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# USING CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING APPROACH IN THE SUBJECT “POLITICS AND LAW” TO DEVELOP FORM 12 STUDENTS’ ENGLISH LEXICAL COMPETENCE

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*All English language skills require knowledge of words, and the ability to use them appropriately in any given social context. To ensure that learners can successfully participate in communication in English they must gain and develop English lexical competence. Content and language integrated learning approach (hereinafter, CLIL) is recognised as a beneficial method both by policy makers and teachers as it brings added value both to the acquisition of the foreign language and the content of the study subject. CLIL has been one of teaching approaches that can foster the development of this competence.*

*The impact of CLIL on the development of Form 12 students’ English lexical competence in the subject “Politics and Law” was explored in this study. A case study was carried out at a secondary school in Riga, Latvia, from 1 September 2021, until 20 November 2021, with 25 Form 12 students as the research sample. Quantitative and qualitative data gathered through questionnaires, a pre-test, a post-test, and interviews with CLIL teachers were analysed to assess the impact of CLIL.*

*The results of this study showed that learners’ lexical competence in the target domain improved because of CLIL lessons which both included explicit instruction and created implicit learning opportunities. Explicit teaching was more effective; however, the impact of implicit acquisition might have been lower due to the short duration of the research. CLIL lessons had an overall positive impact on the receptive and productive dimensions of lexicon, as well as its organisation. Receptive dimension was affected more than the productive dimension and the changes in the organisation were less substantial.*

*Communicative aspect of CLIL lessons is currently insufficiently utilised. Students value this element of CLIL lessons more than teachers and it should be exploited more in the future to maximise the positive impact of CLIL. Both teachers and students evaluate CLIL lessons positively, mostly stressing identical benefits, such as more meaningful learning for real current and future needs.*

## Introduction

All English language skills — reading, listening, writing, and speaking — require knowledge of words, and the ability to use them appropriately in any given social context. To ensure that learners can successfully participate in communication in the English language, namely, comprehend different messages and convey intended meanings, they must gain and develop English lexical competence.<sup>1</sup> According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>2</sup>, lexical competence is one of the elements forming communicative language competence, and hence, it must be properly addressed within the English language teaching curricula and syllabuses. In this context, teaching lexis becomes paramount.

To achieve this aim, teachers of English as a foreign language must be knowledgeable in the area of lexical competence. Furthermore, it is vital that teachers have theoretical knowledge and practical skills to implement different teaching approaches that foster development of learners’ lexical competence.

Content and language integrated learning (hereinafter, CLIL) “in which an additional language is used for the teaching and learning of subjects with a dual focus on language and content”<sup>3</sup> can be considered as one of such approaches. CLIL has also been identified as one of the priorities by the European Union and the Council of Europe as part of the efforts to promote multilingualism in Europe<sup>4</sup>. It has been implemented in different European countries, including Latvia<sup>5</sup> as an alternative or addition to traditional general English language lessons and considered

beneficial for acquisition of a foreign language.<sup>6</sup>

The innovative aspect of this paper is related to the new competence-based approach, implemented in Latvia since 1 September 2020, which requires that students must be able to use a foreign language to study also other subjects.<sup>7</sup> However, as there is insufficient time to include extra political and legal topics in the general English language classes, especially, to develop students’ lexical knowledge and abilities to use it in communicative situations, students’ lexical competence in the domain of political affairs and abilities to use topical lexis in communicative situations is rather limited. Furthermore, the author considers that higher lexical competence in political affairs is a precondition for accessing information on global political processes that have impact also on Latvia. Hence, a higher level of comprehension would empower students to better recognise and realise their roles as global citizens.

Given the timeframe of this research, it focuses on a topical problem and thus can be deemed innovative and relevant. The results of this study will be useful for the implementation of social science’s subjects, and for incorporation of CLIL in these subjects.

Based on the above mentioned considerations, the aim of the paper was to explore the impact of the implementation of CLIL approach in the subject “Politics and Law” on the development of Form 12 students’ English lexical competence.

The following research objectives were set:

- 1) to study and analyse relevant theoretical literature on CLIL approach and lexical competence in English as a foreign language teaching process;
- 2) to design, teach, and evaluate CLIL lessons in the subject “Politics and Law” in Form 12;
- 3) to assess how Form 12 students’ English lexical competence within the field of politics and law was affected as a result of CLIL lessons.

The research question is whether and how systematic integration of CLIL approach in the lessons of “Politics and Law” affects English lexical competence of Form 12 students.

The case study was carried out at a secondary school in Riga, Latvia, from 1 September 2021 until 20 November 2021, with 25 Form 12 students as the research sample. Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were chosen to ensure reliability and validity of results, as well as data triangulation.

### **Lexical competence in teaching English as a foreign language**

The ability to communicate in English as a foreign language depends on knowing words in English and skills to use these words appropriately in different contexts. “A word” is an ambiguous notion<sup>8</sup>, which is very difficult to define. Jackson and Amvela<sup>9</sup> define a word as “an interruptible unit of structure consisting of one or two morphemes, and which typically occurs in the structure of phrases”. Vocabulary can be defined as “a total stock of words of a language”<sup>10</sup> and is a rather restrictive concept.<sup>11</sup>

The notion “lexis” has been introduced more recently.<sup>12</sup> Barcroft et al.<sup>13</sup>, while referring to the meaning of the word in Greek, define “lexis” as “all words in a language, the entire vocabulary of a language”, thus equating this term with the notion “vocabulary”. Likewise, also Jackson and Amvela<sup>14</sup>

perceive both terms as identical — “lexis, understood as the stock of words in a given language, i.e. its vocabulary or lexicon”. However, another perspective can be found in the academic literature, where “vocabulary” refers to words and their meanings, but “lexis” is a broader, more complex term, defined as “a system of word units, which relates to other units creating a network of meanings ranging from polysemy, collocation, ambiguity, synonymy and frequency”<sup>15</sup>. This approach has clear pedagogical implications, as it shows that learning isolated word-lists does not bring added value to the development of lexical competence. Instead, it is necessary to focus on learning lexis in the particular context.<sup>16</sup>

It is also significant to establish the meaning of “competence” in linguistics and “lexical competence”. Chomsky<sup>17</sup> stresses the knowledge of the rules of the language, but Hymes<sup>18</sup> views language competence through the perspective of communication, namely, one must be able to appropriately use grammatical structures within the particular social and linguistic context. Despite the growing attention to lexical competence as an important element of communicative competence, as well as appeals from scholars to move beyond mere grammatical aspects of knowing words<sup>19</sup>, there is no agreement about the definition of “lexical competence”. Academics have focused on different aspects of lexical competence and used a variety of methodologies to operationalise it.<sup>20</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>21</sup> defines lexical competence as “knowledge of, and ability to use, the vocabulary of a language”; and it consists of lexical and grammatical elements.

### **Dimensions of lexical competence and testing approaches**

It is important to assess learners’ lexical competence throughout the teaching

process; however, there is no generally accepted definition of lexical competence and what it entails to know a word.<sup>22</sup>

Two general approaches towards measuring lexical competence can be identified. One part of the research is based on "separate trait models", which include different elements (traits) of what it means to know an individual word.<sup>23</sup> These are very comprehensive models but are highly impractical as they would entail the need to gauge all elements of all individual words a person knows.<sup>24</sup>

Considering practical implications, another approach emerged — "a global trait model" (also called "a dimensional model") which focuses on a person's lexical competence in general and includes a small number of measurable dimension.<sup>25</sup> Two general dimensions of lexical competence are identified — firstly, vocabulary size (breadth), which refers to the number of words a person knows, and vocabulary depth, which refers to how well a word is known.<sup>26</sup>

Size dimension refers to the whole lexicon of a person and does not describe the knowledge of individual words.<sup>27</sup> C2 level according to CEFR require knowing 4000–5000 word families<sup>28</sup>, but Nation<sup>29</sup> points towards a higher number — 8000–9000 word families (and 98% coverage). On the other hand, 2000 most frequent word families cover 79.7%, while 5000 most frequent word families — 88.6% of words in any text in English language.<sup>30</sup> Depth of lexical knowledge is another dimension of lexical competence. It refers to the knowledge of individual words<sup>31</sup> and describes how well the learner knows the word<sup>32</sup>, but no consensus exists as regards the definition of the depth of knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

Meara and Wolter<sup>34</sup> argue that a new approach towards understanding lexical competence is needed, as the previously described perception does not explain the real complexities of one's lexicon. Lexical com-

petence should be viewed as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of size (breadth) and organisation of lexicon.<sup>35</sup> Traditionally, each word a person knows can be visualised as a bar — the longer it is, the "deeper" the knowledge is. Meara and Wolter<sup>36</sup> propose an approach where breadth is depicted by a number of "points" and assumes that lexical competence should be perceived as a complex network of interconnections between them. Any addition of a new word (another point) impacts the whole network, producing new links and connections.

The more interconnected the words are, the better a person can perform while using language in real life situations.<sup>37</sup> These interconnections can be identified through association chains — the more chains a person can make and the shorter they are, the higher the interconnection is.

Different vocabulary breadth and depth tests are available, some of which focus on measuring its receptive, while others — productive dimension, such as Vocabulary Levels Test, Word Associates Test etc.<sup>38</sup>

Another way to measure learners' lexical knowledge is to use the vocabulary knowledge scale, developed by Paribakht & Wessche in 1993.<sup>39</sup> It is a self-assessment scale that measures the self-perceived knowledge depth of lexis. It includes five levels of word acquisition — starting with unfamiliarity with a word; moving on to partial recognition, full recognition of the word, and finally — the ability to explain the meaning of the word and use the word in a sentence.

Thus, this scale includes both receptive and productive dimensions of lexical competence.

## **Development of lexical competence in English language lessons**

The development of lexical competence has never been pivotal in English as a foreign language teaching.<sup>40</sup> Richards claimed

that “the teaching and learning vocabulary has never aroused the same interest within language teaching as have such issues as grammatical competence” and Lewis stated that “vocabulary teaching has rarely been systematic”<sup>41</sup>. With the change towards the development of communicative competence as the main focus of teaching English language and the rise of the communicative language teaching approach starting with the 1970s, the interest in the development of the lexical competence has increased.<sup>42</sup>

Meara (1996) claims that the underestimation of lexis in language teaching is due to the lack of knowledge about its significance, even though “lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence”.<sup>43</sup> Hence, today the focus has shifted, and vocabulary is perceived as a crucial part in a foreign language learning.<sup>44</sup>

Different pedagogical approaches have been proposed regarding the development of lexical competence of learners. According to Krashen<sup>45</sup>, foreign language acquisition occurs subconsciously and implicitly, and the process is similar to the way a child learns their first language, namely, learners do not even realise that they are learning a new language, but only use it for communication. On the contrary, learning a language is a purposeful process, based on explicit and straightforward studying, remembering, and practicing language rules and structures.<sup>46</sup>

In line with this theoretical framework, Hunt and Beglar<sup>47</sup> identify three types of vocabulary teaching approaches — explicit instruction (identifying which words learners do not know, presenting unknown words to learners, ensuring different knowledge about the words and practice using them to achieve fluency); incidental learning (including extensive reading and listening activities) and also independent strategies development (guessing from context and work with dictionaries).

## Content and language integrated learning as a teaching approach

As the world becomes more interconnected, educational systems must respond to the growing demand for multilingual school graduates, able to use foreign language in a variety of professional contexts.<sup>48</sup> If regular English language lessons in schools are not enough to provide students with the possibilities to learn and practice using the English language in meaningful communicative contexts, other options need to be explored. CLIL has been such a response with the aim to increase the opportunities for students to improve their foreign language proficiency outside the traditional language learning settings.

The term “content and language integrated learning” was coined by David Marsh in 1994<sup>49</sup>. CLIL is a “dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for learning and teaching of both content and language”.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it combines teaching and learning a foreign language and another non-linguistic school subject simultaneously.<sup>51</sup> Content in CLIL means a specific subject, such as math, history etc., which is taught in a foreign language.<sup>52</sup> Although language and content are of equal importance in CLIL, this approach is flexible and can be implemented in a variety of ways.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the term itself can be used as an “umbrella term”<sup>54</sup> for a variety of teaching approaches.

CLIL as a didactic measure is being implemented for more than 30 years and has become widespread around the world.<sup>55</sup> Even though CLIL has become a significant element in the educational systems of the European countries and most of the countries in Europe have developed and implement CLIL programmes<sup>56</sup> it cannot be labelled as a consistent methodological approach, as almost every CLIL case is different from another and the conclusions of empirical research about the implementation

of CLIL have not been transferred into consolidated mainstream educational policies or approaches.<sup>57</sup> This approach leaves a lot of discretion for schools to develop, manage and implement their CLIL programmes according to their specific circumstances and possibilities.<sup>58</sup>

The situation with CLIL in Latvia is similar. Historically, CLIL in Latvia has been viewed within the margins of bilingual education and has been implemented in schools since the end of the 1990s. It referred mostly to programmes implemented in ethnic minority schools, as well as special school level programmes or projects implemented using English as a foreign language.<sup>59</sup> Apart from official bilingual education programmes in minority schools, the implementation of CLIL has not become a part of mainstream educational system in Latvia. Also, the new competence based national educational curriculums for elementary and secondary education do not provide precise guidelines as regards the aims or application of CLIL in Latvia. There is an indirect link between the teaching of foreign languages and other subjects included in the secondary school curriculum, where the integrated approach is deemed to be a useful strategy for Latvia's competence-based educational system. Planned learning outcome 1.3. in the foreign language study field states that language should be used as means to study other courses and participate in international events.<sup>60</sup> However, the syllabus for Foreign language I (English) designed by the National Centre for Education (Valsts izglītības satura centrs) directly mentions CLIL<sup>61</sup>, emphasising its implementation in schools.

Coyle et al.<sup>62</sup> developed the framework of CLIL — 4Cs model which consists of four structural elements — content (subject), communication (language), cognition (learning and thinking) and culture (intercultural awareness, global citizenship), which are referred to as 4Cs in the academic literature.

Learning takes place in a specific environment — the context where subject's content and language are integrated.<sup>63</sup>

Research shows that CLIL has an overall positive effect on learners' foreign language competences.<sup>64</sup> Diverse English language skills can be developed in CLIL lessons. Learners' reading and listening skills, vocabulary, morphology, creativity, risk-taking and fluency are positively affected, while syntax, writing, informal/non-technical language, pronunciation, and pragmatics are unaffected or affected less by CLIL<sup>65</sup>. Heras and Lasagabaster<sup>66</sup> and Gierlinger and Wagner<sup>67</sup> also found that learning of specific English terminology is enhanced in CLIL lessons, as here learners use key phrases and relevant, content-related concepts systematically in meaningful ways. Another beneficial element of CLIL, as argued by several researchers<sup>68</sup>, is related to the increased motivation of students. CLIL has also positive impact on the cognitive development of learners, as students are more actively and creatively engaged in the learning process.<sup>69</sup>

Studies of different scholars<sup>70</sup> indicate that CLIL improves the lexical competence of learners as they are more intensively exposed to subject-related specific lexis in real and meaningful communicative situations. Furthermore, lexical competence is named as one of those linguistic competences that is developed the fastest and most effectively, especially with regard to acquisition of lower frequency and academic vocabulary.<sup>71</sup> Other studies have gathered evidence that leads to opposite conclusions about the impact of CLIL on the development of lexical competence. The studies of Admiraal et al.<sup>72</sup> and Gierlinger and Wagner<sup>73</sup> did not find any major improvements in the general English vocabulary growth in a group of CLIL students, if compared with a control non-CLIL group.

Studies on CLIL have also identified possible challenges and risks. There is evidence that in some cases CLIL students show

insufficient content competence if compared with students who study the subject in the mother tongue<sup>74</sup>, which can sometimes be the result of the oversimplification of the content.<sup>75</sup> Other challenges related to CLIL are institutional, such as lack of knowledge and awareness among schools' administrations and teachers about the aims and practical implementation of CLIL.<sup>76</sup> These uncertainties may result in chaotic or meaningless lessons, e.g., language is included only through random translations; teachers are reluctant to cooperate and use materials prepared by their colleagues, or CLIL may have only a very limited added value.<sup>77</sup> Lack of specific coursebooks, and materials for CLIL lessons is another major challenge, as it creates an additional burden on teachers.<sup>78</sup> Another problem that often occurs is the lack of communication with students and their parents about the benefits of CLIL.<sup>79</sup>

## Research methodology

A specific case was identified, and the research was conducted between September 2021 and November 2021 in Form 12 (one class) in a middle-sized Riga secondary school. The research sample consisted of 25 Form 12 students. During this time, eight "Politics and Law" CLIL lessons were taught partially face-to-face and partially online, due to the Covid-19-related state of emergency declared in Latvia on 11 October 2021.

Based on the theoretical framework, CLIL lessons had two aims — one related to the subject content and one linked to English language. CLIL lessons were held in English language, thus emphasising the communicative element of CLIL and providing opportunities for implicit acquisition of subject related lexis and practise using it in a real communicative situation. In addition, tailor-made and integrated teaching materials (worksheets, handouts, and presentations), conceptually based on the educational cur-

riculum and syllabuses for both subjects — English language and Politics and Law, were designed and used in the CLIL lessons.

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used within the research.

Firstly, an anonymous questionnaire was designed for the students and administered in the beginning of the research to gain information about students' English learning experience and general self-assessment of their lexical knowledge and needs in the domain of politics. Another questionnaire aimed at exploring the change in students' general self-assessment of their lexical knowledge on the topics of politics and law, and their evaluation of CLIL lessons was designed and administered at the end of the research. To assess the size of students' written lexicons as used in written production, hence, communication<sup>80</sup>, lexical richness of their productive (in writing) lexical competence was tested. Therefore, a pre-test and a post-test consisting of two parts (a self-assessment vocabulary scale and a writing task) were developed and conducted before and after CLIL lessons were implemented. The aim of the pre-test was to determine the learners' existing lexical competence in the field of politics. This test was conducted in a face-to-face lesson before the CLIL lessons. The first part — a self-assessment vocabulary test consisted of the lexical items that were included in the content of the planned CLIL lessons, as they are directly linked to the curriculum of the subject "Politics and Law" and also correspond to B2–C2 English knowledge level according to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, accessed on the Internet (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/topic/>).<sup>81</sup> The template for the self-assessment test was based on the Vocabulary Knowledge test, developed by Paribakht & Wesche<sup>82</sup>, which was supplemented with an additional column, based on Meara<sup>83</sup> and Meara and Wolter<sup>84</sup> to ensure that the or-

ganisation of lexical competence is also assessed.

The second part — a writing task included one controversial political topic linked to the content of the subject of “Politics and Law” and relevant also in today’s circumstances in Latvia and Europe, which ensured that students needed to use language for real life communication but did not require specific subject knowledge. Students were required to produce a text consisting of 150–200 words. The aim of this task was to obtain data to assess the productive lexical competence through the analysis of the lexical richness of students’ lexicons, based on the theory of Laufer & Nation<sup>85</sup>.

Similar immediate post-test was carried out after the implementation of CLIL lessons, also consisting of two parts (a self-assessment test and a writing task). The lexical items were different, but their choice followed the same logic as in the pre-tests; also the writing task included a controversial, yet relevant political topic for Latvia and Europe.

Thirdly, partially structured interviews with four CLIL English language teachers and three CLIL non-linguistic subject teachers were carried out to obtain information about the experience of teachers with CLIL and the impact CLIL has on the development of English language competences of learners.

## **Analysis of the results**

Lexical competence of the research sample in field of politics and law improved after the CLIL lessons and thus the findings of this research generally correspond to the results of other studies on this topic<sup>86</sup>, reinforcing the existing evidence that CLIL lessons tend to have a generally positive impact on the development of students’ English lexical competence. The pre-test and post-test data analysis indicated that lexical competence of the research sample as defined and analysed

in this research improved after the CLIL lessons. It must be, however, mentioned that the changes were not statistically very significant, which might be explained by the practical circumstances and limitations of the research, such as low intensity of CLIL lessons and a relatively short exposure period. These findings were consistent with the results from student’s self-assessment questionnaires and CLIL teachers’ opinion. It must be noted that students subjectively feel more positive about the improvement, if compared with the post-test results, which can be considered a more objective instrument.

Data from students’ questionnaires and self-assessment scales showed that learning lexis explicitly was a more effective method for lexical development. Importance of explicit teaching was also emphasised by teachers. Although this conclusion does not fully support the theory that CLIL is primarily based on implicit learning, it reinforces the conclusions that explicit teaching of lexis should not be disregarded in CLIL and that such instruction brings more immediate results. Less significant impact of implicit acquisition could be explained by the relatively short period and low intensity of CLIL lessons, and students’ existing experience in learning English where they are used to and favour a more explicit teaching approach.

The gains in the receptive dimension of lexical competence were more pronounced, if compared with the improvements in the productive dimension, which corresponds to the theoretical findings. The author also found that the organisation of the lexicon was affected less, as the increase in the abilities to create association chains between lexical items did not improve substantially. Short exposure time to CLIL lessons might have affected the results. The author deems that these findings may indicate that the impact of CLIL on receptive dimension is visible sooner. These findings

have pedagogical implications, namely, CLIL lessons need to be implemented for a longer period of time or be more intensive to ensure gains in the productive dimension, as well as the organisation of learners' lexicons.

The communicative aspect of CLIL lessons and acquisition of lexis implicitly should be fostered in the future to maximise the positive impact of CLIL lessons, as currently this aspect is underestimated and insufficiently utilised. Most students believe that their productive skills to use topical lexis have increased less than receptive skills. However, they appreciated the opportunity to use English to learn another subject, use authentic sources and communicate throughout the learning process. On the other hand, teachers admitted that speaking activities are not usually included in CLIL lessons, as they are mostly taught by subject teachers. Therefore, changes in the approach towards CLIL lessons, where English teachers are more involved in actual teaching process and view using English as the language of instruction more positively, should be considered. This, however, implies a challenging way forward that might include more comprehensive structural changes towards CLIL in school.

Findings on advantages and drawbacks of CLIL mirrored the conclusions of other studies, identifying increased motivation and cognition as the main benefits, and identifying lack of time and collaboration among teachers, and contradictory perceptions of CLIL as the main challenges. Additional support from school's administration and additional training on CLIL should be therefore considered. English language and other subjects' teachers' points of view did not differ significantly. However, opinions of teachers and students differed on two issues. Firstly, teachers more strongly than students believe that students enjoy CLIL lessons, and their motivation increases. Secondly, whilst teachers argued that content acquisition

is largely unaffected or affected positively, several students stressed they had comprehension issues. Thus, the teacher's role in explaining the aims of CLIL and providing a more individualised and targeted content-related or linguistic assistance is paramount.

## Conclusions

The results of the conducted empirical study mostly corresponded to the theoretical conclusions on lexical competence and CLIL and reinforced findings of the analysed empirical studies. The results of this study showed that learners' lexical competence in the target domain improved because of CLIL lessons which included both explicit instruction and created implicit learning opportunities. Even though changes were not statistically substantial, which can be explained by the low intensity of CLIL lessons and relatively short duration of the research, it can be concluded that teachers should utilise CLIL in social sciences subject to ensure a more in-depth acquisition of lexis and thus development of students' English language competence.

Explicit teaching was more effective which was attested by the results of the post-test, students' self-assessment and it also corresponded with the opinion of teachers. The impact of implicit acquisition in the authentic communicative context might be lower due to the short duration of the research.

CLIL lessons had an overall positive impact on the receptive and productive dimensions of lexicon, as well as its organisation. Receptive dimension of lexical competence was affected more than the productive dimension and the changes in the organisation were less substantial, which can also be explained by the short duration of the research.

Communicative aspect of CLIL lessons is currently underestimated and insufficiently utilised. Students value the communicative

element of CLIL lessons more than teachers and it should be exploited more in the future to maximise the positive impact of CLIL on lexical development.

Both teachers and students evaluate CLIL lessons positively, mostly stressing identical benefits, such as more meaningful learning for real current and future needs, using English language to acquire content through authentic sources etc. However, students are less positive that CLIL lessons increase their motivation and more often voice concerns about the comprehension of content.

Findings raised other questions where further research might be necessary, e.g., whether longer or more intensive exposure to CLIL would have a stronger effect on the productive lexical competence and whether the role of implicit acquisition would increase in long term. The author also considers that lexical retention is a highly relevant element for the development of lexical competence, and as this aspect was not analysed, further research might be useful.

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