EFL/ESL Vocabulary Teaching Strategies:
The Effects of Bottom-Up and Top-Down Approaches on the Acquisition of EFL/ESL Vocabulary by Chinese University Students

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Abstract

While there has been some research on the role of bottom-up and top-down processing in the learning of a second/foreign language, very little attention has been given to bottom-up and top-down instructional approaches to English academic vocabulary teaching. This dissertation presents a quasi-experimental study designed to assess the relative effectiveness of two modes of academic English vocabulary instruction, bottom-up and top-down, for Chinese university students (N = 120).

For the purposes of the research, the participants were divided into two groups (bottom-up and top-down) and were exposed to 48 hours of explicit vocabulary instruction over eight weeks. The groups differed in that each was only exposed to one method of vocabulary teaching, either bottom-up or top-down. Two dimensions of the participants’ academic English vocabulary development (reception and controlled production) were measured quantitatively with two different vocabulary tests, Academic Vocabulary Size Test (AVST) and Controlled-Productive Knowledge Test (CPKT), administered at the start (T1) and at the end (T2) of the treatment.

The analyses of the test results revealed that both groups made significant gains in the attainment of English academic vocabulary, both in terms of vocabulary size and controlled-productive vocabulary knowledge. However, the study’s findings indicate that the bottom-up group slightly outperformed the top-down one at T2, on both vocabulary size and controlled-productive knowledge, for this population of English as a Second Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

A range of factors are likely to have been responsible for this outcome, including the nature of L2 lexical acquisition, learners’ proficiency levels, and the specifics of the Chinese cultural and educational tradition. Additionally, it appears that the innovative
EFL academic vocabulary course that was specifically constructed for the purposes of the study was quite effective in achieving good learning outcomes, in both the two instructional approaches. These findings also reinforce the argument for the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary teaching, as has been reported in relevant literature.