

Högskolan Dalarna  
English C  
Essay  
Supervisor: Una Cunningham  
Ht 2004

## **Foreign Language Learning**

A study among Swedish children at school on how they learn English words and which  
learner strategies they use

Anette Strömberg  
Olsjövägen 10  
772 70 Saxdalen  
0240 – 31003  
670317 – 7227  
ianette36@yahoo.se

## CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
1.1 Background.....	3
1.2 Linguistic Theories.....	5
1.3. Second Language Learner Strategies.....	8
1.4 Non-Linguistic Factors.....	9
<b>2. AIM</b> .....	14
2.1 Method.....	15
<b>3. RESULTS OF THE STUDY</b> .....	16
3.1 Results Group 1 (Vocabulary test and Strategies).....	16
3.2 Results group 2 (Words in Context and Test).....	19
<b>4. DISCUSSION</b> .....	20
<b>5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION</b> .....	23
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	26
<b>APPENDICES</b> (Worksheets used in the study).....	27

## 1. INTRODUCTON

### 1.1 Background

This essay will show a linguistic background to how languages are acquired or learned. It also includes a study on how Swedish school children manage to learn new words in English.

To begin with, the choice of topic; Foreign Language Learning, must be discussed since it might not be obvious what it really means. It can be mixed up with the concept Second Language Acquisition (SLA). They may seem similar but there is a difference in how to define the two concepts. Gass and Selinker's (2001) definition of Foreign Language Learning is the learning of a nonnative language in the environment of one's native language. In this essay that means Swedish children learning English in Sweden. Second Language Acquisition would be a Swedish child learning English in England.

Ellis (1997 p.3) explanation about SLA is that 'second' can refer to any language that is learned subsequent to the mother tongue; the language can be learnt in the new country you live in or in a classroom. The opposing view of how SLA can be explained was described by Krashen (1982) in the 1970s, in his Monitor Model. In Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, which is a part of his Monitor Model, he claims that second language learners have two independent means of developing knowledge of a second language; one way is through *acquisition* which is defined as a process similar to the way children develop their ability walk i.e. a subconscious process. The other way is through *learning*, which is a conscious process where the focus is on knowing about the language i.e. knowing about grammar and rules. (Gass and Selinker 2001 pp.198-199)

An essential part of learning a language is to build up a collection of words and learn how to use these words in context. When we learn our first language we pick it up by listening and imitating what we hear i.e. we acquire it by living with the language. There are of course

many linguists who have different theories about how we acquire our first language but the ways mentioned above are basically the most important.

At school we have a different situation when it comes to language learning. In spite of all the teachers' good intentions to make their teaching as close to reality as possible i.e. they have as a goal to create situations in the classroom that will give the pupils the opportunity to acquire the language and learn it that way, the situation becomes rather absurd most of the times. The reason why the situation might be called absurd is that it seems very hard to create a natural environment. I mean, what is natural about having a teacher who you, as a pupil, know is Swedish and then he or she suddenly pretends to be someone else and is only able to speak English? Another thing is that you, as a pupil, are limited to use (in this case I refer to speaking) English only for about 100 minutes a week and when you are supposed to speak the teacher has decided what you are going to speak about. The reason why I point this out is to show that the learning situation at school is very different from first language learning. Despite all this many people have learned a second language at school and sometimes even a third. What happens when a child is learning new words at school? Does the studying of glossary lists serve any purpose for learning? Is it easier to learn words in context from the beginning and start to use it on your own? Are successful students more aware of how they learn i.e. are they aware that there are useful strategies to use when it comes to language learning?

First the access to Universal Grammar (UG) will be discussed in the essay, and it will show that the different levels of access affect the ability to learn a second or foreign language. The essay will also show that there are differences in how we learn our first language if we compare it to second/foreign language learning. A description of successful learner strategies will also be presented as well as a description of personal features that can affect you as a

language learner. A study at a Swedish school on how children learn English words will be shown, discussed and compared to the linguistic theories.

## **1.2 Linguistic Theories**

Some linguists argue that language learning is innate. “The theory underlying UG assumes that language consists of a set of abstract principles that characterize core grammars of all natural languages”(Gass and Selinker 2001 p.169). Chomsky is one of the linguists who strongly argue that humans are born with the ability to learn language i.e. a special part of our brain is programmed for language learning. “[...] children seem to develop language in similar ways and on similar schedule, in a way not very different from the way all children learn to walk.” (Lightbown and Spada 1999 p.15) The evidence for this, according to Chomsky, is that children learn their native language when they are very young at a time when they are not expected to learn anything so complicated. The language children are exposed to is not a complete language with correct sentences and these sentences do not contain everything a child eventually is able to express. Children also manage to learn their native language without having someone pointing out the errors they make before they have learnt their adult version of the language. (Lightbown and Spada 1999 pp.15-17)

As most of us have experienced, learning a second or foreign language is difficult and takes a lot of time. As a student in school you do not think about that you actually have learnt a language already, with all its difficulties (grammar etcetera), without even thinking about it. We have probably also experienced that even if we study hard we will never learn the second language as well as our first language. The possibility of achieving a native accent is, for most of the foreign language learners, very limited.

The main difference from learning the first language is that of motivation and attitude towards the target language and also the amount of time the learner, is exposed to the target

language. As a second or foreign language learner you have to learn everything so much faster than a first language learner. There is too little time for a foreign language learner to acquire a language by only attending the English lessons at school.

There are differences in how we learn or acquire a first, second (or third language). As Gass and Selinker (2001 pp.174-175) point out, much of the work concerning second language acquisition is based on the assumption that first and second language acquisition involve the same process, but there are differences in the learning process depending on several circumstances such as, for example age and which language is learnt. “The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis starts from the belief that with regard to language learning, children and adults are different in many important ways” (Gass and Selinker 2001 p. 174). In normal situations children reach complete knowledge of their native language while it is more difficult for second language learners to reach complete knowledge of a second language. All children are capable of learning any language since they do not have a complete language system, which seem to interfere while learning a new system in a second language. The more related the first and the second language is the easier it is to learn, because the language systems are more similar to each other. School children already have developed a complete knowledge of their native language. Therefore they have a language system that will interfere with their second or third language learning which makes it more difficult to learn.

One of the major differences between first and second language learners is the fact that first language acquisition has to occur during a specific period in life. Linguists argue that there is a ‘critical period’ hypothesis which according to Lightbown and Spada (1999 p.61) is that: children must acquire their first language by puberty to be able to reach complete knowledge in their native language. As a second language learner you are exposed to a new language, at the earliest by the age of nine (at least in Swedish schools) and linguists have, in

their research found that there is a steady decrease in performance with the steepest decline at the ages 14-16; the period in life when children at school are expected to learn a second language. Therefore one can argue that a second language has to be learnt as early as possible in school because of the fact that there is a decline in performance surprisingly early in life.

Another major difference is Chomsky's linguistic hypothesis on first and second language learning, which shows that we can have different levels of access to Universal Grammar (UG). In first language acquisition the learner (the child) has full access to the innate device UG. Having full access means that the child has access to general information that can apply to all sentences in any language. When the child is exposed to a specific language he or she acquires the language-specific information and builds the language with the syntax specific for that language. As second or foreign language learners the access to UG can be at different levels. All this is explained in White's (2000) Access to Universal Grammar Hypothesis that says that there are five possibilities of having access to UG. (First language will be referred to as L1 and second as L2. Second language acquisition is referred to as SLA). A common situation for adults learning a second language is that they come to the learning situation with fully developed grammars so if there is no similarities in grammar in the first and second language the difference makes it difficult to learn because it is not available for SLA. The situation in school is, most of the time, the fact that there is a disconnection between L1 and the developing L2 grammar. The two languages will develop at the same time, but there is a critical period for learning an L2 through UG, which makes it more difficult to learn a second language. The Access Hypothesis also mentions that there can be a difference in acquisition depending on the Grammar of L1 i.e. there can be a difference in the learning process depending on the difference in grammar between L1 and L2. There can also be a situation where only parts of L1 are available and no full L2 is possible. (Gass and Selinker 2001 pp.174-178) Current research regarding access to UG still says that the

access to UG for second or foreign language learners is still uncertain because of the different possibilities of having access. (Ellis 1997 p.69)

### **1.3 Second Language Learner Strategies**

Since we all have been pupils at school we all have experienced the fact that some are successful in their language learning and others are not. Of course there can be differences in the access to Universal Grammar (discussed in the earlier section) but there are certain strategies that you can use to improve your language learning process. Personal factors may also have an effect on the ability to succeed in language learning.

Edge (2001) mentions three ways of thinking about successful strategies for the language learner. The strategies he mentions are: “Social strategies, e.g.: Go to places where English is used, and Communication strategies, e.g.: Practise these phrases for getting into the discussion: *I’d like to come in there* or *Can I just make a point here?*” The third strategy he mentions is learner strategies. “When you meet a new word in the foreign language, ask yourself what word it sounds like in your own language, then make a mental picture of the two meanings together.” (Edge 2001 p.21) The first two are a bit difficult to apply to foreign language teaching at school, but a place where English is used is definitely a classroom where English is taught. As a teacher of foreign languages you need to be aware of different ways of learning a language and see to that it becomes a part of your teaching. The idea of teaching strategies is that we can improve our learning if we are more aware of what we are doing, how we are doing it and what choices are available to us. We will improve both our conscious and subconscious learning because of extra involvement. (Edge 2001 p.21)

Gass and Selinker (2001) relate conscious learning to knowing about the second language, which means being aware of its rules, and being able to talk about the rules.

Subconscious learning is what happens when we, as small children, learn our first language and when second languages are “picked up” in natural settings, i.e. it is a subconscious process where the language is only used for communication. (Gass and Selinker 2001 pp.198-199)

Another purpose with teaching strategies, which in turn increases the learner’s awareness, is to help the learners to get more independent while learning. It helps them to go on with their work and develop on their own without that much help from the teacher. Independence is a very important part and aim of the teaching in Swedish schools today.

The strategies mentioned above are what we can use to learn the whole language i.e. whole sentences and fixed expressions etc., but the most important part of a language are the words. To begin with, the learner must work with the new words in the way that he is aware of what he is doing; the word must mean something to the learner or no learning will occur. To know a word means that a learner has to be able to use it in new contexts and also be able to change the grammar of a word if it is necessary i.e. it is not enough to understand a word with help from a vocabulary list or a dictionary. The learner must be able to use the word to be considered as knowing it properly. (Tornberg 2000 p.97) (My translation)

#### **1.4 Non-Linguistic Factors**

There are more than successful techniques and strategies that decide whether you will become a successful language learner or not. The fact is that your personality also affects the learning process i.e. anxiety, motivation, aptitude etc., are factors that will affect the learning. There are also different types of intelligences that work in different ways for different personalities during the learning process. A teacher’s mission is to be aware of these different intelligences and plan his or her teaching to suit the pupils’ preferences.

Tornberg (2000 p.97) mentions Howard Gardner’s seven different types of intelligence.

1. *Linguistic intelligence* where the learner writes his own sentences, gets help from the context and from knowledge in other languages.
2. *Logical-mathematical intelligence* where the learner draws conclusions from one word to another, makes his own tests, simplifies and splits up the words.
3. *Visual-spatial intelligence* where the learner, for example, can see the words on the wall in letters of fire.
4. *Musical intelligence* where the learner pronounces the words out loud and has both a sound picture and a picture of the word in writing.
5. *Kinaesthetic intelligence* where the learner has to move around to learn the words. For example walk around and shout the words.
6. *Social competence*, here we learn about the pupils who learn better if they work together in a group or if they prefer to work on their own.
7. *Intuition*, or linguistic instinct.

(Tornberg 2000 p.97)

Most people are a mixture of several different intelligences and the learner has to find his way and try different ways to learn, and later decide which of the intelligences he or she chooses to use. Tornberg (2000 p.100) also mentions that you should both as teacher and pupil be aware of the fact that the studying of glossary lists is not enough to reach the goal; words have to be dealt with over and over again in different contexts before the words are learnt properly.

The aim with the studying of words is, of course to be able to use them. Tornberg (2000) says that you have learnt a new word or expression when you can use it in a new context. (p.100)

(My translation)

In earlier research, about vocabulary learning among Swedish children learning English at school, the conclusion was drawn that there are not many pupils who write their own

sentences (The STRIMS project, Bergström, Håkansson, Malmberg, Tornberg, and Öman 2000). The ones who do it are mostly more mature pupils with a larger experience from languages. The researchers could, from the answers they got from their students, say that it seems urgent to, as early as possible, make the pupils aware of the fact that there are other and considerably efficient ways to learn words than studying traditional vocabulary lists. (My translation) The researchers who carried out this project also came to the conclusion that most students learn mechanically; by studying vocabulary lists with two columns. The researchers also found that the learners study the words without a deeper understanding about what the actual goal for vocabulary learning should be. The learners write the words and test themselves by covering the columns one at a time, they focus on every single word and are not able to see the connection between the words in the list and the words in context.

(Bergström, Håkansson, Malmberg, Tornberg, Öman 2000 p.97)

Social competence and intuition (mentioned earlier) i.e. personality factors, also affect you as a language learner. An introvert personality is someone who prefers to work alone while the extrovert is the opposite: someone who prefers to work with other people and communicate. You might think that having an extrovert personality would be better for language learning but recent research says that both introvert and extrovert personalities can be successful language learners. Certain tasks might suit the introvert and the extrovert might be successful with something else. (Gass and Selinker 2001 p.360)

Another personality factor that is important for becoming a successful language learner is that of willingness to take risks. Risk taking in language learning might be a situation where the choice might mean failure of some kind. (Gass and Selinker 2001 p.361) Many language learners are inhibited by the fact that they are afraid of taking the risk and guess the answer. They prefer to remain quiet or they refuse to give an answer in writing.

An additional personality trait is defined as *Field Independence*. The learner who belongs to this group can be recognised as a person who tends to be highly analytic, ignoring confusing information in the context and also self-reliant. The opposite of the field-independent learner is consequently the field-dependent learner who can be defined as a person who pays attention to context. To be an analytic or field-independent learner means that you see or need to work with details in, for example a text while the field-dependent learner has to work with the context to understand and do not pay attention to details. (Gass and Selinker 2001 pp.362-363) According to recent research there is no evidence to prove whether one personality trait is better than the other, when it comes to language learning. What one can assume though is that your personality demands different kinds of learning processes.

Three other factors that can be mentioned here, which also affect language learning, are *motivation, aptitude and anxiety*. Ellis (1997 p.75) mentions four different types of motivation. The fact that learners of foreign languages are only motivated to learn the language to pass an examination to later be able to go on with their studying and get a good job is very common, at least by young children who have not chosen to study the language themselves; they have to study English because it is a compulsory subject. This kind of motivation is mentioned as *Instrumental motivation*. Later in life when the learner is a bit older he or she can choose to learn a language because of interest in a particular country or a particular language, in this case one can talk about *Integrative motivation*. *Resultative motivation* can be very common in a learning situation in a classroom for foreign language learners, where motivation is the result of language achievement i.e. learners become more motivated when they experience success. It can also have the opposite effect. The result could be that the learner become less motivated because he or she knows that he or she is going to be successful and maybe needs more difficult tasks to work with to become more motivated. In some learning situations, it may not be learners' general reasons for learning an L2 that are

crucial in determining their motivation. Indeed it is possible that many learners do not hold distinct attitudes, positive or negative, towards the target language group. Such is probably the case with many *foreign* language learners. It does not follow, however, that such learners are unmotivated. They may find the kinds of learning tasks they are asked to do *Intrinsically motivating*. According to this view, motivation involves the arousal and maintenance of curiosity and can ebb and flow as a result of such factors as learners' particular interests and the extent to which they feel personally involved in learning activities. If you are intrinsically motivated you may have the feeling that language learning only involves the tasks that you have to do in a classroom and not experience the learning process as something you can use in real life. Therefore some tasks may be experienced as less motivating than others because the learners feel that what they are learning is not useful for them personally.

Being a successful language learner means that you also have different skills that are beneficial for language learning. Gass and Selinker (2001) present John Carroll's (1959) account of aptitude. The ability to encode foreign sounds in a manner that they can be recalled later i.e. phonemic coding ability, helps to become a successful language learner such as the ability to recognise the function of words in sentences, grammatical sensitivity, which does not always mean that the learner is able to name and describe the functions but the learner is able to recognise that words in different sentences have the same function. There are also learners who are less reliant on rules presented by the teacher or the material used in class, they have the inductive learning ability to be able to come to their own conclusions from samples of the language, Some linguists (Becker 1991) also suggest that good memory is important for being a successful language learner. The linguists say that much more is memorised than subjected to rules and generalisations.

The last factor, mentioned here, that has something to do with both the learner's personality and being a successful language learner, is anxiety. Gass and Selinker (2001

p.357) present Bailey's (1983) study of anxiety and language learning, where he says that anxiety occupies an intermediate stage between motivation and personality. There appears to be a basic tendency for a person to be more or less anxious and if a learner is not at all anxious he or she is unlikely to be motivated. If a learner is highly motivated but does not expect to reach the goals, for some reason or other, it might increase anxiety.

There are also different types of anxieties depending on the situation the person find himself in. "Social anxiety is basically concerned with constructing and / or maintaining a favourable impression upon others. In language learning situations, this could involve teachers, interlocutors, or fellow students" (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p 357). Other sources of anxiety may be, for example, test anxiety-fear for not doing well on tests. (Ibid. p.357) Both teachers and the fear of not doing well on a test put the learner in a learning situation very far from a first language learner where no such thing occurs.

## **2. AIM**

This study tests the hypothesis that the studying of glossary lists is not enough for learning new words and that as a learner you have to learn the words in context to be able to use them properly. The study is based on the difference between acquisition and learning a language in a foreign language classroom. It is also hypothesised that successful students are aware of which strategies they use when they are learning. The results of the study will be discussed in the light of current discussions about language and vocabulary learning.

### **2.1 Method**

Ten words were chosen for this study. They were taken from a frequency list in the Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000) where the words are divided into sublists according to how often they are used. The first seven words were chosen from sublist one: *assume*,

*available, context, create, environment, evidence, involved*. One word was chosen from sublist three: *task* and two words from sublist four: *obvious, summary*. Two different worksheets were then created and used in class. The first containing the ten words in English and then translated into Swedish with a request for the pupils to learn what they mean in Swedish and be able to spell them in English. The second worksheet contained the ten words, underlined, in sentences with a request for the pupils to translate the sentences and use them in their own context.

A Swedish lower secondary school was then contacted to meet with a teacher willing to cooperate by lending his/her pupils for the study. Arrangements were made to use two classes in seventh grade with 26 pupils in each class and the classes were visited two times. I decided to call the classes Group 1 and Group 2. Group 1 consists of 13 girls and 13 boys and Group 2 of 11 girls and 15 boys. The major part of each group has studied English as a second language since they were nine years old i.e. since they started third grade. A few of them started in second grade and a couple in fourth. The classes were contacted on two occasions.

On the first occasion the first class (Group 1) was given the ten words for homework for next time. The second class (Group 2) was given the words in context and was also given the opportunity to translate the sentences and use the underlined words in their own sentences (See appendices 1 and 2). They were then asked to bring this home to work with for the next time we met. On the second occasion both groups were tested with a traditional vocabulary test in writing. The tests were brought home and marked to check the results. Six pupils, from Group 1, were contacted to answer five questions about learner strategies to figure out the difference in use of strategies among successful language learners and those not so successful. A comparison of the results from Group 1 and 2 was also made to see if words in context would give better results.

A question was also asked to be aware of if there were any of the pupils who had lived in an English-speaking country or spoke English at home with their parents. This was done to try to get a picture of the level of input outside school.

### **3. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 Results group one (vocabulary test and strategies)**

In this group 25 pupils out of 26 participated in the vocabulary test. The test was corrected so that the maximum total score was 20 points with a pass mark of ten points. In that way, the pupils had the opportunity to pass by only writing the word to show that they probably could pronounce it but not spell it. Two of the pupils knew and could spell all the words correctly. One failed with zero points. The total result for the whole group was that: 15 out of the 25 knew and could spell the words correctly with results from 10-20 points. The rest; ten out of 25 failed with results from 1 – 9 points. The average result was 11.64 points for this group. (See Diagram 1 p.19 for a comparison of the results between Group 1 and Group 2)

Six pupils from this group were chosen to describe, in writing, how they learn new words in a foreign language, in this case English. Three pupils who were successful (**S**) on the vocabulary test and three who did not succeed (**U**) were asked to participate. They were given five questions (**Q**) to answer.

<b>Q1</b>	<b>How do you learn the new words you get for homework?</b>
<b>S1</b>	I sit down and practice. I cover the English words with my hand, or ask my mother to test me.
<b>S2</b>	My mother or someone else tests me a couple of times, but I do not have any particular tricks I use to remember the words. I already know some of the words before I have them for homework.
<b>S3</b>	First I look at the words; then I put a paper to cover the English words and practise until I know them. Then I do the opposite.
<b>U1</b>	I read through both the Swedish and the English words. Then my mother helps me by testing me in writing.
<b>U2</b>	I practise and read them and then someone tests me. If I know them I finish practising, and if I do not, I read again.
<b>U3</b>	I go to my grandmother (She and my grand father live next to us). There I study and my grandmother makes sure that I know the words.
<b>Q2</b>	<b>What do you do to remember the words during the test afterwards?</b>
<b>S1</b>	You remember because you have practised.
<b>S2</b>	I just remember; or the words have something that you will remember particularly well.
<b>S3</b>	I have practised, haven't I? And I have a good memory.
<b>U1</b>	Well, you have studied until you know them and then you just remember.
<b>U2</b>	I have given the words a characteristic.
<b>U3</b>	You have practised it well enough so that you will remember.
<b>Q3</b>	<b>When do you know a new word?</b>
<b>S1</b>	When you have practised and know it by heart.
<b>S2</b>	When you know how to pronounce, translate and spell the word.
<b>S3</b>	When I have practised enough.
<b>U1</b>	How you pronounce and write the words.
<b>U2</b>	When you fairly well know how to spell the words and know what they mean.
<b>U3</b>	What the word means in its "home" language and when you know where to put it.
<b>Q4</b>	<b>Which results do you usually get on a vocabulary test?</b>
<b>S1</b>	I am usually successful.
<b>S2</b>	I am usually successful.
<b>S3</b>	I usually do pretty well.

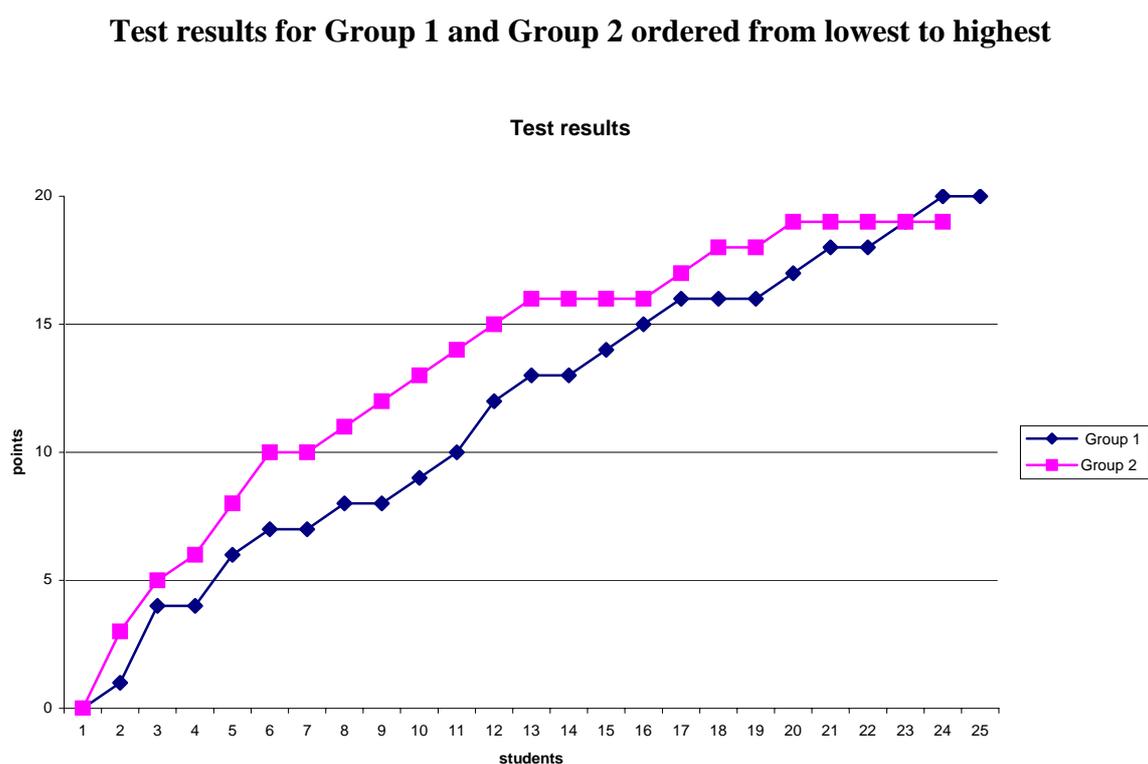
<b>U1</b>	I usually have pretty good results.
<b>U2</b>	I am usually successful.
<b>U3</b>	Pretty good.
<b>Q5</b>	<b>What do you think about English, do you like it or not and why?</b>
<b>S1</b>	English is quite fun.
<b>S2</b>	It is fun most of the time. I like to speak English and work with the tasks in my “planning-sheet.”
<b>S3</b>	It is fun because you learn a new language.
<b>U1</b>	Personally I do not like English, because most of the time it gets so boring, because of all the nagging about what to do.
<b>U2</b>	It is fun because you learn a new language.
<b>U3</b>	It is quite boring because language learning is difficult for me.

### 3.2 Results group two (words in context and test)

The same correction procedure, as with Group 1, was used here, with a total score of 20 points and with a pass mark at ten points. The results are shown in Diagram 1 below.

In this group 24 out of 26 pupils participated in the glossary test. No one reached 20 points in this group and one failed in this group too. The total result for the whole group was that: 19 out of 24 managed to know most of the words and spell, most of the words, correctly with results from 10-19 points. Five of them failed with results from 0-8 points. The average result in this group, 13.29 points, was at a higher level compared to Group 1.

*Diagram 1*



The diagram shows that the results of the vocabulary test for Group 2 are generally at a higher level compared to Group 1.

In the study there is one of the pupils in Group 1 who speaks English with his parents at home, which means that he has had access to UG for both languages. In Group 2 one of the pupils has lived in an English-speaking country and has relatives there. Two of the pupils have visited an English-speaking country. The two pupils who have continuous connection with the foreign language were both successful at the vocabulary test in the study. For the pupils who had only visited an English-speaking country, it made no difference for the result on the vocabulary test.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Two groups in the study participated in a vocabulary test where the difference was that one group was asked to learn ten new words the traditional way, by studying the two columns of a vocabulary list, and the other group was given the opportunity to work with the words in context before they were asked to practise the words at home. The results in Group 2 (who had worked with the words in context) were better compared to Group 1. In Group 2 only five out of 24 failed and in Group 1, ten out of 25 failed. The average result for Group 1 on the vocabulary test was 11.64 points while Group 2 had an average result of 13.29 points. There are circumstances, which could have affected the results in a negative way for Group 2; such as they were given the words for homework for the week after they had worked with them, unlike Group 1 who was tested the same week. Group 2 was also tested the last lesson on a Monday, and they were really tired. Despite these negative aspects they were able to produce better results than Group 1. Though the result of the study did not show any statistically significant difference between the average results on the vocabulary test the results show that the group who was able to work with the words in context were able to show slightly better results than the other group. The conclusion of this must be that working with words in

context may be somewhat more efficient for the language learning procedure than studying the two columns of a vocabulary list.

All of the six pupils who participated in answering the five questions about vocabulary learning show that they use very traditional ways of studying vocabulary. There seems to be a lack of information regarding this in the foreign-language-teaching classroom or the problem might be that this is how language has been learnt over the years and new ways are difficult to introduce. Another reason might be that the usage of different strategies takes a lot of time and the that pupils might think it is not worth it, since they probably belong to the group who are motivated for the reason to pass an examination, in other words they belong to the group with *Instrumental motivation*.

Two of the pupils who participated in the group of six who were chosen to explain how they learn new words hinted that they use some kind of strategy when they practise. One of them says that: “[...] I do not have any particular tricks I use to remember the words.” One may interpret this statement as if this person is aware that there are different ways of learning, and that this person is clearly on his/her way to be able to improve the learning process by using strategies. This person belonged to the group who was successful on the vocabulary test and is clearly motivated since this person thinks that: ”It is fun most of the time. I like to speak English and work with the tasks in my ‘planning-sheet’.” The other person says that: “I have given the words a characteristic” It is a short statement, but one can interpret it as if he or she already uses strategies. This person belonged to the group who were not successful on the vocabulary test but is motivated to learn a new language. This person’s reason for not being successful was clearly a general problem with spelling and other difficulties with language i.e. a problem with aptitude.

Successful pupil 2 (**S2**), (see p.17 in the study) seem to have a phonemic coding ability when the pupil says that “I just remember the words or the words has something that you will

remember particularly well.” It seems that this person is able to encode the sounds of a word to remember it later. The person (**U3**), (see p.18) who belonged to the group of unsuccessful pupils at the vocabulary test, clearly shows that he or she has an aptitude problem when the person says: “It is quite boring, because language learning is difficult for me.” On the other hand, the same pupil shows an example of grammatical sensitivity when he or she says that you know a word in the foreign language when you know “what the word means in its “home” language and when you know where to put it.” (See p.17 **U3**)

From the answers by the pupils participating in the study it has been shown that they rely on their memory to be able to learn and remember words. Successful pupil 3 (see p.17 **S3**) is a good example when he says: “I have practised haven’t I? And I have a good memory.” The amount of pupils in the study, who answered the questions dealing with strategies, might not show an authentic picture of reality since there were only six pupils participating.

In current discussions about language learning it has been found that anxiety plays an important role in the language learning process. The pupils in the study were probably affected by the situation when, first of all, a new person came to work with them and, secondly, some were anxious about doing well on the vocabulary test. There were a few of the learners who immediately wondered if they were graded on this test. The six pupils who were asked to answer five questions about their learning were taken to another room and they immediately asked if they were the only ones who were going to participate and why. A certain amount of anxiety also affected those pupils in that situation.

Since the access to UG can be at different levels, according to Chomsky, depending on age etc. it might be interesting to see if a learner who has had access to UG for both languages early in life would be a successful learner in a foreign language classroom when the learner continues to learn the second language as a foreign language at school. A question was asked in both Group 1 and Group2 to investigate if anyone of the learners had been in contact with

the foreign language (in this case English) earlier in life. The conclusion from their answers and the way they performed in the classroom, for example when they translated the sentences they were given to work with, must be that the access to UG is significant for language learning since the pupils who have English-speaking relatives or have lived in an English-speaking country themselves were all successful at the vocabulary test. They also showed that they are skilful at communicating, and they had minor problems with the translation of the sentences they were given. This result could be interpreted as they are having access to UG for both language-learning processes, and are able to develop two systems at the same time.

## **5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Linguists believe that we are born with the ability to learn language, and that we learn it in the same way as we learn to walk i.e. language learning is something innate. The innatists also believe that the ability to learn a new language decreases when you get older and that there are different levels of access to the innate device, called Universal Grammar (UG). The access to UG may be one of the reasons why language learning at school is different from acquiring a language, but there are other differences as well. First of all, the amount of time the pupils are exposed to the language is very limited, compared to the time we get as first language learners. There is also a difference in the sources of input (teacher, material and other fellow students) where the language often is far from authentic language. The main problem at school, probably depending on an unreal situation, is that of motivation.

Despite the slightly negative picture of foreign language learning at school given above, there are many young people at school who actually get really good at using the target language and this essay has focused on the question how pupils learn new words. The real picture of language learners in a classroom is that some are more successful than others. One way, as a teacher, to help his or her pupils is to make them aware of the fact that there are

strategies worth trying to become more successful and more involved in the learning process. The outcome of being able to use different strategies is that you will become more independent as a learner. Current research concerning this, like the STRIMS project has, I'm afraid, shown that the most common thing among pupils today is that they still use very traditional ways of studying words. Though the results of the study show that there was a practically non-existent difference between the results in each group. Common sense says that learning in context must be more efficient since it is more similar to how a first language is acquired. Among the pupils in this study at a Swedish school one can clearly see that, at least two of the six pupils, who were asked to describe how they learn new words, say that they cover either the Swedish words or the English words when they practise. The conclusion of the other given answers is that you can find hints that they only use the lists to practise the words. No one mentions the use of putting the word into sentences when they practise, and they all seem to rely on their memory to remember the words, at least for the moment except one who showed an aptitude problem.

This essay has, besides strategies, shown that personality traits also affect you as a foreign language learner. These personality traits may be a determining factor, for a language learner in a classroom, if he or she works better alone or in a group. The main point concerning different personality traits is that they do not seem to affect you as a language learner either in a positive or negative way. Different personality traits only demand different ways of learning.

The most evident problem with foreign language learners at school is that of motivation. Most pupils seem to belong to the group, which Ellis (1997) defines as *Instrumental motivation*, where the learner is motivated for functional reasons like, for example, passing an exam. In the group of six, who participated in the questioning, all the successful pupils say that they like English for some reason or other. Among the ones who failed, two say that they

do not like English. One says: "Personally I do not like English, because most of the time it gets so boring, because of all the nagging about what to do." The other person thinks it is boring because it is too difficult. The third member of this group is the person who has problems with spelling. This person says that he likes English, but obviously there are other difficulties for him to deal with. In this case it seems like the motivated students are the ones who were successful at the vocabulary test, and the ones who are not that keen on English failed on the vocabulary test. The study has shown that there was an insignificant difference between the two groups concerning the results on the vocabulary test, which means that the studying of glossary lists can be enough for learning new words. The learners also seem to memorise the words when they are learning rather than using successful strategies. The learners do not seem to pay much attention to how they learn or which different ways there are to improve the learning process.

One question that rises from this investigation is if unsuccessful learners would improve their results if they got the opportunity to become aware of the fact that there are strategies they can use to improve their results as foreign language learners. This could be an interesting topic for further investigations.

**REFERENCES**

- Edge, Julian, 2001. *Essentials of English Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
- Ellis, Rod, 1997. *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Gass, Susan and Selinker, Larry, 2001 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). *Second Language Acquisition: an Introductory Course*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Krashen, S, 1982. *Principles and Practise in second language acquisition*. London: Pergamon.
- Lightbown, Patsy and Spada, Nina, 1999. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Malmberg, Per, Bergström, Inger, Håkansson, Ulla, Tornberg, Ulrika, Öman, Martin, 2002. *I Huvudet på en Elev*. Stockholm: Bonniers.
- Tornberg, Ulrika, 2000. *Språkdidaktik*. Kristianstad: Glerups.

## Homework for Group 1

Learn how to spell and pronounce the following words and what they mean in Swedish

### English

1. assume
2. available
3. context
4. create
5. environment
6. evidence
7. involved
8. task
9. obvious
10. summary

### Swedish

1. anta, förmoda
2. tillgänglig, ledig
3. sammanhang
4. skapa
5. miljö
6. bevis
7. inblandad
8. (arbets) uppgift
9. tydlig, självklar
10. sammanfattning

## Homework for Group 2

Translate the following sentences into Swedish. Learn the underlined words and make your own sentences with them

1. I assume that you are Jane's brother.

---

---

2. I'm always available at eight o'clock in the evening on Mondays.

---

---

3. It's always easier to know what they mean if you hear it in context.

---

---

4. I want to create something new.

---

---

5. Too many cars are not good for the environment in the cities.

---

---

6. There is evidence for the fact that you have murdered your husband.

---

---

7. I feel that I'm involved in something over which I have no control.

---

---

8. Maybe this task was too difficult.

---

---

9. The evidence for the fact that you have murdered your husband is very obvious.

---

---

---

10. When you have read this book I want you to make a summary of what you have read.

---

---

---