

Exploring Senior High School Students' Difficulties and Strategies for Reading L1 and L2 Texts in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore proficient Taiwanese senior high school students' difficulties and strategies toward L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) Reading. A total of eight proficient students participated in this study. An in-depth face to face interview was adopted for data collection. Through the enthusiastic response of the students, we can gain an overall understanding of their reading difficulties and strategies toward Chinese and English reading. This study shows that there are some similarities and differences between Chinese and English reading perceptions. Based on the findings of this study, classroom teachers will be able to design more effective reading strategy curriculum and instruction geared to the students' needs.

Keywords: "L1 and L2 reading difficulties", "L1 and L2 reading strategies", "reading strategy curriculum and instruction"

Introduction

Broadly speaking, language is a part of culture, and language is the totality of beliefs and practices of a society. Language is also indispensable for the functioning of a culture and for transmitting that culture to succeeding generations. In other words, language plays a significant role in culture. Without language, culture would not be possible. Language is also impacted and shaped by culture. Language cannot exist without culture. That is, language and culture are interrelated and inseparable (Nida, 1993).

In general, different cultures in the world have developed distinctive and specific writing systems to represent their own language. Writing systems have been classified by Birch (2002) into three major categories: 1) "In logographic writing systems, one symbol represents the concept or meaning of an individual word or part of a word, such as Cantonese, Chinese" (p.15). 2) "In syllabic writing systems, one symbol represents a consonant-vowel sequence or a consonant-vowel-consonant sequence of sounds" (p.17). 3) "In alphabetic writing, such as English, generally one symbol represents one sound, either a consonant or a vowel" (p18).

According to the preceding paragraphs, we can see that first language (L1)(Chinese) structural variations is an important source of individual differences in processing behaviors among second language (L2) (English) reading. Most importantly, if one systematically investigates the vital variances and the key factors between the Chinese and English languages, one will gain greater understanding of their precise influence on the formation of language-processing competence with respect to reading. This study, therefore, is aimed at exploring challenges and strategies of successful Taiwanese senior high school students regarding Chinese and English texts. It is hoped that such an inquiry may lead to answering the following two questions:

1. What are successful Taiwanese senior high school students' challenges and strategies for reading Chinese (L1) text?
2. What are Taiwanese senior high school students' challenges and strategies for reading English (L2) text?

Literature Review

The following section will discuss key factors that influence the development of L2 reading and those factors that would be particularly salient for Chinese speakers' English reading development.

Characteristics of the Chinese and English Writing Systems

Based on Taylor (1995), Chinese has approximately 7000 different morphemes and 400 syllables with four distinct tones, making up 1,200 tone-syllables. Chinese characters are logographs, each of which stands for a morpheme, the smallest meaning-bearing language unit. In general, a morpheme can be a word by itself or it can be part of a word. With regards to Chinese logographic scripts, the basic units of character formation are radicals (Chen, Allport, & Maeshall, 1996; Shu & Anderson, 1997). Many radicals are single unit characters and are adopted both as independent lexical morphemes and as components in other characters. Compared to the Chinese writing system, the English writing system has only 26 letters to represent about 44 phonemes, and for this and other reasons its letter-sound relations are apt to be complex (Shu & Anderson, 1997). Based on Taylor (1995), this complexity might be one of the reasons why some children have a difficult time reading and spelling English.

Phonological Awareness in Chinese and English

Phonological information in Chinese is represented by a single graphemic unit. For instance, in a single-unit character, the sound is holistically associated with its grapheme. Phonological decoding in logographic systems requires simultaneous phonological activation both at the whole character and radical levels. In English alphabetic scripts, one phoneme is usually assigned to each graphic symbol (letter). Phonological decoding in alphabetic systems requires the sequential analysis of a word's component letters and letter clusters (Koda, 1999).

Morphological Awareness in Chinese and English whereas phonetic radicals indicate the pronunciation of whole characters, semantic radicals provide a guideline to the meaning in the Chinese system. As a result, semantic radicals are often viewed equivalent to single morphemes (Shu & Anderson, 1997). On the whole, Chinese morphemes are graphically coded in the form of lexical and non-lexical radicals, and as single- and multiple-unit characters. Recognizing this semantic radical information facilitates character identification. English is a concatenative language system, and its morphological formation generally entails the addition of affixes-either before, after, or written base morphemes. In other words, English morphological formation is quite systematic and follows a linear fashion (Koda, 1999). The significance of morphological awareness plays a vital part in reading because of its direct connection with the semantic processing during word recognition. The following are findings from different researchers: 1) skilled readers are sensitive to a word's morphological structure (Fowler & Liberman, 1995; Stolz & Feldman, 1995), and 2) skilled readers use morphological analysis during lexical processing (Chilant & Caramazza, 1995; Taft, 1991; Taft & Zhu, 1995).

Possible Variations in Lexical Processing in English and Chinese

Due to the differences in the structural and functional properties of their writing systems, lexical processing in English and Chinese differs in two major ways. First of all, English lexical processing involves systematic and linear chains. On the contrary, Chinese lack this formation systematicity in light of lexical processing. Secondly, each graphemic unit in English has segmental phonological information, thus subsequent integration of the segments is important to lexical processing. However, Chinese lexical information has phonological and semantic functions, which are associated holistically and independently with each graphic unit at both the lexical and sublexical levels. Logographic readers are required to consider the whole character and its components through simultaneous information activation, instead of intra word segmental analysis and integration (Koda, 1999).

Rhetorical Structure in Chinese and English Expository

With respect to rhetorical structure in Chinese expository writing, *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* is a prevalent model. Literally, "*qi* means beginning of a topic. *Cheng* means following-elaborating the opening. *Zhuan* means turning or changing. *He* means wrapping up, when the writer provides the highest level of generalization" (Chu, Swaffar & Charney, 2002, p.515). In general, *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* represents a conceptual/reasoning sequence in overall Chinese writing organization. These features are different from Western writing organization. The Western features usually use deductive style and the Chinese features tend to use inductive approaches, in expository writing in particular (Chu, Swaffar & Charney, 2002). The practice of putting the main thesis of a text prior to the supporting ideas breaks a Chinese readers' expectation for what Kachru (1998) defines as a "delayed introduction of purpose" or "delayed topic statement" (p.55). Chen (1986) tries to compare the expository discourse structure between English and Chinese passages, and found that Chinese paragraphs were prone to introduce more subtopics than English paragraphs did. Compared to English writing, Chinese writing is inclined to be indirect rather than a direct presentation of authorial intent. According to Jensen's (1998) perspective, it is obvious that classical Chinese is filled with subtlety, analogy, and metaphor in terms of writing techniques.

In doing so, these features tend to hide the writers’ intent. He also identified that this tendency toward direct allusion harks to the Chinese ancient cultural heritage in rhetoric.

The L1-L2 Transfer Continuum

According to Hornberger (1989), “Biliterate development is defined not only by continuities between spoken and written language, between listening and speaking, and between reading and writing, but also by those between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Recognizing the close connections between development in one and the other language, researchers have attempted to determine to what extent knowledge of one language transfers to the other (and aids learning and to what extent knowledge interferes with the other (and impedes learning)” (p.119). Based on Field’s study (1984), the transfer of some reading strategies from Chinese to English is likely to be difficult for native speakers of Chinese, partly because of the adjustments that occur in the switch from reading an ideographic language (Chinese) to reading an alphabetic one (English).

Method

Research Setting and Participants

The setting the researcher has chosen is an 11th grade classroom in a Comprehensive High School which is located in the central cluster of Taiwan. A total of eight 11th grade students participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 17-18 years old. Based on the research questions, the selection of student participants focused on three criteria: (a) students scored in the top 10% in English based on their mean scores on the English mid-term and final exams for the Spring semester, 2015; (b) students scored in the top 10% in Chinese based on their mean scores on the Chinese mid-term and final exams for the Spring semester, 2015; and (c) students could express their opinions and ideas freely with very little difficulty as based on their teachers’ recommendations.

Code names of participants were A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. A total of eight successful readers participated in this study. A basic profile of the eight participants is presented in Table 1

Table 1. Basic Profiles of the Eight Participants

Participant	A	B	C	D
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age	17	18	17	17
Chinese Learning History (years)	15	14	15	15
English Learning History (years)	8	8	7	7
Chinese scores	87	89	87	84
English scores	88	88	85	88
Participant	E	F	G	H
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age	18	18	17	17
Chinese Learning History (years)	15	15	15	15
English Learning History (years)	7	6	7	7
Chinese scores	86	90	86	85
English scores	90	83	88	92

Data Collection

For this study, the researcher conducted a face to face in-depth interview with each student participant, in Chinese; each interview lasted sixty minutes or less. The researcher began with a general interview of each student. This was a ten-question open-ended interview on the readers’ Chinese and English reading difficulties and strategies. Questions one and two deal with the Chinese reading difficulties among these successful readers. Questions three to five explore Chinese reading strategies among these successful readers. Questions six and seven deal with the English reading difficulties among these successful readers. Questions eight to ten explore the English reading strategies among these successful readers. (See Appendix A). The researcher used a portable cassette tape recorder during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze transcripts for this study. In the initial stage, I conducted an extensive and intensive analysis of the content of the data, writing notes as I listened to the tape recordings and read the transcripts numerous times. I identified groups of related utterances which reflected a common perspective and revealed recurring topics and themes. As a result, two themes that emerged were consistent across all participants' responses. The two themes identified were: (1) Chinese reading difficulties and strategies and (2) English reading difficulties and strategies.

Results and Discussion

Findings of the Interviews with the Students

This part contains an explanation of the themes that emerged from data from the data analysis of the interview transcripts. The presentation and interpretation for each theme responds specifically to the first research question, "What are successful Taiwanese senior high school students' difficulties and strategies for reading Chinese text?" When it comes to Chinese reading difficulties, most of the readers considered the classical texts as the most challenging Chinese text. In terms of perceptions of Chinese reading strategies, when the students came to unknown Chinese paragraphs, they used the following reading strategies: asking their teachers and peer groups, checking the reference books, highlighting, rereading, and skipping. Among these strategies, the strategy of asking their teachers and peer groups was ranked as the most frequently used. In other words, most readers really depended on teachers' and students' help when they encountered the unknown Chinese paragraphs.

When the students came to unknown Chinese vocabulary, strategy usages were the following: asking teachers, checking reference books, making contextual guesses, skipping, and looking in the dictionary. Among these strategies, the strategy of asking their teachers was ranked as the most frequently used. Namely, most of these readers also counted on their teachers' help when they encountered unknown Chinese vocabulary.

When the students got to the most important part of the Chinese text, strategy usages were the following: looking through the entire text, focusing on the first and second paragraphs, focusing on the title of the text, and intuiting. Among these strategies, the strategy of looking through the entire text was ranked as the most frequently used. That is, most of the readers tried to look through the entire text, and then looked for the relationship among paragraphs. In doing so, they could make sense of the main ideas of the texts.

In the following section, the researcher will demonstrate some solid examples to support the findings. Chinese reading difficulties (the classical Chinese texts): From this interview, the researcher found that five readers thought the classical texts were their main reading problems.

(The researcher): Did you have any Chinese reading difficulties or problems? Why?

(Reader A): In my opinion, my reading problem was the classical Chinese, because it was hard to understand.

(Reader F): The classical Chinese was very difficult for me because it was written for ancient people not for modern people.

(Reader G): I had to translate the classical Chinese into modern Chinese; otherwise I couldn't understand it. Sometimes a Chinese word would have multiple meanings; I had to figure out the suitable one carefully.

(The researcher): What kinds of Chinese texts were the most difficult to read?

(Reader B): The classical Chinese. In terms of this kind of text, I had to rely on a lot of translations. That's why I had a hard time reading it.

(Reader H): The classical Chinese was the most difficult area for me. It was written for ancient people; I had to translate it into modern Chinese. Even with the translation, I still couldn't get the whole idea.

As mentioned above, we can clearly see that classical Chinese is the most difficult to read for most of these readers

Chinese reading strategies (asking their teachers and peer groups):

It is most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with unknown Chinese paragraphs.

(The researcher): When you came to a Chinese paragraph you didn't know what did you do?

(Reader A): I highlighted it and asked my classmates about it. I also read it several times and looked for the main ideas.

(Reader B): I asked my teachers or classmates. I also checked some reference books. The translations and explanations were included in the reference book, and they were very handy for me.

Chinese reading strategies (asking teachers):

It is most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with Chinese reading strategies for an unknown vocabulary word.

(The researcher): When you came to a Chinese vocabulary word you didn't know, what did you do?

(Reader A): I asked my teachers. Sometimes, I looked it up in the dictionary.

It seems that asking their teachers and peer groups is their main method to deal with unknown Chinese paragraphs and vocabulary for most of these readers.

Chinese reading strategies (focusing on the first and second paragraphs):

It is most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with the Chinese main ideas.

(The researcher): How did you get the main idea of the Chinese texts? Explain why?

(Reader D): I usually read the first or the second paragraph, and I tried to organize the ideas, which the author emphasized. Judging from this, I tried to figure out the main ideas.

The following part contains an explanation of the themes that emerged from data from the data analysis of the interview transcripts. The presentation and interpretation for each theme responds specifically to the second research question, "What are Taiwanese senior high school students' challenges and strategies toward English reading?"

When it comes to English reading difficulties, most of the readers considered vocabulary and poetic texts as the most challenging when reading English. In terms of perceptions of English reading strategies, when the students came to the unknown English paragraphs, strategy usages were the following: looking in the dictionary, asking their teachers and peer groups, checking the reference books, skipping, using vocabulary clues, and reading several times. Among these strategies, the strategy of looking in the dictionary was ranked as the most frequently used. It is common for most of the readers to use dictionaries and reference books to deal with unknown English paragraphs in senior high school based on the researcher's teaching experiences. When the students came to an unknown English vocabulary word, strategy usages were the following: looking in the dictionary, asking teachers, and making contextual guesses. Among these strategies, the strategy of looking in the dictionary was ranked as the most frequently used. Interestingly, these above results and findings proved clearly that they were apt to use the dictionary to deal with unknown English paragraphs and English vocabulary according to interview results and analyses. When the students got to the most important part of English text, strategy usages were the following: focusing on the first and second paragraphs, looking through the entire text, looking for the repeated ideas, and focusing on vocabulary. Among these strategies, the reading strategy of focusing on the first and second paragraphs was the most frequently used when they looked for the main ideas of the text.

In the following section, the researcher will demonstrate some solid examples to support the findings.

English reading difficulties (the English vocabulary): From these interviews, we found that seven readers did have English reading problems, and all seven readers stated their reading problems lay in the English vocabulary. In the following section, the researcher will provide a solid example regarding readers' perceptions of their English vocabulary problems.

(The researcher): Did you have any English reading difficulties or problems? Why?

(Reader A): Vocabulary. If I did not know the meaning of each word, I couldn't understand the meaning of phrases or sentences in the text.

(Reader D): A word might have multiple meanings, and it depended on how it was used. It was difficult for me.

(Reader E): I had a hard time fitting the words together. There were many new words and grammar usages I didn't know before; I had to spend a lot of time figuring them out. A word might have multiple meanings; I was not sure which one was the correct one to fit in a sentence. It was a big problem for me.

From these interviews, we can understand that not only the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge but also semantic and syntactic knowledge played an important role in reading English for most of the readers.

English reading difficulties (the poetic text): From these interviews, most of the readers mentioned that poetic text is the most difficult English text genre to read. We will use readers A and E as an example.

(The researcher): What kinds of English texts were the most difficult to read? Why?

(Reader A): English poetry was the most difficult to read for me because the meanings of poem were hard to imagine. I could not imagine the situation, which the authors described, and I didn't feel the same way the authors felt.

(Reader E): I thought the poetry was the most difficult area for me. The author always said something deeply between the lines; we had to know the background of the author and we needed to have more experiences in our lives; if we knew these things, we could comprehend the poems better.

English reading strategy (looking it up the dictionary): It is the most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with unknown English paragraphs.

(The researcher): When you came to an English paragraph you didn't know what did you do?

(Reader A): I usually checked my reference books because they included the Chinese translations, grammar explanations and the usage of words.

English reading strategy (looking up in the dictionary): It is the most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with an unknown English vocabulary word.

(The researcher): When you came to an English vocabulary word you didn't know, what did you do?

(Reader A): I looked it up in the dictionary or electronic dictionary. Besides this, I sometimes asked my teachers.

(Reader D): I looked it up in the dictionary or asked my teacher. Sometimes I discussed it with my classmates who were good in English.

(Reader H): I checked the reference books, because there were some explanations of English vocabulary in the reference books

Interestingly, most of the readers use the strategy of looking up words in the dictionary to cope with unknown English paragraphs and vocabulary

English reading strategy (focusing on the first and second paragraphs): It is most frequently used strategy by readers to deal with the English main ideas.

(The researcher): How did you get the main idea of the English texts? Explain why.

(Reader A): Our teacher told us that you could usually find the main idea in the first and second paragraphs.

Based on the results of the interviews, some implications can be used for classroom teachers.

The reading syllabus for senior high students concerning efficient reading strategies should be based on the notion that students learn to read best by reading. In other words, reading should aim at the readers' flexibility using strategies to deal with their reading challenges and difficulties instead of solely understanding the text. In order to read efficiently students need more "fix it" strategies to make sense of the texts. Reading comprehension instruction should strike a balance between "bottom-up" method and "top-down" one. It is believed that reading strategies can be taught and trained by reading teachers. The empirical findings of this study will enable teachers to design an efficient and practical reading curriculum and effective instructional techniques for students.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions

1. Do you have any Chinese reading challenges and problems right now? Why?
2. What kinds of Chinese texts are the most difficult to read right now? Why?
3. What do you do when you come to a Chinese paragraph you don't know?
4. What do you do when you come to Chinese vocabulary you don't know?
5. How do you get to the most important part of Chinese text? Explain why?
6. Do you have any English reading challenges and problems right now? Why?
7. What kinds of English texts are the most difficult to read right now? Why?
8. What do you do when you come to an English paragraph you don't know?
9. What do you do when you come to English vocabulary you don't know?
10. How do you get to the most important part of English text? Explain how?