

# Teaching reading in China and in the United Kingdom: A comparative study<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

As the world has become more global, so education has become more international as well and there is a good deal which can be learnt from comparative studies of educational policies and practices in different countries. The research reported in this paper aimed to investigate some differences and similarities between the techniques of teaching reading to young children in England and in China, and to make a brief comparison of them. Since the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of these two countries are very different, so the educational methods will almost certainly vary. The ultimate goal of this study is to explore whether teachers and schools could find a possible way to learn from each other and to modify some existing weaknesses.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this research. A questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and some structured observations were used to collect data. The research focused on three questions:

1. What are the principal differences in the techniques of teaching reading to young children used in England and in China?
  - what are the influential factors when teachers teach reading to young children in these two countries, such as gender, age, experience, training background, and school facilities?
  - what do the teachers use for aids and supports when they teach reading to young children in these two countries, such as books, radio, computer, video, TV?
  - what features characterize the interactions between teachers and students in these two countries, such as the texts, classroom organization, activity size, and the expectation of the teachers?
2. What are the similarities in teaching reading to young children in England and in China?
3. What might teachers and schools in both of the two countries learn from each other which could improve their education in the field of teaching young children reading?

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## Introduction

It is of the greatest importance that children make a good start in learning to read. Beginnings are important. Literacy beginnings, as crucial as they are to children's development as readers and writers, often take diverse paths, however. Once children fall behind, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to catch up, as their peers read more and forge ahead in all areas of the curriculum. Therefore, how to teach reading effectively to the children who are just beginning to learn reading is significant.

There has been a great deal of research into the teaching and learning of early reading in English-speaking contexts, but comparatively little into the same processes in other cultures, particularly in cultures where Chinese languages are the medium of instruction. The limited research into the teaching of reading in Chinese suggests that there are major differences between the context, pedagogy and content of reading teaching in English-speaking and Chinese speaking communities.

Chan, Juan, and Foon (2008) investigated Chinese preschool children's literacy development. They suggested that, 'Children in Hong Kong are explicitly taught to write at a very young age. They are guided to draw vertical and horizontal lines at age three, and are required to write simple characters with few strokes at age four. When children are ready for formal schooling at age six, many of them can write around 50-60 characters'. In the preschool stage, 'young children learn to capture their own ideas through symbols, beginning with pictures and scribbling and eventually learn the letters/characters that are used in their society' (p. 135). According to Chan, Juan, and Foon, 'Chinese has long been classified as a logographic language, which refers to the use of symbols to represent words or morphemes. A character is a squared-shaped configuration made up of strokes and the combination of strokes forming stroke-patterns' (p. 136). Such strokes provide only graphic information to get to meaning and pronunciation, and not the phonological information familiar in Western alphabetic scripts. Hu and Catts (1998) have argued that learning to read Chinese is achieved primarily by visual memory for Chinese characters. This is based largely on the assumption that Chinese orthography is a "deep" orthography with little correspondence between sound and symbol. Zhang and Feng (1992) suggested that more than 80% of Chinese characters contain a graphic cue as to the meaning of a word. However, Hu and Catts (1998) argued that this underestimates the importance of phonological information in reading Chinese. It seems that both visual memory and phonological information are important for reading Chinese, but that visual memory may be more practical for children who have just begun to read, as Chan, Juan, and Foon (2008) have suggested that Chinese is principally a logographic language, unlike English.

The techniques used by teachers in China seem to be different from those used by teachers in England. An obvious example is that students in China are encouraged to criticize each others' character formation, which can be quite pointed from the Western perspective. However, this is very necessary. Mistakes have to be corrected immediately because

eventually the students must write the characters perfectly (Pine, Ping'an and Song, 2003, p. 805-806). From a Western perspective, also, Chinese lessons in first, second, and third grades are fast-paced, noisy, and very much teacher-centred (Yin & Rohsenow, 1994).

### **Comparative research**

Some researchers have compared the learning of Chinese and English. When Chinese children learn to decode and comprehend characters they focus on writing system components quite different from those found in the English alphabet. English users speak of sounding words out, of the sounds of poetry, of invented spelling; while Chinese users speak of balanced characters and stroke order, of the appearance of a character, of the visual allusions found within the characters of a poem (Pine, Ping'an and Song, 2003, p. 777-778). The Chinese writing system employs a knowledge base quite different from an alphabetic system, such as English. Although some researchers dispute what cognitive mechanisms are triggered while reading Chinese, Chinese clearly requires some skills and strategy configurations that are quite different from English, Spanish, and other writing systems that utilize the Latin alphabet (Cheng, 1992).

Compared to the words and morphemes of alphabetic writing systems, Chinese characters are relatively independent from the spoken language. Characters represent primarily the meaning of a morpheme and only indirectly its sound. In Chinese, a literate person often sketches a character in the air to clarify a meaning (Yin & Rohsenow, 1994). In the 1980s the study of Chinese character processing was still rare (Zhang & Feng, 1992), but during the last decade more studies have reported on Chinese character recognition and the processes involved. In recent decades, the Chinese government has made considerable effort which focused on the effects of simplifying characters, with many studies conducted in areas such as frequency of character use and determining which characters are vital for beginning literacy levels (Yin & Rohsenow, 1994, p. 784).

Because the nature of the English and Chinese writing systems is so different, one hypothesis might be that children's decoding processes in China would be quite different from those found in English. Research (Pine, Ping'an and Song, 2003) has suggested that Chinese children notice details of signs within signs in their literacy system, which appears to be very different from the learning strategies employed by Western beginning readers who often focus on beginning sounds and letter/sound associations from preschool years. In addition, although teachers in China spend the majority of time on detailed text comprehension, attention to character structure and reinforcement of precise stroke and component formation within the balanced, whole character were embedded throughout the lessons. Shu and Anderson (1997) also found that Chinese students developed an early insight into the formation of characters. Another clear difference is that once children developing literacy in English have learned to decode, even in rudimentary ways, they are able to unlock many words for themselves. On the other hand, children developing literacy in Chinese either know the characters or they do not.

There are, according to the literature, two routes to reading. One is through the regularity of the letter-to-phoneme correspondence in a shallow orthography which may lead readers to rely more heavily on the route through sound to the lexicon (Rayner and Pollatsek, 1989, p. 99). Another is through a logographic system (like the Japanese Kanji) which might lead to a heavier reliance on the direct visual route than English (Rayner and Pollatsek, 1989, p. 99). Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) recommended that syllabic systems have to be translated into a phonological code before lexical access is possible while the lexical access of words written in Kanji can be achieved without reference to phonology. The argument of Rayner and Pollatsek was that while different writing systems may influence readers to rely more heavily on one route than the other, both routes are used in all languages (p. 99).

After reviewing the research cited above, it still seems, however, that there are not enough studies about the detailed differences and similarities in teaching beginning reading to young children of teachers in England and in China. This is an interesting topic, especially giving the growing salience of China within the modern world, and consequent increasing human mobility. The study reported in this paper was undertaken, therefore, to investigate the specific methods used by teachers in both countries.

## **Research Methods**

The aim of this study was to explore the principal differences and similarities in teaching reading to the beginning readers in England and in China, in order to identify the possible ways in which each of the two countries could improve their education in this field. Therefore, the sample for this research consisted of the teachers who taught the early readers in these two countries. The study was designed to collect both quantitative data and qualitative data. The quantitative data was collected by using questionnaire, observations and interviews to some extent; while the qualitative data collection was done mainly through interviews and observations.

There were two groups of teachers involved in this study, one in England and one in China. Each group was composed of thirty teachers who were currently teaching children at an early stage of reading. Gathering these samples involved a number of steps. Firstly, fourteen primary schools in England were chosen at random from primary schools in and around the UK city of Coventry, while two kindergartens in China were randomly selected from the kindergartens in Beijing. Secondly, thirty teachers who taught children at an early stage of reading in the fourteen primary schools in England and thirty teachers in the two kindergartens in China were randomly chosen from the teachers available. It is accepted, of course, that the two teacher samples used in this study may not be representative of other teachers across the two countries, but it is hoped that the data collected from these teachers might be suggestive of wider trends.

## *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was employed in this study to get a preliminary picture about how teachers in the two countries taught early reading, what they used to aid their teaching, and what might be influencing their teaching. The preliminary picture was expected to help with planning further research using observation and interview. The questionnaire included seventeen closed questions, covering the ranges of gender, teaching experience, books used, materials used, resources used, class organization, frequency and length of lessons, activities of helping learning, children's involvement (the interactions between teachers and children), teaching content, and assessment. The questionnaire was piloted with three teachers in Chinese kindergartens and one teacher in England before the research began. Some directly translated words from English to Chinese were found to be confused and misleading, so they were changed. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a question for the teachers to choose whether they would like to be involved further in this study or not. This was crucial for choosing the sample for observations.

Based on personal experience of study in China and volunteer work in English primary schools, some speculation about possible differences and similarities took place before the questionnaire was designed. These were put into the questionnaire, in order to check whether the speculations were right or not. To be specific: the way teachers organized the class and the content (focus, words, sentence, etc.) of teaching were suspected to be different; the materials (pictures, songs, poems, etc.), resources (computers, programmes, toys, etc.), and activities (after class games, etc.) used by teachers, plus the interactions (in class activities, children's involvement, etc) between teachers and children, and the assessment of learning were suspected to have both differences and similarities; the frequency and length of lessons were suspected to be similar.

## *Observations*

Observations were then carried out of five teachers in each country, chosen randomly from those who had volunteered to take a further part in the study. These were used to detect the differences and similarities between practices in teaching reading used in England and in China. The details of how teachers taught, what they taught, and what they used to aid their teaching were observed. A check list was planned before the observations were conducted. It included the classroom setting, the materials and resources that might be used by teachers, the sorts of books and their content, the teachers' behaviour, the children's behaviour and the interactions between teachers and the children. The purpose of the observation was to investigate the details of the teaching and to research more deeply the questionnaire answers.

## *Interviews*

After each observation session, each of the 10 teachers were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, using a schedule based closely on the questions in questionnaire, supplemented by points raised in the observations. The interviews were expected to get some insights into the opinions of the teachers about their questionnaire answers and the things they had done in the observations. For example, if the teachers claimed to use character/word cards in class in the questionnaire, and they did use them in class when observed, they would be asked in the interview about the reason why they did this.

A triangulation of the data collected from questionnaire, observations and interviews was established after the interviews had been done.

### ***Methods of data analysis***

The collected data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The statistical package, SPSS, was used to analyse the questionnaire responses against each variable, and the chi-square statistic was used to assess whether the differences were significant or not. The observations were analysed by a content analysis of the skills, the materials and resources, and the activities used by the teachers in each country. The interviews were transcribed as written texts. Similar to the observation analysis, the points related to teaching reading were marked and written down. The five interview transcripts of each country were analysed separately: the skills, the materials and resources, and the activities used by the teachers while they taught in each country were picked out.

## **Results**

### ***Questionnaire***

The questionnaire results revealed some general issues affecting these two groups of teachers. Of the teachers completing the questionnaire almost all, both in China and in England, were female. Only one of the 60 teachers (in the Chinese sample) was male. All of them in this sample had been trained before they taught, and the Chinese teachers in this study tended to have less teaching experience than those from England. 43.4% of the teachers in China had less than 5 years experience compared to 30% of the teachers in England; only one Chinese teacher in the sample had taught for more than 20 years, whereas 4 of the teachers in England had done that. These differences between the two groups were not, however, statistically significant ( $p=0.46$  using the chi-square statistic). Some detailed issues are listed below:

#### ***1. Textbook use***

There was a marked difference between the two groups of teachers in terms of their use of a text book to teach reading. Table 1 below shows that 70% of the teachers in China claimed to use the same text book compared to only 10% of the teachers in England. This difference was

highly significant ( $p < 0.001$  using the chi-square statistic). Two teachers in England mentioned that they follow the same scheme to teach reading.

**Table 1: Teachers' use of a textbook to teach reading**

Question: Do you always use the same textbook to teach reading?							
Teachers answering Yes to this question	in China		in England		in full sample		$p < .001$
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
	21	70.0	3	10.0	24	40.0	

## 2. Material use

Table 2 below shows that teachers in both countries were heavy users of stories, poems and pictures in teaching reading. There was a small difference in their use of pictures, where 96.7% of the teachers in England claimed to use these, compared to only 80% of the teachers in China. A greater difference was found in the reported use of songs. Here 93.3% of the teachers in England claimed to use songs, compared to only 44.8% of the teachers in China, a difference which was statistically significant ( $p < .001$  using chi square).

**Table 2: Teachers' use of materials for teaching reading**

Question: Which kinds of materials do you use for teaching reading?							
Materials	Teachers in China claiming use of these		Teachers in England claiming use of these		Total teachers claiming use of these		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Stories	28	93.3	30	100	58	96.7	$p = .15$
Poems	27	90.0	26	86.7	53	88.3	$p = .688$
Pictures	24	80.0	29	96.7	53	88.3	$p < .05 *$
Songs	13	44.8	28	93.3	41	69.5	$p < .001 **$

Beside these four types of material, some teachers also mentioned some other material they use for teaching reading. Several teachers in China claimed to use idioms (2), words cards (3), VCDs (2), the materials came with textbooks (1), prose (2), as well as some famous works passed from ancient China (1) to teach reading. Several teachers in England claimed to use phonics programme (10), non-fiction texts (1), CD-ROMS (1), interactive whiteboard of websites (4), and story bags (2) as materials to teach reading. A quite obvious difference can be seen here in that the teachers in England had begun to teach phonics, but with the teachers in China had not yet. However, the teachers in China had begun to teach some complicated phrases (ancient idioms) to children already.

## 3. Resources use

Table 3 below shows that teachers in both countries were heavy users of toys, computers, radio/video and TV in teaching reading. The two significant differences were in the use of computers and radio/videos. 93.3% of the teachers in England claimed to use computers to teach reading, compared to only 76.7% of the teachers in China; 90% of the teachers in China claimed to use radio/videos, compared to only 53% of the teachers in England.

**Table 3: Teachers' use of resources for teaching reading**

Question: Which other resources do you use for teaching reading?							
Resources	Teachers in China claiming use of these		Teachers in England claiming use of these		Total teachers claiming use of these		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Toys	21	70	22	73.3	43	71.7	p=.774
Computers	23	76.7	28	93.3	51	85	p=.071
Radio/videos	27	90	16	53	43	71.7	p=.002
TV	13	44.8	11	37.9	24	41.4	P=.594

Other resources used to teach reading were different in England and China. Teachers in China mentioned the use of surroundings, both outdoor and inside the classroom, as their other resources to teach reading, while the teachers in England mentioned they used puppets, big books, role play actions, and Jolly phonics as their other resources for teaching reading.

#### 4. Class organization

From table 4 below, it can be seen that there were differences between the two groups of teachers in terms of organizing the teaching of reading lessons. 100% of the teachers in England claimed to teaching reading to the whole class, to small groups, and to individuals; compared to 93.3% of the teachers in China, 69% of them claiming to teach reading to small groups, and only 37.9% of them claiming to teach reading to individuals. There was not a marked difference between these two groups of teachers in terms of teaching reading to the whole class. However, in terms of teaching reading to small groups, the teachers in England used it much more than the teachers in China. A marked significant difference here between these two groups of teachers was in terms of teaching reading to individual students ( $p < 0.001$ ). The outcome suggests that whole class teaching and the use of a text book seemed to go together.

**Table 4: Class organization for teaching reading**

Question: How do you organise your teaching of reading?							
The methods teachers chose	Teachers in China		Teachers in England		Total teachers		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	



To the whole class	28	93.3	30	100	58	96.7	p=.15
To small groups	20	69	30	100	50	84.7	p=.001
To individuals	11	37.9	30	100	41	69.5	p<.001*

From the further question and its results, it can be seen that for the method of teaching reading to the whole class, the majority (22) of the teachers in China claimed that it occupied 70%-100% of their teaching time and 9 of them said that they used 100% of their teaching time to teach reading to the whole class, compared to the majority (22) of the teachers in England who claimed that they spent 20%-60% of their teaching time to do this. This difference was quite significant ( $p=0.001$ ). As for the method of teaching reading to small groups, 10 teachers in China said they never taught reading to small groups, 13 of them said that they spent 5%-30% of their teaching time to do that, compared to 23 of the teachers in England claiming to spend 30%-60% of their teaching time teaching reading to small groups. This difference was significant as well ( $p=0.003$ ). As for the method of teaching reading to individuals, 21 of the teachers in China said they never did this, compared to 20 of the teachers in England claiming to spend 10%-20% of their teaching time to teach reading individuals. This difference was significant ( $p<0.001$ ).

One of the teachers in England indicated that she used big books to teach reading to the whole class. She also used guided reading to teach phonics to small groups. Apart from that, she taught reading individually and this depended on the children's levels. It can be seen that in China, teaching to the whole class appeared to be the norm. In England, however, these three approaches appeared to be shared equally. The outcome suggests that to some extent, the education in China involved a focus on consistency, compared to the education in England which seemed more concentrated on individualism.

### 5. *Reading lessons*

100% of the teachers in China claimed that specific lessons were used for teaching reading, compared to 83.3% of the teachers in England. This difference was, however, not statistically significant. The majority of the teachers both in China and in England gave reading lessons, which lasted between 16-30 minutes, to children. In total, only 18.3% of all the teachers gave reading lessons less than 15 minutes, and only 8.3% of all the teachers give reading lessons between 31-45 minutes. There were no significant differences between the two groups of teachers.

From table 5 below, it can be seen that there was a significant difference between the two groups of teachers in terms of how frequently they gave reading lessons to children. 43.3% of the teachers in China claimed that they had two lessons a week, compared to 57.7% of the teachers in England who claimed that they had reading lessons every day. This difference was statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ).

**Table 5: the frequency of reading lessons**

Question: How many times do you have reading lessons every week?							
Frequency	Teachers in China		Teachers in England		Total teachers		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
1	1	3.3	7	26.9	8	14.3	P<.001
2	13	43.3	4	15.4	17	30.4	
3	8	26.7	0	0	8	14.3	
4	1	3.3	0	0	1	1.8	
everyday	7	23.3	15	57.7	22	39.3	

**6. Reading activities**

It can be seen that activities were used a lot by teachers in both countries. 96.7% of the teachers in China claimed to use activities outside reading lessons, compared to 100% of the teachers in England.

However, in terms of the sorts of activities used by these two groups of teachers, there were some differences, which can be seen from Table 6 below. Only 60% of the teachers in China claimed to use the activity of children sharing books and reading together after class, compared to 100% of the teachers in England. This difference was significant ( $p=0.001$ ). It also can be seen that most of the teachers both in China and in England used games to help children memorize the content of reading lessons. However, there was a slight difference between these two groups of teachers, as 70.4% of the teachers in China claimed to use games, compared to 83.3% of the teachers in England.

**Table 6: Outside class activities for teaching reading**

Question: Which kinds of activities do you use for teaching reading outside class?							
Activities	Teachers in China		Teachers in England		Total teachers		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Share books and read together	18	60	30	100	48	80	$p=.001$
Play games to help memorize	19	70.4	25	83.3	44	77.2	$p=.244$

the content							
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This outcome suggests that even through the types of activities and games used by the teachers in these two countries were very different, their focuses were both to teach children how to express themselves orally.

### 7. *Children's involvement*

From Table 7 below, it can be seen that there were some differences between the two groups of teachers in terms of how they involved the children in lessons, but not significant ones. One marked difference between these two groups was that 86.7% of the teachers in China claimed to ask children to read after them, compared to only 63.3% of the teachers in England ( $p < 0.001$ ). Another significant difference was that 53.3% of the teachers in China ask children to read aloud in front of the class, compared with only 13.3% of the teachers in England ( $p = 0.001$ ).

**Table 7: Children's involvement**

Question: How were the children involved in the reading class?							
Involvement	Teachers in China		Teachers in England		Total teachers		Difference between China and England
	n	%	n	%	n	%	p
Read after the teacher	26	86.7	12	40	38	63.3	$p < .001$ **
Read with the teacher together	28	93.3	28	93.3	56	93.3	$p = 1.00$
Read one text one by one	12	40	20	66.7	32	53.3	$p = .038$
Read aloud in front of the class	16	53.3	4	13.3	20	33.3	$p = .001$ **
Read quietly by themselves	9	31	18	60	27	45.8	$p = .026$
Read to each other	16	55.2	14	46.7	30	50.8	$p = .514$

### 8. *Teaching writing*

There was a marked difference between the two groups of teachers in terms of teaching reading and writing together. This can be seen from table 8 below: 83.3% of the teachers in England claimed to do this compared to only 16.7% of the teachers in China. This difference was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 8: teaching reading and writing together**

Question: Do you teach reading and writing together?
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Teachers answering Yes to this question	in China		in England		in full sample		p<.001
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
	5	16.7	25	83.3	30	50	

## 9. Assessment

All the teachers both in the Chinese sample and in the English sample made assessments of the children's learning. There was no marked difference here. However, regarding to the frequency of assessment, there were slight differences. 40% of the teachers in China claimed to assess the children's reading more than once a month, compared to 28.6% of the teachers in England claimed to assess the children's reading less often than every three months. Some teachers both in China and in England mentioned the use of ongoing assessment.

**Table 9: The frequency of assessment of reading**

Question: How often do you assess children of their reading							P=.063
Frequency	in China		in England		in full sample		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
More than once a month	12	40	2	28.6	14	37.8	
Once a month	11	36.7	0	0	11	29.7	
Every three months	1	3.3	1	14.3	2	5.4	
Less often than every three months	1	3.3	2	28.6	3	8.1	
Ongoing assessment of learning	5	16.7	2	28.6	7	18.9	

## Observation

### 1. Classroom setting

In China, the five observed classrooms were all separated into at least three areas, one for teaching, one for children to play, and one for teachers to prepare the lessons. They all had at least two big tables and lots of chairs; a big black board for teaching; a big white theme board for presenting pictures and other materials; a book shelf; a toy section; a computer; and a special board for praising well behaved children by pasting golden stars etc. under their names.

In England, the five observed classrooms were separated into at least three areas as well, usually one for teaching, one for playing, and one for teachers to prepare the lessons. But this was not a certainty, children could learn and play everywhere in the classrooms basically. They all had several small tables and many chairs; a white board; an interactive white board;

a book shelf; a lot of toys; many materials related to words and numbers, hung everywhere; at least one computer; two of them had 5 computers.

The similarities in these two countries are that: teachers both in China and in England tended to separate the classrooms into areas; they both had book shelves in the classrooms; they both had boards, white or black for teaching; they both had many toys in the classrooms; they both used computers; they both pasted something related to study in the classrooms – on the theme boards in China and everywhere in England.

The differences in the classroom settings were: the teachers in China used bigger tables which were arranged into rows, whereas the teachers in England used small tables that they arranged into group settings. Apart from that, the teachers in China had less computers in the classrooms compared to the teachers in England. The teachers in England also used the interactive white board for teaching reading. The teachers in China used the black board to teach reading, together with the big white boards that had different themes every week or every two weeks. In addition, the teachers in China had a special praising board used to show the children's achievement in learning. These white board boards and praising boards were only found in Chinese reading classrooms but not in English classrooms.

## 2. *Class size and class organization*

The class sizes in both countries were about 30 children in each class. However, the class organizations were very different between these two groups of teachers.

The five observed teachers in China all taught reading to the whole class all the time, even though three of them separated the whole class into three groups, they still taught the children together, and the children always sat on their chairs when they studied. Comparatively, the five teachers in England all taught reading to the whole class first, and chose several children to teach in small groups separately. The children sat on the floor when they had the whole class time, and sometimes sat on the chairs when they had group times.

## 3. *Length of lessons*

The observed reception classes both in England and in China had lessons to teach reading of about 15-30 minutes each. The teachers in China spent the whole time teaching to the whole class, compared to the teachers in England who spent 5-10 minutes teaching the whole class first, and then spent about 10-15 minutes teaching small groups.

## 4. *Teaching content*

The content teachers used to teach reading was significantly different between these two groups of teachers. Three teachers in China used text books, which contained about 20 texts and some exercises, but different kindergartens used different text books. The content of the

text books were mainly about stories, poems (both ancient and modern) and fables. On one page, there were many Chinese characters but usually just one or two pictures. One of the teachers told children a story about how Chinese characters developed. Another one practised a poem with the children. Four of them taught characters and phrases by using the cards. The teachers mainly taught the children how to read and how to recognize the Chinese characters.

The teachers in England used a greater range of books to teach reading. Three of them used big books and three of them used phonics cards with the whole class. Four teachers used Oxford Reading Tree, which was a series of short story books, with small groups. These books all had only one sentence on one page, with a big picture. One teacher used nonfiction books with small groups as well. Three of them used phonics and word cards as well. Phonics seemed a very important part of their teaching.

## 5. *Teaching skills*

Both differences and similarities between these two groups of teachers could be seen from the observations.

### *Differences:*

#### 1) Teaching order

In China, the three teachers who used text books seemed to follow a similar teaching order: read the new content to the children first, and ask them to listen carefully, pointing to the characters while they are reading; then they ask the children to follow them sentence by sentence; then read with the children together; and two of them ask the children to read the texts together at last. On the other hand, the teachers in England read big book stories to children or led them to pronounce phonics with the cards when they had whole class time. For small group time, they usually asked the children to read first, and corrected their pronunciation or taught them how to read; then asked whole groups to read together with them.

#### 2) Teaching focus

The four teachers in China explained the meaning of Chinese characters and asked the children to combine the characters into phrases with the character/phrase cards. One of them used the characters both of ancient China and nowadays to explain how the characters were formed and their meaning. One teacher in China also asked the children to recite an ancient Chinese poem. The teachers in England explained the pronunciations and taught the children to blend them together to read words with the phonics/words cards.

#### 3) Involving children

Four of the teachers in China asked the children questions about content of the text, so the children were motivated to guess the plots of the stories or retell the stories, compared to the teachers in England who tended to ask children to read the pictures, so that the children might guess what the sentence could be. One of the teachers in China also asked several children to

lead other children in reading the character/phrase cards, compared to one teacher in England who asked the children to copy some simple sentences.

#### 4) Competition in class

Three of the teachers in China separated the whole class into groups and asked them to compete with each other, which none of the teachers in England did.

#### *Similarities:*

##### 1) Playing games

Three of the teachers in China played games with the children that related to Chinese characters, and the games were various. Two teachers in England played the matching game with the children.

##### 2) Looking for characters/words

Three teachers in China asked the children to look for the characters/phrases they had learnt in the texts, while four teachers in England asked the children to look for the words they had learnt in the story books.

##### 3) Praising/Encouraging children

One teacher in each country gave children golden stars or green cards to praise the well behaved children. Two teachers in each country made mistakes on purpose and encouraged the children to help them.

#### 6. *Communication with parents*

The teachers in China used pamphlets to communicate with the children's parents, while the teachers in England had reading diaries that they could use to communicate with the children's parents.

#### *Interviews*

##### 1. *Teaching content and aims*

In China, all of the teachers claimed to follow the same teaching scheme and the kindergartens provided many books. Four teachers also mentioned that they changed the text books every semester (5 months), and the content would get harder and harder. One of them explained in detail that the teaching aim at this stage was to teach children to recognize the shape of Chinese characters and pronounce these first, and then to teach them to build phrases with characters, and build sentences with phrases.

All of the teachers in England mentioned that they had a government scheme, which could be supported by using other materials as well. Four of them claimed to use Oxford Reading Tree, which was a series of story books. Two of them mentioned the use of the Jolly Phonics

programme in which pictures and actions were linked with sounds. Two teachers also explained in detail that the teaching aim at this stage was to teach letters and sounds, and to teach children to blend them together in order to read. One teacher said that for teaching stories, they taught the children the characters' names in stories and words first, and then taught them to read the books.

## 2. *Class organization*

The teachers in China mentioned that the content they taught to the whole class was according to the syllabus outline, and usually was new knowledge; they sometimes had extension activities, such as doing exercises with texts, in groups, and they might ask the children who learnt well to lead others; they worked with individuals as well as their parents if the children needed extra support.

In England, the teachers claimed to teach general things, such as reading stories, letters and sounds; for small groups, they divided the children into groups that had 6-7 children depending on their level of ability; they taught individuals when they needed extra support. One teacher indicated that every day, they had carpet time twice for the whole class; 10-15 minutes for every group; 5 minutes individual time.

## 3. *Teaching skills*

In China, three teachers mentioned playing the tapes of texts to children before teaching; one claimed to play a VCD of idioms for children; one claimed to ask children to recite Tang poems; one teacher claimed to related events that happened recently to the teaching; and two teachers explained the reason for separating the teaching of reading and writing was they thought children at this stage only needed to be able to read and write down some simple characters and recognize the difficult ones.

In England, three teachers claimed to use puppets and toys to teach children phonics as well as to tell stories, because children responded to puppets very well; one teacher claimed to read stories for children every day and another claimed to use modelled writing to motivate children; two teachers explained that their focus was phonics when they taught reading and writing together, not on whether the children spelt correctly or not. There was one teacher in each country who claimed to give children homework, which was very simple and could be finished quickly.

## 4. *Activities and games*

In China, all the teachers claimed to allow 20 minutes for games related to characters, ancient Chinese phrases, Tang poems, etc. every day, for example, matching games; two teachers



claimed to use the activity of creating story plots by imagination, discussing the stories and playing guessing games with partners; and one teacher mentioned that they did not have a lot of activities because the daily schedule for children was very tense.

In England, all the teachers claimed to play sounds and phonics games; three of them mentioned matching games; one teachers mentioned role playing; and one teacher mentioned a Bingo game (especially when they taught tricky words). There were two teachers in China and three teachers in England who claimed to have a computer programme for children to play.

#### 5. Assessment

Both the teachers in China and in England claimed to make assessments of children's learning. Three teachers in China and four teachers in England used observation; two teachers in China and one teacher in England said that they assessed children one by one, using the Chinese character/phrase/ancient phrase cards or phonics/words cards to ask children recognize them. The teachers in China also mentioned that they sometimes asked the children to retell stories they had learnt. It can be seen that in this study, the teachers in both countries assessed the children's learning of reading.

### Discussion and Implications

This study produced two kinds of finding related to how groups of teachers in England and in China taught initial reading to beginning readers: one was the principal differences between the two groups of teachers; another was the key similarities between these two groups. These are presented in Table 10 and Table 11, and discussed further below.

*Table 10: Principal differences between these two groups of teachers*

Differences	England	China
Beginning readers' class	Most of the initial reading classes were in primary schools.	Most of the initial reading classes were in kindergartens.
Textbook	No standard textbook, a greater range of books were used, but most of them used Oxford Reading Tree and a phonics programme.	Textbook, supported with extra books. Different kindergartens might use different textbooks.
Class organisation	Taught to the whole class, to small groups and to individuals equally. To the whole class first, followed by small groups as guided reading sessions.	Most of them mainly taught to the whole class, some of them taught to small groups, only a few of them taught to individuals.
Classroom setting	The materials related to learning reading were set more randomly in the reception class.	The materials related to learning reading tended to follow the themes they were setting.
Teaching content	Mainly stories, sometimes non-fiction books.	Stories, poems, prose, fables (both classical and modern styles) and exercises.
Teaching focus and aims	Taught children phonics and how to blend sounds together in order to read.	Taught children to recognise the shapes of Chinese characters and pronounce

		them.
Teaching flow	Directed children to read first, and then corrected their pronunciation.	Read for children first, and then asked children to follow.
Interaction in class	Asked children to look at the pictures; sometimes asked the children to copy some writing.	Asked children about the content of the texts while teaching; sometimes asked one child to lead others.
Competition	None of the teachers in England asked the children to compete with each other in this study.	The teachers might ask the children to have reading competitions in groups.
Literacy	Usually taught reading and writing separately.	Usually taught reading and writing together.

*Table 11: Principal similarities between these two groups of teachers found from this study*

Similarities	England & China
Teachers gender	Most of the teachers were female
Classroom setting	Both had book shelves, teaching boards, toys, computers, and study materials.
Class size	About 30 children in one class.
Lesson length	About 15-30 minutes.
Teaching aid	Stories, poems, pictures toys, word/phonic or character/phrase cards, computers, radio/video and TV were used intensively.
Teaching skills	Gather children's attention; pointed at the words while reading; look for words in the stories/texts; provided hints with pictures.
Teaching curriculum	Teachers followed the teaching curriculum set by their governments.
Teaching flow	The difficulty level of the content increased over time / as the lessons progressed.
Activities/games	Activities and games were used frequently by the teachers in both countries.
Communication with parents	Reading diaries and communication diaries were used to communicate with the children's parents regularly.
Learning assessment	Formative (ongoing) assessment of the children's learning.

There could be many reasons that cause these differences in teaching reading to beginning readers in England and China. The geography, culture, language, and social environment are different in each country. Based on the literature review and the findings from the present research, these differences can be seen from four perspectives: the education system, the cultural background and tradition, the language system, and the teaching strategies and techniques.

### *1. The education system*

First of all, the education systems in England and in China are different from each other, but only issues about the stage of beginning reading in these two countries are discussed here. At this stage, the fundamental difference between England and China lies in the starting age for compulsory education. In England, this (the term after a child's fifth birthday) is relatively

early compared to that of other countries, which generally set six or even seven as the official starting age. Most English children start school at four, because of the growing practice of admitting children to the reception class at the beginning of the year in which they become five (Sharp, 1998, p. 1). The Foundation Stage applies to children aged from three to the end of reception year in primary schools, by which time most children are of statutory school age (Aubrey, 2004, p. 634). Therefore, formal initial reading education in England is a part of compulsory education. Meanwhile, in China, education for children aged from three to six is primarily provided in kindergartens. According to the Compulsory Education Law of China, the children who reach six years old must be educated in school. Therefore, six years old is the beginning of compulsory education in China. In other words, the teaching of initial reading in China is not a part of compulsory education. This may be a cause for the differences seen between the two groups of teachers in England and in China in terms of teaching reading.

This study compared the teaching of initial reading, and two groups of teachers were selected, one from reception classes, which are part of compulsory education in England, and the other from pre-school classes in kindergartens in China, which are not part of compulsory education. Even though the children in China had yet to join compulsory education in this study, they were almost one year older than the children in England. This might cause some differences in strategies and techniques in teaching reading.

Since the age of the beginning readers is different in these two countries, the teachers might treat them differently. In this study, the children in England usually sat on the carpet, while the children in China always sat on chairs. In addition, the classroom setting in England was more colourful and random. The learning environment in England seemed to involve more elements of playing than the learning environment in China. The materials related to learning in the classrooms in England were more colourful and vivid compared to the setting of Chinese classrooms as well.

The curricula used in these two countries were different as well. In England, from September 2000, education at the Foundation Stage, for the first time, was given a distinct identity with explicit intended outcomes, Early Learning Goals (ELGs) that most children should reach by the end of the Foundation Stage in six areas of learning, including language and literacy. In China, since 1950, the traditional contents of the kindergarten curriculum have generally been arranged into six subjects, one of which is language (Wang and Mao, 1996, p. 147).

To sum up, the education system in these two countries might exert an important impact on the teachers' teaching of initial reading to the beginning readers.

## 2. *Culture and tradition*

China is an ancient oriental country, while England is a developed western country. Therefore, there must be differences between these two countries in terms of culture and

tradition, and these may have an influence on education. Literature also attests that cultural differences produce different types of self-concepts, and the most widely examined aspect of cultural differences in self-concept is individualism versus collectivism (Brand, 2004, p. 58). The significance of the differences between individualism and collectivism was found in this study.

Individualism has played a very important role in Western cultures, including the culture of England. This can be seen from many studies. Brand (2004) suggested that ‘Western cultures are associated with individualism, a focus on individual personal qualities and self-achievement. In contrast, non-western cultures tend to reflect a collectivistic self-concept in which the individual thinks of him or herself more in terms of relations with other people’ (p. 58). Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985) indicated that ‘Individualism was considered by many Western cultures as an expression of the freedom of citizens. Therefore, individualism arose from the pursuit of democracy. Today individualism has been recognized as a defining characteristic of western culture’ (p. 356). On the contrary, collectivism has played an important role in Chinese culture, which has a long history. The main trend from ancient China that has influenced education is Confucianism. This is a school of thought that developed between 770 and 221 and has been the keystone of Chinese traditional culture as well as of Chinese education. Confucianism has been basically characterised as a “philosophy of life”, and the following elements are most important in relation to education: worshipping traditions; adoring authorities; stressing collectivism; and emphasising ethical and moral self-cultivation. To some extent, all these have implications for Chinese early childhood education (Wang and Mao, 1996, p. 144).

The differences between these two kinds of culture were found in the present study, especially in two aspects. In England, the teachers spent a lot of time teaching small groups and individuals. However, in China, the teachers usually gathered the children and taught them together. At the same time, the teachers in England used different story books with different small groups, while the teachers in China used the same textbooks to teach the whole class together. This suggests that Western culture might pay more attention to individualism, compared to Chinese culture, which is more focused on collectivism.

### 3. *Language system*

It is obvious that the nature of the English and Chinese languages are very different from each other. The origin of English is an amalgam of the Germanic and Latin language, while Chinese is a principal language group of eastern Asia, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family. All the Chinese languages share a common literary language (*wenyan*), written in characters and based on a common body of literature. Written Chinese characters, unlike English, appear to have no specific connection to individual phonemes. Chinese children process written Chinese using semiotic systems distinct from those emphasized in learning English. Chinese is a system that utilises the visual rather than sound as a medium (Pine, Ping’an, Song, 2003, p. 807-808). In addition, in English, a word is identified by the

space at either end of a letter string in a text. In Chinese, a word can be written using one character, two characters or three characters with no graphic linkage between the characters to indicate the boundary of a word (Chan, Juan, Foon, 2008, p. 137).

There are two routes into learning to read. One is through the regularity of the letter-to-phoneme correspondence in a shallow orthography, which may lead readers to rely more heavily on the route through sound to the lexicon. Another is the logographic system, which might lead to a heavier reliance on the direct visual route to word recognition. Several researchers have argued about this issue. Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) argued that syllabic systems have to be translated into a phonological code before lexical access is possible, although it has also been suggested that the lexical access of words written in characters can be achieved without reference to phonology (Rayner and Pollatsek, 1989, p. 99). However, the argument of Rayner and Pollatsek in their book was that different writing systems may influence readers to rely more heavily on one route than the other, but both routes are used in all languages (Rayner and Pollatsek, 1989, p. 99). The findings of the present study are consistent with this literature.

Similar research has been carried out by Pine, Ping'an, Song (2003), who compared how children learn literacy in the United States and in China. Their findings suggest that in the United States, children focused on sound/symbol associations and sound segmentation while they were decoding English. Children in China appeared to focus on visual segmentation while they were decoding Chinese. In the study, U.S. primary grade teachers spent enormous amounts of effort and time developing children's awareness of the sound components of English – letter/sound associations, phonemes, onsets/rimes, and how these function in decoding print. In contrast, Chinese teachers appeared to spend considerable energy and time in the early grades on visual learning, teaching stroke order, the precision and balance of character writing, and character recognition through visual and morphological decoding and encoding strategies (p. 807-808). Their findings are echoed in the present study.

In this study, the teachers in England taught phonics to children to a large extent, therefore, it can be seen that letters and sounds play a very important part in teaching initial reading to beginning readers in England. The teachers in China, on the other hand, paid more attention to teaching children how to recognise Chinese characters according to their shapes at this stage of teaching. The teachers in China also claimed that phonics would be taught to children after they had begun their compulsory education in primary schools. Phonics is important to both English and Chinese, but because of the different language system, the flow and focus of teaching language could be different. A Chinese teacher in this study suggested that “Pinyin (the Chinese phonics system) is the most difficult part for children at this stage now. They will learn it after they go to primary school. At this stage, teaching them how to recognise the shapes and structures of Chinese characters are our focus of teaching.”

It can be seen that different language systems exert a significant impact on the initial teaching of reading to the beginning readers in England and in China. In my opinion, it is one of the

main reasons that lead to the findings on differences between these two countries in this study. In other words, such difference is inevitable.

#### 4. *Teaching strategies and techniques*

There were both differences and similarities in terms of the teaching strategies and techniques used with beginning readers in England and in China. Similarities included the lengths of lessons, the use of activities/games, and the assessment of learning.

However, an important difference was found between these two groups of teachers in terms of their role in teaching. Research has suggested that early childhood education in England is generally regarded as child-centred, as opposed to subject-centred or teacher-centred approaches. In contrast, in China, the activities of the preschool are teacher-centred. Teachers are responsible for the selection and organization of the whole teaching process. Although this does not mean that teachers can decide what subjects are taught, they can decide how the courses are taught (Stimpfl, Zheng, Meredith, 1997). In this study, it was observed that the children had more time to play by themselves in England, while the children in China usually had the activities arranged by the teachers for the whole day. For example, while the teacher did guided reading with small groups in England, the rest of the children were playing by themselves. In China, however, almost all the activities were conducted with the whole class together, led by the teachers.

Another obvious difference was that the teaching flows of these two groups of teachers were different from each other. The teachers in England asked the children to read according to what they had learnt before (the phonics), and then corrected their pronunciations. On the other hand, the teachers in China read to the children first, and then asked the children to follow and read themselves. In my opinion, this difference relates to the difference between the language systems.

### **Conclusion**

This study compared the teaching of initial reading in England and in China. There was a consistency in the outcomes of this research. The different education systems in England and in China seemed to have led to a fundamental difference in terms of teaching initial reading between these two countries. The formal teaching of initial reading in England began at reception stage, which is a part of compulsory education; while the formal teaching of initial reading in China began in the pre-school, which is not a part of compulsory education. In addition, the children began their formal education at four in England, compared to the children in China who began their formal education at six. This inevitably has led to some important differences in teaching initial reading between the teachers in these two countries.

Such differences might also be attributed to the distinct cultures, backgrounds and traditions between England and China. History, geography, and social environment may all have had an

impact. A key issue is that of individualism and collectivism: individualism is associated with western culture, while collectivism is linked with Chinese culture. The impact of this could be clearly seen in the study. For example, the teachers in England spent more time on teaching to small groups and individuals, compared to the teachers in China who spent most of their time teaching to the whole class.

Another factor with an important impact on the findings of this study is the different language systems of England and China. Teaching initial reading in England was more focused on phonics, while in China the concentration was more on the shapes and structures of Chinese characters, and this distinction can be attributed to the nature of the writing systems in each culture.

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