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Effect of Using a "Top-down" Strategy on Chinese University Students' Comprehension of English Readings

Zhenhui RAO
University of South Australia

This article reports on how English teachers in China used a "top-down" strategy of teaching reading comprehension in their English reading classroom. Based on the schema theory model in the teaching of reading comprehension, the researcher argues that the "top-down" strategy should be introduced into the traditional English classroom in China. By comparing the effect of using the traditional "bottom-up" strategy with that of using the "top-down" strategy in the reading course for English majors of a Chinese university, the researcher found that some reading strategies popular in English-speaking countries did work well in the Chinese setting as long as the teachers could take into account their students' learning environment and learning styles.

Introduction

Reading ability is one of the most important language skills in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and research on it has drawn considerable attention in the field of EFL teaching. Yet, most of these studies have been carried out either in English-speaking countries or in non-English speaking countries where English is used as an official language. Therefore, not much is known about whether they are applicable in Mainland China, where English is neither a mother tongue nor an official language, and how the Chinese EFL teachers can apply certain effective reading strategies from English-speaking countries to the teaching of English reading comprehension in the Chinese context.

Although some researchers have analyzed the specific context for English teaching in China (Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Biggs, 1996; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1996; Li, 1984), studies so far have focused on the possible reform of English language teaching as a whole. Because one of the major aspects in EFL teaching is improving students' reading competence, and because the teaching of reading skills in China is somewhat different from that in the English-speaking countries (Harvey, 1985; Rao, 1996; Scovel, 1983; White, 1989), it is of vital importance to introduce some reading strategies that work well in the English-speaking countries into a traditional setting like China. By doing this, we may find more efficient ways to teach reading comprehension.

Traditionally, EFL teaching in China is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar translation method and an emphasis on rote memory. These language teaching approaches reflect the typical Chinese classroom for teaching English reading, in which a text is generally attacked from a more detailed perspective through the traditional "bottom-up" strategy. In order to run such a core course well, a selection of good textbooks is especially important. The teachers will devote almost all their effort in class on focus texts — the nice, compact text of just the right length and level, in which they can find language points they want to elaborate on, and on which hours can be spent explaining, analyzing, paraphrasing, asking questions, practicing patterns, reading aloud, retelling, etc. until the students very nearly, if not literally, learn every word by heart. Chinese teachers of English believe that "learning sparsely but well" is a practical and economic way to facilitate language acquisition.

However, the ultimate goal of teaching English reading is far from teaching students how to analyze the sentence structures and master grammatical points. More importantly, English teachers should focus greater attention on the meaning of the text. In this aspect, the methodology of teaching reading in China has lagged behind that in Western countries, although in recent years, some efforts have been undertaken. Cynthia White, for example, describes her experience in teaching English reading by reconciling communicative approaches to the teaching of English with traditional Chinese methods (White, 1989). A more recent successful program is provided by Zheng Min and Chen Fenglan. They present an action research in the teaching of reading in which not only the students' reading proficiency has greatly improved, but also the teachers themselves

have benefited a lot from it (Zheng & Chen, 2000). By using the statistical results of a large-scale survey, Xu Yulong investigates how the various teacher and teaching factors affect Chinese learners' reading proficiency in English. It is found that some of these factors contribute to higher English reading achievement for students at both the beginning and the intermediate levels, while some others are more important for students at one level rather than the other (Xu, 1999). The present study fits into this broad context of efforts at reform and reports the results of the introduction of a reformed teaching methodology, i.e., the "top-down" strategy of teaching reading comprehension, at one Chinese university.

Theoretical Background

The teaching of reading in China has for most part continued to adhere to a more traditional methodology dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. Most Chinese teachers of English hold to the theory that the chief source of difficulty in reading is imperfect mastery of the mechanics. Essentially, reading is seen as little more than recognizing letters and associating them with their corresponding sounds. Difficulties in reading are attributed to a lack of vocabulary or a failure to recognize grammatical structures. This traditional view is challenged by the schema theory model, which has been formulated to account for the role of the reader's background knowledge in language comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; 1988).

Anderson and Pearson (1984) state that a schema is an abstract knowledge structure which the reader brings to the text while reading. It is abstract in the sense that it summarizes what is known about a variety of cases that differ in many particulars. And it is structured in the sense that it represents the relationship among its component parts. The fundamental assumption of this theory is that a text does not by itself carry meaning. Rather, it only provides directions for readers as to how they should reconstruct meaning from their own previous acquired knowledge, i.e., background knowledge. According to this model, comprehension is an interactive process between a reader's background knowledge and the text, and between new knowledge and the old knowledge store (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). In the process of reading, meaning is dependent not just on the actual words and other linguistic features of a text, but also on the thoughts, attitudes, world-knowledge and experience the reader brings to that text. Essentially, the more world-knowledge that the reader brings to text, the less dependent he or she is upon purely linguistic information

such as grammatical, syntactic and semantic clues, thus making his or her reading process more efficient.

Schemata are hierarchically organized from the most general at the top to the most specific at the bottom. The process of reading comprehension is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of that schema must be compatible with the input information. Celce-Murcia (1991) divides this process into four stages: 1) clues to meaning are taken up from the page by the eye and transmitted to the brain; 2) the brain then tries to match existing knowledge to the incoming data in order to facilitate the further processing of new information; 3) predictions are made about the content of the text based on the previous experience; and 4) the data is examined more closely and predictions are either confirmed or revised.

The principle above results in two basic modes of information processing: "bottom-up" processing and "top-down" processing. The former is evoked by the in-coming data, whose features enter the system through the best fitting bottom-level schemata. Readers analyze each word for its meanings or grammatical characteristics and then accumulate meanings to form propositions. As these schemata converge into higher level, more general schemata, the top-level schemata, become activated. The "top-down" processing takes place when the system makes general predictions based on higher level, general schemata, and then searches the input for information to fit into these partially satisfied higher level schemata. Individuals make use of real world schematic knowledge to develop expectation of text meaning. These schemata enable the person attempting to comprehend a passage to anticipate what will occur next, to predict conclusions, and to infer meaning where portions of the text are imperfectly understood.

The Present Study

This study investigated how a "top-down" strategy of teaching reading comprehension could be introduced into the reading course for English majors. The setting is at a Chinese university where students are accustomed to the traditional "bottom-up" strategy.

The study is grounded in the schema theory model mentioned above, from which we can summarize that reading is essentially a "top-down" process, whereby the reader samples the text visually, making use of

schematic knowledge. To understand, the reader has to proceed reasonably fast if "tunnel vision" is to be avoided. This rapid sampling of the text is based on the reader's "hypothesis": at all times we are unconsciously predicting the content and the sense of what we are reading and are about to read.

Readers of English in China are especially prone to "tunnel vision." Since most Chinese teachers of English in reading classrooms spend a great deal of effort focusing on the detailed explanation of the language form rather than its meaning, it is not surprising that such a teaching method has resulted in students' slow reading speed, narrow scope of knowledge and limited command of vocabulary. Students are held up by problems of vocabulary and grammar (Li, 1984). What is attempted in this study is to train students to use a "top-down" strategy, applying their background knowledge and hypotheses about text meaning to the full. As a consequence, students realize that they can read authentic texts without frustratingly frequent reference to the dictionary.

Data Collection: Rationale and Methodology

Scientific knowledge is accumulated at an increasingly rapid speed. Because reading is the key to the labyrinth of knowledge and because the job of English teachers is to impart this key to the students, the research on how to improve reading efficiency in the field of EFL teaching is likewise becoming more and more important. Responding to this need, in 1999, Jiangxi Normal University, where this study was conducted, approved this research project in which the teachers attempted to introduce the "top-down" strategy for teaching reading comprehension into their English reading course. By applying this strategy, the teachers obtained some first-hand data and experience, thus making it possible for us to compare the effect of using the "top-down" reading strategy with that of using the "bottom-up" strategy of teaching reading on Chinese university students' comprehension of English readings. In addition, at the end of the project, an attitudinal questionnaire was also given to the subjects in the experimental class, seeking their views on using the "top-down" strategy in their English reading course. These qualitative results were later used to confirm or revise what had been discovered in the previously quantitative comparison.

Subjects

The subjects were 89 first-year English majors; 12 were male students and 77 were female students. They entered the university in the fall semester of 1999. The students' ages were between 18 and 19 years, with a six-year English learning history in middle school and high school. All of them had learnt English through a Chinese traditional English reading course, which followed the "bottom-up" approach. At the beginning of the semester, we randomly assigned all the subjects into three classes, with 30 students for Class 1 and Class 2 respectively, and 29 students for Class 3. The students were then given a reading test, which consisted of fast reading and reading comprehension. The total score of this test is 100, with fast reading accounting for 20% and reading comprehension 80%.

1. Fast reading: A passage of the length of 1000 words was selected. In the calculation of the reading speed and comprehension accuracy rate of each student, no time limit was set, but students were asked first to read as quickly as possible and then to answer ten true/false questions based on the passage without looking back at it. Immediately after they finished, students handed in their answer sheets. Therefore, the actual time each student took and his or her comprehension accuracy rate for this part of test could be recorded. The selected reading materials were of an appropriate level of difficulty for first-year students.

2. Reading comprehension: This was composed of the reading comprehension of four passages. After reading each passage, the students were provided with questions, each question followed by four multiple choice answers. The students were required to choose the best answer to each question. The results of this pre-test are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparisons of the Mean Scores and Mean Reading Speed of Three Classes in the Pre-test

Class / Category	Class 1		Class 2		Class 3		*F* and significance	Comments level
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
mean scores in reading	78.5	8.7	79.7	9.2	77.6	8.9	0.857 ($p > .05$)	n.s.
mean reading speed (wpm)	77	9.6	71	8.5	85	9.1	2.796 ($p > .05$)	n.s

As we can observe from this table, there was no significant difference in the mean scores of three classes in this test. The ANOVA results indicated that the English reading proficiency was at the same level for all the subjects in three classes at the beginning of the semester. This provided the researcher with an ideal situation in which the subjects of the same English reading proficiency level could be divided into two groups and treated with different reading strategies in their reading classes. By the end of the semester, the difference of effectiveness of various reading strategies would be expected to appear in the post-test.

Just as the English reading proficiency level of the subjects, the mean reading speed for each class in the fast reading test was also somewhat similar, with Class 1 being 77 wpm, Class 2, 71 wpm and Class 3, 85 wpm. Even in such a case, the class with a medium mean score and medium mean reading speed (Class 1) was chosen as the experimental class, and the other two classes as control classes.

Three teachers participated in the study. A returning Australian teacher was the instructor for the experimental class. She was well-trained in Australia as to how to apply the "top-down" strategy to the English reading course. Two teachers taught the control classes; both had long and rich teaching experience, but they had not been exposed to the "top-down" strategy.

Teaching Material

The same course book was used for all the three classes to try to provide a more reasonable ground for an effective comparison. So far, most of English textbooks for English majors in Chinese universities have been compiled on the basis of the theory of the grammar-translation method or that of the audio-lingual method, mainly focusing on linguistic competence. In this experiment, however, the core material selected for the study was Alexander's *Mainline Progress A and B* (1980), a set of established classroom textbooks. It was chosen for the following pragmatic reasons:

1. It is set at a level judged appropriate by our teachers for students who have recently completed secondary education.
2. It incorporates a functional/notional approach and exploits (for example, the functional implications of grammar structures). While facilitating the mastery of essential grammar forms, it does

so within a framework that takes into account the learner's communicative needs. It thus offers a transitional approach lying appropriately between the "bottom-up" approach and the "top-down" approach but demonstrably heading towards the "top-down" approach.

3. The teaching material does not attempt to inculcate an awareness of a particular national background or to present as models native-speaker-to-native-speaker situation. Rather, it is aimed at adult-learners in their own countries who will have to communicate with native English speakers or with speakers of other languages able to use English as a common second language.

Procedures

The control classes in this experiment followed the traditional "bottom-up" approach in which the English reading course mainly focuses on a text and a list of language points drawn from the text. The language points are concerned only with the form of the language, emphasizing grammar and vocabulary. In this traditional "bottom-up" approach, the teacher first goes through the text word by word, line by line, and then explains the meanings of words and grammatical structures of sentences. Finally the teacher assigns students exercises in order to help them grasp the reading more fully. The students learn to focus their attention on every word instead of on the meaning of the paragraph or the whole text when they do the reading.

However, the procedure for the experimental class was rather different. This procedure was intended to help students move from global to detailed interpretation, emphasizing the role of the reader's background knowledge in language comprehension. Here is the detailed procedure of the experimental class:

1. Provide students with basic information, such as author, year of publication, the historical background of the time of the story and any cultural knowledge that is needed.
2. Ask students to read only the title of the text, and then to predict and write down at least five vocabulary items æ key words which they expect to see in the text.
3. Let students skim the text quickly, looking for key words in the text. Then ask them to use all the typographical indications, their

previous knowledge, cognates and repeated words and write down, in no more than fifteen words, the main theme of the text.

4. Try to work out a most accepted main theme of the text by encouraging students to discuss, negotiate or even argue with each other. Give students some directions if necessary.
5. Allow students to reread the text for five or ten minutes, and then ask them to answer such questions as: What seems to be the author's main intention: to persuade you or just to inform you?
6. Divide the class into five groups, each group with six students. Ask students to divide the text into sections. Is there an introduction? If so, where does it end? Is there a conclusion? If so, where does it start? Explain the answer.
7. Appoint a leader from each group to present the result of group discussion to the class, and explain their answers.
8. Ask students to write down the main idea of each section. Try not to mention insignificant details. After that, discuss with students so as to arrive at a most acceptable main idea of each section.
9. Ask students to write down any words or phrases which look important in the text — key words or phrases which they did not know before reading it. Beside each one, ask them to write down their idea of what it probably means, and then check their guessing and make some corrections if necessary.
10. Invite students to tell the class the number of each paragraph which they feel they couldn't understand properly, or are not sure they understand.
11. Try to work out why the students found the paragraph they mentioned just now so difficult. What was the main reason?
    a. lack of previous knowledge of the topic
    b. a grammatical problem (which one)
    c. inefficient reading strategies
    d. difficulty in separating main points from details
    e. difficulty in identifying the introduction or conclusion, etc.
12. Help students to solve remaining problems concerning the understanding of the text. For example, if the understanding was held up by the grammatical structures of the sentences, try to analyze them until the students got a clear idea of the structures.
13. Critical reaction: Ask students to answer such questions as: Whose interests does this text reflect? Which country, which social class, or which institution? Who would find the publication

of this text desirable? Is the information in this text applicable to your own situation?

14. Make students indicate their interest in this text, using a scale from 1 to 5 (5 = very interesting, 1 = very boring).
15. Now let students estimate their comprehension of the text. (e.g., 50%, 80%).

The procedure listed above illustrates the way in which we apply the top-down strategy in a reading course for the English majors in the experimental class. Step 1 aims to acquaint our students with the relevant background knowledge of the reading so as to make them relate the material at hand to their prior knowledge. Step 2 is designed to get the students predicting intelligently, anticipating problems before they arise. Step 3 starts the comprehension process at the level of general overview. Students try to start from what they know already, not from what they do not know. Step 4 encourages the students to solve the concrete problem by involving them in the group discussion. While doing this, they are also developing their communicative competence. Step 5 attempts to identify the difference between persuasion/argument and a more factual exposition. Steps 6 to 8 aim at the comprehension of "main points" which trains the students to distinguish the main from the marginal points. Step 9 is aimed at developing several skills: (a) awareness of the relative importance of different vocabulary items; (b) skipping over the insignificant items; and (c) trying to work out the meaning of unknown words from context before using a dictionary. Steps 10 to 12 focus on the detailed comprehension, mainly helping students overcome the remaining obstacles in understanding the reading. Steps 13 to 15 try to elicit personal reactions because reading without some sort of personal involvement is likely to be less effective.

Results

At the end of the first semester, another reading test was given to the experimental class and the control classes. The reading test paper designed at this stage was similar to the pre-test both in format and difficulty level in order to provide evidence to show the contrasts between pre-test and post-test results in the experiment. It not only gave a measure of reading speed and comprehension, but also provided a chance to compare the reading ability between the students in the experimental class and those in

the control classes after they were treated differently in their English reading course for a whole semester. The results of the reading test at this time are shown below in Table 2:

Table 2. Comparisons of the Mean Scores and Mean Reading Speeds of the Three Classes in the Post-test

Class / Category	Class 1		Class 2		Class 3		*F* and significance level	Comments
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
mean scores in reading	88.6	9.8	81.7	8.5	80.3	8.7	15.62 ($p < .01$)	Class 1 > Class 2 Class 1 > Class 3
mean reading speed (wpm)	210	15.6	120	11.9	140	12.1	27.56 ($p < .01$)	Class 1 > Class 2 Class 1 > Class 3

The ANOVA results above indicated that significance appears in the mean scores of the three classes in this post-test. Although the three classes made progress in reading ability compared with the results of the pre-test, Table 2 informs us that the progress rate of these classes varied considerably, with Class 1 (experimental class) ranking at the top. Post hoc Scheffe test showed no significant difference between Class 2 and Class 3 ($p > .05$), the two control classes (mean scores were 81.7 and 80.3). However, the test did indicate significant differences between each of those two control classes and Class 1, the experimental class (mean 88.6).

The same was true with post-hoc Sheffe test on the mean reading speed of each class. Similarly, this post-test revealed a sharp difference between the experimental class and the two control classes, with the experimental class rising to 210 wpm, Class 2 rising to 120 wpm, and Class 3 rising to 140 wpm. However, the test showed no significant difference between the two controlled classes. Therefore, the "top-down" strategy was indeed more effective than the "bottom-up" strategy in this experiment.

In addition to the reading test, an attitudinal questionnaire was sent to the students in the experimental class. The first part of questionnaire was a statement: *Using a "top-down" strategy is an efficient way to increase my reading ability.* The students were asked to respond to the statement on a five-point scale (*strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree*). Of the 30 students in the experimental class, 8 (27%) *strongly agreed* and 17 (57%) *agreed*, with only 5 (16%) *undecided.* The second part of the questionnaire was a question: *In which aspect(s) do you think that the "top-down" strategy in English reading helps you a great deal*?

The results are listed in Table 3 (Note: Many students chose more than two aspects):

Table 3. Aspects in which the "Top-down" Strategy Facilitates English Reading

Speeds up reading and improve comprehension	82%
Improves ability to analyze and appreciate	78%
Broadens scope of knowledge	86%
Enlarges vocabulary	65%
Improves writing	42%

The attitudinal survey indicated that the students felt positive about the "top-down" strategy. Most of these students suggested that the strategy helped them comprehend the reading better.

Discussion

By the end of the first semester, the "top-down" strategy employed in the experimental class had already showed its advantages over the traditional "bottom-up" approach. This satisfactory outcome has resulted from the teaching procedure in the reading course of the experimental class.

Taking the "top-down" strategy as a whole, we can see that there is some development from very superficial skimming (to achieve "general comprehension") to deeper and more critical levels of comprehension. There are three main levels of comprehension: (1) general comprehension; (2) main point comprehension; (3) detailed comprehension. In real life, preliminary skimming often suffices for particular purposes. Alternatively, a search for the main points, disregarding the details, may be quite enough in many situations. "Detailed comprehension" is necessary for our students because they are learning English in a non-English speaking country. They have to learn the language through reading practice. In a country where English is taught as a foreign language, students know very little about the English language, let alone the culture of English-speaking countries, because there is little exposure to information from English-speaking nations that students might use as a model. The students would not be harmed by the teacher's explanation of the English language system and the detailed language points. As Harvey (1985) states, "We would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively" (p. 185). Moreover, "understanding the grammatical framework of a language is extremely important for some

learners, often especially so for speakers of different languages" (Harvey, 1985, p. 185).

It is obvious that this "top-down" strategy is intended to help students achieve global understanding first, then come to the component parts. It may seem logical that we can not understand the whole unless we have first understood its parts. But in fact, comprehension is not so tidy. Sometimes it is possible to interpret difficult parts of the text because we already have a fair understanding of the overall message. Global understanding enables us to dismiss various misinterpretations because they do not fit in with the overall message (Nuttall, 1982). Often, our students look up every word in the dictionary. As they read on, they sometimes find some of the meanings do not fit in with the whole context or the previous meaning. Then they are perplexed.

Using the "top-down" strategy to achieve a global understanding first will help to predict and define the meaning of detailed parts because it is from the context that a word derives its value. By exploiting the limiting and supporting functions of the context, students can guess, infer and use other reading skills to help build up their comprehension, thus developing their reading skills and avoiding "tunnel vision." Since we take great care to integrate language content and language form, speed and comprehension, and fluency and accuracy in our "top-down" strategy, the students' reading speed and accuracy in the experimental class have tremendously improved, as evidenced by the results presented in the pre-test and post-test.

Finally, the "top-down" strategy in our experiment promotes the active process of reading. In the traditional "bottom-up" strategy, students are the passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge. They listen and do what the teacher asks them to do. Using the "top-down" strategy changes their passive role into an active one: they have to find out everything possible by themselves. The teacher only deals with the most knotty points. So they cannot depend too much on their teacher. Nuttall (1982) points out that students' roles as readers demands that they should make sense of the text for themselves. In their reading lessons, they are supposed to learn how to do this. Doing this for students will not teach them this ability. Furthermore, Nuttall states that if the teacher begins by explaining or summarizing for the students, he or she is telling them something readers ought to find out for themselves. The "top-down" strategy trains students in the independent skills of reading because the students, not the teacher, will need to do the skimming, scanning and other kinds of reading in the future.

Implications

The findings of this study imply that some effective reading strategies developed in ESL/EFL teaching in Western countries (in this case, the "top-down" strategy) do work well in a traditional EFL setting in China, where the students are accustomed to the traditional "bottom-up" strategy. Though the students in the experimental class performed better in the reading tests than those in the control classes, this successful outcome was not achieved with ease because the approach implemented makes such a break with accepted English reading practice in China. At the beginning of the experiment, students considered the "top-down" strategy ridiculous and inappropriate. They were reluctant to cooperate with the teacher and insisted on focusing their attention on the language form.

As a consequence, in the face of such resistance, the EFL teacher needs to persistently and patiently introduce the method in the reading class. By being constantly exposed to the strategy, the students may gradually adapt themselves to the new approach. Actually, the traditional "bottom-up" strategy of teaching reading has as its goal a common focus with the "top-down" strategy, that of reading for total comprehension. As long as students are aware of the benefits they can draw from the new strategy, they are likely to make a smooth transition from their accustomed "bottom-up" strategy to a more effective "top-down" strategy.

In the experimental class, a text is attacked from a more general perspective through the discourse (above the paragraph) level, and the students are taught to catch the main idea as perceived through an overall examination of a reading passage. However, this does not mean that the detailed comprehension of the text can be ignored. English learners in a non-English speaking country have a very limited chance to expose themselves to the English language. To learn the language well, they have to understand how the language functions systematically. Meanwhile, the students in these countries have developed their own learning habits and strategies in their long traditional education. In this study, most of the Chinese students had a keen interest in the exact understanding of every word and a low tolerance for ambiguity. Therefore, the teacher must take into account their actual learning environment and habitual learning style while introducing a new teaching method. "By acknowledging the expectations of the students in terms of what they wanted to learn and how they were used to learning language, and by making careful compromises, it was possible to meet their needs, to expose them to new ways of learning

English, and to encourage them to put their language to work in meaningful ways" (White, 1989, p. 213). In fact, many research studies have proved that "bottom-up and top-down processing should occur on all levels simultaneously" (Finocchiaro, 1986, p. 78). "Bottom-up processing ensures that the reader will be sensitive to novel information, whereas top-down processing helps the reader resolve ambiguities, that is, to select among alternative possible interpretations of input" (Finocchiaro, 1986, p. 78).

The present study is an attempt to find a better way of teaching reading comprehension in EFL teaching. Further research is needed to introduce more reading strategies from English-speaking countries to the teaching of English reading in non-English countries. Such research might further explore the possibilities of reconciling more reading strategies popularly used in English-speaking countries with the traditional ways of teaching reading. Although the effectiveness of the "top-down" strategy has already manifested itself in this experiment, it does not necessarily mean that it should be used all the time or to the exclusion of other reading strategies. EFL teachers should carefully consider the reading selections, the students themselves and their purposes for reading the selection at hand before determining which reading activities would be most effective. However, it does seem that the "top-down" strategy can be a strong and effective way to enhance the students' reading comprehension in a traditional setting whenever they are facing unfamiliar and challenging selections, particularly those that contain unfamiliar cultural information. In conclusion, the results have shown the effectiveness of the "top-down" strategy in a Chinese context and may offer research and teaching possibilities for those in similar situations within and outside China.

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Zhenhui RAO is a professor in Jiangxi Normal University, PRC. Currently, he is pursuing a Ph.D. degree at the University of South Australia. He has published more than 10 articles in journals, including Research in the Teaching of English *and* SYSTEM. *His research interests are in English teaching methodology and learning strategies.*