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Authors

Chen, Jenn-Yeu

Chuang, Yalin

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The effect of word-by-word presentation on reading of Chinese texts by native Chinese readers and learners of Chinese as a second language

Jenn-Yeu Chen

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

Yalin Chuang

Nanya Institute of Technology, Taoyuan, Taiwan

Abstract

There are no spaces between words in Chinese texts and this can present a challenge in reading for learners of Chinese as a second/foreign language (CSL) and native Chinese alike. We designed a self-paced reading computer platform on which individual words were shown or highlighted successively as participants pressed the spacebar to read a text without word spaces. CSL learners could read faster in this way than the traditional way where the entirety of the unspaced text appeared as a whole. Native Chinese readers did not show such a beneficiary effect. The results support the Processing Cost Hypothesis which states that word segmentation when reading unspaced texts consumes processing resources and therefore saving the resources by providing segmentation cues could benefit readers only when processing resources are overtaxed under certain circumstances, e.g., reading difficult texts, under time pressure, for beginner readers, and for foreign learners.