



Reasons to read

Reading has always been an important skill for language learners. And in today's social media world there are more opportunities to communicate through the written word than ever.

But in the classroom, reading instruction can often look pretty two dimensional and students can be put off from developing this skill. So what can you do to motivate your students to read texts in Chinese, both long and short?

It's not a translation exercise

Possibly the most helpful thing you can do is to help your learners understand how reading tasks can have different objectives. All too often, teachers and their students think about a text as a challenge to learn and understand every single word.

On a day to day level this is impossible, especially with the many thousands of characters used in Mandarin. If students attempted to translate every word in a text they were given, then reading would simply turn into a long and arduous piece of dictionary work each time.

This is not only unrealistic, it is a sure fire way to make students cringe whenever they are given something to read. Vocabulary acquisition is very important but most people can handle just 10-20 new words in a single session, not the 100-200 unknown words they will find in the average text.

Different ways to read

So, the idea that learners can work with a text without understanding all of the words is a new and very liberating approach to reading in recent years. Faced with a long page of Chinese characters, students can take a moment to pause rather than panic... and then use a range of strategies to help them understand what the writer is trying to say.

This is where your teaching becomes so important. Rather than simply handing out a text and asking your students to understand it using a dictionary, give them several different reading tasks.

The first could be to scan the text quickly, simply to find the names of people and places they may know. They could do it again where they only have to look for words and characters they have already learned. With this information, what do they think the story is about?

Pre-reading

These kinds of activities will enable you to introduce “pre-reading” into your lesson planning. It’s a useful way to help your students to connect with the text. Suddenly, what they are about to read becomes more interesting because they see Chinese characters they already know and understand enough from the context to guess what comes in between.

Your pre-reading activity could also break out into a class discussion, where students are able to share ideas about the story and tell everyone what it means to them. Suddenly, their motivation to read has now become personal.

Reading

Then the reading starts and there are different ways to do this as well.

In language classrooms around the world, the idea of “Intensive” and “Extensive” reading is very common and this approach is now coming into Chinese language learning.

Intensive reading means a long text is broken up into short sections, with questions and tasks at the end of each chapter. Students often preview these and use them as a way to manage how they read.

In other words, the next 500-600 words of the story contain all the answers, and learners read with their radar switched on to find them. This can be a very interesting way to work through a long text in Mandarin.

Extensive reading is less structured and resembles the way people read books, novels, and long articles in their own language. Higher level learners find this very motivating because of the sense of achievement it brings.

After-reading

And finally, what do you do when your students have finished their text? The most satisfying and motivating stage for them is often to talk about it and to share their ideas again. After all, they have just completed a challenging piece of work and feel proud to talk about what they have just done.

“After-reading” is a really important part of the process to help your students continue to develop this skill. The next time you give them a text to read, they will remember how great it felt to talk about the last book they finished.

So, think about your students’ ability to read in Mandarin as a piece of fabric. In the early days, the holes will be large. Later on, these start to close until finally your students see the full picture.

Developing reading skills in Mandarin is not easy, but that is where your role as the teacher comes in. No one is perfect, so don’t try to achieve everything in one go.