

Expanding the Discussion on Second Language Reading Strategy Training: A Response to Taylor’s Commentary on Lin, Gao, and Huang (2023)

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Abstract

This article responds to Alan Taylor’s commentary (Taylor, 2024) on our study, Lin et al. (2023), which reported the positive effects of a strategies-based Chinese as a second language reading instruction program on reading comprehension. First, we clarify the calculation of effect size in our study, which indicates a moderate effect size. In agreement with Taylor, we emphasize that the effectiveness of reading strategy training may depend on many factors, including the types of strategies taught, learners’ language proficiency, and the linguistic features of target languages. As a result, there is no clear consensus on the impact of reading strategy training. The success of reading strategy training also largely depends on the design and structure of the training programs. Building on Taylor’s discussion, we further elaborate on the strengths and limitations of our reading strategy training program and suggest improvements for further research.

Keywords: L2 reading, reading strategy training, reading comprehension, effect size

We appreciate Alan Taylor’s insightful commentary (Taylor, 2024) on our research article on strategies-based Chinese as a second language reading instruction (“Strategies-based Chinese as a second language reading instruction: effects and learners’ perceptions” Lin et al., 2023). We especially value his feedback on our research design, as well as the design of the training session and strategy application practice sessions. Additionally, we are grateful for his suggestions regarding future research directions.

Nonetheless, we point out that there is no consensus on the effects of strategy training on second language (L2) reading comprehension (Taylor et al., 2006). Echoing Taylor et al. (2006) and other previous studies, such as Singh (2019) and Yapp et al. (2023), we found that the reading strategy training program we designed had a positive effect on L2 reading comprehension, with a moderate effect size of $r = 0.40$ ¹. Regarding the effect size, Dr. Taylor suggested using Cohen's d , which resulted in an effect size of 0.96.

First and foremost, we need to clarify our calculation of the effect size. Due to the small sample sizes in our study, we employed non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests instead of independent sample t -tests to compare group differences. This choice was made because Mann-Whitney U tests are more conservative and do not rely on normal distribution assumptions. The calculation of effect size for the Mann-Whitney U test differs from that of t -tests. When using the Mann-Whitney U test, the effect size should be calculated using the following formula (Pautz et al., 2018), rather than Cohen's d (see Figure 1). According to Cohen (1988, 1992), a commonly used interpretation is to refer to effect sizes as small ($r = 0.1$), moderate ($r = 0.3$), and large ($r = 0.5$). Therefore, we still believe that the effect size of strategy training in our study is moderate ($r = 0.40$).

$$r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{n_a + n_b}}$$

Figure 1. Effect Size Used in Pautz et al. (2018, p. 122)

Second, Taylor raised important points that the effectiveness of reading strategy training may depend on a number of factors. Variables like language proficiency, the linguistic features of target languages, and the types of strategies taught may especially impact its effectiveness. In Lin et al. (2023), we focused on the training of top-down reading strategies for advanced L2 Chinese learners. While bottom-up strategies concentrate on word recognition, decoding, syntax, or text details and attend to lower-level linguistic units, top-down strategies focus on higher-level cues and are primarily used to synthesize information and develop a holistic understanding of larger sections or entire texts (Lee-Thompson, 2008). Thus, top-down reading strategies may hold greater significance for advanced readers, who often engage with longer texts. As Taylor suggested, there may be a threshold at which top-down strategy training becomes more effective for beginner or intermediate learners, warranting further research.

Regarding linguistic characteristics, Tsao (1979) argued that a key distinction between Chinese and English is that Chinese is a discourse-oriented language, while English is more sentence-oriented. English sentences have clear boundaries, allowing for syntactic analysis at the sentence level. In contrast, reading comprehension in a discourse-oriented language like Chinese should rely on all of the discourse information available (Tsao, 1979). For this reason, top-down reading strategies, which facilitate holistic understanding, could be more salient for reading discourse-oriented languages than sentence-oriented languages. All in all, to further investigate the effects of training of top-down reading strategies, more research is needed that includes L2 learners of other languages and L2 learners of lower proficiency levels.

Third, the primary determinant of the effectiveness of strategy training lies in the training itself. Aspects such as the design of training procedures, the quality of strategy modeling and practice, and the alignment of reading materials with the students' proficiency level directly impact the success of reading strategy training. Several models of language learning strategy training have been proposed, such as Cohen and Weaver's (2005), Carrell's (1998), and Janzen's (2002) models. Based on these models, we designed our 5-step reading strategy instruction used in the study. We attribute the effectiveness of our strategy training program to two main reasons.

1. In strategy-use modeling, not only declarative knowledge but also procedural and conditional knowledge of reading strategies were introduced. Specifically, the instructor explained what the specific strategy entailed, how to apply it, why it was important, when (before, during, or after reading), and where (in which part of the text) it should be used.
2. We helped students internalize reading strategies through reflection and sufficient practice. The final two steps of strategy-use training encouraged students to reflect on their use of strategies and how to apply them in other reading contexts.

What is more important, we arranged six 50-minute sessions of strategy application practice, following the strategy-use training. In each session, students practiced using reading strategies they had learned while reading three articles from diverse genres. In addition, while reading, students were required to mark on reading materials to indicate their strategy use. Although marking the text might distract students' reading comprehension, it ensured that they were practicing using strategies while reading.

In Lin et al. (2023), we reflected on the limitations of the training program we designed and reported student suggestions on how to improve it. Especially, as Taylor also pointed out, the ten reading strategies were taught all at once during the first week of instruction and this intensive approach appeared to overwhelm the students. Students might forget some of the instructions in the following six weeks. To address this limitation, we considered using four 30-minute strategy training sessions instead of a single 75-minute session, focusing on teaching and practicing only two to three strategies more thoroughly in each session. While we still intend to maintain the six 50-minute sessions for strategy application practice, we believe it is essential to provide individualized and immediate feedback, which was lacking in our original design. Generally speaking, participants did not show much interest in reading strategy training. Exploring ways to enhance students' instrumental and intrinsic motivation for learning reading strategies deserves more research and instructional efforts.

In summary, the effectiveness of reading strategy training depends on a range of variables. The effect of strategy training may vary based on students' proficiency levels, the target languages, and the strategies being taught. It may not be feasible to draw a conclusion about the overall usefulness of strategy training; instead, we can only evaluate the effectiveness of specific training programs or models for particular groups of L2 learners.

Note

1. In our original article published in 2023, there was a typographical error where the effect size was written as “ $r = 0.43$.” With the editors’ assistance, we corrected this error in March 2024, changing “ $r = 0.43$ ” to “ $r = 0.40$.”

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AI Usage Disclosure:

We used ChatGPT to help correct grammatical mistakes in certain sentences.

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