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Killing two birds with one stone? Turning CFL learners into book writers: An exploratory study

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Abstract
Two problems often emerge in the process of learning Chinese. First, learning to write at the beginning stage often focuses on forms, without an authentic purpose. As a result, learners do not have enough motivation to write. Second, while extensive reading benefits language learners, not many extensive reading materials are available to beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners. This empirical study examined the feasibility of incorporating a writing project into the curriculum, as well as the potential impact of such a project on learners’ reading and writing progress. A total of 89 learners participated in this study. The findings show that the participants who wrote books and those who read the books both enjoyed and benefited from the project.

Keywords
writing for audience, guided writing, reading, writing, book writing, meaningful writing, extensive reading, writing with purpose, images in writing, leisure reading, communicative writing

Disciplines
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Comments
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Killing two birds with one stone? Turning CFL learners into book writers
An exploratory study

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Two problems often emerge in the process of learning Chinese. First, learning to write at the beginning stage often focuses on forms, without an authentic purpose. As a result, learners do not have enough motivation to write. Second, while extensive reading benefits language learners, not many extensive reading materials are available to beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners. This empirical study examined the feasibility of incorporating a writing project into the curriculum, as well as the potential impact of such a project on learners’ reading and writing progress. A total of 89 learners participated in this study. The findings show that the participants who wrote books and those who read the books both enjoyed and benefited from the project.

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中文学习中常常会遇到两个问题：一是初级写作中往往过于注重形式而没有真实的写作目的，导致学生写作动机不足。二是由于阅读材料的缺乏，泛读作为非常重要的一个学习环节往往被忽略。本文以实证方法，探讨了以一石二鸟的方式为初级及中低级中文学生解决这两个问题的可能。学生在教师指导下写成的图书，被后来语言程度相似的学生用作了泛读材料。共有八十九名学生参与了此项研究，研究结果表明，此项图书写作活动及作品的使用，既对学生的写作有益，又对学生的泛读有帮助。

关键词：中文写作，中文泛读，中文课外阅读，中文写作指导，目的写作

1. Introduction

Writing, for beginning and lower-intermediate foreign language learners, tends to be mechanical and dull, focusing on lexical and syntactic matters instead of meaning. As a result, it is hard to motivate the learners to start to write. It is imperative to discover writing activities that can personalize and contextualize beginning and lower-intermediate learners’ writing to make it meaningful.

Reading, one of the most important proficiency skills in foreign language learning, requires special attention in curriculum, especially for Chinese-as-a-foreign-language (CFL) learners. Due to the logographic nature of Chinese language, learners whose native language is English need extensive exposure to text early on in their learning in order to achieve reading fluency at a later stage of learning. However, for beginning and lower-intermediate CFL learners, there are not enough good and interesting reading materials at their proficiency level.
This study examined the feasibility of an approach to motivating CFL learners to write and to using their writing products as extensive reading materials for CFL learners of similar proficiency level. This report includes a detailed description of the study’s approach, and analyses of learners’ perceptions of the writing and reading processes were analyzed.

2. Rationale and literature review

Writing is an important skill in foreign language learning, but it is often reduced to skill-getting practice. In the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLEP 2006), five “Cs” (“Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Community”) are given as the goals that foreign language learning should reach. One of the five Cs, “Communication”, requires that students “present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners and readers on a variety of topics” (p.4). This requirement covers two important skills, speaking and writing. While speaking has the priority in most classrooms, and in the research field (Harklau 2002; Leki 2000), writing is mainly used as a means to enhance speaking skills (Magnan 1985), or to learn the sub-components of writing, vocabulary and grammar, and is thus often referred to as skill-getting practice (River, 1975), or as transcription-oriented practice (Dvorak 1986; Musumeci 1998). Skill-getting or transcription-oriented writing practice refers to activities that are mainly concerned with spelling, grammar, and other formal features of the written work. In this type of practice, meaning is usually ignored or is treated as secondary.

To guide learners to focus on meaning-making and communication, foreign language writing practice needs skill-using, or communication-oriented activities. “Writing is not simply a skill to be acquired or displayed; rather it is a powerful shaper of the way we view ourselves and the world” (Musumeci 1998). Writing activities in foreign language learning should help learners integrate cultural and personal perspectives, along with the information learned in the classroom and/or on their own. Writing is communicative in nature. In the real world, an author intends to convey a message to a particular audience within a context, and for a specific purpose. Writing activities introduced into foreign language learning must be designed to “help determine writers’ conceptualization of the rhetorical problem, and engage higher-level planning and reviewing processes” (Lee and VanPatten 2003: 251). That is, writing should engage learners in thinking about its purpose, target audience, topic, and goal.

Research results show that students produce more thoughtful, effective, and accurate compositions when the audience for the writing is clearly indicated (Chen and Brown 2012; Paulson 1993). However, if not made to pay attention to the audience and the purpose of their writing, students will view writing merely as completing a class assignment (Lee and VanPatten 2003). The students’ motivation for writing will wane soon after they start the writing task.

Communication-oriented writing activities should start at the early stage of foreign language learning. Research has shown that meaningful writing with a specific audience and purpose, at an early stage of language learning, is very beneficial to learners (Omaggio Hadley 1993; Scott 1995; Stokes 2007). Scott (1995) points out the benefits of the discoveries that learners could make when they write with an audience and a purpose in mind at the beginning of their language learning. Stokes (2007)’s study proved that a semester-long writing activity that is contextualized, personalized, and meaningful was very beneficial to beginning Spanish learners.

Omaggio Hadley (1993), among others (Feuer 2011; Maley and Duff 1989), has suggested that, in order to encourage students to express themselves, beginning and lower-intermediate learners should engage in various kinds of creative writing activities. Creative writing activities include writing stories, poems, and songs. Their purpose is not primarily to inform, but to enrich and entertain. For example, Kramsch (1993) argues that poetry writing is advantageous to learners simply because of the pleasure derived from doing it.

Extensive reading should also start early. Foreign language learners should have repeated exposure to print when they start to learn the language. LaBerge and Samuels (1974, 1994) state that the attention resource capacity that readers can allocate at any one time is limited. To achieve successful reading
comprehension, it is necessary that lexical access such as orthographic segmentation and word recognition should be automated so that attention can be devoted to comprehension of sentences, paragraphs, and entire passages. This is especially true in the case of Chinese language. Being logographic in nature, Chinese characters represent words or morphemes, not phonemes. Therefore, compared to learning alphabetic languages, it would take students who come from an alphabetic background more time to learn to read Chinese, and to achieve automated character recognition (Everson 994; 1998; 2009). CFL learners therefore need to spend more time reading a larger number of Chinese texts at an earlier stage of learning. An important way to help learners achieve this is to expose them, continuously, to a great amount of print, i.e. extensive reading (Everson 1994; Everson 2009; Sergent and Everson 1992).

Research also shows that reading speed and comprehension are closely related to reading quantity in first language acquisition (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding 1988; Elley and Manghubai 1983), and in second language acquisition (Bell 2001). Different from extensive reading, intensive reading is close reading of short but difficult texts, treating texts as vehicles for the presentation of language points. Learners use the texts for practice and consolidation of the use of language (Bartram and Parry 1989; Hyland 1990; Susser and Robb 1990). Intensive language focuses on the use of individual words and grammar structures in sentences. Extensive reading, on the other hand, is fast reading of large amounts of text to achieve an overall understanding. Another term for extensive reading is pleasure reading (Mikulecky 1990). It is what we do in our native language in daily life when we read online publications, brochures, and so on. Extensive reading is also called “free voluntary reading” or “Sustained Silent Reading” (Krashen 1993) when used as a teaching procedure. Extensive reading is critical in improving learners’ reading comprehension, and in helping learners expand their vocabulary and gain knowledge about the world and the language (Bell 2001; Krashen 1989; Nation 1997).

Reading with images helps. For beginning and lower-intermediate level learners, images in a book are important because they help with understanding (Grellet 1981, Hudson 1982; Lee and VanPatten 2003, Omaggio-Hadley 2001). For low-proficiency readers, pictorial cues can increase comprehension of text (Hudson 1982). Furthermore, cultural images enrich a text. Images can capture readers’ attention, and teach them to predict (Barnet 1989). Visual imagery can also provide meaningful clues for unfamiliar words and, hence, support the process of learning new vocabulary (Kellogg and Howe 1971), and enhance incidental learning of vocabulary (Chun and Plass 1996; Krashen 1989).

One of the biggest obstacles to getting beginning and lower-intermediate level learners to read a large amount of text is the lack of appropriate extensive reading materials. As far as I know, some reading materials written for beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners started to appear a few years ago, such as Chinese Breeze published by Peking University Press in 2008, and the available online reading materials “Chinese Reading World” (Shen, 2016). However, a large number of such text is urgently needed. As Bamford and Day (1997) put it, “the beginning students are in a Catch-22 situation. They cannot understand enough of the foreign language to make sense of most written materials, and yet they must read the foreign language in order to develop reading fluency” (p. 7). Beginning and lower-intermediate level students need extensive reading materials, written at their proficiency level, that are engaging and interesting. The extensive reading materials should be well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar (Bamford and Day 1997; Day and Bamford 2002). Children’s books seem to offer the best available extensive reading option because they use simple language and images; however, the topics of children’s books are unlikely to interest college students. Various types of textbooks offer another option; however, most feature texts in the dialogue format.

Is there a way for beginning or lower-intermediate level language learners to do more meaningful writing, with a purpose and audience, and to have access to more reading materials with images? Is there a way to kill two birds with one stone? Is it feasible for the learners to write books that would then be used as extensive reading materials for themselves and for future learners? The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of incorporating a semester-long writing project into a language-learning curriculum, and the potential impact of such a project on the reading and writing progress of beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners.
There are four main research questions in the study:

1. Are beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners able to write a short picture book if provided careful guidance and a proper amount of assistance?

2. What are the learners’ views on the experience of writing short picture books? Does the picture book-writing activity help learners learn the language, and if so, in what ways?

3. What difficulties, if any, do students encounter during the process of writing a short picture book?

4. What is the students’ perception of the extensive reading experience if they use the books written by their peers for this purpose?

3. Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory design to assess the feasibility of the picture book-writing project. Forty-five beginning and lower-intermediate Chinese learners participated in the writing phase of the picture book-writing project and wrote short books in Chinese under close guidance. (Note: Participants’ language proficiency level in this study was based on the length of time they had been learning Chinese in the program. Beginning Chinese learners were first-year CFL students and lower-intermediate Chinese learners were second-year CFL students.) Another 44 beginning and lower-intermediate learners participated in the reading phase of the project and read the books created by former students for leisure reading. Data collected include student surveys, the books that the students wrote, written records of in-classroom and outside-classroom communication between students, instructor/researcher field observation notes, and a semi-structured group interview. Use of a survey and an interview together help to better reveal students’ perception and process (Mackey and Gass 2005). Since the study involved two groups participating in two different activities/phases (the writing activity/phase and the reading activity/phase), the participants and procedures are introduced separately (see below).

3.1 The Writing phase: participants and contexts

A total of 45 beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners in six classes from a Mid-western comprehensive university participated in the writing phase of the picture book-writing project. Of the 45 participants, 41 were college students and four were high school students. About one third of the participants were first-year students who were in the second semester, and the rest were second-year students who had studied Chinese for three semesters. Three out of the 45 participants were heritage learners. The writing project (writing phase) was conducted as an extra-credit activity over four semesters and in multiple sections of Chinese classes. Of the 45 participants, 11 students, either individually or working with others, wrote more than one book, but no more than one book per individual or group was written per semester.

3.2 Writing phase: procedures

The writing project participants received their picture book-writing task and its requirements three weeks after the semester started. They had two months to finish writing a short book. They received a detailed timeline so that they would not find themselves in a rush to finish it a few days before the final deadline. The timeline included the deadlines for reaching key project milestones, such as: choice of topic/genre, meeting with the instructor to discuss and decide an approach to writing the book, submission of the first draft, submission of the second draft, submission of the final copy (both electronic and hard copies), and sharing their book with their classmates. Participants chose whether to write the book individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. (See Appendix A for the detailed requirements.) The participants’ short picture books could be of any genre and on any topic they wished. The participants knew that they would be required to share their books with their classmates, and that incoming CFL students in the Chinese program would read their books as extensive reading materials.
The books could take any possible genre, including a regular information book, a brochure, an advertisement, a travel guide, a handbook, a manual, or a storybook. Then if, for example, a participant chose the storybook format, he or she could choose a picture book, cartoon book, diary, or other presentation style for it. Participants could choose to write about any topic; they could write about the study of Chinese, about another area of study familiar to them, or about common activities -- cooking, dining, a hobby, sports, pets, travel experiences, or friendship, for example. Their books could be about culture; for example, comparing aspects of Chinese culture to those of another culture, or about kung fu or tai chi.

Students were permitted to choose any topic and any genre, but they all had to follow the format requirements: 1) the book must be attractive, and interesting in content; 2) the minimum length of the book must be 10 pages for the first-year students, and 15 pages for the second year students; 3) each page must comprise illustrations and typed sentences in Chinese characters; 4) the sentences must express substantive content, and the illustrations must maximally express, or supplement, what the author wanted to convey. In addition, a front cover page and a back cover page were required. The front cover page was to include the title of the book in an appropriate font size and style, and include the name of the author and the name of the illustrator. The back cover page was to include a sentence or two promoting the book in an interesting way. It was required that an information book have a Table of Contents page and that the pages be numbered, starting with the first content page. If the book included any images or graphs created by others, a credit page at the end of the book was also required. The required minimum dimensions of the book were four inches wide by six inches tall.

A number of picture books, written in or translated into Chinese, were shown to the participants as samples and for inspiration. Systematic instructions about the procedures were given to the participants to help them execute their writing projects smoothly. See Appendix A for the book-writing guidelines.

Resources were provided for the participants to use during the writing process. These resources included the instructor, the Teaching Assistant (TA), native speakers of Chinese on campus or upper level CFL learners who were available to help, and family members. Participants could utilize these resources to discuss their ideas and to ask how to express them in Chinese if they were stuck.

At the end of the semester, the participants filled out a survey and were informally interviewed by the researcher about their writing experience. The main purpose of the survey and the interview was to understand the participants’ writing process, the difficulties they had encountered, and what they had learned. The semi-structured interview was conducted after the survey data were collected; its specific purpose was to give the participants an opportunity to talk with the instructor/researcher about the writing project in detail, and to give the researcher/instructor an opportunity to gather information not included in the survey. The semi-structured interview consisted of three main questions, and some follow-up questions were asked depending on the participants’ answers. (See Appendix B for the survey and the interview). Even though most of the semi-structured interview questions could be included as survey questions, talking face-to-face with the instructor/researcher, from the pedagogical perspective, reduces the teacher-student distance and signals the importance of the picture book-writing project; from the research perspective, the interview supplements the survey with additional valuable data. Using both survey and interview in this study was beneficial pedagogically and helped obtain more accurate data.

3.3 Reading phase: participants and context

Three classes and 44 students participated in the reading phase. Of the 44 students, 21 were first-year students in their first semester of learning Chinese, and 23 were second year students who had studied Chinese for two semesters. Two were high school students. Two were heritage learners. In order to maintain an objective view about the use of these books, none of the 44 students who participated in the reading-phase were involved in writing the books they read, nor were they classmates of those who wrote the books they read.

3.4 Reading phase: procedures
Two researchers worked together to select the best books to be used in the reading phase, and to decide which books were appropriate for each group of participants. Of the 38 books produced in the writing phase by the beginning and lower-intermediate CFL learners, 30 books were selected as reading materials to be used in the reading phase.

The book selection was based on three criteria: (1) language use, vocabulary, and grammar; (2) the book appearance, its genre and the quality of the illustrations; (3) whether it was interesting; (4) the level of language used. Based upon the language level criteria, the 30 books selected were further categorized (with overlaps), 24 to be assigned to the first-year students and 27 to the second-year students. The language level used in some of the books assigned to the first-year students was a little higher than the language level they had attained. However, considering that the topics of these books were interesting, and their illustrations were vivid, the researchers decided to include them to further motivate the participants in extensive reading.

During the reading sessions, the instructor first explained the reading task. She pointed out the importance of extensive reading (reading for pleasure) as opposed to intensive reading (close reading), and displayed the books on her desk for the students to choose.

The students were allowed to read the books individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. After reading their first book, the students were asked to fill out an after-reading worksheet, return the book to the desk, then choose a second book and repeat the process. The after-reading worksheet was designed to encourage the readers to write simple reading journals. (See Appendix C.) On the worksheet, the students were required to write the title of the book, what the book was about, whether or not they liked the book with their reasons, and what they had learned from the book. If students had read a book as a group, each student filled out a separate worksheet for the book they had read together. The after-reading worksheet gave the students space to record their personal thoughts and reactions to the reading and encouraged them to engage themselves with the text, instead of just glancing over the images. The instructor was present during the reading exercise to answer questions. The students were informed that the exercise was informal and that their worksheets would not be graded. Since none of the students had ever done extensive reading in Chinese, they still did not have the habit of guessing the meaning of new words from the context and some of them preferred to find out the meaning of some key words using their electronic devices. Therefore, the students were permitted to use personal electronic devices, if they wished to, but they were not encouraged to do so.

The students read for 45 minutes. After the reading session ended, they filled out a survey, then met informally with the researcher to discuss their reading experience. The main purpose of the survey was to determine how the students viewed their reading experience. (See Appendix D).

4. Findings

The findings suggest that beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners were able to create and write short books with guidance and assistance, and that the writers learned a lot, not only about language and culture, but also about interacting with students from China. Most of them expressed that, if there was another chance, they would like to write another picture book in Chinese, and in fact some students wrote more than one. The books they created proved to be beneficial as extensive reading materials for the CFL learners of a similar language level proficiency, and provided an enjoyable reading experience for the participants in the reading phase.

4.1 Beginning and lower-intermediate level students are able to write a short book with careful guidance and a proper amount of assistance

The 45 students produced 38 short picture books (or brochures). Since the picture book-writing project (the writing phase) lasted four consecutive semesters, some students who had enrolled in more than one
semester volunteered to write a book during more than one semester. Seven of the 45 students wrote two books over two semesters, and four students wrote three books over three semesters. These eleven students worked either individually or with other peers in completing the books.

To create the short books, 21 students worked individually, 22 worked in pairs, and 18 worked in groups of three. Some of the books were original and some were adapted from stories they had read in the past, or were translated and adapted from non-Chinese books. Some students painted and drew to illustrate their books, and some illustrated their books with photos they had taken. A few illustrated their books with images they had found on the internet. Writers expressed their meaning through adequate cohesive devices, correct grammar, and rich vocabulary. See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for sample pages.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** The cover page and five inner pages of the book, My Pet 《我的宠物》, written by a first-year student
Genres and topics of the books varied greatly. Twenty-one of the thirty-eight books were non-fiction and seventeen were fiction. The non-fiction books had a wide variety of themes and covered a wide range of topics. Five recounted life or an adventure in another culture, including China, India, and Japan, and two of these five retold the story of participant’s study-abroad experience in China. Four books introduced foods in different regions or countries, and included names of the foods, their ingredients, cooking and eating instructions, and enticing pictures of the foods. Three books introduced schools and universities that the writers had attended. For example, two learners worked together and wrote a series of two books, over a two semester period, introducing their university to incoming Chinese students. These books explained the traditions and the unique features of the university, and fun places to go and fun things to do around the campus. Two high school students worked together to illustrate their books with photos they had taken of their high school activities, teachers, and buildings to introduce their school to readers. Two books introduced cities, one Washington D.C, and the other, the city where the learner lived. The other seven books focused on different themes and each of them was very unique. For example, one was about the student’s love for the four seasons because of the different activities he did with his young son during each one. One was a travel-advertising brochure created by three learners, which featured different types of dorms in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Tokyo. Two books are worthy of special mention: one book detailed the benefits of learning Chinese, and the other was a very well-designed guide for tourists who had no prior knowledge of Chinese, to use while traveling in China. Other topics included sports culture in China and in America, the Chinese zodiac, and famous architecture around the world. See Figure 3 for the topic and theme distribution of the 21 non-fiction books.
Of the seventeen fiction books, ten were original stories created by the participants, and seven were adapted or rewritten based on existing stories. All books were written following a plot and supplemented with meaningful illustrations. It was easy to see that the participants had put a lot of thought into their books. All books, including the adapted ones, were very interesting, humorous, and creative. When the participants wrote or rewrote the stories, they were thinking about their audience, readers who were interested in Chinese culture and society. The books were rich in Chinese culture. For example, two students adapted a children’s book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* written by Judith Viorst and illustrated by Ray Cruz (1987). In the original story, the little boy was having a frustrating day with people, especially with his siblings, and thought of escaping to Australia. Making many funny changes, the two students adapted the story to reflect the Chinese culture -- the boy, in the student’s adaptation, now thinking of escaping to China because there were no sibling problems in China due to the one-child policy! (When the students did the writing project, the one-child policy had still not ended.)

4.2 Students enjoyed the writing process and the book-writing experience was beneficial to the writers in various ways

A majority of participants enjoyed the picture book-writing project for various reasons. The first reason was that, as one student commented, “This project incorporated creativity, research, culture, and language”: The project gave the participants choice and space to create. In order to produce their books, the participants needed to do research on culture and language expressions. Students viewed the project as an open-ended writing exercise. Doing this type of exercise allowed them to, in one student’s words, “put all the previously learned vocabulary and language structures in use.” The second reason was that the writing project proved more interesting and more engaging than other types of writing assignments. One student wrote in the survey, “It was fun and more beneficial than typical homework.” Another student said, “It’s fun to try something new.” A third student wrote, “I think we should have to write a book each semester.”

Participants enjoyed the book writing project because its purpose went beyond handing in an assignment for a grade -- they were writing for the incoming learners. Knowing that their books were not only the fulfillment of an extra credit requirement, but were also a product that would be read by other
students, the students anticipated that their books would be useful and be enjoyed. In the semi-structured interview, some students said that thinking about the future audience of their books had made them choose the topics carefully and had motivated them to make the books more fun. One student said, “We had to think what the readers would like.”

Through writing books, the participants reported that they had learned in four notable ways. First, their language ability improved. The picture book-writing activity had helped them strengthen what they had learned, including vocabulary and grammar. The project had opened a channel for them to learn new vocabulary and new structures. One student wrote, “[i]t made me think outside the box and learn new words.” Participants learned to think about things not typically learned in the language classroom, they learned how to put to use what they had learned in and out of the classroom. As one student wrote, “I learned the context for using many of our vocabulary words and when different grammar points apply.” The project helped them correct some grammatical misunderstandings they had. One first-year student gave an example of a new word he learned, 另外, and its differences from another similar word he learned in class, 別的.

Second, doing the picture book-writing project improved the participants’ ability to put their ideas together and form complete thoughts in Chinese. It helped them learn more about using cohesive devices to make ideas flow better. As one student said, “I learned how to put things together.” Another student wrote, “It makes you think in fluent sentences and use situations/expressions you wouldn’t cover so much in class.”

Third, students learned about Chinese culture through the project. A majority of students reported this, especially those who wrote books on food and traveling. They mainly gained new cultural knowledge from asking native speakers of Chinese on campus.

Fourth, the participants reported that they had learned how to better utilize the vast number of learning resources available, including the internet and the large number of Chinese students on campus. Some participants started to interact with Chinese students on campus because of the picture book-writing project. In order to finish the project, some students interviewed Chinese students about culture and asked them about some expressions in Chinese. This activity greatly enhanced their interaction with native speakers of Chinese.

In addition to the language and culture learning mentioned above, some participants reported that they had learned how to better work with a partner during the process of writing books. They said that they had learned how to schedule their meetings, how to approach the project together, and how to negotiate and to learn from each other.

4.3 Students encountered various difficulties in the process of writing books

To complete their books, the students had to overcome some challenges. These challenges included limited vocabulary and limited knowledge about grammar (especially for first-year learners), limited time to complete their books, and some typing problems.

Limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge was a hindrance to only a few students due to the writing goals they had planned to achieve and the topics on which they chose to write. While most students were writing to the Chinese learners who would be participating in the reading phase, two first-year students chose to write a book together for incoming students from China. They wrote a book that would be used by the incoming students to familiarize themselves with the university, with local life, and with American culture. The additional demands of writing to a Chinese audience caused these first-year Chinese learners a good deal of frustration. They expressed particular frustration that, as first-year learners, they could not yet use the language adequately to express things in the way they felt that their native Chinese audience would be able to enjoy. Unfortunately, by undertaking a task that was beyond their ability, these two students came to dislike their project. One of them wrote in the survey, “Maybe limiting book topics to the vocabulary in our textbook? It was frustrating to not know so much. I think this project would have been more fulfilling if I had more vocabulary and knowledge of Chinese in
On a positive note, despite the frustration they experienced when they wrote their first book, they decided to write a sequel when the new semester started. After these two students finished writing their second book at the end of their 3rd semester of learning Chinese, they were pleased with their final products, and the challenging process of completing them. In fact, both their first book and their second book were very well written, and displayed complex structures, good vocabulary use, and well-chosen photos to complement the text and enhance reader understanding.

Some students tried to tackle seemingly easy topics that turned out to be difficult, for example, food. Writing about food involves introducing such things as ingredients, and describing flavor and appearances. Such topics can present a significant challenge to beginning-level learners whose studies have focused mainly on basic daily conversation. As these beginning-level learners began to write their books about how to cook certain foods, their history, their taste and their appearance, they became quite frustrated. After they discovered that “some expressions make sense grammatically, but still don’t quite sound right to natives, and sometimes it didn’t make sense at all,” these students needed to constantly seek help from the instructor or their Chinese friends to complete their books.

Time was always an issue. It is natural for students to believe that they would have done better given more time. This sentiment is particularly true in the case of students who are perfectionists and who are assigned “open-ended” activities, the product of which can always be made better. Furthermore, despite the fact that the picture book-writing requirements and a detailed timeline were given to the students early in the semester, and the fact that most students followed these instructions quite strictly and finished their products very well and on time, a few students had to rush during the final days before the deadline, regardless of the reminders sent out by the instructor. These were the reasons why a few students reported in their survey that there was a lack of time in finishing and improving the books.

Since most of the first-year students were typing Chinese for the first time, showing them how to type Chinese just once was often not enough, and when a student encountered computer problems, for various reasons, the learning experience had the potential to become frustrating.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, most participants created very good books. They expressed their appreciation for the help they had received from the instructor, the TA, their Chinese friends, family members, and the online resources available. All participants sought assistance of some sort from the instructor. For instance, some students asked for the Chinese translation of certain expressions, or asked questions on logistics and collaboration. In addition to answering the questions, the instructor provided detailed and constructive feedback on their drafts. If a student had tried to put in too much information into a book, the instructor helped him or her focus on the important aspects of the topic. If a student lacked the knowledge of how to use the space, or how to distribute illustrations within the text, the instructor gave suggestions. A majority of the participants sought assistance from their Chinese friends. Little more than half of the students used online resources to help them finish the project, using them primarily to look for cultural information or to translate words. One-third of the students asked family members to help.

4.4 Students participating in the reading phase positively perceived the experience of using the books as extensive reading materials

Each of the 44 students read two to three books, then filled out one worksheet for each book they had read, during the 45-minute reading time. All students were very engaged in reading. Some students read the books individually, and some read books together in groups of two or three. All read quietly, although giggling and laughing could be heard occasionally. Sometimes the students discussed topics related to the books they were reading. For example, one group of three (An American student, a Korean student, and a Malaysian student) read about dorms in Japan, then briefly discussed the relationship between Korea and Japan, and between Japan and China. One pair read a book about the zodiac then exchanged their understanding of the story in an effort to determine why there was no cat in the Chinese Zodiac.

In general, all students enjoyed reading the books they read, and were impressed that they had been created by Chinese learners just like them. One participant was surprised “by the degree of creativity
displayed using a limited vocabulary and number of grammatical structures.” Some students left comments in the survey, such as “everything was good!” “我觉得很有意思!” and “Chinese comics are interesting and I like to read these books.”

One student enjoyed reading the books because they provided “a change of pace from our usual lessons.” One student wrote in the survey that the books afforded “a very good chance to read something not specifically tailored to a certain lesson,” and one viewed the book-reading experience as “an enjoyable challenge.” Unfamiliar expressions found in the books were not daunting to the students. On the contrary, one student said, “it was fun to try and figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words.” Some students considered this reading opportunity valuable because it was not easy to find books for leisure reading written at their proficiency level. One student wrote, “I also liked that the books were written by students so that Chinese wasn’t too difficult to understand.” Another student said, “The thing I enjoyed the most was that I could read almost all of it because the people writing have a similar vocabulary.”

One first-year learner chose a challenging book first, and then asked the instructor if she could choose another one. She commented, “I read one I could barely understand, but I enjoyed the activity. It was fun to read the ones I understand.”

Most students reported that the reading experience was beneficial to their Chinese learning. One student reported that the reading assignment was a “seemingly difficult assignment, yet seems rewarding.” Some students regarded reading the books as a good way to review. One said it was a “good review experience” and “a nice way to be exposed to all sorts of vocab we previously learned.” One student thought that “being able to use a translation app for some of the difficult characters” was beneficial.

When the students came across things in the books that they had not learned, they used different strategies to understand them. One strategy was to use apps on their cell phones. Another was to ask the instructor for help. In cases where participants believed, but were not certain, that they had figured out a meaning from its context and illustrations, they occasionally asked the instructor to confirm their guesses. Sometimes participants raised questions during the reading. One question, for example, was, “why do people say 意大利 (‘Italy’) but not 意大利国 as in 中国, 美国, 英国?”

The images in the books played an important role in helping the students understand things they had not yet learned. All participants agreed that pictures were very useful for their understanding of meaning. One student wrote, “as long as the books had pictures, even if I didn’t know the words I could guess and figure it out.”

Students noted that reading with one or two partners made it more fun, and that group members helped each other. One student commented, “It would be nice to read through a small book together.” Another student wrote, “Some of the characters were really hard so I enjoyed reading with a partner.”

Some participants specifically mentioned that they would also like to create a short picture book in Chinese. Others felt that, if they had a chance to create a book in the future, they would prefer to work together with others.

While a majority of the participants enjoyed the reading experience and considered it beneficial, a small number of first-year students expressed the frustration that they had experienced and gave suggestions. The primary source of the frustration was the words they had not previously learned. One student said, “It was hard to read new words in Chinese.” One student suggested that a word bank be provided with each book, stating that, “vocabulary is [the] main problem for beginners, so if there is a word bank, it would be better.”

5. Discussion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that skill-using writing, in other words, communication-oriented writing, is possible for beginning and lower-intermediate CFL learners. The participants were not only able to create short books reflecting their interests, but also able to enjoy creating them. During the process of creating books, they were not only able to learn about the language, the culture, the use of the
language in context, and how to put ideas together in the target language, but also about collaborating with others, about utilizing resources, and about interacting with native speakers of the language.

Supporting the conclusions of Feuer (2011), Omaggio Hadley (1993), and Maley and Duff (1989), this creative writing activity encouraged the students to write in their target language. The findings of this study proved that giving a language learner choices and freedom, while providing guidance, can motivate them to write. As Omaggio Hadley (1993), Scott (1995) and Stokes (2007) contend, meaningful writing with a specific audience in mind, at an early stage of language learning, is beneficial. Additionally, the findings of this study show that beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners learned a lot during this writing process, and that they became proud and confident when they found the meaning of writing and saw their finished, well-written books in front of them. The authentic writing purpose not only motivated the participants’ writing, but also made them confident about their learning ability.

For beginning level learners, writing books can present challenges. However, the study shows that those challenges can be overcome if the instructor foresees them at the beginning. For example, a beginning learner’s limited vocabulary and limited grammar knowledge can become a challenge if they want to pursue a relatively demanding writing task, such as writing for Chinese students. If the instructor foresees the challenge, he or she can either persuade the student to instead write for language learners and stay within the bounds of what they know, or the instructor can plan to give the student extra help. The two participants in the study who got extra help and wrote books for native speakers of Chinese seem to have learned much more than others who completed less challenging books.

The findings of the study also confirmed the hypothesis that, with careful guidance, the books written by the learners were useful as extensive reading materials for other learners. All readers of the books enjoyed and learned from the reading experience. Two particular factors played an important role in enhancing the enjoyment of this experience: the existence of images, and reading together with peers. The images helped the learners figure out the meaning of unfamiliar expressions, and thus expanded their vocabulary. Reading together allowed participants to discuss the books’ meanings and help each other.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the feasibility of beginning and lower-intermediate CFL learners creating short books written in Chinese, and using these books as extensive reading materials for incoming learners. The results of the semester-long picture book-writing project, conducted in six different classes and over the course of four semesters showed that, with close guidance and assistance from various sources, beginning and lower-intermediate level CFL learners were able to create effective short books. This writing project gave students an opportunity to apply what they learned to a specific context, to acquire new knowledge about the language and the culture, and to learn to interact and collaborate with native speakers of the target language. Having an audience in mind motivated the participants to write, and helped them find great purpose in writing.

A 45-minute reading session, conducted in three classes with different levels of learners (first-year and second-year CFL learners), showed that the books created by these students functioned well as extensive reading materials for CFL learners. The CFL readers appreciated the availability of these interesting books, written at their proficiency level (or a little above) with fun and interesting topics, and not only enjoyed, but also benefited from reading them.

Given the current lack of skill-using, communication-oriented, and meaningful writing activities available to the Chinese language learning community, and given the lack of appropriate extensive reading materials available to beginning and lower-intermediate level language learners, the findings of this study will no doubt contribute to the field by providing a win-win strategy to solve two problems through one activity.

Although this concept of book-writing has been previously discussed in the literature, this study is the first to determine whether this hypothetical win-win strategy would work. It demonstrates a number of
strengths including innovation in research design, the complementary use of both the survey and the semi-structured interview in data collection, and the originality of the picture book-writing project.

The study does have its limitations. First, if more extensive-reading sessions had been offered, participants would have been afforded the opportunity to enjoy reading more books of different styles. However, while this limitation on the reading sessions may have deprived the CFL learners of some learning opportunities, it did not affect the results of the study. With a well-planned and well-balanced teaching approach, additional extensive reading sessions could be added to the curriculum. Further research can also be done to investigate whether extensive reading of student-created books has any effect upon the reader’s vocabulary and reading ability. Second, even though participants’ self-reported perceptions of the writing project and the books they created have sufficiently shown the benefits of book writing, it would be worthwhile to do an experimental study examining the effect of writing short books on the students’ learning. For example, further study can specifically test whether the writing-phase participants’ writing ability and language ability in general have improved, as compared to those of students who did not do the writing project. Third, it would be interesting to see if it is a good idea to adopt the digital format. Reading e-books has become more and more popular. If the books were in a digital format that allows readers to use online reading apps, would it aid their reading comprehension and increase opportunities for incidental learning? Finally, the addition of interviews with those who wrote multiple books, and an examination of the books they wrote during different semesters, could shed light on how those students perceived their writing experience at different stages of their learning, and how their improvement in specific language skills affected that experience. These pieces of information would provide a more complete indication of the advantages and disadvantages of writing multiple books.

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References


Appendix A. The Picture Book-Writing Project Guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About this Project</th>
<th>Make a picture book of any genre and any topic using Chinese characters and the selected books will be shared with students in the program.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Book Requirements   | 1. The book should be attractive in appearance and interesting in content.  
                        2. Fifteen or more pages excluding the front/back covers (and the table to contents page and/or the credit page if it applies).  
                        3. Format:  
                                       a. On each content page, there must be typed Chinese characters and illustrations.  
                                       b. On each content page, there must be substantive content expressed with sentences and illustrations.  
                                       c. There must be a cover page with the title of the book in big font and the author/illustrator’s name.  
                                       d. There must be a back cover. If it is a story picture book, a hint of the story must be provided in an attractive way.  
                                       e. If it is an information book, there must be a Table of Contents page before the content pages.  
                                       f. The page number should start from the first content page.  
                                       g. The minimal size of the book: 4 inches X 6 inches  
                                       h. If you use images/graphs that are created by others, you should include a credit page in the end of the book before the back cover. This page is not counted as one of the content pages. (If you use images you Googled from the Internet, you should copy the URL where you found the image and paste the link to the credit page. You can’t just simply say “Google image”)  
                        4. Final version to hand in: One e-copy & one color hard copy |
| Procedure           | Step 1: Decide if you want to work on your own or with one or two classmates. Find your partner(s) if you want to collaborate and work on the book writing project.  
                        Step 2: Decide on a topic/theme and the genre.  
                        Step 3: Come up with a plan and make progress each week and follow the time points indicated on the timeline.  
                        Step 4. When making your book, you should keep asking yourselves the following questions: 1) How to tell the story or present the information so that it can be easily understood and attractive as well? 2) What images/graphs to use and how to use them to help enhance readers’ understanding? |
| Timeline            | 1. Decide on a topic by the week of 10/21. Talk with me or the CUA about how you are going to approach it.  
                        2. A draft ready for the CUA to proofread by the week of 11/11  
                        3. Final version due, 12/6  
                        4. Sharing books with others in class, 12/9-12/13 |
| Hints on Genres/Format | Your book can be an information book about anything in the world. Possible formats:  
                                    a) A regular information book  
                                    b) Brochures  
                                    c) Travel guides  
                                    d) Handbooks |
Running head: CFL LEARNERS AS BOOK WRITERS

| e) Manuals                        |
| f) …                               |
| Your book can be a narrative book (a story book). Possible formats: |
| a) A regular picture book         |
| b) Cartoons                       |
| c) …                               |

**Hints on topics**

a) About study (study of Chinese, or other fields/areas)

b) About daily life (such as cooking, dining, hobby, sports, pets, travel experiences, friendship, etc.)

c) Culture (such as comparing some aspects of Chinese culture to American culture, or Gongfu, Taiji, American culture),

d) Other creative topic (such as science fiction, dreams, etc.)

e) Your life, your friend’s life (think about the interviews)

f) What you have learned in CHIN 201 …

**Resources**

If you want to discuss your idea about the book or if you want to know how to express something in Chinese, you can seek help from 1) Your instructor 2) Your one-on-one Chinese Undergraduate Assistant 3) Chinese students in the Chinese Club 4) Upper level students who are studying Chinese

**Appendix B. Survey for the picture book-writing project (the writing phase)**

Congratulations on finishing your book! Here is a survey that asks about your book writing process and your thoughts about this project. There is no right or wrong answer to these questions. Please tell me your true situation/feelings. (Use the back of the page if there is not enough space.)

1. You are a student in
   - ☐ CHIN 101
   - ☐ CHIN 201
2. You wrote a book
   - ☐ by yourself
   - ☐ with one classmate
   - ☐ with two classmates
3. What topic was your book about?
4. How did you come up with the current topic for your book? Do you like the topic? Would you change it to another one if you had another chance of writing a book?
5. What was the most difficult part of writing the book?
6. What was the most fun part of writing the book?
7. How did you finalize what to include in your book?
8. You were encouraged to get help from different resources. Who did you seek assistance/help from in the process of writing the book? Circle all that apply.
   a. Chinese friends
   b. Family member(s)
   c. Instructor
   d. TA
   e. Other ___________
9. Were the people you sought help/assistance from helpful? Why or why not?
10. Do you think writing the book helps you learn Chinese language? Why or why not?
11. Do you think writing the book helps you learn about Chinese culture? Why or why not?
12. Can you tell me in detail what you learned through writing the book?
13. Overall, what do you most want to tell about this project?
14. Do you have any suggestions to the instructor so that he/she could improve the project in the future?

Semi-structured interview questions:
1. Tell me about your book and your writing process.
2. Do you think the book-writing timeline worked well? Any suggestions?
3. Would you like to write another picture book in Chinese, if given the chance?

Appendix C. The Worksheet for the Extensive Reading Session

Book #1 title: _________________________________________
1. What is this book about?

2. What do you think of this book? (Do you like it? Why? Did you learn anything from it? What impressed you? ... … )

Book #2 title: _________________________________________

What is this book about?

What do you think of this book? (Do you like it? Why? Did you learn anything from it? What impressed you? ... … )

Book #3 title: _________________________________________

What is this book about?

What do you think of this book? (Do you like it? Why? Did you learn anything from it? What impressed you? ... … )

Appendix D. Survey for the Picture Book-Writing Project (the Reading Phase)

1. I’m a student in: Chinese 101 Chinese 201

2. Gender: Male Female

3. This reading experience was fun.
   Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

4. This reading exercise is beneficial to my Chinese learning.
5. The pictures/images in the books helped me understand the information and/or the story.
   | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
   | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |

6. If I have the chance to create a book in Chinese, I’d be happy to do that.
   | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |

7. Overall, I like this reading experience.
   | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |

8. Other comments:

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**Appendix E. Book Title List**

1. 爱荷华州立大学
2. 爱荷华州立大学（续）
3. 在华盛顿你应该做什么？
4. 在埃姆斯有什么好玩的地方？
5. 埃姆斯高中
6. 我最爱吃的饭
7. 埃姆斯的餐馆儿
8. 中国菜
9. 12 生肖动物－你是什么动物？
10. 菜的世界
11. 在爱荷华的四季-- 献给我的儿子
12. 我的生活
13. 在不同的国家学习
14. 美国运动和运动文化
15. Guide to China
16. 你在印度的时候
17. 学中文 201 的好处
18. 现在是探险时间，跟你的朋友一起来吧！——我们会去遥远的国度
19. 范校，邓肯，李可达的旅行社（住在日本的宿舍，上海大学，香港东花公寓楼）
20. 世界上最好看的建筑
21. 我的在中国的生活
22. 我的宠物
23. 我想找回我的帽子
24. 李凡的决定
25. 兴夫和孬夫
26. 愤怒的小鸟
27. 王朋的冒险
28. 两只孤独的蜗牛
29. 你好，小李!
30. 我的小马驹，龙害羞
31. 叶限
32. 科仰的故事
33. 艾丽西娅的冒险
34. 你好，我女人
35. 一个美丽雪花
36. 亚历山大的很糟糕，很可怕，很不好，很坏的一天
37. 公主和一个豌豆
38. CIA 最高机密---李老师的档案
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