the results of the questionnaire must only be taken for what they are: the opinions of four English teachers.

# 5 Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, the current body of research suggests that learning from context is superior to direct learning with some notable exceptions: rich instruction is more appropriate for high-frequency words and words for which the learner has special needs. Thus, for English at the upper secondary school level, teachers are advised to encourage extensive reading, with TV subtitled in English as an alternative. Vocabulary should only be *taught* when there is a special need. In most cases it is more efficient to *facilitate learning*. When direct learning is appropriate, word cards have proven a very effective method. The study of derivational affixes is also justified to some degree. Teachers should find out if and how their pupils use English outside school, and encourage any activities where pupils communicate with native English speakers. These findings have the full support of the syllabi, curriculum and national test system in Sweden.

Personally, my belief in extensive reading has been strengthened. All research seems to back this position. However, where I used to dismiss direct learning methods, I have been made aware of their usefulness. Still, it is my belief that word cards and similar are perhaps more appropriate at lower levels of education.

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# Appendix – Teacher Questionnaire

*Att försöka utöka elevernas vokabulär är en naturlig del av undervisningen i engelska. I mitt examensarbete utreder jag vilka metoder som verkar fungera bäst (på gymnasienivå) och vilka begränsningar de medför. Givetvis är det av största intresse att undersöka vilka tankar och erfarenheter lärare har. Svara därför gärna så utförligt som möjligt på följande frågor och motivera dina svar:*

1) Var tror du att eleverna lär sig de flesta engelska ord, i eller utanför skolan?
2) Vilken slags vokabulär (informellt/formellt språk, specifika domäner osv) anser du att eleverna har och varifrån tror du att den kommer?
3) Berätta vad du tror om eventuella skillnader i *ordförståelse* mellan en person som huvudsakligen lärt sig engelska på egen hand (genom att exponeras för engelska) och en person som huvudsakligen lärt sig engelska i skolan.
4) Finns det ett "centralt ordförråd" i skolan, och hur förhåller sig i så fall elevernas ordförråd till detta (och, som en följd, till de nationella provens krav)?
5) Vad har du för synpunkter på utbytesprogram och språkresor när det gäller att utöka *vokabulären*?
6) Vad är dina erfarenheter av gloslistor (t ex tagna från en text i en lärobok)?
7) Kan omfattande läsning av böcker på engelska vara ett effektivt sätt att utöka vokabulären? Bör böckerna i så fall vara av en viss typ eller på något sätt speciellt anpassade för inlärning?
8) Kan visning av film och TV-serier på engelska under lektionstid vara ett lämpligt sätt att utöka elevernas vokabulär? Bör de i så fall vara textade på engelska eller svenska eller inte alls?
9) Vad tror du om grupparbeten, debatter och andra elevprojekt när det gäller att utöka och förbättra vokabulären?
10) Är generellt sett de läroböcker du använt i din undervisning effektiva hjälpmedel för att utöka elevernas ordförråd? Varför/varför inte?
11) Hur stor vikt lägger du vid vokabulären i din undervisning (ungefärligt)?
12) Har du några andra tankar kring undervisning i ordförståelse och vokabulär?