

The Effects of Directed Reading Activities on English Reading Ability of Grade 12 Students in a Chinese Vocational School

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Abstract

Directed Reading Activity (DRA) is a structured instructional approach designed to enhance students' comprehension and engagement during reading. This study investigated the effects of DRA on the English reading ability and learning satisfaction of 12th-grade students at Tianfu Information Vocational College in Sichuan, China. A quasi-experimental design was employed with two intact classes. The experimental group (n = 50) received DRA-based instruction for eight weeks, while the control group (n = 50) received teacher-centered reading instruction focusing on vocabulary explanation, text translation, and comprehension questions, without explicit reading strategy instruction. Pretest and posttest scores were compared using paired-sample and independent-sample t-tests. A student satisfaction questionnaire was also administered and analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The results showed that the experimental group achieved significantly higher reading scores after DRA instruction. Students also reported a very high level of satisfaction, particularly regarding overall perception and the relevance of reading topics to their vocational fields. These findings suggest that DRA is an effective pedagogical approach for improving English reading proficiency and fostering positive learning attitudes among vocational school students in China.

Keywords: Directed Reading Activity (DRA), reading comprehension, vocational education

Introduction

Globalization and the Importance of English Reading

Globalization has dramatically increased the need for English proficiency across educational, professional, and social domains. English serves as the lingua franca for international business, technology, and higher education, providing access to vast repositories of information. According to UNESCO (2021), over 80% of academic journals worldwide are published in English, and proficiency in reading is essential for

students to access cutting-edge research. Grabe and Stoller (2002) argue that reading is not only a foundational skill for language learning but also a primary channel through which learners gain disciplinary knowledge. In this context, the ability to comprehend written texts becomes indispensable for students' academic achievement and employability.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated a strong correlation between reading proficiency and long-term academic outcomes. The OECD (2023) reported that students with higher reading skills tend to achieve better results in other academic subjects and are more adaptable in professional contexts. Reading supports lifelong learning, enabling individuals to stay updated with professional developments and global trends. Therefore, in the Chinese context, equipping vocational students with sufficient reading ability is not merely a linguistic goal but also a strategic necessity for national competitiveness.

However, while the importance of English reading is widely acknowledged, its instruction remains a challenge in many educational systems, especially in non-elite schools. Vocational education, designed to prepare students for specific industries, often underestimates the role of language and communication skills. This contradiction between global demands and local practices highlights the urgency of improving English reading instruction for vocational learners in China.

Challenges in Chinese Vocational Education

Vocational schools in China serve a significant portion of the student population, yet their English outcomes are consistently lower than those in academic high schools. Chen (2014) points out that students in vocational programs typically exhibit low motivation to learn English, as they perceive it to be irrelevant to their future careers. Yang and Gao (2017) further note that students often lack opportunities to engage with authentic English texts, limiting their exposure to practical applications of language. As a result, their reading proficiency lags behind, creating a skills gap that persists into their professional lives.

Traditional teaching methods exacerbate this issue. The grammar-translation method remains dominant in many classrooms (Li & Wu, 2018). While effective for teaching discrete grammar points and vocabulary, it fails to foster comprehension or higher-order thinking skills. Students often memorize passages without understanding, which leads to frustration and disengagement. Wang and Zhang (2019) highlight that these methods also neglect strategy training, leaving students ill-equipped to approach unfamiliar texts independently.

Moreover, vocational students often come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Their prior learning experiences may have been exam-driven, with little emphasis on critical or analytical reading. As a result, they enter vocational colleges with weak foundations and little confidence in their English abilities. Without targeted interventions, these challenges perpetuate cycles of underachievement, both academically and professionally.

Teacher and Institutional Barriers

In addition to student-related challenges, teachers and institutions also face systemic barriers. Many teachers lack access to suitable instructional materials that integrate vocational content with English learning. This lack of relevant resources

makes it difficult to design lessons that resonate with students' interests and career goals. Furthermore, institutional policies often emphasize technical training at the expense of language development, reinforcing the marginalization of English education in vocational curricula.

Professional development opportunities for vocational English teachers are also limited. Few have received training in innovative pedagogies such as task-based learning or strategy instruction (Yang & Gao, 2017). Consequently, many rely on traditional lecture-based methods, which fail to engage students actively. This not only restricts students' learning outcomes but also contributes to teacher burnout, as they struggle to meet institutional demands with inadequate support.

Wang and Zhang (2019) argue that unless systemic reforms are made, English instruction in vocational schools will continue to fall short. The combination of inadequate resources, outdated methodologies, and institutional neglect creates a learning environment where students cannot thrive. These barriers underline the importance of exploring alternative teaching strategies that can revitalize vocational English education.

Directed Reading Activities as a Pedagogical Response

Directed Reading Activities (DRA), introduced by Stauffer (1969), represent one such alternative. DRA divides the reading process into three structured phases: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. In the pre-reading phase, teachers activate prior knowledge and establish reading purposes. During the while-reading phase, students engage with texts through guided activities, promoting active comprehension. The post-reading phase consolidates learning by encouraging discussion, reflection, and application of knowledge.

Empirical evidences support the effectiveness of DRA. Alfassi (2004)'s study, for example, he found that strategy-based reading approaches improved comprehension outcomes among struggling readers. Similarly, Klinger and Vaughn (2015) observed that DRA facilitated participation and improved comprehension in diverse classrooms, including multilingual contexts. Furthermore, in China, Li and Wu (2018) reported that high school students showed significant gains in both comprehension and vocabulary acquisition through DRA instruction. These findings suggest that DRA has considerable potential for addressing the unique challenges faced by vocational students.

Moreover, DRA is not merely a technique but a philosophy of teaching that prioritizes interaction, engagement, and meaning-making. It contrasts sharply with traditional translation-focused approaches by fostering learner autonomy and critical thinking. In vocational contexts, where students often struggle with motivation, DRA's structured yet interactive nature may help bridge the gap between linguistic skills and real-world applications.

Research Significance

Despite its proven benefits, DRA remains underexplored in vocational education settings. Most research in China has concentrated on academic high schools or universities, leaving a gap in understanding how DRA can benefit vocational learners (Wang & Zhang, 2019). This study addresses that gap by examining the effects of DRA on Grade 12 students at Tianfu Information Vocational College in Sichuan Province.

Specifically, it investigates not only improvements in reading comprehension but also students' satisfaction with the learning process.

By situating DRA within the vocational education context, this research contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends the application of schema theory and interactive reading models to a new population. Practically, it provides actionable insights for teachers seeking to improve reading instruction in resource-constrained environments. Ultimately, this study aims: 1) to investigate the effects of DRA toward the reading pre-test scores of grade 12 students in Tianfu Information Vocational College, and 2) to study the levels of students' satisfaction towards Directed Reading Activities, which demonstrates that innovative, student-centered pedagogies can transform English learning outcomes in vocational schools, thereby enhancing students' academic and professional futures.

Literature Review

Theories of Reading

Reading is a multidimensional process that involves decoding linguistic symbols, constructing meaning, and integrating new information into existing knowledge structures. Early theories of reading can be divided into two main schools: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up models emphasize the role of phonological and orthographic decoding, where comprehension emerges from the sequential recognition of words and sentences (Gough, 1972). Top-down models, by contrast, stress the role of background knowledge, prediction, and inference in guiding comprehension (Goodman, 1967). Neither approach alone fully captures the complexity of reading; thus, interactive models emerged.

Rumelhart (1980) and Stanovich (1984) proposed interactive models, suggesting that reading is a dynamic interplay between decoding and higher-level cognitive processes. Readers continuously integrate textual input with prior knowledge to generate meaning. Schema theory, advanced by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), further supports this perspective by asserting that comprehension depends on the activation of schemata-mental frameworks that organize knowledge. In practice, this implies that effective reading instruction must provide strategies that help learners both decode text and activate relevant prior knowledge.

Reading Comprehension in Vocational Education Contexts

In China, vocational education students often exhibit lower levels of English reading ability compared to their counterparts in academic tracks. This discrepancy is attributed to several factors, including limited instructional time devoted to English, a curriculum heavily weighted toward technical subjects, and students' lack of exposure to authentic texts (Chen, 2014). Yang and Gao (2017) argue that vocational students' attitudes toward English are shaped by pragmatic considerations; many see little direct connection between English and their career goals, leading to diminished motivation. Consequently, these students struggle with basic comprehension tasks and fail to develop higher-order reading strategies.

The problem is exacerbated by teaching practices. Li and Wu (2018) observed that the grammar-translation method still dominates vocational classrooms. Although this approach can improve discrete knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, it fails to cultivate comprehension skills or critical engagement with texts. As Wang

and Zhang (2019) highlight, vocational students are often trained to memorize answers for exams rather than to develop independent reading strategies. This limits their ability to process complex or unfamiliar texts, a skill increasingly necessary in globalized workplaces where technical manuals, safety guidelines, and professional documentation are often published in English.

Directed Reading Activities (DRA)

Directed Reading Activities were first introduced by Stauffer (1969) as a systematic framework to guide students through texts. The process is divided into three stages. In the pre-reading stage, teachers activate students' prior knowledge, set purposes for reading, and preview vocabulary. The while-reading stage engages students in active comprehension through guided reading, questioning, and annotation. Finally, the post-reading stage consolidates learning through summarization, discussion, and application. This cyclical process not only improves comprehension but also enhances motivation by making reading interactive and purposeful.

Alfassi (2004) demonstrated that DRA improved comprehension among struggling adolescent readers by combining explicit strategy instruction with guided practice. Klinger and Vaughn (2015) emphasized its adaptability, noting that DRA can be modified for use in multilingual classrooms and across subject areas. Hollingsworth and Gallego (2010) found that pre-teaching vocabulary within DRA improved reading outcomes for bilingual students. These findings illustrate the flexibility and effectiveness of DRA in various contexts.

Various studies have consistently shown the value of DRA and similar strategy-based approaches. In the study of (Graesser et al., 2011), incorporating DRA principles into reading instruction promoted critical thinking and collaborative learning. Moreover, DRA, aligns with global educational trends emphasize learner autonomy and competency development, OECD (2023). Studies in Europe(e.g., Harrison & Salinger, 2025) further demonstrate that structured reading activities foster not only comprehension but also learner engagement and confidence in reading.

In terms of using DRA in vocational schools, students' reading comprehension and confidence were improved, particularly among learners with low initial proficiency, Misdi (2023). Similarly, DRA-based instruction increased students' willingness to participate in reading tasks and its motivational benefits are as important as its cognitive ones (Gutierrez & Rodriguez, 2019). These studies reinforce the idea that DRA is both an effective instructional method and a tool for enhancing student engagement.

In China, research on DRA has gained traction in recent years. Li and Wu (2018) presented that high school students receiving DRA instruction outperformed their peers in both comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Similarly, vocational students exposed to DRA reported higher levels of motivation and engagement compared to those taught through traditional methods (Wang and Zhang, 2019). Zhang and Wang (2022) emphasized the importance of aligning reading strategies with students' vocational interests, arguing that DRA can be adapted to incorporate technical texts relevant to students' future careers.

Furthermore, DRA encouraged vocational students to collaborate during reading activities, fostering both social interaction and language development. Students not only improved their reading comprehension but also developed confidence in group

discussions, a skill valuable for workplace communication (Chen & Zhang, 2021). Despite these positive findings, the number of studies focusing specifically on vocational education remains limited, underlining the significance of the present research.

The review of existing literature reveals that reading is a complex process influenced by cognitive, linguistic, and contextual factors. Theories such as top-down, bottom-up and interactive models provide a foundation for understanding the importance of strategy-based instruction. International and domestic researches consistently supports the effectiveness of DRA in improving reading comprehension and motivation. However, gaps remain in applying DRA to vocational education in China, where unique challenges such as low motivation, limited resources, and exam-oriented instruction persist. This study addresses these gaps by evaluating the effects of DRA on both reading achievement and student satisfaction in a vocational setting.

Directed Reading Activities can also be viewed as a form of explicit reading strategy instruction. Research has shown that explicit teaching of strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing significantly enhances reading comprehension, particularly among learners with lower proficiency (Alfassi, 2004; Klinger & Vaughn, 2015). By systematically guiding students through pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages, DRA makes these strategies visible and actionable for learners.

Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design at Tianfu Information Vocational College, Sichuan Province, involving two intact Grade 12 classes. The experimental group (n=50) received Directed Reading Activities (DRA) instruction, while the control group (n=50) continued with traditional reading instruction. The intervention lasted eight weeks, with two 45-minute reading lessons per week, totaling 16 sessions.

Participants included 100 students aged 17–18, with comparable gender distribution and baseline proficiency. The same teacher taught both groups to minimize instructor-related variability. Three instruments were employed: (1) a reading comprehension test administered as pre-test and post-test, (2) a satisfaction questionnaire, and (3) A total of 16 lesson plans for Directed Reading Activities (DRAs).

Data were analyzed using Paired-sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-test scores within each group, independent-sample t-tests to compare between groups, and descriptive statistics to summarize questionnaire results.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

To ensure methodological rigor, the validity and reliability of all research instruments were carefully examined. The reading comprehension test was developed based on the objectives of the Grade 12 vocational English curriculum and the reading skills targeted in the Directed Reading Activities framework. The test included items assessing literal comprehension, inferential understanding, and vocabulary knowledge.

Content validity was established through expert review by three university lecturers specializing in English language teaching and reading instruction. Item difficulty and discrimination indices were examined through a pilot test conducted with

students of similar proficiency ($n = 30$), and all items fell within acceptable ranges. The internal consistency reliability of the reading comprehension test was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.82.

The student satisfaction questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on reading instruction and learning satisfaction and modified to suit the vocational education context. It was reviewed by the same panel of experts to ensure content validity and clarity. Pilot testing indicated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88.

In addition, the 16 Directed Reading Activities lesson plans were developed in accordance with Stauffer's (1969) DRA framework and principles of explicit reading strategy instruction. The lesson plans were reviewed by experts to ensure instructional validity and consistency of implementation throughout the intervention period.

Reading materials were selected based on students' English proficiency levels, vocabulary load, and relevance to vocational fields such as e-commerce and hospitality. Text difficulty was aligned with the national vocational English curriculum in terms of length, lexical density, and syntactic complexity. To ensure equivalency between groups, both the experimental and control groups used reading texts of comparable difficulty, with the experimental group receiving additional strategy-based support through Directed Reading Activities.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study derived from quantitative data analysis to address the research objectives. The results were obtained through a reading comprehension pretest, posttest, and questionnaire administered to 50 grade 12 students who participated in the study. The data collected from these research instruments was analyzed in light of two research questions:

1. How does Directed Reading Activities affect the reading comprehension of the grade 12 students?
2. What are levels of satisfaction of the grade 12 students towards Directed Reading Activities?

The findings of the study were presented in terms of tables and description. The results of the data analysis were divided into 2 parts:

1. The students' average reading comprehension pretest scores and posttest scores: This part reported the results by comparing average scores of the students in the reading comprehension test before and after learning reading through Directed Reading Activities.
2. The students' satisfaction towards learning reading through Directed Reading Activities: This part reported the results of the students' satisfaction towards learning reading through Directed Reading Activities from satisfaction questionnaire.

Table 1

Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Experimental Group (N = 50)

Test	N	Mean	S.D.	t	df	Sig
Pretest	50	20.72	5.60	17.93	49	.001**
Posttest	50	38.36	5.52			

Note: Significance level at .05.

N	=	Number of students
Mean	=	Mean score
S.D.	=	Standard deviation
t	=	T-distribution
df	=	Degree of freedom
**	=	Significant value of $p < 0.05$

As shown in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial improvement in reading comprehension scores, increasing from a mean of 20.72 to 38.36. The paired-sample t-test confirmed the significance of this improvement ($t=17.93$, $p<.001$).

Table 2

Post-test Scores between Experimental and Controlled Groups

Group	Posttest Mean Score	T	df	Sig
Experimental Group	38.80	12.26	98	.001 **
Controlled Group	24.76			

Note: Significance level at .05.

N	=	Number of students
T	=	T-distribution
**	=	Significant value of $p < 0.05$

Table 2 compares the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group ($\bar{X} = 38.80$, $\bar{X} = 24.76$), with an independent-sample t-test confirming the significance of this difference ($t=12.26$, $p=.001$).

Table 3*Students' Satisfaction toward Directed Reading Activities (N = 50)*

No.	Questionnaire Items	Mean	Interpretation
Section A: Engagement and Enjoyment			
1	I looked forward to the DRA reading lessons each week.	4.58	the Highest
2	The classroom atmosphere was active and engaging.	4.51	the Highest
3	I felt motivated to participate in reading-related tasks.	4.47	High
4	I enjoyed the use of group work and pair activities.	4.45	High
5	The step-by-step structure of the lesson made reading less stressful.	4.62	the Highest
Total		4.53	the Highest
Section B: Usefulness and Learning Outcomes			
6	The vocabulary activities helped me understand technical words better.	4.40	High
7	Peer discussions improved my comprehension of the texts.	4.36	High
8	The annotation tasks (e.g., underlining, circling) helped me focus while reading.	4.49	High
9	I can now understand texts more independently than before.	4.42	High
10	I feel more confident answering reading comprehension questions.	4.38	High
Total		4.41	High
Section C: Relevance to Vocational Learning			
11	The reading topics were related to my future job field (e.g., e-commerce, hospitality).	4.55	the Highest
12	The texts used in class were realistic and work-related.	4.48	High
13	I learned how English reading can be used in real-life professional settings.	4.50	the Highest
14	I felt that the reading materials matched my level of English.	4.43	High
Section C: Relevance to Vocational Learning			
15	The lessons helped me see the value of English in my major.	4.53	the Highest
Total		4.50	the Highest

Table 3 (Continued)

No.	Questionnaire Items	Mean	Interpretation
Section D: Overall Perception			
16	I prefer this DRA method over traditional reading lessons.	4.56	the Highest
17	I felt supported by the teacher during the lessons.	4.60	the Highest
18	I made clear progress over the 8 weeks.	4.52	the Highest
19	I would recommend this reading method to other students.	4.49	High
20	I would like to continue using this method in future English classes.	4.57	the Highest
Total		4.55	the Highest
Overall Total		4.50	the Highest

As summarized in Table 3, students expressed the highest satisfaction with DRA instruction. Overall perception achieved the highest mean score (4.55), followed by engagement and enjoyment (4.53), vocational relevance (4.50), and usefulness (4.41). This descending order suggests that students not only valued the overall learning experience most strongly but also appreciated the interactive and profession-related aspects of the lessons. The relatively high rating for usefulness further indicates that DRA helped students perceive tangible improvements in their reading ability and confidence.

Discussions

This study examined the impact of Directed Reading Activities on reading comprehension and student satisfaction among vocational college students in Sichuan Province, China. The findings demonstrate that DRA significantly enhanced reading achievement compared to traditional instruction, with experimental group students achieving substantially higher post-test scores. Additionally, students reported very high levels of satisfaction with DRA instruction, citing increased engagement, motivation, and perceived relevance to their vocational studies.

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that Directed Reading Activities (DRA) substantially improve reading comprehension among vocational college students. This indicates that DRA is more effective than traditional grammar-translation instruction in fostering reading achievement. These results are consistent with the interactive model of reading (Rumelhart, 1980; Stanovich, 1984), which posits that comprehension results from the integration of decoding and background knowledge. By structuring pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities, DRA actively engaged students in constructing meaning, thereby enhancing their comprehension skills.

Beyond statistical improvement, these findings highlight the pedagogical importance of interactive and student-centered approaches in vocational English education. DRA provided scaffolding that encouraged learner autonomy and collaborative meaning-making, both of which are essential for lifelong learning. The sustained increase in students' satisfaction suggests that affective engagement plays a

crucial role in their language development, echoing Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory.

Furthermore, the high levels of student satisfaction, further reinforce the effectiveness of DRA. Students valued the support of the teacher and expressed positive attitudes toward the method as a whole. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan (1985), which emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in motivation. The supportive structure of DRA may have enhanced these motivational dimensions, resulting in greater engagement and persistence. The results also echo the idea that DRA encouraged collaboration and improved reading outcomes in Chinese vocational schools (Chen & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, DRA also increased motivation and confidence in Southeast Asian contexts (Misdi, 2023). Together, these studies suggest that the benefits of DRA are not limited to a single cultural or educational setting.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Implications

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for improving English reading instruction in vocational colleges. First, teachers are encouraged to adopt Directed Reading Activities (DRA) systematically as part of their routine classroom practice. The structured nature of DRA-including the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages-helps guide students through the comprehension process and supports active and meaningful engagement with texts.

Second, teachers should incorporate pre-reading activities such as activating prior knowledge and previewing essential vocabulary. These practices reduce anxiety, improve readiness for comprehension, and help vocational learners approach texts more confidently. During the while-reading stage, teachers may employ techniques such as guided questions, annotation, and peer collaboration to support comprehension. Post-reading activities should emphasize summarization, reflection, and application of content to vocational contexts, enabling students to connect English reading with professional knowledge.

Third, the selection of reading materials should align closely with students' vocational interests and future careers, such as hospitality, e-commerce, or information technology. When reading content is perceived as relevant and practical, students are more motivated and develop more positive attitudes toward English learning.

Institution-level support is also essential. Administrators and policymakers should provide training and professional development that enable vocational English teachers to implement DRA confidently and effectively. Furthermore, integrating DRA principles into vocational English curricula may contribute to national education reforms aimed at reducing the gap between academic literacy and workplace communication.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Future research may extend the findings of this study in several ways. First, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of DRA on reading proficiency, vocabulary retention, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Second, future work may employ mixed-methods designs-combining classroom observations, interviews, and qualitative analysis-to capture deeper insights into students' experiences with DRA.

Additionally, researchers may explore the effectiveness of DRA across different vocational majors or compare outcomes across regions to understand contextual influences. Replication studies involving larger and more diverse samples would strengthen the generalizability of the results. Finally, future studies could investigate how digital or technology-enhanced DRA models (e.g., e-reading platforms, digital annotation tools) support reading development among vocational learners.

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