

ESL VOCAB INSTRUCTION: BOTTOM UP OR TOP-DOWN

二语语汇宏微观双向教学对比研究

蒋国武 郑通涛◎著



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Introduction

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 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.

Chapter 1 : Background

1.1 Introduction

Second Language (SL) vocabulary acquisition is a critical part of the process of attaining a new language, and it is not surprising that SL researchers have given it a considerable amount of attention, as evidenced by a range of influential publications devoted specifically to this issue (e. g. Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Nation, 2008; Schmitt & McCarthy, 2004; Singleton, 1999).

Bogaards and Laufer (2004) categorise the relevant research by theme, as follows;

- a. the pattern of vocabulary learning development;
- b. the definition of vocabulary knowledge, such as receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge;
- c. the distinction between vocabulary knowledge and use;
- d. the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency;
- e. the role of word frequency in vocabulary learning;
- f. the learning strategies and teaching strategies employed in vocabulary learning; and
- g. the techniques of vocabulary learning.

According to Nation and Coxhead (2013), in the last ten years there has been remarkable progress in research on vocabulary. The current trends in vocabulary studies cover areas such as multiword units, computer-assisted vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning activities and vocabulary testing. Undeniably, previous research has considered a number of important dimensions of L2 vocabulary acquisition, including some issues regarding Chinese English learners (e. g. Ma, 2009; Wang, 2010). Surprisingly, there is still very limited experimental research on what vocabulary approaches are efficient for Chinese university students learning English for academic purposes. It is estimated that there are more than 300 million learners of English in the People's Republic of China. Without sound research to address this target population, both the theory and practice of vocabulary acquisition will not be complete.

The current study goes beyond the previous research on vocabulary by testing experimentally the effectiveness of two new vocabulary courses (bottom-up and top-down approaches). It focused on two dimensions of academic vocabulary knowledge: receptive knowledge



and controlled-productive ability. The course design used in the current research was inspired by a range of recent scholarship as well as a range of online resources. It seeks to find an answer to the question of which teaching approach is more effective in this particular population when the original course design is applied.

The current chapter introduces the field of L2 vocabulary instruction and provides background information on vocabulary teaching in China. It also discusses the significance of conducting this research. In particular, it outlines the research objectives and research questions.

The second chapter provides a review of the previous literature on L2 vocabulary and explains how existing scholarship informed and inspired the current research. It involves a brief outline of the methodology and approaches in language teaching and vocabulary teaching, vocabulary knowledge and development, and the components of a vocabulary course and bottom-up and top-down processing in vocabulary teaching. This chapter also provides a comprehensive review of previous research on both vocabulary teaching and the bottom-up and top-down approaches. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for vocabulary teaching and research by drawing together the previous scholarship.

The third chapter provides a detailed description of the research design and methodology. It first describes how participants were recruited and how they were allocated to the two research groups in this quasi-experimental design. Then the research instruments (such as the pre and post test) are presented and the data collection process is detailed. Finally, the chapter describes the syllabus and the teaching methodologies deployed for vocabulary instruction in the research groups.

Chapter 4 analyses the research data from the pre and post tests of the bottom-up and top-down groups. The test scores collected based on the current design were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 2.0, 2012) in order to answer the research questions and hypotheses introduced in Chapter 1. Both the preliminary and main analytical procedures are provided in details next and finally, the research findings are reported and compared to the research questions.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive interpretation and discussion of the research results reported in Chapter 4, in relation to both the theory and research findings on vocabulary teaching. It addresses the differences between the bottom-up and top-down approaches before commenting on the role of the new vocabulary course design.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the current study and provides some of the contributions and implications of the thesis for both vocabulary teaching and research. Some unavoidable limitations which occurred during this study are also discussed before future considerations are provided. In particular, this chapter proposes an L2 teaching model titled *Eclectic Dynamic Language Acquisition Model: A Bottom-up and Top-down Approach* by pulling together the advantages of previous scholarship and the findings of the current research. The Model is presented to assist in providing guidance to both L2 teachers and re-

searchers.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

For the past two decades there has been increasing debate on the relative merits of bottom-up and top-down approaches to the teaching and learning of non-primary languages. According to Anderson and Lynch (1988), Lynch (2010), and Rost (1990), the discussion has dealt mainly with reading comprehension and it has been significant in the literature on listening comprehension as well. However, the effects of the bottom-up and top-down approaches on the acquisition of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge have received limited attention. It is worth emphasising that this approach has not been studied experimentally in relation to Chinese learners of English as a Second/Foreign Language (EFL). The question of which of the two approaches works better for vocabulary acquisition is clearly significant for language pedagogy and has obvious implications for teaching and learning strategies (Chaudron & Richards, 1986). There is an ongoing debate on which of the two approaches is more effective for SL teaching and learning, with strong proponents of both approaches. In light of this, it seems that there is a clear need for a research study designed to experimentally compare the relative effectiveness of the two teaching approaches. Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive review in relation to the concept of bottom-up and top-down processing and the relevant research findings.

1.3 Research Objectives

The aim of the proposed research was to investigate the effects of the bottom-up and top-down teaching approaches to the acquisition of English academic vocabulary by Chinese university students. The research attempted to critically review and evaluate existing vocabulary teaching theories and approaches, design a specific innovative syllabus that addresses the two approaches, collect data to test their impacts and finally provide insights on vocabulary teaching and research for the future.

To realise the research objectives, the research attempted to answer the following two questions:

1. What is the effect of the bottom-up approach on Chinese learners' acquisition of English academic vocabulary?
2. What is the effect of the top-down approach on Chinese learners' acquisition of English academic vocabulary?

These two research questions were formulated as three hypotheses:

1. *Hypothesis One*: A top-down approach produces a larger increase in learners' receptive academic vocabulary knowledge than a bottom-up approach.

2. *Hypothesis Two*: A top-down approach produces a larger increase in learners' productive academic vocabulary knowledge than a bottom-up approach.

3. *Hypothesis Three*: The growth of productive vocabulary knowledge is larger than that of receptive academic vocabulary knowledge when a top-down approach is employed.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The current study investigated experimentally which instructional approaches (bottom-up and top-down) were more effective in inducing a substantial increase in the participants' academic English vocabulary knowledge and the value of a new course design. The research is significant in a number of ways.

Firstly, it can be expected to make a substantial contribution to L2 vocabulary teaching in China and elsewhere. This study is an original approach to the study of L2 vocabulary teaching. Therefore it expected to provide valuable new theoretical and practical findings in relation to processing management, the nature of L2 development stages, course design, etc.

Secondly, it is worth emphasising that the current innovative course design will facilitate both course development and teaching practices in the future, particularly in the Chinese educational context. It will function as an example or guidance to future L2 teachers and material designers.

Additionally, although the current study was specifically designed to address issues of L2 vocabulary instruction, it is also expected to shed some light on L2 teaching in general, such as in instruction in the other major language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking and translating). The future development of ELT in China, and globally, will be served with a more holistic teaching model in *The Eclectic Dynamic Language Acquisition Model: a Bottom-up and Top-down Approach* as proposed in Chapter 6.

It is also significant to emphasise that the current study is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to consider the relative effectiveness of these two approaches in relation to vocabulary instruction. Notably, it is also the first one to examine this issue within the Chinese context.

1.5 Vocabulary Teaching in China

1.5.1 English as a Second Language in China

English has become the dominant language of international trade (Davies, 2003) and is used by over two billion people around the world (Graddol, 2006). China is one of the significant global trading partners of Western countries within the world market (Hu, 2002a), and houses the largest population of EFL learners, possibly as many as 300 million,

or even more (Crystal, 2008; Yong & Campbell, 1995). With the Chinese people's growing commitment to learning English, ELT has come to play a paramount role in the commercial and socio-cultural development of China. One reason for this is that by augmenting the level of English proficiency among the Chinese public, China has in essence transformed conversancy in English into a national resource in its own right (Hu, 2002a; 2005c).

English education is now regarded by the Chinese government as a vital component of the development and modernisation of the country (Aadmsen & Morris, 1997; Ross, 1992). From another perspective, the acquisition of English should undoubtedly be acknowledged as a potential and, in most cases, a real benefit at a personal level. The larger and more widespread the population of fluent Chinese speakers of English, the more secure English speaking tourists from around the globe feel in visiting China for the first time and in making return visits. The revenue from increased tourism affords the general public greater "access to both material resources and 'symbolic capital' for the betterment of personal well-being" (Hu, 2004, p. 26). Chinese people's fluency in English is in essence a *passport* to better education, a kind of intellectual *credit card* to access better professional and social opportunities, and ultimately, a higher standard of living (Hu, 2002a; 2003; 2004; Jiang, 2003). Being able to communicate more easily with visitors provides an environment within which Chinese citizens can develop business opportunities, research collaborations and lifelong friendships.

1.5.2 The Role of Vocabulary Knowledge

The importance of vocabulary acquisition, as part of the overall attainment of the target language, cannot be overestimated. As Gass (1988) points out, vocabulary errors constitute a major problem for learners, much more so than grammatical errors, since vocabulary errors can cause miscommunication. Hatch (1983, p. 74) states: "When our first goal is communication, when we have little of the new language at our command, it is the lexicon that is crucial ... the words ... will make basic communication possible."

Many also emphasise the significance of vocabulary knowledge. Insufficient vocabulary size is a sudden shock experienced by a large number of L2 learners (Keller, 1975; Twaddell, 1973). Hirsh and Coxhead (2009, p. 5) state, "vocabulary is central to understanding and using language at any level". Nation (1990) claims that vocabulary size, particularly academic vocabulary size, is an important indicator of the ability of SL learners to achieve academic success. According to Anderson and Freebody (1981), vocabulary is of paramount significance, because lexical development and academic reading comprehension are linked together. Vocabulary size is also a strong predictor of academic achievement and success in language ability (Laufer, 1997; Saville-Torike, 1984; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004).

The issue of vocabulary competence in EFL seems to be of particular relevance in the Chinese educational context. The Chinese College English Syllabus (2013) specifies 4,200 English words as the minimum operational vocabulary knowledge which university students must have, although some experts (e. g. Huang, 2004; Nation, 2006) have suggested that this number may be too low. In reality, very few Chinese students achieve even this relatively



modest level of competence in EFL vocabulary (Frederic, 1997).

1.5.3 The Current Situation of Vocabulary Teaching in China

According to Ma (2009), the primary task for university students in China is to develop their vocabulary proficiency in English. This is because most English grammatical knowledge has been gained in secondary school. Ma (p. 276) reviews the typical procedures of English lessons in China:

- Students are required to preview each lesson before attending each English class. This includes familiarising themselves with the vocabulary list of the lesson, listening to recordings of the text and reading the text.

- During the class, students may be asked to read each word. Teachers may explain their meanings, usage and provide some example sentences. Students may need to read or recite example sentences aloud to make sure that they pronounce the sentences correctly.

- After that, teachers start explaining the text in both Chinese and English and ask comprehension questions related to the text. The teacher will pay specific attention to the so-called 'language points' in China, such as usage and grammar.

- Finally, the teacher will lead the students through related exercises e. g. vocabulary usage, grammar and translation.

According to Ma, English teachers will dominate the majority of each class, without many interactive activities, since English teachers have to meet the syllabus requirements within the course calendar.

Ma (2009) conducts a survey on vocabulary teaching and learning at China Three Gorges University. The survey found that most English teachers in China believe that vocabulary knowledge is developed by extensive reading, regarding explicit teaching and learning as only a complement. Furthermore, they felt that learning vocabulary is the students' own responsibility. Most of the teachers preferred traditional approaches such as repetition and vocabulary exercises to communicative approaches or computer assisted vocabulary learning (CAVL). Ma states that the students lack a systematic approach to learning vocabulary. They encounter new lexical items mainly in textbooks and find their meaning in a bilingual dictionary, but they do not review and use words productively in interactive activities. Additionally, according to Ma (2009) and Gan et al. (2004), rote learning is the most valued learning strategy for both successful and unsuccessful English learners in Chinese universities, although the former combine other strategies like reviewing, reading and using words productively, while the latter do rote learning only. Therefore, an innovative vocabulary course to fit this population is essential.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Second language teaching has over the past 100 years become a global industry which nowadays involves hundreds of millions of learners. The vast majority of these have naturally been keen to attain substantial knowledge in the SL relatively quickly, and this has driven research and innovation in the field of language teaching, with a special focus on what are effective modes of SL instruction. In recent years there has been an increased recognition that vocabulary teaching is an essential part of instruction, and now there is already a solid body of literature on issues of vocabulary teaching (Nation 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Sonbul & Schmitt 2010, among many others). This review provides a comprehensive summary of the literature dealing with vocabulary teaching, including the question of how language learners process new language input, with special reference to the two principal types of processing, bottom-up and top-down.

The review has been divided into five sections, based on the following literature map:

1. Methodology and approaches in language and vocabulary teaching
 - Methodology and approaches in language teaching
 - Methodology and approaches in vocabulary teaching
2. Vocabulary knowledge and development
 - Vocabulary knowledge
 - Vocabulary development
3. The components of a vocabulary course
4. Language processing
 - Levelt's model (1989) of language process
 - Bottom-up and top-down processing in vocabulary teaching
5. Relevant research
 - Research on vocabulary teaching
 - Research on bottom-up and top-down approaches
6. Implications for vocabulary teaching and research

The section on methodology and approaches deals with the historical understanding of these terms in the profession, the pedagogical options for language teaching, and how vocabulary teaching has advanced in an era when language teaching involves a vast number of



teaching contexts, purposes, students' needs, learning styles and affective traits (Brown, 2008). The section on vocabulary knowledge and development considers the dimensions of vocabulary knowledge and how it is acquired. The next section presents Nation's (2008) idea of the essential components of a vocabulary course, and examines issues such as teaching goals, needs analyses, environment analysis, teaching principles, teaching content and sequence, format and presentation, monitoring and assessment, and course evaluation. The section on language process first introduces Levelt's (1989) model of speech production as a theoretical framework, then considers the conceptualisation of bottom-up and top-down processing, and finally discusses the rationale for implementing such approaches in academic vocabulary teaching. The review concludes with the implications that this body of literature holds for future research.

2.2 Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching

The concept of *method* is central to the teaching of non-primary languages (as it is to teaching generally). A *method* can be described as a general plan for a systematic presentation of language in the classroom, providing a set of detailed prescriptions in relation to what is to be taught and in what order, including clearly defined teaching techniques, learning tasks and activities (Anthony, 1963; Brown, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2010). Methods are typically rooted in a more general approach to language teaching, one which is essentially a set of general suppositions about the nature of language, teaching and learning. The past century saw the emergence of a variety of different approaches, such as:

- Communicative language teaching
- Competency-based language teaching
- Content-based language teaching
- Cooperative learning
- Lexical approaches
- Multiple intelligences
- The natural approach
- Neurolinguistic approaches
- Task-based language teaching
- Whole language

Informally, an *approach* can be seen as a form of teaching philosophy comprising fundamental beliefs about what is *good* and what is *bad* in relation to teaching, a set of basic principles of teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2010). The concept of *approach* therefore, seems to be broader than *method*; an approach does not by itself specify a precise set of teaching or learning procedures to be applied in actual teaching. As a consequence, *approaches* are often characterised by different interpretations as to how teaching principles should be applied,

and allow for a considerable degree of individual variation in actual teaching practices.

Methods, on the other hand, as a rule, involve a very clearly defined set of teaching procedures which are typically based on a specific theory of language and language learning. As Richards and Rodgers (2010, p. 245) state, a method contains “detailed specifications of content, roles of teachers and learners, and teaching procedures and techniques ... it has generally little scope for individual interpretation”. Over the course of the previous century, SL experts devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to developing new methodologies for teaching second/foreign languages, such as the following:

- Audiolingualism
- Counselling - learning
- Situational language teaching
- The silent way
- Suggestopedia
- Total physical response

In each case the construction of a new method was driven by the desire to enable learners to attain a high level of competence in a new language relatively quickly and easily. It would be fair to say that while some of these methods may have been marginally more successful than others, in terms of the outcomes they have produced, none has been able to achieve the breakthrough results that had been hoped for.

There is little doubt that a wide range of factors is responsible for the relative lack of achievement in the field of SL learning. As far as teaching methods are concerned, experts have pointed out that methods are often too over-generalised to provide effective solutions to all classroom contexts, and that while they can be very distinctive in the initial stages of instruction they often become indistinguishable in the end.

Furthermore, many methods are based on assumptions which have not been verified via research, and it is recognised that methods are sometimes promoted because of vested interests, not because they have produced outstanding results (Kumaravadevelu, 2009; Richards & Renandya, 2008).

This has led SL researchers and language experts to re-evaluate their understanding of the role that highly specialised methodologies play in the teaching of non-primary languages. There is a growing conviction that specialised methodology does not have the capacity, of and in itself, to guarantee high learning outcomes for all learners, and that language teaching needs to go “beyond approaches and methods” (Richards & Rodgers, 2010, p. 244). This view is aptly captured by Nunan’s (1991, p. 228) assertion:

It has been realised that there never was and probably never will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second lan-