English Vocabulary and Comprehension Instruction in Secondary Schools in China

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe English vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction at three secondary schools under the most current English curriculum in Beijing, China, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Twenty English teachers in three secondary schools in Beijing participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documents including curriculum standards, instructional materials, and teaching artifacts. The results suggested that vocabulary and comprehension remain the most important aspects of English reading instruction at the secondary school level under the current curriculum. For vocabulary knowledge, instruction focused on five aspects: pronunciation, spelling, meaning-usage-collocation, size, and application. For comprehension knowledge, instruction had three foci: testing strategies, stages of reading, and extensive reading. The importance of the findings was discussed, and teaching recommendations were made.

Keywords: vocabulary instruction, comprehension instruction, Chinese teachers of English, EFL.

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Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in China has undergone significant changes in the last decade. In 2001, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China published the National English Curriculum Standard (NECS) requiring English instruction be introduced in elementary school, and it has set higher objectives for students' vocabulary and comprehension achievement in secondary school (MOE, 2001). For example, it required students to master 1,500 to 1,600 vocabulary words and 200 to 300 phrases at the end of grade 9, and to understand and appreciate simplified version of English Classics at the end of grade 12 (MOE, 2001, p. 20, p. 17). In the two most important nation-wide examinations conducted at the end of middle school (grade 9) and at the end of high school (grade 12) – High School Entrance Examination (ZhongKao) and College Entrance Examination (GaoKao), the total points assigned to vocabulary and comprehension have also been increasing (Hu, Y. 2006; Zhang, Y. 2006). Although vocabulary and comprehension seem to have the increased significance, empirical studies on how and what vocabulary and comprehension instruction have been taught are limited. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to investigate vocabulary and comprehension instruction in secondary schools under the 2001 NECS. The research question investigated is: *How and what aspects are vocabulary and comprehension taught in secondary school classrooms in China?*

Literature Review

Reading is the most important skill in language learning (Gu, 2010). Although phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension have been regarded as necessary components of reading that should be taught to both native English speaking and English as a second or foreign language speaking (ESL and EFL) students (Hu, R. 2009; NRP, 2000; Tindall & Nisbet,

2010), vocabulary and comprehension have been the focus of instruction. While comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, vocabulary has been regarded as the base for English language learning and has played an important role in achieving comprehension (Lu, 2010; Luo, 2007). The literature review is divided into two sections: studies on vocabulary instruction and on comprehension instruction.

Vocabulary Instruction

Studies focusing on vocabulary instruction at the secondary school level in China pointed out current instructional problems (Lu, 2010; Luo, 2007; Miao, 2010). First of all, new vocabulary words are taught in isolation when research has shown that children better learn words when taught in the context of other words (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). Lu (2010) stated that many teachers taught unknown vocabulary words independently using the rote learning method, and failed to provide an appropriate context for students to remember the meaning and usage of the target word. Miao (2010) further indicated that some teachers depended on the glossary and neglected quality vocabulary exercises. Secondly, vocabulary instruction was partial, covering only the single aspect of a target word. Luo (2007) and Miao (2010) argued that knowing a word thoroughly means knowing its synonyms, antonyms, adjectives, adverbs, and different forms under different tenses (if it is a verb). Hence, teachers should introduce multiple meanings and usages of the word in different contexts (Lu, 2010). Thirdly, teachers failed to provide opportunities for students to repeatedly visit and review previous learned vocabulary words to enhance memorization. And lastly, under this technology-prevailed world, teachers failed to use multiple media to support vocabulary instruction and there was limited opportunity for students to practice using the learned

vocabulary in reality.

Other studies offered suggestions and recommendations about how vocabulary should be taught and what strategies should be used in second or foreign language education (Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Lu, 2010; Luo, 2007; McBride-Chang et al., 2005; Miao, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2001; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009). Seven strategies were suggested by these researchers: (a) using images, pictures, real objects to facilitate vocabulary learning, (b) using tongue twister, games, songs, and other activities to promote students' interest in learning vocabulary, (c) focusing on phonological awareness (English sound and letter relationship) and morphological structure awareness (the structure of morphemes or other units of meaning in the English language such as affixes, suffixes, and the parts of speech of a word), (d) helping students to form good learning habits (use a dictionary, develop a vocabulary notebook, learn vocabulary from multiple sources, and find opportunities to use them often), (e) providing explicit (direct teaching) and implicit lexical instruction (reading extensively, develop reading fluency), (f) using scientific memorization methods based on Ebbinghaus' Memory Curve, and (g) providing constant vocabulary quizzes.

Comprehension Instruction

Cunningham and Allington (2006) described comprehension as "the reason and prime motivator for engaging in reading" (p. 136). Although extensive amount of research explored classroom comprehension instruction of English, these studies investigated either the effectiveness of a specific approach and strategy (Jallad & Bani Abdelrahman, 2008; Liu, Chen, & Chang, 2010; Tsai, Ernstb, & Talleya, 2010; Zoghi, Mustapha, & Maasum, 2010) or how a particular aspect/activity influenced comprehension (Chang, 2010; El-Koumy,

2006). No study reported how comprehension instruction was conducted and what aspects were covered in secondary classrooms in China.

Several studies pointed out the problems of current comprehension instruction in China, such as teachers failing to promote students' higher order thinking skills, using ineffective activities, and focusing too much on language points rather than making meaning (Huang, 2007; Zhang, Y. 2006; Zhang, Y. N. 2008). A few other studies indicated vocabulary as the major hurdle in reading comprehension (Gu, 2010; Huang, 2007; Wu, 2008; Zhang & Annul, 2008; Zhang, Y. 2006). In addition, students' limited knowledge on comprehension strategies also caused poor comprehension among Chinese students (Gu, 2010; Kong, 2006; Liu, 2010; Tsai, Ernstb, & Talleya, 2010; Zhang, Y. N. 2008).

Suggestions have been offered in terms of how to improve comprehension instruction. Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, and Paris (1998) advocated the importance of previewing in teaching comprehension. Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2010) highlighted the importance of cultural factors in reading and advised that teachers should find every opportunity to find out what students know, need to know and what to know in terms of the cultural phenomenon in reading. Yu (2010) recommended questioning as an effective reading strategy and different questions should be asked at different reading stages. S. M. Wang (2006) suggested the combination of top-down and bottom-up strategy to form an interactive model of reading.

Other approaches recommended by many researchers were to encourage extensive reading (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Wang, Y. J. 2004) and repeated reading (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass & Gorsuch, 2004). ESL and EFL learners benefit a great deal from reading extensively and repeatedly to improve comprehension, promote vocabulary development, and enhance writing skills and oral proficiency.

Finally, Li (2010) offered suggestions on how reading comprehension should be taught under the task-based language teaching approach. Li argued that before reading, teachers should give enough time and design appropriate group projects to let students explore the topic. During the reading lesson, teachers should provide background knowledge and pay attention to students' interest in reading. Students should be encouraged to read multiple times with a different focus on each reading. Activities in different format should be conducted after reading, such as retelling, role-playing, and extra reading, to enhance comprehension.

The importance of vocabulary and comprehension has been elevating; however, research focusing on how vocabulary and comprehension are taught at secondary school level was limited. The above mentioned studies revealed the status quo, problems, and issues of vocabulary and comprehension instruction and offered suggestions for improvement; however, none of them elaborated on how vocabulary and comprehension instruction were conducted in classrooms or what instructional activities teachers used. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to describe vocabulary and comprehension instruction in secondary school classrooms.

Method

The study was framed under the social constructionist view that knowledge is constructed between and among the investigator and the investigated (Schwandt, 2000). Holding this view, social constructionists believe that research should be conducted in a natural setting, researchers should act as the research instrument, and qualitative methods, such as interviewing,

field observation, and document analysis, should be used to investigate the issues in depth (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; 1994). Therefore, this study adopted the qualitative research design. The research was conducted in the natural setting—the three secondary school classrooms in Beijing, China. The researcher was the instrument collecting data through interviewing, field observation, and document analysis; the goal of the study was to provide an in-depth explanation about the English vocabulary and comprehension instruction in EFL secondary classrooms in China.

Participants

Three secondary schools in Beijing, China were selected using the convenience sampling method (Patton, 2001). All three secondary schools are the complete secondary school, which means that they have both the middle school section (grade 7, 8, and 9) and the high school section (grade 10, 11, and 12). A total of 20 teachers participated in the study with 11 from middle school sections and nine from high school sections. Letters and numbers were used to replace the school and teachers' name in order to protect their privacy. Table 1 below shows the schools, the participating teachers at each school, and the grade level they taught.

Table 1. *School and Teacher Information*

Grade Level	Six Teachers in School A	Ten Teachers in School B	Four Teachers in School C
Grade 7	A1	B1	C1
Grade 8	A2	B2, B3	C2
Grade 9	A3	B4, B5	C3
Grade 10	A4		C4
Grade 11	A5	B6, B7	
Grade 12	A6	B8, B9, B10	

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews, class observations, and document collection. Semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1998) were used to talk with each teacher twice— one time before observation and one time

after all the observations have been done. Class observations (45 minutes long for each observation) were conducted to understand what the teachers said during interviews and, especially, what they have not said or done (Glesne, 2006). Each teacher was observed at least twice, but two teachers agreed to be observed teaching a complete unit, which consisted of eight lessons.

The documents collected in this study came from two major sources. The first major source of document data was public documents including textbooks, students' workbooks, teachers' manuals, and the 2001 NECS. These documents provided considerable information about the general objectives and standards of English teaching in Beijing, and the content of English teaching in these schools. The second major source of document data were those that were provided by the teachers including their PowerPoint presentations, the teacher or district and students work samples. These documents provided additional information to supplement the interview and observational data and helped develop further understanding of the participants and the research question.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was guided by the research question—*How and what aspects are vocabulary and comprehension taught in secondary school classrooms in China?* Interview and observation data were examined to look for instructional aspects and delivery methods on vocabulary and comprehension. Interview data were first analyzed, and then followed by the observational data.

A directed approach to content analysis was used with the interview data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In terms of vocabulary instruction, initial coding categories were developed based on R. Hu's (2009) research finding that teachers provided vocabulary

instruction from three aspects: *pronunciation, spelling,* and *meaning* at elementary schools in China. For the data that could not be coded under these three categories, new codes were developed, such as *vocabulary size, vocabulary usage and collocation,* and *vocabulary application.* In terms of comprehension instruction, R. Hu (2009) reported seven methods of instruction including *Chinese translation, picture walk/ illustrations, movies, questions, silent/ repeated reading, group reading,* and *explicit teaching of comprehension strategies* and they were used as the initial codes. For data that could not be coded under these seven categories, new codes were developed, such as *pre-reading activities, during-reading activities, post-reading activities, comprehension strategy, reading test explanation.* All these codes were then regrouped into three overarching categories: *test strategies, stages of reading,* and *extensive reading.*

The codes emerged from the interviews guided observation analysis. First, all the activities in each observation were listed and the emphasis of the lesson was determined. For example, in an 8th grade lesson, seven activities were conducted (Teacher asked pre-reading questions, Teacher asked students to make personal connections, Teacher asked students to do role-play activities, Teacher played a short movie clip of the text passage, Teacher asked listening comprehension questions, Teacher asked students to read aloud to each other, Teacher divided students into groups to write a short essay based on the topic), and the foci of the lesson were comprehension, listening, and writing. Then the number of lessons focused on each area was counted to summarize the instructional emphasis at middle school and high school levels. The interview analysis result, the list of instructional activities emerged from observations, together with the teaching, practice, and examination materials

given by the teachers, provided a complete picture to answer the research question.

Results

Out of the total of 49 observations, 11 lessons focused on comprehension, seven lessons focused on vocabulary, another seven lessons focused on vocabulary/comprehension, four lessons devoted to examination analysis and four lessons focused on writing, three lessons focused on writing/vocabulary, two lessons each focused on grammar, grammar/vocabulary, grammar/comprehension, grammar/vocabulary/comprehension, one lesson each focused on listening, listening/vocabulary, listening/comprehension, writing/vocabulary/comprehension, and listening/comprehension/writing (Figure 1). It was evident that vocabulary and comprehension were addressed in 38 out of the total 49 lessons (77.6%).

Figure 1. Number of observations focusing on each aspect
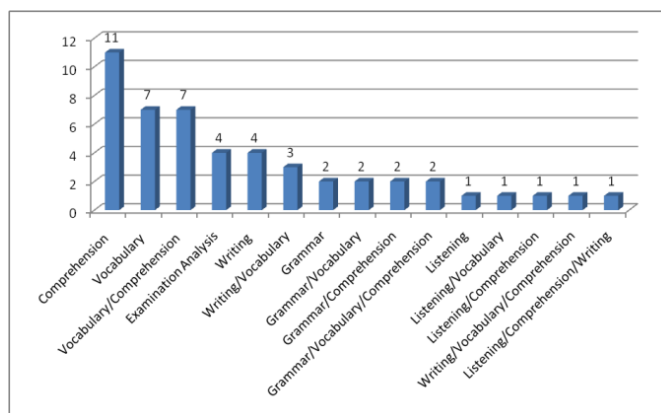
Vocabulary Instruction

Five aspects of vocabulary knowledge were included in vocabulary instruction, which were vocabulary pronunciation, vocabulary spelling, vocabulary meaning-usage-collocation, vocabulary size, and vocabulary application.

Vocabulary Pronunciation. Only 7th grade teachers provided explicit instruction

on vocabulary pronunciation and they have used two instructional activities: (a) teaching common letter combinations (e. g., a teacher taught students the pronunciation of letter combination *ou*, *au*), and (b) teaching the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Teachers reported that even though IPA was no longer required, they still taught it because they believed "once students know IPA, it gives them a tool to be able to sound words out by themselves" (Teacher C1, personal communication, March 15, 2010). Teachers in higher grades believed that students were already equipped with the ability to learn word pronunciation by themselves at above 7th grade, so no explicit instruction was necessary. And the teachers suggested students listening to the tape reading aloud to imitate pronunciation, paying attention to teachers' read-aloud during class, and referring to their electronic talking dictionary for correct pronunciation.

Vocabulary Spelling. Three teachers in school A did not consider vocabulary spelling as a problem for their students, whereas the rest of the teachers regarded it as students' major weakness. One grade 7 teacher said: "The spelling of words goes hand-in-hand with the pronunciation. If students could memorize the phonics rules, word spelling should not be that hard for them; however, they just cannot remember those rules, so spelling is a big problem for my students" (Teacher A1, personal communication, April 13, 2010). Another 12th grade teacher said: "I require my students to review the vocabulary list every day. Even just for a few minutes, they have to review the spelling every day to enhance memorization" (Teacher A6, personal communication, April 14, 2010). These teachers suggested different teaching methods.

Repeated Writing. Teachers stated that repeated writing of words while reading out loud was the most efficient way for language learners to memorize vocabulary spelling. The Chinese saying, *Practice makes perfect*, explains this task: once students have practiced spelling repeatedly, spelling the word out became automatic and effortless. Teachers suggested students should not only read the words, but also repeatedly spell them out. Teachers also suggested students copy unknown vocabulary in pocket notebooks, so students could use their free time (e.g., on the bus going to school in the morning, during lunch break, and taking the bus home in the afternoon) to review and sky-write those unknown vocabulary.

Word Formation Knowledge and Compound Word Awareness. Three teachers mentioned teaching word formation knowledge to assist memorization of word spelling. These teachers believed that knowing prefix, suffix, and root word could enlarge students' vocabulary size and made memorization easier. Another teacher reported helping students to build compound word awareness to enhance spelling. For example, understanding the words *home* and *sick* facilitate memorization of the word *homesick*.

Vocabulary Meaning, Usage and Collocation. Because instruction on the vocabulary meaning, usage, and collocation was usually delivered concurrently, they were grouped together as one category. Vocabulary meaning, usage, and collocation refer to students' ability of knowing a word's single and/or multiple meanings, how to use it under different contexts, and the co-occurrence of certain words together.

Learning from Context. Learning from context was the suggested and most commonly used approach. Teachers focused on text explaining rather than vocabulary

explaining, with the expectation that students could understand the meaning of the word and its usage from the context. For example, when teaching *used*, teachers explained the sentence *John got used to getting up early for morning exercises* rather than just the single word. Teachers expected students to understand the meaning of the word in this context, its usage and collocation, such as the word is usually used as a phrase *be used to*. Teachers emphasized the importance of teaching multiple meanings of words, as one teacher said: "We teach students the multiple meanings of words, not just the meaning in this one passage. In this way, when students come across the word in a different context, they will not regard the word as new" (Teacher B2, personal communication, March 5, 2010).

Explicit Instruction. Most of the teachers indicated that after students had the first exposure to the unknown words in the reading passage, they also explicitly explained the important vocabulary words. Teachers at grade 9 and 12 stated they spent half of the semester's classes summarizing the usage of the required 800 words at the end of 9th grade and 600 words at the end of 12th grade for students to master. This explicit instruction included teaching multiple meanings, usages, collocations, its synonym and autonym, different forms under different tenses. Figure 2 presents examples of two teachers' explicit instruction on two key vocabulary words *wonder* and *ruin*.

Figure 2. Explicit instruction on the words *wonder* and *ruin*

Wonder
- use as a verb.
  1) wonder about … or wonder + wh-clause
  2) I wonder if/whether I/you could… (politely ask a request).
     E.g. I was wondering… (more polite)
  3) wonder at something = to be surprised at something
     E.g. She wondered at her own stupidity.
- use as a Noun. Uncountable = Surprise.
     E. g. He gazed down in wonder at the city.
- use as a noun. Countable
     E. g. The seven wonders of ancient world…
     E. g. It is a wonder that …
     E. g. It is no/little/small wonder …

Ruin
- verb form: ruin (东西还在但被毁了) – damage (可修复的损坏) – destroy (彻底的毁坏，不可修复)
- noun form: ruin – damage - destruction
- ruin – spoil 娇惯
- spoil (verb.) – the spoils (noun. 赃物，掠夺品)
Translate Chinese sentences to English and decide on the appropriate words to use.
- 他们销毁了一切证据。They destroyed all the evidence.
- 好几辆车都在事故中损坏了。Several cars were damaged in the accident.
- 吸烟有害于健康。Smoking damages your health.
- 加热破坏维生素C。Heat will destroy vitamin C.
- 别吃太多坚果，会影响你的食欲。Don't eat lots of nuts. It will spoil your appetite.
- 我的新鞋被泥巴给毁了。My new shoes have been ruined by the mud.

Vocabulary Size. Vocabulary size refers to the amount of vocabulary words students should be able to recognize or master. There are two levels in this definition: words to recognize and words to master. At the recognition level, according to the ZhongKao and GaoKao Guide and the teachers who taught grades 9 and 12, there were 1,600 vocabulary words students needed to be able to recognize at the end of middle school (grade 9), and 3,500 words at the end of high school (grade 12). At the mastery level, students should master 800 vocabulary words out of the 1,600 words at the end of 9th grade and 600 out of the 3,500 words at the end of 12th grade.

All the 20 teachers commented that the new objectives in the 2001 NECS toward vocabulary size are unrealistic for the majority of students. One grade 9 teacher said: "This objective is too high for our students and that is why they lose points on vocabulary in ZhongKao" (Teacher B5, personal communication, April 22, 2010). Another grade 12 teacher said: "Most of our students cannot reach this objective; however, I do have special ones who have lived and studied abroad. They can read English novels and have a large vocabulary" (Teacher B9, personal communication, March 22, 2010).

Extra Reading. Several middle school teachers tried to extend students' extra reading by subscribing to the practice-based English newspapers and magazines, such as *English Weekly (for middle school)*, and *English in the Air*. These extra materials, together with the workbooks, provided more opportunities for students to read. High school teachers (grades 10 and 11) also indicated that reading extensively, including reading authentic English magazines, newspapers, and novels, were the best way for students to increase their vocabulary size. At one school, the teachers started a book club project in which students were asked to look up definitions and usages of the unknown vocabulary words from the reading and write a book report every month.

Vocabulary Application. Vocabulary application refers to students' ability to understand and use the learned words in different classroom tasks. Results of the study indicated that teachers have emphasized vocabulary application in reading and listening tasks much more often than in writing and speaking tasks. According to many teachers, reading and listening tasks were the best ways to assess if students have truly mastered the words. As many of the reading tasks are closely associated with comprehension (in the next section), the focus here is on listening tasks.

At middle school level, listening tasks focused on vocabulary reinforcement. Listening passages contained the key words learned from the reading passage, and the fill-in-the-blank exercise was provided as a way to assess students' understanding of the learned words. For example, in a reading passage, students learned the words *Olympic sports*, *table tennis*, *gymnastics*, *popular*, *cycle*, *ski*, *bore*, and *relax*. In the listening passage, students were asked to listen to the tape reading aloud the listening script and fill in blanks with the correct words. Listening exercises at high school level focused on comprehension. Rather than assessing individual key vocabulary words, the goal was to understand the whole passage in order to finish the comprehension questions correctly. For example, after listening to a 300-word long passage about the traffic problems caused by elephants in the city of Bangkok, three comprehension questions were asked: *(1) What is the passage about? (2) What would happen if police catch elephant handlers on the streets? (3) What is the solution to the problem?*

Comprehension Instruction

Various instructional methods have been adopted by teachers at different grade levels with different foci regarding comprehension instruction. Compared with teachers at other grade levels, the 9th and 12th grade teachers have demonstrated obvious emphasis on test preparation. In this section, three foci of comprehension instruction were reported: testing strategies, stages of reading, and extensive reading.

Testing strategies. Teachers at 9th and 12th grades have demonstrated clear emphasis on teaching testing strategies and they made every reading lesson a lesson point lesson. They used Chinese to deliver their classes as they believed that using Chinese was clear and saved time, and they understood their major tasks were to prepare students for ZhongKao and GaoKao. Three strategies were reported by the teachers including analyzing question types, text structure, and sentence structure.

Analyze Question Types. The most commonly used strategy reported by almost every 9th and 12th grade teacher was analyzing question types. Every reading passage on the examination paper and in the textbook contains four to six multiple choice questions. Teachers asked students to read these questions as well as the four answer choices before starting to read the passage. According to one teacher, it "allows students to get an overall idea about what the passage is about" (Teacher C3, personal communication, May 3, 2010). With the questions and the possible answers in mind, reading became answer-seeking. Further-more, teachers summarized the different types of questions that might possibly be asked and taught corresponding strategies to deal with each type of question. For instances, the main idea question was usually the first question, and students should

complete this question the last. And generally speaking, students should read the first and last paragraphs in the passage and the first and last sentences in each paragraph to find answers for this question. For questions asking for the details, the best way was to use keywords to locate where in the passage similar information was discussed. For questions asking students to infer, the correct answer was the one that was not directly mentioned in the reading.

Analyze Text Structure. Analyzing text structure was another popular strategy used to locate appropriate information from texts. Teachers mentioned that narrative texts were usually easy and students did not have much problem to understand. However, for argumentative texts, teachers stressed that students needed to read the beginning or the end of the text or the beginning or the ending of the paragraph carefully to understand the author's argument. And students should also focus on the meaning after key words such as *although, however, on the other hand* in order to understand the author's real point. For expository texts or scientific texts, instead of using background knowledge or common sense, students should stick to the passage when completing the questions.

Analyze Sentence Structure. Analyze sentence structure was also used to facilitate comprehension of complex and long sentences. In many reading passages, especially those at 12th grade, a sentence could be as long as a few lines thus making it hard for students to understand. Teachers recommended students to look for the key components in a sentence – subject, verb, and object, and ignore all other elements.

Stages of Reading. In addition to testing-focused instruction in grades 9 and 12, teachers at other grade levels focused on different stages of reading – pre-reading,

during-reading and post-reading, and carried out numerous activities to accomplish different goals.

Pre-reading Stage. Six different activities have been reported and observed during the pre-reading stage. Activities included: (a) questioning students to make reading more purposeful, (b) asking students to predict based on the title, (c) asking students to make personal connections, (d) introducing key vocabulary words, (e) explaining cultural and background knowledge of a topic to facilitate students' comprehension (i.e. Teacher introduced the background knowledge of *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* before asking students to read the excerpt passages in textbook), and (f) activating students' prior knowledge (i.e., role-playing about solving a problem before reading a passage about *problems*).

During-reading Stage. Five activities were reported and observed at the during-reading stage. Activities included: (a) teacher or tape reading aloud (used in grades 7 and 8), (b) students reading aloud (in grade 7 and 8) or reading silently, (c) reading multiple times (first time skimming or scanning for main idea, second time careful reading for details, third time reading for key vocabulary and grammar rules), (d) teacher explaining the meaning and usage of key vocabulary words, complex sentence structures, and grammar points (e.g., provide Chinese translation to difficult sentences), and (e) teacher analyzing text structure (e.g., asking students to find the conclusive paragraph or topic sentences).

Post-reading Stage. Six activities were reported and observed at the post-reading stage. Activities included: (a) using questions to examine students' comprehension, (b) completing the exercises on the textbook, students' workbook, and other materials, (c)

filling in the blank quiz to assess students' familiarity with texts (i.e., *Lots of visitors to the Olympic Games will speak English, so the people from Dongsi _____ learn English _____. They want to speak it well. No one wants to speak it ____ or ____.* Correct words used in the text passage were *need to*, *quickly*, *badly*, and *carelessly*), (d) using open-ended or higher order thinking questions to initiate discussion (commonly used in grades 10 and 11, e.g., what is the author's purpose in writing the passage?), (e) teaching reading strategies (e. g., avoid word by word reading and reading based on semantic chunks, simplify sentence structure by identifying subject, verbs, and objects), and (f) producing language output through speaking and writing (e.g., write a dialogue based on the reading passage and speak out with a partner).

Extensive Reading. Teachers mentioned using extensive reading as a way for students to improve reading ability. All these schools were equipped with a library containing abbreviated English novels. Middle school teachers encouraged students to read one to two novels minimum in a semester and record unknown vocabulary and good sentences that could be used in writing. High schools teachers had higher expectations, such as asking students to write monthly reading reflections and holding monthly book club meetings for groups to discuss the books.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

A good deal of literature indicated that vocabulary and comprehension were the most important aspects of instruction in secondary schools (Chan, 2003; Feng & Wang, 2005, Feng & Mokhtari, 1998). The results in this study supported the literature and suggested that vocabulary and comprehension remained important areas of

reading instruction, and these aspects of knowledge weighed heavily in different examinations in EFL context. A difference was also found between the result of this study and those of the previous ones, which was the increased amount of extra readings students were encouraged to complete. Teachers no longer just taught from the required textbooks. Instead, they started to appreciate the value of using extensive reading to increase students' vocabulary and comprehension.

In regard to vocabulary instruction, instruction focused on five aspects: pronunciation, spelling, meaning-usage-collocation, size, and application. These five aspects of vocabulary knowledge were similar to the three categories of vocabulary knowledge defined by Daller, Milton, and Treffers-Daller (2007), which included vocabulary breadth, depth, and fluency. According to Daller, Milton, and Treffers-Daller (2007), vocabulary breadth refers to the number of vocabulary words students know, which is similar to the vocabulary size reported in this study. Vocabulary depth refers to "knowledge of the relevant concepts and referents, associations, grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on use of given words" (Li & MacGregor, 2010, p. 239), and it includes the aspects of vocabulary pronunciation, spelling, and meaning-usage-collocation in this study. Vocabulary fluency refers to "the ability to use given words both receptively (i.e. in reading or listening) or productively (i.e. in writing or speaking)" (Li & MacGregor, 2010, p. 239), and it is similar to vocabulary application in this study.

Differed from R. Hu's (2009) finding that teachers at elementary school levels emphasized on vocabulary pronunciation instruction and provided phonemic awareness and phonics instruction regardless of the students' grade levels, it seems that phonological knowledge was only necessary

in facilitating vocabulary learning below 7th grade at these secondary schools in Beijing. In addition, vocabulary spelling and meaning-usage-collocation instruction also supported Hunt and Beglar's (2005) argument that both explicit and implicit instruction were needed for vocabulary learning. Explicit instruction was provided through teachers' explanation and summarization and most commonly occurred at grade 9 and 12. Implicit teaching, on the other hand, was an approach to encourage students' independent learning by reading extensively and looking for context clues.

The findings on reading comprehension instruction brought a few issues. First of all, an obvious difference existed between regular classroom reading instruction and test-preparation reading instruction in grades 9 and 12. Regular classroom reading instruction focused on the different stages of reading and corresponding activities were provided. The teachers tried to meet the objectives on the 2001 NECS, which recommended the use of different activities to promote students' interest, encourage students' participation and collaboration. Reading instruction in grades 9 and 12 served the purpose of preparing for ZhongKao and GaoKao and emphasized knowledge review. Known to many, ZhongKao and GaoKao are the most important assessments during middle and high school years for both students and teachers. Scores on these examinations are not only the sole factor determining what type of schools a student attends, but also have significant influence on the teacher and school evaluation. This finding indicated that teachers at different grade levels had different instructional foci and it challenged the argument that all teachers of English in China turned reading lessons into language point lessons focusing on teaching grammar, sentence structure, key vocabulary and phrases rather than how to get meaning from the passages (Zhang, Y. N.

2008; Zhang, Y 2006).

Furthermore, the findings supported Y. N. Zhang's (2008) claim that in some classrooms teachers used ineffective activities. In some classrooms, especially at the middle school level, some teachers simply read the questions listed in books, picked a student to answer the question, and then checked the correct answer. They failed to provide the student with enough time to think, and more importantly, they did not explain why the answer was wrong or where students could locate correct information. This situation was less common at the high school level. In fact, several high school teachers have conducted highly effective activities at different stages of reading. For instance, when a teacher introduced key vocabulary (bacteria, black hole, software development, energy, light year, mass radiation, radium, solar system, etc.) before reading the passage about pioneers of science, she asked students in groups to divide these words into four branches of science (biology, information technology, physics, and astronomy) and add more science words (what they have learned before) into each branch. This teacher has provided students opportunities to learn and review vocabulary related to science.

Some studies pointed out Chinese students had limited knowledge of comprehension strategies (Gu, 2010; Kong, 2006; Liu, 2010; Tsai, Ernstb, & Talleya, 2010). It is not the purpose of this study to reveal whether students are equipped with rich comprehension strategy knowledge; however, the results of the study reflected the different strategies teachers demonstrated and introduced to students (e.g., predicting, making connection, questioning, sum-marizing, discussing, analyzing text structure, etc.). And many of these strategies were considered effective reading comprehension strategies used in classrooms where English is the native language. Under

this circumstance, an assumption can be made. If students had limited knowledge about comprehension strategies, it might be due to the fact that teachers only demonstrated the activities/strategies during their teaching but failed to emphasize the application of them in reading. In other words, teachers were not successful in preparing students to be independent learners using comprehension strategies in reading.

The study also revealed the utmost importance of the two national examinations—ZhongKao and GaoKao. Because of the nature of the assessment being summative, it was unavoidable that teachers tended to teach for the test and students wanted to learn what would be tested. And this trend of test-oriented instruction was especially apparent in the graduating grades 9 and 12. There was nothing inappropriate that teachers wanted to better prepare students for the examinations; however, what has been missing was that none of the teachers mentioned that they would use the examination results to modify instruction for future students. Hence, the assessment results failed to inform instruction, and all the teachers stuck to the ways of instruction that they found helpful or they thought to be the best.

This qualitative study has provided research evidence about the English vocabulary and reading instruction in three secondary school classrooms in Beijing, China. Different from all other studies mentioned in the literature review, this study presented valuable information about the Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives and instructional activities on vocabulary and comprehension. Therefore, it provided the most fundamental information for curriculum revision, policy making, English teacher preparation, and future research on ways of improving students' achievements on vocabulary and comprehension.

What is more, the study also provided valuable information for the growing English training market. In 2006, the MOE reported

that over 300 million Chinese were learning English (MOE, 2006) and among which 175 million were K-12 grade students. Chinese children and students, starting from 3 years old, have been attending English classes not only at schools but also in many different types of extracurricular English programs. Therefore, extracurricular English training has become a lucrative business and attracted not only Chinese teachers but also foreigners coming to China to teach. Even though there was no official data on how many extracurricular programs and students were available, it was estimated that the annual marketing value of extracurricular English training was worth approximately 2.6 billion U.S. dollars with the annual increasing rate of 12% (News Weekly, 2010). With this said; however, there was no standard or evaluation criteria to assess the quality of these programs, no research-based instructional guide to direct teaching, and no study available on whether these programs really helped students' English achievement. In addition to providing valuable information, the results of this study also revealed the instructional support that teachers and students needed. It would be beneficial for all if extracurricular English programs could design appropriate curriculum to support classroom instruction. Finally, although this study focused on Chinese students in secondary schools, it provided information and made recommendations for teaching English in other countries where there is no strong presence of English outside of the EFL classroom.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research that need to be kept in mind when reading the findings. Like many qualitative studies, the results of the study cannot be generalized. The study only focused on 20 English teachers from three complete secondary schools in Beijing. The English vocabulary and comprehension instructions reported by these teachers cannot entirely represent the situation of English instruction in the city. Furthermore, as China is a large county with a big imbalance in economic and educational development, the instructions provided by teachers in Beijing are not representative of the whole country's situation either. Finally, as the goal of the study is to present a holistic picture of English vocabulary and comprehension instruction at these secondary schools, the study does not report the instructional differences among the teachers. Future studies can be conducted to examine the differences within teaching and factors that cause the differences.

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