

Effects of text types on advanced EFL learners' reading comprehension

Lin Zhou*

linzhou03@hotmail.com

Peerasak Siriyothin**

peerasak@sut.ac.th

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effects of two text types on Chinese advanced EFL students' reading comprehension: narrative and expository texts. It also examined the students' perceptions of the text types. The participants in this study were 133 Chinese third-year English major students from five intact classes in a comprehensive university in southwest China. The data used for the study were drawn from a reading comprehension test, written questionnaires with 127 respondents, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 13 interviewees. The comparison of multivariate means between groups at each level showed that text types had significantly different effects on reading comprehension and that the students performed better on expository than narrative texts. It was also found that the students thought text types affected their reading comprehension. The findings have implications for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in the Chinese context.

Keywords: text types, narrative text, expository text, reading comprehension

* Associate professor at College of International Studies, Guizhou University, the People's Republic of China

** Lecturer, School of English, Suranaree University of Technology

1. Introduction

In a world that demands competency with printed texts, the ability to read in an L2 is one of the most important skills required of people in international settings. The acquisition of reading skills in an L2 is a priority for millions of learners around the world. As Eskey (2005) pointed out, many EFL students rarely need to speak the language in their day-to-day lives but may need to read it in order to ‘access the wealth of information’ (p. 563) recorded exclusively in English.

The importance of academic reading has been well recognized by many researchers. Levine, Ferenz, and Reves (2000) stated that the ability to read academic texts is considered one of the most important skills that university students of ESL or EFL need to acquire. Indeed, good reading comprehension is essential not only to academic learning in all subject areas but also to professional success and, indeed, to lifelong learning (Pritchard, Romeo, & Muller, 1999).

However, due to the complexity inherent in the reading process, reading is also a skill that is one of the most difficult to develop to a high level of proficiency. As Dreyer and Nel (2003) have pointed out, many students enter higher education underprepared for the reading demands that are placed upon them.

Once EFL students enroll in upper-level courses, it is often assumed that they are fully proficient readers of the foreign language. However, it is often the case that very few students meet this assumed standard of proficiency in upper-level courses, and many students are unable to understand the assigned texts (Redmann, 2005). Blame is placed either on lower-level teachers for failing to teach the necessary grammar and vocabulary, or on students for their failure to devote the necessary time and efforts to reading. As a matter of fact, what the EFL students often lack is experience with the target language. Rather than assuming that students are proficient in English, upper-division English teachers should endeavor to turn them into proficient readers by expanding their experience in the target language. Therefore, continual attention must be given to EFL reading in EFL upper-level courses.

In L2 reading research, text type has been claimed by many researchers to be one variable that needs to be explored. The influences of text types on L2 reading are complex. Hinkel (2006) suggested that teachers select readings from a wide array of genres, such as narrative, exposition and argumentation. Nevertheless, research of comprehension differences between texts of different types in L2 has been slim (e.g. Alderson, 2000; Brantmeier, 2005; Grabe, 1988; Olson, 2003; Perfetti, 1997).

According to Alderson (2000), narrative and expository texts may be the two text types that attract researchers' attention because these two types are found to be most different from each other. Narration frequently uses description, while exposition often incorporates aspects of all writing domains. Narrative writing requires readers to focus on events and to arrange the parts in a time or order frame. To understand a narrative text, students must learn about ordering, beginning and ending, transition and balance, and suspense and climax. While reading an expository text, readers must be able to understand analysis, organization and development, logical argument, evidence and sometimes figurative language.

Grabe (1988) asserted that an important part of the reading process is the ability to recognize text genres and various distinct text types. In a study that examined text types (stories and essays) and comprehension, Horiba (2000) reported that non-native readers are affected by text types. Perfetti (1997) proposed that depending on the types of texts used and the types of tasks performed, readers may develop a complex integration of information that can be learned.

Carrell and Connor (1991) conducted a study to determine the relationships of intermediate-level ESL students' reading and writing of both persuasive and descriptive texts. Twenty-three undergraduate and 10 graduate ESL students were asked to do four tasks in four separate class periods over a 2-week period. The results indicated that text genre has complex effects on L2 reading and writing, and that descriptive texts are easier to understand than persuasive texts. Carrell and Connor noted that complex interaction of genre and language proficiency occurs in reading performance. Higher language proficiency may aid question-answering for more difficult persuasive texts, but does not significantly affect the question-answering for easier descriptive ones.

More recently, Sharp (2004) conducted an experimental study with 490 Hong Kong secondary students learning English as a second language in order to determine if rhetorical organization affects reading comprehension. Four rhetorically different texts were used, namely, description, cause-effect, listing and problem-solving. The students were given eight minutes for reading and five minutes for answering questionnaire questions. After that, the students were given 10 minutes for writing a recall. In the end, they were required to do a cloze test for another 10 minutes. The results showed that the test measures differed in the results they produced. Cloze testing showed significant differences between the four texts, while the results of recall protocols indicated no significant difference between the text types. Sharp explained this phenomenon is due to the education system in Hong Kong, where memory-related tasks are traditionally emphasized. While taking the recall test, the students may have used memorizing strategy, which contributed to their higher scores in the recall test.

Brantmeier (2005) investigated the effects of reader's knowledge, text types and test type on L1 and L2 reading comprehension. Four reading passages, including two topics, two versions each with one in Spanish and one in English, one with analogies and one without, were applied as the instrument. The assessment tasks included multiple-choice tests, recall protocol and sentence completion. Analysis of covariance was used to analyze the data. The results showed that the addition of analogies in texts did not aid L1 and L2 reading comprehension when measured by recall, sentence completion, and multiple-choice tests. However, there was a significant effect of subject knowledge on comprehension.

As can be seen from the above reviewed studies, in examining various variables involved in L2 reading, most investigations have particularly targeted learners at the beginning and intermediate levels of instruction. Little empirical research has been done with respect to readers at the advanced level. As Brantmeier (2001) and Young (2003) have rightly pointed out, it is at this stage of acquisition that more L2 reading research is lacking.

To further complicate the matter, in contrast to the amount of attention paid to the effects of text type on reading comprehension, EFL readers' perceptions of the effects of text types on their comprehension have been lamentably

underinvestigated. Alderson (2000) claimed that active, meaningful communication between the author and the reader is instrumental to comprehension. How EFL students look at and react to different text types might be an important factor affecting reader-author interaction and in turn affecting comprehension. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to investigate how the students think text types may affect their reading comprehension.

To fill the gap, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of text types on advanced Chinese university EFL students' reading comprehension and their perceptions of text types on their comprehension. Specifically, these two research questions were addressed: 1) Are there any significant effects of text types on Chinese EFL students' reading comprehension? If so, what are they? and 2) How, if at all, do students think text types influences their EFL reading comprehension? A total number of 133 Chinese third-year English major students participated in the study. Their reading comprehension rates on narrative and expository texts as measured by a reading comprehension text (RCT) were quantitatively compared, and then their perceptions of the effects of text types on their comprehension as revealed by their responses to a self-report questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were qualitatively interpreted. It is our hope that the information gleaned from this study will add to our understanding of L2 reading and thus contribute to our classroom practice.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

A total number of 133 third-year English majors from five intact classes of a comprehensive university in southwest China participated in the study. As was anticipated, most of the participants were females (63%), while 37% were males. Their age ranged from 19 to 23, with a median of 20.7. The students were classified as advanced EFL learners. The students' advanced level placement was based on two considerations. First, the National Curriculum for College English Majors in Higher Education in the People's Republic of China (2000) states that third-year undergraduate students are at the advanced level. Second, according to Bamford,

Julian, and Richard (2004), advanced language learners are those who “already have a basic knowledge of, and are literate in, the foreign language.” All the participants in the present study, with at least six years of English study experience behind them at the time of admission, could read and write in English fairly well after two years of intensive English study at the university as English majors. In fact, the shortest time of the participants’ English study was eight years and the longest 14 years.

2.2 Instruments

In order to address the research objectives, which concern the effects of text types on reading comprehension and the students’ perceptions, this study employed such triangulated data elicitation procedures as a reading comprehension test (RCT), a students’ self-report questionnaire and individual semi-structured interviews.

The effects of text types on reading comprehension was determined by an established, valid RCT as measured by short-answer and multiple-choice questions. Four reading comprehension texts selected from the Public English Test System (PETS), Level 5, made up the Reading Comprehension Text. The PETS is administered by Ministry of Education, China. The test, jointly developed by China and Britain, assesses test-takers’ English proficiency in terms of reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are five levels in PETS, of which Level 5 is the highest. The researcher drew reading texts from PETS5 mainly because, given the popularity of the test scores as a criterion in selecting candidates for overseas study and employment, the test has been held highly reliable and valid. Another important reason is that it is similar to the level of English majors when they finish their two-year intensive learning at university (Zhang, 2003).

The RCT consisted of two narrative texts and two expository texts. Each text was accompanied by five short-answer and five multiple-choice questions. The questions followed the same format. Thus, the students’ performance on the RCT would not be the result of question format difference. To be specific, among the ten questions of each text, two questions were about the main idea, two about vocabulary, four about details and two required the students to infer from the texts. Altogether, there were 40 questions in the RCT and the suggested time was 50 minutes. Table 1 below is an overview of the four texts used in the RCT.

Table 1 Overview of the Four Texts in the RCT

Text	Text type	Main idea
1	Narrative	Slums in the city of Birmingham
2	Expository	How shops increase sales
3	Narrative	The Gypsies of Europe
4	Expository	Dowsing

Researchers assert that the outcome of each individual assessment task provides a limited representation of reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Bernhardt, 1991; Brantmeier, 2001). In order to assess comprehension and to be able to generalize research findings, a variety of assessment tasks are needed (Bernhardt, 1991). Two different reading comprehension assessment tasks were used in the RCT: multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Multiple-choice questions are a common means of assessing learners' reading comprehension because the task is familiar to subjects and is easy for researchers to score (Wolf, 1993). The other test task of the RCT was short-answer questions. Alderson (2000: 227) sees short-answer questions as "a semi-objective alternative to multiple choice." Taking into account the assertions about reading comprehension assessment, the researcher decided to use two reading assessment measures in the RCT - multiple-choice and short-answer tests - to explore more varied areas of reading comprehension. The choice was based on the advantages and disadvantages of each test task and also on their wide use in language learning in general. Also, multiple-choice and short-answer tests were selected because the students in the current study were familiar with them and this may reduce anxiety that could be introduced by the inclusion of unfamiliar task types in a test (Yo, 2006). In the RCT, short-answer questions were always put before multiple-choice questions for all the texts. The purpose was to ensure that the students' answers to short-answer questions would not be influenced by the multiple-choice questions.

The purpose of the students' self-report written questionnaire (see Appendix I) was to find out each individual student's perceptions of the text types. Likert-scale questionnaire was used as the items were close-ended questions requiring choices which could be clearly presented only if questionnaires were used. The 5-point

Likert-scale questions that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” were utilized in order to make the distinction clear between those students who agreed with the statement and those who did not. For better understanding and convenience, Chinese was used as the working language.

A semi-structured interview (See Appendix II) was conducted to elicit an in-depth understanding of the participants’ perceptions. There were six guide questions in the interview. Although the questions were based on a predetermined interview schedule, questions were open-ended for the purpose of eliciting in-depth information. For the interview, one from every ten students was randomly selected and their consent to be interviewed was obtained. As a result, thirteen out of 133 participants were interviewed. Chinese was used for better understanding and convenience. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and translated into English for qualitative data analysis.

2.3 Procedure

The RCT was administered to the 133 participants in March 2009 when they started their 6th term at the university. They were required to read the four texts and answer all of the 40 questions. While doing the test, the students were not allowed to ask questions concerning the content, nor were they allowed to use a dictionary.

The questionnaire was administered when the participants had finished the RCT. They answered seven 5-point Likert-scale questions concerning their perceptions of the text types. The 133 questionnaires distributed were all returned. The researcher carefully checked each submitted questionnaire, thus to make sure no blank sheet was submitted. As a result, only six questionnaires were discarded for the reason of uncompleted information. The remaining 127 questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively.

On the next day, the semi-structured oral interviews were conducted with the 13 selected students. Prior to recording the interviews, the researcher told each interviewee that the interview was not going to affect their grade. In addition, they were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that whatever answers they gave would not affect their academic record. The interviews were conducted individually in Chinese for accuracy. The interview time for each respondent varied,

depending on how much information he/she was willing to share. On average, each interview lasted 15-20 minutes. All 13 interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and translated by the researcher into English.

2.4 Data analysis

The students' real names were replaced with codes in all the examples used to illustrate the patterns found in the data. A number was randomly assigned to each student, and this number was consistently used for the same student in the data analysis of the study. For example, student number one was coded S1 and student number 133 was S133, respectively.

The data drawn from the RCT, the questionnaire, and the interviews were analyzed either quantitatively or qualitatively. Data obtained from the RCT were subjected to statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software program version 15.0. Descriptive statistics was employed for an overall picture of the students' performance on the RCT. A MANOVA test in General Linear Model of SPSS was utilized to verify whether or not text types had significantly different effects on the students' reading comprehension as measured by short-answer and multiple-choice questions.

The students' responses to the questionnaire were coded and keyed into the SPSS 15.0 for statistical analysis. In scoring the students' responses, one point was allocated to "strongly disagree", two to "disagree", three to "undecided", four to "agree", and five to "strongly agree". It is noteworthy that the students' scores on the questionnaire did not represent their reading comprehension ability but only their perceptions. That is, a higher number of points meant more positive perceptions of the effects of text types.

By following the sampling method stated earlier, the researcher selected the 13 students for the interview as follow S2, S12, S25, S37, S43, S61, S73, S86, S97, S105, S114, S129, and S130. Data elicited through the students' interviews were subjected to qualitative analysis aiming at identifying the categories of the students' attitudes. Examples were quoted from the original answers provided by the students. Although the interviewees provided additional information on their reading difficulties and strategies, this study concentrated on data germane to the research

questions. The interview data were translated into English by the researcher. In the student comments quoted later, although false starts and hesitations have been omitted, grammatical errors have not been corrected in order to keep the authenticity.

3. Results

3.1 Results from the RCT

The students’ scores on the RCT revealed the effects of text types on reading comprehension. Table 2 below shows the students’ performances on narrative and expository texts. It was found that the participants’ average score on expository texts (Mean=17.08) was higher than that on the narrative ones (Mean=15.90) by 1.08 points.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for participants’ performance on the RCT (N=133)

Text types	Question type	Mean	SD
Narrative texts	Short-answer questions	7.900	1.605
	Multiple-choice questions	8.000	1.676
	Total	15.900	2.082
Expository texts	Short-answer questions	8.820	1.403
	Multiple-choice questions	8.260	1.021
	Total	17.080	2.063

Table 3 MANOVA results of the participants’ performance in terms of text type (N=133)

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Intercept	.014	3283.765	2	60	.000
Text types	.492	2.732	2	45	.009*

*Significant at 0.05 level (p<0.05)

Table 3 shows the MANOVA results. It was found that the students’ scores on narrative and expository texts were statistically different (p=0.009) for Wilks’

Lambda multivariate test. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the students' multivariate mean scores on narrative and expository texts were equal was rejected. That is, the students' mean score on expository texts was statistically higher than that on the narrative texts. The researcher then concluded that different text types had significantly different effects on the students' reading comprehension, and that the students were more likely to perform better on expository texts than on narrative ones.

Results from tests of between-subjects effects as shown in Table 4 below reveal that the differences lay in the short-answer questions ($F_{(1, 131)} = 7.21, p=0.002$) where the students performed significantly higher on expository texts (Mean=8.82) than they did in narrative ones (Mean=7.90). Nevertheless, the results show that the students did not demonstrate significant difference as measured by multiple-choice questions ($F_{(1, 131)}=2.698, p=0.087$).

Table 4 Tests of between-subjects effects in terms of text types

Source	Dependent variable	Type III sum of squares	df.	Mean square	F	Sig.
Text types	Short-answer	46.385	1	23.821	7.213	.002*
	Multiple-choice	24.503	1	11.356	2.698	.087
Error	Short-answer	295.623	131	3.890		
	Multiple-choice	321.072	131	4.152		
Total	Short-answer	18617	132			
	Multiple-choice	17583	132			

*Significant at 0.05 level ($p<0.05$)

The results of the multivariate tests indicate the significant effects of text types on the students' reading comprehension, as measured by the short-answer test ($F_{(1,131)} = 7.21, p =0.002$). The students' performance on short-answer questions reveals that they had a better understanding of expository texts (Mean = 8.82, SD = 1.40) than of narrative texts (Mean = 7.90, SD = 1.61).

3.2 Results from the questionnaire

In Table 5 below, significant variations in frequency of students' reported attitudes are not taken into consideration. Instead, frequency and percentage of choice are shown. These simple descriptive statistical procedures were done to establish the baseline information about the students' perceptions.

Table 5 Students' responses on the likert-scale written questionnaire (N=127)

Content	Frequency/Percentage of respondents				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.Text types affects my reading comprehension.	34/ 26.8%	55/ 51.2%	30/ 15.7%	6/ 4.7%	2/ 1.6%
2. Narrative texts are difficult to understand.	4/ 3.1%	23/ 18.1%	46/ 36.3%	31/ 24.4%	23/ 18.1%
3. Expository texts are difficult to understand.	16/ 12.6%	40/ 31.5%	35/ 27.6%	28/ 22.0%	8/ 6.3%
4. Background knowledge plays important roles in narrative texts.	17/ 13.4%	46/ 36.2%	32/ 25.2%	22/ 17.3%	10/ 7.9%
5. Background knowledge plays important roles in expository texts.	15/ 11.8%	39/ 30.7%	34/ 26.8%	33/ 26.0%	6/ 4.7%
6. Textual clues play important roles in narrative texts.	13/ 10.2%	41/ 32.3%	35/ 27.6%	30/ 23.6%	8/ 6.3%
7. Textual clues play important roles in expository texts.	11/ 8.7%	37/ 29.1%	32/ 25.2%	32/ 25.2%	15/ 11.8%

The quantitative analysis of the data elicited through the written questionnaire reveals that more than half of the students (68%) thought their reading comprehension was affected by different text types. Nearly half of the students (44%) thought expository texts were difficult to understand, while only 21% regarded

narrative texts difficult. Except for item two which concerns the difficulty of narrative texts, the number of students who agreed with the statements was more than that of the students who disagreed. Concerning the role of textual clues in reading comprehension, about the same number of students chose either “agree” (37.8%) or “disagree” (37%) as their response to item seven. Among the 127 students, 49.6% agreed background knowledge played important roles in their understanding of narrative texts and 42.5% of expository texts. Meanwhile, at least one fourth of the students reported “undecided” for all the other items except item one. To be specific, most students were not sure about the difficulty of narrative texts and 36% of them chose “undecided” as their response to this question item.

3.3 Results from the interviews

Results from the interviews reveal the students’ deep understanding of the text types. Generally, the students thought narrative texts were easier to understand and more interesting. About the same number of students thought background knowledge played an important role in their understanding of both narrative and expository texts. Many more students regarded textual clues important in expository reading than narrative. In addition, the ways that the students approached texts of the two types varied.

To be specific, Question 1 is about the difficulty of the two text types. Most students commented that narrative texts were easy to understand.

S37: “Narrative texts are familiar to me, so I can understand them better.”

S97: “I like reading interesting stories, I think narratives are easier.”

Interestingly, among the 13 students, only two stated that expository texts were easy to understand.

S86: “Expository texts, because there are a lot of expository texts in the textbook in the third-year and I know how to read them.”

Question 2 deals with the interestingness of narrative or expository texts, 8 out of the 13 students reported that narrative texts were more interesting.

S129: “Narrative texts are more interesting because they are often about interesting stories.”

Meanwhile, three students reported that expository texts were more interesting.

S114: “From expository texts, I may learn about the new technology, the new inventions, etc., which I think is very interesting.”

In response to Question 3, six students thought background knowledge played an important role in their understanding of expository texts. SS105 stated: “Background knowledge is important in understanding expository texts because it is the foundation of the arguments.” Three students thought background was important in their understanding of narrative texts. S61 compared background knowledge in narrative and expository texts and commented that narrative texts required more background for understanding. She commented: “I think background is important for understanding narrative texts. Without it, I have no idea what the author means. ” Equally important, 4 students said that background knowledge had equal importance in their understanding of narrative and expository texts.

Question 4 is about the roles of texts clues. All the students interviewed regarded textual clues important for understanding expository texts.

S37: “Text clues are like the guideline of the expository texts. By following the text clues, I can understand the texts better.”

When asked about narrative texts, S37 mentioned that textual clues were not “that important as long as I understand the topic.”

Students’ remarks on how they approached texts of different types (Questions 5 and 6) showed that the time they spent reading varied. Some students noted that they read narrative texts faster.

S97: “Normally I read narrative faster because the language and the text structure are often easy.”

Others claimed that they read expository texts faster because “generally speaking, they are quite short.” Some students reported having difficulty understanding the content of the text. These comments illustrate the students’ problems with specific text types.

S6: “I don’t like reading expository texts. They are too boring for me to have a general idea. I like reading narrative texts because they have clear organization and are closely related to the readers.”

S57: “I don’t like texts about science because they are not so relevant to me.”

4. Discussion

As reviewed previously, type of text is one of the major factors affecting reading comprehension. Interestingly, even though most students reported, both in the questionnaire and the interview, that expository texts were more difficult to understand, the RCT results indicated their better performance on expository texts than on narratives. This finding contrasts with most other studies (e.g. Carrell & Connor, 1991; DuBravac, 2002; Sharp, 2004) that claimed narrative texts were easier to read and understand.

How is this result accounted for? One cause is most likely to be genre differences. As shown in the questionnaire and interview results, students had different perceptions of narrative and expository texts. Readers use their schema, memory and learning, to comprehend text of any type (Uzuner, Kircaali-Iftar, & Karasu 2005). Different genres have their characteristic rhetorical and organizational features and linguistic options, which may distinguish them from other genres. Expository texts are generally very systematic in that they follow a logical argument with explanations, contrasts, cause and effect, etc., organized with typical markers of cohesion (DuBravac, 2002). Besides, there are heavy demands on identifying and using text structure to guide comprehension of expository passages. Therefore, Kroll (1990) pointed out that difficulties in the comprehension of expository texts often arise from the reader’s inability to make sense of some linguistic features, such as specific grammatical structures as well as expressions and vocabulary items. Furthermore, expository texts are often decontextualized. They tend to address topics that are far removed from a person’s everyday experience and are normally written for a wider audience who do not need to have shared experiences for understanding. Consequently, expository texts generally call for an extensive use of

the readers' world knowledge. By contrast, narrative texts are more closely related to the reader's everyday experiences since they "involve people performing actions in pursuit of goals, the occurrence of obstacles to goals, and emotional reactions to events" (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994: 372). Also, cohesion of English narrative texts is described as text-based, specified, change-oriented, and non-additive (Mohamed & Omer, 2000). In order to understand a narrative text, readers need to activate their schemata very similar to those they use with elements that are contained in the text. Therefore, if the students' ability to structure text was lacking, their comprehension might well suffer, especially because text structure is one way that readers identify main and important information.

The participants' better understanding of the expository texts might also be explained by their relatively advanced age. DuBravac (2002) claimed that the structural composition of expository genres is acquired in formal training, while the structural composition of narrative genres is acquired before school age. Unlike the young language learners in the previous studies of DuBravac (2002) and Graesser et al. (1994), whose understanding of a text relied much on activating schemata similar to those in the text, the adult participants in this study were old enough (Mean=20.7 years) to understand the decontextualized information employed in the expository texts. For example, even though dowsing, the topic of Passage IV, was possibly new to most of the participants, they were old enough to infer and understand the text based on the text structure and the linguistic features, since it is expository in nature. Nevertheless, lack of schemata about Gypsies may have caused some participants' misunderstanding or not understanding of Passage III, which is narrative in nature.

Another explanation may be the similar inference requirement of expository texts and short-answer tests. Short-answer questions require the students to infer from the information given in the text, which overlaps the knowledge-based inferences of expository texts. In their junior year of intensive English study, the participants in this study had had much exposure to expository texts, which may have improved their skills in inferring information. Therefore, the similar requirement on information inference by the short-answer test and expository texts might account for the students' better understanding of expository texts when

measured by short-answer questions. Additionally, it was found that the students' scores on the multiple-choice test were not significantly different. It may have resulted from the requirements of multiple-choice question items. As long as the students could match the questions to the appropriate part of the text, either narrative or expository, they could choose the correct answers.

Although the seven questionnaire items and the follow-up interview on 13 participants are not assumed to represent the views of all EFL students, they offer insights into the effects of text types on reading comprehension. Students' commentary on text passages and impressions on the texts show that the students had positive tendency towards the effects of text types on their reading comprehension. To be specific, the questionnaire and interview results both indicate that most students thought narrative texts required more background knowledge than expository texts. In addition, many students regarded textual clues important in their reading comprehension. The students' lower mean score of narrative texts may be explained by some students' shortage of background and textual clue knowledge of the two particular narrative texts on the RCT.

The finding of this study is in line with that of Brantmeier (2003), which found that differences in existing knowledge about the content of text materials may be an important source of individual differences in reading comprehension. As Reid (2002) suggested, different contextual and rhetorical schemata may result in ineffective ESL learning. Unlike native speakers of English, L2 learners may experience unexpected comprehension problems related to rhetorical difficulties. Reading and understanding a text represent a range of processing problems for L2 learners. Reid (1996) indicated that ESL readers have difficulty predicting the sentence that immediately follows the topic sentence, which may cause ineffective reading comprehension.

The complexity of the text content with regard to rhetorical organization may account for the students' difficulty in understanding. Shi and Kubota (2007) found that even though many texts have a three-part structure consisting of introduction, body, and conclusion, the introductions in some texts are lengthy, with multiple paragraphs. In addition, the opinion or main idea is not necessarily presented in the introduction but rather in the middle or at the end of the essay. All the variations in

text structure may have led to the students' difficulty with reading, which highlights the problem of explicating constructed rhetorical conventions in EFL teaching and the necessity of more exposure to texts of different types.

In view of the results of the present study, text type differences may merit more attention in the EFL reading classroom. Rich opportunities should be provided for the students so that they can have adequate experience with different kinds of texts (Olson, 2003). Explicit instruction may well be an effective way to sensitize students to the generic differences between text types thus helping them to read with better understanding. Although the findings of this study may not be applied to EFL students at other locations, they can at least be considered an indication of how text types can influence EFL reading comprehension in the Chinese context. Hopefully, this study will stimulate further exploration of the relationships of the intertwined variables in EFL reading.

References

- Alderson, C. A. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bamford, J. & Richard, R. D. (Eds.) (2004). Extensive reading activities for teaching Language. In Liskin-Gasparro, J. E. (Ed.) "MLJ Reviews" *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(3): 424-425.
- Bernhardt, E. B. (1991). *Reading development in a second-language*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Brantmeier, C. (2001). Second language reading research on passage content and gender: Challenges for the intermediate level curriculum. *Foreign Language Annals*, 34: 325-333.
- Brantmeier, C. (2003). Does gender make a difference? Passage content and comprehension in second language reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 15(1): 1-24.
- Brantmeier, C. (2005). Anxiety about L2 reading or L2 reading tasks? A study with advanced language learners. *The Reading Matrix*, 5(2): 67-85.
- Carrell, P. L. & Connor, U. (1991). Reading and writing descriptive and persuasive texts. *Modern Language Journal*, 75: 314-323.

- Dreyer C. & Nel C. (2003). Teaching reading strategies and reading comprehension within a technology-enhanced learning environment. *System*, 31: 349–365.
- DuBravac, S. (2002). Reader question formation as a tool for measuring comprehension: narrative and expository textual inferences in a second language. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 25(2): 217-231.
- Eskey D. E. (2005). Reading in a second language. In Hinkel, E. (Ed.): *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grabe, W. (1988). Reassessing the term 'interactive'. In P. L. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey, (Eds.) *Interactive approaches to second language reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graesser, A. C., Singer, M. & Trabasso, T. (1994). Constructing inferences during narrative text comprehension. *Psychological Review*, 101: 371-395.
- Hinkel, E. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching the four skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1): 109-131.
- Horiba, Y. (2000). *Reader control in reading: effects of language competence, text types, and task*. <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a784401162~db=all>> Retrieved 23.02.09.
- Kroll, B. (1990). *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine A., Ferenz O. & Reves T. (2000). EFL academic reading and modern technology: How can we turn our students into independent critical readers? *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language Journal*, 4(4): 1-9.
- Mohamed, A. H. & Omer, M. R. (2000). Texture and Culture: Cohesion as a Marker of Rhetorical Organisation in Arabic and English Narrative Texts. *REL C Journal*, 31(2): 45-75.
- Olson, C. B. (2003). *The reading/writing connection: strategies for teaching and learning in the secondary classroom*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

- Perfetti, C. A. (1997). The psycholinguistics of spelling and reading. In C. A. Perfetti, L. Rieben, & M. Fayol, (Eds.) *Learning to spell: research, theory, and practice across languages*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Pritchard R.E., Romeo G. C. & Muller S. A. B (1999). Integrating reading strategies into the accounting curriculum. *College Student Reading*, 33(1): 77-82.
- Redmann, J. (2005). *An interactive reading journal for all levels of the foreign Language curriculum* [OL]. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. <<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=4628>> Retrieved 14.06.09.
- Reid, J. M. (1996). U.S. academic readers, ESL writers, and second sentences. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 5(2): 129-161.
- Reid, J. M. (2002). *Managing small-group learning*. Newtown, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Sharp, A. (2004). Strategies and predilections in reading expository text: the importance of text patterns. *RELC Journal*, 35(3): 329-349.
- Shi, L. & Kubota, R. (2007). Patterns of rhetorical organization in Canadian and American language arts textbooks: An exploratory study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 26(2): 180-202.
- Uzuner, Y., Kircaali-Iftar, G. & Karasu, P. (2005). Comparing the effects of various procedures on reconstruction of narratives according to story grammar of a youth with hearing loss. *The Reading Matrix*, 5(2): 15-26.
- Wolf, D. (1993). A comparison of assessment tasks used to measure FL reading comprehension. *Modern Language Journal*, 77: 473-89.
- Yang, Z. W. (2000). *National curriculum for college English majors of higher education in P. R. C.* Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education.
- Yo, I. (2006). The effects of test anxiety on listening test performance. *System*, 34(3): 317-340.
- Young, D. J. (2003). Language learning series lecture. In C. Brantmeier (Ed.) The effects of language assessment and L2 reading performance on advanced readers' recall. *The Reading Matrix*, 6(1).
- Zhang, Z. X. (2003). *New Idea to Textbooks for PETS*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.

Appendix I: Questionnaire

Instructions: Please read statements 1 through 5 carefully and tick (✓) one of the answers which best indicates your reality or opinion. Please also note that your response constitutes no right or wrong answers.

Item	Content	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Text types affect my reading comprehension					
2	Narrative texts are difficult to understand.					
3	Expository texts are difficult to understand.					
4	Background knowledge plays important roles in narrative texts.					
5	Background knowledge plays important roles in expository texts.					
6	Textual clues play important roles in narrative texts.					
7	Textual clues play important roles in expository texts.					

Appendix II: Interview questions

Instructions: Please answer questions about your opinions on the effects of text types. Please also note that your response constitutes no right or wrong answers

1. Do you think narrative or expository texts are more difficult to understand? Why?
2. Do you think narrative or expository texts are more interesting? Why?
3. Do you think background knowledge plays more important roles in narrative or expository reading?
4. Do you think textual clues play more important roles in narrative or expository reading? Why?
5. How do you approach reading narrative texts?
6. How do you approach reading expository texts?