Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 16. Number 4, December 2025 Pp.239-256
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol16no4.14

From Problems to Progress: Evaluating Dalton Plan-Based Instruction in Chinese College English Reading

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Received:06/21/2025 Accepted:11/10/2025 Published:12/10/2025

Abstract
The Dalton Plan, an educational approach centered on student autonomy through assignment contracts and self-paced learning, offers a potential alternative to traditional teacher-center instruction. This study examines its application within the challenging context of Chinese College English (CE) reading courses, where students often struggle with academic reading comprehension and lack self-regulation skills. A quasi-experimental design was employed to evaluate the impact of Dalton Plan-based instruction on the reading performance and learner autonomy of 31 second-year medical students. Participants were divided into a control group (n=15) receiving conventional instruction and an experimental group (n=16) receiving Dalton Plan-based instruction, which emphasized independent reading assignments with tailored teacher guidance. A mixed-methods approach collected quantitative data (reading tests, Autonomous Learning Scale) and qualitative data (thematic analysis of student self-reports). Results indicated that Dalton Plan-based instruction significantly enhanced learner autonomy; however, its effect on reading test scores was not statistically significant. Thematic analysis of self-reports revealed a developmental trajectory from initial challenges—such as time management and vocabulary inadequacy—to later progress in reading interest, strategy use, and persistence. These findings not only provide pedagogical insights for innovating reading instruction in Chinese EFL (English as foreign language) contexts but also highlight the complex relationship between fostering autonomy and achieving measurable gains in reading proficiency.

***Keywords*:** College English reading, Dalton Plan-based instruction, English as a foreign language, learner autonomy, reading performance

How to cite: Qi, T., Albakri, T. S. M. A., & Mokhtar, M. M. (2025). From Problems to Progress: Evaluating Dalton Plan-Based Instruction in Chinese College English Reading. *Arab World English Journal, 16*(4):239-256. tps://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol16no4.14

Introduction

Studies in English as a second language (ESL) or / English as a foreign language (EFL) field have consistently highlighted the importance of integrating 21st-century skills into teaching and learning practices (Mokhtar, 2021; Tahir et al., 2020). Among these skills, learner autonomy has emerged as a critical focus in contemporary education. Additionally, assessing students' behaviors and individual areas of interest has been found to significantly contribute to the enhancement of their language proficiency (Tahir et al., 2020; Zulkepli, 2024). One notable instructional approach that supports learner autonomy is the Dalton Plan, which has been implemented in China to foster greater student independence and self-directed learning.

The Dalton Plan is designed to transform traditional classroom teaching. The fundamental distinction between traditional teaching and the Dalton Plan lies in the locus of control: while the former emphasizes direct instruction, the latter prioritizes student autonomy through self-directed assignments. Parkhurst (1922) argued that traditional teaching methods often rely excessively on teacher-led instruction, which may hinder the development of students' creativity, initiative, and sense of responsibility. Under the Dalton Plan, students and teachers establish a learning contract, granting students autonomy in making decisions regarding their learning process. Students determine what tasks to complete, where and when to complete them, and at what pace. The teacher's primary role is to track students' progress, provide individualized guidance, and facilitate collaborative discussions through classroom conferences. This shift from teacher-driven instruction to student-centred learning allows students to take ownership of their educational progress, fostering greater independence and accountability.

Comparative studies have demonstrated that the Dalton Plan is more effective than traditional instructional methods in promoting learner autonomy, self-regulation, and collaboration (Babuščáková, 2008; Moosavi, 2019). This effectiveness can be attributed to the Plan's emphasis on student initiative, which helps sustain prolonged motivation. According to Van der Ploeg (2013), this motivation largely stems from "the work as work" (p. 84). He elaborates that the assignment is perceived as "a real job" and experienced as "my work"—with an emphasis on "my"—which in turn fosters motivation, concentration, and discipline. Furthermore, Tian (2017) argued that implementing the Dalton Plan is especially pertinent in the" Internet +" era, as it encourages students to engage in self-directed learning while still benefiting from structured guidance.

The Dalton Plan has gained substantial traction in China's educational landscape since its introduction (Huang, 2022). Many schools nationwide have implemented Dalton-inspired educational reforms, leading to notable advancements (Tian, 2017). Zhang (2018) suggested that although the Dalton Plan has traditionally been applied in middle and high school settings, college students who exhibit greater psychological maturity stand to benefit even more from its emphasis on independent learning. The principles of freedom and cooperation embedded in the Dalton Plan align well with the broader goals of higher education, which aim to cultivate inquiry-driven, responsible individuals. One domain where learner autonomy is particularly critical is the College English (CE) course, a mandatory program for non-English major students in Chinese universities. The course, which spans two years (four semesters), aims to develop students' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. However, with limited instructional time (3-4 hours per week), achieving these objectives remains a challenge. Recognizing this limitation, *The College English Teaching Guide* (2020) has emphasized the importance of academic reading, particularly its integration with students' respective disciplines. The guide encourages students to

engage with English-language scholarly materials to enhance their expertise in their fields. Consequently, reading proficiency plays a crucial role in the CE curriculum.

A major challenge in the CE course is students' difficulty in academic reading comprehension. According to Cai (2016, 2017, 2018), many university graduates in China struggle to read English-language academic literature related to their disciplines. This issue suggests that reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge for CE students. Zhang and Seepho (2013) found that Chinese EFL learners often lack essential self-regulation skills, such as self-planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation, which impede their reading performance. Lian (2017) further noted that the traditional teacher-centred grammar-translation approach which focuses on sentence-by-sentence explanations tends to make students passive learners, ultimately diminishing their interest in reading. In contrast, reading is an inherently cognitive and interactive process that requires active engagement for optimal comprehension.

Given these challenges, this study investigates the effects of Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction on learner autonomy and reading performance in the CE course. Additionally, it explores the challenges students face when implementing Dalton Plan-based instruction and how they progress in reading under this instructional approach. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Does Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction improve students' learner autonomy in reading in the CE course?
2. Does Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction enhance students' reading performance in the CE course?
3. What challenges and progress related to reading performance do students report under Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction?

Literature Review

The Dalton Plan, an educational approach developed by Helen Parkhurst in the early 20th century, is founded on the core principles of autonomy, responsibility, and collaboration. Its relevance endures in modern pedagogy, which prioritizes learner-centred models aimed at fostering independent thinking and self-regulation (Moškvanová, 2009). Research consistently highlights its strength in fostering learner autonomy, a critical foundation for successful language acquisition. Babuščáková's (2008) comparative study of English lessons in the Czech Republic found that the Dalton Plan's use of individualized work, pair and group tasks, and a shift in the teacher's role from "controller" to "facilitator" were instrumental in cultivating a learning environment where students took greater initiative and responsibility for their learning outcomes. This development of autonomy is closely linked to the improvement of metacognitive skills. A longitudinal study by Říčan and Lanková (2019) demonstrated that pupils in Czech Dalton schools showed statistically significant improvements not only in reading comprehension but also in metacognitive monitoring, indicating an enhanced ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes.

Beyond general autonomy, the plan has shown efficacy in developing specific language competencies. Geraskevich and Nurgalieva (2021) implemented the Dalton Plan in a Russian high school context, focusing on foreign language communicative competence. Their findings revealed that the plan's structure of self-paced assignments, coupled with reflective practices like self-analysis, led to significant student improvement in communication skills. Notably, students reported high levels of interest and enthusiasm, underscoring the method's positive impact on

motivation. Similarly, at the primary school level, Kwella (2020) integrated the principles of independence, responsibility, and cooperation into English lessons in Poland, observing marked improvements in students' self-esteem, confidence, and collaborative problem-solving abilities in the target language. However, the implementation of the Dalton Plan in language classrooms is not without its difficulties. A recurring theme across studies is the time-consuming nature of the method for both teachers in preparing individualized assignments and for students in managing their learning (Friedl, 2012; Geraskevich & Nurgalieva, 2021). Furthermore, the success of the approach can be variable. Friedl's (2012) investigation of a Dalton-inspired model (COOL) in Austrian vocational schools, while noting gains in student independence and cooperation, found that only 60% of students felt it directly helped their English learning, suggesting that the subjective experience of progress does not always align uniformly with pedagogical objectives.

The plan's versatility is evidenced by its successful adaptation beyond language learning. For instance, Yang et al. (2023) integrated it into high school aerobics using learning contracts to foster ownership and teamwork, while Stary & Weichhart (2017) applied its principles to digital design education, using "learning contracts" and feedback systems to scaffold self-regulation. A key contemporary development is the integration of the Dalton Plan with digital tools. Moosavi (2019) theorized that the plan provides a solid pedagogical framework for "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) initiatives. This has been operationalized in studies like that of Weichhart et al. (2018), who developed a digital learning environment featuring "Dalton Plan Editors" and "Feedback Graphs," thereby translating the plan's core mechanics of assignment management and progress tracking into a digital format to support self-regulated learning.

Despite this body of evidence, critical gaps remain, particularly concerning the Chinese tertiary EFL context. First, while studies like Říčan and Lanková's (2019) focus on reading in primary schools, there is a scarcity of research investigating the Dalton Plan's effect on the academic reading proficiency of university-level EFL learners. Second, the existing literature often notes challenges like student adaptation to self-direction, but few studies qualitatively explore the specific, evolving problems and progress learners report throughout the process. Finally, there is a lack of empirical investigation into how the plan functions within educational cultures characterized by more teacher-centred traditions, such as that of China. Therefore, this present study is designed to address these gaps by empirically evaluating Dalton Plan-based instruction in the Chinese College English reading course. It will quantitatively measure its effects on learner autonomy and reading performance, while qualitatively tracing the challenges and progress students experience. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced model of how autonomy-focused frameworks can be effectively adapted to a specific and widespread EFL context, moving from documented problems to tangible progress.

Methods

This study employed the quasi-experimental research design using quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches.

Participants

This study employed convenience sampling due to its practical accessibility to the researcher. This non-random sampling method involves selecting participants based on ease of access, geographic proximity, availability, or willingness to participate (Dörnyei & Griffee, 2007). The study focused on second-year medical students enrolled in two CE course classes organized by the university’s

Section of Academic Affairs. Class one, the control group, consisted of 15 students: nine majoring in Clinical Medicine and six in Nursing. Class two, the experimental group, comprised 16 students: nine majoring in Stomatology and seven in Medical Laboratory Technology.It has to be pointed out that initially each class had about 60 students, but many were exempted from attendance and exams after passing CET4 with scores of 425 or above, therefore, the participants involved in the study were those who had not passed CET4 and had a relatively lower language proficiency compared with their peers who had passed CET4 already.

Intervention Plan

This study implemented two distinct instructional approaches over a three-month period: Dalton Plan-based instruction for the experimental group and traditional classroom instruction for the control group.

Dalton Plan-Based Instruction (Experimental Group)

The experimental group followed a Dalton Plan-based classroom approach, comprising three key stages. First, students, in consultation with the researcher, identified their reading objectives to ensure alignment with their individual learning needs. Second, students and the researcher collaboratively selected monthly reading assignments from three available options (maximum, medium, or minimum workload), allowing for personalized workload adjustments. Once finalized, students signed assignment contracts and completed their reading tasks both during and outside class hours. Lastly, students worked on their reading assignments with instructional support provided through classroom sessions and individual guidance.

Teacher instruction was delivered in two formats. Classroom sessions focused on developing reading skills and analyzing complex sentences within reading materials. In contrast, individual guidance was conducted outside class time to address non-reading-related challenges such as time management and emotional regulation, based on students' weekly self-reports submitted online. Each week, students allocated approximately one-third of their three weekly 45-minute sessions to teacher-led instruction, while the remaining two-thirds were dedicated to independent reading practice. Adjustments were made based on students' self-reported challenges, ensuring that instructional support was targeted and responsive to their needs.

Traditional Classroom Instruction (Control Group)

The control group followed a conventional teacher-centred approach, which differed in several key aspects. Time allocation was a significant distinction. While the experimental group spent most of their time on independent reading, the control group followed a lecture-based model, with two-thirds of class time dedicated to teacher-led instruction and only one-third allocated for individual reading practice. During their reading practice sessions, most students focused on materials related to College English Test Four (CET4) preparation.

Another key difference was the instructional approach. Unlike the Dalton Plan-based model, which was tailored to students' self-reported needs, the control group followed a standardized curriculum based on textbook content and teacher discretion. Instruction primarily focused on analyzing text structure, genre, and main ideas, explaining difficult vocabulary and sentence structures, completing textbook exercises, and providing general guidance on reading strategies and proficiency assessment.

Research Instruments

This study utilized three main types of reading materials: course book texts from *New Progressive College English Integrated Course (Book Four)*, CET4-related reading materials, and students' self-selected materials, which included both leisure reading and discipline-specific literature relevant to their majors. The course book materials comprised 18 reading passages organized into six units, with each unit containing three passages centred on the same topic. These passages were designated for intensive reading, requiring students to thoroughly comprehend the text, including vocabulary, sentence structures, and accompanying exercises. Intensive reading has been shown to enhance student engagement, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition through contextual memorization (Andrés, 2020).

The CET4-related reading materials consisted of reading comprehension passages sourced from authentic CET4 test papers and model tests. These passages were categorized into blank-filling, paragraph-matching, and multiple-choice questions of varying lengths. They were assigned as extensive reading tasks, designed to help students develop an overall understanding of the main ideas rather than requiring a detailed analysis. After reading, students completed exercises to reinforce comprehension. Extensive reading has been found to counteract passive learning tendencies commonly associated with traditional classroom instruction (Mede, 2013).

The students' self-selected materials included two categories: leisure reading materials and academic literature related to their fields of study. Leisure reading materials were accessible through the WeLearn online teaching platform, which supports CE courses. CE teachers could create online classes corresponding to the course books used in their lessons. In this study, the researcher provided reading passages through the platform's teacher interface, allowing both experimental and control groups to select and read them.

For discipline-specific literature, students independently selected reading materials, often using academic databases like PubMed, as recommended by their professional course instructors. These materials were also assigned as extensive reading tasks, aiming to cultivate students' interest in voluntary reading. Prior research by Fatimah (2019) highlights that extensive reading (ER) is closely linked to "pleasure reading" or "voluntary reading", emphasizing that students engage in extensive reading only when genuinely interested in the material.

Data Collection Methods

Autonomous Learning Scale

The Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS), developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010), was administered online to both the control and experimental classes before and after the experiment. The purpose was to determine if there were differences in learner autonomy between the two groups. This scale consists of 12 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from one (very unlike me) to five (very like me). Higher scores indicate higher levels of autonomy in learning. It is important to note that all items, except for item 2, require a positive response. For item 2 ("I frequently find excuses for not getting down to work."), a negative response indicates higher autonomy. To ensure consistency in responses, the researchers reversed the scoring for item 2 using the data transformation function in the SPSS statistical package. The survey was conducted during class sessions, with an emphasis on the confidentiality of responses and their irrelevance to students' CE examination scores to encourage authentic responses from the students.

Reading test paper

The reading test, developed by the researcher, featured passages from the WeLearn online platform for CE courses, with a difficulty level comparable to CET4. The test included four passages: a vocabulary-focused passage (200-250 words) with ten fill-in-the-blank items; a long passage (1,000 words) requiring sentence-to-paragraph matching for main ideas; and two shorter passages (300-350 words each) with five comprehension questions each. Both pre- and post-tests were identical, with minor adjustments to question order in the post-test to avoid recall bias. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.84, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The tests were administered to control and experimental groups before and after the intervention, each lasting 40 minutes during a class session, with printed papers and answer sheets provided. Scores were calculated after both tests to evaluate reading progress.

Self-reports

The experimental class students' self-reports detailing their feelings and challenges in completing the reading assignments were collected. The self-report format was adapted from progress graphs used by Parkhurst (2005). It comprised three sections. The first section recorded basic information such as the student's name, major, and type of assignment contract. The second section tracked the percentage of the reading assignment completed each week. The third section invited students to describe any challenges and emotions experienced while working on the reading assignment; notably, the word "feelings" was used instead of "progress" to avoid prompting students to report progress directly. This section resembled open-ended questions, allowing students to express their thoughts freely. If students had nothing to share, they had the option to leave this part blank. Since the study spanned three months, students submitted weekly self-reports, resulting in a total of 12 reports per student. Data involved in this study was students' report of their feelings and problems.

Results

Autonomous Learning Scale

Table 1. *Comparison between two classes on learner autonomy*

		Pre			Post		
Group	N	M	SD	Sig(two-tailed)	M	SD	Sig(two-tailed)
Experimental Group	16	38.69	3,807	.642	42.06	5.792	.043
Control Group	15	37.87	3.255	(P>0.05)	39.60	3.225	(P<0.05)

Table 1 presents the results of the ALS (Autonomy of Learning Scale) for both the experimental and control groups. Before the experiment, the mean pre-test scores for the experimental group were 38.69 and for the control group were 37.87. After the experiment, the mean post-test scores increased to 42.06 for the experimental group and 39.60 for the control group. This indicates that both groups showed improvement in learner autonomy from before to after the experiment.

Initially, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups as determined by the pre-test ALS ($p = 0.642$, which is greater than 0.05). However, three months later, the post-test ALS showed a significant difference ($p = 0.043$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that students who received Dalton Plan-based instruction demonstrated significantly greater improvement in learner autonomy compared to those in conventional classroom instruction.

Reading Test

Table 2. *Comparison between two classes on reading scores*

		Pre			Post		
Group	N	M	SD	Sig(two-tailed)	M	SD	Sig(two-tailed)
Experimental Group	16	140.80	19.821	.691	145.93	14.119	.0712
Control Group	15	138.00	18.389	(P>0.05)	143.33	23.011	(P>0.05)

Table 2 shows the descriptive and inferred results of a reading test conducted on both the experimental and control groups. Before the experiment began, the average pre-test scores were 140.80 for the experimental group and 138.00 for the control group. After the experiment concluded, the average post-test scores rose to 145.93 for the experimental group and 143.33 for the control group. This indicates that both groups demonstrated improvement in their reading test scores from before to after the experiment.

Prior to the experiment, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups based on their pre-test reading scores ($p = 0.691$, which is greater than 0.05). Similarly, three months later, the post-test reading scores also showed no significant difference ($p = 0.0712$, $p>0.05$). This suggests that students who received the Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction did not exhibit significantly greater improvement in reading proficiency compared to those taught using conventional classroom methods.

Self-Reported Problems

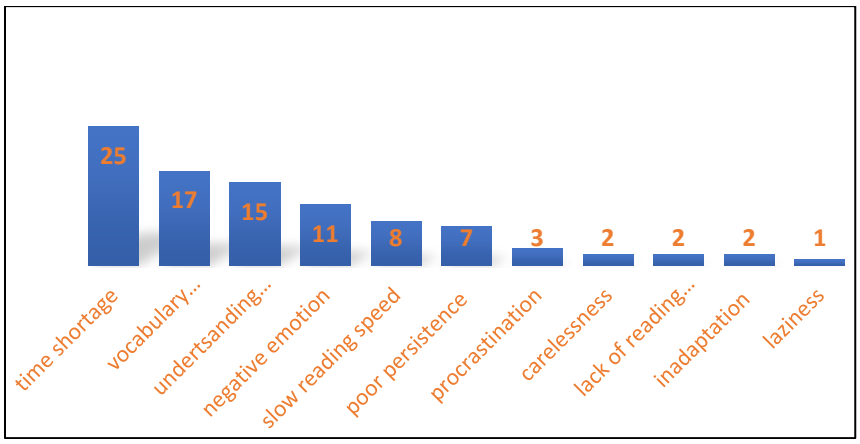


Figure 1. Problems and frequency

Figure 1 above illustrates that a total of 11 types of problems were reported across 12 instances of self-report. These issues, listed in order of frequency from highest to lowest, include time shortage, vocabulary inadequacy, understanding difficulty, negative emotions, slow reading speed, poor persistence, procrastination, carelessness, lack of reading strategies, inadaptation to new learning modes, and laziness.

Time Shortage

The issue of time shortage was the most reported problem. Almost all participants (except for S9 and S13) mentioned that they did not have enough time to complete their reading assignments. This issue was largely influenced by the students' majors; all participants in the study

were majoring in medicine, which meant they had more classes and homework than other students. Below are some excerpts from students:
"*At the beginning of the plan, since I myself had to arrange the assignment, inefficiency and inaccuracy appeared, and sometimes I felt time was not enough to finish the assignment.*" (S3)
"*Because of the mid-term examination, I do not have enough time to review all subjects, so I have to give up English reading most of time, in the next following two weeks, I will make up for what I have missed.*" (S6)

Vocabulary Inadequacy

Vocabulary presents the most significant challenge for foreign language learners worldwide (Hellekjær, 2009). In this study, insufficient vocabulary was identified as the second most prevalent issue. A total of 11 students (S1, S2, S4, S6, S7, S8, S10, S13, S14, S15, S16) mentioned that their vocabulary was inadequate for completing reading assignments efficiently and effectively.

"*I need to repeatedly memorize the new words again and again, still I forget many of them, so I cannot understand the reading passages well and sometimes it takes much time to finish one.*" (S8)
"*In the aspect of reading, I have a problem with words. If there are too many new words in a passage and I cannot understand most part of it, I just give it up.*" (S7)

Understanding Difficulty

The issue with the third highest percentage was inefficiency and inaccuracy in understanding texts. In total, 12 students (S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S13, S14, S15) in this study reported difficulty in understanding, mainly due to long and complex sentences and paragraphs. The following excerpts are from students' reports.
"*I can understand the main idea of the passage, but when I do the exercises after the passage, I make mistakes, that means I do not have a complete understanding of it.*" (S10)
"*In reading, I do not understand some long and difficult sentences, especially when there are unknown words in in them, which makes it harder to understand.*" (S5)

Negative Emotion

Various negative emotions related to reading were reported by students in the study, with impatience and depression being the most common. Students typically felt these negative emotions when they struggled to comprehend what they were reading, particularly in long passages containing many unfamiliar words. Below are some excerpts from students:

"*I feel impatient when I read, the reason for this is that I do not understand the meaning since there are many new words, then I feel panic.*" (S15)
"*When I read the long passages, I feel unwell and confused, I just couldn't concentrate on it.*" (S6)
"*This week, I felt especially restless and couldn't calm down, so my reading plan didn't go well. I'll make adjustments as soon as possible next week.*" (S8)

Slow Reading Speed

Reading speed is considered one of the indicators of reading proficiency (Khasawneh, 2021). It was commonly reported that it usually took them much more time than expected to complete a passage. Below are some responses from students:
"*I do not finish the assignment this week because I read very slowly due to many unknown words in it.*" (S4)
"*My problem in reading is that it takes me more time compared with other students, I cannot understand the meaning of the whole passage that quickly.*" (S2)

Poor Persistence

Seven students (S1, S2, S6, S7, S10, S12, S16) reported experiencing poor persistence during their reading process in accomplishing the reading assignment. According to their feedback, this issue did not arise when they read material they could easily comprehend without much additional effort. However, when faced with longer and more complex passages, they reported lacking the determination and patience needed to overcome obstacles and fully understand the content. The following are some excerpts from the students:

"*In accomplishing the reading assignment, I would like to memorize as many new words as I can, it's convenient and easy to do, but as for reading, I have no patience to continue since I make many mistakes in understanding.*" (S9)
"*Sometimes I just give up reading long and difficult passages since it's time-consuming, usually two or three hours to finish one passage. I know I do not have the patience to analyse them carefully.*" (S12)

Other problems

Procrastination (S5, S13, S16), carelessness (S1, S7), lack of reading strategy (S10, S14), inadaptation to the new learning mode (S5, S7), and laziness (S16) are other problems reported with low frequency in the study. Below are some responses from the students:

Progress

Figure 2 illustrates sixteen aspects of progress reported by students in their self-reports conducted 12 times. Among these aspects, the first nine improvements are considered common due to their relatively higher percentage of reporting. In descending order of frequency, these common improvements are increased reading interest, understanding improvement, cultivation of reading habits, improvement in using strategies, better emotion control, increased reading speed, more persistence, vocabulary enhancement, timely completion of assignments, and better time management. The remaining aspects of improvement such as enhancement of language sense, increased self-discipline, and increased confidence, were reported less frequently.

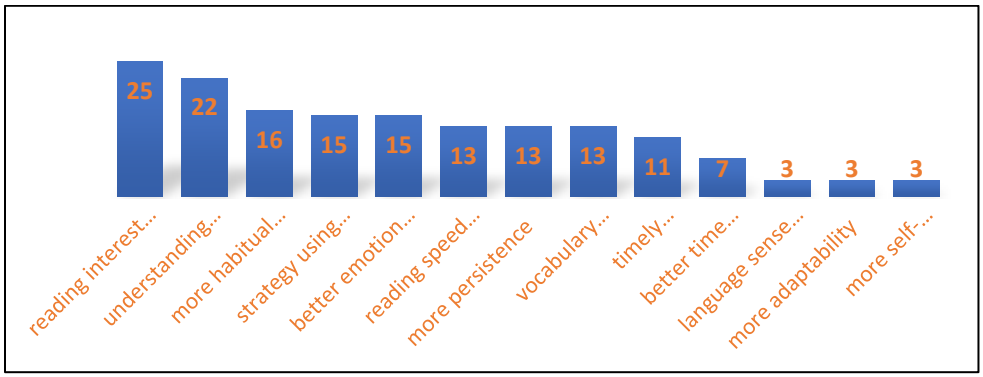


Figure 2. Progress and frequency

Reading Interest Increase

All students except for one (S6) expressed their interest in reading English texts increased. Students' interest in reading increased mainly by the sense of achievement in completion of reading assignment given in the assignment contract. The sense of achievement strengthened reading pleasure. The following are some excerpts from students:

"*……, practices make perfect, I find the correct way in reading just by reading a lot, when I verify the method by doing the exercises and find the accuracy improved, I feel a sense of achievement, and I can't help doing more reading, this is a very interesting process.*" (S3)

"*Since the college entrance examination, I have had a negative attitude to learning English, the reason for this was that I had been bored and tired of being driven by teacher every day in high school. But this time the teacher arranged us to read on our own independently, I was not used to it at the first, but after trying and trying, I began to have a little interest, although I may make many mistakes in reading exercises after the passage, I am relieved to have some improvements.*" (S7)

Understanding Improvement

All participants reported this aspect of improvement. Among them, four students (S2, S5, S10) reported twice, while one student(S11) reported four times. Most accounts of this progress were too general to pinpoint the specific aspect. Many students expressed improvements in aspects such as "reading" and" understanding," or "become smoother in reading." Below are some excerpts from students:

"*There has been progress compared to the beginning stage, and I'm gradually able to understand the reading passages. Unknown words are having less of an impact on me, and my accuracy in answering questions has also improved.*" (S15)

"*Reading is becoming smoother, and without looking up words, I can roughly understand the meaning of complex and difficult passages.*" (S5)

More Habitual Reading

The second most reported improvement was the cultivation of more habitual reading habits, mentioned by 14 students (S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14) in their self-reports. From the self-reports, it is evident that many students tried to read daily. Below are some excerpts from students:

"*Reading is becoming more regular. I strive to do a reading passage every day. Building up vocabulary is important, and repeatedly memorizing words greatly helps in answering reading questions.*" (S9)
"*This new learning process has guided us in developing good reading habits and improving our autonomy. In the midst of our busy daily lives, English reading has become a way to take a little break.*" (S1)

Improved Reading Strategy

Almost all students (except for S9 and S15) expressed improvement in their reading strategies. Among them, two students (S3 and S12) reported improvements twice. These improvements are primarily evident in strategies such as skimming for the main idea, controlling reading speed, analyzing the structure of complex sentences. Below are some responses from the students' self-reports:
"*I use skimming more often than before; it is a very good way to make yourself concentrated on the main idea and ignore the unknown words.*" (S11).
"*Now I am able to guess the meaning of the new words in the passages, not like before, I looked up each unknown word I met.*" (S8)
"*One important strategy I have learned is that the analysis of complex sentences. If I can know the structure of these sentences, I can understand their meaning no matter how complicated they seem."* (S13)

Better Emotion Control

There was a gradual process, as many students initially displayed impatience and restlessness. However, as the experiment progressed, students reported varying degrees of progress in overcoming this issue. A total of 10 students (S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S9, S10, S13, S14, S15) reported this improvement. The time it took for them to make some improvements ranged from one week to four weeks (one month). The following are excerpts from some students:
"*Now I can calm down when I am reading and I read very carefully, I try to understand the meaning inside the articles, and also with a sense of pleasure.*" (S2)
"*Generally, I have made progress, now I can settle down more quickly to reading*." (S15)

Reading Speed Improvement

Ten students (S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, S9, S10, S12, S15, S16) mentioned this improvement in reading speed in their self-reports. This study found that reading speed was closely related to the vocabulary students mastered, the type of passages, and the structure of the passages. Below are some excerpts from the students:
"*My reading speed is much faster than before, and I take an interest in reading (major-related) literature, but the present state does not reach my expectations, it's somewhat confusing. I will keep trying with harder work.*" (S3)
"*I feel my vocabulary expanded to some extent, and my reading speed improved accordingly, slowly the accuracy rate in understanding was enhanced.*" (S10)

More persistence

A total of 11 students (S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S11, S12, S14, S15, S16) mentioned improvements in this area. The enhanced persistence was primarily evident in the aspect of

continuing to read even when faced with difficulties. Below are some excerpts from the students' responses:
"*Now I can go on reading with the unknown words in the passages, they (the unknown words) do not affect me too much, not as they did before, and I can read passages of more genres than before.*" (S14)
"*I try not to read the Chinses translation given in the answer sheet, even there is much difficulty in understanding the meaning. I look up every unknown word bit by bit, trying to catch the meaning with my efforts.*" (S16)

Vocabulary Increases

The improvement in vocabulary was reported by 11 students (S1, S2, S4, S6, S8, S9, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15). One of the components of the assignment contract was the vocabulary memorization task, which was included upon the students' request. Most of the students had some form of vocabulary memorization plan before the experiment, but some may not have practiced it effectively in the past. The following are some responses from the students:
"*This month I have made relatively big improvement in my vocabulary quantity, I recite 25 new words each day in good time, I also have made slight improvement in reading speed.*" (S16)
"*I have improved in vocabulary accumulation, which is very important to reading comprehension, and I have developed a little language instinct in reading.*" (S9)

Timely Completion of Assignment

A total of 11 students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S9, S10, S12, S14, S15) reported this` improvement. Most students noted this improvement in comparison to the initial stage when they struggled with the assignments. Below are some responses from the students:
"*This week the undertaking of the assignment is relatively smooth, sometimes when I do not finish the amount of reading I assigned myself, I would add the amount the next day, trying to reach the goal required.*" (S3)
"*The general completion status is good, and I have gradually developed the habit of completing the reading assignment on time.*" (S14)

Better Time Management

Altogether six students (S1, S5, S8, S10, S12, S15) mentioned this improvement. Efficiency and flexibility in management of time are commonly reported by students. One of the essences of the Dalton Plan which distinguishes it from other teaching forms is the students' budget of time. Students had to use their time judiciously to accomplish their assignments on time under the Dalton Plan-based instruction. The following are some excerpts from students' response.
"*Sometimes when time is ample and I am in a good state, I can do more reading, I even do the task set for next week in advance.*" (S1)
"*Slowly I can make use of some fragmented time to do reading, not like the before, I had to have some time set specially for reading. And the amount of reading I have finished in one week is larger than before.*" (S5)

Other Progress

Some additional improvements were observed, though reported with lower frequency. These include enhanced language sense, increased adaptability, and greater self-discipline. Specifically,

ISSN: 2229-9327

the enhancement of language sense was noted by three students (S2, S8, S9), adaptability was mentioned by three students (S1, S4, S11), and increased self-discipline was reported by another three students (S3, S12, S14).

Discussion

The implementation of Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction has demonstrated a significant positive impact on learner autonomy in reading among CE students. However, despite these improvements in autonomy, the anticipated gains in reading proficiency were not achieved. Early in the program, students reported common challenges, such as time constraints, vocabulary limitations, difficulties in comprehension, negative emotions, slow reading speed, and low persistence. In the later stages, students self-reported notable progress in overcoming these challenges, including increased interest in reading, enhanced comprehension, development of reading habits, better strategy use, improved emotional regulation, faster reading speeds, and more persistence. This shift from initial "problems" to later "progress" reflects a pattern of gradual improvement in areas where students initially struggled, supporting a "from problems to progress" model of development.

Interestingly, while students' self-reports reflected these subjective improvements, they did not correspond to gains on standardized reading assessments. This discrepancy suggests that while students felt more engaged and autonomous in their reading practices, these subjective improvements did not directly translate to measurable gains in reading proficiency as assessed by standardized tests. A possible reason for this disconnect may lie in the differences between self-perceived progress and skills that are quantifiable through traditional assessment methods, which may not fully capture the nuanced, qualitative aspects of autonomy and engagement developed under the Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction. These tests may thus overlook the more gradual, foundational shifts in students' reading habits, persistence, and strategy use.

The observed increase in learner autonomy aligns with Babuščáková's (2008) research, which found that Dalton Plan-based lessons enhance autonomy more effectively than non-Dalton methods. This may be attributed to the Dalton Plan's emphasis on assignment contracts, which place responsibility on students, encouraging them to manage their learning independently. Responsibility is widely regarded as a foundational element of learner autonomy and is essential for successful language acquisition (Benson & Voller, 2014; Holec, 1981; Myartawan & Latief, 2013). Under this model, teachers guide progress and provide feedback rather than dominate instruction, giving students time and space for independent learning, the teachers' less dominant role might contribute to the improvements in learner autonomy. In Parkhurst's words, "freedom and responsibility together perform the miracle"(Parkhurst, 1922, p.29).This study adds to the body of evidence supporting the adaptation of the Dalton Plan in college settings, where the maturity of students could make them more receptive to learner-centred approaches (Zhang, 2018). In this study, autonomy was fostered through choices in reading assignments, flexible completion rates, and the inclusion of extracurricular materials, illustrating the potential of the Dalton Plan to promote autonomy in college students.

The lack of improvement in reading proficiency could be explained by two main factors. First, the participants were students who had not passed the CET-4 exam, indicating relatively low language proficiency. Prior research (Qi et al., 2024) suggests that the Dalton Plan may be more effective for students with higher language proficiency, who may better utilize autonomous learning techniques to improve their reading skills. Second, although essential Dalton Plan

elements like learning contracts and teacher-guided progress tracking were integrated, traditional classroom schedules were retained, limiting flexibility in time management. This rigid structure may have restricted the benefits of independent reading activities, contributing to the lack of improvement in reading test scores.

The "problems to progress" pattern observed in students' self-reports highlights that problem-targeted instruction effectively addressed specific challenges. For instance, impatience and restlessness were frequent issues during the early phase, particularly when students encountered long, difficult passages. Over time, students reported progress in managing these emotions. They were encouraged to persevere even when confronted with unfamiliar words and advised to avoid looking up each unknown word immediately. Instead, they were taught to infer meanings from context, an approach modeled during instruction. This strategy helped students focus on understanding the overall text rather than becoming fixated on individual words. Additionally, the Dalton Plan-based self-report mechanism encouraged students to reflect on their learning processes and identify specific areas for improvement. Recognizing one's own challenges is a critical step toward addressing them, as self-reflection has been shown to foster strategic learning and self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008).

The mismatch between students' self-reported improvements and their reading test results suggests that while the Dalton Plan-based instruction effectively fosters a sense of autonomy and engagement, there is gap between subjective improvements and actual progress. Research (Dunning et al., 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008) indicates these subjective improvements may not directly translate into quantifiable gains on standardized assessments. Several additional factors may have contributed to this disconnect. Students reported consistent challenges with time management and vocabulary, which, despite some progress, likely affected their reading test performance. The demanding course load for medical majors may have limited the time students could dedicate to reading, heightening the sense of difficulty with complex texts. Vocabulary, a fundamental component of reading comprehension, was frequently mentioned as a barrier throughout the experiment, which would have further hindered test performance.

Conclusion

In summary, the Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction appears to foster a more autonomous learning environment that empowers students to take responsibility for their reading habits and promotes positive attitudes toward learning. However, while qualitative data suggest significant gains in motivation and engagement, the quantitative data from reading tests do not reflect similar improvements. Future studies may involve the development of alternative assessments that more accurately capture the skills fostered through Dalton Plan-based classroom instruction. Additionally, integrating focused strategies for vocabulary development and comprehension support could further enhance students' reading proficiency. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of how learner autonomy can be cultivated in EFL contexts and underscores the complexities of translating such autonomy into measurable academic outcomes.

Funding: This research is not funded.
Acknowledgments: No applicable.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work.

Artificial Intelligence Statement: The authors used DeepSeek to check and correct some possible mistakes to assist with improving language clarity and readability. The authors took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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