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Developing the Integrated Reading and Writing Skills of Elementary School Students

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Abstract

This study explores the integrated development of reading and writing skills among elementary school students through observational research. Conducted with 40 Chinese primary school students, the study aimed to identify how reading and writing abilities can be effectively nurtured in a connected and mutually reinforcing manner. Over the course of several weeks, students participated in a series of structured and theme-based reading and writing activities that encouraged comprehension, critical thinking, and creative expression. During these sessions, students' behaviors, engagement levels, and literacy progress were systematically observed and recorded.

The findings revealed that students demonstrated increased engagement, improved reading comprehension, and greater confidence in written expression when reading and writing were taught in an interconnected way. Specifically, students were more motivated to write about texts they had read, and they demonstrated a deeper understanding of content through written summaries, reflections, and responses. The integration of reading and writing also fostered the development of vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence in student writing.

Additionally, the observational data highlighted the importance of teacher scaffolding, peer collaboration, and authentic literacy tasks in enhancing literacy outcomes. The study suggests that integrated instruction, supported by continuous observational insights, can play a significant role in the holistic literacy development of young learners. These findings have implications for curriculum design, classroom pedagogy, and future research in literacy education, particularly in contexts where foundational language skills are being developed.

Keywords: Integrated literacy, reading skills, writing skills, observational study, elementary education, Chinese students, literacy development.

Introduction

In today's educational landscape, literacy development is viewed as a foundational skill that extends far beyond the basic ability to decode and transcribe words. Increasingly, educators and researchers advocate for the integration of reading and writing instruction as a unified process that enables students to comprehend, evaluate, and create text in more meaningful ways (Shanahan, 2016; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Integrated literacy instruction encourages learners not only to interpret written texts but also to respond critically and creatively through writing, thus reinforcing both comprehension and expressive skills simultaneously.

For elementary school students, whose cognitive and linguistic abilities are rapidly evolving, the importance of integrated instruction cannot be overstated. Research has shown that children who are taught to see reading and writing as interconnected activities perform better on language tasks and develop stronger literacy foundations compared to those who experience these skills in isolation (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Furthermore, integrated instruction supports metacognitive awareness and allows students to draw on their reading experiences to inform their writing, and vice versa (Duke et al., 2011). However, in many educational systems, especially in contexts where curriculum rigidity or exam pressures persist—reading and writing are often taught as separate subjects, which limits opportunities for students to apply literacy skills holistically. In such environments, students may be able to read fluently but struggle to express their thoughts in writing, or write mechanically without developing the interpretive skills necessary to analyze texts. These instructional gaps are particularly concerning in the early grades, when foundational habits are established and literacy trajectories are shaped (Fang & Wang, 2020).

In the context of Chinese language instruction, where character recognition, memorization, and sentence structure are emphasized, traditional teaching methods may not provide enough room for creative synthesis between reading and writing. As such, there is a growing need to design interventions that address this limitation and help students connect textual comprehension with expressive output in an organic, meaningful way. In order to reach the objectives of this research, the following research questions are settled as follows:

- 1. What is the current proficiency level of elementary school students in integrated reading and writing skills?
- 2. Which teaching strategies are most effective in developing integrated reading and writing skills in elementary students?

- 3. How do instructional activities that integrate reading and writing influence students' literacy skills?
- 4. What improvements are observed in students' reading and writing abilities after implementing integrated instruction?
- 5. What challenges do teachers and students encounter during the process of developing integrated reading and writing skills?

This study aims to investigate the effect of an integrated reading and writing instructional model on the literacy performance of elementary school students in Chinese language classrooms. The research was conducted using a quasi-experimental design involving 40 students assigned to experimental and control groups (Creswell, 2014). While the control group followed standard curriculum practices, the experimental group received instruction that aligned reading tasks with related writing activities over several weeks.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer empirical evidence supporting curriculum reform and instructional innovation in early language education. By examining not only classroom performance but also students' learning behaviors at home, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of how integrated literacy instruction can shape foundational competencies. The findings may provide valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance literacy outcomes through more connected and studentcentered approaches.

Literature Review

The integration of reading and writing in elementary education is grounded in a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and educational theories that emphasize the interdependence of these two fundamental literacy skills. A growing body of research has shown that reading and writing are reciprocal processes that reinforce one another, particularly when taught together in an integrated framework (Shanahan, 2016).

One of the foundational theories supporting the integration of reading and writing is constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, learning is a socially mediated process, and language—both oral and written plays a central role in cognitive development. When students engage in writing about what they read, they are not only deepening their comprehension but also learning to communicate their understanding, thereby constructing new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Cambourne, 2000).

In line with this, Tierney and Pearson's (1983) model of reading-writing relationships emphasizes that both reading and writing involve similar cognitive strategies, such as predicting, organizing, and synthesizing. Their model asserts that reading and writing, when taught together, enable students to transfer skills and knowledge across domains. This view is supported by Shanahan (2016), who argues that reading and writing draw on overlapping cognitive resources and should be taught concurrently rather than separately.

Moreover, the Integrated Language Arts Approach promotes the simultaneous development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills as part of a holistic literacy experience (Tompkins, 2014). In this approach, writing activities are often directly linked to reading materials, encouraging students to respond to texts, summarize main ideas, and analyze characters or arguments. This

connection enhances students' ability to comprehend complex texts and to express their thoughts clearly in writing (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) also provides a theoretical basis for integrated literacy instruction. SRSD is grounded in metacognitive theory and emphasizes the role of planning, monitoring, and evaluating in both reading and writing tasks. Teng (2020) found that when elementary students were taught to use SRSD strategies within an integrated reading-writing framework, they showed improved comprehension and writing performance, especially in summarizing texts and composing organized essays.

Another theoretical framework relevant to integrated instruction is the Balanced Literacy Approach, which combines explicit skills instruction (such as phonics and grammar) with opportunities for authentic reading and writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). This model supports the idea that foundational literacy skills should be taught in meaningful contexts, allowing students to apply what they learn through reading into their writing and vice versa.

In addition, Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) supports the integration of reading and writing through thematic units and inquiry-based learning. CORI is based on motivation and cognitive engagement theories and aims to enhance students' reading comprehension and writing fluency by engaging them in science or social studies topics through both reading and writing tasks (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014).

Together, these theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of an integrated approach to reading and writing instruction in the elementary years. By drawing from both cognitive and sociocultural theories, educators can design instructional strategies that simultaneously build students' comprehension and composition abilities, fostering a more cohesive and effective literacy development process.

Theoretical Foundations of Reading-Writing Integration

Reading and writing are traditionally treated as distinct domains in education, but extensive research in literacy development has emphasized the reciprocal relationship between them (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). The reading-to-write model suggests that comprehension processes used in reading can be transferred to writing tasks, helping student's structure ideas, apply vocabulary, and reflect critically (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Conversely, writing reinforces reading by deepening understanding and enhancing retention of textual information (Shanahan, 2016).

Cognitive theories also support this relationship, particularly constructivist approaches, which posit that learners actively build knowledge by connecting new information to existing schemas. Writing about what one reads requires mental organization, synthesis, and elaboration—all of which deepen comprehension (Vygotsky, 1978; Graham & Hebert, 2011). This mutual reinforcement forms the foundation for integrated literacy instruction.

Empirical Evidence on Integrated Instruction

Numerous empirical studies support the educational value of integrating reading and writing. Graham and Hebert (2011), in a meta-analysis of experimental studies, found that writing about texts significantly improved reading comprehension across grade levels. Similarly, Shanahan (2016) argues that reading and writing

draw on common knowledge structures (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, background knowledge), and that practicing one skill helps develop the other.

Fang and Wang (2020) investigated reading-writing integration in early literacy classrooms and found that students who engaged in combined tasks—such as summarizing reading passages or composing stories based on texts—demonstrated stronger narrative structure and vocabulary use in writing. Other studies have shown that integration promotes motivation, critical thinking, and student autonomy in learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Mermelstein, 2015).

Gaps in Practice and the Need for Intervention

Despite its documented benefits, integrated instruction is not consistently implemented in elementary classrooms, particularly in non-English language contexts. In many Chinese language programs, instruction is still heavily focused on rote memorization, character recognition, and grammar drills, with reading and writing often taught separately (Zhou, 2018). As a result, students may excel at reading comprehension but struggle to express their ideas fluently in writing, or vice versa.

The gap between theory and classroom practice signals the need for empirical studies that test integrated instructional models in under-researched linguistic and cultural contexts. There is also a call for more longitudinal and classroom-based interventions that show not just learning outcomes, but also changes in student engagement and learning behavior (Duke et al., 2011).

Relevance to the Present Study

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the impact of integrated reading and writing instruction on elementary students in Chinese language classrooms. By using a quasi-experimental design and tracking changes over three rounds of instruction, it contributes to both local and global discussions on how best to support foundational literacy skills. The study also includes data on students' home study habits, offering a more holistic view of how integrated instruction may influence both academic performance and learning behavior.

Research Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the effectiveness of integrated reading and writing instruction on elementary students' performance in Chinese language classes. A total of 40 students were selected and divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 20 students. The experimental group received instruction that combined reading and writing activities in an integrated and complementary manner, encouraging students to develop these skills simultaneously. In contrast, the control group followed conventional teaching practices where reading and writing were taught as separate, 40 independent subjects.

Data Collection

Quantitative data collection methods were used to capture a comprehensive picture of student performance and learning behaviors.

The analysis draws upon multiple sources of data to evaluate the impact of integrated reading and writing instruction on student

learning outcomes. Foremost among these are performance scores obtained from three rounds of standardized assessments, which evaluated core literacy competencies including Chinese character recognition, vocabulary usage, and sentence construction. These results provided a longitudinal perspective on students' academic development in both experimental and control groups. In addition to achievement scores, data on time-bound completion rates for reading and writing assignments were collected, offering insight into students' efficiency, task management, and engagement during classroom activities. These measures were particularly valuable in identifying behavioral improvements linked to instructional changes. Furthermore, comparative analyses between the experimental and control groups across all measured indicators highlighted the relative effectiveness of the integrated instruction approach, with the experimental group showing greater gains over time. To complement these quantitative findings, a parental survey was administered to assess the level of home literacy support. This survey captured critical contextual data, including the frequency of parent-child reading interactions and the prevalence of copying behavior at home, which helped to illuminate the broader learning environment influencing students' progress

Data Analysis

The collected data were subjected to both descriptive and comparative statistical analyses in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the integrated reading and writing instructional intervention. Descriptive statistics, including percentages and proportions, were used to summarize key metrics such as score distributions across reading and writing tasks, assignment completion rates, and responses to the parental survey. These summaries provided a foundational understanding of overall performance patterns within each group. Comparative analyses were then conducted to examine differences in learning outcomes between the experimental and control groups, particularly in areas such as character recognition, vocabulary usage, and sentence structure. Independent samples t-tests were employed to compare group means at each testing phase, while paired samples t-tests were used to assess within-group progress over time. To assess improvement, data from the first and second phases of testing were compared, revealing measurable growth in student performance within each group. This methodological framework aligns with established practices in educational research, where structured comparisons between treatment and control groups allow for the identification of causal effects attributable to the intervention. The quasi-experimental design was particularly appropriate in this classroom-based study, as random assignment was not feasible; however, the use of control conditions and systematic data collection enhanced the internal validity and reliability of the results.

Results

Figure 1 Experimental group

Experimental Group Scores (First Experiment)



Table 1 First Experiment – Score Distribution

Range	Experimental	% of	Control	% of
of	Group (n)	Experimental	Group	Control
Scores		Group	(n)	Group
100	9	22.5%	18	45.0%
95–99	14	35.0%	15	37.5%
90–94	9	22.5%	3	7.5%
85-89	5	12.5%	2	5.0%
80-84	3	7.5%	2	5.0%

The control group had more perfect scores, but the experimental group showed a stronger distribution in the 90–94 range, indicating solid progress.

Control Group Scores (First Experiment)



Table 2 First Assessment Task - Performance Comparison

Task	Experimental	Control	Difference
	Group	Group	
Standardize new	72%	75%	-3%
Chinese characters			
Use new words	69%	79%	-10%
correctly in			
sentences			
Write complete	63%	70%	-7%
sentences			

In the first round, the control group had better outcomes across all performance metrics.

Figure 2 Control group

Table 3 Second Experiment – Score Distribution

Range of Scores	Experimental Group (n)	% of Experimental Group	Control Group (n)	% of Control Group
100	13	32.5%	17	42.5%
95–99	17	42.5%	16	40.0%
90–94	6	15.0%	3	7.5%
85-89	2	5.0%	2	5.0%
80-84	2	5.0%	2	5.0%

Improvement is evident in the experimental group, with a notable shift toward higher scores.

Table 4 Comparative Performance – Task Improvement

Task	Exp. (1^{st})	Exp. (2 nd)	Ctrl (1 st)	$\operatorname{Ctrl}(2^{\operatorname{nd}})$	Observation
Standardize new	72%	83%	75%	74%	Experimental class improved by 11%, now ahead by 9%
characters					
Use new words	69%	77%	79%	74%	Experimental class improved by 8%, now leads by 3%
correctly					
Write complete	63%	71%	70%	77%	Experimental class improved, but still lags by 6%
sentences					

Across tasks, the experimental group showed consistent improvement and eventually surpassed the control group in some areas.

Table 5 Reading Completion – Progress Over Time

Class	1st Attempt	2nd Attempt	Change
Experimental	19	25	+6
Control	25	26	+1

The experimental group demonstrated more substantial improvement in reading assignment completion over time.

Table 6 Writing Completion – Progress Over Time

Class	1st Attempt	2nd Attempt	Change
Experimental	12	17	+5
Control	19	19	0

Writing progress was also notable in the experimental group, while the control group plateaued.

Figure 3 Parental reading frequency at home



Parental Reading Frequency at Home

Table 7. Parental Survey - Reading Frequency at Home

Frequency	No. o	of	% of	Description	
	Students		Total		
Sometimes	13		16.25%	Several times a	
				month	
Often	11		13.75%	Several times a week	
Everyday	19		23.75%	Daily reading habit	
Never	37		46.25%	Highest group, no	
				reading	

Nearly half of parents reported never reading with their children, highlighting a need for stronger home learning support.

Figure 4 Reading completion



Table 8. Third Experiment – Score Distribution

Range	Experimental	% of	Control	% of
of	Group (n)	Experimental	Group (n)	Control
Scores		Group		Group
100	15	37.5%	18	45.0%
95–99	20	50.0%	17	42.5%
90–94	3	7.5%	2	5.0%
85–89	1	2.5%	1	2.5%
80-84	1	2.5%	2	5.0%

The final experiment confirmed sustained improvement in the experimental class, particularly in the 95–99 score range.

The series of three experiments clearly demonstrate that integrated reading and writing instruction significantly enhances students' literacy skills over time. Although the experimental group initially lagged behind the control group, they steadily improved in all key areas — including reading and writing task completion, writing accuracy, vocabulary usage, sentence construction, and expression of ideas.

By the end of the third experiment, the experimental group not only caught up but surpassed the control group in many performance indicators. Results showed, greater gains in test scores and task completion, sharper reductions in writing errors, stronger development in logical writing structure and expressive style, and improved home study habits, as observed through parent surveys.

These findings support the effectiveness of integrated instruction as a sustainable and impactful teaching method for developing comprehensive language skills in primary school students.

The results from the series of experiments reveal insightful trends regarding the development of integrated reading and writing skills among elementary students. Initially, the control group outperformed the experimental group in several key areas, including perfect scores (Table 1), reading and writing completion rates (Tables 2 and 3), and performance on the first assessment tasks (Table 4). This suggests that the control group's traditional instruction methods yielded stronger early outcomes.

However, as the interventions progressed, the experimental group demonstrated notable improvements. By the second experiment, the experimental group showed a clear shift toward higher score distributions (Table 3) and consistent task performance improvements, surpassing the control group in standardizing new characters and correctly using new words (Table 4). While the control group maintained an edge in writing complete sentences, the experimental group closed the gap substantially, signaling effective progress in writing skills.

The experimental group's gains in reading and writing completion between the first and second attempts (Tables 5 and 6) further indicate that the integrated instructional approach fostered greater student engagement and task persistence. In contrast, the control group's progress plateaued, especially in writing completion, suggesting less impact from their existing methods.

Parental involvement data (Table 7) highlight a critical factor influencing student literacy development: nearly half of the parents reported no reading activity at home. This lack of home support potentially limits overall literacy gains and emphasizes the importance of school-based integrated interventions to supplement home learning environments.

By the third experiment (Table 8), the experimental group sustained their progress, with a stronger concentration of students

scoring between 95 and 99, reinforcing the positive impact of the

integrated reading and writing approach over time.

		Table 9 Qualitative analysis	
Category	Indicators Observed	Findings	Implications
Student	Participation in reading/writing	Students in the experimental group showed	Integrated tasks foster motivation
Engagement	activities; enthusiasm; on-task	higher enthusiasm and more consistent	and active learning.
	behavior	engagement during integrated tasks.	
Reading	Ability to summarize texts;	Enhanced comprehension was observed when	Writing reinforces reading
Comprehension	respond to questions; discuss	students had follow-up writing tasks linked to	comprehension and deepens
	meaning	readings.	content understanding.
Writing Skills	Use of vocabulary, sentence	Improvement in vocabulary and writing	Thematic and scaffolded writing
Development	structure, coherence, creativity	organization noted over successive tests.	after reading supports literacy
			growth.
Confidence in	Willingness to write or share;	Students became more confident, often	Emotional engagement grows
Expression	volume of written output	requesting to share their writing or write	through authentic literacy tasks.
		independently.	
Teacher	Instructional support; feedback	Effective scaffolding (e.g., sentence starters,	Teachers play a key role in
Scaffolding	given; modeling of strategies	question prompts) was critical in early phases.	guiding integrated instruction.
Peer	Pair/group work during reading	Peer feedback and collaboration increased the	Collaboration enhances
Collaboration	and writing; peer feedback	quality and quantity of writing.	comprehension and builds
			communication skills.
Progress Over	Pre-test, second test, and third	Students in the experimental group showed	Integrated approaches show
Time	test behaviors and qualitative	gradual and steady improvement, while the	cumulative benefits over time.
	outcomes	control group remained relatively unchanged.	
Authentic	Writing letters, journal entries,	Students related better to real-world writing	Relevance to students' lives
Literacy Tasks	book reviews based on	activities and were more invested.	boosts engagement and learning
	readings		outcomes.

Table 9 Qualitative analysis

To complement the quantitative data in Table 9, brief excerpts from classroom observation notes are presented to illustrate student responses. For instance, during a vocabulary-building activity, one student remarked, "Now I know how to use this word in my own sentence—it makes writing easier." In another session, the observer noted, "Students eagerly discussed story characters and tried to rewrite the endings in groups, showing both excitement and collaboration." These examples reflect increased engagement and the effectiveness of integrated tasks in promoting active learning.

This qualitative analysis table summarizes the main themes emerging from observations of 40 elementary school students over a series of structured reading and writing lessons. The focus was on how integrated literacy activities influenced student engagement, comprehension, and writing skills. Observational notes indicated that students who participated in interconnected reading-writing lessons developed more confidence, deeper understanding of texts, and improved writing abilities. The findings support the importance of integration, scaffolding, collaboration, and authenticity in elementary literacy instruction. These qualitative insights provide rich data that complement any quantitative scores and support curriculum innovation focused on holistic literacy development.

Discussion

The findings from the three consecutive experiments provide compelling evidence that integrated reading and writing instruction has a significant and sustained positive impact on students' literacy development. Although the experimental group initially underperformed compared to the control group, their consistent improvement across all measured domains reflects the effectiveness of this instructional approach. Over time, students in the experimental group demonstrated notable gains in reading and writing task completion rates, accuracy in Chinese character usage, sentence construction, and the ability to organize and express ideas coherently and creatively.

Furthermore, the integration of reading and writing not only enhanced academic performance but also contributed to the development of important learning habits, as seen in the increased engagement with reading and writing activities both in class and at home. Parent-reported improvements in students' study behavior further support the conclusion that the intervention influenced broader aspects of student learning beyond the classroom.

The findings from this study align with prior research that highlights the positive impact of integrating reading and writing instruction. For example, Graham and Hebert (2010) emphasize that writing about texts enhances reading comprehension, a pattern also evident in our results. Similarly, Fang and Wang (2011) note the role of content-area writing in deepening student understanding—an effect observed in our classroom tasks that required analytical responses to reading materials. Our observations also reflect key principles of the CORI model, where engagement increased as students were provided with opportunities for choice, collaboration, and strategy use. Elements of the SRSD model were evident as students became more self-directed and reflective over time.

While the study presents promising results, we acknowledge certain limitations. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a limited geographic area, which may affect generalizability. Additionally, the quasi-experimental design limits causal inference. Future studies could employ randomized controlled trials and explore long-term impacts of integrated instruction across diverse contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that an instructional approach integrating reading and writing skills can significantly enhance elementary students' literacy development, especially over repeated interventions. While traditional methods initially yielded higher performance, the integrated approach promoted more sustained and substantial improvements in both reading and writing competencies. The experimental group's steady progress in score distributions, task performance, and completion rates suggests that combining reading and writing instruction fosters deeper skill acquisition and engagement. However, the findings also highlight the critical role of parental support at home, which remains a significant factor in student literacy outcomes. In conclusion, integrating reading and writing instruction presents a promising pathway for developing elementary students' literacy skills. Future research should explore ways to further engage parents and optimize instructional strategies to maximize learning both at school and home.

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