

BOOK REVIEW



Review of *Ponddy Reader*

Jing Zhou, Zhejiang International Studies University

April Zhao, Harvey Mudd College

Ponddy Reader

Product Type: a web-based learning platform

Requirements: a mobile device, tablet, or computer

Access: via website

Available from: <https://reader.ponddy.com>

Cost: free for Lite users; US \$ 35 annually for School users; US \$ 99.99 annually for Standard users



Introduction

[Ponddy Reader](#) is a website that provides Chinese language teachers and learners with online reading resources and Chinese lessons. Leveraging Ponddy Reader's artificial intelligence (AI) and nature language processing (NLP) algorithms, the platform transforms any reading content into an interactive learning module which offers visualization of the vocabulary items, grammar points, Chinese characters, radicals (i.e., base components of each character), as well as customized games and discussion questions. A free version of the platform is available for open access, although many of the features are limited to subscribed users only.

Description

Reading Material

With Ponddy Reader, learners of Chinese can read articles (also known as *Pondlets*) available from the website's *Ponddy Library* database. The Ponddy Library provides over a thousand interactive lessons to teachers and learners of Chinese, which are categorized into different collections, such as Advanced Placement (AP), Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK, a Chinese proficiency test), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (see [Figure 1](#)).

When users look for articles in the Ponddy Library, they can see the title, date posted, *claps* (i.e., a type of "like" button), and assigned difficulty level ([Figure 2](#)). Furthermore, students can access a list of vocabulary and grammar items and add them to *My Pond*, where they can learn and practice these items in detail. It is worth noting that there is a list of "can-do statements" at the top of the Pondlet. Learners can check whether they are able to fulfill those can-do statements after reading the Pondlet and completing the lesson. Once a student opens a Pondlet, they can play the audio of the article ([Figure 3](#)). Students have the option to listen to the entire article, listen paragraph by paragraph, or even word by word. The words are underlined according to the difficulty levels, and students can click on any word to view its definition.

Figure 1

Ponddy Library

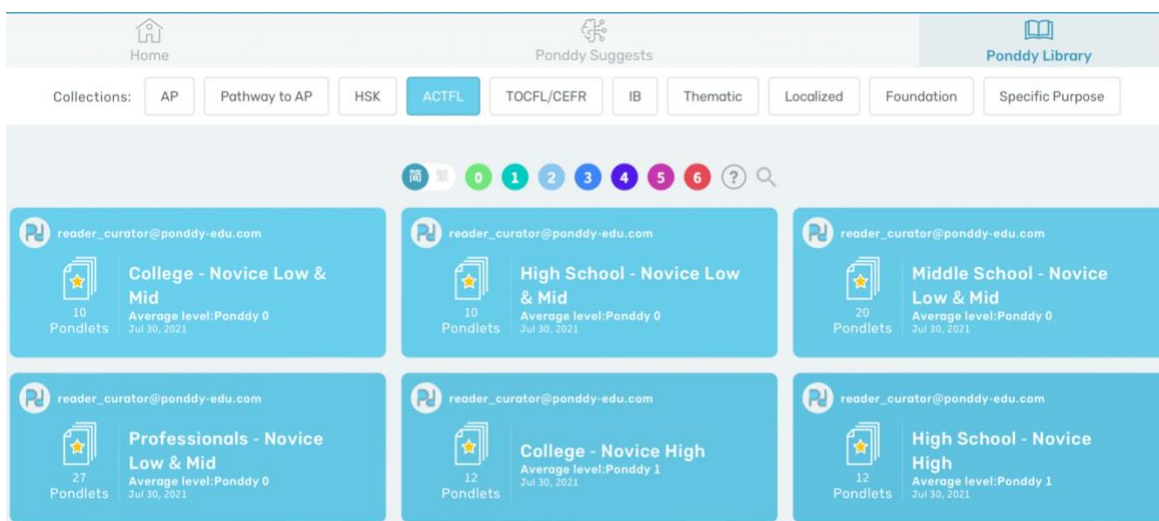
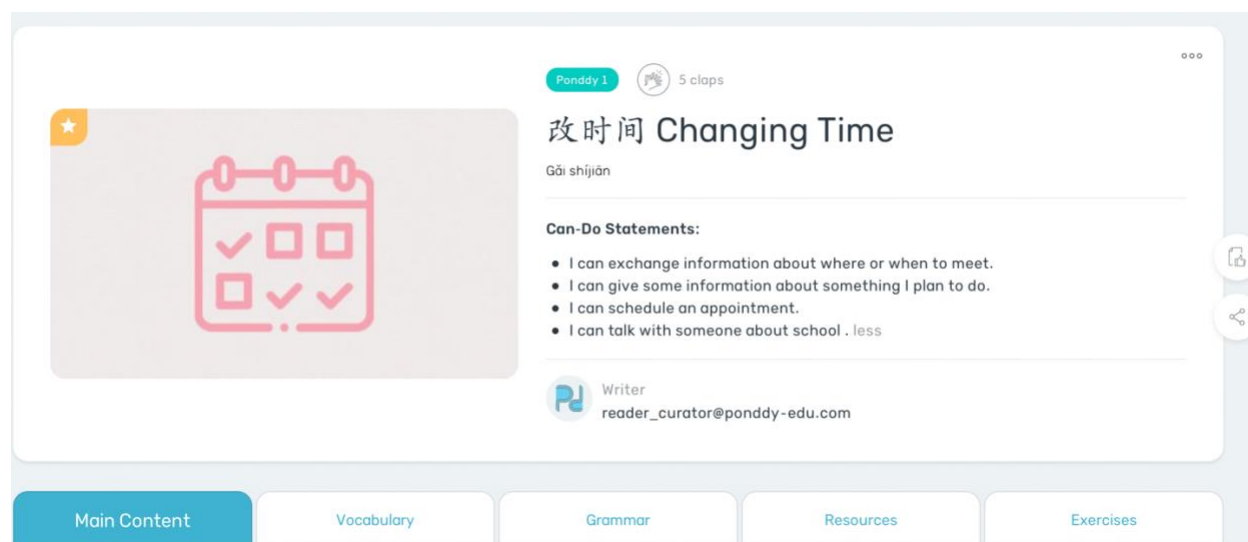


Figure 2

A Pondlet in the Ponddy Library



Alternatively, teachers can upload their own articles to the website. Once uploaded and processed, the generated Pondlets are automatically assigned difficulty levels based on the difficulty of the vocabulary items in the articles (i.e., automatic leveling). The website then creates the main content (i.e., the text in Pinyin), vocabulary, grammar explanations, resources, and exercises for the uploaded article. After the Pondlet is completed and ready to use, the teachers can download the PDF version of the Pondlet, share it through Facebook or Twitter, or post a link to the Pondlet in a learning management system such as Canvas or Sakai.

Figure 3*Reading a Pondlet*

北京有许许多多的胡同，胡同与胡同之间是住宅，这些住宅就是四合院。
 Běijīng yǒu xǔxǔduōduō de hùtòng , hùtòng yǔ hùtòng zhījiān shì zhùzhái , zhèxiē zhùzhái jiùshì sìhéyuàn
 。 “四”是东、南、西、北四边，“合”的意思是围在一起，四合院
 。 “Sì” shì dōng , nán , xī , běi sì biān , “hé” de yìsi shì wéi zài yìqǐ , sìhéyuàn
 就是一个用四边房屋包围起来的院落。四边房屋分别是正房、南
 jiùshì yí ge yòng sì biān fángwū bāowéi qǐlái de yuǎnlùò . Sì biān fángwū fēnbíe shì zhèngfáng , nán
 房、东厢房和西厢房，房屋与房屋之间是用院墙连接起来的
 fáng , dōng xiāngfáng hé xī xiāngfáng , fángwū yǔ fángwū zhījiān shì yòng yuàn qiáng liánjiē qǐlái de
 院子。
 yuǎnzi .

Interactive Vocabulary

One of the most unique features offered by Pondly Reader is its interactive vocabulary display. Once a user clicks on a vocabulary item, they are presented with four panels: (a) *Dictionary*, (b) *Word Pond*, (c) *Character Pond*, and (d) *Radical Pond*.

Dictionary

The Dictionary panel allows learners to see an overview of a vocabulary item. It provides a traditional dictionary view with audio, part of speech, frequency, and sample sentences (Figure 4). Sample sentences are ranked by the difficulty level so that the learners can refer to the ones that best suit their current language proficiency. The frequency feature gives a general idea of how frequently this vocabulary item is used (i.e., low, medium, or high).

Figure 4*Dictionary View*

中国人
 Zhōngguó rén
 Chinese (people)

Frequency
 LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Zhōngguó rén n. Chinese (people)

王先生，你是中国人吗？
 Mr. Wang, are you Chinese?

方蕾是中国人。
 Fang Lei is from China.

Word Pond

Word Ponds provide visualizations of words closely related to a single vocabulary item. A Word Pond allows learners to see the words or phrases that often appear together with the vocabulary item so that they can deepen their understanding of this vocabulary item's use. Arrows pointing toward or away from the vocabulary item indicate the ordering of the two words or phrases, which is another feature of the visualization. For example, Figure 5 shows the words and phrases that are closely related to the vocabulary item “中国人” (Zhōngguó rén, Chinese). “我们” and “中国人” together means “we Chinese,” and “中国人” and “齐心协力” together means “Chinese people work together.”

Figure 5

Word Pond for 中国人



Character Pond

Learners can learn how a character is used to form other words or phrases through the Character Pond feature. A Character Pond is provided for each character in a vocabulary item. For the vocabulary item “中国人” (in Figure 5), a Character Pond is provided for “中” (center), “国” (country), and “人” (people) respectively (see Figure 6). Learners are first shown a dictionary definition of the character, then provided with words or phrases that contain the character. Learners can click on the related words and phrases to look up their pronunciation and meaning.

Radical Pond

Finally, a Radical Pond is provided for each radical in the characters of the vocabulary item. Radicals are basic components of Chinese characters (Sun, 2006). The Radical Pond in Figure 7 displays different characters with similar components to facilitate understanding of the semantic and phonetic radicals that make up each Chinese character. Radical knowledge, especially semantic radical knowledge, has been found to contribute to Chinese character recognition and reading comprehension among Chinese as a foreign or second language readers (e.g., Zhou, 2018). The Radical Pond feature can expand L2 Chinese readers' knowledge of radicals and orthography, thus contributing to their reading proficiency.

Figure 6

Character Ponds for 中国人

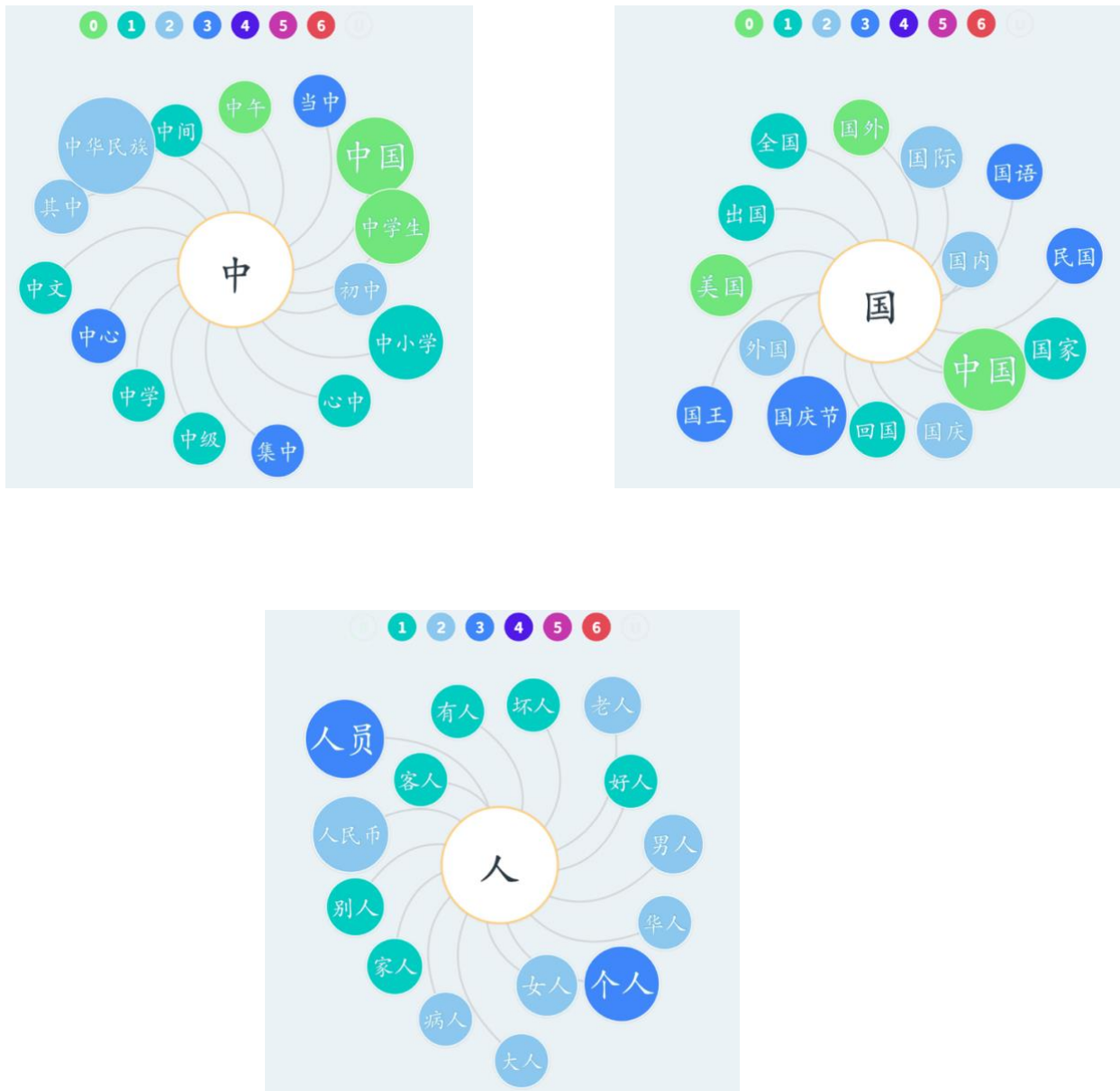


Figure 7*Sample Radical Pond***Grammar**

The grammar points from Pondlets are summarized in a list format. Similar to vocabulary items, these grammar points are also assigned a difficulty level. Grammar rules can also be added to a learner's Pond. Learners can view their vocabulary and grammar Ponds separately in their personal dashboards. For each grammar point, a learner can read grammar details, which is an explanation of the usage of the grammar point in English, as well as several sample grammar sentences (Figure 8). However, the sample sentences feature is available only to subscribed users.

Figure 8*Grammar Point View*
Resources

In addition to vocabulary and grammar explanations, Pondy Reader also provides a *Resources* section for additional activities. This section is comprised of several components: the reading comprehension section, the language note corner, supplementary readings, performance-based activities, and some supplementary words. For some Pondlets, there are also video clips with comprehension and discussion questions. The reading comprehension section asks learners detailed open-ended questions about the readings. These

questions are all based on the facts from the readings and are designed to check learners' comprehension of the reading material. However, an answer key to these questions is not provided. The language note corner provides explanations for some key grammar points. Performance-based activities are potential classroom activities for language teachers. Video clips available in some Pondlets can be a valuable resource for lead-in or review activities. If learners want to read more on a topic closely related to the article, they can explore articles provided in the supplementary readings.

Exercises

Finally, Pondy Reader offers interactive exercises for each reading to help learners consolidate vocabulary and grammar knowledge learned from the reading materials. Examples include Match the Pronunciation, Word Puzzle, Match the Meaning, Word Arrangement, and Drag to Fill games. These games offer learners opportunities to match vocabulary items with their pronunciation and meaning, as well as to practice the word order of a sentence. Each game is designed to address integrated skills, such as listening and reading, and can be played individually or as a group.

Evaluation

Pondy Reader is a valuable platform for teachers and learners of Chinese at all levels. The graded reading materials are particularly helpful for those learners who are interested in developing their Chinese reading skills and vocabulary knowledge. To encourage students to read more, L2 readers must read texts that reflect their language ability (Day & Bamford, 2002). The Pondy Library provides over a thousand readings for Chinese learners to choose from. Appropriate reading materials can be selected based on learner proficiency level and the difficulty level of the materials. To our knowledge, Pondy Reader is one of the first websites to provide online graded reading materials for learners of Chinese (an equivalent website for learners of English is Xreading.com). One suggestion to the website developers would be to include graded Chinese books in Pondy Reader. With its AI-assisted content processing function, the website can generate vocabulary items, grammar explanations, and exercises for the graded books. This way, Chinese language programs could use Pondy Reader for their extensive reading programs.

Besides the reading materials, the language activities, multimedia resources, and build-in exercises all support self-learning. Learners can learn new words by reading sample sentences, listening to their pronunciations, and looking up the meanings in the dictionary. They can further expand their Chinese character and radical knowledge by exploring the Character and Radical Ponds. The presentation of characters and radicals in networks (as shown in [Figures 6 and 7](#)) provides vivid visualization of a character or a radical as a building block for new words or characters. Since radical, character, and vocabulary knowledge are all lower-level linguistic skills that are essential for building L2 reading comprehension (Zhou, 2018), beginning and intermediate-level learners can benefit greatly from Pondy Reader. However, some of the information on the website might not be very helpful for learners. For example, although Pondy Reader presents information on the frequency of a vocabulary item, it is not clear how the frequency is calculated or what exactly it means. Thus, this function might not be very helpful for some learners.

Furthermore, learners can also use the website when preparing for Chinese proficiency tests as test level standards (e.g., AP, HSK, Pondy, TOCFL) can be selected in the account setting. As a result, all the readings, vocabulary, and grammar points can be marked according to that level standard (e.g., HSK 6). This feature can help learners to better prepare for language tests.

Pondy Reader is also a practical website for language teachers. Teachers can simply choose a Pondlet from the Pondy Library and adopt it in their language classroom or use it with minor revisions. One of the most powerful functions of the website is its ability to create language lessons based on the materials uploaded by teachers. The website can analyze reading materials and generate vocabulary items, grammar points, and exercises. This function can save language teachers a lot of time in lesson planning and material preparation. One weakness related to this function is that there is a 2500-character limit for the reading material that can be uploaded by subscribed users. Thus, if a reading passage exceeds the character limit, it

must be shortened. After the materials are prepared, teachers can incorporate them into a learning management system such as Canvas or share them via auto-generated links.

In sum, Pondy Reader is a useful tool for both learners and teachers of Chinese. With its AI-assisted content processing function, Pondy Reader provides rich resources for learning as well as teaching L2 Chinese in or outside a classroom.

References

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About the Authors

Jing Zhou is an associate professor at Zhejiang International Studies University. Her areas of research include second language reading, extensive reading, and teaching and learning Chinese and English as foreign languages.

E-mail: zhoujingshirley@gmail.com

April Zhao is a BA student majoring in computer science at Harvey Mudd College.

E-mail: abzhao@g.hmc.edu