

A Survey of Undergraduate Chinese Students' Self-perceived Reading Ability in English

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Abstract

Reading is one of the indicators of how much a reader understands a language. Though reading is taught early in students' education, some still struggle to comprehend texts, especially if a language is a stranger. Reading is a skill that enhances intellectual and affective processes, including reasoning, inferences, empathy, and critical thinking. Thus, a lack of language familiarity to interact with the text can hinder reading comprehension. This article focuses on Chinese students' self-perceived reading ability that hinders reading comprehension. The aim is to answer the question; To what extent do Undergraduate Chinese students' of University X perceive their reading ability in English? This survey is significant because letting the students understand their reading ability helps the teacher understand what to focus on in the English course and provides the correct reading strategies to achieve the reading goal. One hundred ninety-nine students from one of the private universities participated in this study. Using a questionnaire survey to assess students' self-perceived reading ability supported by the semi-structured interview, this study found that although Chinese students employed good reading strategies, they still found their reading comprehension problematic because of the influence of their reading speed. Thus, this affects the reading goal and students' interest in reading.

Keywords: Barriers to reading, Chinese students reading ability, Reading comprehension, Self-reading ability

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Introduction

Reading is one of the many activities teachers integrate into teaching English as a foreign language. When teaching undergraduate Chinese students, the assumption is that reading is not a problem anymore. Contrary to that belief, however, reading is one of those challenges undergraduate students have encountered in learning English as a foreign language. Supposedly, reading has a minor part in teaching English as a foreign language in the English course, as the teaching focus was speaking. However, when providing a text so students could read and discuss afterward, it was found that five minutes of reading texts took students 20 minutes or so before discussions. Because of this issue, this project aims to understand Chinese undergraduate students' reading ability, one of the significant challenges they face at University X.

The first question that comes to mind is, what is reading? Why is it necessary to understand students reading abilities? When talking about reading, there are always players that come to mind, a reader and a text. When reading, there is always an interaction between these two elements (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). The purpose of reading is not only about recalling and understanding what is going on in the text but also about being entertained by what is happening in the text a reader reads (Kintsch, 2013; Nation, 2005). To comprehend a text, students must synthesize the relationship of the spelling pattern to the sound pattern of the written language (Cho et al., 2017) and acquire the vocabulary needed for higher text comprehension and appreciation of the text. According to Makau (1990), a student with good comprehension needs to possess the following abilities; s/he should have the ability to understand the information, should know the spirit of the message, and should have the ability to analyze and evaluate the meaning beyond the text (Goodman, 2019). Reading various texts can be challenging for foreign language learners like Chinese undergraduates.

This article focuses on identifying Chinese students' perception of their reading ability so teachers can know which reading domain they need to focus on to improve students' reading comprehension and provide pedagogical implications for reading. Adapting Macau's (1990) questionnaire survey, this paper answered the research question: To what extent do Undergraduate Chinese students of University X perceive their reading ability in English?

Literature Review

Understanding Reading and Reading Comprehension

Reading is an interactive process of inferring, knowing correct sounds, and comprehension (Catts, 2022; Kamhi & Catts, 2002). To use these skills, a reader must have good reading comprehension as a crucial element to understanding texts. A successful reader is determined by reading attitude, reading purpose, prior knowledge about the text (McNamara, 1996), textual structure, and vocabulary knowledge as the basis of how readers interact with the text (Yıldırım, 2010). The number of vocabulary readers determines the reading comprehension obtained and is a good indicator of a reader's fluency in decoding the meaning of the text (Oakhill et al., 2019). As the reading progresses, the amount of vocabulary helps the readers process the meaning, thus influencing reading comprehension (Fernandes et al., 2017; Kintsch, 2013). Students can develop reading comprehension with good reading practices (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

According to Dale (1965), one of the pioneers of reading, reading is divided into three levels:

1. The simple, uncritical reproduction and duplication of what has been said. The reading comprehension level we refer to as 'reading the lines' or literal comprehension.

2. At A higher level, drawing inferences from what is read or 'reading between the lines' requires critical thinking.

3. A third level involves evaluation and application, which requires vigorous and critical judgment. This reading is called "reading beyond the line" (As qtd in X. Zhang, 2021, p. 25).

A reader's comprehension of the texts improves as they read. As highlighted by Dale, one of the determinants of students' higher comprehension is their ability to read between and beyond the line, the second and third levels of reading. Students at the undergraduate level assume to be at the second or third level. This means that they have enough vocabulary knowledge to equip them in reading.

Comprehension is always regarded as the goal of reading. This involves decoding the texts through word recognition and is one of the aspects of reading ability. Although the speed of reading is not always the focus of the different studies, this component has something to do with the comprehension of texts because to decode the meaning, a reader needs to have good concentration and discrimination of the text (Silverman, 2021). Comprehension also relies on a reader's vocabulary knowledge; hence, readers' understanding of the text influences the reading speed. According to scholars (Goodman, 2007; Nation, 2005; Schreiber, 2003), a reader's accurate perception, sound recognition, word recognition, word discrimination, semantics, syntax, and linguistic processes and comprehension are foundations for compelling reading. Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz (2003) argued that working with different texts and textual structures, making predictions and inferences, setting goals, and using strategies enhance reading comprehension prior to the transfer of information in the reading environment during the reading process (Catts, 2022; Cain & Oakhill, 2006; Kamhi & Catts, 2005; Kintsch, 2013; Kintsch & Rawson, 2005). Text comprehension involves the three levels of mental representations: surface code, text-based, and situation models, in which a *surface code* is a verbatim memory of words or phrases and is less relevant to discourse processes (Mulder & Sanders, 2012). Text-based, however, is a representation of meanings of a text, comprised of textual propositions and their interconnections. It is relevant to discourse processes because it includes readers' recollection of relations between information in the text (Kintsch, 2013; McNamara & Kintsch, 1996). This could lead to reading fluency, where students become familiar with new words they encounter in text. Therefore the more reading students do, the more familiar they are with the complex text, thus improving their comprehension. As Stenner (2022) emphasized, reading comprehension is "the best predictor of success in higher education" (p.71)

Reading Fluency and Vocabulary Comprehension

Reading fluency is a predictor of reading comprehension in which the amount of vocabulary from the texts increases their ability to interact with what they read. According to Fernandes et al. (2017), "Decoding contributes to developing the ability to read words efficiently, allowing the establishment of lexical knowledge. This latter ability directly determines text-reading fluency (Fernandes et al., 2017, p. 17)." According to Silverman, Speece, Haring, and Ritchey (2013), fluent readers can read words effortlessly and automatically as they decode and comprehend the text (As qtd in Silverman et al., 2021). Thus, fluency in reading has something to do with how much comprehension a reader knows (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005).

Consequently, vocabulary knowledge influences this understanding of the text and contributes to fluency in reading. As Vermeiren, Vandendaele, and Brysbaert's (2023) study indicated, vocabulary "correlated with general knowledge," precisely "reading comprehension,"

even for students whose first language is English (p. 1046), more so when English is a Foreign Language (EFL). Mol and Bus (2011) indicated that learners with good reading ability have greater vocabulary knowledge (As qtd in Van Der Kleij, Burgess, Ricketts, & Shapiro, 2022). Furthermore, Oakhill, Cain, and Elbro (2019) argued that good reading comprehension is an invaluable source of word knowledge because learners have accumulated vocabulary over time that equips the development of their reading fluency (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Brown, 2010). However, as readers are foreign language learners, reading is affected by students' familiarity or understanding of words and their comprehension of a particular language, such as English (Foorman et al., 2015; Van Der Kleij et al., 2022). This is why reading should always start with vocabulary knowledge, as this is one of the essential foundations of understanding a language. Thus, strong reading skills should be regarded as necessary "for the continuing education that rapidly changing technology and economic conditions demand" (Stenner, 2022, p. 71). Nation (2005) and Zano (2022) emphasized that vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension, especially for English as Foreign Language Learners (EFL). This is required for the English language and almost every subject the students study. Reading is one of the different abilities students need and is viewed as one of the essential foundations for English language learning. However, one of the problems encountered in teaching reading is that students need to comprehend what they read and have a considerably slower reading speed. Thus, to fully understand the quality of students' reading ability, the researcher, as the teacher, surveyed students' perceived reading ability.

Method

As the study focused on surveying the undergraduate Chinese students' perceived reading ability in English, the qualitative research design was used to collect and analyze the data. The researcher used purposive sampling as the intention was to help the English teacher to prepare the students for the English foundation course.

Participants

Two hundred students participated in this survey using the sampling technique mentioned above. They were first-year undergraduate Chinese students of the Academic Year 2021 studying an English foundation course at University X.

Instruments

To answer the research question posed in the study: *To what extent do the Chinese students' of University X perceive their reading ability in English?* The researcher used a questionnaire survey adapted from Macau (1990) to identify Chinese undergraduate students' self-perceived reading ability. Although this study is purely statistical, the survey result would be supported by an interview of the randomly chosen participants interviewed in groups. Therefore, the students were given two letters initially for anonymity.

The questionnaire survey has five domains: reading speed, reading comprehension, number of materials, concentration, and retention.

The reading speed domain hopes to understand students understanding of their own pace as one of the determinants of their reading ability.

Reading comprehension is to understand students' ability to comprehend the main idea and interpretations of the text, especially if these are implied, while the number of materials is for

knowing whether students can complete all required reading materials. This also includes identifying whether they are utilizing strategies helpful for reading.

Concentration, on the other hand, is about understanding the focus exerted by students when they read, as this has something to do with how much they can retain while reading.

As the researcher intends to know students' direct answers, three Likert scaling measurement was applied; 0= describes me almost never; 1= describes me sometimes; 2= describes me often or to a large degree. Using descriptive analysis, frequency, and percentage were used to analyze the data.

Research Procedures

The questionnaire survey was distributed to the students who participated in the study using Microsoft Teams. The students were given a week to return the questionnaire. After one week, more than 50% of the students returned the survey questionnaire. Thus, the students who did not return the survey were given another week to complete and return it. After two weeks, the survey was collected, and 199 returned. These 199 surveys were the basis of the analysis. Using Microsoft Excel, the surveys were calculated using descriptive analysis. The frequency and percentage were analyzed to answer the research questions. When the analysis result was completed, the researcher set for an interview using purposive sampling. The respondents for the interview were chosen from the Wednesday English foundation class. The interviews aimed to clarify some domains based on the students' explanations and support the survey findings.

The presentation of the findings starts with the statistical result, and then excerpts from the interviews are provided to support the findings.

Results

The findings answered the research question; *to what extent do the Chinese students of University X perceive their reading ability in English?* are presented and discussed based on each domain of the reading.

The first domain is 'reading speed.'

Table 1. *Reading speed*

No.	Item	0	1	2
1	I am a slow reader compared to other students.	37 18.5%	21 10.5%	141 71%

As illustrated in the table, out of 199 Chinese students who participated in the survey, 71% described their reading ability as *slow*. They described themselves 'often or to a large degree.' While there were only 18.5% chose 'describes me almost never' or perceived themselves as *fast readers*, while 10.5 % indicated that the statement 'describes me sometimes.' The result means that students perceive reading speed as one barrier contributing to their lack of interest in reading. According to them, they read slowly because 'they had difficulty understanding the meaning of words, 'especially words they had not encountered before.

According to **Ch**, "*There is much vocabulary that I did not know in the text. So, I have to translate that word in my language first, then translate in English and find the meaning on my phone*". While **Ru** added, "*The reading text sometimes is boring, and the words look like not interesting, so I have to look for examples in pictures to understand them .*" Based on the findings supported by the students' interview, lacking vocabulary exposure has contributed to students' slow

reading speed (Abdelrahman, & Bsharah, 2014). One thing which was quite interesting was knowing what plays a part in this slowness. As these students indicated, their strategy of knowing the meaning requires cognitive processing ability, such as translating the word into the first language and then the target language or finding images to understand the words. Thus, these different processes explain why their reading speed was relatively slow.

The second domain is 'reading comprehension.'

Table 2. *Reading Comprehension*

No.	Item	0	1	2
2	I have difficulty finding the main idea when I read.	43 21.5%	15 7.5%	133 66.8%
3	I often need to read materials several times before I understand them.	27 13.6%	39 19.8%	139 70%
4	I have difficulty interpreting the meaning of words I read.	44 22%	16 8%	134 67.3%
5	I have trouble 'reading between the lines for implied meaning.	45 22.6%	20 10.1%	133 66.8%

When it comes to reading comprehension, 21.5% of the students indicated that they have 'no difficulty in finding the main idea' of the text, 13.6% do not need to read the materials several times, 22% have a problem interpreting the meaning of words and 22.6% have no problem 'reading between the lines .' However, as indicated, sometimes 7.5% of the participants 'have difficulty finding the main idea' in the text, 19.8% have difficulty understanding what they have read, which was the reason why they had to read the materials or text many times, 8% still encountered difficulty in interpreting the meaning of words in reading materials. In comparison, 10.1% have problems reading between the lines. However, the rest of the 70% found that **they have difficulty in reading comprehension**. For example, 66.8% found it 'difficult to find the main idea in the text,' 70% 'needed to read materials several times,' 67.3% still had 'difficulty interpreting the meaning of words, and 66.8 % had trouble 'reading between the lines .'Based on this finding, students in University X need help with reading. Thus, they need to read more to be familiar with different words in the English language, as lack of familiarization and exposure to the English language influence Chinese students' difficulty in reading.

If out of 199 students, only 10% indicated that they have no problems understanding what they read in English, there is a big problem here. Reading is central to students learning English subjects and other subjects taught in English. If 70% of students' 199 students indicated difficulty in reading comprehension, this situation would affect students' performance in English and other subjects.

According to the interviewed students, reading textbooks is acceptable if they are given enough time to read at home. If given only a few minutes, answering questions immediately is difficult.

According to **Rn**, "I can understand what I read if I have time to read the passage many times, and I can find the meaning on my phone. However, nevertheless, if teachers told me to read for 15 minutes, I would have difficulty understanding what I read. Also, I need my teacher to explain to me in Chinese to understand easily."

The third domain is about the 'number of materials.'

Table 3. *Number of Materials*

No.	Item	0	1	2
6	I cannot read all the required readings (I need more time).	54 27.1%	21 10.6%	124 62.3%
7	I cannot keep up with supplementary readings.	42 21.1%	21 10.6%	136 68.3%
8	I skim before reading for detail.	35 17.6%	67 33.7%	97 48.7%

Several reading materials implied the number of materials the students can read as suggested by a teacher. As shown in the table, more than 20% of the participants have 'no difficulty' reading the required readings as indicated in Item Six, 27.1% have 'no difficulty reading all the required readings,' and in Item Seven, 21.7% keep up with supplementary readings. However, only 17.6 % used 'skimming' as a good reading strategy before reading (as illustrated in Item eight). The survey indicated that the 'reading speed' and 'reading comprehension' have shown why students have difficulty completing or reading the assigned reading materials because, as illustrated, 62.3% and 68.3 % could not keep up the reading and the supplementary materials, respectively. Interestingly, 48.7% indicated that they used a good reading strategy, such as skimming the contents of the text before reading for detail. The indication is that some students know how to use one of the excellent reading strategies, but they need help comprehending some words. Hence, this influences their reading speed.

Xu stated, *"I skimmed the reading text before I read, hoping to get the main idea immediately. But, I feel frustrated sometimes because as I skimmed once, I stuck to words I could not understand. However, I could not ignore it. So I have to check the meaning on my phone immediately. So, sometimes the purpose of skimming becomes useless as I could not carry on fast enough. So, instead, I tend to go back from the beginning again."*

Again, this boils down to the problem of vocabulary comprehension because even if students skimmed the text, it becomes a reading barrier once they encounter complex vocabulary.

The following domain presented is about 'concentration.'

Table 4. *Concentration*

No.	Item	0	1	2
9	I often can only focus if I am very interested in the material.	71 35.7%	104 52.2%	24 12.1%
10	My eyes often see the words, but my mind is somewhere else.	78 39.2%	108 51.3%	13 6.5%
11	I am easily distracted by my thoughts while reading.	66 33.2%	108 54.3%	25 12.5%
12	I am easily distracted by things going on around me.	57 28.6%	125 62.8%	17 8.6%

Interestingly, most participants indicated that their reading concentrations were good. Based on the findings, 35.7% focused on materials they read, 39.2 % concentrated on their reading and were not easily disturbed by their thoughts, and 28.6% were not easily distracted by what was happening around them. Meaning more than 30% of the participants have good concentration while reading. However, as indicated, out of 199 students, only about 10% have difficulty with concentration, as 55.15% implied that they have difficulty sometimes. Therefore, a lack of vocabulary understanding contributes to Chinese students' reading comprehension and influences their reading speed.

The last domain is 'retention.'

Table 5. *Retention*

No.	Item	0	1	2
13	I forget much of what I read soon afterward	67 33.7%	117 58.8%	15 7.5%
14	I make notes while reading.	19 9.5%	99 49.7%	81 40.8%
15	I highlight or underline while reading.	10 5%	84 42.2%	105 52.8%

Retention is the last component to understanding how Chinese students perceive their reading ability. Based on the findings, only 33.7% perceived they had no problem retaining the information after reading. In comparison, 7.5% have implied that they forget the information after reading, and 58.8% have indicated that they have sometimes forgotten what they have read. As for Items 14 and 15, almost 50% of the students implied that they have effective reading strategies as they made notes while reading and highlighted or underlined words. Interestingly, about 50% of the participants used the strategies. Therefore, items 8, 14, and 15 are about good reading strategies the students use. Therefore, reading strategies are different from why Chinese students need help with reading or are slow readers.

Discussion

This article focuses on understanding University X Chinese students' self-perceived reading ability. Using the questionnaire survey, the findings illustrated that in the first component, 'reading speed,' students indicated a problem with their reading speed as most students are slow readers and very few are good readers. The outcome of this study is supported by Abdelrahman and Bsharah's (2014) argumentation, where they indicated that reading speed tends to project how much information a reader can know that can influence their retention of words (Brown, 2010). Nevertheless, this does not mean a fast reader acquires more information than a slow reader. A good reader typically knows where to focus and what information needs to be internalized. Also, no matter how fast a student can be, there is still a tendency for a reader to experience difficulty retaining all information he/she reads (Catts et al., 2016). This is why competent readers know when to speed up and slow down when they read (Duke & Pearson, 2002). For first-year Chinese students of University X, this indicated that their perceived reading ability could be better even if they use good reading strategies.

Reading comprehension involves readers understanding words or the language they acquired and how they organized them meaningfully (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In this study, Chinese students' self-perceived reading comprehension tends to be varied. The reason depends on the reading materials they read. For example, poor comprehension tends to be influenced by poor vocabulary knowledge in English or to retain the information a reader needs (Brown, 2010). On the other hand, good comprehension involves selecting and understanding necessary information and linking it together (Goodman, 2019). This is why a reader's background knowledge and vocabulary level influence comprehension (Vermeiren, Vandendaele, & Brysbaert, 2023; Yildirim, 2010).

As for completing the reading materials, a few need help to complete their assigned reading and other supplementary materials. What was illustrated in the survey was that, although the majority indicated that they used some strategies in reading, for example, skimming or scanning, somehow their vocabulary comprehension influences their ability to complete what they read. According to Abdelrahman and Bsharah (2014) and Sutz and Weverka (2009), skimming for

information can expedite your reading time if you have many reading materials waiting (McNamara & Kintsch, 1996). This is because they only focus on important information they need to know. However, as students have stuck on the vocabulary themselves, this influences the reading speeds as they concentrate on the words. One of the reasons students read slowly is their need for language exposure (Anderson et al., 2010), which might influence their comprehension level.

Pedagogical Implication

Pedagogically, reading is needed to help Chinese undergraduate students improve their reading. Exposures to different text types are necessary as this is crucial to develop their vocabulary. As their main problem stems from their difficulty in understanding different vocabulary they hardly encountered, providing them with different reading text types for reading in the classroom and reading materials to bring home are among the suggestions to be implemented. To help Chinese undergraduate students reading ability develop, they should be encouraged to read more as the amount of input from the reading help them to improve their vocabulary comprehension. Thus, improve their reading skills which are “important for the continuing development of language and literacy skills” (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998 as qtd in Van Der Kleij et al., 2022, p. 515)

Conclusion

This paper aims to identify Chinese students' self-perceived reading ability that hinders reading comprehension. The findings indicated there is a need for an implementation for teaching reading. Reading is an interaction between texts and readers, and perceives as an 'active skill.' Helping Chinese students to comprehend what they read means allowing them to extract the correct information from the text. Therefore, students need help understanding words where they can have sufficient time to read, whether in the classroom or at home. As students tend to be equipped with good reading strategies, thus all they need is a course to develop their vocabulary comprehension and improve their reading speed. As teachers know students' reading ability, providing students with suitable materials and ways to employ the right reading strategies would lead to achieving the reading goal and improving the different reading domains that impede their vocabulary comprehension.

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