Independent Project with Specialization in English Studies and Education
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The use of social media for promoting vocabulary acquisition in the L2 classroom

Sociala medier som verktyg för att främja elevers utvecklande av det engelska vokabuläret i klassrummet

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Abstract

Social media as a tool in the classroom is not a concept one hears much about. Being that social media is still a relatively new phenomenon, this is not particularly strange. Research surrounding the subject is sparse, but there are several articles that show there being a possible place for social media in the classroom. These studies find that there is a need for educators to be properly informed and make precise decisions regarding how and why they want to use social media in the classroom. In this paper we found evidence that supports the idea that social media can be useful as a tool in the classroom; however, findings show that there are few if any moments of explicit vocabulary learning, and therefore social media should be used more as a motivational tool, resulting in implicit vocabulary acquisition. In order to get proper usage of social media, educators need to conduct their own research, thereby expanding the knowledge of social media as a tool.

Key words: Vocabulary acquisition, ESL, Second language learning, Implicit learning, Motivation.
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Introduction

Learning English is a difficult task, a task that requires years of study and continuous effort to sustain the knowledge one acquires. One important aspect of learning English comes in the form of vocabulary acquisition. According to Adolphs and Schmitt (2003), a person needs to understand 90-95 per cent of the total words in a given text in order to mostly comprehend it, and 99 percent coverage of the total words would lead to an almost complete understanding of a given text. In their own research, they found that to reach a lexical coverage of ca 95 per cent a person needs to know around 2,500-word families – stems/roots plus their inflectional and derivational affixes across different grammatical categories. Given these statistics we can clearly understand that learning vocabulary is important, and most teachers today would agree to this point. Skolverket (2011) states that all students should be able to comprehend and interpret the content in different texts and should be able to formulate sentences and communicate in the English language. Both goals require, among other things, a fair amount of English vocabulary knowledge. The question then becomes how can we as teachers best help our students to efficiently acquire this knowledge?

A frequently posed question is how L2 learners can most efficiently and effectively acquire vocabulary and what methods can be used in order to enhance students' learning. Arndt and Woore (2018) present incidental learning as an important part of vocabulary acquisition. For Arndt and Woore, incidental learning, or implicit learning, can be described as a process of acquisition that occurs when learners are not focused on language learning but are instead focused on understanding the material they engage with (c.f., Krashen, 1982: Krashen 1985 ). Therefore, implicit learning can also be described as a consequence of communicative language tasks. Explicit learning however is not to be disregarded, and a number of benefits have been identified as a result of learners being active in the process and informed as to what they should learn. According to Nick Ellis (2008) the acquisition of L1 grammar is largely implicitly driven, and a fair part of L1 learning comes from experience of usage rather than rules. However, he also argues that L2 learning has some limitations in regard to implicit learning. The attainment of L2 accuracy requires the learner to have a certain consciousness in regard to the language learning process, at least to some degree, such as the learner being aware of negative evidence and explicitly noticing and attending to language form. Explicit and implicit learning are distinct cognitive processes and potentially correspond to different types of knowledge of and about language. However, different educational experiences lead
to different types of knowledge, and therefore, one can argue that both types are needed in order to enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Another key factor that has been shown to affect language learning, including vocabulary acquisition, is motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Atkinson & Raynor, 1974; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Dörnyei (1998) conceptualizes motivation as a key factor that influences the rate and success of second language learning and argues that even the most remarkable individuals need motivation in order to achieve long-term goals. Furthermore, he claims that high motivation can make up for considerable deficiencies in one’s aptitude and learning conditions. For Dörnyei, motivation should be seen as a process that can be influenced and changed throughout an individual's life and a large part of the discussion also looks at motivation from a psychological standpoint. Dörnyei argues the most influential conceptualizations have tended to adopt an expectancy-value framework. According to the main points of the expectancy-value theory, motivation is a product of the individual's expectancy of success in a given task as well as the value the individual attaches to success in that task. He claims that if students believe that there is a good chance of them accomplishing the task and they have a greater incentive value, the student will have a higher value of positive motivation. When students take part in second language learning through social media, one can assume that there is a greater incentive value due to the students connecting social media to extrafusal activities and their individual interests. If there is an initial interest, the students will probably feel that there is a greater probability of them accomplishing the task and this will work as a motivation for the students to both achieve their goals and learn.

One potential way of boosting opportunities for implicit learning and motivating students to engage and be motivated to learn with L2 English and thereby enhance vocabulary learning in the classroom is through the use of social media. Social media is on the rise in the world and is used by over 4 billion people according to Google. Toffoli and Socket (2010) investigated how often non specialist students of English interacted with the language. This was done through interviewing 250 students at university level in France who studied around two hours of English per week. The results of this study found that the majority of students took part in either monthly or weekly listening or reading of English online. The authors claim that listening to English music does not necessarily have any value for language learning because lyrics are not often processed for meaning. In contrast, films, personal
messages, and TV-series function effectively for such purposes since these mediums are usually processed for their meaning. Toffoli and Socket argue that engaging with such resources can comprise a form of informal learning, meaning a form of impromptu learning that happens outside of the classroom. The question becomes whether engaging with such resources can be useful for students inside the classroom as well. Does using social media have an impact on L2 learners? Is this a positive or a negative impact? What will happen if these platforms are brought into the classroom? Can we make use of social media platforms in the classroom in order to enhance the language acquisition of our students? What, if any, are the best platforms to use in order to enhance vocabulary learning? These are some of the questions we aim to pursue in our current study.
Aim and research questions

Our aim in this paper is to investigate to what extent the in-classroom use of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (and related platforms) can help students to facilitate their acquisition of English vocabulary in the L2 English classroom, and whether any detrimental aspects can be identified. We will also investigate which formats (audio, visual, and/or written) are most effective for this purpose. Further we will investigate whether these platforms can help motivate students with their vocabulary acquisition. We will not focus on any single one of these platforms since they have only existed for just under two decades. Our research questions are as follows:

1. Can social media be used as a tool to enhance vocabulary acquisition in the classroom, and if so to what extent?

2. Can social media help motivate students in the classroom to enhance vocabulary acquisition?
Method

To address our research aims, we conducted a database search for existing studies on the topic of social media usage in the classroom. When searching for these sources we used the following keywords and more: *language acquisition, YouTube, media, better, worse, improve, second language learning, ESL, vocabulary acquisition, secondary students, implicit learning, social media, social network, Facebook, Tik Tok, Twitter, Incidental learning.*

We will include studies which focus on students' perception as well as studies regarding ESL learners and how they learn by using language specific apps, such as Duolingo. Furthermore, we placed a certain focus on studies that include secondary students, though some had university students as participants in their studies. When discussing these latter studies, we will focus on the content of the research and try to apply the results in the context of vocabulary learning for secondary students. Additional sources on motivation in second language learning and implicit and explicit learning were also found and used in this paper. We chose to not include a date criterium. The reasoning behind this decision is that there are no older studies regarding social media use in the classroom, considering the fact that social media first came 2004, and was not popularized until a few years later.

The databases that were used in the process were ERIC via EBSCO, ERC (Education Research Complete) and ERIC via ProQuest. In ERIC via EBSCO. The table below shows how many peer reviewed results were found using the different key words we had acquired, not accounting for overlapping research using different keywords and on different platforms.
Table 1

*Number of results found on the different databases and how many that were used*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of database</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Number of sources used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ERIC via EBSCO</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC via ProQuest</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several of the sources used in this paper such as Dörnyei (1998) and Ellis (2008) were found outside the search portals through additional exploratory Google Scholar searches that fell outside our above delineated keyword searches, and the latter was found through looking at the reference list in some of the papers that were found using the databases provided by MAU. In Gotseva (2016) she used a Turkish study on incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition through video games and they further discussed explicit and implicit learning. However, that study was in Turkish and only a brief translation was provided. Upon searching in the reference list for other sources on explicit and implicit learning, we found Ellis’ (2008) text on explicit and implicit knowledge.

Based on the research we found several different sources we could use. In table 2 the sources that are being used in the results and discussion section are being shown together with the authors names, year of publication and important themes. The order of the information is in the order that the sources are used in the results and discussion section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/s</th>
<th>Name of Articles</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Important theme/themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henriette L. Arndt &amp; Robert Woore</td>
<td>Vocabulary learning from watching YouTube videos and reading blog posts</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Vocabulary acquisition as a result of implicitly learning through social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alessia Plutino</td>
<td>Teachers as awakeners: a collaborative approach in language learning and social media</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Social media as a tool for vocabulary acquisition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan M. Sorensen</td>
<td>Student Attitudes toward Social Media Technology as an Enhancement to Language Acquisition</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Students attitude towards technology and how teacher’s implementation of social media as a tool can affect students’ learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbeth M. Brevik</td>
<td>Gamers, Surfers, Social Media Users: Unpacking the role of interest in English</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Incidental learning during extramural activities that benefits the ESL student in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elda Tatari</td>
<td>The Use of Social Media for Academic Purposes in Student’ Learning Process</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Students’ attitudes towards social media and the implementation of social media as a study tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Description</td>
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Results and discussion

In this following section we will present recent research that has been conducted on the topic of social media usage of students and its impact on facilitating (or hindering) vocabulary acquisition. Further we will present research which helps to inform us as to what effect social media can have on student motivation to learn L2 English. We are also going to discuss the findings of our research and connect what we found to our research questions.

Social media as a tool for vocabulary acquisition is a fairly new concept and there is a limited amount of research on how it really affects students’ learning. In order to reach a conclusion whether social media can be a valuable tool it is by all means necessary to understand how different forms of social media can affect vocabulary acquisition. Arndt and Woore (2018) investigated how written blog posts and video blogs affected EFL students’ vocabulary acquisition through allowing students to engage with the media formats. One group watched three video blogs and the other read three blog posts. The students were not told what the focus would be, instead the authors relied on the process of implicit learning when conducting their study. Students simply engaged with the material without any further reflection as to what is expected. Arndt and Woore describe the learning outcomes that derive from implicit learning as the consequences or byproducts of simply engaging with the assignment. Their findings were that the group that watched videos scored higher in regard to recalling the grammatical function of the target words as well as a greater recognition and recall of their meanings, and the group that read blog posts scored higher on orthographic knowledge. Therefore, the results support the thesis that videos and texts can provide suitable input for incidental learning. However, the results did not show any significant difference in total vocabulary gains and that should work as a caution from drawing any conclusion in regard to the general effectiveness of video blogs and written blogs for vocabulary learning.

Similar results were found by Plutino (2017) in regard to the project TwitTIAMO. The project was used to incorporate micro-blogging in regard to L2 Italian language learning in order to enhance university students’ language skills. The aim of the project was to determine whether Twitter could be used to enhance collaborative and spontaneous learning outside the classroom and create learning communities inside the classroom. By using the format of micro-blogging, the students would improve their communicative skills as well as aspects of
their vocabulary such as pronunciation and accuracy. As believed in Arndt and Woore’s (2018) research, when students simply engage with the material as well as with this familiar format, they will implicitly improve their vocabulary. However, the students in Plutino’s research are intermediate users of L2 Italian and have studied the language for one year, and Arndt and Woore examine vocabulary acquisition for EFL students with different backgrounds. The difference between the groups might be interesting to take note of however, learning is a process and to be able to determine the effectiveness of using social media as a tool it is relevant to include studies that might differ from the specific research question. By including studies such as Plutinos that investigate the L2 Italian learners, we get a sense of how language learning can be a similar process even if the language differs.

Before reaching a conclusion, Plutino (2017) described how the results should not be seen as complete as a full data analysis is yet to be completed. However, the initial outcomes of the project confirm other findings that the Twitter format can positively impact students’ fluency and facilitates interactive discussions. Similarly, Arndt and Woores’ (2018) show that the video and blog format can have a positive impact on students’ vocabulary acquisition. However, it is important to understand how to implement the social media format in the classroom in order for it to be a useful tool.

Sorensen (2013) investigated students’ attitudes towards technology in general as well as how that may affect their attitude towards online language learning tools in a social media context. The study's primary goal was to better understand students’ attitudes, how they use technology at home and what type of technology should be used in the classroom to enhance the engagement and efficiency of a curriculum that uses technology as a tool. The curriculum in question used a social networking site, SNS, as its platform for content delivery that could improve ESL students' language learning. The platform had a similar structure to Facebook, where students created a profile and befriended fictional characters on the platform. The characters shared their lives, and the students could engage with the posts. The reasoning for conducting the study came back to social media being a fairly new concept, therefore there is a limited amount of research on how to utilize it in the classroom. Educators more often than not use social media as a motivating means to encourage student interaction in the target language; however, Sorensen urges educators to not use technology just because one should. There is a need for educators to investigate how to properly implement social media by understanding how it can have an impact on the classroom and how to implement it.
effectively. Furthermore, Sorensen acknowledges how technology has an important role in the students’ lives however, students might not understand how to use technology as a learning tool.

Similarly, Brevik (2019) reaches a conclusion that supports the belief of how technology is important in the language learning process. In her study, Brevik investigates how secondary students in Norway are statistically better L2 English readers than L1 readers and how their interest, as well as the use of social media, might have had an impact on their reading skills. Brevik identified three profiles that all consume English outside the classroom in different ways; written, spoken, produced by themselves, and through discussions online. The Gamer, the Surfer, and the social media users’ only difference was the amount of time spent on their interests where English was being used.

Brevik (2019) found that when students engage with the English language during extramural activities, their proficiency develops incidentally. The students simply engage in their interest, with no further thought and therefore learning becomes an embedded part of when the students engage with their interests. Therefore, Breviks’ findings support what Arndt and Woore (2018) found in connection to implicit learning. To further support her findings, Brevik interviewed the students to get a better understanding of what they saw were the reasons for their reading proficiency. The students saw their use of English in extramural activities as the primary reason for their English reading proficiency. All the students that were a part of Breviks’ study were better L2 readers and all had similar results on L2 reading tests. However, the students were seen as outliers based on their notably low L1 reading results.

Brevik (2019) concluded that the results demonstrate how interests and L2 learning are connected. The students had a primary interest to engage with the L2 language outside the classroom, and the implicit learning process led to the students becoming more proficient in the L2 language. Brevik described how students had gained more language knowledge by engaging with English in the classroom and in extramural activities.

Furthermore, Brevik (2019) argues that future research on the area of social media as a tool for learning could profit from looking at the possibilities and to what extent the students are benefited by building a bridge between school and extramural context. Breviks findings
support the idea that students could enhance their vocabulary acquisition by introducing a format that the students are familiar with in the classroom. Evidently, students acquire language through engagement with the L2 language outside of the classroom and today’s students are digital natives, where technology and social media plays a large part in their everyday life. Therefore, it would be beneficial to incorporate something familiar in the classroom that results in a higher motivation amongst the students to learn.

Similarly, Tatari (2015) investigated students' attitudes towards the use of social media for academic purposes and their opinion on using social networking sites as a study source. Tatari gathered information from 180 undergraduate students from Tirana through a questionnaire and individual interviews to understand students' attitudes. Most of the university students used social media in some way and all of them had used social media either very often or often. However, when questioned about how their language learning might have been improved by using social media only 60 percent agreed, the rest of the students disagreed or were undecided. During their interviews, the students were inherently positive towards using social media for academic purposes even if they did not necessarily find social media to be a part of improving their language. Furthermore, the interviews supported the fact that students integrate social media in the language learning process by using it as a tool to communicate with others to help each other with homework or by using it to improve their language through watching videos. Tatari concluded that the majority of the students used social media and were positive towards using social media as a studying tool. Tatari found that a large part of the students already had incorporated social media as a tool outside of the classroom and Tatari suggested that the use of social media could help students seek educational information. Furthermore, students could better complete tasks and develop their language skills.

Tatari’s (2015) findings further supports what Brevik (2019) and Sorensen (2013) found in regard to students' positive attitudes toward social media as a learning tool. Based on their findings, it can be seen as relevant to include social media in the classroom due to the students’ positive attitude towards it. Social media could be used as a motivational tool, and it would be relevant to conceptualize something that is familiar and has a high status in the students’ lives. By students being more engaged in their learning process, that could result in a greater vocabulary acquisition. Arndt and Woore (2018) found that the use of social media formats could have an impact on the students vocabulary acquisition however, if it was video
blogs or written blogs were not as important as both of them showed improvements in the students’ vocabulary yet in different areas. However, even if all agree that there are benefits by using social media as a learning tool for vocabulary acquisition, educators need to be cautious when implementing technology in the classroom. As Sorensen states, technology should not just be implemented because we should, and it is the way that technology is implemented that also plays a role in how the students feel towards the format.

The question whether social media can be of any use in the classroom today is what the research has been focused on and by asking other similar questions, it was almost possible to reach an answer. Social media, if used correctly, can be useful and an inherently valuable tool for teachers to use in the classroom in order to support students' ESL vocabulary acquisition. However, it is important that there is a focus on how to use social media correctly. As Sorensen (2013) stated, teachers should not use technology just because it can have benefits, it is important that teachers take a closer look on how to implement technology in the proper way in order for it to actually be useful for the students. It is important for teachers to properly implement tools in their classroom, something that is mentioned as necessary in the curriculum. Skolverket (2011) describes how teachers in Sweden need to use digital tools in their teaching process; however, it is never specified how teachers should use them. That can be quite problematic since teachers end up using something they do not inherently know how to properly implement, and there is little to no support for teachers to be able to figure out how to implement it. However, we hope that more research will be done on this in the future so an initial model, that has been tested and found to work, can be created as a support which will make it possible for teachers to implement social media without having to spend an extensive amount of work to simply figure out where to even begin in the implementation process.

An interesting way that the use of social media could be implemented was the form of implicit learning. As Arndt and Woore (2018) describes it, implicit learning is a valid way of language learning, and an improved vocabulary acquisition can easily become a byproduct of using social media in the classroom. When students engage with social media in the classroom, a format that the students initially have a positive reaction towards, they will not focus on how vocabulary acquisition is the primary focus, and they will simply just engage with the material. However, Ellis (2008) stated that implicit learning is something that is largely prevalent in L1 learning and not so much in L2 learning of grammar. This doesn’t
necessarily matter too much in this case since the use of social media in the classroom does not have to be for the sake of inducing implicit learning on students. Furthermore, the results from Brevik (2019) allows us to understand how students can learn language implicitly by using social media platforms. Their initial interest works as a motivator for learning, and therefore the students simply engage with what they already find interesting.

When combining the research surrounding social media platforms' impact on students together with the structured language learning of the classroom, one can assume that preferable learning outcomes are possible to achieve in regard to vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, it is relevant to note that a majority of the research discussed in this text were specifically focused on an older age group. The paper by Plutino (2017), which was used with caution due to the lack of determined outcomes and information regarding what the research is exploring. However, the reason it was still used as a source was that it explored how students can interact with an app in a controlled environment and therefore achieve preferred results. There is an understanding that it can be seen as problematic to use research based on adults; however, learning is a process that can be and usually is quite similar regardless of the age of the learners. There are probably things that should be changed if using social media with a younger age group, however, it is common that changes need to be made in most classroom preparations to properly work for the specific age group.

Arndt and Woore (2018) found in their study that there weren’t any large statistical differences between reading a blogpost versus watching a video blog (vlog) instead. If the content is the same, there seems to be vocabulary acquisition happening despite the format. Arndt and Woore do not state that the students watching vlogs used captions when viewing. We can therefore not state whether that could possibly be better than just reading or just watching. The main findings here were that using both video and reading of blog material can help students in their language acquisition.

However, Arndt and Woore (2018) found that there were no significant vocabulary gains that came as a result from using social media. On the other hand, it is still interesting to implement social media in the classroom as it can have a motivating factor and the students can take part in real interactions without having to travel far. Arndt and Woore noticed that the students seemed to be interested in engaging with any of the digital formats and with further research one might be able to draw a more correct conclusion in regard to vocabulary
acquisition and social media. Arndt and Woore describes how videos and blogs can be suitable for incidental learning due to the students engaging with the material with interest. Their findings were that the learning outcomes were a byproduct of students engaging with material that they have an initial interest in, in this case they are familiar with the format and will find it interesting to use something that they are familiar with. By using something familiar, the students might find it easier to engage with the assignment and furthermore it will lead to students wanting to enhance their ESL knowledge to be able to use the formats to the full extent.

In regard to how social media can motivate students in their vocabulary acquisition process, Dörnyei (1998) among others indicated that motivation is a large part of students' vocabulary acquisition. Motivation is what can make or break a student's possibilities of acquiring a language. For this reason, it is important that teachers support students to feel motivated in their language learning process. Using social media in the classroom can certainly be a tool for teachers to motivate students in the classroom. Social media is something students use frequently, which might result in the process of learning feeling more familiar and not something that is tied down to a traditional lecture structure.

Sorensen (2013) noted that social media could work as a means for motivation, yet it is important for teachers to know how to properly implement technology in the classroom. In her work, Sorensen found that students highly enjoy and value technology and its role in their lives and furthermore discusses how technology is found to play a large part in language learning. Many students today interact with the English language outside of the classroom, specifically through social media platforms. Sorensen found that the students' attitudes towards technology is what really determines to what extent the usage of social media might be beneficial. The students' enjoyment and overall attitude towards technology works as a motivating factor, they are interested to engage with material that they find familiar and interesting. Sorensen found that it came down to how the teacher implemented the program and worked with it that determined how the students felt about the usage of technology in the classroom.

Dörnye (1998) describes motivation as an important part of the process of learning anything and by using something familiar it could further increase the student’s motivation. Sorensen (2013) acknowledges that ‘digital natives’ use social media almost every day, therefore it can
be useful to use the social media format as a motivating tool due to the familiarity. However, it cannot be used as a motivating tool if the teachers do not properly use it. Sorensen's findings support the idea that technology can be useful when teachers implement it in a way that works for the students.
Conclusion

Technology and social media are fairly new, which means that there is room for further research on how to properly implement it in the classroom. Students today are familiar with the format social media provides, and the studies show that it can work as a motivating tool for ESL students. Some studies also show that there can be moderate improvement of language acquisition through the use of social media in the classroom. Social media can allow students to engage in conversations in the target language, which is shown to be the most efficient way to learn a language. Through the use of social media, they are also able to do it from the comfort of their own classroom. Therefore, the most important aspect social media can provide is the improved student motivation through the use of the familiar format of social media. This can certainly support teachers and as a byproduct make learning easier for the students.

However, there is a need for teachers to conduct research on how to properly implement social media in the classroom in order for it to become a valuable tool. Skolverket (2011) states that it is important that teachers use digital tools as a part of the teaching process, and to be able to use any teaching method properly, there is a need for teachers to conduct research by themselves. Furthermore, it is important to look at the possibility of using social media as an implicit learning tool. The studies that have been used indicate that there is indeed a possibility for this, however the research is still new, and hopefully more teachers will conduct their own research so that more definitive proof of it working on a larger scale can be discovered. This goes for the rest of our research as well; social media is still a new phenomenon that a small amount of research has been done on. Especially the subject of using social media in the modern-day classroom. More often than not, teachers find the use of phones to be more disturbing than helpful for the students' learning process. If more teachers can see the possibility that these new technologies can provide, hopefully we can soon find more ways to motivate our students to find language learning more enjoyable and therefore increase the students' vocabulary acquisition.
References


