

IMPROVING READING IN CHINESE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

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English is widely used by people around the world in various fields. As a non-English country, China focuses on English education to meet the demand of English talents. China has more than 100 years in development history of English teaching. This paper reviews the history of English education in China and centers on the English education in Chinese elementary schools, particularly students' English reading as well as difficulties and strategies to improve their reading.

Shan Yao

Under the Supervision of Dr. Gillota

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Chapter I Introduction

As a result of globalization, English is increasingly an international language. It is the most popular second language in the world and is the primary language of international communication (Schulzeke, 2014). In many countries, such as India, Thailand, Singapore and so forth, English is one of the official languages. However, in China, English is taught as the only foreign language at the compulsory education stage. Subject to the regulations of the Ministry of Education (2001a,2001b), all students have to learn English beginning in the third grade in primary school. Close attention should be paid to English teaching in the elementary stage. In terms of learning language, four basic skills are necessary: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Many researchers conduct studies on using reading to develop the language proficiency of EFL (English as Foreign Language) and ESL (English as Second Language) learners (Wang, 2016). This paper will focus on the teaching strategies for improving reading in Chinese elementary school students.

Statement of the Problem

Though China sets English as the compulsory lesson since third grade, students have a slim chance of using English out of the classroom in a non-English environment. Reading comprehension is of great importance as one of basic language skills. Zhang (2016) surveyed some third graders in a primary school in Guangzhou and the results show that roughly sixty percent of them do not like English reading due to some prominent reasons, such as the lack of extracurricular reading materials, limited vocabulary, low interest in reading, and poor reading skills and strategies. Additionally, teachers' teaching methods and strategies should be improved.

Wang and Ao (2015) propose that in reading class, teachers should shift focus from teaching vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to developing foreign language reading literacy.

Definition of Terms

Globalization: Guttal (2007) stated that globalization is the global integration of local and national economies, especially transnational corporations, as well as a political phenomenon created by the firm of states.

Reading literacy: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2016) defines reading literacy as “the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment”.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore some efficient teaching strategies for improving English reading in Chinese elementary students. It will help the struggling teachers to improve students’ English reading comprehension and other related skills.

Significance of the Study

Many countries use English as a second language. English is widely used in various fields, e.g. business, science, mass media and so forth. Crystal (2003) assumes English will increasingly become the world language over the next century. As a non-English speaking country, China is in great need of skillful English talents, but most Chinese English learners live in a non-English environment, which reduces the chances of using English. Wang (2017) states that reading

connects the text, life and reader's mind, so students' capabilities could be improved during reading, such as cognition, understanding, appreciation and evaluation. The findings of this study will mainly benefit the EFL/ESL teachers and students in China so as to improve students' reading comprehension and related skills, e.g. vocabulary and writing.

Methodology

This study will focus on strategies for teaching reading. Library research will be done with libraries and online database, e.g. academic research complete provided by UW-Platteville and China CNKI. Because the topic is about English teaching in China, some Chinese researchers' literature is used as strong support of paper.

Chapter II Review of Literature

It is known that English is widely used as a global language in various fields. English education is also an emphasized part in China's schools from primary level. Despite this, some Chinese primary students show weak performances on English reading compared with peers, and teachers have confusion about how to improve students' English reading performances. This paper aims to discover about English reading teaching in Chinese elementary levels. Four parts are included as followed: the development of English education in China, English teaching reading teaching in elementary schools in China, difficulties in reading for Chinese elementary students and teaching strategies for improving English reading.

The Development of English Education in China

The beginning of English education in China dates back to the late Qing Dynasty and developed rapidly during the Western Affair Movement, also known as the Self-Strengthening Movement (Suo, 2011). According to Yang (2000), the movement was strongly supported by some progressive Chinese officials, who realized the importance of learning from the West after experiencing disastrous military defeat in the Opium Wars. Besides, to meet demand of translation talents. In 1862, the Qing government set up China's first government-run English language school in Beijing named Tong Wen Guan or School of Combined Learning, and employed some foreigners as English teachers (Gu, 2004). The foundation of Tong Wen Guan represented the beginning of English education in China (Liu, 2011; Gu, 2004; Yang, 2000) and it provided China's earliest bilingual diplomatic officers, translators and English teachers (Suo, 2011).

With the important political missions of that time, Tong Wen Guan received great attention from the government. The teaching staff were required to be reviewed by the Qing Emperor after

the government's strict selection, including foreign teachers (Zhu, 1983). According to the syllabus of Tong Wen Guan (1876), the length of schooling was eight years, and students should acquire foreign affairs related skills, mainly including literacy, translation, grammar, general knowledge about foreign countries, and there were science and technology courses as well. Qing Hui Dian, an official record of the Qing government published in 1899, recorded that the language teaching of Tong Wen Guan complied the sequence as alphabets, pronunciation, vocabulary, passage and translation. Students who were unable to complete the exams would be eliminated from school. In addition, Chinese language practice was still emphasized to improve students' limited Chinese ability (Feng,2002).

Mei (2004) concluded that Tong Wen Guan was featured by the following aspects: Tong Wen Guan firstly applied the class-based teaching system and this system was applied nationwide after 1902. Second, it introduced western teaching methods that motivated students and improved students' learning outcomes by converting conceptions to facts. Third, language teaching was associated with translation and interpretation practice in real situations, so the class improved students' translation skills with the Grammar-translation method.

Afterward, more similar schools were built in Guangzhou (Canton), Shanghai and Hubei of China and so forth, based on the experience from Tong Wen Guan (Feng, 2002; Suo, 2011). New-style schools were promoted by supporters of the thought of "Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical application" (Lei, 2014). These schools played important roles as well in the history of China's English Education during the late Qing dynasty.

In fact, before Tong Wen Guan was established in 1862, there had been few missionary schools run for the sake of teaching Christianity to Chinese people, most of which were located in

the South-east coastal areas of China, which contributed to the foundation of Tong Wen Guan as well. For example, Morrison school of Macao, which was moved from Malacca in 1839, with the support from Morrison Education Society. Besides teaching English language, it also taught western science and technology subjects in English including using English textbooks (Gu, 1985). The foundation and blossom of missionary schools proceeded respectively after First and Second Opium War, when the Qing government was forced to sign the unequal treaties: Treaty of Nanjing and Beijing, which declared missionary schools legal in China. However, the missionary work still did not receive great response among Chinese people at first, so they changed the strategies by emphasizing schools' function of education so as to adapt China's national condition and obtain more listeners (Yang, 2000). Shanghai Yinghua (Anglo-China) school, founded by early British missionary John Fryer, initially began formal English teaching lessons in 1865 (Gu, 2004). Except English, some schools also taught western science and history, mathematics, even Chinese traditional class (Lutz, 1987).

Compared to practical knowledge from mission schools, the flaws of Chinese traditional education were exposed to young Chinese people. By the end of nineteenth century, missionary schools had won a powerful place that threatened Chinese traditional education (Gu,2004). In 1900, Beijing, the capital of Qing, was severely attacked by the eight-nation alliance which was led by Britain. The battle caused the Qing government understand that the solution was not only learning western science and technology, but also reforming China's backward educational system (Lutz, 1987). Therefore, the 1300-year-old imperial examination system was abolished in 1905 and replaced by systems borrowed from Japan or western countries, such as Germany. The policy also benefitted many missionary schools at the same time.

The Qing dynasty ended and the Republic of China was established in 1912. The new government learned from western countries, especially the U.S., to create new education systems and encouraged cooperation and exchange of teaching theories with western countries (Lv, 2008). Around the 1920s, many famous scholars were invited to China and gave advice and suggestions about China's education, such as Dewey, Monroe, Pankhurst and so forth. China's English education of this period was the continuation of the late Qing dynasty, and it accounted for a large proportion of middle and high schools, even during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (Li, 2012). The Grammar-Translation method and the Direct method were still dominantly used in English class. However, it was considered that the Grammar-Translation method should be secondary to others because the Direct method is was more suitable for Children's cognition (Lv, 2008).

Overseas returnees made great contributions to China's English education as teachers, translators or researchers. Some of them wrote English textbooks or dictionaries, and some also discovered teaching methods that fit in China. For example, Zhang Shiyi emphasized the important function of situation and his situational method in English teaching in 1922, which was the first work about English teaching method in China.

Owing to chaos caused by wars, the development of China's education was affected seriously after 1930. It could be regarded as the maintenance of China's English education. English occupied the dominant position in China's foreign language education since the 18th century, but it declined during the early period of the People's Republic of China. The development of English education was put aside because of the influence from the political policy of "Learning from the Soviet Union" and Cultural Revolution, and it regained attention since China's Reform and Open policy in 1978,

to meet the urgent needs of connecting to the world (Han & Liu, 2008). The government put emphasis on the importance of English teaching development, and English was included in China's college entrance examination since 1983, along with more opportunities brought by English capability which caused a nationwide "English Fever" since China's middle 1980s, sustaining for twenty years. In the past thirty years, in order to promote the reform of English teaching, China's education commission paid many efforts and attention on designing English teaching curriculum standards for different levels, English textbook compiling work as well as development of teaching methods, and in fact those measures achieved great results (Chen, 2015). English education began in third grade of elementary schools since 2001. Today, China's English teaching in elementary school is responsible for more aspects of education than English alone, such as developing students' English literacy and thinking ability, broadening their horizon and experiences, having cross-cultural awareness and so on (Wang, 2013).

In the history of China's English teaching, many international popular and influential teaching methods appeared on China's stage. For example, according to Guo (2007), The Grammar-Translation method continued to be used widely in English class and textbooks during the 1980s, followed by the Listening and Speaking method and the Communicative Language teaching method around the 1990s, and the Task-based language teaching method which was recommended in China's English Curriculum Standard (2001). In fact, some Chinese English educators also creatively discovered some native characteristic teaching methods through their experiences and practice (Chen, 2015). In addition, because of the limits of foreign teaching methods, and some problems of China's English education, we need to discover foreign language teaching theories that adapt to the condition of China (Shu, 2005; Dai, 2001).

English Reading Teaching in Elementary Schools in China

Reading literacy is always the most focused upon domain because it plays an important part in educational context and also in many areas of adult life. Meanwhile, the citizens are called for becoming life-long learners, so “students must be prepared to handle the variety of printed and written information that they will encounter throughout their lives” (PISA, 2002). Chinese students as EFLs have to overcome more difficulties to meet the goal, so English reading teaching is drawing more and more attention to improve Chinese students’ English reading literacy.

Generally, the implementation of English teaching in China clings closely to the National English teaching curriculum standards. In 2001, English was officially taught in primary school from third grade to sixth grade, according to the National English curriculum standards (MOE, 2001), which was designed on the same basis as that for other subjects (Li, 2007). In some developed cities, English lessons could be taught earlier, from grade one. The curriculum standard defined the curriculum objectives from five aspects as followed: Language skills, Language knowledge, Emotion and attitude, Learning strategies and Cultural notion. Language skills included four basic skills as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, and it also provided more specific requirements for low levels so as to meet children’s need of psychology and physiology, their cognitive development and emotion.

Nine-level of language skills objectives includes primary school (Level 1, 2), middle school (Level 3,4,5) and high school (Level 6, 7, 8, 9). The objectives of English reading skills for primary students are defined in Curriculum 2001 as:

1. Be able to identify and read the learned vocabulary;
2. Be able to read simple words by phonics rules;
3. Be able to understand short instructions or demand;

4. Be able to understand simple information on cards or so forth.

5. Be able to understand simple stories or short passages with illustrations, and build the habit of reading by sense group;

6. Be able to correctly read learned stories or short passages.

English Teaching Curriculum Standard (2011) affirmed two qualities of the compulsory education stage (G1-G9): instrumentality and humanity. English teaching aims at developing Chinese students' English competence, thinking ability, and comprehensive humanity competence. The above objectives about reading skill were continually used in Curriculum 2011.

Textbooks are the main source of students' English reading. To realize those objectives, English textbooks are written as supportive materials for class based on the national curriculum. English textbooks are not unified, so the provinces or districts are given autonomy of selecting teaching materials (Li, 2007). According to the China's Education Bureau, 27 English textbooks from 21 presses were used in schools in China until 2018, and all of them must be approved by a national committee of textbooks. Basically, the text types contain dialogues, rhymes or chants and stories, and most of them are short in length. Therefore, in order to further improve students' reading, many teachers usually select extra reading materials and add them to the class, such as English picture books, leveled books and newspapers.

The most popular type of reading materials is picture books, which are liked by both students and teachers in primary school. According to Zhao (2015), picture books are highly used in low-grades because of the following advantages:

1. Extend students' reading scope;
2. Make the text more readable;
3. Promote students' reading interests;

4. Develop reading skills, such as plots prediction;
5. Develop students' ability of appreciating beauty and thinking.

On behalf of students, their interest in reading picture books is mainly from the combination of text and pictures. Li (2018) studied the extracurricular English reading of high-grade students in primary schools, and the result showed that 72.8% of the students choose strongly agree or agree under the question "Do you like English reading materials with pictures?" with 41% strongly agree and 31.8% agree, which means almost three quarters of high-grade students like reading English books with pictures. The result of this study could also be applied to the lower graders with less mature cognition. Reading picture books could help children start to like reading in a relaxed way (Wu & Ren, 2016).

By and large, as stated in study of Chen (2015), English reading classes in primary school have common features:

1. Reading starts from knowing and saying vocabulary;
2. The texts are short and easy, such as dialogue, story, card and so forth;
3. The topics or theme of readings are connected to students' daily life;
4. The reading texts are illustrated to meet the need of students' cognition ;
5. Non-language output activities sometimes are applied, such as drawing pictures.

Moreover, based on the closer communication with the world in recent years, the studies on key competences for Chinese students' development become necessary to realize future talent strategies in a new era. It was published in 2016, and contains "International Understanding" as one key point under "Society participation." Also, as English Curriculum Standard of General High School (2017) point out, key competences of English contains four domains: language ability,

thinking and quality, cultural awareness and learning ability. Both provide significant and supportive direction for the English education of elementary stages.

Long-term practice and education are necessary for making progress in reading skills (Nichols, 2004), but students' other competences could be improved during the process, especially for elementary level students. Reading can help with students' knowledge and skills, also their self-development of comprehensive competence (Xiao, 2018). Li (2016) considered that English reading classes improve students' key competences, other than reading skills, such as expression, thinking, emotion, sense of language, awareness of culture and learning strategies.

Difficulties in Reading for Chinese Elementary Students

Reading literacy is a basic skill in both education and individual development of one's life. The European Commission (2001) recognizes that students should be able to "read and understand instructions and text" so as to achieve success in school; however, literacy skills are "key to all areas of education and beyond" which contribute to one's lifelong learning, social integration and personal development. For Chinese students, good English reading literacy also brings them a broader platform to communicate with the world.

In recent years, China's English education continuously learns from foreign and domestic experiences, and shifts focus from students' English reading skills to their English reading literacy development. However, as English beginners, elementary students still face unsolved difficulties. Wang (2015) stated that there is a similarity between first language acquisition and foreign language acquisition, in terms of the spiral learning process, but Chinese students' cognition development don't match their foreign language acquisition in environments where the native language is dominantly applied everyday. Chinese occupies almost all of the input and English mainly appear in classrooms or other learning contexts. Ghazali (2006) asserted that the language

input in the classroom is limited with confined means such as teachers' talk and course books, "whereas the language is often used in isolated settings for fulfilling certain tasks." Within such situations, it is even more difficult to develop Chinese students' English reading literacy.

Many studies have shown that Chinese students' English reading difficulties are largely caused by the lack of two elements: language knowledge and reading interests (Chen,2015; Zhang,2016; Hu,2017; Shen, 2014). Others related elements consist of time, cultural background knowledge, reading skills and strategies, the quality and quantity of reading materials, teachers' guidance and phonetic knowledge (Wu, 2011; Zhou, 2015; Tao,2016; Hu, 2017; Li, 2018).

Fluent reading is built upon three cognitive foundations: letter-sound knowledge, phonemic awareness, and rapid automatized naming skills (RAN) (Hulme & Snowling, 2013). Some Chinese students in elementary school struggle when they are reading English passages, because there are many words or sentences that they don't understand. Most of them are not good at learning vocabulary either (Wu, 2011), nor dealing with unknown words in context (Zhou, 2015). According to Spear-Swerling (2015), poor readers have three common difficulties: Specific Word Reading Difficulties (SWRD), Specific Reading Comprehension Difficulties (SRCD) and Mixed Reading Difficulties (MRD). They are explained as:

1. SWRD: readers have problems related specifically to reading words, not to core comprehension areas such as vocabulary or background knowledge.
2. SRCD: readers have the opposite pattern with SWRD: poor reading comprehension despite at least average word-reading skills.
3. MRD: readers have a combination of weaknesses in word-reading skills and core comprehension areas.

Students' reading experience and motivation has direct influence on their attitude to English reading. Students with reading problems show less interest and confidence about English reading, even fear and worries in some cases (Hu, 2017). However, if students realize they have efficacious performance in a reading activity, they intend to perform better, or at least continue their performances (Sckunk & Pajares, 2009). Cartwright et al. (2015) also stated that students who intend to be successful readers and think reading is important will show higher motivation and more engagement in reading, and have better performance on reading skills. It is important for students to have motivation in the hierarchical process of reading development, so that they are willing to invest much effort and time and grasp the necessary skills and strategies (Wigfield, 2016).

In addition, teachers should also contribute to motivating students. Some research indicates that teachers' guidance and motivation style affects students' motivation for reading during classroom activities (De Naeghel et al. 2016). Zhou (2015) finds roughly half of surveyed upper grade students think reading class is dull, and the result reveals that teachers focus more on vocabulary and grammar teaching but less on reading strategies and skills in English reading class. Their reading motivations are not activated because "pupils are confined to the boring training of reading instead of experiencing the joy of reading. Interest and fun can drive them to read more. Without these, pupils won't go an further by themselves" (Wu, 2011).

Meanwhile, Chinese students also have great demand for appropriate English reading materials, such as leveled books, and sufficient time, no matter during the class or after school. Wang (2017) considers that the limitation of teaching hours is related to students' entrance exams of senior school or university, and also agrees with the scarcity of reading materials in English textbooks and teachers' professional development.

Teaching Strategies for Improving English Reading

Though students have different problems and difficulties in English reading, appropriate teaching strategies play the significant part in the process of improving students' English reading. For teachers who prepare English reading class, Chen (2015) proposes some principles that should be taken into consideration: focus on students' psychology and internal motivation of reading; stimulate students' reading interests with the help of computer resources and attractive class activities; enlarge the quantity and the scope of English reading materials; teach reading skills and strategies, such as skimming, scanning, finding key words; help students to develop as daily English reading habit. Students can be motivated and supported by reading in the created situation of the material. Many researchers or English educators also explore some efficient and available teaching strategies and theories about English reading.

1. PWP Strategy

Many studies recommend PWP reading teaching strategy, which divides the whole teaching procedure into three stages: Pre-reading, While-reading and Post-reading. The pre-reading stage basically aims at activating comprehension, simulating students reading interests, and preparing new vocabulary and expressions prior to reading the text. Next, students acquire information from the text, and grasp reading skills and strategies to construct comprehension in the phase of while-reading. Finally, multiple post-reading activities enable students apply and extend the reading material, and connect to experience of individuals.

Furthermore, teachers can activate resource of students' knowledge with the help of title and illustration, also need to elicit students to outline and summary the text, practise their critical thinking about cultural difference (Meng, 2018). Wang (2015) advocates to use the illustrations as important support of students' reading outcomes. In the prereading stage, instructional practices

in form of Hands-on activities or prior knowledge activation can also contribute to students' comprehension performance (Bråten et al., 2017).

2. Building Vocabulary in Early Grades

In most cases, foreign language learners have limited vocabulary and developing grammar sense, which leads to poor reading (Grabe, 1991). Although PWP teaching strategy can reduce the effect of students' lack of language knowledge by teaching new words and expressions in advance, teachers should help students to enlarge their vocabulary beginning in early grades. For primary school students, Gao (2015) considers that vocabulary should be accumulated in lower grades to prepare for English reading in higher grades; students should be guided with reading skills, strategies in middle grades and develop reading habits through extensive reading in high grades. Students are able to enlarge their vocabulary by intensive reading and extensive reading. The latter is beneficial at "consolidating learners' vocabulary knowledge", as well as providing a wider range of vocabulary (Senoo&Yonemoto,2014).

3. Differentiating Instruction

However, if students have those three common reading problems represented previously (SWRD, SRCD and MRD), in the opinion of Spear-Swerling (2015), their reading outcomes can be beneficial from differentiating classroom instruction according to different patterns. Firstly, SWRD children need intervention such as systematic phonics, Phonemic Awareness, and oral text reading and teachers' feedback. Secondly, it is meaningful for teachers to pay more attention on "the specific comprehension areas" in which SRCD students are weak with oral language support sometimes. Thirdly, MRD Children need a "combination of intervention needs for first two patterns and multicomponent interventions." Spear-Swerling (2015) also indicates that it is

necessary to provide reading intervention in higher grades to prevent the late-emerging reading problems.

4. Oral Reading, Silent reading and Repeated Reading

Teachers could implement these types in the teaching to meet students' need and guide poor English readers in the class. Oral reading and repeated reading are proved to have positive influence on students' reading comprehension. Robinson et al. (2019) find that oral reading can help students with specific learning disabilities in reading understand more than silently reading with improved comprehension. However, it depends on teachers' intentions. Wang (2015) suggests that students should have free silent reading time to read books they choose by themselves, without teachers' intervention so that they can enjoy English reading gradually.

Repeated reading is a all-students-friendly strategy. "Whole-class repeated reading is a social variation that offers much potential for developing English learners' reading confidence and competence" (Monobe et al., 2017). Additionally, repeated reading intervention is also proved to develop slow learners' reading fluency and passage comprehension skills (Bendak, 2018).

5. Teachers' Feedback and Perception

Zhang (2016) also confirms teachers' praise and encouragement have positive feature on students to exhibit higher motivation to read. English reading. Therefore, teachers should be aware of "the influence that their perceptions can have on their students" and "creating a supportive classroom", and that girls' reading motivation are especially more likely influenced by teachers' perceptions (Boerma et al., 2015).

6. Computer Assisted Teaching

Teachers can build a situation of the reading material with the help of computers. Children are motivated to read in a computer assisted teaching environment providing auditory and visual

materials due to the flexibility, supports, responsiveness, and visual attractiveness (Al-Awidi & Ismail, 2014). Compared to paper storybooks, multimedia stories on touch-based devices can improve children's vocabulary as well as reading engagement (Zhou & Yadav, 2017).

7. "Other" Factors

Teachers should pay attention to and instruct students' development of both cognitive and affective factors as developing readers. Besides reading strategies and skills, Afflerbach et al. (2013) believe that successful readers possess four powerful other factors: metacognition, engagement and motivation, epistemic beliefs, and self-efficacy and these factors "operate in relation to strategy and skills" also "one another".

Summary

English is already a global language that build communication among people around the world. In terms of basic language skills, reading plays a very important role in both academic and social contexts. This paper rivets the English education in Chinese elementary school, particularly students' English reading difficulties and strategies to improve their reading. By reviewing related literature, the author represents the development history of Chinese English education since the late Qing Dynasty to the current China, the historical background behind the foundation of China's first language official language school Ton Wen Guan, and the huge influence brought by western missionary schools. The second part mainly focuses on the recent policy and reform, common features and tendency of English reading teaching in China's

elementary schools. However, teachers in elementary school inevitably have to confront children's English reading difficulties for some reasons such as children's cognition and psychology, the lack of reading materials and so forth. On the basis of difficulties discussed previously, some teaching strategies and suggestions are provided at last.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

As a developing country, China pays close attention to English education to cultivate more English talent. Reading is one of the basic language skills and is also a direct access to knowledge and information in many situations and aspects. Therefore, teachers must learn about their students and analyze the problems and difficulties they struggle with, so that they select appropriate methods and strategies. For elementary school teachers, boosting students' reading interest and the accumulation of language knowledge should be put in the first place. Meanwhile, in some cases, students with reading problems need differential instructions or strategies based on their condition. Besides strategies and skills, students should also develop effective factors that help them become successful readers in the future. It is recommended that more research be done in this area to explore other ways to help Chinese students' English reading. It is also recommended to conduct an official and specific investigation about English reading ability of Chinese students in elementary school.

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