



## **Examining the Modern View of the Nature of Ease/Difficulty in Second Language Reading with Different Text Genres: A Case Study**

**Jingyi Zhu**  
Ohio State University

### **ABSTRACT**

*Hauptman (2000) proposed a modern view about the easy/difficult nature of second language (L2) reading, proposing five factors: background knowledge, signaling, language, discourse, and length. Little research, however, has explored the hypotheses empirically. To fill this gap, this qualitative case study investigates: 1) What are the factors determining the nature of difficult/ease of L2 English reading across different text genres? 2) What is the participant's perception about the L2 English reading experience? and 3) To what extent do the findings show divergence from the modern view? The participant is an undergraduate Chinese student at a US university. Data were collected through a reading session (three texts in different genres but a same topic), interview, and artifacts. Data analysis involved coding, memos, and member checks. The major findings reveal that Hauptman's (2000) factors were mostly observed, but vocabulary seemed the most primary factor, confirmed by the participant. Also, the participant's attention and reading habits may influence how signaling works. Moreover, length, as a minor role, may have some psychological effects for accessing to materials. Last, genres could potentially intrigue emotions (e.g., anxiety), causing reading difficulties, as reflected by the participant. The study concludes with implications in research directions and pedagogical practices.*

### **A READING STORY**

On our trip to a nearby city, Zhenzhen (participant, pseudonym) and I went to a concert that performed Symphony No. 5 composed by Shostakovich. It was her first time to attend to a concert. Back to our hotel, Zhenzhen took out the concert booklet and started to read the introduction of the musician and the symphony closely. She also looked up the musician on the websites and shared some fun facts with me. After about ten minutes, she was surprised and excited to realize that there was a list of the names of the musical instruments at the end of the booklet. Immediately, she started to study these words by looking them up in the English-Chinese dictionary and at the same time told me what she had found and even tested me with some new words. A few words that came up in our conversation were symphony, trombone, clarinet, tuba, and harp, etc. (Field Note (FN), 11/17/2018).

### **INTRODUCTION**

Scholars have shown interest in second language (L2) reading and employed a variety of models in efforts to outline the landscape of L2 reading from different perspectives, such as

cognitive or sociocognitive dimensions. For instance, the connectionist view draws upon neural science and describes reading as a process reinforced by “repetition of information” which leads to the recombination and strengthening of some cognitive networks (Grabe, 2009, p. 86). Bernhardt (1991), for another, proposes a social and cognitive view towards L2 reading. She endorses a reader-based perspective that highlights the reconstruction of texts in reading processes (Bernhardt, 1991). These theoretical constructs are widely applied to support the discussions of various aspects of L2 reading processes. One line of research in this area is concerned with the difficulty/ease of L2 texts. To date, researchers have proposed that L2 readability and reading performance is correlated with factors such as working memory (Alptekin & Erçetin, 2010; Leaser, 2007; Sagarra, 2017; Shin, Dronjic, & Park, 2019), reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Zin & Rafik-Galea, 2010), background knowledge (Hauptman, 2000), depth and width of vocabulary (Ölmez, 2016; Prichard & Matsumoto, 2011), and syntactic awareness (Nergis, 2013).

Particularly, there is a traditional view that regarded “language” and “text length” as critical factors that affect L2 readers for perceiving texts’ difficult/easy nature. This traditional view was supported by audiolingual pedagogy that teaching to read should start with grammar and vocabulary imbedded in simplified texts (Hauptman, 2000). Recent literature, however, disagrees with this view. Employing the schema theory, research has challenged the traditional view concerning the factors that determine the difficulty/ease of L2 texts. Falling into the category of cognitive models, schema theory has been used to shed lights on second language reading. Indicated by this theory, background knowledge is “organized in cognitive structures or schemata and stored in our brains at all levels of abstraction” (Rumelhart, 1980, cited in Hauptman, 2000, p. 623). Research within this framework argues that readers rely on the organization of their past experiences when attending to L2 texts (Barry & Lazarte, 1995). With the underpinning of the schema-theoretical framework, scholars have proposed that background knowledge (e.g., culture schemata), among other factors, as a crucial element (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Hauptman, 2000; Roller, 1990) that makes L2 reading either challenging or accessible.

It’s worth noting that Hauptman (2000) went further to propose hypotheses involving several factors at play. Utilizing schema theory, Hauptman (2000) states that the traditional view of difficulty/ease in second language reading— language and text length— is not adequate to explain the nature of L2 reading. Instead, He offered what he called a “modern view” by proposing some new hypotheses concerning the following five factors at work in reading: background knowledge, signalling, language, discourse, and length.

Specifically, “background knowledge” is considered the “first Primary Ease Factor” in L2 reading (Hauptman, 2000, p. 622), that is, the factor most likely to make L2 reading texts more accessible. When “background knowledge” is not adequate, “signaling” plays a primary role, that is, linguistic and rhetorical clues drawing attention to key information to make easier processing. Hauptman (2000) asserts that the more signaling embedded in a text, the easier for an L2 reader to access to a text when other factors are the same. Additionally, “Language,” “Discourse,” and “Length” are considered secondary factors, with other factors being equal (Hauptman, 2000, p. 622). Hauptman’s (2000) propositions are illuminating; however, building his hypotheses upon the previous literature and his university teaching experiences, Hauptman (2000) does not provide detailed empirical evidence to confirm the hypotheses. Little research has been done to follow up the hypotheses. Therefore, it is imperative to inspect this modern view and examine how these factors play out in a specific case, namely, a college student’s L2

reading experiences. In addition, Hauptman (2000) does not specify how L2 readers respond to texts when reflecting upon the nature of ease/difficulty in L2 reading. It may provide more insights by including readers' perceptions. Also, considering that text genres have been frequently mentioned in conversations regarding L2 reading, this study will employ three different texts to inspect the factors that affect the difficult/easy nature of L2 reading.

Therefore, to gain a better knowledge about this issue and enrich the empirical literature, this qualitative case study aims to investigate the following research questions: 1) What are the factors that determine the nature of difficult/ease of L2 English reading across different text genres? 2) What is the participant's perception about the nature of difficult/ease of reading L2 English with different text genres? and 3) To what extent do the findings show divergence from Hauptman's (2000) modern view? Implications and limitations will be discussed at the end of the study.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participant

At the time of the research, my participant Zhenzhen (pseudonym) was a fourth-year undergraduate Chinese student at a prestigious Mid-West University in the US. I have known her for more than two years. Since the first day we met, I have been impressed by her curiosity in learning English, especially vocabulary. She was planning to take GRE in order to apply for a master's program in the future. At the time of data collection, she had entered the stage of preparing for GRE reading and had been studying a great deal of GRE vocabulary. In terms of her English learning history, Zhenzhen started to learn comprehensive English classes from 7<sup>th</sup> Grade, yet none of her school classes focused particularly on reading. The first time she was exposed to systematically learning English reading was when she prepared for her TOEFL exams in college; however, the strategies she learned from preparing TOEFL were mostly test-oriented which may not be transferred to other types of reading. Overall, she considers herself a proficient Chinese reader but not a proficient English reader. She does not actively look for English reading except the materials required in her classes or for taking tests (Interview, 09/13/2019).

### Reading Materials

The selection of the reading materials was based on Zhenzhen's narration about her previous experience: her experience with classic music and related reading as well as her goal of passing GRE (Memo, 09/01/2019). Accordingly, I prepared three texts (see appendix) that are related with music and music instruments and contain GRE-level materials, with a purpose of connecting the reading materials with her previous experiences. These three texts fall into different genres: a GRE reading comprehension test, a paragraph from a periodical, and a picture book.

The first text is a reading comprehension sample passage available from the official GRE website. The text is one paragraph of 129 words followed by three questions. Its content is related with a musician using elements of rock music in his classic music. The second text is an excerpt from the periodical *London Review of Books*, which is listed on the GRE official website

as GRE-level reading materials. Similarly, this excerpt contains one paragraph with 214 words; however, there are no questions attached to this short passage. With regards to the content, it is from a diary written by a musician who reflects on how he perceives the challenges of composing a piece of music. Different from the first two texts, the third text is a picture book named *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* (Uegaki & Leng, 2014). It portrays a Japanese-American girl Hana who is inspired by her grandfather's music talent and persistence and decides to follow his path and enter a talent show playing violin. The picture book is 32 pages in length. Different from the first two texts which were printed out, the picture book was a digital version on an iPad.

## Research Setting

The reading session and the follow-up interview took place in a study room of the university library out of Zhenzhen's choice. The idea was to provide a cozy and relaxing environment for reading. It was around 4:30 in the afternoon when Zhenzhen started to read. Zhenzhen picked a seat that she felt the most comfortable and read the three texts without being interrupted.

## Procedure

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2018). The main methods that I used for data collection are the reading session, follow-up audio-recorded interview, and artifacts (reading materials with my participant's notes and highlighting). I tried to triangulate the data from different sources.

I jotted down notes or wrote memos after Zhenzhen and I spent time together: grabbing a lunch, working on a part-time job, walking on campus, etc. I did so especially when she initiated conversations about improving her English to capture her learning experiences.

The reading materials were collected after Zhenzhen finished her reading. Before the reading activities, I emphasized that she could read the texts with the ways she usually does so that the reading experience could resemble her normal reading activities. She was given writing tools (including a pen and an apple pencil for the IPAD) and was told that she could take notes and underline the texts if she wanted. After her reading, she was also asked to mark the parts with a yellow highlighter that helped her comprehend the texts. The reading session took about half an hour.

The interview following the reading session lasted approximately 30 minutes. It was audio-recorded and entailed two components. The first part was related with Zhenzhen's background of learning Chinese and English, with a particular focus on her previous English reading experiences. The questions in the second part of the interview centered around her reflections on reading the three texts: her overall impression of the reading materials, recalls of the texts, and details about her reading experience with a specific focus on the potential factors that affect the ease/difficulty of the readings.

Data analysis started two days after the interview and was both descriptive and iterative. Overall, I tied together the evidence from my memos, the reading materials, and the interview to serve the qualitative analysis of the factors in L2 English reading. Coding is the major analytic tool I used for data analysis. I drew on my notes and wrote paragraphs of conceptual memos (Heath & Street, 2008) to summarize related findings. Coding was used on the memos, the interview transcription, and the reading materials. Based on Hauptman (2000)'s hypotheses,

terms of “background knowledge,” “signaling,” “language,” “discourse,” and “length” were used for coding. Some emergent and more specific categories were added to the coding system when occasions arose, such as “linguistic knowledge,” “cultural knowledge,” and “word-recognition.” Two cycles of coding were conducted in case major categories were missing. Based on the coding, comparisons were made between the findings and Hauptman’s (2000) modern view.

## FINDING

In this section, I will delve into the findings with an initial discussion about Zhenzhen’s responses to the five factors suggested by Hauptman (2000), namely, “background knowledge,” “signaling,” “language,” “discourse,” and “length.” Following that, I try to foreground Zhenzhen’s perceptions in terms of ease/difficulty in L2 English reading. Finally, a comparison will be made to highlight the similarities and divergence between Hauptman’s (2000) hypotheses and the findings from the current case study.

Zhenzhen’s overall impression about the three texts is that even though the GRE text was the shortest one, it was the most difficult one. The periodical article excerpt was perceived as the second most difficult one and even though it seemed easier, she still was not sure if she fully understood it. Compared to the first two texts, the picture book reading was the easiest and the most fun (Interview, 09/13/2019). In the following sections, attention will be paid to the factors that could affect the nature of ease/difficulty in L2 reading and the participant’s perceptions as to what helps her access to the texts.

### **Hauptman’s (2000) Five Factors at Play**

It is apparent that “background knowledge” has played a role when Zhenzhen attended to the three texts. The effects of previous linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge were both observed in the reading experience. During the interview, Zhenzhen mentioned that words such as “symphony” which were learned previously from her encounter with music were helpful. A look at the reading materials indicates that none of the musical instrument vocabulary is circled as new words by Zhenzhen. This furthermore proves that her background knowledge about the music instruments may have helped her understand the text. Cultural background also makes it easier for Zhenzhen to understand the texts. This is especially obvious in the picture book. When reflecting on the reading experience, Zhenzhen specifically points out the sentence “disappear into a crack between the floorboards” which reminds her of a very similar saying in Chinese. Additionally, daily life experience adds to the ease of the texts. Zhenzhen responded that of the three texts, the picture book was the easiest not only because it had simpler sentences but also because it was related to daily life (Interview, 09/13/2019). As Zhenzhen states, “When I read about the kids eating ice cream and oranges, I went to the picture and tried to find the food in the picture... I feel it is very picturesque... and feel there is common emotion. That reminded me of my personal life, that is why I remember this” (Interview, 09/13/2019). It could be argued that her daily life schemata were activated when reading the household activities in the story.

“Signaling” is another factor that has been found to make the texts more comprehensible. According to Hauptman (2000), signaling refers to both iconic (non-linguistic organizers such as pictures and maps) and non-iconic (such as titles and margin notes) cues. In the case of the picture book, the illustrations and the title are the signaling elements. In discussing the

illustrations, Zhenzhen replied that the pictures complemented her understanding of the text. For instance, Zhenzhen pointed out that a picture which shows the girl was about to walk towards the center of the stage gave her hints that she had not performed yet (Interview, 09/13/2019). Title is a non-iconic organizer in the picture book. When I asked Zhenzhen how the title helped her reading, Zhenzhen returned with a smile and said she never paid attention to titles (Interview, 09/13/2019). Based on how Zhenzhen treated the signaling in the texts, it suggests that even though signaling is an important factor to increase the accessibility of texts, readers' attention and reading habits may also be taken into consideration.

In Zhenzhen's case, "language," specifically, word-recognition, plays an essential role in making the texts either easy or difficult. When responding to my question concerning how she reacted to the new words, she expressed that she tried to guess the meanings of those words and felt frustrated when she could not and that affected her comprehension of the texts, especially in the first two texts (Interview, 09/13/2019). From the reading materials, it could be seen that the parts Zhenzhen circled during reading included new vocabulary, such as "provocateur's dungeon" in the second text.

Aligning with Hauptman (2000), recognizing "discourse" contributes to the accessibility of the texts. When Zhenzhen was done reading the three texts, she was immediately asked to mark the parts that helped her understand the first two texts (the GRE text and the paragraph from the periodical). Interestingly, except for a few nouns, most marked parts were rhetorical structures. For instance, words such as "yet" and "rather than" were highlighted showing that the rhetorical expressions of comparison and contrast aided her in the reading process. As Zhenzhen reflected, "When reading it, I will rely on the transitional words, and read the parts that are easier and then went back to the more difficulty part" (Interview, 09/13/2019). This reveals that Zhenzhen has utilized discourse as strategies to cope with the reading difficulties.

Length, which is regarded as the last factor in Hauptman (2000), does not show a critical effect on the nature of reading in terms of ease or difficulty in this case. As mentioned earlier, Zhenzhen voted the shortest text the most difficulty one which she read up to three times trying to understand its general idea. The second text is slightly longer but it took her shorter time to understand the text (Interview, 09/13/2019). It is hard to tell if the length contributes to the accessibility of the third text as the language in the picture book is relatively simpler than the previous two and the illustrations (iconic signaling) could largely improve the accessibility of texts (Hauptman, 2000).

### **Zhenzhen's Perceptions**

Even though it should not be generalized to a larger population, the participant's perceptions about the factors influencing the accessibility of texts may provide an insider's perspective. To better understand how Zhenzhen perceives the difficult/easy nature of texts, she was first invited to evaluate herself as an L2 English reader at the beginning of the interview. Towards the end of our talk, she was presented with eight factors including Hauptman's (2000) five factors in random sequence (i.e., background knowledge, text genre, word-recognition, grammar/syntactic knowledge, strategies, signaling, discourse, and text length) and was encouraged to rank order by importance.

It is crucial to note that, due to the nature of this case study, the factors for ranking are modified compared to the five factors in Hauptman's (2000) hypotheses. With the five categories still included in this new list, two factors were newly generated and the category "language" was

modified. Specifically, as the texts involve test materials, the factor “strategies” is added. Also, the texts in this current study include different genres, which leads to another factor “genre” added to the list. Hence, there are eight factors for ranking in total. In addition, this study wants to tease apart word-level knowledge and sentence-level knowledge to gain more nuanced understanding about the “language” factor. Therefore, two separate categories—word-recognition and grammar/syntactic knowledge—are created. To avoid confusion, I spent some time explaining the terms (such as “signaling”) based on Hauptman’s (2000) article until she felt ready to rank order.

It seems that from Zhenzhen’s perspective, a proficient L2 English reader should not have linguistic barriers, be it word-level recognition or sentence-level knowledge. Since she views herself having issues with vocabulary and grammar, she considers that her English knowledge is not adequate for reading proficiently and expertly. She explained in the interview that “what makes it most challenging is that... three to five new words I don’t know. The grammar, the structures of the sentences are complicated for me. When I read the second sentence, I forgot what the previous sentence is about. I had to go back a lot. This is not the case with Chinese...” (Interview, 09/13/2019).

What also stands out in Zhenzhen’s reflection is that her reading is largely affected by the text genres. When asked to describe the feelings for reading the two GRE-level texts, she shared that “I felt nervous. If I cannot answer the questions, I cannot take the GRE. I feel frustrated. I wish I could study English earlier. Wasted a lot of time. For the digital text... no need to highlight anything as the paragraph is short. It is a story. I was relaxed as I don’t need to get points for this” (Interview, 09/13/2019). It seems that with readings related with high-stake tests, Zhenzhen experiences more reading anxiety facing the pressure of “getting points,” which in turn adds to the difficulty of accessing to the meaning of the texts. On the contrary, the picture book which is embedded with lovely pictures and holds no “threat” for failing a test provides ease for Zhenzhen to engage in reading.

Overall, with regards to the five factors mentioned in Hauptman (2000), Zhenzhen sees language, especially word recognition, as the first factor that affects the easy or difficult nature of texts. When comparing the language variable with others, she made an argument that even when she had some background knowledge, she still would not be able to understand the texts if she had not known the key vocabulary (Interview, 09/13/2019). She ranked the rest of the factors in this manner: text genre, grammar/syntactic knowledge, strategies, background knowledge, discourse, signaling, and text length. In her view, the effects of her background knowledge and recognition of the rhetorical structures were both obvious in her reading process whereas signaling and length played minor roles.

## **A Comparison**

Based on the data analysis and Zhenzhen’s perceptions, the current study attempts to delineate the factors that determine the nature of ease/difficulty in L2 English reading. Below is a comparison of the ranks between Hauptman’s (2000) modern view and an updated view based on the participant’s reading experience (Table).

An examination of the table shows that the findings are divergent. An immediate question would be whether the background knowledge and signaling revealed in the reading process are primary factors. Note that I prefer to use past (nonlinguistic) experiences instead of background knowledge. This is because it seems that background knowledge may be too broad a term; it

could cover previous knowledge on language, discourse, and signaling, etc. It is hard to tease apart the factors. Past (nonlinguistic) experiences include previous activities that are not language specific, such as cultural experiences, disciplinary knowledge, daily conversations and activities, etc. This understanding actually corresponds to Hauptman's (2000) notion that background knowledge is readers' prior knowledge in a certain field or their cultural schemata. In short, I feel it would be more specific and accurate to point out that the background knowledge refers to nonlinguistic past experiences.

**Table.** A Comparison of the Factors Ordered by Importance

<b>Hauptman's (2000) Modern View</b>		<b>An Updated View Generated from the Case</b>	
<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
1. Background knowledge	1. Language	Word-recognition	1. Text genre (reading anxiety related with genre)
	2. Discourse		2. Grammar/syntactic knowledge
2. Signaling	3. Length		3. Strategies
			4. Past (nonlinguistic) experience
			5. Discourse
			6. Signaling
			7. Text length

As shown in the current case, it seems that the past experiences did play a role, but it might not be a primary or crucial role. Zhenzhen commented that if she had not had the experience of attending to concert, she would have guessed the texts were about a type of music based on the contexts anyways (Interview, 09/13/2019). Similarly, signaling does not seem to take the second place as a primary factor in Zhenzhen's case. She relied on illustrations to comprehend the text in the picture book; however, other signaling features such as the title has limited effect on making the text more accessible. Note that I should be cautious to draw conclusions concerning signaling as it is not abundant across the texts. In other words, potential effects of signaling may not show in this case study.

Hauptman (2000) maintains that language, discourse, and length are the secondary factors following background knowledge and signaling. This case study, however, presents a different picture. Concerning the "language" factor, it seems to be a prominent factor that influences the text accessibility (Hauptman, 2000). This has been reflected throughout the interview with Zhenzhen and her highlighted reading materials. Specifically, word-recognition has been observed as important in this case study. This understanding connects well with the notion of language proficiency threshold (Cummins, 1979) or linguistic ceiling (Clarke, 1978). According to the language proficiency threshold hypothesis, "readers will not be able to read effectively until they develop some proficiency in the target language, even though the threshold level is liable to vary from task to task and from reader to reader" (Lee & Schillert, 1997, p. 714). To be put in another way, language proficiency threshold may be "the deciding factor" in success or failure in L2 reading, including the capability of drawing upon the knowledge in L1 (Lee & Schillert, 1997). Likewise, when determining whether a text is easy or difficulty, it seems that readers' knowledge of vocabulary or grammar has to reach a certain level so that other



factors could come into play. For instance, insufficient word knowledge may block the recognition of rhetorical structures, which would affect the access to texts. Once a certain level of language competence is reached, other factors are easier to be noticed and produce effects. It is also worth noting that language competence and reading comprehension are mutual; therefore, when attending to an easy or difficult text, readers are meanwhile accumulating more linguistic knowledge. The codependency propels readers' L2 reading competence. In a word, language (especially word-recognition in Zhenzhen's case) seems to be a primary factor that goes before other factors.

Text genre is a factor not explicitly mentioned in Hauptman's (2000) article, but this case study attempts to make an argument that text genre plays an important role in categorizing texts as easy or difficulty ones. More importantly, emotions associated with text genres may lead to differences in perceptions of a text. In Zhenzhen's case, the reading anxiety that came along with the reading made it more challenging for her to obtain the meaning of the texts. With the same topic of classic music, the GRE sample reading and the GRE-level excerpt from the periodical were considered as more difficult than the picture book which is featured with longer length, pictures, and less-complicated sentences. Recognition of text genres may create some sort of mental preparation or anxiety for readers to know what they will get into. As Eysenck and Calvo (1992) suggest, "Task difficulty is equated with the amount of attentional resources demanded by a task" (p. 411). Specifically, if a reader experiences worries, it will distract their attention to task-relevant information, resulting in a reduced availability of the cognitive resources for processing tasks (reading in this case). Consequently, the efficiency of a task performance would be negatively affected (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992). Knowing the materials will be for a test may produce more burden on readers whereas a fun story increases accessibility to texts. This aligns with Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) notion that "students' reading anxiety levels increased with their perceptions of the difficulty of reading" (p. 215) in their foreign language. The words "nervous" and "relaxing" Zhenzhen described about reading the GRE texts and the picture book respectively convey the message that reading anxiety was manipulating her responses to different texts.

It can be observed that "strategies" are also considered as a factor that could affect readers' perception of the easy/difficult nature about a text. The evidence includes Zhenzhen's reliance on transitional words, the use of the multiple-choice questions to comprehend the texts, her preference of "easier" parts to read first, and making decisions of reading certain parts repeatedly (memos, 09/13/2019). It follows that Zhenzhen intentionally used reading strategies to cope with the difficult texts and made it easier to access to the meaning. By disrupting the conservative way of reading (i.e., reading in a sentence-by-sentence fashion as Zhenzhen did with the picture book), Zhenzhen was able to make the task less daunting.

With a certain level of language competence, "discourse" becomes an ease factor for L2 readers. As is shown in the reading materials and the interview, Zhenzhen relied on the analogies and transitional structures to look for the coherent parts of the texts. That largely helped her comprehend the materials. This finding parallels with Hauptman's (2000) argument that "texts with easily identifiable discourse markers are undoubtedly easier to understand" (p. 629). Most parts Zhenzhen identified as helpful for her to understand the texts are easily recognizable discourse markers, such as "yet" and "but." As a matter of fact, it is revealed from the case study that discourse may take a more important place on the hierarchical list (before signaling).

Length does not seem to significantly determine whether a text is accessible or not in this case. This aligns with Hauptman's (2000) notion that text length is "of relatively minor

significance” (p. 629). Hauptman (2000) also highlights the psychological effect of text length on readers stating that L2 readers may be deterred by longer texts, which affects their reading performance. Evidence has been shown in Zhenzhen’s case. She seemed happy working on a short text and quickly absorbed herself in the reading. However, the shortest text was considered as the most difficult one in her reflections. That is to say, even though a shorter text could possibly ease a reader in reading, the language (and possibly other factors) would be still an important factor that determines if the text is easy or not. Insufficient language knowledge becomes obstacles even when the text is short. To conclude, text length may have some psychological effects, but the effects may only stay at the early stage of reading and the other factors are more significant than length.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

There are limitations and implications of the case study that warrant attention. First, in terms of comparing the findings with the modern view, this study mainly focuses on the order of the factors in the issue of ease/difficulty in L2 reading. Larger-scale and longer-term studies are therefore needed to test many more aspects of the hypotheses. For instance, a better control of certain factors (e.g., signaling) could be implemented while searching for appropriate reading materials so as to better observe how other factors come into play when background knowledge and signaling are equal. Second, as a researcher, I intentionally selected the texts for my participant, which may confine the scope of looking at the factors on a fuller scale. It would be also interesting just to look at the materials participants normally are engaged in reading or have participants choose their own reading. Third, as this is a case study with only one participant, the findings generated from this case may not be applied to other circumstances. More participants, therefore, are required to present more insights related to this issue. Fourth, different factors may be at play in different language families. The accessibility of texts in L2 English may shift in other languages, such as character-based languages; therefore, more types of L2 reading texts should be examined to test the modern view. Last but not the least, to classify a text difficult or easy depends on readers’ perceptions. A difficult text for one reader may be an easy one for another; therefore, more studies are needed to focus on readers’ perceptions and individual differences. Pedagogically, with the knowledge of readability, instructors would be able to design curricula accordingly. For instance, one implication is that teachers could introduce difficult reading topics using more relaxing text genres and ease students in more complicated ones.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings in this case study may suggest that the factors that determine the easy or difficulty nature of L2 reading texts are not as linear as the modern view illustrated in Hauptman (2000). First, most factors were observed in Zhenzhen’s reading activity, but vocabulary seems the most primary factor which affects the operation of other factors. In other words, language (e.g., word recognition) may play a more significant role compared with other factors and there is a threshold beyond which it is hard for other factors (e.g., discourse) to make texts more accessible. Moreover, length, which is missing in Hauptman (2000) may have some

psychological effects preparing readers to access to materials, but still are not as important as language, past experiences, discourse, and signalling. Text genres which is missing in Hauptman (2000) could potentially intrigue different reading emotions and may play a more important role in this process. Additionally, Zhenzhen's own perceptions on the nature of the reading materials shed lights on the classifications of the reading materials from an insider's perspective. Overall, it seems that the factors that are involved in this process function in a messier fashion than the clear hierarchy of the factors mentioned in Hauptman (2000) and the schema theory, though illuminating, may not be able to capture the whole picture of L2 reading ease and difficulty. It is hoped that this case study could generate more research interest in the future to look at the modern view proposed by Hauptman (2000), revisit the view suggested in this article, and uncover more nuanced findings in this area.

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## APPENDIX

Reading materials:

Text one: GRE sample reading test

Available at the GRE website: <https://www.ets.org/gre/>

Questions 1 to 3 are based on this passage.

Reviving the practice of using elements of popular music in classical composition, an approach that had been in hibernation in the United States during the 1960s, composer Philip Glass (born 1937) embraced the ethos of popular music in his compositions. Glass based two symphonies on music by rock musicians David Bowie and Brian Eno, but the symphonies' sound is distinctively his. Popular elements do not appear out of place in Glass's classical music, which from its early days has shared certain harmonies and rhythms with rock music. Yet this use of popular elements has not made Glass a composer of popular music. His music is not a version of popular music packaged to attract classical listeners; it is high art for listeners steeped in rock rather than the classics.

1. Select only one answer choice.

The passage addresses which of the following issues related to Glass's use of popular elements in his classical compositions?

- A. How it is regarded by listeners who prefer rock to the classics
- B. How it has affected the commercial success of Glass's music
- C. Whether it has contributed to a revival of interest among other composers in using popular elements in their compositions

- D. Whether it has had a detrimental effect on Glass's reputation as a composer of classical music
  - E. Whether it has caused certain of Glass's works to be derivative in quality
2. Consider each of the three choices separately and select all that apply.  
The passage suggests that Glass's work displays which of the following qualities?
- A. A return to the use of popular music in classical compositions
  - B. An attempt to elevate rock music to an artistic status more closely approximating that of classical music
  - C. DA long-standing tendency to incorporate elements from two apparently disparate musical styles
3. Select the sentence that distinguishes two ways of integrating rock and classical music.

Text two: an excerpt from *London Review of Books*

Muhly, N. (2018). Diary. *London Review of Books*, 40(20), 38-39.

More practically, I see each commission as a challenge: write a piece of music which lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes, for an orchestra comprising the following 65 instruments, and we'd like it by this date. These are known restrictions, the sort of predetermined constraints architects and painters work with too: you know the site on which the building will be built, or the size of the wall on which the canvas will be hung. The primary task, I feel, is to create a piece of art that is better than the same amount of silence; I would prefer to sit silently thinking for ten minutes than to listen to certain pieces of music, and therefore feel that it is my duty as a composer to occupy the time of the listener and the musicians with something challenging, engaging and emotionally alluring. I don't want to play them a movie with a clear exposition, obvious climax and poignant conclusion, nor do I want to drop them blind into a bat cave of aggressively perplexing musical jabs. I try to create an environment that suggests motion but that doesn't insist on certain things being felt at certain times. Mapping the piece's route helps me avoid the temptation of the romantic journey or the provocateur's dungeon.

Text three: Two sample paragraphs in the picture book

Uegaki, C., & Leng, Q. (Illustrator). (2014). *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin*, Kids Can Press.

As Hana walked onto the stage, her violin tucked under her arm and bow gripped tight in her hand, an oceanic roar filled her ears.

Things seem to be moving in slow motion, and for one dizzy moment. Hana thought, "Kenji and Koji were right. This is going to be a disaster." She wished she could turn into a grain of rice and disappear into a crack between the floorboards.

**Jingyi Zhu** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Ohio State University in the Foreign, Second, Multilingual Language Education Program in the Department of Teaching and Learning. She teaches academic L2 English writing. Her interests are L2 reading, arts-based practices in L2 research, and language teacher education.

Email: [zhu.1662@osu.edu](mailto:zhu.1662@osu.edu)