

## Read-Along Videos for L2 Chinese Learners (给汉语为二语学习者用的“跟着读”影片)

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the use of “read-along” videos made for Chinese as a second language (L2 Chinese) learners taking Chinese language classes online. These videos make it possible for students to read along with teacher-created texts and audio support. Students may also mute the audio, pause, slow down or speed up playback, and use pop-up dictionaries while viewing to adapt to their own learning needs. I list findings in research on L2 Chinese reading instruction and development relevant to the design and use of these videos. I also describe the teaching context in which these videos are now used. Then, I recommend how to make similar videos, both from a text design and from a technological point of view, and how to coach students on more effective use of such videos. The paper closes with observations about students’ use of these videos and their application in other instructional settings, Chinese reading development, and future research.

**提要:** 这篇文章报告如何在网课使用为汉语为二语学习者做的“跟着读”影片。这种影片让学习者能边看边听教师提供的阅读材料。学习者还能把音效静音、把影片暂停、把速度放慢加快，也可以用网上词典即时翻译不熟悉的汉字，以便学生根据自己的学习目标和语言水平调整用法。本文先针对汉语为二语的阅读教学和发展做文献探讨。然后，分享笔者如何在教学里使用这种影片，并从文本设计和科技技术层面分享如何制作“跟着读”影片，也对于如何引导学习者更好地使用“跟着读”影片提供建议。文末探讨“跟着读”影片如何应用于其他的教学情境，分享使用这种影片的学习者在中文阅读发展的教学观察，并提出未来的研究方向。

**Keywords:** CALL, Chinese reading instruction, L2 Chinese reading comprehension

**关键词:** 电脑辅助语言学习、中文阅读教学、汉语为二语阅读理解

## 1. Introduction

This paper reports on the use of recorded, “read-along” videos made available to Chinese as a second language (L2 Chinese) learners. These videos seem to hold potential usefulness for other instructors, particularly those with distance learning formats and for settings in which students find it challenging to read Chinese character texts. Read-along videos grew initially out of my classroom practice several years ago, when I taught in a high school Mandarin Chinese program. I first developed these videos as a way to provide make-up content for students who were absent on days in which a main focus of class time involved choral reading. Choral reading is any kind of whole class reading aloud from a text. I have used choral reading with my oral support to introduce a few, newly-seen characters in reading texts (Waltz, 2015; Neubauer, 2018). I began to create read-along videos because I noticed that students who missed days with such guided reading experiences later struggled to catch up unless they spent time in a similar way. Namely, they needed the time and means to make connections between the sound and meaning of recently introduced, unfamiliar words and phrases in Mandarin to how the newly-seen characters looked within a comprehensible reading text. Students could use read-along videos outside of class as that type of supplemental reading experience.

Over the past three years, read-along videos became a solution to the challenge of minimal time per week with students in elective, online classes which I teach. By providing videos online in YouTube, students could use them at their convenience. And, unlike choral reading in a classroom setting, in which students read together at the same pace, students using read-along videos can adjust use of the videos to their individual learning needs and available time. They can use videos multiple times and pause, mute, and play at different speeds using video controls built into YouTube. An added benefit of using YouTube as a platform is the ease of sharing the links to the videos and making playlists to collect a series of related videos. Other video platforms and recording methods are certainly possible as well. Students need some guidance about how to use the videos, as effective use is more than a matter of clicking play or passively watching once.

Other reading applications which have aural support have proliferated in recent years. I am glad for more resources in our field designed to provide Chinese language learners with more reading content, especially at beginning levels, but I find read-along videos to fill a role which these apps do not. I find two main differences between subscription sites and apps for L2 Chinese reading and read-along videos which I create. First, because read-along videos are made by me specifically for my students, the content is personalized. I have found that teacher-created reading allows students the benefit of background knowledge and some additional interest in the text, since they know it will be about content that is familiar and in which their ideas from class discussions may appear. A second benefit is that I can tailor the reading intentionally to include Chinese characters that are new to my students multiple times. I also am able to build in “review” characters in these videos. I have not typically found such personalized features in reading apps for L2 Chinese learners. As will be described later in this article, creating videos for my students has not been burdensome in time or technology skills. I have found the benefits to outweigh the time and skill needed to produce them.

The structure this paper is as follows: first, an overview of some research findings relevant to aspects of the design and use of these videos; second, how I have designed and made read-along videos; then, the context for how I use read-along videos in my sequence of instruction with fully online, remote Chinese language classes. I next describe ways in which I coach new students to optimize use of these videos, including ideas students shared with me themselves. I conclude with anecdotal observations about students' reading development through these videos and suggest research possibilities for understanding and improving them. I am in the process of seeking approval from my university for an empirical study related to use of these videos.

## 2. Research Background

Learning to read Chinese character texts as L2 has been noted for many years in research as challenging (Everson, 1994, 2011, 2016; Packard, 1990) and anxiety-producing (Zhao et al., 2013), particularly for those in early levels of Chinese learning. Heritage speakers of Chinese have not necessarily shown faster recognition and production of Chinese characters as compared to L2 learners of Chinese (C. Ke, 1998). Research and the field of Chinese language education have not been entirely conclusive about when and how to introduce character reading to new learners of Chinese (Everson, 1994; Knell & West, 2017; Packard, 1990; Shen, 2014; Ye, 2013). Helping students accomplish literacy in Chinese characters within the limits to time available in a Chinese program is “[o]ur major challenge” as Chinese language educators (Shen, 2013, p. 383).

However, some general findings about L2 learners' development of reading comprehension of Chinese texts do exist (S. Ke, 2020). Among Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) studies, active learning strategies and meaningful learning tasks have been found beneficial for Chinese learning and may be preferred by students (Shen & Xu, 2015). Sometimes teachers use technology apps as a way to involve students more actively in reading or character learning. However, although a variety of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tools exists for Chinese learning, these tools are not always integrated well into instruction (Shen, 2014). In terms of more integrated approaches to reading in Chinese classrooms, repeated reading of texts has shown benefits for vocabulary recognition for heritage learners (Han & Chen, 2010). Repeated reading has also shown benefits in reading fluency and confidence among students in Chinese immersion programs (Knell & Fame Kao, 2020). CSL studies have also identified challenges for L2 Chinese readers. These challenges include recognizing characters, realizing where to segment words (which are not spaced in texts written for native speakers), and lexical access, which is interpreting a word's meaning within the context in which it appears (Shen, 2014). For beginning readers of L2 Chinese, studies have found that adding spaces between words can aid in reading fluency and comprehension with lasting effects (Bai et al., 2013). Read-along videos have been designed with such research findings in mind.

Reading comprehension can be considered at three levels: “the independent level, the instructional level, and the frustration level” (Shen, 2005, p. 1, citing Gillet & Temple, 1994). The independent level involves texts which learners can approach without support

from their teacher or other, more proficient learners. The instructional level of reading means that learners find the text approachable but benefit from the support of their instructor and peers to read and understand the entire text very well. The frustration level is to be avoided, but those texts may be suited to later use, when students' proficiency has increased. Frustration level texts include more new words and phrases than would allow students to read and comprehend highly, even with support in the classroom. Important aspects of Chinese language instruction therefore include choosing texts that are appropriate for students to read and understand on their own and providing enough scaffolding to render slightly more challenging texts comprehensible for students, without leading to frustration.

Read-along videos are my attempt at providing texts at the independent level, and which provide enough support for learners to use them at the instructional level, even when the teacher is not present. Their design relies on a view of Chinese character learning that begins from listening comprehension and matching familiar sound and meaning to the visual appearance of characters through experience with highly comprehensible texts in Chinese characters. In seeking aural language development first using pinyin, and later reading in Chinese characters, read-along videos follow a "process view" of reading (Everson, 1994, p. 4). In a process view of reading, learners first acquire aural language during which time pinyin is used, and later are introduced to those words in Chinese character form. Likewise, read-along videos expect that students' recognition of Chinese characters will develop in stages (Zhang & Ke, 2018). The design of the reading material is based on Cold Character Reading texts. In such texts, students encounter a limited number of newly-seen, unique characters, which correspond to words and phrases that are very familiar when heard because of preceding auditory input. Newly-seen characters repeatedly appear throughout a multiple paragraph-long text which otherwise contains only familiar characters from prior, ample reading experiences (Neubauer, 2018; Waltz, 2015). No pinyin is shown in these texts, as the use of pinyin is limited to aural steps when a word or phrase is newly introduced. It is more typical for Chinese language instruction to focus first on character and word-level study at the same time as aural language is introduced (Shen, 2013, 2014). Read-along videos therefore diverge from that more typical approach to instruction, since they begin from aural language introduced with pinyin, and only later involve character reading. Character reading begins through a more implicit learning stage prior to any explicit character analysis or noticing of character components. Therefore, use of the read-along videos is the major way learners are encouraged to develop Chinese literacy and character recognition in my classes. Over time, it is my aim that the videos aid in building character recognition through re-exposure to a few new characters each time, and through subsequent re-occurrence of those words.

### **3. Design of Read-Along Videos**

The features of the text of read-along videos includes purposeful sheltering of new words and phrases, with familiar words and phrases throughout forming the context in which those new words and phrases appear. Reading ranges in length, from about 400-800 characters (occasionally including the names of people or places in English). Perhaps three to four new words are seen for the first time in Chinese characters in a video, and they

appear many times throughout the text: approximately ten to 20 times. The reading tends to be a story, description, or other type of multiple paragraph-long, coherent discourse based on language and topics that arose during the previous class session. Appendix A contains an example of the content of a read-along video designed for the first reading text for a beginning class. See Figure 1 (below) for a screenshot from a read-along video. The golden circle in the image is how the cursor appears in the program I use to record videos, Screencast-O-Matic. Note that the font size is very large, which is intentional so that characters can be seen clearly. Spaces between words have been deliberately added to aid in word segmentation and therefore ease of comprehension (Bai, et al, 2013). The video recording contains my carefully articulated, read aloud of the text, using the cursor to coordinate with my voice as I read. Appendix B includes links to two read-along videos.



**Figure 1** A screenshot from a read-along video

The steps to making read-along videos may appear numerous, but after preparing them on a nearly weekly basis, I can usually complete a read-along video in about 20 minutes, from writing to recording to starting to upload online.

1. First, I write the reading text in a Google Document. I create the text based on part of class discussion in the synchronous lesson, so I do not need to create original content for each video. I may change or drop some details or add or emphasize some parts of our discussion in the read-along video. I use the “Find” function in Google Docs to check for how many times new words appear in the text, aiming for 10-20 occurrences.
2. I then copy and paste that text into a new slideshow in the website Qwikslides (<http://www.classtools.net/qwikslides/>). Qwikslides automatically creates a slideshow more quickly than presentation software like PowerPoint.

3. When the slideshow is ready, I play that one slide at a time while I read aloud and record a video using Screencast-O-Matic. While recording, I move my cursor under each word as I read it, something like a karaoke video. I use Screencast-O-Matic specifically because its cursor is visually more obvious than that in other screen recording apps. I believe that linking the sound of the Chinese words to how they look in the reading is a very beneficial aspect of these videos, so want to be sure students can easily follow visually. See Appendix B for links to video tutorials about how I create these videos and two example read-along videos.
4. Once the video is ready, I upload it to YouTube, either Unlisted or Public.
5. In more recent months, I have copied and pasted the full transcript into the information area which appears below the video window. By adding this transcript, students can also more easily access comprehension support for any words in the video, as unlike the video itself, the words in the information window can be accessed by pop-up dictionaries. Students can hover over words with a pop-up dictionary such as Zhongwen or Perapera, which show pinyin and English meaning. In a situation in which students might abuse this feature, perhaps copying and pasting the entire transcript into Google Translate, it may not be recommended. I added the transcript after students requested an easier way to double-check meaning, since that is not easy to do from the video itself. I have not found this additional scaffold to hinder their reading in Chinese.
6. I then share the link to the video with students.

#### **4. Context for Read-Along Videos: Online Chinese Language Classes**

The context in which I currently use these videos are one-hour-long, synchronous classes once per week with small groups (usually six-12 people). Most students are adults, but some are as young as 11 years old, in classes including people located in several countries. These classes are entirely elective and not associated with any school or credit-issuing institution. They could be described as “open” or “online instruction” since there is no face-to-face component at all (Goertler, 2019, p. 53). Those synchronous classes take place in Zoom meetings, usually with students on video camera view. We focus synchronous class time on aural input and interaction, using a variety of the video conferencing features in Zoom. I use a green screen and virtual backgrounds to display, talk about, and point to images. Students’ occasionally use the Zoom chat window to send me short, typed messages. I have found a physical whiteboard on the wall of my office preferable for writing new vocabulary and drawing to aid comprehension because it allows me to pause and point to those words again as they come up in discussion. During class, I take photos of the whiteboard and post these to a shared Google document for students’ later reference, if they wish (see Appendix A for an example).

I emphasize aural input during classes, with numerous opportunities for students to indicate comprehension and contribute to class discussions, which I expect prepares them for successful use of the read-along videos. My teaching approach aligns with comprehension-based communicative language teaching, including some elements from Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS; Lichtman, 2018; Ray & Seely, 2019), MovieTalk (Murphy & Hastings, 2006), Story Listening (Mason et al., 2020),

and other strategies including input-based tasks. Goals for synchronous class time are developing students' listening comprehension and providing opportunities for oral interaction in the context of communicative events: greetings, story co-creation, discussion of interests and events among class members, and intercultural topics. Some occasional focus on form arises within the context of student questions or the need to clarify meaning or word usage. We usually finish class with a few minutes in which I begin to type reading material based on our class session, asking students for details to include in the reading. The shared Google document also include notes about the class and links to videos, and that Google document is where I finish typing reading material.

The second part of class consists of asynchronous reading that I make into read-along videos. I leverage the listening comprehension developed in synchronous classes in these videos. By putting literacy instruction mainly in an independently-accessed video format, students can pursue reading abilities to the degree that they wish. Since the classes are elective, there is no grading or required homework. Some learners do not have the goal of literacy in Chinese or lack the additional time per week to devote to reading; others use them very frequently and regularly. The videos can be made available either as Private videos (which only specific email accounts can access); Unlisted (which has a shareable link but cannot be found in a search); and Public (which allows search engines to find it, and YouTube to promote the video to any YouTube user). I estimate that these videos may benefit both learners' listening skills (Perez, 2019) and their reading comprehension (Taylor, 2019) since they include both complete audio voiceover and text. Some researchers have found that learners strongly prefer full captioning in videos in technology-enhanced listening (Perez et al., 2014). Though these videos were originally designed to target reading comprehension, the interactive way in which many students report using the videos may represent a new kind of digital literacy, in which visual input, aural input, and technology features form a combined experience (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019). In my teaching circumstances, any additional work with characters or handwriting is at their initiative. I share additional ideas for students who wish to do more Chinese learning on their own, but do not require any additional self-study. I have anecdotal evidence that students who use read-along videos frequently can read aloud and understand unfamiliar texts which contain words and phrases introduced through read-along videos. Students from my classes have read aloud from new texts containing words introduced through read-along videos.

## 5. Coaching Students to Use Read-Along Videos

Students seem to benefit more when they take advantage of YouTube control options and do not play videos straight through. I base that observation first on overhearing my students talk at the beginning of class about how challenging their first videos felt when played at normal speed and without pausing. Students therefore need to be actively engaged in the reading process, and to recognize their own reading speed and comprehension level so that they can adjust use of the video accordingly. They also may need to be shown the tools YouTube has to make playback fit their needs well. Pausing, predicting, muting, and playing at a slower speed are all easy to do within YouTube settings. However, I have come to realize that students are not always aware of those features in YouTube or how they

might benefit from them while using read-along videos. I therefore suggest viewing them multiple times in different ways, for different purposes. Videos can be used with listening as a focus, played on a slower speed, pausing and thinking about the meaning, much like an audio book. The videos can also allow a focus on reading aloud with the audio, as in shadow-reading (Commander & De Guerrero, 2013). If a student has the goal of recognizing individual characters or increasing reading speed, watching multiple times may help. Using videos while muted to self-assess reading ability can also be useful.

Students have developed more ways to use the videos than I had originally envisioned. Some students always say they listen first, pausing often after hearing a slide read aloud to process the meaning. Others report that they try reading to themselves before listening to the audio, and then play and read aloud along with the voiceover, playing at a slower speed if necessary. I believe these differences may reflect different proficiency levels among the students. Their ideas also suggest that there are easy ways to differentiate use of the videos. Chinese literacy development generally proceeds in predictable ways, but we cannot expect all students in the same class to be at exactly the same developmental level (Zhang & Ke, 2018). Read-along videos can be differentiated in their use, so that students with stronger reading skills can do more predicting and muting of the sound of the words, while students who need or want more auditory scaffolding or slower speed playback can easily access those features. These videos can enable students to take control of their reading experiences and the degree of support that they wish at any given time.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Read-along videos seem to be user-friendly and enjoyable reading and/or listening experiences. They are a tool that more Chinese language teachers may wish to consider using, especially with distance learning and beginning levels of students. These videos rely mainly on implicit development of reading skills, which does not always result in students' awareness of what they have learned. Therefore, students may need or want an outside assessment of their reading progress to "know that they know" how to read. An outside assessment, perhaps through a standardized vocabulary test or reading comprehension test like some level of the HSK, might give them a clearer sense of their progress. Such a test might also be useful for research purposes to find out more about how this kind of reading experience helps students develop character recognition.

In some teaching contexts, read-along videos may have limitations. The learners who attend my classes are mostly adults and quite self-motivated, and all have learned other languages before. For schools with younger students, teachers may need to provide more coaching and supervision to maximize benefits from this type of reading. Also, read-along videos do not directly include assessment that can be checked by the instructor. Teachers who need to provide grades may want an additional way to assess students' progress. EdPuzzle or other apps could be used, and comprehension checks through questions, drawings, or other responses could be designed. Likewise, instructors who want students to develop independent character knowledge very early may want to supplement with individual character study of some kind. I would, however, recommend any character



analysis or studying come *after* read-along videos rather than before, so that characters are primarily encountered within a meaningful context.

Students may also benefit from thinking about goals for each time that they use a read-along video, and for their reading long-term. For example, they may focus first on overall comprehension, relying in part on listening skills and making use of the audio track. On a subsequent view, they may aim to read on their own by muting the audio except when needing to check or confirm the sound of certain words. Teachers may want explicitly to clarify what they expect students to “feel like” while reading and that it seems to be normal not to be able fully to trace one’s learning, character-by-character, from these videos. I would be surprised if read-along videos feel completely effortless, though I hope that reading with them feels like a pleasant, achievable challenge that gives a rewarding sense of accomplishment. It seems that giving students expectations for their experience, including the way that implicit learning progresses, might increase their sense of confidence in using the videos.

I hope in the future to investigate read-along videos in empirical research now in the process of seeking Institutional Research Board approval. In the future, I would like to investigate their uses among a broader range of students. How younger students and students in a more standard, credit-bearing course could use this type of video is particularly worth investigation. Results in terms of measurable reading and character recognition outcomes after a semester, year, or longer periods of time using read-along videos designed in this way could inform Chinese as a second language courses in how best to use them. How do students score on reading proficiency tests, HSK reading comprehension tests, and tests of Chinese character recognition? Lastly, how might read-along videos help students develop their compositional writing skills? Answers to these questions may help to answer whether or in what ways read-along videos might supplement or replace more typical literacy instruction in online and face-to-face instructional settings.

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## Appendix A

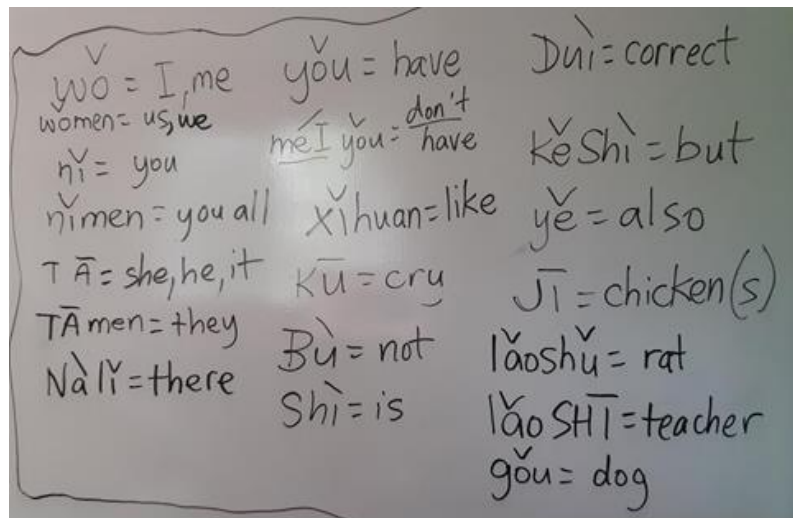
An example of the Google Document I make and share after each class. This example comes from the first beginning class on September 8, 2019.

2020年9月8号

Highlights from class time:

- Getting to know how Zoom & class sessions work.
- I have... discussion, starting with Nutella.
- Live Typing.
- People shared some ideas for review/learning Chinese during the rest of the week (end of class session video).

Whiteboard photo with vocabulary that came up:



Class session video recording: [link removed]

Read-along video: <http://somup.com/cqQjYVeaQA>

Important for the read-along video: I do not speak at what is probably the ideal speed for a total beginner when I record these. Therefore, you will probably want to use pause, slower speed playback, and mute (to predict how it sounds) to make the most of the read-along videos. Here's a video that introduces those features in YouTube: [How to Use YouTube with Read-Along Videos.](#)

Another thing about read-along videos: I will not expect that you all have time/interest now in reading Chinese, so during class, I generally use pinyin as words come up. However, reading Chinese means reading in characters, and it's like seeing a film in color compared to watching in black-and-white. I think it's worth the time!

Here is what we started typing together:

Diane 有 Nutella.  
 Diane 没有 pizza。  
 Diane 有 Nutella, 可是 Diane 没有 pizza。  
 Bess 没有 Nutella!  
 Diane 有 Nutella, 可是 Bess 没有!  
 Bess 哭! Bess 没有 Nutella。  
 Diane 有 Nutella. Diane 不哭!

(You do NOT need to be able to read what's below directly - it's better to use the read-along video which has larger font size and better spacing. I type up the reading material here so I can keep track of it more easily. I don't expect you to be able to read this from here, without hearing some of the words. And the font size is too small for comfort as a new reader! I also switched around who has or doesn't have Nutella.)

Qwikslides version: [http://www.classtools.net/qwikslides/87\\_c4H3G8](http://www.classtools.net/qwikslides/87_c4H3G8)

Bess 有 Nutella. Bess 没有 pizza.

Bess 有 Nutella, 可是 Bess 没有 pizza.

Diane 没有 Nutella!

Bess 有 Nutella, 可是 Diane 没有! AIYa!

Diane 哭! Diane 没有 Nutella.

Bess 有 Nutella. Bess 不哭。

Bess 喜欢 Nutella, 可是, Diane 也喜欢 Nutella.

Bess 没有 pizza, 可是 Bess 不哭。

Bess 喜欢 pizza, 可是 Bess 不哭。

Diane 也没有 pizza. Bess 不哭。

可是, Diane 也没有 Nutella. Diane 哭了! Diane 喜欢 Nutella!

Bess: “Diane, 你哭了!”

Diane: “我哭了! 我没有 Nutella!”

Bess: “你喜欢 Nutella 吗?”

Diane: “喜欢! 我喜欢 Nutella! 可是, 我没有。你不哭。你有没有 Nutella??”

Bess: “我有 Nutella. 你没有吗?”

Diane: “我没有 Nutella! 可是, 我喜欢。我哭! 哭哭哭!”

Bess: “AIYa! 你哭了! 我喜欢你, 可是, 我不喜欢你哭。”

“我有 Nutella. 你喜欢 Nutella, 我也喜欢 Nutella. Diane, 我的 Nutella! 你有 Nutella 了!”

Diane: “WA! 你的 Nutella! 我有 Nutella 了! 我喜欢! 谢谢你!”

Bess: “不谢。我喜欢 Nutella, 我也喜欢你。”

“可是, 我不喜欢你哭! 你有 Nutella 了。你哭不哭?”

Diane: “我不哭了! 有 Nutella, 我不哭。谢谢。我喜欢你的 Nutella。”

Bess: “不谢, 不谢。”

## Appendix B

Links to video tutorials with suggestions for use and making of these videos, and two read-along video examples for different levels of students:

- Instructional video for how to use and make read-along videos: [https://youtu.be/4acHV\\_HU14E](https://youtu.be/4acHV_HU14E)
- Design factors for read-along videos and similar texts: <https://youtu.be/z3uN-bShC50>
- Example of a Chinese read-along video (designed for first reading ever in Chinese): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zILn6Be40cU>
- Example of another read-along video (designed for people after about 60 hours of Chinese): <https://youtu.be/rfmL6bakOPw>