Abstract
There is a widely held assumption that Chinese learners are passionate about learning English vocabulary. Their training in recognizing the characters of Chinese is associated with a highly developed visual memory which may place them at an advantage when learning the words of a foreign language. There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence about Chinese learners’ attempts to learn English vocabulary by memorizing texts and wordlists. In the light of the priority Chinese learners attach to vocabulary, it may seem surprising that they often perform badly in tests of English vocabulary size.

This paper presents the results of research which examined the respective English vocabulary size of 250 mainland undergraduates admitted to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a similar-sized sample of the University’s local Hong Kong students. Although both groups belong to an academic elite, their knowledge of English words, according to the results of the Vocabulary Levels Test (Laufer and Nation 1999), was disappointing: The majority knew fewer than 3,000 words. At first sight at least, such results are puzzling. Research by Laufer (1992) suggests that a vocabulary size of 5,000 words is required for an adequate understanding of academic texts. Yet it was known that most of the students had been exposed to a wide range of English texts and had consciously attempted to learn large amounts of English words throughout their primary and secondary education. Why had such hard work not resulted in greater vocabulary acquisition? Two lines of interpretation are explored in the paper: (a) Were the students’ vocabulary learning efforts unsuccessful because of inadequacies in their approach to word learning? (b) Are tests based on word frequency samples adequate for measuring the size of Chinese learners’ English vocabulary?

References: