The Impact of the Dalton Plan-based Instruction on Learner Autonomy in Reading Among College English Course Learner in China

Tianxiu Qi[1,2], Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri[1], Noriah Ismail[3], Khazaila Zaini[1], Mariyati Mohd Nor[1], & Nurul Farehah Mohd Uri[1]

[1] Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

[2] School of Foreign Languages, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou, China

[3] Academy of Language Studies, Mara University of Technology, Johor, Malaysia

Correspondence: Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900 Perak, Malaysia. E-mail: safinas@fbk.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

This study explored the impact of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learner autonomy in reading performance among learners in College English course in China. A quasi-experimental design was employed to reach the goal. The experiment was undertaken in one university characterized by students from multi-ethnic background. One second year College English (CE) course class with 16 students makes the experimental class, the other same level CE course class with 15 students composes the control class. The experimental class received the Dalton Plan-based instruction and the control class received conventional classroom instruction. All the participants are medical majors. The data were collected by utilising Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS)，students' self-reports and semi-structured interview. The findings of this study revealed that Dalton Plan-based instruction was more effective in building learner autonomy compared to conventional instruction. Data from the analysis of the ALS indicated that the experimental group improved in study habits and independent learning. Additionally, findings from the students' self-reports showed that the students in the experimental group experienced an increase in reading interest, a more regular reading habit, better emotional control, improvement in reading strategies and more adaptable to reading challenges. This research bears crucial pedagogical implications in that the Dalton Plan-based instruction may be considered as a good alternative to choose in the current College English (CE) course teaching and learning reform which highlights the importance of building student's learner autonomy in their English learning.

Keywords: autonomous learning, Dalton Plan-based instruction, English language, learner autonomy, reading performance

1. Introduction

Research on the teaching and learning of English has highlighted the necessity for teachers to equip students with 21st-century skills (Min et al., 2023; Chandarn et al., 2022; Albakri et al., 2021; Sarudin et al., 2019; Uri & Aziz, 2024; Herlinawati et al., 2024). Among these skills, learner autonomy has drawn significant attention in the educational context. Autonomy in learning, particularly in reading, which is crucial for academic performance, necessitates that learners develop independent learning capabilities. Additionally, considering learners' interests and behavior is essential for the development of their language abilities (Tahir et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2020; Prasangani, 2019; Omar & Kussin, 2017; Ismail et al., 2012; Ismail et al., 2010; Mansor et al., 2022). Consequently, teachers must adopt instructional methods that promote learner autonomy. The Dalton Plan has been identified as a flexible instructional form conducive to fostering this autonomy.

1.1 The Dalton Plan

The Dalton Plan is an instructional approach that consists of two instruments, namely, assignment and feedback graph. The assignment supports students in the management of their learning tasks while the feedback graphs are used to make the learners' progress visible (Stary & Weichhart, 2017). Under the Dalton Plan, students shoulder the responsibility for their learning by establishing assignment contracts with the teacher. The teacher records their self-reported progress and gives corresponding guidance to students in the form of individual tutoring and classroom conference.

Freedom and cooperation are two principles of the Dalton Plan. Freedom is mainly embodied in students deciding how to learn, what to learn, and when to learn, without being restricted by traditional class timetables. While cooperation happens between student and teacher when students report to the teacher his or her progress and the teacher guides and assists accordingly. Ccooperation also occur among students when they worked collaboratively on certain tasks or when more capable students help less capable students in completing the given tasks.

The research work on the Dalton Plan instruction indicated that it could build learner autonomy than non-Dalton instruction, making learners more independent and responsible, also developing cooperation between each other (Babuščáková, 2008; Moosavi, 2019). The

concept of responsibility is vital in building learner autonomy, the value of the Dalton Plan was in its approach to educating students in their responsibility for self-education and self-development (Vorobiova, 2019). Goal setting is an important foundation to develop autonomy (Morrison & Navarro, 2012) and in the Dalton Plan, assignment plays a role of general goal for students to reach. This does not say teacher's roles are downplayed, rather, teachers are more like a helper and progress tracker, instead of a knowledge transmitter, The mission of the Dalton Plan was aimed to urge students to learn independently under the goal-direction and teachers' guidance, and this is important in this 21st century era of technology (Tian, 2017).

In China, since its first introduction to schools in Shanghai in 1922, the Dalton Plan have had a significant impact on the education across the country (Huang, 2022). In recent years remarkable achievements have been attained in many schools in China by utilizing the conception from the Dalton Plan in education reforms (Tian, 2017). Although most of the schools applying Dalton instruction were middle or high schools, college students were more in need of this independent-learning-based instructional mode since they were more psychologically mature. Principles of freedom and cooperation in Dalton Plan could be applied in college classroom teaching to realize the aim of higher education, which is to cultivate people with free spirit in learning and responsibility for community (Zhang, 2018).

1.2 Problem Statement

College English (CE in the following) is a compulsory course for all non-English major college students in China. For undergraduate college students, the duration of the course is 2 years (the first 4 semesters). The overall aim of CE course is to train college students comprehensively in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating, but most college English teachers put the focus on reading due to the time-limit of classroom teaching time (3-4 course hours each week).In addition, the College English Teaching Guide issued in 2020 highlights its emphasis on reading and its combination with students' major，which means students should use English as a tool to read related literature to improve their expertise in their major (The College English Teaching Guide, 2020).

Much progress has been made in foreign language education since China's Reform and Opening up, yet still there are some problems. From primary school to college, the instructional form in foreign language education is universally traditional teacher-centred classroom teaching. Researchers (Benson & Voller, 2014; Han, 2015; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Nor et al., 2024) claimed that traditional classroom teaching do little to contribute to build students' autonomy and independence in language learning. The lack of learner autonomy brought by the traditional teacher-centred classroom teaching was detrimental to the improvement of language proficiency in College English course. The result of the research work (Deng, 2007; Putu et al., 2013)indicated there is a strong, positive and linear relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency in EFL/ESL learning, namely, the students' English proficiency increased with their learner autonomy and vice versa.

Besides that, Xia (2018) mentioned the current teacher-centred classroom teaching of College English (CE) Course does not address the students' differentiation and individuality. The lack of differentiation and ignorance of individuality accounts partially for students' unsatisfactory perception to their CE course learning, as in the survey done by Xia (2018), it shows 44.4% of students gave negative answers like "they do not make any progress " or "they retrograded instead of progressed in English proficiency" to the question "How is your present English proficiency compared with it four years ago (when they entered university)? It is understandable both teachers' depression in teaching and students' demotivation in learning are increased if the situation above is not changed. Therefore, one of the challenges faced by CE teachers is how to differentiate students so that appropriate instruction could be offered to them.

One of the issues related to traditional teacher-centred classroom teaching in CE course is students' language proficiency is affected in terms of reading performance. Cai, the director of College English Guiding Committee in Shanghai, stated the graduates from Chinese universities cannot read English literature of their own major smoothly, a problem resulting from the 'time-consuming and low efficiency' of CE course, and this is a phenomenon plaguing Chinese EFL teaching for ages (Cai, 2016, 2017, 2018). It means that academic reading comprehension has become a major challenge among the CE course learners and their reading proficiency need to be developed. According to Zhang and Seepho (2013), the reason for poor proficiency in EFL reading was due to the fact that Chinese EFL readers cannot self-plan, self-monitor, self-regulate and self-evaluate their own reading activities properly. This brings us back to the reality that there is lack of learner autonomy in reading among Chinese EFL learners.

In summary, the present CE course is heavily teacher-centred traditional classroom teaching, which does not give the students the opportunity to self-plan and self-regulate their language learning, this is detrimental to building their learner autonomy and leads to poor language proficiency. The problem of poor proficiency in reading was focused in this study since CE course students were challenged in EFL reading under conventional teacher-centred classroom teaching. In view of the overall scenario, the research questions designed in this research are as follows:

1) Q1: Does the Dalton Plan-based instruction improve College Engliah course students' learner autonomy in reading?

2) Q2: How does the Dalton Plan-based instruction affect learner autonomy?

1.3 Related Literature

1.3.1 The Dalton Plan Instruction on Learner Autonomy

The term "learner autonomy" is used interchangeably with the terms "self-directed learning" or "independent learning" (Deng, 2007). Studies have shown that fostering autonomy-supporting interaction and a social and supportive environment, educators can help students develop into independent and autonomous learners (Bei and Giossos, 2020; Han, 2021; Vuong and Tran, 2022; Xincai, Madzlan and Ying,

2023; Kheiri & Muzium, 2023; Ovilia, Ramadhani, Fitrawati, 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated that teachers' behaviours in the classroom can promote learner autonomy (Wang and Ryan, 2020; Han, 2021; Vuong and Tran, 2022). Students are more likely to feel excited and involved when they have the autonomy to make decisions about their education. Educators are social actors who have a significant impact on learners' academic and social practices. The foundation of the language classroom is the role of educators as the most dominant individuals.

Traditional classroom instruction cannot meet the needs brought by this information technology era. The combination of the Dalton Plan with students' own devices provided the instructors the effective instruction to help digital native students become more independent and responsible, to enable them to control their own learning more efficiently (Moosavi, 2019). The Dalton Plan principles could meet the students' needs of learning in the 21st century, since technology alone will not be effective in learning unless it is used appropriately with the guidance of an appropriate teaching theory in instruction (Ismail, 2011; Jamil et al.,2022, Tianxiu, Albakri and Mokhtar, 2024). One of the benefits learners can obtain from the instruction is the formation of good learning habits. The application of the principles of independence and responsibility in the Dalton Plan in teaching English to children led to the cultivation of the independence in learning habit (Kwella,2020). Instructions in each stage were given on how to perform the task (with "asking support from teacher or partner as the last choice), thus successfully shifted the responsibility of learning from teacher to students. Also, by giving posters such as "I am good at …...", to let students discern his/her advantages and at the same time know which partner to ask for support when meeting specific difficulty in English learning, built cooperation between students (Kwella,2020).

The assignment and self-reporting graphs played a key role in undertaking the Dalton Plan instruction. Stary & Weichhart (2017) constructed models applying the Dalton plan's assignments and graphs in educating learners and work force with different backgrounds in digital design and production with an inquiry-based methodology. The Dalton Plan support environment empowered learners through promoting self-regulated and targeted capacity building. Another contextual design was developed, and respective software components based on the structure of the Dalton Plan was implemented in web-based learning environments. The result revealed the Dalton Plan provided role models for individualized instruction, individual assignments, differentiation, self-direction, self-pacing, freedom, tutor learning and co-operation(Weichhart et al., 2018).

1.3.2 Ways to Foster Learner Autonomy in EFL Reading Classroom

In second/foreign language learning, reading is regarded as the main way for language input in Krashen's Input Hypothesis Theory (Krashen,1985). Many EFL students may not need to speak English in their daily lives but they do need to read to access the rich information in English (Eskey, 2005; Ismail & Elias, 2009). Learner autonomy in reading is important since only a learner is willing to read autonomously, can he or she be maximumly exposed to the target language and can the sense of familiarity of the language to the learner be built. The research by Pasaribu (2020) investigating on how digital reader response tasks in a reading class promote learner autonomy in Indonesia found that the tasks enabled learners to plan, execute, and evaluate their own learning, and the learners' motivation and autonomy in reading were enhanced. Han (2022) applied the reading circle method in English for Academic Purposes course at a comprehensive university in China to explore the effect on developing learner autonomy in English language learning. The result indicated that the reading circle approach is effective in promoting the cultivation of learner autonomy, this is mainly embodied in helping learners to increase their reading interest and motivation, facilitating learners to improve their learning capability and strategies.

A study by Ding and Shen (2022) looked at how an EFL MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) move towards Chinese students' autonomy. As opposed to students in standard educational environments, the research showed that students who were encouraged to take care of their learning had higher levels of engagement, motivation, and self-regulation. By creating a learning environment where students could choose their own materials, make their own goals, and evaluate their progress, this method boosted language competency and gave them a stronger sense of control over their educational process.

In EFL reading, both extensive reading and intensive reading are main ways and necessary to master the target language. Intensive reading is utilized to exemplify the specific aspects of relatively short texts, such as lexical or syntactic system of the target language, while, the goal of extensive reading, on the other hand, is to expose learners to large quantities of target language input with few or possibly no specific tasks on this (Hellekjær, 2009). However, in building learner autonomy in reading, extensive reading (ER) plays a more important role (Mede et al., 2013). ER is defined as a way of learning the target language through a great amount of reading for pleasure (Jeon & Day, 2016). The "amount" of the reading materials is emphasized since the reader's familiarity with the language is built on large quantity of language input by reading, therefore, students need to read extensively both in and outside the classroom. Learner autonomy can be cultivated through extensive reading since in extensive reading activity characteristics of an autonomous learner are embodied, such as the ability to independently choosing what to read (Ningsih, 2019). The intervention through extensive reading of large amount of reading materials to build learner autonomy also led to the cultivation of the good study habit, including taking responsibility for one's learning, setting objectives, more regular reading, and reading engagement based on the enhanced motivation and interest (Fatimah, 2019).

2. Method

This study offered an instructional design based on the Dalton Plan in reading in College English Course in a university featured in multi-ethnic students in China. The research design in this study is a quasi-experimental design using a quantitative and qualitative research approach.

2.1 Sampling

Convenient sampling is adopted in this study since the samples offer the most accessibility for the researcher. Convenient sampling is a type of non-random sampling where members of participants that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the research (Dörnyei & Griffee, 2007).

The participants of the study were second year medical school students from two CE course classes, which are classes specially organized for CE course teaching by the Section of Academic Affairs of the university. Class 1 with 15 students makes the control class, among them, 9 majored in Clinical Medicine, 6 in Nursing, Class 2 with 16 students makes the experimental class, among them, 9 majored in Stomatology, and 7 in Medical Laboratory Technology. The reason for the small size of participants is that these students are among the students who have not passed CET4 yet. Most of the students have passed CET4 exam and they were exempted from attendance and school examinations in accordance with the university's regulations.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

In this research study, the researcher used three instruments for data collection, Autonomous Learning Scale, students' self-reports and semi-structured interview. A detailed description of these instruments is as follows:

Autonomous Learning Scale

Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) (Appendix A) developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) was done online with both the control and experimental class before and after the experiment to see whether there is difference between control class and experiment class in learner autonomy. Autonomous Learning Scale is a 12-item measure with two subscales measuring independence of learning (item1,6,7,8,10,11,12) and study habits (item 2, 3, 4, 5,9), with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very unlike me) to 5 (very like me) with higher scores indicating greater levels of autonomy to learning. The alpha coefficients are .82 for the total scale. There are 12 items in the scale, so the full point is 60 and the lowest point is 12. It should be noted all items (e.g., item 3 "I am good at meeting deadlines.") except for item 2 require a positive response, item 2 ("I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work.") require a negative response. The researcher flipped the responses to item 2 with the data transformation function in the SPSS statistical package to make all of them "in the same direction". The survey was done during class sessions and the confidentiality of the data and its irrelevance to students' scores of CE examinations were emphasized to get the most authentic responses from students.

It's noteworthy that Autonomous Learning Scale is used to check the psychological features of learner autonomy, since the researchers (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010) contended that psychometrical measure of autonomous learners is essential and sufficient to explain the features of autonomous learners and psychological features are more frequently labelled autonomous learning or independent learning. The Dalton Plan is an unconventional instructional approach based on motivational psychology (Parkhurst, 2005, p.3,p.182). Therefore, Autonomous Learning Scale is an ideal instrument to use to investigate the learner autonomy status of the students under the Dalton Plan-based instruction.

Students' self-reports

Experimental class students' self-reports (Appendix B) on their progress and problems in the process of undertaking the reading assignment were collected to be part of the foundation on which the instruction was given, and they were also the data to be analysed to see how participants build learner autonomy. The self-report form is an adaptation to progress graphs used by Parkhurst (2005,p.95). The self-report includes three parts; the first part is on basic information of name, major, and category of assignment contract, the second is the ratio of reading assignment they have finished in the week. The third part is the problems and feelings they had during the undertaking the reading assignment, this part is something like open questions, students were required to note down what they felt most heartedly, if students had nothing to say, they could just leave that part blank. Since duration of the study was 3 months, therefore there were 12 weekly self-reports.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure involved three stages, prior to treatment, treatment and post-treatment.

2.3.1 Prior to the Treatment

Autonomous Learning Scale was run before the experiment to all students in the two classes to locate their degree of learning autonomy in the CE course.

2.3.2 Treatment (The Dalton Plan-based instruction)

The intervention period was three months (12 weeks). The experimental class received the Dalton Plan-based instruction, and the control class the conventional classroom teaching. Students in the experimental class were asked to complete online self-report form weekly on their progress and problems during the undertaking the reading assignment.

The Dalton Plan-based instruction for the experimental class was conducted in three steps. Since the reading assignment contract between students and teacher was made monthly and the whole duration of the experiment was 3 months, there were 3 monthly rounds of these three steps. The first step was making decisions of the objective. Each student decided on his/her objective of reading in CE course through consultation with the researcher since objective which suits oneself is considered most practical. Next, reading assignment contract was made

between each student and the researcher. Three categories (maximum, medium, minimum in amount) of reading assignments were offered to students to choose the one which suits them most, students were allowed to add or subtract some parts if they felt the workload was too heavy or light, then they sent the signed assignment contracts to the researcher. A task of certain quantity of words memorization was also added to the reading assignment based on the participants' request. Research work contended the lack of adequate vocabulary constitutes the big impediment to the fluent reading in EFL/ESL(Grabe, 2009).The last step was students' reading practice and the teacher's instruction. Students finished their reading assignment both in class and outside class. Teacher's instruction was mainly embodied in collective classroom instruction in class and individual guidance outside the class. The former instructions mainly focused on reading-materials-related problems, such as practicing on certain reading skills, explicating of difficult sentences, while the latter on non-reading materials-related problems, such as time management and emotional issues related to reading. Both forms of instructions were based on students' self-reports, which was submitted online by students weekly and covered their progress as well as problems.

There are two parts consisting the classroom instruction: 1. Teacher's feedback of common problems and collective progress in completing the reading assignment and corresponding instruction. 2. Students' reading practice.

Students had three CE course hours (135 minutes) on average per week, one course hour is 45 minutes. About 1/3 of course hours (about 45minute) were used by the teacher to give feedback and instruction, 2/3 of it (about 90 minutes) was set aside for students' reading practice. Palani (2012) emphasized the significance of class time used for students' self-reading, since it offers them opportunity to read for their own purposes and pleasure. Empowering students with the time to allocate in reading is emphasized as a precondition for learning freedom in the Dalton Plan, since in this case students regard his time as his own capital to be spent judiciously (Parkhurst, 1922). According to Lee (2000), the central tenet in the Dalton Plan remained in the students' control of whatever amount of time was allowed to them.

For teachers' instruction on problems reflected in students' self-reports, classroom instruction was mainly on common problems related to reading materials, such as, understanding problems produced by failure in deep meaning attainment, or difficult sentences or vocabulary, and teacher's reading skills modelling, etc... The focus of the classroom instruction was placed before the class since the researcher knew from the students' self-reports where their progress was and what their most common problems were. For example, one common difficulty was the deep meaning attainment, the researcher chose the short story *The Story of One Hour* by Kate Chopin from students' self-chosen digital materials as an example to identify inconsistence in reading. The researcher distributed the printed passages to students during class time. First, students read the passage individually, then students were asked to share the information they got from reading. After the main idea was clear to everyone, the researcher put forward the question whether there was any inconsistence between the main body and the conclusion of the story. The main body presented the heroine's transformation in emotion from somewhat sorrow to huge joy at the news of her husband's death, while the conclusion narrated, she died of joy when she saw her husband came back alive. Nearly all students did not notice this inconsistence and just understood literally, while the deep meaning or the meaning beyond the lines here was that the heroine died of huge sadness brought by her husband coming back to her alive, which suddenly destroyed an imagined promise land without her husband's restrictions. Different materials were prepared by the researcher in advance before the class to deal with different problems met by students in the reading assignment.

While for some non-reading-material related problems, such as time management, perseverance in reading, emotional issues such as depression in reading etc., since they were usually not common, the form of individual guidance was taken outside of the class. The researcher gave individual tutoring to students who reported these problems, inquiring the reasons for these negative emotions and provided suggestions. For example, a student told the researcher that her anxiety in reading was mainly from new words, she had to look up each new word she met, this made her reading very slow and inefficient, but if she did not do it, she could not concentrate on reading because the words she did not look up seemed to be a worry in her mind all the time. The suggestion for her was to give herself a time limit to finish the passage before reading, this way maybe she would focus on understanding by reading quickly and ignore some other things including new words, anyway, some unknown words don't impede one's understanding of the text. The student later told the researcher she made some progress in this aspect. The following figure is the illustration of the Dalton Plan-based instruction:
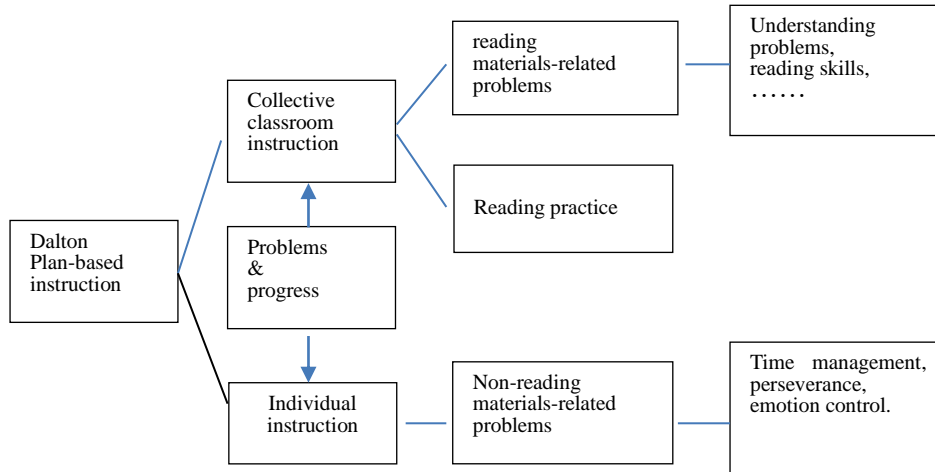
Figure 1. The Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction for the experimental class

For the control class, the conventional classroom instruction was utilized, the classroom activities also include teacher's instruction and students' reading practice, but the difference were:1. Time allotment. Most of the time (2/3) was for teacher's instruction, as all teacher-centred conventional classroom instruction do, only 1/3 of class time were given to students for reading practice, during this time nearly all the students chose to read CET4 reading materials. 2. Non-Dalton Plan based. The teacher's instruction was not based on problems reported by students related to the assignment contract as in the experimental class, but on textbook and teacher's own belief or choice of what should be presented in class. Students were instructed mainly in the following aspects: 1. Structure, genre, and main idea of the texts. 2. Explication of difficult points of texts. 3. Text-related exercises. 4. reading practice. The following is the illustration of the control class:
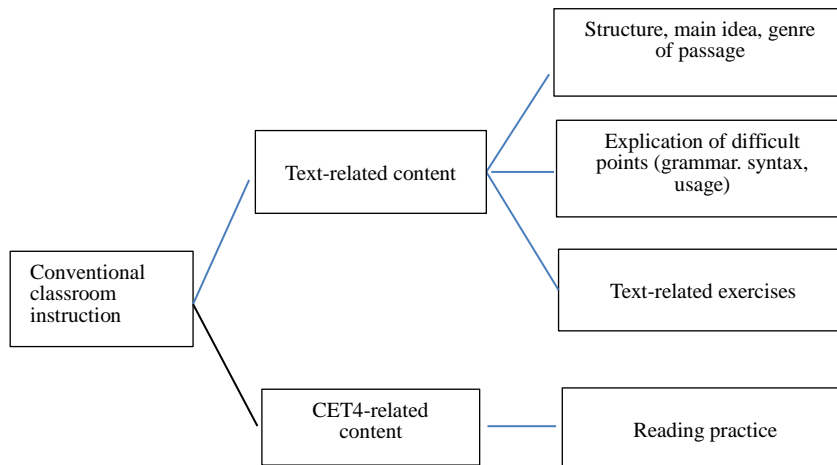
Figure 2. The conventional classroom teaching for the control class

2.3.3 Following the Treatment

Autonomous Learning Scale was presented online to all participants to complete during the last session of the term after the intervention to locate the degree of learner autonomy for students both in control and experimental class.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data collected was analysed in two ways: quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative data, all the data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, version 28:00. As for the data from the students' self-reports, thematic analysis was used. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a widely used approach to analyse data from face-to-face data collection methods and textual data from qualitative surveys, there are six phases for researchers to follow during thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Terry et al., 2017). In this research, after all data from the open questions of the self-reports were organized and transcribed, the researcher read the transcription repeatedly before coding was generated, all narration with similar topic but in different expression were put under same codes, then the codes were grouped. Based on the grouped codes, some broad candidate themes were established, then the researcher reviewed the transcription once again while analysing the data to establish more specific themes, which are closely related to this

research, those themes which match important pieces of information related to the research purpose and questions were further clarified and shaped, and those with little relevance to the study were rejected. Lastly the analysis report was produced.

3. Results

3.1 Autonomous Learning Scale

To answer the first question of the research concerning the effect of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on students' learner autonomy in reading performance in CE course, the researcher conducted descriptive statistics to organize the experimental and control groups' data on learner autonomy.

Table 1. Data on learner autonomy

Group	Test	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
control	Pre	15	37.87	3.255	27	45
	Post		39.60	3.225	33	43
Experimental	Pre	16	38.69	3.807	32	46
	Post		42.06	5.792	35	46

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the participants in the experimental group, which included 16 students who received the intervention, scored an average mean score of 38.69 in the pre-survey and 42.06 in the post-survey. In comparison, the control group, which consisted of 15 students, had an average mean score of 37.87 in the pre-survey and 39.60 on the post-survey. Both groups improved their scores in learner autonomy from the pre-survey to the post-survey. However, the difference in post-survey scores between the two groups indicates that the students in the experimental group achieved a higher level of learner autonomy after the intervention. Hence, an independent samples t-test was conducted to identify whether the difference in the scores of the pre-survey and post-survey between the two groups are significant or not.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test of Pre- and Post-survey ALS Scores for the Control and Experimental Group

		Pre-		Post-	
Groups	N	t	p	t	p
Control	15	.469	.642	2.11	.043
Experimental	16				

Table 2 shows that in the pre-survey, the p value is 0.642, which is greater than 0.05. This indicates that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of learner autonomy before the treatment phase. However, in the post-survey, the p value is 0.043, which is less than 0.05. This indicates a significant difference between the two groups after the intervention. The data shows that students who received Dalton Plan-based instruction showed significant improvement in learner autonomy compared to students who received conventional classroom instruction.

3.2 Self-Reports

Data presented in Table 2 below indicates the themes derived from the analysis of the self-reports gathered from the students in the experimental group. Five themes were recorded which are increased in reading interest, regular reading habit, better emotional control in reading, improvement in reading strategies and more adaptable to reading challenges.

Table 2. Findings derived from the self-reports

Themes	Codes	Frequency	
Increased reading interest	*Reading interest increase	11	25
	*Reading pleasure attainment	9	(Total)
	*Sense of achievement	5	
Regular reading habit	*Reading everyday	5	16
	*Reading outside the class	4	(Total)
	*Sense of responsibility for reading assignment	4	
	*Regular reading habit	3	
Better emotional control in reading	*Overcoming negative emotions (impatience, panic, vexation, restlessness, etc.)	11	15 (Total)
	*Overcoming concentration problem	4	
Improvement in reading strategies	*More frequent use of skimming	4	15
	*Guessing the meaning of unknown words	5	(Total)
	*Adjust reading speed	3	
	*Being sensitive to structure and length of the texts	3	
More adaptation to reading challenges produced by	*Unknown words	5	13
	*Long and difficult sentences	3	(Total)
	*Slow reading speed	3	
	*Low accuracy in understanding	2	

3.2.1 Increased Reading Interest

Progress in this aspect was mainly reported in reading interest, reading pleasure, and sense of achievement. The Dalton Plan-based instruction provided a certain degree of freedom to students in choosing the suitable amount of reading task, suitable time for reading and

suitable content for reading in completion of reading assignment contract. Under this relatively relaxing atmosphere, students felt easier to experience enjoyment brought by reading. Happy and positive feelings attained by reading will in turn cause a reader to read more, thus a virtuous cycle is established. The pleasure brought by reading is incomparable, something other teaching methods cannot make it, since the pleasure from reading leads to the increased exposure to words and spelling, which ultimately leads to the acquisition of the language (Krashen, 2009). The following are some excerpts from the students:

Excerpt 1

After reading many passages as required in the assignment, my reading speed is improved gradually, it's a sense of achievement, so after I finish one passage, I can't help doing more. This plan developed my interest in English reading, I feel the pleasure of it during the boring life as a medical student. Now sometimes when I feel bored in recitation of medical knowledge, I will stop and do some English reading, it's something like I am in a promised land when I am in English reading. (S2)

Excerpt 2

I feel happy and full to have finished all assignments on schedule, I just hope I can persist it. ……,. Holding the mentality to read only for the sake of reading instead of doing exercises is helpful to be immersed in reading, this feeling is so great! (S6)

Excerpt 3

It's great sense of achievement to have completed the reading assignment with my own plan and allotment, which is helpful to my reading proficiency. (S12)

3.2.2 Regular Reading Habit

Progress in this aspect was mainly expressed in words like "reading everyday", "reading outside the class", "regular reading habit" and "responsibility for reading assignment". The reading assignment contract built between the researcher and the students was signed monthly or every four weeks on average, students needed to complete 1/4 of it every week, but the reality was sometimes they did more when time was ample and sometimes less when time was limited, this was allowed from the beginning since freedom in choosing when and how to finish the assignment was the first principle in the Dalton Plan. The assignment served as a general outline of the task for the students, as to how to further divide it into weekly or daily was put on the students' shoulder to plan. Students were encouraged to read each day, even sometimes when time was limited, and they could do only a little.

From the self-reports, many students tried to read every day to complete the assignment. If they could not read due to certain reasons, they made up the following days. The following are some responses from the students:

Excerpt 4

Every day I spare some time to finish reading assignment and words recitation. I have developed a sense of responsibility for CE course, that is not to solely depend the teacher any more but to learn autonomously, to read some materials which are interesting or helpful, and reading is a way to relax myself outside the class. (S3)

Excerpt 5

The first month I think I have mainly developed the regular reading habit, I read every day, not like before, when I did it by fits and starts, (S7)

Excerpt 6

If I do not read for some days, then when picking it up again, the language seems very strange to me, so I need to read every day to make it familiar to me. (S8)

Excerpt 7

Now I can read autonomously after I leave the classroom, this is a good habit. (S15)

3.2.3 Better Emotional Control in Reading

Students reported their improvement in emotion control mainly in overcoming some negative emotions and concentration problems in reading process. Overall, this was a gradual process for students. in the early stage of the intervention, many students displayed various negative emotions such as impatience and restlessness due to the inadaptation to the new learning mode. However, with the advancement of

intervention, many students reported different progress in solving this problem, but the students' progress were more from their own numerous reading practice than teacher's help. Teacher's role in the classroom instruction was to give feedback, track progress, or organize the reading activity and acted as a role model in reading for students to follow. During individual tutoring, teacher acted as an adviser, sometimes just as a listener. The decisive factor in the improvement lay in the students' own efforts, just as the saying goes: you can only lead the horse to the river, but you can't force it to drink the water. The time it took for them to have improved their status was different from one student to another. The following are excerpts from some students:

Excerpt 8

Basically (there is) no big problem, I have just calmed down from the impetuous state at the beginning(weeks), now I

can read with much patience, after reading, I will look up each word and record them in my notebook. (S2)

Excerpt 9

At the beginning week, it's difficult to concentrate on reading content and I was somewhat restless, but after one week's

persistence, I get used to this pattern, and the accuracy (of answers to questions after reading) is improved." (S3)

Excerpt 10

(We) should calm down as soon as reading begins, do it quietly but not to be occupied with vexation and panic which will destroy

our ability to concentrate. (S6)

Excerpt 11

I personally feel I have more patience now than the past when I had no plan and assignment, and I also pay more attention to

details. (S7)

Excerpt 12

I have a much more stable mindset in reading now, also it's easy to get down to the work, not like before, when I was impetuous.

(S13)

3.2.4 Improvedment in Reading Strategies

Being aware of one's learning strategies is one of metacognitive strategies attributed to the sub-dimension of psychological features of an autonomous learner (Murase, 2015). Almost all students expressed their improvement in reading strategies. Reading skills practice was one of the focuses in classroom instruction of the intervention. The improvements were mainly embodied in more frequent use of skimming to get the main idea of the passage, guessing the meaning of unknown words, controlling of reading speed and being sensitive to structures of passages. Practices make perfect, students became more skilled in utilising the reading strategies through relatively larger amount of reading tasks under the Dalton Plan-based instruction. Furthermore, the strategies a reader concludes from one's practice are different from what were taught by teacher, the former are more securely mastered by the students, as for the latter, it equals to nothing without students' practice. The following are some responses from students' self-report:

Excerpt 12

During the reading process, I try to read faster than the past, and I also adjust the order of doing exercises after the passage. Now

I have mastered the strategy of skimming, guessing the meaning of new words, retelling the main idea in my own words, I feel I

have achieved a lot, and the sense of achievement is great, I just hope this status can continue to CET4, cheer myself! (S3)

Excerpt 13

Now I use skimming a lot, when I meet some difficult parts, I read more carefully and slow down, reread, or go back and forth in

the text, trying to be more concentrated. Guessing meaning of words, circling or underlining some information I think important

are also very important reading strategies. (S12)

Excerpt 14

Now I intentionally read faster, circling, and guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context, after I finish reading, I

look up all new words I circled and write Chinese under it, gradually my reading proficiency is improved. (S16)

3.2.5 More Adaptation to Reading Challenges

The reported progress in this aspect refers to increased persistence in reading even when there were challenges in understanding the reading materials. The challenges were usually caused by too many unknown words, long and difficult sentences, low accuracy in after-text exercises, and slow reading speed. Conquering the challenges in reading materials and proceeding with the reading process without giving up is an important psychological feature of an autonomous learner (Murase, 2015). The following are the excerpts of the progress:

Excerpt 15

I accustomed to stop to look up every unknown word I met in reading in the past, if I went on reading without looking it up, it seemed it had always been a worry in my mind, which made my reading a huge task(with so many words to look up) and I just gave up many times, now I can go on reading comfortably by overlooking some of the new words, telling myself they may not affect my understanding or I can get the meaning of them after I finish the article. (S3)

Excerpt 16

I tended to give up reading because I just could not understand meaning and I read too slowly, but now when I am going to give up, I think of the fact that this is chosen by myself, anyway one has to finish what one has chosen, so I pull myself together to go forward… (S6)

Excerpt 17

Now I try not to give up the reading even with some sentence incomprehensible, it's a great sense when I see its meaning suddenly after I read again with the help of dictionary. (S12)

Excerpt 18

*It's important to read a passage again and again to understand it, the first reading I try not to think too much (to make me burdened), the second time I looked up some key words, then usually the third time the main idea comes up in my mind. (*S7)

4. Discussion

This research focused on the effect of the Dalton Plan-based instruction in second year college students' learner autonomy in reading performance in CE course in China. Two classes of CE course students were involved, one of them constituted the control class, and the other made up the experimental class. The control class was instructed with traditional classroom teaching with teacher's teaching occupying most of the time. As for the experimental class with the Dalton Plan-based instruction, the focus was on teacher's feedback and guidance on progress and problems reflected in students' self-reports, as well as reading practice under the teacher's guidance. The Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) and self-reports were used to collect the data to explore whether students improved learner autonomy under the Dalton plan-based instruction.

The findings from the quantitative data revealed that students in the experimental class displayed a significant higher learner autonomy than students in the control class. Data from the qualitative data indicates that the students in the experimental group showed improvements in five aspects which are increased reading interest, regular reading habit, better emotional control in reading, improvement in reading strategies and more adaptation to reading challenges.

The findings of this study accords with the research work by Babuščáková (2008) that the lessons taught according to the Dalton Plan positively influences learner autonomy in language teaching, compared with non-Dalton lessons. Much of the benefits can be attributed to the assignment and a less dominant teacher. It also conforms to the results by Yang et al. (2023) in that the application of the Dalton Plan-based instruction improved learners' autonomy and interest in this course. The core of the Dalton Plan is assignment contract between teacher and student (Lee, 2000). The Dalton Plan is just a feasible operational plan which transformed what the students should do into assignment contracts between teacher and student, the latter therefore is entrusted with the task of looking after one's learning by oneself, thus responsibility for one's learning is established. "Responsibility" is the core concept among all the definitions given to learner autonomy (Benson & Voller, 2014; Holec, 1981; Myartawan & Latief, 2013) in which success in language learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). One of the distinguishing principles of the Dalton Plan is on the teacher's roles. The teacher's role should be more embodied in tracking progress and giving feedback instead of teaching, a large amount of time in language learning should be given back to students to do independent learning, since mastering a foreign language also depends heavily on students' own initiatives to acquire the language beyond the classroom context (Van der Ploeg, 2013; Myartawan & Latief, 2013; Salleh et al, 2017). Apart from that, too much teaching or a teacher-dominated classroom will be detrimental to the building of learner

autonomy.

The study results appear to support calls for current Chinese classroom teaching reform based on the Dalton Plan, i.e., proposing the integration of the Dalton Plan with the current classroom teaching system could serve as a solution to problems existing in conventional classroom teaching (Tian, 2017). In CE course , as it is aforementioned, one of the problems is monotonous mode of teacher-centered classroom instruction which featured sentence-to-sentence grammar explication to students, causing students to become passive participant and lose interest in reading gradually (Lian, 2017).Therefore, the current study is a contribution to support the viewpoints that promoting learner autonomy under the Dalton Plan-based instruction might be practically achievable. It also seems to support calls for introduction of the principles of the Dalton Plan into the college classroom teaching, since at present most of schools undertaking the Dalton Plan are secondary schools, but compared with students in secondary schools, college students are more mature physically as well as psychologically, so they are more in need of this learner-centered instruction (Zhang, 2018). Since autonomy and independence in language learning tend to be built with the increase of age (Benson & Voller, 2014), more freedom should be given to college students in language learning. Just as in in this study, freedom was embodied in students' choice of reading assignment, completion rate of the assignment, and choosing extracurricular reading materials.

The limitation of the study is it was conducted in a specific university in China with a limited number of participants, so the findings may not be generalized to cover all university students. However, the findings derived from the study provide a relatively complete and objective understanding of learner autonomy in CE course with the Dalton Plan-based instruction due to the utilization of the two investigation tools, namely, Autonomous Learning Scale and self-reports. A combination of investigation tools is needed to provide a better understanding of whether autonomous learning is taking place or not since learner autonomy is extremely difficult to measure (Mynard, 2006).

This research will benefit students, teachers, administrators in the university involved as it sheds light on effective ways to build learner autonomy in learning English in the Chinese context. However, as studies on the effect of the Dalton Plan on learner autonomy so far mainly focused on secondary school students, there is a need to conduct more empirical research work revealing its effects on college students. Similar kinds of research may be conducted on students in other universities in China and other countries. The sample size may be increased in future work to check the generalisability of the current results. In that way, a better pathway will be paved to utilize the Dalton Plan instruction to improve learner autonomy among college students.

In conclusion, the Dalton Plan has a significant impact on promoting learner autonomy by fostering a learning environment that encourages students to take responsibility for their own education. By allowing learners to work at their own pace, choose their learning activities, and set personal goals, the Dalton Plan cultivates self-directed learning and decision-making skills. This approach empowers students to develop a deeper understanding of the material, enhances motivation, and prepares them for lifelong learning. The flexibility and individualized nature of the Dalton Plan make it an effective instructional strategy for promoting autonomy and active engagement in the learning process.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study has demonstrated the significant influence of Dalton Plan-based training on improving Chinese college English course students' learning autonomy in reading comprehension. According to the results, the Dalton Plan, which emphasises student accountability, learning freedom, and cooperative engagement, has been shown to be more successful in promoting student autonomy than conventional teacher-centered teaching strategies. The study provides useful insights into the Dalton Plan's application in the context of Chinese higher education in addition to confirming its theoretical foundations.

The efficacy of this instructional strategy in encouraging self-directed learning behaviours is demonstrated by the statistical evidence. College students who are about to enter a fast-changing workforce that requires independence, critical thinking, and adaptability must exhibit these behaviours. By emphasising assignment contracts and self-monitoring, the Dalton Plan empowers students to take control of their education, which increases their motivation and involvement in reading-related activities.

Qualitative information collected from students' self-reports further clarifies the Dalton Plan's many advantages. A comprehensive growth of learner autonomy is demonstrated by the appearance of themes including greater reading interest, the formation of regular reading habits, enhanced reading techniques, better emotional control, and improved adaptability to reading problems.

Furthermore, the results show that the Dalton Plan develops critical life skills like goal setting, time management, and emotional resilience in addition to academic abilities. Students gained a sense of accountability for their education as they became more adept at handling their reading assignments on their own. This mentality change is essential because it gives pupils the confidence and self-efficacy to tackle upcoming academic and professional obstacles.

In conclusion, in the context of college English instruction in China, Dalton Plan-based instruction offers a viable substitute for conventional teaching techniques. This method, which places a high value on learner autonomy, improves reading proficiency while simultaneously developing critical abilities that equip pupils for the demands of the contemporary world. Adopting cutting-edge teaching techniques like the Dalton Plan will be essential as educational institutions develop further in order to satisfy the demands of modern students and prepare them for success in both their academic and professional endeavours. In the end, encouraging learner autonomy

through successful teaching strategies can result in more capable, engaged, and driven students who are prepared to face the future with assurance and skill.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Autonomous Learning Scale in English Learning

Autonomous Learning Scale in English Learning

Dear everybody, this questionnaire is aimed to investigate the degree of your learner autonomy in English learning, the five numbers after each item stands for the degree which suits you most, please read each item carefully and choose one number which suits you most. Please note that there's no right or wrong choice, only the authenticity is valued. Thanks for your participation.

[1] very unlike me
[2] basically unlike me
[3] sometimes like me, sometimes unlike me (50% or so)
[4] basically like me
[5] very like me

Your name and student number [blank filling]

_____

Your major [blank filling]

_____

Your gender [single choice]

○male

○female

1. I enjoy finding information about new topics on my own. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
2. I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
3. I am good at meeting deadlines. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
4. My time management is good. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
5. I am happy working on my own. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
6. Even when tasks are difficult, I try to stick with them. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
7. I am open to new ways of doing familiar things. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
8. I enjoy being set a challenge. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
9. I plan my time for study effectively. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
10. I tend to be motivated to work by assessment deadlines. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
11. I take responsibility for my learning experiences. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
12. I enjoy new learning experiences. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Appendix B

Weekly Report

Weekly Report

(Take The First Weekly Report of the first month as example)

Dear everybody, please be authentic in ticking the item, remember this data has nothing to do with your grades in CE course.

1. Name: _____

2. Major:

  ○Clinical medicine

  ○Nursing

  ○Stomatology

  ○Medical Laboratory Technology

3. I choose_____ for the first month.

  ○the first category assignment contract

  ○the second category assignment contract

  ○the third category assignment contract

4. The ratio of the reading assignment I finish for the first week of the first month.

  ○4/4

  ○3/4

  ○2/4

  ○1/4

  ○less than 1/4

  ○not begin yet

5. Please narrate the problems and feelings in the first week in carrying out the reading assignment contract. (Can talk from aspects of vocabulary, reading strategies, reading speed, reading interest, monitoring and control of reading comprehension activity)