

READING INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA: GENERAL STATUS AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

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This paper discusses reading instruction in primary schools in China from two perspectives, namely the current status of reading instruction as it plays out in Chinese schools, and development trends in China which have emerged during the curriculum reform since 2001. In the section that looks at the general status of reading instruction, the focus is on the following three aspects: the three-tiered system made up of the overall objectives for reading instruction in primary schools, prioritised objectives for each phase of schooling, and class period targets for each class; seven focus areas in reading instruction; and major strategies applied in reading instruction, including: both general strategies and prioritised strategies for each phase of schooling. In the section that explains the development trends, the changes to the objectives underlying reading instruction, the type of readings, the procedure and the pattern of reading instruction are discussed. The last part/section of the paper supplements previous sections by exploring four principles and four pairs of key concepts that provide guidance to current practices of reading instruction in primary schools in China.

Keywords: Reading instruction, teaching objectives, teaching contents, teaching strategies, development trends

INTRODUCTION

Sixty-six years have passed since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. As a result of the efforts of Chinese language teachers in primary schools and academics working in the field, a great deal has been achieved over the years in the development of the curriculum, teaching materials, teaching methods, teaching and learning assessment, as well as research with regard to teaching reading in Chinese. In retrospect, six stages can be identified in the development of Chinese language teaching and reading in primary schools in the past 66 years. Teaching practices during Stage One (1949-1957) are characterised as following language teaching and learning theories and experiences from the former Soviet Union. Stage Two (1958-1976) is remembered for the advocacy of 'Double Basics' (basic knowledge and basic skills). During this stage, however, regular teaching and learning activities were severely disrupted by the misled social movement, known as 'the cultural revolution'. During Stage Three (1976-1991) the development of students' intelligence and ability was viewed as the main purpose for Chinese language teaching. The emphasis in Chinese language teaching during Stage Four (1992-2000) shifted to language training itself. With regard to Stage Five (2001-2011) proficient language attainment is taken as the focus of language teaching. The years 2011 to 2015 could be seen as Stage Six. Based on previous understandings about Chinese language teaching, students' ability of actual application of the language is highlighted in this stage. Among these six stages, the year 2001 is the line of demarcation because the Eighth Curriculum Reform initiated that year, greatly changed the whole picture of Chinese language teaching gradually and in phases, making it

what it is today. The general status and development trends for reading instruction for Chinese language teaching in primary schools in China discussed in this paper are based on the Eighth Curriculum Reforms initiated in 2001.

Within the five areas of Chinese language teaching in primary schools in China, i.e. literacy, oral communication, reading instruction, composition instruction and comprehensive study (thematic activities), reading instruction is the primary focus. Specifically, 'reading' refers to 'text reading', which can be further divided into three kinds of reading, i.e. intensive reading, skimming, and selected reading. Reading instruction in itself is comprehensive. It focuses on perception, understanding, memorisation, and actual application of the language. In this comprehensive activity, the study of words, sentences, paragraphs, and articles, the practices of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills, and experiences of emotion and culture, are all involved.

GENERAL STATUS OF READING INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

In China, nine-year education is compulsory. It is usually made up of six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education. Since 2001, Chinese language teaching for compulsory education has been guided by the national policy of *Curriculum Standards for Chinese Language Teaching*, which was first released in 2001 and revised in 2011. Taking into account the developmental level, maturity level, and cognitive features of students at different ages and for the convenience of curriculum management, teaching Chinese in primary schools is further divided into three phases. Phase I covers Grades 1-2, Phase II covers Grades 3-4, and Phase III covers Grades 5-6 (Ministry of Education, 2012: 5). In describing the general status of reading instruction in primary schools in China, the multi-leveled objectives underlying reading instruction which include overall aims, phase-specific prioritised objectives, and class period targets, but also the seven focus? areas of reading instruction, and both commonly applied general strategies and phase-specific prioritised strategies for reading instruction, will be explained in the following sections.

OBJECTIVES FOR READING INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Guided by the overall objectives and prioritised objectives for a particular phase, varied class period targets direct teaching and learning activities for each of the 40-minute long class period in all grades in primary schools.

Overall aims

According to the *Curriculum Standards for Chinese Language Teaching* (2011), the primary aim of teaching Chinese during the compulsory education stage is to help students learn to use the language appropriately. Guided by this general purpose, the overall aims of reading instruction in primary schools are as follows:

1. The volume of readings required. The total volume of readings expected for primary school students is at least 1.75 million Chinese characters through six school years, including 0.3 million characters from textbooks and at least 1.45 million from extracurricular reading materials. Among all those from extracurricular reading materials, at least 0.05 million is expected to be read through Phase 1 of primary school (Grades 1-2), at least 0.4 million for Phase 2 (Grades 3-4), and at least 1 million for Phase 3 (Grades 5-6).

2. Language requirements. There are many different estimates about how many characters exist in the Chinese language system. It is safe to say that there are at least 8 105 Chinese characters which are among the most frequently used, as listed in the *Table of Commonly Used Standard Chinese Characters* (State Council 2013) issued by the Ministry of Education and National Working Committee of Chinese Language and Characters. This of course places heavy demands on the teaching and learning of these characters. Students need to recognise about 3 500 commonly used Chinese characters by the end of primary education, i.e. after six years of schooling. (This will be explained in greater detail below.) They also need to recognise and memorise a certain amount of words, phrases, well-known sayings, aphorisms, idioms, basic sentence patterns, and commonly used expressions. In addition, they need to recite at least 160 articles (both full and selected extracts of articles included) and poems during primary education, including 50 of them required by the end of Phase 1 of primary school (Grades 1-2), another 50 required by the end of Phase 2 (Grades 3-4), and the rest (60) required by the end of Phase 3 (Grades 5-6).
3. Required reading abilities. These include the following six aspects:
 - The ability of word recognition and pronunciation. Generally, it refers to the ability of quickly perceiving and recognising Pinyin (the Chinese phonetic alphabet), punctuation marks, and Chinese characters. It is based on the development of literacy, and it is fundamental to the development of reading ability.
 - The ability to comprehend reading materials. It is an important aspect of reading ability as it requires students to understand key words, major contents, text structures, author style, emotions, etc., through reading.
 - The ability of appreciation which includes the ability to appreciate, draw lessons from and internalise reading materials.
 - The ability to make comments on ideas within the texts, and identify patterns and stylistic features of reading materials.
 - The ability of language use. It refers to the ability to make use of what has been learned through reading, i.e. the ability of imitative speaking, imitative writing, solving real life problems through the use of the language, etc.
 - Reading skills. This include the skills for reading aloud, silent reading, speed reading, as well as good reading habits and proper reading methods.
 - The ability to make use of reading support measures. It refers to the ability of proper use of commonly used reference books, as well as the ability to collect and process related materials.

PRIORITISED OBJECTIVES FOR EACH PHASE OF SCHOOLING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Each of the three phases of the six-year primary education is assigned different prioritised objectives in reading instruction.

The three prioritised objectives for reading instruction in Phase 1 (Grades 1-2):

- Read aloud with accuracy.
- Recognise and write Chinese characters accurately.
- Read and recite with fluency.

In this phase, teachers need to make sure that every learner reads texts fluently in standard Chinese with accuracy, that is, without any incorrect words, unnecessary words, omitted words, repeated words, or pausing at the wrong places in a sentence.

Recognising and writing Chinese characters accurately is a target that should be integrated into every lesson for Chinese language instruction in Phase 1 of primary schools. By the end of Phase 1 (Grades 1-2), students are expected to recognise 1 600-1 800 characters, while 800 -1,000 of these must also be written accurately. What is important to note is that the objective of recognising and writing Chinese characters continues to be one of the primary objectives during Phase 2 and 3 of primary education, although it competes with other objectives listed in the next two sections. By the end of Phase 2 (Grades 3-4), students are expected to recognise around 2 500 characters, of which 1 600 must also be written accurately. At the end of their six-year primary education, students are expected to recognise approximately 3 500 commonly used Chinese characters, of which about 2 500 must also be written accurately.

Reading and reciting with fluency is another prioritised objective in Phase 1. Students/students? are required to recite words, sentence patterns, and selected articles (both full and selected extracts of articles included). As is required by the *Curriculum Standards for Chinese Language Teaching* (2011) phase 1 students are expected to recite 50 selected articles /poems, and their extracurricular readings are expected to be at least 50 thousand Chinese characters (Ministry of Education, 2012: 5).

The three prioritised objectives for reading instruction in Phase 2 (Grades 3-4):

- Experience, recognise, and memorise reading materials.
- Comprehension and retelling.
- Recitation.

During this phase, while reading aloud fluently with accuracy and appropriate intonation are still emphasised, the training of silent reading and skimming is highlighted. Special attention is paid to helping students to build the ability and develop the habit of thinking while reading, i.e. the ability and habit of recognising, memorising, and summarising reading materials while reading.

The practice of comprehending and retelling is emphasised in this phase. There are three aspects underlying comprehension and retelling. Students are expected to be able to grasp the meaning of words and sentences, and comprehend the functions of key words and sentences in expressing emotions and ideas. Students are expected to be able to abstract the main ideas of texts, grasp the ideas and emotions embedded in texts, and raise questions about aspects that they do not understand. Students are expected to be able to retell the main storyline of narrative texts, appreciate the vivid images created by the authors and the beautiful language and expressions applied in the writings, and share their reading experiences with others.

Recitation is valued in Chinese culture and is another focus in this phase. As required by the above-mentioned curriculum standard, students at this phase are expected to recite more than 50 selected poems and articles (both full and selected extracts of articles included), and their total volume of extracurricular readings are expected to be above 400 000 characters (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION 2012: 6).

The three prioritised objectives for reading instruction in Phase 3 (Grades 5-6):

- Improved reading speed.
- Improved comprehension.
- Further practice in recitation and expanded reading experiences.

In this phase, there is a continued emphasis on improving students' performance of reading aloud and reciting, which helps students master the skills of skimming and improve their silent reading (at least 300 characters per minute). Students' performance of thinking while reading is expected to be enhanced.

When it comes to comprehension in this phase, students are expected to be able to infer the exact meaning of the words in context, recognise the affective meanings of words, make conjectures about the connotations of related words, and experience the expressive effects of these words. Students are expected to be able to figure out the order of expressions of the articles, experience authors' thoughts and feelings, comprehend basic expression methods of the articles, and have the courage to give their own opinions. Students are expected to have a better understanding of different styles of writing, such as in narratives, expository texts, poems, etc.

Given the large number of characters to be learned in a logographic writing system, further practice in recitation and expanded reading experiences is believed to establish students' initial ability of independent reading. During this phase, as required by the above-mentioned curriculum standard, students are required to recite 60 selected poems/articles (both full and selected extracts of articles included), and their total volume of extracurricular readings should be above 1 million characters (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION 2012: 8). Recitation and extra readings are always emphasised as critical in helping develop a sense of the language and provide students with lots of exposure to rich language materials.

The above-mentioned prioritised objectives for reading instruction for each of the three phases in primary schools are interconnected and arranged in an ascending spiral of difficulty levels. Fostering students' ability to read independently is the major focus of the whole objective system.

Class period targets for reading instruction

Generally speaking, a text assigned for intensive reading purpose requires two class periods of class teaching. Each of the two class periods (a class period is 40 minutes long) is assigned different targets.

During the first lesson period, the teacher first discusses the topic with the class. Thereafter the focus shifts to mastering the vocabulary of the text to be read. During the third step the text is required to be read aloud accurately and with fluency by the students through various kinds of practices and activities. Thereafter main points and general content of the text are discussed (note that this step is not required for Phase 1 students – Grades 1-2). As for Phase 2 and 3 students, the second and third targets listed above are expected to be achieved mainly through pre-class exercises and in-class monitoring.

During the second lesson period the focus remains on comprehension. For Phase 1 students the focus is mainly on comprehending the meaning of words and sentences, and discussing the content of the text. For Phase 2 students the focus is on grasping the structure of the text and the functions of key words and sentences in expressing emotions and ideas. Phase 3 students are required to recognise the ideas and emotions embedded in the text through examining the style of the writing, the order of expressions, and the key words and sentences, as well as recognising the way of expressions of the text and its functions in conveying meanings. Students are expected to read texts carefully so as to understand the language,

build their knowledge of the language, and learn to use the language. Students are also expected to engage individually in focused exercises, integrated reading-writing exercises, and to participate in extensive readings.

Seven focused areas in reading instruction in primary schools

Seven main focused areas for reading instruction are identified in the *2011 edition of the Curriculum Standard of Chinese Language Teaching for Compulsory Education* in primary schools in China, namely, vocabulary teaching, sentence teaching, paragraph teaching, text teaching, reading aloud, silent reading, and retelling (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION 2012).

Vocabulary teaching: This area includes three aspects: reading and writing Chinese characters and words with accuracy, comprehending the meaning of characters and words, and vocabulary building. Among these three aspects, helping students grasp the meaning of characters and words is the focal point, and vocabulary building is the purpose. In the Mandarin system, some characters do not have substantial meanings, while most do have. Some characters may sound the same, while the same character may sound differently in different contexts. The same applies to the meanings of characters. Words are different from characters. In some cases, a character itself is a word, e.g. the verb ‘动’, which means ‘move’, is both a single character and a word; but in most cases, words are made up of two or more characters, e.g. the noun ‘动力’, which means ‘the driving force’, is made up of two characters. And several words combined may create a phrase, e.g. the phrase ‘高速铁路’, which means ‘the fast railway’, is made up of two words, ‘高速 (fast speed) and ‘铁路 (railway), comprising four characters. Similar to the case of characters, different words may refer to the same thing, while the same word may carry different meanings in different contexts. Therefore, three categories of words require special attention in vocabulary teaching, i.e. new words made up of new characters, new words made up of known characters, known words made up of known characters but with different meanings in differing contexts or serving as the key words in a piece of text.

Sentence teaching: This area includes the following two aspects: grasping the meaning of sentences at three levels, that is, literal, contextual and implied meaning, and sorting out relationships between words and sentences. There are three possible entry points for sentence comprehension. One can start from analysing key words of the sentence. As for those sentences with structural functions to the text, discussing its structural functions would be a good start. As for those carrying special meanings, it is wise to start from analysing their rhetoric meaning. Besides, students’ real live experiences, teachers’ demonstration, the analysis of the contexts, historical background of the text, and the basic structure of the sentences all help in sentence teaching.

Paragraph teaching: Paragraph teaching aims to help students recognise basic elements of paragraphs and their functions, grasp basic rules and methods for composing paragraphs, and learn to create paragraphs with sentences. As for those important paragraphs in the text, what's worth studying is not only characters, words and phrases, sentences, punctuation marks, rhetoric techniques, and logics, but also its central idea, content, structure of expressions, and presenting skills. Therefore, for paragraph teaching to be effective, its needs to be integrated with character, word, sentence and text teaching. An integrated way of teaching will leave students with a concrete and deep impression which helps them to develop the ability of drawing inferences about other cases from what has been studied.

Text teaching: There are four objectives underlying text teaching, i.e. helping students get a clear idea of the logic of the text, grasp its main content, grasp the theme, and appreciate

the authors' thoughts and feelings. Although all of the above four tasks are important in text teaching, the focus is different for students studying at different phases of schooling.

Reading aloud: Reading aloud plays a significant role in helping students comprehend the meaning of texts, acquire language expressions, and develop linguistic sense. In primary schools in China, the exercise of reading aloud is very important. Students are expected to read aloud accurately, fluently, and with feeling.

Silent reading: There are three basic requirements for silent reading. Firstly, students are expected to read silently and attentively, but without finger pointing, lip moving, counting, or subvocalising. Secondly, speed matters. Students in Phase 3 of schooling are expected to read at least 300 characters per minute. Thirdly, thinking while reading is encouraged from an early age.

Retelling: There are four types of retelling. Students in Phase 1 and 2 are usually encouraged to retell everything. Retelling the gist of a story is an activity introduced to Phase 2 students. The last two types of retelling are more challenging: retelling in creative ways includes three variations, i.e. retelling by changing the narrative order, such as introducing a flashback into the chronological sequence; retelling by changing the person, such as changing from a third person perspective into a first person perspective; and retelling by changing the genre of the text, such as retelling a poem in the form of a story. The last type of recall is imitative retelling. In this activity, students are expected to follow the example of the original text and create a similar one. For example, in the story *The Wonderful Circus*, there are detailed descriptions about three circus programmes, called *Pole-climbing by the Monkeys*, *Black Bear on the Wooden Ball*, and *Goat on a Wire*. After reading the text, students are encouraged to follow the example of the above-mentioned writings and create alternate versions such as *Puppies Doing Arithmetic*, *Monkey Riding*, and *Fire Drill for horses*, etc.

MAJOR STRATEGIES APPLIED IN READING INSTRUCTION

General strategies

Liu (2007: 125-142) argues that the following strategies of reading instruction applied in primary schools in China are based on the psychology of constructivism.

Preview strategy. Before applying this strategy, students are assigned with self-study tasks before the whole class teaching begins. Previewing helps them to be better prepared for comprehending the content of the text.

Anchoring strategy. This strategy requires teachers to create a broader context for text learning. In other words, the text to be studied is situated or 'anchored' within a broader background.

Double two-step strategy. Reading instruction is arranged in a double two-step procedure. The first two-step deals with the relationship between teaching and learning. What we expect is a preview by students before class teaching. The second two-step deals with the relationship between learning by oneself and learning in groups. We expect students to study by themselves first, and then to participate in group discussions.

Diagrammatical strategy. This strategy requires teachers to make use of charts and diagrams where necessary to help students grasp key information, overcome text difficulties, grasp more fully the content and logic of the text, and build knowledge structures.

Comparative strategy. Comparisons will make students aware of similarities and differences within and across the texts, and this will help them to get deeper understandings about what has been learned.

Performance-based strategy. This strategy connects input with output. Through all kinds of activities for output, such as speaking, writing, and doing things, internalised knowledge

will be checked through externalised performance.

Prioritised strategies for each phase of schooling in primary schools

Prioritised strategies for Phase 1 include: (1) Fostering students' reading habits and interests. (2) Helping students to master the proper way of reading aloud. (3) Activities involving using characters, words, and sentences. (4) Improving students' handwriting of characters. (5) Emphasising language development during the process of reading instruction.

Prioritised strategies for Phase 2 include: (1) Encouraging students to read texts aloud with emotion. (2) Helping students to acquire rudimentary skills of silent reading, and start to teach them the skills of skimming. (3) Developing students' ability of grasping the meaning and making use of words and sentences. (4) Developing students' ability for summarising main contents of texts. (5) Highlighting paragraph teaching in reading instruction.

Prioritised strategies for Phase 3 include: (1) Helping students to acquire the ability and foster the habit of previewing texts before class. (2) Helping students to master the ways of expressions through the study of the texts. (3) Helping students develop rudimentary reading methods for texts in most literary forms. (4) Helping students to learn to abstract central ideas of texts. (5) Encouraging students to read extensively.

DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF READING INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

Since the launch of the Eighth Curriculum Reform in 2001, the face of reading instruction in primary schools, especially in major urban schools, has been greatly changed. Wang has made a summary of the major development trends of reading instruction since 2001 (Wang 2015) as outlined below.

Changes in objectives underlying reading instruction: from single to multidimensional structure

For quite a long time, 'basic knowledge and basic skills' was almost the sole purpose for reading instruction in primary schools across China. The problem with an overemphasis on fundamentals is that it can lead to a neglect of the development of reading competence and positive attitudes towards reading. However, things are changing within the schooling system. Driven by the more recent round of curriculum reforms since 2001, the objectives for reading instruction have been changed into an interconnected three-dimensional system, namely 'knowledge and abilities', 'processes and methods', and 'emotional attitudes and values' (Ministry of Education, 2012: 6). The first dimension, the objective of 'knowledge and abilities' provides guidelines for the acquisition of characters, words, and sentence patterns, as well as for the practices of reading aloud, reciting, listening, speaking, and writing.

The second dimension, the objective of 'processes and methods' provides guidelines for mastering the methods of reading, observation, self-learning, and writing. As for the third dimension, the objective of 'emotional attitudes and values' provides guidelines for students' appreciation of values embedded in texts, expected frequency and style of teacher-student communication, and the involvement of students' personal experiences and habits. For the three-dimensional system, the objective of 'knowledge and ability' is fundamental but its

realisation depends on the achievement of the objectives of the second and third dimensions. The objective of 'processes and methods' is instrumental and it serves the purpose of the realisation of the objective of 'knowledge and abilities'. Without the guidance of the objective of 'processes and methods', advocated learning methods featured as 'independent learning, cooperative learning, and learning through exploration' will be difficult to implement. The objective of 'emotional attitudes and values' serves as a motivation system for reading instruction. This objective can be attained along with the realisation of the second and third objectives. Reading instruction without pursuing the objective of 'emotional attitudes and values' cannot be humanistic.

Thus it can be seen, that all three dimensions are different but closely interconnected. However, in actual class teaching, it is impossible to lay equal stress on all three dimensions simultaneously. It is obvious that class teaching will adopt a different course type, text, and the phase of schooling will stress the three individual dimensions differently. Therefore, in primary schools in China, there are reading instructions particularly focused on the objective of 'knowledge and ability' in primary schools, while others pay more attention to the objective of 'processes and methods' or 'emotional attitudes and values'. However, as a whole, the objective of 'knowledge and ability' gets more attention in primary schools than in later schooling.

Changing the type of readings: from single text reading to multiple texts reading

Reading instruction in primary schools in China used to be dominated by intensive reading of a single text. Nowadays, single text reading is still one of the major types of readings practiced in classes, but the importance of multiple texts reading and book reading has now also been widely recognised, especially multiple texts reading. However, the practice of multiple texts reading is not expected to substitute single text reading but should supplement traditional practices of single text reading (Jiang 2014: 11-15).

Instruction of multiple texts reading requires teachers to guide students to read a series of selected and related texts within a certain time period. It is a new form of extensive reading. As for this type of reading instruction, students' volume and speed of reading matters, and their ability to construct meaning over a variety of texts is emphasised. Therefore, the practice of multiple texts reading is of great importance to students' all-round development of language attainment. The following explains three key points about conducting successful multiple texts reading instruction.

The selection of texts is also important. A group of texts is not randomly collected. All the texts that are chosen are expected to relate to the same theme. The common theme is what gives the texts coherence as a group. In some cases, the theme is determined by unit topics of textbooks or thematic tasks while in extracurricular readings and skimming practices, it is the teachers' responsibility to decide on the theme. Texts are grouped together according to pre-decided themes.

Texts should be presented to students in the order that fits the purpose of reading instruction. There are many different ways to present the group of selected texts to students. To make the right choice, teachers shall take into account not only the theme of the reading task and the relationships between texts in the group, but also the purpose of reading instruction. After studying one piece of text intensively, a series of texts under the same theme with similar but different topics could be introduced to students with the purpose to encourage them to draw

inferences about other cases from one instance. A series of texts differing in difficulty levels could be presented to students from easy to difficult to build a ladder for students to progressively get a better understanding of the theme. To reinforce what has been learned in one piece of text, a series of parallel texts shall be introduced.

The judicious use of the texts is also called for. Multiple texts reading is based on single text reading, but its effect is expected to be much more than merely the mechanical accumulation of reading several pieces of texts separately. Therefore, teachers should take the group of texts as a whole, and use well-designed questions, such as those which involve knowledge transfer, comparison, and problem solving, to guide students to find connections between texts within the group. The practices of multiple texts reading conducted in this way will activate students' higher level reading abilities of knowledge restructuring, knowledge extension, criticising, creative thinking, etc.

Changes in procedures of reading instruction: from unified procedure to diversified procedures

Traditionally, reading instruction in primary schools in China follows a three-step procedure. In the first step, students read the texts by themselves and then share their opinions with peers. Next, students probe into texts jointly and cooperatively in order to come to a better/fuller understanding of the texts. The third and final step involves consolidating what has been learned and trying to make use of it. Although this three-step procedure can be completed in one class period, it could also take up two or three class periods. Usually, one class period will be more appropriate for a short article, but for those relatively long and difficult works, two to three class periods will be necessary. However, a two-class period procedure is most common. In this arrangement, the first class period is arranged in four steps. Firstly, students' interests are raised and lead to the topic. Secondly, students first read the text independently and then share their opinions of the text with their peers to get a general picture of the text. Thirdly, students read intensively to get a better understanding of the content, ideas and emotions conveyed in the text. Finally, students expand the topic and draw conclusions.

The second class period is arranged in three steps. Firstly, the teacher reviews/revises what has been learned and restates the content of the text with the students. Thereafter, the teacher guides the students in consolidating what has been learned and tries to apply the knowledge in different contexts/texts. Thereafter, the class summarises the text and students are encouraged to do extra reading practice, such as extracurricular reading, speaking and writing.'

However, the previously introduced teaching procedure is no longer the only option in primary schools. Currently, more and more diversified teaching methods with different focuses have been introduced to the classes. Yang states that there are different themes for different teaching procedures (Yang, 2013). The following are seven examples of teaching methods:

The first example is the *knowledge-centered procedure*. In this procedure, first the meaning of the title is discussed and then various word meanings. The paragraphs in the text are identified and examined and the central ideas of the text are then extracted from them. The author's writing style is also discussed. Exercises are then done after the discussion of the text. This procedure looks at complete knowledge structure and highlights the instrumental

function of language teaching, but ignores the human elements in Chinese language. It is all about awareness and knowledge of language tools, but little attention is given to the use of these tools.

The second example is the *problem-centered procedure*. Here, much of the attention is given to the topic and issues or problems relating to the topic. After the topic is introduced, problems will be introduced to students for their discussion in groups. Group findings are then shared with the class as a whole, and groups' views can be questioned or discussed in class. Problems will stimulate students to think. Hence, this procedure looks at the development of the ability to think and solve problems.

The third example is the *reading centered procedure*. In this procedure the text is read for the first time to get the general picture. Thereafter it is read intensively to understand the content at a deeper level and to break up and deal with the difficulties. A final reading focuses on the emotions conveyed by the text.

The fourth example is *the procedure focused on four challenges*. Here the first step involves reading aloud to deal with the challenge of general perceptions. The next reading focuses on appreciation, to overcome the challenge of language perception. The third reading relies on reading intensively to overcome the challenge of thorough exploration and research. The final reading involves reading with fluency and feeling, to meet the challenge of language performance. This procedure is arranged around the four challenges. As can be seen, students are required to read the same text over and over so that deeper understanding comes with each reading.

The fifth example is *the procedure focused on fostering reading habits*. There are four levels of reading habits. As a popular Chinese saying goes, 'read texts several more times, even without any effort to try to comprehend the meaning, and the meaning of the texts shall become obvious to the readers naturally'. Encouraging students to read the same piece of text many times is the first step in this procedure. The habit of reading the same piece of text several times is the lowest level of reading habit that should be fostered. Once the basic level reading habit has been consolidated, students are encouraged to foster the second level of reading habit, which is the habit to read while taking notes. The third level of reading habit is to raise questions while reading. It is believed that the more questions asked the more will be learned. The top level of reading habit is to read for use. Students are expected to make use of what has been learned. Reading instruction that follows this procedure helps students foster reading habits step by step and level by level through reading practices.

The sixth example is the *language centered procedure*. In this procedure, each step of reading instruction is centered with a different focus in language learning. The steps are arranged in this way to comply with the psychology of learning. The focuses of the series of steps move from language perception, language acquisition, language transformation, to language use. Particularly focused on language itself, it guides students to experience the whole process of language learning.

The seventh example is the *learning centered procedure*. This procedure is arranged with the focus on the process of learning. It takes the following three steps, namely learning independently, i.e. self-learning by individuals; learning with peers, i.e. learning in pairs, usually together with desk mates; and guided learning, i.e. learning in class with the guidance of the teacher. This three-step procedure for reading instruction of the Chinese language in

primary schools is raised by the author after years of reflections and observations in class. Table 1 provides details of this procedure.

Table 1. Three steps for a learning centered procedure

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| <p>Step 1: Learning independently</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read the whole text by oneself in class. Read aloud or silently, both are acceptable.2. Grasp the plot and main contents of the text.3. Annotate and comment on the content and language they appreciate.4. Underline or indicate the places they don't understand. <p>Step 2: Learning with peers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Share with peers, usually a desk mate, about the discoveries and problems in reading the text.2. Sharing questions and answers from one another.3. Discuss with peer anything from the text which interests both of them.4. Pose questions about aspects that are problematic in the text and share them with the class. <p>Step 3: Guided learning</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Discuss the key points, difficult points of the text in class under the guidance of the teacher.2. Analyse the structure, the layers of structure, and the relationships among different parts of the text.3. Examine typical ways of expressions used in the text, including typical textual structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure, lexical structure, etc. and learn to use them.4. Summarise language knowledge contained in the text. |
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It should be noted that the focus of the reading instruction procedure for students at different phases of schooling will be different. The following is an example.

The general procedure of reading instruction for students at Phase 1 of primary school can be as follows: When reading for the first time, the accuracy of reading and students' awareness of new characters are the focus. When reading for the second time, fluency is highlighted and students are expected to become more familiar with the new characters encountered. When reading for the third time, students are expected to grasp the thoughts and feelings contained in the text and they should consolidate the understanding of those newly learned characters. As the last step, students will be guided to practice the hand writing of those newly learned characters; accuracy remains the focus.

The general procedure of reading instruction for students in Phase 2 of primary school can be as follows: When reading for the first time, both accuracy and fluency of reading are required. Students should try to grasp the main ideas of the text through reading. When reading for the second time, students should try to identify the key points of the text and the emotions carried by the text. As the last step, extra reading and writing activities are arranged to encourage students to apply what has been learned in the different stages.

The general procedure of reading instruction for students in Phase 3 of primary school can be as follows: When reading for the first time, both the accuracy and fluency of reading are required and students should try to grasp the main ideas of the text through reading. When reading for the second time, students should try to understand the emotions conveyed by the text from the author's perspective. When reading for the third time, students are expected to recite the text from memory aloud and try to appreciate the text.

Changes to the pattern of reading instruction: from 'guide before learn' approach to more diversified approaches

Reading instruction in primary schools in China used to be dominated by 'guide before learn' approach. However, this is not the only option today. Besides the traditional 'guide before learn approach', the 'learning with guidance' approach and the 'dual subjects' approach are all possible choices in reading instruction in our primary schools currently.

Reading instruction in the 'guide before learn' approach stresses the teacher's leading role in class teaching. The teacher is responsible for asking questions, conducting activities, encouraging students to learn through experiencing, and organising exercises. Students are expected to complete learning tasks assigned by their teacher. There is a detailed plan for teachers, including the tasks for each step, and a time allocation for any task. It is the teaching pattern which is relatively traditional.

Reading instruction in the 'learning with guidance' approach stresses students' subjectivity. It can be summarised by the following four concepts: *students' self-learning before teachers' class teaching, learning determining teaching, more self-learning and less class teaching, and the effectiveness of teaching is measured by the outcome of learning*. In this approach, students are encouraged to raise questions, make choices of learning methods, do exercises, and learn through their experiences, while the teacher plays the role of a facilitator by providing context, guidance, and helping students to amplify their achievements in learning through supervision and making summaries.

Reading instruction in the 'dual subjects' approach considers both the teacher and students as subjects in reading instruction. In this approach, learning content and process are established through discussion between the teacher and the students on an equal footing. However, equality does not mean that the class has total freedom. The teacher still shoulders the responsibility of driving the whole process.

All the above-mentioned approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. In actual teaching practice it is not a question of adopting a good approach or giving up a bad one, but choosing an appropriate one to fit the contents of teaching and the students' grade level. For example, the 'learning with guidance' method is not as suited for students in Phase 1 as for older students in primary school. In ideal teaching practices, teachers should apply various patterns where necessary. For example, in teaching of the same piece of text, it is possible to adopt the 'learning with guidance pattern' for the task of recognising new Chinese characters,

the 'guide before learn approach' for reading tasks, and the 'dual subjects' pattern' for ability enhancement tasks. To sum it up, different patterns suit different tasks.

IDEAS FOR SUPPORTING CURRENT PRACTICES OF READING INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

The eighth curriculum reform since 2001 does not only aim to change the practices of reading instruction in class, but also the attitudes of teachers. In line with the above-mentioned development trends, the following principles of reading instruction are embraced in primary schools. Popular understandings about four pairs of key concepts are discussed below.

The principles of reading instruction

In the past, most principles applied in actual classes for reading instruction in primary schools in China did not include developments in learning theories and psychology. They tended to be merely a summarisation of teachers' own personal experiences. However, there are steps that should be followed in reading instruction, that derive from procedures underlying learning processes, as expounded in theories of learning psychology (Wang 2013: 1). The following principles are supported by both teaching experiences and theories related to learning and psychology (Wang 2010: 255).

Gist before details. A piece of text carries multiple aspects of details, such as wording, sentences, paragraphs, grammar, rhetoric, logic, literary talent, etc. Details are important, but it is not necessary to cover every detail in reading instruction. It is a teacher's understanding of the gist about the text that determines which details are of value of being discussed in class. Therefore, in reading instruction, teachers should always have the gist of the text in mind and try to achieve teaching targets through detailed reading activities.

Perception before comprehension. Perception is the direct reflection of objects in one's brain through one's sensory organs. Comprehension is a kind of thinking activity which gradually discovers innate characters and natural laws through recognising connections and relations among objects. The logic of 'perception before comprehension' in reading instruction is supported by reading psychology. Perception is the precondition and foundation for comprehension. Therefore, in reading instruction, sufficient time should be allowed for students' apperceiving the text and special attention should be paid to help students acquire general perception of the whole text individually.

Respect the principle of '*speaking first*', while reading and writing practices follow. It is common among students in their early years in school that their development in speaking the language is far more advanced than their development in written language. This unbalanced development in language acquisition is determined by a series of factors, such as the natural rule of language evolution, language environment in children's lives, education, etc. Seen through the aspect of language evolution, it is obvious that the development of the written form of a language is based on the development of colloquial language. Hence, in the process of language evolution, oral form comes into being first, while written form comes later. Examining the environment of children's early development, it is obvious that oral language is always present in their lives since the first day they enter into this world. Conscious or unconsciously, they have already made great progress in the acquisition of oral language even before they are first exposed to the written form of the language. Therefore, one of the major responsibilities of Chinese language teaching in primary schools is to help students make

significant progress in the acquisition of the written form of the language through sufficient opportunities to practice reading and writing, so as to help them to achieve balanced language development. Along with the advancement of pupils' mastery of the written form of the language, the quality of their oral Chinese will also be improved significantly.

Students' performance comes first while teacher's assistance comes second. Fundamentally, reading instruction is the process of knowledge acquisition and meaning construction by students under the guidance of the teacher's assistance. Hence, the students' subjective initiatives should be encouraged in the whole process. 'Lecturing' is no longer the teaching method favoured in Chinese language classes, while 'student centered education' and 'learning focused class teaching' is the future for reading instruction in primary schools in China. One of the popular practices in reading instruction is the introduction of the learning sheet, which is a collection of learning assistant materials, including requirements for lesson previewing, exercises, and extended learning materials.

Understanding four pairs of key concepts

'Follow the textbook' or 'use the textbook to teach'. For quite some time, teachers in China used to consider textbooks as something 'sacred'. They followed what was written in the book, and never thought of making any changes in their classes. Teachers were the 'slaves to the textbooks'. However, the eighth curriculum reform changed the mind of teachers. The textbook is no longer viewed as the beginning and the end. Teaching content is considered to be much more than just textbooks. Hence, the idea of 'use the textbook to teach' rather than 'follow the textbook' is welcomed nowadays.

What to teach: the content or the method of writing embedded in the text? In reading instruction, helping students to grasp the content of the text is important. However, although it might not be comprehensive enough, students may already have some understanding about the content even before class teaching. This is the reason why the content cannot be everything and definitely is not the most challenging part in reading instruction. Therefore, what's more important in reading instruction should be guiding students to explore the method of writing contained in the text. The slogan popular among teachers and researchers related to reading instruction in primary schools in China says: 'the story in the text is obvious to students; the main idea of the text is not challenging for students; while the way of expression is a secret to students'.

Teaching and learning as planned or as something generated in class. The traditional way of teaching strictly follows teaching plans prepared before class. This pattern pays attention to teachers' teaching role, while the other pattern concentrates on teaching and learning 'as something generated in class', respects students' interests, cares more about students' learning, and leaves sufficient room for adjustments in class to answer the needs of students. Obviously, the traditional pattern is too rigid to contribute to students' individualised development, while the 'generative pattern' provides flexibility and cares more about students' need. It is unwise to continue with the old fashioned way of teaching. However, replacing it by the 'generative pattern' is not the simple answer. Time consuming and easy to deviate from major learning tasks and teaching targets are the disadvantages of the 'generative pattern'. Therefore, how to take advantage of both patterns and take into account prescribed teaching targets and students' individualised development is the challenge for teachers.

Which is more important, in-class reading or extracurricular reading? Nowadays, both intensive reading in class and extensive reading out of class are regarded as intrinsic components of reading instruction in primary schools in China. Guided by the popular idea of building the foundation (of reading development) through intensive reading in class, and pursuing further development through extracurricular reading, currently, more and more attention has been paid to organising all kinds of reading activities out of classes and building relationships between in-class reading and extracurricular reading.

CONCLUSION

Through sixty-six years of development in reading instruction in primary schools in China, much has been discussed, and much has been changed. The recent Eighth Curriculum Reform has made the greatest impact and shapes the way forward. It is safe to say that there is a tradition of laying great store by fundamentals in reading instructions in primary schools in China and now much attention has been paid to diversified ways of delivery, students' active involvement, and comprehensive ability enhancement with fundamentals still in mind.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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