



English Reading Instruction in Elementary Schools in China

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study is to explore English reading instruction in elementary schools in China under the revised curriculum in 2001. Eleven English teachers in three elementary schools in Beijing participated in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documents. The study reports seven aspects of knowledge that beginning English reading instruction in these schools has covered, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, and cultural knowledge, as well as the instructional activities provided by these teachers.

INTRODUCTION

No one can deny the fact that English has become the language of globalization because of its use in social, economic and political fields in many countries. With China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its hosting of the Olympics in 2008, English has been closely associated with Chinese people's daily life. It has become a key to success and to the world outside China. The Ministry of Education (2006) has reported that more than 300 million Chinese people are learning English, and that the total number of English learners in China will surpass the total number of native English speakers in the world in the next few years. The hunger for learning English has made it a required subject in elementary school. In 2001, English became a required subject starting at third grade (MOE, 2001a). The Ministry also suggested that some elementary schools could start English instruction as early as first grade if they had the capacity. The 2001 National English Curriculum Standard (NECS) promoted the idea of developing students' comprehensive language abilities through language application (MOE, 2001b). Under this revised curriculum, language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, should be the foci. However, reading and listening should be emphasized first and foremost because the abilities to read and comprehend assist writing and speaking abilities (Bao, 2004; 2006).

Though it has been seven years since the implementation of the new curriculum, the teaching of English at elementary school is still in the experimental stage. There remain problems associated with this implementation, such as the insufficiently developed curriculum to include English as a required subject in elementary schools and the shortage of qualified teachers

and resources (Bao, 2004, 2006; Cui, 2002). Given the current situation, the purpose of this descriptive study is to reveal what and how English reading is taught in elementary schools in Beijing China. Three elementary schools in Beijing were selected based on the convenience sampling method and 11 English teachers in these schools participated in the study. *What aspects of English reading are taught in elementary schools in Beijing China and how they are taught?* comprises the study's major research question.

WHY FOCUS ON READING?

The term *Reading* has different definitions in different times and under different contexts. In the United States, where English is the native language, three definitions of reading were identified and have influenced the literacy programs for years (Foertsch, 1998). The first definition stated that learning to read means learning to pronounce words; the second that learning to read means learning to identify words and get their meaning; and the third that learning to read means learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. Collectively, these three definitions reflected a complete prospective about reading. However, current literacy research suggests a more comprehensive view. The National Reading Panel (2000) reported that phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension are the five components to be included in reading instruction. Other research also recognized the importance of skill instruction as one part of the reading process and recommended a balanced reading instruction for all (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Au, 1993).

In the world of teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), reading as well as listening, speaking and writing have been identified as the four basic skills in language learning. Reading is considered especially valuable under the foreign language context because it is one major source for students to obtain language input (Ediger, 2001). The term *reading* has also been used to refer to two different processes: reading aloud from the print and reading for comprehension (Chastain, 1988). While both processes are important for learning to read a foreign language, most reading research to date has focused its attention on reading for comprehension in the Chinese context (Hu, 2007).

The 2001 NECS specified six objectives for reading instruction at elementary schools. It stated that students who complete elementary school should be able to (1) recognize words and phrases that they have learned (能认读所学词语); (2) read easy words based on spelling rules (能根据拼读的规律, 读出简单的单词); (3) read and understand easy directions on the textbooks (能读懂教材中简短的要求或指令); (4) read and understand the simple information on greeting cards (能看懂贺卡等所表达的简单信息); (5) read and understand easy stories and essays with the help of illustrations and form the habit of reading based on semantic chunking (能借助图片读简单的故事或小短文, 并养成安意群阅读的习惯); and (6) read aloud stories and essays with fluency and accuracy (能正确朗读所学故事或短文) (MOE, 2001b, p. 11). These objectives emphasized both reading out loud and reading for meaning. Therefore, instructions should be provided to meet these goals.

ENGLISH READING INSTRUCTION IN CHINA

To answer the question—*what is known about English reading instruction in Chinese classrooms?*—a literature review was conducted. Even though the literature on teaching English in China abounds, little empirical research has been conducted at the elementary school level on English reading instruction. Chien and Chen (2002), Leou and Huang (2006), and Liaw (2003) studied elementary school students in Taiwan, and one finding they shared in common is that when explicit instruction on phonological awareness was provided in classrooms, students made great improvement on their vocabulary and reading comprehension. Wang Lu (2003) and Wang Mintao (2006) studied elementary school children in Mainland China, and reported that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction led to positive gains on students' spelling and comprehension ability. Xu (2002) explored the development of Chinese and English phonological awareness for Chinese Mandarin-speaking children and found that there was a strong correlation between children's development of Chinese and English phonological awareness. Teaching English phonemic awareness and phonics can not only facilitate students' English learning but also their learning of Chinese.

Other studies focused on students' use of strategies in learning vocabulary and comprehension at secondary school and tertiary levels (Chan, 2003; Feng & Wang, 2005; Feng & Mokhtari, 1998; Gu, 1994, 2003; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Gu & Qian, 1990; Ji, 1993; Li & Munby, 1996; Li, S. H., 2003; Lin & Cao, 1999; Pang, 2008; Parry, 1996; Tang, 1997; Xu, Zhang & Fan, 1993; Yang, 2004; Zhang, L. J., 2008). These studies revealed similar findings. First of all, successful learners were aware of and able to use a variety of learning strategies to achieve success. Secondly, regardless of the difference in learning strategies and methods (i.e., some students depended more on repeated practice to enhance memorization, whereas others were able to use cognitive learning strategies), successful learners were able to make it work with enough effort.

Another area of research attention concerns the English intensive and extensive reading courses at tertiary level (Ge, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Wu, 1990; Zhang, R. W., 2004; Zhang, Z. Y., 1997). Researchers and teachers criticized the ways these courses were taught, and argued that these courses were teacher-centered grammar-translation training courses rather than reading-based language courses. They suggested an integration of all skills in teaching English reading and a student-centered approach using reading centers, paired work, group discussions, and student involvement in various kinds of teaching tasks, including text explanation and analysis (Ge, 1993; Wang & Xing, 1993; Wu, 1990; Yue, 1990; Zhang, R. W. 2004; Zhen & Zou, 1993).

The results of the literature review provided the rationale for this study, and also demonstrated the significance of it. The fact that much research focused on tertiary level English instruction while little is known about how to teach English reading at the elementary school level suggested a great need to investigate beginning reading instruction. And because it was in 2001 that the Ministry of Education in China required elementary schools to include English as a compulsory subject (MOE, 2001a), beginning English instruction was fast becoming a new area needing exploration. In addition, the literature revealed that reading instruction in classrooms in China included the teaching of phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension. The reading objectives in the 2001 NECS for elementary school, however, suggested more aspects that instruction should include, such as letter recognition, reading fluency, etc. Hence, there is a pressing need to investigate whether those aspects are taught in classrooms and how they are taught.

Research Sites and Participants

Based on the convenience sampling method (Patton, 2001), three elementary schools in Beijing were selected. All these schools were located in downtown areas in the southeast of Beijing. And all these teachers taught at different grade levels from first to sixth grade in their schools.

School A is located in a quiet neighborhood, having one five-floor brick building with about 1,000 students and more than 80 teachers. Each classroom is well equipped with an air conditioner, a computer, a projection screen, a TV, and an overhead projector. School A has five English teachers, and four teachers participated in the study.

School B is located on a busy street. Six to seven major city buses go through that street and they were crowded almost all day. The school has a big four-floor building with east and west wings. Each classroom has a TV, an overhead projector, and three fans hanging on the wall. The school has 850 students and 75 teachers. Among all the teachers, four are English teachers who participated in this study.

School C is two streets away from School B in the same neighborhood. The school has a history of 100 years and is regarded as a key elementary school in the district with more than 1,700 students and 130 teachers. It has two four-floor main buildings with 39 classes. Because of the school's fame, many students are enrolled in the school. Compared with the class size of the other two schools, School C has the largest class size with more than 40 students in each class. The classrooms look crowded with these many students. The equipment in the classrooms is similar with those in School B, with a TV, an overhead projector and three fans on the wall. School C has six English teachers, and three participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research methods were used to gather various kinds of data. The author interviewed each of the 11 teachers twice and observed each of their lessons twice. The first interview was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) and the second interview was conducted after observations as a way to get teachers' perspectives on what the author has recorded about their instructions and to address questions and concerns the author might have after the interview. Twenty-two observations (40 minutes long for each lesson) from first to fifth grade classrooms were conducted and digitally recorded. Six grade classrooms were not observed due to testing reasons. Documents were also collected as part of the data, and they came from two sources: (1) public documents including textbooks, students' workbooks, teacher's manuals, and the 2001 NECS; (2) documents provided by teachers including their PowerPoint presentations, examination papers, and students' work samples.

Data were analyzed inductively to look for patterns and categories (Patton, 2001). Interview transcripts were analyzed using IN VIVO codes, and then the codes were grouped into categories based on the interview questions. Some of the categories generated were *vocabulary activities*, *homework and exercise*, and *other aspects of instruction*. The observation field notes were first open coded and then put into categories. For example, the open codes *teaching vocabulary spelling*, *teaching vocabulary pronunciation*, and *providing Chinese translation* were all categorized under *vocabulary activities*. It should be noted here that field observation was used to understand what the teachers said during interviews and, especially, what they have not said (Glesne, 2006).

RESULTS

Seven aspects related to the reading instruction in these classrooms came from the data analysis, and they were *phonemic awareness*, *pronunciation/phonics*, *fluency*, *vocabulary*, *comprehension*, *grammar*, and *cultural knowledge*. Phonemic awareness and pronunciation/phonics instruction target allowing students to read out loud, whereas the others aim at reading for comprehension. These teachers differed in their belief about how and why to teach certain aspects; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to report those differences.

Reading Out Loud Instruction

Reading out loud instruction in this study refers to instruction that focused on teaching English sounds, letters, and the relationship between the two, which enabled students to read aloud. Although some teachers reported that Chinese students had to memorize English sounds and letters and the traditional rote learning method of *look and say* was the best approach, some mentioned providing phonemic awareness and phonics instruction to ensure students' reading out loud ability.

Phonemic Awareness Instruction. Phonemic awareness instruction refers to teaching activities that help students develop awareness toward English letters and sounds without the aid of print. Five teachers reported phonemic awareness instruction at some level, including

- asking students to orally identify or match words that have the same sound, such as *tea*, *team* and *read*;
- asking students orally or using picture cards to blend individual sounds into a word or segment a word into individual sounds. For example, a teacher said the word *dog* and then asked students to tell the phonemes in the word /d//o//g/;
- segmenting and/or blending syllables. For example, a teacher presented students with a picture of a basketball, led students to read aloud the word a few times, and then asked students to segment the syllables;
- using self-created songs and chants to teach letter-sound relationship, for example, apple, apple, /a/, /a/, A; baby, baby, /b/, /b/, B;
- asking students to orally identify rhyming words; and
- asking students to orally identify and/or match words that begin or end with the same consonant sound, for example, *boy* and *banana*; *cat* and *car*.

It is worth noting here that these teachers provided phonemic awareness instruction regardless of students' grade level. For example, segmenting syllables for the word *basketball* was reported by a teacher who taught fifth grade.

Phonics Instruction. Phonics instruction refers to any activity that teaches students the relationship between letters and sounds who in turn use this relationship to correctly pronounce, read and write English. Besides the traditional *look and say* method, teachers reported four types of phonics activities in teaching students how to read English, including

- using letter cards to teach single letter-sound correspondences. For example, a teacher showed students letter A and ask students what sound letter A makes;
- blending and segmenting activities. For example, a teacher showed students the word *basketball* and asked students to segment the syllables;
- teaching common letter combinations. For example, in the fourth grade textbook Unit 8 on page 20 (Wang & Methold, 2005), six words are presented: *toys, boy, oyster, oil, coins,* and *boil*. Teachers read aloud these words or have the tape played aloud, emphasized the *oy* and *oi* letter combinations and the sound they make, then students either repeated the taped voice or the teacher read aloud these words, and, finally, teachers asked students to do some exercises based on the textbook. Textbook exercises included matching sounds with pictures, reading more words that have the same letter combination; and
- teaching English pronunciation by using Chinese Pinyin. Many letters in Chinese Pinyin have the same pronunciation with the consonant letters in English. Teachers often taught students to use the Pinyin system to figure out the sounds and the spelling of the English words.

Even though many teachers provided phonics instruction in classrooms, they also indicated that they still favored the traditional rote learning method due to the limited class time and the tight teaching schedule. One teacher said:

This is the struggle here. If I spend too much time on that, we won't finish what we should. The good thing about the rote-learning method is that students can do that at home. They all have the tape. They listen to the tape for correct pronunciation and repeatedly imitate or practice the correct pronunciation, and then remember the spelling. That's it.

Fluency Instruction

Fluency is the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). All teachers reported that it is important for Chinese students to achieve reading fluency, and indicated that reading fluency was a prerequisite for students to achieve speaking fluency. Teachers have provided many opportunities to practice reading fluency in class. Fluency instruction was provided at three levels: *word level, sentence level, and text level*. The word level refers to the teacher having students read words repeatedly with the focus on pronunciation and reading rate. Some first and second grade teachers have used word cards and lists to have students read aloud the key words. They asked students to read following the teacher, audiotape, or compact disc as a whole class, in groups, in pairs, or individually.

Teachers asking students to read key sentences in a unit repeatedly is fluency instruction at the sentence level. Key sentences in each unit were listed in a section called *Uncle Booky's Storyboard* in the textbook. For example in first grade textbook II, the key words in Unit 12 are

walk, run, jump, swim, and dance and the key sentences are *I can ... (walk, run, jump...)*; *Can you...;* *Yes, I can;* and *No, I can't.* When asking students to practice fluency at the sentence level, teachers provided students repeated opportunities to echo read, group read, and partner read. After reading, teachers also provided students scenarios that they could speak these sentences in conversations.

Upper grade textbooks have more text including stories, narrative passages, dialogues, lyrics, and chants. Students were required to read these texts fluently, which refers to fluency at text level. All these teachers have provided students with many repeated reading aloud opportunities in class either following the CD/tape or the teacher. Echo reading, choral reading, partner reading, group reading were all present. In addition, reader's theatre was also an activity used by some. Students were asked to take different parts/roles of the texts to practice reading, and to present fluent reading of the text to the whole class.

Vocabulary Instruction

All the teachers agreed that vocabulary was the most important and basic aspect of learning English at elementary school, and have talked about their instruction from three aspects: vocabulary pronunciation, vocabulary spelling, and vocabulary meaning. For pronunciation and spelling, 3 out of the 11 teachers indicated that they observed a big improvement in accuracy after introducing and having students practice phonics rules. The rest of the teachers still believed the value of using repeated practice, such as repeated reading out loud and repeated copying of words to enhance memorization of the pronunciation and spelling of the new vocabulary. Teachers have used different ways and activities to teach the meaning of vocabulary. These activities included:

- *Chinese translation.* This is the most commonly used way to provide meaning to English vocabulary. One teacher gave an example of the English word *very*. Simply by offering the Chinese meaning *非常*, students could get the meaning and immediately know how to use the word in speaking and writing.
- *Action, pictures and real objects.* Teachers of lower grades performed the action in order to demonstrate the meaning of verbs, and used pictures or real objects to teach nouns.
- *Context clues.* Some teachers did not teach vocabulary separately; instead, they explained the vocabulary in the context of the story.
- *Games, riddles, and other instructional tasks.* Two games, *freeze* and *touch*, were reported. Regarding the *freeze* example, a teacher first asked the students to stand up and do whatever they wanted to do. Next she said “FREEZE” and students had to stop moving. Then she wrote the directions on the board such as “move your head (hand, foot, feet, arms...)” and students were asked to act out accordingly. One teacher reviewed vocabulary using riddles. After learning the vocabulary for *deer*, *frog*, and *bird*, she said to the students in English: “I am going to say something and you tell me what it is, OK? It is an animal. It is green. And it can jump. So what is it?” Students shouted with the answer—*frog*. Another teacher reported giving students different tasks to learn vocabulary. One task she created was *vocabulary jungle*. She hid vocabulary cards in the classroom, divided students into groups, and asked groups to find all the required vocabulary cards and make sentences using those vocabulary words.

- *Exercises from textbook and workbook.* For example, in the second grade textbook II (Cheng, Wang, & Methold, 2005) pages 64 and 67, three sections, *listen for words*, *listen to this*, and *write the letter*, contain vocabulary exercises. In these three sections, students either match a word with a picture by listening to the tape or fill in the missing letter to complete a word (a picture of a pear and *_ear* is written below the picture. Students' job is to fill the line with the letter p).

Comprehension Instruction

All the teachers believed that comprehension was important in learning English, and mentioned many ways and methods to teach reading comprehension.

- *Chinese translation.* All the teachers reported that translating the English text to Chinese is a powerful way to ensure students' comprehension. Teachers of upper grades have reported more Chinese translation in class than those teaching in lower grades.
- *Picture walk/illustrations.* Teachers reported that the pictures and illustrations accompanied with texts were great support for comprehending the text.
- *Movies.* The movies here refer to the animated version of the textbook story. A compact disk is accompanied with the current textbooks presenting the story just like a cartoon movie. Students watch the cartoon characters talking and acting exactly like what is presented in the text. Teachers reported that after watching the movie, students could comprehend 80% to 90% of the story.
- *Questions.* Different teachers reported using questions before, during, and after reading as a way to help students' overall comprehension: *pre-reading questions* allowed students to be more purposeful in reading; *during reading questions* helped teachers better realize when and where more explanation and Chinese translation might be needed to help comprehending the text; and *post-reading questions* gave teachers opportunities to assess students' comprehension.
- *Silent reading and repeated reading.* Two teachers indicated that they asked students to do silent reading first in class before the whole class instruction. These teachers also mentioned that at times when they found out that students did not understand the text, they always encouraged students to repeatedly read the text before asking teachers for help.
- *Group reading.* One teacher favored group work and always asked students to read in groups to seek support from peers.
- *Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies.* Teachers stated that students needed to know some strategies in order to do well on examinations. The methods/strategies they mentioned included using key words or sentences to locate answers, ignoring individual unknown vocabulary and trying to get comprehension of the passage as a whole, reading the questions before reading the passage, and applying comprehension strategies students learned when reading Chinese to English passages.

Grammar Instruction

Teachers indicated that grammar was involved in every aspect of English instruction at every grade because it was not only a big portion in all the required examinations, but also an inseparable part that helps foreign language learners achieve comprehension. Even though direct explanation of grammatical rules was still present during instruction, many teachers believed in the power of teaching grammar implicitly within the language context. For example, one second grade teacher indicated that when teaching singular noun and plural noun, she repeatedly showed the picture and the word label to students: a picture of a duck and then the word label *one duck*; a picture of four ducks and then the word label *four ducks*. She stated that by doing so, students gradually learned that the morpheme *-s* should be added to some nouns to express the meaning of more than one. In teaching grammar rules for upper graders, instead of explaining grammatical rules without a context, such as *was* means past and *will* means future, teachers asked students to read the text first, and explanation and direct teaching of grammatical rules were provided after reading.

Cultural Knowledge

The 2001 NECS has suggested that Chinese students should develop awareness toward the cultures in English speaking countries (MOE, 2001a). Most of the teachers included the cultural components in their teaching by providing direct explanation. They mentioned three reasons of including the cultural knowledge into their English reading instruction. First of all, learning different cultures made learning English fun, and thus, students were more motivated. Many teachers also reported that students were very interested in learning how people celebrated different holidays, ate different foods, and participated in different social customs in English speaking countries, such as the United States. Secondly, knowing different cultures better prepared students to use English competently in the future. For example, one teacher said, "...using the appropriate ways to greet an American definitely made my students better English speakers." Finally, cultural knowledge facilitated reading comprehension. One teacher mentioned that students' cultural background was needed in order to understand some reading passages in textbooks. For example, because Chinese do not bake, knowing that Americans have ovens at home so they can bake cakes was necessary for Chinese students to understand a reading passage about baking.

The teachers mentioned specific examples of the cultural knowledge that was included in their teaching: (1) holidays, Chinese spring festival vs. Christmas, Halloween; (2) food, such as the names of Western food (French fries, hamburger, pizza, etc.) and the habit of eating and cooking (having sweets after a meal, drinking coffee instead of tea, baking at home); (3) social customs, such as age (inappropriate to ask), privacy (greeting by saying 'how are you' or 'how are you doing' instead of saying 'where did you go' or 'have you eaten your lunch/dinner'), personal space (should not be too close to someone), pets (dog is a beloved animal and it is not a bad word), numbers (13 is an unlucky number in Western culture), days of the week (Sunday is the first day of the week in the western culture, not Monday); and (4) sports, such as the difference between football and soccer in the US.

CONCLUSION

The present descriptive study presented a holistic picture of beginning English reading instruction in three elementary schools in Beijing, China, under the 2001 revised curriculum. It revealed several important findings and suggested areas that need further development and research. First of all, even though traditional rote learning or the *look and say* method was still used by many teachers to enhance memorization of English sounds and letters in order to read aloud, phonemic awareness and phonics instruction were also present in some of the classrooms. The inclusion of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction revealed that memorization was not the only way for learning how to read in English under a foreign context. Similar findings have also been suggested by several studies exploring the role of phonemic awareness and phonics in teaching Chinese students learn to read English (Chien & Chen, 2002; Leou & Huang, 2006; Liaw, 2003; Wang L., 2003; Wang, M. T., 2006). This study, however, contributes to the field by uncovering the instructional approaches and activities used by these teachers toward phonemic awareness and phonics for Chinese elementary school students. The application of different reading activities, such as reader's theatre, games and riddles, and the use of group and pair work in classroom, were indications of teaching creativity and innovation, which contradicted the traditional Chinese model of teaching (Paine, 1990).

In addition, the fact that these teachers made no distinction with regard to which years of English instruction need phonemic awareness and phonics instruction provided valuable information for EFL instruction and research. Research on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction recommended that instructions on these two aspects should be provided to young students including kindergarteners and first and second graders (CIERA, 2003; Cunningham, et al, 1998; NRP, 2000). However, this was not the case with EFL instruction in these three schools in Beijing. The Ministry of Education does not specify the grade levels when these aspects of English should be taught. The teacher's manual and the textbook do not have this specification either. Instead, they present sound and letter relationship knowledge under a few sections called *Sounds and Letters*, *Listen for Sounds*, and *Reading with Uncle Booky*. It left to the teachers to provide the instruction whenever they felt they needed to and in whatever ways they wanted. Should this decision be left to the teachers or should there be some guidance for teachers regarding when and how to provide phonemic awareness and phonics instruction? Research is needed to answer this pressing question and to explore the appropriate grade level for phonemic awareness and phonics instruction to Chinese EFL students.

Fluency is considered a neglected aspect in teaching reading (Allington, 1983), and studies on how to teach fluency in elementary classrooms in China are also limited as suggested by the literature review. However, responses gained from these teachers revealed that fluency was important and instruction was provided at the word level, sentence level, and text level. The instructional activities, such as repeated reading, choral reading, echo reading, group reading and partner reading, were similar to those in native English speaking classrooms. Meanwhile, it is also important to acknowledge that these teachers believed reading fluency to facilitate the development of oral/speaking fluency, which differed from the view that EFL students should develop oral/speaking fluency before reading fluency (Farrell, 2009).

A good deal of literature indicated that vocabulary and comprehension were the most important aspects of instruction in secondary school and tertiary level universities (Chan, 2003; Feng & Wang, 2005; Feng & Mokhtari, 1998; Gu, 2003; Li & Munby, 1996; Li, S. H., 2003; Lin & Cao, 1999; Pang, 2008; Tang, 1997; Yang, 2004; Zhang, L. J., 2008). This study suggested

that vocabulary and comprehension are important aspects of instruction at elementary school level as well, and revealed that teachers apply a variety of methods such as direct translation, explicit teaching of strategies, and use a variety of resources and activities to teach vocabulary and reading comprehension. Under the standard curriculum and the unified textbooks, these teachers applied different methods to provide different instruction.

Grammar knowledge was crucial in learning to read a foreign language. Even though explicit teaching of grammatical rules was still used, the implicit approach of grammar teaching has gained popularity among teachers, which suggests a shift of focus from teaching how to analyze the language to how to use the language (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). This change aligned with the 2001 curriculum objectives. However, it also raised the problem of failing to prepare students with a good command of grammar knowledge in order to advance them to the middle school level (Xiahou, 2003), which suggests yet another area of fruitful research.

Finally, cultural knowledge is an important component in building diversity and global awareness in classrooms (Clarke & Drudy, 2006). The inclusion of cultural knowledge in EFL classrooms is a significant curriculum development in China, aiming to better prepare Chinese students to compete in the globalized world. However, it also presented many more challenges to the teachers. In addition, these teachers viewed English culture as one homogeneous culture and the United States as the representative of Western culture. They either did not know or ignored the fact that there are many different English speaking countries and a variety of English cultures. This shortcoming calls for a need of providing more opportunities for EFL teachers to experience diverse English cultures.

The descriptive qualitative study reported here has provided research evidence about the status quo of English reading instruction in three elementary school classrooms in Beijing China, which informs curriculum revision, policy making, English teacher preparation program, and EFL instruction in other countries. However, it also presents some limitations. Like many qualitative studies, the results of the study cannot be generalized. The 2005 statistics suggested that Beijing has 1442 elementary schools in the 18 districts and counties (Beijing Municipal Education Commission, 2009). The quality of education among the districts is different as well as the quality of teachers and the availability of educational resources. There are even differences among districts in the grade level at which English instruction is provided: some districts start English teaching at first grade and some at third grade. The 11 teachers in the three elementary schools reported here do not represent all elementary schools or all teachers teaching at the elementary level. Larger scale studies should be conducted to examine EFL instruction under the 2001 NECS in different districts and schools. In addition, this study reported findings on the instruction provided by these 11 teachers in three schools as a whole. Instructional differences within these teachers and schools were not compared or analyzed due to the focus of the paper. Future studies should be conducted to examine the differences within teaching and factors that cause these differences.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Protocol

- What do you think about the current national syllabus or objectives toward elementary English?
- Do you plan your class based on the syllabus or the teacher's manual? If yes, why? If not, what else you will add to your teaching? Why?
- How do you teach students how to read in English? Do you primarily rely on using Chinese or English during teaching?
- What kinds of skills do students need to have in order for them to learn to read English?
- What aspects are included in your teaching? Importance? How do you teach each?
- How do you teach letter-sound relationship?
- How do you teach pronunciation? Do you think phonics is important for Chinese students learn to read English?
- How do you teach fluency?
- How do you teach vocabulary?
- How do you teach comprehension?
- Other aspects?