English Vocabulary Learning in Upper Secondary School

Students’ Attitudes Toward English Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

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**Författare:** Olsson, Helena

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**Abstract:** Acquiring and extending one’s vocabulary is of significant importance for the L2 learner. In order to maximize the learning there are several methods to choose from. This study examines upper secondary school students’ attitudes toward vocabulary teaching and learning. This is done by using a qualitative data collection method in the form of questionnaires. The results show that both students and teachers agree that focus should be placed on a more varied vocabulary teaching with a strong emphasis on context-based learning and written exams. Furthermore, the result display that students wish for a higher degree of context-based learning but when it comes to assessment, they prefer non-contextual testing methods.

The results of the study can be useful for both future teachers as well as teachers who are already working in upper secondary school, as they could provide some guidance as to how students experience vocabulary learning.
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1. Introduction

"Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs."

- Pearl Strachan--

In 1980, Paul Meara characterized vocabulary learning as a “neglected aspect of language learning” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:96). Now, more than twenty years later, the scenario looks quite different. Today, the studies being carried out on vocabulary acquisition are extensive and there are constantly new approaches evolving on how to improve and maximize students' learning abilities.

“The English language is estimated to have anywhere from 100,000 to one million words, depending on how words are counted” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:96) but in order to communicate in a language effectively the learner only has to master 20,000 words (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

In order to obtain these 20,000 words, teachers and learners have to make a choice, deciding which method/methods to use in the word acquisition process. There are various methods available for language teachers to work with, in order to increase and develop the students’ vocabulary. Therefore, it is of interest to study students’ views, thoughts and ideas on vocabulary acquisition, in order to know how teachers can contribute to optimizing their students' learning experience.

In this paper, data on vocabulary teaching and learning strategies collected by means of questionnaires from student groups in the upper secondary school by use of questionnaires will be analyzed, compared and contrasted with the findings within the groups as well as between them.
1.1. Aim
This essay focuses on upper secondary school students’ attitudes towards L2 vocabulary learning. First, it examines the students’ general opinion regarding vocabulary learning. Secondly, it investigates what part the students’ gender plays in regard to their attitude towards vocabulary learning. Thirdly, the study discusses the attitudes of students at two separate course-levels and attempts to establish if course progression influences L2 students’ attitudes toward vocabulary learning.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Acquisition and learning
Acquisition and learning are two terms in second language teaching established by Stephen Krashen. Language acquisition refers to a subconscious process which happens informally. According to Krashen (in Hoffman & Goodman, 2009) acquisition requires meaningful real interaction in the target language where the learner is an active partaker. When working with acquisition the focus is put on the communicative act and increasing the learners self-confidence. Furthermore, language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the target language, but they develop a sense for correctness and develop skills in spoken language without theoretical knowledge.

Language learning on the other hand is the product of more formal instructions i.e. what happens in the classroom. When working with learning the learner receives information about the grammatical rules of the target language. Those rules, through a conscious process, are transformed into conscious knowledge about the language (Hoffman & Goodman, 2009).

According to Krashen and Terrell (1995), affective vocabulary activities may involve the use of certain grammatical structures. However, vocabulary activities are not designed to”teach” that structure. “The same is true for vocabulary; activities are not necessarily” vocabulary builders”.

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Students' attention is not on vocabulary learning per se but on communication, on the goal of an activity” (Krashen & Terrell 1983:156).

2.2. Vocabulary teaching methods

According to Milton (2001), previously conducted studies examining whether presenting students with large amounts of vocabulary might be counterproductive have shown that even the most proficient learner can be overwhelmed by a large amount of new vocabulary presented, resulting in a lack of learning. Milton (2001) argues that by reducing the amount of words, learning can be improved. Furthermore, it may be of importance for L2 teachers to have a basic knowledge of how the memory and memorization work. By gaining better awareness regarding this, teachers may better maximize the effectiveness of their vocabulary teaching (Moras, 2001).

Since vocabulary learning is considered to be an essential part of acquiring a language, it is imperative that both learners and teachers find a strategy that suits them. Research has revealed that relying on only one vocabulary teaching method, is not the best alternative when striving to optimize the learning of new vocabulary (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). According to Milton (2001) the input students receive needs to be varied in order for them to develop a vocabulary that consists of diverse categories of words (Milton, 2001). Empirical evidence (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000) also indicates that drawing connections between various reading materials and oral language in different contexts seem to have an effect on the student’s ability to learn new words. One additional feature that plays a central role when acquiring new vocabulary is how frequently the learner is exposed to the specific word. Nation observes that in order to learn a word, the student must have experienced many meaningful encounters with the given word, sometimes up to as many as 16 times (Nation, 2006). Furthermore, for certain learners it might take up to 30 encounters before they recognize the word in a new context or in fluent speech.
However, focus cannot be put on varied input alone, but it also needs to be on practice. One theory as to why words are not learned is that “information falls into disuse unless it is activated fairly regularly” (Gairns & Redman, 1986:89). In other words, we need to practice what we learn or the newly acquired input will gradually fade from our memory and ultimately disappear. Consequently, it is of important that teachers create multi-faceted experiences in order for the student to acquire new words and increase the depth of the vocabulary that has already been learnt (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). The National Reading Panel has issued a list consisting of different guidelines that teachers should pay attention to in order to create a multi–faceted leaning environment:

1. Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly.
2. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important.
3. Learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning.
4. Vocabulary tasks should be restructured when necessary.
5. Vocabulary learning should entail active engagement in learning tasks.
6. Computer technology can be used to help teach vocabulary.
7. Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning.
8. How vocabulary is assessed and evaluated can have differential effects on instruction.
9. Dependence on a single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning.

(National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000)

This list presents factors that language teachers should try to keep in mind when structuring their vocabulary teaching. In the following section, a number of teaching methods being practiced in today’s schools are explained.

2.2.1. Word-lists

A widespread method of teaching vocabulary is the use of word-lists. This method provides the student with new vocabulary in a list form. These lists are often connected to a text,
providing a context for the words. When working with word-lists one approach is to isolate the words from any context and just provide the translation of the words in question, where the teacher never asks the learners to use the words in a context of a text.

According to Nation (1990), there are advantages with using word-lists as a teaching method. One of the benefits is that the student may acquire a large number of words in a comparatively short time. There are two factors that contribute to making the learning more efficient is one if the foreign word-form is associated with a word in the learner’s native tongue, rather than with a foreign synonym or definition. Secondly, in order to maximize the learning, each word-form and its translation should be put on a small card with the foreign word on one side and the translation on the other. These two strategies have proven to be more effective than having students write them in a book or on a sheet of paper (Nation, 1990).

### 2.2.2. Learning vocabulary through reading

Another alternative way of acquiring vocabulary is through extensive reading. Researchers as well as teachers, agree on the fact that reading helps learners to significantly expand their vocabulary. “Reading is important, because comparisons of large corpora show that written texts are richer in lexis than spoken ones” (Horst, 2005). According to the National Reading Panel (2000), using extensive reading is considered to be one of the best ways of presenting vocabulary in a rich context. It is argued that by using authentic texts, a more profound vocabulary teaching can be performed then by teaching isolated words without any context.

Another method of teaching reading is to let the learner guess the meaning of a word entirely from its context. The aim of this method is for the student to be able to make qualified assumptions about the meaning of a word, just by using the context provided. By working with context-based vocabulary learning, teachers can encourage students to” develop different strategies for inferring the meaning of the new word from the context in which they occur” (Nunan1991). Nation (2001) argues that learning from context is a form of incidental learning
that occurs when reading extensively, listening to a story being told, watching TV or taking part in a conversation and should therefore be used as a complement to other methods. Furthermore, in order to “maximize the student’s learning, the teacher should encourage students to read as much as possible, and also provide them with exercises involving guessing from context” (Nation, 2001:250).

Studies have also shown that in order to increase the quantity of new vocabulary through reading, the quantity of text used has to be quite extensive (Nation, 2001:149). Moreover, the ideal way of working with a text is to link exercises to the text, enabling the teacher to check the comprehension-level of the student (Nation, 2001).

An important factor when working and succeeding with this method is for teachers to have a good knowledge of the learners’ current vocabulary size in order to find appropriate reading material that will contain the optimal ratio of both known as well as unknown words (Nation, 2001). Milton talks about factors such as “availability, learnability, and words that are opportunistically available or related to the learner’s level, needs or interests” (Milton, 2001:195) which are to be taken into consideration in the process of selecting adequate material.

Consequently, words that should be learned cannot be selected based on the teachers’ choice of unknown texts, but need to be established in the learners’ actual knowledge. This requires that the teacher, prior to selecting the teaching-material, assesses the learner’s level of language proficiency.

In order to correctly infer the meaning of a word, the reader needs a number of clues that provide sufficient information for understanding the text. Examples of clues can be “grammar, punctuation, definition, contrast, connectives, reference words, word analysis and the learner’s experiences and common sense” (Nation, 2001:232). The next stage is to look at
the word’s immediate context and then to take a broader view of how the clause containing the word relates to other clauses, sentences, or paragraphs. However, Nation (1990) states that this way of working, using different stages, is only used in order to get the inexperienced students to develop their skills as efficient readers. Once they have become more experienced readers, these steps are no longer required (Nation, 1990). One of the advantages of this method, it is argued is that not only does incidental learning occur, but there are also the additional benefits from learning through context, such as the improvement of grammatical knowledge, the understanding of text structure, improved reading skills and also the experience of how wonderful it might be to read (Nation, 2001).

However, in other studies (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) argue that there is a problem when learning vocabulary through context-based reading. Factors such as intonation, shared psychological surroundings as well as body language, are all features that written texts lack. Beck et al., (2002) state that even though written texts lack important features, new words can be learnt through reading. However, it is argued that the amount and diversity are not particularly substantial. Furthermore, the learner has to have multiple encounters with the words before learning can be fully accomplished. According to studies of vocabulary and reading, out of 100 new unfamiliar words found while reading, as few as 5 to 15 will be learnt (Beck et al., 2002). Beck et al, also point to the fact that students who are considered somewhat weak, rarely participate in any extensive reading activities or choose literature that challenges them in any way.

2.2.3. Dictionary use when learning vocabulary

Many studies (Prichard, 2008) have shown that extensive reading helps to improve learners’ reading comprehension and can even lead to improved lexical development. Prichard also states that teachers who tend to focus on traditional grammar translation methods, more often encourage their learners to look up words in a dictionary as a help to decoding the text.
However, teachers using on a more communication based approach, more often emphasize the importance of understanding the central points and the information needed in order to complete a follow up task, rather than pointing out the necessity of understanding each word (Prichard, 2008).

When using extensive reading to acquire vocabulary, looking up words using a dictionary is considered an effective method for learning vocabulary by many teachers and students. Studies focusing on dictionary use have been performed, using comprehension results post reading, from students where one group used a dictionary and the other did not. In these studies, contrasting results are revealed, however, one conclusion that can be drawn, is that dictionary use can facilitate comprehension. Thus, it is argued that rather than discussing whether dictionaries should be used, or not, the discussion needs to center around how to optimize learners’ use of dictionaries (Prichard, 2008). Nation (1991) argues that teachers must keep in mind that the outcome of using dictionaries to acquire vocabulary is dependent on the learner’s background and ability to relate to the text.

Furthermore, studies support that learners are more likely to find the accurate definition of a word in a dictionary, than by guessing from context. Prichard (2008) states that it can be assumed that if the use of dictionaries can increase comprehension, there is also a possibility that it “may lead to incidental learning of unknown words” (Prichard, 2008:3). However, Hirsh and Nation (2001) argue that in order for incidental vocabulary learning to take place, the learner needs to be familiar with up to as much as 98% of the running words in the text which is a level of proficiency that is reached only by a small percentage of the students (Prichard 2008). To obtain this level of learning is to many students too time consuming. However, Prichard (2008) presents a solution to the problem In order to eliminate the time consuming element teachers might provide the students with reading material which has
marginal glosses integrated into the document, and therefore enable them to work with
dictionaries while reading in a more efficient way.

Prichard suggests that one approach to working with dictionaries might be through selective
use. When working with selective dictionary use it is recommended that students focus on the
most frequently used words in the text or a passage. These words are vocabulary that cannot
be guessed at from the context and therefore need to be looked up

2.2.4. Acquiring vocabulary through the media and the computer
In the last decade, the media and the Internet have evolved rapidly and are now a significant
part of society. The media provides both teachers as well as students with many opportunities
on a daily basis to hear and read authentic material in the L2 and use this in language
teaching. For the language teacher the new technology has revealed new possibilities as to
how teaching can be performed. This enables the teacher to access a wide range of different
material such as newspapers radio and television broadcasts. Lekakos et al. (2008) argue that
television, soap operas, films, and news reports offer the learner a rich variety of language
experiences. However, Lekakos et al., (2008) emphasize, that teachers when using television
as a teaching-tool have to be aware that students can consider television as mainly a fun
activity and not an alternative teaching method. Lekakos et al., (2008) state that in comparison
to other media and platforms, television has come to be seen as inferior and been labeled as
leisure and has therefore been underused in the language classroom.

In a study examining the effects of television on vocabulary acquisition, Pemberton’s (2008)
results showed that in order to fully expand the vocabulary using television, the learner needs
to have access to a transcript of the TV series to maximize his/her learning.

In addition, there is the issue of whether teachers should provide subtitles for the movies
being screened. Using subtitles for watching movies or television programs provides the
learner with some support as to comprehension and retention. Koskinen et al. as cited in Pemberton (2006) argue that captioned television can be utilized as an effective instructional tool in learning vocabulary. Furthermore, studies also indicate that learners viewing programs with an L2 audio track but with subtitles in the L1 language can lead to incidental learning (Pemberton, 2006). However, Lipsitz et al. (2006) claim that as television programs and movies produced in the USA have come to dominate the global scene, and the effectiveness of using these programs for teaching vocabulary is slightly limited due to the prevalence of fragmented sentences. Thus, the language level in these programs does not serve as a learning opportunity for those students aiming going on to higher education and is only suitable for the learners at a lower level (Lipsitz et al. 2006). Lipsitz et al. state that research has shown that American TV-programs airing on prime time only used a limited number of different words about 4000. According to Lipsitz, in order for a TV program to help build new vocabulary, it needs to use more than 10,000 words.

One additional way to acquire vocabulary is through the use of a computer. The NRP (2000) argue that, “multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Learning in rich contexts, incidental learning, and use of computer technology all enhance the acquisition of vocabulary” ([NRP], 2000).

The National Reading Panel (2000) observes that a number of studies have established that the use of computers in vocabulary instruction is more effective than traditional methods, and that particular, the possibility of using hypertext is an advantage. Through the Internet, the student may also easily access magazines, television, radio, blogs and discussion-boards (Murphy& Hurd, 2005). By using these different sources, students can get a clear picture of

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1 Highlighted text that links to underlying definitions or supporting or related text, almost like an electronic footnote
how the target language might differ in various countries and contexts, and make his/her own contribution, to discussions for example (Murphy & Hurd, 2005)

3. **Assessing vocabulary**
As stated in the Introduction, teachers’ awareness regarding the importance of vocabulary teaching and methods has increased. Accordingly, interest in assessing students’ vocabulary has followed the increasing development of teaching strategies. Developing effective assessment methods has to be considered as a high priority when working with language acquisition, as words are the essential building blocks that a learner needs to have in order to form larger units such as paragraphs, sentences and texts. Thus, as argued by Read (2001) vocabulary, from various points of view, is considered to be a highly important area within language teaching. In order to monitor learners’ knowledge, appropriate tests need to be performed, to determine whether students’ word knowledge is adequate in terms of meeting their need to communicate. For the majority of L2 learners, acquiring a large amount of words is essential when learning a new language, as reflected in students showing a strong inclination to memorize extensive lists of L2 words (Read, 2001). Read argues that measuring vocabulary knowledge might seem easy and straightforward in the sense that there are ready made vocabulary lists with a fixed set of words accessible to teachers. These lists are most often used as a basis for multiple-choice tests and are expedient for teachers to use as they are easy to write and to score, saving teachers a substantial amount of time. However, recent research has shown that vocabulary testing should move away from multiple-choice testing toward a more communicative approach. Focus should not be on whether the learner knows one correct meaning of a word but rather on “tasks simulating communication activities that the learners are likely to be engaged in outside the classroom” (Read, 2001:5). When using a performance-based test, writing, speaking and reading samples are selected and judged by the teacher. Moreover, the samples should be based on real life situations (McNamara, 2000).
However, before the actual assessing can be performed, it is necessary to determine what the goal of vocabulary teaching is. Additionally, the teacher should, when working with assessment, consider what criteria for knowing a word he/she will use. “For example, a learner may be able to supply a synonym for a word but not know how to use it, or understand the context in which it appears but be unable to express its meaning” (Beck et al., 2002:95).

4. Methodology and data
Questionnaires were used as the research method for this essay. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine students’ views on vocabulary teaching. The questionnaire was constructed in order to examine Upper secondary students’ general view on the matter, including questions concerning suggestions for alternative teaching strategies and to find out how comfortable students are with their current vocabulary teaching.

The 74 participating respondents aged 16-18 are studying at a Swedish upper secondary school located in a small sized town. The respondents are enrolled in vocational programs: Construction, Hotel and Restaurant, Child and Recreation, Vehicle, Business and Administration, Industry, Food, Media and Health Care programs as well as the Theoretical Natural Science, Social Science programs have various socioeconomic backgrounds. As this school practices a system where English classes are based on the students language level at the beginning of the course, the classes are a combination made up of different programs and the majority of the students at the school take the A course as well as the B course. There is also an optional C course available at the school for those students who wish to improve further their proficiency in English. However, for this study, only students from the A and B-course were chosen for examination and comparison, since the A and B-course, since opposed to the C courses, provide respondents with backgrounds that are more diverse, regarding language knowledge and ambitions.

2 Apendix 1
For the study, 74 students were randomly chosen by four English teachers at the school. The questionnaires were given to the teachers with no additional instructions other than to hand them out to as many of their students as possible.

Out of the 74 participating students, 37 originate from the A course and 37 from the B course. 33 were female and 41 were male. The questionnaire consisted of ten open-ended questions dealing with the students’ opinions on and experiences of vocabulary learning and teaching. The questions were selected based on previously conducted research on vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, by using open-ended questions, the expectation was that the received answers would be more elaborate; the respondents were accordingly, presented with additional space to express themselves. One additional factor that played a major role when selecting open-ended questions was the difficulty in foreseeing the range of possible answers that could occur (Dörnyei, 2002). Furthermore, the questionnaires were to be answered anonymously, since the responses were more likely to be honest when there was no possibility of identifying the respondents (Dörnyei, 2002). Nevertheless since one aim with this essay was to examine what part the students’ gender plays concerning their attitude towards vocabulary learning, the students were asked to state their gender on the questionnaire. The majority of the participating students provided answers to all of the questions. However, the answers given varied in their degree of elaboration, providing a wide range of material to analyze.

In the analyses and result section, data relevant to the aim of the thesis will be presented and discussed. The collected data has been sorted and categorized according to gender and course level. Furthermore, selected citations submitted by the students are incorporated into the result as a way of clarifying the material.
5. Data analysis and results

5.1. How do students prefer to learn new vocabulary?

When examining and analyzing the collected data, it was shown that all the participating students considered it imperative to learn new words in order to improve their language skills. Furthermore, the collected data revealed that in the experience of the students, words, which are taught during lessons and homework, are not fully memorized. Several students stated that “words just stay until the tests are done, then I forget them”. According to the data, several students maintained that the number of words they are required to learn is too extensive and therefore, they only learn the words for the test. Moreover, there is no recapitulation of the newly learnt words after the vocabulary tests have taken place. The absence of repetition is, as previously observed by Gairns and Redman (1986), and also argued by the students in this study, one reason as to why words are not learned. Furthermore, the students state that in their current English courses they are not given opportunities to practice and actively use new vocabulary.

![Pie chart showing how students prefer to learn new words]

**Figure 1**
The data also disclosed that when stating their opinion on how they prefer to learn new words, students’ answers varied in range as seen in Figure 1. As observed by both the NRP (2000) and Milton (2009), it is imperative that the input students receive be varied in order for them to develop their knowledge and skills. The students in this study stated that if they were to use diverse media sources, they believed that their vocabulary would increase in a more effective way as the computer can provide a varied selection of both spoken as well as written texts. This is also conveyed by the National Reading Panel, (2000) who state that drawing connection between various reading material and oral language in different contexts seem to have a positive effect on the student’s ability to learn new words.

One of the methods preferred by a majority of the students was learning through movies/computer and books, all of which studies have shown to be excellent sources of input. As seen in Figure 1, students claimed that an efficient way to acquire new vocabulary would be by watching movies or television. However, additional comments also revealed that they considered watching movies to be an entertaining activity that does not demand as much effort on their part. This is a reaction that is also brought up by Leakos et al. (2008) (see section 2.1.4) who state that in comparison to other media and platforms, television by some students and teachers has come to be seen as inferior and labeled as leisure. Consequently, teachers have to thoroughly plan and carry out activities involving movies and television, as well as presenting opportunities such as interactive communication and language labs. Furthermore, it is also important that language teachers acknowledge that in order for words to be learnt, the viewing should be complemented by transcripts and preparatory work.

According to The National Reading Panel (2000), a number of studies have established that the use of computers in vocabulary instruction is more effective than traditional methods. Students stated that they prefered working with the computer since they had easy access to online dictionaries where they both could hear the pronunciation as well as see authentic
examples of the word in sentences. Furthermore, one student argued that using a computer for vocabulary training would be an effective resource when learning new words, as the computer programs provided by the school also allow the student to hear the words being pronounced. In addition to the benefit of actually hearing the words, several programs provide a selection of exercises, for example, fill in the gap (a text where one word is left out) and word puzzles which students considered to be positive features when using a computer in vocabulary learning. Additionally, by having access to a computer, the teacher has the opportunity to make use of the Internet and its resources. As stated by the students and by Murphy and Hurd (2005) (see chapter 2.1.4), by using the Internet various sources of input and different language samples can easily be accessed.

One additional feature that plays a central role when acquiring new vocabulary is how frequently the learner is exposed to the specific word. As stated previously by Lightbown and Spada, it can take up to as many as 30 encounters before a learner is familiar with a new word. When questioned on how well they were currently learning new words a majority of the students answered “Not at all”, with additional comments to the effect that the main reason for the discontent was the low number of lessons per week. Consequently, if the number of lessons per week is too few, the 30 encounters will be hard to achieve and optimal conditions for acquisition will not be reached. Therefore, the teacher has to find alternatives in order to allow the students to be exposed to authentic language samples, as well as exclusively use the target language when teaching and interacting with them.

One additional activity that students claim plays a significant role in vocabulary enrichment is through extensive reading, particularly reading fiction. Consequently, L2 learners acquire not only vocabulary, but also correct spelling in an effective way while receiving comprehensive input. As stated by the National Reading Panel (2000), extensive reading is considered to be one of the best ways of presenting vocabulary in a rich context. It is also argued by the NRP
that by using authentic texts, a more profound vocabulary teaching can be performed than when learning isolated words without any context.

5.2. What sorts of words would students like to learn?

According to the data shown in Figure 2, students would like to learn words that are useful to them, indicating that they rate the ability to use the words in real communicative situations highly.

Furthermore, students stated that they would like to acquire words connected to their future work careers, such as phrases they could use when serving at a restaurant or when working at a car-repair garage. As previously stated by Hurd and Murphy (2005), in order to increase students’ active and passive vocabulary, it is essential that the teaching provide varied input, exposing the learner to different situations and contexts. The importance of varied input is also brought up by Milton who talks about factors such as “availability, learnability, and words that are opportunistically available or related to the learner’s level, needs or interests” (Milton, 2001:195), pointing to the fact that the words have to be chosen based on learners skills and interest in order to be learned. As Figure 2 shows, 14% of the students stated that
they would like to focus on difficult words, meaning words that would render a high grade at the end of the course.

5.3. Assessment

When asked how they preferred to be tested on newly learnt words the most common answer was (see Figure 3), “by written tests” whilst a minority of respondents suggested “by oral context-based tests”. The written tests at this school are generally created in the form of word-lists, where students are requested to provide the correct meaning of a word, either in the native language or in the target language, without including any context at all. Furthermore, students stated that they would prefer to be tested on fewer words more frequently rather than, as now, quite infrequently on a large amount of words.

These comments combined with the collected data show a contradiction as students claim that one of the most significant features when acquiring new vocabulary is being able to distinguish in which contexts words can be used, yet when asked how they wish to be assessed, the answers indicated that they still prefer word-list based tests. Word-list
methods of assessment do not provide a complete testing in terms of varied context-based learning situations. According to previously conducted studies, assessment methods are tending to move away from word-list assessments towards a more communicative assessment.

5.3. How well do students learn words in their current courses?
As shown in Figure 4 a majority of the students claimed that they learn new words well in their current English course. However, as Figure 4 shows, 22% of the students stated that they did not learn new vocabulary at all and the additional comments made by those students indicate that the number of lessons combined with the large amount of words are the two major reasons why this is so.

![How well do you learn new words in your current English course? (All)](chart)

5.4. Dictionary use
The data revealed that students’ found learning vocabulary through reading to be a satisfactory method. As this method is strongly associated by some teachers with students’ ability and willingness to look up unknown words in a dictionary while reading, the question “do you look up words in a dictionary while reading” was of interest. Data indicated that students rarely use a dictionary to look up unknown words, leading them to guess the meaning
of the unknown word from the context. As illustrated in Figure 5, 38% of the students stated that they occasionally look up words they do not know. Several of the respondents also claimed that the main reason for not looking-up words while reading was laziness, as they consider it too time-consuming. The time aspect of dictionary use can, as argued by Prichard, be managed by integrating marginal glosses. As a result, time spent on looking up words, which according to the students appears to be the main reason for not using a dictionary, can be reduced. Furthermore, students’ additional comments showed that they found it important to look up certain words in order to understand the context of the text, a method known as “selective dictionary use.”

As shown in Figure 5, 28% of the students argued that they felt no need to look up words while reading, since as they claimed they knew all the words. This comment is interesting as Beck et al. (2008) also state (see section 2.1.2) that one core issue when working with vocabulary is that students in need of developing their vocabulary rarely engage in extensive reading, nor do they choose books containing a larger number of unfamiliar words that challenge them by

![Pie chart showing the breakdown of responses to the question: Do you look-up words while reading? (All courses) Yes 34%, Sometimes 38%, No 28%](Image)
Moreover, the data revealed that the participating students felt no need to look up words, as they used the context as a guide to what the word could mean.

As previously argued by Nation (1991), teachers must keep in mind that the outcome of using dictionaries to learn vocabulary is dependent on the learner’s background and ability to relate to the text. Therefore, the teacher has to take responsibility for providing the learner with appropriate literature in order to present the learner with a challenge. Furthermore, in order to “maximize the student’s learning, the teacher should encourage students to read as much as possible, and also provide them with exercises involving guessing from context” (Nation, 2001:250).

5.5. Gender differences
As the respondents were asked to state their gender in the questionnaire, the data collected from the students could also be analyzed from a gender-oriented perspective. Out of 74 participating students, 41 were boys and 33 girls.

In general, (see Figure 6) boys and girls were equally pleased with their current situation and the teaching material being used. However, the girls stated that they would prefer a more diverse teaching method such as the one referred to by the NRP (2000) which states (see section 2.1.2) that “multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Learning in rich contexts, incidental learning, and use of computer technology all enhance the acquisition of vocabulary” ([NRP], 2000). Suggestions for various sources of input mentioned by the students were extended reading, music and movies, all of which are excellent bases for vocabulary acquisition. Students also argued that if teachers were to lower the demands on the students, more words would be acquired.
Furthermore, as shown in Figure 7, boys seem to agree that out of the numerous strategies they have come across so far when working with vocabulary learning, word lists and homework are the best methods. As Figure 7 shows, girls, alongside with boys consider word lists, movies and books to be key sources to increasing their vocabulary. Both boys and girls found the computer to be a useful resource when acquiring and working with vocabulary, stating that computers are excellent learning tools since they offer not only the Internet but numerous sources for both reading, as well as hearing English in various contexts.
Comparing the results concerning assessment, both boys and girls agreed that the numbers of words tested by exams are often too extensive and that if fewer words were given to be learned, the actual learning would not only increase but it would also be easier to learn and remember the previously learned words. In addition, both groups agree that the best way of learning vocabulary is through repetition that is later examined in the form of written tests. When asked about preferred assessment methods, a small group of students stated that they would prefer not to be tested at all. They stated that checking whether or not words were learnt was up to the students themselves and not a teacher related issue.

5.6. Differences between course levels
As the respondents were requested to state at what course level they are studying, it was possible to analyze the collected data from a progression perspective. The data showed that attitudes toward vocabulary learning between these two levels were not particularly varied with students in both the A and B course providing similar answers. One clear tendency that could be discerned was that the numbers of students displeased with their current vocabulary teaching were significantly higher in the B-course. From the collected
data and additionally supplied comments, the conclusion could be drawn that the main reason for this dissatisfaction was the insufficient number of English lessons per week. Moreover, students in the B-course, to a higher degree, wished to increase the use of English in the classroom in order to acquire words that are more practical and can be used in daily communication. In contrast to this, students in the A course expressed a desire to learn words that were referred to as difficult. This result may be seen as an indication that students, as the courses progress, value the ability to actually be able to use their acquired language knowledge to a higher degree.

![How do you want your teacher to test your word knowledge?](image)

As seen in figure 8, written exams are the preferred method of assessment in both the A and B courses. When comparing the two groups, it becomes evident that B course students seem less in favor of oral assessment than the students in the A course. These results support the observation that students prefer gradable assessments and exercises that later may be
incorporated in the students’ final grade. The students seem to believe that oral exams do not translate into a course grade in the same way as written assessments.

Comparing the data regarding dictionary use in the A and B course, can be seen in Figure 9, that a higher percentage in the A course than in the B course look up words they do not fully understand. However, in the B course a majority of the students stated that they only “sometimes” look up words, indicating that these students have a more selective approach to using a dictionary. This is probably a result of the increased understanding of written texts in the target language that the students have acquired in the A course.

![Figure 9](image.png)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was conducted in order to analyze upper secondary students’ attitudes toward vocabulary teaching. Moreover, the initial objective was to see whether any parallels between the two participating respondent-groups could be distinguished and if any conclusion regarding the role of gender could be drawn. In order to find the answers in both categories, a qualitative analysis was done using data was collected from a questionnaire distributed to students in year one and two in upper secondary school.
The data collected that the majority of the students in the study were content with their current form of vocabulary teaching. However, the respondents stated that they would prefer a more contextualized type of acquisition, as they pointed out the necessity of being able to use the words in the correct context. Moreover, the students studying at vocational programs stressed the importance of learning vocabulary connected to their future careers, something that they experienced as being neglected in their current courses.

The data also showed a contradiction in terms of opinions regarding the importance of context-based learning. The students claimed to favor a more context-based learning-approach during classes, but later stated that assessments should be conducted by using written tests that provide no context at all. One conclusion that might be drawn from that result is that students might know that the best ways to learn new words are through varied input and context-based learning. However, they are also aware of the fact that learning strategies involving a more context oriented learning are more time consuming and demand more effort on their part.

Furthermore, vocabulary-teaching methods preferred by students involve the use of modern sources such as the Internet, movies or music. As the data revealed, apart from using repetition and word-lists, modern media was the preferred method for learning new vocabulary. However, as previously studies as well as my own data showed, modern technology is considered by students to be a source of entertainment rather than instruction. Therefore, as observed by Lekakos et al., (2008) it is important for teachers using modern technology such as television, movies and computers to stress that these various sources of language input are not only an entertaining element in lessons but should be seen as adequate vocabulary teaching tools. Students’ state that by using these different sources combined with the course textbook, vocabulary learning can be more effective and that variety of input can be the optimal aid in learning new vocabulary as it provides variation in different areas of
proficiency. However, since the data was collected by using questionnaires, there was no opportunity to ask the students to expand on their answers where needed. In a future study a different method of collecting the data, such as interviews, would provide opportunities both to obtain answers that are more elaborate as well as to ask follow-up questions.

This study has found that most students seem to favor written exams in the form of multiple-choice questions. This result is somewhat surprising, as many recent studies have found that in order to optimize the learning, focus should be placed on various context-based, communicative tests, rather than multiple-choice exams that do not provide any context at all. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that it is extremely important for the teacher to find a way to motivate students to learn new vocabulary as well as to point out and present the benefits of different teaching methods and testing methods. The importance of making it clear to the students how different teaching methods work and what the various ways in which words are learnt cannot be stressed enough. Furthermore, this result could also be interpreted as reflecting a teacher related problem since the lack of time might be a major reason why teachers use multiple-choice tests. However, this is something that I have no data to support, though it would certainly be an interesting topic to study further.

The data used in this study also show that students have a clear idea of how they can use different sources of input in their language training though they lack the knowledge of how that input can be transformed into permanent knowledge in their memory. Moreover, the tendency seems to be that students in the A course preferred oral exams and that the students in the B course favored written assessments. This might be seen as an indication of different content in curriculums or a higher degree of stress regarding grades as several students in the study stated that they would like to focus on words necessary for achieving a high grade.
For future research it would be interesting to examine and compare students’ and teachers’ view on vocabulary learning strategies through interview, or to follow a small group of students for an entire course and monitor their vocabulary development.
References


Appendix

1. Hur viktigt tycker du att det är att lära sig nya ord?

2. Vilken sorts ord vill du lära dig?

3. Vilket sätt tycker du att du lär dig ord bäst på

4. Hur vill du att läraren skall kolla om du lärt dig orden?

5. Vad anser du om glosläxor?

6. När du läser en bok eller annan text, brukar du då slå upp ord som du inte förstår?

7. Vad tycker du om att använda sig av datorn för att lära sig nya ord

8. Är det viktigt att man lär sig hur man använder sig av nya ord dvs. hur och i vilka sammanhang du kan använda orden?
9. Hur väl tycker du att du lär dig nya ord i engelskundervisningen just nu?

10. Hur eller vad skulle du vilja förändra i undervisningen?