Schoolchildren should engage in more writing and picture drawing to enhance their reading acquisition skills in Chinese language, a group of Hong Kong University (HKU) language experts recommended yesterday.

The university experts said dyslexic children can engage in writing by simply copying Chinese characters to alleviate specific learning difficulties in reading.

An HKU survey revealed that children’s writing and drawing skills are strongly associated with their ability to read Chinese. This is contrary to prominent Western theories that reading acquisition abilities are built on people’s phonological sensitivities.

With the help of 131 Beijing schoolchildren, aged seven to 10, the university conducted a variety of reading, writing, picture drawing and sound awareness tests in recent months. In the tests, children were required to read some Chinese characters accurately and copy samples of Chinese characters as well as line-drawing pictures.

Siok Wai-tang, the university’s assistant research professor in linguistics, said the survey’s results have showed children’s writing skills are closely associated with their reading abilities.

Siok said: “Throughout the writing process, children can learn to deconstruct Chinese characters, which are composed of strokes and subcharacter components, thereby fostering their awareness of the characters’ internal structures and forming long-term memory of Chinese characters. This helps boost students’ reading acquisition and writing abilities.”

She said engaging in more line-drawing pictures can enhance students’ reading skills.

Meanwhile, the survey found that people’s phonological sensitivities have played a minor role in reading abilities.

This is because spoken Chinese is highly homophonic. While many characters share the same syllables, they are based on meaning rather than sound, Siok explained.

She suggested students with dyslexia can do more writing to cope with difficulties in reading.

Dyslexia is the most common type of specific learning difficulty. Dyslexic students often fail to read accurately and fluently. They are slow in word retrieval, or may demonstrate difficulties in visual-perceptual skills, orthographic awareness, phonological awareness or memory.

According to government figures, the Education and Manpower Bureau has handled more than 2,800 students’ cases with specific learning difficulties in reading and writing over the past three years.

At present, the bureau provides assessment to identify students with dyslexia at primary and secondary schools and offers support services.