

The Lack of Standardized Chinese Reading Proficiency Assessment Tools in Chinese Basic Education: The Current State, Causes, and Solutions

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Abstract: *The lack of established Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools at the basic education level has hindered the scientific evaluation and systematic cultivation of reading ability in Chinese students. The study describes the current state of reading proficiency assessment in China and analyzes the underlying causes of the lack of established reading assessment tools in Chinese basic education, which include education culture-related factors like the pervasive utilitarian attitudes towards reading and misconceptions of reading proficiency, technical issues like the complexity of the Chinese language, insufficient reading assessment data, and research limitations, and education policy-related factors, such as the delayed reform of the education evaluation system and the lack of relatively unified understanding of reading proficiency. Corresponding suggestions are also proposed to address these challenges.*

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Introduction

FOR EVERY individual, reading is the bedrock of all other learning activities as well as a pivotal avenue for developing their knowledge of the world. Reading proficiency is a multifaceted skill that underpins academic achievement, personal growth, and future success; it reflects the individual's overall reading performance in decoding words, understanding vocabulary, comprehending sentences and paragraphs, critically engaging with text, and other dimensions (Lyon & Weiser, 2009; Jeon & Day, 2016; Merke et al., 2024). The student's reading proficiency development at the basic education level plays a significant role in their lifelong growth by laying groundwork for their cognitive and academic progress.

An effective reading proficiency assessment tool (RPAT) is essential for accurately evaluating students' reading ability levels, a precondition for implementing personalized reading instruction (Zhang, 2007). With scientific RPATs, teachers and parents can have a sound understanding of children's reading competence, identify their strengths and weaknesses in reading, and thereby formulate targeted training schemes for more effectively enhancing their reading levels. Additionally, the use of RPATs can generate a reliable data basis for education policies, helping decision-makers acquire comprehensive knowledge of reading proficiency of the school-age population and thereby develop more legitimate education programs and curriculum standards.

Internationally, there are currently many well-established reading assessment frameworks or tools, including those administered in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) implemented by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States. Assessment frameworks like these not only scientifically and accurately measure students' reading competence levels but also provide a wealth of data resources for education research, advancing reading education studies.

Alongside these measurement frameworks advanced by major organizations, there is also a variety of assessment tools for more specific purposes, which have proven effective in improving student reading proficiency. For example, Accelerated Reader, a reading comprehension assessment tool, classifies students' reading levels and reading books into graded categories. It helps enhance students' reading proficiency by encouraging them to read books within their zone of proximal development and complete corresponding quizzes, (Smith et al., 2017). The Lexile Framework for Reading, a tool that both measures reading ability and grades

reading materials, assists teachers and students in selecting appropriate reading materials (Lennon & Burdick, 2004). The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, developed by Dr. Richard Woodcock, is a widely used standardized reading test tool, capable of evaluating an individual's reading ability from kindergarten throughout adulthood (Woodcock, 2011).

Nevertheless, the development of Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools has not drawn sufficient attention in the Chinese education system. There is a lack of authoritative, established RPATs that can be administered on a large scale in Chinese basic education; rather, reading proficiency assessment has been incorporated in standardized Chinese language tests. Moreover, scarce is research on RPAT development in China. Reading education research is mostly focused on reading literacy training and the relationships between reading and other abilities, such as “reading and creativity” and “reading and writing skills.”

The lack of effective RPATs could cause an array of problems to Chinese basic education. For students, reading proficiency is crucial for all learning activities across various subjects. Without scientific assessment tools, they have difficulties identifying issues and shortcomings in reading and making targeted improvements, which hinders their mastery of knowledge in all subjects, compromising their overall academic performance. For the Chinese language teachers, the absence of authoritative RPATs means they lack objective and valid benchmarks for evaluating students' reading levels, which, in turn, may negatively affect teaching material and method selection, hamper instructional decision making, and impede teaching practice improvement. The present study focuses on analyzing the causes of this issue and exploring possible solutions, aiming to advance the development of scientific, standardized, and quantitative tools for assessing reading proficiency of Chinese basic education students and drive reading education in China.

The Current State of Chinese Reading Proficiency Assessment

Relying on the Standardized Chinese Language Test

In China, the assessment of students reading proficiency primarily relies on standardized Chinese language tests. However, this evaluation approach to reading education has its limitations. Despite containing a considerable number of reading questions, the standardized Chinese language test is aimed at assessing multiple dimensions of an individual's Chinese proficiency rather than focusing on reading assessment. Also, as a component of a comprehensive test, such reading assessment has never been

examined in terms of reliability and validity. At the same time, high-stakes exams such as the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and the Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao) are in constant reform in recent years, with testing content and design being continually adjusted (Zhao, 2017). Using them as overriding avenues for assessing reading proficiency is not beneficial for ensuring the consistency of the results. Despite their limitations, teachers and parents still place great value on the results of standardized Chinese language tests, with little interest in standalone reading proficiency assessments.

Being Neglected in Reading Instruction

The Course Standards for Chinese Language in both *The National Compulsory Education Curriculum Program 2022* and *The Senior Secondary Curriculum Program 2017 (revised in 2020)* emphasize the importance of reading proficiency and require teachers to prioritize reading ability development in students in day-to-day instruction while also underscoring the significance of effective assessment for reading education. Yet, in actual reading instruction, “drill-and-practice” that simulates high-stakes exams remains the dominant teaching strategy; on top of standardized Chinese language tests, also adopted are qualitative assessments, such as task cards and reading journals, to document students’ reading activities (Gao & Zhou, 2024). While the qualitative approach may be effective in reflecting students’ reading behavior and attitudes towards reading, it is inadequate in quantitatively evaluating reading proficiency, making it difficult for the teacher to monitor students’ progress in reading and provide precise guidance.

Gaps in Reading Proficiency Assessment Research

Developing a scientific, valid RPAT often requires years of data gathering. However, due to constraints in resources and time, Chinese researchers tend to favor short-term cross-sectional studies, resulting in the scarcity of long-term, systematic research on RPATs. Additionally, most reading tests developed by Chinese universities or research institutions are designed for academic research purposes, which can hardly be broadly used in actual education settings. Even though some researchers or research institutions have developed assessment tools or question banks for small-scale application, these often come with various issues. Some lack norms, which means score interpretation is entirely dependent on item difficulty; some lack equating, making it impossible to compare results across different versions; and others may lack vertical linking, and consequently, scores from different grades cannot be compared based on a uniform measurement scale,

hindering effective evaluation of reading performance progress of the student (Yang & Yang, 2018).

Challenges of Localizing International Assessment

Tools

With the absence of locally developed, authoritative RPATs, certain education researchers have attempted to introduce internationally established ones (such as the Lexile Framework for Reading) to fill the gap. Yet, due to differences in linguistic features and cultural contexts between Chinese and English, the localized application of these international assessment tools has been limited to a small scale. Meanwhile, although global reading assessment frameworks like the one in the PISA have been adopted by China since 2009, this practice has largely been confined to economically developed regions such as Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang (Yan et al., 2025). While the test results from these regions may reflect the educational standards in certain areas, they cannot represent reading proficiency of the majority of Chinese students. Additionally, the lengthy testing cycle of PISA has dampened its ability to provide timely feedback and guidance for teaching practices.

Underlying Causes of the Lack of Standardized RPATs

The issue in question is the consequence of three kinds of factors. Culturally, utilitarian attitudes towards reading, misconceptions about reading proficiency, and traditional notions of reading education have negatively affected the development of RPATs. Technically, the distinctiveness of the Chinese language, insufficient research data, and limitations of existing research have added complications to the development process. Education policy-related factors, such as the delayed reform of education evaluation mechanisms, the absence of a uniform reading proficiency framework, and inadequate policy support for the development of such tools, have left developers without clear directions.

Cultural Factors

Pervasive Utilitarian Attitudes towards Reading

Against the backdrop of exam-focused education and societal pursuit of instant educational attainments, utilitarian attitudes towards reading have become pervasive in the education community. While utilitarian approaches

to reading, in the era of information explosion, offers benefits like precision information acquisition and improved reading efficiency, they may lead to the undesirable practice “reading to test” as well as presenting the dearth of deep learning and deprivation of senses of achievement in students (Guan et al., 2025). Teachers have become reluctant to make sustained efforts to foster students’ reading competences, and researchers disregarded the necessity of developing effective RPATs.

Misconceptions of Reading Proficiency

Despite the widespread recognition of the significance of reading to student academic success, there remains misunderstanding of reading proficiency in teachers and parents. First off, a portion of teachers and parents equate “Chinese reading proficiency” with “Chinese language exam results.” While exam scores of the Chinese language subject may reflect the overall language abilities (including memorization, writing, reading, etc.) of the student, they cannot serve as clear indicators of the core dimensions of reading ability, such as information acquisition and logical analysis (Yang & Yang, 2019). In the meantime, Chinese language teachers have long confused reading proficiency with test-taking tactics. In actual instruction, teachers often focus more on imparting test skills and answer templates to ensure students can quickly spot “standard answers” from the exam paper while neglecting the genuine enhancement of their competence in comprehension and critical analysis of text.

Traditional Notions of Reading Education

Traditional notions of reading education in China, such as “The meaning may be grasped but cannot be expressed in words” and “Reading a book a hundred times naturally reveals its meaning,” make sense to some extent but overly emphasize subjective experience and perceptions. Traditional notions like these ignore the possibility that reading proficiency can be quantitatively assessed through scientific devices and have no regard for systematic planning and scientific guidance for reading ability improvement. As a result of their influence, a sizable number of teachers often evaluate students’ reading comprehension ability using their own subjective judgments based on students’ oral or written expressions, rather than employing standardized testing tools for reaching objective assessment. In addition, some parents and teachers encourage children to read extensively after class but rarely pay attention to whether they have truly mastered reading techniques during the process.

Traditional ideas of reading education not only undermine the systematic and operational nature of reading proficiency development but

also hamper the creation and introduction of scientific assessment tools. First off, constrained by the said traditional notions, researchers may undervalue quantitative evaluation, with low motivation for developing assessment tools. Moreover, even if scientifically validated reading assessment tools are available, skepticism, rooted in traditional mindsets among some teachers or parents, may impede their widespread application in schools and other educational institutions.

Technical Factors

Distinctiveness of the Chinese Language

Among the many technical challenges in the development of RPATs, the inherent complexity of the Chinese language itself is the primary one. Chinese, as an ideographic script, varies significantly from alphabetic languages (such as English) in terms of word formation, grammar, syntactic structure, and even linguistic logic. For example, the Chinese language lacks strict morphological changes (such as tense or singular/plural distinctions) but relies more on the context and function words to convey semantic relationships. Additionally, Chinese word formation is highly flexible, and the meaning of compound words can hardly be deduced directly from their literal components. These features present significant difficulties in borrowing from English reading assessment tools, necessitating special considerations in terms of question design, the creation of distractors, and the establishment of scoring criteria.

At the same time, the presence of reading materials in classical Chinese in reading education further complicates the development of RPATs. In Chinese language education, students need to read articles and poetry in both modern and classical Chinese. Classical Chinese differs markedly from modern Chinese in vocabulary, grammar, and ways of expression, with a heavy use of inverted sentence structures, elliptical expressions, and special usages of function words, necessitating the readers' possession of systematic knowledge of it. Meanwhile, the highly elliptical representation, complex imagery (e.g., "willow" symbolizing parting, "wild goose" representing letters), and historical allusions demand profound cultural literacy for an accurate comprehension of classical text. The dual linguistic system not only increases the complexity of reading materials in reading education but also imposes higher requirements on Chinese reading assessment tools, which need to measure the students' proficiency in both modern and classical Chinese reading.

Inadequate Data

The development of scientific and effective RPATs warrants substantial data support. Yet, developers of Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools faces severe difficulties in gathering data. First, China lacks large-scale reading proficiency assessment data. Existing data are mostly from certain regions or schools, unable to comprehensively represent the reading proficiency levels of students nationwide. Second, there is a dearth of longitudinal data on student reading ability development. As improving reading proficiency involves a long-term process, longitudinal studies are necessitated to fully examine how students' reading ability evolves across different phases. Third, existing reading assessment data vary greatly in quality, with a lack of unified norms. Data presented by various institutions and researchers differ significantly in test content, assessment methods, and scoring criteria, making data integration and comparison challenging.

Research Limitations

Notable limitations exist in current research on reading assessment tools. First off, the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration is a pronounced issue. Developing a RPAT concerns expertise from multiple academic domains, such as linguistics, education, and psychology. Nevertheless, due to disciplinary, institutional, and regional divides, no effective communication and cooperation mechanisms are available to researchers across domains like these. This leads to fragmented and dispersed research efforts, making it difficult to produce systematic and comprehensive outcomes.

Also, many RPATs are developed in disconnection from actual teaching practices. A portion of development efforts are primarily research-driven, serving the purpose of academic publication rather than the needs of genuine educational scenarios. RPATs developed in this context are often tested only in laboratories or small-scale training settings without being validated in real classroom environments. Such disconnection compromises the effectiveness and practicality of the tools, hindering their application in regular reading instruction as well as their wide-scale dissemination, which could discourage further efforts for development of RPATs.

In addition, various research teams or institutions operate in isolation in developing RPATs, without a relatively uniform theoretical framework or comparable assessment methodology and application objectives. For example, the *Reading Proficiency Evaluation Framework for Children and Adolescents and Leveled Reading Materials Framework for Children and Adolescents*, developed by the Southern Leveled Reading Research Center, grade reading levels by learning phase in compulsory education, assessing reading proficiency in terms of reading quantity, reading skills, and reading habits (Southern Research Center for Leveled Reading, 2009; Chen, 2021). *Chinese Children's Leveled Reading Guidelines and Children's Cognitive*

Development and Recommendations on Leveled Reading by the Jieli Research Center for Children's Graded Reading focus on children aged 0–12, providing recommendations based on developmental characteristics of children (Song, 2014). Meanwhile, Qinjinmuyu's *Leveled Reading Program* underscores child reading literacy development, aligning itself with the national curriculum standards for Chinese language education (Xiang, 2022). These independently developed tools differ significantly in theoretical basis, assessment methods, and application objectives, rendering the comparison and generalization of their research results difficult and hindering the successful development of RPATs for across-the-broad application.

Education Policy-Related Factors

Delayed Reform of the Education Evaluation System

Currently, traditional examinations predominate in China's education evaluation system. In effect, in policy papers like the national basic education curriculum programs, the educational authorities call on schools to adopt multi-dimensional assessment methods in a bid to reform the current education evaluation system. Nonetheless, their efforts in this regard are relatively moderate, and, in the short term, cannot effectively alleviate the chronic impact of the exam-focused culture on the educational perspectives and evaluation methods pervasive in the education community. As a result, the utilitarian reading education practices aforementioned persist, dampening the development and introduction of competence-focused evaluation instruments, including the RPATs.

Despite that a portion of school districts have conducted diverse experiments in reforming the reading proficiency assessment, including developing and adopting the whole-book reading assessment tool (Yang, 2022), the constraints from the official education evaluation system remain. Currently, schools and parents still prioritize assessment tools that align with the official education evaluation system, or more specifically, those that assist with Gaokao and Zhongkao.

The Lack of Agreed Understanding of Reading Proficiency

At present, there is no agreed framework of reading proficiency in China, meaning relevant research projects cannot provide valid direction for the development of RPATs. Certain researchers argue that reading proficiency consists of six chief dimensions: information acquisition; comprehension; analysis and summarization; interpretation and inference; association and

extension; and critical appreciation (Zhang et al., 2015). At the same time, other studies contend that the construct of reading proficiency should include elements like the reading speed, the breadth of reading content, and the use of reading skills (Yao, 2012). The absence of a unified construct also makes cross-sectional comparison and longitudinal examination of assessment results across different regions and time periods difficult, undermining the scientific rigor of many assessment tools.

Inadequate Governmental Support

Developing a scientific and effective Chinese reading proficiency assessment tool requires substantial investment; meanwhile, there is insufficient support from the government. First, although recent central policy documents, such as the *Circular on Further Implementing the National Reading Initiative for Adolescent Students* (Ministry of Education of China & Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee, 2025), emphasize the necessity of organizing professional institutions to develop reading assessment tools, their lack of clear implementation guidelines and supporting action plans makes it difficult to successfully enforce these policies. Second, official supervision and guidance for the assessment tool development efforts is inadequate, resulting in quality gaps in existing RPATs. Third, the development of assessment tools requires long-term planning and sustainable support, which has been neglected by current education policies. The local education authorities may allocate special funds for developing reading assessment tools from time to time but fail to establish long-term mechanisms for maintenance and updates, causing these tools to gradually become obsolete. For example, in 2013, Shanghai Municipal Education Commission launched a research project for developing a leveled reading program for basic education students, with the Chinese Reading Proficiency Grading Framework for Shanghai Primary and Secondary Students (Draft) being one of its outcomes (Education Research Office of Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2021). This framework played a positive role in fostering students' reading ability. Nevertheless, little information is available on the updating of the framework or whether any follow-up research has been conducted.

Solutions

Transforming Stakeholders' Understanding of Reading Education

Changing societal attitudes towards reading is the prerequisite for developing and introducing scientific reading assessment tools. To do so, it is important to increase publicity to shift the utilitarian attitudes to reading in the public. The significance of reading proficiency for personal holistic development and lifelong learning should be extensively propagated through various channels, such as education departments, media, schools, and community centers. For example, leveraging social media platforms, educational public accounts, and TV programs to publish articles, short videos, and special features on reading skill development can draw more societal attention to the issue. Special emphasis should be placed on parent training to help parents develop legitimate understanding of reading education. For instance, it is advisable to organize lectures for education experts to impart to parents strategies for cultivating child reading competence and to educate them to support long-term reading proficiency development in their children rather than focusing attention on their short-term exam results.

More important is to popularize scientific notions of reading education in the education community. First, it is imperative to help teachers update their reading instruction methods. Rather than expecting “fixed interpretations” of text from the students, Chinese language teachers should learn how to direct them to analyze reading materials from multiple perspectives to foster their independent thinking and critical thinking. Second, relevant professional training should be provided to help teachers master scientific methods of reading proficiency assessment, including organizing regular reading education seminars, expert lectures and on-site training for them. Third, interdisciplinary teaching practices can assist in raising students’ awareness of the value of reading proficiency for their overall academic achievement.

Seeking Technical Backing

Technically, the development of Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools can be advanced via the following measures: (i) Create interdisciplinary research platforms. Led by the education authorities, dedicated interdisciplinary research projects should be set up to fund researchers from various domains like linguistics, education, and psychology to collaboratively develop high-quality reading assessment tools. Interdisciplinary seminars should be regularly organized, inviting specialists and researchers from diverse fields to share recent research findings and promote cross-disciplinary integration. (ii) Encourage collaboration with international research institutions. Although Chinese differs significantly from other languages like English, internationally established RPATs, particularly those widely adopted ones, can still serve as a framework of

reference for the development of Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools. Hence, Chinese education researchers should be encouraged to participate in international conferences and training programs in this area to stay updated on global advancements and enhance research levels. Chinese universities should actively collaborate with internationally renowned research institutions and universities to jointly develop RPATs matching the characteristics of the Chinese language. (iii) Formulate an open Chinese reading assessment database. Under the auspices of the government, universities and educational institutions should assume the responsibility to collect reading assessment data from students across various regions, schools, and grades to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the data. Reading assessment data can also be gathered through online testing platforms and standardized to guarantee data quality. Also, academia-industry partnerships should be encouraged to increase investment in the development of RPATs and fully leverage the database. Additionally, the database should be regularly updated to reflect the latest state of student reading proficiency, with a dynamic maintenance mechanism for ensuring its long-term effectiveness. (iv) Harness new technology to reduce the costs and hurdles in reading assessment tool development. For instance, large language models can be leveraged to develop low-cost adaptive assessment tools. Specifically, natural language processing (NLP) as an artificial intelligence technology can be employed to develop reading assessment tools capable of automating the comprehension and analysis of Chinese text. Adaptive assessment tools can dynamically adjust test content and difficulty based on the student's reading competence, improving assessment accuracy while also reducing manipulation costs. Technology-powered tools like these can be applied to various scenarios, such as classroom teaching, online education, and home-based learning, providing students with personalized feedback and recommendations. By applying innovative technologies, developers can not only enhance their work efficiency but also supply more scientific and effective support for reading education practices.

Strengthening Governmental Support

Governmental support is of vital significance for advancing the development of Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools. First off, the education authorities should accelerate the pace of reform of the current education evaluation system, progressively lowering the weight of traditional exams but increasing that of competence-focused assessment (including reading ability assessment) in basic education. That will successfully remove the barriers to the development efforts presented by the exam-focused culture. We suggest that reading assessment reform be first piloted in several school districts and subsequently introduced to schools across the country.

Also important is to gather assessment experts and researchers together to create a uniform framework for Chinese reading proficiency to determine its dimensions (such as vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, text interpretation, reading speed, reading skills, etc.) and their respective weight. This would provide consistent guidelines for reading proficiency assessments in schools across various regions. At the same time, an evaluation and feedback mechanism for the said reading proficiency framework should be established. Feedback from teaching practitioners could help identify and address issues with the framework in a timely manner, continuously improving its scientific validity and effectiveness.

For policy documents issued, such as the Circular on Further Implementing the National Reading Initiative for Adolescent Students, specific implementation rules and supporting action plans should be made to ensure their execution. For example, specific funding plans and personnel training programs could be formulated to provide strong support for the development of RPATs. Also, it is necessary to set up a regulation mechanism for the development process of such tools, tighten the approval procedures for development institutions, and strengthen quality control and evaluation of the RPATs developed. Furthermore, the education authorities need to formulate long-term plans for the development and application of RPATs. For instance, a special funding plan should be in place for the long-term maintenance and updating of these tools, and research institutions and businesses be encouraged to engage in continual research and development efforts to ensure the sustainable advancement of RPATs.

Conclusion

The lack of standardized Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools is unfavorable for reading ability improvement in students, teaching decision making optimization, or education policy advancement. The issue is complicated, being the consequence of multiple factors, involving the dominant educational culture, technical limitations, and inadequate governmental attention. The study delves into the underlying causes of the current state of RPAT development in China and makes corresponding suggestions. Despite the existing challenges facing RPAT development efforts, we should have confidence in their prospects, considering the ever-increasing social awareness of the significance of reading ability, as well as the advances in technology and adjustments of education policy. The societal demand for scientific assessment of reading proficiency is bound to drive the professional development of RPATs and prompt its marketization. The application of emerging technologies like AI and big data will assist the development of more intelligent and accurate RPATs. In the meantime, the ongoing reform of the education evaluation system is instigating policy

support for RPAT development. The joint efforts of all stakeholders will hopefully result in the creation of high-quality Chinese reading proficiency assessment tools, which can contribute to reading proficiency enhancement in Chinese basic education students and reading education development in China.

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