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Research on the Effects of Whole English Book Reading in ELT for Developing Learners' Reading and Autonomous Learning Ability

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ABSTRACT

In Chinese higher education, English courses aim to enhance language skills while cultivating learners' personality, cultural awareness, and autonomous learning abilities. However, current English reading instruction often results in passive learning. Whole English Book Reading (WEBR), guided by Project-based Learning (PBL), addresses this by promoting comprehensive reading, teacher support, and exploration of main ideas and author intentions. This study uses experimental methods, including tests and questionnaires, with 123 participants to examine the impact of WEBR. The research aims to: 1) Determine if WEBR improves students' English reading ability and, if so, to what extent; 2) Assess whether WEBR enhances students' autonomous learning ability and the nature of this effect. Findings show significant improvements in reading skills and autonomous learning, highlighting WEBR's effectiveness in advancing both areas. The significance of this research lies in its potential to refine instructional reading practices by demonstrating the benefits of integrating WEBR based on PBL. Limitations such as the study's brief duration and small sample size suggest directions for future research.

Keywords: Higher Education; Reading Ability; Whole English Book Reading; Autonomous Learning

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, the growing need for cross-cultural communication, and the learning ability that underpins all the subjects, have made English language education in China increasingly vital. For Chinese undergraduates, the English program is not only a foundational and compulsory language course but also a critical component of quality education that broadens their knowledge and develops essential learning skills for their future careers, which is in accordance with the curriculum objectives of the Ministry of Education[1]. English language education serves a dual purpose: it equips learners with practical language skills and fosters their capacity for independent learning, preparing them for the challenges of the globalized world.

In recent years, there has been a significant improvement in the approach to College English teaching in China. In the past, English instruction heavily relied on teacher-centered methods, focusing on rote memorization and exam-oriented learning. However, the College English Teaching Guide (2020 Edition), released by the Ministry of Education[1], emphasizes a more learner-centered approach. This shift highlights the need for curricula that not only develop language proficiency but also encourage active participation, critical thinking, and autonomous learning. Teachers are now viewed as facilitators and guides, with students taking a more active role in the learning process both inside and outside the classroom. Given these developments, the design of the College English curriculum should reflect the principles of practicality, knowledge enhancement, and learning ability cultivation. This study explores how these principles are being incorporated into English teaching in Chinese universities, and how they influence student engagement and learning outcomes.

According to a recent survey about reading instruction in undergraduate English courses, several issues need to be addressed. Firstly, teachers applied some advanced EFL/ESL theories or approaches abroad but failed to modify them with the context of China. The impractical use of these teaching methods simply ignores the learning characteristics of domestic students, resulting in a foreign teaching theory model that is difficult to match with the domestic teaching environment, resulting in the effect of the opposite of what was intended[2]. In addition, students of different learning levels are taught in the same-level teaching materials, and the problem encountered in the reading classroom is that students' reading learning process is not "tailored teaching", leading to the lack of students' interest in active learning[3].

Whole English Book Reading (WEBR) is a teaching approach that emphasizes the principle of reading the whole book thus to grasp the whole picture[4]. By doing this, students understand the structure and the main idea, which facilitates the exploration of the author's intention and attitudes, thus eventually relating the book to reality. As the extensive reading or reading of English originals is advocated by providing comprehensible input in EFL settings[5] and the richness of the indirect and authentic context[6], WEBR is applied in this study.

By examining the issues aforementioned and the implementation of the College English Teaching Guide (2020 Edition), this research seeks to provide insights into effective reading teaching strategies that motivate learners, promote autonomous learning, and ultimately improve English proficiency among undergraduates. There are two research questions need to be addressed:

Does WEBR have some impact on learners' reading abilities?

Does WEBR affect learners' autonomous learning?

By employment of WEBT in the reading classroom, the qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed to find its effectiveness for improving learners' reading ability and autonomous learning ability.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Objectives of Reading in ELT in China

Reading is a crucial skill in ELT. A quality reading class will facilitate the conduction of the Guide for undergraduates. The new guide enables students to choose materials and methods of learning to suit their learning needs, obtain guidance from teachers, and gradually improve their reading skills and the ability to learn independently and autonomously.

As explicated in the Guide, the levels for English reading skills for undergraduates are divided into three levels: intermediate, medium, and advanced[1]. The three levels represent different objectives of the reading instructions for various learners as shown in **Table 1**.

The three levels of the objective manifest a ranked and personalized consideration for different undergraduates with

Table 1. Different objectives of reading instructions for various learners in Higher Education [1].

Levels	Objectives	Descriptions
Intermediate	- To read and understand English reading materials with familiar themes - Medium language difficulty	- Be able to understand the main idea, analyse the language characteristics, and understand the cultural background. - Read English textbooks of their major subjects and materials of common styles with the help of dictionaries.
Medium	- To basically read and understand articles in English newspapers and magazines. - More complex language	- Be able to accurately retrieve the target information. - Think critically of the contents and the language in the reading materials. - Read the literature review related to their majors, or the manuals and operation guides related to their future work
Advanced	- To read and understand texts fully. - High language difficulty	- Be able to completely read and comprehend the main ideas and details. - Read articles in different genres of English materials, including academic paper, literary and cultural works, newspaper and magazines.

various English proficiency. For the intermediate level, learners are supposed to read and understand most of the newspaper articles and other English materials with familiar themes and medium language difficulties, including the main idea, analysis of the language features, the cultural background. For their majors, the Guide requires the capability of rough understanding the materials in their major subject matter in English via the help of a dictionary; for the medium level, learners are supposed to understand the main idea, key information, chapter structure even the more complex language of literature. A higher demand for their reading ability is to read between the lines, thus infer authors' attitudes and intentions, then assess and evaluate the language and content; For the advanced level, learners are supposed to fully read and understand texts and comprehend the main ideas and details. All genres of English reading materials would not be challenging for them to read, understand, infer, evaluate, and connect with their own academic field of interest smoothly [1].

The objectives of reading instruction are promising and challenging, which call for an efficient approach that facilitates English reading skills, including all genres, as well as the development of learning ability. Since Chinese undergraduates have sufficient time in self-learning which guarantees WEBR, their reading skills and autonomous learning ability could be fostered by utilizing WEBR designed based on PBL.

While the Guide provides a solid framework in how to teach reading, there remains a gap in the literature regarding its effectiveness in improving students' autonomy and independent learning abilities in the Chinese ELT context. Comparative studies, such as those conducted in similar educational settings in Japan and South Korea [7], suggest that more direct teacher involvement and guide may be necessary for the successful implementation of such programs. Further empirical studies are needed to validate these claims and assess their applicability within China.

2.2. Autonomous Learning

Holec defines autonomous learning in the 1980s and attracts wide-range attention [8]. On the foundation of previous research in this field, it is defined as an active learning process in which learners self-design, manage, regulate, monitor and evaluate their English learning through the activities of determining learning goals, choosing learning methods, monitoring the learning process and evaluating the learning outcomes, and it is a behavior formed by learners' psychological response to the learning process and content [9]. Fotiadou et al. suggest that though learners' autonomy is primarily

decided by individual personalities, the instructional setting is also an important factor influencing autonomy[10].

In the context of Chinese higher education, undergraduates lack autonomous learning ability, which is the most necessary characteristic in fulfilling their learning and self-development not only in colleges and universities but also in their future careers. How to foster the ability is regarding these aspects according to the intonation of the definition: learner-centeredness while a selection of reading materials and management and evaluation of their reading; teachers' guidance by providing necessary help in facilitating learners' selection of materials, self-management and evaluation, lastly, creating a relaxing and open atmosphere, which providing learners an environment of enjoying reading, cooperation and exchanging viewpoints with peers and teachers.

The focus on autonomous learning and student-centered approaches in ELT has gained significant traction, particularly in response to growing demands for lifelong learning skills in globalized contexts currently. Benson's[11] exploration of learner autonomy, have further underscored the importance of giving learners control over their learning processes, which serves a core feature of WEBR. Additionally, with Fotiadou et al.[10] argument that autonomy is fostered not only by individual learner traits but also by the instructional environment, the Project-Based Learning (PBL), which states to form a student-centred form of instruction on the bases of the three constructivist principles: context-specific learning, active learners' involvement and goals achieved through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge, providing the framework that guides WEBR to creates a real-world, collaborative setting that facilitates deeper engagement, critical thinking, and self-regulation—fitting all key components of autonomous learning[7]. By situating WEBR within the broader theoretical perspectives, its relevance as an effective method for improving both reading proficiency and autonomous learning skills in EFL contexts, especially within Chinese higher education is supported.

2.3. Undergraduates' Status Quo in English Reading

When scrutinizing the current English reading courses from the aforesaid objectives regarding reading skills, it is evident that the pedagogy of undergraduates' English learning is still a "single mode, solidified mechanism and backward technology" though the Ministry of Education has launched the reform of ELT in Higher Education since 1970s. It has not yet shifted the teacher-centredness to learner-centeredness by paying more attention to learners' features than ways of teaching. Generally speaking, the results are still unsatisfactory[12]. These challenges are compounded by large class sizes, shortened class time and limited opportunities for individualized feedback, which hinder the development of critical reading skills and autonomous learning. Whole English Book Reading (WEBR), offers a potential solution by encouraging students to actively engage with complete texts rather than fragmented readings. This comprehensive approach allows learners to explore complex narratives in their groups or by individuals in their sufficient spare time with feed backs frequently with their teachers and other learners.

Some surveys were conducted to garner information about learners' English learning ability by local researchers, they proposed the prominent questions as follows[12]:

1) The deficiency of learner-autonomous learning.
2) Lack of guidance from the instructors.
3) The constraints of time and space, causing scarce flexibility in English learning

Yuan and Tan[13] distributed a questionnaire regarding autonomous learning ability to 112 undergraduates and collected the data from three perspectives: self-directed learning psychology (m = 3.62), self-managed learning skills (m = 3.55), self-directed learning behaviour (m = 3.50), which are not quite satisfying to achieve the objectives enlisted in the Guide.

As the Guide stated, the new teaching mode should grant students the right to choose materials and methods of learning, obtain guidance on learning strategies from teachers, and gradually improve their ability to learn autonomously[1].

2.4. Whole English Book Reading

Beck and McKeown[14] proposed the basic concepts, and cognitive processes along with pedagogues of Whole English Book Reading, which build the foundation of the related research. Li and Liu[15] thought of Whole English Book Reading as a way of reading and learning. The explicit statement sheds light on the current study to combine WEBR with the development of reading skills and autonomous learning ability. From the consideration of curriculum and instruction,

the key feature of the WEBR is "integration".

Implementing WEBR is in line with the objectives of the Guide and the connection from the reading ability to autonomous learning. WEBR is different from reading a single article, and it emphasizes the principle of "reading the whole and getting the whole picture" ([4], pp. 32–35). It requires students to read the complete story, understand the structure and the main idea, explore the author's intention and attitudes, thus eventually relate it to reality.

WEBR aims to teach students reading strategies, accumulate reading experience, thus developing reading ability. With the guidance of PBL, undergraduates set and explore projects through self-management, monitoring and regulation; group cooperation and interaction with peers and teachers along with practice in the real context. Eventually, they are eligible for in-depth reading experience which internalizes and absorbs language knowledge, and the development of autonomous learning ability.

Whole English Book Reading (WEBR) also aligns with theories of language acquisition theories, such as Krashen's[16] Input Hypothesis. It emphasizes the role of comprehensible input in language learning, which should follow "i+1" model, meaning learners have not yet acquired but are ready to. The providing of A whole English book, especially a novel is rooted by this theory. WEBR inherently supports by encouraging extensive exposure to language in context and the learners. Furthermore, Dulay et al.[17] acknowledge the low Affective Filter, in other words, the marked openness to language input, will facilitate learning, which serves a principle in this study. The interesting and realistic features of English book, the self-election and controlling of the reading material and reading pace, and the cooperation and communication with other learners account for the openness.

Due to the study on project-based approach combined with WEBR is scarce in the field of ELT in China, this study aims to investigate its potential and effective strategies in cultivating students' English reading literacy through empirical research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Paradigm

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm. Empirical data is collected through tests and questionnaires to ob-

jectively measure the impact of Whole English Book Reading (WEBR) on reading skills and autonomous learning ability. Quantitative analysis is used to derive research conclusions.

3.1.1. Teaching Approach

The approach used in this study combines Project-Based Learning (PBL) with Whole English Book Reading (WEBR). This approach guides students to engage in real-life projects, enabling them to engage in deeper learning and active participation. PBL serves as the guiding framework, emphasizing the resolution of real-world problems, which increases student engagement and promotes collaboration among them, while WEBR provides specific and feasible teaching methods for reading and project exploration.

3.1.2. Research Method

This study employs an experimental research method. Two groups of students (an experimental class and a control class) were selected to examine the effects of WEBR. The experimental class received instruction using the WEBR approach guided by PBL, while the control class continued with traditional reading instruction methods. Data was collected through tests and questionnaires, and statistical methods were used to compare the results between the two groups.

3.2. Participants

The present study selected two classes of sophomores from a mid-ranked university in Sichuan Province, China, as the participants, shown in **Table 2**. The reason why chose the learners in one university in Sichuan is that the one of researchers works in the university, which currently has undergone teaching reform and the teaching intervention has been welcomed and supported by administrators, teachers and learners.

Table 2. Demographics of participants.

Class	N	Gender	
		Male	Female
Experimental Class	62	32	30
Control Class	61	32	29

For this study, the undergraduates were in two classes. The researcher randomly assigned one class as the experimental class (EC) and the other as the control class (CC). There are 62 and 61 undergraduates respectively in the two

classes, with EC composed of 32 male and 30 female participants, while CC composed of 32 male and 29 female participants. The average age of students in both classes was around 20 years old, having eight years of experience in English learning equally. With similar English backgrounds and cognitive levels, their teaching progress was also consistent with the same teacher since their enrollment in the university. Their English reading proficiency was almost equal according to the comparison of their average scores in the Reading Comprehension section of the final English examination last semester, and there was no significant difference in their autonomous learning ability, therefore they can be identified as homogeneous research participants.

3.3. Instruments

The research utilized a combination of tests and questionnaires to ensure a thorough and diverse range of information, thus facilitating a more comprehensive and objective analysis of the data, also time and cost saving,

3.3.1. Test

A reading comprehension test aims to assess four aspects included in English reading ability: decoding skills, language proficiency, reading comprehension and awareness of culture. To ensure accurate measurement of participants' reading ability, The researcher selected the Reading Comprehension section in final English examination of the current semester. For the consideration of the accuracy and objectivity of the final examination paper, its reliability was verified by two teachers who had finished the draft paper twice in the required time: the first time was in the thirteenth week, and the second time was one month later. The results are quite similar therefore the reading test is of reliability as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Results of reliability test.

Teachers	Scores	
	1st	2nd
A	94	92
B	95	96

The Reading Comprehension section consists of 4 passages followed by 5 multiple-choice questions respectively. Each question was assigned 2 points, with a total score of 40 points. The test paper covers a range of reading abilities, including speed and fluency, strategies, language knowledge, and the extent of how familiar with cultural background.

3.3.2. Questionnaire

Cotterall[18] and Guglielmino[19] contribute to the development of self-directed learning ability scales[11, 20], However, learners in different cultures and learning environments have various forms or degrees of autonomous learning ability[21, 22]. Therefore, a scale of English autonomous learning ability of undergraduates in China should be developed according to the specific context and characteristics of the specified population in China[23].

The questionnaire in this study employs a five-point Likert scale with 38 questions to be answered by the participants, with the following values assigned to each option: completely agree as 5 points, agree as 4 points, uncertain as 3 points, disagree as 2 points, and completely disagree as 1 point. The higher the score the better the ability. Besides Lin's[23] verification of the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Yuan and Tan[13] employed SPSS 26 to ensure the reliability and validity tests, too. Their result showed the questionnaire is reliable (Cronbach's α = 0.932). The measurement for the questionnaire in the current study agrees with Yuan and Tan[13] (Cronbach's α = 0.857).

3.4. The Intervention of WEBR Guided by PBL in Reading Instruction

WEBR guided by PBL was conducted in EC, whereas CC continued their previous reading teaching.

In the intervention, guiding undergraduates to deeply explore real projects is a fundamental requirement in PBL theory, which places an emphasis on the authenticity of research projects. Within the framework of PBL, the situation takes the role of a vital catalyst for stimulating undergraduates' reading enthusiasm and interest, which are vital in fostering autonomous learning ability psychologically. Essentially, the situation highlighted in PBL allows learners to solve problems that appeared in real life and to have the experience of the excitement and sense of accomplishment associated with learning.

The whole teaching intervention consists of three phases as shown in **Figure 1**:
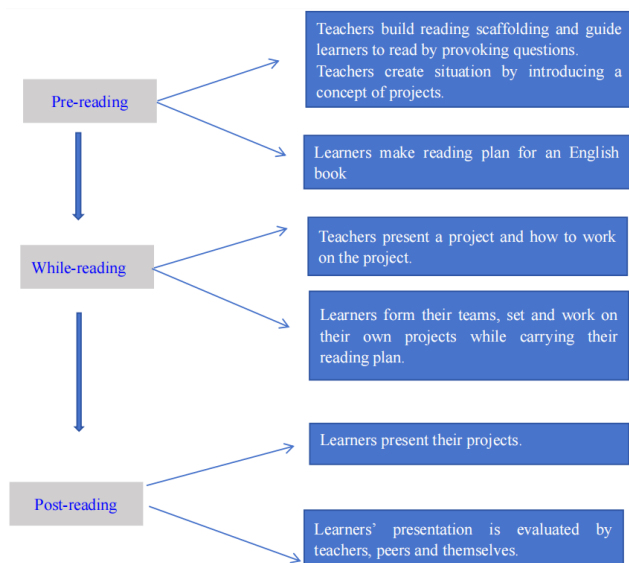
Figure 1. The intervention procedure.

3.4.1. Pre-Reading

Due to the lack of cultural background, learners have many difficulties in reading a famous English book directly. Teachers built reading scaffolding and guided students to make their reading plan after careful selection of a famous English book -The Little Prince. Considering the core of PBL, teachers created an ELT situation in the first class. The concept of the project was introduced and exemplified by asking driving questions and modeling.

During this phase, learners experienced and practiced how to prepare themselves for a challenging reading task psychologically; how to design their learning and they also need to manage, regulate, and monitor their behaviors while progressing.

3.4.2. While-Reading

In this phase, learners are supposed to stick to their reading plans, which are available to be made some modifications during their implementation. Teachers present a project of their own and demonstrate how to work on the project. Learners form their teams, and set and work on their own projects while carrying their reading plan.

During this phase, learners learn in real situations about how to insist on their challenging reading tasks and projects psychologically as well as being encouraged and motivated by their group members and teachers. Meanwhile, they had to manage, regulate, and monitor their behaviors while progressing and do some necessary adjustments flexibly according to the environment.

3.4.3. Post-Reading

The whole phase is dominated by learners instead of the teachers. Students presented their project and, afterwards explained the project from ideas and emphases, the division and arrangement of project tasks as well as the experience of completing project tasks. Reading skills developed through The Little Prince and autonomous learning ability, including monitoring, assessing and evaluating are cultivated, additionally, their recognition and preparation for future English learning are enhanced by the evaluation.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

This empirical study has lasted for a semester, nearly four months.EC used WEBR teaching via PBL, while CC used traditional English reading instruction. This study distributed the questionnaire to EC and CC separately before and after the intervention for the exploration of changes in their autonomous learning ability. The scores of Both EC and CC in Reading Comprehension of English final test papers last semester and this semester were collected and compared.

3.5.1. Data Collection

Test

An independent sample test on the pre-test results of EC and CC indicates that there is no statistically significant distinction in their reading ability before the test, as shown in **Table 4**.

After one semester of English learning, both CC and EC underwent progress in their reading skills. WEBR approach employed in this study aroused a significant improvement in the post-test scores of EC by measurement of the post-test sig. (2-tailed) value 0.000. When the value is below the significance level of 0.05, it manifests the significant difference between the two groups of respondents, as shown in **Table 5**.

Questionnaire

After one semester of English learning and teaching, both CC and EC went through progress in their English autonomous learning ability. Before the intervention, there was barely difference between EC and CC, as in the aspects of autonomous learning psychology (t = 1.102, p > 0.05); autonomous learning management (t = 0.675, p > 0.05); autonomous learning behavior (t = 0.981, p > 0.05). After the

Table 4. Independent samples test of EC and CC in pre-test.

Pre-Test	t	df	Mean Difference	Sig.
Equal variances assumed	0.607	88	0.400	0.544
Equal variances not assumed	0.607	88.231	0.400	0.544

Table 5. Independent samples test of EC and CC in post-test.

Post-Test	t	df	Mean Difference	Sig.
Equal variances assumed	4.004	88	2.540	0.000
Equal variances not assumed	4.004	75.201	2.540	0.000

intervention, EC performs better in autonomous learning psychology (t = 2.531, p < 0.05); autonomous learning management (t = 1.815, p < 0.05); autonomous learning behavior (t = 2.475, p < 0.05) than CC as shown in **Table 6**.

Table 6. Independent samples test of EC and CC in reading tests.

Tests	Variables	EC (N = 62)		CC (N = 61)		t	p
		M.	SD	M	SD		
Before	learning psychology	3.45	0.26	3.46	0.46	1.102	0.260
	learning management	3.45	0.3	3.41	0.39	0.675	0.503
	learning behavior	3.47	0.31	3.45	0.46	0.981	0.286
After	learning psychology	3.87	0.35	3.54	0.36	2.531	0.014
	learning management	3.92	0.39	3.49	0.53	1.815	0.032
	learning psychology	3.85	0.51	3.62	0.43	2.475	0.020

3.5.2. Results and Discussion

This study employed a test and questionnaire to collect data, followed by analysis of the results of the pre- and post- test of EC and CC with SPSS26. The analysis implies that most undergraduates in EC were engaged in the WEBR which facilitates the development of their reading abilities concerning decoding, reading strategies, comprehension, awareness of culture and accuracy. When they implement their reading plan, longer and richer reading materials put cultural background, reading strategies, vocabulary and grammar into practice, which consequently leads to better reading ability. Additionally, the whole book also provides them with pleasure and nourishment in their mind.

Concerning the autonomous learning ability, both EC and CC have been improved, with greater progress in EC due to the following possible reasons:

Firstly, WEBR via PBL provides a real situation for learners' English learning by combining reading with exploring projects. To fulfill the projects, learners have to set a reading plan and prepare themselves for the challenges of reading and project exploration in their minds with confi-

dence, thus forming their autonomous learning psychology.

Next, during the implementation of the reading plan, learners gathered into several teams. They learned and indulged in cooperation with other members, which boosted the communication between them and teachers. As Mohan[24] stated education is communication to some degree. The communication makes the situation real and meaningful, which motivates learners' insistence on reading and exploration to catch up and perform well. They will practice how to manage, regulate, monitor and adjust their reading plan if necessary.

The encouragement and suggestions in the evaluation phase after the fulfillment of their project offer learners confidence and resolution for their future English learning. Meanwhile, their reflection on the whole process beneficially gives them experience and strength in controlling their learning.

Last but not the least, learners' autonomous learning of English is enhanced by the self-selection of reading materials, controlling their reading process, along with constant reflection and evaluation of their reading results, which marches Van Lier's view that the way to direct one's learning will make learners more responsible for their tasks and more en-

gaged in self-reflection on their planning, controlling and evaluation of their learning strategies [25].

4. Conclusions

The current research demonstrated that students in the EC group exhibited notable improvements in reading skills. In terms of autonomous learning, EC students, due to the PBL-based WEBR approach, demonstrated greater progress in psychology learning management, learning behavior self-regulation, planning and reflection, compared to the CC group.

This indicates that this teaching method has a significant impact by providing of real situations, teachers' guidance and meaningful communication. The participants practice their reading skills and based on their reading, accomplish self-invented projects. They enhance their autonomous learning ability psychologically and practically since the process of students' English learning is a process of autonomous learning [26].

There are some pragmatical implications for ELT teachers. An English book or original can provide a real situation for learners, which is lacking in the context of China. WEBR based on PBL would facilitate the communication and cooperation of learners. The communication and cooperation make the situation real and meaningful, which motivates learners. By reading a whole English book as a project, time planning and self-regulating are important. Learners learn how to manage, regulate, monitor and adjust their reading plan if necessary by practice. More opportunities to fostering their autonomous learning of English are provided by their self-selection of reading materials, controlling their reading process, along with constant reflection and evaluation of their reading results. Nevertheless, the short duration and small sample size of the experiment induce the limitations of the present study, which may result in further research.

Author Contributions

In this article, conceptualization, M.D. and N.E.B.M.S.; methodology, M.D.; software, M.D.; validation, N.E.B.M.S.; formal analysis, M.D.; investigation, M.D.; data curation, M.D.; writing—original draft preparation, M.D.; writing—review and editing, M.D.; visualization, M.D.; supervision, N.E.B.M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the specific context in China. As the ELT teacher in the specific class, the students are informed and approved the data collection verbally and willing to devote to the reform of English Language Teaching in higher education of China.

Informed Consent Statement

Participants' consent was waived due to there is only verbal consent from the participants and the students who felt not interested were absent while the data collection.

Data Availability Statement

Data is unavailable due to privacy of the participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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