A Story of English Language Learning – How Can Children’s Literature be Used in Teaching Vocabulary to Young English Language Learners?

- A Literature Review

Author: Vanja Jennessen
Supervisor: BethAnne Paulsrud
Examiner: David Gray
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Abstract

This study aims to find research relating to the use of children’s literature to promote vocabulary development in young children, particularly English language learners in Sweden. The main questions address how (methods) children’s literature can be used and why (reasons) children’s literature is often recommended for the teaching of vocabulary to young learners. The study also aims to explore reasons against the use of children’s literature in vocabulary teaching found in previous research. A systematic literature review was carried out, including results from five empirical studies. The studies involved native speakers, second language learners and foreign language learners from various backgrounds. The results suggest that while research has shown children’s literature to be a good tool to use with young learners, careful lesson planning needs to be carried out. Direct instruction and scaffolding using pictures, technology and gestures is recommended. Hence, the teacher plays an important part for the vocabulary development using children’s literature in the classroom.

Key words: children’s literature, vocabulary, English language learners, primary school
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1. Introduction

As a general rule, when I shop for a child’s birthday present I almost always choose to buy a book. It has to be carefully chosen, depending on the child’s age and interests. Sometimes I may buy something that I think the parents will enjoy too, as I know they will be more inclined to read it to, or with, their child. Even though the child usually starts the day playing with noisy, flashing toys, I have noticed that at the end of the day or playtime they love to snuggle up with their new book. As well as that, good books are often treasured and kept – I still have story books from my childhood. Some of them I can even remember word for word, even though I may not have read the books for years.

Remembering the exact words of a story might not be the only thing I learned. Ingvar Lundberg, professor at the University of Gothenburg, explains in an interview how reading aloud to children not only promotes vocabulary development, but also understanding of word structure, motivation to read and “gradually a perception of how a typical story is constructed” (author’s translation). Vocabulary, in turn, is greatly important for reading comprehension, development and understanding of grammar (Lee, 2009, p. 70; Nagy, 2005, n.p.). These skills may be considered an advantage for learning, as they play a big part in both education and society. Hence, in giving the gift of a book, do I also give the gift of a stepping stone to academic success through greater vocabulary development?

Developing vocabulary knowledge and a greater flow at reading and writing are the main focus points of the literature based literacy project *Literacy Lift Off* I worked with in an Irish primary school some years ago. There, I discovered ways of teaching that I had not previously encountered in the Swedish educational system. However, during my student teaching practice and substitute teaching in Sweden, I noticed something different to the Irish pedagogical practices. The main part of the English lessons observed was taken up by working in text books, covering topic areas that seemed irrelevant to the pupils’ language requirements in and outside of school. This said, many young pupils still managed to impress me with their good knowledge of English. The teaching methods I observed cannot be generalised for all Swedish classrooms, but this is when I started thinking about if and how children’s literature in English can be used in primary schools in Sweden to ensure the pupils are encouraged to develop their vocabulary and language skills to their full potential.

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1 For more information about Literacy Lift Off, the *Professional Development Service for Teachers’* publication available from [http://pdst.ie/nade/292](http://pdst.ie/nade/292) is a good place to start.
1.1 Aim of study and research questions

The aim of this literature review is to learn what previous research has found regarding how, why or why not to use children’s literature in teaching English vocabulary to Swedish primary school pupils.

For this study the following research questions have been chosen:

- What can be found in previous research regarding how to use children’s literature in teaching vocabulary to young English language learners?
- What reasons for or against the use of children’s literature in teaching vocabulary to young English language learners can be found in prior research?

While this study aims to find results that can relate children’s literature and vocabulary development of English language learners in Sweden, the research questions are not limited to Swedish pupils only. The reason for this is that an international approach is considered to be of interest. The definitions of the terms used can be found in Section 2.5.

2. Background

2.1 English in the Swedish context

The Swedish National Agency for Education, *Skolverket* (2012, p. 11), hereafter referred to as the Agency for Education, states that learning English is compulsory in Sweden from grade 3 at the latest. According to the English syllabus, the more languages one knows the more “opportunities to create contacts and greater understanding of different ways of living” are available (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 32). The English syllabus states “communication, listening and reading” as the three main focal points for the primary school years 1-3. These focal points also have sub-categories to help structure the core content, one being “songs, rhymes, poems and sagas” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 228). Sagas2, or children’s stories (see footnote below), is the main focus area of this thesis.

Furthermore, according to the Agency for Education, English is considered important and a significant part of daily life for Swedish people (Skolverket, 2012a, p. 11). Yoxsimer Paulsrud (2014, p. 17) refers to a study by Kristiansen and Vikør (2006) which concluded that a third of the Swedes in the study had used English “at least four times in the last week”, further

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2 It should be noted that compared to the Swedish version of the curriculum, the translation of the Swedish word *saga* (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 31) typically refers to any kind of story or fairy tale rather than the narrower meaning of the English word *saga*. 
portraying the frequent usage of the language in Sweden. It has also become a necessity for many jobs, as well as university studies and has been called the “first foreign language” of the Nordic countries (Höglin, 2002, pp. 6-7). Hyltenstam (2002, p. 47) describes English as a foreign language as one “learned to be used in communicating with international, non-Swedish-speaking contacts” and English as a second language as one “required for daily communication at work and in society”. Consecutively he claims that English is becoming a second language rather than a foreign language.

With such an early start in English language learning it may come as no surprise that Swedish pupils generally do well in international English language tests. When approximately 3600 Swedish ninth-graders along with more than 49 000 students from 13 other countries took part in the European Union’s research project ESLC (European Survey on Language Competence) in 2011, they reached first place in both reading and listening comprehension and second place in writing (Skolverket, 2012a, pp. 23-25). However, Hyltenstam (2002, pp. 47-48) discusses whether great quality education is the only reason why Swedish people have become well known for their high level of English, and suggests travel, media and the close relationship between the languages as other possible explanations.

However, although it may seem evident that English could in fact be considered a second language in Sweden, there are some inconsistencies. For example, in a press release from the Agency for Education, English is referred to as a foreign language along with Spanish, German and French (Skolverket, 2012b). But, in a later publication regarding foreign language learning in Sweden, only Spanish, German and French are mentioned (Skolverket, 2015b). It is possible that the Agency for Education has changed its view on English as a foreign language to become English as a second language since 2012. However, no actual evidence of this has been found. Therefore, due to the fact that the educational status of English is still not entirely clear, the term English language learners has been chosen for this study. In doing so, articles relating to children’s literature combined with English as either a second or a foreign language will be accepted.

2.2 Why children’s literature?

Motivating the pupils and keeping their interests is important when creating lesson plans (Pinter, 2006, p. 37). In addition, the English syllabus also mentions this when stating that “interests and daily life” should be part of the education (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 33). Many books and articles describing teaching methods for vocabulary and literacy skills suggest using children’s literature (e.g. Appelt, 1985; Beauchat, Blamey & Walpole 2009; Pinter, 2006; Sandström, 2011). A reason
for this may be that children’s literature can be considered as a “common, natural and highly valued early literacy experience” (Beauchat et al., 2009, p. 27). However, choosing a book for teaching purposes needs to be done with careful consideration. Proper planning can clarify the intended goal of the lesson, while explicit teaching of vocabulary mostly leads to more words being learned at a faster pace than if learning is incidental (Schmitt, 2008, p. 341). Loukia (2006, p. 28) even suggests using a check list of language level, content, visuals, pronunciation, motivation and language learning before choosing a book to read with the language learners, carefully deciding whether or not the different areas relate to the children’s level of understanding.

Choosing an English book to read in class should not be difficult in Swedish schools. Firstly, there is an extensive amount of English books available online. Secondly, according to Swedish law (Skollagen, 2010:800, 2 Ch. 36 §) all primary and secondary school students must have access to a school library. Assuming that this law is followed and knowing that libraries often offer interlibrary loans, using children’s literature in teaching English is certainly possible. Therefore, the research questions in this study are intended to be valid for primary schools all over Sweden.

2.3 Why vocabulary?

Young children learn new vocabulary quickly, and many words can easily be taught without translating them to the first language by using visual aids (Pinter, 2006, pp. 87-88). Nagy (2005, n.p.) points out the importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension and underlines that “effective vocabulary instruction is a long-term proposition” that has to be present all the way through the child’s education. Furthermore he suggests that reading aloud and storytelling are among the most effective ways of supporting vocabulary development, whilst extensive reading is the best way for older children. Schmitt (2008, p. 329) agrees that “vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language”, while explaining the importance of understanding the words to be able to use them properly (2008, p. 333).

Lee (2009, pp. 69-70) also proposes that large vocabulary in the early years is positively connected to early reading talent. She refers to a study by Bates, Bretherton and Synder (1988), concluding that “vocabulary development has been found to be a good predictor of grammar development” (Lee, 2009, p. 83). However, Pinter (2006, p. 83) claims that since vocabulary and grammar are interdependent they should be learned in conjunction with each other. She is of the opinion that this is especially important when the children are young but emphasizes that it is best to expose the young learners to grammar without analysing it (Pinter, 2006, p. 86).
2.4 Theory

The interaction between the reader and the child is an essential part of the story and can be connected to some theories on language learning. According to Sandström (2011, p. 35), an interactive approach where learners are allowed to ask questions and talk about the story promotes their chance to understand it better. In using an interactive approach, children’s learners can then “construct [their] own learning”, which Dewey highlighted (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 9).

The social aspects of learning were discussed by Piaget, and further explored by Vygotsky (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 12). Vygotsky believes that learning is holistic (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 13) and stresses the importance of language as a tool for constructing knowledge (Säljö, 2010, p. 187). However, with a holistic approach to learning, he does not differentiate between written language, body language, pictures or sign language (Säljö, 2010, pp. 188).

One of Vygotsky’s main concepts is the Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD (Säljö, 2010, p. 191); a “systematic team-work between the educator and the child” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 254) which helps the child to construct new knowledge not far from the level he or she is already at (Säljö, 2010, p. 191). When a child has acquired fundamental skills in one area the step to the next level is within reach and can be easily grasped with some help from a more knowledgeable helper (Säljö, 2010, pp. 191-192; Vygotsky, 1999, p. 254). The communication process in which the child is being supported to develop more knowledge in a certain area within the zone of proximal development, is according to Säljö (2010, p. 192) called scaffolding. However, while Cameron (2001, p. 8) connects this term to American psychologist Bruner rather than Vygotsky, the explanation of what it involves is the almost the same. However, Bruner seems to use it exclusively in relation to verbal communication (Cameron, 2001, p. 8).

Even if the children are in different zones of proximal development, Cameron (2001, p. 6) points out that competent teachers are able to determine what is needed for them to reach the next level of understanding. Loukia’s (2006, p. 28) check list mentioning language level, content, visuals, pronunciation, motivation and language learning is one example of how teachers can simplify the selection process. A book that the pupils understand yet find interesting and slightly challenging may encourage concentration and motivation, given that story time usually appeals to many children. As well as that, a suitable book can be a scaffolding tool that helps the children reach the next level of language development.

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3 Holistic refers to the belief that ideas, subjects and concepts can be organised by connecting them to each other by referring to the whole (Oxford Dictionaries 2015-06-07)
2.5 Definitions of research questions

To clarify the research questions of this thesis, this section will explain the definitions of the chosen terms that may be interpreted in various ways. Please note that the below mentioned definitions are the author’s own. Since they refer to this study only there is a possibility that they have broader meanings in previous research or in other contexts.

**Children’s literature** – texts written by adults for children, including both fiction and non-fiction. **Fiction** refers to made up texts such as picture books, stories, fables and fairy tales; while **non-fiction** refers to texts that are generally considered factual, e.g. encyclopaedias and informative books. Sometimes the term *children’s literature* seems to only include fictive books. However, in this study, children’s non-fiction was included in the database searches as it was considered relevant for vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

**Young** – children in their first few years of school, particularly age 5-10. In Sweden, children must start primary school in the autumn of the year they turn seven, at the latest (Skolverket, 2015a), but are also able to start pre-school class (*förskoleklass*) the year they turn six (Skolverket, 2014). The lower years of primary school are up to and including third grade, when the pupils are 9-10 years old on average. However, since research on kindergartners also seemed to address areas of relevance for this study, the word *young* was chosen.

**English language learners** – children learning English in a country where English is not a first language. As explained in Section 2.1 the reason for choosing this term is due to the discussions on what role English really plays in the Swedish educational system and society. In other contexts, this term is sometimes used in relation to children learning English as a second language in an English-speaking community.

3. Methodology

This section will describe the methods and criteria used in searching for, selecting and analysing the chosen literature.

3.1 Design

This study answers to the present research questions through a systematic literature review in order to gain information about vocabulary instruction through children’s literature and hence lay the foundations for further research. A systematic literature review is a scientific research method aiming to objectively “identify all available evidence of relevance to a specific subject
area” and critically analyse them, in order to give recommendations for future research or a

After consultation with a university librarian and searching the specific English subject area in
the online library at Dalarna University, the following databases were used:

- **ERIC** (The Education Resources Information Center) EBSCO and PROQUEST
  Educational literature and resources
- **LIBRIS**
  Collection of literature and resources from Swedish national and university libraries
- **LLBA** (Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts)
  Language and linguistics resources
- **MLA** (Modern Language Association) International Bibliography
  Language and linguistics resources

As well as the above mentioned databases⁴, complementary searches in the academic journals
*TESOL Quarterly* and *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* were also conducted. Also, Google Scholar
was used as a complement to the other databases in order to find full-texts. The search results
were documented using a matrix for each database. The search term(s), limiter(s), total number
of results, total number of titles/abstracts/full texts read, number of texts included and
comments for each search were recorded. A summary of the searches can be viewed in Section
4.1. Each search that resulted in one or more articles of interest was highlighted and a note was
kept on the article name(s). The list of relevant literature was then colour coded to keep track of
which articles were found in full text format and which would have to be sourced elsewhere.
After the database searches the literature lists were compared to underline repeats and update the
colour codes, as some articles could be found in full-text in one database but not in another.

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⁴ Although login is mostly required to gain access to full texts, the databases and journals can be found here:
ERIC EBSCO: https://www.ebscohost.com/
ERIC PROQUEST: http://www.proquest.com/products-services/eric.html
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.se/
Journal of Early Childhood Literacy: http://ecl.sagepub.com/
LIBRIS: http://libris.kb.se/
LLBA: http://search.proquest.com/llba/advanced
MLA: https://www.mla.org/
TESOL Quarterly: http://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/journals/tesol-quarterly
3.2 Selection criteria/strategies

In the search for information the following search words were used, divided into three different groups:

1. children’s literature (picture book, story book, fairy tale, fiction, non-fiction, fable), vocabulary, English language learners (L2, ELL, ESL, foreign language, FLES, second language, YELL)
2. language learning, language acquisition, teaching method
3. barnlitteratur, bilderbok, språkinlärning, undervisning, språkundervisning, undervisningsmetod, andraspråk, andraspråkselever, främmande språk, engelska, barnbok

The words from the first groups were considered the most important, with children’s literature, vocabulary and English language learners being the initial search words. They were also searched in combination with each other or with words from the second group. The abbreviations of some terms were discovered when using the thesaurus or whilst reading articles already found. Therefore, the search words in brackets were added after the initial searches and used in combination with each other as well as the other search words in the first two groups. The third group consists of Swedish words used in the LIBRIS database. At times truncation (\*) was used, which would result in more matches. This was another recommendation from the university librarian.

When needed, some limiters were used to narrow the searches. Due to the set time frame and to give priority to recent studies, the university guidelines suggested only to choose literature published since 2005, which was set as a constant limiter, where possible. To ensure good quality articles, another limiter set was for the work to be peer reviewed, meaning that it has been “critically examined by independent experts” in the subject area (Eriksson Barajas et al., 2013, pp. 61-62). Hence, at the beginning of the search the intention was to only use peer-reviewed articles from 2005 onwards, containing all of the search words from list 1. However, the limiters differ between the databases. In the ERIC EBSCO database, as an example, it is possible to set limiters for the education level. Here, only results at primary, elementary, grade 1-3 or early education levels were chosen to be displayed.

The search results were then sorted “by relevance”, an option available in all of the databases used. This meant that the searches with a large number of results could still be used to find relevant literature, although not all titles were examined. To draw the line on when to finish
reading the results from a search, a general rule was created: when five titles in a row seemed of little or no relevance to the study, another fifteen titles were read. If no more title seemed relevant among the last fifteen, the search was deemed to be complete.

The selection process consisted of three steps. In the first step, described in the previous paragraph, the titles were read. Some titles could be immediately excluded as they strongly disclosed another focus area than the current study. In the second step the article’s abstract was read, but only if there was uncertainty or if the title seemed relevant. The abstracts of the articles had to mention at least one of the words referring to children’s literature plus either vocabulary or a word referring to English language learners. Articles with three of the key words were considered the most relevant. In the third step, the articles with three of the key words and relevant abstracts were read in full. The following template was used to determine relevance for the research questions of this study:

Table 1. Assessment of relevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>*</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the article discuss the use of children’s literature as a teaching tool?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the article discuss teaching/learning vocabulary?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the study refer to English language learners?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the age of the learner relevant for this study? (5-10 yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The (*) answer was used as an “in-between” option. In some cases, the area in question was mentioned but not discussed in detail. The articles were then scored accordingly; yes – one (1) point, no – zero (0) points, * - half (0.5) point.

3.3 Analysis

The selected articles were read repeatedly with different focus areas in mind during each reading. In addition to being relevant, the articles had to be of good academic quality. Once an article had passed the “Assessment of relevance”, it was analysed to establish its level of quality. To do so, an assortment of yes and no questions presented by Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013, Ch. 6-8) were used, along with questions found in the university guidelines. Again, the articles were marked as

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Some abstracts seemed relevant to be used either as a background reference or for future research without mentioning at least one of the key words. These articles were compiled and saved in a separate folder. Some of them were later read in full and used in the background of this thesis.
follows; yes - one (1) point, no - zero (0) point, * - half (0.5) point. As all of the searches were set to only include peer reviewed articles, this question is not included in the quality assessment.

Table 2. Quality assessment questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Is there a clear description of the aim and/or research questions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Is there a clear connection between questions, methods and collection of data?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Is there a clear connection between research questions and end result?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Is the text spelled and divided into paragraphs correctly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Does the author mention taking ethical aspects into consideration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Does the author mention limitations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Does the author mention validity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Does the author mention reliability?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Does the author discuss the results of the study?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scores of the relevance assessment and the quality assessment were then combined, followed by a content analysis. Here, patterns, differences and similarities concerning the main questions of this study were brought forward for further discussion (Eriksson Barajas et al., 2013, pp. 147-148). Notes were kept on any differing or coherent methods, results or suggestions in relation to how and why or why not to use children’s literature in teaching English vocabulary.

3.4 Ethical aspects

The chosen articles have been analysed to identify if ethical aspects have been taken into consideration during the studies, and if so, which aspects. As support, The Swedish Science Council’s advice for ethical principles has been taken. This consists of four areas of requirements, briefly described below and freely translated from Swedish (Swedish Science Council, 2011, pp. 7-14):

- **Information** – the informant(s) should be fully aware of what role they play to the project and know that they are allowed to withdraw at any time.

- **Consent** – the informant(s) must give their consent of participation, and in the case of minors the researcher must get parental consent.

- **Confidentiality** – Anyone involved in the research project should sign a form guaranteeing the full confidentiality towards all participants, and care should be taken in reporting the findings so that no person’s identity can be disclosed. Any data gathered must be stored securely.

- **Usage** – All data gathered during the project must not be used for any other purposes other than further research.
4. Results

4.1 Search results and assessment of relevance

Searching for the individual search words resulted in a large number of matches. Therefore, some of the search words were combined to limit the number of results displayed. An example of searches can be viewed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Example of searches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Search Word(s)</th>
<th>Limiter(s)</th>
<th>Number of Results</th>
<th>Number of Titles Read</th>
<th>Number of Abstracts Read</th>
<th>Number of Full Texts Read</th>
<th>Number of Texts Included in Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ERIC EBSCO</td>
<td>Child* literature</td>
<td>Peer Reviewed Publishing date: 2005- Education Level: Early Childhood Education, Elementary, Primary, Grade 1-3</td>
<td>1405</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1* (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC EBSCO</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>1244</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC EBSCO</td>
<td>Child* literature OR picture book OR story book AND language learn* OR language acqui*</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4* (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC PROQUEST</td>
<td>Child* literature vocabulary L2</td>
<td>Peer Reviewed Publishing date: 2005-</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1* (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC PROQUEST</td>
<td>Child* literature language learn vocabulary</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLBA</td>
<td>Child* literature language learn* L2</td>
<td>Peer Reviewed Publishing date: 2005- Languages: English, Swedish</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of texts included in the study refers to the eight articles brought forward to the relevance assessment. When the scores from the relevance and quality assessments were combined, only five articles (shown in brackets) passed and were analysed in full in this literature review, initially sourced by using the search words shown above.

Finding up-to-date, good quality articles concerning all three areas of children’s literature, vocabulary and English language learners proved difficult. Therefore, the selection criteria were
broadened to also include literature researching at least two of the areas. No results contained studies researching the subject area within a Swedish educational context, and no relevant articles were found in the journal searches nor LIBRIS and MLA. After the relevance assessment, one of the eight articles was excluded and is presented in Appendix 1.

4.2 Assessment of quality

In this section the results of the quality assessment of the seven articles left after the relevance assessment are presented.

No article managed to get the full nine points, but two of them (Silverman & Hines, 2009; Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker & Schneider, 2013) were only half a point short. Both of these articles merely give a vague description of ethical aspects, causing them to lose half a point each. Silverman and Hines (2009, p. 307) describe that the children’s parents have filled out a questionnaire with questions on the children’s language background but fail to mention whether they have been given consent for participation. And, although Suggate et al. (2013, p. 560) did receive written consent, they explain that the purpose of the study was unknown to both children and parents. This goes against the information requirement set by the Swedish Science Council’s advice for ethical aspects, resulting in half a point being deducted from the total score. It is possible that the ethical guidelines these authors were expected to follow differ from those set by the Swedish Science Council. However, since there was not enough time to research this, and because the results are expected to be valid in the Swedish context, the Swedish guidelines were followed and hence points were deducted. Furthermore, even though only three articles (Silverman & Hines, 2009; Suggate et al., 2013; Maynard, Pullen & Coyne, 2010) discuss the validity of their studies, all seven of them mention reliability. No spelling mistakes or incorrect divisions of paragraphs, as covered by quality assessment question four, were found in any of the articles.

The two least recent articles (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Boote, 2006) scored significantly lower than the rest, 5.5 and 4.5 points respectively. However, to get a clear overview of the total scores of all articles, their quality assessment scores were combined with those of the relevance assessment. Not surprisingly, due to the lack of points in the quality assessment, the same two articles failed to reach the level of the other studies and were subsequently excluded from this study. An outline of the assessments can be found in Appendices 2 and 3.

---

6 All of the articles have been read a repeated number of times, and although four of them do not discuss validity, they have been considered to be of high standard. The described methods do in fact seem to measure what the study intends to research.
4.3 Presentation of articles

In this section the five articles chosen for analysis are presented. Since they all do not involve empirical research within the same area, some background information regarding target area and population will also be given in this section.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Quality Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Total Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leacox’s and Wood Jackson’s study compares if there is a difference in vocabulary gain after technology enhanced English vocabulary instruction with word explanations in Spanish and after an adult has read aloud. Twenty four children between the ages of four and six took part in the study.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Quality Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Total Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this article researchers examine if twenty-two Hispanic American children, between the ages of four and six years, benefit from Spanish bridging during story book reading in English. It also investigates whether the children’s prior language proficiency makes a difference to potential benefits from such teaching methods.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Quality Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Total Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is an extensive study including 224 pupils in Grade 1 from low income families, investigating whether there is a difference between rich, basic or incidental instruction in teaching vocabulary. The authors describe about 42 % of the population as “non-white” and from the ethnic backgrounds “black, Asian, Hispanic and other” (Maynard, Pullen & Coyne
but do not clarify whether or not those children have another first language than English or what age the children are.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Quality Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Total Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Silverman and Hines (2009, p. 307) compare a “multimedia-enhanced read-aloud vocabulary intervention with a read-aloud vocabulary intervention that does not include multimedia enhancement”, in pre-kindergarten through to second grade. They also investigate the language background of the children to see that is another factor that makes a difference in vocabulary learning. Around a third of their studied population have a different first language than English.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Quality Assessment Score:</th>
<th>Total Score:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study aims to find out possible differences in first language vocabulary learning when a story is read to or told to German children in second and fourth grade, with average ages of eight years (2nd grade) and ten years (4th grade).

4.4 Content analysis results

The five chosen articles were once again read in full, this time focusing on the two questions related to the purpose of this literature review – methods (how) and reasons (why or why not). During the readings some key words were collected. These were chosen as they occurred in several of the texts or because they were of great relevance to the research questions and were used to create a clear summary of the results. An overview of the relationship between key word appearances in the different texts can be found in Appendix 4.

Due to the limited amount of research focusing specifically on teaching vocabulary to young English language learners using children’s literature that was found, other studies of relevance were selected. These included teaching vocabulary to children from low socio-economic
backgrounds (Maynard et al., 2010) and teaching first language vocabulary to primary school pupils in Germany (Suggate et al., 2013). However, Silverman and Hines (2009, p. 306) explain that according to research, “vocabulary instruction that works for non-English language learners works as well if not better for English language learners”. This quote was therefore taken into consideration.

### 4.4.1 Methods – How?

**Key words:** rich and direct instruction, scaffolding, bridging, repetition

In their study, Maynard et al. (2010) compare different types of vocabulary instruction groups; rich, basic and incidental, and what effects the three methods have on learning the target words. Although no specific definitions of the different instructional approaches are given in the article, the chosen methods give an overview as to what they entail. The rich instruction group was given opportunities to learn pronunciation and participate in discussions of word meanings in different contexts, as well as post-reading activities. The children in the basic instruction group were only provided with simple descriptions of the intended target words and did not take part in any other activities involving the words. In the third group of incidental instruction, the words were mentioned as part of a story, with no definitions given. After reading a storybook three times the children were asked questions about the story without a focus on the target words (Maynard et al., 2010, pp. 218-219).

However, although Maynard et al. (2010, pp. 212; 231) promote rich instruction, they explain that this is a very time consuming method that needs to be motivated by the teacher in charge. They also underline that working with rich vocabulary instruction using children’s literature, although highly beneficial for most children, might not be enough for some pupils. Still, they are of the opinion that rich instruction is worth the time, as their study shows that it is of great gain to the students’ vocabulary development (Maynard et al., 2010, p. 231). The study concludes that rich and basic instruction is preferred over incidental instruction (Maynard et al., 2010, p. 228). In fact, all studies included in this literature review except Suggate et al. (2013) found that rich or direct instruction of target words is beneficial for vocabulary gain.

---

7 *Direct instruction* is a teaching method using “explicit explanations, small learning steps, frequent review [and] frequent teacher-student interactions” (Crawford, Engelmann & Engelmann, 2009). However, Beck and McKeown (2004, pp. 15-17) explain that, although word learning by direct instruction has been scientifically proven to work, previous research has failed to connect it to improved reading comprehension. They suggest that *rich instruction* using even more explicit methods of instruction, leads to a deeper understanding of the target words.
In turn, Silverman and Hines (2009, p. 311) highlight that their study consisted of direct instruction combined with watching videos where the chosen vocabulary was being used. This is something their findings suggest to be beneficial for English language learners. But, they propose that extra support for English language learners may be required, although they do not give examples of any specific methods (Silverman & Hines, 2009, p. 306). However, they do go on to explain that discussing the target words in connection to the video viewed was used as scaffolding to increase learning (Silverman & Hines, 2009, p. 312). Leacox and Wood Jackson (2012) also investigate the use of technology to increase word learning, but instead of videos they use electronic books, e-books, with translations to the children’s first language.

Defining the target words in the children’s first language is called bridging (Leacox & Wood Jackson, 2014, p. 178; Lugo-Neris et al., 2010, p. 316). Both of these studies have similar target groups and settings – Hispanic children age four to six in summer education programmes. Although the two studies conclusively recommend bridging, Leacox and Wood Jackson (2014, p. 190) and Lugo-Neris et al. (2010, p. 321) explain that the benefits of this chosen method cannot be entirely proven by their findings. The other articles in this study do not mention bridging, however, it is worth noting that Leacox and Wood Jackson (2014) and Lugo-Neris et al. (2010) are the only two articles that solely focus on English language learners.

Another recurring word reflecting the methods for teaching is repetition. All studies except Suggate et al (2013) discuss the importance of repeated reading, post-reading activities and pronunciation exercises for vocabulary gain and text comprehension. Silverman and Hines (2009, p. 323) recommend repeated exposure to target vocabulary within different contexts to give a wider understanding of word meanings, while Leacox and Wood Jackson (2012, p. 178) find that the combination rich instruction and repeated readings gained a considerably deeper understanding of the chosen words.

One article contrasts from the rest, both in terms of key words and in overall similarities. Although straight reading from a book or silent reading is discouraged in three articles (Maynard et al., 2010; Silverman & Hines, 2009; Suggate et al., 2013) Suggate et al. (2013) examine whether oral storytelling, i.e. not reading out of a book, is a more useful way of promoting vocabulary development than the reading of a book. In their research they compare adult read-alouds, independent reading and free storytelling. Suggate et al. (2013, p. 554) bring attention to the fact

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8 In their study, Suggat et al. (2013) examine three different approaches:
Read alouds – An adult reads a storybook to a group of children.
Independent reading – A child reads a storybook to him-/herself, in silence.
Free storytelling – An adult tells a story to a group of children without using books or transcripts.
that children learn a large amount of words up to the age of six and point out that non-textual influences must be taken into consideration for vocabulary development. The study found that independent reading was the least effective method for learning vocabulary, while free storytelling resulted in the greatest gain (Suggate et al., 2013, p. 562). Yet, their findings do not oppose the use of children’s literature in teaching vocabulary. Instead, they merely propose a method for usage that can create a more interactive pedagogical learning environment – the adult learns a story well enough to be able to retell it, possibly including props like pictures and objects or using gestures to involve the children more (Suggate et al., 2013, p. 559).

4.4.2 Reasons – Why?

Key words: research based, natural, motivational

The key words for this section were collected to give a summary of reasons mentioned in the articles. The occurrence of words was not as consistent as the key words for the methods, as can be viewed in Appendix 4. As for reasons why to use children’s literature as a means to teach vocabulary to young learners, most studies justified their chosen method by referring to previous research supporting this method (Lugo-Neris et al., 2010; Maynard et al., 2010; Silverman & Hines, 2009; Suggate et al., 2013). However, other than finding that their conducted studies support the use of children’s literature for teaching vocabulary, no reasons were found in the actual studies. However, Lugo-Neris et al. (2010, p. 316) and Maynard et al. (2010, p. 212) also introduced their work by describing children’s literature as natural and motivational.

No reasons against the use of children’s literature were found in the chosen studies, however, the traditional way of reading stories to children (i.e. the children sit quietly and listen to the adult reading the story from cover to cover) is criticized in three of the articles (Maynard et al., 2010; Silverman & Hines, 2009; Suggate et al., 2013).
5. Discussion

5.1 Main findings

The purpose of this literature review was to discover what previous research has found regarding how and why to use children’s literature in teaching English vocabulary to Swedish primary school pupils, with the following research questions in mind:

- What can be found in previous research regarding how to use children’s literature in teaching vocabulary to young English language learners?
- What reasons for or against the use of children’s literature in teaching vocabulary to young English language learners can be found in prior research?

As it turned out, no research articles were found to include Swedish primary school pupils. Either the search words were not suitable, or else there is a lack of quality research regarding English language learning in combination with children’s literature for Swedish children. However, as explained previously, English is a big part of Swedish society and daily life. Therefore, the results of this literature review can be seen to have a possible connection to the Swedish curriculum, as the methods described can support working in accordance with the English syllabus. Also, with children’s literature being widely available through local libraries and online, Swedish primary school pupils are never too far away from accessing a desired book. Furthermore, using research based methods from English speaking countries involving children from various social and language backgrounds may be considered an advantage for vocabulary acquisition, since methods that benefit native English speakers tend to also benefit children learning English as a second or foreign language (Silverman & Hines, 2009, p. 306).

Using children’s literature in the classroom is found to be a successful method for increasing vocabulary knowledge and understanding of word meaning in all the studies reviewed. But, teachers must choose literature relevant for the context and target age group (Leacox & Wood Jackson, 2014; Silverman & Hines, 2009), which can be connected to determining the children’s zones of proximal development as presented by Vygotsky. In the Swedish context the teacher may like to choose books with target words relating to other content taught in different subjects, to promote rich instruction and a deeper understanding. In doing so, the support for further vocabulary acquisition is increased as the content is repeatedly presented to the children.

Bridging to Swedish can possibly be seen as a scaffolding technique as it is a way of supporting the children to understand certain words, yet, the use of props, gestures, pictures and/or
technology are the scaffolding techniques suggested in some studies (Leacox et al., 2014; Lugo-Neris, et al. 2010; Maynard et al., 2010; Silverman & Hines, 2009). Considering the generally high level of English in Swedish society, this support may be preferred as a first alternative to direct translation. However, since that area is not covered by this literature review, it is a question for further research.

The second research question of this study is harder to answer by referring to the reviewed studies. Some suggest that children’s literature is natural and motivational (Lugo-Neris et al., 2010, p. 316; Maynard et al., 2010, p. 212), but there is really not much else mentioned in the articles with regard to reasons for or against children’s literature other than previous research supporting the chosen methods. However, seeing the results of the studies, it is clear that using children’s literature as a means of working with vocabulary instruction is found to promote learning. All five studies extensively investigate different methods involving children’s literature, and all five of them have come to a positive result. None of them state that their research was unsuccessful; they rather lay the foundation for further research to broaden the understanding of the possibilities of using children’s literature. Therefore, their results can be seen as reasons for using children’s literature in teaching vocabulary. The words natural and motivational can possibly be used as reasons too, since this second, or foreign, language is such a big part of the pupils’ daily lives. Therefore, using something as natural and motivational as a book to learn more words seems to be just that – natural.

5.2 Limitations

Due to the time frame given for completion of this study, a limited number of articles were chosen by searching a few databases recommended by the university librarians. A change of search words or an extension of database searches may have given a different result. Also, the search results were often filtered using the pre-installed “by relevance” option in the databases. This should mean that the computer automatically lists the results “by relevance” to the search words entered, however, this can be questioned. Relying on a computer filter cannot guarantee that the all of the excluded articles were irrelevant for this study. Another limitation to this study is the sample size, both in regards to the number of articles chosen (5) but also the sample size of some studies analysed. This could question the reliability of the results presented.

The quality of the chosen articles is another area that cannot be guaranteed. Although they were all verified by using a quality assessment matrix, they were examined by someone who is not a native English speaker. Hence, there is a risk that the spell- and grammar check is incorrect.
Working in collaboration with others and re-reading the articles several times would have been beneficial, however, it was not possible this time. Yet, the examined texts had already been peer-reviewed, giving a possibility that the quality of the excluded articles is fine. Two of the excluded articles (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Boote, 2006) are written by authors often referred to in other scientific texts, questioning the quality assessment measures of this study. It is also highly likely that the authors had other ethical guidelines to follow other than the Swedish ones. However, the selection criteria chosen had to be followed for transparency and due to that they were excluded.

No reasons against the use of children’s literature in teaching vocabulary were found. This can depend on the chosen search words – the opponents of this teaching method might not use their time to research the benefits of children’s literature. Instead, they probably put their focus on other areas that would have been naturally excluded from the results, as they may not have contained any of the search words entered. Although terms relating to children’s literature would still feature in the texts, they might not be mentioned in the key words or abstract which were the two sections first read in the relevance assessment.

Another limitation is the chosen target group, “young English language learners”, which referred to children aged 5-10 years with a different first language than English. Only two out five studies solely focused on English language learners. Other research groups consisted of children from various linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, even though the use of the term “English language learners” has been previously motivated and explained, it may be of importance to note that it sometimes refers to children learning English as a foreign language, but in an English speaking country (Silverman & Hines, 2009, p. 312). The differences in word meaning or the use of a term could be considered a limitation of this study.

5.3 Further research

Although the main findings of this study may be possible to apply to young English learners in Sweden, it would be interesting to explore the use of English children’s literature in the Swedish classrooms. Since the status of the language is somewhere in-between a foreign and a second language here, in Sweden, it is relevant to determine whether the methods used in English speaking countries can be used in similar ways in Sweden. For this, an empirical research study is recommended.

Another interesting research area would be one examining different scaffolding techniques in the Swedish context. In this study, bridging to the children’s first language was recommended by some
research, while using props, pictures and technology were promoted methods in other studies. Researching this would be of great benefit to English teachers in Sweden, as it could lead to specific recommendations for young pupils in Swedish primary schools.

Also, as explained previously, the vocabulary development of young children between the ages of four and six is more frequently researched. No research regarding third grade was found to be used in this study. For teachers in lower primary schools in Sweden, which involves pre-school class to third grade, it could be of use to find scientifically researched methods on how to best promote vocabulary knowledge all throughout the four school years rather than just the first three.

6. Conclusion

Working with children’s literature in the classroom seems to be a common occurrence around the world, both in teaching of the first language, which could be English, and in teaching English language learners. However, simply reading aloud or letting the children read quietly to themselves may not be enough. It is important to have a certain aim for the lesson – one that is in accordance with the national curriculum. Incorporating children’s literature with technology and using rich instruction to teach vocabulary can be good ways of getting more out of this type of teaching method, according to the studies included in this literature review. Although more research on specific methods would be beneficial for creating lesson plans based on scientific evidence, structured work with children’s literature does not seem to do any harm to young learners’ literacy skills. Instead, it appears as though it is a method with great potential.
References


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Skolverket (2012b). *Svenska elevers engelska i toppklass.* Available 2015-05-19 from:
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toppklass-1.177735


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http://www.skolverket.se/skolformer/grundskoleutbildning

http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=42

Suggate, S. P., Lenhard, W., Neudecker, E. & Schneider, W. (2013). Incidental vocabulary acquisition from stories:
551-571.

Swedish Science Council (2011). *Forskningsetiska principer.* Available 2015-05-04 from:
http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf


Stockholm: Department of Language Education, Stockholm University.
Appendix 1. Relevance assessment matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article name</th>
<th>Does the article discuss the use of children’s literature?</th>
<th>Does the article discuss teaching/learning vocabulary?</th>
<th>Does the study refer to English language learners?</th>
<th>Is the age of the population relevant for this study? (5-10 years)</th>
<th>Total points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biemiller &amp; Boote 2006</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>* 50%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugo Neris, Wood Jackson &amp; Goldstein 2010</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4-6 , average age 5.1 years</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beck &amp; McKeown 2007</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>* Low income</td>
<td>Kindergarten/First class – no age specified</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silverman &amp; Hines 2009</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>* 30%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economou 2015</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker &amp; Schneider 2013</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>* 2nd Grade &amp; 4th Grade</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leacox &amp; Wood Jackson 2014</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>* 4-6 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maynard, Pullen, Coyne 2010</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>* “at risk students”, low income and other ethnic backgrounds</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exclusion after relevance assessment:

### Appendix 2. Quality assessment matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article name</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Total points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biemiller &amp; Boote 2006</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugo Neris, Wood, Jackson &amp; Goldstein 2010</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beck &amp; McKeown 2007</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silverman &amp; Hines 2009</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Contact with parents</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker &amp; Schneider 2013</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Consent without full understanding of purpose</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leacox &amp; Wood Jackson 2014</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maynard, Pullen &amp; Coyne 2010</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although scoring low, all assessed articles were put forward to the final selection process described in section 4.2 and presented in Appendix 3.
Appendix 3. Total results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article name</th>
<th>Relevance Score</th>
<th>Quality Score</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biemiller &amp; Boote 2006</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugo Neris, Wood Jackson &amp; Goldstein 2010</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beck &amp; McKeown 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silverman &amp; Hines 2009</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker &amp; Schneider 2013</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leacox &amp; Wood Jackson 2014</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maynard, Pullen &amp; Coyne 2010</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exclusions after combination of relevance and quality assessment scores:

Appendix 4. Key words in selected articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods – how?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich instruction</td>
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