L A V A I

International Journal of Education

Motivating foreign students' learning based on their reading skills: the example of foreign students studying in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the reading comprehension skills of foreign students to identify the factors that influence their ability to read in a foreign language. A total of 174 Mongolian students from universities in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of China have been participated in a questionnaire survey to assess their reading abilities. Among the participants, 70.1% were found to have an intermediate level of Chinese language proficiency, suggesting that the findings of this study are credible, as the participants represent a homogeneous proficiency group. While these students self-assessed their Chinese reading ability at 81.61%, actual results varied. Specifically, 54.2% reported difficulties with scientific texts, 32.18% found literary works challenging, and 31.03% struggled with newspaper articles. These findings suggest that insufficient knowledge of scientific vocabulary is a major impediment to improving overall reading ability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Insufficient reading and comprehension skills among foreign students pose significant barriers to their academic success, especially in professional coursework (Mingyuan & Weihe, 2024, p.78). These challenges can hinder students' ability to grasp course materials, negatively impact their learning strategies, and reduce their preparedness for professional careers. Addressing these deficiencies has therefore become a priority

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in higher education, particularly for foreign students studying in Chinese universities. Reading comprehension skills among foreign students have been identified as a critical issue due to their substantial impact on academic performance. Current evaluation standards often overemphasize surface-level skills, such as reading aloud or memorizing text, while neglecting deeper comprehension abilities. Consequently, many students can read individual words or passages but fail to grasp their meaning fully. Without the ability to comprehend text accurately, students struggle with essential academic skills, such as summarizing, critical thinking, and writing.

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted cognitive process that involves decoding linguistic input, constructing meaning, and applying knowledge in a broader academic context (Mingyuan & Weihe, 2024, p.78). Despite the extensive language instruction offered at preparatory programs-30 hours per week, totaling 1,080 hours annually-the overall outcomes remain suboptimal. This discrepancy highlights the need for comprehensive research to understand the underlying factors influencing reading proficiency among foreign students in Inner Mongolia.

Researchers have noted that the ability to read, comprehend by reading, and read with fluency affects the ability regardless of what language do people speak.Also, regardless of the language, reading ability refers to the ability to correctly interpret words，words with related sources, and to process information in order to understand the general meaning of information (Byambatseren, 2020.p.74).

The result of reading depends on two abilities: reading words and reading comprehension (Krashen, 2021, p.81). Researchers Guthrie & Wigfield (2017, p.12), Jialing Han (2024, p.1), Dina & Dongming (2020, p.11) pointed out in their research that the language ability of readers is closely related to the use of reading strategies. Based on these studies, students with high reading ability are more likely to read and comprehend the content (Zhang & Wu, 2009, p.15). Students with low reading skills may not be able to comprehend the meaning of a text (Ping & Hua, 2024, p.6). Researcher Yumasheva, (2008, p.5) supported the above idea, they emphasised that reading comprehension is a cognitive activity that includes understanding the meaning of content, consciously responding, and integrating (Mufidah et al., 2023, p.4).
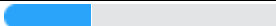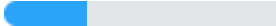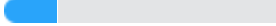
Additionally, comparative studies have shown that reading fluency and comprehension abilities are foundational to academic performance across disciplines and cultural contexts. For instance, studies indicate that reading proficiency directly influences mathematical performance, underscoring its cross-disciplinary relevance (Ministry of Education, World Bank, 2018. p.9). Building on these insights, this study investigates the reading challenges faced by Mongolian students in Inner Mongolia and explores targeted strategies to improve their academic and professional outcomes.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, we used mixed-methods approach that consisted of theoretical analysis, factual comparison, and empirical research to explore the reading comprehension skills of Mongolian students studying in universities in Inner Mongolia. We collected our primary data through the questionnaire from 174 students and 30 instructors, between March and June, 2024. Our questionnaire survey was aiming to evaluate reading abilities and comprehension levels. The research methodology also incorporated a quantitative analysis of participants' self-assessments and performance metrics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by these students.

General Information:

Table 1. Age Distribution of participants

Age category	Number	Percentage
18-19	53	30.46%
20-21	51	29.31%
22-23	32	18.39%
Above 24	38	21.84%
Total number of participants in the study	174	

The survey revealed that the participants were distributed across four main age groups: 30.46% of students were aged 18–19, 29.31% were aged 20–21, 18.39% were aged 22–23, and 21.84% were aged 24 or older (Table 1). This diverse age range reflects the varied academic and personal experiences of the respondents, which may influence their reading abilities and learning strategies.

Table 2. Gender Distribution

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	92	52.87%
Female	82	47.13%
Total number of participants in the study	174	

The gender composition of the participants was relatively balanced, with 52.87% male and 47.13% female students. This gender distribution ensures a representative sample for examining the reading challenges and strategies adopted by both groups.

Table 3. Duration of Study

Period of study	Number	Percentage	
1 year	107		61.49%
2 years	27		15.52%
3 years	19		10.92%
4 years	7		4.02%
Above 5 years	14		8.05%
Total number of participants in the study	174		

The majority of respondents (61.49%) were in their first year of study at Inner Mongolia universities, while smaller proportions reported studying for two or more years. This suggests that most participants are relatively new to the academic environment, which may contribute to their challenges with Chinese reading and comprehension.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found that 80.5% of students possessed Chinese language proficiency at Chinese Proficiency Test HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) Level 3 and 4. This indicates a relatively consistent baseline of language skills among the participants, making them suitable candidates for studying reading comprehension challenges (Figure 1A).
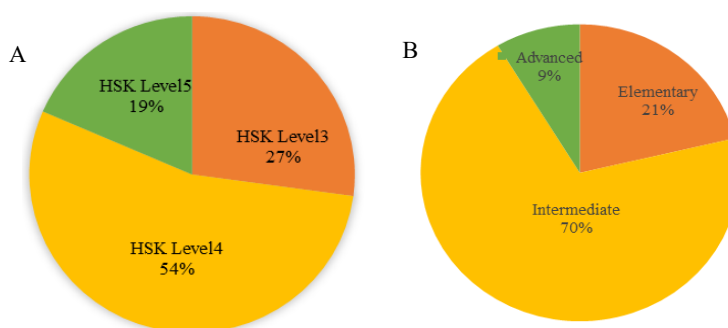

Figure 1. A. HSK Level of all participants, and B. Self-Assessment of Reading Proficiency level

When asked to rate their Chinese reading proficiency level, 21.6% of respondents categorized themselves as elementary readers, while 70.1% assessed themselves as intermediate. These self-assessments align with the overall challenges identified in the study (Figure 1B).
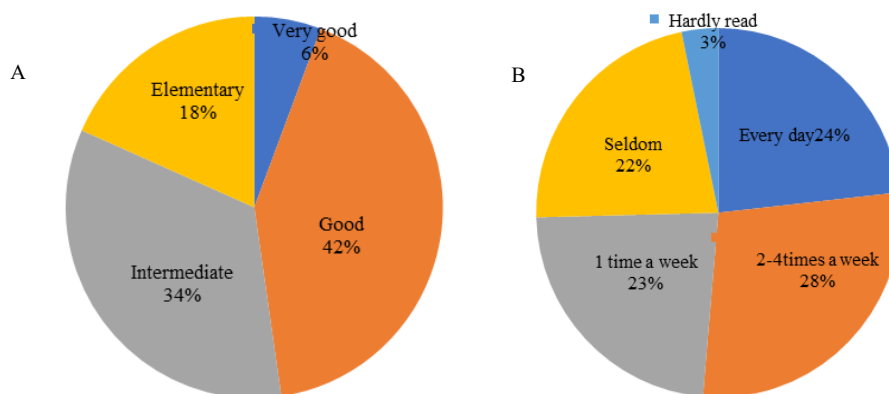
Figure 2. A. Self-Assessment of Reading Ability Acquisition, B. Reading Frequency Outside Class

Of the 174 students who participated in our study, 47.7 percent rated their Chinese reading ability as good enough, and the remaining 52.3 percent rated it as moderate, which shows the need for this research (Figure 2A).

The data highlights significant variation in students' engagement with reading outside class. While 24.71% of students reported reading Chinese daily, nearly half (45.4%) admitted to reading less than once a week, reflecting a need to foster better reading habits (Figure 2B).

Table 4. Types of Difficult Reading Material

Type of text	Number	Percentage	
Textbook	47		27.01%
Newspapers and articles	54		31.03%
Literature book	56		32.18%
Non-fiction essays	45		25.86%
Free non-fiction essays	40		22.99%
Scientific books and writings	94		54.02%
Others	6		3.45%
Total number of participants in the study	174		

Students reported varying levels of difficulty with different types of reading material. Scientific books were identified as the most challenging (54.02%), followed by literary texts (32.18%) and newspaper articles (31.03%). These findings suggest that specialized vocabulary and complex content are primary obstacles (Table 4).
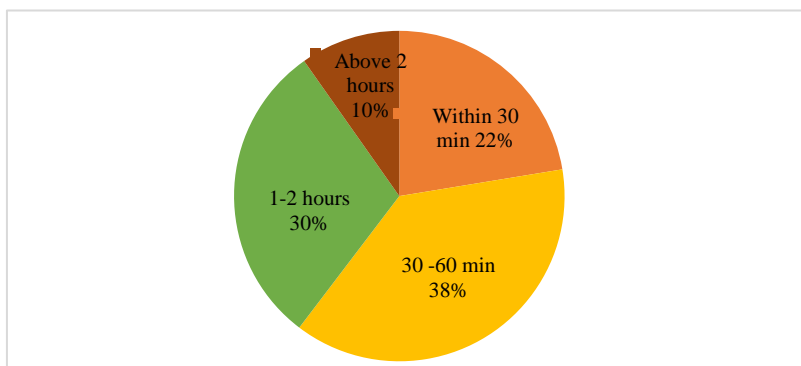
Figure 3. Duration of Outside class reading

We believe that the students in our study are not spending enough time in outside class reading. The proportion of students who study for more than two hours is 9.8%, reflecting a need to be further improved.

Table 5. Types of Electronic Tools

Electronic tools	Number	Percentage	
Audiobooks and e-books (such as Kindle)	58		33.33%
Online articles, news and information	36		20.69%
Chinese learning apps (Duolingo, Fluentu, Wechat)	99		56.9%
Online courses (HSK, Udemy)	31		17.82%
Others	38		21.84%
Total number of participants in the study	174		

Our research shows that the participants come from a particular generation with a high use of electronic devices, they use all types of electronic devices equally.
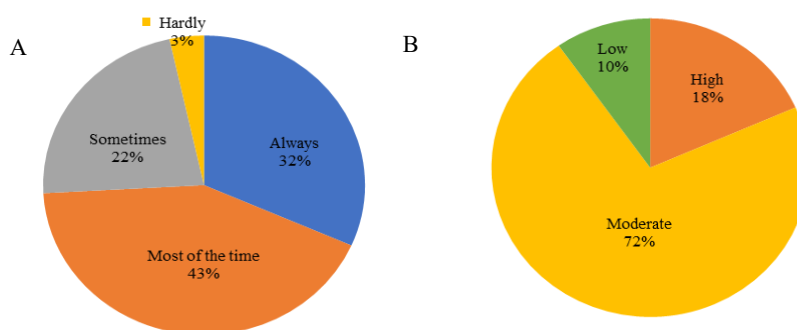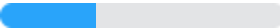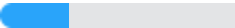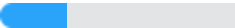

Figure 4. A. Frequency of Using Dictionaries and Translation Software, B. Self-Assessment

of comprehension of the content

Our research shows that 74.14% of the respondents use dictionaries and translation programs frequently. Over-reliance on translation program is not conducive to memorizing new words or understanding the text completely (Figure 4A).

Only 18% of the students who participated in the survey said they fully understood the content , and 82 % said they could not fully understand (Figure 4B).

Table 6. Ways to Learn Chinese

How	Number	Percentage	
Take notes and translate the key content	80		45.98%
Memorize new words to increase vocabulary	87		50%
Ask other students for help	59		33.91%
Use electronic textbooks to teach oneself	60		34.48%
Take extra classes to improve reading skills	42		24.14%
Learn Chinese by playing games (Qu Chinese, FluentU, LinguPin)	41		23.56%
Other applications	10		5.75%
Total number of participants in the study	174		

Students learn Chinese in a variety of ways, with（45.98%）taking notes and translating and（50%）memorizing words. This shows that they cannot read the text directly.

	Mongolian Students in Universities of Inner Mongolia
Current status	- Half of the students (52.3%) have an intermediate level of Chinese language skills. - 45.1% of students read less than once a week outside class. This indicates that they do not have the reading comprehension and application ability in the professional knowledge. - 54.2% of students found it challenging to read scientific books, followed by literary texts (32.18%) and newspaper articles (31.03%). These findings suggest that developing independent reading ability is in an urgent need. - The high demand for reading e-books can be seen from the heavy use of apps to learn Chinese. - We have found that one obvious disadvantage of frequent use of translation software is the inability to remember words. - 82% of students found it difficult to fully comprehend the text. - Taking notes and reading new words using a dictionary affects comprehension.

The findings of this study underline the need to develop targeted strategies to improve the reading comprehension skills of Mongolian students in Inner Mongolia universities. Several key recommendations can be drawn from the results:

1. *Enhanced Curriculum Design*: Update course content to focus on vocabulary enrichment, contextual comprehension, and advanced reading strategies, with special attention to scientific and technical texts.

2. *Incorporation of Technology*: Leverage digital learning tools, such as language apps, e-books, and online courses, to enhance engagement and provide interactive learning experiences.

3. *Teacher Training*: Equip instructors with methodologies that integrate interactive learning and provide structured guidance on improving comprehension.

4. *Encouraging Independent Reading*: Foster a culture of independent reading by providing access to diverse reading materials and emphasizing its importance in academic success.

Conclusion: This study investigated the factors influencing the development of reading comprehension skills among Mongolian students studying in universities within the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. A total of 174 students participated in the questionnaire survey, which provided valuable insights into their reading abilities and challenges.

- Among the participants, 70.1% demonstrated an intermediate level of Chinese proficiency, suggesting that the findings are credible and representative of this demographic. While the students self-assessed their Chinese reading ability at an average of 81.61%, the results from the pilot study revealed notable discrepancies.

- Specifically, 54.2% of the respondents reported difficulties in reading scientific texts, 32.18% struggled with literary works, and 31.03% found newspaper articles challenging. These findings indicate a significant deficiency in their scientific vocabulary, which heavily impacts their overall reading comprehension.

- The study also highlighted a lack of commitment to improving reading skills outside of class. Only 9.8% of students spent more than two hours daily on independent reading, which is insufficient to achieve meaningful progress.

- Furthermore, 45.98% of the students reported relying on taking notes and translating key content to understand texts, while 50% focused on memorizing new vocabulary. This suggests that many students still lack the ability to read, comprehend, and translate directly without additional support.

These findings underscore the urgent need to implement targeted interventions to enhance reading comprehension among these students. Encouraging greater engagement in

independent reading, expanding their scientific vocabulary, and promoting more effective reading strategies are essential steps toward improving their overall proficiency and academic performance.

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(Handling editor: Onolragchaa Ganbold)