

The Use of Newspaper Articles to Enhance the Reading Proficiency of Chinese EFL Learners

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Liu, Zhen & Zhang, Xiaohong & Kang, Seung-Man. "The Use of Newspaper Articles to Enhance the Reading Proficiency of Chinese EFL Learners." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 48.2 (2022): 147-163. Reading plays a critical role in improving the language proficiency of EFL learners. Indispensable to this end are appropriate reading materials for them to use in their reading class or on their own. This paper attempts to investigate the pedagogical effects of using newspaper articles as an authentic reading material. For our discussion, we take a survey among 65 Chinese EFL college students to find out their attitude towards news reading materials, strategies for reading, and enhancement in reading comprehension. The findings of the survey reveal that the teaching of these reading materials via explicit instruction exerts positive effects on the three objectives as follows. First, the paired-sample *t*-test of the pre-Q and the post-Q shows that teaching English newspaper materials improves the students' attitude towards English reading. Second, this test also shows that the students have greatly improved their reading strategies for reading. Third, the results of the paired-sample *t*-test and the independent *t*-test indicate that there is significant improvement in reading comprehension after explicit instruction. (Chungbuk National University)

Key Words: attitude, comprehensible input, newspaper article, reading strategy, reading comprehension

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I. Introduction

Reading can be said to be the most important language skill especially when it is related to the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Carrell, 1989). Reading has traditionally been the skill most emphasized in EFL teaching and learning. Krashen (1993) also notes that reading helps us to become good readers and spellers and to develop a good writing style, adequate vocabularies, and advanced grammar.

Reading has a host of advantages, but how to improve learners' reading proficiency is a main issue that many researchers are addressing in language teaching and learning. As a mode of reading, extensive reading, in particular, plays an important role in improving students' reading ability and other language abilities (Bell, 1998; Elley, 1991; Eskey, 1986; Nuttall, 2002). However, the importance of extensive reading has usually been neglected in Chinese EFL instruction. In Chinese EFL settings, special attention has traditionally been paid to intensive reading, in which each sentence, in isolation, is contrived for explicit instruction and analyzed in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, etc. It follows that intensive reading is far from being authentic in meaning and discourse.

Many studies prove that authentic reading materials promote the learner's motivation, attitude, and learning ability. Accordingly, English newspaper articles, as an authentic material, have been regarded as an effective way to improve learners' reading ability (Daly, 2004; Dheram & Rani, 2003; Kitao, 1996; Park, 2011; Rajaretnam, 2002). Some researchers have explored using news articles in EFL classrooms (Hamuddin, 2015; Poudel, 2017). Researchers have also focused on the importance and techniques of using English newspapers as well as various activities in the classroom (Radhika & Rajeswari, 2012). Overall, they have come to the conclusion that using newspapers in the classroom can bring a host of benefits to enhancing the learner's reading comprehension.

Based on the foregoing, this paper delves into some properties of reading and examines how Chinese EFL learners' reading proficiency is enhanced via teaching

English newspaper articles. For our discussion, we have conducted a survey among 65 Chinese EFL learners, who are all non-English major students at a university in China. For the survey, we have divided them into two groups, an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG). They were asked to answer a questionnaire and take a reading comprehension test before and after an instruction period of 16 weeks. The results of the survey reveal that the students' attitude, reading strategies, and reading ability have significantly improved via the explicit teaching of the selected reading materials.

II. Theoretical Considerations and Literature Review

2.1 Input Hypothesis

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis is a comparatively comprehensive theory in the field of second language acquisition (SLA hereafter). The hypothesis claims that the natural progression of learning occurs when learners comprehend input that contains structures beyond their current level of expertise and acquire language only one way--by getting messages or receiving comprehensible input. 'Comprehensible input' here is represented as Krashen's famous 'i+1' formula, in which 'i' refers to the learner's current level of a second language. It follows that 'i+1' refers to the very next stage in the learner's language development with the natural order, and '1' means the gap between the current level and the next stage.

Cook (1989) points out that the input should be neither too difficult nor too easy. This means that the language material should be "a little bit beyond" the learner's current level. If we use the material that is too difficult to understand, the learner will feel frustrated, and it will hurt their self-confidence. On the other hand, if the material is too simple, there will not be much room for improvement for the learner. In a word, language acquisition can be said to readily occur if and only if the

learner understands the input of $i+1$.

Krashen (1985) believes that language input is the first process in language acquisition, and his ideas have exerted a great influence on SLA and language teaching pedagogy. In general, Krashen's (1985) five hypotheses, including the Input Hypothesis, provide teachers with huge insight into the process of language teaching and learning.¹ The Input Hypothesis of our concern in this paper holds that a sufficient quantity of comprehensible language input is the key to language acquisition, which is often given in the form of listening and/or reading of a target language. In an EFL educational setting, therefore, teachers are strongly required to provide learners with more suitable listening and reading materials.

2.2 The Role of News Materials in Language Learning

Research shows that English news materials, as authentic culture-based materials, have been profitable for English language teaching (Antepara, 2003; Berardo, 2006; Bermejo, 2000). They are observed to have the characteristics of news in general, such as authenticity, accuracy, timeliness, etc., so that the news content that they report will truly reflect local customs, social circumstances, political events, economic conditions, etc., of the target culture. Therefore, students can understand and learn the cultural as well as linguistic background knowledge of the countries and regions reflected in those news materials (Berber, 1997; Poudel, 2017). This background knowledge, in turn, can enable students to better understand language and culture, which are often treated as two sides of a unified coin. English news materials are usually characterized as authentic in language use, and their constructions are thorough and logical. By being authentic here, it means that they are not created or edited for use in language classes, but they are produced by real message senders for real message recipients, conveying real messages (Benson & Voller, 1997; Porter &

¹ The other four hypotheses are the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and the Natural Order Hypothesis.

Roberts, 1981). It follows that they are highly suitable for students to practice their essay composition and speaking as well, which is authentic, not contrived, in nature. Along these lines, many researchers have focused on how to utilize news materials in English classes (Kitao, 1996), more specifically, on the four language skills (Aiex, 2000; Gebhard, 2006; Nunan, 1999; Radhika & Rajeswari, 2012).

2.3 The Effects of News Materials in Language Learning

News materials are an excellent resource for EFL students' language learning, and they may benefit a lot from reading news materials if they are of an appropriate level to the learners' language proficiency, which amounts to an *i+1* level in the sense of Krashen (1985, 1993). Kitao (1996) states that newspaper articles can be used effectively in language instruction, but students must first become familiar with their features to utilize them to their fullest potential. Rajaretnam (2002) also notes the effects of news materials by saying that they can expand students' knowledge schema and strengthen their reading skills.

Dycus (1996) integrates newspaper articles into jigsaw activities, and he finds that students feel more interested in doing these activities than simply reading and discussing the topics of the articles. Newspaper articles can also be used to make students proactive and willing to accept the challenges of reading newspapers by building and increasing vocabularies in them and getting their gist (Daly, 2004; Wijayanti, 2020). Antepara (2003) suggests that news stories provide a wealth of teaching materials to the ESL classroom, and the use of 5 Ws of journalism improves both intensive and extensive reading skills by helping the students focus on specific information in a coherent way. Finally, Kumsorn (2014) argues that an English newspaper is beneficial for English teaching and learning as it contains a variety of language usages, such as problems and solutions, causes and effects, and facts and evidence, that could be used as teaching materials to improve students' grammatical and writing skills.

III. Method

This qualitative and quantitative research attempts to examine and analyze how Chinese EFL learners can enhance their reading proficiency via reading authentic news materials in the class. As we conduct a survey among the students, we raise three research questions as follows.

1. What is their attitude towards the English reading class (Table 1)?
2. Do their reading strategies change after reading English news materials (Table 2)?
3. Do English news materials improve their reading comprehension (Tables 3 and 4)?

3.1 Subjects

A total of 65 subjects have participated in the survey. They are all second-year non-English major students of 42 males and 23 females of a four-year university in China, majoring in electronic information engineering as a homogeneous learning group. All of them are surveyed to have taken and successfully passed the College English Test (CET) Band 4.² It follows that they are presumed to be at the intermediate level of English proficiency based on the test in question. The students were divided into two groups, the experimental group (EG) of 33 and the control group (CG) of 32, and they were instructed by the same instructor.

3.2 Materials and Procedure

We have prepared a set of questionnaire with 17 items for the survey, which are

² The College English Test, better known as CET, is a national English as a foreign language (EFL) test in China. It tests the English proficiency of undergraduate and postgraduate students in China.

divided into two parts on the subjects' attitude towards their reading class (Part 1) and their strategies for reading news materials (Part 2). Note that all the items of the two parts were asked to both groups in the pre-questionnaire (pre-Q) and the post-questionnaire (post-Q).

We have also prepared a test battery of reading comprehension for evaluation before and after instruction, which is dubbed as a pre-test and a post-test in this paper, respectively. The experiment was conducted over the course of the whole semester of 16 weeks, taking three steps as follows. In Step 1, the two groups of students, EG and CG, were asked to answer the pre-Q and take the pre-test before the explicit pedagogical intervention. They were required to complete the questionnaire within 25 minutes. Then, all the students took a reading test, the reading passages of which were drawn from what we call CET-4 question banks, which are generally considered to be highly reliable and valid in terms of difficulty levels. The pre-test was administered to both groups to constitute a basis with which the post-test results are compared for the evaluation of the explicit reading instruction of news materials. In Step 2, the two groups were given reading instruction; the CG were instructed with conventional reading materials, which generally cover the topics and issues of students' interest within the reach of their vocabulary, and the EG were taught with news materials, which are authentic in nature and cover a variety of topics and issues of their interest.

Now explicit instruction was implemented exclusively to the EG for 40 minutes a week for 16 weeks, utilizing authentic news materials as follows. Firstly, we have chosen the two internationally-renowned news service networks, CGTN and CNN, to excerpt the news materials considered authentic in content and expression.³ We have started from the news materials that matched the students' current level of language proficiency and gradually increased the level of difficulty, which amounts to 'i+1' in the sense of Krashen (1985, 1993). As for the content of the materials, it mainly focused on sports, entertainment, tourism, overseas studies, and current affairs news.

³ CGTN: China Global Television Network, CNN: Cable News Network

All of these topics are seen to cover international as well as domestic affairs so that the subjects might be familiar with them via their textbook knowledge and world knowledge. Furthermore, we chose some different news reports on the same event so that the subjects could find any inherent bias slanted to one another.

Secondly, the teacher's instruction on the reading materials was implemented, using PowerPoint, in the form of lecture that included the content and background of the given news materials. The content of the lecture breaks down as follows.

- Suggested steps for reading English newspapers
- The structure and language features of English news reports
- The functions and types of headlines
- Commonly-used news-related lexis (abbreviations, acronyms, clippings, etc.)
- The background knowledge of the related newspaper materials

The lecture was delivered by demonstrating the technique of skimming, scanning, *wh*-word questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, and so on.

Thirdly, we have divided the EG of 33 into 6 sub-groups for group presentation about a given topic or event. Each sub-group were given the same or different topic so that they could prepare their own presentation notes by collecting relevant information and pictures, brainstorming on them, and simulating a comprehensive scenario. After each group's presentation, the instructor provided them with constructive feedback in relation to the points instructed above.

Finally, in Step 3, the subjects were asked to answer the post-Q and to take the post-test after 16 weeks' pedagogical intervention. The post-Q was asked to the CG and the EG to see if there is any change in their attitude towards the conventional reading class to the former and the news reading class to the latter. Then, we administered the post-test equally to the two groups to determine whether there is any improvement in their reading comprehension. Note that the reading passages for the post-test were also drawn from the CET-4 question banks for the same reason

mentioned above.

3.3 Instrument and Data Analysis

Each of the 17 items in the questionnaire, as shown in the appendix, was answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (uncertain), 2 (disagree), and 1 (strongly disagree) for the pre-Q and the post-Q. The pre-test and the post-test of reading comprehension all consist of 5 reading passages, each of which is accompanied by 4 questions, totaling 20 in all. Data from the questionnaire and the test administered in two stages were collected and analyzed through SPSS 26.0. The data processing was divided into two steps as follows. In Step 1, it was examined whether there was a significant difference in students' reading efficiency after explicit instruction to the EG, for which a method of paired-sample *t*-test was used. In Step 2, we examined a difference in the reading proficiency of the CG and EG by employing a method of independent-sample *t*-test of the pre-test and the post-test.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 Attitude Towards English Reading Class

Table 1 clearly shows that the average mean scores of both groups' attitude towards the reading class in the post-Q are higher than in the pre-Q: 3.043 versus 2.941 for the CG and 3.295 versus 2.940 for the EG. Then, the results of the *t*-test indicate that the differences in the mean scores between the pre-Q and the post-Q are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), especially for the EG (.039), as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Attitude Towards English Reading Class (N=65)

Items	Group	Pre-Q		Post-Q		<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
1	EG	2.939	1.116	3.575	.830	-5.230	.000*
	CG	2.781	.870	3.156	.884	-4.313	.000*
2	EG	3.060	.788	3.545	.665	-5.488	.000*
	CG	2.875	.707	3.031	.740	-2.396	.023*
3	EG	2.969	.729	3.636	.549	-5.933	.000*
	CG	2.938	.647	3.094	.660	-2.395	.022*
4	EG	3.281	.772	3.500	.762	-2.946	.006*
	CG	3.250	.718	3.469	.671	-2.946	.006*
5	EG	3.303	.134	2.848	.098	3.464	.002*
	CG	3.688	.644	3.656	.602	.329	.745
6	EG	2.843	.628	3.031	.647	-2.252	.032*
	CG	2.781	.608	2.875	.660	-1.359	.184
7	EG	2.283	1.192	3.114	.986	-3.136	.003*
	CG	2.250	.6472	2.469	.718	-2.946	.006*
8	EG	2.313	.645	3.171	.945	-2.353	.000*
	CG	2.343	.602	2.531	.671	-2.675	.012*
9	EG	3.531	.761	3.125	.659	3.455	.002*
	CG	3.500	.7184	3.188	.592	2.743	0.10
10	EG	2.909	.678	3.090	.631	-2.667	.012*
	CG	3.031	.647	3.000	.622	.329	.745
Average in Total	EG	2.940	.401	3.295	.260	-2.410	.039*
	CG	2.941	.452	3.043	.364	-1.707	.122

* $p < 0.05$

This means that, through the teaching of English news materials, the subjects have increased their interests relatively in the reading class and have some new insights into the reading skills. Conclusively, we can say that the teaching of English news materials exerts a positive influence on the students' motivation and attitude towards reading. However, it is worth noting that non-significant mean scores of the CG for items 5, 6, 9, and 10 reveal that most students of this group think that they are not a good reader; they are not seen to be fully motivated to take the class, simply taking it as a mandatory course.

The EG deserve a more careful attention to their attitude. For the EG, the data all show a significant increase in each item, indicating that English news materials have increased their interest in reading English. We attribute this to the fact that the materials are highly authentic in expression, diversified in content, topics, and issues, and customized to the subjects' interests and reading proficiency. Item 10 for the EG, however, exhibits a slight increase in their attitude, which is not so significant, compared with the other items. We infer that this is due to their busy course schedule, not due to their lack of interest in reading itself.

4.2 Reading Strategies in English Reading Class

Similarly, the data of the EG show that the average mean scores of the post-Q (3.469) are higher than those of the pre-Q (2.737), as illustrated in Table 2. Items 11-16 are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This means that, through studying English news materials, the students have greatly improved their reading strategies. It is assumed that they have improved such strategies by learning how to use background knowledge, scanning, skimming, and other strategies, which were included in Step 2 during explicit instruction consistently throughout the semester.

Table 2. Reading Strategies in English Reading (N=65)

Items	Group	Pre-Q		Post-Q		<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
11	EG	2.575	.663	3.273	.574	-4.946	.000*
	CG	2.593	.756	2.750	.718	-1.539	.134
12	EG	2.063	.982	3.170	.941	-5.293	.000*
	CG	2.218	.706	2.312	.693	-1.791	.083
13	EG	2.894	1.122	3.751	.733	-4.002	.000*
	CG	2.594	.875	2.719	.851	-2.104	.044*
14	EG	2.727	.574	3.273	.574	-4.157	.000*
	CG	2.781	.906	2.875	.833	-1.791	.083
15	EG	2.697	.637	3.363	.548	-4.927	.000*
	CG	2.687	.738	2.750	.762	-1.438	.161

16	EG	2.972	.943	3.785	.873	-4.057	.000*
	CG	2.844	.677	2.938	.669	-1.359	.184
17	EG	3.253	1.022	3.677	.832	-1.896	.066
	CG	3.250	.803	3.375	.751	-1.679	.103
Average in Total	EG	2.737	.371	3.469	.258	-8.632	.000*
	CG	2.758	.286	2.783	.304	-1.544	.173

* $p < 0.05$

On the other hand, the data of the CG reveal that the students' reading strategies have not significantly changed from the pre-Q (2.783) to the post-Q (2.758), ending up with a slight increase (.003) compared with those of the EG (.732). Meanwhile, it is noticeable that item 17 exhibits a slight difference, no statistical significance ($p > 0.05$) in both the EG (.066) and the CG (.103). This implies that the students have already expressed an interest in English news materials before taking this course, so they are more likely to accept the teaching and learning methods associated with the materials.

4.3 Reading Comprehension Ability

As we mentioned above, the pre-test and the post-test of the reading passages from CET-4 were administered to test whether the students had significantly improved in English reading comprehension, which was measured in terms of test scores. The test results of the CG and the EG are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Scores of Reading Comprehension⁴

Group	No	Pre-Test		Post-Test		<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
EG	33	67.969	6.775	70.121	8.146	-3.604	.001*
CG	32	67.937	6.652	68.250	6.862	-1.667	.106

* $p < 0.05$

⁴ Note in this table that the mean scores are upon 100%.

From Table 3, it can be seen that both groups have improved in reading comprehension in the post-test after 16 weeks' instruction. However, the two groups differ in the degree of improvement. That is, the EG, as shown in the table, exhibit a much sharper increase than the CG in their reading capacity: 2.152 for the EG versus .313 for the CG. The results of the *t*-test also indicate that the EG (sig=.001) have improved more significantly ($p < 0.05$) than the CG (sig=.106).

Now let us turn to the independent sample *t*-test of the two groups, the results of which are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Independent Sample *t*-Test

EG/CG	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Pre-Test	1.972	.148	.289	.161
Post-Test	12.592	.000*	1.803	.143

* $p < 0.05$

As shown in the table above, the *t*-value between the EG and the CG is 1.972, and the significance is .148 in the pre-test. The independent sample *t*-test shows that there is no significant difference between the two groups before the instruction. This amounts to saying that the EG and the CG were of an equivalent level before the experiment. In the post-test, however, the EG and the CG manifest a huge difference, .000 versus .148, respectively, in which the former show statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), whereas the latter do not ($p > 0.05$). It can be concluded, therefore, that the students of the EG have improved in reading comprehension much more significantly than those of the CG via explicit instruction.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the effects of the teaching of English

newspaper materials on the reading proficiency of Chinese EFL learners, centering around the students' attitude, reading strategies, and improvement in reading comprehension. For this purpose, we have taken a survey among 65 Chinese second-year non-English major college students. For the experiment, we have divided them into the EG of 33 and the CG of 32 and provided the EG with explicit instruction on English news materials for 16 weeks. The findings of the survey reveal that the teaching of the materials in question has a significant effect on the three research objectives posed above as follows.

Firstly, the paired-sample *t*-test of the pre-Q and the post-Q shows that teaching English newspaper materials improves the students' attitude towards English reading. This indicates that the students tend to have a positive attitude toward learning English via news materials. Secondly, the paired-sample *t*-test of the pre-Q and the post-Q also demonstrates that, through studying English news materials, the EG have greatly improved their reading strategies compared with the CG. This indicates that the EG are more confident in reading English news materials than other materials. Thirdly, the results of the paired-sample *t*-test of the pre-test and the post-test indicate that the EG experience a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension after the instruction, and the independent *t*-test results indicate that the difference between the EG and the CG is statistically significant after 16 weeks' explicit instruction. This means that the utilization of English news materials in the classroom can obviously improve the reading proficiency of Chinese EFL students.

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Appendix

Instructions: This questionnaire aims to find out your understanding of English news materials and the self-assessment of your reading ability. The results are for research purposes only. Please answer the following questions according to the five scales below.

Scales: 5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-uncertain, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree

1. I am very interested in learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I like the current English curriculum.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I'm very satisfied with the teacher's teaching model.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I think it's important to learn English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I take English reading classes just for the sake of the course.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I think I have a good grasp of English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
7. When I read, I can look up the information I need quickly.	1	2	3	4	5
8. When I read in English, I am willing to take the initiative and devote myself to reading.	1	2	3	4	5
9. English reading is a burden to me.	1	2	3	4	5

10. I have a fixed time to do English reading every week.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often read English news.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know the characteristics of English news.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I take notes when I read English news.	1	2	3	4	5
14. When I read English news, I make use of relevant background knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I know how to guess the meaning of new words when I come across them in reading English news.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I can read popular articles in English news and understand their main ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Compared with other English reading materials, I prefer to choose English news.	1	2	3	4	5

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