Abstract

THESIS: Phonemic Activation or Graphemic Activation: An Investigation on The Access to Word Identification of Chinese ESL Learners

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Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental and necessary component in second language acquisition. Language learners with a large amount of vocabulary will feel at ease in communication, comprehension and production in the target language. Identifying and recalling a word form efficiently and accurately can profit learners by achieving vocabulary width in a short period of time. This study explores how Chinese ESL learners identify and recall an English word form. Learners identify a word through phonological access and visual access while a writing system may affect the performance of the two accesses. Compared to English, Chinese is a deeper orthographic language. Therefore, native Chinese speakers rely more on visual access than phonological access in Chinese character recognition, which will be transferred to second language acquisition. This study investigates the role of phonemic and graphemic activation in English word form identification and recall for Chinese ESL learners, based on backward masking procedures and materials adopted in the research of Perfetti and Bell (1988, 1991). Twenty Chinese ESL participants are exposed to the targets (e.g., bake), paired
with phonological masks (e.g., BAIK), visual masks (e.g., BAWK), unrelated masks (e.g., CRUB) in pseudowords upper case and the blank masks. The targets recall accuracy indicates intermediate and advanced Chinese learners rely slightly more on phonological access than on graphic access in word identification and recall. Their English proficiency and English exposure opportunity affect their extent of reliance on the two accesses.