# Vocabulary acquisition

## Possibilities within the task-based framework

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# Abstract

This This review sets out to supply an overview of the field of vocabulary learning within the task-based framework. First, an outline of vocabulary knowledge in general is drawn and connected to a theoretical background, consisting of influential work from Krashen (1989), Swain and Lapkin (1995) and Long (1996). The lion part of this review is constituted of articles in which different task-based approaches are tested. These are divided into input-based tasks, communicative tasks and, what is in this review called, production-based tasks. All three approaches show both promising and discouraging results. In addition to these task-type divisions, form focus is analysed. The gathered literature shows that incidental focus on form (FonF) is altogether possible within tasks but that when time is considered, a decontextualized focus on forms (FonFs) seem more effective. Suggestions are made that scholars examine task-based language teaching in its weaker form. This could allow for explicit vocabulary teaching through FonFs whilst still maintaining its meaning-centred core. This was shown to be a success in a study by de la Fuente (2006). Lastly, it is suggested that researchers be detailed in their analyses of what type of tasks relates to what type of vocabulary knowledge, as surveyed literature indicates that different tasks are useful for different purposes.

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# 1 Introduction

Acquiring wider and deeper vocabulary knowledge is paramount in the pursuit of becoming a proficient foreign language speaker. It can be argued that lack of vocabulary knowledge often has a more severe impact on clarity and fluency of spoken and written language than insufficient grammatical knowledge or poor pronunciation (Hedge, 2000). Shaw and McMillion (2008, p, 141) show that vocabulary is related to reading speed by comparing native speakers of English with Swedish English as a foreign language (EFL) students. They find that the latter needed 25% more time in order to comprehend the given text in relation to the native-speakers' benchmark, pointing to the severe impediment of having an inadequate vocabulary. It seems as though vocabulary is a key feature in order to make oneself understood as well as to understand others.

Several thresholds have been established in trying to pin down how many words that actually should to be learned. Nation (2006) maintains that in order to understand a variety of texts, learners need a lexicon of around 8000-9000 word families. This number is believed to be enough for a 98% comprehension rate of a novel or newspaper. The discrepancy found between Nation's vocabulary threshold and the vocabulary knowledge of EFL students as presented in Laufer (2000, p. 48) is daunting (e.g. German high-school students had a lexicon of around 1200 words after 400 hours of instruction), but consequently emphasises the need for a long-term and sustainable strategy and practice in vocabulary teaching.

Researchers have put forward different theories trying to map out the cognitive processes involved in vocabulary acquisition. Depending on the stance taken by the researchers, different hypotheses and consequently different experiments have been able show when acquisition takes place and when it does not. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1989) has been influential in one strand of research, investigating the effectiveness of learning large quantities of vocabulary through a flood of input with extensive reading as his focus of study. The model questions the need for structured input, as well as the need for learners to produce newly encountered vocabulary in order to acquire it. The Input Hypothesis is based on the postulate that learners are often successful in inferring meaning from context. However, its critics have often maintained that this is not necessarily the case, and that learners might not even notice the unknown word or make an effort to learn its meaning (Oxford & Crookall, 1990). Yet, comprehensible input is one of the most important sources for meeting new vocabulary and even though not in is full form, the input hypothesis still is considered to have bearing (Nation, 2007, p. 4).

Other theories have instead maintained the need for methods where learners have the chance to convey meaning (Skehan 1996), notice new words and their morphology in communication (Schmidt 1990, Long 1996), and practise them through output (Swain and Lapkin, 1995).

In this review, the above-mentioned divergence is of interest as input, meaning and output are key components in most contemporary vocabulary research (Nation, 2007). More specifically this review is interested in investigating one approach that seems to have the possibility of incorporating these different aspects, namely, task-based language teaching (TBLT). The field stems from the communicative vogue in language teaching and has traditionally been interested in incidental language acquisition through meaningful tasks, which are said to promote complexity and fluency (Shehan, 1996). These can all be considered crucial aspects of language proficiency. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that maintaining that as a sole interest might have a negative effect on form and structure (Laufer, 2005). This notion has invoked new research trying to incorporate form-centred activities into tasks, but how this is done most appropriately or effectively is widely contested. Should form- focused instruction be teacher or learner initiated? Should attention to form to be given before or after meaning has been established? Is form most efficiently learned through communicative tasks or as stand-alone segments? These questions are under scrutiny in the present review. Much of contemporary research within the field of vocabulary teaching and learning is concerned with the investigation of computer and internet-based tasks. This strand of research is however beyond the scope of this review. Instead, research covering input- based tasks, communicative tasks and production-based tasks are surveyed.

# 2 Explanations of concepts

## 2.1 Knowing a word

Laufer (1991, pp. 82-83) made an attempt to pinpoint what knowing a word actually implies. She described five separate categories: First, form is singled out, which encompasses the ability to recognise a word in aural and written contexts as well as being able to pronounce and spell the word. The second category is word structure, which alludes to the morphemes (free or bound) that constitute a word, as well as its derivatives. Third, syntactic behaviour is found, which signifies how a word operates in a sentence and what lexical consequences have to be taken into consideration when using the designated word. The fourth category is meaning, which includes its referential meaning (homonyms, polysemes, idioms etc.) affective meaning,

and its pragmatic meaning. The last category found is lexical relations, which denotes knowing the word's relationship to other words and their meanings (synonymy, antonymy, hyponomy), as well as its collocations. These five categories, she says, are related to different pitfalls that a learner might encounter, either due to L1 transfer or from misconceptions of words and their different meanings and connotations (Laufer, 1991). Miller (1999) defined word knowledge in a similar way, but he also noted that knowing a word is not a static category within the learner. He writes that people rarely express themselves through decontextualized words but through sentences. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that everyone who uses a word in a sentence can define the word itself. A more fluent scale is presented, on which the learner is positioned according to how extensive the knowledge of a word is. This bears with it that even though a learner might not have the ability to describe a word or state all of its features, it does not mean that the learner is completely oblivious to that word.

## 2.2 Receptive and productive vocabularies

Receptive and productive vocabulary are two terms important for a more global understanding of vocabulary learning. Receptive vocabulary, in broad terms, implies the understanding of the meaning of a word encountered in speech or writing. A productive vocabulary, in the same broad strokes, is the portfolio of words available within a learner's interlanguage for production. These concepts have been made more detailed and precise by Laufer and Goldstein (2004) who defined vocabulary into a hierarchy of four levels: active recall (being able to use the target word); passive recall (understanding the meaning of the target word); active recognition (recognising the word when given its meaning); passive recognition (the ability to recognise meaning when given options). Additionally, Laufer and Goldstein suggest that the vocabulary level most associated with L2 classroom success is passive recall, and this could be considered as a proposed point of focus for vocabulary teaching. However, one could also argue that passive recall is related to success as classroom practice often revolves around passive or receptive activities, such as reading and listening (Webb, 2005). Expanding ones active vocabulary might be a very desirable goal for non- native speakers in order to progress in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity. This might involve activating words that are already known but are not likely to occur in production due to lack of explicit knowledge of the word, or due to lack of confidence to use more complex vocabulary. High-frequency vocabulary is more likely to be used since such words are encountered more often in input.

These words also have a tendency to have wider definitions where low frequency vocabulary might be very specific (Laufer, 2005).

## 2.3 Incidental and intentional learning

Incidental learning of vocabulary can be described as words being acquired when engaging in an activity with another purpose than learning vocabulary, such as reading a book, listening in on a native-speaker conversation or trying to decide together with a peer the order of furniture in a room. Intentional learning is defined as an activity where learning vocabulary is the purpose or emphasis of a task. This could be done either through form-focused instruction (FFI) or through learner activities, such as memorising wordlists. This dichotomy is, however, somewhat problematic as pointed out by Bruton, García López and Esquiliche Mesa (2011). They argue that it is important to recognise that vocabulary acquired as a by-product of an activity can be both incidental and intentional. They maintain that intention can only be measured at task level, in form of task objectives. Intention, however, is also found at the subordinate learner level, concerning choices made by the individual in order to understand and learn the designated word, even if being involved in an incidental-learning activity. Therefore, the term incidental should only be used to explain task design rather than the actual learning situation since the strategies learners implement cannot be known beforehand and is not quantifiable (Bruton et al., 2011).

However they occur, form-focused activities are argued to be essential to vocabulary learning and acquisition (Laufer, 2005). These are commonly divided into two groups: focus on forms (FonFs), denoting decontextualized and non-communicative activities that stress lexical form, and focus on form (FonF), encompassing activities in which form is noticed as a result of a need to grasp the meaning of a word, the need to use target vocabulary in communication, or through negative feedback given by the interlocutor (Shintani, 2013).

From a task-based standpoint, FonF activities, or incidental form focus, should be preferable since tasks revolve around meaning and its purpose usually centres on task completion rather than explicit language learning (Skehan, 1996). Yet, many studies seem to indicate FonF as not being a sufficient activity in order for students to amplify their lexical proficiency. Instead some researchers would maintain FonFs to be indispensible to L2 acquisition, pointing to the need for explicit teaching and perhaps even towards a necessary diversion from the naturalistic assumptions stipulated within the strong version of TBLT and input-centred vocabulary learning (de la Fuente, 2006; Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat, 2011).

## 2.4 Theoretical background

Krashen's Input Hypothesis states that language can only be learned to a certain extent since it is an unnatural process of gaining competence (Krashen, 1989). Language, Krashen says, is acquired, and this happens unconsciously whilst engaged in decoding meaning. The most effective way of gaining linguistic competence is through comprehensible input, and he specifically prescribes extensive reading as good source for such input.

This view is contrasted in Swain's Output Hypothesis, which proposes that comprehensible input is not enough in terms of reaching close to native-like competence (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Although input is acknowledged as a vital part of L2 learning she maintains that in order for a learner to reach beyond the understanding of meaning, grammatical organisation of language has to be initiated. This happens when learners are pushed to produce language as correct and comprehensible as possible (so called pushed output). Comprehension is achieved from having the opportunity to revise and modify that output (Pica, Holliday, Lewis & Morgenthaler, 1989). Swain and Lapkin (1995) write that it is in language production that learners have the opportunity to acknowledge where their linguistic competence is inadequate. Noticing this deficiency is a result of feedback, either from an external source (for example a teacher or peer), or from the learner himself (Schmidt, 1990).

This is in line with Long's interaction hypothesis (1996), which states that face-to-face communication is a good arena for language acquisition. Conversation is seen to be an aggregate of comprehensible input, negative feedback, and negotiation for meaning. Long suggests that when a conversation breaks down due to the speaker's inadequacy to produce a certain word, form or grammatical structure, the interlocutor may attend to the failed statement, using a correct grammar or word, and the speaker may negotiate for meaning. It is believed that at this stage, when the meaning of the messages being conveyed has been established, attentional space[1] can be allocated to form of a word and the feedback of the interlocutor. Long writes that "negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS [native speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (1996, pp. 451-452)

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[1] Van Patten (1990) suggests that the learner posits a limited amount of attention and that meaning and form cannot be attended to at the same time.

In addition to Swain and Long's influential hypotheses, the Involvement Load Hypothesis, put forward by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), has been found to be useful for predicting outcomes of tasks. The theory gravitates around the idea that learners' engagement in the establishment of meaning of newly encountered vocabulary is paramount for acquisition. Laufer and Hulstijn present three categories generating such involvement load: need, search and evaluation. Need signifies the motivation to understand or use a word. Search, draws on the concept of noticing (Schmidt, 1990), and signifies the attention paid by students to find out the meaning of a word. This is done by turning to a dictionary or by consulting an authority. Evaluation occurs when the learner has to make a syntactic and semantic choice between words, contrasting them for precision. If tasks inspire students to engage in these activities, this increases the involvement load, and so, the chances of acquiring target vocabulary.

## 2.5 Tasks

Tasks are understood differently depending on the theoretical background. Whereas some think of tasks simply as the primary occupation of a classroom situation, the task-based research community has often understood tasks as an activity, or sequence of activities, with a set objective; this objective is reached by engaging in some form of social interaction where meaning is pivotal. Language, in such a framework, is a tool used to reach that objective and language learning is, subsequently, incidental (Ellis, 2000).

This is a naturalistic approach to language learning that carries with it some complications. For one thing, classroom situations are not natural, and for learners to suddenly forget that they are in such a situation is unlikely. Moreover, learners have different styles with which they approach tasks. Even though language is though to be a mediating tool used to convey meaning, this process is altered by the fact that learners adopt different strategies to solve the task. Lastly, these activities are believed to be motivating as they aspire to be meaning centred or real-world oriented. Yet, learners may vary in enthusiasm depending on a range of different factors.

Powerful critique has been raised against TBLT. Meaning-centred production tasks where words are used in speech or writing are endorsed, to some extent, by Oxford and Crookall (1990) who write that such activities, besides being meaningful and motivating, push new words into production with the possibility of generating feedback and negotiations.

However, Oxford and Crookall note that this approach, also, is limited in its possibilities. They write that such a communicative approach only lets learners experiment

with words that are already known. This notion is the pinnacle in Swan's (2005) argument against wholly communicative approaches. In his opinion, such methods have failed continuously to show empirical evidence to support their underlying linguistic assumptions. More importantly, he states that the ideological nature of research being conducted in this field systematically portrait other methods as being completely obsolete or inadequate and this, he finds, prohibits an expansion or re-evaluation of ideas and assumptions. Swan believes that this has lead to TBLT refusing to acknowledge the fact that its only strength is the incitement to practise what is already known by the learner. It does not, however, answer to how these items or structures are to be acquired in the first place. Research that have adopted pre-teaching of language, or some type of pre-task activity, seldom describe these elaborately but more probably note them as problematic features of the task; either as a result of a belief that such activities could overshadow the actual task, or because of the notion that forcing learners to use extensive amounts of newly encountered items is unnatural to communication and therefore is less likely to lead to acquisition (Swan, 2005).

# 3  Research overview

## 3.1 Input-based tasks

Studies within the task-based research area have primarily been devoted to the investigation of students' vocabulary acquisition through negotiating of meaning and the opportunity to produce target vocabulary in context. This is a point of criticism of Swan's (2005) who is sceptic towards the lack of input in TBLT.

A few studies have, however, looked into input-based tasks and found varying degrees of success in terms of acquisition. Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki (1994) conducted two studies that have paved the way for several others. In their design different input-based tasks were under scrutiny (base-line input, pre-modified input and interactionally-modified input). Results pointed to input with the possibility of negotiation being more facilitative in terms of vocabulary acquisition. Yet, this was not thought to be a consequence of the depth of processing but rather the outcome of learners having the opportunity to control the received input. Results seemed to indicate that the group having this opportunity spent more time on target vocabulary and repeated the words to a greater extent. This was thought to give learners a chance to hear comprehensible input at their own level, as well as to have needed breaks in

order to process newly encountered items. This conclusion was partly arrived at since the study indicated that learners engaged in negotiations did not acquire more vocabulary than those who passively partook. Ellis et al. (1994) thus seem to imply that comprehensible input and repetition play a significant part in vocabulary learning.

Similar studies have been conducted by Ellis and He (1999) and de la Fuente (2002). In the former, one test group was subjected to modified input alone, input that was somewhat adapted for the level of proficiency of the students. This group did not show equally promising results as the other test groups having the opportunity to negotiate meaning (communicatively modified input), or use target vocabulary in production. The input group had a mean comprehension score of 68% compared to 71% and 81% in the other two groups (Ellis & He, 1999, p. 297). The study showed similar results for recognised vocabulary as for for the number of vocabulary items produced. Despite their initial predictions, negotiation of meaning only resulted in slightly better outcomes than the base-line input group. The output group, on the other hand, proved to be significantly better. That being said, a flaw in their study was the teacher-fronted instructions, which were found to be qualitatively different in the separate groups. Therefore general conclusions can hardly be drawn from their study. In terms of oral input, de la Fuente's study (2002), which revolved around students having to position furniture according to oral instructions in appropriate places in a room, showed somewhat similar results. Yet, in comparison to Ellis and He (1999), results suggested that interactionally-modified input clearly had a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition. In general, the study seems to support Ellis et al. (1994), however their respective conclusions appear to differ. de la Fuente (2002) states that negotiation is primarily a noticing activity (Schmidt, 1990), and suggests that  words which meaning is understood without the explicit attention of the learner will not be processed at the same depths, and therefore is not as likely to be acquired. Moreover, de la Fuente' study seems to point in the same direction as Ellis and He (1999), as productive tasks were found to lead to productive vocabulary gains.

A more recent study by Shintani (2012) displays positive results. Albeit being conducted on much younger children than in the three above-mentioned studies, interesting aspects are pointed out. Participants in the study, in a natural manner, engaged in negotiation and FonF, although not instructed to do so by the teacher. The study indicates that input-based tasks can be learner-centred rather than teacher dominated and in this case it "provided the learners with the opportunity to control the way the discourse developed" (p. 266). This conclusion is much in line with what was presented by Ellis et al. (1994).

## 3.2 Communicative tasks

The locus of acquisition in task-based learning is said to be meaning-centred, communicative activities (Long, 1996). Looking into research on vocabulary acquisition in wholly communicative tasks, although being limited in quantity, reveal difficulties in pinpointing specific areas that are to be learned. An early study by Newton (1995) followed one student through four separate tasks: two which were information exchange tasks in which each participant had unique pieces of information; and two were consensus-oriented tasks in which a decision had to be made by the group as a whole. Although being very limited in generalizability, due to the single participant, results are still indicative. The participant acquired 21 of the 56 target lexical items (37,5%), which was believed to be a positive result as a communicative task has additional goals beyond learning vocabulary. Interestingly, the study did not seem to indicate negotiation of meaning as particularly effective for vocabulary learning, instead Newton suggested that task design had an effect on the participant's depth of processing of target items. This notion did not seem to be exclusive to any particular task, but instead success was thought to be an effect of the extent to which the task was dependent on a specific word being used. It might be the case that such tasks have higher involvement load, although, as suggested by Laufer and Hustijn (2001) needs imposed by the task does not generate as high involvement load as the needs of a learner to communicate a message. Furthermore, Newton (1995) also notes that within such a communicative task, the participant had the possibility of partaking in negotiations as well as to be passive, rendering some words completely untreated which in turn could point to the unpredictability of incidental learning. Therefore, a task-demand to produce target items can prove to be useful.

This study was mirrored, although with a higher number of participants, in a later study by Newton (2013). This study sheds light on the causal relationship between task design and learner procedures, which in turn are related to what features of words are given most attention. An information-gap task was seen to induce focus on form, whereas an opinion-gap task showed to elicit negotiation of meaning. This is explained by the fact that in an information-gap exercise, learners have to note findings made by the group, which require some attention to form. Conversely, in opinion-gap exercises learners draw from the material given by the task. With that, form is essentially already established, whilst meaning is not. The study also reveals that one in three unknown words was learned from the communicative tasks, although this was not primarily a result of negotiation. The number of negotiated words learned was 18, whereas non-negotiated words learned were 72. On the other hand, words that

were in fact negotiated were more likely to be learned (77% and 67% vs. 55% and 56%). That so many words (n=72) were attained through input was credited to the positive effects of meeting words in context and from observing others engage in negotiation. Although it could be interpreted as if input-based approaches are superior to communicative tasks, Newton argues that the primary concern of the task was not vocabulary learning but rather task completion, and this is maintained to be rewarding in other aspects such as fluency and discourse competence. This is of course valid, however, completely decontextualized vocabulary exercises might be much more efficient in terms of numbers of words learned per minute (cf. Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat, 2011).

Incidental learning of vocabulary in communicative tasks, as is seen in Newton (1995, 2013) is supported by Fernández Dobao (2014). In this recent study collaborative tasks are investigated, comparing dyads to small groups of learners. She draws on sociocultural theory and proclaims that groups have a greater cumulative lexical competence than pairs. Besides being more qualified for the given task, this joint competence is also believed to have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition within the group. Results seem to support this supposition. Moreover, findings corroborate with those found in Newton (2013), indicating that even though not all group members engaged in negotiation, no significant difference was found in acquired vocabulary among the learners. Fernández Dobao (2014) states that "[t]hese learners might seem passive, but were in fact actively involved […] as listeners and observers" (p. 515).

## 3.3  Production-based tasks

Other studies have tried more hybrid approaches, with intentions of combining input, communicative segments, and some form of output. These are foremost concerned with productive vocabulary gains. What is in this review referred to as a production-based task is not a commonplace division, and surely the case could be made that communicative tasks are wholly productive as well. Yet, this review finds that the following research is unique in that it is concerned with preemptive measures to aid learners in production of vocabulary in various ways.

Some tasks adopting a more classical classroom design have been shown to be successful in facilitating vocabulary gains. Lee (2003) showed that vocabulary could effectively be pushed from passive to active. In the pre-test 13.19% of the recognised words showed to be productive. In the post-test that figure had risen to 63.62%. In addition, at the end of the study

it was found that 43% of the newly acquired vocabulary had become productive. Participants went through explicit vocabulary instruction prior to using a writing frame (a sheet on which learners could record and organise vocabulary before writing) and composition writing, and therefore it is difficult to clearly distinguish to what extent the different segments of the task contributed to this vocabulary transition. However, as is concluded by Lee, modified output may give students the opportunity to use new lexical items within an appropriate context, something that is also a part of the lexical proficiency (Miller, 1999). Lee and Muncie (2006), looking into possible vocabulary gains from different forms of input, as well as from composition writing, scrutinized teacher-fronted instruction more explicitly and found this to be insufficient in terms of productive vocabulary gains. As in Lee (2003) modified output was found to be particularly effective for such gains, but results also revealed that composition writing using a writing frame was fruitful for raising the overall level of language and for using low-frequency vocabulary. In the students' first draft, after teacher-fronted negotiation of meaning and form-focused instruction (FFI), they used 5.8% of target vocabulary, whereas after the deployment of the writing frame, their second composition included 20.42% of the target words.

Lee (2003) and Lee and Muncie (2006) concurrently adopted more traditional teaching approaches rather than naturalistic and incidental-learning tasks (cf. Skehan 1996). Such methods are further endorsed by Webb (2009) who suggests that pre-learning of words generate better reading comprehension as well as a higher production-rate of target words.Webb supports decontextualized vocabulary activities along side more communicative segments of tasks as this might prove time efficient.

If Lee (2003) and Lee and Muncie (2006) seem to turn from a strictly communicative language teaching, de la Fuente (2006) appears to encapsulate the possibilities of TBLT. Consequently, she renounces a classical PPP (present-practise-produce) set-up as a method adequate for long-term vocabulary retention. In the study three groups were compared: one PPP group, for which vocabulary was presented and negotiated for meaning, followed by teacher-fronted FonFs and three FonFs activities, as well as a practise session; one task-based group, which engaged in a meaning-centred pre-task, followed by a information-gap and role-play task and a planning stage together with the teacher (FonF). The task was then repeated but without teacher guidance (focus on meaning); and lastly, one task-based group identical to the previous, although with teacher-initiated FonFs instead of task repetition at the end. In the immediate post-test, the PPP group and the task-based groups showed equal results but in the delayed post-test the last-mentioned task-based group that had FonFs activities outperformed

the others. When comparing the free production segment in the PPP group to the pre-planned production stage of the two task-based groups, de la Fuente (2006) explains that the former was insufficient as to provide students with the opportunity to process new vocabulary at a deeper level, as suggested in the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), and as a result little or faulty production was seen. She writes that "|t]he nature of the task provided for negotiated interaction where both noticing […] and focus on meaning was ensured. These negotiations may have given students the opportunity to process meaning in a way that the PPP lesson cannot provide" (de la Fuente 2006, p. 281). These results signal that explicit instruction after social interaction has taken place is preferable for vocabulary learning.

These findings regarding the importance of sequencing are not supported by Gass and Alvarez Torres (2005). They compared learning outcomes from tasks using four different task-element sequences: input only, interaction only, input followed by interaction and interaction followed by input. It was found that in the case of vocabulary acquisition, no significant difference was found between the different groups. To lend support to de la Fuente (2006), the last-mentioned group would have had to show better scores. However, it should be noted that Gass and Alvarez Torres (2005) did not investigate complex vocabulary, but merely content nouns, which might be an important distinction between the two studies.

Reflecting a notion of uncertainty regarding which task elements that lead to vocabulary learning, Webb (2005) finds that research has been rather misleading in stating which of a word's many aspects is being tested. He continues to say that surely greater gains in knowledge of a word's syntactical function would be found in a vocabulary test that provides context rather than word-pair exercises. Similarly, he says, receptive and productive learner vocabularies have been tested. His study that followed revealed a complex relationship; the results seem to indicate that receptive and productive learning is fundamentally different in terms of learner effort and consumed time. When time-on-task was the same, a receptive learning task was more effective in generating receptive and productive vocabulary gains, contrasting with the results found by Ellis and He (1999) and de la Fuente (2002). Yet, Webb problematizes these findings and questions if students, outside of experiments, are likely to spend as much time reading sentences that appear to be understood, as with productive tasks which have a set goal. Although Webb's (2005) own findings are ambiguous and difficult to interpret, his initial assumption is worth taking into account when examining results from various vocabulary research.

## 3.4 Form-focused activities

By scholars looking into task-based learning, focus on form has often been maintained to be most rewarding if occurring naturally in meaning-centred discourse. Form has often been understood as grammatical form but this is only one of several meanings and form applies just as rightly to vocabulary (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001).

Several studies suggest that FonF is a possible prospect for vocabulary acquisition. Newton (2001) listed measures that could be adopted by teachers to help students manage new word encounters. He argues that collaboration in communicative settings is most gainful as they immediately allow students to use words in meaningful contexts. He declares that form is often the first negotiated aspect and meaning is consequently inferred from context and use. However, Newton stresses that teacher presence is vital for ensuring relevant input, teaching inference strategies, as well as to guide negotiations. Ellis et al. (2001) found that when focus on form occurred, vocabulary was most likely to be attended, both when FonF was teacher-initiated (60%) and learner-initiated (66%). It was also found that preemptive learner-initiated FonF (form that is given attention, not as a result of a performance error but from a perceived gap in knowledge) was much more likely to result in uptake than other types of FonF. Similar results were found in Zhao and Bitchner (2007), who by analysing interactional patterns in learner-learner communication and teacher-learner communication saw that students were equally capable of inducing form-focused activities as in teacher- fronted classrooms, but with the advantage of not hindering fluency in the process. Similar to the study by Shintani (2012), their study seem to indicate that students felt more comfortable negotiating meaning with each other, and that their linguistic foci, foremost, were on vocabulary, corroborating the findings in Ellis et al. (2001). However, Zhao and Bitchner did not investigate the results of student-initiated FonF in terms of vocabulary acquisition, and therefore their results, foremost, describe the social behaviour of students and indicate that learners' social competence might be enough for FonF to occur incidentally within a task.

This might, however, prove a crucial aspect for actual classroom practice. Shintani (2013) showed that FonF, occurring in an input-based task with beginner learners, was more effective in terms of incidental learning of adjectives for free production than the FonFs group. Additionally, FonF proved to be equally effective for learners to acquire nouns as the other group. Even though the FonFs group had the opportunity to produce target items more times than the FonF group, no difference in productive vocabulary was shown in the post-test. This was thought to be a result from meeting target vocabulary in context and negotiating its

meaning. In other words, learners in the FonF group had a communicative need to understand and produce the target vocabulary.

Keating (2008) asserted that tasks that incorporate a focus on form is significantly better for word retention, and this was indicated to be related to the task involvement load as suggested by Laufer and Hustijn (2001). However, Keating's study also showed that students engrossed in reading tasks without FonF still produced good scores in the comprehension test. These findings suggest that students were attentive to meaning rather than to word form in such a task. These results were further emphasised by the low comprehension scores that were found in the reading group were FonF was included. This echoes the assumptions made by Webb (2005), that different tasks may be adequate for different types of word knowledge, and relays Miller's (1999) suggestion that word knowledge is highly dependent on context.

Although positive results have been found supporting FonF as a natural part of TBLT, other studies points in favour of decontextualized form focus. In a study by Laufer (2006) incidental and intentional vocabulary learning were investigated using FonF and FonFs-induced activities. In the first phase of the study, incidental learning was scrutinised. The FonFs group received teacher-fronted instructions on target words prior to using them in exercises. After completion, the teacher and the rest of the group discussed learners' answers and clarifications were given. Participants in the FonF group read and answered questions.

The opportunity to look up words in a lexicon was given, but none of the participants in the experiment did. In the following phase, both groups were told to memorize a wordlist in 15 minutes. Results from the following vocabulary tests showed that the FonFs condition lead to more vocabulary acquisition in the first phase. Results covering the second phase revealed that both groups were equally successful recalling target vocabulary. These findings are understood to be a natural consequence of the fact that the second task essentially was a FonFs activity, and therefore learners' vocabulary gains speak in favour of such an approach. From a task-based standpoint Laufer's (2006) study could be criticised as for not comparing focus on forms activities to FonF prompted in truly communicative settings. Moreover, none of the participants chose to use the supplied lexicon, which also indicates that they were not as dedicated to acquire the target vocabulary as the other group. This could be a similar effect as that found in Keating's study (2008). Nonetheless, findings still indicate FonFs activities to be sufficient for effective vocabulary learning. Analogously, de la Fuente (2006) suggests that FonFs is rewarding for learners' productive vocabularies. In contrast to Laufer's (2006), perhaps fallible FonF group, de la Fuente's study indicates that FonFs activities can be incorporated into communicative, production-based tasks. She argues that FFI after meaning

has been negotiated is more successful as this allowed students the attentional space that is needed for learning morphology and phonology. In her words "[t]his focus-on-forms component allows for noticing of such aspects, and it seems to be more effective when meaning acquisition has taken place" (p. 287). The group that had teacher-initiated FFI outperformed the two other groups, where form was student-initiated and incidental. Although adopting a task-based framework, her study abandons the assumption usually considered fundamental in task-based language teaching, namely, that form is focused as a consequence of meaning being negotiated (Long, 1996).

In a study by Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011), two aspects were measured: task design and word occurrence. When target words were encountered the same amount of times in both groups, FonFs lead to better retention scores. When the FonF group met the target words six to seven times, it generated the same results as for the FonFs group where words were encountered once in text and in three to four times in exercises. From these findings a withdrawal from a communicative method of vocabulary teaching is recommended. They write that "Since FonFs appears to be particularly effective for recall, we suggest that the non-communicative, partly decontextualized characteristic of FonFs are crucial for learners' future performance of authentic language tasks" (p. 401). Their study contrasts findings that indorse communication as a vital part of vocabulary acquisition (see de la Fuente, 2002, 2006; Ellis & He 1999; Newton, 1995, 2013; Shintani, 2012, 2013; Zhao & Bitchner, 2007). Nevertheless, Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat argue that when the number of word encounters is the same in both a FonF and a FonFs set-up, the latter is more time efficient as a method for vocabulary acquisition. However, it should be stated that their study did not use a proper communicative task as a comparison, but a input-based design, which meant that learners did not have the opportunity to negotiate meaning or form, but were only permitted to consult a dictionary to infer meaning. It is not clear if the involvement load was the same in both groups, which might have had an effect on the study's outcome.

# 4  Discussion and conclusions

Task-based language teaching encompasses methods that are rooted in the belief that language is the mediating tool for transferring a message to a receiver. This approach is primarily concerned with raising the overall level of fluency and complexity of the learner's language, but has later been modified in order to also include morphology, as this is found to be a vital component of vocabulary learning.

It has been argued that TBLT is a "straitjacket" where input is frowned upon and only known words are practised (Swan, 2005, p. 388). However, research regarding input-based tasks have shown that input, in fact, plays an important role within task-based learning, and that this does not necessarily alter its communicative purpose. Shintani (2012) shows this to be a possible prospect as students proved to engage in meaningful negotiations despite the classroom being teacher-fronted. Ellis et al. (1994), Ellis and He (1999), de la Funte (2002) understand communicatively modified input as way for students to process and practise the given input rather than as interactions standing in the way of new vocabulary being introduced. Moreover, this overview of research indicates that input is conspicuous in vocabulary learning in general. In the reviewed communicative tasks, negotiations have been seen to facilitate repeated input at the learners' respective proficiency levels. Newton (2013) stated that learners gain from taking part of such interactions even though not being one of the active participants. These results are corroborated by Fernándes Dobao (2014) who supports larger groups in interaction as this could supply each student with even more comprehensible input.

Swan (2005) doubts that negotiation of meaning will lead to much vocabulary learning if the interlocutor is a peer rather than a native speaker or teacher. Surveying more naturalistic examples of task-based learning, Newton (1995) suggests that such tasks are potent instances for incidental learning of vocabulary, although in this study only 37,5% of target items were acquired. Most notable in Newton's study is, however, that negotiation of meaning did not seem to aid vocabulary acquisition to any great extent. As in his later study (Newton, 2013), depth of processing as a result of task design was deemed the more influential factor for acquisition. In contrast, Ellis and He (1999) and de la Fuente (2002) suggest negotiations as a vital part of the task and their respective studies support this argument. Since these studies were input-based, it is possible that negotiations play the important part of allowing students to control the new content. Thus, dubious results can perhaps be expected from negotiations within purely communicative tasks, as these are amorphous and learner interactions more unreliable. Such an inference could lend support to Swan's (2005) supposition of learners needing an experienced interlocutor, since well-structured input in task tasks could substitute for such a proficient discussant.

This conclusion might account for the successful outcomes in the reviewed production-based tasks. Participants in Lee's study (2003) were subjected to a pre-task instruction and composition writing using a writing frame. This study showed that roughly 13% of recognised vocabulary was productive in the pre-test and the post-test showed that 63.62% had become productive. A similar study by Lee and Muncie (2006) showed similar results but this study

also revealed that teacher-fronted negotiation of meaning and pre-task focus on forms were not sufficient procedures for significant productive vocabulary gains. After a writing frame was adopted, result improved. It would seem as though these separate elements together resulted in a task constitution advantageous for vocabulary improvement. This could speak in favour of more classic present-produce-practise designs. Yet, this is firmly reproached by de la Fuente (2006) who recommends communicative task-based lessons since these are believed to elicit deeper processing of target vocabulary. The set-up related to greatest vocabulary gains in her study was the task-based group which engaged in negotiation of meaning followed by explicit FFI. Her study opposes a naturalistic task-based approach and recommends a turn towards a weaker version. This is in line with previously mentioned conclusions, pointing to organisation rather than freedom as a more gainful task aspect.

If one proceeds from the core of task-based instruction, form should be focused as a by-product of negotiation of meaning. This was shown to be a possibility by Zhao and Bitchner (2007), who found that learner-learner interactions were more likely to revolve around form focus than teacher-learner interactions. Shintani (2012, 2013) argue that learner-initiated FonF leads to acquisition, although his studies only observed young beginner learners. FonF was also put to the test by Laufer (2006) and Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011) both indicating limited possibilities for this approach. Their studies adopted FonF activities that were meaning centred and where words were acquired rather than consciously learned. Yet in these instances, activities were not communicative, which might have had an impact on the outcomes.

Therefore, the possibilities or limitations of focus on form have not been clearly established by the literature in this review. Interestingly, other findings in the literature are indicative. Newton (2013) saw that tasks most related to learner-prompted focus on form were information-gap tasks. In addition to saying something about learners' abilities to engage in negotiations and FonF, these findings also indicate that different tasks might be effective for learning different lexical aspects, a notion that was also reflected by Keating (2008). His study indicated that FonF was good for word retention but that such activities might have a negative effect if the task is strictly meaning-centred.

Several scholars instead favour decontextualized form focus (de la Fuente, 2006; Laufer, 2006; Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat, 2011; Webb, 2009). As stated above, de la Fuente (2006) points to explicit FFI being effective for learning morphological aspects of words if meaning has already been established, lending support to Long's Input Hypothesis (Long, 1996). Laufer (2006) maintains that FonFs is more preferable than FonF since such a method showed

to be more time efficient. Yet, she concludes that all vocabulary cannot be learned through explicit instruction and states that all instances of form focus are important. Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011) go one step further and recommend a withdrawal from communicative vocabulary teaching altogether. This is deduced from the comparison of the two methods in relation to word encounters. They show that when words are encountered the same amount of times, FonFs is more effective in terms of words learned per minute.

These findings clearly reveal that FonF and FonFs are derived from different theoretical assumptions, and therefore, results are interpreted differently. In studies where FonF is investigated, scholars tend to see this to indicate that form can be focused if needed to by learners. The fact that huge amounts of words are not acquired is seen as a natural consequence of the primary goal being to solve the task. FonFs promoters on the other hand are interested in time efficiency. It is doubtlessly so that explicit instruction is more time efficient in the same way that paired wordlists are more efficient than vocabulary acquisition through reading. Therefore, results derived from comparisons between the two are uncertain and perhaps other parameters needs to be included. This review, however, sheds light on more inclusive approaches where the prospect of combining meaning-centred activities with FFI seems possible. Yet, it remains to be seen if such designs are sufficient for learners to reach Nation's (2006) vocabulary threshold.

From the above-analysed literature, certain areas emerge that are in need of deeper scholarly scrutiny. First, de la Fuente's research (2006) has shown the possibilities of incorporating input, negotiation of meaning, pushed output and decontextualized form-focused instruction into one vocabulary-learning unit. Since her study, to my knowledge, is one of a kind, similar designs should be put to the test. Second, as been seen in this review, many factors can be altered and fine-tuned within a task. Hence, group size, pre-learning and sequencing of task elements are also points of interest and should be factors investigated in future task-based vocabulary research. Lastly, it needs to be carefully mapped out which tasks elicit which type of vocabulary knowledge. If this can be done, teachers will have a greater possibility of using specific tasks for specific purposes rather than hoping for as much vocabulary as possible to be acquired from communicative activities.

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