

Learning to Read Authentic Texts in Chinese as a Foreign Language: An Action Research-Based Investigation of a New Approach towards Raising Students' Awareness of Literary Function Words

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Abstract

Understanding the gist of Chinese authentic functional texts is a particular challenge for advanced beginners not only because of the morpho-syllabic writing system, but also due to the particular literary style. A didactic concept based on Stanovich's (2000) and Gernsbacher's (1997) reading models was developed for teaching Chinese as a foreign language at the university level. It is aimed at drawing the students' attention to highly frequent literary function words in everyday texts, facilitating both the formation of relevant units of meaning and the application of higher-level strategic reading skills. The implementation of this new approach was investigated using the framework of action research. The data were analysed with qualitative methods and the results incorporated into the several teaching cycles. Two quasi-experiments were conducted to elicit individual problem solutions by the students. These data were collected in the form of video recordings of group work and student worksheets. Due to the predictability of specific literary structures, a certain automatisisation in processing literary structures could indeed be achieved. Further construction of meaning, however, will have to be achieved through attentive-driven strategies, e.g. targeted dictionary use. It is important to train the students' executive control mechanisms (e.g. comprehension monitoring), since Chinese can easily lead into a 'dead end' due to the absence of word segmentation and a high degree of polysemy.

Keywords: Chinese as a foreign language, strategic reading, literary function words, action research



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Introduction: Identifying the Research Problem

A major goal of learning a foreign language for academic purposes is to be able to read authentic functional texts—also termed expository prose as opposed to narrative prose (Grabe 2009: 249-251)—in order to extract information. Therefore, it is essential that university students majoring in sinology or Chinese studies attain basic skills in dealing with authentic written texts in Chinese as early as from the advanced beginner level.¹ However, my personal experience as a university teacher in Chinese second-year reading classes has shown that the majority of curricula and textbooks designed for this level neglect the need to teach authentic reading in a specific way. Rather, they circumvent the fact that authentic expository texts in Chinese cannot be understood without some knowledge of the literary style (*shūmiànyǔ* 书面语), by focusing instead on texts reflecting the spoken style.

As early as 1966, John DeFrancis—the innovative doyen of Chinese language pedagogy and author of highly influential Chinese textbooks—published the article “Why Johnny Can’t Read Chinese,” in which he criticises that what is being taught in Chinese reading classes in America is just written versions of the spoken language and thus utterly fails to enable the students to comprehend simple signs or written announcements (DeFrancis 1966). Forty years later, Peter Kupfer comes to a similar conclusion in his article “Eloquent but Blind: The Problem of Reading Proficiency in Chinese as a Foreign Language”: even advanced learners who already have fairly independent oral language competencies cannot understand authentic functional texts in Chinese (Kupfer 2007).

Finally, some fifty years later, in 2012, the authors of the *European Benchmarks for the Chinese language* (EBCL)² are faced with the dilemma of not being able to transfer the corresponding CEFR (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) can-do statements to reading Chinese at the A2-level (basic user). The descriptors in question are: “Can understand short, *simple texts* on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of *high frequency everyday* or job-related language,” and “Can understand short, *simple texts* containing the *highest frequency vocabulary*, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items” (CEFR 2001: 10; emphases added). They delimit the scope of target texts to be understood by “basic users,” so that a global definition of the A2 level will be possible. This definition,

¹ At the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Vienna this equals to the second year of instruction and translates into the following rough numbers: after the first year of instruction, students will have attended about 240 teaching hours, with a minimum of ca. 400 Chinese characters and 760 lexemes taught.

² The EBCL-project was funded by the European Commission and undertook the task of developing competence descriptors adapted to Chinese as a foreign language on the basis of the CEFR. To date, the benchmarks and descriptors for levels A1 and A2 are available online (EBCL).

however, has proven difficult for Chinese, because intelligible, everyday functional texts are not simple, in that the everyday vocabulary and structures learned in beginners' communicative classes (*kǒuyǔ* 口语, 'spoken language') do not match those of Chinese written texts. It is rather a combination (now called literary language) of elements of classical and modern Chinese, which is common for any written utterances (Rosner 1992; Wáng 2003; Féng 2006 and 2009; Chéng 2012; Féng and Yán 2013). This diglossic situation accounts for the fact that even simple signs or dialog boxes on websites or mobile phones are incomprehensible for beginning learners, although texts like these are being regarded as straightforward and simple enough by the CEFR to be used as authentic reading material at the A2-level.

I thus identified the necessity to improve the teaching practice and developed an action-research design which would offer insights into the feasibility of speeding up the development of real-life reading skills, although Chinese is labelled as a (linguistically and culturally) distant foreign language which is estimated to require about two to three times more lessons than European languages (Guder 2005: 65; Kupfer 2007: 7; Guder 2008: 70): "The action piece of action research is about improving practice. The 'research' piece of action research is about offering descriptions and explanations for what you are doing as and when you improve practice" (McNiff and Whitehead 2011: 14).

My empirical research does not test or compare classic theories of psycholinguistic reading research, nor does it claim to reveal straightforward (quantitative) cause-effect correlations. As a first step, the aim of my research has been to formulate a specific practical theory³ based on findings in cognitive psychology and on insights from practical teaching experience. This led to the development of the reading module—an innovative concept for the collection and classroom-adaptation of authentic reading material. The ultimate aim or final step of my research is in fact far from being 'final,' as it is characterised by the continual testing or "trialling" (Wallace 2008) of the material and the resulting modifications and (anticipated) improvements.

This paper will describe all stages of my research project: from the development of an action idea firmly grounded in psycholinguistic research and a concrete concept for a teaching intervention which can be integrated into the reality of a university language-course with limited class-hours, to the documentation and analysis of the empirically collected data. It will also present some results and insights derived from the first trialling phase.⁴ Since action research projects are by definition iterative and

³ The term 'practical theory' is a well-established technical term within the framework of action research and forms the theoretical basis of concrete empirical action-research research-cycles (Altrichter and Posch 2007; Grabe and Stoller 2011; McNiff and Whitehead 2011).

⁴ Detailed documentation of the two cycles of the first trialling phase can be found in Bazant-Kimmel 2017.

cyclical (Altrichter and Posch 2007; McNiff and Whitehead 2011), the analysis of the results has led to new ideas for more trialling cycles, which will be outlined briefly in the last section of the paper.

Theoretical Foundations

Processing Levels of Reading Comprehension

In the cognitive sciences reading is now invariably seen as a process involving several component skills, with comprehending being the general goal (Grabe 2009: 14-15). Psycholinguistic research unanimously adopts the model depicting reading as involving several linguistic and strategic comprehension processes on different levels, often labelled lower-level processes and higher-level processes (Grabe 2009: 21-58). In her very compact terminology for the comprehension-building process, Koda (2007: 3-10) identifies three main levels: The first level is termed 'decoding' and encompasses the mostly automatised skills of extracting orthographic, phonological, lexical, and morphological information directly from the written symbols. The next stage of 'text-information building' is where the extracted linguistic information is integrated into larger chunks like phrases, sentences, and paragraphs with the help of syntactical knowledge and awareness of text-coherence and text-structure. During the last stage of 'reader-model construction,' the text-model created at the second level is synthesised with background knowledge. Successful reading is also determined by higher-level executive control mechanisms regulated by meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic awareness (monitoring the reading process, strategic reading), as well as by the capacity of the working memory, which is where the data are being temporarily stored. Working memory capacity is also important for carrying out the various comprehension processes described above (Baddeley 2003).

The focus of my research is on the level of 'meaning-proposition encoding' (Grabe 2009: 30-32), also termed 'semantic-proposition formation' (Grabe and Stoller 2011: 14), with its prerequisite skill of 'syntactic parsing,' both of which form part of Koda's second level of 'text-information building.' Since reading in a foreign language, and especially in a so-called distant foreign language as Chinese (Guder 2006) with its different writing system and lexical system, is likely to suffer several constraints at lower-level processing such as word recognition, the attentional application of executive control sub-skills (like conscious inferring or intelligent guessing, use of dictionaries, application of background knowledge) plays an equally important role in my theory.

Selected Models of Reading

The underlying guiding framework shaping my theory of reading instruction in Chinese as a foreign language is the *Interactive Compensatory Model* by Keith Stanovich (2000). Stanovich's highly influential model predicts that higher-level strategic reading processes (i.e., activation of background knowledge, consulting a word-dictionary) can interact with lower-level processes (i.e., word recognition, lexical processing) if necessary, thus being able to compensate shortcomings at the lower levels. In my didactic concept, compensatory strategies like looking up the meaning of content words are in fact an indispensable part of beginner-level reading of authentic texts, but the crucial point is to intelligently predict which words to look up. A very useful adaptation to the L2⁵-language learning context of Stanovich's model is the *Three-Dimensional Model of Second Language Reading* developed by Elizabeth Bernhardt (2005). In her model she accounts for the simultaneous and compensatory interaction of processes pertaining to L1 literacy (twenty per cent), L2 language knowledge (thirty per cent), and the so-called unexplained variance (fifty per cent).⁶ My didactic concept aims at focusing on developing a specific skill within the area of L2 language knowledge, namely syntactic parsing of Chinese literary function words,⁷ and thus enabling various comprehension strategies from Bernhardt's large area of unexplained variance to effectively come into play.

In an entry titled "Comprehension Instruction" (rather than reading instruction) in the *Handbook of Reading Research*, Pearson and Fielding (1991: 832) make a strong argument for raising students' meta-linguistic awareness of the textual signaling in expository texts: "In general we have found incredibly positive support for just about any approach to text structure instruction for expository prose." This inspired the application of the more specific *Structure Building Framework* developed by Morton Ann Gernsbacher (1997) to my practical theory. The *Structure Building Framework* explains reading comprehension with the help of a sentence-by-sentence processing of discourse markers. It predicts the constant interaction between building meaning-propositions (phrases) with the help of discourse markers and forming a text-model. Gernsbacher emphasises the function of suppression of less likely mental structures (meaning-propositions) and the shifting to new sub-structures if the incoming information is less coherent (Gernsbacher 1997: 266-267). This led to the concept of

⁵ L2 refers to the language learned or acquired in addition to a person's native language (also termed L1).

⁶ Unexplained variance comprises factors like background knowledge, comprehension strategies, and motivational and affective factors.

⁷ The technical term in Chinese is *Xiàndài shūmiàn Hànyǔ zhōng de wényán yǔfǎ chéngfèn* 现代书面汉语中的文言语法成分 (Literary function words in modern Chinese literary language) (Sūn 2012).

teaching highly frequent literary function words and proceduralising their processing with the help of authentic texts. The literary function words serve as reliable discourse markers which should enable the students to form semantic propositions even when they are lacking adequate lexical knowledge. The predicted suppression of less plausible phrases should prove essential for reducing pressure on working memory capacity.

Practical Theory (Didactic Concept)

The grounding for my practical theory is a cognitive-constructivist view of language-learning processes. The cognitive learning theory ACT-R (*Adaptive Control of Thought-Rational*) developed by John Anderson (2000) describes learning as a three-stage process: from cognitive learning, through associative learning, to an autonomous stage. Applied to L2-reading instruction, it involves the possession of declarative knowledge of the language in a text (cognitive stage) and passes through the stage of practicing the ‘how’ to apply the declarative knowledge (associative or procedural stage) until automaticity is reached—that is, fluent and skilled reading where correct associations are being attained without over-taxing working memory (autonomous stage).

Drawing on major findings of the aforementioned reading models as well as on contributions of applied linguists regarding the importance of text structure (Grabe 2009: 244-248), I have come up with a practical theory as the basis for my didactic concept. The practical theory has emerged from and is based on the following four assumptions:

1. Awareness and quick recognition of typical Chinese literary function words can be achieved by the use of authentic Chinese functional texts (simple signs or notes, manuals, or other informational texts).
2. Quick recognition of these literary function words leads to syntactic parsing and construction of meaning-propositions (also called chunking) with the help of substituting unknown content words with place holders. The skill of intelligently tolerating constraints in lexical access to the meaning of content words (as the vocabulary of students at this proficiency level is still quite limited) is an essential step during the reading comprehension process.
3. Successful chunking reduces pressure on working memory and allows for higher-level executive control mechanisms—strategies like inferring, specific dictionary use, suppression of non-salient information—to be consciously directed to the text-model formation and thus compensate for the lack of vocabulary knowledge in L2.
4. Successful chunking with the help of typical literary function words can also reduce the emotional burden of dealing with challenging authentic texts with a high number of unknown content words, and will eventually convert the strategic

responses described above into default, or fairly automatised, processing skills (Grabe 2009: 52). This in turn leads to a further reduction of pressure on the working memory and supports the comprehension process on the linguistic, cognitive, and affective levels.

Praxis Intervention: Development and Implementation of the Material

The literary style (*shūmiànyǔ* 书面语) that poses a challenge to reading skills acquisition as outlined in the introduction encompasses both content words and function words with the respective structures governed by them. My didactic concept focuses on literary function words only, since it is this linguistic category that promises to be most effective for developing useful reading comprehension strategies at the beginning level. As opposed to the hopelessness of mastering a large number of infinite content vocabulary, the memorisation and automatised processing of a limited number of fairly predictable high-frequency function words seems to be a feasible undertaking even at the basic stage. Moreover, it is the function words that provide textual signaling as to the general patterns of discourse organisation. They point to the respective thematic roles of content words or phrases in a sentence: “Who / does what / to whom / ...” (Harley 2006: 262)⁸—and are thus important for building plausible meaning propositions, especially when vocabulary knowledge is restricted. During the implementation period of the reading module, a list of very frequent literary function words was developed together with the students.⁹

Figure 1: Sample list of frequent literary function words in Chinese

	Pinyin	简体字	繁体字	口语	Translation
1	běn	本	本	这个	this
2	cǐ	此	此	这个，这儿	this; here
3	ér	而	而	和；可是	and, also; but
4	fāng	方	方	只	only
5	gāi	该	該	上边说的	the said
6	hé	何	何	什么	which
7	jí	及	及	和	and
8	jí	即	即	就 / 就是	namely

⁸ For details about the importance of processing signal words for text cohesion and coherence, see Koda 2005: 127-130; Koda 2007: 8; Grabe 2009: 243.

⁹ Students were encouraged to enter the function words in a glossary available on the learning platform Moodle whenever they detected them in our texts.

9	jiāng	将	將	把	<i>cf. 把-construction¹⁰</i>
10	jiāng	将	將	将来，就要	<i>for future reference</i>
11	jǐn	仅	僅	只	only
12	jiù	就（按）	就	按照，关于	concerning
13	nǎi	乃	乃	就是；所以	is; thus; therefore
14	qí	其	其	他/她/它的	his / her / its / their
15	què	却	卻	可是，但是	but, however, yet
16	rú	如	如	像一样，比如说	like, e.g.
17	ruò	若	若	如果	if
18	rěng	仍	仍	还	still
19	shàng	尚	尚	还	still, yet (e.g.: 尚未 not yet)
20	sù	遂	遂	就	then, thereupon
21	suǒ	所	所	--	<i>for nominalisations; e.g. 他所说的 [that], what he said</i>
22	wéi	为	為	就是	is, as, serve as
23	wèi	未	未	（还）没有	have not, not yet
24	wú	无	無	没有	not have, there is not
25	wù	勿	勿	不要	do not ...! (<i>neg. imp.</i>)
26	xiàng	向	向	到，往，对着	to, towards
27	yǐ	已	已	已经	already
28	yǐ	以	以	用	with the help of, by means of
29	yǐshàng	以上	以上	上边	above; above-mentioned
30	yǐjǐ	以及	以及	并且	and, moreover
31	yǐ...wéi	以。。。为	以。。。為		... take ... as ...
32	yǐxià	以下	以下	下边	below; the following
33	yīncǐ	因此	因此	所以	therefore
34	yóuyú	由于	由於	因为	since; owing to
35	yú	于	於	在，比	in, on, at, to; than
36	yǔ	与	與	和	and; with
37	zé	则	則	就	<i>indicating cause, condition; contrast</i>
38	zhě	者	者	…的人	someone who ...
39	zhī	之	之	的	<i>of; possessive particle</i>
40	zhì	至	至	到	to, until
41	zhì	致	致	给	to send; so that
42	zì	自	自	从	from, of

Source: Author's own material

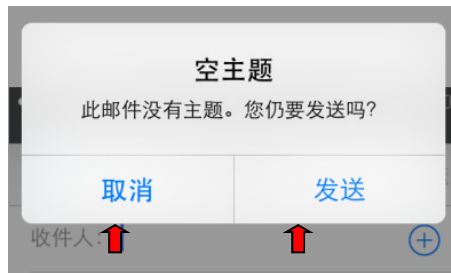
In spite of the above mentioned importance and the considerable amount of literary function words, most CFL-textbooks for the beginning level evade the dilemma of

¹⁰ The *bǎ*-construction marks the direct object with *bǎ* 把 and moves it right before the verbal complex in order to make room in the predicate for other elements and thus draw the attention to what has happened to the object. This is considered a kind of topicalisation process.

diglossia in Chinese by ignoring authentic texts and merely presenting printed spoken language (Wáng 王 2003: 99-100; Féng 冯 and Yán 阎 2013: 6; Zhāng 張 2012: 2). Likewise, both the widely known standardised language-tests HSK (*Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* 汉语水平考试, Chinese Proficiency Test) from Mainland China and the TOCFL (*Huáyǔwén Nénglì Cèyàn* 華語文能力測驗, Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language) from Taiwan do not include the literary style in reading tasks at the basic language user level (Level A in the CEFR).

Having identified the shortcomings of most readily available textbooks designated for the advanced beginner level, I developed the so-called reading module: a collection of authentic functional texts that includes pictures of public signboards, screenshots of authentic internet-text from common websites, and examples of everyday professional communication (e-mail) from my own stock. Short and catchy manifestations of the literary style in everyday written texts were used to arouse students' interest and activate any previous experience with literary function words. The following example shows a simple smartphone dialog box, which the students are all familiar with (albeit in languages other than Chinese): "This message has no subject. Do you want to send it anyway?"

Figure 2: Dialog box "Empty Subject"

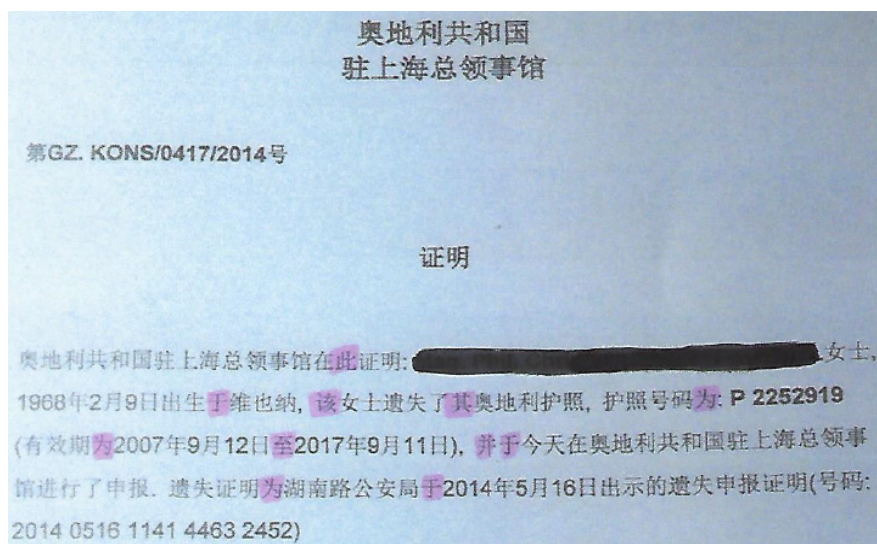


Source: Author's own material

Here, in line with Feng Shengli's findings that "[...] modern formal Chinese cannot be composed without employing some literary Chinese" (Feng 2009: 2) and Erhard Rosner's insight that not just the degree of formality (Koch and Österreicher 1985) but the fact that something constitutes a written utterance is what determines the use of literary features (Rosner 1992: 74), we see the typical literary function words *cǐ* 此 ('this') and *réng* 仍 ('still') as opposed to the spoken equivalents of *zhè* (ge) 这(个) and *hái* 还.

Subsequently, students' attention was gradually led to longer texts of varying degrees of formality, from e-mail communications to the preface of the students' own textbook (which most students at this level would not endeavour to read) as well as to consular documents and short academic texts.

Figure 3: Consular document (extract)



Source: Author's own material

‘How’ the teaching material is presented and dealt with in classroom settings is of just as high importance as the ‘what.’ Although the particular teaching methods I used were not in the focus of my research, they nonetheless make up some of the variables¹¹ that influence comprehension and learning processes. The teaching methods I use are all in line with my general assumptions about the well-dosed application and balancing of automatisisation and awareness. Teaching techniques and tasks include:

- “Searching for –x”: focusing awareness and guiding cognitive attention by having the students scan the text for literary function words (Buttaroni 1997: 233-235) and create glossaries collaboratively.
- Achieving “dual comprehension” (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 51-52) with the help of “mirroring” (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 106).¹²
- Bilingual techniques like mixing languages for contrast or emphasis (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 13).¹³

¹¹ Cf. “unexplained variance” in Bernhardt’s model (Bernhardt 2005).

¹² ‘Mirroring’ means to draw the student’s attention towards a particular structure in the foreign language by using literal translations, or even morpheme-by-morpheme translations, and thus linking meaning and form (dual comprehension): e.g. *Yī Zhōngwén wéi mǔyǔ zhě* 以中文为母语者, ‘take – Chinese – act as – mother tongue – those who.’

¹³ E.g. “Taking Chinese as mother tongue –zhě.” This is an example of the mixed-language rendering of *Yī Zhōngwén wéi mǔyǔ zhě* 以中文为母语者, ‘Those with Chinese as mother tongue.’

- “Teacher modelling” of step-by-step comprehension processes (Koda 2005: 268).
- Retrospective introspection: group discussions of individual reading processes.¹⁴
- Reading out loud: practicing to recode the text phonologically, which can be very supportive of the comprehension process, especially in an orthographically non-transparent language like Chinese (Krames 2015: 190-194).

Action Research Design: Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data Collection

The underlying research question for my action research project tackles the key-notions of my practical theory: how does raising the awareness of literary function words and automatising the processing of the resulting structures support reading comprehension of authentic Chinese functional texts? It is important to note that in addition to being explorative in nature, as I want to observe and try to understand how reading comprehension processes at the level of syntactic parsing work, my research also endeavours to evaluate the implementation of the reading module and test the value of my practical theory. Adhering to the goal of action research, namely trying to ultimately achieve an improvement of practice through thorough documentation of and reflection on the action ideas and their application, I decided to use a mainly qualitative research design, although some basic quantitative analysis of student feedback data was included.

The target group for my empirical research was a cohort of multilingual and therefore experienced language learners with highly developed L1-reading skills who are learning Chinese for academic purposes in the third semester of a Chinese studies B.A. programme at the Department of East-Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. A short questionnaire with the goal of finding out general attitudes towards and experience with reading in Chinese administered through the learning-platform Moodle revealed that twelve out of thirteen respondents saw the decoding of Chinese characters as the biggest challenge in reading Chinese texts. Only five students stated that they had attempted to read authentic texts (i.e., Chinese texts other than those printed in textbooks), and none of the students mentioned the discrepancy between the literary and colloquial style of Chinese, which suggests an unawareness of this characteristic of authentic Chinese everyday writings.¹⁵

In order to gain insight into how the implementation of the reading module might promote reading comprehension skills of authentic expository texts at the beginner

¹⁴ This awareness-raising teaching technique simultaneously functions as data-collection.

¹⁵ The complete questionnaire with all the answers by the thirteen respondents can be found in Bazant-Kimmel 2017: 241-246.

level, the didactic concept was integrated into my regular reading-courses of the third and fourth study semester over a period of thirty-one weeks:

Figure 4: Time-frame of action-research cycles¹⁶

<p>Cycle A: Seventeen students (one group) <u>November 20, 2015 – January 22, 2016</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Six teaching units (teaching log, research journal, audio-recording, student-feedback) ▪ One “Post-Test A” (video-recording) <p>Cycle B: Fifteen students (two groups) <u>June 3, 2016 – June 13, 2016</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One teaching unit (teaching log, research journal, audio-recording) ▪ One “Post-Test B” (teaching log, research journal, audio-recording, student worksheet)
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The four assumptions of my practical theory were operationalised and re-formulated as hypotheses, followed by the application of suitable data-collection methods:

1. If attention is drawn to literary function words by using authentic texts, then they will be recognised quickly in any text. Main data sources: teacher journal, audio-recordings of group-discussions, written student-feedback, video-recording of Post-Test A, worksheet of Post-Test B.
2. Once the literary function words have been recognised, they will be processed into meaningful chunks. Main data sources: video-recording of Post-Test A, worksheet of Post-Test B.
3. After the formation of semantic propositions (chunks), higher-level executive-control processes (e.g., use of dictionary, suppression of less important information) will set in. Main data sources: video-recording of Post-Test A, worksheet of Post-Test B.
4. If the attentively monitored chunking-process becomes automatised, then working memory capacity will be available for further linguistic and cognitive attention. Main data sources: video-recording of Post-Test A.

Being simultaneously the teacher—and thus a participant in the teaching and learning process—and a researcher, there is the danger of being caught up in one’s own perceptions and reflections. I therefore triangulated the data from the student perspective outlined above with data from the teacher perspective (teaching logs, research journal) and used different data-collection methods to collect both primary data (e.g.,

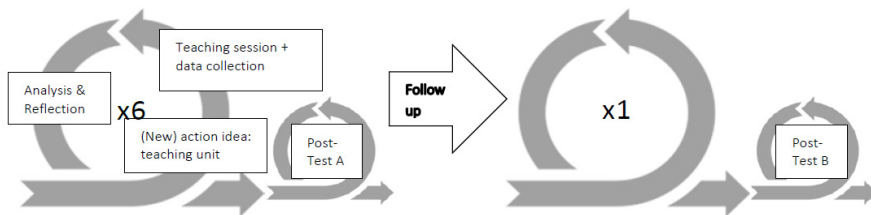
¹⁶ A detailed description and analysis of all teaching units can be found in Bazant-Kimmel 2017: 146-197.

video-recordings, student worksheets) as well as secondary data (e.g., verbal reports¹⁷ during group discussions) to gain multi-faceted vantage points.

Data storage techniques include paper-based data (student worksheets and student feedback, Post-Test B), digital records (teaching logs and research journal, assignments on Moodle), audio-recordings (group discussions), and video-recordings (Post-Test A).

A unique feature of action research projects is that the research process resembles a continuous cycle of action, reflection, and adaptation/modification, with new action ideas being derived from data analysis of the previous cycle and leading to a new phase of action, reflection, and adaptation/modification.

Figure 5: Action-research cycles A and B



Source: Author's own diagram

In my project, the six teaching units of cycle A culminated in the so-called Post-Test A, in which two groups of three and four students, respectively, were confronted with a challenging authentic text passage of an academic abstract and were told to work together for forty-five minutes and extract as much information as they could. The group work was video-taped in order to facilitate comprehensibility for the researcher in instances of overlapping speech or silent phases.

For Post-Test B, on the other hand, the students were asked to work individually with a very short extract of an academic text. The first task was to highlight the literary function words directly in the text and then translate the phrases resulting from them into German or English. They were explicitly reminded to use place holders for any unknown words within the chunks that they detected. After completion of this task students were asked to read the whole text again silently for one minute and then turn the worksheet over and write down in German or English on the back of the page what they remembered from the text. This technique is known as written recall protocol (Bernhardt 1991; Grabe and Stoller 2011). The worksheets were then collected by the teacher and a clean copy of the text was handed out to the students, so that we could discuss the text and the comprehension processes as a group.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the technique of verbal reports, see Wallace 2008: 76-91.

Data Analysis

As outlined above, teaching units were the source of multi-faceted data (from the student and the teacher perspective) on the efficiency of and satisfaction with the teaching material, the presentation of the material, and the general realisation of the teaching sessions (e.g., time-management, learning activities). The reflection process consisted of a general description of each teaching session and targeted analysis of single instances deemed relevant for understanding the students' reading comprehension processes and helping to answer the research question.¹⁸ Relevant data were analysed immediately in order to react promptly and adapt the following teaching sessions (e.g., modifying the printing size of texts, adjusting time-management, or finding more authentic examples of a particular literary structure). Generally, it can be said that it was the audio-taped group discussions that were particularly helpful to shed light onto the students' comprehension processes, since they often revealed ambiguities that led some learners at this level to construct a wrong meaning. The group-discussions encouraged the students to share their reflections on their own meaning-construction processes, and thus produced valuable data in the form of verbal reports (Wallace 2008: 76-91).

As an example I would like to cite the group discussion of the literary function word *běn* 本 ('this') from a text in the first teaching unit. Students were presented with individual sentences taken from the student handbook of East China Normal University and asked to identify the literary function words and try and construct the meaning of the sentence. In the discussion of the various text models constructed by the students it became obvious that the very common usage of the word *běn* in modern Chinese, as a classifier for printed material or denoting printed material, which the students have invariably learned in the first study year, interfered with the realisation that in this case *běn* is in fact used as a literary function word meaning 'this': *Shàng kè bù xǔ zuò yǔ běn kè wú guān de shìqíng* 上课不许做与本课无关的事情, 'During class it is not permitted to deal with things that have nothing to do with this lesson.' Erroneous meaning constructions due to misinterpretations of *běn* by the students yielded translations like 'During class it is not permitted to shut the books.' Revealing moments like this confirmed the importance of the teaching techniques of dual comprehension and mirroring during class sessions and of striving to stay alert to possible ambiguities in the following teaching sessions.

Data from the student feedback mainly helped to adapt the length and the printing-size of the texts and confirmed the motivational power of using original lay-out of authentic everyday material that corresponds to the life reality of the students. It also showed that the students appreciate recycling of items already learned in varied

¹⁸ The description and detailed analysis of the teaching units of cycle A and cycle B can be found in Bazant-Kimmel 2017: 153-176 and 189-191.

authentic contexts (e.g., the use of the literary function word *wù* 勿 [‘do not’] in numerous different public signs). The students’ evaluation of different class activities revealed the highest marks for such teaching instances, in which the students were able to actually understand the gist with the help of syntactic parsing in spite of not knowing many of the content words. This sense of achievement motivated them to endeavour to learn the (limited) list of literary function words and practice the strategy of intelligent chunking (cf. the audio-documents of recorded group discussions).

The text for Post-Test A administered in the seventh teaching unit was an extract of an academic abstract with the title *Yǐ Zhōngwén wéi wàiyǔ de yǔyán xuéxí zhě Zhōngwén zìxíng rènzhī fāzhǎn yánjiū suǒ dàilái de qīshì* 以中文为外语的语言学习者中文字形认知发展研究带来的启示 (Developing orthographic awareness among CFL [Chinese as a foreign language] learners: What the research tells us) (Everson 2007). It was hoped that the contents of this challenging text would be somehow familiar to the students, since it referred to issues of learning Chinese as a foreign language. The text exhibited fifteen types and thirty-two tokens of literary function words which the students had already encountered during the six previous teaching units. Many of the content words, however, were quite advanced and were not available in the students’ mental lexicons. Figure 6 shows the authentic text that was selected as material for Post-Test A.

Figure 6: Post-Test A: “Abstract Everson” (extract)

以中文为外语的语言学习者中文字形认知发展研究
所带来的启示

摘要 近期的研究指出, 以中文为母语(L1)的中国儿童在小学阶段持续地发展中文字形与发音原则的认知。此中文字形与发音的认知能力指的是学习者利用中文字的组成部分(即部首或偏旁)来推测整个中文字的字义和发音。Shu 与 Anderson (1999) 的研究指出, 学习阅读所需要的就是“对于口语语言及文字系统之基本单位的认知以及此两者间对应关系的认知”。

儿童对中文字认知能力之发展的重要性也吸引了许多研究者注意以中文为外语(CFL)的成人(特别是其母语是使用英文字母系统的成人)对中文字认知能力的发展。(Ke, 1998; McGinnis, 1999; Jackson, Everson, and Ke, 2003, 等)。

本研究将着重于三个目标: 一、[...]. 二、[...]. 三、[...]. 本文作者希望借此研究引领尚未接触上述研究资料之国际读者进入此研究领域。

Note: The literary function words have been highlighted here for reference; they were not highlighted in the original student worksheet. Source: Everson 2007: 35-36

In the Post-Test A procedure, the video analysis was used to find out if the students would actually use the strategy of building meaningful chunks with the help of literary function words outside the teaching sessions, where the focus on and practicing of this strategy was explicitly steered by the teacher. The analysis of the material was conducted as explicative-qualitative content analysis according to Philipp Mayring

(2010: 85-92).¹⁹ The two forty-five-minute-long video-documents were structured into five-minute slots and transcribed selectively with clarifying annotations first, in order to determine those instances that would have to be transcribed in detail (Altrichter and Posch 2007: 145). The super-categories ‘organisation,’ ‘silent work,’ ‘discussion about literary function words,’ ‘discussion about content words,’ ‘discussion about sentences,’ ‘discussion about the text’ were then allotted to the communicative actions detectable in the video-recordings, excluding the categories ‘organisation’ and ‘silent work’ from further analysis. Sub-categories (e.g., successful chunking, or ‘dead-end-street’ = unsuccessful chunking) were inductively developed during the viewing of the video-recordings and consequently related to the respective super-categories.

Both groups were not able to finish (i.e., read and make sense of) the text within the forty-five-minute limit, which showed that the difficulties of dealing with a challenging academic text are still very salient at this level of competence. Nevertheless, it could also be noted that awareness of the literary function words was very high, with one group starting out to scan the text for these words right at the beginning and both groups succeeding in finding them. The videos showed that the fact that the students were able to detect many function words quickly, and even succeeded in meaningful chunking without delays, was very motivating in the beginning. The subsequent instances of semantic proposition formation, however, varied from exhibiting successful chunking and suppression of not so important information to implausible dead-end-street-constructions, resulting from the frequent polysemy of Chinese words, wrong phonological recoding, or wrong grouping of Chinese characters into words. The anticipated facilitation of the targeted use of a dictionary for content words and the integration of background knowledge after successful syntactic parsing of function words could often only be observed after a longer time of being caught up in details. In the group discussion following the group work the students confirmed the facilitating effect of the strategy of syntactic parsing, but they also emphasised that it has to be practiced much more intensively.

The realisation that the text for Post-Test A was felt to be too long and that the group-work design showed some shortcomings (e.g., lack of communication between group members at times) led me to the decision to implement another action idea resulting in one additional teaching unit in cycle B and the administration of Post-Test B.

As can be seen in Figure 7, the text for Post-Test B was much shorter than the text for Post-Test A, which was a modification resulting from the insights gained through Post-Test A. The extract from the “Leipzig Recommendations” issued by the Chinese

¹⁹ This method of analysis does not aim at reducing data in order to facilitate analysis and detect general patterns, but makes use of a technique called data enrichment through context in order to arrive at plausible explanations of phenomena (Reininger 2010: 17).

Language Teachers Association of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland refers to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language at the university level and thus relates to the students' experience.

Figure 7: Post-Test B: "Leipzig Recommendations" (extract)

德语区汉语教学协会的建议:

本教学协会认为, 德语地区需要设置以汉语语言为重心的相关学士课程, 并在基础上设置以培养未来笔译与口译人才为目标的硕士课程。

Note: The literary function words have been highlighted here for reference; they were not highlighted in the student worksheet. Source: Fachverband Chinesisch e.V. (FaCh) 2016: 67

Post-Test B was completed by twenty-four students. The analysis of the first individual task consisting in highlighting the literary function words revealed a sound competency of recognising familiar literary function words in most students (twenty-one students detected all function words), which reasserts the first assumption of my practical theory. The second assumption (processing into meaningful chunks) was also largely confirmed, with eighteen (first phrase) and nineteen students (second phrase), respectively, forming correct phrases (albeit with place holders) governed by the important literary structure *yǐ...wéi...* 以...为, 'take ... as...; ... functions as ...'

The twenty-four individual written recall protocols, in which the students were asked to note down in German or English what sense they made of the text (formation of a situation-model), were allotted to three different categories: (1) The gist of the whole text was largely understood; (2) the meaning of at least one core-phrase was understood correctly and integrated into a plausible situation model of reader interpretation; and (3) no core statement of the text was reflected by the written protocol. The analysis revealed that fifty per cent did not succeed in forming a plausible situation-model. Ten protocols (not quite forty-two per cent) came under the second category and only two students (eight per cent) succeeded in delivering a plausible written protocol of the text. The rather disappointing quantitative results from Post-Test B can be put into perspective by the insights gained in the following group discussion. The students pointed out that it was the lack of familiar content words that made it impossible to come up with a coherent interpretation of the text. It was possible to produce correct chunks with the help of place holders, but when it came to putting down in writing a plausible situation model the lack of vocabulary still was an unsurmountable barrier. The use of dictionaries should therefore be allowed in future testings, but time has to be restricted to prevent excessive and untargeted use of lexicons.

The danger of getting stuck in dead-end-streets became evident again in the concrete example of failing to understand the words *bǐyì* 笔译 ('written translation') and

kǒuyì 口译 ('oral translation'): although the students are familiar with the word *fānyì* 翻译 ('translation, to translate') they did not recognise the character *yì* 译 ('to translate') in isolation and were therefore not able to make the necessary inferences.

Discussion of Research Outcome and More Action Ideas

Empirical data collected over a longer period and analysed qualitatively revealed that practicing and automatising the processing of literary function words does help to improve the efficiency of semantic-proposition formation or chunking. Improving efficiency in lower-level processing skills invariably has an encouraging and motivating effect on the students' willingness to take on the challenge of reading authentic Chinese texts, and also has the potential to reduce pressure on working memory and thus facilitate the use of higher-level processing skills. It can, however, not completely make up for the very limited vocabulary possessed by advanced beginner students of Chinese as a foreign language.

General reading research shows that vocabulary is a major decisive variable of comprehension (Grabe 2009: 333; Krames 2015: 7), but the proposed ratio of ninety-five to ninety-eight per cent for fluent reading is unachievable at the level of A2. Thus, trying to compensate for the limitations in A2-level reading in Chinese with a strategy combining syntactic parsing based on predictable literary function words and the resulting grammatical structures ("bridging" inferences: Pressley 2006; Grabe 2009: 40) with higher-level executive control mechanisms, like inferences and goal-oriented use of dictionaries, is a realistic way to make authentic texts accessible to students at the advanced beginner stage.

Acknowledging the importance of vocabulary knowledge and the negative influence of a lack thereof, L1-reading-like automaticity at the level of syntactic parsing and chunking cannot be recommended, since at the beginner stage the danger of wrong turns and getting stuck in dead-end-streets due to a general lack of language proficiency is still high. The goal, therefore, should be to achieve a maximum shortening of attentive processing (Bimmel 2002: 125) at the level of chunking—the automatised processing of literary function words in combination with an attention-driven substitution of unknown words with place holders to build meaningful chunks.

In addition to the constraints of the learners' mental lexicon, there exists, in the case of Chinese, the huge challenge of a very non-transparent orthography, which can yield wrong phonological representations or even frustrate the learners to the extent that they give up altogether. In this case the strategy can help overcome affective barriers in that the learners experience at least some satisfaction when they recognise frequent function words and can use them to form meaningful parts of speech.

In my research I isolated meaning-proposition encoding with the help of literary function words for analytic investigation. One aim was to investigate the four as-

sumptions of my practical theory; however, the overall objective was to create a data-driven, heuristic description of some of the learning processes involved in reading authentic Chinese functional texts at the advanced beginner level (cf. Seliger and Shohamy 1989).

As demonstrated by the analysis of comprehension processes, the suggested strategy has to be practiced extensively with as many authentic examples as possible. Even repeated exposure to similar literary structures cannot prevent instances of ambiguities or erroneous meaning-proposition encoding. Following up on this research project, in which the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ was the focus, I suggest that future research must explore the ‘how,’ based on the continual implementation of this didactic concept and on the relentless recording of misunderstandings, wrong turns, and dead-ends—thus optimising the didactic concept by the means of more action research cycles. The numerous cases of pitfalls, observed and collected during authentic learning situations, can then in turn be used to draw the learners’ attention to them and ultimately lead to the ability to deal with authentic Chinese functional texts from an early stage in the foreign language acquisition process.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT-R	Adaptive Control of Thought-Rational
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CFL	Chinese as a foreign language
EBCL	European Benchmarks for the Chinese language
HSK	Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì 汉语水平考试 ‘Chinese Proficiency Test’
TOCFL	Huáyǔwén Nénglì Cèyàn 華語文能力測驗 ‘Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language’

GLOSSARY

<i>běn</i>	本	this, one’s own
<i>bǐyì</i>	笔译	written translation
<i>cǐ</i>	此	this
<i>fānyì</i>	翻译	translation, to translate
<i>háí</i>	还	still
<i>Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK)</i>	汉语水平考试	Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK)
<i>Huáyǔwén Nénglì Cèyàn (TOCFL)</i>	華語文能力測驗	Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language (TOCFL)
<i>kǒuyì</i>	口译	oral translation
<i>kǒuyǔ</i>	口语	spoken language, colloquial style
<i>réng</i>	仍	still
<i>Shàng kè bù xǔ zuò yǔ běn kè wú guān de shìqìng</i>	上课不许做与本课无关的事情	During class it is not permitted to deal with things that have nothing to do with the lessons
<i>shūmiànyǔ</i>	书面语	literary language, written style
<i>wù</i>	勿	do not
<i>Xiàndài shūmiàn Hànyǔ zhōng de wényán yǔfǎ chéngfèn</i>	现代书面汉语中的文 言语法成分	literary function words in modern Chinese literary language
<i>yì</i>	译	to translate
<i>yǐ...wéi...</i>	以。。。为。。。。	take ... as...; ... functions as ...
<i>Yǐ Zhōngwén wéi mǔyǔ zhě</i>	以中文为母语者	Chinese native speakers (‘those with Chinese as mother-tongue’)
<i>zhè (ge)</i>	这 (个)	this