



# Applying functional language analysis approach in Chinese college English reading classes

Yinghui Sun<sup>a</sup> and Fang Zhang<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China; <sup>b</sup>English Teaching Group, Beijing No. 20 High School, Beijing, China

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that applies Functional Language Analysis (FLA) in Chinese college English reading context to promote students' understanding of the reading texts. Different from other commonly practiced reading activities, FLA encourages students to explore text meanings from aspects of content, organization and attitude, and how clues of lexical and grammatical resources help construct these three meanings. Thirty freshmen from a university in Beijing, China received FLA instruction for four months. Data were collected from students' analysis of reading tasks, presentations, and questionnaires. The study found that FLA is effective in facilitating Chinese students' active exploration of the text. Specifically, through an examination of participants, processes, and circumstances, students were able to comprehend the content meaning accurately. With attention paid to themes, conjunctions, and other linking devices, they could picture the text structure. They also started to understand the author's attitude by examining grammatical elements of formality, voice, mood, and modality. Additionally, FLA helped improve students' confidence and interest in English reading. Positive influences of this approach on students' other English skills such as listening, writing, and speaking were also reported. The findings suggest that FLA can be successfully implemented in Chinese reading classes.

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## 1. Introduction

English reading instruction in China has long been focusing too much on individual vocabulary learning and traditional grammar training, with not much attention paid to the true meanings of the text. Although strategies such as predicting, inferring, visualizing, and methods of top-down, bottom-up, and other models are being practiced in English reading classes, students still encounter great difficulty for a comprehensive understanding of the text. What is worse, after entering into college, students face more reading problems, with the reading of professional texts and academic theses among the most challenging one. The language of academic reading material is considerably distinct from that used in other types of texts, and consequently, many students are frustrated about reading and even afraid of it. It is high time to re-conceptualize what reading is and how to

teach it alternatively. Instead of just doing isolated grammar drills and vocabulary exercises, reading instruction for a more meaningful purpose is urgently needed.

A new approach called Functional Language Analysis (FLA) answers the call. Different from some commonly practiced methods in English reading classes, FLA, proposed by Fang and Schleppegrell (2008), Fang (2011), Fang and Wang (2011), offers a new perspective towards text understanding and how to teach it effectively. Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 2000; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), FLA approach views language as creative resources for making meaning. Through detailed analysis of language patterns, FLA approach focuses on exploring various meanings in text. The meanings in focus are of three types: the content, the organization, and the attitude/style/voice/tone, which correspond, respectively, to the ideational, textual, and interpersonal functions in SFL. As a linguistic approach to reading instruction, FLA also presents how clues of lexical and grammatical resources of language can help construct these three meanings.

FLA approach has been practiced widely in American educational contexts, especially in content-based instructions (e.g., Fang 2006; Fang and Schleppegrell 2008, 2010; Fang et al. 2008; Schleppegrell 2011), and is generally thought to be very practical and effective for text understanding. However, this approach has not been used much in Chinese contexts. Does it equally work well? This study, therefore, aims at exploring the possibility of applying it in a Chinese college reading context. The overall question is: Can FLA approach be applied successfully in Chinese college reading classes? Two specific questions are raised for this study:

- (1) How do Chinese college students use FLA to help them comprehend the text?
- (2) What are Chinese college students' perceptions towards this approach?

The study is of great pedagogical significance. As FLA offers a new perspective towards reading instruction, in which students are directed towards the understanding of the text from aspects of content, organization, and attitude, this study could help cultivate students' deep exploration of the text meaning, enlarge their scope of reading comprehension, and hence achieve the real purpose of reading. In the process of applying FLA, various ways that different grammatical elements function to construe these meanings are discussed, which will develop students' critical language awareness and critical thinking and ultimately help to achieve the final purpose of education, which is student development.

## **2. FLA approach and related studies**

### **2.1. FLA approach**

Over the last three decades, SFL has had a strong influence on literacy (e.g., Halliday 1975, 1978, 2007; Halliday and Hasan 1989; Christie 1989), and among various achievements from the application of SFL on education (e.g., Huang 2004; Huang and Morgan 2003; Huang and Mohan 2009; Schleppegrell 2004, 2010, 2012; Pitcher and Fang 2007), FLA approach makes a unique and much-needed contribution to text understanding by exploring three meta-meanings of the text in terms of content, organization and

attitude. Content refers to what the text is about; Organization refers to how the meaning is presented in a coherent way, and attitude refers to social or personal relationship enacted by the text or style/tone/voice reflected in its interpersonal meaning. The framework of FLA approach (Fang 2011) is shown in Table 1.

We can see that this framework presents a very detailed illustration about what text meanings need to be explored and how to approach these meanings. Three basic meanings are included in the framework, the content, the organization, and the attitude. Accompanying each is some eliciting questions aiming to guide the learners for these meanings. In order to answer these questions, a concrete list of specific language strategies is provided, which are related to some distinctive language features of the text.

As the element of content corresponds to the ideational or experiential meaning in SFL, transitivity patterns realized through process types, participants, and circumstances are highlighted in the framework. Four major types of processes, that is, processes of doing, sensing, being, and saying are emphasized in FLA approach. As the participants involved in these processes are typically realized in nominal phrases, and circumstances such as time, space, and conditions in which the processes happen are typically realized in adverbs or prepositional phrases, these linguistic features are listed in the framework to make clear what is going on in the text.

The element of an organization involves the logical and textual meanings of a text shown at three levels: the organizational pattern of the whole text, cohesion patterns between paragraphs and logical links and dependency relationships among clauses. By examining some cohesive links, the theme/rheme structure in the text, and clause combination devices, the organizational meaning about how the author calibrates information flow and builds up an argument is achieved.

The third element, attitude, refers to the interpersonal meaning in SFL – that is, the relationship among people – is realized as Mood and Modality systems. In the Mood system, four functions are categorized according to the exchange of information or goods and services: offer, commands, statements, and questions. The Modality system allows users to express possibility, usuality, inclination, and obligation. People's stance, judgment, and evaluation can also be identified through modal verbs, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, and modal nouns together with other attitudinal lexes. Analysis of the interpersonal meaning can make readers understand the author's attitude and how this attitude exerts influences on readers.

We can see that the FLA framework helps readers gain access to three meanings of a text. By offering an array of analytical tools for engaging students in discussion of a variety of language resources, this framework makes explicit how these meanings are constructed.

## 2.2. Related studies

Since it was first put forward, FLA has been applied in various readings and text related situations, among which one important application area is American secondary education. Scholars (Fang and Schleppegrell 2008) noted that many students in America lack literacy competency necessary to succeed in secondary schooling. One explanation is that academic texts in secondary content areas contain more complex language patterns than those in the texts the students read before. First, technical and dense language characterizes academic texts the students are studying, and nominalization

is frequent in subject lessons such as science, mathematics, and history. Second, some basic reading skills and strategies are not enough for students to understand fully the new type of texts. These challenges require students with more subject-specific skills than ever before. Fang and Schleppegrell (2008, 2010) applied FLA approach in secondary schooling, and by describing features of texts in science, history, mathematics, language arts, and other secondary school subjects, they made use of this approach to help the students better engage with school knowledge across different academic content areas.

Schleppegrell (2011) has applied the FLA approach in history teaching with the aim of better-developing students' language ability and history knowledge. Some concrete analysis strategies and classroom activities were carefully designed and used following the framework. Her findings suggest that FLA approach is effective in developing students' disciplinary literacy in secondary education and has broader implications for helping students cope with academic texts in other subjects.

In the process of learning, students need not only much sufficient exposure to language resources, but also a good understanding of the functions of these language resources. Related to this, Fang (2010) presented a series of tasks in science education, including morphemic analysis, noun deconstruction, noun expansion, paraphrasing, sentence combining, sentence completion, and syntactic anatomy and integration. These tasks engage students in learning the language while learning about knowledge. They turned out to be very useful for students' understanding of features of science language, enabling the students to better deal with the challenges in their science reading and writing.

The research mentioned above reveals that FLA approach, with attention drawn to different types of texts and their linguistic resources, is effective in developing students' subject area knowledge, their language analysis ability, and critical thinking. Besides its application in literacy development, FLA approach can also be applied to the evaluation of writing. Nowadays, rubrics have been commonly practiced for evaluating students' writing competence. Several score levels are differentiated in the rubrics-based writing assessment from aspects of content, organization, fluency, language conventions, and so on. For example, for the content aspect, a good piece of writing should present a clear, focused idea, with strong relevant supporting details. As for the organization, high-quality writings should be logical and coherent. However, this assessment standard is often criticized for being too vague to follow, and teachers have to rely on their institution in making judgments (e.g., Fang and Wang 2011). In addition, these rubrics ignore genre- and register-specific requirements for the writing. To overcome these disadvantages and achieve the purpose of evaluating students' writing abilities in a more objective and scientific perspective, Fang and Wang (2011) advocated FLA approach in the writing evaluation. Examining writing from aspects of content, organization, and attitude, and evaluating the corresponding linguistic resources used for expressing these three meanings, this approach can be used as a good alternative for traditional assessment.

In addition to research on how to use this approach for teaching and assessment purposes, researchers have also studied the applicability of the approach from the teacher's perspective. Achugar, Schleppegrell, and Oteiza (2007) launched a project that engaged teachers in activities of language analysis for the purpose of developing their

reflective literacy, the ability to both recognize semiotic resources that construe knowledge and reflect on how these resources construe ideologies as well. In this project, FLA was introduced in a 3-week-long professional development session for history teachers. Most teachers who participated in this session reported that FLA approach helped greatly in developing their language awareness. They said that this project promoted their meta-linguistic knowledge, and stimulated their critical reading ability.

Fang et al. (2014) carried out an empirical research, examining 39 inservice teachers' perception towards their use of the approach in the classroom. It was found that most teachers showed great interest in employing FLA in the class. However, challenges were also revealed, with the major one coming from teachers' lack of related knowledge of the language. The authors drew the conclusion that although teachers accepted this approach in their classes, implementing it confidently demanded considerable professional support, especially in how to identify text types and their corresponding linguistic features, and how to apply analysis strategies.

FLA approach has also been suggested for use in developing college students' literacy (e.g., Fang 2011). According to Fang, students are facing more challenging reading materials than before when they enter colleges. They need to read texts of different academic disciplines, and these texts may vary greatly in structure, meaning, and tone or style. The language becomes denser, more abstract and more complicated. Each discipline may have its own language features. Even disciplines which share common language features may function differently in their specific situations, and consequently, a more variety of discourses appear. Therefore, students at the college level need to develop high-level reading skills in order to handle such a big variety of texts. The approach, Fang (2011) suggested, has the potential to achieve positive results in guiding college students towards an in-depth reading comprehension and high-level language learning.

Although FLA has been extensively employed in various contexts for educational purposes, few studies have been carried out to integrate FLA with reading instruction in a Chinese college context, and no research has been done to observe the application process and its effectiveness. The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to investigate the possibility of applying this approach in Chinese college reading instruction, and to be specific, how Chinese college students use FLA approach to comprehend their English reading material and their perception towards this approach.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. *Adapted framework for the present study*

By directing the students to comprehend the text from three aspects of content, organization, as well as attitude, and helping the students understand how language works to create these meanings, FLA makes a unique and much-needed contribution to the reading instruction. However, as FLA framework (see Table 1) involves some technical terms in SFL, which requires much professional and theoretical knowledge, Chinese college teachers and students may find it hard to follow in its application. In consideration of this actual situation, this study adapted the original FLA approach with some simplification, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Functional language analysis framework (Fang 2011).

Text elements	Questions about text	FLA strategies
Content	What is going on in this text? What does the author tell us? What is this text about?	Analyze transitivity patterns such as process types (typically realized in verbal groups), participants (typically realized in nominal groups), and circumstances (typically realized in prepositional phrases and adverbial groups)
Organization	How does the author organize this text? Is this text well organized? By what logic is this text produced?	Analyze Theme/Rheme structures Analyze cohesion patterns (e.g., pronouns, synonyms, conjunctions) Analyze clause types and clause combining strategies (e.g., dependency and logical relations)
Style/voice	How does the author interact with the reader? What is the author's perspective? What is the nature of the interaction among the story characters?	Analyze mood Analyze appraisal resources such as modality, attitudinal lexis, and other word choices

**Table 2.** A simplified functional language analysis framework.

Text elements	Questions about text	Items for Analysis
Content	What is going on in this text?	The verbal groups, nominal groups, adverbials, prepositional phrases
Organization	How is the text organized?	What begins each clause, conjunctions, pronouns
Attitude	What is the author's attitude/tone/emotions/style of the text?	Active voice or passive voice, subject, personal pronouns, attitudinal words, modal verbs, sentence types (declarative, imperative, interrogative)

We can see that in the new framework, three key questions in the second column remain the same with the original, while some items for analysis in the third column are replaced by grammatical terms more familiar to teachers and students. The adapted framework for the present study is very handy to use in the classroom. Firstly, it directs the learners to the exploration of the text meaning by answering three major questions: what is going on in this text? How is the text organized? What is the author's attitude/tone/voice/style of the text? These three questions correspond to the three key text elements—content, organization, and attitude, respectively.

Secondly, the items listed in the third column, being typical grammatical terms familiar to both teachers and students, make it possible to be easily identified from the text. Through the analysis of these items, students can work out how these language resources construct different meanings of the text. For instance, items of verbal groups, nominal groups, adverbials, prepositional phrases need to be analyzed for answering questions about the content meaning. Verbal groups show what mainly happens in the text; Nominal groups indicate what kinds of participants are involved and adverbial groups and prepositional phrases show the time, space and conditions of the event. Through analyzing these items, the content of the text is constructed. In the same way, analysis of what begins each clause, such as conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *or*) and pronouns, makes explicit what logical relations between sentences are, and how the whole text is organized. Similarly, identification and analysis of voice (active voice or passive voice), grammatical subject, personal pronouns, attitudinal words, modal verbs, sentence types and so on help readers understand the author's attitude. For instance, passive voice is often used in formal texts and abstract nouns tend to function as subjects in an

objective context. Analysis of the use of attitudinal lexis (nouns, adjectives, adverbs), modal verbs, modal adjectives, and modal nouns help reveal authors' attitude, judgment, and evaluation. Finally, the analysis of mood helps readers gain insights into authors' positions and feelings.

### **3.2. Participants**

The present study took place in an English-as-Foreign Language (EFL) reading class at a university in Beijing, China. The reading course was a 16-week course which lasted 90 min each week. Thirty freshman students aged from 18 to 20 from six colleges took this course, and their majors were economics, physics, history, geography, education, and English. The students had learned English as a foreign language for 6 to 11 years and their native language was Mandarin Chinese. The teaching materials covered disciplines of news reports, computer science, English literature, geography, and history. Text genres included academic papers, popular science articles, novels, travel brochures. The adapted FLA framework was instructed and applied in the reading course.

### **3.3. The teaching procedure**

As FLA approach was new to the students, the teaching curriculum employed a three-stage model: teacher instruction, group discussion practice, and individual presentations. The duration for each stage was 4 weeks, 4 weeks, and 8 weeks, respectively. During the whole term, the students were asked to employ FLA approach in the classroom reading activities and encouraged to use it in reading as well as other language skill learning outside of the reading class.

As the reading material covered a variety of disciplines and genres, which was linguistically and conceptually challenging, students were in the first four weeks taught by the teacher how to use FLA framework to comprehend the text, especially how to acquire various meanings of the text from clues of language features of that particular type of text.

In the second stage, students were divided into groups, discussing together some specific language choices which contribute to the formation of the knowledge and meanings of the text. By answering questions and using strategies presented in the framework, students were asked to discuss the meanings of the text from its content, organization, and attitude, and how these meanings were realized. During this stage, the teacher gave students necessary guidance to ease their difficulty and help them arrive at the correct understanding. For example, in the understanding of attitude, the following questions were provided by the teacher:

- (1) What is the likely relationship between the speakers in the dialogue? (e.g., teacher and student? Father and son? Colleagues? Friends?)
- (2) List all the phrases that show the author's feelings. Consider these expressions in terms of the pronouns, the verbs and verb forms (e.g., modal verbs, active/passive voice), and which kinds of verbs and verb forms are used with different pronouns.

Under the help of the teacher, students gradually learned the way language was used in particular contexts to express the meanings specific. After four weeks of group



practice, students gradually gained more confidence and expertise in applying the FLA approach, and it was time for them to take a more active role. In the next eight weeks, students were required to report their understanding of the text and their reading comprehension process individually through reading task analysis. At the same time, presentations were performed in groups to demonstrate their understanding of the texts selected by the students themselves. The teacher assisted the students to deal with any possible difficulties they might encounter before, during, and after the presentation.

### **3.4. Instruments and data collection methods**

A qualitative method was adopted in the research, in which three instruments were utilized: (1) three reading analysis tasks, (2) students' presentations which demonstrate their integration of FLA approach in the reading process, and (3) two open-question questionnaires for the students' perceptions towards this approach.

Three reading tasks were assigned to the participants in the ninth week, the twelfth week, and the sixteenth week, respectively. The three tasks were of different genres with different topics, with the first one featuring a descriptive text of a war event, the second an account of the history of the English language, and the third an expository text about how coins were made. Students were required to analyze the three texts individually from perspectives of their content, organization, and attitude.

Presentations were students' group demonstrations, and the purpose was to evaluate how well the students could apply FLA approach in their disciplinary reading through cooperative work, and whether they could make their understanding of the text explicit to the whole class. Groups were formed mainly according to their majors (or related majors), and texts for the presentation were selected by students themselves from their own major (or related) disciplines. Altogether, eight groups were formed and demonstrated their presentations.

Two open-question questionnaires were distributed to the students during this course. The first was at the beginning of this course, aiming to probe the students' attitudes towards English reading and their reading habit before applying FLA approach. Besides some basic information about the students, such as their major, age, English learning time, the questionnaire was made up of three open questions:

- (1) Do you like English reading? Why or why not?
- (2) How do you usually deal with English reading? What methods do you often use to help you comprehend the reading texts?
- (3) What are your main problems in your reading?

The second questionnaire was administered at the end of the course, aiming to find out the students' perceptions towards the FLA approach. Their comments on the teaching effects, changes in their attitudes and what they gained in the course were also collected through this questionnaire. This questionnaire was also composed of three open questions:

- (1) In our English reading course, we tried to comprehend the text from aspects of content, attitude, and organization. We also made use of some language clues to help acquire these meanings. How do you perceive this approach? Is it effective for you?



- (2) Is the approach useful in other language learning situations?
- (3) Do you have any attitude change towards English reading after this course? If yes, what are the changes? If not, what are the possible reasons?

## 4. Findings

This section reports the analysis results of the students' three reading tasks, their group presentations, and their answers to the two questionnaires.

### 4.1. Students' use of FLA approach in their reading

Analysis showed that during the 16 weeks' reading instruction and practice, the students were able to apply FLA approach successfully for the exploration of text meanings, which could be explained through their performance in the three reading tasks and their group presentations.

#### 4.1.1. Analysis of three reading tasks

Positive results can be seen through analyzing how students actively made use of the FLA framework and language prompts suggested in the framework to comprehend the reading tasks from aspects of the content, the organization, and the attitude.

**4.1.1.1. Students' understanding of the content.** Understanding the content means working out what is happening in the text, that is, what the topic is mainly about. It was found that the students could grasp the content of the text accurately. Here is one student's analysis towards the content meaning of the three reading tasks:

This text is about an important war happened in America. The first part of this text tells us how the war began ... (Task 1)

This passage mainly introduces four main stages in the development of English: old English, Middle English, early Modern English, and late modern English. At the end of the passage, the author mainly talks about the modern stage. (Task 2)

The content of the two texts are similar. Both texts talk about the process of making coins. (Task 3)

Further analysis showed that most students could actively use strategies listed in the FLA framework to acquire the main idea of the text. The following is from one student's analysis of the first reading task, illustrating how he/she comprehended the content of the text from clues of verbs.

The first part tells us how the war began. In this part, many specific verbs such as "organize", "protest", "close" and so on are used to help us identify what is happening in the text. Some colonial leaders wanted independence from Britain, so they organized "Boston Tea Party", which infuriated George III. Then George III closed the port of Boston. In this background, the First and the Second Continental Congress were established. Then the war began.

For the second part, verbs such as "favored", "asserted", "said", "issue", "write", "refused", "justify" are used, which explain why and how the Declaration of Independence was written. Because the Americans wanted to have the same rights as the English, which was refused by the king, the Declaration was necessary to break the final tie between America and Britain.

For the third part, the verb “explain” tells us what this part is about, that is, it explains the main reasons that led the success of the war. Three reasons are mentioned and they are high motivation of Americans, mistakes made by the overconfident English generals and the attitude of the weary British people. (Task 1)

We can see that by focusing on some important verbs and verbal groups used in the text, this student was able to construct the content meaning accurately, and meanwhile, in the procedure of doing the analysis, the student could not only understand what the text is mainly about but how language works to make the meaning happen.

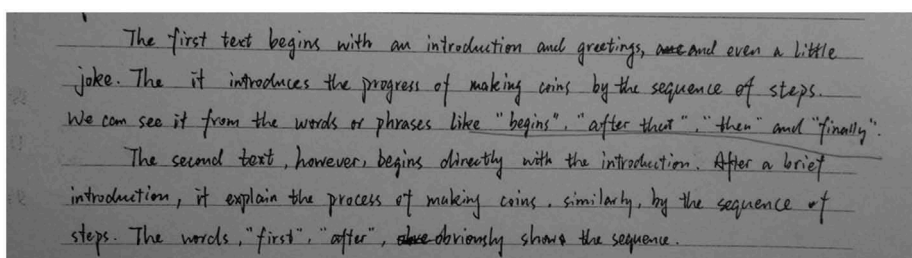
**4.1.1.2. Students’ understanding of the organization.** Understanding the organization is to identify how the text is structured. Compared with the content meaning, students experienced some difficulties in making use of the language prompts listed in the framework for mapping the organization of the text, especially at the beginning of the course. Some students were rather slow in identifying language resources such as the linking devices, the beginning of each clause and other language features which contributed to the text organization, and they were not very sure about how to make use of these resources to help construct the structure of the text. But after a period of learning and practicing, progress was made and the students’ ability to locate these language hints for the organizational pattern improved gradually.

The following is from one student’s analysis of Task 1.

The first part of the text is organized in a chronological order, as many sentences in this part begin with time expressions such as “over the next decade”, “in 1773”, “in September 1774”, “On 19 April 1775”. The following part develops with views about how the war broke out, which can be seen from conjunctions and adverbs such as “therefore”, “since”, “although”, “but”. The third part is organized by presenting a series of reasons, as can be seen from the topic sentence, “several reasons explain their success”. The linking words “first”, “second”, “third”, “finally” help construct the sequence of the reasons. (Task 1)

We can see that this student could successfully construct the organization of the text with the help of some important language devices. Firstly, the student noticed the beginning part of each clause, that is, the theme played an important role in structuring the text. In the first part of the text, most clauses began with time expressions such as “over the next decade”, “in September 1774” and so on, which indicate that the writer gives a recount of events in a sequence of time. The student recognized this feature accurately and pointed out that this part of the text followed a chronological pattern. In the second part, the themes changed to some conjunctions and other linking devices, such as “although”, “but”, “therefore”, and “since”, and for these features, the student drew the conclusion that the second part of the text was not an account of events anymore, but points of view behind the war. In the third part of the text, the student noticed that the first sentence, “several reasons explain their success” was the topic sentence of this section. Themes in the next few sentences “first”, “second”, “third”, “after a few years”, and “finally” also drew the student’s attention, which helped him construct the rhetorical organization of this section.

Below is what another student wrote for the third reading task:



The first text begins with an introduction and greetings, and even a little joke. Then it introduces the progress of making coins by the sequence of steps. We can see it from the words or phrases like 'begin', 'after that' 'then' and 'finally'.

The second text, however, begins directly with the introduction. After a brief introduction, it explains the process of making coins. Similarly, by the sequence of steps. The words, "first" "after", obviously show the sequence. (Task 3)

In this analysis, the linking words indicating the sequence of actions "first", "after that", "then", "finally" made the student form a good understanding of the text organization.

We can see that the students could make good use of the language clues listed in the framework for understanding the organization of the text. The practice of analyzing reading texts made the students learn not only how to identify the relationship among sentences from a local perspective, but also how to structure the whole passage and how to sequence ideas from a global view.

**4.1.1.3. Students' understanding of the attitude.** Attitude in the FLA framework means the tone or the style of text. It may also refer to the author's explicit or implicit emotions conveyed in the text. It is found that among the three meanings – the content, the organization, and the attitude, recognizing the right attitude of the reading text is the most difficult, especially at the early stage. However, over the term, the students improved greatly and they could make use of attitudinal lexes, modal verbs and other language items presented in the framework to capture the right attitude of the text, as can be seen from their reading analyses:

It is obvious that the two texts have different styles. In Text one, the active voice dominates, and for the other, the passive voice dominates. In addition, Text one is funny and attractive. For example, in Text one, the author says, 'first of all, I want to apologize if you are attending this talk in order to find out how to become a successful businessman or a millionaire.' The author uses phrases 'we just make ...' 'we used to do this ...' and so on, which makes the reader feel like a friend is talking. Text two is serious and academic. For example, the author uses words such as 'approximately', 'the initial designs', which are formal, objective with no personal feelings. Obviously, the first text is telling a story or some interesting things in life. The other is a real science reading, which may appear in science magazines. What is more, Text one uses plenty of 'we', 'our' to introduce. Text two does not use these words. To conclude, Text one is an informal speech and Text two is an official document. (Task 3)

In this analysis, the student compared the styles of the two parallel texts from voice, pronouns and other lexical choices used before concluding that these two texts

belonged to two different genres. That is, one is a speech and the other is an academic document.

The students could also work out the author's feeling successfully from the attitudinal adverbs and adjectives used in the text, as can be seen from the analysis below:

The author shows deep love for English language by using some positive adverbs, such as "inarguably", "overwhelmingly", "firmly", as well as adjectives like "remarkable" and "useful". (Task 2)

In addition to some attitudinal lexes, students also paid attention to subjects of the sentences for understanding the text style. Here is how one student analyzed the last task:

The text is very formal, as the subjects of most sentences are entities or things, such as "the Renaissance of Classical learning", "the invention of printing", "the dialect of London", instead of persons. (Task 3)

Noticing that the subjects in the sentences were not persons that usually initiated the activities, but entities and things realized as complex nominal groups, a key grammatical resource for abstraction and information condensation contributed to the technicality of texts, this student drew the conclusion that the text was presented in a formal style.

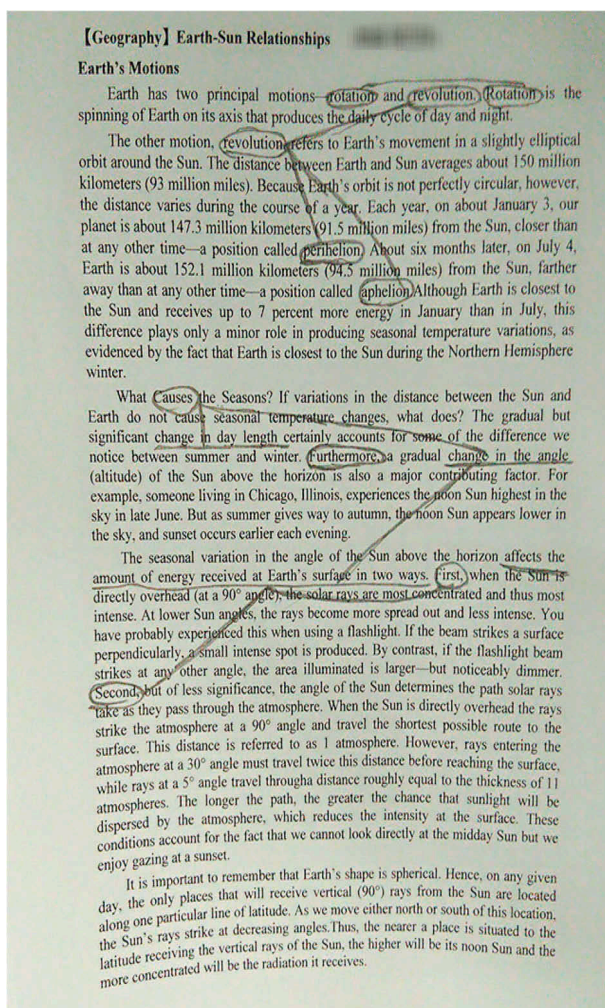
We can see that the students could identify some important language resources in the text, such as attitudinal lexes, voices, pronouns, subject features and so on, and by analyzing these features, students were able to form a good understanding of the feeling, the tone or the attitude of a reading passage.

#### 4.1.2. Analysis of students' presentations

After stages of FLA instruction and group practice, the students were required to demonstrate their use of FLA approach in text understanding in presentations. It was found that the presentation groups could apply successfully what they had learnt from the FLA instruction and made good use of questions and language strategies in the framework, thus achieving a very satisfactory result.

The presentation activity started with the students' own selection of reading materials. As the presentation group was formed according to the students' majors (or related majors), each group was asked to read extensively in their own discipline before deciding a text for presentation. After the text was chosen, they re-read the text carefully, discussed the details of the text, and then made their plan for presentation. Figure 1 displays the text chosen by one group and how the group worked on the reading material and tried to figure out the text meanings for demonstration.

This text is from the Geography group, and the topic is on Earth-Sun relationships. We can see that the group started with circling and highlighting two key concepts in the article, *rotation* and *revolution* in the first sentence for understanding the whole passage. The group drew lines between the two concepts and some explanations, reasons, and sub-factors, which helped to construct the content meaning of the text. The group also circled some cohesive devices such as "furthermore" and ordinal numbers "first", "second" to mark the organizational pattern of the text. This analysis enabled them to understand the main relationships mentioned in the text and helped make clear how the author weaved information about these relationships.



**Figure 1.** An example of group presentation.

When the presentation started, each student in the group took a role in the demonstration. In groups of four students, for example, the first presenter usually introduced some background disciplinary knowledge of the text; The second one guided the class to read the whole text, following the normal teaching procedure such as raising some comprehension questions, organizing class discussion of the answers, and asking the class to report the discussion results; The third explained how the meanings were identified, and the fourth one summarized the whole lesson with an emphasis on some prominent disciplinary features of the text.

The presentations showed that the students could integrate FLA approach into their demonstration. Take the Chemistry group as an example. Before reading started, the first presenter introduced some basic background knowledge related to the text, including five categories of chemistry and explained important technical terms appeared in the text. Then the second presenter raised some questions concerning the reading text from

aspects of the content, the organization, and the author's tone. Some special disciplinary language features were also highlighted to the class. The reading lasted 12 min. After the whole class completed the reading, the third presenter led the class into the discussion around the comprehension questions. At the final stage, the fourth presenter summarized the whole reading with comments on language features of the text. Here is part of the last presenter's summary:

The text is a brief introduction to analytical chemistry and how it is classified. The author holds the view that analytical chemistry is closely related to our daily life, which can be seen from the adjectives and adverbs used in the text, 'fundamentally', 'vitality', 'close', 'important' and 'popular'.

The language of the text is accurate. We do not find expressions like "approximately", "almost", "a little" and so on. Instead, we find some accurate numbers like 0.000001g. There are many formal words and a large number of professional terms. No rhetorical expressions are used. The reason for it is that the text aims to tell you something about a chemical reaction or the properties of a certain substance, and therefore, the information must be accurate, formal, and concise.

This presentation example shows that the students were able to integrate what they had learnt in the FLA instruction for their understanding and explanation of the chosen text. By drawing attention to some prominent language resources typically used in the text, the students were able to actively explore how these different lexical and grammatical elements functioned to construe the main content, the organization, as well as the style of the text.

Presentations in group forms also suggested that students working cooperatively could help to solve many challenges in their disciplinary reading, which would bring the students a sense of achievement, and consequently make the demanding tasks of disciplinary reading both enjoyable and rewarding.

## **4.2. Students' perceptions towards the FLA approach**

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed that the students held positive views towards this approach, as can be seen from their change of attitudes towards English reading and their report of positive influences on other skills in English learning.

### **4.2.1. Attitude change**

In most college English reading classes in China today, reading has been regarded as a chief way to promote students' mastery of new words, phrases, and grammatical structures. Instead of the exploration of the true meanings of the reading text, explanations of new words and grammar patterns and practice of them are the main focus of the reading class. The result is that students do not know how to comprehend the text, nor can they feel the pleasure of reading. Many students complained that before this course they often felt helpless about their English reading. They did not know how to understand the meaning, especially when reading difficult texts. They said that they had to resort to dictionary a lot, which not only hindered the speed for reading comprehension but also made them feel bored. Even though they consulted all the new words and made clear all the difficult grammar points in the text, they still could not understand completely what the text really meant.



After the FLA instruction, students' attitude towards reading changed greatly. Many students said that English texts were not as difficult as they used to feel, and they started to understand what reading comprehension was and how to make use of the grammar knowledge to read more effectively. The following are from two students' accounts:

*Student one:*

I used to be afraid of English reading. I had difficulty in understanding the meaning of the text. I used dictionaries a lot, which was very boring. But from this course, I've learnt a new way to comprehend the text and I know how to figure out its various meanings through verbs, nouns, structures of the sentence and so on. I also have a new understanding of the English grammar.

*Student two:*

I won't be worried or afraid of reading English passages after taking part in this class. It turned out that I am enthusiastic about English reading. Reading is necessary for my major.

We can see that the FLA approach makes the students approach the reading text in a new way. A new feeling has also been brought about, that is, the enhancement of their confidence and interest in English language and English reading.

#### **4.2.2. Influences on other skills in English learning**

In addition to their attitude change towards English reading, positive influences were also reported on other skills in their English learning. Some students mentioned the effect of FLA approach on their English listening. One participant commented,

This method is really helpful when I practice my listening after class. For example, when doing VOA listening exercises, for the first time of listening, I tried to get the structure of the listening passage by using this method, because understanding the structure could help me get a general understanding of the passage. Attention paid to the tone of the listening material is also very helpful. If I hear many technical terms, I can judge quickly that this is academic and formal. If there are many casual words, then I know this is informal. The nouns and verbs are particularly important for me to acquire some specific meanings of the passage. This method has greatly improved my listening quality and speed.

Another student reported specifically the positive effect of this approach on helping to acquire the speaker's feeling in the listening task:

I learned from the approach the importance of understanding the speaker's feeling and how to identify it, which turns out to be very useful in understanding the real meanings of the listening passage.

Students also reported that FLA approach helped them considerably in their writing practice. They said that perspectives of content, organization, and the author's attitude could make them compose their writing in a more comprehensive way. What is more, these three aspects would also guide them to evaluate their own writing. In addition, they started to value the lexical and grammatical choices in their writing because they understood now these choices would influence greatly their intended meanings. The following are how two students answered in the questionnaire:



### Student 1

I find FLA approach helps me understand the passage better, and when I write my own article, I also follow this method. For example, I will try to make my structure clear. I also consider whether I need to write formally or informally and what language can express my right emotion or attitude.

### Student 2

Through this course, I've learnt that texts in different genres have different language features. In my own writing, I will pay attention to these issues and make my own writing more logical. I have realized the importance of a clear structure. Before writing, I would write an outline to make my structure clear. After learning how to analyze the author's attitude, I know what kind of attitudes I should hold in different types of writings and how I can express my attitude correctly.

We can see that FLA approach could help the students write in a more sensible way. Realizing the importance of a clear structure and an appropriate tone for a good piece of writing, the students started to pay conscious attention to the choice of some linguistic devices to help organize the passage and express the right tone or feelings.

Besides its impacts on listening and writing activities, some participants commented that this course influenced their oral English too. Here is what one student wrote in the questionnaire:

When I do oral English, such as debate and speech, I will list an outline first and consider what word choices can make my speaking more logical and expressive.

To sum it up, the FLA approach was evaluated highly by the students. The students not only used it actively in a reading situation but also practiced this approach for the purpose of enhancing their whole learning ability.

## 5. Discussion

The study explored the impact of a new approach to teaching reading in Chinese college classrooms. It is found that FLA offered students a new perspective towards reading comprehension and its use improved students' reading performance greatly. Through the whole term's instruction and practice, most students were able to make good use of the strategies listed in the FLA framework for their exploration of the text meanings. With attention paid to verbal groups, nominal groups, adverbials, prepositional phrases used in the text, the students could accurately grasp the content meaning conveyed. By analyzing the beginning parts of the clauses, conjunctions, and other cohesive devices, the students were able to make clear the structure of the text, and how ideas developed logically. Identification and analysis of various lexical means, especially attitudinal lexes make the students figure out authors' attitudes or emotions successfully. The study also found that FLA approach was very well perceived by students. They said that the FLA approach not only helped them understand the text but increased their confidence and interests in English reading. They were less afraid of reading than ever before even though the materials they were facing at college were becoming more and more difficult. Students' attitude towards reading changed from negative to positive. FLA approach also promoted the students' learning of other

linguistic skills. It was generally considered that the three perspectives in the framework, the content, the organization, and the attitude helped them compose their own writing in a more expressive, logical, and coherent way. They said that this framework also provided them reliable criteria for the evaluation of their own writing. Some students mentioned that this approach was useful in their efforts to improve listening and speaking skills.

Several reasons explain the positive findings reported in the study. Firstly, FLA approach makes our reading instruction a meaningful process. Instead of focusing on isolated language points and grammar rules, this approach encourages students to explore the authentic meanings of the text from multi-perspectives. With detailed guidance of how to make use of language clues in the text, this approach cultivates the students' language awareness and trains their ability to actively construct text meanings. Being consciously paying attention to linguistic choices of the nouns, the verbal groups and other language features, students are actually learning both the knowledge of the text through language and how language works to construct the knowledge. Take scientific text, for example. Featuring technical, dense, abstract, and complex characteristics, science language is the result of a lengthy evolution process, which "enables scientists to think and reason in ways that facilitate the development of new theories and dissemination" (Fang 2010, 49). Therefore, helping students understand these particular language features and how these features construct a specific meaning in the scientific text is what most students need. The analysis process improves the students' language awareness, and meanwhile makes them think more deeply about the world from the reading.

Secondly, instead of adopting a totally different teaching method, FLA complements other popular reading strategies. In the reading process, students showed a wonderful combination with other strategies towards text comprehension. For example, some students combined some cognitive reading strategies of inferring and prediction in their understanding of the text, as can be seen from students' reading analysis tasks:

*... as the last sentence of the passage is "The American Revolution had begun", the next part will be about how the American Revolution went on. It will tell us the details about the war.*  
(Task 1)

The sentence "Several reasons explain their success" indicates that this passage will continue to tell us the reasons why the Americans won the war or the significance of the war.  
(Task 1)

This text ends with four reasons. The text seems not completed. Maybe there is another part, telling us the great significance of the war because significance usually appears at the end of a text about the war. (Task 1)

This passage mainly introduces the development of English, with four main stages – old English, Middle English, early Modern English, late modern English. At the end of the passage, the author focuses mainly on the history of present stage. So I think it's reasonable to introduce the tendency of the development of English in the future. (Task 2)

The text tells us the global status of English. The author may continue to predict the future development of the English language. The author is very convincing in discussing the current status of English, and I want to read more about how the author predicting the future of English. (Task 2)

Thirdly, FLA approach makes the teaching a fruitful process. In the teaching process, a variety of other multimodal literacy skills were involved for a thorough comprehension of the text, especially some science texts, such as seeking information about authors, getting information by examining source notes, citations, interpreting illustrations, captions, charts, graphs, and numbers. No doubt, these skills together with FLA approach can help develop students' multi-literacy abilities.

Practicing FLA approach is by no means an easy task. In the text analysis process, the students also encountered difficulties, especially when they did the first individual text analysis. Many students found it hard to figure out the attitude and organizational pattern of the text. Therefore, patience and encouragement are necessary for the application process. Strategies for engaging students in coping with these challenges should also be carefully planned. The implementation procedure used in the course, the three-staged teaching model – teacher explanation, cooperative practice in groups, and group presentation turned out to be effective in easing students' worries and difficulties when doing FLA analysis.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study explored the use of FLA approach in Chinese college English reading classes and its effects on students' literacy learning. It shows that FLA offers a promisingly effective way of teaching reading in Chinese colleges. Because the study was carried out in only one reading class with 30 participants, future research can use a more variety of reading classes. What is more, as the academic background of the teachers in the present study is Functional Linguistics, much needs to be explored in classes whose teachers know little about Functional Linguistics. In addition, the findings of the study are mainly drawn from qualitative data, with analysis focusing only on students' reading procedure and their perceptions towards this approach. Future studies can document student learning and perception in quantitative ways. They can also compare student reading achievement data in classes taught using FLA versus those taught in traditional ways. Such research should yield more robust evidence regarding the effectiveness of FLA in classroom reading instruction.

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## Notes on contributors

**Yinghui Sun** Ph.D., is a Professor at the School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China. She has published 2 academic books and 40 articles home and abroad. She is an editor and author of several high school and university textbooks. Her main research areas include functional linguistics, discourse analysis and English language teaching.

**Fang Zhang** is a Teacher at the English Teaching Group, Beijing No. 20 High School. She got her MA degree from Beijing Normal University and now teaching English.

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