

## **Abstract**

Past research reveals that character languages and alphabetic languages demand different linguistic skills in word reading. South Asian children, with an alphabetic language background, may find it difficult to learn Chinese as a second language in Hong Kong. This study aimed to examine the effect of language backgrounds on children's Chinese word reading. The effect of gender was also examined.

Fifty one second grade participants (28 character language background learners and 23 alphabetic language background learners) were recruited. The participants were tested on Chinese word reading and various aspects of linguistic skills. Stepwise regression analyses showed that character background learners rely more heavily on visual spatial skills and orthographic skills while alphabetic background learners rely more heavily on phonological skills in Chinese word reading. Multiple hierarchical regression analyses suggested that gender difference only exists in morphological awareness.

This research showed that children from a character language background and an alphabetic background rely on different aspects of linguistic awareness in Chinese word reading. This has strong implications on determining the optimal ways for local children and children with an alphabetic language background to learn Chinese respectively.