Abstract

Students in Singapore generally spend little time on Chinese reading outside of their textbooks, yet the importance of reading cannot be overstated.

This paper attempts to test the author's hypothesis that a limited vocabulary size is the main factor that hinders Chinese reading among students. The degree to which vocabulary size can have an effect on reading will also be analysed statistically.

A survey was conducted in a local Secondary School to explore students' reading habits, attitudes and difficulties. It is found that while a large majority of students come from Chinese-speaking home environments, most do not practice the habit of reading Chinese materials and there is an obvious preference of English over Chinese reading regardless of genre. However, most students can draw self-motivation to read Chinese materials in
order to improve their Chinese results, and when they have available time. Limited vocabulary knowledge is chosen over all other factors as the greatest barrier to Chinese reading, yet when students encounter new vocabulary while reading, most would ignore or guess its meaning as opposed to proactively finding out the correct explanation.

A total of 100 vocabulary items sampled from a wordlist, previously gathered from common sources of local Chinese reading materials, were also administered as a Vocabulary Size Test to the same research subjects. Results show that for 75% of students, the average vocabulary size is 14,235 words, much lower than the start-up vocabulary size equivalent to 95% text coverage (18,083 words) as derived from theory proposed by Liu Na & Nation (1985), Laufer (1989) and Hu Yue Bao (2009).

Through the use of the SPSS 18.0 statistical analysis software, it is found that above the 95%
start-up level, there is a positive effect of students' vocabulary size on Chinese reading. However, most Secondary School students in Singapore have yet to attain that level, and hence their vocabulary sizes show no significant effects on reading. The findings of this paper thus show that vocabulary size is indeed one of the main limiting factors to Chinese reading, contrary to popular belief that it is mainly the psychological barriers and time constraints students face that lead to a lack of Chinese reading.

Finally, through classroom observations, this paper aims to elucidate the shortcomings of reading activities conducted in classrooms and offer suggestions to increase the readability of materials as a means to enhance Chinese reading. This can be achieved by increasing students' current vocabulary size or by controlling the amount of unfamiliar vocabulary in recommended reading materials.