

A Study of the English Vocabulary Knowledge of University Students in Hong Kong

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This article reports a study of Hong Kong university students' English vocabulary knowledge. The investigation addresses vocabulary knowledge from the two main perspectives which have pre-occupied vocabulary testing in recent years: breadth and depth. One hundred and eighty-seven students newly admitted to The Chinese University of Hong Kong participated in the study. Two vocabulary measures, (1) the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (Laufer & Nation, 1999), which assessed students' vocabulary knowledge across different word frequency levels, and (2) a self-constructed depth-of-knowledge test which assessed students' lexical competence across different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, were employed. The results suggest that local tertiary students can master high-frequency English words fairly well. However, their knowledge of low-frequency words is disappointingly deficient. Although they can recognize a reasonable range of academic words, the quality of their knowledge of this group of words is unsatisfactory. Limited morphological and collocational knowledge is likely to hinder their productive use of the words in sentences. The study concludes by recommending that the teaching profession should attach equal emphasis to both breadth and depth in students' English vocabulary development.