

## AN INVESTIGATION OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' SELF-EFFICACY, ENGLISH READING BELIEFS AND STRATEGIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Based on the interviews with four Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners at middle school, the phenomenological study investigated these four high-level six-graders' implicit and explicit beliefs on English reading and their strategies used in reading comprehension. Findings showed these high-level interviewees shared the same understanding on English reading, as they all regarded English as a way to decode and learn new information; all the students thought cloze was the most difficult part in reading; three students used test score as the only criterion to judge a good reader and defined a good reader as someone who succeeded in the reading tests; all the students in the study used the strategy of making inferences when they came to some new words in the text. Discussion centered around the effects of test-based instruction on these young Chinese EFL learners and the curriculum design in the transitional period between primary school and middle school.*

**Keywords:** Self-efficacy beliefs; reading beliefs; reading strategies; test-based instruction; curriculum design; Chinese EFL learners

### INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have shown that students' beliefs about learning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Lonka, Joram, & Bryson, 1996; Schommer-Aikins, 2004) and their strategy use (Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman, 1990) are of great importance in their academic success. This paved the way for researchers in literacy education and applied linguistics who have done much research on English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learner' beliefs on English reading (Law, 2009).

However, most studies in EFLs' reading beliefs focused on learners' self-efficacy or implicit beliefs, that is, how they motivate themselves to read and learn (Horner & Shwery, 2002; House, 2003), but seldom paid attention to explicit beliefs, which reveal how students view English reading as the content they learn. The present study aims to reveal Chinese six-graders' implicit and explicit beliefs on English reading and their strategy use in English reading comprehension. It is based on the interviews with four Chinese EFL learners, who are high-level six-graders in the middle school for their first semester. The purpose of the study is to explore what are the interviewed students' self-efficacy beliefs, English reading beliefs, and the strategies they use in English reading. It aims to provide some insights to EFL teachers and guide them to better understand their students and design their curricula.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Studies on Students' Beliefs on English Reading

For decades, researchers have done considerable studies on the cognitive and affective factors involved in the learners' change process. These may include learners' motivation (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002), interest (Andre & Windschitl, 2003), metacognition

(Hennessey, 2003) and beliefs (Mason & Boscolo, 2004; Mason, 2003). Among the studies on learners' beliefs, substantial research has dedicated to the relationship between student beliefs and academic outcomes (House, 2003). These studies can be further categorized into two types: the first one focuses on implicit beliefs, or self-efficacy beliefs, referring to the extent to which a person believes s/he has a good command of a task and is capable of doing it well (Durik, Vida, & Eccles, 2006); the second is the research on explicit beliefs, which refers to how learners view and define English learning or reading in their eyes (Knapp, 2002). Regardless of implicit or explicating beliefs, they may lead students to use different strategies when they comprehend a text (Davis & Neitzel, 2010).

### ***Students' Implicit Beliefs on English Reading***

Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action", which may "influence how people think, feel, and motivate themselves and act" (p. 2). Students with self-efficacy beliefs analyze their academic outcomes and interpret the causes on their own (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). As a result, self-efficacy beliefs may affect students' overall reading performance. O'Sullivan and Howe (1996) indicated that high achievers believed their abilities were related to their success in reading, whereas low achievers were more likely to account for their poor reading with lack of abilities. In addition, Horner & Shwery (2002) believed young students' self-efficacy beliefs help them choose the effective reading strategies and monitor their reading process, and the finding is consistent with Wagner and his colleagues who found good beginning readers acknowledged their contribution in selecting good reading and use of strategies (Wagner, Spratt, Gal, & Paris, 1989).

### ***Students' Explicit Beliefs on English Reading***

Students' perceptions of English reading vary from each other. According to Weintraub and Denny (1965), some students regarded reading as a way to learn new things, some others viewed reading in terms of specific objects, and even some students, in a graph-morpheme way, defined reading as a process of sounding out words. Johns (1972; 1974) listed students' different definitions on reading. While many of the fourth- or fifth-graders in his studies were not able to define reading exactly, they still gave their understandings on reading: some students saw reading as a classroom procedure, and some others focused on word recognition when interpreting reading; while a few students viewed reading as a process of making meaning, some students combined word recognition and meaning making to define reading.

Rasinski and DeFord (1988) did a classroom-based experiment, they observed three first-grade classrooms: the first is in a mastery-learning environment, the second is a traditional classroom, and the last is literature-based. They found that "the manner in which children are taught to read and write is related to the conceptions the children hold and take into subsequent literacy experiences" (p. 60). For example, students in the mastery-learning classroom defined reading and writing in terms of word parts and words. There also exists some research on struggling readers' beliefs. In Knapp's experiment (2002), one of the two struggling students in the study regarded reading as an activity that "could generate knowledge and transform thought" (p. 92), whereas the other at-risk reader saw reading as a school requirement. It turned out students' perceptions on reading served as a mediator between their prior experiences and literacy learning at school.

### **Research on Students' Strategy Use in English Reading**

Both implicit and explicit reading beliefs influence readers to choose their best practices in reading a text. Therefore, a bunch of studies explored the relationship between students' reading beliefs and their use of reading strategies. According to Oxford (1990), reading

strategies can be classified into two types: direct and indirect strategies. Different from Oxford, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) categorized strategies into three major types: metacognitive, cognitive and socio/affective strategies. As belief is one of the factors covered in the socio/affective strategies, the present study is exploring its relationship with the other two types, namely, metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

### ***Metacognitive Strategies***

Simply put, metacognition is the thinking of thinking (Metcalf & Shimamura, 1994). Some scholars regarded metacognitive strategies as some functions monitoring or regulating cognitive strategies (Devine, 1993; Flavell, 1981). Metacognitive strategies are different from cognitive ones in that the former are used to learn a great multitude of subject matters (Schraw, 1998), but the latter basically plays a role in learning a specific subject area (Phakiti, 2003). Metacognitive strategies, from a macro perspective, deal more with how to plan, monitor, select and evaluate in one's process of learning; in contrast, cognitive strategies, from a micro perspective, focus more on how to make inference, deduction, summary or organization in a specific content area (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Mastery of metacognitive strategies helps English language learners to understand and grasp cognitive strategies (Ramesh, 2009; Shokrpour & Nasiri, 2011).

### ***Cognitive Strategies***

While metacognitive strategies may help readers develop their cognitive strategies, it is cognitive strategies that enable readers to construct meaning from a reading text more directly (Salataki & Akyel, 2002). Cognitive strategies include making prediction, translating, summarizing, referring to prior knowledge experience, applying grammar rules, and inferring meaning from context (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). They lead readers to interact with materials they read, entitle them to manipulate the materials, and assist them to apply specific techniques to a learning task. According to Phakiti (2003), cognitive strategies helped EFL test-takers develop their ongoing mental activities to use their language and world knowledge to solve the given task.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Significance of the Study**

Studies on students' reading beliefs and reading strategies lead us to a further step to explore the relationship between the two. The present study interviewed four Chinese EFL learners who were in their first year in the junior middle school. These selected participants were high-level students in English reading, according to their scores in entrance examinations. The study aims to reveal what are these EFL readers' beliefs on reading and examined how their beliefs relate to their use of strategies in reading activities. Findings may provide insights to reading teachers who help their struggling students build their reading beliefs and improve their reading abilities. They may also orientate reading teachers to design their curricula and instructional activities.

### **Participants**

Four Chinese EFL students who are in their first semester in junior middle school were selected as the interviewees in the study. Their school is an urban school with a high reputation and qualified teaching faculty in the region. As the school is highly selective in admission, therefore, these students were enrolled into the school after they had taken an entrance examination and met the requirement. The students were selected according to their scores of the entrance examination. As the top four students in the examination, they were

labeled as the high-level students among their peers. It is unexpected that the top four students were all girl readers.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Interviews have been used as the primary method to conduct the study, with an open-ended questionnaire to facilitate the interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Reading Beliefs Inventory (RBI) designed by Kara-Soteriou (2007). It covered questions soliciting students' thoughts on reading per se, (e.g., "what is reading?") and also their viewpoints on reading and reading strategies (e.g., "when you come to some new vocabulary in reading a text, what will you do to help you understand its meaning?"). Extended questions were addressed after the designed questions when the researcher was interviewing the students.

The study was conducted from the lens of a phenomenological inquiry, as it deals with the participated students' perceptions per se, that is, their "immediate feelings" about English reading. Willis (1991) stated that a phenomenological inquiry "can be represented metaphorically as a visual process," with researchers' attention on "perception itself and the immediate feelings it evokes." Therefore, with the interviews as the primary means to collect the data, the researcher made the study a phenomenological one in nature.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Self-Efficacy Beliefs**

Liu, the first interviewee said: "I think I am a good reader, because I can answer all the questions in the exams". This is almost the same answer from the other three interviewed students. All these interviewed EFL learners regard themselves as good readers. However, when asked to explain why they thought they were good readers, they all answered it was because they can answer the questions in the reading tests. I show great mercy to these kids, because they have already been the victims of the test-based instruction. The situation may be the same in America, or all cross the world. Admittedly, test is a direct way to select the best candidates for the schools or the societies. With more and more population growing and increasingly advanced technologies appearing in the world, the supply of job vacancies is far more challenging than the demand. However, that is not the excuse to push the kids to a more test-based orientation.

Liu continued her answer to "who, do you think, is a good reader in your class?" and said: "Cai is the best reader in my eye, because she always outperforms others in English exams". The answer again proved my concern with these kids, because test score has already been the only criterion they use to judge their performance. When the other students in the interview were required to give an example as a good reader in their class, two of them also chose students who are good test-takers. The only one of the four students, Yao, answered the question in a different way. When being asked what made her think she was a good reader, Yao responded me with "I read every day, and I read fast". It seems that Yao regarded the quantity and speed as the first determinant of a good reader. Yao's answer seemed identical to the ones from American students. I used to talk with my peers and professors in the US, and asked them what might be the answers from American children. Some told me American kids might regard the ones who can read fast and fluently as the good readers.

It is reasonable to state that students at this level do not pay much attention to text comprehension, which is the reading focus of a majority of adolescent or adult readers. I used to ask the same question to a Chinese EFL graduate studying in the US, and he answered that a good reader has a good command of comprehension. I found the difference between children and adolescents/adults on defining a good reader reasonable, because when the kids

read the reading material for the first time or during their first years, they probably do not fully comprehend the text. At this time, what they need to get from reading is simply the words and grammar. Therefore, they are not required to struggle with comprehension, which may neither be their teachers' objective.

Admittedly, no correct answer to the question on "what is a good reader", especially for children who are still developing their cognition in their critical period. In addition, children's answers may also be influenced by political ideology, education philosophy, teaching emphasis in their motherland. As reading teachers in elementary school focus more on grapho-morpheme and fluency, they undoubtedly influence their students in this way. Think about the textbooks used for Grade 1 in America: some classrooms choose comic books like *Spice Cake* as their textbooks, and what teachers focus on is the graph-morpheme knowledge instead of grammar or meanings. Teachers at this time only guide the students to form a kind of phonemic awareness, instead of stimulating them to a semantic level. The same situation also occurs in China, and most English elementary education focuses on the behaviorist tenet, that is, stimulus-and-response is the primary approach to the kids to learn English. Kids just need to repeat the same sentence or structure repeatedly, in order to get the input and improve the fluency.

### Reading Beliefs

Some students in the interview regarded English reading as a way to new knowledge, and they all thought reading is a good way to get new input and improve their reading abilities. "English reading is kind of decoding process, from which I learn new knowledge." said Cai, a girl in the same class with Liu. Her answer was identical to Liu, which means they shared the same belief on English reading. As mentioned earlier, students at this age are taught in a grapho-morphemic way, regardless of in America or China. Texts books in this phase are mostly decodable books, which focus on sounds and letters; they are different from the adolescents' or adults textbooks, which are more predictable, guiding readers to comprehend the meanings. Besides, students at the early age also need to get more input from reading texts, in order to accumulate their knowledge for future. Therefore, it makes sense that the interviewed students perceived reading in this way.

Furthermore, Cai and Liu's identical reading belief resulted in the same reading habit between the two girls, and they both spend a fraction of time reading every day, apart from reading for their academic purpose. The notion of higher exposure to print indeed helps readers to achieve better academic outcomes, which has already been proved by some scholars (Ellis, 1985). Exploring the two students' reading belief in a further step gets us to correlate their reading belief with their self-efficacy beliefs. There is no doubt that the two high-level students are with high self-efficacy beliefs, which make them more self-motivated to read. Different from struggling readers, who regard English reading as a "school requirement" (Knapp, 2002), the two high-level students are aware of the importance of reading, and treat reading as a positive way to explore the new knowledge.

The interviewees were then asked what they thought were the most difficult parts in English reading. Yao answered, "Neither vocabulary nor grammar is difficult, however, sometimes I have difficulty in doing the cloze." Cloze is one typical form of tests to evaluate students' whole language ability. It tests all the three aspects in a language system, the grapho-phonics, the syntax, and the semantics. Even TOEFL or IELTS test-takers would also find the cloze more difficult than other types of questions. In this sense, it is understandable that why the interviewed kid found it the most difficult. Ideal as a holistic approach is, the cloze is actually beyond the interviewed students' abilities. The students at this level only focus on the grapho-phonics and at most the syntax; they are incapable of dealing with semantics.

Krashen (1985) hypothesized that input should be comprehensible, which means knowledge students learn should be designed in accordance to the students' actual level. The knowledge level should be a little higher than the students' actual levels, but should also be within the students' comprehensibility. As the cloze aims to test the students' three aspects of knowledge, it is inevitably more challenging than just to test a single aspect of knowledge. If the cloze is designed to be over-demanding, it will lower its validity.

### Reading Strategies

When being asked what strategies the students use when comprehending a difficult text, they answered they sometimes reply on the translation from their mother tongue. Cai stated, "When doing English reading, I sometimes decode them in Chinese first, and then encode them in English". Students' first language (L1) can either be a facilitator or a detriment to their second language (L2) development. In a positive way, L1 shares the same meta-lingual knowledge with L2. Because students have years' exposure to their L1, it is easy to associate L1 with L2 when they begin to learn the new language. However, languages are the embodiments of cultures or mindsets of the people who speak them, therefore, transferring between their target language and mother tongue sometimes deters learners to fully experience the culture in the target language. As a result, when learning an L2, students may refer to their mother tongues only in case of comprehending a concept that shares the same equivalent in their own language and culture.

The interview then proceeded with the question on what would the students do when they encountered some new vocabulary in English reading. Most of the students responded that they would probably turn to the context for help. For example, Yao answered, "When meeting some new vocabulary in reading, I usually turn to the context for help". They usually refer to the former or the latter sentence, and with the comprehension of these adjacent sentences they try to guess the meaning of the unknown. The answer seemed reasonable. It makes sense that this cognitive approach works well in some case when understanding can be built upon the context.

### DISCUSSION

The interviews revealed some issues in Chinese EFL context: first, as Chinese students are immersed into a great multitude of quizzes, tests, and exams every semester, they take it for granted that a good reader is the one who is doing well in the reading exams. In order to pass the tests, students are inevitable to seek for the best skills or strategies; teachers also regard teaching skills as an effective teaching method, which can at best improve students' performance, thus acknowledging the teachers' performance. That seemingly stands for a good method to satisfy both teachers' and students' needs; however, on a second thought, how about students' comprehension of the text? They have the deft skills, which help them to solve all the problems, so they even do not need to fully comprehend the text before answering the questions. However, what is the meaning of reading? It is a way that helps students perceive, experience, and comprehend the world, instead of a tool used only to helping them answer test questions.

Students nowadays have already much more informational challenges than the old generation. They are labeled as "internet natives", who are in contrast to their parents, the "internet immigrants". In order to survive, they have already been facing with more knowledge and techniques to learn. Situation in China has been deteriorating in the new generation, as fewer and fewer enrollments in the universities make the competition among students increasingly fierce. The competitive situation and test-based philosophy cause students to be "great" test-takers. Think about Liu's answer, which seemed an indicator to the

strategies she usually used in her reading. It was hypothesized that she would have a good command of test-taking skills in order to “survive” in the exams. It turned out that she is actually a good reader with great test-taker skills.

Second, the notion of test-based instruction does not turn the education in China to be totally negative. What I found satisfactory in the interview is the curriculum design in the transitional stage between primary school and junior middle school in China indeed does a good job. All the interviewees told me that there seemed no gap on English reading between primary school and junior middle school. “I can adapt that,” said Liu, which was then agreed by other interviewees. However, Liu, as a representative of high self-efficacy beliefs among her peers, has a good command of adaptation into a new environment. It does not mean that what she answered in the interview is applicable to other students in her class. It only turns out students with high self-efficacy beliefs are easy to get used to a new learning environment. I used to talk about the same issue with my peers in America, and they told me there were a big gap between primary school and junior middle school in America. Some of the topics in the reading class seem boring to the boy readers, which results in a higher rate of boy dropouts at this stage. It should be scientific to design the curricula in the transitional period, because students need to accommodate them in a totally new environment. They need to make new friends, meet new teachers, and experience new cultures; therefore, the gap between the former academia and the latter one should not be in a great divergence. The second semester of the new environment is more suitable to give students more challenges to take.

Last, at the end of the interview, I asked the students what might be improved in their current English course. Students gave me the answer that there remained an imbalance on English skills trained in class. Among reading, writing, speaking and listening, speaking and listening were still paid less attention than reading and writing. “I think teachers seldom emphasize speaking practice in class, and what we focus on is simply grammar and vocabulary”, Liu said. This is not directly concerned with English reading, but it is not an old horse in China. Since 1980s, the English education in China has already focused more on writing and reading than on speaking and listening. That resulted in a generation of Deaf Englishers, who can only read and write but seldom speak or listen to the English. The situation has not been changed too much, according to the interviewees’ response. It is highly suggested that curriculum design should be steered towards a more practical orientation. After all, the aim of learning a foreign language is not only to experience the culture, but also to communicate with the language native speakers. With the fast pace of globalization, speaking as a direct way to communicate merits more attention. Chinese EFL learners should have fewer burdens in their studies, and get more practice with their learning. English reading curriculum for the intermediate level should develop diverse foci, not only on comprehension but also on communication.

## CONCLUSION

The paper interviewed four Chinese high-level students, who are in their first semester in the middle school. Through exploring their implicit and explicit beliefs on English reading, and their strategies used in English reading, the researcher revealed some issues in Chinese EFL context: for example, test-based instruction is leading students in China to move towards being test-skill masters rather than jack-of-all-trades. The findings of the study aim to provide insights to EFL teachers and educators, who can better understand their students, and then better design and develop English reading curricula. What is suggested for future research might be to investigate Chinese EFL teachers’ perceptions on English reading and how their beliefs inform their teaching practice.

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

The paper has been presented in the 10th Education Research Exchange (ERE) Conference, Cleveland, and the United States.

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