

Action Research

Incorporating Free Voluntary Reading for an Engaging Curriculum

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This paper examines the impact of incorporating Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) into the DLIFLC Chinese Mandarin Basic course. The paper starts with two reasons for incorporating FVR: the documented benefits of FVR on language development as evidenced by research, and the intensity and low repetition rate of vocabulary of the DLIFLC Basic Chinese Mandarin course curriculum. This paper outlines the three phases of the reading program, provides an overview of teachers' and students' feedback on the FVR program, and does an informal comparison of test results. Despite some challenges, the program offers varied repetition of vocabulary, boosts students' confidence in reading extended texts, enhances their enjoyment of language learning, and leads to improved performance in DLIFLC reading tests. The paper supports the use of FVR as an integral component of any DLIFLC Basic course curriculum.

Keywords: Free Voluntary Reading, Curriculum Enhancement, Repetition Rate, Graded Readers

INTRODUCTION

Krashen once stated, "Free voluntary reading, reading because you want to, is one of the most effective tools we have in second language and foreign language education. It is also the easiest and most pleasant to use" (Krashen, 1997, p. 11). In a later paper, Krashen also said, "In the last few decades, evidence from several areas continues to show that those who do more recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. These results hold for first and second language acquisition, and for children and adults" (Krashen, 2004, p. 1). In many ways, his words ring true today, yet the reality is that a growing number of students spend a limited amount of time reading extensively in any language. This action research project explores the degree to which free voluntary reading in the target language can benefit DLIFLC students in terms of engagement and language gains.

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BACKGROUND

The benefits of ongoing, consistent reading have been well-documented in the language learning literature. Krashen and Mason (2015) analyzed the progress of seven adult English learners living in Japan using the method of free voluntary reading. The students took pre- and post-TOEIC tests (Test of English for International Communication) to track their progress. The analysis showed that the variable of “hours spent reading” was a very strong predictor of gains on the TOEIC test. The students gained a mean of 0.62 points for every hour of free voluntary reading. For example, if a student spent 120 hours on FVR, the test score would improve by 74.4 points (total score of 990). This result is nearly the same as what was reported by Nation (2014). Nation took a different approach by using corpora of various sizes and composition to see how many tokens of input would be needed to gain at least twelve repetitions, which empirically proved to be the threshold of word retention. Following Nation's analysis, it would take about 1,223 hours of reading for an English learner to reach the 9,000-word family level. This would be translated as 0.57 points gain in the TOEIC test for every hour of reading.

The effect of FVR is consistent with Krashen's theory of Comprehensible Input. Krashen said that “Free voluntary reading is an extremely powerful form of comprehensible input, and it is delivered in a low-anxiety environment” (Krashen, 2003, p. 3). It is also consistent with the theory of word repetition rate and retention. There is a clear relationship between repetition and vocabulary acquisition. Webb (2007) found that learners who encountered an unfamiliar word more times in informative contexts (e.g., reading to obtain information or reading for pleasure) achieved significantly greater vocabulary gains compared to those with fewer encounters with the given words. This is because language acquisition is exemplar-based; it is through the piecemeal learning of thousands of structures to achieve an abstraction of the regularities (Ellis, 2002). Extensive reading facilitates word repetition in meaningful contexts, and learners are more likely to engage in extensive reading because it is enjoyable.

With FVR, individuals read content that is interesting to them at a level they can easily understand. They should enjoy the reading and the reading process. Through this extensive reading, students reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures, while also immersing themselves in the target language. FVR has other names from researchers, such as “extensive reading,” “recreational reading,” and “pleasure reading.” They share the same features as summarized by Day and Bamford (2002):

1. The reading material is easy (i.e., “well within their reading comfort zone” p. 137, with learners knowing at least 98% of the words, according to Hu & Nation, 2000).
2. A variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.

However, in most language learning settings, students typically sit in a classroom, struggle through a challenging passage designed to demonstrate vocabulary and grammar, translate most of it, study the linguistic or grammatical structures, answer comprehension questions about it, and do drills. This “intensive reading” (vs. “extensive reading”) can be very difficult and offers only the promise of delayed gratification. Intensive reading also has benefits, but strong language programs implement both intensive and extensive readings in their curricula.

The following analysis, based on the latest edition of the Chinese Basic Course Semester I textbooks, offers an example of an *intensive* reading. This example is used to showcase the difference between the two types (intensive and extensive) and discuss the benefits each type offers.

The first key characteristic that underscores the curriculum's demands is the high density of new vocabulary. Below is an excerpt from Lesson 5, Presentation 3 (each lesson comprises three texts, referred to as presentations).

重庆在中国西南部， 是一个山城。重庆一年四季大部分是阴天， 很少有晴天。重庆的春天经常下雾。夏天很热， 最高气温 43 摄氏度。秋天常常下雨， 有时候刮风。冬天跟春天一样， 也常常下雾， 可是很少下雪。重庆的气候没有蒙特雷这么好， 夏天没有蒙特雷凉快， 冬天比蒙特雷冷， 平均最低气温 7 摄氏度左右。重庆有很多好玩的地方、好吃的东西， 是一个很有意思的城市。

The presentation consists of 146 characters, 79 of which are for new vocabulary (indicated with straight underlining), accounting for 54.1% of the entire text. Words with wavy underlining are from the lesson the students learned the previous day, consisting of 14.4% of the text. As these words have limited exposure and reinforcement, they are not yet firmly retained in memory, adding to the cognitive load. A text with over 50% new vocabulary requires significant deliberate study and cognitive effort from students.

The second notable characteristic is the low recurrence rate of vocabulary. The Semester I curriculum requires that students learn a total of 2,231 words, 47.6% of which appear only once throughout the semester.

Table 1

Word Occurrences Count of DLIFLC Basic Chinese Course Semester I Curriculum

Semester 1 Total words	2231	100%
Number of times a word appears		
1	1063	47.6%
2	399	17.9%
3–4	315	14.1%
5–6	138	6.2%
7–9	101	4.5%
10-11	37	1.7%
12 and above	178	8.0%

Due to the high density of new vocabulary, coupled with the low repetition rate, the curriculum is very intensive and demanding. Students learn under high stress; the retention remains a problem and occurs mainly through the simple repetition of old materials.

This action research aims to address the issue of low word repetition rates in materials and to enhance students' reading comprehension, motivation, and engagement through the implementation of FVR program. By incorporating this reading program, the researcher seeks to provide varied repetition of vocabulary in meaningful contexts and create a more enjoyable and low anxiety learning environment.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive the FVR program given their already rigorous and intensive workload?
2. To what extent does FVR improve students' reading comprehension and performance?

CONTEXT OF ACTION RESEARCH

Participants

The participants in this study are 18 students enrolled in the Chinese Mandarin program at DLIFLC. By week 12, the students had completed Unit 2 of the curriculum and been exposed to 765 words consisting of 601 unique Chinese characters.

On average, the students' reading performance was weaker than their listening. In the Unit 1 test, the average reading score was 79.64, compared to an average listening score of 82.43. In the mid-unit 2 test, the average reading score improved slightly to 81.14 but remained 2.75 points lower than the average listening score of 83.89. Also, the students frequently commented on the difficulty of learning Chinese characters.

Materials

The reading materials were primarily selected from graded readers. Graded Readers are “books of various genres that are specially created for learners of foreign languages” and can include new, original stories written only as graded readers or they can be simplified versions of existing works; these can be fiction or nonfiction. The word “graded” is used because “the syntax and lexis are controlled in order to make the content accessible to learners of the language” (Extensive Reading Foundation, n.d.). In other words, a class of students can all read the same story, but at different graded levels—some with easier vocabulary and grammar, others with more complicated structures. But the characters and plot are all the same. For this action research project, the books were from a series specifically designed for high school and college students. Each book aligns with grade-specific vocabulary and grammar while delivering an engaging story. The materials also include a few books for native speakers.

Table 2

The Graded Reader Reading Materials used in the FVR Program

Chinese Breeze graded readers		
Level 1	300-word level	3 books
Level 2	500-word level	4 books
Level 3	750-word level	3 books
Level 4	1100-word level	4 books
Other graded readers		
HSK* level 4	1200-word level	2 books
In traditional character	300-character level	1 book
Non-graded readers		
For native children		3 books
For native youth		1 book

*HSK is the Chinese Language Proficiency Test in China that has nine levels.

Take the first graded reader introduced to the students as an example. The book *Whom Do You Like More* (300-word level) was introduced at the end of Unit 2. Compared to the Unit 1 and 2 textbooks in the Chinese program, this reader contains 230 unfamiliar words, the majority of which are transparent words. This means components of these words are already familiar to the students, so the meaning can be easily deduced with minimal cognitive effort. For example, 打/电话 (make a phone call), 好/朋友 (good friend), 有/事 (occupied) are all built from previously learned components. The graded reader introduces only a total of 52 new characters, making it accessible and manageable for students at this stage.

Additionally, some new words serve as important supplements to the DLIFLC textbook, such as 昨天 (yesterday), 教室 (classroom), 再见 (goodbye), 上班 (go to work), and 上一次 (last time). These high-frequency words were not introduced early in the existing textbook.

Using these analyses, the teaching team was confident that this book was well-suited as an effective starting point for the FVR program. The collections' carefully scaffolded content and controlled introduction of new vocabulary make them an ideal resource for fostering independent reading, sustaining progress, and supporting ongoing language development.

ACTION PLAN: THREE PHASES

Phase 1

Phase 1 represents a modified version of the FVR program. Due to the limited availability of beginner-level books and the need to effectively assess students' progress and gather feedback, the teaching team carefully selected the first book for the students. While this approach involves some initial limitations in book selection, it upholds the core principles of FVR by ensuring the material is slightly easier than their current study level, allowing students to read at their own comfortable pace. Faster readers can move on to other books at the same level once they complete the initial selection, preserving a sense of freedom and flexibility in their reading journey.

The first book, *Whom Do You Like More*, was introduced to the students after they completed Units 1 and 2. The students read the book independently during class time with instructors available for support. It took six sessions for the entire class to finish the book. After finishing the book, each student wrote a book report. To provide context for their reports, here is the summary of the main content of the book:

Fang Xin's wife, Xie Hong, went to study in America and decided to settle there and wanted her husband to join her. However, Fang Xin wanted to stay in China and develop software. During his time of solitude, a girl named Xiaoyue offered him much-needed help. Eventually, Fang Xin successfully developed the software and was ready to start his own company. Also, Fang Xin and his wife divorced, and he married Xiaoyue happily.

Table 3 shows excerpts from the students' book reports written in the target language, discussing the content and language level of the book, accompanied with English translation.

Table 3

Excerpts from Students' Book Reports about the Content and Language Level of the First Graded Reader

Excerpts from students' book reports	Translation
我觉得这本书真不错。从小的到现在，我总是喜欢看书。这本书是一样。	I think this book is really good. I've always loved reading since I was a kid. This book is the same.
虽然我不喜欢方新，但是这个故事非常好玩。	Although I don't like Fang Xin, this story was a lot of fun.
我觉得这本书为我们班阅读的能力很合适。	This book is very suitable to the reading level of our class.
故事只有四个人，谁我都不太喜欢，不过我对故事还感兴趣。	There are only four people in the story. I don't really like any of them, but I'm still interested in the story.
这个故事我喜欢，因为我常常想了“他们都会做什么？”	I like this story, because I've often wondered "What would they do?"
我很喜欢这个书，因为是有意思，而且我读懂了，可以连我的阅读。我平常不喜欢阅读，因为读的事又不有意思，又没有故事。我也觉得这个故事是喜欢种的故事。	I like this book very much, because it is interesting, and I understood it. It's suitable to my reading level. I usually don't like reading because the reading material is boring and there is no story. I feel this is the type of story I like.

The students also shared their moral perspectives on the book. Table 4 shows excerpts from their book reports in the target language, along with the English translation.

Table 4

Students' Book Reports about Their Moral Perspectives on the First Graded Reader

Excerpts from students' book reports	Translation
为什么方新没去美国？他可以做软件到处吧。	Why didn't Fang Xin go to America? He can work on his software anywhere in the world, right?
方新我有时不喜欢，有时觉得还可以。他做了很多的问题，比如他几个月后才告诉他的太太他的计划。同时我觉得如果他不想去美国，他应该不去。他的问题是他对他太太没说太多时间。	Sometimes I don't like Fang Xin, sometimes I feel he is okay. He made a lot of trouble, like he didn't tell his wife about his plans until months later. If he doesn't want to go to America, he doesn't have to, his problem is that he didn't spend enough time to communicate with his wife.
谢红是我最喜欢的人。不过，我还不喜欢她。她没有想太多方新想做什么，只想了她要什么。她当然还爱了他的先生，所以我不能不喜欢她。	Xie Hong is my favorite character. but I still don't like her that much. She doesn't care what her husband wants to do. She only thinks what she wants. However, she still loves her husband, that's why I can't help but like her.
然而小月，我不喜欢因为她知道了方新根谢红结婚了，但还做了她的事。	I don't like Xiaoyue, she knows that Fang Xin is married, but she still did a lot.
我觉得这样的故事很有意思，这个故事告诉我们，在生活中沟通很重要。 能教很多人最好把你想要的事说出来。比如故事开始的时候，两人能一起说他们想的事比较好。大概如果他们说得好的话，会更懂了为什么方新不想要去美国。第二我担心年轻人读以后，他们觉得找爱人是很容易。不是容易，非常难。你找爱人的时候，最好耐心地认识你喜欢的人。我懂方新的感觉，可是我不能同意他的做法。	I think this kind of stories are very interesting. This story tells us that communication is very important in life. It teaches a lot of people that it is better to speak out what they are thinking. For example, at the beginning of the story, it would have been better for the two to be able to say what they were thinking. Probably if they talked about it well, they would have understood better why Fang Xin didn't want to go to America. Secondly, I worry that when young people read it, they would think it's very easy to find a partner. It's not easy, it's very hard. When you're looking for a partner, it's best to be patient and get to know the person. I understand how Fang Xin feels, but I can't agree with his approach.

From these comments, we can see the following from students' perspective:

1. The book's content successfully captured the students' interest and was well-suited to their comprehension level.
2. They demonstrated critical thinking about the characters' decisions and actions. They are not just summarizing the plot but analyzing the characters' behaviors and choices, indicating that they are engaging deeply with the text.

Phase 2

Phase 2 involved assigning books as homework, with students writing a summary in the target language for each chapter they read. This phase was further divided into two stages.

In the first stage, students were required to complete three chapters per week. However, the teaching team noticed a widening gap in reading speeds—some finished a chapter in 30 minutes, while others took up to 90 minutes. To address this, the second stage introduced a fixed reading time of 90 minutes per week, allowing students to read at their own pace within that timeframe. The goal was to ensure FVR didn't become another burden for the students. By shifting to a time-based approach, the program accommodated individual differences while preserving the flexibility and autonomy central to FVR.

The teaching team also designed some activities to support students' reading and encourage participation from the entire class. One such activity was "Guess Who." In this game, a student would take on the role of a character from books they had read, keeping the character's name a secret. The other students would then ask questions to figure out the character's identity. Another activity involved creating side stories for minor characters in the books and exploring the reasons behind their behavior.

These activities kept students fully engaged in their studies. Through the assigned homework and classroom activities, students integrated their reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Furthermore, their critical thinking, imagination, and creativity were actively nurtured and applied, contributing to a well-rounded learning experience.

Phase 3

Phase 3 of the program introduced free voluntary reading in its full form, giving students the freedom to decide whether to continue with the program, select their reading materials, and determine how much time to devote to reading, without it being a mandatory assignment.

Phase 3 began at the beginning of Semester II. While a few students opted out of the reading program, most completed all the graded readers voluntarily.

As the students progressed through the DLIFLC curriculum, their reading abilities improved rapidly. Some students reported that they could finish an entire graded reader book in a single weekend and requested more advanced materials. A few students moved beyond graded readers and began reading books meant for native speakers. One student even took the initiative to create footnotes for two native speaker books to help his classmates.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Perceptions of the FVR Program

Overall, students voiced appreciation for this program. The teaching team initially was concerned that students might resist the reading program due to their already rigorous study load. However, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, students perceived the graded readers very positively despite their demanding workload. This positive reception is further evidenced by their high level of engagement during classroom activities related to the graded readers, the fact that most students voluntarily completed all available graded readers, and the requests from some students for more advanced books. Despite having studied Chinese for only a few months, students experienced a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment from completing entire books; this tangible progress boosted their motivation and reinforced their commitment to learning.

Students perceived that the FVR Program helped their reading comprehension and performance due to the following:

1. Confidence in reading extended texts and boosted motivation

Many students initially felt apprehensive about reading long texts, often finding lengthy passages in their textbooks daunting. However, as they progressed through the FVR program, they reported increased confidence in tackling more complex materials. Most of the graded readers contained between 10,000 and 15,000 characters, helping students gradually improve their reading fluency and adapt to longer texts. A few students read unadopted books exceeding 25,000 characters. This progression suggests that the FVR program can foster reading habits and reduces reading anxiety.

2. Enhanced vocabulary understanding through varied repetition

To fully grasp the meaning of a word, it must be encountered multiple times in various contexts. The following quote from students highlights this point: “When taking the ICPT and PROFIPT tests, I recognized that I had learned these words before, but I wasn’t sure about their meanings in the new context.” This illustrates the importance of varied repetition in language learning.

During the reading program, students frequently inquired about the meaning of phrases in the graded readers like 不知道东西南北了. While the students had previously learned the

characters, words, and grammar, they still couldn't fully understand the intended meaning. The phrase translates to "don't know the cardinal directions of east, west, south, or north," but its actual meaning refers to being mesmerized by flattery. Phrases like this are not typically covered in dictionaries or grammar books; they can only be understood through extensive reading and contextual experience.

Reading Gains in the FVR Program

As noted in the participants section of this article, the students initially demonstrated lower reading performance in unit 1 and 2 tests compared to listening. The average reading score for the first two units was 82.61, compared to the average listening score at 83.37. This is primarily due to challenges with Chinese character recognition and writing. After implementation of the reading program at the end of unit 2, the students' average reading test score remained lower than the listening for two units, suggesting a possible delayed effect that manifested later. From Unit 5 onward, however, reading performance consistently exceeded listening performance, with both modalities showing improvement. While this is promising, it is important to note that test scores are influenced by various factors, requiring more detailed analysis in the future to better understand these trends.

Table 5 shows the results of major listening and reading tests during semesters I and II, the numbers in bold indicate higher scores compared to the other modality.

Table 5

Results of Students' Listening and Reading Tests in Semesters I and II

	Listening average	Reading average
Mid unit 1	84.54	86.31
Unit 1	82.43	79.64
Mid unit 2	83.89	81.14
Unit 2	82.61	83.35
Mid unit 3	84.50	85.18
Unit 3	84.36	78.56
Mid unit 4	84.35	80.41
Unit 4	88.21	82.75
Mid unit 5	84.42	87.69
Unit 5	85.81	87.20
Mid unit 6	88.29	92.19
Unit 6	85.65	89.38
Mid unit 7	92.77	94.58
Unit 7	88.37	91.54
Mid unit 8	92.81	93.65
Unit 8	85.58	91.67
Mid unit 9	84.92	89.27
Unit 9	88.90	92.27

CHALLENGES

Developing and implementing a free voluntary reading program over time does pose some difficulties. One key challenge is the limited availability of reading materials. While the graded readers provide a convenient start for the reading program, most are at lower levels, with vocabulary size less than 1,200 words, falling behind the students' reading level after the first half of semester 2.

Additionally, there is a significant gap between these materials and the books intended for adult native speakers. Research by Nation (2006) and Laufer (2013) indicates that readers need to understand 98% of the words in a text to achieve relatively fluent reading and adequate comprehension. For instance, the popular Chinese novel *A Beijing Native in New York* contains a vocabulary size of nearly 8,000 words, meaning students would need to know over 7,800 words to read it comprehensibly, far beyond their current reading ability. To address this challenge, after most students finished the available graded readers and requested more books, the team began recommending books intended for native children and young readers. This was what the team tried to avoid at the beginning of the reading program, as the content might not appeal to adult learners and the language in children's books is often unnatural for them. Moving forward, DLIFLC may consider acquiring or developing more Chinese Mandarin graded readers and encouraging their regular use in class. This would likely benefit students.

The second challenge involves supporting lower-performing students in the reading program. Notably, two students were exempted from the program during Phase 2, and three students withdrew in Phase 3 due to difficulties keeping up with the DLIFLC coursework, choosing to prioritize the core coursework. Ultimately, all five students were disenrolled from the DLIFLC Chinese Basic course because of low academic performance. This outcome suggests that while the FVR program aligns well with the DLIFLC curriculum, it serves primarily as a learning enhancer rather than a remedial intervention. To better support lower-performing students, the program could be introduced earlier with simpler reading materials, lower word counts, and more visual aids to build student confidence and gradually improve their comprehension skills. Additionally, aligning the reading program more closely with the core curriculum would help students see direct benefits in their academic performance, making reading a more supportive tool.

The third observation is less of a challenge and more of a missed opportunity. Many graded readers include audio recordings of the transcripts. Most students, however, did not utilize this feature. Future projects could consider how teaching teams can integrate audio recordings into a free voluntary reading program to leverage gains in both reading and listening skills.

CONCLUSION

This action research describes a FVR program that can improve students' reading comprehension, motivation, and learning engagement. Through this program, students reported that they increased their language knowledge through implicit learning, consolidated previously learned

language through varied repetition, developed reading fluency and automaticity, gained confidence with extended texts, and experienced a sense of gratification through language learning even at the basic level. This action research project demonstrates that FVR can be a valuable addition to the Basic Chinese course curriculum and has potential applications to all language schools at DLIFLC.

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