Chapter XV
Electronic Strategies to Improve Chinese Reading Skills

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a series of studies carried out with intermediate learners of Chinese regarding the reading of authentic e-materials with hyperlinked dictionaries. The study results indicate that it is practical to let intermediate students read authentic e-materials when aided by hyperlinked dictionaries, which can improve reading comprehension and vocabulary retention. Guided by the findings from these studies, good practices on how to use authentic e-materials and hyperlinked dictionaries to improve reading skills for intermediate students are introduced. It is recommended that in order to achieve optimal results when using technology, instructors need to employ systematic strategies to support and guide students in the reading process.

INTRODUCTION

Because Chinese sentence structures are relatively easy, mastery of vocabulary is the principal difficulty in reading Chinese. In Modern Chinese texts, there are boundaries for characters, but no boundaries for words that may be composed of a variable number of characters. In the reading process, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) learners need to recognize characters, combine them into words, and recognize the meaning of words. The bottleneck for intermediate CFL learners to read authentic materials lies in their lack of vocabulary. Intermediate learners in this chapter are defined according to the general division in the U.S.—intermediate low students are those who have mastered the basic grammatical patterns and several hundred core vocabulary items, while intermediate high students are those who are nearly ready to tackle authentic materials. One popular textbook series, Integrated Chinese (Yao et al., 2005), leads students through the entry level over two level-one books. After finishing the level-one
books, students are ready to take intermediate courses, and they have learned basic sentence structures, a little more than 700 characters, and less than 2,000 words.

In Chinese, knowledge of the 1,500 most frequently used characters constitutes the threshold of literacy. According to the frequency list of modern Chinese (Language Teaching Research Section of the Beijing Language Institute, 1986), the first 1,500 characters in the list covered approximately 96% of all the characters in the corpus texts from which the frequency list was generated. In terms of words, the 4,000 most frequently used words in the list covered approximately 90% of the corpus texts. Liu (2000) points out that around 5,000 words are needed to read general articles in newspapers and to understand general broadcast news. To summarize, the 1,500 most frequently used characters and 4,000-5,000 words are needed to read general authentic materials. Hence, there exists a large vocabulary gap between what intermediate (especially intermediate low) students know and what is required for reading authentic materials.

Can we use authentic materials to improve reading skills for intermediate students? At the intermediate level, CFL students have already learned the basic sentence structures of the language. Moreover, generally speaking, CFL learners are proficient readers in L1 (first language), which is conducive to their reading in L2 (second language), Chinese in this case. As indicated by Nuttall (1996), “There is a strong transfer of reading habits from one language to another” (p. 58). Bernhardt (2003) indicates 20% of L2 reading can be explained from L1 literacy. Nevertheless, there is still a great vocabulary hurdle for intermediate students to surmount in order to read authentic materials. Nuttall (1996) thinks that 2-3% of new words in extensive reading texts is a high concentration of new vocabulary. If we use this criterion, intermediate CFL learners have too large a vocabulary gap to close in order to read authentic materials. A paper dictionary cannot effectively aid them, as it is very time consuming to look up a word in a dictionary. Hence, it is difficult for immediate students to use a paper dictionary to tackle authentic materials that are not yet within their reach.

We can resort to computer technology to help intermediate students read authentic electronic materials (e-materials), because in an “optimal instructional environment,” “technology is an integral part of a successful foreign-language curriculum” (Bai, 2003, p. 1). Martinez-Lage (1997) points out that “the use of interactive hypermedia technology in the teaching of reading…brings a number of unquestionable benefits to both instructors and students” (p. 149). This chapter explores the use of authentic e-materials and hyperlinked dictionaries to develop reading skills for intermediate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is done to explore the uniqueness of the Chinese language, the differences between reading printed and e-materials, the advantages of using authentic materials, the features of hyperlinked dictionaries, and the existing literature on the effects of hyperlinked dictionaries on reading comprehension.

The Prominence of Understanding the Meaning of Characters and Words

Characters are the building blocks of written Chinese. As summarized by Xu (2001), the basic language unit in Chinese is the character, not the word—in fact, linguists cannot give a precise definition of the Chinese word. Holding the same view, Lü (2006) also advocates the idea that characters are combined into words and phrases, and words and phrases are further expanded to sentences in actual use. Because of the central position of characters in the written language,