



**EFFECTIVENESS OF READING COMPREHENSION, MOTIVATION AND
ATTITUDES OF ENGLISH MAJORS IN A UNIVERSITY IN CHINA
THROUGH LITERATURE CIRCLES**

By

MA LEI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

February 2024

FPP 2024 1

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 2024

Chairman : Associate Professor Lilliatl Ismail, PhD
Faculty : Educational Studies

Literature circles, as a reading activity that integrates literature into language learning through peer interaction, have gained popularity in recent years. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate the effectiveness of literature circles for English major students in Chinese tertiary education. It seeks to determine whether literature circles can effectively enhance students' reading comprehension and reading motivation, as well as to gauge the participants' attitudes towards using literature circles in their language learning. To evaluate the effectiveness of literature circles, the mixed methods quasi-experimental design was employed. A total of 74 subjects from two intact classes were selected using non-probability sampling procedures from a private university in northwest China. The study spanned 13 weeks, during which the experimental group engaged in literature circles, while the control group received no treatment. Data was collected using reading tests, questionnaires, and reading logs.

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data provide solid evidence supporting the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing reading comprehension and reading motivation of English major students. The t-tests conducted to examine the impact of literature circles on reading comprehension revealed a significant difference ($p < .001$) between the experimental group and the control group in overall reading comprehension scores as well as in both lower-level ($p < .001$) and higher-level ($p = .028$) reading processes in favor of the experimental group. The Wilk's Lambda value ($F = 11.539$, $p = .001$) corroborated the results of the t-tests and further showed that the intervention accounted for more variances to the lower-level (partial $\eta^2 = .244$) than to the higher-level (partial $\eta^2 = .028$) reading processes. The t-tests and MANOVA carried out to ascertain the effectiveness of literature circles on reading motivation also showed a significant difference in overall reading motivation levels ($p = .008$) and in both intrinsic ($p = .003$) and extrinsic ($p = .031$) reading motivations between the experimental group and the control group in favor of the experimental group. The between-subject effect from the MANOVA further indicated that the intervention contributed more variances to the intrinsic (partial $\eta^2 = .116$) than to the extrinsic (partial $\eta^2 = .063$) reading motivation. Most of the students expressed positive views about literature circles and highlighted language-based enrichment as one of the key benefits of this approach. Furthermore, the analysis of the reading logs submitted by the participants in the experimental group provided additional insights into the process through which the participants engage with the literary texts.

This study concluded that literature circles are effective in enhancing the reading comprehension and reading motivation of Chinese English major students. The study benefits the stakeholders by incorporating literary texts through literature circles as a

pedagogical approach, offering practical guidance for enhancing reading proficiency of English major students in China. This study has further advanced the understanding of applying literature circles within a collaborative framework that integrates social cultural theory, transactional theory, and self-determination theory. Future studies should consider including students from diverse academic backgrounds, conducting longitudinal studies over one academic year or more, exploring subject variation differences, and examining the effectiveness of virtual literature circles.

Keywords: Attitudes; Literature Circles; Reading Comprehension; Reading Motivation

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia Sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KEBERKESANAN PEMAHAMAN MEMBACA, MOTIVASI DAN SIKAP
PELAJAR JURUSAN BAHASA INGGERIS DI SEBUAH UNIVERSITI DI
CHINA MELALUI BULATAN SASTERA**

Oleh

MA LEI

Februari 2024

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Lilliaty Ismail, PhD
Fakulti : Pengajian Pendidikan

Bulatan sastera, sebagai aktiviti membaca yang mengintegrasikan sastera ke dalam pembelajaran bahasa melalui interaksi rakan sebaya, telah menjadi popular dalam beberapa tahun terakhir. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat keberkesanan Bulatan sastera bagi pelajar jurusan Bahasa Inggeris di institusi pengajian tinggi di China. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan sama ada Bulatan sastera boleh meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan motivasi membaca pelajar secara berkesan, serta untuk mengukur sikap peserta terhadap penggunaan Bulatan sastera dalam pembelajaran bahasa mereka. Untuk menilai keberkesanan Bulatan sastera, reka bentuk eksperimen separa kuantitatif campuran digunakan. Sejumlah 74 subjek dari dua kelas yang utuh dipilih menggunakan prosedur persampelan bukan kebarangkalian dari sebuah universiti swasta di barat laut China. Kajian ini berlangsung selama 13 minggu, di mana kumpulan eksperimen terlibat dalam Bulatan sastera, manakala kumpulan kawalan tidak menerima sebarang rawatan. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan ujian membaca, soal selidik, dan log membaca.

Dapatan daripada kedua-dua data kuantitatif dan kualitatif memberikan bukti kukuh yang menyokong keberkesanan Bulatan sastra dalam meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan motivasi membaca pelajar jurusan Bahasa Inggeris. Ujian *t* yang dijalankan untuk mengkaji kesan Bulatan sastra terhadap pemahaman membaca mendedahkan perbezaan yang signifikan ($p < .001$) antara kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan dalam markah keseluruhan pemahaman membaca serta dalam proses membaca aras rendah ($p < .001$) dan aras tinggi ($p = .028$) yang menyokong kumpulan eksperimen. Nilai Wilk's Lambda ($F = 11.539$, $p = .001$) mengesahkan hasil ujian *t* dan menunjukkan bahawa intervensi menyumbang lebih banyak variasi kepada proses membaca aras rendah (partial $\eta^2 = .244$) berbanding kepada proses membaca aras tinggi (partial $\eta^2 = .028$). Ujian *t* dan MANOVA yang dilakukan untuk menentukan keberkesanan Bulatan sastra terhadap motivasi membaca juga menunjukkan perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap motivasi membaca keseluruhan ($p = .008$) serta dalam motivasi membaca intrinsik ($p = .003$) dan ekstrinsik ($p = .031$) antara kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan yang menyokong kumpulan eksperimen. Kesan antara subjek dari MANOVA juga menunjukkan bahawa intervensi menyumbang lebih banyak variasi kepada motivasi membaca intrinsik (partial $\eta^2 = .116$) berbanding kepada motivasi membaca ekstrinsik (partial $\eta^2 = .063$). Kebanyakan pelajar menyatakan pandangan positif tentang Bulatan sastra dan menekankan pengayaan berasaskan bahasa sebagai salah satu manfaat utama pendekatan ini. Selain itu, analisis log bacaan yang dikemukakan oleh peserta dalam kumpulan eksperimen memberikan pandangan tambahan tentang proses di mana peserta terlibat dengan teks-teks sastra.

Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa Bulatan sastra adalah berkesan dalam meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan motivasi membaca pelajar jurusan Bahasa Inggeris di China. Kajian ini memberi manfaat kepada pihak berkepentingan dengan menggabungkan teks sastra melalui Bulatan sastra sebagai pendekatan pedagogi, menawarkan panduan praktikal untuk meningkatkan kecekapan membaca pelajar jurusan Bahasa Inggeris di China. Kajian ini telah mengemaskan pemahaman mengenai penggunaan Bulatan sastra dalam kerangka kerjasama yang mengintegrasikan teori budaya sosial, teori transaksional, dan teori penentuan sendiri. Kajian akan datang sepatutnya mempertimbangkan penyertaan pelajar dari latar belakang akademik yang pelbagai, menjalankan kajian longitudinal selama satu tahun akademik atau lebih, meneroka perbezaan variasi subjek, dan menyiasat keberkesanan Bulatan sastra maya.

Kata Kunci: Sikap; Bulatan Sastra; Motivasi Membaca; Pemahaman Membaca

SDG: *GOAL 4: Quality Education*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am truly grateful to all those who have been a part of this incredible journey and have contributed to the successful completion of my PhD research. I owe them all the honour.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lilliaty Ismail. Her unwavering support, invaluable guidance, firm beliefs in my abilities and expertise have been the cornerstone of my entire PhD journey. Without her insightful inspiration, I could never have the determination and persistence in exploring the realm in which I have never set foot before. I am also grateful to my co-supervisor, Dr. Norzihani Saharuddin, for her invaluable inputs, expertise, and time invested in reviewing and evaluating my work. Her kindness and encouragement have kept me from stopping and lingering whenever I encountered difficulties. Their collective effort has been the greatest blessing throughout my journey.

I am deeply grateful to my parents and my mother-in-law. Their unwavering love, support, understanding, and sacrifice have been the driving force behind my efforts. I would like to extend a special thank you to my beloved husband and my lovely children for their constant companionship, care, and love throughout the journey. The precious love of my family has been my source of strength, shaping me into the person I am today.

I am also greatly indebted to all my wonderful PhD friends for their continuous support, encouragement, and help. Their presence, both in good times and challenging moments, has made this journey more enjoyable and memorable.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the participants who took part in my study. Their willingness to contribute their time and effort has been crucial in the completion of this research.



This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Lilliati binti Ismail, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Norzihani binti Saharuddin, PhD

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

ZALILAH MOHD SHARIFF, PhD

Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 13 June 2024

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMRS	Adult Reading Motivation Scale
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
CSE	Chinese Standards of English Language Ability
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English Language Learners
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
L1	First Language / Mother Tongue
L2	Second Language
MANOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Variance
MCQ	Multiple choice question
MOE	Ministry of Education
NACFLT	National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching
SAQ	Short answer question
SDT	Self-determination Theory
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TEM	Test for English Majors
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an introductory overview of the current research and justifies its relevance in the Chinese context. The first section establishes the research background by exploring the multifaceted importance of English reading. It delves into the various dimensions through which English reading holds significance. Building upon this foundation, the subsequent sections discuss the research objectives, research questions, hypotheses, significance, and limitations of the study. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing clear definitions for several key terms used throughout the study.

1.2 Background of the Research

In the era of globalization, English has emerged as a prominent international language with widespread usage and significance (Mckay, 1982). It is learned by individuals worldwide as a native language, second language, or foreign language, depending on their linguistic and cultural contexts (Kachru, 1992). The British Council reports that there are currently 750 million individuals learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and 375 million learning it as a second language (ESL) for various purposes, and these numbers continue to grow (Beare, 2020). EFL refers to the study of English in non-English speaking countries, while ESL refers to the learning of English by non-native speakers in English-speaking countries. Both EFL and ESL learners are engaged in acquiring English as a second language (L2) alongside their first language (L1).

English proficiency has become a crucial requirement for individuals seeking opportunities in the global business market, diplomacy, science, and technology. It is now considered a decisive factor for international talents, and a nation's economic and social development is strongly influenced by the English proficiency of its citizens (Li & Zhou, 2017). The prevalence of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China dates to the Reform and Opening Policy in the late 1970s. By now, English and its education have played a crucial role in supporting China's modernization and its active participation in various global communities (Li & Hu, 2021).

Presently, China holds the largest population of English learners, with an estimated number exceeding 300 million individuals studying English as a foreign language. As globalization advances and China's economic power grows, the number of English language learners will continue to increase at an ever-quicken pace (Cheng & Wang, 2012). The significance of English in China is evident at all educational levels. English has become one of the three major compulsory subjects, alongside mathematics and Chinese, in the primary and secondary education stages. The state-enforced curriculum mandates English learning from the third grade onwards (Peng, 2020). The English learners at the tertiary level comprise two main strands: non-English majors and English majors. Non-English major students account for the majority of EFL learners in China's tertiary-level institutions, learning English as a compulsory course throughout college life focused on the development of four language skills. Nonetheless, the English major has emerged as the largest undergraduate discipline offered in more than 1,300 universities across China (Feng, 2016), responsible for educating and training English language learners at all levels, from talents involved in international affairs, trade, cultural exchanges, tourism to

those who would become teachers of English at the primary, secondary and tertiary level (Cheng & Wang, 2012). The English major holds significant importance within China's higher education system and has made substantial contributions to the country's social and economic development throughout various stages. It is expected to continue playing a vital role in the new historical period.

The conditions for learning English in China are becoming more and more conducive due to national efforts (Lam, 2002). In 2000, the Ministry of Education (MOE) released the National Syllabus for English major education in universities, which served as a guideline for teaching objectives and curriculum design across all types of universities. This syllabus introduced a significant innovation by categorizing English major courses into two types: language skills (such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and professional knowledge (including linguistics, literature, and culture). A milestone in the development of English education in China occurred in 2018 with the publication of the MOE National Standard of Teaching Quality for Foreign Languages and Literature, as well as the Chinese Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) by the MOE and the State Language Affairs Committee. The National Standard emphasized the cultivation of English majors' abilities in literature appreciation, cross-cultural communication, critical thinking, and independent learning, among others. On the other hand, the CSE provided a comprehensive framework for assessing English language proficiency, focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, with particular emphasis on the specific language learning skills of English majors. According to Feng (2020), language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are the primary objectives of language teaching but the development of non-linguistic qualities in liberal arts is also crucial to ensure the core

competitiveness of English majors. Therefore, the teaching objectives outlined by the MOE for English major education can be summarized into two categories: language skills and the cultivation of non-linguistic qualities in liberal arts.

With decades of practice and development, research on English major education has also identified several challenges impacting the quality of English learning, such as overemphasis on examination, outdated teaching approaches, limited authentic language practice, and incongruence between English proficiency goals and practical constraints (Haidar & Fang, 2019; Pan, 2015; Hu, 2005), which will in turn hinder effective English language acquisition nationwide. Stakeholders, including EFL learners, instructors, parents, and policymakers are all affected by these challenges. Up to now, though existing research has delved into various aspects of English major education in China, such as the impact of language policies, the effect of learner motivation and attitudes, and the impact of different learning methodologies (Zhang & Shi 2023; Wang & Clarke, 2014), there is still a need to better understand the specific needs of English major students and identify more effective approaches to contribute to enhance English major education in both basic language skills and non-linguistic qualities.

Among the four fundamental language abilities, reading holds a crucial position in the improvement of second language learning, whether it be English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL). Reading proficiency is vital for individuals to access information and compete economically and professionally in the modern era (Celik, 2018; Holden, 2004). According to Schiefele et al. (2012), our learning heavily relies on written materials, and a lack of reading competence can have

serious consequences for acquiring other necessary skills. Israel (2008) suggests that effective reading ability correlates significantly with personal and career achievement later in life. Kavlu (2015) argues that students' reading habits and abilities directly impact their achievement in university life. Anderson et al. (1985) define reading as a cognitive process in which readers construct meaning from a text, involving automatic and unconscious word decoding and sustained motivation. However, reading comprehension is a complex activity with various subskills that require significant time, skill, and resources to develop (Nassaji, 2011; Bojovic, 2010; Moreillon, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to teach specific reading comprehension skills to students to improve their reading abilities continuously and effectively.

In addition to developing specific reading comprehension skills to improve reading ability, reading motivation also plays a crucial role in facilitating reading development (Mol & Bus, 2011). Numerous researchers have recognized the benefits of reading motivation in developing reading ability (Han, 2021; Mubarak & Sofiana, 2017; Stutz et al., 2016; Wolters et al., 2014; Guthrie et al., 1999). According to Wigfield and Guthrie (1997b), reading motivation significantly contributes to the quantity and breadth of reading, which, in turn, substantially impacts reading achievement and performance. Schiefele et al.'s (2012) comprehensive review of empirical research confirms the positive and significant relationship between reading ability and intrinsic motivations like reading attitudes and intrinsic task value while pointing to the need for further research on the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Moreover, research has consistently shown an inseparable link between reading motivation and reading comprehension skills (e.g., Han, 2021; Stutz et al., 2016;

Ölmez, 2015; Pecjak & Sosir, 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). McGeown et al. (2015) highlight the importance of reading motivation as a predictor of reading comprehension in adolescents. Morgan and Fuchs (2016) assert a bidirectional relationship between reading comprehension skills and reading motivation, emphasizing the need for interventions that effectively promote both aspects simultaneously.

Previous empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of student-centered cooperation or reading programs in improving students' reading proficiency (e.g., Olaya & González-González, 2020; Gao et al., 2018; Wichadee, 2005). McElvain (2010) suggests that reading is a transactional process involving learners, reading materials, peers, and instructors, where messages and knowledge are exchanged. Mubarak and Sofianna (2017) propose that teachers can guide students to engage in reading activities to develop their reading ability. Meanwhile, according to Pecjak and Sosir (2008), reading motivation is reflected in the behavior of the students through different dimensions influenced by teacher activities. Factors that support reading motivation and reading comprehension, as agreed upon by researchers (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Sweet et al., 1998; Gambrell, 1996), include opportunities for choosing reading materials, interesting reading tasks, collaboration in reading activities, and incentives related to reading. Rodrigues-Vall and Ponce (2013) emphasize the need for active student participation, interaction with teachers and peers, and critical evaluation of materials. However, teaching L2 students to read effectively requires careful selection of appropriate reading materials (Al-Issa, 2006). Therefore, an important task for the language teacher is to design interesting activities that can make full use of suitable reading materials for students.

Brumfit (1981) suggests that literature provides an attractive and abundant source of reading materials for learners. Alshammari and Ahmed (2019) propose that incorporating literature in reading instruction can enhance learners' reading motivation and positive attitudes towards mastering necessary English skills. Other researchers also support the idea that authentic literature provides a meaningful context for language learning, developing language competence, and fostering reading motivation (Baytar & Timuçin, 2021; Ghosn, 2002; Peacock, 1997; Mckay, 1982).

A multitude of past studies has shown that integrating literature into language learning can be an effective way to improve reading development, especially when implemented through collaborative learning activities such as literature circles (Imamyartha et al., 2020; Bedel, 2016; Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005). In an educational setting, this collaborative learning can be achieved by students "working in groups mediated by the teacher" (Elliott, 1990, p. 192). Daniels (2002) argues that literature circles provide a perfect platform for integrating the authentic reading of books into the curriculum in the form of student discussion. As an effective way of learning to become good readers, many researchers have put literature circles into practice ranging from the K-12 learning context to college education. Ragland and Palace (2017) suggest that one better way to overcome the challenge faced by English language teachers when trying to create a student-centered class is to use literature circles. Bedel (2016) argues that literature circles play a crucial role in developing the skills of good readers and enhancing English language learning through collaborative and cooperative activities. By focusing on reader response, literature circles actively encourage students to engage with the text and their peers in reading groups. According to DaLie (2001), if students are motivated to talk freely and actively in their

learning, they will enjoy the elements of challenge, empowerment, and collaboration in the activity, and the learning can be more effective and meaningful. Through the collaborative discussions, authentic reading materials, and supportive learning environments fostered by literature circles, learners have more autonomy to select reading materials and topics, as well as more opportunities to assume different roles, thus, cultivating a love for reading literature, to enhance reading comprehension and reading motivation.

Given the positive findings regarding the effectiveness of literature circles in English language learning, integrating this reading activity into the curriculum and additional curriculum of English learners can address the reading challenges faced by English learners (Imamyartha et al., 2020; Bedel, 2016; Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005). Therefore, teachers can implement literature circles to create student-centered classrooms that enhance reading motivation, improve reading comprehension, and facilitate meaningful literature reading experiences and other skills and abilities through the collaborative and interactive learning environment.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

As an indispensable skill to master a second language, efficient reading is crucial for EFL/ESL learners to achieve academic success, particularly in secondary and university settings (e.g., Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; Grabe, 2014). English language educators in China have recognized the significance of improving learners' reading ability and strived to enhance their experience of English reading through various strategies, approaches, and activities (Mei, 2018). The National Syllabus in China specifies that English majors should be able to comprehend editorials, book reviews,

historical biographies, and literary works from English-speaking countries, analyse viewpoints and discourse, and read and grasp the main ideas and details of a 1600-word article in 5 minutes (NACFLT, 2000).

However, despite the emphasis on reading, there exists a significant disparity between the stipulated requirements of the national syllabus for English major students and the actual reading situation of Chinese English majors. The issue can be examined from three perspectives. Firstly, Chinese EFL learners face more challenges in their reading comprehension (Xu et al., 2021). Regarding English major students, the problems are also prevalent. Wang (2008) reported that English major students have difficulties in understanding complex sentences and grasping main ideas when taking the Test for English Majors (TEM). Similarly, by analyzing the TEM result, Xia (2011) identified problems such as limited vocabulary, slow reading speed, lack of decoding skills, and ineffective reading strategies among Chinese English majors based on TEM results. Zhong and Suwanthep (2022) also reiterated similar reading problems to previous studies, such as small vocabulary size, and difficulties in understanding long and complicated sentences. Furthermore, Wu and Fang (2021) also observed poor logical analysis and inferencing skills in the reading ability of English major students. Xu and Chayanuvat (2021) investigated the reading ability of 285 Chinese college English major students and attributed their poor performance to insufficient reading training and ineffective teaching methods, suggesting the need for innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Ge's (2021) survey revealed that poor reading comprehension of English major students in China can be attributed to little amount of time in reading, lack of systematic selection of reading materials, neglect of efficient reading methods, and limited amount of after-class reading. This result is consistent with the findings of

Yin's (2019) survey of after-class reading of English major students.

As a demanding cognitive process, reading comprehension not only requires much effort to be invested continuously into the practice (Grabe, 2009), but it also involves a range of specific skills ranging from lower-level processes based on accessing directly-stated information in the text, such as word recognition, lexico-syntactic processing, and semantic processing, to higher-level processes based on inference and evaluation, like identifying main ideas, recognizing thematic information, constructing a text model, and personal interpretation (Grabe, 2014). Both levels are essential to the comprehension process and ensure accurate and thoughtful reading.

Nuttall (1996) stresses that inadequate reading comprehension skills and abilities can undermine students' motivation to read, resulting in diminished interest in learning and reduced effectiveness of language teaching. Gao et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of not only spending more time on reading but also developing higher-level reading comprehension. Previous research has shown that the development of reading is closely linked to both the quantity of reading and the quality of reading instruction provided to students (Küçüköğlu, 2013; Davis, 1995). Therefore, to address the poor reading abilities of Chinese English major students, it is crucial to provide more effective reading activities and high-quality reading materials that target improving reading comprehension in both lower-level and higher-level processes such as identifying the main idea, finding themes and keywords, decoding, and deducing, and other related reading skills.

Another factor that impacts the reading proficiency of Chinese EFL learners is a general lack of reading motivation, which has been a prevalent issue among Chinese EFL learners (Li et al., 2022), despite the awareness of reading for language learning. This phenomenon is also prominent among English major students, who also face challenges in language learning such as decreased effort, interest, concentration, and persistence (Lu, 2023). Earlier, Wang (2012) highlighted the generally low motivation for reading among English major students, which negatively impacts their reading ability and fluency. Gong and Liu (2012) found that high-level readers have lower reading motivation, with extrinsic motivation being the primary driving force for students to perform well in examinations. Wang and Li (2016) study also reports that English major students are less motivated to read. Quan's (2022) investigation into the reading habits of English majors further verified a lack of interest in reading among English major students. The low motivation phenomenon among English major students significantly impacts language teaching effectiveness and students' interest in the subject (Wolters et al., 2014), but it is important to note that disengagement from reading may not be solely due to a lack of ability, but rather a lack of motivation (Davis et al., 2018).

The issue of reading motivation for Chinese EFL learners has become a growing concern in recent years because reading comprehension ability is closely intertwined with students' motivation to read and learn effectively (Paris & Oka, 1986). Xu and Durgunoğlu (2020) emphasize the importance of motivational factors in EFL reading comprehension to promote deeper understanding and engagement, as well as a thorough understanding of the reading materials. Also, according to Han (2021), reading motivation is vitally important in affecting reading behaviors, such as strategy

use and reading frequency, as well as reading proficiency. Yao (2023) found a correlation between reading strategies, motivation, and self-efficacy, suggesting that a reading program could enhance reading motivation. Sandy and Fidian (2022) revealed that engagement in reading activities is one of the factors to enable students' motivation for inside and outside classroom learning. Efriza et al. (2023) also suggest creating a sociocultural environment and allowing students to choose reading materials on their own as effective solutions to enhance reading motivation.

To address the two issues of comprehension and motivation concerning reading, previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of using literature as a medium and effective tool (Ashrafuzzaman et al., 2021; Baytar & Timuçin, 2021; Alshammari & Ahmed, 2019; Hall, 2005; Collie & Slater, 1987). However, in the context of English major students in China, there is a negative attitude towards literature, often viewed as a “soft option” or an indulgence rather than a crucial component of language learning (Yin & Chen, 2002, p. 318). Hou and Lei (2019) revealed that there is a declining interest in literature among English majors in China, with some even showing indifference to literature reading. Research investigating literature reading habits among Chinese English majors consistently reveals that students allocate limited time to reading literature and struggle with understanding it (Zhu, 2011). Chinese EFL learners often encountered reading difficulties in reading literature including a small vocabulary size, difficulty in comprehending long and complex sentences, and poor overall understanding (Wang et al., 2016; Zhu, 2011). Moreover, many students read literature primarily for external reasons, rather than genuine interest (Wang et al., 2016). Several surveys conducted by Liu and Wang (2021), Deng and Ou (2019), and Lin (2018) also confirm that English major students have limited

reading experience, little interest in literature, and struggle with understanding literary texts. This belittling of literature's value in English learning has resulted in a shortage of high-quality foreign language talents and a lack of humanities literacy, posing a crisis for English education in China (Gu, 2016; Hu, 2009; Hu & Sun, 2006). Given these challenges, it is crucial to change the attitudes of Chinese English major students towards literature reading and to incorporate literature reading to foster learners' creativity, language skills, and cultural understanding (Yin & Chen, 2002).

Yeasmin (2011) suggests that incorporating activities such as role plays, group discussions, and presentations can actively engage students in language learning and ignite their interest. Regmi (2022) proposes that collaborative and interactive exploration of literary texts can effectively enhance students' language skills. Rooted in sociocultural theory and transactional theory, literature circles have emerged as a valuable framework to address this issue by providing a collaborative learning environment for peer interaction and suitable reading materials for meaning construction. Being recognized as a powerful method, literature circles are effective in developing students' comprehension skills in finding the theme, main idea, and keywords in a text (e.g., Karatay, 2017; Irawati, 2016), alleviate reading anxiety and encourage more learner engagement in group discussion (e.g., Suci, et al. 2022; Shelton-Strong, 2012), inspire students to participate in the literary text emotionally and intellectually (e.g., Kim, 2004), as well as other benefits in language learning such as oral and written communication skills of L2 learners (Iida, 2013) and development of social skills (e.g., Doğan and Kaya-Tosun, 2020).

Considering the effectiveness of literature circles, integrating this method into the after-class reading of Chinese English major students has the potential to improve their reading comprehension skills, and reading motivation, and cultivate a positive attitude towards literature reading. However, empirical research on the application of literature circles to address the issues faced by Chinese English major students is still limited. Firstly, literature circles are commonly used in primary and secondary schools in China to cultivate reading literacy (Qin, 2022; Sun, 2021). Secondly, in the context of tertiary education, research is scarce on the impact of literature circles to enhance reading motivation and reading comprehension simultaneously (Chou, 2022; Qin, 2022; Su & Zheng, 2019). Thirdly, there is a dearth of research on the application of literature circles to cultivate the reading attitudes towards literature reading among English major students in China. Therefore, there is a methodological gap to be addressed considering the limited exploration of the effectiveness of literature circles on the reading development of English major students in China.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing the reading comprehension and reading motivation of English major students in China. Additionally, the research aimed to explore the attitudes of English major students towards this student-centered reading activity and delves into the mechanisms through which students engage with literary texts. The study was designed to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To determine the effect of literature circles in improving the reading comprehension of English major students in a university in China.
2. To determine the effect of literature circles on the reading motivation of

English major students in a university in China.

3. To gauge the attitudes of English major students in a university in China towards the implementation of literature circles in EFL reading.
4. To explore the process through which English major students in a university in China engage with literary texts.

1.5 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the research objectives, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions and test the related hypotheses:

1. What is the effect of literature circles on the lower-level and higher-level reading comprehension processes of Chinese English major students?

H₀₁. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of overall reading comprehension in the experimental group.

H_{01a}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the lower-level reading process in the experimental group.

H_{01b}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the higher-level reading process in the experimental group.

H₀₂. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of overall reading comprehension in the control group.

H_{02a}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the lower-level reading process in the control group.

H_{02b}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the higher-level reading process in the control group.

H₀₃. There is no significant difference in the overall posttest mean scores

of reading comprehension between the experimental group and the control group.

H_{03a}. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of the lower-level reading process between the experimental group and the control group.

H_{03b}. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of the higher-level reading process between the experimental group and the control group.

H_{03c}. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of reading comprehension between the experimental group and the control group based on the results of the lower-level and higher-level reading processes.

2. What is the effect of literature circles on the intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation of Chinese English major students?

H₀₄. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of motivation levels in the experimental group.

H_{04a}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of intrinsic motivation levels in the experimental group.

H_{04b}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of extrinsic motivation levels in the experimental group.

H₀₅. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of motivation levels in the control group.

H_{05a}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of intrinsic motivation levels in the control group.

H_{05b}. There is no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest mean scores of extrinsic motivation levels in the control group.

H₀₆. There is no significant difference in the overall posttest mean scores of reading motivation levels between the experimental group and the

control group.

H06a. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of the intrinsic reading motivation levels between the experimental group and the control group.

H06b. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of the extrinsic reading motivation levels between the experimental group and the control group.

H06c. There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of reading motivation levels between the experimental group and the control group based on the results of intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivations.

3. What are the attitudes of Chinese English major students towards the implementation of literature circles?
4. How do Chinese English major students engage with literary text through literature circles?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of incorporating literature circles into the foreign language learning of Chinese English major students who face challenges in reading comprehension skills and reading motivation. First and foremost, the findings of this study could contribute to the existing literature on the implementation of literature circles to enhance reading comprehension skills, and reading motivation, and foster a deeper interest in literature reading among Chinese L2 learners. As previous research in China has predominantly focused on the reading strategies of non-English major students (Chou, 2022; Su & Zheng, 2019) or on the cultivation of reading literacy of primary and secondary school students, there is a dearth of research

findings regarding the effectiveness of literature circles on English major students in China. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by implementing literature circles as an extracurricular activity leading to improved reading ability of English major students in China.

Additionally, the findings of this study have the potential to enrich the understanding of the application of sociocultural theory, self-determination theory, and transactional theory in guiding studies in classroom settings. By synthesizing the three theories within the context of literature circles, the study contributes to the exploration of how learners can exercise autonomy, construct meaning collaboratively, share their interpretations, and engage in cultural contexts. Through participating in this reading activity, students are provided with a platform to interact with peers and develop a deeper understanding of the texts they read. Building upon existing literature on the benefits of literature circles (Chou, 2022; Chamba & Ramirez-Avila, 2021), this collaborative reading activity has the potential to significantly enhance the reading comprehension and motivation of Chinese college English major students. By fostering a heightened interest in reading literature, this study seeks to advance the understanding of language learning and teaching methodologies, ultimately contributing to the broader landscape of educational practice and theories.

Furthermore, this study aims to illuminate the reading experience of Chinese L2 learners participating in literature circles. By delving into the nuances of engagement with literary texts through literature circles, the research findings have the potential to inform and enhance reading instruction practices, ultimately benefiting language learners in their academic journey. While the benefits of incorporating literature into

language learning are widely recognized, including increased motivation, exposure to authentic language use, enhanced general knowledge, improved interpretive skills, and enriched vocabulary, the specific impact of literature circles on these aspects remains unexplored within the context of English majors in China. By examining the relationship between reading literature and language acquisition, the research aims to shed light on the potential efficacy of literature circles in facilitating language learning outcomes among English major students in China.

Finally, the findings of this research could offer insights for the development and implementation of enhanced reading methods and activities aimed at bolstering the reading proficiency of English language learners. By uncovering valuable insights into the reading experience of Chinese L2 learners within literature circles, this research can provide inspiration for Chinese educational institutions, course designers, textbook authors, and language instructors to refine their approaches to language instructions and build a more conducive learning environment for students, ultimately advancing the overall language teaching and learning in Chinese educational settings.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

A mixed methods quasi-experimental design is employed to investigate the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing reading comprehension, reading motivation, as well as attitudes towards literature circles among Chinese college English major students. The scope of the study is limited to sophomore students majoring in English in a private university in northwest China. The study involves two intact classes selected from a population of second-year English major students through a non-probability sampling procedure. Therefore, this study carries the

following limitations.

The first and foremost limitation of this study is the potential lack of generalizability of the research findings. The mixed methods quasi-experimental design used in this study involved selecting two intact classes from a private university in the northwest of China through non-probability sampling procedures. Although hypothesis testing was employed, it is important to note that drawing conclusions and making statistical inferences about the population from a sample is a common practice in educational research (Gall et al., 2003). However, this means that the findings may not be applicable to English major students of different levels or in top universities or to non-English major students at the tertiary level in China. Nonetheless, these findings can still offer valuable insights into the L2 reading experiences of English major students in other private universities. Moreover, the results can serve as valuable data for future meta-analysis studies examining the effectiveness of literature circles on L2 reading comprehension and reading motivation.

Another limitation of this experimental study is its primary focus on the effect of literature circles on reading comprehension and reading motivation by mainly using quantitative data. It does not consider other benefits of literature circles, such as social skills, communicative ability, writing ability, and emotional and aesthetic effects. As a result, the study may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the reading activity. However, the researcher did utilize reading logs to monitor the reading process of participants and track their engagement with reading throughout. The qualitative data collected through these logs were used to complement and consolidate the findings from the quantitative data. This approach helps to justify the

research purpose and provides a more well-rounded perspective on the effects of literature circles on L2 reading comprehension and reading motivation.

The last limitation of this study is that it did not take into account the variations among the participants. Factors such as gender, educational background, prior knowledge, learning style, and personal differences can also influence performance, engagement, bias, interpretation, and the generalizability of the research findings. The research did not analyze or compare the changes in reading comprehension and motivation based on these natural variations among the individual subjects in the research. This oversight limits our understanding of whether literature circles have differential effects based on these factors. Future research should consider including subject variation as a variable and analyze its potential influence on the outcomes of literature circles in terms of L2 reading comprehension and motivation. By doing so, we can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of literature circles as a reading activity for different groups of learners.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Further research should address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies with diverse samples and incorporating qualitative measures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing language reading among Chinese college English major students.

1.8 Definition of Terms

To clarify the scope of research in this study, several key terms related to the independent and dependent variables are defined conceptually and operationally,

which can ensure a consistent and standardized measurement of the variables throughout the study.

1.8.1 Effectiveness

Effectiveness can be defined as the capability of a particular intervention, strategy, or approach to achieve its intended goals and objectives, and produce the desired outcomes (Cameron & Green, 2015). The positive results are usually demonstrated by indicators such as improved performance, increased efficiency, or behavioral changes (Smith et al., 2018).

In the current research concerning literature circles for Chinese English major students, effectiveness refers to the extent to which the intervention of literature circles positively affects the participants' reading comprehension, reading motivation, and attitudes towards the implementation of literature circles, which can be measured by assessing the improvement in students' reading comprehension scores, the increase in their reading motivation levels and the positive attitudes towards this reading activity by test, surveys and personal reading documents.

1.8.2 Literature

The term literature has two distinct meanings. In a general sense, it refers to any written material on a specific topic (Ihejirika, 2014; Türker, 1991). When viewed from the lens of language learning, literature is defined as a literary use of language encompassing “a wide range of styles, text types, and registers” (Violetta-Irene, 2015, p. 75), or as creative, imaginative, and original texts that convey values and qualities

(Hall, 2005). As a record of human narratives, literature presents “a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material” that deals with enduring human issues. (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 5). Covering various genres such as novels, short stories, plays, and poems, literature offers learners a gateway to explore the complexities of human existence and deepen their understanding of the world.

In the context of this study, literature is narrowly defined as literary works comprising short stories and novels written in the original English language by British and American authors. These literary works are selected by the researcher, the reading tutors, and participants to serve as reading materials for English major students in China, facilitating their participation in literature circles.

1.8.3 Literature Circles

Literature circles, also referred to as literature discussion groups or reading circles, are defined by Daniels (2002) as “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (p. 2). In this collaborative framework, group members meet regularly to share their reading experiences, ideas, and opinions in a comfortable and nonthreatening setting (Day & Ainley, 2008). Furr (2004) specifically describes literature circles in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context as structured, meaningful, and open-ended discussions about literature in English and collaboration is the “critical component of a successful literature circle” (Quick, 2021, p. 2).

For this research, literature circles have been implemented as an extracurricular reading activity for Chinese English major students, utilizing literary texts from

British and American literature written in original English. The participants are organized into reading circles of six members each, where they undertake assigned reading tasks corresponding to specific roles, and then convene weekly for approximately 50 minutes to listen, discuss, and share their interpretations in English. The literary texts can be available both online or in hardcopy, then the sharing sessions take place in a traditional classroom setting to foster personal connections and enhance communication among the participants.

1.8.4 Reading Logs

Reading logs, also known as reading journals, are written records or reflections to elicit and explore individual responses to a literary work, where individuals document their reading experiences, thoughts, reactions, and insights related to the materials they have read (Carlisle, 2000). Reading logs can facilitate individuals' engagement with the text, enhance comprehension, and develop critical thinking skills (Smith, 2008), therefore, they can provide tools for self-monitoring, self-reflection, and tracking reading progress over time.

In the context of this research, reading logs are the structured written accounts in which the participants record their responses including the title of the literary text, vocabulary or knowledge gains, emotional responses toward the characters of events, and a summary of the reading materials. These entries are completed weekly for the students to monitor their reading process and reflect on their reading experiences. This system for maintaining the logs/journals helps establish criteria for content inclusion and facilitates meaningful reflection and analysis of reading experiences (Jones & Brown, 2015).

1.8.5 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and make meaning of written text by actively engaging with the content, connecting ideas, and synthesizing information (Snow et al., 2002). It involves assessing individuals' capacity to comprehend and retain information from reading materials through tasks such as answering questions, summarizing texts, making inferences, and demonstrating an understanding of the text's main ideas and details (Guthrie et al., 2004). Grabe (2014, 2009) proposed two inclusive categories of reading comprehension skills: higher-level processes (e.g., drawing upon prior knowledge, inferencing, predicting what will transpire in the text) and lower-level processes (e.g., word recognition, syntactic parsing, etc.).

In this research, reading comprehension is operationally defined as the ability of Chinese English major students to comprehend and interpret reading materials, extract meanings, make connections between ideas and demonstrate a deep understanding of the texts. This comprehension ability is measured in the skills such as word recognition ability, information processing, and interpretation, making inferences, making judgments, emotional responses, and analyzing stylistic features (Zou, 2005), which can be categorized into higher-level and lower-level processes (Li, 2014) measured by Test for English Majors (TEM), a criterion-referenced national test to specifically assess the reading comprehension ability of Chinese English major students.

1.8.6 Reading Motivation

Reading motivation is a component of learning motivation (Wang et al., 2020). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000, p. 405) define it as an “individual’s personal goals, values, and beliefs regarding topics, processes, and outcomes of reading”. Drawing from motivational theories, reading motivations can be classified into two dimensions: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997a). Extrinsic reading motivation involves external reasons that drive learners to seek positive outcomes and avoid negative consequences. Intrinsic reading motivation, on the other hand, is the willingness to read because the activity itself is satisfying or rewarding (Schiefele et al., 2012).

In the context of this research, reading motivation can be defined as the Chinese English major students’ innate desire, interest, enthusiasm, and willingness to engage with and comprehend the literary texts from British and American literature utilized in literature circles. This motivation can be operationalized into two constructs measured through a well-established questionnaire. Within this context, intrinsic reading motivation refers to the inner drive of Chinese English major students to participate in literature circles due to the perceived importance of reading, their aspiration to become skilled readers, and their readiness to embrace challenges. On the other hand, extrinsic reading motivation pertains to external incentives such as peer recognition, academic credits, and success in examinations that influence the reading behaviors of Chinese English major students.

1.8.7 Attitude

Attitude in second language learning is defined as individuals' belief structure, emotional reactions, and behavioral tendencies towards the attitude object (Gardner, 1985), which is usually quantified to show the positive or negative predispositions of an individual towards a particular concept, idea, or entity (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

In the current study concerning literature circles, an attitude refers to the Chinese English major students' perceptions, beliefs, and emotional responses towards the reading activity of literature circles and the literary texts involved in collaborative reading discussions with peers, which involves assessing the students' self-reported feelings, opinions, and behavioral inclinations through surveys and personal documents.

1.9 Summary

This chapter introduces the researcher's main interest in the current study on the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing reading comprehension, reading motivation, and attitudes towards literature circles and literature reading of Chinese English major students. The chapter also explains the problems, research purpose, significance, and limitations of the study. The research objectives, questions, and hypotheses are also presented. The conceptual and operational definitions of several terms are provided at the end of the chapter. More evidence of the implementation of literature circles from past studies and theoretical underpinnings are presented in the following chapter.

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