Exploring Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge about Teaching Reading Comprehension in English

A Study of Teacher Knowledge at a University in China

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Abstract

Teachers’ personal practical knowledge is the knowledge of teachers which is principally known and produced by teachers themselves. Greatly inspired by Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard (1999), this study uses a questionnaire and an interview to continue the line of their investigation. The study aims to describe and illustrate the content of 13 teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension to non-English majors at a university in China. The study is also to examine similarities (shared knowledge) and differences in teacher knowledge, and potentially relevant background variables in it. As a result, detailed information about these teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension has been found. Meijer et al. (1999) could not find shared knowledge by investigating teachers from different schools. In this study, by investigating teachers from the same school, shared knowledge could not be found either. Thus, by comparing these teachers’ personal practical knowledge, they can be classified into three groups: subject-matter-oriented, student-oriented and student-learning-oriented teachers. Each group is illustrated by describing one teacher’s knowledge as a typical example. Moreover, six potentially relevant background variables are discussed in this study. By matching the six background variables to the responses of these teachers, three patterns in potentially relevant background variables have been developed: professional-growth teachers, student-centered teachers, and authority-maintaining teachers.

Keywords: Teachers’ personal practical knowledge; Reading comprehension; Teachers and teaching
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Introduction

Traditionally, it was assumed that teacher characteristics and teaching methods were the main areas of importance to student learning. It has only recently been accepted that teachers’ knowledge and how they express their knowledge is central to student learning (Connelly, Clandinin & He, 1997). In many educational innovations, teachers were regarded as executors who were supposed to implement these innovations to demonstrate the required behavior in accordance with the intentions of the innovators. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the educational innovations failed after some time, because teachers abandoned the new behavior and returned to the old routine ways after a period of change (Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001). As a result, researchers recognized the centrality of teachers in educational processes. If the educational reforms did not seem to correspond to teachers’ knowledge and beliefs, the failure was inevitable. Therefore, professional development should focus on deepening teacher knowledge in order to promote teacher learning and changes in practice (Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000).

Fenstermacher (1994) distinguishes two major types of knowledge in research on teaching: formal knowledge and practical knowledge. Formal knowledge is described as knowledge for teachers which is primarily known and produced by researchers. Practical knowledge is the knowledge of teachers which is principally known and produced by teachers themselves. This practical knowledge of teachers can also be called personal practical knowledge of teachers, which is highly determined by individual experiences, personality variables, personal history, subject matter knowledge, and so on (Verloop et al., 2001). Connelly and Clandinin (1988) understand that personal practical knowledge is “a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation” (1988: 25). In this essay, the focus of attention is on this personal practical knowledge of teachers. It can also be called teacher knowledge or teachers’ practical knowledge. Although it is strongly related to individual experiences and circumstances, there might be some elements which are shared by teachers.
Greatly inspired by the research done by Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard (1999) who conducted a qualitative study using a structured open interview and a concept mapping assignment in order to explore the similarities (i.e. shared knowledge) and differences in language teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension to 16 to 18-year-old students, the present study uses different instruments to continue the line of their investigation. In the study of Meijer et al., the participants are language teachers teaching reading comprehension in foreign languages and the mother tongue (Dutch) from different schools. As a result, they could not find similarities in these teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. This research hopes to find shared knowledge by studying a group of teachers teaching reading comprehension in English as a second language at the same school. Moreover, this research wants to find out whether the categories, typology and patterns developed by Meijer et al. still hold in this study.

1.1 Aim
The aim of the present study is to investigate teachers’ personal practical knowledge with respect to the teaching of reading comprehension. The focus of this study is to describe and illustrate the content of teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. The study is also to examine the similarities and differences in teachers’ personal practical knowledge, and background variables which potentially influence teachers’ personal practical knowledge.

1.2 Material and Method
To carry out the investigation, both the participants and instruments were carefully selected. A questionnaire and an interview are involved as the main sources of data collected and analyzed in this study.

1.2.1 Participants
The participants of this study are 13 teachers. Considering the close relationship between teachers’ personal practical knowledge, the teaching context, the subject
matter, the language taught, and the school context, the study was confined to one specific group of teachers. All the 13 teachers are native Chinese speakers who teach an integrated English course\(^1\) to non-English majors at a university in China. Eleven teachers are female and two are male. The teaching experiences of these teachers range from three to 14 years.

Cooperation between teachers and researchers is considered to be very important, because researchers are “after the knowledge of teachers” (Meijer et al., 1999: 61). In an interview, some people will tend to speak less, or they might be unwilling to tell their own thoughts if they are in front of a stranger. It will influence the results of the study. Moreover, Meijer et al. discovered in their study that personal characteristics of teachers had an influence on teachers’ personal practical knowledge. Therefore, being familiar with the participants is beneficial to this study. All the participants in the study are colleagues of the researcher and they were willing to participate in the questionnaire and the interview.

### 1.2.2 Questionnaire

One instrument used to examine teachers’ personal practical knowledge in this study is a questionnaire. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), a major advantage of a questionnaire is that researchers can e-mail it to the participants who “use self-report to express their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward a topic of interest” (2009: 232). It is an especially important and convenient way for the researcher in this study to get information from the participants in China.

Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard (2001) used a questionnaire of only closed-format questions to investigate similarities and differences in the practical knowledge of 69 teachers to conduct a quantitative study. In order to get more varied information for

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\(^1\) An integrated English course is the most popular course for non-English majors at universities in China, which means incorporating reading, writing, listening, speaking, and translation into one course.
our qualitative study, both closed-ended questionnaire items with predetermined response categories and open-ended questionnaire items which require narrative responses were included (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The questionnaire (see Appendix) includes twelve questions, with ten closed-ended items and two open-ended items. For each of the closed-ended items, three or four choices are offered. Participants were required to choose the one that corresponded to their opinions. If they had different suggestions, they were invited to write them down in the last choice of each item.

Meijer et al. (1999) provided a system of categories of teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension in their study: (a) subject matter knowledge; (b) student knowledge; (c) knowledge of student learning and understanding; (d) knowledge of purpose; (e) knowledge of curriculum; (f) knowledge of instructional techniques. They further divided the first three categories into several subcategories. The present study included the six categories in the design of the questions in the questionnaire. Some subcategories were excluded because they were not suitable and meaningful in this study. Detailed information about how the questions were designed is shown in the following six aspects.

(1) Subject matter knowledge: Meijer et al. distinguished five subcategories in teachers’ subject matter knowledge. They are definition of reading comprehension, necessary skills for reading comprehension, proper procedure for reading texts, relationship of reading comprehension to other language skills, and relationship of reading comprehension to other subjects taught in school. In the present study, three subcategories were included based on the study of Meijer et al. The three subcategories are: (a) definition of reading comprehension; (b) necessary skills for reading comprehension; (c) relationship of reading comprehension to other language skills. The first three questions in the Questionnaire were designed on the basis of these three subcategories.
(2) Student knowledge: According to Meijer et al., student knowledge is further divided into three subcategories. They are knowledge about characteristics of students, knowledge about environment of students and knowledge about motivation of students. In the present study, the following two subcategories were included based on their study: (a) knowledge about students’ characteristics; (b) knowledge about students’ motivation. Questions 8 and 9 in the Questionnaire were designed on the basis of these two subcategories.

(3) Knowledge of student learning and understanding: Meijer et al. distinguished four subcategories in this knowledge. They are differences among students, abilities, skills and difficulties in reading comprehension. In the present study, the four subcategories were combined and divided into two subcategories based on their study. They are: (a) students’ difficulties in reading; (b) factors for the differences of students’ reading abilities. Questions 10 and 11 in the Questionnaire were designed on the basis of the above two subcategories.

(4) Knowledge of purpose: Although Meijer et al. did not subcategorize teachers’ knowledge of purpose, two major questions were raised from their work. They are reasons why teachers consider teaching reading comprehension is important and reasons why teachers teach reading comprehension. Based on these two questions, two subcategories were established in this study: (a) importance of reading; (b) goals for teaching reading. Questions 6 and 7 in the Questionnaire were designed on the basis of the above two subcategories.

(5) Knowledge of curriculum: According to Meijer et al., a difference in teachers’ knowledge of curriculum can be found in the kinds of materials and texts they use in their classrooms. Based on this statement, one question (Question 4) was included in the Questionnaire.

(6) Knowledge of instructional techniques: Meijer et al. explored teachers’ knowledge
of instructional techniques by asking teachers how to design and prepare their lessons. Based on the work done by them, one question (Question 5) was included in the Questionnaire to explore teachers’ knowledge of instructional techniques.

The questionnaire aimed to obtain teachers’ attitudes and opinions towards the content of teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. We wanted to find out whether the six categories could help us describe personal practical knowledge, as well as similarities and differences in the knowledge of teachers in this study.

1.2.3 Interview

The questionnaire was followed by interviews with the participants after it was analyzed. As Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) point out, interviews provide ample opportunity for interviewers to ask for explanations and collect a powerful data. The interview used to examine teachers’ personal practical knowledge in this study is an informal conversational interview. The main purpose of the informal conversational interview is to get more information from the participants. The questions are mainly about why they chose certain items.

Moreover, during the informal conversational interview, participants were asked to tell stories of their teaching, stories of their own education, or stories of their students. According to Connelly et al. (1997), researchers cannot simply use one or several methods to understand and study teachers’ personal knowledge. It is necessary to work with teachers in all aspects of their lives, including classrooms and their personal lives. In this study, observations into classrooms and personal lives are not workable since the study is not carried out in China. Nevertheless, the researcher could get some data through the interviews. The interviews were carried out on an individual basis through the chatting software QQ, which is quite similar to MSN but more popular in China. The content of the interviews was recorded for further analysis.
1.3 Procedure
The investigation was conducted through the following four steps. Firstly, a questionnaire was carefully designed according to the aim of the study to obtain teachers’ attitudes and opinions towards their personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. Then, the participants were selected. In order to exclude the influences of subject matter, teaching and school contexts on teachers’ personal practical knowledge, this research decided to study teachers working in the same contexts. All the 13 teachers in this study are native Chinese speakers who teach an integrated English course to non-English majors. Next, with the help of one of the researcher’s colleagues, the questionnaire was sent via e-mail. All the participants finished writing all the items in the questionnaire in their offices. The colleague then collected all the responses, took pictures of them, and after converting them into e-material, sent the responses back to the researcher via e-mail. Finally, the interview was conducted after the responses of the questionnaire had been sent back. The interviews were carried out on an individual basis through the chatting software QQ. The informal conversational interviews were recorded for further analysis.

2 Theoretical Background
Teaching is a complex activity. Teachers’ personal practical knowledge research which reflects this activity is part of an educational revolution. Beijaard and Verloop (1996) argue that teachers’ knowledge research reflects the complexity of teaching and important things in teaching practice. According to them, what really matters in teaching quality is teachers’ knowledge. Detailed information about teachers’ knowledge will be presented in this section. Relevant theories on reading comprehension, including concept of reading and processes of reading are also discussed in the following subsections.

2.1 Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge
A wide range of research has been done on teachers’ personal practical knowledge. Due to different research purposes, the definitions of teachers’ personal practical
knowledge are different and they will be addressed below. The discussion about the content of teachers’ personal practical knowledge is a central issue to the present study. Background variables influencing teachers’ personal practical knowledge will also be included in the subsection to follow. Moreover, a review of previous research on teachers’ personal practical knowledge is presented in this section.

2.1.1 Definition of Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

In the literature about teachers’ personal practical knowledge, several terms have been used by researchers. These are teacher knowledge, teachers’ practical knowledge and teachers’ personal practical knowledge. Each term illustrates which aspect is considered the most important by the researchers (Verloop et al., 2001).

In the term of teacher knowledge, the knowledge is inclusive. According to Carter (1990), teacher knowledge is the total knowledge of a teacher at his or her disposal at a particular moment, which underlies his or her actions (Verloop et al., 2001). Teacher knowledge may have a variety of origins including both teachers’ experiences and initial teacher education or continued professional training. In this sense, teacher knowledge is not opposite to theoretical knowledge. Instead, the theoretical knowledge teachers get from education or training can be integrated into their personal practical knowledge (Verloop et al., 2001).

In the term of teachers’ practical knowledge, the knowledge is the base of teachers’ actions for practice (Verloop et al., 2001). According to Beijaard and Verloop (1996), practical knowledge refers to teachers’ knowledge of classroom situations and the practical dilemmas they face in carrying out actions. It determines or guides teachers’ actions in practice. Grossman and Shulman (1994) stress that the knowledge and practical understandings of teachers are unlikely to be composed of principles which are derived from research. Teacher knowledge is composed largely of what happened in particular classes.
In the term of teachers’ personal practical knowledge, the knowledge is personal and forms the base of teachers’ actions for practice. Clandinin (1992) points out that personal practical knowledge of teachers lies in teachers’ past experiences, present thinking and future plans. As Clandinin writes:

> It is knowledge that reflects the individual’s prior knowledge and acknowledges the contextual nature of that teacher’s knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge carved out of, and shaped by, situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection (Clandinin, 1992: 125).

Beneficial changes and improvements may occur with teachers’ reflection on themselves and teaching practice. Fenstermacher (1994) defines teachers’ practical knowledge as the knowledge teachers themselves produce as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences. Connelly et al. (1997) understand teacher knowledge as knowledge derived from personal experience, and that the knowledge is found in the teachers’ practice. It is not something objective or independent, but is the sum total of teachers’ experiences.

Most studies concentrate on one or two characteristics when defining teacher knowledge, “which has implications for the term that is used and the design of the study” (Meijer et al., 1999: 60). From the review of these studies, this research recognizes teachers’ personal practical knowledge as the knowledge which has a variety of origins including both teachers’ personal experiences and initial teacher education or continued professional training. Based on this recognition, teachers’ personal practical knowledge in this study is defined as the knowledge and beliefs of a teacher that form the base for his or her own actions in teaching. In the following text, teacher knowledge will be used as an abbreviation to refer to teachers’ personal practical knowledge.

### 2.1.2 Content of Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

Given the range of different terms and definitions used in the study of teacher...
knowledge, there is no agreement about the content of this kind of knowledge (Meijer et al., 1999). According to Beijaard and Verloop (1996), practical knowledge is described as knowledge which is employed and reflected on by teachers. Teachers should possess knowledge with regard to the following six aspects:

- subjects and how to teach them to students (expertise in a certain discipline and the translation of this expertise into knowledge needed for teaching);
- problem solving or higher-order thinking, including intellectual qualities regarding critical analysis, reflection, evaluation and the like, because there are also expected from students;
- facilitating, managing, monitoring and evaluating student learning;
- curricula (why are they arranged as they are; the curriculum’s organization or structure in relation to student results);
- target groups and types of learning (processes and styles of learning);
- reflection on practical experiences

(Beijaard and Verloop, 1996: 280).

These six domains are relevant both theoretically and practically. This knowledge consists of the information and skills that teachers acquire in order to function in teaching practice.

Petrosky (1994) discusses the work on teacher knowledge by Lee Shulman (1987). According to Shulman, teacher knowledge is a collection of knowledge, skill, understanding, technology, ethics, disposition and responsibility. He proposes a theoretical model of categories of teacher knowledge as follows: (a) content knowledge; (b) general pedagogical knowledge (general principles and strategies of classroom organization); (c) curriculum knowledge (a grasp of teaching materials and programs); (d) pedagogical content knowledge (specific content and pedagogy of professional understanding); (e) knowledge of learners and their characteristics; (f) knowledge of educational contexts (here educational contexts include: groups, classrooms, schools, communities and cultures); (g) knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values (Petrosky, 1994).

By regarding these seven categories as discursive practices and structures, we can
conclude that teacher knowledge can be positioned as terms in educational discourse (Petrosky, 1994). When teacher knowledge is approached as discourse, various productions of teachers as knowledge of teaching can be understood, including how they act or think in the discourse.

Meijer et al. (1999) define teachers’ practical knowledge as the knowledge and beliefs that underlie teachers’ actions. This kind of knowledge is personal, contextual, based on experiences, and related to content. They provide a system of six categories of teachers’ practical knowledge. They are: (a) subject matter knowledge (knowledge of the specific subject); (b) student knowledge (knowledge about students in general); (c) knowledge of student learning and understanding (knowledge of learning and understanding about the specific subject); (d) knowledge of purposes (goals for and importance of teaching the subject); (e) knowledge of curriculum (texts and materials used for the subject); (f) knowledge of instructional strategies (how to design, prepare, and organize the lessons for the subject). These six categories are very useful for exploring teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching a particular subject. By investigating the content of the six categories and their relationships, detailed information of what teachers know and how they deal with the complexity of teaching might be provided.

The above mentioned categories are to a large extent similar to the categories Van Driel et al. (1998) found in their study, which include seven aspects: (a) knowledge of subject matter; (b) knowledge of general pedagogy; (c) knowledge of student learning and conceptions; (d) knowledge of purposes; (e) knowledge of curriculum and media; (f) knowledge of representations and strategies; (g) knowledge of context (Meijer et al., 1999). The seven categories focus on relationships between pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of the specific subject content.

2.1.3 Influencing Factors of Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

As Grossman and Shulman (1994) point out, there is a foundational misleading view
of teacher knowledge that the knowledge for teaching is a static one, and exists somehow outside teachers. There is also a misconception that teachers come to their instructional tasks with a fixed knowledge base. According to Verloop et al. (2001), “the knowledge base of teaching is conceived as all profession-related insights, which are potentially relevant to a teacher’s activities” (2001: 441). In the process of teaching, teachers will develop a new understanding. Although there is shared knowledge among teachers, there are large differences in their practical knowledge (Verloop et al., 2001).

According to Meijer et al., there are six background variables which might influence teachers’ practical knowledge: “(a) personal characteristics; (b) frequency and nature of reflection; (c) prior education; (d) years of experience; (e) the language taught; (f) the school context” (1999: 61). Teachers create knowledge in response to various problems they need to solve, like how they deal with their professional training, their experiences, and relationships with their students and colleagues. Conversely, such kind of knowledge can be used by teachers in their teaching.

Kauchak and Eggen (2003) state that two teacher characteristics have proved to be powerful variables influencing teacher knowledge, and they are teacher experience and understanding of the subject matter. Experienced teachers are able to interpret the complicated events and make quick decisions using their experience. Outstanding teachers use their experiences as a basis for effective approaches to solve new problems and meet new demands (Ayers & Schubert, 1994). Teachers’ understanding of the subject matter can be helpful to students. As Kauchak and Eggen (2003) write:

The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students (2003: 21).

Subject matter knowledge is knowledge about a specific subject and how to deal with things in that subject. Subject matter expertise allows teachers to organize and explain
ideas in ways that make sense to students.

Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) point out that teachers’ teaching context, teaching experience and biographies have strong influences on teacher knowledge. Teaching context consists of the environment of the classroom and the culture of the school. Teacher knowledge is dependent as much on the environment in which they work as on the individuals. Biographies or autobiographies tell the personal and professional stories of the teachers (Connelly et al., 1997). Examples include teachers’ prior education, their family lives, their hopes, their ambitions, and so on. Researchers are interested in how teachers’ personal life experiences interact with their professional lives.

2.1.4 Previous Research on Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

Although research on teaching has a long history, teacher knowledge research is relatively new. From the beginning of research into teacher knowledge, there have been different opinions about whether studies should be confined to describing teacher knowledge of individuals or small groups, or the studies should be focused on the more general characteristics of teacher knowledge of a larger group of teachers.

As it has been mentioned before, Meijer et al. (1999) conducted a qualitative study in order to explore the similarities and differences in language teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension to 16 to 18-year-old students. With the definition of teacher’s practical knowledge as the knowledge and beliefs that underlie their actions, they chose 13 teachers as their participants. Two instruments were used to investigate teachers’ practical knowledge: a structured open interview and a concept mapping assignment. They provided a system of categories of teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension: (a) subject matter knowledge; (b) student knowledge; (c) knowledge of student learning and understanding; (d) knowledge of purpose; (e) knowledge of curriculum; (f) knowledge of instructional techniques. The results revealed a wide diversity in
teachers’ practical knowledge. Instead of capturing shared knowledge, they developed a typology of practical knowledge. Three types of practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension were found: (a) subject matter knowledge; (b) student knowledge; (c) knowledge of student learning and understanding. However, the group of teachers investigated is too small to make reliable generalizations.

As a result, Meijer et al. (2001) conducted a quantitative follow-up study to investigate the similarities and differences in teachers’ practical knowledge of a larger group of teachers. Using the same system of categories from the qualitative study mentioned above, a questionnaire was designed which contained closed-format questions. Altogether 69 teachers returned the questionnaire. Items with a low variance were regarded as teachers’ shared knowledge. For unshared knowledge items, principal component analyses were used. These components provided insights into the relationships between the different aspects of teachers’ practical knowledge with regard to the teaching of reading comprehension. They concluded that although there was shared knowledge among these teachers, their practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension was greatly different.

In addition to the above mentioned qualitative and quantitative studies, some other researchers use narrative inquiry as the research method to study teachers’ personal practical knowledge. Clandinin (1992) writes:

In narrative inquiry we offer ways of telling individuals’ stories—researchers and participants—as embedded within particular cultures and histories. Accounts of how the individual is shaped by the larger professional knowledge context and also the ways in which the professional knowledge context has been reshaped in the unique situation in which the individual lives and works are constructed (1992: 128).

Narrative inquiry is a method of telling stories of teachers on the basis of the constructions of personal practical knowledge. Clandinin states that there are some risks and difficulties in narrative inquiry. Some participants are silenced and some are not willing to participate. Therefore, the collaborative work between researchers and
participants are very important for collecting data and carrying out research.

Clandinin explored experienced and novice teachers’ knowledge using narrative inquiry. A group of university teachers, cooperating teachers and student teachers worked together to illustrate the ideas of teacher knowledge through one student teacher’s story. The story highlights the growth, changes and tensions of a student teacher’s way of living. In the research process, researchers collected the data through observation and asking questions. In addition, the participant’s autobiographical writing, journals, stories and letters were collected as field texts. The purpose of the study was to help readers understand enough of the experiences of the participant and help readers raise questions about their own practices through reflection.

Connelly et al. (1997) conducted research which focused on teacher knowledge in the professional landscape. They outlined the methodology for undertaking the research by a case study of a teacher in China. They began with a story constructed from conversations and interviews between one of the researchers and the participant. By illustrating how the participant worked with these ideas expressed in the conversations and interviews, they gave a clearer description of how teacher knowledge developed in the context of their working environment. Their way of telling the story greatly helps the present study to discuss similarities and differences in teacher knowledge by describing some teachers’ knowledge as typical examples.

2.2 Reading Comprehension

In second language teaching and learning, reading has always had a paramount position in the interests of both second language teachers and researchers. For many students, among the four skills in a second language acquisition (reading, writing, listening and speaking), reading is by far the most important one (Carrell, 2006). The important interaction of reading ability and language proficiency is now well accepted. Moreover, the importance of background knowledge and the role of sociocultural meaning in second language reading comprehension are fully recognized (Carrell,
According to Devine (2006), proficient second language reading depends on the interaction of three types of knowledge: linguistic, background and schematic knowledge. In order to achieve successful reading, these three types of knowledge must function simultaneously. If readers have difficulty understanding language patterns of a reading material, the material can be called linguistically complex material to these readers; if readers have difficulty understanding the background knowledge, culture and information in a reading material, the material is then conceptually complex to the readers (Devine, 2006). Schematic knowledge consists of formal schematic knowledge and content schematic knowledge; the former refers to background knowledge of rhetorical organizational structure of a text, while the latter refers to background knowledge about the content area of a text (Carrell, 2006). To be an independent and proficient second language reader, one must be able to deal with both linguistically complex material and conceptually complex material.

In the following two subsections, different opinions of the concept of reading will be discussed. Different models of reading processes will also be presented, including the Goodman Model, bottom-up and top-down models which are the results of schema theory, and interactive model. It can help us to have an adequate understanding of reading comprehension.

2.2.1 Concept of Reading

In the history of theories of reading in a second language, there are some different opinions about how to understand reading. As Eskey and Grabe (2006) state, reading requires a high degree of grammatical control and a large-scale development of vocabulary. It is necessary for fluency in reading. However, many other researchers tend to put their emphasis on describing reading as a process. Sheridan (1993) points out that reading is a process of active and creative thinking in which readers’ responses can never be ignored. According to Carrell (2006), reading is not a passive,
but rather an active, even an interactive process, and it is viewed as a decoding process of reconstructing the author’s intended meaning through the letters and words. Goodman (2006) declares that reading is a psycholinguistic and receptive process. It “starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by the author and ends with meaning which the reader constructs” (Goodman, 2006: 12). Thus, there is “an essential interaction between language and thought in reading” (Goodman, 2006: 12). In this process, readers reconstruct meanings from the written words by relating them to their experiences and knowledge of the language.

2.2.2 Processes of Reading
Based on the knowledge of reading and how it works, different models of processes of reading have been developed. Goodman (2006) points out that although reading is a process in which information is dealt with and meaning is constructed continuously, it can be represented as a series of cycles: optical, perceptual, syntactic and meaning cycle. Each cycle melts into the next.

As the readers move through the cycles of reading, they employ five processes: recognition-initiation, prediction, confirmation, correction, and termination (Goodman, 2006). These five processes have an essential and irreplaceable sequence. Recognition-initiation precedes prediction which precedes confirmation, correction and termination. On the other hand, the same information can be used to confirm a previous prediction and recognition. This is called “Goodman Model” (Goodman, 2006: 20). Since it copes with how language and thought interacts, it is a psycholinguistic model (Goodman, 2006). Some experts characterize the model as a top-down pattern because it makes readers active participants in making and confirming predictions in reading by using their linguistic background knowledge, although Goodman does not make the characterization himself (Carrell, 2006).

Within a psycholinguistic model of reading, the importance of background knowledge has been recognized, known as schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 2006). Carrell
(2006) states that schema theory research shows that if a reader has background knowledge of a text’s content, the reader will have a better understanding of the text. According to the schema theory, the process of reading comprehension is directed by the principle that “every input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of that schema must be compatible with the input information” (Carrell & Eisterhold, 2006: 76). This principle leads to two basic models of reading processing: bottom-up and top-down processing.

Bottom-up and top-down here are merely metaphors for the complex mental process of reading. Bottom refers to the physical text and top refers to some higher order mental concepts, such as the knowledge and the expectations of readers (Eskey & Grabe, 2006). According to Harris and Hodges (1981), in bottom-up processing, comprehension is regarded as text-driven: “[I]t is built up and governed by the text only, and does not involve the reader’s inner experiences and expectations” (1981: 38). In top-down processing, comprehension is regarded as reader-driven, rather than text-driven. Top-down processing is a process of “using one’s experiences and expectations in order to react to text and build comprehension” (Harris & Hodges, 1981: 332).

To make effective use of both bottom-up and top-down processing models, an efficient interaction of both models is needed, called interactive processing (Carrell, 2006). It includes both bottom-up and top-down strategies. In interactive processing, reading involves both the processing of a text and the use of readers’ experiences and expectations, and “both sources of information interacting and modifying each other in reading comprehension” (Harris & Hodges, 1981: 160). This model incorporates the implications of reading as an interactive process involving background knowledge, experiences, expectations, context, and so on. It also incorporates notions of recognition for letters, words, lexical forms and “the concept of automaticity in processing such forms” (Eskey & Grabe, 2006: 224). That is to say, when processing and interpreting a text, skills at all levels are interactively available.
3 Analysis and Discussion

In this section, the 13 teachers’ knowledge about teaching reading comprehension is analyzed and discussed. The data consists of 13 responses of the Questionnaire and 13 transcripts of the interviews. The objective here is to explore the content of teacher knowledge with regard to the teaching of reading comprehension. The working definition of teacher knowledge in this study is the knowledge and beliefs of a teacher that form the base for his or her own actions in teaching; this kind of knowledge has a variety of origins including both teachers’ experiences and initial teacher education or continued professional training. The content of teacher knowledge is categorized into subject matter knowledge, student knowledge, knowledge of student learning and understanding, knowledge of purposes, knowledge of curriculum and knowledge of instructional techniques (Meijer et al., 1999).

This section is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a close examination of each category of teachers’ personal practical knowledge. The second part discusses similarities and differences in teachers’ personal practical knowledge using some teachers’ knowledge as typical examples. The third part discusses potentially relevant background variables in teachers’ personal practical knowledge.

3.1 Content of Each Category of Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

As was mentioned in section 1.2.2, when designing the content of the items in the Questionnaire, the six categories identified by Meijer et al were included. This study used the list of these categories for the reason that detailed information of what teachers know and how they deal with the complexity of teaching reading comprehension could be found by investigating the content of the six categories and their relationships. This is very useful for exploring teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading. In the present study, the same categories were employed to describe the data and to make them serve as the basis for the analysis. The six categories and brief descriptions of each category are presented in Table 1 below. Table 1 is based on Table 2 in the study of Meijer et al. (1999).
Table 1. Categories of teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Subject matter knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge of reading comprehension in the integrated English course, not directly in relation to teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge about 18 to 20-year-old students (freshmen and sophomores) in general, not directly in relation to reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of student learning and understanding</td>
<td>Knowledge of the learning and understanding of 18 to 20-year-old college students with regard to reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge of purpose</td>
<td>Knowledge of goals for teaching reading comprehension and importance of teaching reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Knowledge of curriculum</td>
<td>Knowledge of texts and materials used in lessons on reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Knowledge of instructional techniques</td>
<td>Knowledge of teaching strategies, for example: how to prepare, design, and organize lessons in reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1 above, we can see that in this study the content of teacher knowledge is categorized into six parts. They are subject matter knowledge, student knowledge, knowledge of student learning and understanding, knowledge of purpose, knowledge of curriculum, and knowledge of instructional techniques. For the purpose of exploring teacher knowledge with respect to the teaching of reading comprehension, this study confines the subject to reading comprehension only. Moreover, all the 13
teachers teach either freshmen or sophomores at a university in China, and as a result, the ages of the students range from 18 to 20 years old.

In the present study, subject matter knowledge refers to the knowledge of reading comprehension in the integrated English course. It is the knowledge of the subject itself. Teaching of reading is not included in this category, because it will be discussed in relation to knowledge of instructional techniques. Student knowledge refers to general knowledge about freshmen and sophomores who are 18 to 20 years old. Students’ knowledge about reading comprehension is excluded here, but it will be described in knowledge of student learning and understanding. Knowledge of purpose is teachers’ understanding of the goals for their teaching of reading comprehension and the importance of teaching reading. Knowledge of curriculum refers to teachers’ knowledge of what kinds of texts and materials they use for teaching reading. Knowledge of instructional techniques is knowledge of teaching strategies. It refers to teachers’ teaching of reading. To be specific, designing, preparation and organization of lessons in reading comprehension are included in this category.

Each category of the content of teacher knowledge of the 13 teachers is compared and summarized in the following subsections. Subcategories within the first four categories are presented, providing more detailed information of teacher knowledge of teaching reading. In order to make this study objective, the researcher tried to let the results emerge from the data as much as possible to “reduce the potential bias of the interpretative nature of this study” (Meijer et al., 1999: 65). In other words, this study was confined to the descriptions of the data instead of using the researcher’s own imaginations to interpret the data.

3.1.1 Subject Matter knowledge
Meijer et al. distinguished five subcategories in teachers’ subject matter knowledge: definition of reading comprehension, necessary skills for reading comprehension, proper procedure for reading texts, relationship of reading comprehension to other
language skills, and relationship of reading comprehension to other subjects taught in school. In the present study, three subcategories were included based on their study: definition of reading comprehension, necessary skills for reading comprehension, and relationship of reading comprehension to other language skills. The first three questions in the Questionnaire (see Appendix²) were designed on the basis of the three subcategories. The 13 teachers’ responses to each of the three questions are presented and discussed in the following three subsections.

3.1.1.1 Teachers’ Responses to Definition of Reading Comprehension

As mentioned in section 2.5.1, there are different opinions about how to understand and define reading in the history of theories of reading in a second language. Among the four fixed items of choices (A, B, C and D) in the first question, options A and B focus on how we understand the meaning of a text. For option A, the meaning of a text is inside the text itself; for option B, the meaning of a text is something outside the text, the real world. Options C and D focus on the distinction between the importance of the content and the form of a text. The 13 teachers’ responses to the first question are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Teachers’ responses to definition of reading comprehension (Question 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>T1, T2, T5, T13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*T1, T2, the etc. are abbreviations which stand for each of the teachers investigated in this study.

² Appendix includes the Questionnaire, and all the information about the questions and options can be found there.
We can see from Table 2 that most of the teachers (nine teachers) chose C as their response to the definition of reading comprehension. For them, reading comprehension is a process of having insight into the content of a text, not the structure. Their reasons for choosing C are quite similar, which can be concluded as follows: the purpose of reading is to find out the meaning of the content, not the structure; they can easily understand the content of a well-organized text. The remaining four teachers chose A as their responses. For them, reading comprehension is a process of understanding the essence of a text itself, and it has nothing to do with the real world outside. As one of the teachers (T5) says, people read newspapers to know what exactly happened around them; but at least in most of the readings done in the classroom, they always focus on the text itself. As T2 says, they seldom relate the text to the real world, because they need to explain the text in detail to let every student in the classroom have a better understanding of the vocabulary, structure and content, so they do not have much time to relate the content to the outside world. The opinion of T2 is quite popular among these four teachers.

3.1.1.2 Teachers’ Responses to Necessary Skills for Reading Comprehension

In section 2.5.2, three different processes of reading were mentioned: bottom-up processing, top-down processing and interactive processing. The bottom-up model stresses a text itself in reading, while the top-down model focuses on readers’ experiences and expectations. The interactive model involves both the processing of a text and the use of readers’ experiences and expectations. Each model focuses differently on the necessary skills for reading. Eskey and Grabe (2006) point out that teachers may play important roles in developing students’ reading skills for the reason that it is always teachers who really decide what materials and how much students should read. Students might have no interest in reading those uninteresting or too difficult materials. In order to have a better understanding of a text, necessary skills are needed. The 13 teachers’ responses to the second question are shown in Table 3 below.
Table 3. Teachers’ responses to necessary skills for reading comprehension (Question 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>skimming, scanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>vocabulary strategies, reading fluently, reading with a purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>predicting content, guessing the meanings of new words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>skimming, scanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>skimming and scanning, guessing new words, background knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>mastery of the language, using reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T7</td>
<td>background knowledge, having interest, having insight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T8</td>
<td>guessing new words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T9</td>
<td>grasping a certain number of vocabulary, predicting the content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T10</td>
<td>making inferences, skimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T11</td>
<td>skimming, scanning, note-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T12</td>
<td>skimming, scanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T13</td>
<td>guessing new words, making inferences, knowing sentence structures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3 above, we can see that these teachers have different views about the necessary skills for reading comprehension. Most of the teachers say that they answered the question from their own experiences. Some teachers combined the experiences of both themselves and their students. From their responses, we can find that skimming occurs most frequently, with six teachers mentioning it. The second is scanning, with five teachers supporting it. The third is guessing new words, with four teachers bringing it up. In order to make these results clearer, all the information is presented in Table 4 below.
Table 4. Teachers’ responses according to different reading skills (Question 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Necessary skills for reading</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skimming</td>
<td>T1, T4, T5, T10, T11, T12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning</td>
<td>T1, T4, T5, T11, T12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guessing (the meanings of) new words</td>
<td>T3, T5, T8, T13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicting content</td>
<td>T3, T9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making inferences</td>
<td>T10, T13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background knowledge</td>
<td>T5, T7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary strategies</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading fluently</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading with a purpose</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery of the language</td>
<td>T6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using reasoning</td>
<td>T6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having interest</td>
<td>T7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having insight</td>
<td>T7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasping a certain number of vocabulary</td>
<td>T9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taking</td>
<td>T11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing sentence structures</td>
<td>T13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 above clearly shows us that there are 16 different necessary skills for reading comprehension mentioned by the 13 teachers. Although these teachers have different opinions about reading skills, some skills are highly recommended: skimming, scanning and guessing the meanings of new words. Meijer et al. found that teachers tend to have different views about the skills as a result of their different definitions of reading comprehension. However, the obvious relationship between the definition and skills could not be found in this study. One of the possible reasons lies in the fact that Meijer et al. conducted the research using a structured open interview and they asked the questions or modified the questions according to the participants’ responses (cf. Meijer et al., 1999). The result is that the connection between each question is obvious. However, in the present study, the questions are already there in the
questionnaire. It is very likely that the participants answered each question without considering the connection between them. Although the obvious relationship between the definition and skills in reading comprehension cannot be found in this study, there seems to be some relationship between them. All of the 13 teachers think that reading comprehension is a way to understand or have insight into the essence or the content of a text, and all of the 16 necessary skills for reading comprehension listed in the above Table 4 are connected with a better understanding of the meaning of a whole text. According to some of the teachers’ responses, they have listed the most important or necessary skills based on the experiences of their own practices in reading comprehension. One of the teachers (T12) says that reading skills are helpful for readers to understand a text better. In the opinion of T13 who has mentioned the skill of knowing sentence structures, having basic knowledge of sentence structures will be helpful for students to have a better understanding of a text.

### 3.1.1.3 Teachers’ Responses to Relationship of Reading Comprehension to Other Language Skills

Devine (2006) points out that language skills should be considered a set of interacting abilities, not separate skills. However, Meijer et al. found out in their study that some of the teachers they investigated thought that reading was a separate skill basically unrelated to other skills. Different people might have different opinions about the relationship of reading to other language skills. The 13 teachers’ responses to the third question (see Appendix) in this study are shown in Table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T1, T4, T6, T7, T11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T2, T3, T5, T8, T9, T10, T12, T13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Table 5 above, we can see that no teacher chose option A. That means none of these teachers agree with the statement that reading is a separate skill basically unrelated to other language skills (speaking, listening, writing and translating). The difference between option B and C lies in the importance of reading in the minds of these teachers. Option B simply states that reading is not a separate skill from other language skills, while option C stresses that reading is the basis of all the other language skills. Five teachers chose option B and eight teachers chose option C. It can be concluded that most of the teachers think that reading is the most important part of the five language skills. As was mentioned in section 2.5, Carrell (2006) tells us that among the different skills in second language acquisition, reading is always considered the most fundamental and important one by students. In this way, the important interaction of reading ability and language proficiency is well accepted by both teachers and students.

3.1.2 Student Knowledge

According to Meijer et al., student knowledge is further divided into three subcategories. They are knowledge about characteristics of students, knowledge about environment of students and knowledge about motivation of students. In the present study, two subcategories were included based on their study. The two subcategories of student knowledge are: (a) knowledge about students’ characteristics, (b) knowledge about students’ motivation. Questions 8 and 9 in the Questionnaire (see Appendix) were designed on the basis of these two subcategories. The responses of the 13 teachers to these two questions are presented in the following two subsections.

3.1.2.1 Teachers’ Responses to Students’ Characteristics

According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), students’ characteristics include many different aspects, such as intelligence, aptitude, personality, attitudes, preferences, beliefs, and so on. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 8 are shown in Table 6 below.
Table 6. Teachers’ responses to students’ characteristics (Question 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T4, T12, T13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3, T6, T7, T8, T10, T11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>T9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>T5: I have about 200 students to teach now, and I tried hard to remember each of their names, but failed. A good relationship between teachers and students is very important. The foundation of a good relationship is that you must know your students well.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 6 above, we find that no teacher chose option A, (teachers know exactly who their students are). No teacher dares to say that he or she knows the students well enough. Three teachers chose option B, which suggests that they have some ideas about all their students. Most of the teachers, eight of them, chose option C, which says they have some ideas about some of their students, not all of their students. Only one teacher (T9) chose option D, which indicates that the teacher has absolutely no idea about her students. In her opinion, there might be some reasons. First, the number of her students is more than 150. She says she is confused, and even cannot remember their faces. Second, after class, she will go home. Therefore, she has no time to communicate with her students after class. Finally, in the classroom, she is busy with her job as a teacher, trying hard to finish the tasks in her schedule. She seldom gives her students opportunities to express themselves. T5 did not choose any of the fixed items. She wrote her own opinion instead. Although she has many students to teach, much more than the students of T9, she does not lose heart. She tries her best to build a good relationship with her students because she thinks that the good relationship between teachers and students is very important for learning and teaching.
3.1.2.2 Teachers’ Responses to Students’ Motivation

According to Kauchak and Eggen (2003), motivation is “a force that energizes and directs student behavior toward a goal” (2003: 12). Teachers can hardly accomplish their goals for teaching if their students have no motivation in learning. Lightbown and Spada (1999) state that motivated students participate actively in class, study a lot and show interest in the subject. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 9 are shown in Table 7 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T1, T3, T6, T7, T8, T10, T12, T13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T2, T4, T9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>T5, T11: It depends on students’ level.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the findings in Table 7 above, no teacher chose option A or D. Option A suggests that students have strong motivations, while option D indicates that students have no motivation at all. Most of the teachers chose B, which suggests that students need to be motivated sometimes. Three teachers chose C, which tells us that students always need to be motivated. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that there might be the fact that students have some motivations, not very strong, but they sometimes or always need to be motivated. The comments made by T5 and T11 might give us some explanations. Both of the teachers state that students’ motivation depends on their level. Their explanations are quite similar. For them, higher level students might have a strong motivation, while lower level students always need to be motivated, and some of them even show no interest in the course at all.

3.1.3 Knowledge of Student Learning and Understanding

Meijer et al. distinguished four subcategories in teachers’ knowledge of student
learning and understanding: differences among students, abilities, skills and difficulties in reading comprehension. In the present study, two subcategories were included based on their study: students’ difficulties in reading and factors for the differences of students’ reading abilities. Questions 10 and 11 in the Questionnaire (see Appendix) were designed on the basis of the above two subcategories. The 13 teachers’ responses to these two questions are discussed in the following two subsections.

3.1.3.1 Teachers’ Responses to Students’ Difficulties in Reading

Kauchak and Eggen (2003) point out that nowadays students are becoming more diverse in their learning abilities, background knowledge, motivation, interests, and so forth. To understand difficulties in students learning requires teachers’ time and efforts. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 10 are shown in Table 8 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>T1, T3, T5, T7, T8, T10, T13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T6, T9, T11, T12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>T4: Students do not have enough background knowledge or a good understanding of foreign cultures.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 8 above, we can see that more than half of the teachers chose A as their response. For them, the most difficult thing for students in reading is the knowledge about vocabulary. There are too many words students are not familiar with when reading a passage. According to several teachers, many students complain that trying to memorize new words and expressions is a big headache. Four teachers chose C, which indicates that the most difficult thing for students to read is the text itself. An uninteresting and unreadable text with content that students are not familiar with is the major problem for their understanding. Only one teacher chose B (T2), which
indicates that students have difficulty in concentrating on reading. T2 says it always happens in his class when he asks his students to read a text. One day, he asked his students to read a text in fifteen minutes. When the time was up, he asked his students several questions and few could answer. He was annoyed because the questions were fairly easy for the students. Then he asked them why they could not answer the questions. His students told him that they could not concentrate, or they did not want to read the text at all. T2 complains that most of his classes are scheduled in the afternoons, and most of the students feel tired and drowsy after a busy day (usually they have classes in the mornings). T2 says that most of his students are not very interested in the English course, which is compulsory for them, and it makes matters even worse if the classes are badly scheduled. T4 chose E to show her own opinion. For her, students think that reading is difficult because they do not have enough background knowledge or a good understanding of foreign cultures.

3.1.3.2 Teachers’ Responses to Factors for the Differences of Students’ Reading Abilities

As was mentioned in section 3.1.3.1, students’ learning abilities are different. Reading abilities are included, since reading is a part of learning. Meijer et al. point out that teachers differ in their explanations of these differences: some think it has to do with students’ characteristics, while others think it might be influenced by reading skills. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 11 are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Teachers’ responses to factors for the differences of students’ reading abilities (Question 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T1, T11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T3, T5, T7, T8, T12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>T2, T6, T9, T13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>T4: Practices and talent; T10: Vocabulary acquisition and reading strategies.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9 above shows us that five teachers chose C as their response. That is to say, for these teachers the most important factors for the differences of students’ reading abilities are students’ reading levels or reading skills. One of these teachers (T8) claims that high level students have many reading strategies or skills which are essential for improving their reading abilities. Four teachers chose D, (students’ practice and hard-work). One of the teachers (T9) made a comment in Question 12, in which the teachers were invited to write their comments on any of the eleven questions in the Questionnaire. She says reading is really important, but it needs practice. It is wrong for students to hope to improve their reading abilities without any hard work. Two teachers chose B, pointing out that reading strategies alone lead to the different abilities in reading. However, T10 says that only reading strategies are not enough to tell the difference, thus vocabulary knowledge should be included. If the vocabulary of the students is very limited, reading strategies alone cannot help them to improve their reading abilities. T4 stresses practices and talent. She says practice makes perfect. In order to learn a language, especially a foreign language well, including reading abilities, talent really matters.

3.1.4 Knowledge of Purpose
Although Meijer et al. did not subcategorize teachers’ knowledge of purpose, it can be found from their work that two major questions were raised. They are reasons why teachers consider the teaching of reading comprehension is important and reasons why teachers teach reading comprehension. Based on these two questions, two subcategories were established in this study. The two subcategories of teachers’ knowledge of purpose are: (a) importance of reading, (b) goals for teaching reading. Questions 6 and 7 in the Questionnaire (see Appendix) were designed on the basis of the above two subcategories. The 13 teachers’ responses are presented in the following two subsections.

3.1.4.1 Teachers’ Responses to Importance of Reading
Meijer et al. discovered that although all of the teachers investigated in their study
considered reading important, reasons for the importance of reading were varied: some related the importance of reading to schools, such as reading was the main subject in many schools; others related it to real lives, such as reading newspaper or understanding messages were necessary for communication among people. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 6 are shown in Table 10 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>T2, T3, T8, T10, T11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T1, T4, T5, T6, T7, T9, T12, T13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 10 above, we can see that most of the teachers chose option C as their response to the importance of reading. In their opinions, reading is important in conveying and understanding messages. The comment made by one of these teachers (T6) might help us to understand it better. His opinion is that the great importance of teaching lies not only in the fact that it accounts for a large part of the exam, but also because it is a quite practical skill in our daily lives. Five teachers chose option A, that is reading is the most important part in learning English. Their explanations are almost the same. For them, reading is the most fundamental skill in all of the language skills. Moreover, reading is important because students acquire vocabulary through reading, as one of these teachers (T11) says.

3.1.4.2 Teachers’ Responses to Goals for Teaching Reading

Kauchak and Eggen (2003) state that it is necessary to have clear goals in mind when teaching, because goals identify what teachers want to achieve in classrooms in a broad and general term, and provide a meaningful starting point in teacher planning. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 7 are shown in Table 11 below.
Table 11. Teachers’ responses to goals for teaching reading (Question 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>T4: To enhance students’ reading abilities and to enlarge their horizons; T5: To enhance students’ reading abilities and to expand their vocabulary.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 11 above, we can clearly find out that an overwhelmingly large proportion of these teachers chose option C as their response to goals for teaching reading. In their opinions, increasing students’ reading abilities is absolutely one of the greatest goals or even the only goal in teaching reading. However, there are two other teachers who have something more to say. T4 points out that the goals for teaching reading are not only to enhance students’ reading abilities, but also to enlarge their horizons. In her words, horizons refer to students’ knowledge about the real world. T5 says that the goals for teaching reading include both reading abilities and vocabulary. She says it is a fairly easy and effective way to learn new words through reading.

3.1.5 Knowledge of Curriculum

As Kauchak and Eggen (2003) declare, beginning teachers tend to depend heavily on text materials in their lessons, while after several years of teaching, they become more independent and begin to personalize their curriculum. Curriculum decision making requires professional understanding, time and energy (Kauchak & Eggen, 2003). According to Meijer et al.’s finding, a difference in teachers’ knowledge of curriculum can be found in the kinds of materials and texts they use in their classrooms. Based on this statement, one question (Question 4) was included in the Questionnaire (see Appendix) to explore teachers’ knowledge of curriculum. The 13 teachers’ responses to Question 4 are shown in Table 12 below.
The above Table 12 clearly shows us that most of the teachers (eleven of them) chose D as their response, which means that they use both their textbooks and other materials. As one of these teachers (T10) says, textbooks are really very useful and valuable, but some articles are out-dated. T2 says that sometimes errors can be found in the textbooks. Most of these teachers hold the opinion that using textbooks only is not enough for teaching reading, because some of the textbooks have been published several years ago and new materials cannot be added regularly enough. Therefore, teachers should select some new and appropriate materials as supplements for teaching reading. Only two teachers chose A, which means they only use their textbooks in teaching reading. T7 and T13 have something in common. T7 is now pregnant, and T13 has a very young baby who is only about ten months old. Both of them complain that they do not have enough time to prepare something new which is outside the textbooks for their students. In addition, they claim that the materials from the textbooks are really enough for them to teach. When asked if they would consider adding some more materials for teaching in case they had more free time, T7 said of course, while T13 answered that she was not very sure.

### 3.1.6 Knowledge of Instructional Techniques

As was mentioned in section 3.1, in the present study, knowledge of instructional techniques is the same as knowledge of teaching strategies. It refers to designing,
preparation and organization of lessons in teachers’ teaching of reading comprehension. It includes decisions made about content, learning activities, and students’ developmental and motivational needs (Kauchak & Eggen, 2003). Meijer et al. explored teachers’ knowledge of instructional techniques by asking teachers how to design and prepare their lessons. Based on the work done by them, one question (Question 5) was included in the Questionnaire (see Appendix) to show the findings of teachers’ knowledge of instructional techniques. The responses of the 13 teachers to Question 5 are shown in Table 13 below.

Table 13. Teachers’ responses to designing the lessons (Question 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Teachers’ responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>T7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3, T5, T8, T9, T11, T12, T13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>T4, T6, T10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 13 above, we can see that most of the teachers chose C as their response, which indicates that these teachers will always prepare lessons in detail, but sometimes they will make slight changes as they go along during the course. As one of these teachers (T3) says, although they have a fairly rigid task to finish according to the school curriculum, they can make some adjustments. If students show no interest in what a teacher is talking about or teaching, the teacher must organize the lesson in another way, according to what T3 says. Three teachers chose D, which indicates that these teachers sometimes prepare lessons in detail, while sometimes they design their classes according to the reactions and moods of the students without any preparations. According to the opinion of one of the three teachers (T6), students’ interest in learning is the most important thing in teaching. As a result, he gives his students more free time to think about what they really want to learn, and he will make the adjustments according to the feedback from his students. Only one teacher
(T7) chose B, which indicates that the teacher will not prepare lessons at all, and the lessons are based on the reactions and moods of students. T7 explains that her lessons are more like a discussion-based instruction. Topics for discussion have been given to her students several days before the lesson. In her class, students choose several items from these topics and form groups for discussion. After the group discussion, each group presents the results of their discussion to the whole class, and then T7 makes some comments and gives simultaneous feedback to her students.

3.2 Similarities and Differences in Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge

In section 3.1, the content of each of the six categories of teacher knowledge in teaching reading comprehension was described and illustrated. However, although the 13 teachers teach reading comprehension in English as a second language at the same school, the results show that their knowledge about teaching reading is varied. The diversity of these teachers’ responses to each of the ten closed-ended questions in the Questionnaire is shown in Table 14 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Closed-ended questions</th>
<th>Different responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject matter knowledge</td>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student knowledge</td>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of student learning and understanding</td>
<td>Question 10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question 11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of purpose</td>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of curriculum</td>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of instructional techniques</td>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In Question 11 and Question 7, two teachers chose the last choice, which indicates that they have different opinions. Their opinions are different, so we include in the responses as two different responses instead of one, although they are from the same option.

Each of the ten closed-ended questions in the Questionnaire has four or five different choices. From Table 14 above, we can see that the 13 teachers have different opinions
towards each of the questions in the six categories of teacher knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. The great diversity (with three to five different responses) lies in the following two categories: knowledge of student learning and understanding, and student knowledge. The comparatively low diversity (with only two different responses) lies in the following two categories: subject matter knowledge and knowledge of curriculum. However, an open-ended question (Question 2) was included, describing subject matter knowledge. It asks teachers to list no more than three necessary skills for reading comprehension. Although some of the skills are recommended by more teachers than other skills, for example skimming, scanning and guessing the meanings of new words, the responses are varied. There are altogether 16 different skills mentioned by these teachers.

As was mentioned in section 1, Meijer et al. (1999) could not find similarities in teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension in their group of 13 language teachers who taught reading comprehension from different schools. As a result, Meijer et al. developed a typology of these teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. The typology contains three general types of teachers’ practical knowledge: focus on subject matter knowledge, focus on student knowledge, and focus on knowledge of student learning and understanding.

By confining the present study to a group of 13 teachers teaching reading comprehension in English as a second language at the same school, this research hoped to find shared knowledge in this group of teachers since they taught the same subject at the same school. However, from the results of the Questionnaire and the interviews, shared knowledge in all of the 13 teachers could not be found. Thus, by comparing these teachers’ knowledge about teaching reading, based on the typology developed by Meijer et al., these 13 teachers could be classified into three groups. The three groups of teachers are: subject-matter-oriented, student-oriented and student-learning-oriented teachers. The typology developed by Meijer et al. to include the wide variety they have found in their study of teachers’ practical knowledge about
teaching reading is shown in Table 15 below, which is adapted from Table 3 in the work of Meijer et al. (1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subject-matter-oriented teachers</th>
<th>Student-oriented teachers</th>
<th>Student-learning-oriented teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject matter knowledge</td>
<td>Having clear ideas and detailed knowledge about definition, skills and possible ways of working in reading comprehension.</td>
<td>Subject matter is of minor importance, and teachers’ knowledge of a subject should play a minor part in education.</td>
<td>Having clear ideas and knowledge about skills and possible ways of working in reading comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student knowledge</td>
<td>Having little clear knowledge about students in general.</td>
<td>Having basic concern and detailed knowledge about students.</td>
<td>Having clear knowledge about students in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of student learning and understanding</td>
<td>Having little clear knowledge about how students work, and teaching reading is seen as the training of skills.</td>
<td>Having clear ideas about how to motivate students and always trying hard to make students feel comfortable.</td>
<td>Having clear ideas about how students work and what makes differences between them, based on knowledge of both subject matter and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of purpose</td>
<td>Teaching reading is seen as important because of its emphasis in learning English or in the final exams.</td>
<td>Teaching reading is considered important because it allows students to deal with the real world.</td>
<td>Teaching reading is important because of its emphasis in learning English and in preparing students for further education and real lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of curriculum</td>
<td>Reasons for selecting texts are based on knowledge of subject matter.</td>
<td>Reasons for selecting texts are based on general knowledge of students.</td>
<td>Reasons for selecting texts are based on goals that have to be achieved in a lesson in reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of instructional techniques</td>
<td>If teachers are familiar with the texts, preparing lessons is not necessary.</td>
<td>Making sure that every student keeps up.</td>
<td>Designing lessons based on the goals, and making adjustment according to students’ preferences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above Table 15 is an abstract typology which describes the interrelationships between the six categories of teacher knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. By considering the different interpretations of the interrelationships of these categories, three ideal types of teachers could be identified: subject-matter-oriented, student-oriented and student-learning-oriented teachers.

Subject-matter-oriented teachers have clear ideas and detailed knowledge about the subject matter. In this study, subject matter knowledge includes definition of reading comprehension, skills for reading comprehension, and possible ways of working with reading comprehension. Subject-matter-oriented teachers have little clear knowledge about students in general and how students work. For them teaching reading is seen as the training of skills. The importance of teaching reading lies in its emphasis in learning English and in the final exams. Subject-matter-oriented teachers select texts based on their knowledge of subject matter, and they think preparing lessons is not necessary if teachers are familiar with the texts.

Student-oriented teachers consider subject matter as of minor importance, and they think teachers’ knowledge of a subject should play a minor part in education. However, student-oriented teachers have basic concern for their students and detailed knowledge about them. They have clear ideas about how to motivate students and they always try their best to make students feel comfortable. Student-oriented teachers think teaching reading is important because it allows students to deal with the real world. Student-oriented teachers select texts based on their general knowledge of students, and they think text-selection is a kind of strategy to motivate students. They try to make sure that every student can keep up.

Student-learning-oriented teachers have clear knowledge about both the subject matter and students in general. They have clear ideas about how students work and the differences between them. Student-learning-oriented teachers think teaching reading
important not only in learning English, but also for further education and real lives. Student-learning-oriented teachers select texts and design their lessons based on goals that have to be achieved in lessons in reading. Moreover, they will make some changes about the lessons according to the preferences of students.

Although the 13 teachers investigated in this study do not correspond exactly with the descriptions of these three ideal types, a rough categorization could be made. The categorization is shown in Table 16 below.

Table 16. The categorization of 13 teachers into three types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of teachers</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-matter-oriented teachers</td>
<td>T1, T2, T7, T9, T13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-oriented teachers</td>
<td>T5, T6, T12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-learning-oriented teachers</td>
<td>T3, T4, T8, T10, T11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is a rough categorization, typical examples for each type of teachers could still be found in our study. In the following three subsections, each of the three types of teachers is illustrated by describing one specific teacher’s knowledge based on the results of the Questionnaire and the interviews. In doing so, it is not only helpful for the three teachers to reflect on themselves as teachers and to understand their self-image better, but also helpful for novice teachers to gain some knowledge about becoming a teacher (Beijaard et al., 2000).

3.2.1 T9: A Subject-Matter-Oriented Teacher

T9 is 33 years old, and she has been teaching the integrated English course to non-English majors in this university for ten years, after she graduated from her
university. She received several courses for training beginning teachers in the first two years of teaching. She is now studying for her master’s degree in English education. According to Grossman and Shulman (1994), such training courses can help teachers think about teaching practices and reexamine their experiences as learners. Teachers might have a better understanding of teaching after they have attended such courses.

T9 has a pre-school child and she spends a lot of time and efforts taking care of him.

In her teaching group, there is a meeting every week. All the teachers reflect on their latest teaching experiences in the meetings. They discuss the issues and problems and give support for each other. T9 says such a meeting may be helpful if you really have some problems, but it is always very boring. It is more like a routine job to do because the school authority asks them to do so.

T9 understands reading comprehension as having insight into the content of a text. In order to understand the whole text, grasping a certain number of words is essential. Being able to predict the content of a text is also a necessary skill for reading. In all the language skills, she says reading is the basis. T9 has no idea about her students’ characteristics. As was mentioned in section 3.1.2.1, there might be some reasons for it. First of all, the number of her students is more than 150 and it is not an easy job for her to remember all of the students. Second, she needs to go home after class and she does not have time to communicate with her students after class. Finally, she tries hard to finish the tasks in her schedule in the classroom without giving much time for her students to express themselves.

As to the motivation of her students, she says that her students have a low motivation and they always need to be motivated. T9 says that the most difficult aspect for students as to reading is that they are not familiar with the texts. If the texts are

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There are two teaching groups for teachers who teach the integrated English course to non-English majors in this university. Teachers of Group 1 teach freshmen, and teachers of Group 2 teach sophomores. Each group is relatively independent and serves mainly as a cooperative and supporting system for its members.
interesting and readable to them, reading will be much easier. In her opinion, if the students want to improve their abilities in reading comprehension, practice and hard work are necessary.

T9 says that reading is important because it conveys messages and helps us understand each other better. The goals in teaching reading are to enhance students’ reading abilities. Selecting the texts and materials for teaching, T9 prefers to use both the materials from textbooks and other materials. She likes articles from newspaper online because she says they are updated in both the content and the language itself. T9 prepares lessons in detail, and she says it is a secure way to do so. She says that if you make no preparation at all, you go into the classroom with an empty mind.

In conclusion, she says that the responses of her students will have a strong influence on her mood. Sometimes when she comes into the classroom and finds that all the students seem to be sleepy and show no interest, she feels that the only thing she wants to do is to finish the class as soon as possible and run away.

Subject-matter-oriented teachers might have such problems when cooperating with students, like T9 in this study. As Grossman and Shulman (1994) state, subject matter knowledge is not enough for teachers; therefore, teachers should go beyond their own understanding of a text and know students’ understandings or even their potential misunderstandings. In doing so, students will think that what teachers are talking about is not something irrelevant to them, and they might be willing to cooperate with teachers and be more active in classes.

3.2.2 T5: A Student-Oriented Teacher

T5 is 35 years old, and she has been teaching the integrated English course to non-English majors for 14 years. She earned her master’s degree in English education three years ago. Like T9, she also received some courses for training new teachers in the first two years of teaching. She has a pre-school child too. Although her
mother-in-law comes to help her take care of her son, she still has a lot of things to do with her little boy. She was awarded annual best teacher of the university once, and annual best teacher of her department three times. She is one of the most popular teachers in her department. She has a good relationship with her students and her colleagues too.

T5 defines reading comprehension as a way to understand the essence of a text. In her opinion, there are many good things to learn in a passage or an article, especially the excellent books our ancestors have left for us. In order to understand reading materials well, students need to know the background knowledge. She says skimming and scanning are very helpful for students to have a general idea about an article they are going to read. English is a foreign language to Chinese students, and as a result, coming across some new words or unfamiliar words in reading is inevitable. She always encourages her students to try to guess the meanings of these words from the context, instead of looking them up in a dictionary. She says it is a good way for students to improve both their speed and proficiency of reading. For her, reading is also the basis of all the other language skills. In her opinion, although listening and speaking are the main parts of daily communication, reading is still the most fundamental one.

Although the number of her students is about 200, T5 tries her best to remember the names of all her students. As was mentioned in section 3.1.2.1, T5 says that a good relationship between students and teachers is very important, and the foundation for a good relationship is that teachers must know their students well. She says that most of her students feel comfortable in her class and they are very active in the class. As to the motivation of her students, she says that higher level students always have a strong motivation, while lower level ones always have a weak motivation or even no motivation at all. Therefore, teachers should make adjustments in both the materials and the methods for teaching.
T5 says that the most difficult thing for students in reading comprehension is their limited knowledge about vocabulary. She says it is true for most of her students. Many students tend to give up reading if they find there are more than two new words in the same line of a passage. In her opinion, reading skills are the main factors for the differences in students’ reading abilities. As was mentioned above, she says that skimming and scanning, guessing the meanings of new words, and having background knowledge are the three necessary skills for reading. She encourages her students to use these skills and practice them in reading, and some students have improved a lot in doing so.

Student-oriented teachers like T5 try their best to make their teaching practice fit with students’ prior education as well as the goals for teaching as a whole (Verloop et al., 2001). In T5’s opinion, reading is important because it conveys information and helps students to understand messages. Without reading, the excellent books and articles our ancestors have left for us will become meaningless. For her, the goals for teaching reading are to improve students’ reading abilities and to expand their vocabulary. T5 uses both the materials from textbooks and other materials which she has found from journal articles or newspaper or even novels. She says that textbooks are already there, and students can read themselves. If teachers always use the same textbooks, students will feel bored. Therefore, it is always a good idea to add something new and fresh to the class. Like most of her colleagues, T5 prepares her lessons in detail. However, slight changes are needed. She says that she makes some adjustments when she finds that what she is talking of is of no interest to her students, or beyond her students’ understandings.

T5 and T9 are in the same teaching group. As was mentioned in section 3.2.1, T5 says that the meetings in her teaching group are very boring, while T9 has a quite different opinion towards the weekly meetings in their group. She says that such meetings are really helpful for all the teachers. She explains that sometimes teachers will come across one or several problems, and need others’ opinions and suggestions. It is hard
to have a long time discussion with other teachers, because all of the teachers are fairly busy and they do not have a lot of time to sit down and talk. Therefore, the weekly meetings give all the teachers an opportunity to share their experiences and get support from each other. As Grossman and Shulman (1994) state, teachers can reflect on their actions and thoughts when they review their experiences. T5 adds that the meetings are especially important for novice teachers, who will meet more problems in their teaching because they do not have any practical experiences. In the meetings, they have a chance to learn how experienced teachers deal with the similar problems in their teaching practices. Such meetings will save a lot of time for novice teachers to understand teaching situations better and become more experienced.

3.2.3 T4: A Student-Learning-Oriented Teacher

T4 is 26 years old, and she has been teaching the integrated English course to non-English majors for three years after having earned her master’s degree in English literature. She also received some courses for training beginning teachers in her first two years of teaching. She attended her colleagues’ classes and tried hard to learn something useful for her own teaching, according to her opinion. She always discusses with her colleagues about the things happened in her class and shares her experiences in teaching. She lives in a dormitory inside the school campus, so she has more opportunities to communicate with her students. In last year’s competition for selecting the most popular teachers from all the teachers in the university, she was awarded one of the ten most popular teachers. She has a good relationship with her students too.

In T4’s opinion, reading comprehension is a way to have insight into the content of a text. Therefore, she says that skimming and scanning are necessary skills for students to have a general idea about the passage they are reading. For her, reading is not a separate skill from other language skills, but she does not think that reading is the most fundamental one among them. Instead, she says that listening, speaking, reading and writing are complementary skills.
As was mentioned above, T4 lives inside the campus, so she has more time to communicate with her students, compared to other teachers who live far away from the school. Among the 13 teachers we have investigated, T4 is the youngest one. She is very active and outgoing. Her students like to talk to her after class. Therefore, T4 has some ideas about her students. However, she says that her students always need to be motivated. Although they like the teacher, they seem to be less interested in her class.

For T4, the most difficult thing for students when it comes to reading is that they do not have enough background knowledge, or they have difficulty in understanding the foreign cultures. She says that sometimes her students find that a passage they are reading is rather easy, without any new words or difficult sentences. However, they just cannot understand the general idea of the passage. She finds that these difficulties lie in students’ unfamiliarity with the background knowledge and cultures rather than the passage itself. She then introduces something about cultural differences to the students in her class, and encourages her students to watch some original movies or read some original novels to know something about the foreign cultures. She says that students’ reading abilities are different because of their practices and talents. In her opinion, learning a foreign language well needs talent and hard work. For those students who do not have the gift to learn a new language, more practices are necessary.

In the opinion of T4, reading is important not only because it accounts for a large part of the final exam, but also because it is a quite practical skill in our daily lives. It is important for us to convey and understand messages. The goals in teaching reading are to improve students’ reading abilities as well as to enlarge their horizons. Teachers should help students extend their horizons to move out of their present view of the world (Sheridan, 1993). T4 says that reading is a good way for students to know the world better.
Like many of her colleagues, T4 uses both the materials from the textbooks and other materials which she has found by herself. However, she thinks that both appropriate and updated reading materials are difficult to find. Although some materials in the textbooks are out of date, they are well-designed and closely related to the goals that have to be achieved in reading. T4 prepares lessons in detail sometimes, while some other times she just designs the lessons according to the reactions and moods of her students without any preparations. Her opinion is that lessons are prepared in order to meet the goals for teaching, but necessary adjustments are also very important. On several occasions, she takes her students’ preferences and learning abilities into consideration.

T4 is in the same teaching group with T5 and T9. She says that three years ago when she was a novice teacher, the weekly meetings in the teaching group gave her much help. She says that at that time she was not familiar with other colleagues, and she felt very shy to discuss with other teachers if she had some problems. Therefore, the meetings gave her opportunities to listen to others’ experiences and to reflect on her own. She adds that attending some experienced teachers’ classes also helps much in her teaching. Experienced teachers use their experiences to approach new problems and adjust their practices to meet new demands (Ayers and Schubert, 1994). In T4’s opinion, each teacher has his or her own way of teaching, and by comparing their ways of teaching, valuable resources for a better understanding of the teaching practices can be acquired.

3.3 Potentially Relevant Background Variables in Teachers’ Personal Practical Knowledge
As was mentioned in section 2.3, some researchers have found background variables which will influence teacher knowledge. Meijer et al. found six background variables which might influence teachers’ practical knowledge. These six background variables are “(a) personal characteristics; (b) frequency and nature of reflection; (c) prior
education; (d) years of experience; (e) the language taught; (f) the school context” (Meijer et al., 1999: 61). Beijaard et al. (2000) point out that teachers’ teaching context, teaching experience and biographies have strong influences on teacher knowledge. According to Kauchak and Eggen (2003), two teacher characteristics have proved to be powerful variables influencing teacher knowledge, and these two characteristics are teacher experience and understanding of the subject matter.

Based on the results of the above mentioned work and the results of the Questionnaire and the interviews in this study, six background variables were included in this study. These six background variables and their brief descriptions are presented in Table 17 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 17. Potentially relevant background variables</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potentially relevant background variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Personal characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reflection on teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prior education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teaching experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Personal life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Teaching context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above Table 17, we can see that the six potentially relevant background variables are personal characteristics, reflection on teaching, prior education, teaching experiences, personal experiences and teaching context. Personal characteristics include the age, sex and personality of these teachers. Reflection on teaching refers to
teachers’ reflection on their lessons, the classroom atmosphere and their students’ responses and reactions. Prior education includes the educational background of these teachers and their formal teacher training. Teaching experiences refer to the years of their teaching reading comprehension to the non-English majors at the same university. Personal life experiences refer to the family lives of these teachers and their hopes or ambitions. Teaching context includes the classroom environment, school culture and policy, and the interacting between colleagues.

Meijer et al. found three patterns of attitudes and behavior concerning background variables to teachers’ responses to questions in their interview. The first pattern concerns teachers with low responsibilities and minimal teacher trainings. The second pattern relates to teachers who focus on student knowledge rather than on subject matter knowledge. The third pattern is connected to teachers who always participate in formal training courses for teacher development.

In this study, 13 teachers were investigated. It is hard to decide which background variables are closely related to teacher knowledge because of the small sample. However, based on the patterns found by Meijer et al. and the results of our study by matching the six background variables mentioned in the above Table 17 to the responses of the 13 teachers to the Questionnaire and the interviews, three other patterns in potentially relevant background variables in teacher knowledge were identified.

The three patterns identified in this study are: (1) teachers who enhance their professional growth in the practice of teaching (professional-growth teachers); (2) teachers who focus on student knowledge rather than on subject matter knowledge (student-centered teachers); (3) teachers who put great emphasis on teacher authority and try to maintain it (authority-maintaining teachers). The three patterns in potentially relevant background variables in teacher knowledge in the present study are described in Table 18 below.
Table 18. Three patterns in potentially relevant background variables in teachers’ personal practical knowledge in the present study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potentially relevant background variable</th>
<th>Three patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional-growth teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics</td>
<td>With more energy and commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on teaching</td>
<td>Always reflect on teachings, both on the lessons and students’ reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior education</td>
<td>Often participate in some training courses for teacher development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experiences</td>
<td>From 3 years to 14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal life experiences</td>
<td>Some of them have young children, but they can manage to keep a balance between family life and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching context</td>
<td>Try to build a cooperative way for teaching and learning, have a good relationship with colleagues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above Table 18, we can see that considering the six background variables (personal characteristics, reflection on teaching, prior education, teaching experiences, personal life experiences and teaching context), three patterns of teachers could be
found. They are professional-growth teachers, student-centered teachers and authority-maintaining teachers. Although some of the variables are not significantly related to teacher knowledge about teaching reading comprehension in this study, distinctions between these three types can still be found.

Professional-growth teachers try to enhance their professional growth in the practice of teaching. Teachers of this pattern usually show more energy and commitment in their personalities. They always reflect on their teachings, including the lessons and students’ reactions. They like to talk with their colleagues about their experiences of teaching and they want to know more about the ways and methods which can improve their teaching. In doing so, there will be knowledge growth in teaching (Grossman and Shulman, 1994). Moreover, these teachers are always very active in participating in some training courses or meetings to help them understand teaching better. In our study, teachers of this pattern vary in their years of teaching. Some are very experienced teachers with 14 years of teaching the same subject, and the youngest teacher is comparatively less experienced with only three years of teaching experience. Some of these teachers have young children, and some are unmarried. Even for the mothers with young babies, they can still manage to keep a good balance between their family lives and their work. When they are working, they try to build a good relationship with their colleagues and try their best to enhance cooperative learning in teaching.

Student-centered teachers focus on student knowledge rather than subject matter knowledge. They love their students and they are easygoing. They are willing to give as much help and services to their students as possible (Verloop et al., 2001). Sometimes they will reflect on their teaching, but such reflection is always centered on the students’ reactions and their interaction between each other. For these teachers, training courses are not so necessary if their students like their lessons. The teaching experiences of these teachers in the study are nine years to ten years. They enjoy both their family lives and the working situations. They do not have very big ambitions.
They are satisfied with their present situation and they do not want to study more. When they are teaching, they focus on the classroom atmosphere and the interaction between students.

Authority-maintaining teachers put great emphasis on teacher authority and try to maintain it. Teachers of this type are more or less teacher-centered, and they are a bit rigid in personality. They regard themselves as experts, and they always expect their students to work hard (Verloop et al., 2001). They seldom reflect on teaching, because they do not think it is necessary or helpful to do so. They do not like to take courses for training teachers, because they think their knowledge for teaching is enough. However, if the school authority asks them to do so, they will have to take such courses. The teaching experiences of this pattern of teachers range from nine years to 14 years. When they are working, they tend to pay more attention to the school policy, for example, they think that changes in curriculum and goals for teaching are the responsibility of the leadership, and such changes have nothing to do with teachers.

By examining the six potentially relevant background variables, the three patterns of teachers have been discussed. This does not mean that the knowledge and beliefs of certain types of teachers should be the standard (Verloop et al., 2001). Connelly et al. (1997) state that teachers are different and they know their situations; teachers “are not mere screens who translate other’s intentions and ideologies into practice” (1997: 674). Although it was not the aim of this study to make suggestions about professional development of teachers, the researcher assumes that in the process of answering questions in the Questionnaire and the interviews, these teachers will reflect on their teaching and develop a new understanding of their teaching.

4 Conclusion

This study focuses on 13 teachers’ personal practical knowledge with respect to the teaching of reading comprehension at a university in China. It can be found that the categories, typology and patterns developed by Meijer et al. (1999) are still workable
in this study. The content of teacher knowledge is categorized into six categories identified by Meijer et al.: subject matter knowledge, student knowledge, knowledge of student learning and understanding, knowledge of purposes, knowledge of curriculum and knowledge of instructional techniques. By investigating the content of the six categories and their relationships, detailed information about these teachers’ knowledge about teaching reading comprehension has been found.

Focusing this study on a group of teachers teaching reading comprehension in English as a second language at the same school, shared knowledge in these teachers’ practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension could not be found. Instead of belonging to the same category of teachers, as we presupposed, these teachers could be classified into three groups: subject-matter-oriented teachers, student-oriented teachers and student-learning-oriented teachers. Typical examples for each group could be found in this study, although not all of the teachers correspond exactly with this ideal typology. Each of the three groups of teachers is illustrated by describing one teacher’s knowledge based on the results of the Questionnaire and the interviews.

Six potentially relevant background variables are discussed in this study: personal characteristics, reflection on teaching, prior education, teaching experiences, personal experiences and teaching context. Based on the patterns identified by Meijer et al. and through matching the six background variables to the responses of the 13 teachers, three patterns in potentially relevant background variables in teacher knowledge were developed: professional-growth teachers, student-centered teachers, and authority-maintaining teachers.

Meijer et al. point out that “focusing on teachers’ practical knowledge as a source of information to be used in teacher education can serve as a tool for professional development” (1999: 82) and also serve as a tool for educating novice teachers. Focusing on teachers’ knowledge provides detailed information of what teachers know and how they really act in their teaching practices. In this way, teachers might
have a better understanding of their teaching practices. However, reliable generalization of teachers’ knowledge about teaching reading comprehension cannot be made because of the small sample in this study. Therefore, it is worthwhile for further research to investigate a larger group of teachers to achieve more generalized results.
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Appendix

Dear friends,
This questionnaire forms part of a research study about teachers’ personal practical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension. Thank you for your participating in the questionnaire.
Good luck,
Yu Huiping 03/09/2011

Questionnaire

Name:    Sex:    Age:    Teaching experience (how many years):

Directions: There are 12 questions in this questionnaire. For most of the questions, different choices are offered. Please tick the one that corresponds to your opinion. If you have different suggestions, you are welcome to write them down in the last choice of each item. For the other two questions (Question 2 and Question 12), you are invited to write down your ideas briefly and clearly.

1. What is reading comprehension?
   A) to understand the essence of a text
   B) to relate the content of the text to the real world
   C) to have insight into the content of a text
   D) to have insight into the structure of a text
   E) others, write your ideas: __________________________________________

2. There are some necessary skills for reading comprehension. Please list no more than three skills here: (1)_____________________________________________
   (2)_____________________________________________
   (3)_____________________________________________

3. What is the relationship of reading comprehension to other language skills (speaking, listening, writing, and translating)?
   A) reading is a separate skill basically unrelated to other skills
   B) reading is not a separate skill from other language skills
   C) reading is the basis of all the other language skills
   D) others, write your ideas: __________________________________________

4. What kinds of materials/texts do you use in the lessons on reading comprehension?
   A) only the material from textbooks
   B) prefer to use texts focused on the final exams
   C) prefer to select my own texts, from newspaper or elsewhere
   D) both the material from textbooks and some other materials, like newspaper
   E) others, write your ideas: __________________________________________

5. How to design your lessons?
   A) prepare lessons in detail, design them according to the textbooks I am using
   B) not to prepare lessons, design them as function of questions, reactions and
moods of the students
C) although prepare lessons in detail, sometimes make slight changes
D) sometimes prepare lessons in detail, sometimes not (as choice B presents)
E) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

6. Why is reading important?
    A) reading is the most important part in learning English
    B) reading is the most important part in the exams
    C) reading is important in conveying and understanding messages
    D) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

7. What are the goals in teaching reading?
    A) to expand students’ vocabulary
    B) to get higher scores in the exams
    C) to enhance students’ reading abilities
    D) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

8. Do you know the characteristics of your students?
    A) Yes, I know exactly who they are
    B) Yes, I have some ideas about my students
    C) I have some ideas about some students, not all of them
    D) No, I do not know
    E) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

9. How about the motivation of students in your class?
    A) they have strong motivations
    B) they need to be motivated sometimes
    C) they always need to be motivated
    D) they do not like the course at all
    E) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

10. What do students consider the most difficult when reading a text in your opinion?
    A) too many words they are not familiar with
    B) hard to work up concentration on reading
    C) not familiar with the texts and they are uninteresting and unreadable
    D) have problems with the structure of a text and how it is put together
    E) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

11. Students’ reading abilities are different. What do you think is the most important factor for it?
    A) students’ talent and self-confidence
    B) students’ reading strategies
    C) students’ reading level or reading skills
    D) students’ practice and hard-work
    E) others, write your ideas: ________________________________________

12. Do you have any more comments on the question(s) above? If yes, then write your ideas:
    ____________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________