

## Literature-based instruction and language learner autonomy: A case study of a tertiary EFL reading course

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### Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to investigate pedagogical strategies for developing language learner autonomy through scrutinising a literature-based EFL reading course carried out in a tertiary institution in China. To achieve triangulation, data were collected from multiple sources, including two diagnostic surveys, post-course feedback interviews, student artefacts, teacher's reflective journal, and related teaching materials. In data analysis, triangulation was accomplished by involving and integrating multiple investigators' perspectives – three researchers collaborated in analysing data collected from student feedback interviews. Findings of this study could be classified into three categories. Regarding second language acquisition (SLA), results from the surveys and interviews indicate a comprehensive improvement in learners' L2 competence, in addition to their cognitive and motivational enhancement. With regard to literature-based instruction, evidence from this study contributes to a deepened and enriched understanding of the comprehensive approach to L2 literature and scaffolded extensive reading. For developing language learner autonomy, this study provides a three-dimensional modal with pedagogical implications for literature-based instruction, from the perspectives of teaching content, methodological approaches, and ideological orientation.

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## INTRODUCTION

in L2 instruction, either with intensive reading or extensive reading approach. As Bland (2020) put it, “deep reading of literature can promote all aspects of cognition and engagement with text, including emotion, empathy, ethics, knowledge of the world, ideology and social justice issues” (p. 73). While the benefits of integrating literature into L2 pedagogy have been well investigated and widely discussed, challenges involved in its implementation still remain a focused research topic that deserves close scrutiny and in-depth discussion. Specifically, the complexity of this pedagogy (Zengin et al., 2019) and teachers’ lack of relevant training (Saka, 2018) highlight the challenges, therefore calling for intensive investigation and research in this field. Based on previous scholarship, the comprehensive approach to L2 literature (Bloemert et al., 2016; Bloemert et al., 2019) and scaffolded extensive reading strategies (Sun, 2022a, 2022b) provide pedagogical guidance for L2 literature-based instruction, respectively offering content-focused approaches and methodological strategies.

Language learner autonomy, or ‘a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning’ (Little, 2022, p. 64), merits L2 teachers’ attention for the purpose of achieving language learners’ sustainable development. The existing body of literature foregrounds teachers’ roles in strategy training (Aryanjam et al., 2021), learner empowerment (West, 2018), and peer collaboration (Tseng et al., 2020) in the development of language learner autonomy. Drawing on the accumulated evidence from previous studies and discussion, along with the findings from the English as a foreign language (EFL) reading course under focus, the current study aims to delve into pedagogical details and formulate some principles for L2 practitioners to implement literature-based instruction with the vision of enhancing language learner autonomy.

### Literature review

#### *L2 literature-based instruction*

The legitimacy of using literature in L2 pedagogical practice has long been discussed and widely accepted. In a broad sense, scholarship in this respect could be classified into two groups: what to teach (content-focused) and how to teach it (methodology-focused), as outlined and detailed in the following two parts.

With regard to teaching content and objectives, literature-based instruction has gone through three major stages (not linearly developed, though): language-based approach, literature as content, and literature for personal enrichment and development (Lazar, 1993). Respectively, each stage focuses on language learning, literary elements (e.g., literary genres and devices), and learners’ cognitive, affective, and psychological development (Hall, 2005/2015). When communicative approach gained popularity in L2 pedagogy in the 1980s and 1990s, literature was given extra attention as authentic reading materials. In the past two decades, new dimensions have been added to the focus of literature-based instruction, including critical thinking and culture-related competence (e.g., cultural competence, critical cultural literacy, and intercultural communicative competence) (Bland, 2013; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Serafini, 2005; Xia, 2019). From reader’s perspective, Freebody and Luke (2003) identified four roles that might provide reference for L2 teachers to design literature-based activities: code-breaker – using bottom-up strategies to decode the text; text participant – using top-down approaches to interpret the text; text user – using the text with awareness of its social and cultural functions; text analyst – critiquing the text with awareness of its discursive and ideological implications and novel interpretation of the reader (Burns & Siegel, 2018). Careful reading of these four roles, however, reveals overlapping between the categories, for example, the difficulty in differentiating reader as text participant and text analyst. In a more practical and easy-to-follow way, Bloemert and colleagues (2016, 2019) put forward a comprehensive approach to L2 literature, based on Lazar’s (1993) three basic approaches and Paran’s (2008) four-quadrant model for L2 literature teaching. This comprehensive approach includes: text approach – focusing on literary discourse, genres and related terminologies; context approach – locating literature in particular sociocultural and historical contexts; reader approach – encouraging readers’ unique interpretations of the text and critical thinking; language approach – using literature as a repertoire of authentic texts for language acquisition. These four approaches, according to evidence from some recent studies, were not given equal attention in L2 classrooms. For instance, language-based approach, compared with the other parallel approaches, was extensively and predominantly used in various L2 teaching contexts (Bloemert, et al., 2016; Cheung

& Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Luukka, 2019; Tsang et al., 2020). This phenomenon poses a question: by what means could practitioners help L2 learners approach literature in a more comprehensive and balanced way?

The question raised above leads the discussion to the methodological dimension. To begin with, intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER) are two basic approaches that teachers adopt when dealing with L2 reading materials, including literary works. IR aims at detailed comprehension of short texts, with special focus on the linguistic and content study, while ER involves reading a substantial body of texts for the main purpose of reading for pleasure (Broughton, 1978; Krashen, 1993). In a succinct way, Widdowson (1978) applied two terms – language usage and language use – to differentiate IR and ER. In IR, texts are used to study the system or components of a language, while in ER texts are explored for real-world communicative purposes in forms of intrapersonal and interpersonal activities. Regarding SLA, while IR is oriented towards the improvement of language accuracy and reading skills, ER is conducive to language fluency and provides opportunities to practise the skills (Anderson, 2008; Grabe, 2009; Hedge, 2000). Therefore, it is preferable to integrate IR and ER into L2 literature-based instruction to enhance learners' all-around language capabilities. Advocacy of such integration takes different terminological forms, such as, blended extensive and intensive reading (Day, 2015) and ER as literature (Waring & Mclean, 2015). Under such general guidance and drawing on empirical evidence from multiple case studies, Sun (2022b) put forward the notion of scaffolded extensive reading (SER) which emphasises teachers' scaffolding and facilitation when promoting students' extensive reading of engaging materials for the main purpose of L2 acquisition. Teacher scaffolding could take the form of giving guidance on selecting reading materials and reading strategies, initiating or organising collective activities, or monitoring and supervising students' reading activities (Sun, 2022a). SER bears features of three pedagogical approaches in a non-linear but systematic manner: IR instruction, shared-reading, and ER instruction (see details in the three-stage model for scaffolded extensive reading, Sun, 2022b, p. 19). It is legitimate to say that if SER is effectively implemented, the actual integration of IR and ER has high chances of benefitting L2 learners in a more comprehensive manner.

In view of the values of the comprehensive approach (content reference) and SER approach (methodological reference), the investigated first-year English major reading course was designed on the two pedagogical bases. Results of this study may provide further empirical evidence of effective strategies for literature-based instruction in L2 classrooms.

### *Language learner autonomy*

L2 literature reading is related to language learner autonomy in that classroom instructions are important for students to engage with literary works, but far from sufficient. It is more likely that through igniting learners' enthusiasm for reading, or the development of learner autonomy, L2 learners benefit from reading literature in a more profound and far-reaching sense. In other words, if teachers have the awareness of improving language learner autonomy, their implementation of literature-based instruction has higher chances of effecting changes in L2 learners.

In a seminal report, Holec (1981) defined autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3). In more detail, Dickinson (1987) theorised autonomy as learners' taking responsibility for making decisions about their study and abiding by those decisions in actual learning. According to Dickinson (1993), autonomous learners often possess the following capabilities: understanding what is being taught; formulating learning objectives; employing appropriate learning strategies; identifying strategies unsuitable for them; monitoring and assessing their learning. Corroborating the emphasis on appropriately adopting strategies, Cotterall (1995) construed learner autonomy as 'the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning' (p. 195). Based on such propositions, it is assumed that L2 practitioners need to equip students with essential strategies for processing/interpreting literary works when delivering literature-based instruction. However, what are the essential strategies and how to teach the strategies in a systematic way still remain unresolved questions.

Another element of learner autonomy that merits practitioners' attention is the social dimension (Little, 1999). In an educational context, the exercise and development of individual learners' autonomy depend on and contribute to other learners' autonomy (Little et al., 2017). To put it another way, language learner autonomy is not an individual construct; it is a product of a 'social-interactive learning environment' (Little, 2022, p. 70). This presupposition mirrors the

understanding that ‘a greater capacity for autonomous self-regulation’ is correlated to ‘deeper relatedness to others’ (Deci & Flaste, 1996, p. 6). From teacher’s perspective, it is almost equated to stating that learner autonomy is a socially-situated construct in which learners and teachers cooperate to achieve shared goals (Zhong, 2021). This ‘collaborative and mutually supportive nature of the autonomous learning environment’ (Little, 2022, p. 70) calls for teachers’ full awareness of the interdependence in the cultivation of learner autonomy, and they need to involve learners as agentive partners who are engaged with the planning, implementing, and evaluating learning activities (Little, 1995). The topic under discussion went even further when Little (1995) built the link between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, and Benson (2008) came up with classroom autonomy which encouraged teachers to deploy the ‘usable’ construct to help learners develop autonomy without challenging institutional conventions.

To investigate effective and comprehensive methodological approaches to L2 literature-based instruction, with the view of developing language learner autonomy, this study aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the strategies for implementing literature-based instruction with the intention of fostering autonomous language learners in a tertiary EFL teaching context?
2. How do students respond to and evaluate the literature-based instruction?

## METHODS

### Research context

The reading course under focus was intended for first-year English majors in a public university in China. Different from other parallel classes that used textbooks for the intensive reading course, the participating class (an experimental class) took this compulsory course aimed at enhancing L2 capabilities through reading classic works (mainly comprised of but not confined to literary works). The teacher – the principal investigator of the study – taught this year-long course and designed the second-semester syllabus (the first-semester syllabus was co-designed by her and another teacher). The current study examined this year-long course, with intense focus on the second semester.

To understand student needs and expectations of the course, a diagnostic survey was conducted one week before the first semester started. The teacher drew on the results of the survey to design the formative assessment, which took up 40% of the final mark of this course. Similarly, at the end of the first semester, another diagnostic survey was carried out, and results were used to make amendments to the formative assessment and syllabus design in the second semester. At the end of the school year, individual interviews with each student were conducted to obtain students’ detailed feedback and suggestions for this course (see details in Table 1).

Table 1. Pedagogical process and formative assessment of the course

| Time                  | Task   | Function   |
|-----------------------|--|------------|
| Pre-course            | Survey 1   | Diagnostic |
| Semester 1 (14 weeks) | Participation in class (10%); presentation (10%); drama performance (10%); reading journal (10%) | Formative  |
| Mid-course            | Survey 2   | Diagnostic |
| Semester 2 (15 weeks) | Reading marathon (10%); play adaptation and performance (20%); reading journal (10%)             | Formative  |
| End-course            | Feedback interview   | Evaluative |

In the second semester, the teacher incorporated four reading themes in the syllabus, respectively the American Dream, education & society, family & marriage, and science & future. Under each theme, materials were selected on twofold principles: textbook articles took up approximately 50% of the reading materials to ensure average learners’ confidence in the reading; supplementary materials were ‘classic’ to satisfy advanced learners’ need of reading something challenging and profound (results from the diagnostic surveys). It is important to add that when reading articles from the textbook, students were instructed to selectively do the vocabulary and grammar exercises of the unit. The teacher provided answers to the exercises and offered help to any unsolved questions (in class for common questions, otherwise after class).

### Respondents

Student participants were 20 English major freshmen, including 14 females (70%) and 6 males (30%). With reference to CEFR, their English competence was generally between B2 to C1 (Council of Europe, 2001). They came from different parts of China, with a range of secondary educational backgrounds (students from major cities or English experimental schools generally had a higher level of EFL proficiency). For example, in the mid-course survey, a few students expressed difficulties they encountered in understanding supplementary materials, while some reported that they did not find the materials challenging. Students' different educational backgrounds also led to varied perceptions and expectations of the course. Those from exam-oriented teaching environments had high expectations of language-focus approach whereas those who had been accustomed to communicative language teaching were open to a wider range of pedagogical approaches (results from the diagnostic surveys).

### Data collection procedures

To construct a holistic picture of the bounded system under discussion, data were collected from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013), including two diagnostic surveys (see Appendix A & B), semi-structured one-on-one interviews (see Appendix C), students' artefacts (reading journals, presentations, and classroom learning outcomes), teachers' reflective journal, and various types of teaching materials (see Table 2). The two surveys were conducted online, respectively to identify students' needs regarding the course and to collect students' mid-course feedback for the improvement of the syllabus design. The post-course interviews were carried out for the main purpose of gaining detailed feedback for further enhancement of the course.

Table 2. Data collection instruments

| Instrument             | Time          | Participants | Relation to research questions (RQ) |
|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Survey 1               | Pre-course    | 17 students  | RQ 2                                |
| Survey 2               | Mid-course    | 20 students  | RQ 2                                |
| Interview              | Post-course   | 20 students  | RQ 2                                |
| Ss' artefacts          | Semester 2    | 20 students  | RQ 1 & 2                            |
| T's reflective journal | A school year | The teacher  | RQ 1                                |
| Teaching materials     | A school year | The teacher  | RQ 1                                |

Since the surveys were carried out on a voluntary basis, 17 out of 20 students in the class participated in the first survey; all the 20 students participated in the second one. Questions in the two surveys were open-ended questions to enrich the data (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). The semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted by two assistant researchers both of whom obtained a degree of Masters of Science (MSc) in Education from a UK university. Each assistant researcher interviewed ten students in Chinese, and each interview lasted around 20 minutes. To achieve anonymity and enable students to express their feedback and evaluation of the course freely, two assistant researchers did not know students' names. Participants were coded as S1-S20 for data storage and analysis. From the second week of the course, students wrote and submitted a reading journal entry at the end of each week. In Semester 1, they could write anything (without word limit) about what they read in class or outside class. In Semester 2, they were encouraged to write about *The Great Gatsby* – the novel selected for the reading marathon programme (see details in the first section of Findings). Teaching materials included the syllabus, teaching plans, slides used in class, and selected reading materials.

### Data analysis

While the principal researcher took charge of analysing other sources of data, the three researchers collaborated and shouldered different responsibilities in analysing the interview data. First, two assistant researchers transcribed the ten interviews they conducted with individual students. In this process, they familiarised themselves with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following that, they coded the transcripts by identifying initial codes and emergent themes. In the meantime, the principal researcher coded all the 20 interview transcripts following the same procedures. They

created initial codes (i.e., key words that represent or summarise important information from the data) by doing “line-by-line coding” to avoid preoccupations with the interpretation (Gibbs, 2007, p. 52). Then, the three researchers shared their coding results: they compared the emergent themes they had identified, discussed the discrepancies, and sought solutions to integrate related ones and re-examined inconsistent ones (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The final themes they conflated include: *perceived benefits of this course; difficulties students encountered; suggestions for further improvement; teacher scaffolding and its effects; strategies for learner autonomy development.*

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Two surveys to identify student needs and feedback on the course

The first survey was conducted one week before the school year started. To learn about student needs and expectations regarding this course, a link to an electronic survey with six open-ended questions (see Appendix A) was sent to the WeChat group – a virtual space for posting notice and sharing learning materials within the class. Seventeen students responded to the survey, and the results were summarised as follows. Regarding reading materials, respectively ten and eight students showed interest in reading novels and short stories, two in drama/theatre scripts, one in comics. With regard to ways of communication about the reading, 12 students demonstrated preference for group discussion, four for presentation, and four for keeping reading journals. One student gave specific reasons for keeping a reading journal: ‘I think it can help improve our writing ability’. Another explained the reason for favouring group discussion: ‘It may improve our spoken English’. Interestingly, one student expressed ‘No presentation’ without giving any explanation. Regarding potential difficulties in reading, more than half of the respondents considered a limited vocabulary as the biggest obstacle to EFL reading, followed by difficulties in understanding long and complicated sentences, and a slow reading speed (see details in Figure 1).

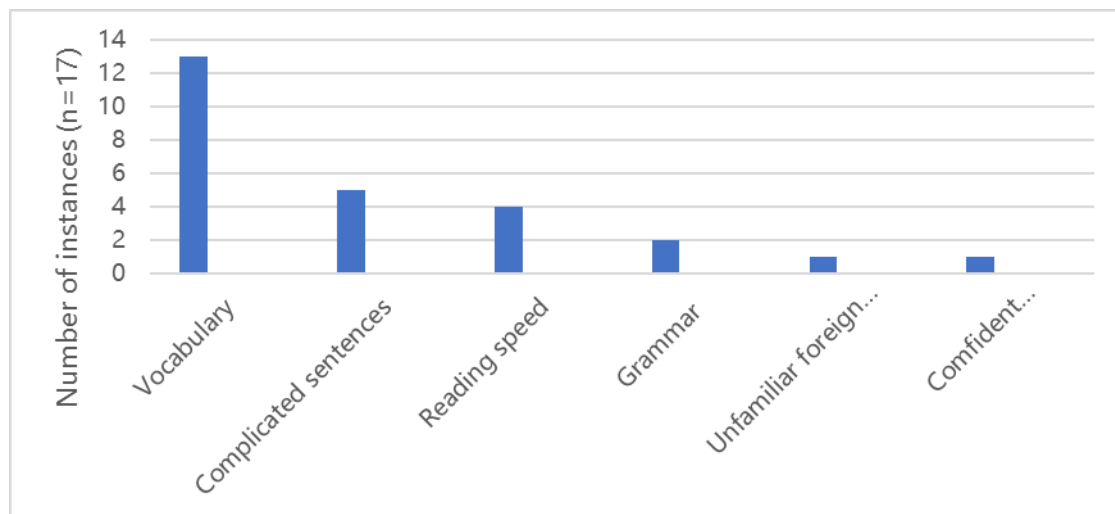


Figure 1. Difficulties in EFL reading students envisioned in Survey 1

Based on the results of Survey 1, the teacher made several adjustments to the course design. Catering to most students’ favoured ways of communication about the reading, four categories of formative assessment were set up – participation in class; presentation about classic literary works; drama performance; keeping a reading journal. Concerning the selection of reading materials, Semester 1 syllabus included excerpts from novels (e.g., *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London), short stories (mainly from the textbook), and a play – *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. To tackle the vocabulary challenge perceived by some students, vocabulary and grammar exercises from seven units of the textbook were periodically assigned as optional homework after reading the article of that unit. In doing so, the teacher intended to give students the autonomy to make decisions on what exercises to do, judging by their English capacity and varied weaknesses and strengths. The teacher provided answers to the exercises after learning the unit. Students could send unsolved questions to the course representative who collected and forwarded the questions to the teacher. In class, the teacher would explain some common questions. However, in effect, only one or two students raised

questions concerning the exercises. In the reflective journal, the teacher noted down her uncertainty about the way of addressing vocabulary and the action she took to seek student feedback:

I asked the course representative today about how students perceived the way of dealing with vocabulary and grammar in the textbook, and why few students asked questions. The representative replied: 'With the keys you provide for us, we can solve the problems by ourselves.' This response erased my worries, so I decide to continue doing so. (October-6th Journal entry)

The second dialogic survey was conducted at the end of Semester 1 with the main purpose of improving the syllabus and pedagogical approaches in Semester 2 (see survey questions in Appendix B). In general, students gave quite positive comments on the course and expressed satisfaction with the overall design. Thirteen out of 20 respondents used terms such as 'interesting' and 'a rich variety of' to describe reading materials selected by the teacher. Six students explicitly expressed their fondness for the activities the teacher organised in and out of class. One said: 'Teacher helped us understand the text by adopting many different types of novel activities'; another said: 'I like the freedom we are granted – the opportunities to freely express our opinions'. Again, students showed varied attitudes towards presentation: one expressed liking; one dislike; another one said 'no more presentations'. In comparison, drama appreciation and performance were better received by students. One suggested: 'I expect more chances of drama performance. If possible, give more credits to it in formative assessment.' When it comes to difficulties in reading, 12 students revealed that weakness in vocabulary and reading strategies hindered their reading comprehension and speed.

Responding to student needs and suggestions expressed in Survey 2, the teacher drew up the syllabus for Semester 2. Compared with the previous one, this syllabus retained the diversity of reading materials and collective activities. Presentation was removed from formative assessment, giving more credits to drama adaptation and performance (as a student suggested), which took up 20%, along with keeping a reading journal (10%), and the reading marathon programme (10%). Also at students' suggestions, pre-reading questions were incorporated into reading activities. Likewise, the teacher attached more emphasis to giving guidance on word-attack strategies and sentence-analysis skills. For example, in the first session of Semester 2, the teacher firstly introduced IR and ER as two approaches to processing texts for different reading purposes.

### **Two teaching designs reflective of the comprehensive approach and SER**

As aforementioned, design of the course was influenced by the comprehensive approach to L2 literature and scaffolded extensive reading (SER), as elucidated in Literature Review. To demonstrate and interrogate the influence of theory on practice, and provide some insight into a more profound interpretation of the theory, two teaching designs implemented in Semester 2 are to be introduced and analysed.

#### ***The reading marathon programme***

This programme started from the outset of Semester 2, lasting 14 weeks. The novel selected for the reading programme was *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Drawing on the three stages of SER, this programme comprised three major procedures (see Figure 2). At the beginning of each lesson, five students took turns to read aloud one page to the peer audience. Before the reading, they created and shared three pre-reading tasks based on the content of the page they were to read. By each Sunday, students completed and shared their reading journal entries about this novel. In the journal entry, students could respond to three pre-reading tasks created by peers or write anything concerning the sections of the novel they read that week.

In a general sense, teacher scaffolding took the form of designing the mechanism of this reading programme. Under each procedure, students took responsibility for creating specific tasks and making decisions on what to read closely and write about in the journal entry. Applying the comprehensive approach to gauge this programme, we may find that the first and second pre-reading tasks, respectively selecting 3-5 words for further study and extracting one difficult sentence for deeper understanding, were reflective of language approach; the third task – raising one authentic question for in-depth discussion – mirrored reader approach. When the reading programme drew to a close (students had completed reading aloud the novel in class), the teacher

used two sessions to have an overall discussion of the novel and main characters. Discussion topics included the historical background (e.g., The Jazz Age, Prohibition on alcoholic beverages, New Woman/flapper etc.), the American Dream in relation to the novel, ‘new money’ and ‘old money’. In the second session, students presented character analysis in groups, followed by the teacher’s summarisation of features of each main character.

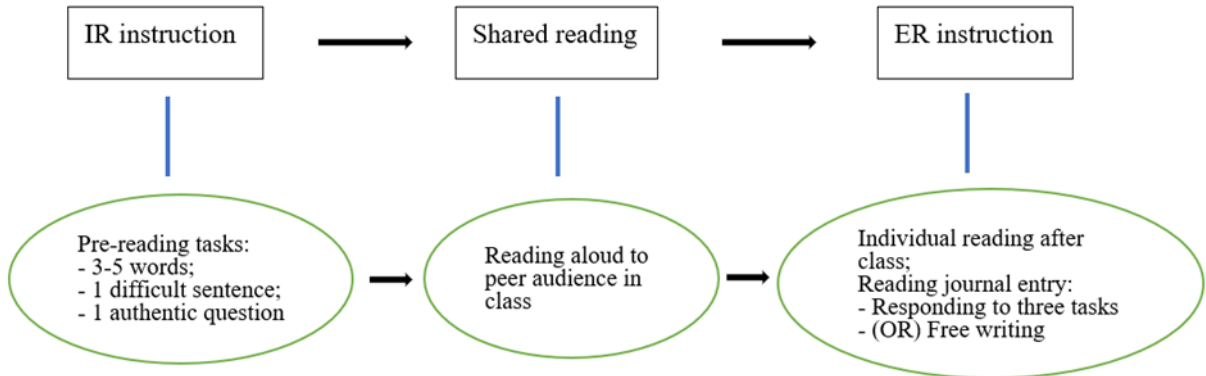


Figure 2. Reading marathon procedures

***A comparative reading design***

Inspired by one student’s suggestion proposed in Survey 2 – ‘I hope this course could incorporate more elements about domestic and foreign countries’, under the theme of Family & Marriage, the teacher selected excerpts from two books – Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom and The Importance of Living by Yutang Lin – for comparative reading. ‘Comparative’ could be interpreted in two ways: comparison between two influential (Chinese & American) authors’ views on marriage and family; comparison between two reading partners (see detailed instructions for this activity in Figure 3).

### In-class pair reading

- Randomly, you will get a text labelled A1-A10, or B1-B10.
- **Add annotations** in the margin while reading (around 20 mins; you may skip some content you regard as irrelevant or uninteresting).
- Find your reading partner (e.g., A1&B1), and exchange your reading.
- **Add annotations** in another colour (around 20 mins; you may skip some content you regard as irrelevant or uninteresting).
- Pair discussion: ←
- Together, you two draw a mind map to show the similarities and/or differences you find in these two texts regarding marriage/family.

What are the eastern and western views of *family and marriage*?  
Are there any differences or similarities?

Figure 3. A slide of instructions for the comparative reading

This reading activity commenced with teacher’s introduction to the two authors, some social backgrounds and literary features of the two books, the main character of Tuesdays with Morrie (particularly the disease he suffered from – ALS). Then, students started in-class reading, following the procedures presented in Figure 3. After the first session, students created mind maps with their reading partners (see one example in Figure 4). In the second session, each pair demonstrated their viewpoints with the assistance of their mind maps. The final step was teacher’s



summarisation – giving comments on students’ mind maps and presentations, followed by several points that the teacher regarded as important from her perspective as a reader. For example, she reminded the students that *The Importance of Living* was created in 1937, thus the traditional lifestyle and ideological patterns portrayed in the book could be dramatically different from the current situation in China.

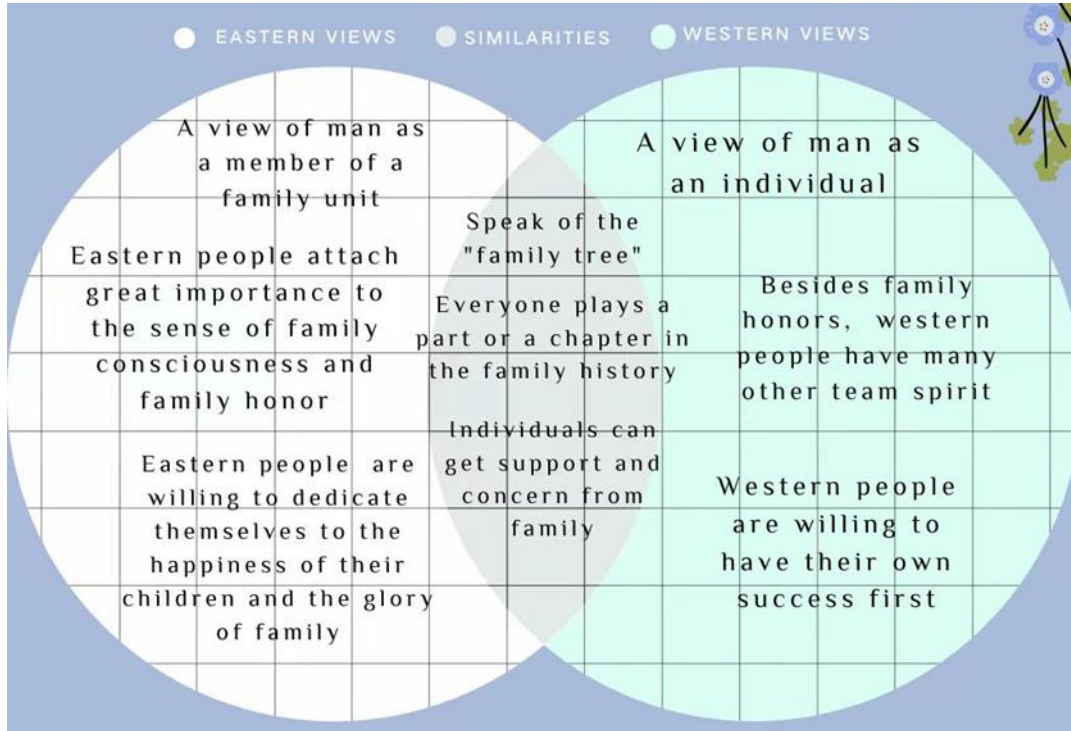


Figure 4. A mind map created by a pair of reading partners

A closer examination of this comparative reading design could lead to the conclusion that the comprehensive approach to L2 literature was embodied in different procedures of the activity (see details in Figure 5). However, due to the limited class time left for the teacher, the language approach – some vivid expressions from *Tuesdays with Morrie* – were not fully explained. The slide created for that purpose was displayed to students without fulfilling teacher’s intention: to draw students’ attention to the linguistic features of the text in addition to understanding the content.

This unintended omission of language approach resonated with one of the teacher’s reflective journal entries:

After observing one teacher’s IR lesson today, I thought quite a lot: this teacher attached great importance to the basics, particularly vocabulary learning strategies and acquisition. In comparison, the course I’m teaching is more like literature appreciation – to get students immersed in it, to feel it, but not very helpful for their vocabulary acquisition. (April-10th Journal entry)

This inward reflection revealed the teacher’s realisation that the comprehensive approach was adopted in an imbalanced manner in her teaching practice, which assumably could help her make adjustments to future designs.

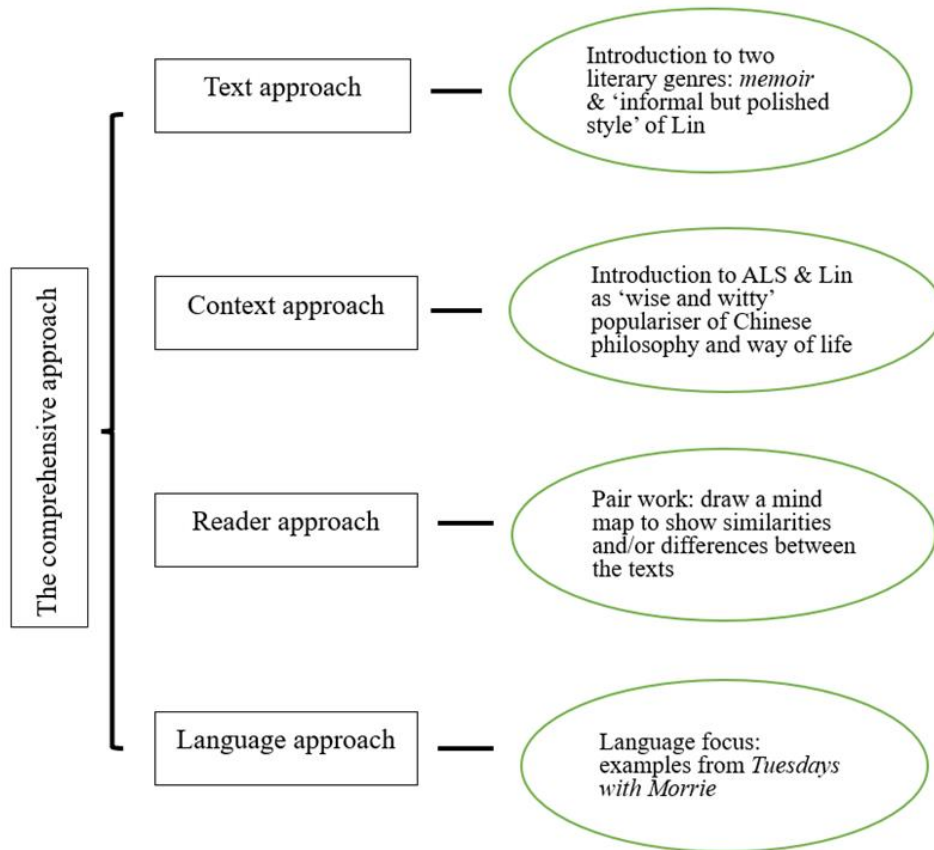


Figure 5. Application of the comprehensive approach to the comparative reading design

**Students’ feedback regarding this course**

Upon the completion of this course, each student anonymously made their comments with constructive suggestions in the feedback interviews (see questions in Appendix C).

The majority of students claimed that taking this course enabled them to improve not only their reading abilities, including reading efficiency and text analysis ability, but also their overall English competence, including speaking and writing (see details in Table 3). Seventeen out of 20 students expressed that their reading strategies had been enhanced to different degrees due to teacher’s instructions and guidance, such as their ability to analyse characters, appreciate important details, and sort out inner logic of the text. Critical thinking ability was regarded by 80% of the students as improved owing to various analytical activities. Sixty percent of the students perceived enhancement in their peer collaboration ability, and the same percentage of students perceived improvement in their cultural awareness.

Table 3. Improvements students perceived as a result of taking this course

| Perceived improvement      | Total instances (n=20) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Reading strategies         | 17                     | 85             |
| Critical thinking ability  | 16                     | 80             |
| Peer collaboration ability | 12                     | 60             |
| Cultural awareness         | 12                     | 60             |
| Oral English capacity      | 10                     | 50             |
| Reading efficiency         | 8                      | 40             |

Some students explicitly gave credit to teacher scaffolding in respects such as providing guidance on reading strategies and organising various collective activities. S6 detailed as follows: 'The reading course was outlined based on different themes, and the selected literature was located in particular sociocultural and historical contexts, which is better than studying the literature in isolation'. Regarding the benefits of participating in collective activities, S5 said: 'Discussions with classmates enriched and deepened my thoughts.' Among all the activities held in class, Reading Marathon was regarded as the most rewarding. S19 commented: 'Reading Marathon literally helped me a lot with my expression and pronunciation problems.' Another popular activity was drama performance to which students attributed various improvements in L2 acquisition. For instance, one shared in excitement:

Through adapting and rehearsing the play, we gained a deeper understanding of the text. It improved not only our English ability, but also our creativity, particularly when we worked on the adaptation of the play. We couldn't help but feel the charm of drama when we put on the performance. (S4, Feedback interview)

Regarding reading materials, most of the students expressed interest in the teacher-selected literary works. In effect, results indicate that student satisfaction with the selected reading materials was the main reason for most of them to do extensive reading after class. Quite a few students mentioned that this course provided them with precious opportunities to read classic literature and have a deeper understanding of foreign cultures. This course also helped some learners form a good reading habit. For example, S9 conveyed that through keeping the reading journal, he had developed a habit of doing extracurricular reading on a regular basis. Interestingly, a few students claimed that they were motivated to finish the reading assignments because they liked the teacher, as S12 said: 'I'm really lucky and happy to meet our teacher, which is one of my achievements in this course'.

## Discussion

### *Benefits and challenges of implementing the comprehensive approach*

Results of the current study, particularly students' feedback from the post-course interviews, manifested multi-faceted benefits of the comprehensive approach to L2 literature that Bloemert and colleagues (2016, 2019) synthesised and promoted. These benefits were of three general levels featuring different dimensions: social, cultural, and historical dimensions (Bland, 2020); cognitive, affective, motivational, and aesthetic dimensions (European Commission, 2012); language acquisition dimensions (Hall, 2005/2015). At the socio-cultural level, in Survey 2 and post-course interviews, more than half of the students expressed their improvement in cultural awareness. Regarding cognitive development, 80% of the students believed their critical thinking was honed through participating in various activities. The results corroborate Naji et al.'s (2019) findings concerning the benefits of literature-based instruction on learners' multiliteracy skills and higher-level thinking skills. Some students in the present study claimed positive changes in their attitudes towards EFL reading; this affective factor in turn boosted their language learning motivation. Furthermore, many a few students mentioned that their aesthetic appreciation of classic literary works had been enhanced. Finally yet importantly, almost all the students gave positive feedback on the effects of this course on their EFL competence, especially the enhancement of reading strategies and reading efficiency.

One major challenge to the implementation of the comprehensive approach is teachers' holistic view and relatively equal weight given to each sub-approach: text, context, reader, and language approaches (Bloemert, et al., 2016. Bloemert, et al., 2019). A number of studies have gleaned evidence showing that in many L2 teaching contexts, language approach, compared with the other three approaches, was given disproportionately predominant emphasis (Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Luukka, 2019; Tsang et al., 2020). In the current study, the situation seemed to develop in a reverse direction: the teacher allocated vocabulary and grammar exercises as optional assignments with the view of giving students autonomy to make decisions based on their language competence. However, student feedback indicated that teacher's intention of fostering learner autonomy was not well fulfilled – some students explicitly expressed the expectation of gaining more instruction and supervision on vocabulary and grammar learning. Student needs in this aspect could be spelled out in two ways. First, most of the students had been

receiving exam-oriented education, particularly in their secondary schooling. Thus, they expected continuity of this teaching mode in their tertiary education. Second, before designing this course, the teacher had learned about the predominance of language approach in various teaching contexts, therefore purposefully avoiding it in her teaching. At a later stage, she realised and reflected upon this imbalance in her literature-based instruction (see the April-10th Journal entry in Findings section). Presumably, such reflections could help the teacher make some adjustments to the composition of the course in future design and implementation. This finding confirms the existing literature with evidence that a balanced way of implementing the comprehensive approach is considerably difficult in teaching practice. Nevertheless, reflective teaching and periodic student need analysis, as adopted in the current study, may contribute to a sensibly-proportioned L2 literature instruction.

#### *Literature-based instruction and language learner autonomy*

In the present study, the L2 practitioner demonstrated awareness of fostering language learner autonomy in the pedagogical design and practice. As noted in the previous section, the self-study mode of processing vocabulary and grammar exercises revealed teacher's intention of developing learner autonomy, although not fully effective. With closer observation and analysis, we are able to find other strategies adopted for cultivating language learner autonomy in the course under study. Mirroring Little's (2022) notion that autonomy is a product of social-interactive learning environment, various forms of collective activities were carried out in the investigated course. These activities not only boosted learners' motivation for further and extensive reading after class, but also enhanced peer collaboration capabilities and their enthusiasm for the course and EFL learning, as evidenced in the feedback interviews. This adds to Tseng et al.'s (2020) finding that well-designed peer collaboration helped enhance learner autonomy and elevate learners' motivational levels in L2 learning. Another element of learner autonomy that Little (1995) emphasised is involving learners as agentive partners who shoulder the responsibility of designing, implementing, and assessing learning activities. In this course, two diagnostic surveys and one evaluative interview were conducted with each student to engage them in the design and continuous improvement of the course. Such teaching practice corroborates the advocacy of empowering students through offering them chances to make decisions on their learning (West, 2018). Also, this study gleaned evidence indicating that providing students with various platforms and chances to voice their opinions from their unique perspectives helped enhance learner autonomy, because the confidence gained in the process served as incentive for students to further and deeper engage with the learning. This finding affirms the effectiveness of *hermeneutic pedagogy* that allows learners to fully express and share their views, which could improve L2 learners' self-esteem and effect positive motivational changes (Nguyen, 2016). In line with Chen's (2022) finding that in a student-centred environment, teacher played a significant role in learner autonomy building, this study adds to that with evidence indicating that fondness for the teacher improved learner autonomy – students wanted to learn just because they liked the teacher. More importantly, teacher's role in training reading strategies was highly valued in literature-based instruction, as shown in the present study. This mirrors the finding of another study: systematic instruction of strategies was important for developing language learner autonomy (Aryanjani et al., 2021). The course under discussion demonstrated one of its weaknesses in this respect, which explained why some students hoped for more guidance on reading strategies, such as word-attack strategies and long-sentence analysis strategies.

Drawing on the findings of the current study, and integrating the content, methodological, and ideological dimensions of language learner autonomy building, a three-dimensional model is constructed as reference for L2 practitioners of literature-based instruction (see Figure 6). With respect to teaching content, systematic instruction of strategies for L2 literature reading is of supreme importance. Regarding teaching methodology, organising various types of collective (in-class and out-of-class) activities is beneficial for learners' motivational and affective development. At the ideological level, teachers should have the awareness of empowering learners by providing opportunities for them to participate in the pedagogical design, voice opinions, and make decisions for their learning. The three dimensions should be interactively integrated to create better chances for the development of language learner autonomy.

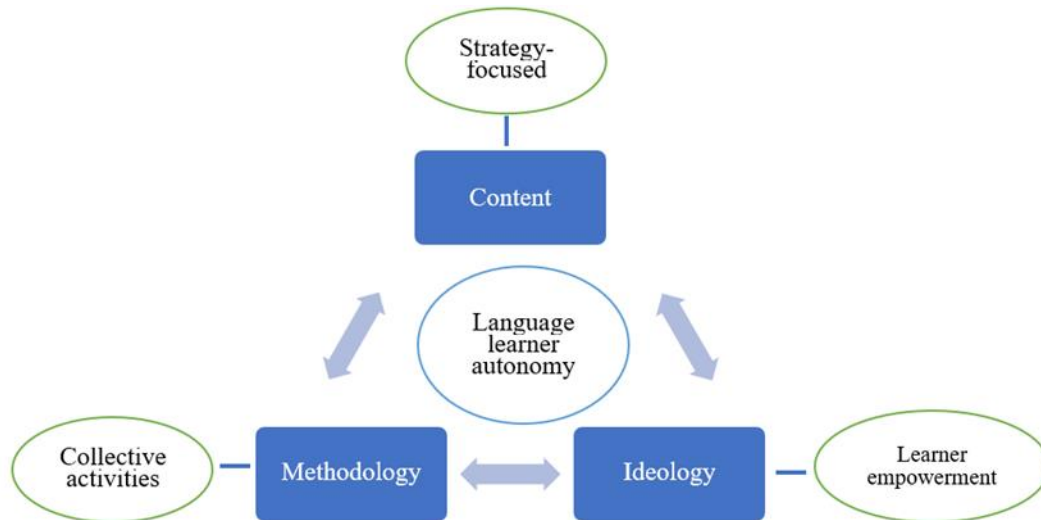


Figure 6. A three-dimensional model for language learner autonomy development

### *An expanded interpretation of scaffolded extensive reading*

In tandem with the proposition of the three-dimensional model for developing language learner autonomy, the concept of SER can be expanded to afford more pedagogical functionalities. First, at the macro level, scaffolding in literature-based instruction necessitates teachers' awareness of the reciprocal relationships between language, culture, and literature. Accordingly in IR instruction, teachers will employ varied approaches that feed on the links and better the instruction. In the current study, students perceived significant changes in their cultural awareness due to teacher's culturally-enriching instruction. This finding confirms the result of another case study carried out in a similar teaching context (Nguyen, 2016).

The expansion of the concept takes another two directions – *sequential flexibility* and *interpretation possibility*. Reading Marathon serves as a good example to elucidate sequential flexibility of the concept. Inspired by the three stages of SER – IR instruction; shared reading; ER instruction (Sun, 2022b) – this reading programme followed a similar pattern, with some adjustments to the order of procedures (see Figure 2). To be precise, rather than rigidly taking the three steps, this programme placed IR instruction (i.e., analysis of themes and characters of the novel) at the end of the programme, which was valued as helpful by students in the feedback interview. The sequential flexibility in teaching procedures broadens the understanding of SER.

Moreover, interpretation possibility in SER empowers practitioners to interpret key elements of the concept with a certain degree of autonomy. Two examples from the course are presented as follows. Different from the conventional understanding that teacher delivers IR instruction, in the course under study, it was the teacher and students who collaboratively fulfilled this task. That is, the teacher outlined the structure of pre-reading tasks and students took turns (one person one page) to create specific tasks which their peers might respond to in the post-reading activity. Another example was the wider interpretation of shared reading, originally interpreted as reading activities that allow for communication and collaboration between learners, or between teacher and learners (Sun, 2022b). In the reading marathon programme, shared reading took the main form of students' taking turns to read aloud to the peer audience in class, which was perceived by students as an effective way to enhance their English pronunciation and confidence as English majors.

### CONCLUSION

This study scrutinises a first-year English major reading course to seek for strategies for improving language learner autonomy in literature-based instruction. Influenced by the comprehensive approach to L2 literature and scaffolded extensive reading strategies, the course under study was perceived as helpful for EFL learners to gain a wide range of achievements, including deepened and widened understanding of socio-cultural background knowledge concerning the literary works, and correspondingly improved cultural competence. Students also revealed progress in cognitive, motivational, and aesthetic dimensions, in addition to enhancement in L2 acquisition. While giving

credit to the two sets of guidance (the comprehensive approach and SER), this study provides evidence to better or enrich them. Regarding the comprehensive approach to L2 literature, results of this study indicate that reflective teaching and regular student need collection and analysis contribute to a balanced implementation of the four sub-approaches. Concerning SER, this study highlights its two features – sequential flexibility and interpretation possibility – respectively adding variation to the chronological order of activities and nuances in the interpretation of key elements.

The most important pedagogical implication of the study lies in the practical guidance it offers for developing language learner autonomy, particularly when implementing literature-based instruction. The three-dimensional model that combines content, methodological and ideological considerations, serves as the foundation of the pedagogical guidance, that is, focusing on strategy training, offering a variety of collective activities, and empowering students through offering opportunities for them to engage with activity design and make decisions that suit their learning profile and language competence.

Limitation of the study could be the double status of the principal researcher – also the teacher of the course. However, triangulation achieved through having two assistant researchers could mitigate the potential biases in analysing data. It is hoped that future research in this field could testify the feasibility of the three-dimensional model for cultivating learner autonomy in different contexts of literature-based instruction.

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