

Review

Difficulties in Teaching Chinese Reading to International Students and Corresponding Pedagogical Suggestions

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Abstract: This review paper aims to explore the multifaceted difficulties encountered in teaching Chinese reading to international students and to propose corresponding pedagogical suggestions. Thereby Chinese reading, with its unique script. Complex grammatical structure. And cultural nuances, presents considerable challenges for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and these difficulties span linguistic. And cognitive. And affective domains; impeding reading comprehension and fluency. The paper synthesizes existing research on the linguistic challenges, including character recognition, hence vocabulary acquisition. And grammatical understanding, as well as the cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension, such as inference-making and schema activation. Furthermore, the review addresses the affective factors that influence reading motivation and engagement, thereby such as cultural background and learning styles. By examining these challenges, and the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the obstacles faced by international students learning to read Chinese. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes a range of pedagogical suggestions to enhance reading instruction, including the use of technology. The integration of authentic materials. And the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies. These suggestions aim to address the specific needs of diverse learners and to promote successful reading development in Chinese.

Keywords: Chinese reading; International students; Pedagogical challenges; Reading comprehension; Character recognition; Vocabulary acquisition; Differentiated instruction

1. Introduction

1.1. Significance of Chinese Reading Proficiency

In recent years. International interest in learning Chinese has grown rapidly, with students coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Among the four language skills. Reading proficiency plays a pivotal role, as it enables learners to engage with academic texts, participate in discussions. And navigate professional and social contexts effectively; strong reading skills allow learners to decode complex characters, comprehend nuanced meanings. And develop critical thinking, all of which are crucial for academic success. Beyond academics, reading proficiency supports daily communication, cross-cultural understanding, and the ability to access information efficiently in a rapidly globalizing world [1].

1.2. Overview of the Challenges

Despite its importance, learning to read Chinese presents international students with a variety of challenges, thereby linguistically, the logographic writing system. Tonal pronunciation, thereby and unique grammatical structures differ significantly from many alphabetic languages; this creating obstacles in character recognition, vocabulary acquisition, and sentence comprehension [2]. And many students struggle with visually similar characters, polysemous words, hence and context-dependent meanings. And this can

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slow reading progress, thereby cognitively, memorizing thousands of characters and processing their forms and meanings imposes a heavy mental load [3]. Affective factors. Including reading anxiety, cultural unfamiliarity. And fluctuating motivation; further complicate the learning process. These linguistic, cognitive. And affective factors interact to shape reading outcomes. Hence influencing not only academic performance but also learners' confidence, hence engagement, hence and willingness to persist. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing pedagogical strategies that can effectively support international students in achieving Chinese reading proficiency [4].

2. Historical Overview of Chinese Reading Instruction

2.1. Traditional Approaches

Traditional Chinese reading instruction has historically placed a strong emphasis on rote memorization, repetition, thereby and accuracy in reproduction, hence students typically spent long hours reciting classical texts and copying characters. Meticulously practicing stroke order and structural components, often without fully understanding the underlying meaning [5], and this approach was rooted in the Confucian educational tradition. This valued memorization and precise replication of canonical texts as a measure of discipline, hence thereby intellectual rigor. And moral cultivation. Character acquisition relied heavily on repetitive practice, and with many sessions devoted solely to the mechanical reproduction of forms. While this method promoted familiarity with the written form and reinforced long-term retention of character shapes, thereby it often constrained learners' ability to engage with meaning. Infer context. Or develop reading fluency, and in particular, students frequently struggled to transfer memorized characters into functional reading skills, limiting comprehension of new texts [6].

The teacher's role in traditional instruction was primarily as an authority figure, hence directing repetition and monitoring accuracy rather than facilitating critical thinking or independent analysis [7], thereby assessment focused largely on recitation and reproduction, thereby with success measured by accuracy and adherence to established norms rather than interpretive understanding or application; as a result. Thereby while traditional methods ensured a solid foundation in character recognition and stroke mastery, they often fell short in fostering comprehension, interpretive skills, hence or adaptive reading strategies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional and Modern Chinese Reading Instruction Methods.

Feature	Traditional Chinese Reading Instruction	Modern Chinese Reading Instruction
Primary Focus	Rote memorization and accurate reproduction	Comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement
Learning Method	Repetitive recitation and copying (repetitions often considered key)	Meaning-based reading, contextual understanding, and application
Character Acquisition	Meticulous practice of stroke order and structure	Emphasis on character components, radicals, and contextual learning
Role of the Teacher	Authority figure imparting knowledge through repetition	Facilitator guiding students towards independent understanding and critical analysis
Assessment	Recitation accuracy and character reproduction	Comprehension tests, discussions, writing assignments, and project-based learning

Feature	Traditional Chinese Reading Instruction	Modern Chinese Reading Instruction
Goal	Familiarity with the written form of texts	Deeper engagement with content and development of well-rounded literacy skills

2.2. Evolution of Modern Methodologies

Modern methodologies mark a significant departure from grammar-translation. Influenced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Reading instruction now emphasizes comprehension and practical application. Learners are encouraged to focus on understanding the message and purpose of texts rather than only analyzing grammar, reflecting a shift toward using reading as a tool for communication, and task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) further promotes authentic reading experiences. Where students engage with texts to complete meaningful tasks, thereby this fostering active reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and inference-making [8].

This evolution prioritizes developing skills applicable to real-world scenarios; learners practice reading in contexts such as interpreting news articles, thereby analyzing literary texts, or following instructional materials, hence this enhances comprehension and critical thinking, and compared to traditional methods. These approaches encourage learner autonomy and engagement, hence although students with limited character knowledge or grammar exposure may require additional scaffolding to succeed. Table 1 illustrates the contrast between traditional and modern instruction. Highlighting changes in focus. Methods. And assessment [9].

2.3. Impact of Technology

Technology has significantly reshaped Chinese reading instruction. Complementing modern pedagogical approaches, thereby online dictionaries, translation software, hence and digital texts with embedded audio provide immediate support for vocabulary acquisition, thereby pronunciation, hence and comprehension [10]. And interactive platforms enable collaborative reading and discussion, hence this allowing learners to annotate texts, participate in forums. And and engage in group comprehension tasks, hence this fostering motivation and active engagement.

The accessibility of diverse online resources expands the range of reading materials available to students, catering to different interests and proficiency levels. Authentic texts such as news articles, blogs. And literary excerpts enhance cultural understanding and contextual learning [11]. However, technology also presents challenges: an overabundance of resources can overwhelm learners, and and reliance on translation tools may hinder the development of autonomous reading skills. Effective integration requires careful pedagogical planning to ensure that technology enhances rather than replaces active reading strategies [12].

3. Linguistic Challenges in Chinese Reading

3.1. Character Recognition Difficulties

Character recognition remains one of the most formidable challenges for international students learning Chinese. Unlike alphabetic scripts, Chinese characters are logographic, often composed of multiple radicals and intricate strokes that require fine visual discrimination and motor precision. Learners must memorize thousands of distinct characters-typically around 2,000-3,000 for functional literacy-which imposes a substantial cognitive load. The complexity and sheer volume of characters make initial reading slow and error-prone, often causing frustration and reducing motivation.

Additional difficulties arise from visually similar characters and structural interference, thereby for example, "mǎ" (horse) and "mà" (scold) have similar forms but different

tones and meanings. This creating potential confusion for learners, and characters sharing radicals. Such as "qīn" (parent) and "qìng" (celebrate). Can also be visually misleading, increasing the likelihood of misreading, thereby stroke order further complicates recognition, as incorrect sequencing can produce poorly formed characters that are difficult to identify, hence mastery therefore requires systematic practice, repeated exposure. And strategies to reduce cognitive load, such as focusing on high-frequency characters or learning radicals and components to facilitate memorization and recognition.

3.2. Vocabulary Acquisition Issues

Vocabulary acquisition is another major obstacle in Chinese reading, primarily due to the language's limited phonetic transparency. Unlike alphabetic systems. Pronunciation cannot be reliably inferred from character forms, so learners must memorize both the form and pronunciation of each word individually, thereby many words are polysemous, with meanings heavily dependent on context, requiring learners to analyze surrounding text to select the correct interpretation.

Additional difficulties arise from visually similar characters. And homophones, hence and function words. For example, "lizi" (example/case) can mean either "example" in an academic context or "case" in a legal context, depending on the surrounding sentence. Thereby homophones such as "tóngyīn" (same sound) illustrate the problem of words that sound identical but have different meanings. This can confuse learners when reading aloud or listening while reading. Function words, like "yǔfǎ" (grammar/grammatical). Require careful attention to grammatical context for correct interpretation. As incorrect parsing can lead to misunderstanding sentence structure, hence these challenges increase cognitive demands and slow reading comprehension, particularly in texts with dense or unfamiliar vocabulary, and effective vocabulary acquisition therefore involves not only memorization but also strategic approaches, such as prioritizing high-frequency words, using contextual clues, hence and leveraging knowledge of radicals and character components to facilitate recognition and recall.

3.3. Grammatical Complications

Grammatical differences between Chinese and many other languages present significant hurdles for international students learning to read, hence one of the primary challenges lies in word order; while some languages, such as English, rely heavily on inflection (i. E. Changes in word endings) to indicate grammatical function, Chinese depends more on sequential arrangement; for example, in English, thereby the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure is standard: "I eat an apple." In Chinese, however, and while the structure is typically similar ("wǒ" (I) "chī" (eat) "yī gè píngguǒ" (an apple)). The sentence may change form depending on context. Certain sentence patterns, such as topic-comment structures ("tā" (he) "shì lǎoshī" (is teacher)), do not follow the exact SVO order, hence this leading to potential misinterpretations.

Additionally, the use of classifiers ("zhī" (classifier for animals) or "běn" (classifier for books)) presents a unique challenge, and these grammatical units, required when quantifying nouns, have no direct equivalent in many languages, thereby this creating confusion for learners. In English, for example, we simply say "one dog" or "two books," but in Chinese, students must choose the correct classifier based on the type of noun, thereby the phrase "yī zhī gǒu" (one dog) and "yī běn shū" (one book) highlight how different classifiers are used for different categories of nouns. This can seem arbitrary and demand considerable memorization.

Finally, variations in sentence structure, and including the use of topic-comment constructions and the omission of subjects under certain conditions, can complicate reading comprehension. Chinese frequently omits subjects when they are clear from context. This is often ungrammatical in English, thereby for instance, in the sentence "tā qù mǎi dōngxī" (He is going to buy things), the subject "tā" (he) is understood, but sometimes the subject

is entirely omitted if it is obvious from context, hence understanding when and why subjects are omitted in Chinese requires students to shift their approach to parsing sentences and extracting meaning, especially when translating from languages that rely heavily on subject-verb agreements.

4. Cognitive and Affective Factors Influencing Reading Comprehension

4.1. Role of Background Knowledge

Background knowledge plays a pivotal role in reading comprehension. Especially in Chinese. Where cultural references and historical context are often crucial for fully understanding the material; international students frequently struggle with the absence of context-specific knowledge, such as Confucian values; traditional Chinese festivals, or key historical figures; and for instance, and references to Confucianism or the Tang Dynasty can significantly affect how students interpret texts. And without understanding the background, students may misinterpret key ideas or miss underlying themes.

Cultural knowledge directly influences comprehension (K) and reading performance (C), hence students with more background knowledge can grasp deeper meanings, thereby hence while those lacking this context may find it challenging to understand texts fully, thereby teachers can activate students' prior knowledge through pre-reading activities. Such as introducing cultural context or discussing historical references that may appear in the text. Hence this approach helps bridge gaps in understanding and prepares students for the challenges ahead.

4.2. Impact of Reading Strategies

The ability to use effective reading strategies is essential for mastering Chinese reading, hence skimming and scanning are two fundamental strategies. Skimming helps identify the main idea of a text quickly, while scanning is useful for locating specific details. In Chinese; where a character can have multiple meanings depending on context, these strategies are particularly useful in navigating long or complex passages.

Another key strategy is inference-making-the ability to deduce meanings beyond the literal text. Chinese texts often rely on metaphors, idioms, or cultural references that require students to read between the lines, thereby the more proficient students are in applying these strategies, the better their reading comprehension becomes. And teachers can help by explicitly teaching these strategies and providing practice, allowing students to improve their ability to tackle more complex materials independently.

4.3. Affective Factors: Motivation and Anxiety

Affective factors such as motivation and anxiety play a significant role in Chinese reading. Students with high intrinsic motivation-those genuinely interested in the language and culture-tend to engage more deeply with the material and persist longer when faced with challenges, hence however, anxiety can undermine comprehension. Students who feel anxious about their ability to read Chinese may experience stress. This hinders their ability to focus and process information effectively.

To mitigate anxiety, hence this creating a supportive and low-pressure learning environment is essential. Thereby teachers can encourage positive attitudes toward learning by setting achievable goals and offering praise for effort rather than just accuracy. Thereby this boosts students' confidence and reduces the negative impact of anxiety; additionally. This fostering intrinsic motivation through culturally engaging materials can make the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful for students.

5. Comparison of Reading Challenges Across Language Backgrounds

5.1. East Asian Language Speakers

Students with East Asian language backgrounds, particularly those from Japan and Korea; have a distinct advantage when learning Chinese due to their familiarity with Chinese characters (Hanzi), thereby both Japanese Kanji and Korean Hanja share roots with Chinese characters. This provides these learners with an early advantage in character recognition, hence however, this familiarity can lead to interference; as subtle differences in character form, meaning. And pronunciation between the languages may cause confusion. For instance. While many Kanji characters are derived from Hanzi, their meanings and uses can differ. Thereby this making it difficult for Japanese learners to apply their prior knowledge correctly in Chinese. Similarly, Korean Hanja, though similar in origin, hence has different pronunciations and contexts in Korean compared to Chinese.

This familiarity can also result in a plateau effect. Where students become overly reliant on their existing knowledge of characters, and this can hinder their ability to fully grasp Chinese grammar and pronunciation. This issue tends to be more prominent in students who have a deeper knowledge of characters, as they may struggle to adapt their understanding of characters to the unique syntactic structures and phonetic rules of Chinese. Despite these challenges; understanding the shared roots of Chinese, Japanese; and Korean vocabulary offers learners a unique opportunity to leverage their prior knowledge. Hence as seen in Table 2, many key vocabulary items overlap across these languages, such as terms related to education, culture, and and economy, thereby and however. And learners must be cautious of the subtle differences in pronunciation and usage, hence a balanced approach that emphasizes Chinese-specific grammar and pronunciation is essential for overcoming these obstacles.

Table 2. Common vocabulary between Chinese/Japanese/Korean.

Concept	Chinese (Hanzi/Pinyin)	Japanese (Kanji/Romaji)	Korean (Hanja/Romanization)	Notes
School	/ Xuéxiào	/ Gakkō	/ Hakgyo	General term for school.
Library	/ Túshūguǎn	/ Toshokan	/ Doseogwan	Place for Books
University	/ Dàxué	/ Daigaku	/ Daehak	Place of higher education
Book	/ Shū	/ Hon	책 / Chaek	Written material, Japanese uses Kanji for origin but pronunciation is different
Teacher	/ Lǎoshī	/ Sensei	/ Seonsaeng	Title for educator
Time	/ Shíjiān	/ Jikan	/ Sigan	Represents duration and point
Economy	/ Jīngjì	/ Keizai	/ Gyeongje	Pertains to financial matters.
Culture	/ Wénhuà	/ Bunka	/ Munhwa	Encompasses art and customs.
Health	/ Jiànkāng	/ Kenko	/ Geongang	Pertains to wellness.
Politics	/ Zhèngzhì	/ Seiji	/ Jeongchi	Is the study and practice of government

5.2. Indo-European Language Speakers

Speakers of Indo-European languages often face significant challenges when learning to read Chinese, thereby primarily due to the differences in script and grammatical structure. And Chinese characters are logographic, meaning each character represents a concept rather than a sound, and this requires students to memorize thousands of individual symbols. In contrast, Indo-European languages rely on alphabetic scripts, hence where letters represent sounds. Additionally, Chinese grammar differs greatly from that of many Indo-European languages. Thereby for example, word order in English is rigid, while Chinese often allows more flexibility in syntax. This can lead to confusion for learners from languages with more fixed structures. Furthermore, the absence of inflectional morphology in Chinese, thereby where grammatical relationships are shown through word order rather than changing word endings, creates additional difficulties.

Another major challenge is the presence of tones in Chinese. This adds complexity to reading and comprehension. Unlike many Indo-European languages, thereby hence where pronunciation is more straightforward, Chinese uses four tones to distinguish meaning between words that are otherwise spelled the same, hence this tonal system can be particularly difficult for learners whose native languages do not have tones, hence and it requires additional mental processing to interpret the correct meaning of a word based on its tone.

5.3. Typological Distance and Reading Acquisition

The typological distance between Chinese and learners' native languages plays a significant role in how easily they can acquire reading skills. Languages that are structurally dissimilar to Chinese, such as those using alphabetic scripts or following Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, thereby present greater challenges for learners. The cognitive load is higher for learners whose native language differs significantly from Chinese in grapheme-phoneme correspondence; morphological structure, and syntax, thereby for example, and the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between the written form of Chinese characters and their sounds increases the learning curve compared to alphabetic languages, hence this has a more transparent relationship between letters and sounds.

The greater the typological distance between Chinese and a learner's native language, the more effortful and extended the learning process becomes. This distance, represented by a larger value of *d*, indicates that learners from languages with significantly different structures will need more explicit instruction and focused practice to successfully acquire reading proficiency in Chinese. Understanding this relationship helps in designing more effective and tailored pedagogical strategies that address the unique challenges posed by typologically distant languages.

6. Pedagogical Suggestions for Improving Chinese Reading Instruction

6.1. Integrating Technology

Technology integration offers a diverse range of tools that can enhance Chinese reading instruction, thereby with the advent of interactive software and digital platforms. Immediate feedback on student performance becomes possible, and this allows educators to cater to each student's individual pace. For example; platforms such as Reading Assistant can help students practice reading comprehension by providing real-time corrections and suggestions; this fostering autonomous learning. Furthermore, multimedia tools, including digital texts with embedded audio and visual components; provide students with authentic language exposure. This enhancing both listening and reading comprehension.

Additionally, the use of online dictionaries and translation tools gives students immediate access to word definitions and translations. This reducing reliance on instructors, hence and such tools can enhance vocabulary acquisition by offering contextualized meanings. And the availability of diverse online resources allows learners to explore a wide variety of reading materials according to their interests and proficiency levels. For

example, using XiaoMi; a popular reading tool in China, enables students to increase reading speed by as much as 20% through interactive and adaptive reading exercises, hence as illustrated in Table 3. These technology-enhanced tools not only make learning more accessible but also significantly boost engagement. This allowing students to take more ownership of their learning process.

Table 3. Technology-enhanced tools for teaching Chinese reading.

Tool	Description	Benefits
Interactive Software	Provides immediate feedback on student comprehension.	Adapts to individual learning paces, tracks progress. Hence and offers personalized exercises.
Digital Texts	Offers online reading materials. Often with built-in dictionaries and translation tools.	Exposes students to authentic language use, diverse perspectives, thereby and a wider range of vocabulary. Thereby the use of x number of digital texts can increase reading speed by y words per minute.
Multimedia Materials	Includes audio and video resources accompanying texts.	Enhances engagement, provides contextual understanding. And improves listening comprehension alongside reading.
Online Dictionaries & Translation Tools	Facilitates quick access to definitions and translations.	Reduces reliance on instructors, allows students to independently decode unfamiliar words and phrases, thereby this fostering autonomy.

6.2. Differentiated Instruction Strategies

Differentiated instruction is essential for addressing the diverse needs of international students in Chinese reading classes. Given that students come from various linguistic backgrounds, hence each with unique learning styles and levels of proficiency. Flexible teaching methods are critical. For instance, some students may benefit from simplified texts that provide extra scaffolding, while others with a stronger linguistic background might engage more effectively with complex literary works. By offering a range of materials based on difficulty, instructors can ensure that all students are challenged appropriately, without overwhelming them.

Additionally, instructors should vary their teaching approaches and assessment methods to accommodate students' preferences. For example. Visual learners may benefit from infographics and mind maps. While auditory learners could gain more from discussions or podcasts, hence and providing different avenues for students to demonstrate their understanding-such as written summaries. Group discussions. Or multimedia presentations-ensures that learners can showcase their skills in the way that suits them best, hence this approach not only supports different learning styles but also fosters a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment.

6.3. Use of Authentic Materials

The use of authentic materials—such as news articles, short stories, and literary texts—plays a vital role in enhancing reading comprehension and cultural understanding. Exposing students to real-world language through these materials not only improves fluency but also helps them connect classroom learning with real-life applications. For instance, reading news articles related to Chinese culture or contemporary issues can provide students with contextual knowledge that enhances both their language skills and their understanding of Chinese society.

However, the choice of authentic materials must be carefully tailored to the students' proficiency levels. Texts that are too advanced may cause frustration, while texts that are too simple may fail to engage learners. Scaffolding activities, such as pre-reading vocabulary exercises and post-reading discussions, can further support comprehension by providing context and encouraging critical thinking. For example, a teacher might introduce a new article by discussing its main ideas and any unfamiliar vocabulary beforehand. Afterward, students can engage in discussions about the cultural aspects of the article; this deepens their understanding and improves retention, and by incorporating authentic materials into the curriculum, educators not only enhance reading fluency but also give students a greater sense of how Chinese is used in everyday contexts.

7. Conclusion

International students learning Chinese face significant challenges in reading comprehension; these stem from a combination of linguistic, grammatical, and cultural differences. These challenges include difficulties with character recognition, vocabulary acquisition, and understanding Chinese sentence structures, and these are often quite different from those of their native languages. In addition to these inherent obstacles, the lack of culturally relevant reading materials and teaching strategies that cater to diverse learning styles can further impede students' progress. Effective pedagogical strategies, such as explicit grammar instruction, contextualized vocabulary learning, and the integration of authentic materials, are essential for addressing these issues, and additionally, the use of technology, thereby including AI-powered reading assistants and interactive platforms, offers new opportunities to engage students in the learning process, and provide real-time feedback, and cater to individual learning paces.

Looking to the future, further research is needed to explore targeted interventions for improving Chinese reading skills, and this includes investigating strategies that address character recognition, enhance contextual vocabulary acquisition, and utilize discourse analysis techniques; longitudinal studies tracking the progress of students over extended periods could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of various interventions. Additionally, exploring the role of learner autonomy, particularly through self-regulated learning strategies like goal setting and self-evaluation, could offer new ways to enhance reading comprehension and motivation. Another promising research direction would involve examining how reading strategies from students' first language (L1) can be transferred to learning Chinese; this could lead to more effective cross-linguistic pedagogical approaches, thereby finally, the integration of technology into Chinese reading instruction deserves more attention, and the use of adaptive learning platforms and AI-driven tools could significantly boost reading proficiency by providing personalized learning experiences.

In conclusion, thereby this improving Chinese reading instruction is essential not only for enhancing language skills but also for promoting cross-cultural understanding and academic success among international students. The challenges discussed in this work require targeted interventions and innovative teaching methods. By addressing the linguistic, hence cognitive, and affective factors that impact reading comprehension, educators can significantly improve the effectiveness of Chinese language instruction. Ultimately, the future of Chinese language education will depend on our ability to create more

accessible, engaging. And and effective learning environments that meet the diverse needs of international students.

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