Improving Chinese students' English reading through graded readers

Rationale, strategies and effectiveness

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Primary English in China has been in practice since 2001. Despite the success of widespread provision, there have been concerns regarding the quality of students' learning. To enhance English literacy in schools, a national English reading project chaired by university teacher educators using graded readers was introduced to accompany mandated coursebooks in 2014 initially among a few schools then quickly expanded to thousands. The participating schools were guided to use English graded readers in primary classrooms in collaborative projects with university teacher educators. This paper reports a case study based on a project school in a suburb of Beijing with a cohort of 290 Grade 4 students and their 8 English teachers. The study investigated changes the reading project has brought to the students and teachers between 2017 to 2019. Data collected include three reading test results (pre-, mid-, and post-), and a post-project student questionnaire. Data collected concerning the 8 teachers included classroom observations, teachers' lesson plans and post project narrative reports. Analyses were closely linked to how students' literacy developed, including their reading ability, interests, habits, and creative thinking. Changes in the teachers' views and their teaching practices were also examined.

Keywords: reading, literacy, primary English, English graded readers, collaborative projects

1.   Background

English language teaching in Chinese primary schools has been in practice for almost 20 years with the government's initiative since 2001. Following the initiative (Ministry of Education, China, 2001a, 2001b), English was officially integrated

in the primary curriculum for all Grade 3 children while allowing a flexible starting age from Grade 1 (age 6) for those schools with adequate teaching resources. The main goal of primary English was to stimulate and cultivate students' interest in learning English through activities such as singing, chanting, playing, acting, listening and speaking, as well as story reading. During this period, policy initiatives throughout the country have contributed to the training of specialist English teachers for primary children and the rapid expansion of provision of English from Grade 3 in all provinces, with provision from Grade 1 in the major cities, especially the eastern coastal cities. In spite of its success in ever more widespread provision, there have been concerns regarding the low quality of students' learning, especially since the focus of teaching in a majority of primary schools has been on vocabulary and structure of the language with limited input based on prescribed course books (see Coursebook Examples 1–3). Therefore, how to enhance the quality of learning has become the foremost concern in recent years, given that the curriculum is now largely in place.

Coursebook Example 1. Primary English Grade 3, Book 1, Unit 3, 2012, People's Education Press, p. 46 (The text below is presented with six pictures showing a bear taking other animals to the zoo).

Bear: Hello, Pig! Follow me.

Bear: Hello, Dog! Follow pig. Follow me.

Bear: Hello, Duck! Follow dog. Follow pig. Follow me.

Bear: Hello, Rabbit! Follow duck. Follow dog. Follow pig. Follow me.

Squirrel: Don't follow Zoom (the bear).

Squirrel: Follow me, please.

Coursebook Example 2. Primary English Grade 5, Book 1, Unit 5, 2013, Beijing Publishing House, p. 36 (The text below is presented with two pictures showing parents taking their two kids on a sightseeing bus in London while the tour guide is saying hello to everyone:)

Tour guide: Good morning, everyone! Welcome to London.

Girl: Where is London, baobao (the boy)?

Boy: It's here, in the U.K.

Girl: Where is the U.K.?

Boy: It's in Europe.

Coursebook Example 3. Primary English Grade 4, Book 2, Unit 2, 2013, Beijing Publishing House, p. 15 (This is an exercise in the coursebook. Students are asked to listen, repeat and act. The picture shows Dr. Wu is with a patient (a

boy). Two other patients (a lady and a man) are waiting outside the room.)

Dr. Wu: what's the matter with you?

Boy: My right foot hurts.

Man: What's wrong with the boy?

Lady: His right foot hurts.

Coursebook Examples 1–3 are representative of over 30 titles of primary course-books, reviewed and recommended by the Ministry of Education in China aiming to provide easy and interesting materials using dialogues, games and stories for young children to learn specific structures and vocabulary. However, despite their colourful style, the dialogues often take place in unauthentic contexts and games are designed to provide practice drills with little cognitive engagement. The stories generally lack interesting and engaging plots, offer limited opportunities for developing higher order thinking or for instigating value judgements regarding what is right and wrong according to culturally relevant moral values.

Another issue concerning the quality of primary English is the approach to teacher training. Over the past decade, primary level teacher training has largely centred around "how to teach" issues, such as how to teach a dialogue, how to teach vocabulary, how to teach a grammatical structure, how to teach pronunciation, how to teach short texts, and how to use games and songs in primary classrooms. Training workshops were organized at various levels using public lessons, with many teachers observing (Wang, 2015) to demonstrate good teaching. Despite all the efforts, the quality of primary English has not substantially improved in recent years. As Prensky (2017) points out, "it's less *how* we teach that's the real problem, – and more *what* we teach" (p. 90). He asserts that "the idea of what we teach – i.e., what subjects comprise (or do not comprise) our curriculum – does not get nearly enough attention" and this is "an underlying cause of current education malaise at least as much, and probably more, than the issues with how we teach" (p. 89). He believes that four key things are actually important to the success of every person in the world, and should be included in the curriculum. These are: "effective thinking, effective action, effective relationship, and effective accomplishment" (p. 92).

Recently, the newly issued Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition) (Ministry of Education, China, 2018) calls on developing students' core competencies through the subject of English. The core competencies are composed of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity and learning ability. To this end, the new curriculum stresses the importance of teaching analysis before considering teaching strategies and has proposed a "what/why/how" format for doing content analysis (Ministry of Education, China, 2018). Thus,

how to help students develop the English core competencies and guide teachers to do content analysis have become the main concern in the new round of curriculum reform. With these new goals and requirements, language learning is expected to reflect a theme-based, meaning-oriented exploratory process based on various written, oral, or multimodal texts. And teaching content analysis becomes a new skill for teachers. As for language knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, teachers should teach it in an integrative way with the cultural knowledge through the use of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing), the practice of thinking skills, and the exercise of learning strategies. It is believed that such a learning process will lead to new knowledge construction and transfer of competencies for developing problem solving capabilities with positive attitudes and correct value judgement. With the competency-based goals in mind, more and more English language teacher educators and teachers in China realized that the low quality of primary English literacy might be related to the fact that there had not been enough meaningful content as input in the coursebooks and teacher training had not paid enough attention to what to teach but had focused mostly on "how to teach". Given these concerns, ways of enriching the content of primary English have been identified as the key to breaking through the traditional ways of teaching a language. Responding to these concerns, a group of teacher educators have turned to English graded readers with the belief that they may better help children develop the English core competencies through theme-based, meaning-oriented exploratory learning. In 2014, the first group of reading projects were set up in seven schools supported by university teacher educators (UTEs hereafter) who provided supervision for school teachers to use English graded readers in their classrooms. Such support included holding training workshops to guide teaching content analysis, introducing new teaching strategies, and paying classroom visits to observe the teaching of graded readers with constructive feedback provided on a regular basis – twice a semester, 4 times a year for each school, targeted at helping children read, think, and connect the ideas to their own lives.

Alongside these developments, guidelines for the development of reading were prepared, known as the "English Reading Literacy Framework for Basic Education in China" (ERL) (Wang & Chen, 2016), funded by the 12th Five-year Plan of National Education Sciences. The document sets up the first national graded standards on reading in English and provides guidance for the use of graded readers in schools. The framework will be elaborated in the next part.

Next，we will provide a rationale for introducing graded readers to Chinese schools. We do so by distinguishing between graded readers and picturebooks, and by further clarifying the purposes of English graded readers in China. Then we move on to a discussion about the potential benefits of graded readers to EFL

teaching, along with an elaboration on the ERL Framework, which serves as a theoretical guideline for the reading project.

Following the rationale, we will pinpoint a few teaching strategies introduced to participating teachers in primary schools. These include: a so-called Picture Tour, Jigsaw Reading, Reading Circles and Silent Reading (SSR). They are all aimed at supporting teachers in using graded readers to teach English for meaning exploration. This is then followed by a case study report in which we investigated the changes the national reading project had brought to the students in one suburban primary school in Beijing between 2017–2019. The purpose of the case study was to see how the students in this school were enabled to read English graded readers along with increased interest, better reading skills and creative thinking ability, considerably changing the picture of primary English education in that school.

2.   Rationale for the project

2.1   Graded readers vs. picturebooks

In the West, graded readers are known as "books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax" (Hill, 2008, p.185). They can create a series of steppingstones for EFL learners to eventually read authentic materials written for native speakers (Waring, 2020) as they are often adapted from classic literature or original fiction or non-fiction books, such as animal fantasies or biographies. The books designed for younger school pupils are often presented in the form of stories with abundant illustrations that fully support meaning. Thus, terms such as "picture story book", "picture book" and "picturebook" are often found in EFL literature. However, according to Bader, a picturebook has the following features which are quite distinct from graded readers.

> A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a [reader/beholder]. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page.
>
> Bader, (1976, p.1, as cited in Mourao, 2016, p.199)

Different from picturebooks, graded readers are specifically written for language learners, using a restricted vocabulary set (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999). Though written by native speakers, they are not wholly "authentic" but more designed for pedagogical use.

2.2   English graded readers in China

English graded readers in China are mostly imported with copyright from or jointly published with British, US, or New Zealand publishers. Chinese publishers and literacy experts select titles from the original series, such as *Oxford Reading Tree* from Oxford University Press and *Big Cat* from Harper Collins Publishing House, for publication based on the relevancy of themes, interest level for Chinese students, and levels of linguistic difficulty with regard to students' learning needs. Some adaptations are made, including appending glossaries, bilingual notes and additional teachers' guidebooks. Despite the fact that the language of these graded readers is controlled and limited, compared with students' coursebooks, stories contained in these readers appear more "authentic" in their themes and language presentation for both children and teachers.

2.3   The potential benefits of graded readers to EFL teaching

There has been abundant literature giving strong evidence that graded readers or levelled readers, sometimes also known as simplified readers, enjoy a number of benefits compared to students' coursebooks. Firstly, they could provide more exposure to narratives and other factual texts which children would be required to read in their further education or for their future work or travel (Charboneau, 2013). Secondly, as the difficulty span between the levels is carefully controlled they could provide a smoother transition from one level to the next as far as the learning of grammar and vocabulary is concerned (Charboneau, 2013; Meng, 2014). Thirdly, with controlled language and appealing themes they seem to have a strong motivating effect on children and their desire to read (Hill, 2001; Charboneau, 2013; Albay, 2017). Fourthly, graded readers have been shown to enhance reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar knowledge development, and range of expression (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Krashen, 1993; Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999; Hill, 2001; Horst, 2005; Macaro & Mutton, 2009; Nation, 2009; Meng, 2014; Albay, 2017). Finally, graded readers could help promote extensive reading as Bamford (1984, p. 218) has claimed "for all but advanced learners, the best way to promote extensive reading is by means of graded readers".

2.4   The ERL for basic education in China

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reading literacy is "understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society" (OECD, 2019, p. 14). Yet for foreign language (FL) learn-

ers, who are going through a typical learning process with their FL proficiency level far behind their cognitive development, the lack of FL ability inevitably limits their development in reading. In addition, their limited knowledge of other cultural contexts may cause confusion or even failure to understand. For this reason, Wang and Chen (2016) developed the ERL Framework for Chinese schools (see Figure 1) based on which graded reading standards are specified from primary levels to senior high school.
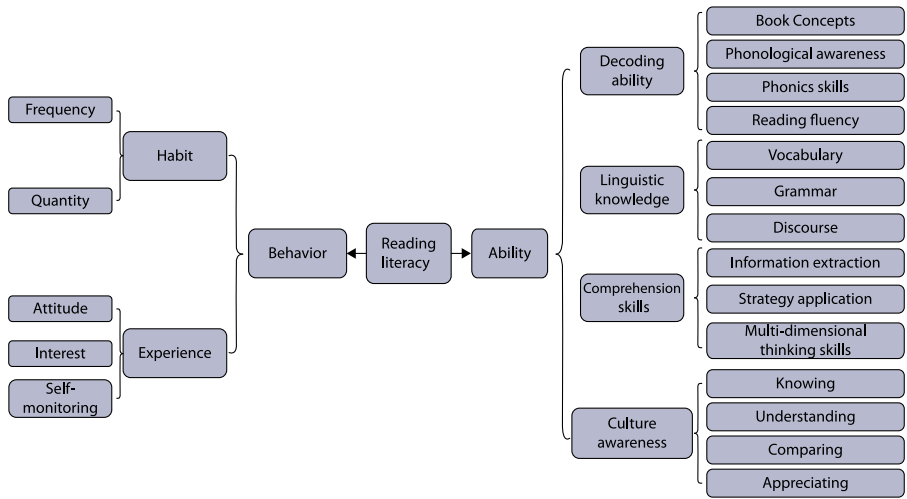

Figure 1. The framework of English reading literacy for basic education in China

The ERL Framework has two strands: reading ability and reading behaviour. Reading ability includes decoding ability, linguistic knowledge, reading comprehension and cultural awareness. Due to space limitations, we will not detail every component regarding reading ability, but focus on cultural awareness as an example. Culture here refers to both foreign and Chinese culture presented either materially or spiritually. Cultural awareness, in this context, not only indicates cultural knowledge itself, but also cultural perception, understanding, comparison and appreciation, which helps students interpret texts and form global consciousness with correct value judgement. As regards Reading behaviour, it refers to reading habits and reading experiences which have been largely ignored in FL education in China. Reading habits concerns the frequency and quantity of students' reading according to the teaching requirements in primary and secondary schools, while reading experiences emphasize the emotional experience students get from reading, including attitude, interest, self-monitoring, based on self-assessment. The ERL Framework together with its graded English literacy standards has pro-

vided an orientation for English reading in Chinese schools and objectives to be achieved by the reading projects.

3.   Main teaching strategies used in the project

In this part, we present four teaching strategies which were introduced to the project's participating teachers using graded readers. These teaching strategies are very different from those they were used to in the past.

3.1   Picture Tour

The term 'Picture Tour' is used here to describe a teaching strategy similar to shared reading. In the classroom, teachers engage students in reading graded readers page by page while helping students learn unknown or unfamiliar words from the context with both lower and higher-order thinking questions to encourage observation, prediction, comprehension, analysis and evaluation, and share their feelings or personal interpretations about the book. During this process, students learn vocabulary and grammar to aid the construction of new knowledge and to achieve better understanding of the book.

The kind of Picture Tour adopted for this study includes the following six basic steps (Wang, Ao, Luo, Chen & Ma, 2017):

3.1.1   *Warm-up*

Songs, pictures or videos are used to activate students' vocabulary knowledge and interest in reading.

3.1.2   *Developing book concepts*

Students look at the cover page of the book and try to identify the title, author, illustrator, publisher etc. and use the cover page to predict possible storyline or content for establishing the concept of books.

3.1.3   *Picture Tour*

Teachers and students go over the book page by page. Students predict what is going to happen based on the pictures or words. They may raise questions and try to offer solutions to any problems in the book. Then, teachers and students together construct a story map using a mind map or flow chart to illustrate the main plots or concepts.

3.1.4 *Internalising, summarising and evaluating*

Students use the flowchart or mind-map to talk about the main plots or concepts, summarise the main idea and make comments.

3.1.5 *Individual reading*

Students read the book silently and / or aloud individually to review the details, consolidate the language knowledge learned and form their own understanding.

3.1.6 *Discussion and sharing*

Students discuss the underlying meaning of the book and then work together to act it out. Finally, they may add new plots or create their own stories with drawings to be shared in class.

3.2   Jigsaw Reading

Jigsaw Reading is a teaching strategy used widely with the purpose of promoting cooperative learning and autonomous learning (Law, 2011; Souvignier & Kronenberger, 2007, etc). To conduct Jigsaw Reading we first divide a book into 4 to 6 parts and divide the class into several corresponding groups. Each part of the book is given to a different group. Each student in the group reads the same part individually first and then together to make sure that everyone gets the same information. Such a group is called the "experts group". Then each student takes his / her part of the book to go and form a new group with one member from each group and share what he/she has read to construct a logically connected complete story. Then everybody learns about the whole story. Such a reading activity is claimed to promote cooperative and autonomous learning, which also creates a motivation or purpose for interaction and communication.

3.3   Reading Circles

In this study, Reading Circles proposed by Bookworms Club Bronze (Furr, 2007) is adopted. Normally, students work in a group of six with each taking a role and completing one type of reading task. The six roles are Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Culture Collector, Connector, Word Master, and Passage Person. In Reading Circles, students read individually to complete the task following the specifications required in the role card. Then, the six roles meet to share what each has accomplished. The group work is normally organized by the Discussion Leader. Finally, a class presentation is organized to encourage students to present their work as a group to the class. Reading Circles require each student to read care-

fully, think deeply, and take responsibility for his/her learning, and to help and support each other when sharing.

3.4   Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

SSR is a practical way to help students develop their reading habits at school. It encourages each student and the teacher to read quietly for 5 to 15 minutes every day without any forms of testing or evaluation after reading (Gardiner, 2001; Krashen, 2004). SSR has been proved to have a positive effect on students' performance in reading comprehension as the students reading assessment scores from the experimental group was found significantly higher than the control group in both L1 (Birmingham, 2006; Lanford & Allen, 1980) and L2 learning (Aranha, 1985). Moreover, it is demonstrated that SSR has a strong impact on students' reading habits and attitudes towards reading (Cline & Kretke, 1980; Kirby, 2003). Also, another very important finding is that the longer students practise SSR the better results it will bring (Krashen, 2004).

4.   A case study of a suburban primary school in Beijing

In this section, we present a case study of a school in a suburb of Beijing. We report on the implementation of the graded reader project and its impact.
The study was designed to answer the following 3 questions:

1. What teaching strategies are being used by the teachers before and after the reading project?
2. What are the students' reading performances including both reading ability and reading behaviour before and after the reading project?
3. What have the participating teachers gained from the reading project?

4.1   Information about the school

The case study school is in the northern suburb of Beijing – Changping. The students of this school are from relatively low social economic families, 60% of whom are not locals in Beijing. The main material for students to learn English is prescribed coursebooks such as those presented in Coursebook Examples 1–3. Students in this school start learning English from the first grade and have three 40-minute English lessons per week. Due to low family economic conditions, most students do not attend English tutoring lessons after school. The school has 6 grades, 58 classes, 2,400 students and 15 English teachers in all. The school

began to use graded readers as early as 2014, introducing them from Grade 1 with no outside support available at the time. Teachers were not sure how to use graded readers and they treated the readers mostly as coursebooks. In September 2017, the school joined our reading research project, which lasted for two years and ended in September 2019.

4.2   The participants

The participants of the current case study were 290 students and 8 English teachers who taught this group during the two-year study. The students began using graded readers from Grade 1 (aged 6) and joined the project in September 2017 when they entered Grade 4, aged 9. Among them, 46.2% were females and 53.8% males (see Table 1). They were from 8 different classes and taught by 8 teachers (see Table 2). By September 2019, they had moved to Grade 6.

Table 1. Information about the participating students

Gender	Number of students	Percentage
Female	134	46.2%
Male	156	53.8%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Table 2. Information about the participating teachers

		Number of teachers
Gender	Female	8
	Male	0
Age	21–30	3
	31–40	5
Education Background	Undergraduate	8
	Postgraduate and above	0
Years of Teaching	1–9	5
	10–19	3

4.3   Project procedures

The reading project was officially launched in 2017. On the basis of two traditional coursebook lessons, the school added a graded reading lesson each week in the English curriculum. The language of instruction in the classroom was English.

The readers were selected by university teachers from high-quality graded reading books such as *Project X* and *Big Cat* imported and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. By September 2019, the students had read 40 books in class. The main teaching strategies included Picture Tour, SSR, Reading Circles, and Jigsaw Reading. Among them, Picture Tour was the most frequently used teaching strategy. SSR was implemented during the first 5 minutes of all three weekly classes. In addition, the school also set up 20 minutes of independent reading time during the lunch break on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when students could choose to read books written in either Chinese or English. Students were encouraged to choose their favourite books (fiction or nonfiction) during the SSR. Some books were also brought from home by students themselves, while others were borrowed from the school library. After reading, students were asked to complete a reading record (samples of reading records see Appendix A).

During the project, the participating teachers cooperated in their preparation of the reading lessons. UTEs provided situated and sustained supervision and feedback following lesson observations. In addition to the teacher who was teaching the lesson, other participating teachers were also involved in observing and in discussion. Sometimes the observation session took the form of an open class, with teachers from other schools who were not involved in the project also attending the observations, thus increasing the scope of benefits and promoting educational innovations.

4.4   Data collection

In order to answer the 3 research questions regarding both the students' improvements in reading in English and the participating teachers' changes in their views and practices in teaching reading as well as gains from the reading project, various types of data were collected. Specifically, to find out whether and to what extent students had been improving their reading ability, reading interests and habits, data were collected through: reading tests conducted at three points (pre-, mid-, and post-), a post-project student questionnaire, and eight classroom observations. To compare teachers' attitudes and practices on graded reading, eight classroom observation videos and the corresponding lesson plans were collected in addition to a teacher questionnaire in the form of a narrative frame (Gu, Xu, & Gu, 2013), completed by the end of the project.

4.4.1   *The Reading Level Test*

The so called 'Reading Level Test' is a test bank developed by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and adopted for the study. It comprised of an online adaptive reading test bank with 20 levels designed according to the ERL Frame-

work targeted at primary and secondary school students. The test bank has a variety of reading texts at different levels (mostly supported with images or pictures) followed by 1–2 multiple choice questions for each text. The purpose is to assess students' level of reading comprehension, in such areas as understanding facts, locating specific information, identifying main ideas, making predictions, distinguishing facts from opinions, analyzing cause and effects and making inferences, etc. (see Figure 2 for an example). When students begin the online test, a set of four texts covering levels 1–4 are automatically presented to the students. After they have finished reading the texts and answered the questions that follow, the next set of 4 texts with mixed levels is made available to the student according to his or her reading performance on the previous set. In total, every test-taker will read 4 sets of 16 texts and answer 16–20 questions before a final level is determined. The average time spent on the test is 15–20 minutes. Students complete the test in the school's computer room with teachers invigilating the test.

Read the text about the robot Derek and answer the question below.

The average child in Luke and Liv's fourth-grade class never has to do any chores. Sure, they could choose to take out the trash or make their own beds. But why do something themselves when someone or something else can do everything for them?

For Liv and Luke, that something is Derek.

Derek is a robot. He doesn't just make beds. He vacuums, does laundry, and even washes windows.

Liv and Luke got Derek when they were in the second grade, and the three of them are great friends. Luke even lets Derek play with the family dog, Lucy.

9. **What is the job of Derek?**

A. Doing daily chores.

B. Waking children up.

C. Playing with Lucy.

Difficulty 0.39
Item Discrimination Index 0.71

Figure 2. Sample task (Level 5) and the test data

The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the project in September 2017 to all 290 participating students, the mid-test was a year later in 2018, and the post-test in September 2019. The purpose of the three tests was to track the students' reading development.

4.4.2   *Student questionnaire*

The student questionnaire was administered by the end of September 2019. It consisted of 4 parts with 23 questions. The first part (questions 1–4) collected the stu-

dents' demographic information, such as age, gender and experience of foreign language learning. The second part (questions 5–13) concerned students' length of reading time and the amount of reading per year, and whether students preferred to read e-books or paper books. The third part (questions 14–21) was designed to learn about students' reading attitudes and interests. The final part (questions 22–23) investigated students' reading strategy use and self-assessment skills. All questions were developed according to the ERL framework formulated as closed questions, some of which were adapted from the 2009 PISA Student Questionnaire and from a Questionnaire on Reading in English (Camiciottloli, 2001).

4.4.3   *The narrative frame*

The development of a narrative frame was based on the concept of writing frames which could be used to provide guidance and support for teachers writing their lesson reflections (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The narrative frame for this study contained 15 sentence starters (see Appendix B). The main role of the frame was to help teachers to provide structured, focused and relevant reflections and responses. The language of the narrative frame and the teachers' answers were all in Chinese.

4.4.4   *Classroom observation videos*

During the two years, eight lessons were observed by UTEs along with feedback for improvements. These observations were also video-recorded with two cameras set for recording both the teacher's instruction and the performance of the students. These observation videos were collected and then transcribed for later analysis.

4.4.5   *Lesson plans*

For all eight observed lessons, teachers' lesson plans were collected. These included teaching content analysis based on a "what/why/how" template; student analysis such as students' learning needs, interests, linguistic and cultural readiness, and potential difficulties for reading the book; lesson objectives, lesson procedures, as well as supporting materials such as Powerpoint slides to be used, student exercise worksheets, etc.

4.5   Data analysis methods

Different data analysis methods were applied to different types of data. The reading tests and the student questionnaire were analyzed statistically using SPSS 24 with analysis based on the entirety of the students' data, including all the pre-, mid- and post-tests and the completed questionnaires. Those that did not meet

the criteria were withdrawn resulting in a final set of 239 valid data. Descriptive analysis was used for analyzing the questionnaire data. For the three reading tests, the mean for the valid data ($n = 239$) each year were calculated respectively. Student cross-year level growth including 1 year-level growth (2017–2018, 2018–2019) and 2-year level growth (2017–2019) were analysed using paired samples T-tests.

Content analysis was applied to data collected from the narrative frames, coded and categorized with reference to the teachers' views, practices, and gains based on the research questions. Data collected through the video-recorded lessons were transcribed for examining students' reading performances and teachers' teaching strategies. Lesson plans before and after the reading project were compared for differences in teaching objectives and strategies.

5.   Results and findings

5.1   Changes in teachers' views and practices before and after the project

These findings were derived from the analysis of the teacher's narrative frames, classroom observation videos, and lesson plans. Data regarding teachers' views were singled out from the narrative frames, including their teaching goals, self-assessment of teaching effectiveness, attitudes to graded reading and their self-reflections. Evidence of changes in teachers' classroom practices was mainly derived from their personal narratives, videoed lessons and lesson plans.

5.1.1   *Changes in views*

Before the project, teaching was almost entirely based on coursebooks as presented in Coursebook Examples 1–3. Teachers paid more attention to the mastery of language knowledge. For example, five out of eight teachers stated that before encountering graded reading, their main teaching concerns were the mastery of vocabulary and grammatical structures (see Appendix C). The other three teachers focused respectively on developing reading strategies (T1), practising dialogues (T2) and comprehending the text (T3). They felt the lessons were boring and the language learned by the students was limited. For example, "mechanical" or "inflexible" were the most frequently used words to describe their lessons before the project (T2, T3, T4, T5, T7 and T8). When the eight teachers first came across English graded readers, they all expressed great interest but did not know how to use such reading materials for classroom instruction. Consequently, they attempted to apply the traditional coursebook teaching strategies but found these unsuccessful.

After joining the project, the mastery of vocabulary and grammar were no longer the main goals of language teaching. Meaning construction, character analysis, literary appreciation, digging into the meaning of the text and helping students discover the connection between the text and real life became new teaching goals. Such changes revealed how these teachers had begun to pay more attention to the learning content for its educational value, integrating language learning with content learning. For example, some teachers commented (see Appendix C): "For reading graded readers, teachers should help students read deeply, to feel the beauty of language and emotions the author wanted to convey." (T3) "Teachers should focus on the language and the meaning of the text for developing student's critical thinking skills and cultural awareness." (T8). They were also more aware of the importance of developing students' English reading literacy and preparing students for lifelong learning. After joining the project, they learned new strategies for teaching graded readers and soon students began to show greater interest in English, in reading story books and in speaking the language.

5.1.2   *Changes in practices*

Before the project, these teachers used a variety of activities to teach language knowledge, such as songs and chants, dialogue exercises, role-plays, etc. However, these activities were conducted in a somewhat mechanical style and generally lacked authentic contextualisation. Additionally, there was a frequent lack of continuity and logical connection between these activities and students found it difficult to express their ideas in English after the lesson. Furthermore, the activities rarely involved students in deep thinking.

Teachers' teaching strategies and practices changed after the two-year project (see Appendix D). With the introduction to the new teaching strategies, teachers began to experiment one by one, starting with the Picture Tour strategy. Once the teachers were familiar with the strategies, they began to experiment with new activities in class, such as storytelling, drama, interviews, talk shows, readers' theatre and group presentations, as well as students making their own storybooks. Successful attempts at various strategies had led to a greater increase in teachers' confidence in using graded readers. Students had also become more active and enthusiastic, and their language and thinking skills had been improved. Teachers began to realize that teaching English did not have to be so difficult and boring but could be inspiring for both students and teachers. Most importantly, with the enriched teaching strategies, teachers began to focus on students' learning needs and to guide them to understand the meaning of texts, rather than simply teaching language knowledge mechanically. As some of them stated in the narrative frame, "When using graded readers in the classroom, I organized role plays and made

the students create their own storybooks"(T4). "I learned how to use the picture tour first and later I learned to use jigsaw" (T6).

The change in teachers' teaching practices was also reflected in the observation videos and lesson plans. Before the project, most teachers only prepared Powerpoint slides with no complete and systematic teaching plans. For them, simply picking out some vocabulary and grammar from the text would be enough for teaching. Since classroom activities were mainly question-and-answer based as reported by the teachers (see Appendix D), teaching was largely teacher-centred and the interaction between teachers and students was very limited. After participating in the training workshops and receiving feedback from the UTEs lesson observations, teachers began to pay attention to the content and analysis of the text following "what/why/how" format (Ministry of Education, China, 2018). Table 3 is an extract of T4's text analysis based on the graded reader *How the Bear Lost His Tail.*

Table 3. Text analysis of *How the Bear Lost His Tail.* extracts (translated)

Perspective	Content
[What] the theme and the main content	..., this book tells a story about a bear who lost his tail because he trusted the fox's way of fishing, and conveys the theme that people should take the comments of others with "a pinch of salt" ...
[How] structure and rhetoric of the text	...., this book uses the past tense..., many adjectives are used in a parallel way (big and hairy, but they were sweet and kind; as quick and slow and clever as ever) which clearly reflects the features of the characters.
[Why] writing purpose	... to demonstrate the importance of having independent thinking abilities.

Teachers were also encouraged to use a lesson plan template to articulate the goals of each activity, the level of thinking it intends, and the way of assessing learning (see Table 4 for an example). Through this template, teachers were able to self-assess the effectiveness of the activity design. For example, instead of asking questions prepared before class, T4 asked students to observe the book cover and ask questions on their own. As a result, students' interest in reading was immediately stimulated, as they could not wait to read the book to find answers. In this case, reading was more purposeful and meaningful.

The following is a classroom teaching extract from the observation videos. The extract illustrates how T4 provided students with many opportunities to express themselves, while her timely feedback provoked the students to think and discuss. For example, in the Word Master reporting session for Reading Circles, T4 guided the students step by step, ensuring that each student was on the same page for the task. When the students did not know how to express themselves

Table 4. An extract of activity design for *How the Bear Lost His Tail* extracts by T4 (translated)

Lesson objectives	Student activities	Purpose of design	Cognitive levels	Assessment indicators
To map out the main plots of the story	Activity 1: Look at the book cover and predict what will happen in the story. Students raise as many questions as possible about the story. Activity 2: Read the story independently. Activity 3: Students share in class the answers they found to the questions they raised before reading it.	to cultivate observation and questioning skills to develop information extracting skills	Remember and understand	Be able to make predictions and ask questions about the story. Be able to find answers to the questions they raise.

in English and when they answered questions in Chinese, T4 repeated the student's answers in English to provide timely input for new language expressions. Besides, when S5 showed difficulty in understanding, T4, instead of giving an answer immediately, asked the student and the whole class to re-read that part until they reached a consensus.

Observation video transcripts extract 1, T4 (Grade 6)
An example of Teacher-student Interactions: Word Master reports in Reading Circles
S1 (Word Master): I choose the word "grit". It means courage.

T: Grit?

S1: Yes. It is on page 18.

T: Wait a moment. Ok, everyone let's go to page 18. She chose the word "grit". "Bear had to grit his teeth."

S1: I choose it because it is a new word and it is a good word.

T: Ok. You think it is a new word. Others, have you looked for the word "grit" in the dictionary? Do you know what it means?

S2: I think the words means that牙齿在颤抖，就是很冷 (meaning: the Bear's teeth are chattering and it is feeling cold).

T: The teeth are chattering, right?

S3: I think 咬紧牙关 (meaning: the Bear is very brave).

T: What can you know from this word?

S4: I think the bear is brave. It is very hurt to put his tail.

T: Yes. And he didn't give up. How about others?

S5: I think the bear use the…maybe使劲 (meaning: putting effort). Because I think it's very cold and bear's tail is in the lake. And I think the bear want the tail..maybe..to

T: catch more fish?

S5: No. I think the bear wants the tail to don't in the lake.

T: Oh you think the bear had to grit his teeth because he had to pull his tail out of the water?

S5: Yes. I think this is so cold.

T: Ok let 's read this part again. I think maybe you need to read it again. OK? Everyone let's look at page 18. "Bear had to grit his teeth. The more it tingled the more fish he thought he was catching." So, at this time, did the bear pull his tail out of the water?

Ss: No.

T: So why did he grit his teeth?

S6: I think the fish bit his tail.

T: Yes. Not just cold, but also very hurt.

5.2   Changes in students' reading skills before and after the project

The change in students' reading skills was mainly reflected in the indicators of reading level growth, reading interests, reading habits, reading attitudes, as well as their thinking ability development. The findings were based on the analysis of data from the levelled tests, post-project student questionnaire, classroom observation video transcripts and teachers' self-reported narrative frames.

5.2.1   *Students' reading level growth*

By comparing the results of the three tests given at the beginning (2017), middle (2018) and end (2019) of the two-year project, the reading-level growth of each student before and after the project could be tracked. Table 5 presents the results of the paired samples T-tests between 2018–2017, 2019–2018 and 2019–2017. As shown, with the mean of 2018 being 6.13 ($sd = 4.71$) and 2017 being 6.12 ($sd = 3.33$), significant difference was found ($t = 15.64$, $df = 238$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, significant difference was found ($t = 6.15$, $df = 238$, $p < 0.001$) between the 2019 and 2018 pair with the former mean 12.46 ($sd = 4.18$) and the latter mean 10.56 ($sd = 4.71$). The same was true for the 2019–2017 pair ($t = 24.4$, $df = 238$, $p < 0.001$) with the mean of 2019 being 12.46 ($sd = 4.18$) and 2017 6.13 ($sd = 3.33$). The analysis showed that these students' reading levels during the 2-year project increased steadily from 6.13 in the pre-test to 10.56 in the mid-test, and 12.46 in the post test as shown in Figure 3.

Table 5. Paired samples T-test statistics

		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
			Paired samples test				
			Paired differences				
Pair 1	2018–2017	4.42678	4.37548	0.28303	15.641	238	0.000
Pair 2	2019–2018	1.90795	4.79407	0.31010	6.153	238	0.000
Pair 3	2019–2017	6.33473	4.01218	0.25953	24.409	238	0.000

Figure 3. Changes in the mean of the students' reading levels

Due to ethical concerns, no control group was selected among Grade 4 students ($n = 290$). Therefore, no comparison between groups was possible. However, the data showed a significant improvement in the reading level of most students who took part in the project.

5.2.2   *Students' changes in reading habits, attitudes and interests*

Before the project, most students had little English reading experience at home except for a few who had the privilege of attending extra-curricular English lessons. Therefore, the majority had no established habit of reading English books and their reading interest was low since their English proficiency was too limited to allow independent reading. The changes regarding the students' reading habits, attitudes and interests in reading are presented below based on Questions 5,6,7,16,17,18 from the student questionnaire ($n = 239$).

The answers to Question 5,6 and 7 reveal that over 80% of students have developed a degree of reading habit as a result of the two-year project. 35% of students stated that they read 1–2 days per week, 30% read 3–4 days per week and 19% read nearly every day (see Figure 4). Students who seldom read accounted for 16% of the total population. In addition, 46% of students reported that they read for 10–20 mins each time, and 23% for 20–30mins (see Figure 5). This indicated that

10–30 mins reading per day was preferred. Moreover, 8% of students read more than 51 books in 2019 and 12% of the total read 31–50 books, magazines and newspapers excluding coursebooks (see Figure 6).
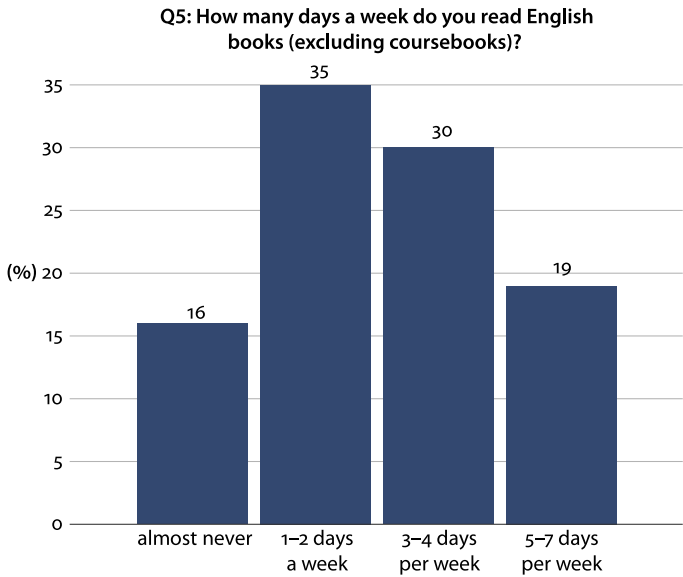
Q5: How many days a week do you read English books (excluding coursebooks)?

Figure 4. Students' reading frequency per week

Q6: How much time on average do you read a day?

Figure 5. Student's reading time per day

Q7: How many English books did you read in the past year ((excluding coursebooks, newspapers or magazines)?

Figure 6. Student's reading amount per year

Regarding the changes in the students' attitudes towards reading and their reading interests, evidence is drawn from Questions 16, 17, and 18. Figure 7 presents the findings. As illustrated, 83% ($n=198$) of the students held a positive attitude towards reading while 17% ($n=41$) reported that they disliked reading English books. The reasons provided for loving reading in English were mostly related to intrinsic motivation. For example, they believed that the value of reading was to help them expand their vocabulary ($n=150$) and improve their academic performance ($n=113$). Many reported that they enjoyed reading and found books interesting ($n=130$). A small number reported that they were motivated by extrinsic factors such as receiving praise from teachers and parents ($n=4$) (see Figure 8).

Explanations for why students ($n=41$) did not like reading included both internal and external ones (see Figure 9). The former included difficulties in reading ($n=29$) and lack of enjoyment when reading ($n=15$). External reasons seemed to have hindered students from reading. For example, some had limited reading time because of course work pressure ($n=30$).

In the project, the students' intrinsic motivation in reading was well nurtured by the rich literacy environment created through various teaching strategies such as Picture Tours, SSR, and Reading Circles as well as engaging activities such as role plays and drama performances. In studies conducted by Guthrie and Alao (1997) and Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) both reported that intrinsic motivation was positively related to reading amount and performance. Similarly, in the case
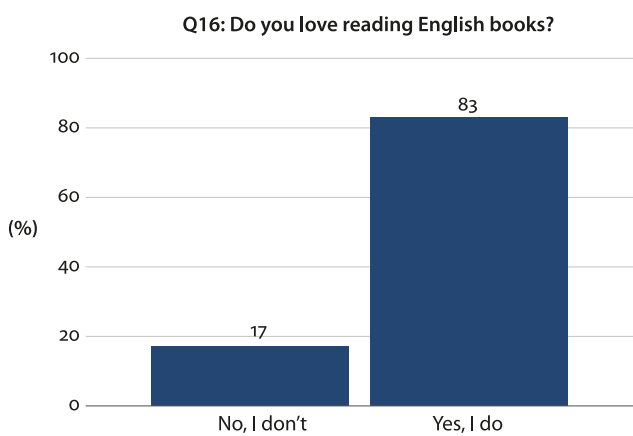
Q16: Do you love reading English books?

Figure 7. Students' attitudes towards reading graded readers

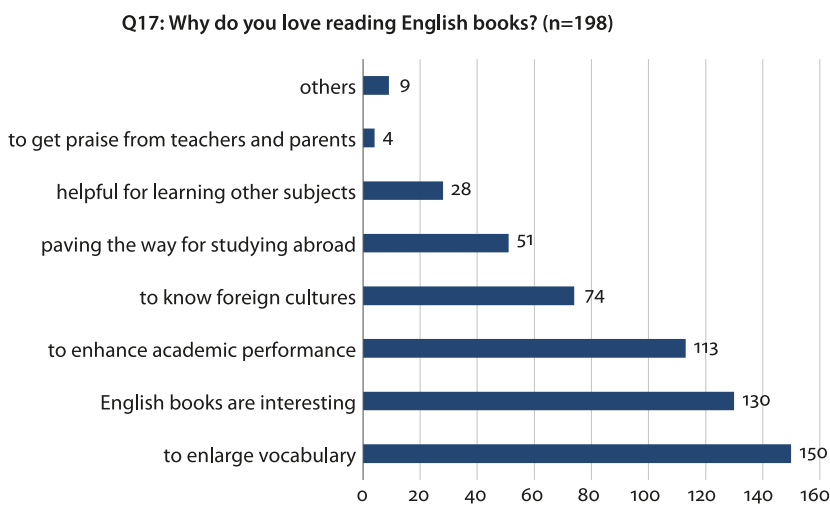**Q17: Why do you love reading English books? (n=198)**

Figure 8. Reasons for loving reading graded readers

study reported here, both cognitive goals of academic achievement and motivational goals of engagement among most students were successfully achieved in the 2-year project.

5.3   Improvement of students' language ability and critical thinking

The development of students' language ability and critical thinking was examined through the comparison of two extracts based on two observed/videoed reading lessons, one taking place in 2017 and the other in 2019. The two lessons were com-

Q18: Why don't you love reading English books? (n=41)

others	8
I have no idea where to get English books.	1
I have no idea what to read.	15
My parents don't encourage me to read.	0
lack of time	30
There is no use in reading English books.	3
Reading English books is too difficult.	29
I feel unhappy when reading.	15

Figure 9. Reasons for not loving reading graded readers

pared to see whether the students' language ability, reasoning, and critical think-ing skills had improved. Both lessons adopted the Reading Circles approach. Two clips were selected for comparison from each lesson: one related to a discussion of the book cover. The other was about ideas sharing with the role of the "Criticizer" in Reading Circles.

Observation video transcripts extract 2, T2 (Grade 4) (2017)

Figure 10. Powerpoint slide of the book cover *The Race* (Project X, Level 4, 2012)

T: Today I have a new story for you. Look at tiger. Tiger was sitting in a micro-buggy. So, is tiger big or small now?

Ss: Small.

T: Yes. And look at Cat. Cat is sitting on something. What was Cat sitting on?

S1: I think it's a s…snail.

T: Oh, you think it's a snail. How do you know it's a snail?

S1: Because I saw…those things. (pointing at the body of the snail)

T: Ok. You know you see the body. What's this (pointing at the shell)? Do you know?

Ss: Shell.

T: Yes. The shell. So, it's a snail. And, you can see two tentacles. Look at the cover, what title would you give this book?

S2: I see…I will give it micro race.

T: Ah, micro race. Maybe. You are creative.

S3: Maybe I give it new car. They drive it. Maybe they want to ride the car and the snail. Maybe they want to drive it. They didn't want to drive the…the…the…bigger car.

T: So, they want to drive the micro-buggy.

S3: Yes.

T: So, the name you give this book is?

S3: New Car.

In Extract 2 T2 was clearly attempting to draw students' attention to the book cover. However, the questions were mostly framed in such a way as to lead to pre-determined answers. The students' answers were often in one word or very short sentences. Once the students had responded correctly, there were no follow-up questions on the teacher's side to invite reasoning from the students. Mostly, the students' answers to higher order questions were built on personal experience rather than evidence from the book. They jumped to their conclusions without fair justification or elaborations. Two things were obvious on the students' side: one is that students' language was limited with quite a few grammatical errors; the other is that there was no opportunity for students to discover what they could see or might want to find from the book cover.

In Extract 3 below, we can see again that students' expressions contained quite a few ill-formed sentences. Evidence from the transcript also suggests that they paid more attention to the pictures at a surface level and demonstrated little or no reasoning in relation to the pictures.

Observation transcripts extract 3, T2 (Grade 4) (2017)
T: Now it's Criticizer (meaning it's the Critizer's turn.） Some part of the story is weird or unreasonable.

S1: Page 11 is unreasonable. Er…why there have some smoke behind the micro-buggy?

T: When the micro-buggy has already stopped. Yes. Anything else?

S2: Picture 5 is very weird. Because in our life the snail when he em it just like I think when we touch it, and the snail will very scared.

T: And the snail will hide in the shell.

S2: But on this story, the Cat, Cat, is, er…it's had, and she touch the snail, but the snail is isn't afraid of Cat. It's weird.

T: Maybe. Yes.

From the two extracts taken from videoed lesson transcripts in 2019, we could see that students' language became more complex and their responses were based on evidence from the book rather than their personal judgement. The questions they asked also demonstrated that they were beginning to think more critically (see Extract 4).

Observation transcripts extract 4, T4 (Grade 6) (2019)

Figure 11. Powerpoint slide on *How the Bear Lost His Tail* (Traditional Tales, Lisheng Series, Level 6, 2013)

T: It's our story time again and first look at the picture. Do you have some questions about the picture?

S1: Why does the bear have a long tail?

T: Why do you think the long tail is very strange? Why?

S1: Because normally bears' tails are usually short.

S2: I want to know why the bear is sitting on the wood in the winter. Em…em…many bears sleep in the winter.

T: Yes. Many bears sleep in the winter. But the bear is not sleeping, right?

S3: I want to know why the bear hold his tail.

T: Oh, the bear is holding his tail. Any other questions?

S4: I want to know what is he doing?

S5: Why the bear is very happy?

T: You think the bear is very happy, right? Good. Good question.

In 2019, it was observed that the number of students' grammatical errors was significantly reduced and they had begun to use complex sentence structures. In addition, they were given opportunities to express what they would like to find out from the story by looking carefully at the book cover and were also trained to use complete sentences when asking questions. For example, they used "I want to know …". S1's and S2's questions both indicated that they did not only ask questions but also clearly expressed why they were asking them. In the study this was identified as evidence of critical thinking.

Observation transcripts extract 5, T4 (Grade 6) (2019)
T: Ok, Critical Thinkers?

S: I want to say something about page 10. I think it is good because I find it is a good part. It's good because it uses adjectives like "longer" and "fluffier" to describe the bear's tail.

T: Yes. It uses a lot of good adjectives to describe the tail, right? Like "longer" and "fluffier". Did you find some other words to describe the tail after the bear lost its tail?

S: Short and stumpy.

In Extract 5, the student used complete expressions such as "I want to say something about…" and began to analyse the text and appreciate the writing techniques. The "Criticizer" was not only able to find irrationalities in the text, but also able to appreciate the author's style of writing. This evidence demonstrated improvements in the students' ability to carefully examine the text using higher order thinking skills, both cognitive and metacognitive.

5.4   Teacher's reports of students' changes in performance

The narrative frames also provided data on the students' changes in reading performance from the teachers' perspective. Before the project, teachers were dissatisfied with their students' performance because very few students were able to participate in class discussions. However, by the end of the reading project,

both the students' language and critical thinking abilities were improved (see Appendix E). Teachers found that their students' oral and writing skills were enhanced (T1 and T7); they were more willing to express themselves (T2); they made significant improvements in intonation (T6). Also, the students could retell a story in a more logical way (T5), and they were able to analyse questions dialectically (T7). In addition, students became more interested in English, and their ability to demonstrate creativity and imagination in their use of English developed. From graded readers they learned about "the truth of life" (T4), including greater understanding about such themes as: good and evil, courage, goodness, the challenges of life, diversity of our society, faith and belief etc. and they became interested in learning English (T8).

5.5   Participating teachers' gains from the reading project

The teachers' self-reported narratives indicate what they have gained through this project, including: the ability to solve problems in teaching, to learn and develop independently, and to experience professional satisfaction through the various awards they have received.

5.2.1   *Problem-solving abilities and professional learning abilities*

Analysis of teachers' data included in Appendix F shows that the main difficulty faced by teachers in this project was the change of teaching materials from coursebooks to graded readers, given their lack of effective strategies for using graded readers in teaching. For instance, they did not know how to deal with the large amount of new words in stories (T1, T4 & T5). For some teachers it was difficult to tell a story in a lively way, since they were foreign language learners themselves (T3), while another reported that she did not know how to design post-reading activities with story books (T8).

During the project, all the teachers tried hard to improve their teaching, including joining collaborative lesson preparation (T1), reading academic books and journals, giving or observing public lessons (T7), attending seminars or academic conferences (T7), and learning through new media (T4), etc. In addition, they learnt many new teaching strategies to improve their teaching (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6 &T8).

Through professional learning and support from peers and UTEs, they gradually found solutions to their problems. Some teachers used body language and pictures or videos as effective teaching support to keep class interesting (T3, T6). The contextual clues in a text and the pictures were all useful strategies for helping students to understand the unknown words in "rich" contexts (T1, T4).

5.5.2 *Other self-reported gains and awards teachers received*

In the narrative frames (see Appendix G), most teachers stated that they had learned some theoretical perspectives related to reading instruction and had tried to apply a range of teaching strategies according to different text types and teaching aims. Their classes had become more interesting and efficient and were very much liked by their students (T2, T3 &T6). Teachers also found that they were better equipped to cater for the different needs of students (T5). Along with other gains, their own language proficiency also improved (T4). Surprisingly, under the pressure of more work, the project teachers had become more passionate and showed greater affection for the profession (T8).

In addition to the changes reported, these teachers have also received various awards and participated in many professional activities. Appendix G indicates that T1, the team leader, gave paper presentations on behalf of the whole team at both national and international conferences. Six teachers (T1, T2, T4, T5, T7, T8) gave public lessons at various levels with many more than once. Five (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6) have published academic papers. Six teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 &T6) received teaching awards for their lesson plans at district, municipal and national levels. All the project teachers have participated in writing teachers' manuals for a new series of graded readers which have been published for use by other teachers interested in using graded readers in primary schools.

6.   Conclusion

In light of the results obtained from the case study, it can be concluded that graded reading instruction has effectively improved students' reading abilities and changed teachers' teaching beliefs. The case study reported here is one of many in the fast expansion of the reading projects in China. What has been achieved has greatly encouraged more and more teachers to use graded readers. Thus, one big challenge for the future is how to train more teachers in China (and possibly elsewhere) to effectively use graded readers in classrooms. Also, given that the idea of using graded readers for teaching English is still new and China is geographically vast with quite diverse educational and economic contexts, extensive and effective application of classroom instruction using graded readers can pose a great challenge for both researchers and practitioners. Teachers need to go beyond merely teaching language knowledge. They need to develop a mindset which focuses on the improvement of students' reading abilities in English together with their reading habits, reading interests, critical thinking skills, imagination and creativity. This task will entail more systematic and rigorous research and sustained teacher

support programmes. Today in China there are now national English reading conferences held each year and many public lessons which demonstrate different approaches for teaching graded readers both fiction and non-fiction, attended by hundreds or thousands of primary and secondary school English teachers. Teaching demonstrations of this type have proved to be quite effective for teacher's professional learning in China.

In addition to the above, educational administrators at every level, throughout the country need to legitimize the reform of teaching materials and methods. The pivotal role of school principals in creating a dynamic atmosphere for collaborative teaching and learning is essential to the future progress of this initiative. Finally evidence from this project has revealed the vital importance of variety and quality of resources, including the need for more graded readers from both imported sources and collaborative efforts for writing stories and cultural topics which reflect Chinese traditions.

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Appendix A. Examples of students' reading records

Reading record (1)

Reading record (2)

Reading record (3)

Reading record (4)

Appendix B.   Sentence starters on the narrative frames for teachers (translated)

1. **Before graded readers were introduced**
   The main teaching methodology and processes in my regular class was ……. My teaching goal and emphasis was……., and I think this kind of teaching was ……. My students' language ability and learning motivation were …….

2. **During the reading project**
   In the year of ……., I first heard about graded readers, I felt ……. and I tried to use the graded readers in my class, but I met with many/some problems, such as……. After a period of practice, I found/did not find solutions, for example, ……. I think the key to teaching graded readers was……. I tried many ways to enhance my teaching ability, mainly through …….

3. **After the project**
   I have changed (please describe it from the perspective of teaching attitudes, strategies, and students' changes etc.) ……. I designed many activities in my class, for example, ……. My students also changed (please give at least three supporting examples) ……. I made some achievements (such as giving demo lessons, publishing papers, gaining awards, etc.) …….

4. **Things I would very much like to add** …….

Appendix C.   Changes in teachers' views

No.	Before the reading project	After the reading project
T1	1. Teaching goals: strategies like skimming and scanning and information extraction. Students showed no interest in class.	1. Teaching goals: can comprehend the text, analyse characters, evaluate authors' views, express viewpoints and relate the text to life. Satisfied with the current class and students showed much more interest.
	2. Liked graded readers but felt that students were not interested in reading them. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: Failed.	2. Felt that text interpretation and multi-levelled activities were the key to successful teaching.
T2	1. Teaching goals: to practice dialogues. Activities were mechanic and language learned by students was limited.	1. Teaching goals: can get the outline of the story, analyse characters' personalities, appreciate literature and express viewpoints.
	2. Interested in graded readers but did not know how to use them. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: failed.	2. Graded readers were enchanting. Language could be learned by reading them.

No.	Before the reading project	After the reading project
T3	1. Teaching goals: vocabulary, sentence patterns and the overall meaning. Classes were full of mechanic questions and answers and simple exercises.	1. Teaching goals: can extract information and comprehend the text, retell the story, analyse characters, relate to self-life and create a new story or finish a report. Students became happy to express their viewpoints.
	2. Felt graded readers new and challenging. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: not smooth.	2. Teachers should help students to read more deeply, to appreciate the beauty of language and to feel the authors' emotions.
T4	1. Teaching goals: to master Language knowledge. Classes were boring and mechanic.	1. Teaching goals: can comprehend the text, retell the story, analyse characters, evaluate the text, relate to self-life and create a new story or finish a report. Students loved to think deeply.
	2. Interested in graded readers but did not know how to use them. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: not very successful.	2. Teachers should engage themselves in the stories first to make students more engaged. Attention should be paid to individual differences.
T5	1. Teaching goals: vocabulary and grammar. Teaching procedures were inflexible.	1. Teaching goals: can extract information and comprehend the text, retell the story, analyse characters, ask text-dependent questions and discuss based on real life experiences. Diverse way of teaching made classes more interesting.
	2. Interested in graded readers but felt lost Previous teaching experience using graded readers: not very successful.	2. Teachers should guide students to appreciate the language and emotions in the stories.
T6	1. Teaching goals: vocabulary and sentence patterns. Classes were boring.	1. Teaching goals: an extract information and comprehend the text, retell the story, analyse the text and express viewpoints. Reading instruction could prompt the positivity and creativity of students.
	2. Felt curious but knew very little. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: not very successful.	2. Teachers should stimulate students' reading interest and enhance their reading skills.
T7	1. Teaching goals: to master language knowledge. Too much mechanical training with no deep-thinking provoking questions.	1. Teaching goals: can extract information and comprehend the text, retell the story, analyse characters, relate to self-Life.
	2. Felt surprised and looking forward to using them. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: felt not very comfortable	2. Teachers could use the graded readers as supplements of coursebooks to enhance student's reading literacy.

No.	Before the reading project	After the reading project
T8	1. Teaching goals: vocabulary and to recite the texts. Too much mechanical practices, lack authentic context. 2. Both students and teachers felt attracted by graded readers. Previous teaching experience using graded readers: ordered but not efficient.	1. Teaching goals: according to Bloom's taxonomy, remember, under stand, apply, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. 2. Teachers should pay more attention to text meaning, the development of students' thinking abilities and cultural awareness.

Appendix D. Changes in teachers' practice

No.	Before the reading project	After the reading project
T1	Used tried jigsaw reading (learned this method in college before) and let students read independently.	Used picture tour, jigsaw reading, reading circles, book talk and drama performance.
T2	Used music or videos as lead-in and then asked students questions.	Read and interpreted the text more deeply. Used SSR, picture tour, jigsaw reading, reading circles, gallery walk.
T3	Asked questions, let students watch videos, and then answered the questions.	Used SSR, picture tour, jigsaw reading, reading circles, gallery walk.
T4	Lead-in and drilled sentence patterns.	Used SSR, picture tour, jigsaw reading, reading circles, gallery walk. Organized role-play and made students create their own picture-books.
T5	Asked questions, let students watch videos, and then answered the questions.	Used picture tour, jigsaw reading, reading circles, gallery walk, sharing of book reviews and reading into writing activities.
T6	Asked questions, let students watch videos, and then answered the questions.	Applied picture tour at the beginning of the project and then learned to use jigsaw reading later.
T7	Warm-up, read aloud, role plays and scenario-based interactions	Applied jigsaw reading, interviews, readers' theatres and reading circles
T8	Teach vocabularies and dialogues.	Used picture tour and SSR.

Appendix E. Teacher's assessment of changes in students' Performance

No.	Before the reading project	After the reading project
T1	Students' language abilities were relatively low and only a few top students could join the class discussions.	Showed development in reading interest, thinking abilities, oral language skills and written skills.
T2	Students' language abilities were relatively low.	Students became willing to express their viewpoints. Their language skills and logical thinking abilities were improved.
T3	Students' language abilities were relatively low.	Showed improvements in language skills, logical and critical thinking skills, and read aloud performances.
T4	Students' language abilities were relatively low.	Their power of imagination and creativity get enhanced. Students' reading proficiency and thinking abilities were improved. And they learnt the truth of life.
T5	Students' language abilities were relatively low.	Students' vocabulary was enlarged and they could retell story in a more logical way. Students could analyse problems dialectically.
T6	Students' language abilities were relatively low.	Students made much progress in intonation and pronunciation. Students' spoken language skills improved. Students could express their ideas in a logical way
T7	Students' language abilities were relatively low. They showed interest in role-play activities.	Students' overall language ability improved, and they could express their thoughts more creatively and naturally. Students' vocabulary was enlarged, and they could use words more accurately. Students could analyse problems dialectically.
T8	Overall language ability was weak and showed less and less interest in English study.	Students' overall language ability, their thinking abilities improved. Students were more interested in English study in my class.

Appendix F. Teachers' problem-solving abilities and professional learning abilities

No.	Problems encountered	Professional learning	Corresponding solutions
T1	1. Could not set up clear goals for reading instruction. 2. Did not know how to deal with unknown words.	Learned theories of reading instruction, discussed problems with peers and joined collaborative lesson preparation.	1. First set up an overall objective of reading instruction according to the school English curriculum and then set up different goals and phases for students of different language levels. 2. Help build students understanding of unknown words by visual aids.
T2	Did not know how to analyse the plot.	Learned theories of reading instruction	Get trained how to interpret text.
T3	Found it difficult to explain the story to students in a vivid way.	Learned theories of reading instruction	Using other aids, such as pictures and body language, arouse students' interest and guide students to make predictions.
T4	Did not know how to deal with unknown words.	Read journals and learned through new media.	Guide students to guess the meaning of unknown words using content clues.
T5	Did not know how to teach vocabularies and grammar in traded readers.	Learned theories of reading instruction	Guide students to promote language skills while doing well-designed activities, such as information extraction tasks, ideas sharing in groups and role play tasks.
T6	Found it hard to keep classes interesting.	Learned theories of leading instruction	Using other aids, such as pictures and body language.
T7	Did not know teaching strategies of graded readers.	Read academic books and journals, watched demonstration teaching, attended seminars or academic conferences.	Get trained and put the new teaching strategies into practice, such as jigsaw reading and reading circles.
T8	1. Did not know teaching strategies of graded readers. 2. Found it difficult to design interesting after-reading activities.	Learned theories of reading instruction	1. Get trained and put the new teaching strategies into practice, such as jigsaw reading and reading circles.

Appendix G. Gains and awards teachers won

No.	Achievements
T1	I learned many instructional strategies and theories. My team and I gained growth. I participated in writing teachers.' manuals for keylinks Series. I made a conference presentation about the innovation application of reading circles at TESOL, China 2019. And I gained a national prize for promoting teaching using graded readers. I gave teaching demonstrations at a national conference and my academic paper about reading circles was published
T2	I had created a positive classroom atmosphere and my efficiency in classroom was improved. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. I gave teaching demonstrations at a national conference and my academic paper about reading circles was published and gained municipal first prize.
T3	My class became more interesting and I felt confident to tell stories to my students. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. My academic paper was published and gained municipal first prize.
T4	My own language ability was improved and I could apply many teaching strategies. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series.. I gave teaching demonstrations several time at workshops and national conferences, and I was awarded as "prominent teacher" in Changping district.
T5	I could apply many teaching strategies and pay more attention to different needs of my students. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. I save teaching demonstrations in Shenzhen and Xinglong. My academic paper was published and gained municipal first prize.
T6	My class became more interesting and I could apply many teaching strategies. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. My academic paper was published and gained municipal third prize.
T7	My teaching skills were improved and I felt more confident in my students. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. I gave teaching demonstrations at a national conference and shared my experience with teachers in Chongqing.
T8	I loved teaching even more. I could apply many teaching strategies. I participated in writing teachers' manuals for Keylinks Series. I gave teaching demonstrations at a national conference in 2019.

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Biographical notes

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