



# **A study on lexical inferencing**

**- To what extent, and in what ways, do pupils make use of the lexical inferencing strategies, learnt in school when they encounter an unknown English word in their spare time?**

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## Summary

**Background:** During our VFU (Workplace-based Education), we met a teacher, who worked with metacognitive strategies, and used a holistic, top-down approach with her pupils. The teacher had been working with them in this way for three years. We wanted to know how the pupils used lexical inferencing strategies they had learned about in school, in their spare time outside school.

**Purpose and aim:** The purpose of the study was to examine the use of lexical inferencing strategies and the aim was to find out whether pupils who had been encouraged to use lexical inferencing strategies in classroom teaching actually used these strategies when encountering unknown English words in their spare time.

**Method:** We used a qualitative, semi-structured group interview, with an interview guide approach as method to achieve descriptions of the lived world of our interviewees. Eighteen out of 24 pupils in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade class were interviewed. We conducted six interviews, since the pupils were interviewed in groups of three. During the process of data analysis four different categories of strategy use emerged.

**Results:** The results of our study showed that the pupils used the following strategies when encountering an English word outside school: avoidance, referring to another resource, inferencing from context and metalinguistic knowledge. The results also showed that even though the pupils are trained to use these strategies in school, they did not use them consistently in free time encounters with English language texts.

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Maria Helena Benko and Miriam Tunvald

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# 1. Introduction

One of the challenges faced by second language learners is to gain the ability to adopt a top-down approach, i.e. when the learner uses the knowledge that she/he already has together with the context when reading or listening to a text. Learners need to develop their receptive skills that enable them to go beyond the difficulties of individual words and to aim towards a holistic approach. Today, strategy training is promoted in schools, which is why we wanted to know if these strategies also are used outside school.

This study is about language learning and has a focus on vocabulary; therefore, we investigated the usage of lexical inferencing strategies, the main meaning of these strategies is inferring the meaning from the text itself and the information it provides. Lexical inferencing strategies are a form of metacognitive strategy. We chose a 9<sup>th</sup> grade where we knew that the teacher consciously had been working from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with lexical inferencing strategies. The teacher used a Learner Autonomy approach, i.e. the learner takes the whole responsibility for her/his learning, partly when it comes to the goals and content and partly when it comes to the different stages, which are achieved during the way to the goal.

We investigated if these pupils use lexical inferencing strategies that they have learned in school in their spare time outside school. We wanted to conduct research about if the pupils have automatized their knowledge about how they learn and if they apply this knowledge outside school when they encounter an English word they do not know.

There is a lot of research done on second language acquisition and metacognitive strategies conducted on adults or more advanced level students, but we have not found any research that has this angle of approach to lexical inferencing strategies outside school although we searched the ERIC database and the literature available. The STRIMS – project (Malmberg et al. 2000) that investigated strategy use in school is one example of research, which contains strategy use in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> grade as well as upper secondary school.

As teachers to be we are interested in finding out whether lexical inferencing strategies are of value to the pupils outside school as well. The Course Syllabus states that:

*The English language and other forms of culture from English-speaking countries are widely accessible in Swedish society. Pupils encounter today many variants of English outside school. They meet English in a variety of contexts: on TV, in films, in the world of music, via the Internet and computer games, in texts and via contacts with English-*

*speaking people. The subject of English provides both a background to and a wider perspective on the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today's international society. The subject covers both examining the meaning conveyed by language and making use of the richness and variety of English, which children and young people meet outside the school. (The Course Syllabus 2000)*

This refers to the notion of Lifelong Learning in the sense that the skills learnt in school have an application outside of school and in the learner's future life. This is relevant in the context of strategies for discovering the meaning of unknown English words, since pupils are going to come into increasing contact with them throughout the rest of their lives. According to the National Curriculum, a goal to strive towards is that the pupils acquire knowledge about the subjects in school in order to become educated and develop preparedness for life and should "... acquire good knowledge in school subjects and subject areas, to develop themselves and prepare for the future" (The National Curriculum 2000, p. 9). According to the National Curriculum, it is essential to prepare the pupils for Lifelong Learning through giving them the tools of effective strategies.

*The school's task of promoting learning presupposes that there is an active discussion in the individual school about concepts of knowledge, on what constitutes important knowledge today and in the future, as well as the development of the learning process itself. Different aspects of knowledge and learning are natural starting points for such a discussion. 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. The work of the school must therefore focus on providing scope for the expression of these different forms of knowledge as well as creating a learning process where they balance and interact with each other to form a meaningful whole for the individual pupil. (The National Curriculum 2000, p. 9)*

However, the STRIMS project (Malmberg et al. 2000) shows that pupils seem to lack effective strategies for vocabulary learning and decoding, and that strategy promotion is a very important, but perhaps neglected element in language teaching. "...many pupils say that they have never thought about their language learning earlier and that these types of questions have made them more aware of which strategies they use themselves" (Malmberg et al. 2000, p. 30, our translation). Therefore, we thought it would be interesting to study pupils that we

knew had worked with lexical inferencing strategies in school and examine if they also use them outside school.

## **2. Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of the study was to examine the use of lexical inferencing strategies and the aim was to find out whether 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who had been encouraged to use lexical inferencing strategies in classroom teaching actually used these strategies when encountering unknown words in spare time English language environments. Our research questions are: What sort of exposure do these pupils have to English outside school? What do these pupils do when they encounter a word they do not understand? How useful are these strategies outside school?

## **3. Previous research and theoretical points of departure**

In this section, we are going to provide a brief overview of the second language acquisition field as a background to our main area of focus. We have divided it into three main areas. The first area deals with the status of English in Sweden today, where we write about the influence of English, the STRIMS project, the National Evaluation 2003, a comparative study of English in eight European countries and research on spare time. The second area deals with second language acquisition in general, individual differences and the challenge of vocabulary in a more specific way. In the third area, we explore learning strategies, where we in detail deal with areas that are the focus of our study, namely metacognitive strategies and inferencing.

### **The status of English in Sweden today**

#### **The influence of English**

According to Josephson (2004), there are three different types of English influence in Sweden:

- loan words are imported,
- code switching is used, i.e. when the speaker shifts between English and Swedish in the same speaking or writing situation, and

- a change to English domains, i.e. English becomes the working language in certain areas.

Imported words expand the Swedish language with new opportunities for expression. The number of new words is not as many as people might think. In a daily paper, there are only 1 % loanwords. However, the number of loanwords might be 2 % in areas about IT, economy, popular culture and some sports, e.g. golf or basketball. There are also many words translated into Swedish that have an English origin, e.g. *mobile telephone* = 'mobiltelefon' and *search engine* = 'sökmotor' (Josephson 2004, p. 10).

Code switching is very common, especially among young people in informal situations, where they use English expressions to emphasize what they are saying, e.g. 'Take it or leave it!', and 'No problem!'. In a society where people have a good knowledge of English code switching is natural. Code switching is used to enhance prestige, to show that the speaker can communicate in a sophisticated manner and that the speaker can make use of the language resources she/he has.

A domain can be defined as a group of language situations that share crucial features: place, aim and purpose with the linguistic exchange, and relationship of the speakers. A domain can be a school, family, working life or sports. The risk of losing domains is the biggest within research, international companies and parts of the working life. Nevertheless, it is important that research is published in English to reach out to a bigger public. International cooperation demands a good knowledge of English, but Swedish has to exist side by side with English.

It could be argued that the English language cannot be regarded as foreign language in Sweden anymore. Today, English has the status of a second language, as 75 % of all Swedish adults are able to hold a conversation for everyday use (Josephson 2004).

### **Top-down and bottom-up approach**

These terms are normally used together with listening and reading comprehension. Each of them stands for a different process of understanding. Top-down uses a holistic starting point that relies on the learners' pre-knowledge and the use of context. Bottom-up uses word forms and relies on independent words and how they are put together into sentences. The advantage with the top-down approach is that the learner uses the context to create an understanding of the text. The bottom-up approach on the other hand is to decode one word at a time, which

does not give an understanding of the context if the decoding is unsuccessful (Tornberg 2000).

### **The STRIMS project**

The STRIMS project (Malmberg et al. 2000) is a unique longitudinal project about language learning strategies. This summary is concentrated on a general description of the project and the part that deals with vocabulary acquisition. The STRIMS project is mainly a qualitative investigation about how Swedish pupils think and what strategies they use when they work with tasks in a foreign language. The project is unique in the sense that it covers nine grades and includes the four most common languages in the Swedish school, namely English, German, French and Spanish. The investigations of English that took place covered mainly fourth to ninth grade while the investigations of German, French and Spanish took place in the upper secondary school.

As the research is based on qualitative methods and therefore limited to a certain number of pupils, the results are not possible to generalise to all pupils. The authors suggest that further research should concentrate on English in the last two grades in upper secondary school and the learning of German, French and Spanish in the compulsory school to reach a more complete picture of the strategies and language use in both compulsory school and upper secondary school.

In one part of the STRIMS project there are questionnaires on the pupils' thoughts about their own language learning where the researchers asked: "What do you do when you do not understand a word in a text that you are reading?" (Malmberg et al. 2000, p. 24, our translation). The pupils in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade answered that they use three different strategies:

1. look up the word in a dictionary directly,
2. use the context to understand the word, and
3. skip the word, but implicitly they understood the word by the context.

In the upper secondary school, the pupils mainly used the same strategies as the pupils in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. However, in one of the three classes in the upper secondary school there was a difference. They also used these strategies mentioned above, but the dominating strategy was number two, the use of context. They deferred looking up the word until they felt they had to, to understand the context. The pupils in this class gave the impression that they work very consciously with new words in the text. In addition to the context, they also said they use

other strategies such as "read the sentence before and after", "associate to similar words" and "mark the words and return to them later" (Malmberg et al. 2000, p. 25, our translation).

These questionnaires were also used with pupils who studied French, Spanish and German in the upper secondary school. The question to these pupils had another wording: "How do you do to understand unknown words in the text?" (Malmberg et al. 2000, p. 24, our translation). These pupils also used the three strategies mentioned above, but they also used a fourth strategy, namely comparing the unknown word with words in another language. In this part of the study, it was also possible to discover a distinguishing characteristic for pupils using several strategies. They adjust the strategies after the conditions. After one year when this questionnaire was used again, the pupils had even more insights about which strategies they use. The pupils proved to have a conscious and rational behaviour when they encountered unknown words. The researchers in this project assume that this behaviour at least partly was an effect of the training they had acquired.

These results provide evidence that the pupils in these classes used four different strategies to understand unknown words. The use of the strategies changed during the period of the study in the sense that it became less common to look up the word in a dictionary. Instead, pupils tried to understand the word from the context.

*Even here, we can see traces of conscious strategy training. It leads to that we also in this area want to recommend that you discuss how to use the different strategies with the pupils, e.g. the strategies here numbered from 1 to 4, and especially show which clues the context can give when the pupils want to understand the meaning of an unknown word. One should also point at the value in combining different strategies. Among other things, it can be useful for the pupils with the help of a dictionary, to confirm that the meaning of the word that they have come up with in the context actually has this meaning and other possible meanings. It can result in an expansion of the word and phrase arsenal. (Malmberg et al. 2000, p. 26, our translation)*

The researchers in the STRIMS project (Malmberg et al. 2000) recommend that teachers make the pupils conscious of different strategies as well as talk about how to combine them.

## **Studies about English outside school**

The report “*The National Evaluation of the Compulsory School 2003 – English*” (2005) from The National Agency for Education (Skolverket) describes an investigation representative for the whole country of Sweden about the current situation and tendencies of development in the subject of English in the 9<sup>th</sup> year in compulsory school. The investigation was carried out during the spring term 2003. It included a selection of about 7,000 pupils, (49, 7 % girls and 50, 3 % boys) and their 378 teachers (73 % female and 27 % male) in 120 schools. 85 % of the pupils were born in Sweden and had at least one parent who had Swedish as mother tongue.

The results of the report show tremendously positive attitudes according to both the pupils and the teachers. The teachers state that it is great fun to teach English and the pupils have great motivation to learn and they consider English the most useful subject. English gets the second highest ranking when it comes to the pupils’ ability to influence the content and the way of working. It is the subject where they learn the most and the subject that pupils would like more time for. Today, more pupils consider themselves able to read a book or understand directions for use in English, compared to ten years ago. The pupils feel a great safety with the language and they want and dare to use it to communicate both within and outside school. They consider themselves able to communicate with English speaking persons in different situations and to listen to and understand English in song texts and on TV. In spite of this, there are relatively many pupils who consider English difficult and therefore support from school is necessary.

“*English in eight European countries – an investigation of young people’s knowledge and opinions*” (Lagergren & Lund 2004), is a comparative study where Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden participated. In the study from 2004, 1, 431 pupils, 48 % boys and 52 % girls, in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade from different schools in Sweden participated. The National Agency for Education selected the pupils randomly. Approximately 10 % were born in another country than Sweden and/or had another mother tongue than Swedish.

The study shows that the Swedish pupils have not been able to learn English outside Sweden to any great extent. However, they have great opportunities to encounter English in other ways in the country and outside school. The pupils watch films where English is spoken on TV, video and at the cinema with or without a Swedish subtitle, they listen to a tremendous amount of music, in most cases with English texts, they play computer games in

English and they use the Internet many hours per week. Almost half the pupils say that they are exposed to English when they travel abroad. The study shows that English surrounds the great majority of the pupils in a very evident way. They have great opportunities to informal language acquisition. Less common though, is that pupils read English papers or books in paper editions, but one can assume that they read quite a lot when they use computers.

Lundahl (1998) has also conducted research on exposure to English in spare time. The research from 1994 shows that more than half of the 255 pupils in the intermediate level acquired at least 16 hours of English in their spare time every week. Lundahl also writes that the National Evaluation of English in the Compulsory School from 1992 showed that one third of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade students learned more or as much English in their spare time as in school. Most of them listened to English everyday, but only a few students read, wrote or spoke English outside school. Over the past ten years, this is something that has changed significantly.

## **Second language acquisition**

According to Ellis (1997), the systematic study of how people acquire a second language is quite a recent phenomenon, belonging to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ellis argues that perhaps it is not a coincidence, since “this has been a time of the ‘global village’ and the ‘World Wide Web’, when communication between people has expanded way beyond their local speech communities” (p. 3).

The term ‘second language acquisition’ needs an explanation: ‘Second’ refers to any language being learned after the mother tongue, e.g. when immigrants in Germany learn German. ‘Second’ should not be confused with ‘foreign’, since foreign language learning takes place in a country where it is not spoken every day, e.g. when learning French in Germany. Foreign language learning is a form of second language learning. Thus, Ellis defines second language (L2) acquisition as “the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom, and ‘Second Language Acquisition’ (SLA) as the study of this” (p. 3).

Description is one of the goals of SLA, whereas explanation of external and internal factors, which show why learners acquire an L2 the way they do, is another. According to Ellis, social milieu is one external factor. The opportunities learners have to speak and hear the language, as well as the attitudes towards the language are all influenced by social

conditions. Input is another external factor, which has to do with the samples of language the learner is exposed to. Input is needed to learn a language. Cognitive mechanisms that learners possess are internal factors and make it possible for them to draw information about the L2 from the input. When learners want to learn an L2 they already have a lot of knowledge that they bring with them:

1. they have already learned their mother tongue, which helps them when they learn an L2,
2. general knowledge of the world helps them to understand input, and
3. communication strategies which they possess help them make use of their L2.

Ellis (1997) also states that there is a possibility that learners know how language works in general, and that this knowledge helps them learn. Language aptitude is also an internal factor, and it deals with a learner's natural ability for learning an L2, which is why some learners find it easier to learn an L2 than others do.

According to Ellis, different kinds of learning are involved in L2 acquisition:

1. learners acquire parts of language structure, i.e. formulas, e.g. 'Can I help you?', which is a fixed expression = 'item learning', and
2. learners acquire rules, i.e. different linguistic features that are used in various contexts with different functions, e.g. the verb 'can' can be followed by different verbs and have diverse functions, e.g. ability and permission = 'system learning' (p. 13).

Both these kinds of learning and how they interact must be considered in the explanation of L2 acquisition. Ellis concludes: "The goals of SLA, then, are to describe how L2 acquisition proceeds and to explain this process and why some learners seem to be better at it than others" (p. 6).

### **Individual differences in second language acquisition**

SLA acknowledges that there are individual differences in L2 acquisition. According to Lightbown & Spada (2006), many people believe that individual differences, which are intrinsic, foretell if we are going to succeed or fail in our language learning. These beliefs can be based on one's own experience or on other people's experiences we get in touch with. Characteristics that are believed to give success in language learning are the age at which the learner begins learning the language, intelligence, motivation, aptitude and an extrovert personality.

Lightbown & Spada argue that if aptitude includes abilities that help the learner learn quickly it is possible to present a hypothesis: if a learner has high aptitude, she/he will learn faster and easier, while other learners have to persist to become successful. Lightbown & Spada also refer to Skehan (1989), who argues that even if learners are successful in learning a language, it does not mean that they possess all the abilities of aptitude. The strengths and weaknesses of these abilities will determine the learners' success in different types of educational programs.

Personal characteristics also affect L2 learning. It is necessary for a learner to take risks to progress in the language learning, but the personal characteristic of inhibition deters risk taking. This problem particularly affects teenagers because they are self-conscious in a way that younger learners are not.

Another personal characteristic is anxiety, i.e. stress, nervousness and worry, which plays an important role if it intervenes with the learning process. All anxiety is not bad though. It can have a positive effect, even simplify learning, e.g. if the learner feels a little anxious before a test, it can give the learner the right motivation and focus to succeed.

Related to anxiety is also the willingness to communicate in an L2. This willingness is often affected by how formal the situation is, what the topic is and how many people are present. Lightbown & Spada point out that some researchers argue that learners who have the willingness to communicate also do it because

*their prior language learning has led to development of self-confidence, which is based on a lack of anxiety combined with a sufficient level of communicative competence, arising from a series of reasonably pleasant [second language] experiences.*  
(Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 62)

Lightbown & Spada (2006) write that many researchers have the opinion that personality has an important influence on a learner's success in learning a language, but it is not the personality alone that stands for the success; instead it is how it combines with other factors and in that way contributes to L2 learning.

The way learners approach L2 learning is affected by age. Some researchers argue that adults learn more quickly in the beginning and then slow down, whereas children begin more slowly but end at a higher level. Other factors that affect the learners' approach are the occasions to learn and what motivation and individual differences in aptitude learners have. All these factors affect the success as well as the speed of learning.

Motivation involves the attitude that impacts on the degree of effort learners make when they learn an L2. Ellis (1997) lists four kinds of motivations that have been identified:

- Instrumental motivation: “The degree of effort a learner puts into learning an L2 as a result of the desire to achieve some functional goal (e.g. to pass an exam)” (p. 140).
- Integrative motivation: “The degree of effort a learner puts into learning an L2 through an interest in a desire to identify with the target-language culture” (p. 140).
- Resultative motivation: “The motivation that learners develop as a result of their success in learning an L2” (p. 143).
- Intrinsic motivation: “The degree of effort a learner makes to learn an L2 as a result of the interest generated by a particular learning activity” (p. 140).

Ellis suggests that since motivation is a very complex phenomenon these four types should be seen as complementary, especially because learners can be motivated in more than one way at a time. He also states that motivation is dynamic in nature, which means that a learner’s motivation can vary from one moment to another depending on the task or learning context.

All these individual differences have an impact on how a learner uses lexical inferencing strategies when encountering a new word. Learners with a high aptitude probably have more success in using lexical inferencing strategies when encountering new words. Personal characteristics, such as risk taking, anxiety and willingness to communicate have an impact on what the pupil does when she/he encounters a new word. Age affects the way pupils deal with lexical inferencing strategies, since it demands a certain maturity. Furthermore, motivation is a crucial aspect on if the pupil is anxious to know the unknown word.

### **The challenge of vocabulary acquisition and the learner’s encounter with new words**

Vocabulary acquisition is complex as it is extremely time-consuming and requires more than just memorising words. Tornberg (2000) asked pupils how they usually learn words, and most pupils answered: “I cover the left column in the wordlist and test myself. Then I cover the right column and test myself the other way” (Tornberg 2000, p. 91, our translation). On Tornberg’s question, what they learn by doing that the pupils answered: “you learn to translate the word, to spell it (if the learning is written), you learn to pronounce it (if the learning is oral) and then you do not learn anything else” (Tornberg 2000, p. 91, our translation). The problem with this is that the pupils do not learn the words in a context. The thing is that many pupils still learn words with this method today. Pupils spend hours and

hours, week after week, year after year learning by using this wordlist model. Nevertheless, pupils have the feeling that they know too few words. According to Tornberg, it is crucial to make a change.

Tornberg (2000) argues that word comprehension is a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes. To teach the pupils to use their pre-knowledge and the context must be more effective than if the pupils learn a basic vocabulary first. Regarding word comprehension Tornberg (2000) emphasizes that pupils must be taught to use their top-down strategies, i.e. to rely on their pre-knowledge and to use clues available to understand unknown words in a text.

The learner cannot acquire vocabulary without having an interlanguage to build on. Interlanguage is a unique linguistic system that results from a learner's attempt to produce the L2. This linguistic system is independent from both the L1 and the L2. Vocabulary acquisition and interlanguage are dependent on each other. The learning process must proceed in a certain order, i.e. there is no point in learning advanced words, before learning basic words, since the learner will not have anything to attach it to. The individual differences all affect vocabulary acquisition in different ways. Age might be most critical for teenagers. Motivation is crucial for every learner, since learners acquire the words that are most interesting first. Aptitude and personality decide how the vocabulary acquisition develops.

According to Read (2000), vocabulary acquisition is a conscious and demanding process for learners. L2 learners are aware of their limitations in their knowledge of words, even at advanced levels. They experience that they read words they do not understand, or they experience that they cannot say expressions as satisfactorily as they can in their L1. Many learners see SLA as a matter of vocabulary learning. That is the reason why they devote a lot of time to memorise lists with L2 words or rely on their dictionary as a basic communicative resource.

Learners' language ability consists of two components: language knowledge and strategic competence. This means that learners need to know about vocabulary, grammar, sound system and spelling, but they also need to know how to draw on that knowledge in an effective way for communicative purposes.

How is the nature of vocabulary knowledge described? Read (2000) cites Richards (1976), who listed eight assumptions about lexical competence. These lexical competences grew out of the 1960s and 1970s developments in linguistic theory:

- 1. Vocabulary knowledge of native speakers continues to expand in adult life, in contrast to the relative stability of their grammatical competence.*

2. *Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words we also know the sort of words most likely to be found associated with the word.*
3. *Knowing a word implies knowing the limitations on the use of the word according to variations of function and situation.*
4. *Knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behaviour associated with the word.*
5. *Knowing a word entails knowledge of the underlying form of a word and the derivations that can be made from it.*
6. *Knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language.*
7. *Knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of a word.*
8. *Knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with a word. (Read 2000, p. 25)*

These assumptions have been taken as a general framework of vocabulary learning and they show how complex vocabulary learning is, and that it involves more than just memorizing words.

Read (2000) also refers to Chapelle (1994), who has defined vocabulary ability. This definition deals both with knowledge of language and with the ability to use language in context. According to Chapelle, there are three components:

1. The context of vocabulary use: the meaning of lexical items is significantly influenced by the social and cultural situation in which they are used.
2. Vocabulary knowledge and fundamental processes: a) vocabulary size: the amount of words a person knows, b) knowledge of word characteristics: this is where Richards' framework fits in, c) lexicon organisation: how words and lexical items are kept in the brain, d) fundamental vocabulary processes: these processes are used to access the knowledge of vocabulary that learners have. This knowledge is used for understanding as well as for one's own writing and speaking.
3. Metacognitive strategies for vocabulary use: are used by all language users to deal with the ways they use their vocabulary knowledge in communication. These strategies are often used unconsciously. The strategies become conscious when we deal with unfamiliar and demanding tasks, e.g. encountering new words.

## **Learning strategies**

Learning strategies are the different procedures used by learners trying to learn an L2. Ellis (1997) explains that they can be behavioural, e.g. when learners repeat new words aloud when trying to remember them, or they can be mental, e.g. when learners use linguistic or situational context to conclude the meaning of a new word they are learning. Strategies that are crucial to our study are:

- “Cognitive strategies are those that are involved in the analysis, synthesis, or transformation of learning materials” (1997, p. 77).
- “Metacognitive strategies are those involved in planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning” (1997, p. 77).
- “Social/affective strategies concern the ways in which learners choose to interact with other speakers” (1997, p. 77).

Various attempts to discover which strategies are important in L2 acquisition have been made. Ellis states that one of the main findings is that good language learners pay attention to form as well as meaning. They are very active in taking charge of their own learning, they are able to show awareness of the learning process, as well as their own personal learning style, and most importantly, they are flexible, meaning that they are accurate in the use of learning strategies. Other findings that Ellis lists are that learners that are more successful use more strategies than the less successful ones, and that different strategies are linked to different aspects of L2 learning. The contribution to the development of linguistic competence involves formal practice, e.g. repeating a new word, while the assistance to the development of communicative skills involves functional practice, e.g. finding native speakers and talking to them. Ellis argues that there is a problem with how to interpret these kinds of findings. It is not clear whether strategy use results in learning or if learning increases learners’ ability to use more strategies.

### **Inferencing – a form of metacognitive strategy**

Both knowledge about learning, i.e. metacognitive knowledge, and regulation of learning, i.e. metacognitive strategies are parts of metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive knowledge is the awareness of one’s own as well as others’ cognitive actions. O’Malley & Chamot (1995) refer to Brown et al. (1983) who state that this knowledge has important features for learning:

1. 'stable', i.e. it is possible to regain it for use in learning tasks,
2. 'statable', i.e. it is probable to think about and discuss with others,
3. 'fallible', i.e. what learners believe about their cognitive actions may be false, e.g. the belief that the key to all learning is drill, and
4. 'late in development', i.e. metacognitive knowledge appears late in a learner's progress since it demands a certain amount of maturity to reflect on one's cognitive actions (O'Malley & Chamot 1995, p. 105).

According to Schmitt & McCarthy (1997) metacognitive strategies are

*used by students to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process in general. As such, they are generally broad strategies, concerned with more efficient learning. (Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, p. 216)*

To acquire an L2 it is crucial to expose the learner to English as much as possible. Reading English literature, magazines, newspapers, and watching movies and DVDs are rewarding methods to acquire a language. If it is possible, a learner can interact with native speakers as much as possible, which is also a way to test one's own abilities in the language. The practice should be scheduled and organized to be effective and to minimize the forgetting that always occurs. Rehearsal must take place soon after the previous occasion and then at frequent intervals. As the English language consists of a huge vocabulary, it is not possible for L2 learners to learn all the words, but they should concentrate on learning the most useful words. "Part of this involves knowing when to skip or pass a word, especially low frequency ones which they may not meet again for a very long time" (Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, p. 216). Studies show that to be able to learn a word, a learner must be exposed to it between five and 16 times or more.

According to O'Malley & Chamot (1995), learning strategies include both metacognitive and cognitive strategies. In cognitive theory, these strategies are presented as complex cognitive skills. These skills follow the same pattern as other types of procedural knowledge, which has the ability to transform the declarative knowledge i.e. interlanguage, and link it to new information. This is how learning strategies affect the acquisition process.

## Inferencing

Read (2000) argues that learners have to be able to use their own strategies when they deal with unknown words outside school. First, they have the lexical inferencing strategies of *evaluation*, i.e. if it is worth to try to figure out what the lexical item is, but if not then ignore it. If it is necessary to understand it, the learner may ask somebody to explain it, or look it up in a dictionary. The most important strategy though is *inferring the meaning from the text itself* and the information it provides. Read states that *inferencing* involves deeper processing and in that way, it is probably going to give a better understanding of the text as a whole. Read answers five questions about lexical inferencing and we summarise his discussion in the following paragraphs.

“What kind of contextual information is available to readers to assist them in guessing the meaning of unknown words in texts?” (Read 2000, p. 54). Read explains that since the 1940s many studies have been done trying to identify and classify the kinds of clues in the context that assist L1 and L2 learners to inference unknown words. When it comes to L1, he refers to Sternberg & Powell (1983). Their theory distinguishes between external and internal context of the unknown word. They categorised the external context after the kind of semantic information that exists around the target word. Morphological structure, i.e. prefix, suffix and stem of the word, forms the internal context. They argue that when the reader goes through this analysis and uses her/his knowledge of the world that it could result in a correct inference of the word. They also state that there are variables in every context that determine how well the reader will be able to use the clues available. In the external context, we can find variables like unknown words, which are easier to guess if they occur several times in different contexts in the text, and the density of unknown words. In the internal context, the variables are similar, but a significant one is the number of words that can be analysed into understandable morphemes. This theory does not include the category of clues that relate to the structure of the text itself.

Read therefore turns to Ames (1966), who states that structural clues can be either syntactic or discorsal:

*On a syntactic level, the reader needs to identify what part of speech the target word is and to search for grammatical clues in the clause and sentence where the word occurs. At the discourse level, the reader can look for expressions of language functions such as*

*definition, comparison and contrast, cause – effect, question – answer and main idea – details.* (Read 2000, p. 56)

Read states that most of the variables that are relevant to L1 readers are also relevant to L2 readers. A variable that especially applies to L2 readers is the level of ability in the language. If the reader does not have a big knowledge of the L2 vocabulary, she/he will meet many unknown words, which means that she/he will not be able to use contextual clues. The density of unknown words is higher for L2 readers. A good source of clues for L2 readers is their knowledge of vocabulary of their L1, or other languages they have acquired, especially languages that are related to each other.

“Are such clues normally available to the reader in natural, unedited texts?” (Read 2000, p. 54). When there are so many contextual clues available, each unknown word will have clues, if the reader knows how to find and understand them. According to Read, this is a very optimistic view, which is often strengthened by research studies and learners’ course books, where target words are presented in edited contexts and the clues are offered in order to give the reader a chance to guess fruitfully. Read states that if the primary intention is to educate learners in the strategy of inferencing, this approach may be accepted, but the basic point Read makes is that it should not be assumed “that the presence of context necessary makes it easier for readers to understand the meaning of words that are unfamiliar to them” (Read 2000, p. 58).

“How well do learners infer the meaning of unknown words without being specifically trained to do so?” (Read 2000, p. 54). According to Read, lexical guessing is not an easy task, not even when contextual information is available. The reason for this is that “learners can be led astray by inferences that are based on partial knowledge and by their failure to check their preliminary guess against the wider context of the text” (Read 2000, p. 59-60).

“Is strategy training an effective way of developing learners’ lexical inferencing skills?” (Read 2000, p. 54). Read points out that even though there is evidence that many learners lack skills to understand unknown words correctly, little research has been done on whether they can be trained for use in reading. Read writes that vocabulary-learning strategies have been included in learning strategies, which makes it difficult to evaluate if training in lexical inferencing is effective. He refers to Oxford (1993), who has identified methodological problems, which have had an impact on investigations of L2 strategy training:

- too short period of training,
- too strong emphasis on intellectual aspects of language learning,

- learners' motivation and attitudes have not been considered, and
- no integration of strategy training into class work.

“Does successful inferencing lead to acquisition of the words?” (Read 2000, p. 54). Read states that if learners manage to conclude the meaning of unknown words, it does not mean that they will automatically obtain knowledge of the word. This means that readers can successfully figure out what words mean for direct understanding, but they will not keep a long-term memory of this knowledge, when they are finished with their task. Read refers to a study by Mondria & Wit-De Boer (1991), who suggested that contextual clues made it easy for their learners to understand words and therefore it did not push them to try to make a mental association between the meaning of words and their forms, that could later be useful in other contexts.

Read concludes that the relationship between vocabulary learning and lexical inferencing is an area which needs further investigation. It is against this background that our study is set.

## **4. Method**

We used the qualitative group interview as method as we wanted to know how the pupils think and act when they encounter English words they do not understand. We used this research method because we believed that it would bring us closer to the pupils' lived worlds and gain a better understanding of their experiences. This method also made it possible for us to ask the pupils to develop their answers.

In this section, the qualitative research interview and the interview guide with questions will be explained. The piloting interview and how the interviewees were selected will be clarified. The transmission of the interviews as well as how the transcriptions and the analysis of the data were done will be explained. Finally, in the end of this section, there is a discussion on ethical issues.

One of us had met this teacher and these pupils during her VFU and seen that they worked with lexical inferencing strategies. The teacher had promoted the metacognitive strategies for three years with these pupils, and had worked with them by using a top-down approach. We interviewed the teacher before conducting our study. The reason was to gain a knowledge of how and why she worked with her pupils in this specific way. This knowledge was used when we did the six interviews with the pupils.

## **The qualitative research interview**

We chose the qualitative research interview, which according to Kvale (1996),

*...attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an inter view, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. (Kvale 1996, p. 1-2)*

Kvale describes twelve different aspects of understanding the interview, which we have interpreted for our study. We used a qualitative semi-structured group interview as method with an interview guide approach to achieve descriptions of the lived world of our interviewees and the aim was to interpret the phenomena we were investigating. The subject of our study was the pupils' everyday world and how they related to it. We tried to interpret the meaning of the pupils' answers. The aim of our study was not quantification; instead, we tried to achieve real specific descriptions from the pupils. As interviewers we had to be open minded about what the pupils told us and not assess or try to categorize what they said during the interview. Through the interviews, we tried to answer our research questions with semi-structured questions and follow-up questions depending on what the pupils answered. We had in mind that the answers we received might be ambiguous and contradictory. The interview might lead to new insights for the pupils, i.e. they might change their opinions about a theme. We had to remember that different interviewers might come up with different answers from the pupils, depending on their knowledge of and sensitivity for the subject. The interview was an interpersonal situation and the knowledge obtained was created between the participants and us. Throughout the interviews, the pupils may have obtained new knowledge about their life situation.

### **Explanation of interview guide and questions**

Kvale (1996) writes that the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews should contain an outline of the topics that the researcher wants to cover, as well as suggested questions. He also states that each question has a thematic and dynamic dimension:

- *Thematically the questions relate to the topic of the interview, to the theoretical conceptions at the root of an investigation, and to the subsequent analysis.* (p. 129)
- *Dynamically, the questions should promote a positive interaction; keep the flow of the conversation going and motivate the subjects to talk about their experiences and feelings.* (Kvale 1996, p. 130)

Kvale emphasizes that questions should be simple, i.e. easy to understand, and that they should be expressed in everyday language. Our questions can be found in the Appendix.

According to Cohen & Manion (2001), strengths of the interview guide approach are e.g. the easy-to-grasp design, which makes the data collection easier to understand and systematic for each interviewee, and that the interview can be kept quite like an ordinary conversation. Weaknesses that might occur are e.g. that important topics are left out and since there is a possibility that the interviewer expresses the semi-structured questions in different ways the responses may differ, which leads to problems when comparing the answers in the analysis. We will discuss how we implemented this guide in the section ‘Conducting the interview’.

## **Piloting**

We performed a pilot interview, which according to Kvale (1996) is a good exercise and reinforces the trustworthiness and quality of the study. This pilot interview was performed with pupils from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, one girl and one boy, who also had been working with metacognitive strategies. This helped us to see that we had prepared good main questions, but that we had to come up with more follow up or developing questions to make the pupils expand their answers. It also made it possible to improve our technique in asking the questions.

## **The selection of interviewees**

We chose this 9<sup>th</sup> grade because we knew that the teacher had worked with metacognitive strategies, i.e. they plan what to do, and they monitor it and finally evaluate what they have done. We also knew that they had worked with Learner Autonomy, i.e. the pupils take responsibility for their own learning, they reflect on how they learn, and they learn to cooperate with other people and not only take responsibility for themselves. The teacher had been working with this class for three years encouraging metacognitive strategies. We

interviewed the pupils three and three, because we thought that it would make them feel more confident and talk more freely when they outnumbered us. These are the reasons why we chose group interviewing (Cohen & Manion 2001). We wanted to interview as many as possible from this particular class and 18 out of 24 pupils agreed to participate in our study. These six interviews made it possible for us to exhaust the area of inquiry. As we wrote before, our aim was not to quantify or come up with generalisations; our aim was to get a deeper understanding of if in their spare time these pupils use the metacognitive strategies they had learnt in school.

With children of this age, it is important to establish a prior relationship; therefore, we followed the class for two days in all their lessons before we began with the interviews of the pupils. The purpose was to make the pupils feel relaxed and secure in our presence, which hopefully led to a qualitatively better interview.

When we divided the pupils into interview groups, we had to take into consideration that the class was already divided into two groups. These two groups were in turn divided into groups of three, of mixed gender. When this was done, we asked the class teacher for advice, if any of these groups were unsuitable, i.e. if there were any pupils that would not function well together. The aim was to get harmonious groups where everybody could feel free to express their thoughts.

### **Conducting the interview**

As interviewers, we tried to establish a harmonious atmosphere and make the pupils feel comfortable with the situation. The aim was to make them feel free to speak about their experiences. According to Cohen & Manion (2001), the establishment of an appropriate atmosphere operates at four levels:

1. Cognitive aspect, which means that we as interviewers had to know about what we were investigating in order to conduct the interviews in an informed manner, which would not make the pupils feel inferior if they themselves lacked knowledge in the subject matter.
2. Ethical dimension, which contains informed consent, confidentiality and consequences.
3. Interpersonal, interactional, communicative and emotional aspects, which had to do with body language. These aspects were especially important to keep in mind, since they would disappear during the transcriptions of the interviews.

4. Dynamics of the situations, which means that we as interviewers had to know how we would make the interviews move forward, how we could motivate the pupils to discuss their experiences, and how we could deal with the unbalance of power, i.e. that we as interviewers controlled the situation by introducing the topics and questions of the conversation. This was a reason why we had chosen to interview the pupils in groups of three. Hopefully, this made them more comfortable and relaxed in the interview situation, when there were three of them and only two of us, and hopefully this made the whole situation look more like an ordinary discussion. We also believed that it would make it easier for the pupils to develop and expand upon each other's views or motivate each other for further talking.

In order to encourage the pupils and make the situation comfortable for them, we began an introduction, where we explained the situation to the pupils, told them about the purpose of the interview and study, mentioned the tape recorder and finally asked them if they had any questions before the interview began. Of course, we did our best to be active listeners, who showed respect, interest and understanding for what the pupils said. At the same time, we had to stay focused on our interview questions. To round off the interview we asked the pupils if they had something to add or ask us. We did not divide the roles between us as interviewers in advance, but instead we tried to keep the interview going like an ordinary conversation, where we took turns in asking the questions. After each interview, we set off some time to have a review of the interview, reflecting over what had been learned and the interpersonal interaction, since we believed that these primary impressions would give a valuable context for the future analysis.

## **Transcriptions**

We recorded the interviews with a tape-recorder and transcribed the interviews on a computer in the Microsoft Word programme. Kvale states that

*The audiotape gives a decontextualized version of the interview, however: It does not include the visual aspects of the situation, neither the setting nor the facial and bodily expressions of the participants. (Kvale 1996, p.160-161)*

When we transcribed our interviews, we had to deal with several issues. To achieve reliability in the transcriptions we both listened to, and then transcribed the interviews. When we did not agree on something, we listened to it several times and discussed it together. However, Kvale also states that it is difficult for two transcribers to totally agree on what has been said. Another issue involving reliability was that we had to be clear about the procedures for producing the transcripts. We also had to deal with interpersonal perspectives and emotional aspects. A third issue was validity. Since we transcribed from oral language to written language we had to keep in mind that the transcripts are not representations of the original interview situation. The transcripts are interpreted constructions frozen in time. This is why we had a review of each interview directly when we had finished it and this was a reason why both of us participated in the interviews.

Kvale emphasizes a basic rule in transcription, i.e. how the transcripts are made should be explained in the report. In our transcripts, we had to think about that we did our pupils justice. Since we were not conducting a study about the way pupils talk and how they pronounce specific items, where a word for word translation would be necessary, we decided that we would transcribe in a correct grammatical way, but still try to keep the feeling of conversation and spoken language in our transcriptions. Ethical issues, such as confidentiality were also considered during the transcription process.

## **Analysis**

We used the meaning condensation analysis to be able to work out the meaning of what was said in the interviews. According to Kvale (1996), there are six possible steps of analysis:

- The first step is the actual interview, where we gathered information about the pupils' experiences.
- The second step could be if the pupils, during the interviews discovered something new about themselves and their use of lexical inferencing strategies.
- The third step has to do with that we as interviewers conducted and interpreted what the pupils said in order to give the pupils a chance to correct us if we were wrong, or that we could ask the pupils for clarification of things we did not understand.
- The fourth step deals with the interpretation of the transcribed material. This step contains three other steps: 1. structuring the material, 2. clarification of the material, and 3. analysis proper, which means that we had to develop the meaning of what had

been said during the interviews, as well as describe the new perspectives that we had gained.

- The fifth step is the re-interview.
- The sixth step is that the pupils begin acting according to their new insights.

In this research, we did not deal with the last two steps, since we did not incorporate them in our study.

Our approach to the analysis of meaning is, as mentioned above, meaning condensation, which according to Kvale deals with the “reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations” (p.192). Kvale divides the analysis into five different steps:

1. Read the whole interview to gain a general impression.
2. Determine the ‘meaning units’ expressed by the subjects.
3. State the dominating theme as clearly as possible without prejudice and thematize the statements from your own point of view.
4. Question the meaning units with the aim of the study in mind.
5. Tie the essential themes into a descriptive report.

We followed Kvale’s five steps by first reading through the whole material. Then we decided which answers correlated to the aim of our study as well as the theme, and finally we categorised them into four categories. The description of the essential themes follows in the results below.

According to Cohen & Manion (2001), coding is often a part of the analysis. Cohen & Manion refer to Kerlinger (1969), who states that it is the translation of the question responses into specific categories, which is the most important aim of the analysis. When coding the transcription we labelled the answers into the following different categories:

- Avoidance,
- Referring to another resource,
- Inferencing from context, and
- Metalinguistic knowledge.

The first two are evidence of pragmatic strategies, whilst the last two are lexical inferencing strategies.

## **Ethical issues**

The aim of the research ethical principles provided by the Science Council (Vetenskapsrådet) is to give norms for the relationship between researchers and informants in the way that a good balance can be reached between the demand on research and the demand on individual protection in case of a conflict. The demand on individual protection contains four main demands, which in turn contain different kinds of specific rules. We have chosen to explain the two most important to our study in detail, whereas the other two are only mentioned.

The first demand is the information demand, which means that the researcher has to inform the informants about the aim of the research task. The information that the researcher gives the informants can be more or less detailed, but information given in advance has to contain information about the researcher so that she/he can be contacted. The aim of the research and how it is going to be carried out, benefits that the research could lead to, e.g. new knowledge, which the researcher should emphasize in order to motivate to participation also have to be given. Risks and discomfort that could come up, that participation is voluntary, that the data collected will be used for science only are also important information. Finally, it should be mentioned where and how the results will be published.

The second demand is the informed consent demand, which means that the informants themselves decide on their participation. This right does not have to mean that conducted data has to be destroyed, but it depends on how the initial information to the participants was formulated.

The third demand is the confidentiality demand, which means that conducted data is given the most possible confidentiality and personal information is stored in a way that does not give unauthorized admittance to them. The fourth demand is the right of use, which means that it is not allowed to use data from private persons to something else, other than research.

An explanation of the way we used the demands from the Science Council now follows. We asked the principal and the pupils for informed consent. The pupils were asked twice, if they wanted to participate, first, when we had a general presentation of the study we wanted to conduct, and the second time was when we asked each pupil personally. We informed the principal via e-mail and asked for her permission. Before we began with the interviews we also went to see the principal personally. We did not have to ask the parents for permission, since all the pupils were over 15 years of age, and our study is not ethically sensitive. We

told both the pupils and the principal that it was the pupils' decision if they wanted to participate in the study or not.

According to the informed consent, we gave the pupils information about the overall purpose with our study and an overall description of the design of our study. We told them about possible risks and benefits of their participation, and finally, that it was voluntary to participate in the study and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To consider confidentiality, we changed the pupils' names as well as identifying features. This concerns the tape recordings, notes we took, transcriptions, analysis and the final report. The tapes and transcriptions are stored in a secure way, i.e. no others than the authors of this study have access to them.

After conducting the interviews, transcribing the data and coming up with a preliminary result we went back to the school before they graduated to tell them what we had found out. The pupils reacted in a positive way and were interested to find out what we had come up with. We collected the e-mail addresses from the pupils who were interested in receiving a Swedish summary of the final paper to be able to send it to them.

## **5. Results**

In this section, we answer each of our three research questions. In the first question, we write about the pupils' exposure to English. The second question deals with the description of the essential categories, which we coded. Finally, the third question is a summary of the usefulness of these categories, i.e. the pupils' strategies.

### **Pupils' exposure to English outside school**

The pupils in our study are exposed to English outside school in many different ways.

*It is mostly music and words, yes, English TV programs, and that is the most common. Then you have more unusual situations, but they are always different. There are no rules that come up regularly except TV and music, not that I can think of anyway.*  
(Interview Two)

They listen to English language music and some of the pupils also download music texts from the Internet when they are interested to know what the songs are about.

*I usually listen to the text many times, then maybe I manage to understand it gradually.*

(Interview Five)

They are exposed to English when they watch TV programs, films, DVDs, and movies.

*You read the subtitle but you do not think about it. You would have understood even if the subtitle was not there, I mean, I do it in school. You just read the subtitle because it is there.* (Interview One)

Some pupils choose to watch DVDs without having a Swedish subtitle, but most of the time they have it.

*Yes, sometimes you are too lazy to activate the subtitle. If you buy films abroad, there are no Swedish subtitles.* (Interview One)

Few pupils seem to read English papers or books outside school.

*No, not in English, not that much at all, not me anyway.* (Interview Five)

*I never read anything.* (Interview Five)

*No books.* (Interview Five)

Most pupils use the Internet a lot where they visit sites written in English, e-mail in English and chat in English.

*At the chat, or msn, half of them are English speaking. Or if I have met people on fan sites, I always chat with them.* (Interview Three)

*No, only if I happen to get there, then you maybe look a little, but otherwise I usually do not.* (Interview One)

Some pupils also play computer games in English.

*The computer game Counterstrike and others. Everybody usually knows English, so you end up talking in English. (Interview Two)*

The pupils also meet English-speaking people when they visit other countries and they seem to think that it is easy to interact in English with other people.

*It is easy, if you have not gone to England, they are just about as good at English as one self is. (Interview Two)*

These results show that these pupils are exposed to English outside school frequently and in different ways.

## **Treatment of unknown words outside school**

We discovered four different categories. The first one is avoidance, which means that the pupils skip the word without understanding it. The second one is referring to another resource, which contains looking up the word in a dictionary and asking somebody else what the word means. The third one is inferencing from context, which means guessing or understanding the meaning by using the context. The fourth one is metalinguistic knowledge, which contains looking at the word structure and using knowledge from other languages to guess the meaning of the word.

### **Avoidance**

The pupils seem to use the strategy of avoidance depending on if they consider the word important to know or not. The pupils have different reasons for avoidance, e.g. if they only read for pleasure, if they are not curious to know the word, if they try to figure it out but just cannot and then they give up when it is too strenuous, or if they skip it right away.

*If you have been trying to find it out, what it is for a long time, but do not know what it is, perhaps you skip it. When it becomes too strain to sit and think and think and try to come up with what it is all the time. (Interview Two)*

*Sometimes I do not have the energy. (Interview One)*

*It depends if it is unimportant or so. If you are not that keen to know it or feel like it, then you skip it. (Interview Four)*

*If it is something you read for pleasure then yes, because I will surely get to know it in the future. (Interview Six)*

*If it is not important then I do not give a shit. (Interview Six)*

### **Referring to another resource**

This strategy has two different possibilities, i.e. look up the word in a dictionary or ask somebody else about the word. Dictionaries seem to be used when they are easily accessible. The pupils use dictionaries in paper form or they look up the word in an electronic dictionary on the Internet. Translation programs are also used. Pupils know how to use dictionaries but they do not always care to use them. The use of dictionaries also depends on what kind of text the pupils are reading if it is important or not.

*[...] then you take a dictionary, but not that I have done that. (Interview Three)*

*If I sit by the computer, then I look it up in the dictionary. (Interview One)*

*If it is a text where you need to know the word, then you look it up. (Interview Six)*

The pupils ask people around them, e.g. parents, brothers and sisters, close friends and chat friends. They ask for either a direct translation or an explanation of the word.

*But if you talk to an English speaking person, he has to try to explain what he means. (Interview Three)*

*If you are chatting, you can ask them if they know what it means or I ask my dad if I do not understand. But if you talk to an English speaking person he has to try to explain what he means. (Interview Three)*

*Or you ask the parents or something, if they are around. (Interview Five)*

### **Inferencing from context**

This strategy seems to be used with great confidence. Pupils use the context to figure out the word they do not understand. They think this is a good strategy because they can guess, take chances and feel secure that they grasp the right meaning.

*If there is a word you have difficulties with, then you just have to look at what context it comes up in, then you can assume what it might be, what possibilities there are. (Interview Two)*

*You read the whole sentence and check the context. Then you can find out what it means. (Interview Four)*

*No, but if it is a text, there are certain words that I do not understand, then maybe you understand the word anyway, because other words describe it so well. (Interview Five)*

*If it stands in a text, you look at the context and try to understand, but if it is just a word then it is difficult. (Interview Five)*

*If it is a game, for example, then you see by the context and the text and then you know what to do. (Interview Six)*

*You try to look on the whole lot, and then you often understand the word. (Interview Six)*

## **Metalinguistic knowledge**

This strategy demands a greater awareness of language. Looking at morphology, i.e. the word structure, does not seem to be that useful to the pupils. We think that the reason for this might be that the metalinguistic awareness, i.e. the ability to describe language in grammatical terms, develops later on, when the language development has come further. Some pupils use it as a last solution to understand the unknown word, whereas others use the word structure to gain an understanding.

*You look after a while if you sit and think, this is not what you do at first, but if you sit a while and try to come up with what it is, then you can think about it. But it is not the first thing you think about. (Interview Two)*

*No, but if it says like this, e.g. 'the old man has several cats'. I do not know if you can say 'several' in this context, but, or 'many cats', then you can say like this that if you hear that it is 'cats', then it is plural, that is many and he had them, you can understand that is was many. (Interview Two)*

*Oh, but it just comes automatically, if it says so, that is the way it is with all words. (Interview One)*

*Yes, if you absolutely cannot, then you can do it. (Interview Two)*

*You do that as well, I suppose. (Interview Four)*

Using knowledge from other languages seems to be a difficult strategy for some pupils. It is not regarded as a 'safe' strategy compared to the strategy where they inference the meaning by using the context. The pupils are aware of that this strategy is tricky, since some words, even though they may look the same as other known words, mean something completely different. Some pupils see that they can use the strategy where they use Swedish for understanding German in the same way as they use Swedish to understand English. Other pupils are aware of this strategy but they choose not to use it at home.

*Some words in English are a bit similar to Swedish, it is just like German, which is a bit alike Swedish in certain words, then it is quite easy, but sometimes it can mean something completely different. (Interview Five)*

*Sometimes it can be that you notice that it looks alike a language, for example German perhaps, but it is not often. (Interview One)*

*It is the same as in school, like French and Spanish, and stuff you recognize, but it is nothing you think about at home. (Interview Six)*

*Yes. That is the way it is in German. They ask super easy questions about long words, but it sounds like something else in Swedish, for example 'båtbrygga' or something like that, then it is called similarly in German. It is a little like that with English and Swedish too. (Interview Two)*

A summary of this is that the first two categories are evidence of pragmatic strategies, which are easy to use for everybody and do not require a lot of knowledge. The avoidance strategy depends on motivation. The strategy referring to other resources can be used in a successful way. The last two categories are evidence of inferencing strategies, which demand more knowledge and require a more mature learner. The inferencing from context strategy is the most useful strategy for the pupils, because they seem to feel secure in using it. The metalinguistic knowledge strategy is the most difficult one and it requires the ability to reflect on languages.

## **The usefulness of the strategies outside school**

All these strategies are used in different ways outside school. The one that the pupils use the most and feel most secure in using in encounters with English outside school is undoubtedly the inferencing from context strategy, i.e. where they guess or understand the meaning by using the context. Some pupils that have more knowledge of morphology use that knowledge when looking at the context. Using metalinguistic knowledge, i.e. knowledge of other languages is also a useful strategy for some pupils. The strategy where they refer to other resources, i.e. ask somebody else, is also used very frequently by the pupils, since they can

use it wherever they are, except when they are alone. Dictionaries are used depending on access to them. The avoidance strategy is used depending on how important it is to the pupils to know the word.

Some pupils know about these strategies but they seem not to care about them in their spare time.

*You do not think that much about that in your spare time, but more in school. (Interview Three)*

*Sometimes you are not up to it. (Interview Two)*

We believe that the reason for this is that the pupils have a free choice to use the strategies outside school. Another reason might be that the pupils simply forget about the strategies in their spare time.

## **6. Discussion**

In this section, firstly there will be given a short summary of the aim and purpose of our study in relation to the main results. Secondly, the results in relation to previous research will be considered. Thirdly, interpretations and our own reflections of the study will be put forward. Fourthly, didactic implications will be given and finally, suggestions for further research will be presented.

The purpose of our study was to examine the pupils' exposure to English and the use of lexical inferencing strategies outside school. The aim was to find out whether pupils, when encountering an unknown word outside school, used lexical inferencing strategies. Our research contributes to providing a more complete picture of lexical inferencing strategies and can be seen as an extension of the STRIMS project (Malmberg et al. 2000), since the latter does not investigate the use of lexical inferencing strategies outside school.

The results of our study showed that the pupils used the following strategies when encountering an English word: avoidance, referring to another resource, inferencing from context and metalinguistic knowledge. Interestingly, the strategies found in the STRIMS project partly correspond to the strategies found in our study. The strategies were, to look up the word in a dictionary, to use the context to understand a word, to skip the word and to

compare the unknown word with words in another language. As the project was going on the researchers noticed that the usage of the strategy to look up a word decreased whereas using the context strategy increased to understand unknown words. This is also a commonly used strategy in our study. What our results also showed is that even though the pupils are trained to use these strategies in school, they do not use them all the time outside school.

Our study also shows that the pupils' exposure to English is enormous. This is nothing new. Earlier research has also come up with the same conclusions in "*The National Evaluation of the Compulsory School 2003 – English*" (2005) and "*English in Eight European Countries – an investigation of young people' knowledge and opinions*" (2004). Furthermore, our results also correspond well with what the Swedish Language Committee states about that English can be regarded as a second language in Sweden. It seems natural to the pupils to speak English whenever they encounter people from other countries. In "*The National Evaluation of the Compulsory School 2003 – English*" (2005) it is evident that the pupils feel secure in using the English language. This was also very visible in our study.

We found that inferencing from the context was the most useful strategy. It means that the reader uses the context in different ways to understand the word. Read (2000) argues that it is easier to guess an unknown word if it occurs several times in different contexts in a text. The density of unknown words also affects how the pupils will succeed in guessing the meaning of the word. Read writes that inferencing is not easy, even when the context is available. The reason for this is that the learners can be led off track by their lack of knowledge and because they fail to check their guess. This is interesting, since the pupils we investigated seemed very confident in using the context for guessing and understanding unknown words.

Metalinguistic knowledge, i.e. looking at the word structure to understand the word, involves considering the morphological structure, i.e. prefix, suffix and stem of the word (Read 2000). The number of words that can be analysed into understandable morphemes increase the possibility to understand the context. When the learner goes through this analysis and uses her/his knowledge of the world, it could result in a correct inference of the word. The pupils in our study did not seem to be aware of the use of the morphological structure. We do not know if the teacher considers these pupils too young to work with this, or if she has not prioritized to work with it. We believe that the pupils need to develop the knowledge about morphological structure because it is a useful strategy to know.

The other part of metalinguistic knowledge, i.e. using the knowledge from other languages to guess the meaning of a word, is according to Read (2000), a good source of

clues. Learners can use both their L1 and other languages they have acquired, especially languages that are related to each other. This is also something we saw that the pupils we investigated used. They used Swedish and German to understand English. Pupils with a high language aptitude probably use this strategy more often, although this is a speculative conclusion since it was not the aim of our study.

The strategy where the pupils refer to another source, i.e. ask somebody else about what a word means, is commonly used, as the pupils often seem to have somebody to ask. It is also a very convenient and easy way to gain the knowledge of an unknown word. Very little is written about this strategy in previous research, as far as we know. We believe that the reason for this is that the strategy is easy to understand and most people use it.

The other part of referring to another resource, i.e. looking up the word in a dictionary, depends on the access to either dictionaries in paper form or electronic dictionaries. If the pupil uses this strategy also depends on the degree of effort they are willing to invest in a word.

The avoidance strategy, i.e. skipping the word without understanding it, also depends on the pupils' motivation. As Ellis (1997) writes, motivation is dynamic in nature, which means that a learner's motivation can vary from one moment to another depending on how interested the pupils are in knowing the word. As the English language consists of a huge vocabulary, it is not of course possible for L2 learners to learn all the words, so they should concentrate on learning the most useful words. The avoidance strategy may be a result of this, but this is only a speculation, since this has not been the focus of our study.

According to Lightbown & Spada (2006), learners differ in whether they possess a natural ability for learning an L2 or not. It is necessary for a learner to take risks to progress in the language learning, but personal characteristic of inhibition deters risk taking. This problem particularly affects teenagers because they are self-conscious in a way that younger learners are not. Nevertheless, the pupils in the study seemed willing to take risks, e.g. by asking somebody for help with unknown words, using the metalinguistic knowledge strategy, as well as the inferencing from context strategy, especially since the last two might go wrong. Lightbown & Spada point out that some researchers argue that learners who have the willingness to communicate also do it because

*their prior language learning has led to development of self-confidence, which is based on a lack of anxiety combined with a sufficient level of communicative competence,*

*arising from a series of reasonably pleasant [second language] experiences.*  
(Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 62)

This corresponds to the pupils in our study who seem to have self-confidence in using the English language.

*I think like this, that you recognise most of the words in English, since you have learnt them.* (Interview Two)

*Abroad. I ride horses, so when we are at camp you can talk English, you meet people from all over the world and then you speak English.* (Interview Two)

According to Ellis, learners that are more successful use more strategies. In our study, these pupils had two different first hand strategies to use. These were inferencing from context and metalinguistic knowledge. Some pupils only used the inferencing from context strategy as their first hand strategy. When these options were exhausted, many pupils turned to the strategy of referring to another resource or the avoidance strategy. However, Ellis states that it is not clear whether strategy use results in learning or if learning increases learners' ability to use more strategies.

The awareness of metacognitive knowledge and strategy use varied among the pupils in our study. O'Malley & Chamot (1995) list important characteristics about learning. Some pupils in our study were able to talk about how they use lexical inferencing strategies and other pupils felt very safe about their cognitive actions, e.g. guessing the meaning of a word by context, even though the guess may be problematic. We noticed that some pupils were able to think about and discuss metacognitive knowledge, i.e. they could tell us if they had any special tricks to use when they tried to understand a word, whereas other pupils did not have this ability. A reason for this may be that metacognitive knowledge appears late in a learner's progress since it demands a certain amount of maturity to reflect on one's cognitive actions (O'Malley & Chamot 1995).

One result that surprised us was that even though the pupils have a knowledge of lexical inferencing strategies and they work with them in school, they choose not to use them all the time outside school. Why is it like this? Is it because they do not understand that this knowledge is useful for Lifelong Learning? Or, is it because they think they have to use lexical inferencing strategies in school and therefore choose not to do it in their spare time

when they can decide for themselves? It is important to remember that nothing can be taken for granted; therefore, this discussion must take place in school. Just as the STRIMS project (Malmberg et al. 2000) states, it is important to work with and talk about metacognitive strategies to help the pupils to find effective learning strategies for themselves both inside and outside school.

A speculation made when interpreting the results was that the pupils tried to find the easiest way, e.g. if they did not know the answer themselves, they asked somebody else, or else they just skipped the word. We think that one reason for this might be that in today's society everything has to be in the easiest possible way. Many children today are raised with this attitude. The parents mean well, but at the end of the day, it turns out in the wrong way. The negative outcome is that pupils risk to be considered as lazy when this is a parental responsibility. This 'easy way method' also has an impact on the pupils' development.

## **Didactic implications**

We think it is important that teachers talk to pupils about metacognitive strategies. The more the awareness about learning strategies is raised the more pupils will learn to overcome lexical difficulties. Indeed, our results show that even among pupils who have worked with lexical inferencing strategies for three years, that was not enough for everybody to acquire and automatize them. Therefore, we suggest that the metacognitive strategy training must begin much earlier in the compulsory school. As pupils learn a great deal of English in their spare time, it is essential that they have metacognitive knowledge and more use of this in their spare time. Since the Course Syllabus states that the pupils should be equipped for Lifelong Learning, this must be a goal. Furthermore, teachers need to develop approaches to encourage pupils to use metacognitive strategies outside school. These didactic implications are something we will develop when we become teachers.

## **Suggestions for further research**

We suggest that further research could deal with why some learners acquire metacognitive strategies and others do not, why some learners do not want to use metacognitive strategies outside school and why learners fall back into the old traditional 'wordlist model' when learning vocabulary instead of using their metacognitive strategies.

## **7. Limitations**

One important limitation is that this was a small study, containing 18 informants. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized, and only concern these specific pupils. Another limitation is that we acquired our data over a very short time period. We believe it is an important limitation that we could not spend more time with the pupils before conducting the study. A third limitation is that it was our first research study and we are inexperienced interviewers. We know that this had an impact on the data we obtained. A fourth issue that also had an impact on the data we obtained was that the pupils had difficulties explaining how they thought. The fact that the pupils knew that we are English teachers to be, might also have had an impact on their answers, since they might have wanted to present themselves in a positive light.

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## 9. Appendix

### Interview Guide and Questions

#### *Thematic Questions*

Introducing questions:

Hur känns det att sluta 9:an?

Vad har ni sökt för gymnasieprogram?

Vad ska ni hitta på under sommaren?

Specifying questions:

1. På vilket sätt brukar du träffa på det engelska språket utanför skolan?
  - hör engelska på radio
  - hör engelska på TV, video, bio (textad svenska)
  - hör engelska på TV, video, bio (ej textad svenska)
  - lyssnar på engelska musiktexter
  - läser serier, tidningar, böcker på engelska, engelska sajter på Internet
  - dataspel på engelska
  - chattar, mailar på engelska
  - talar med engelskspråkiga personer
2. Vad gör du om du inte förstår ett ord?
3. Använder du något särskilt knep för att förstå svåra ord?
  - Förstår du ord/fraser genom sammanhanget, andra språk eller analyserar du ordet, dvs. tittar på dess uppbyggnad? T.ex. -ing, -ed, -ly, ordklasser.
4. Er lärare säger att ni först planerar vad ni ska göra, att ni sedan gör det och till sist att ni utvärderar det i era 'diaries'. Håller ni med om att ni jobbar på det här sättet? Känner du att du är mer medveten om hur du lär dig nu, än när ni började med detta arbetssätt i 7:an?
5. Tror ni att detta sätt att jobba på har hjälpt er att bli bättre på engelska ord?
6. Har ni funderat på hur ni lär er bäst?

### *Dynamic Questions*

- Follow-up
- Probing
- Specifying
- Direct
- Indirect
- Structuring
- Silence
- Interpreting

Ending question:

7. Vi har inga fler frågor. Är det något du vill ta upp eller fråga om innan vi avslutar intervjun?

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