

IMPACT OF VIRTUAL LITERATURE CIRCLES ON CHINESE
UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT ENGLISH READING

by

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To pursue the highest academic degree away from home in a foreign country has been the most courageous decision I have ever made. My son, Zeling Yu, was only one and half years old when I left him to obtain a doctorate in Reading Education in the U.S. I have been constantly challenged, both intellectually and emotionally, throughout my PhD program, but there have always been people who lifted me up. This work is dedicated to the people who offered me knowledge, guidance, support, help, and love during my doctoral journey.

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ABSTRACT

IMPACT OF VIRTUAL LITERATURE CIRCLES ON CHINESE UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT ENGLISH READING

by

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The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of virtual literature circles (VLCs) on Chinese university English as a foreign language (EFL) students' independent English reading. The importance of independent reading for EFL students to develop critical thinking, language proficiency, and good readership was extensively discussed and supported (eg. Day and Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1989, 1993, 1995; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Ro, 2013; Yamashita, 2013). However, lack of empirically validated approaches hindered the ability of EFL teachers to effectively promote such reading.

This study proposed a VLC approach for EFL teachers to engage their students in independent English reading. The VLC approach integrated the use of social media into traditional literature circles. To validate this approach in an EFL environment, VLCs were implemented with a sample of Chinese university EFL students. A quasi-experimental between-subjects posttest design was selected to investigate the effectiveness of the VLC. The 118 research participants were enrolled in four reading classes. Two classes (n=59) were randomly assigned to the VLC treatment and the other two (n=59) to the summary-writing treatment, while reading two American young adult novels outside of school. To measure participant reading experiences and reading achievement, five book-dependent

instruments (the Reading Experience Survey, the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, the Reading Comprehension Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay) were developed and administered to all research participants after the eight-week experiment.

A one-way MANCOVA showed that, overall, VLC participants outperformed the summary-writing participants on the composite score of the posttest. Univariate analysis revealed that participation in VLCs led to statistically better performance in the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test. The research provided empirical evidence for the overall effectiveness of the VLC. The findings have important implications for EFL reading instruction and research.

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LIST OF TERMS

Aesthetic stance	A type of reading in which the reader is absorbed in his/her emotions, feelings, and personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 1982).
Asynchronous	Not existing or happening at the same time.
Efferent stance	A type of reading in which the reader focuses on taking away facts or knowledge from the text (Rosenblatt, 1982).
EFL	The abbreviation for English as a Foreign Language, which is mainly used to refer to non-native English speakers learning English while living in their own country.
ESL	The abbreviation for English as a Second Language, which mainly refers to non-native English speakers learning English while living in an English-speaking country.
Independent reading	The act of students reading English outside of school, on their own, and without the teacher's presence.
L1	An abbreviation for first language; the language a person has learned from birth or within the critical period of cognitive development.
L2	An abbreviation for second language; a language other than one's first or native language.
Literature circles	Small groups consisting of four to five students who read the same text and discuss it with each other face to face.
Multimodal	Means of online communication that may include typed comments, voicemail, pictures, videos, or links.
Reading engagement	A deep understanding and appreciation of the text, personal connections to the text, and critical interpretation and evaluation of the text.
Synchronous	Existing or occurring at the same time.
Virtual literature circles	Small groups consisting of four to five students who read the same text and discuss it with fellow group members online in multimodal forms.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My interest regarding the topic of the current study began in 2007 when I took a young adult literature class with Dr. Pavonetti for my Master of Arts in Teaching degree at Oakland University (OU). For this course, all students were required to read young adult novels outside of class and to then discuss them in class. In order to participate in those discussions and to offer intelligent insight, I read more English novels during that semester than I ever had in my life. I am a good reader in my first language, but I must admit that, before this class, I had never been interested in reading English at all, even during my undergraduate English program.

During this stage in my education, the instructional style used in my English Reading class did not appeal to or engage me. My English Reading professor always assigned articles from the textbook and asked us to write summaries of those readings or answer multiple-choice questions based on the material. My classmates and I either copied parts directly from the reading materials or we read the translation of the English materials in order to write the summaries in English. Our professor would give us generic comments like “good job,” “excellent,” “great,” etc., and we simply discussed answers to the multiple-choice questions in class. These assignments and activities never fully motivated me to read because the class structure seemed formulaic and lacked interaction. Partly for this reason, English reading was nothing but a bore to me at that time. My attitude toward English reading changed positively, however, during my

graduate years. I read the young adult English novels assigned in Dr. Pavonetti's class passionately because I enjoyed sharing with my classmates my thoughts and ideas about the readings. This significant contrast prompted me to consider the question of: How can I help my students in China experience the same engagement with English literature that I felt in this young adult literature class?

To help students experience the joy of English reading and become proficient English readers, teachers must know how to first motivate students to start reading and how to then encourage them to stick with this activity. I sought approaches that would be both effective and practical, and assignments and reading activities that could engage students in reading English literature without overwhelming teachers with extra workloads. I also attempted to discover how the integration of technology could be used to facilitate students' learning processes since today's learners use technology on a daily basis.

Informed by my doctoral studies, thorough reflection on these questions narrowed my focus to my current dissertation topic. I designed for my students the virtual literature circles model, a reading approach that incorporates literature-centered practices grounded in my developing beliefs about the importance of social interaction and use of technology in English literacy education. The virtual literature circle approach entails the three elements that I view as most crucial to English education: literature reading, social interaction, and use of technology. It is my hope that this approach will have a positive impact on Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' independent English reading, which, in turn, will be beneficial for their overall English learning.

Background of the Study

Importance of English to Chinese Individuals

English has become the main language of popular culture, trade, international communication, online interaction, and academia in the process of globalization throughout the world (Crystal, 2012). English is used so extensively that over 80 percent of all information in the academic, scientific, and technological sectors is stored in English-based electronic retrieval systems. English is also recognized in almost every country. To a large extent, the English language is functioning as the global language.

Since English is used internationally for commerce and communication, many countries emphasize English language education. China's need to communicate with the outside world, along with the emerging status of English as the global language, brought about the rise of English language education in China. At the beginning of the 1980s, China adopted the Open-up and Reform policy, resulting in the ever-growing international exchange and bringing rapid development of its economy. Over the subsequent three decades, China has attached increasing importance to English language education in order to adapt to the situation of globalization (Chang, 2006). English has become the dominant foreign language in China, and English classes are offered from elementary school all the way to college under China's national foreign language policy.

English is as important to Chinese individuals as it is to the country as a whole. Chinese people value English learning for several major reasons. First, because English is a required course all the way from middle school to college, English proficiency is a necessity for the competent student. Second, English is among the three major subjects tested on the college entrance examinations, along with Chinese and Math. China's

college entrance examinations are national standardized tests on which high-school graduates must earn certain grades to gain entrance into their desired universities. Third, the increasing scale of globalization accelerates the demand for employees with English skills. Simply put, English is closely related to young people's success in life and career. Guo and Sun (2014) did a large-scale national survey to study the relationship between English proficiency and income in China. Their results revealed that English proficiency had a significant, positive correlation with college graduates' starting salaries, probability of changing permanent residence status from rural to urban (an important indicator of social and financial status), and future earning potential.

With English being important to academic studies, professional success, and personal development, almost every university in China now has an English program to prepare English majors. Many English-major students aspire to master the English language and have a successful future, and the country relies on graduates who can shoulder the responsibility of international communication and English education. Thus, both English educators and students are stakeholders in China's EFL instruction.

China's English as a Foreign Language Environment

Despite the fact that English is considered important, it is still a foreign language and therefore requires tremendous efforts for Chinese university students to learn. In countries where English is the official language used for education and daily life, and where speakers of other languages learn English as a second language (ESL), ESL students are more extensively exposed to English and are highly motivated to study the language. In China, however, English is a foreign language rather than a second language. The official language in China is Mandarin Chinese, and English is seldom

used for internal communication. The TV programs people watch are in Chinese. The books people read for pleasure are in Chinese. People speak, listen, read, and write using the Chinese language. English is taught and learned only in the classrooms, where textbooks are the major reading materials; therefore, Chinese English learners do not have enough authentic exposure to the English language, resulting in a lack of the cultural background knowledge essential to English learning. Based on these circumstances, China's EFL environment is not entirely favorable to English learning.

Inadequacies in Chinese University EFL Students' Independent English Reading

For the sake of the present study, independent English reading refers to the act of students reading English outside of school, on their own and without the teacher's presence. As discussed above, English is important in China, but the EFL environment is not conducive to independent English reading. Independent English reading among Chinese university EFL students has been less than optimal. Han, Li, and Yan (2007) conducted a large-scale survey and found that, despite Chinese university students' positive attitudes toward independent English reading, the average time spent on this activity was only about two hours a week. Even the most diligent English majors in top Chinese universities read fewer than 10 books per semester. The researchers deemed this reading time and amount to be insufficient for developing high English proficiency.

China's National Curriculum for English Programs in Higher Education (English Language Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education, 2000) suggests that English-major students read English extensively. The curriculum sets specific standards for the English reading speed and skills necessary for each proficiency level and also recommends a list of novels written in English. Yet, no specific curricular guidelines exist

to inform teachers of strategies by which to encourage independent English reading. Without informed and empirically supported assistance from teachers, it is difficult for Chinese university EFL students to decide what to read and to know how to read outside of school. Consequently, students seldom read independently outside of class even though they know the importance of such reading. These students' failure to achieve the desired depth and breadth of independent English reading results from both environmental and instructional problems. Since English will remain a foreign language in China and the EFL environment will therefore be unlikely to change, it is only meaningful to focus on instructional problems.

Problems in EFL Reading Instruction

Foreign language reading instruction has never been an easy task in that it involves a myriad of disciplines such as linguistics, cognitive psychology, physiology, and educational psychology. In addition to environmental issues, China's EFL reading instruction encounters the following major problems: educators' misconception of EFL reading, insufficient EFL reading materials and guidance, and lack of engaging approaches to independent reading.

Educators' misconception of EFL reading. Reading in general comprises decoding a written text, constructing meaning, extracting information, and perhaps engaging emotionally with the text. As the authors state at the beginning of their book *Reading in a Foreign Language* (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984), it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between first and foreign language reading. From the cognitive point of view, reading in a second language exhibits many similarities with reading in a first language. Nevertheless,

reading in a second language also requires both linguistic and cultural knowledge of the second language, making EFL reading a very complex and demanding activity. Thus, EFL readers often face problems such as poor comprehension, disengagement with the text, and low motivation for reading in English.

Researchers have considered whether poor reading in a foreign language results from problems with the foreign language or from problems with the common skills of reading (Alderson, 1984; Wang & Qi, 1991). Alderson (1984) examined empirical evidence to investigate the question reflected in the title of his paper: “Reading in a Foreign Language: A Reading Problem or a Language Problem?” Wang and Qi (1991) examined the same question in China’s EFL context. However, the issue has yet to be fully resolved. Specifically, it is unclear to what extent foreign language reading problems are due to inadequacy of foreign language proficiency and to what extent they are due to reading problems in general. Alderson (1984) proposed that EFL reading is more a language problem if a reader’s English proficiency is low but becomes both a language and reading problem when a reader passes a certain linguistic threshold.

Chinese university EFL students have reached intermediate to high levels of English proficiency because they have studied English for at least six years before reaching the collegiate status. Thus, EFL reading is presumably both a language problem and a reading problem for them. However, because EFL reading is mainly regarded as a language problem, English reading instruction in Chinese universities still focuses too much on developing linguistic knowledge of English, covering language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and translation. This misunderstanding of EFL reading has, to

some extent, presented obstacles to good English readership because instruction on linguistics is necessary but not sufficient to reading in a foreign language.

Insufficient EFL reading materials and guidance. China's EFL classes are usually textbook-based. Textbooks are a major source of English language input for students and a major source of support for teachers. As the primary type of English reading material for students, EFL reading textbooks in China often incorporate short reading texts and exercises that aim to develop linguistic knowledge and reading comprehension skills. Students are required to read only short passages in the anthology textbooks and to complete accompanying exercises of the textbook. Unfortunately, some of the reading selections in the textbooks are beyond students' independent reading levels or are of very little interest to the students. Thus, textbooks often fail to facilitate productive and enjoyable English reading.

Another drawback of the overreliance on textbooks is that the reading selections are usually too short to convey sufficient cultural context. When students read in English, they not only struggle with the vocabulary and grammar, but also have trouble understanding the subtle cultural connotations. Textbooks often lack cultural background knowledge necessary for successful EFL reading. In addition, since each class includes students of different reading levels, it is hard for teachers to reach all the students with the same textbook. Hence, although textbooks are valuable sources of language data, this dependence on textbooks as a class's only reading material is not optimal for the development of EFL reading skills.

As discussed above, China has an EFL environment in which people rarely perform English reading. Even though there are English reading materials available in print as

well as online, it is unlikely that Chinese university EFL students will voluntarily read those English materials. As Han, Li, and Yan's (2007) study revealed, Chinese university EFL students often feel lost when asked to choose their own English reading materials. EFL students need guidance on choosing outside-of-class texts that are suitable to their English levels and that feature interesting topics. However, EFL teachers rarely assign extra English literature for students to read and do not usually provide guidance in choosing among available reading options. Chinese university EFL students, therefore, lack practical access to appropriate English materials to read outside of school.

Lack of engaging approaches to independent reading. There is a tendency for English instructors in Asian countries to teach reading mainly to develop their students' linguistic knowledge. Instructors focus on test-taking skills rather than fostering interest in reading, leading students to become slow and ineffective readers who depend too much on their teachers (Shih, 1999). Typical EFL reading instruction in China follows a specific formula: Students read the assigned materials on their own and answer questions provided by the textbook, and the teacher checks the answers and clarifies students' comprehension, adopting the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate model. Students learn how to decode and perhaps comprehend under this model, but they are rarely given the opportunity to experience the joy of English reading.

Authentic English reading experience is missing in China's EFL reading classes. Students read to complete corresponding comprehension exercises, and teachers read to teach linguistic knowledge and reading comprehension skills. This kind of instruction often fails to promote an appreciation for and enjoyment of reading, so Chinese EFL students seldom read English outside of school. They consider English reading to be a

boring and difficult task. In addition, teachers' heavy workloads make it difficult for them to take on the extra responsibility of guiding students in their independent reading because it seemingly involves a tremendous amount of work. That is why many Chinese EFL teachers feel unprepared to implement approaches that would support their reading instruction even though they understand the importance of independent reading. This dilemma echoes Han, Li, and Yan's (2007) research finding: Although Chinese EFL teachers embrace the idea that students should read outside of class for their English language development, these teachers have not yet been able to make this happen.

Rationale for the Study

Rao (2006) found that Chinese EFL students rely heavily on their teachers in language learning, following their instructions very closely. This trusting relationship between teachers and students presents an opportunity for EFL instructors to encourage independent reading. If teachers utilize effective and practical approaches, recommending appropriate English literature to students rather than merely assigning textbooks, students will be more motivated to read English literature independently. However, this opportunity is not being optimized due to the lack of engaging approaches for EFL instructors to employ in facilitating independent reading.

Virtual Literature Circles as a Solution

The problems in EFL reading instruction lead to insufficient independent English reading among Chinese university students. It is necessary that EFL instructors adopt empirically supported approaches to address these problems to engage students in independent English reading. The use of virtual literature circles (VLCs), a new form of

traditional literature circles (LCs), is one such approach that has the potential to engage students in reading English literature independently in an EFL context.

Brief introduction to VLCs. VLCs are small groups, consisting of four to five students who read the same English text and discuss it with fellow group members online in multimodal forms. VLCs are based on traditional LCs, which follow similar methods in a face-to-face format. LCs have been a common instructional approach in literacy classrooms across North America. However, the idea of VLCs is relatively new because it only recently came into being, under the influence of technological development.

Technological background for VLCs. Traditional face-to-face LCs have been used successfully in literacy classrooms, which has laid a good foundation for exploring appropriate integration of this practice with technology. New technology, such as the Internet, personal computers, and mobile devices, has changed the way the world operates (Friedman, 2007). Web 2.0 technologies offer platforms for information sharing and collaboration. The advent of social media has made revolutionary changes to the ways in which people communicate with each other. All these technological advancements have not only changed the way people live and work, but have also brought significant changes to literacy education.

Today's learners are radically different from the learners of yesterday. As "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), who stay connected with the world through cell phones, iPads, computers, and other digital devices, today's students are habitual users of the Internet, which they often use to share information. Based on the characteristics of students in the digital age, it is clear that learning is becoming more and more social and that

dependence on the Internet and on social sharing of knowledge continues to grow (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Such changes in students' means of social interaction require teachers to reform the way they teach.

Need for the Study

The limited in-class time is insufficient for the development of high English proficiency; therefore, it is important that EFL teachers guide students to read outside of class as well. One way for teachers to reach students is to integrate technology into research-tested instructional approaches. LCs have long been used in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) literacy classrooms with success at all different levels. VLCs move LCs online, providing students with a platform for reading English as a social activity outside of class.

The VLC approach combines a successful traditional instructional method with the affordances of technology, offering the potential to engage EFL students in reading English outside of class and thereby enhancing their English learning. However, studies on VLCs in EFL environments are almost non-existent. There is a need to conduct empirical research to validate the VLC approach in EFL environments.

Purpose of the Study

As discussed above, independent English reading is important but difficult for EFL students. Teachers need approaches to increase the frequency, longevity, and enjoyment of independent English reading among their students. There is a scarcity of research on effective teaching approaches for guiding EFL students' independent English reading. The current research intends to propose a supplementary reading instructional

approach to help EFL teachers engage students in independent reading and to examine the approach's effectiveness in an EFL context.

I created a VLC model for teachers to follow when trying to engage EFL students in outside-of-class English reading. To validate the use of this practice, I implemented the VLC approach with Chinese university EFL students and examined the impact of the approach on their independent English reading. It is hoped that this study will provide empirical evidence supporting teachers and researchers in implementing VLCs and conducting studies in EFL contexts.

Summary

Although English is very important to Chinese individuals, it takes enormous effort for an EFL learner to master the English language. Independent reading serves as a good method of improving one's English proficiency, but China's EFL environment is not conducive to English learning or, specifically, to the practice of independent English reading. In addition, problems, such as Chinese English educators' misconception of EFL reading, insufficient EFL reading materials and guidance, and lack of engaging approaches to independent reading, lead to inadequacies in both the quantity and quality of Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading.

The question of how to engage EFL students in independent English reading interests me, the researcher of the current study. My personal EFL reading experiences and doctoral study in reading showed me firsthand the problems faced by educators. While teachers clearly value independent reading, the lack of informed approaches makes implementation difficult and adversely affects students' reading behaviors. Furthermore, it is vital in today's technological world that educators innovate the way they teach. I,

therefore, propose the VLC approach in the hope that it will motivate Chinese university EFL students to read English literature outside of class more frequently and critically. The goal of the study is to investigate the impact of the proposed VLC approach on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent reading. In order to structure the study and provide an appropriate background, including both theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, I reviewed literature from three areas: (a) Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading, (b) traditional face-to-face LCs, and (c) VLCs. The synthesis of these three areas of literature provided the background knowledge necessary to frame this study.

Overview of Chinese University EFL Students' Independent English Reading

According to the latest statistics provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of English majors in China as of 2013 was 813,777. To help such a number of students master the English language more fully, educators must know how to engage students in independent English reading. The value of independent reading outside of school for literacy development has been widely acknowledged in academia (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cullinan, 2000; Day & Bamford, 1998; Hammond & Nessel, 2012; Krashen, 1989, 1993, 1995) even though there is no uniform term referring to such reading. Among numerous phrases, "extensive reading" (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009) and "independent reading" (Cullinan, 2000; Hammond & Nessel, 2012) are the two terms most frequently used to denote out-of-school reading.

The current study adopts the term “independent reading” to refer to the act of students reading English literature other than textbooks outside of school without the teacher’s presence.

Benefits of Independent English Reading

Many studies have examined the effects of independent reading in the reader’s first language. For example, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) asked students to complete activity forms to investigate the relationship between various outside-of-school activities and reading achievement. Among all the ways students spent their time, reading books was found to be the best predictor of reading achievement as measured by a reading comprehension test, a vocabulary test, and a reading speed test. Cullinan (2000) reviewed the research literature and confirmed the positive effects of independent reading on school achievement. Even though correlations between amount of independent reading and performance on literacy proficiency tests in the first language are not always statistically significant, independent reading has consistently been found to positively relate to students’ reading comprehension, vocabulary development, writing ability, other literacy skills, and reading motivation (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cullinan, 2000; Hammond & Nessel, 2012).

The value of independent reading in second language acquisition has been extensively noted as well (e.g., Cho & Krashen, 1994; Day and Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1989, 1993, 1995; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Ro, 2013; Yamashita, 2013). Linguistic competence is often found to be positively related to independent reading. For instance, Cho and Krashen (1994) reported that four adult ESL participants increased their competence in English vocabulary as well as both their listening and speaking abilities as

a result of reading novels for pleasure. Mason and Krashen (1997) conducted three experiments at the university level in Japan on the effectiveness of independent English reading. The participants in the experimental groups, who did more extensive independent reading, outperformed the control groups on a cloze test. All three experiments confirmed the value of independent reading to the improvement of EFL skills. Independent reading has also been found to improve second language learners' attitudes toward second language reading (e.g., Ro, 2013; Yamashita, 2013). Day and Bamford (1998) reviewed a comprehensive body of research demonstrating the potential benefits of independent reading, including not only improvements in students' reading skills and speed, but also changes in their general language proficiency and in their attitudes toward language learning.

One of the leading researchers in the EFL field, Krashen (1989, 1993, 1995), whose Input Hypothesis stresses the importance of comprehensible input to second language acquisition, asserts that reading is the most important source of language input. Krashen believes that incidental learning occurs naturally as learners read. He concludes from his empirical studies that a large quantity of independent reading is crucial for EFL learning. The existing literature echoes Krashen's claim and reveals that independent reading can expand students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, increase overall comprehension, familiarize the students with the target language's socio-cultural background, develop students' interest in reading the second language for fun, and foster good reading habits (Day & Bamford, 1998; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Ro, 2013; Yamashita, 2013).

Teacher's Role in Promoting Independent Reading

Hammond and Nessel (2012) state that a teacher's instruction quality is best measured by how well students do outside of school in reading activities. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found that teachers' guidance made a difference in students' outside-of-school reading amount and reading quality. Much research has suggested that teachers play an important role in influencing whether students read outside of school (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Han, Li, & Yan, 2007; Topping, Samuels, & Paul, 2007).

Topping, Samuels, and Paul's (2007) study explored whether it was purely reading quantity that affected reading achievement, or if reading quality and teacher performance were also integral factors. Their findings suggest that reading quality and classroom instruction are as important as quantity for student gains in reading achievement across grade levels 1 to 12. An important component of reading quality is students' comprehension of texts, which can be either facilitated or hindered by teachers' guidance, such as in choosing reading materials and maintaining students' accountability throughout the reading process. The researchers, therefore, concluded that independent reading without proper teacher guidance has only a modest influence on reading achievement.

All the above-mentioned studies emphasize the important role that teachers play in encouraging students to read outside of class. Further, Kasten and Wilfong (2005) emphasized two goals for literacy educators: "The first is to teach our students to read. The second is to teach our students to want to read" (p. 656). The latter goal is the more challenging. In order to develop in students both an ability and a desire to read, literacy

instructors face the challenge of adopting effective approaches to arouse students' interest and engage them in independent English reading.

Dilemmas in Current Instruction of EFL Independent Reading

Although the benefits of independent reading have been widely documented in second language acquisition studies and a consensus has been reached regarding the importance of the teacher's role, it is not easy for teachers to encourage independent reading among Chinese university EFL students. There are various causes of difficulties in promoting EFL independent reading. In addition to the environmental and instructional problems mentioned in Chapter One, contradictory propositions by researchers also lead to confusion among teachers in implementing methods to encourage EFL independent reading.

A review of the relevant literature reveals conflicting viewpoints regarding proper instructional approaches to independent reading. One such conflict is whether teachers should provide direct instruction throughout students' reading processes. Some scholars advocate that incidental learning will automatically result from large quantities of independent reading (e.g., Krashen, 1989, 1993, 1995), while others trust the power of direct instruction and teachers' constant guidance as well as supervision (e.g., Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010) when it comes to reading in a second language. Sonbul and Schmitt's (2010) findings demonstrate the value of the time and effort spent on direct teaching of lexical items in EFL reading classes. These researchers, therefore, assert that direct instruction is especially effective in facilitating the deepest level of knowledge possible for EFL students. Another often debated point is whether teachers should assign books for students' after-class reading. Krashen and his proponents hold strongly that students

should not be assigned books to read but should instead be allowed to read whichever books interest them. Additionally, they argue against the use of follow-up exercises or quizzes based on the belief that such tasks will ruin the fun of reading.

One more argument centers around the question of what kind of books—original, unabridged books or simplified versions—can best help students acquire English skills. Research has yielded inconsistent answers to this question. Researchers argue that using linguistically simplified books can increase language learners' comprehensible input, thereby benefiting their language learning (eg., Nation & Deweerdt, 2001; Nation & Ming-Tzu, 1999). However, other researchers have found that reading simplified texts fails to produce better results than reading authentic versions. For example, Young (1999) sought to determine whether differences existed in recall scores between students who read simplified versus authentic versions of the same text. Young's (1999) findings indicated that recall scores for the simplified texts were not superior to those associated with the authentic versions.

The inconsistent research results on independent reading in a second language, as well as the previously mentioned environmental problems, misconceptions, and instructional problems, contribute to EFL teachers' dilemmas in encouraging the reading of English literature after class. The current approaches to encouraging independent reading are inadequate in most Chinese EFL classes. Even when students are assigned extra literature to read, they are either required to complete no follow-up exercises at all or are asked to submit written work to prove that they have read the material. Of all types of written work students may be required to complete, summary is the most common (Cordero-Ponce, 2000; Yu, 2008), likely because of the ease with which teachers can

grade these assignments. However, summaries are typically text-based and lack a deep-thinking element. When a student writes a summary and submits it to the teacher, interaction occurs only between the student and teacher and is limited to the teacher's one-time brief comments, such as on overall quality, linguistic accuracy, or organization. With little communication involved, such assignments can neither motivate students to read critically nor help them to derive enjoyment from reading.

While teachers attempt to implement methods that facilitate independent reading, the lack of informed approaches presents obstacles to this goal and causes instructors to resort to uninspired "default" approaches that produce less than optimal progress. The current research suggests the VLC approach as a means by which to address the issues in EFL independent reading through personal response, critical reflection, and social interaction. It is hoped that this method will help EFL teachers mitigate the instructional difficulties to engage students in independent reading.

Overview of Traditional Face-to-Face Literature Circles

As the foundation for the VLC approach, "literature circles" were first defined as such by Harvey Daniels in his 1994 book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. LCs have been a common instructional approach in literacy classrooms across North America. Knowledge of traditional LCs, the foundational form of VLCs, can lead to a better understanding of the proposed approach.

Origin of Literature Circles

People have been, for centuries, informally talking about books in settings like churches, libraries, and homes; however, the instructional use of literature discussions in

the classroom only started about 34 years ago. The origin of classroom LCs goes back to 1982 when the fifth graders in Karen Smith's classroom started reading the novels that Karen's friend had donated when moving. There were multiple copies of each novel. Karen did not make any efforts to introduce the books to the students, but the students asked whether they could read the books they found in the corner of the classroom. After the students obtained Karen's permission to read the books, they spontaneously formed groups based on their choices of books, assigned themselves pages to read, and met regularly to talk about those books. Much to Karen's surprise, her students took ownership of their reading and talked about the books with quality, depth, range, and energy (Daniels, 1994).

Even though the term "literature circles" was not coined at that time, Karen's students naturally created their own LCs. Karen, who was also a graduate student at the time, happened to have been reading about Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and immediately recognized the significance of her students' innovation. She invited other educators to observe her students' literature discussions in the classroom. Those educators helped refine the structure of the literature discussions to allow powerful, student-initiated, and high-order discussion, as well as critical thinking about books. As a result, Karen's students' discussions about the books they read became the prototype of classroom-based LCs. Karen then started advocating the power of children's literature discussions together with other educators.

In 1994, Harvey Daniels published his book *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. The book offers specific techniques for starting and managing LCs and practical suggestions for extending LCs across the curriculum.

Daniels's book helped popularize the term "literature circles," and the idea of classroom-based literature discussions has gradually become a familiar concept. There are now numerous American teachers implementing small-group literature discussions of some sort in their classrooms.

Implications of Literature Circles

There have been many publications about small, peer-led group classroom literature discussions while the terms for those literature discussions have not always been uniform. Different researchers have used varied terms to refer to literature discussions, such as "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989), "dialogic inquiries" (Wells, 1999), "reading groups" (Daniels, 2002), "book clubs" (Daniels, 2002; McMahon & Raphael, 1997), and "literature circles" (Daniels, 1994; 2002). Among all the terms, the most common two are "book clubs" and "literature circles." The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) (2010)—an initiative of the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences that reviews and assesses research evidence for educational programs, products, practices, and policies—considers the two terms synonymous in its 2010 intervention report about book clubs. It is not surprising that the WWC would treat book clubs and literature circles the same because there is no consensus on the terms even among the leading researchers of the small-group literature discussions.

McMahon and Raphael (1997) define book clubs as "small, student-led discussion groups in which students [have] the opportunity to discuss with peers the issues and ideas they [find] interesting, relevant, challenging, and exciting in the text that they [read]" (p. 23). Daniels (1994) offers the definition of literature circles as "small, temporary

discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (p.13). His definition in the 2002 updated version of book, “Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (Daniels, 2002, p. 2), remained basically the same.

It seems that book clubs and literature circles are similar in the sense that both are small-group, peer-led discussion groups; both provide the same reading framework to supplement or organize regular classroom reading instruction for students, and both have a structure to facilitate student book talk. Even Daniels (2002), the advocator of literature circles, used “book clubs” in the title of his 2002 updated version of the literature circle book, *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Since there is no consensus regarding the definition, this dissertation chooses to use literature circles to indicate the small-group, peer-led, temporary discussion groups who read the same text.

Theories Underpinning Literature Circles

As a powerful reading program, LCs are grounded in a string of theories. The important ideas in LCs embody many theorists and educators’ philosophies. The first person that has to be mentioned here is a great philosopher and educator, John Dewey, who explained at length one century ago, in *Democracy and Education* (1916/2004) that students learn by doing, teachers serve as guides and coaches, and it is important to make education a social experience and create a real learning-living community. The structure of LCs exemplifies John Dewey’s philosophy by creating such a learning community where students take responsibility for their own learning and teachers facilitate that process. The underlying assumptions of LCs reflect John Dewey’s conception that

learners are fundamentally good, self-regulating, and growth-seeking, so they should be empowered to learn, not controlled. Besides Dewey's educational philosophy, the transactional theory and socio-cultural perspectives also lay a solid theoretical foundation for LCs.

Transactional theory. The premise and many concepts of LCs are also influenced by Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Rosenblatt's transactional theory was first proposed in her book, *Literature as Exploration*, in the 1930s. Rosenblatt was a strong believer in John Dewey's pragmatist epistemological propositions. She adopted the term "transaction" from John Dewey's epistemological writings to imply "unfractured observation" of the whole situation. The transactional theory views reading as a transaction between the text and the reader. Before Rosenblatt's seminal work, earlier theories held the view that meaning resided either in the text or in the reader. It was believed that literary studies should focus on what the author intended to convey and what the text meant; thus, students were supposed to study the author and analyze the text under the teacher's guidance. As a result, most attention was paid to the text itself and the author; the student's role as the reader was largely neglected. Rosenblatt's transactional theory challenged the old assumption of the importance of the text and author over the reader by placing the reader at an equally important status as the text. However, acceptance of the transactional theory did not happen immediately.

Reading as a transactional process. Rosenblatt (1968, 1982, 1995) argues again and again that reading is a transactional process in which a reader brings his/her own past or present experiences to the text, while the text offers a structure and elements to guide

the reader. Meaning does not reside solely in the reader or the text; instead, meaning is within the transaction between the reader and the text. The text remains meaningless until a reader makes sense of it. As the perception of reader-text relationships evolved, scholars began to acknowledge Rosenblatt's work and realize that readers play an important role in the reading process.

It is now widely accepted that reading is not a static one-way act; instead, it is a dynamic, recursive, two-way interaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1982). Both the reader and the text are important agents for meaning making in the reading process. The long overdue importance of the reader's role has been highlighted in the transactional theory. However, the reader's role has not been given sufficient attention in teaching practices.

LCs recognize the reader's role and include elements that "inherently welcome, celebrate, and build upon students' responses to what they read" (Daniels, 1994, p.35). More specifically, for literature study, LC participants start with their own responses rather than the teacher's literary analysis, which can help them to resist passive absorption and instead actively engage with texts.

Reader's stance. According to Rosenblatt (1982), a reader can take either an "efferent" or an "aesthetic" stance during reading. If a reader narrows his/her attention to gathering the meaning, the ideas, and the directions to be retained, and his/her attention focuses on accumulating what is to be carried away at the end of the reading, such reading is "efferent," which means "carry away" in Latin. However, if a reader's attention centers on what is being created during the actual reading, he/she attends not only to the abstract concepts that the words point to, but also to what those objects or referents in the

text stir up of personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes. Out of these feelings and ideas, a new experience is shaped and lived through; this kind of reading is termed as “aesthetic,” from the Greek word meaning "to sense" or "to perceive" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). In simpler words, if a reader focuses on taking away facts or knowledge from the text, he/she is taking an efferent stance; if a reader is absorbed in his/her emotions, feelings, and personal experiences during reading, he/she is taking an aesthetic stance.

Efferent reading and aesthetic reading serve different purposes and are equally important. Rosenblatt (1995) states that both efferent reading and aesthetic reading should be taught; however, in many classrooms, teachers tend to teach efferent reading while neglecting aesthetic reading. The case could not be truer in China’s EFL teaching. Most Chinese EFL teachers focus only on linguistic knowledge and facts from the text, while rarely teaching students to approach English texts aesthetically. Nevertheless, aesthetic reading is crucial to the transactional process for meaning construction during reading. Rosenblatt (1982) stated, “[a]esthetic reading, by its very nature, has an intrinsic purpose, the desire to have a pleasurable, interesting experience for its own sake” (p.275). Studying literary works is not just about identifying the printed words in the text or learning about the author, but also about inviting personal past and present experiences and imagination to respond to a particular text. Understanding the transactional nature of reading can help correct the tendency to look only at the text and the author's presumed intentions. Readers should also be encouraged to pay selective attention to their inner worlds when reading literature.

LCs embrace both efferent reading and aesthetic reading, offering a platform where students can share both their efferent and aesthetic understanding of the text. In

particular, with the format of peer-led group discussions, LCs provide a receptive, supportive, and safe environment in which participants feel free to adopt the aesthetic stance without worrying about their responses being judged by the teacher as right or wrong.

Interpretations mediated by given contexts. In transactional theory, meaning results from the transaction between the reader and the text. Texts offer a certain set of linguistic elements to the reader, and the reader adopts either a predominantly efferent or a predominantly aesthetic stance based on the pattern of verbal symbols. However, reading is also influenced by the setting, by nonlinguistic factors that may enter into the reading transaction and may affect the approach or stance of the reader. As Rosenblatt (1982) states, reading is “a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p. 268). The nonverbal situation, the context, plays an important role in readers’ interpretations of the text. At a particular time, in a particular environment, certain meaning will be made by the transactions drawn on past and present experiences as well as the interests and orientation of the reader.

Rosenblatt’s book, *Literature as Exploration*, has been in print since its publication in the 1930s and was updated to its fifth edition in 1995. In every edition, there is a constant message that there is not just one correct interpretation for a reading, multiple interpretations are possible, and each one is dependent on the individual reader’s own prior knowledge and experience (Rosenblatt, 1995). The individuality of each reader creates a unique encounter with the text, so different readers may come up with different interpretations of the text. Therefore, no two readings, even by the same person, will be exactly the same, given a different time, a different mood, or a different place.

Context is an important factor in the meaning-making process. The transactional theory recognizes context effects and emphasizes students' experiences and responses as a means of understanding literature. Influenced by the transactional theory, LCs not only provide a venue for students to respond to the text according to their own unique reading experiences, but also create a context where participants share ideas and the transactions are not limited to occurring between the reader and the text, but among the text, the reader, and other readers. These transactions continuously shape and reshape meaning.

Socio-cultural perspectives. One further theory underpinning LCs is Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, which attaches great importance to the social context of learning and formulates the notion of social constructivism, suggesting that individuals in groups work together to construct knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory emphasizes three key concepts: (a) the role of language in the development of thought, (b) the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and (c) the process of internalization of newly learned concepts. All three concepts share one thing in common: the fundamental role social context plays in human learning.

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that humans are capable of higher-order thinking, which distinguishes them from other animals, and thinking is made possible through language, which is unique to humans. Language is important in the process of one's cognitive development. He believed that language itself at first develops from social interactions with the purpose of communication. The more opportunities learners have to use language as tools to construct and communicate meaning, the greater the development of higher-order thinking there will be. This idea justifies the design of LCs, which offers students ample opportunity to use language to construct and communicate meaning.

The distance between what students can learn independently and what they can learn with support from more knowledgeable individuals is named the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky theorized that ZPD is the area in which learners can achieve a goal with the support and guidance of a more knowledgeable other, be it a teacher or a more capable peer. The ZPD theory provides educators with a theoretical framework in which it is possible for learners to accomplish what they cannot do independently with the assistance from more knowledgeable people. So long as the tasks are neither too easy nor too difficult, learning occurs through external help within the learners' ZPD. This perspective is important for any instructional design as well as the implementation of the instruction. In the case of LCs, not only the teacher can play the more knowledgeable other scaffolding students who need help, but also the students can offer help to each other because different students possess different strengths. The structure of LCs promotes peer interaction, which brings students' strengths to the group so that all members will benefit and grow together.

The socio-cultural theory focuses directly on students' learning within specific contexts and emphasizes that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.34). Vygotsky suggested that individuals are guided by their own mental processes as they participate in social acts, but these processes are influenced by social experiences. Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspectives have had many proponents who developed and extended the implications of the theory. For instance, Bakhtin, Holquist, and Emerson (1986) proposed that meanings only exist within certain social contexts. They reiterated the importance of social context to meaning construction. Any study of language must consider social context because language cannot be studied

without the social circumstance in which it takes place. Their idea about the social construction of meaning contributes to the structure of small groups in LCs, which offer opportunities for students to communicate their ideas and construct meaning together. In well-structured reading groups like LCs, students learn more not just because they bring different ideas, but because, through communication and interaction, they can make new and better meaning together. One key of effective learning involves collaborative work, where students learn from each other to develop a higher level of cognitive capability. It is important to create a safe instructional environment in which students develop the necessary literacy knowledge and skills to participate effectively in communication about text. LCs provide a structure that facilitates meaningful interaction and collaborative work among students.

Daniels's Literature Circle Model

As mentioned earlier, LCs generally refer to small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. Teachers and researchers might use the same term to denote student literature discussion groups; however, their conceptualization of LCs might be different in terms of how LCs should be carried out. There are various versions of LCs with slightly different details such as who makes the book choice, how to form groups, how to begin the discussion of the text, and how teachers evaluate students' LC participation. The model proposed in this dissertation adopted several elements from Daniels's (1994, 2002) LC model based on the unique needs of EFL learners. In Daniels's model, LCs start with the teacher's brief introduction of the books to the whole class, and students choose whatever books interest them and form groups around book choices. Students read the books either in or outside

of class, taking on different roles to guide their reading and respond to the texts, and then they meet on a regular basis to discuss agreed-upon sections of the book. Finally, students present their books to the whole class through creative presentations.

Daniels (2002) claimed the following eleven points to be the key defining features of his LC model and asserted that authentic and mature LCs should manifest most or all of these features:

1. Students choose their own reading materials.
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice.
3. Different groups read different books.
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
5. Kids use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
6. Discussion topics come from the students.
7. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.
8. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.
9. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
10. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
11. When books are finished, readers share with their classmates, and then new groups form around new reading choices. (Daniels, 2002, p.18)

Besides these features, there is another distinctive feature in Daniels's LC model, the use of roles. Daniels suggested using roles to guide students' reading as well as their discussions at the initial stage when students are not yet proficient readers or are not familiar with the structure of LCs. Daniels's LC model includes different sets of roles for

fiction and nonfiction. This dissertation is interested in students' reading of fiction, so only the roles for reading fiction will be introduced.

The set for fiction generally has four basic roles: Connector, Questioner, Literary Luminary, and Illustrator. Daniels (2002) believes that the four basic roles reflect the fundamental kinds of thinking that good readers habitually use. Specifically, the connector's job is to find connections between the book and the reader, and between the book and the wider world. The questioner's job is to write down questions that occur to him/her while reading. The literary luminary's job is to locate special sections or quotations in the text for the group to talk over. The illustrator's job is to draw pictures related to the reading and presents that to the group. These roles embody different "takes" on the text, the associative (Connector), the analytical (Questioner), the oral/dramatic (Literary Luminary), and the graphic/artistic (Illustrator). Besides these basic roles, there are also four optional roles: Summarizer, Researcher, Word Wizard, and Scene Setter. The summarizer's job is to prepare a brief summary of the text the group has been reading. The researcher's job is to dig up some background information on any topic related to the book. The word wizard's job is to be on the lookout for words that have special meaning in the reading. The scene setter's job is to track where things are happening and describe each setting in detail for the group (Daniels, 2002, pp. 107-114).

The four basic roles serve as the foundation for discussions, and the optional roles can be used, depending on the nature of the book and the reading goals. Daniels (2002) suggested rotating the roles among members of the group so that students can develop and internalize these critical reading strategies. He also made it clear that the roles are

designed to facilitate the initial implementation of LCs in newly-formed groups. Once the students are comfortable discussing the texts, the roles can be discarded.

Daniels's LC model is well-structured and embodies the democratic, socio-cultural educational philosophies. The model encompasses two potent ideas: independent reading and collaborative learning, which emphasize students' autonomy in selecting texts and topics for discussion, as well as social interactions among students over solitary experiences with texts. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text, either in or outside of class, and following a reading and meeting schedule, members make notes to help them contribute to the periodic discussions through the book, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Daniels's LC model offers a workable structure in which students are given choices, time, responsibility, and a bit of guidance to engage in reading literature with their peers.

Benefits of Literature Circles

Rooted in socio-cultural theory and transactional theory, the LC, a learner-centered reading approach, brings together the ideas of independent reading, collaborative learning, and readers' personal responses as a learning vehicle to enhance students' reading experience, reading comprehension, and reading engagement. Students who participate in LCs both learn how to cooperate with each other and also gain a better understanding of the reading material through participation and collaboration. The main goals of LCs are not only the development of social skills of learners, but also the transition from dependent learning to independent learning (Daniel, 1994, 2002). LCs have been implemented extensively in US and Canadian classrooms at different levels to

promote literacy, and a sizeable body of research has identified significant advantages for using LCs in the classroom.

Positive affective impact. Affective factors are influential in the process of acquiring a second language. Negative emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt, and mere boredom, interfere with the process of acquiring a second language, and the opposite results are found for positive emotions (Krashen, 1982). LCs can help promote a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading because the LC structure creates a collaborative, interesting, and accountability-based reading environment for students, giving them autonomy in discussions and opportunities for social interaction (Daniels, 1994; 2002). The positive affective impacts of LCs have been well documented across different grade levels and different types of learners, including L2 learners and learners with special needs (e.g., Addington, 2001; Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Kim, 2004; Kong & Fitch, 2002).

For instance, Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) investigated students at different elementary grades on their perceptions of LCs, and the researchers found that the students favored the LC approach, describing it as “their favorite part of language arts” (p. 243). Kong and Fitch (2002) found that the participants of their study, 25 fourth and fifth graders, moved from resisting participation in LCs to enjoying it, and from not knowing how to respond to texts to becoming proficient at participating in literary conversations. Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002) investigated how 14 eighth and ninth graders, some having special learning needs, perceived their reading abilities when participating in LCs. These students’ reading skills and their perceptions of reading abilities improved, and, most importantly, their self-determination in reading also

intensified. Kim's (2004) study found the literature discussions helped adult ESL students emotionally and intellectually engage in English texts, leading to enjoyable L2 reading experiences. Addington's (2001) study reported graduate-level participants' positive attitudes toward participation in LCs. These studies are only a few examples of the numerous empirical studies on LCs in which participants showed unanimously positive attitudes toward reading and participating in LCs.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) found that intrinsic motivation predicted reading amount and breadth. The subjects of their study, fourth and fifth grade students with high intrinsic motivation, demonstrated higher interests and longer time in reading texts than those with low intrinsic motivation. When learners have more freedom to decide their own focus for discussion, as is the case in LCs, they feel empowered to manage their own learning, which motivates them to develop a favorable attitude toward reading. LCs create opportunities for participants to engage in meaningful, collaborative discussions that promote intrinsic motivation, generating favorable reading attitudes and positive reading experiences. The positive affective impact of LCs can lead to greater reading amount and breadth.

Reading comprehension. The general LC framework aims to improve students' independent reading, reading comprehension, and ability to interpret and think critically about text and communicate effectively about what they read and think. Reading comprehension is an important aspect that the LCs are designed to address. Some research studies reported that students engaged in LCs demonstrated increased comprehension, higher level thinking, and an ability to engage more deeply with text (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) reported that the

participants of their study, 24 diverse elementary school students in grades one, three, four, and five, credited taking part in LCs for their progress in the use of comprehension strategies. McElvain (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine whether LCs would affect the reading comprehension of English language learners in grades 4-6 in mainstream classrooms. The results showed that the students in the LC program outperformed the students in the control group, who did not participate in the LC program on standardized reading tests, and in 7 months, the LC group increased one grade level in reading.

Students have ample opportunity to engage in independent reading and social interactions with their peers in LCs. LCs hold students accountable for their reading, their own questions, ideas, and interpretations of the literature for discussion in these small groups. The prerequisite for effective participation in LC discussions is deep comprehension of the texts. Thus, logically, in theory, involvement in LCs should result in an improvement in reading comprehension.

Vocabulary acquisition. Studies have reported finding positive correlations between participation in LCs and vocabulary acquisition. Kong and Fitch (2002) used LCs with a class of 25 fourth and fifth graders whose home language was possibly not English. The students had diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The researchers used two tests, the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT) and the Meta-comprehension Strategy Index, in this one-year study, both at the beginning and the end of the school year, to gauge the students' learning in the LCs. It was found that the students' average raw score in gain of words in one year was equivalent to 1.8 years of growth. Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, and Dass (2007) adapted traditional LC roles to help high-school

students with intensive science vocabulary learning. These researchers found that the modified LC roles provided students with multiple meaningful interactions with vocabulary, which allowed the use of science terminology during subsequent hands-on inquiry activities and promoted true scientific literacy. Therefore, LCs have the ability to increase vocabulary acquisition.

Engagement with text. The LCs have long been used as a pedagogical tool to engage students in reading literature. As suggested by Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), engagement takes on different characteristics depending upon the manner in which it is situated in the literary event. Students are more engaged when there is a personal commitment to understanding the text, when they can set their own discussion agenda, and when they can ask questions that are important to them and that also permit personal responses. LCs allow all these activities that foster autonomy and engagement in reading.

In addition, the LC approach embraces both efferent and aesthetic reading stances and provides learners with opportunities to develop literacy strategies by analyzing literary components, discussing story elements, exploring background information, expressing personal connections, and making inquiry into the texts in open-ended discussions. Based on the transactional theory, personal responses are a vehicle for deep comprehension of the texts. LCs provide a natural conversation that allows students to read in an aesthetic manner and respond personally to the texts. In LCs, readers, as different as they can be, have opportunities to discover new concepts, think critically about the text, connect personal experiences to the text, exchange different opinions, and examine their own interpretation and responses to the text as they read. Many researchers analyzed LC literature discussions and found that learners as young as second and third

graders (Barone, 2013) and ESL learners (Kim, 2004) are able to develop diverse, insightful responses concerning literal comprehension, personal connections, interpretation, and evaluation of the text. Learners all have the ability to demonstrate engagement with texts when actively participating in peer-led literature discussions.

At the same time, LCs highlight the importance of social interaction, offering students a way to exchange experiences, cultures, and values with peers through a natural and authentic conversation. Lapp and Fisher (2009) stated that the support of peers who value reading is a factor of major significance for adolescents' reading motivation. Almasi (1995) also argued that "students who talk about what they read are more likely to engage in reading" (p. 20). Students who interact with one another about the texts they are reading are more likely to get involved in in-depth thinking about text, self, and the world around them.

Issues with Face-to-Face Literature Circles

As discussed earlier, LCs can help build learning communities and ultimately change the classroom power dynamic from teacher-centered to student-centered. Students take ownership for their own learning and teachers facilitate students' learning processes. LCs have been documented to be effective for reading instruction in many aspects. That is why this reading instructional practice has been used for decades with students and witnessed many successes in enhancing student reading achievement, self-confidence, critical thinking, and reading enjoyment. However, LCs are not without limitations; not all teachers have experienced similar successes, as many have reported struggles with these small group discussions. For example, high rates of absenteeism, a crowded curriculum, tension among students, and stilted conversations are reported barriers to the

use of traditional LCs (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Brabham & Villaume, 2000).

As Bowers-Campbell (2011) points out, traditional LCs may have the following limitations: (a) some participants are not as engaged as others; (b) students sometimes do not react to each other or question each other; instead, they simply give each other what they wrote in their reading logs; and (c) as soon as teachers leave, group discussion stops. Students have different personalities. Sometimes, shy students may remain quiet, while vocal students dominate the oral discussions in traditional LCs. Besides all these problems, traditional face-to-face LCs also have an inherent problem as all traditional classroom pedagogies do: Students cannot continue their discussion when they leave the classroom, and once the oral discussion is over, it is impossible to revisit the discussions. Due to these issues of face-to-face LCs, the present study focuses on VLCs which have the potential to yield more equitable, interactive, and productive discussion.

Overview of Virtual Literature Circles

With the development of technology, many traditional instructional approaches take on new forms. Traditional LCs are no exception. Utilizing technology to conduct LCs seems to be a recent trend. Many teachers have moved student literature discussions online in different formats and for various instructional purposes (eg. Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Day & Kroon, 2010; Klages, Pate, & Conforti, 2007; Maples, 2010; Scharber, 2009; Whittingham, 2013). Given both the advantages and limitations of face-to-face LCs, the integration of technology has the potential to address the problems of the traditional LCs and expand the benefits of this powerful reading instructional approach.

Definition of Virtual Literature Circles

VLCs literally mean LCs conducted virtually. When literature discussions are moved into cyberspace, there should be a term for this kind of new literacy practice. However, just as there is no unanimous term for LCs, there is no uniform term for online literature discussions either. Some researchers directly call this instructional approach online literature discussions (Smith, 2014), some use the term online literature circles (Day & Kroon, 2010; Whittingham, 2013), and some prefer virtual literature circles (Stewart, 2009). Since there is no agreed-upon term, and these terms have been used interchangeably, this dissertation adopts the term “virtual literature circles” to denote LCs that are conducted virtually online. VLCs consist of small groups of participants, usually four to five people, who read the same text and respond to it in an electronic format, be it email, discussion board, or a social media site (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Klages, Pate, & Conforti, 2007; Whittingham, 2013). For this study, an EFL VLC is defined as an online social learning activity that allows students to read English literature and discuss student self-generated topics online in small groups during and after reading in order to help students engage in reading English and improve their English competence.

Features of Virtual Literature Circles

Since VLCs are based on traditional LCs, some fundamental features of LCs, such as participants’ autonomy in generation of their own discussion topics, personal responses, fun atmosphere, and collaborative learning remain the same. However, due to the integration of technology, VLCs have distinctive features, which mainly lie in the discussion format. Below are the major VLC features:

Multimodal responses. Educators have utilized various online media to conduct LCs, such as Facebook (Stewart, 2009), Wikis (Moreillon, 2009), Moodle (Scharber, 2009), and email (Klages et. al, 2007). These VLC environments make multimodal responses to texts possible. Traditional LCs are predicated on the assumption of oral talk while, in virtual settings, interactions take place through multimodal responses rather than solely verbal discourse. Many options exist for student sharing as well as written responses. VLC participants can converse via typed comments or even videotape their responses, discuss in voicemail, post pictures and videos, or use links. Indeed, VLCs have the power to update the format of the traditional literature discussion and make them more accommodated to students' diverse learning preferences.

Synchronous and asynchronous discussion. In earlier years, teachers used software like Blackboard (Lee, 2002) and Wisdom Master (Kung, 2004) to host student discussions. These tools allowed synchronous discussions but such synchronous discussions could only happen on computers on which the software was installed. This practice had a limitation: students had to stay in the school computer lab to take part in the discussion. If a student missed the class for the discussion, he/she could not join the discussion.

Now, there are many online tools available offering both synchronous and asynchronous functions to meet the needs of the student literature discussion. Synchronous tools allow users to log in simultaneously and communicate as if they were in a face-to-face meeting. Synchronous features allow participants to receive timely feedback and to experience the fun and excitement found in face-to-face interactions. Examples of synchronous tools include chat rooms, instant messaging, Internet

telephony, and video conferencing. In contrast, asynchronous tools allow users to log in at their convenience and post content that others may view at their own convenience; email, bulletin boards, and mailing lists are some examples of asynchronous tools (Lewis & Allan, 2004). Asynchronous online discussions allow students time to organize their thoughts about their reading and participate in the discussion when they are ready. Many popular social media tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and QQ, offer both synchronous and asynchronous features. These different types of social media have been adapted to house LCs for different instructional purposes (e.g., Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Klages, et al., 2007; Whittingham, 2013).

Benefits of Virtual Literature Circles

The existing literature reveals that the features offered by the online tools afford VLCs the following major benefits in addition to those inherent in LCs: more time to think, equal chance for discussion, unconfined space and time, more writing opportunity, and automatic records.

More time to think. As many researchers point out, asynchronous communications offer interactive discussion, allowing participants more time to think, compose, edit, and refine ideas before posting messages (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Juárez & Oxbrow, 2010). Unlike traditional face-to-face LCs where students must think on the spot to respond to a group member, the asynchronous feature of the discussion tool allows students time to think and organize their thoughts and language before they share their ideas and respond to others in VLCs. The extra thinking time made possible by the asynchronous feature of the discussion tools can enhance the confidence of students who

are otherwise not so sure of their abilities for taking part in literature discussions (Juárez & Oxbrow, 2010). Foreign language learners often experience problems with spontaneous oral communication. Difficulties understanding others and making oneself understood in a foreign language can result in communication apprehension, which is defined as “type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 127). As Arnold (2007) pointed out, the asynchronous feature is particularly good for language learners since language learners need the time and opportunity to formulate and compose appropriate and complete responses. VLCs offer EFL participants more time to think for a more achieving participation in literature discussion.

Equal chance for discussion. The development of group dynamics and the application of cooperative structures in VLCs encourage equal and shared responsibility from all participants, including even the quietest students. “Students who are normally shy or simply quiet in class share what they think about texts just as do the more vocal students. Text can be entered simultaneously; everyone who can use a keyboard to write has an equal chance to be heard” (Carico & Logan, 2004, p. 296). This assertion is supported by Bowers-Campbell’s (2011) study, which also found that VLCs involved nearly equal participation among members, and ideas from naturally shy students came across as powerfully as those voiced by more vocal students. Bowers-Campbell, therefore, concluded that “integrating technology into literature discussion enables authentic reading experiences that honor the voices of students who have diverse ideas, communication styles, and confidence levels” (p. 557). In short, the online nature of VLCs helps address the problem in face-to-face LCs that the discussion is sometimes

dominated by small numbers of students while shy students do not have an opportunity to express their ideas.

Unconfined space and time. LCs are designed to facilitate socially constructed learning opportunities; however, the learning opportunities are sometimes restricted by time and space due to class schedules and school hours. VLCs can address this limitation by creating a virtual learning community, making it possible for students to collaborate, reflect, and discuss texts in a digital format that is not limited to the classroom or class hours. This offers the possibility to engage students in learning when they are not at school.

More writing opportunity. Traditional LCs are conducted mainly through oral discussion. Students have little writing opportunity except for perhaps making brief notes in preparation for their oral discussion. In contrast, VLCs offer valuable writing opportunities for students by requiring them to use the written form throughout their discussion process. There are two main writing opportunities within VLCs: (1) students compose their responses to the text in the full process of planning, drafting, revising, and publishing, as they need to post their responses to the discussion group; and (2) students question and answer each other in written form for their discussion (Bowers-Campbell, 2011).

Automatic records. Currently, most online discussion tools can create a transcript of discussions among users (Lewis & Allan, 2004). These automatic records can be saved as texts to revisit for the purpose of in-depth literary, content, or discussion analysis (Carico & Logan, 2004, p. 294). Students can revisit their ideas at any time in a

recursive thought process (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). At the same time, auto-recorded texts serve as a kind of surrogate supervisor, a non-present presence that reminds students to stay on task and be accountable.

Empirical Research on Virtual Literature Circles

Despite all the possible benefits of VLCs, few studies conducted on this topic have used the specific term of VLCs. The researcher, therefore, categorized relevant studies with similar concepts as VLC studies for the purpose of this research. However, even the resulting body of work on VLCs is still small compared to the research on traditional LCs because online discussion is a relatively new teaching practice. Similar to research on LCs, most VLC studies were conducted using qualitative methods (e.g., Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Day & Kroon, 2010; Ruzich & Canan, 2010; Stewart, 2009). There are notably more qualitative studies than quantitative studies on the topic of VLCs. Furthermore, the two types of research often produce contradictory results, with qualitative studies reporting benefits of VLCs, while a significant number of quantitative studies fail to support these findings.

As for the research content, many qualitative articles focus primarily on how to carry out VLC sessions, such as by sharing anecdotal experiences (e.g., Day & Kroon, 2010; Scharber, 2009; Ruzich & Canan, 2010). Some VLC studies have explored literacy aspects, such as linguistic features of online discussion (Kung, 2004), online interaction models (e.g., Bowers-Campbell, 2011), participants' perceptions of face-to-face literature discussion and online discussion (e.g., Maples, 2010), student engagement (e.g., Larson, 2009), and students' attitudes toward online discussion (e.g., Whittingham, 2013). These

qualitative studies almost unanimously reported VLCs' positive effects, except for some minor issues with technology.

Similar to the proposed research, there are also studies that seek to examine the effects of certain kinds of online discussion on students' academic achievement; however, the results are not always supportive of VLCs. Specifically, quantitative analyses tend to contradict the positive results of qualitative research. For example, Smith (2014) conducted a study to understand what occurs when middle school students participate in an online literature discussion during the summer and to measure the influence of this participation on reading comprehension and motivation. This unpublished doctoral dissertation found no relationship between students' degree of participation in the online literature discussions and their post-intervention reading comprehension scores. This finding is discouraging of the use of VLCs, as it suggests that time and effort expended by students on online literature discussions is not significantly correlated with beneficial results.

Serena (2009) conducted an action research study of 12th graders to investigate the effects of online discussion on face-to-face classroom participation and academic achievement. The comparison group engaged only in face-to-face discussion, and the treatment group participated in online discussion as well. The test scores showed that the comparison group outperformed the treatment group on quizzes and unit tests; therefore, the researcher concluded that the online intervention "did not produce any quantitatively measured increase in academic achievement" (p. 4). However, the researcher did not account for existing differences between the two intact classes which served as her control and treatment groups. In fact, the researcher points out a significant pre-

intervention difference in enthusiasm and level of engagement between the two classes and uses this difference as a rationale for administering the online discussion treatment to the less engaged group. Therefore, the treatment group's inferior performance may be due at least in part to its inferiority in willingness to engage and participate.

Regarding ESL instruction, Zhang, Gao, Ring, and Zhang (2007) investigated the influence of online discussion forums on ESL high school students' achievement in reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking. Their study found that online discussion forums did influence students' writing skills and provoke critical thinking in face-to-face discussions but did not improve students' performance in reading, grammar, or vocabulary. However, this five-week study was conducted toward the end of the semester when the students were mainly focused on their exams; it is possible that the students were not fully engaged in those online discussions, as the researchers admitted. In addition, the researchers did not control for any pre-existing differences among the three participant groups. Any these factors or a combination of several may have led to the study's failure to detect a significant effect of online discussions on students' ESL academic performance.

To conclude, the existing literature regarding the effects of VLCs seems to yield contradictory results. Qualitative studies found positive effects of VLCs on many aspects that are important for students' literacy development, while quantitative studies did not completely support the findings of the qualitative studies. However, even though some quantitative studies did not find any increase in students' reading achievements, it is too soon to conclude that VLCs cannot help participants improve reading. First, as discussed above, some research did not address the subjects' preexisting differences in academic

abilities, which might account for the differences in the test scores (e.g., Serena, 2009). Second, some studies used standardized tests to measure students' reading comprehension growth over a short period of time (e.g., Smith, 2014; Zhang, et al., 2007). It is not realistic to expect these measures to demonstrate changes in students' reading abilities over a short time span. It is only reasonable to examine whether participation in VLCs will lead to greater reading achievement using more targeted tailor-made measures. In addition, no research on VLCs has been done with university students in an EFL environment. Therefore, more studies are needed to examine the possible impacts of VLCs to fully understand this promising teaching approach.

Summary

This review of three areas of research finds that independent reading is beneficial for many aspects of second language development, including, but not limited to, students' reading attitude, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. However, without effective approaches to guide students through the independent reading process, students are less likely to experience enjoyment of English reading and to achieve English-learning goals. There is still a need to pioneer new ways of encouraging independent English reading in EFL environments and to conduct empirical research on the effectiveness of proposed approaches.

As a new form of LCs, the effectiveness of which has been empirically supported, the VLC approach has not only inherited the benefits of traditional LCs but also incorporates the learning styles of millennial students who are proficient in technology. The main goal of using VLCs is to provide students with a platform for reading English as a social activity. The VLC approach offers EFL learners the benefits of combining the

solitary activity of reading with cooperative group activities in which students share with classmates about what they have read. These during- and post-reading group activities include positive interdependence, individual accountability, and equal participation via simultaneous and non-simultaneous interactions. Such activities present students with a goal and a purpose in reading English materials. The philosophy behind the VLC approach coincides with the idea advocated by researchers, such as Han, Li, and Yan (2007), who suggest that, in order to encourage out-of-class English reading, EFL teachers should help students establish reading groups, facilitate their reading, observe their progress, and ensure they have a pleasurable reading experience.

VLC research studying the population of university students in an EFL context is rare. No research studies have sought to ascertain the possible impacts and potential of VLCs in China. The dissertation aims to fill this gap by presenting the VLC approach toward independent English reading in China's EFL context and to examine its impact on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. Even though the VLC intervention is multifaceted and inherently structured to improve reading, writing, thinking, and communication skills, this research will focus on reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement in an EFL context.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The goal of the study was to investigate the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. Four intact classes of Chinese EFL students were assigned to read American young adult novels outside of class while participating in two different reading activities, VLCs and summary writing, as their two treatment conditions. Two of the four total intact classes were assigned to the VLC groups and the remaining two classes were assigned to the summary-writing groups. A quasi-experimental between-subjects posttest design was used to examine the performance of the VLC groups compared to the summary-writing groups. It was hypothesized that the VLC approach would enhance Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading in terms of their reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement as assessed by five measures developed for the study after removing the effect of students' English proficiency. This chapter describes the design and methodology of the study including research questions and hypotheses, research design, research duration, measures, and data analysis.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions were raised to test the hypotheses to ascertain what impact the VLCs have on Chinese university EFL students' independent English

reading. Research question one focuses on the overall effectiveness of the VLC approach. Research question two focuses on specific effects of the VLC approach.

Research Questions

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' a) reading experience, b) reading recall, c) vocabulary acquisition, d) reading comprehension, and e) reading engagement between the summary-writing groups and the VLC groups as measured by five post-intervention measures?
2. If there are differences in post-intervention measures between the summary-writing groups and the VLC groups, where do the differences lie?

Null Hypothesis

There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement between the summary-writing groups and the VLC groups as measured by five post-intervention measures.

Alternative Hypothesis

The VLC groups will outperform the summary-writing group on reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement as measured by five post-intervention measures.

Research Design

Setting

The research was conducted at a large university located in the suburban outskirts of a metropolitan city in Southwest China. It was a four-year university with about

60,000 registered students. The university was located in a less developed Chinese province, and its library did not have many authentic English reading materials. There were only a handful of native English-speaking instructors teaching at the university. In addition, there were not many native English speakers working in this province due to its under-developed status. Therefore, EFL students at this university did not have sufficient access to good authentic English books, and the students rarely had the opportunity to practice English with native speakers of English. Simply put, the natural environment for English learning at this university was not entirely favorable. However, it represented a typical EFL learning environment in China's less developed areas, which made the university a good research site for the current study.

The university's School of Foreign Languages offered four-year undergraduate EFL programs and admitted around 200 students each year. Like many other four-year universities in China, its EFL programs usually offered courses related to the development of English language skills, such as pronunciation, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc., along with other general education courses in the first two years. In the following two years, students took more advanced courses related to English language and culture, English literature, business English, and translation. Throughout the four-year program, English language skills formed the core of Chinese EFL students' study.

Subjects

Overview of the subjects. In China, college freshmen are typically around 18 years old. Once they are assigned to a class, they remain in the same cohort throughout the four years of their program, taking the same classes at the same time, using the same

textbooks, and receiving almost the same training. Students in EFL programs are no exception. The only difference is that there are usually more female students than male students in those EFL programs.

The subjects of the study were 118 freshmen in four intact classes from the EFL undergraduate program at the university where the research was conducted. All the subjects were English majors who had already studied English for at least six years at school and taken the National College Entrance English Exam before being admitted to the EFL program. After they were admitted, the students were randomly assigned to classes of similar sizes and conditions in the EFL program. They were all registered for the same core courses offered by the department of English Language and Literature. Class 161 ($n=30$), class 162 ($n=30$), class 167 ($n=29$), and class 168 ($n=29$) participated in the study. Since these EFL students received similar English training, took the same National College Entrance English Exam, and were randomly assigned to classes upon their admission to college, they had similar levels of English proficiency.

Recruitment. To best guarantee the fidelity of the treatments, I taught English Reading to these four EFL freshman classes in the department of English Language and Literature at the research site, where I had a teaching position. At the beginning of the new semester, I discussed the general purpose and importance of the planned study with the students from the four intact classes and invited them to participate in the study. Whether or not the students chose to participate in the study, reading American young adult novels was part of their after-class reading assignment. If they chose to participate, I would use their data collected from the post-intervention measures. If some students chose not to take part in the study, they would still need to read and take part in the class

activities, but their data would not be included in the analysis. Participation or non-participation did not affect their final grades for the English Reading course.

Design of the Study

The goal of this study was to examine the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. Specifically, the research sought to establish a causal relationship between participation in VLCs and subjects' reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement with the target novel. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2015), “[o]f the many types of research that might be used, the experiment is the best way to establish cause-and-effect relationships among variables” (p.265). The experimental research method can best demonstrate a causal relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variables, but such a design requires equivalent groups and random assignment to experimental and comparison groups (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). The present research used a convenience sample of four intact classes that were similar in size and English proficiency. When completely equivalent groups and random assignment are impossible, a quasi-experimental research design can be selected to estimate the causal relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable because quasi-experimental research design most closely resembles experimental research design. Thus, a quasi-experimental between-group posttest design was selected for the inquiry of the study.

All the four intact classes read the same American young adult novels outside of class while receiving two different treatment conditions, VLCs and summary writing.

Class 161 and Class 168 were assigned to the experimental group, participating in VLCs.

Class 162 and Class 167 were assigned to the comparison group, writing summaries. All subjects took the same posttest upon the completion of the target novel. Their post-intervention performance was assessed using the five measures for the study. The subjects' College Entrance English Exam scores was used as a covariate to control for possible pre-existing differences on the subjects' English proficiency that might have an influence on their post-intervention performance. By comparing the VLC group to the comparison group, the extent to which extraneous variables could explain any portion of the dependent variables was minimized. Therefore, the quasi-experimental posttest-only comparison group design could best address the research questions for this study in a natural educational environment.

Overview of the Treatments

Reading material. One proposition of VLCs was to let students choose their own reading material, but as discussed above, EFL students needed teachers' guidance on choosing English reading materials. In addition, because the measures of the study were book-dependent, every text involved would require its own version of four of the five measures. The time that would be necessary to develop individual measures for each book and the funds needed to provide access to all the books made it impractical to let students choose their own reading materials. Finally, allowing the students to choose the books would add a confounding variable to the study. Thus, I chose the novels for the participants based on my judgement. It was hoped, however, that the VLC benefits hypothesized would ultimately increase the students' confidence and proficiency in independent reading, eventually empowering them to make informed choices about appropriate reading materials on their own.

The reading material remained the same for the study between the treatment group and the comparison group. The subjects read two American young adult novels that had high interest and easy language levels. The first novel was titled *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 2006), and the second one is *Annie on My Mind* (Garden, 2007). Both novels belonged to the category of American young adult fiction. *Go Ask Alice* was a work of fiction written in diary form about a troubled teenage girl who was addicted to drugs. This novel was used to help the students become familiar with reading English novels outside of class and doing their assigned reading activities. *Annie on My Mind* was about a romantic relationship between two 17-year-old girls. It was the target novel on which all measures of the study were based. I provided all the subjects with access to electronic versions of the two novels. Detailed information on the books is attached (see Appendix A).

Summary-writing groups. Two of the four total intact classes of EFL students ($n=59$), Class 162 ($n=30$) and Class 167 ($n=29$), were assigned to the summary-writing treatment. As discussed above, summarization was an exercise commonly assigned by Chinese EFL instructors to hold students accountable for reading. At the beginning of the study, I talked about the importance of independent reading and introduced the novels to the students to arouse their interest in reading English outside of class. I told the students that they would have four weeks to read each novel and eight weeks in total to read the two novels. I also told the students that their homework assignment was to write an English summary upon completion of each quarter of the assigned novels and to submit the summaries online to me for grading.

I requested that the summaries focus on facts that demonstrate a thorough understanding of the text. It was explained to the students that their summaries would be graded on a scale of A through D based on their recounting of facts, effectiveness of organization, and correctness of grammar, spelling, and mechanics. To hold the students accountable, I made the grade of the summaries account for 20 percent of the students' final grades for the English Reading course. This was the only information provided to students to guide their completion of the summaries because, in China, summary-writing was typically assigned to students without prompts or specific guidelines.

A posttest identical to the one administered to the VLC treatment group was administered to the summary-writing group when the students finished reading the novels. However, the posttest scores did not affect their final grades. Because it was hypothesized that participants' performance would be affected by the treatment assigned to them, it would be unfair to count posttest scores toward students' final grades.

VLC groups. The other two intact classes of the subjects ($n=59$), Class 161($n=30$) and Class 168($n=29$), were assigned to the VLC group and participated in the VLCs when reading the novels outside of class. The present approach to VLCs relied on a hybrid model that incorporated elements considered beneficial specifically for EFL university students, such as using American young adult novels in which girls likely had more interest, using a popular Chinese social media tool to be the platform for VLCs, and adapting Daniels's roles for discussion. Below is a detailed implementation of VLCs.

Online platform for VLCs. QQ was used as the online discussion platform in this study. QQ was a popular social networking tool widely used among Chinese university

students. It was also a free, open-source chatting tool that provided the security and features necessary to host safe and interactive VLCs. Only registered users could access the QQ VLC environment, and only the creators and administrators of the QQ group could monitor the environment; I was the creator and administrator. QQ provided an engaging and accessible interface that required only an Internet connection. QQ group chat rooms offered a complete environment for VLCs that included forums for asynchronous and threaded discussions, synchronous chats, profile spaces for users, and space for resource sharing. QQ could be accessed by either computers or smart phones—by application or web browser. All subjects in the VLC groups were required to register for a QQ account at the beginning of the study.

Training. The VLC was a new reading activity to the students. To help the students get familiar with the approach, I followed the procedures below to train the participants on how to participate effectively in VLCs:

Logistics about the use of QQ. I created a class QQ group and posted the novels and student materials there for VLC use. During the first class meeting, I asked whether every participant had a QQ account. Those without a QQ account needed to sign up to get one. After making sure that every student had an account, I invited all the students to join the class QQ group so that they would have access to the materials and be ready to take part in the VLCs. Once the students formed their VLC groups, they were required to invite me to join their group.

Introduction to VLCs. I introduced the definition of VLCs to the students and elaborated on the benefits of participating in VLCs. I played a video of a group of teacher participants demonstrating how to do a face-to-face literature circle (LC), gave the

students time to read a short story, and had them practice doing face-to-face LCs. After the students got a sense of what a LC is, I told the students that VLCs were the same except that the oral discussions in face-to-face LCs would be replaced by multimodal discussions via QQ online.

Introduction to VLC student materials. I guided the students through all the student materials for VLCs: guidelines, role description, reading schedule, and suggested activities for whole-class book presentation. The VLC guidelines (Appendix B) provided the students with the definition of VLCs, the requirements for participation in VLCs, and expectations for student involvement in VLCs. The VLC role description (Appendix C) gave a detailed account for each of the four roles: Discussion Director, Connector, Language Expert, and Researcher. The VLC reading schedule (Appendix D) was a planner in which the students put their decisions about when they posted their responses to QQ, at what time they started their synchronous online discussion, and how they would like to rotate their roles. They must make all these decisions in advance and submit the reading schedule to the teacher before they started reading their books. The VLC suggested activities for whole-class book presentation (Appendix E) were provided to help students plan their whole-class book presentation. All the VLC student materials were posted in the class QQ site.

Introduction to VLC assessments. I explained to the students that the assessment for VLCs was half student self-evaluation and half teacher observation. I posted both the student self-evaluation form (Appendix F) and the teacher observation checklist (Appendix G) to the class QQ site so that the students would have a clear idea of the teacher's expectations. The student self-evaluation form used a 100-point system for the

convenience of student understanding. The form contained nine elements: (a) complete reading on time, (b) post response on time, (c) have good ideas, (d) read other people's posts, (e) respond to people, (f) be punctual for discussion, (g) ask people questions, (h) stick to the book, and (i) be honest and critical but sensitive to others' feelings. Each of the other eight elements was worth 10 points except "complete reading on time," which was worth 20 points. The students evaluated themselves after they completed one session of their VLC, and I collected their self-evaluation forms upon the completion of one book—four VLC sessions. I observed the students' performance and used the teacher observation checklist to document whether or not the students posted their responses to QQ, took part in the discussion, participated in VLCs actively, and completed self-evaluation.

Grouping. One instructional merit of VLCs was enabling students to have some control over the reading process. I allowed the students to divide themselves into groups of four people, giving the students the freedom to work with whom they like. If the number of students could not be divided in round numbers of four, and there was only one student left, then one group could take the additional member. If there were two or three students remaining, they could form their own group. Each small group remained intact for reading at least the first book, which consisted of a cycle of four VLC sessions. They could remain in the same group for the second book, or form a different group to embrace fresh perspectives from new VLC members. However, most students chose to remain in their groups for the second novel.

VLC discussion roles. The VLC participants rotated through the following four roles while reading a book and discussing online: Discussion Director, whose job was to summarize the reading, raise questions that required critical thinking, and maintain discussions; Connector, whose job was to make connections to self and the world; Language Expert, whose job was to identify new words, expressions, phrases, and interesting sentences important to the understanding of the story; and Researcher, whose job was to investigate background information of the book. I introduced the four roles to the students in detail and made sure the students felt comfortable doing their jobs. The detailed description of the roles is attached (see Appendix C).

VLC online discussion. According to the students' reading schedule, the participants read the selected agreed-upon pages and posted their reading responses based on their discussion roles, and then they discussed what they read synchronously online at the scheduled time for at least 40 minutes. They planned their schedule of activities ahead of time using the reading schedule and submitted the reading schedule to the teacher.

Whole-class book presentation. Each VLC group was required to present the book to the whole class after they finished reading one book, using no more than three minutes. When the VLC groups finished their first VLC session, I asked each group to decide on the activity they would like to do for their whole-class book presentation. The students could use the suggested activities for whole-class book presentation (Appendix E), but they could also choose their own presentation methods with the teacher's approval. I made sure that each group's activity was different from that of other groups. I closely observed how the students performed in VLCs and offered scaffolding

accordingly. To hold the students accountable, I made the students' overall performance in VLCs make up 20 percent of their final grade.

Research Duration

This study lasted nine weeks. The training of the treatments and implementation of the intervention took eight weeks, including four weeks for reading the first novel *Go Ask Alice* and four weeks for reading the second novel *Annie on My Mind*. The Reading Experience Survey was administered to the students in the eighth week upon the completion of the second novel and the other four measures were administered to the students in the ninth week. The Reading Experience Survey was given at an earlier time to prevent the subsequent four posttests from having an impact on participants' reading experiences.

Rater Training

The success or failure of the study, to a large extent, hinged upon how well the raters were trained to assess participant performance on the five measures. To ensure the success of the study, I recruited two doctoral students from OU's reading education program and trained them to be the raters. The two doctoral students had taken research courses and understood general data collection techniques and protocols. In addition, I provided training to prepare the raters to undertake the specific rating work for the current study. The training procedures were as follows: I gave the raters four weeks to read the target novel, *Annie on My Mind*, to develop familiarity with the book. Then, I instructed the raters on the use of all the testing and scoring materials at a training session, directing them to disregard any language errors found in open-ended responses.

Among all the five post-intervention measures, the Reading Experience Survey and the Vocabulary Acquisition Test were scored on a simple correct/incorrect basis; therefore, these two measures were scored by only one rater. However, the Written Retell Test, Reading Comprehension Test, and Reading Engagement Essay needed subjective judgement, so these measures required assessment by two raters who practiced scoring to ensure inter-rater reliability. I randomly selected 5% of the total participant responses to the three subjective measures for training purposes. Using these examples, the two raters practiced scoring, establishing norms of assessment and optimizing the reliability between evaluations. When the training was complete, the raters separately assessed the remaining participants' tests.

Measures

This study aimed to examine the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. I believed that the VLC intervention could help engage Chinese EFL students in reading English outside of class, leading to a more enjoyable and positive reading experience, better reading recall, deeper comprehension of the text, more vocabulary acquisition, and greater reading engagement. Accurate evaluation of an intervention depends upon the availability of valid and reliable measurements to assess the outcomes. This study did not use any off-the-shelf standardized measurements because the existing standardized tests could hardly capture the nature of the targets of VLCs. Tailor-made book-dependent assessments specific to this study were believed to be more sensitive to student reading performance of the target book over a relatively short period of time.

Overview of the Measures

To assess the effectiveness of VLCs, five measures, Reading Experience Survey, Written Retell Test, Vocabulary Acquisition Test, Reading Comprehension Test, and Reading Engagement Essay, were developed to capture different aspects of the impact of VLCs. Each measure produced data that provided insight to a different aspect of the study, and the convergence of data provided a fuller picture of the dependent variables and led to a deep and varied understanding of the impact of VLCs. Table 3.1 below provides an overview of the five post-intervention measures and specifies the order in which they were administered. Each measure will be introduced in depth with a general description, rationale for use, development process, and scoring method.

Table 3.1

<i>Overview of the Measures</i>					
Order	Instrument	Measuring Target	Format	Time	Scoring Tool
1	Reading Experience Survey	a) Reading efforts b) Self-perception of success c) Reading enjoyment d) Reading attitude	20-item participant self-report questionnaire	10 min	Scoring guide
2	Written Retell Test	Reading recall and reading retention	Participant free write	25 min	Scoring Rubric
3	Vocabulary Acquisition Test	Incidental vocabulary acquisition	25 multiple-choice questions and 25 meaning providing	25 min	Answer Keys
4	Reading Comprehension Test	Reading comprehension	20 multiple-choice questions and 20 short-answer questions	25 min	Answer Keys
5	Reading Engagement Essay	Reading engagement	Essay	30 min	Scoring Rubric

Reading Experience Survey. The Reading Experience Survey (Appendix H) was a 20-item 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire, which was designed to measure participants' overall reading experience in the study. All the subjects responded to the questionnaire after they finished reading *Annie on My Mind* and completed their specific reading activities. The respondents were required to check options on the 5-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” to “strongly agree” for each of the 20 statements. It took a respondent approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire, but I allowed more time if needed.

Rationale for use. Readers may be interested in text materials due to individual factors, but they can be interested because of situational factors as well. Schraw and Dennison (1994) conducted three experiments and found that “interest is not necessarily an inherent property of a text or due exclusively to reader preferences” (p.15). These researchers assert that interest has a contextual constraint and can be transitory, environmentally activated, and context-specific. This study did not address participants' individual interests, but what reading activities might lead to more beneficial reading experiences. I believe that VLCs would help Chinese university EFL students have a more positive reading experience compared to that of students who complete summary writing. The Reading Experience Survey in the present study collected information about participant reading experiences, as defined by the four sub-constructs referred to in the above table (Table 3.1).

Development process. Since the purpose of the survey was to collect information about subjects' reading experiences while participating in different reading activities, the

20 statements were constructed based on claims appearing in the literature on small, peer-led group discussions and on other dimensions identified by Daniels (1994, 2002) about the effects of LCs. The survey measured levels of participant reading effort, self-perception of success, reading enjoyment, and reading attitude, which were believed to be associated with participants' overall reading experience in the study. Guided by DeVellis' (2016) book, *Scale Development: Theory and Applications*, I established a pool of about 40 statements from which to select 20 for the survey. There were four aspects of reading experience in the survey: reading effort (2, 12), self-perception of success (1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 17, 18, 20), reading enjoyment (7, 14, 15, 19), and reading attitude (3, 5, 9, 10, 13, 16). To avoid confusion, most statements were positively worded; only three statements (5, 11, 14) were negatively worded.

Scoring method. The Reading Experience Survey was scored using the Reading Experience Survey Scoring Guide (Appendix I) developed by myself. Each survey was graded by only one rater. A higher score indicated a more positive reading experience and a lower score indicated the opposite. The lowest possible score for each statement was one, and the highest possible score was five. Because there were 20 statements on the survey, the lowest possible score for the survey was 20, and the highest possible score was 100. However, if a student left some items unchecked, his/her entire survey was treated as missing data because it would skew the results if used.

Written Retell Test. The Written Retell Test (Appendix J) required test-takers to write what they remembered about the target book in English without access to the book. This measure was used to test participants' reading recall which reflected their

unprompted reading comprehension. Upon completion of their independent reading of the target novel, *Annie on My Mind*, and of their specific reading activities, VLCs and summary writing, all participants were allowed up to 25 minutes at a scheduled posttest time to write on the computer what they remembered about the book. The students were required to write the retell in English because there were many names and proper nouns in the novel that were hard to translate into Chinese. Appendix J included the Written Retell Test with written directions on how to complete the test. During the writing process, the participants were not given access to the novel, and the test proctor did not provide any follow-up questions. When the test time was up, all participants submitted their Written Retell Tests and then moved on to the next component of the posttest.

Rationale for use. Retelling is a means by which to demonstrate students' ability to summarize what they remember from what they read. As Gambrell, Koskinen, and Kapinus (1991) stated, “retelling is a generative task that requires the reader to construct a personal rendition of the text by making inferences based on the original text and prior knowledge” (p. 356). Retelling and conveying the ideas of the text using one’s own ideas and words requires both familiarity with and deep comprehension of the text. A substantial body of research has validated the use of retelling as a measure of reading comprehension (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1989; Marcotte & Hintze, 2009; Shapiro, Fritschmann, Thomas, Hughes, & McDougal, 2014). Furthermore, the method of retelling has been widely used to measure reading comprehension in both L1 (e.g., Koskinen, Gambrell, Kapinus, & Heathington, 1988; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1989; Marcotte & Hintze, 2009) and L2 contexts (Bernhardt, 1983; Riley & Lee, 1996).

There are sound reasons for the popularity of using retelling to measure reading comprehension. First, it is relatively simple to administer the assessment, which can be done at any time or location needed. Second, retelling is a valid measure for comprehension because readers cannot guess the answers when asked to retell. Third, it is a pure measure in the sense that reader understanding of the text is not affected by the distractors in multiple-choice questions. Therefore, it is not surprising that retelling has long been used as a measure for comprehension in the field of L1 reading research. Retelling has also been used to measure L2 reading comprehension. Bernhardt (1983) advocates its use as a method of testing foreign language reading competence because it circumvents the pitfalls of traditional test design (p. 28). Based on all the reasons mentioned above and the fact that retelling works best for narrative texts, this study employed the retelling method as a measure to assess Chinese EFL participants' reading recall which reflected their reading comprehension of the narrative text used in this study.

Retelling includes both oral and written retell. Fuchs et al. (1988, 1989, 1992) found written retell to be a more reliable measure than oral retell for assessing reading comprehension. Marcotte and Hintze's (2009) study also found that written retell is a reliable indicator of student performance in reading comprehension. The written retell test method was especially appropriate to this study for the following reasons. First, Chinese EFL students may have trouble orally retelling the story due to their imperfect English pronunciation and non-proficient spoken English. A written format gave them more time to organize their thoughts and to better reflect on what they comprehended and remembered. Second, because writing avoided the possibility of information loss during the transcribing process, the written format better conveyed the richness of the data

compared to oral retelling transcripts. Therefore, from a research perspective, the written retell test was a good tool to measure unprompted overall reading comprehension.

Development process. I read the target novel many times to develop familiarity with the story and to become a content expert in order to identify all the important literary elements, facts, and inferences of the story. At the same time, I also recruited a qualified expert to read the target novel and created a list of the important details of the story. This assisted in developing the Written Retell Test as well as the scoring rubric. The person recruited for developing the measures was an American native-English speaking graduate assistant from Oakland University's linguistics master's program. He served as the subject-matter expert for the development of the Written Retell Test materials, Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and the book-specific Reading Comprehension Test materials. The subject-matter expert had a master's degree in English as well as certification in teaching English as a second language (ESL) and was also a writing consultant at Oakland University's writing center when developing the measures for the study.

Scoring method. As Fuchs and Fuchs (1992) point out, although retell is a straightforward and feasible assessment strategy in terms of initial preparation, methods for scoring recalls can be difficult and time-consuming to implement (p. 47). The subjectivity lying in the nature of retelling poses threats to the validity and reliability of the retelling measurement, nevertheless, many scholars (eg. Fuchs et al, 1988, 1989, 1992; Irwin & Mitchell, 1983; Shapiro et al., 2014; Short, Yeates, & Feagans, 1992) have tried to develop systems for evaluating the depth and breadth of student text understanding based on student attempts to retell or recall what they read. Prior research

has documented primarily three ways that seemed to be valid in scoring retelling: 1) counting the total number of words retold (eg. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988); 2) tallying the number of content words retold (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1989); and 3) evaluating the number of idea units or other meaning segments of the text (Bernhardt, 1983; Shapiro et al., 2014; Short, Yeates, & Feagans, 1992).

After reviewing the relevant literature and considering the characteristics of the participants along with the purpose of the study, I developed a Written Retell Test Scoring Rubric (Appendix K) based on inspiration derived from prior studies (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2014; Short, Yeates, & Feagans, 1992) to score participants' written retell. The rubric was specifically developed to provide a tool to quantify the evaluation of participants' reading recall and reading comprehension. The 10 elements—theme, problem, goal, characters, places, initial event, climax, sequence, resolution, and end of story (adapted from Shapiro et al., 2014)—were included in the rubric, and I added two more elements: number of events retold and total number of words retold. Since the assessment was book-dependent, I added the details of the story as the content criteria for scoring.

The written retell will be scored based on a four-point scale from 0 to 3. There were 12 elements to be evaluated in total, resulting in a lowest possible score of 0 and a highest possible score of 36. The details for scoring were included in the Written Retell Test Scoring Rubric (Appendix K). Two raters scored each Written Retell Test using the Written Retell Test Scoring Rubric which was supplemented by the Content Criteria table. Inter-rater reliability was computed by using the Pearson correlation. To further reduce variability, the average of the two raters' scores was used for data analysis.

Vocabulary Acquisition Test. A book-specific vocabulary acquisition test was used as the third component of the posttest in this study. The Vocabulary Acquisition Test (Appendix L) contained 50 items in total: 25 words and phrases in the format of multiple-choice questions, giving students some hints of the meaning, and another 25 words and phrases in the meaning-production format, asking test takers to provide the Chinese meanings of the target words or phrases. Students wrote their answers on the answer sheet (Appendix M). The test required the contextual knowledge of the novel. That is to say, if a test taker provided a possible meaning of a word, but it was not the meaning in the novel, the answer was counted as wrong. The test time for the vocabulary acquisition test was 25 minutes.

Rationale for use. Vocabulary plays a very important role in second language learning. Numerous studies have found that, among all the language learning variables, vocabulary has the most direct influence on the outcome of language learning (Carrell, 1989; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Wen & Johnson, 1997). Without a good mastery of vocabulary knowledge, it is impossible for learners to grasp language skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. Since vocabulary is such an important prerequisite for language learning, the development of vocabulary should be the core task for EFL teaching and learning.

Researchers have been arguing for years about the optimal approaches for vocabulary teaching and learning. EFL researchers (Gan et al., 2004; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Wen & Johnson, 1997) contend that direct vocabulary instruction is the most effective in EFL environments, while many western reading researchers take the stand of indirect methods. For instance, Krashen (1989) suggests that language proficiency

develops naturally through comprehensible input. He asserts that vocabulary is best learned incidentally in reading. Proponents of Krashen agree that conscious effort to learn new words is of little or no value and may even be counter-productive. I tend to take a balanced view toward vocabulary acquisition. Explicit vocabulary instruction addresses many aspects of vocabulary, but reading certainly facilitates the vocabulary acquisition process and supports the development of vocabulary in profound ways. The more exposure to words in context a reader has, the more likely he/she will learn the words, and reading provides ample opportunity for vocabulary exposure.

It is my hope that readers would consult the dictionary or ask others for the meaning of new words or expressions to make sense of the text when participating in VLCs. If the participants strategically read the books, it was likely they would acquire vocabulary naturally. Under that premise, vocabulary acquisition was a variable that this research was interested in measuring. However, since I did not give explicit instruction on vocabulary in this study, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test aimed to test only participants' global understanding of vocabulary, which referred to acquisition of word meaning based on the context of the text.

Development process. I first recruited two Chinese EFL freshman students and asked them to read the novel and then make a list of all the new words they encountered in the novel. One student had higher English proficiency, and the other one was an average student. All the words included in the test came from the students' new-words lists. The inclusion criteria for the vocabulary test were that the word and phrases must be 1) those that both students did not know, 2) important to the understanding of the novel, and 3) those that appeared multiple times in the novel. When I developed the initial

version of the vocabulary test, I asked the two Chinese students to take the test and offer their feedback. I made modifications to the test based on the two students' test results analysis and their feedback. After the test was modified, I recruited another Chinese student who did not read the novel to take the vocabulary test in order to see whether it was possible that the students had already known the words from before. The student got 12 percent right, which means the chance for students to know the words in the vocabulary acquisition test was low.

Scoring method. The scoring of the vocabulary acquisition test was straightforward. Each test was scored by only one rater using the answer key (Appendix N) that I developed. Each correct answer was worth two points, so the lowest possible score for the vocabulary test was 0, and the total highest possible score was 100.

Reading Comprehension Test. The purpose for the Reading Comprehension Test (Appendix O) was to assess participants' prompted reading comprehension of the target book, *Annie on My Mind*. The test contained 20 multiple-choice questions and 20 open-ended short-answer questions that covered both the factual information (23 items total) and inferential information (17 items total) of the book. All participants took the reading comprehension test after they submitted their vocabulary acquisition test. The test lasted about 25 minutes.

Rationale for use. Standardized comprehension tests did not apply to this study because it was less likely that the participants' overall reading abilities would have a dramatic increase within the span of this research. Therefore, as stated earlier, I believed that self-developed book-specific tests would work better to assess students' independent

reading performance of a particular book. Multiple-choice questions and short-answer questions were established formats for assessing comprehension. Participants were familiar with the test format and could be prompted to recall some details they might forget to include in their written retell test. The factual questions in the reading comprehension test provided the participants with another opportunity to recall what they read, and the inferential questions provided insight into participants' higher-order comprehension, giving me a more holistic understanding of students' reading performance.

Development process. I read the novel several times and gathered plenty of questions to develop the test. At the same time, the subject-matter expert who helped with the development of the Written Retell Test materials also assisted in developing the reading comprehension test materials. Both the subject-matter expert and I read the novel separately, generated our own questions with answers, and then met to discuss which questions to include in the test. The test contained both factual questions and inferential questions that covered the book from beginning to end including characters, events, locations, and conflicts. Items 2, 3, 6, 8, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21 through 33, 37, and 40 were factual questions (23 total); 1, 4, 5, 7, 9 through 14, 16, 20, 34, 35, 36, 38, and 39 were inferential questions (17 total). The subject matter expert and I also answered each other's questions to make sure the answer keys would provide a good benchmark for judging students' answers. When the initial draft of the reading comprehension test was ready, I asked the two Chinese students who read the novel to take the test and then modified the test based on their test results and feedback.

Scoring method. The reading comprehension test was graded using the answer key (Appendix P) developed through the subject-matter expert validation process. Two raters scored the test, and the raters were instructed to disregard spelling and grammatical errors and to use their best judgment on borderline answers. Each correct answer for the 20 multiple-choice questions was awarded two points, so the highest total possible score for the 20 multiple-choice questions was 40. The 20 open-ended questions was graded using a three-point scale: 0 for irrelevant answer, 1 for partially correct answer, and 2 for correct answer, so the highest total possible score for the open-ended questions was 40. Thus, the highest possible score for the total reading comprehension test was 80. Since there were 23 text-based factual questions in total, the highest possible score for factual information was 46, and the highest possible score for inferential information was 34 because of the 17 total inferential items. The two raters' average scores were used to conduct data analysis and inter-rater reliability was computed using Pearson correlation.

Reading Engagement Essay. In addition to the Reading Experience Survey, the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and the Reading Comprehension Test, all the participants completed the last part of the posttest—the Reading Engagement Essay. The students were asked to write an essay commenting on the target book and describing their personal reactions to and opinions on the story. They were instructed to go beyond the facts of the novel and to describe their own thoughts and feelings evoked by the story. The students were given 30 minutes to write the essay in English. The directions for writing the essay are in Appendix Q.

Rationale for use. The purpose of this measure was to ascertain the levels of participants' reading engagement with the novel. It was hypothesized that participation in VLCs would promote aesthetic reading and that literature discussions would lead to deeper engagement with the text, characterized by greater empathy with characters and events within the story, as well as deeper critical and personal reactions. It was hoped that participants would use writing to reconstruct their emotions and thoughts that were evoked by reading the text and sharing personal responses with peers. An essay format was chosen because essays have been used in the research field to evaluate student performance, as writing best reflects one's thinking. Therefore, the essay was administered to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' reading engagement with the target novel.

Development process. Since the purpose of this measure was to examine the participants' personal engagement with the story, it was important that the directions include prompts to remind the participants to write about what they experienced emotionally in reading. Thus, the directions were carefully worded to make it clear to the participants in both the VLC group and the summary-writing group that writing the essay was different from retelling the story. They must provide commentary on the book and describe their personal reactions to the story. Therefore, their writing should reflect their individual engagement with the text. While the directions clearly defined the topic of the essay, they were general enough to avoid influencing participants or alerting them to the purpose of the measure or study.

Scoring method. I adapted Schraw, Flowerday, and Reisetter's (1998) engagement essay scoring method that was used in an experiment investigating the effects of choice on reader engagement. Their scoring rubric included three main categories: thematic, critical, and personal. The current research adopted only the critical and personal response categories because the components of the thematic category were measured adequately by the Written Retell Test. The scoring rubric (Appendix R) included eight subcategories between these two categories. The critical response category contained three subcategories: statements about new learning, indications of difficulty understanding the text, and critical analyses of the text's ideas. The personal response category included five subcategories: reader engagement, cognitive reactions, affective reactions, empathy with events and characters, and relating experiences described in the text to one's own life. In addition to the scoring rubric, a scoring protocol (Appendix S) was also established for raters to follow.

Schraw et al. (1998) used ideas as the scoring unit for their study, but this scoring method did not apply to the current study because some students might focus on only one idea but elaborate deeply on the idea. Therefore, it was more fair to assess the reading engagement essay by using sentences as the scoring unit. However, only sentences relevant to a subcategory were counted toward scores. The final score of the essay was the number of counted sentences. Like other measures used in this study that required subjective judgement, this measure was also assessed by two raters, and inter-rater reliability was determined using the Pearson correlation. However, I used the average of the two raters' scores for analysis of each essay to further reduce variability.

Data Analysis

As stated above, the following are the research questions of this study. (1) Is there a statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement between the summary-writing groups and the VLC groups as measured by the five post-intervention measures? (2) If there are differences in post-intervention measures between the summary-writing groups and the VLC groups, where do the differences lie? To answer these questions, it was necessary to first understand the variables.

Description of the Variables

There were multiple variables addressing the first research question of this study, including one independent variable, five dependent variables, and one covariate. The independent variable was the treatment condition, VLCs or summary writing. Each measure used in this study generated a result score for each subject; therefore, five measures resulted in five dependent variables of the study. The scores of the subjects' National College Entrance English Examination served as the covariate to control for participants' pre-existing English proficiency differences. The National College Entrance English Examination was a standardized academic English proficiency test held annually in the People's Republic of China. The exam was developed by a group of highly-acclaimed English language educators and has gone through rigorous review. Students took the examination at the end of their high school year in June, and began attending university in September of the same year. The exam comprised listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing, and the highest possible score was 150. The National

College Entrance Examination was a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level. The fact that the research participants have been admitted to university indicates that they have all taken the exam, which had occurred only a few months before data collection. Therefore, the scores of the National College Entrance English Examination were the best available English proficiency indicator to use as a covariate accounting for the pre-existing differences that might affect the results of this study.

Data Analysis Method

To answer the first research question, whether there are statistically significant differences in post-intervention measures between the VLC groups and the summary-writing groups, a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) would be conducted on the five dependent measures of student achievement in reading the target novel. If a main effect was revealed, then univariate analysis would be performed to investigate the significance of the treatment effect on each dependent variable to determine how the performance of the two groups differed. That is to say, univariate analysis would be conducted to investigate whether the VLC group outperformed the summary-writing groups on a) reading experience, b) reading recall, c) vocabulary acquisition, d) reading comprehension, and e) reading engagement. All analyses were conducted with Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 24.0, and all tests of significance were made at the $p < .05$ level of significance unless otherwise noted.

Summary

This study implemented VLCs with Chinese university EFL students to investigate the possible impact of this approach on EFL students' independent English reading. A quasi-experimental between-group posttest design was selected for this inquiry. The research used a convenience sample of four intact classes of freshman English majors at a large university in Southwest China. While reading the same novels, two classes were assigned to the VLC group, and the other two classes were assigned to the summary-writing group. Five book-specific measures were developed to examine the impact of the proposed approach on participants' independent English reading.

It was hypothesized that the VLC group would outperform the summary-writing group on all the five dependent variables generated by the measures. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 24.0. Students' College Entrance English exam scores was used as a covariate to control for preexisting differences in English proficiency. A one-way MANCOVA was used to determine whether a main difference existed. If a main difference was revealed, univariate analysis would be conducted to examine where the differences occurred concerning the five dependent variables generated from the five measures.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the impact of virtual literature circles, a supplementary reading instructional approach on university EFL students' independent English reading. The VLC was a hybrid reading model created with elements taken from Daniels' literature circles and integration of technology to help EFL teachers engage their students in reading English outside of school. However, this approach has not been empirically validated in EFL environments. Therefore, it is important to examine the effectiveness of the approach in an EFL context. My study, the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading, aims to fill the existing research gap and thereby provide a practical means of encouraging independent English reading among university EFL students.

The present study sought to examine the impact of the VLCs on students' independent English reading in a sample of 118 Chinese university EFL students. These research subjects were assigned to read American young adult novels outside of class while participating in one of the two different reading activities, VLCs or summary writing. A quasi-experimental between-subjects posttest design was used to examine the impact of VLCs on those students' independent English reading compared to summary writing, a common reading assignment for EFL reading classes at Chinese universities.

I held the belief that this innovative reading activity, VLCs, would engage university EFL students in independent English reading and yield more productive and positive

outcomes than traditional reading activities. I was interested in all possible impacts that the VLCs had on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading, but given the scope of the study, I only focused on the following aspects: reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement.

To provide a fuller picture of the inquiry, this chapter incorporates four sections: data collection, data analysis procedure, statistical results, and summary. First, the section of data collection presents the data collection process and a description of the data. Then, the section of data analysis procedure addresses methodological choices, inter-rater reliability, data analysis preparation, and testing of assumptions. The statistical results section reports the results of the study to answer the research questions. Finally, the summary section summarizes the major points in this chapter.

Data Collection

Chapter three offered a general description of data analysis. This section presents more details regarding data analysis. Specifically, it provides the data collection process and a description of the data, which were important components of data analysis.

Data Collection Process

The College Entrance English Exam scores were collected from the study participants at the beginning of the study. These scores served as the covariate for the study that provided a baseline for the students' English proficiency. Then, the two treatment groups, the VLC group ($n=59$) and the summary-writing group ($n=59$) read two American young adult novels and completed their respective reading activities. The VLC sessions and the summary writing assignments were carefully carried out to ensure

fidelity of the implementation of the interventions throughout the process of the experiment. Finally, all research participants took the posttest based on the second novel they read for the study.

Five data collection instruments were used to measure the results through multiple lenses. Because all five assessments took a long time to complete and some tests required use of computers, only the Reading Experience Survey was administered to all the participants in their own classes upon the completion of their novel in the eighth week of the study. In the following week, all 118 participants gathered to take the remaining four assessments, the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, the Reading Comprehension Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay, based on the target novel.

Description of the Data

The score of the College Entrance English Exam ($N=118$, $Mean=117.19$, $SD=9.65$) was obtained from every participant in the study, and there was no missing data for this covariate. The return rate of the Reading Experience Survey was 100%. However, two students (1.7%) missed several items in the survey, invalidating their results and their surveys were treated as missing data. Students wrote their written retell and reading engagement essay on the computer, so the data of the Written Retell Test and Reading Engagement Essay were collected via the computer. Due to some technical issues, the Written Retell Test results of four participants (3.4%) were missing, and the results of three participants (2.5%) were missing for the Reading Engagement Essay. There was no missing data for the Vocabulary Acquisition Test. One participant (0.8%) did not write anything on her Reading Comprehension Test. Overall, the missing data randomly occurred across the groups and consisted of less than 5% of the total dataset.

Data Analysis Procedure

This section presents the data analysis procedure in detail. Firstly, a rationale for the methodological choice to use a one-way MANCOVA as the statistical analysis method is explained. Secondly, the establishment of inter-rater reliability is described. Thirdly, a description of data analysis preparation is presented. Lastly, the testing of assumptions is reported.

Rationale for Using One-Way MANCOVA

A one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was selected as the statistical analysis method for the current study because it was an appropriate test to address the research questions. MANCOVA is a conceptual extension of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with covariates added to remove any confounding factors. In other words, MANCOVA is essentially a combination of MANOVA and the analysis of covariance (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005). To understand what a MANCOVA is, it is necessary to first understand what a MANOVA is.

MANOVA is a conceptually straightforward extension of the univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) techniques (Bray & Maxwell, 1985; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). ANOVA tests mean differences on a single dependent variable, and MANOVA evaluates mean differences on two or more dependent variables simultaneously among two or more groups. However, it is mistaken to think that MANOVA equals multiple ANOVAs because MANOVA is not simply running multiple ANOVAs at one time, instead, “MANOVA asks if mean differences among groups on the combined DV [dependent variables] are larger than expected by chance” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001, p.324).

MANOVA evaluates the mean differences on the combined effect of all the dependent variables, while controlling for the inter-correlations among them.

When intact groups are used without randomization of the treatments, the use of analysis of covariance can remove the confounding factor and increase precision of the experiment (Wildt & Ahtola, 1978). The current study used a convenience sample and it was unfeasible to randomly assign participants to treatment conditions to remove bias in the experiment. Therefore, a covariate was used in the study to control for differences in participants' English proficiency which might influence the results of the study. By adding the analysis of covariance to the MANOVA, the statistical analysis has essentially become a MANCOVA. As Bray and Maxwell (1985) suggested, "if one or more variables are collected to statistically control for sources of variation with multiple criterion variables, then MANCOVA is the appropriate methods of analysis" (p.71). There were five dependent variables, one covariate and only one independent variable involved for the current inquiry, thus a one-way MANCOVA was used as the statistical analysis method. This method was also selected for the following reasons.

First, like MANOVA, MANCOVA is the most appropriate when testing a set of measures as they represent some underlying constructs (Bray & Maxwell, 1985). The posttest used in the study assessed five aspects of EFL students' independent English, which could be generally considered as one construct — reading experience and achievement. The combined effect of the five measures evaluated the effectiveness of the proposed VLC approach. Second, MANCOVA can help reveal "the relationships among the variables rather than looking at each of them in isolation" (Bray & Maxwell, 1985, p. 33). The information provided by a MANCOVA result would shed light on understanding

the relationships among the five dependent variables, which would help answer the research questions. Third, although there are mathematical requirements for MANCOVA, it is a robust test, immune to violations of the assumptions in many circumstances (Bray & Maxwell, 1985). In practice, it is unlikely that all the assumptions will be met precisely. Therefore, the MANCOVA results can still be confidently used to answer the research questions even if some assumptions are violated.

Inter-rater Reliability

Five instruments were used in the study. Two instruments (the Reading Experience Survey and the Vocabulary Acquisition Test) did not require subjective judgement and were scored by only one rater. Two instruments (the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay) required subjective judgement and were scored by two raters. The Reading Comprehension Test was the only instrument that required both non-subjective and subjective judgement because there were two subtests, one consisting of multiple-choice questions and the other short-answer questions. The subtest with multiple-choice questions was scored by only one rater, and the subtest with short-answer questions was scored by two raters. Inter-rater reliability was established for the instruments and subtest that required subjective judgement.

To ensure high inter-rater reliability, I randomly selected 5% of the total participant responses to these subjective instruments, 2.5% from the experimental group and 2.5% from the comparison group. Using these examples, the two raters practiced scoring, establishing norms of assessment and optimizing the reliability between evaluations. The raters then separately scored 10% of the participants' tests and then met with me to discuss their scoring. After the raters completed another 20% of the data, a rating session

was again conducted before they assessed another 30% of the data. Finally, the two raters separately assessed the remaining 40% of the data.

Table 4.1 presents the inter-rater reliability for the two instruments and one subtest that required subjective judgement. The first column lists the instruments and the subtest that were assessed by two raters. There were some missing data in these three measures, therefore, the inter-rater reliability was based on how many responses the raters scored. The second column shows the number of responses that the inter-rater reliability was based upon. The third column shows the means and standard deviations of the scores given by rater one and the fourth column shows those given by rater two. The last column presents Pearson's r correlation coefficients, which indicate the inter-rater reliability.

Table 4.1

Inter-Rater Reliability for the Three Subjective Instruments

Instrument	Number	Rater 1 <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Rater 2 <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Pearson's r
Written Retell Test	114	16.66 (3.61)	16.72 (3.73)	.951
Reading Comprehension Test (Short-Answer Questions)	117	27.03 (8.11)	28.14 (8.34)	.984
Reading Engagement Essay	115	11.54 (3.79)	11.44 (3.82)	.984

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The correlation coefficients shown in Table 4.1 indicate a high inter-rater reliability level between the two raters. The systematic training and calibrating led to high inter-rater reliability for each of the three instruments that required subjective judgement. However, even though the two raters' scores reached a very high inter-rater reliability

level, the average of the two raters' scores was used for analysis to further reduce variability.

Data Analysis Preparation

The research data were entered into SPSS 24.0 and screened for analysis. There are seven variables in the dataset, including one independent variable, five dependent variables, and one covariate. The independent variable is a categorical variable with two levels, coding whether the student received the treatment condition of VLCs (coded as 1) or summary writing (coded as 2). The five dependent variables and the covariate were continuous variables. The missing data was less than 5% of the total dataset, and they were replaced with series mean. There were a few outliers among the variables, but they did not threaten the normality of any continuous variables or affect the output results, so the outliers were kept in the dataset. Table 4.2 presents descriptive Statistics for the Five Dependent Variables after the missing data were addressed.

Table 4.2

Descriptive Statistics for the Five Dependent Variables

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Reading Experience Survey	118	77.16	9.23	49	99
Written Retell Test	118	16.73	3.59	8.89	25.04
Vocabulary Acquisition Test	118	58.53	17.37	12	96
Reading Comprehension Test	118	54.88	12.39	24	80
Reading Engagement Essay	118	11.31	3.71	2.54	22.51

The basic information presented in Table 4.2 provides an overview of each of the five dependent variables, with statistics being listed under the columns for the number of responses (*N*), mean, standard deviation (*SD*), minimum score (*Min*), and maximum score (*Max*).

Testing of Assumptions

As a parametric test, one-way MANCOVA requires several mathematical assumptions: independence of observations, multivariate normality, homogeneity of variance, homogeneity of covariance matrices, and linearity (Ho, 2013, p.116). It was important to check the assumptions prior to conducting the one-way MANCOVA. The assumption of independence of observations was embedded in the design of the study, and a series of tests were performed to check the remaining assumptions for running this statistical analysis.

Independence of observations. There are two assumptions to be met for the independence of observations assumption. One is the independent observation between the groups, and the other is the independent observation within the groups. The VLC group and the summary-writing group in the study comprised intact classes of different participants with no participants being in more than one group, and the classes had different schedules at a large university, which helped to prevent the participants from possibly discussing the different treatments they received. Thus, the observations between groups were independent of each other. As for the within group observations, each participant took the posttest only once and the posttest assessed a different aspect of their reading, which guaranteed the within group independent observation assumption.

Therefore, the independence of observations assumption has been satisfied by the inherent design of the study.

Normality. As there are no specific tests for multivariate normality in SPSS, univariate normality for the five dependent variables were tested instead. A visual inspection of the normal Q-Q plots and histograms showed that all five dependent variables were normally distributed. In addition, a Shapiro-Wilk's test was used to test for normality on those continuous variables. The skewness values were also computed. Table 4.3 presents the Shapiro-Wilk statistics, degrees of freedom (*df*), *p* values (*Sig.*), and skewness values for the five dependent variables in the study.

Table 4.3

Tests of Normality for the Five Dependent Variables

Variable	Shapiro-Wilk			
	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Skewness</i>
Reading Experience Survey	.98	118	.128	-.32
Written Retell Test	.99	118	.366	.22
Vocabulary Acquisition Test	.99	118	.200	-.18
Reading Comprehension Test	.98	118	.079	-.35
Reading Engagement Essay	.98	118	.090	.51

The results in Table 4.3 show that the Shapiro-Wilk's statistics were all greater than .05, and the skewness values were almost all within the range of about ± 0.5 ,

suggesting normal distribution of all five dependent variables, thus multivariate normality was a reasonable assumption for the study.

Homogeneity of variance. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was tested by Levene's test of homogeneity of variances, which tested the hypothesis that the two group variances are equal. The Levene statistic for Reading Experience Survey is ($F=.85$, $p=.358$), Written Retell Test ($F=.51$, $p=.476$), Vocabulary Acquisition Test ($F=.26$, $p=.611$), Reading Comprehension Test ($F=.56$, $p=.456$), and Reading Engagement Essay ($F=.13$, $p=.717$). All the p values were greater than .05, thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variance has been met.

Homogeneity of covariance matrices. The homogeneity of covariance matrices assumption was tested with Box's M test; it tests the hypothesis that the covariance matrices of the dependent variables are significantly different across levels of the independent variable. The statistics of *Box's M* (15.21), $F(15) = .967$, $p = .488$ indicated that there were no significant differences between the covariance matrices. Therefore, the assumption has not been violated and Wilk's Lambda was an appropriate test to use.

Linearity. Simple linear regressions were performed to test the linear relationships between the covariate and each of the dependent variables. The results of the five simple regressions are presented in Table 4.4, with the first column from the left showing the five dependent variables and the top row listing the statistic names: standardized coefficients Beta, T score, and significance (Sig.). The values for each of the statistics are presented in the corresponding columns.

Table 4.4

Simple Linear Regressions between Covariate and Dependent Variables

Dependent Variables	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T Score	Sig.
Reading Experience Survey	.18	1.91	.06
Written Retell Test	.17	1.90	.06
Vocabulary Acquisition Test	.08	.89	.36
Reading Comprehension Test	.28	3.1	.002
Reading Engagement Essay	.25	2.7	.006

The simple regression results shown in Table 4.4 suggest that there was a linear relationship between the covariate and the Reading Comprehension Test as well as between the covariate and the Reading Engagement Essay. A marginal linear relationship was found to exist between the covariate and the Reading Experience Survey as well as between the covariate and the Written Retell Test since both p values (.06) were only slightly greater than .05. No linear relationship was found between the covariate and the Vocabulary Acquisition Test since the p value was greater than .05. Only one out of the five pairs of the covariate and the dependent variable relationship was not linear. Therefore, the assumption of approximate linearity for most of the measures in this study has been met.

The design of the study guaranteed that the observations were independent. The above tests also confirmed that, the multivariate normality was highly likely because all the dependent variables were normally distributed, the variance of all dependent variables

were equal for both the VLC group and the summary-writing group, and linear relationships between the covariate and most of the dependent variables were assumed. Therefore, the one-way MANCOVA assumptions have been fulfilled.

Statistical Results

To ascertain the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent reading, it is important to use the statistics to examine the research questions. This section presents both the descriptive and inferential statistics for each of the research questions and sub-questions.

Research Question One

Research question one asked, is there a statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' a) reading experience, b) reading recall, c) vocabulary acquisition, d) reading comprehension, and e) reading engagement between the VLC group and the summary-writing group as measured by five post-intervention measures? Research question one was raised to investigate the posttest difference between the VLC group and the summary-writing group. To inform this research question, it is useful to first examine the descriptive statistics and compare the original posttest mean scores between the VLC group and the summary-writing group. Table 4.5 shows the unadjusted means for the VLC and summary-writing groups, which are the means of the two groups without the influence of the covariate. The very left column lists the five measures. The unadjusted means (*Mean*) and the standard deviations (*SD*) of the five measures are presented in the VLC and the summary-writing columns.

Table 4.5

Unadjusted Means for the VLC and Summary-Writing Groups

Measure	VLC <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Summary-Writing <i>Mean (SD)</i>
Reading Experience Survey	81.12 (7.61)	73.21 (9.07)
Written Retell Test	16.96 (3.73)	16.51 (3.45)
Vocabulary Acquisition Test	59.42 (17.94)	57.63 (16.90)
Reading Comprehension Test	58.76(12.48)	51.00 (11.11)
Reading Engagement Essay	11.73 (3.68)	10.89 (3.72)

The unadjusted means of the posttest assessments presented in Table 4.5 show a general trend that the means of the VLC group were higher than the summary-writing group over all five measures without the influence of participants' English proficiency. However, it was not clear whether the results had any statistical significance and whether the covariate had an impact on the posttest performance. Therefore, further statistical analysis was needed to answer the first research question.

A one-way MANCOVA was performed to test the null hypothesis of the first research question: There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading experience, reading recall, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading engagement between the summary-writing group and the VLC group as measured by five post-intervention measures. The College Entrance English exam score of the research participants was used as a covariate to account for the preexisting English proficiency differences.

The one-way MANCOVA showed that the treatment was found to be significantly different when assessed across all five measures (Wilks' $\lambda = .777$, $F(5,111) = 6.36$, $p < .001$). The covariate was also found to be significantly related to the composite of the five measures (Wilks' $\lambda = .890$, $F(5,111) = 2.74$, $p = .02$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected at the .05 level of significance and the main difference was revealed. There was a statistically significant difference between the VLC group and the summary-writing group on the combined assessment of the five posttest measures, suggesting that the VLC group outperformed the summary-writing group on the combined results of the five post-intervention measures.

Research Question Two

The second research question of the study was, if there are differences in post-intervention measures between the VLC group and the summary-writing group, where do the differences lie? The one-way MANCOVA revealed the main difference, so the univariate main effects were examined to determine where the differences occur. Research question two implicitly comprised five sub-questions resulting in five null hypotheses as follows. The five null hypotheses were examined one by one to answer research question two.

1. There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading experience between the summary-writing group and the VLC group when controlling for differences in participants' English proficiency.
2. There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading recall between the summary-writing group and the VLC group when controlling for differences in participants' English proficiency.

3. There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' vocabulary acquisition between the summary-writing group and the VLC group when controlling for differences in participants' English proficiency.
4. There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading comprehension between the summary-writing group and the VLC group when controlling for differences in participants' English proficiency.
5. There is no statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students' reading engagement between the summary-writing group and the VLC group when controlling for differences in participants' English proficiency.

Table 4.6 shows the result of the test of between-subjects effects that tests the above null hypotheses. The very left column lists the factors that had an impact on the five dependent variables listed in the "Dependent Variable" column. The third column lists statistics for type III sum of squares. The fourth column lists the mean square values. *F* values are reported in column five and *p* values are reported in the final column (Sig.).

As can be seen in Table 4.6, the treatment condition (VLCs vs. Summary writing) had a significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey ($p < .001$) and the Reading Comprehension Test ($p = .002$), thus hypotheses one and four were rejected at the .05 level of significance, suggesting that the VLC group was significantly different than the summary writing group on their reading experience and reading comprehension. Null hypotheses two, three, and five were accepted because the *p* values were greater than .05, suggesting that the difference in the means for these three tests (Written Retell Test, Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and Reading Engagement Essay) was not statistically significant.

Table 4.6

Test of between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Treatment	Reading Experience Survey	1654.66	1654.66	23.76	.000
	Written Retell Test	1.90	1.90	.15	.700
	Vocabulary Acquisition Test	53.58	53.58	.18	.676
	Reading Comprehension Test	1336.54	1336.54	10.07	.002
	Reading Engagement Essay	8.52	8.52	.65	.420
Covariate	Reading Experience Survey	111.32	111.32	1.60	.209
	Written Retell Test	41.24	41.24	3.25	.074
	Vocabulary Acquisition Test	197.61	197.61	.65	.422
	Reading Comprehension Test	936.93	936.93	7.06	.009
	Reading Engagement Essay	89.19	89.19	6.84	.010
Error	Reading Experience Survey	8010.36	69.66		
	Written Retell Test	1457.62	12.68		
	Vocabulary Acquisition Test	35022.59	304.54		
	Reading Comprehension Test	15258.66	132.68		
	Reading Engagement Essay	1499.63	13.04		

The covariate (English proficiency) was found to have a significant impact on the Reading Comprehension Test and the Reading Engagement Essay. The impact of the covariate on the Written Retell Test was marginal at the significance level of .05, and there was no significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey and the Vocabulary Acquisition Test.

To further understand how the VLC group and the summary-writing group differed in their posttest performance when their English proficiency was controlled, it is important to compare their respective adjusted means for each of the five posttest measures. The adjusted means were the mean scores for the dependent variables when the covariate was controlled. Table 4.7 presents the adjusted means (Mean) and standard errors (SE) of the five measures for the VLC and summary-writing groups.

Table 4.7

Adjusted Means for the VLC and Summary-Writing Groups

Measure	VLC Mean (SE)	Summary-Writing Mean (SE)
Reading Experience Survey	80.96 (1.09)	73.37 (1.09)
Written Retell Test	16.86 (.47)	16.60 (.47)
Vocabulary Acquisition Test	59.21 (2.29)	57.84 (2.29)
Reading Comprehension Test	58.29 (1.51)	51.47 (1.51)
Reading Engagement Essay	11.58 (.47)	11.04 (.47)

A comparison of the adjusted means (Table 4.7) shows that the VLC group still had higher means than the summary-writing group on all five assessments. However, only the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension were statistically significant as indicated by the test of between-subjects effects (Table 4.6). The effect sizes for these two significant measures were calculated with the mean difference divided by the standard deviation of the difference, and the effect sizes d were interpreted as medium to large, according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines —small (0.2), medium (0.5), and large (0.8). Specifically, the direction of the difference favored the students in the VLC group compared to the students in the summary-writing group, with an effect size difference of $d = 0.95 SD$ higher on the Reading Experience Survey and an effect size difference of $d = 0.66 SD$ higher on the Reading Comprehension Test. The three non-significant measures, the Written Retell Test ($d = 0.13$), the Vocabulary Acquisition Test ($d = 0.1$), and the Reading Engagement Essay ($d = 0.23$), yielded small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988).

Both the unadjusted means (Table 4.5) and the adjusted means (Table 4.7) show a pattern that the VLC group got higher scores than the summary-writing group over all five posttest measures. A comparison between the unadjusted mean difference and the adjusted mean difference for the five measures show that the covariate brought the differences between the means of the VLC group and the means of the summary-writing group closer. Another interesting thing to be noted is that the treatment was found to have a statistically significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test, and the covariate was found to be related to the Reading Comprehension Test, but not to the Reading Experience Survey, which made the Reading Comprehension Test the only statistically significant measure that was impacted by both

the treatment and the covariate, and the Reading Experience Survey was only statistically impacted by the treatment, but not the covariate.

Summary

This quantitative study was designed to examine the impact of VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. The research data were collected from 118 Chinese university EFL students, with an equal sample size of 59 participants in both the experimental group and the comparison group. After checking the assumptions, a one-way MANCOVA test was conducted on the combination of the five dependent variables (Reading Experience Survey, Written Retell Test, Vocabulary Acquisition Test, Reading Comprehension Test, and Reading Engagement Essay) to determine whether or not there was a mean difference between the experimental group and the comparison group when the English proficiency level of the participants was controlled.

The multivariate analysis revealed a significant main effect. Both the treatment condition and the covariate were found to be significantly different on a combined result of the five dependent variables, suggesting that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group on the composite variable. Subsequently, univariate main effects were examined to investigate the significance of the treatment effect on each dependent variable. The treatment condition was found to have a significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test with the VLC group outperforming the summary-writing group. Even though the VLC group also scored higher than the summary-writing group on the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay, the treatment was not found to have a statistically significant impact. The covariate was found to have a significant

impact on the Reading Comprehension Test and the Reading Engagement Essay, a marginal impact on the Written Retell Test, and no significant effect on the Reading Experience Survey and the Vocabulary Acquisition Test.

Overall, the results suggest that the VLC treatment led to better posttest performances when all five measures are treated as a composite whole after controlling for participants' English proficiency, with statistically significant differences shown in the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test. The results laid a solid foundation for further analysis and discussion on the impact of the VLCs on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. The research findings, implications for practice and research, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of the proposed VLC approach using 118 Chinese university EFL students. Half of the participants participated in the VLC and the other half wrote summaries as their independent reading assignment. The statistical results showed that the VLC group outperformed the summary-writing group on the composite score of the posttest, validating the VLC model to be a more effective reading instructional approach than the traditional reading assignment. Specifically, participation in the VLC was found to have a significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Engagement Essay. This chapter presents the research findings, implications and recommendations for practice, implications for research, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Research Findings

This section provides a detailed interpretation of the findings with respect to the research questions and hypotheses, focusing on each of the five posttest measures designed to capture a unique aspect of independent EFL reading achievement, and exploring the contributing factors for the results. Each research question will be discussed individually.

Research Question One

Research question one addressed the overall effectiveness of the VLC approach by asking, “Is there a statistically significant difference in Chinese university EFL students’ a) reading experience, b) reading recall, c) vocabulary acquisition, d) reading comprehension, and e) reading engagement between the summary-writing group and the VLC group as measured by five post-intervention measures?” This research question was developed based on what the existing literature revealed about the positive influences that small-group peer-led literature discussions may bring to independent reading, as well as my belief in the power of a reading instructional model innovated by combining successful traditional classroom-based teaching practices with technology. My hypothesis was that participation in VLCs would lead to a better performance in independent English reading as measured by five assessments after removing the effect of participants’ varying English proficiency, compared to writing book summaries, a traditional reading assignment.

Research question one was important because the effectiveness of the proposed VLC model in an EFL environment should be supported by empirical evidence. The quasi-experimental between-subjects posttest design of the study sought to establish the causal relationship between the VLC treatment and reading achievement. It was important to first investigate the overall effectiveness of this reading instructional approach. Research question one was answered with the combined results of the five measures: the Reading Experience Survey, the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, the Reading Comprehension Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay. Quantitative analyses revealed that, overall, VLC participants significantly outperformed

the summary-writing participants on the composite score of the posttest. Most of the extraneous variables were controlled in the study. For example, the participants were at the same level in the same program, took the same classes, and read the same books in the study. In addition, their preexisting English proficiency differences were controlled for in the statistical analysis. Thus, it can be assumed that it was the different reading activities (VLCs vs summary-writing) that led to the statistical mean difference in the posttest. The positive finding of the VLC treatment was consistent with the findings of qualitative studies that reported positive effects of various online literature discussions (e.g., Larson, 2009; Whittingham, 2013). In addition, this statistical result not only supported the hypothesis that participation in the VLCs would yield more positive outcomes than writing summaries, but also echoed my informal observation that the VLC engaged the participants in reading the two American young adult novels outside of class, producing positive reading outcomes.

When designing the VLC model, I was guided by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1995), and my goal was to provide students with a platform for reading English as a fun and meaningful social activity outside of school. With the special needs of EFL students in mind, I carefully chose two American young adult novels that were interesting and not overwhelmingly difficult as the reading material for the VLC model implemented in the study. I also created four roles (Discussion Director, Connector, Language Expert, Researcher) based on Daniels' (2002) literature circle model to facilitate students' reading, thinking, and discussing. A familiar online chatting tool, QQ, was selected to host the online discussions.

It was the first time that the research participants had encountered VLCs. They needed to learn how to respond to the text per their assigned roles, form their own discussion topics, and defend their opinions in their VLC sessions. All these activities were new to them, but once they learned how to effectively get involved in those online literature discussions, they thrived in digging information about the books, connecting themselves to the book, engaging in discussions with their group members, and creatively presenting the novels to their class. My intuitive sense as a teacher felt this hybrid reading model worked well in holding the students accountable for reading, thereby producing positive reading experiences and reading outcomes.

The statistically significant results favoring the VLC treatment as well as my onsite observations of the VLC sessions confirmed my belief that an effective instructional method could engage EFL students in reading English. The participants' VLC discussions recorded in the QQ site also served as another piece of evidence to show participants' ability to comprehend, make predictions and connections, reflect, collaborate, and construct meanings of the novels. The one-way MANCOVA treated the five posttest measures as a composite variable and the statistical result confirmed the overall effectiveness of the VLC. I would conclude that the contributing factors for the statistically significant positive finding of the VLC main effects were the three key elements embedded in the design of the VLC model: literature-based reading, social interaction, and use of technology. To explore specific effects of the VLC, the following section discusses research question two in detail, presenting the interpretations of the statistical results and exploring possible explanations of the results.

Research Question Two

Research question two was, if there are differences in post-intervention measures between the summary-writing group and the VLC group, where do the differences lie? This question was important because identifying specific effects of the VLCs could inform teachers and researchers when implementing VLCs. As discussed earlier, the VLC treatment led to a statistically significant difference favoring the VLC group compared to the summary-writing group when all five measures were examined as a whole, yet it was not clear in which measures the two groups differed and whether those differences were statistically significant. Therefore, it was important to thoroughly investigate how the two groups differed to ascertain what effects the VLC treatment had on a specific outcome measure of independent English reading. The statistical results reported in Chapter 4 showed that the VLC treatment had significant impact on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test, but not on the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay. This section presents an in-depth discussion about the significant and non-significant results of the five measures in order to further answer research question two.

Significant results. The difference between the means of the VLC and the summary-writing groups' composite posttest scores was statistically significant. However, only two out of the five measures in the study were found to have a statistically significant relationship with the treatment: the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test. Thus, it was clear that the two significant measures contributed the most to the positive main effect of the VLCs. In addition, these two significant measures yielded medium to large effect sizes, meaning the observed

differences were important and meaningful. To shed light on the impact of the VLCs, it was imperative to thoroughly investigate the two significant measures.

Reading experience survey. The Reading Experience Survey measured participants' self-perceived reading experience of the assigned books in the study, not their general reading experience. The statements in the survey covered participant reading effort, self-perception of success, reading enjoyment, and reading attitude, which were elements of participants' reading experiences. The highest possible score for this instrument was 100, with higher scores indicating more positive reading experiences. Specifically, higher scores in this instrument indicated that respondents thought they made more effort in reading the novels and believed reading the novels helped them learn about different values and improve their vocabulary, reading, writing, and English communicative abilities. Higher scores also indicated participants had more reading enjoyment and more positive reading attitudes. Simply put, the higher the score, the more positive the reading experience was.

Statistical results showed that the VLC group (adjusted mean=80.96, SE=1.09) outperformed the summary-writing group (adjusted mean=73.37, SE=1.09) on the Reading Experience Survey by 7.59 points. It was a statistically significant finding with a large effect size ($d = 0.95$), indicating that the VLC participants had a much more positive reading experience compared to the summary-writing participants. This result confirmed my initial hypothesis that participation in the VLC could build participant self-identification as an English reader and lead to a more positive reading experience. This finding was also consistent with the results of other studies (e.g., Addington, 2001; Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Kim, 2004; Kong &

Fitch, 2002) that almost unanimously reported positive attitude or motivation gains after implementing literature discussions, suggesting that small, peer-led literature discussion activities could result in positive reading experiences.

To better understand why the VLC group outperformed the summary-writing group in the Reading Experience Survey, I examined participants' online discussions in QQ looking for substantial evidence to explain the statistical results. An examination of the VLC responses and discussions confirmed my speculation that it was the interesting book, engaging social interaction, and use of technology that led to participant positive reading experiences. The VLC structure embraced the socio-cultural theory that supported collaborative reader responses and literature-based conversations. Participants developed a sense of learner autonomy while participating in peer-led literature discussions. A supportive learning community was established where participants asked questions, made sense of the text, challenged each other's ideas, and offered sincere encouragement. Participants' discussions reflected their deep emotional involvement with the characters, events, and plots of the assigned novels. Technology made it possible for the VLC participants to use emojis, links, pictures, and videos in their discussions, which made the discussion more fun. Additionally, the whole-class book presentation activity also added enjoyment to their reading. The VLC successfully created a context that made the reading material more interesting to the readers and produced more positive reading experiences. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that the VLC participants viewed them as putting more effort in reading, developing more of a sense of success, and forming a more positive reading attitude, which were all associated with the affective factors that the VLC addressed.

There was another interesting result to be noted about the Reading Experience Survey. The Reading Experience Survey was found to be statistically influenced by the treatment, with the mean of the VLC group much higher than the comparison summary-writing group. However, this measure was not statistically influenced by students' preexisting English proficiency differences, indicating that students would have a more positive reading experience if they participated in the VLC regardless of their English proficiency levels. This suggested that the VLC would be a good instructional method to engage students in independent reading and produce a positive reading experience regardless of their English levels. This information is important because approaches that only work with high-English proficiency or low-English proficiency students would have limited application to classes with varied English proficiency levels. This suggests that the VLC is a good option when considering reading instructional methods to use with students at different English proficiency levels.

Reading Comprehension Test. The Reading Comprehension Test assessed participants' reading comprehension of the target novel with 20 multiple-choice questions and 20 open-ended short-answer questions. Each question was worth two points, and the highest possible score for this assessment was 80. The VLC group (*mean*=58.76, *SD*=12.48) had a mean 7.76 points higher than the summary-writing group (*mean*=51, *SD*=11.11) in the Reading Comprehension Test when participants' English proficiency was not considered. Statistical analysis revealed that participants' English proficiency was significantly related to the Reading Comprehension Test, which was not surprising because language proficiency, the ability to decode the language, was the pre-condition for reading comprehension. The VLC participants in this study had slightly higher

English proficiency. However, even after participants' English proficiency was controlled for in the statistical analysis, the VLC group (adjusted mean=58.29, SE=1.51) still outperformed the summary-writing group (adjusted mean=51.47, SE=1.51) in the Reading Comprehension Test by 6.82 points, with a medium to large effect size ($d = 0.66$). This meaningful statistically significant result supported my initial hypothesis that participation in the VLC would lead to deeper reading comprehension.

One major objective for the VLC was to improve participants' reading comprehension for independent EFL reading. In each of the VLC sessions, participants discussed a quarter of the assigned novel in depth with their group members. The discussion was guided by their responses to what they read, which might include events, characters, the setting, the language, or personal experiences related to the story. VLC participants rotated among four roles (Discussion Director, Connector, Language Expert, Researcher) that provided a unique focus and purpose for reading. The Connector, for example, learned how to make connections between the book to self, to other books, and to the wider world, and those connections deepened book comprehension. Therefore, the VLC framework was the first contributing factor for the significant result in the Reading Comprehension Test because it enhanced readers' ability to interpret and think critically about the text. The second contributing factor was the social interaction among the VLC participants. A close examination of the VLC discussions revealed that there was a very active interaction among the participants. They asked each other questions that were important to understanding the book, shared earnestly and creatively what they found interesting about the book, presented new words and expressions, and offered help if needed in their VLC discussions, which all aided the comprehension of the book.

Notably, all VLC participants had something to contribute to their group discussions, which in turn led to a deeper comprehension of the book. Additionally, technology allowed VLC participants to use multimodal responses in their literature discussions, which greatly facilitated their comprehension of the book. For example, VLC participants used a lot of pictures to demonstrate unfamiliar concepts and words, links to information about the book, and video clips to make otherwise abstract concepts perceivable. All these factors, the VLC framework, social interaction, and technology, contributed to a better performance for the VLC participants in the Reading Comprehension Test compared to the summary-writing participants who wrote summaries on their own.

The result confirmed my assumption and supported Daniels' (2002) assertions of the positive effects of literature circles on reading comprehension. However, prior studies reported inconsistent results regarding this topic. Some studies (eg. Serena, 2009; Zhang, Gao, Ring, & Zhang, 2007) did not find reading comprehension improved after implementing literature discussions, while other studies (eg. Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Eeds & Wells, 1989; McElvain, 2010) reported gains in reading comprehension. Such contradictory findings resulted partially from methodological issues. For example, confounding factors like preexisting group differences were not addressed in the design (eg. Serena, 2009), no comparison group was included (eg. Eeds & Wells, 1989), or insensitive assessments were used to measure reading comprehension growth (e.g., Smith, 2014; Zhang, et al., 2007). The current study included a treatment group and a comparable comparison group and used a book-specific instrument to measure reading comprehension while controlling for participants' preexisting differences in their English proficiency. Therefore, methodologically, it was appropriate to attribute

the observed effect to the treatment. A causal relationship between the VLC and satisfactory reading comprehension has been empirically established.

To sum up, the significant results of the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test contributed most to the overall effectiveness of the VLC model. The VLC treatment led to a higher mean in participants' reading experiences and reading comprehension which was statistically significant, with medium to large effect sizes. The results supported the choices I made as a teacher and researcher in designing and implementing the VLC model.

Non-significant results. Although the VLC group got higher means than the summary-writing group over all five measures with and without the effect of preexisting difference in English proficiency, the difference in the means of three out of the five measures were not statistically significant. The three non-significant measures were the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay. It was useful to also examine the three non-significant measures to fully understand the benefits and limitations of the VLC. This section first discusses the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, a measure that did not require subjective judgement; and then the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay, two subjective measures with shared characteristics.

Vocabulary Acquisition Test. The Vocabulary Acquisition Test was a book-specific instrument that assessed participants' global understanding of vocabulary in the target novel. The test contained 25 multiple-choice questions and 25 items asking students to provide Chinese definitions for English words and phrases. Each question was

worth two points, and the highest possible score was 100. The VLC group ($mean=59.42$, $SD=17.94$) exceeded the summary-writing group ($mean=57.63$, $SD=16.90$) by 1.79 points when English proficiency was not controlled for. After the effect of English proficiency was removed, the adjusted mean difference between the VLC group (adjusted $mean=59.21$, $SE=2.29$) and the summary-writing group (adjusted $mean=57.84$, $SE=2.29$) was 1.37 points. Even though the VLC group got a higher mean, the mean difference did not have statistical significance. This statistical result did not align with my assumption that participation in VLCs would lead to more vocabulary acquisition.

When designing the roles for the VLC, I purposely included a Language Expert to address language learning and vocabulary acquisition needs for EFL students. The Language Expert was supposed to be on the lookout for words, phrases, expressions, or sentences that were important to the understanding of reading. If the Language Expert found words, phrases, expressions, and sentences that were puzzling, unfamiliar, or interesting, he/she should look for definitions and meanings and post them with explanations to the QQ site. When I examined students' VLC discussions, I found that students treated their Language Expert role seriously. They prepared long and detailed vocabulary lists with both English and Chinese definitions. They sometimes used pictures to support their explanations. Their endeavor seemed to be beneficial to vocabulary learning. However, the research did not find a significant impact of the VLC treatment on vocabulary acquisition, which was a surprising result. One possible explanation for this non-significant finding was that the summary-writing participants acquired the same amount of vocabulary from reading the novel and writing the summaries. The summary-writing participants wrote four summaries for the target novel, which was a lot of writing

to the students. It was possible that this large amount of writing benefited participants' vocabulary acquisition because writing required good mastery of vocabulary.

Regarding the relationship to prior studies, the result of the current study did not support the findings of some qualitative studies that reported vocabulary gains through literature discussions (eg. Kong & Fitch, 2002; Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, & Dass, 2007). However, it was not proper to compare the result of this quantitative study to those qualitative studies, because the research methods and research participants were all different. Additionally, there was an apparent lack of quantitative studies that examined the effects of literature discussions on vocabulary acquisition.

Daniels (2002) held the view that meaningful social interactions could facilitate vocabulary learning. As a believer in sociocultural theory, I also believe that social interaction would help students with their vocabulary acquisition. However, foreign language vocabulary acquisition is a complex process. More empirical research should be conducted to investigate how literature discussions could impact EFL vocabulary acquisition.

Written Retell Test and Reading Engagement Essay. The Written Retell Test assessed participants' reading recall and the Reading Engagement Essay was designed to gauge participants' reading engagement levels. The VLC participants got slightly higher mean scores than the summary-writing participants on these two subjective measures with and without the effect of their English proficiency, but the two measures were found to be statistically non-significant to the impact of the treatment. The Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay had some common features. First, both instruments required test-takers to free write in English within a limited amount of time. The only

difference was that the Written Retell Test required test-takers to write what they remembered about the novel and the Reading Engagement Essay was about what they thought about the novel. Second, both assessments required subjective judgement using scoring rubrics. Third, both measures were found to be impacted by participants' English proficiency. Specifically, pre-existing differences in English proficiency had a marginal impact on the Written Retell Test and a significant impact on the Reading Engagement Essay.

The non-significant results of the two measures did not support my hypothesis that participation in VLCs would result in significantly better performances in reading recall and reading engagement. The VLC framework was designed to encourage both the efferent and aesthetic reading stances. It was hypothesized that VLC participants would remember the story better through responding to the story from multiple lenses guided by VLC roles and constantly discussing the book with peers. It was also believed that those literature discussions would promote aesthetic reading and lead to deeper engagement with the text. The examination of the VLC discussions also showed evidence for participants' emotional involvement and textual engagement. However, the statistical results did not support my assumption. The following section offers some possible explanations for the non-significant findings on these two subjective measures.

First, reading American young adult novels was a new experience for both the VLC and the summary-writing participants. Since the VLC was designed to engage the EFL students in independent reading, as expected, VLC participants shared their emotions, thoughts, and ideas about the novel in their discussions, reflecting their critical thinking and deep engagement with the character, events, and the theme. Unexpectedly,

although the summary-writing participants were instructed to only focus on facts that demonstrated a thorough understanding of the text, many summary-writing participants still showed great empathy with the characters, related the story to their personal lives, and commented on certain events within the story in their summaries. Overall, the summary-writing participants found the target novel as fascinating as the VLC participants did. Therefore, it was possible that the engagement level of the book was similar among both the VLC and summary-writing participants.

Second, unlike the other measures that did not require much writing in English, the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay required the test-takers to use writing to retell the story and reconstruct their reactions to the book. The VLC participants completed four VLC sessions sharing their responses to the target novel, while the summary-writing participants wrote four summaries about the novel. Many summary-writing participants organized their summaries in chronological order with lots of details of the book and shared their personal experiences and feelings, which prepared them for retelling the story and commenting on the book in writing. Thus, it was not too surprising that there was no statistically significant difference between the VLC group and the summary-writing group on the two subjective measures that required writing.

Third, although scoring rubrics were carefully developed to assess participant performance in the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay, it was still hard to objectively evaluate the writing in the assessments. With so many details to recount from a 234-page novel and many possible comments on the book, the instruments needed much refinement and precision to serve as effective measures of book comprehension and reading engagement. With all being said, the summary-writing group

did a good amount of writing while reading. If the VLC group did as well as the summary-writing group on the two measures that required writing, it shows that the VLC was still an effective method for students to develop their English writing ability.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The objective of the study was to validate the VLC model created for EFL teachers to use with their students in independent reading. The overall effectiveness of the VLC model has been empirically supported since the statistical results showed that the VLC group outperformed the summary-writing group on the composite score of the posttest. Specifically, participation in the VLC led to statistically better performance on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test with medium to large effect sizes, suggesting that the VLC model has meaningful pedagogical and instructional implications. This section presents the implications and recommendations for teaching practice.

Implications for Teaching Practice

This study empirically supported the overall effectiveness of the VLC and its impact on students' reading experiences and reading comprehension. The statistical results indicated the potential of the VLC to engage EFL students in independent reading and produce positive reading outcomes. Specifically, this current VLC approach was found to be able to lead to more positive reading experiences and deeper reading comprehension compared to writing book summaries, a traditional reading assignment. In addition to the significant statistical results supporting the use of the VLC, my observation on student participation over the course of the VLC implementation also confirmed my belief that the VLC would work to engage EFL students in reading

English-language literature independently. Therefore, the VLC is a good instructional approach to consider when trying to engage EFL students in independent reading.

However, the design and implementation of VLCs need to be appropriate to achieve the desired goals.

Recommendations for Teaching Practice

As discussed above, VLCs could be a valuable addition to EFL curriculum if designed and implemented properly. Recommendations for how to incorporate VLCs in teaching practice will be discussed along with the factors contributing to the success of the current VLC model: design of the VLC, book choice, and teacher involvement and guidance.

Design of the VLC. The current design of the VLC was effective in leading to better overall performance of the posttest, more positive reading experiences, and deeper reading comprehension. Teachers can directly use the current VLC model or adapt it to fit their instructional needs. So long as the basic structure of VLC models stays as small peer-led online discussion groups, the implementation can be varied from teacher to teacher. However, there are some factors worth considering when adapting the VLC model: appropriate platform, VLC roles, and face-to-face components.

Appropriate platform. The success of a VLC relies much on the appropriateness of the platform. When choosing the hosting platform for VLC sessions, first, the online chatting tool should be easily accessible to all users, user-friendly, and free of charge, and at the same time, students' privacy must be well protected when using the platform. Second, the online chatting tool needs to offer both synchronous and asynchronous

functions so that students can post their responses and discuss anytime they wish. Third, the platform should support multimodal responses, such as pictures and images, emojis, sounds, videos, links, and the like to add flavor to online literature discussions. Teachers should carefully choose the online platform to enable enjoyable and insightful discussions to foster positive reading experiences.

VLC roles. Four roles adapted from Daniels' (2002) literature circle model were used in the current study. The roles guided the participants to read from different perspectives and offered them ideas for discussion. Chinese EFL students were accustomed to reading English mainly for linguistic knowledge, not for pleasure or literary engagement. The four discussion roles (Discussion Director, Connector, Language Expert, Researcher) helped them to practice a variety of reading strategies, increased their motivation to read more in-depth, and deepened their reading comprehension of the book. Roles served as effective tools for EFL readers to develop good English readership. When designing roles for students, students' particular learning needs and teacher's instructional goals should always guide the process. Roles should help students generate ideas for discussions rather than inhibit them. A teacher can be creative when designing the roles but should make tasks manageable for students. Once students become confident reading and discussing literature on their own, there is no longer a need to use roles.

Face-to-face components. The model used in the study was called virtual literature circles because literature discussions were carried out online, but there were also some face-to-face components. Thus, the VLC was a hybrid model comprised of

both the online discussion and onsite components for students to give book presentations in the classroom about their independent reading. The online discussion empowered meaningful peer interaction and autonomous learning, giving even the quietest students a voice to express their opinions and ideas. The face-to-face component played an important role in engaging students in independent reading and participating in online discussion. The face-to-face component of the VLC in the current study was a whole-class book presentation, where students creatively presented the book to their classmates in the classroom. All members in the small group cooperated and collaborated to contribute to their class presentation. The interaction, therefore, transitioned from being within the small group to incorporating the whole class. I, as the teacher, also took time to talk about the books with the students in the classroom. These face-to-face conversations, however brief, seemed to motivate students to read and discuss the books. As Hyler and Hicks (2014) stated, “Face-to-face conversations teach students to actively engage with one another and can have the lasting effect of building trust among peers when it comes to expressing thoughts verbally instead of hiding behind written words on a collaborative online space” (p. 117). The inclusion of some face-to-face components appeared to be a contributing factor for the significant finding on participants’ positive reading experiences and should be considered when adapting the VLC model.

Book choice. Many literature circle models allow students’ free choice of books, while the current VLC model assigned novels for participants to read for practical reasons. First, Chinese university EFL students, especially freshmen, needed guidance when choosing books to read outside of class. Second, I bought the digital novels and made them accessible to students for free, so that the students would not worry about the

costs for buying books. The participants found the two novels they read for the study were fascinating and they felt they benefited from reading the books. The quality of the book was an important factor for students' positive reading experience in this study. As for choosing books for EFL students to read independently, the following factors should be considered. First, the English text needs to fit students' reading levels to promote fluent reading comprehension. Second, the instructor should select texts engaging enough to hold the students' interest throughout the whole book, with characters, events, and themes which are relatable to the students. Third, the availability of the text must be ensured. To successfully engage students in reading and participating in discussion, the proper choice of book based on students' reading levels and teacher's instructional goals is key.

Teacher involvement and guidance. Although the VLC was a peer-led discussion group, a teacher's involvement and guidance was vital to the success of this instructional model. The teacher must have high expectations of students and believe they would be able to appreciate and discuss English literature using the English language, while making an effort to create a learning community in which all students' ideas and comments are valued. To successfully run VLCs with EFL students and produce desirable reading achievement, it requires the teacher's full involvement and guidance in training the students, maintaining students' interest for reading, and giving constructive feedback.

First, to promote effective participation in VLCs, teachers should provide sufficient training in literature discussion along with necessary scaffolding of supportive skills of inquiry, problem-solving, book reflection, and cooperative learning. For example, teachers can model how to write a good response to the book, how to develop

appropriate questions for discussion, how to organize their thoughts to answer the questions, and how to interact with peers in English. With the teachers' modeling and scaffolding, students learn to navigate their own reading and become more knowledgeable and capable of comprehending the English texts.

Second, teachers need to be familiar with the books students read and find effective ways to maintain students' interest in reading the books. To establish students' interest in reading the book and sustaining that interest for continuous reading, teachers can utilize a variety of methods to introduce the book and give book talks throughout the VLC cycles. For example, if available, relevant songs and movie clips can be used to introduce the books to students. Teachers can also share with students what they think about a certain character or event in the book, talk about how the book transforms their ideas toward a certain phenomenon, or simply tell the students what they feel about the book overall. If students sense that their teacher is genuinely interested in the book, they are more motivated to read the book.

Third, the teacher's consistent, specific, and timely feedback appeared to be a deciding factor for students' success with VLCs. Students' self-evaluation helped them reflect on participation performance in VLCs, and it was the teacher's evaluation that made students treat the assignment seriously. In the current study, students' online responses were tied to a grade and I offered them comments, which emphasized the importance of the activity and engaged the students. However, the teacher's comments seemed to be more important compared to grades because the comments provided students with insights and encouragement. When I posted follow-up questions, clarifying statements, or comments that showed my interest in student discussions, students were

excited to continue the discussion and bring the VLC to a higher level with more in-depth, insightful, and productive discussions. Additionally, it is important for teachers to join their students' VLC groups online. In the current study, although I did not always participate in the discussions, knowing the teacher was there observing the discussion and reviewing the comments held the students accountable and they became more engaged in discussions. Thus, teacher involvement and guidance appears to be essential to the success of the VLC.

Implications for Research

As discussed earlier, no quantitative research has been done to study the effects of VLCs, especially on EFL students' independent English reading. Thus, the results of the present research have implications for research as well. The present study used a quantitative method to investigate the effectiveness of the VLC with Chinese university EFL students on their independent English reading. The VLC implemented in the study was found to be able to effectively engage university EFL students in independent reading. VLC participants in the study were able to read the English novels outside of class, write quality responses reflecting critical thinking, and discuss English-language literature using the English language. It was encouraging to see that the endeavor to combine traditional instructional methods with technology resulted in desirable reading outcomes. The empirical evidence provided by the present study validated the use of the VLC with Chinese university EFL students.

However, the effectiveness of any particular instructional method cannot be fully justified by only one study. The research questions can only be satisfactorily answered when there is a convergence of several studies using the same population employing a

variety of research methods. So far, no peer-reviewed research articles have been found on the topic of VLCs with the population of university students in an EFL environment, and quantitative studies on online literature discussions using this population were almost non-existent. Thus, in order to establish a convincing body of research to support VLC implementation in university EFL reading classes, much more research must be carried out to explore the effects of VLCs on reading achievement for university EFL students.

This study presented a very detailed description of the VLC intervention with supporting materials. As the process and materials were described in detail, it would be practical to incorporate the current VLC model in EFL reading classes for research purposes. The study also developed five book-specific instruments to measure given constructs related to independent reading achievement. The measures were validated using content expert strategy and high inter-rater reliability was established for each of the subjective measures. Therefore, it is feasible for other researchers to replicate the study using the same books and assessments with necessary modifications.

Limitations of the Study

The present research found substantial quantitative evidence in support of the use of the proposed VLC model. However, although the study was conducted in a stringently systematic way, there were still limitations resulting from the study design. This section presents acknowledged limitations of the study.

Firstly, the research used a convenience sample at a selected university. All participants remained in their intact classes to receive assigned treatments. Although the sample size was not small ($N=118$), participants from a single university cannot represent the entire population of Chinese university EFL students. The use of a convenience

sample and lack of randomization limited the generalizability of the study.

Secondly, it was a limitation that I was both the researcher and the teacher in the study. The VLC was new to Chinese EFL teachers. To ensure the fidelity of the treatments throughout the course of implementation, I taught the English reading course to participants in both the VLC and the summary-writing groups. Although I tried hard to keep my position as an objective researcher, my role as both the researcher and the teacher might have impacted the results of the study. For example, my work ethic might have potentially impacted the research results. I wanted the summary-writing participants to treat their summary writing seriously. I felt it would be unethical not to encourage those students to read with engagement. Therefore, I provided encouraging comments to summary-writing students who included their personal engagement and connections with the book when they were instructed to write summaries based on only facts of the novel. It was possible that the dedication I showed in my role as a teacher impacted the results of the study.

Thirdly, all the post-intervention assessments were based on only one book, which limited the reliability of the results. It was difficult and time-consuming to develop book-dependent measures. Given the scope of the study, with limited resources and financial support, the posttest was based on only one book. The results would be more reliable if assessments were developed for both novels used in the study.

Fourthly, the overload of the posttest was a limitation of the study. It was physically and intellectually very demanding for participants to take the posttest at one time. It was likely that participants experienced fatigue taking the posttest, which might have impacted the result of the study. There were five instruments used in the study. One was

administered to the students at a different time. The other four were administered to the participants at one time. It took the participants almost two and half hours to complete the entire posttest. Additionally, two assessments required writing in English, which were particularly tiring to EFL students. Participants were exhausted toward the end of the posttest. This situation posed threat to the validity of the measures and was a limitation of the study.

Lastly, the imprecision of measures threatened the validity of the results. The two subjective measures (the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay) needed refinement and streamlining to effectively gauge reading recall and reading engagement. Both measures used writing to collect information. The use of writing as an outcome measure led to responses that varied in length and quality, which created difficulty for precise scoring.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study established an empirically causal relationship between participation in VLCs and desirable reading outcomes for independent English reading using a population of Chinese university EFL students. Univariate analysis revealed that the VLC led to significantly more positive reading experiences and deeper reading comprehension. Based on the information gleaned from conducting the current research and the need to fully understand the potential of this innovative reading instructional approach, this section presents recommendations for future research.

First, different research participants should be used to examine the potential effects of the VLC approach in promoting independent English reading in an EFL environment.

The present study used Chinese university EFL students as the research participants to

investigate the impact of the proposed VLC model and its effectiveness was supported by the statistical results of the study. The VLC model has great potential to engage other EFL students in independent English reading. It would be meaningful to examine the effects of the VLC using other EFL students who might benefit from this model, such as high-school EFL students, college non-English majors, or EFL students in countries other than China. The convergence of studies using different participants will provide more insight into the potential of the VLC.

Second, this study did not find statistically significant differences between the VLC group and the summary-writing group on vocabulary acquisition, reading recall, and reading engagement. One possible reason for the non-significant results was that the measures were not precise enough to capture the differences. To measure reading recall and reading engagement more precisely, the Written Retell Test and the Reading Engagement Essay should be streamlined for future use. To be specific, participants could be asked to retell only one event or the end of the book for the Written Retell Test, and only comment on a particular character, event, or theme of the book for the Reading Engagement Essay. Focusing on a smaller range of items could not only establish more precise measures, but also reduce the testing time. Additionally, book-specific measures should be developed for each of the books used in the study for more reliable research results.

Third, a more thorough examination on each of the significant dependent variables is needed to fully understand the benefits of the VLC. The study found statistically significant differences favoring the VLC participants on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test. As for the Reading Experience Survey, there were

four sub constructs (reading effort, self-perception of success, reading enjoyment, and reading attitude) in the survey. It would be beneficial to investigate the impact of the VLC on each of the sub-constructs as well as the relationships between and among the sub-constructs within the Reading Experience Survey. The Reading Comprehension Test was comprised of both factual and inferential questions. Future studies should distinguish factual questions from inferential questions when examining the VLC impact on reading comprehension.

Last, it would be meaningful to examine what specifically in VLC participation led to good performance in the posttest. In the current study, there were 59 students who participated in VLCs and each VLC group consisted of about four people. Some VLC groups scored higher than other groups. Also, within single groups, some VLC participants scored higher than others on the posttest. It would have practical value to explore the VLC participation patterns of high-achieving and low-achieving students in the study. The underlying processes need to be teased apart in future research to better inform EFL teaching practice and research. Additionally, it was found in the current study that students' English proficiency levels had significant impact on the Reading Comprehension Test and the Reading Engagement Essay, and a marginal impact on the Written Retell Test. It would be helpful to investigate how English proficiency levels impacted VLC participation and whether there were differences between the high-English proficiency and low-English proficiency students. In short, the specific patterns in VLC participation and the influence of English proficiency levels on VLC participation should be further explored.

Conclusion

This study adopted a quantitative method with a quasi-experimental between-subjects posttest design to investigate the impact of the VLC model on Chinese university EFL students' independent English reading. The 118 research participants were assigned to either the VLC treatment or the summary-writing treatment while reading American young adult novels outside of school. Five instruments were developed to measure five aspects of independent English reading achievement. The instruments were the Reading Experience Survey, the Written Retell Test, the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, the Reading Comprehension Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay. These instruments were administered to all participants after they completed reading two assigned novels and participating in either VLCs or writing summaries for eight weeks. When data were collected and entered into SPSS, a one-way MANCOVA was performed to examine the posttest performances of the VLC group and the summary-writing group while controlling for their preexisting English proficiency differences.

The statistical results supported the hypothesis that the VLC group would outperform the summary-writing group on the composite score of the posttest. Additionally, participation in VLCs was found to be statistically effective in leading to better performance on the Reading Experience Survey and the Reading Comprehension Test, compared to writing book summaries. However, the VLC was not found to have statistically significant impact on the Vocabulary Acquisition Test, the Written Retell Test, and the Reading Engagement Essay even though the means in each of these measures of the VLC group were higher. Although the higher means did not have statistical value, it was encouraging to see the VLC participants did as well as or slightly better than the

summary-writing participants. Given that only eight weeks of participation in VLCs led to statistically significant group differences in the composite posttest scores as well as in participant reading experiences and reading comprehension, the implementation of VLCs has important practical implications for EFL teachers and researchers.

The participants entered this study with no prior experience with VLCs. In their class presentations, many students said they had never completed reading an English-language novel before the study. After the course was over, some VLC participants emailed me to express their appreciation for being given the opportunity to read the novels and participate in the online discussions about the novels with their classmates. The VLC, apparently, provided an alternative online learning environment that offered unique logistical and motivational benefits that were not possible in the traditional learning environment. Thus, within the time frame of eight weeks, the VLC participants not only successfully completed reading two English novels, but also learned how to effectively discuss literature in a VLC and achieved desirable reading outcomes. Within their VLCs, participants learned to approach English texts from different reading stances with multiple lenses, collaboratively interpreted the assigned novels with a variety of sources, and constructed meaning together. They shared their own understanding and beliefs while embracing different ways of thinking, ideas, and perspectives from others. The VLC created a learning community that was conducive to independent English reading. Reading became a meaningful social activity in which participants interacted with one another, negotiated understanding of the novel, and promoted English reading skills. Participants' engagement with discussion in this study demonstrated the potential benefits of implementing VLCs into EFL reading classes.

This study contributed to literacy research by providing quantitative evidence for the overall effectiveness of the VLC. In addition, this research found empirical evidence that participation in the VLC led to statistically more positive reading experiences and better reading comprehension for EFL university students, when compared to a treatment of writing book summaries. This suggests that the VLC model could engage EFL students in reading English literature outside of class and achieve desirable reading outcomes. Since quantitative studies on the topic of VLCs were almost non-existent, the results of the present study could serve as a benchmark for future studies.

Having been empirically validated, the VLC appears to be a promising method to engage EFL students in independent English reading. VLCs could be a valuable addition to EFL reading classes. However, it requires a teacher's knowledge, experience, preparation, and, most importantly, willingness to create a supportive, productive, and collaborative reading environment that helps students to gain benefits from VLCs. It should also be noted that the VLC is not the only method that could promote independent English reading. EFL reading teachers and researchers need to explore a variety of ways to promote independent English reading, helping millions of EFL students master the English language.

APPENDIX A
READING MATERIAL INFORMATION

Title: *Go Ask Alice*
Theme: Drugs, teenage life
Author: Anonymous
Number of Pages: 213
Year of Publication: 2006
Number of Words: 46,592
Reading Level (American Standard): 7-8th grade

Title: *Annie on My Mind*
Author: Nancy Garden
Theme: Teenage romance, lesbian love, and self-realization
Number of Pages: 234
Year of Publication: 2007
Number of Words: 60, 973
Reading Level (American Standard): 9-10th grade

APPENDIX B
VLC GUIDELINES

What is a VLC?

A VLC is a peer-led small group consisting of four to five students who read the same English text and regularly meet online to discuss their selected readings, primarily in written form. Student written discussions can also make use of multimedia materials.

What are the requirements for participation in VLCs?

1) QQ account

QQ is the online platform that houses the VLCs. You need a QQ account to participate.

2) Access to the Internet and a computer, or a smart phone with data

You need access to the Internet and a computer, or a smart phone with data to participate in online discussions.

3) Books

Your teacher will post the electronic books in your class QQ group for you to read.

4) Time

Participating in VLCs takes time. You need time to read, respond to your reading, and post your responses to QQ. Specifically, you will discuss your reading with your group for at least 45 minutes online every week. Please be prepared to spend the time to participate in VLCs.

5) Team spirit

Team spirit is crucial to your VLC experience. You will read your book independently, but you will discuss the book with your group members collaboratively. If your group members have questions or need help, you should strive to answer the questions or offer help, but of course, if there is something that you really cannot figure out even as a group, then you can post your questions to the whole class QQ group to seek help. You will also present your book as a team to the whole class when you have completed reading the book and participating in all the VLC sessions of that book. Suggestions for the whole-class book presentation activities are attached.

6) Commitment

Your commitment is important to the success of VLCs. Reading in a foreign language can be challenging. Participating in VLCs will make your busy schedule even tighter, but reading English independently and discussing English literature in English are truly rewarding. These experiences will help you become better English readers.

What should you do in a VLC?

1) Read!

The primary purpose of participating in VLCs is for you to engage in independent English reading. Please read the selected pages of your book according to the reading schedule (see below) that your group agrees upon. Follow the reading schedule; do not read less or more than what your group plans.

2) Think!

You need to think while you read. You will be assigned some roles to help you read from a certain perspective, and the prompts (see below) your teacher gives you will help guide your thinking, but most importantly, you should think critically on your own and ask questions throughout the reading.

3) Write!

Please prepare a notebook to jot down ideas and thoughts that occur to you during your reading. Write a response based on but not limited to your assigned role and post the response at the scheduled time so that your group members can read.

4) Make connections!

Compare your book to your own life, your friends and family, another book, or society and culture.

5) Ask questions and respond to people!

Ask questions you had while reading and respond to people if you know the answer in your VLC discussion sessions. Remember there are no stupid questions or wrong answers in a VLC.

6) Share good ideas!

Your classmates are counting on you to share insightful ideas with them, so please think hard and bring good ideas to the discussions. Use your book, your VLC role, your reading prompts, and your original ideas to come up with insights to contribute to the quality of your group discussion.

7) Be respectful and strategic!

Respect your group members' ideas. Remember we are a learning community, and everyone's ideas should be respected and valued. Keep your group members' feelings in mind. Try to provide constructive feedback to comments that you do not agree with. Be tactful!

8) Be punctual!

Stay on time for reading, posting, and discussing. This means you need to complete your readings, post your responses to QQ at the scheduled time, and be online at the scheduled time for the discussion. You all need to be punctual to make the VLCs work.

9) Have fun!

Our VLCs are designed to help you engage in reading and discussion. Most important of all, I hope you will experience the pleasure of reading English and have fun participating in your VLCs.

APPENDIX C
VLC ROLE DESCRIPTION

Discussion Director: Your job is to prepare a brief summary that conveys the gist—the key points, the main highlights, the main events, and the essence—of this week’s reading. In addition, you need to prepare a few questions for your group to discuss in case nobody asks questions; it is also your job to make sure everyone participates in the discussion. For the questions, just notice what you are wondering while you read, and jot down the questions that you have about this part of the book.

Prompts:

1. What is happening? What is going to happen next?
2. How does the author evoke the feelings you have had?
3. What actions does a character take? Why do these characters act as they do?
4. Now that you are this far into the story, what do you look forward to learning next? What conflicts or problems do you think the characters will face?

Connector: The Connector role embodies what skillful readers most often do—they connect what they read to their own lives, their feelings, their experiences, their friends, their family, or to other books and authors. Your job as the Connector is to find connections between the book and you, and between the book and the wider world. This means connecting the reading to your own past experiences, to happenings at school or in the community, to stories in the news, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. You may also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic, or by the same author.

Prompts:

1. If you were the protagonist in the story, what would you do when confronting some specific problems? Explain why you would do that.
2. In today's reading, did the setting or any of the characters remind you of people in your own personal life? In what ways were they alike and different?
3. Does any part of this book make you feel scared, annoyed, sad, frustrated, happy, or horrified? Which part and why?
4. As you read today, what surprised you? Explain how this will affect the story or how it changed your thinking about the story.
5. Would you like to read other books by this author? Why or why not?
6. Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?

Language Expert: The language a writer uses is an important ingredient of the author’s craft. Your job is to be on the lookout for words, phrases, expressions, or sentences that are important to the understanding of your reading. You may run across words that are repeated a lot, used in an unusual way, or key to the meaning of the text. So long as you find words, phrases, expressions, and sentences that are puzzling, unfamiliar, or interesting, mark them while you are reading, and then later find their definitions or meanings, either from a dictionary or some other sources. Prepare a list of those language elements with your explanation for your group. You can use pictures to support your explanation if useful.

Prompts:

1. Why does the author use a certain language style?
2. What are the expressions that you find particularly interesting or useful?
3. Which words or expressions are used again and again in the novel? Why are they repeated so many times?
4. What do some abbreviations mean?
5. Are there any words that have specific meanings in the novel but mean something else at other places?
6. What are the new words, phrases, and expressions you learned from your reading?

Researcher: Your job is to dig up some background information on any topic related to your book. This might include the geography, weather, culture, or history of the book's setting; information about the author, her/his life, and other works; information about the time period portrayed in the book; pictures, objects, or materials that illustrate elements of the book; the history and derivation of words or names used in the book; pictures or music that reflect the book or the time; or anything interesting that does not exist in our culture. The idea is to find some information or material that helps your group understand the book better. Investigate something that really interests you—something that stuck you as puzzling or curious while you were reading. You can use pictures or links to help your group members understand your discoveries if useful.

Prompts:

1. What do you think the author had to know in order to write the work?
2. Why is this story set where it is (not *what* is the setting)?
3. List three facts, theories, or incidents that you found particularly interesting. Now, assume you haven't read the book. Can you find this information? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think the author wrote this story? Where did he or she get the idea or the characters? What message do you think that the author is trying to share?
5. Is there anything in the book that does not exist in the Chinese culture?
6. What background information you think is particularly important to understanding the story?

Adapted from Daniels (2002) and Pavonetti (2007)

APPENDIX D
VLC READING SCHEDULE

VLC Reading Schedule

Book Title:

Group:

Session	Page No.	Response Time	Discussion Time	Discussion Director	Connector	Language Expert	Researcher
1							
2							
3							
4							

APPENDIX E
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR WHOLE-CLASS BOOK PRESENTATION

After you complete reading the book and participating in all the VLC sessions, you are expected to present your book to the whole class as a group using no more than three minutes. Below are some suggestions for your presentation. However, you can present the book in whatever way you want. Be creative and have fun.

1. A traditional book report that includes the following information, the title, the author, the theme, the setting, the characters, the plot, your thoughts, and your evaluation of the book. Read aloud your book report for your classmates.
2. A new ending of the book. Share with your class the new ending of the book and talk about how you came up with this idea.
3. A new cover for the book. Show your classmates the new cover of the book and talk about why you designed the new cover the way you did.
4. An interview with the author. Imagine that you can interview the author. Share with the class the questions you would like to ask as well as how you think the author would respond. You can act your interview out.
5. An interview with character(s). Imagine that you can interview the character(s). Share with the class the questions you would like to ask as well as how you think the character(s) would respond. You can act your interview out.
6. A relationship tree of key characters. Share with the class the relationship tree of key characters from the book. Include the family, friend, school, and other relationships.
7. A timeline of the story. Create a detailed timeline of the events in the story including but not limited to the beginning events, introduction of the conflict, development of the conflict, climax, resolution, and ending. Share the timeline with the class.
8. A retelling of the book in Chinese. Retell the story in Chinese the way you would to someone who has never read the book. Include as many details as possible such as the beginning events, introduction of the conflict, development of the conflict, climax, resolution, and ending.

Adapted from Daniels (1994)

APPENDIX F
VLC STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION FORM

VLC Student Self-Evaluation Form

Group:

Student Name:

Book Title:

Ingredient	Score	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Complete reading on time	20				
Post response on time	10				
Have good ideas	10				
Read others' posts	10				
Respond to people	10				
Be punctual for discussion	10				
Ask questions	10				
Stick to the book	10				
Be honest and critical but sensitive to others' feelings	10				
Total Score	100				

Adapted from Daniels (1994)

APPENDIX G
VLC TEACHER OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

VLC Teacher Observation Checklist

Book Title:

Date:

Group	Student Name	Response	Discussion	Participation	Student Self-evaluation

APPENDIX H
READING EXPERIENCE SURVEY

Reading Experience Survey

Name _____ Student No. _____ Class _____

The purpose of this survey is to collect information about your independent English reading experience. Below are twenty statements regarding your own personal reading experience for this semester's novel reading. There is no right or wrong response to any of the statements. Please respond honestly to the survey and check the responses that apply to you. Thank you!

No.	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	Reading the novels helped me build more confidence in reading English.					
2	I spent a lot of time reading the novels.					
3	I was motivated to read the novels.					
4	Reading the novels helped me learn about different values.					
5	It was a waste of my time to read the novels.					
6	Reading the novels helped me improve my writing.					
7	It was interesting to read the novels.					
8	Reading the novels helped me increase my vocabulary.					
9	Reading the novels was worth the time I spent.					
10	Reading the novels was a rewarding experience.					
11	I learned nothing from reading the novels.					
12	I tried my best to read the novels.					
13	Reading the novels was a good learning experience.					
14	It was boring to read the novels.					
15	Reading the novels was an enjoyable experience.					
16	Reading the novels helped me become more interested in reading English.					
17	Reading the novels helped me improve my reading.					
18	Reading the novels helped me improve my communication abilities.					
19	I was emotionally involved in the readings.					
20	Reading the novels helped me improve my language proficiency.					

APPENDIX I
READING EXPERIENCE SURVEY SCORING GUIDE

Reading Experience Survey Scoring Guide

There are twenty questions on the survey. The score for each answer is included in the table below. If the students do not have the answer checked for one statement, then the score is 0 for that statement. If the students respond to the statements, the lowest possible score for each statement is 1, and the highest possible score is 5; therefore, the lowest possible score for the survey is 20, and the highest possible score is 100. However, if a student does not check any answers, then the result will not be included in the data analysis.

No.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	1	2	3	4	5
2	1	2	3	4	5
3	1	2	3	4	5
4	1	2	3	4	5
5	5	4	3	2	1
6	1	2	3	4	5
7	1	2	3	4	5
8	1	2	3	4	5
9	1	2	3	4	5
10	1	2	3	4	5
11	5	4	3	2	1
12	1	2	3	4	5
13	1	2	3	4	5
14	5	4	3	2	1
15	1	2	3	4	5
16	1	2	3	4	5
17	1	2	3	4	5
18	1	2	3	4	5
19	1	2	3	4	5
20	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX J
WRITTEN RETELL TEST

Written Retell Test

Student Name _____ Student Number _____ Class _____

Directions: You have up to 25 minutes to write a retell of *Annie on My Mind* in the way that you would tell someone who has never read the novel. Focus on major events of the story. Include as many details about the book as possible. Try your best to work from beginning to end, but if you remember random things, you should write them too. Keep writing until you run out of things you remember about the book or until the time is up, whichever happens first.

Below is a list of characters' names for your reference.

Liza Winthrop
Annie Kenyon
Chad Winthrop
Jennifer Piccolo
Sally
Walt
Mr. Piccolo
Mr. Winthrop
Mrs. Winthrop
Mrs. Poindexter
Ms. Baxter
Ms. Stevenson
Ms. Widmer
Mr. Turner

APPENDIX K
WRITTEN RETELL TEST SCORING RUBRIC

Written Retell Test Scoring Rubric
(refer to Content Criteria for clarification of elements)

Student No. _____ Score _____ Scorer _____

Elements	0	1	2	3	Score
Theme	Not mentioned	Any one appropriate theme	Any two appropriate themes	Three or more appropriate themes	
Problem	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
Goal	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
Places	Not mentioned	1 to 2 places mentioned	3 places mentioned	4 or more than 4 places mentioned	
Characters	0-1 characters introduced with details	2-3 characters introduced with details	4-5 characters introduced with details	Above 6 characters introduced with details	
Initial event	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
Climax	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
Sequence	Non sequential	Partially sequential	Almost sequential	Completely sequential	
Resolution	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
End of story	Not mentioned	Vaguely mentioned	Mentioned	Adequately mentioned	
Number of events	0-1	2-4	5-6	Above 7	
Number of words	0-150 words	151-300	301-450	Above 450	

Content Criteria

Elements	Content Criteria
Theme	teenage romance, lesbian love, school life, morality, conflict with society, and self-realization
Problem	Liza and Annie fall in love with each other, but lesbian love is not very acceptable in the novel's setting
Goal	To accept their sexuality regardless of the world around them
Places	New York city, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, Foster Academy, Annie's school, Liza's home, Annie's home, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's home
Characters	<p>Annie Kenyon: protagonist, 17-year-old girl who attends a public high school in NYC, good at singing</p> <p>Liza Winthrop: protagonist, 17-year-old girl who attends to Foster Academy, student council president</p> <p>Chad Winthrop: Liza's younger brother who loves his sister very much</p> <p>Mrs. Poindexter: the headmistress of Foster Academy, serious, solemn, and rigid</p> <p>Ms. Baxter: teacher at Foster who teaches The Bible and she is Mrs. Poindexter's administrative assistant</p> <p>Ms. Stevenson: a versatile art teacher at Foster with a fierce temper but being fair, Ms. Widmer's lover</p> <p>Ms. Widmer: English teacher at Foster Academy, Ms. Stevenson's lover</p> <p>Sally: student at Foster, the leading role in the ear-piercing incident</p> <p><i>Mr. Winthrop: Liza's father, MIT graduate</i></p> <p><i>Mrs. Winthrop: Liza's mother, MIT graduate</i></p> <p><i>Jennifer Piccolo: A freshman girl at Foster who is one victim of Sally's ear-piercing incident</i></p> <p><i>Mr. Piccolo: Jennifer Piccolo's father who is the publicity chairman for the fund drive</i></p> <p><i>Mr. Turner: the head of the Board of Trustees of Foster Academy</i></p> <p><i>Walt: Sally's boyfriend</i></p> <p><i>Annie's parents and grandmother</i></p>
Initial event	Liza meets Annie for the first time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Liza falls in love with Annie
Climax	Liza has to face an expulsion hearing after she and Annie are caught making love at Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's house

Elements	Content Criteria
Sequence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Annie and Liza met at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts for the first time. 2. Sally and Liza got in trouble because of Sally's ear-piercing incident 3. They became friends and went to more museums and parks together. 4. They visited each other's homes and met their families. 5. They fell in love with each other but were unsure of being gay. 6. They gradually accepted who they were and explored more about their relationship. 7. Annie and Liza found that Liza's two teachers were gay too when Liza was watching Ms. Stevenson's cats. 8. Annie and Liza were caught making love at Ms. Stevenson & Ms. Widmer's house. 9. Liza found out that she could attend MIT even though she went through two hearings at Foster 10. The headmistress was removed from her position. The two gay teachers were fired. 11. Annie and Liza are in love and still keep the relationship.
Resolution	Liza continues in her position of Student Council President. No account of the hearing appears on her record and Liza is able to attend MIT.
End of story	Both Liza and Annie go to their desired colleges. Liza finally overcomes her guilt and uncertainty and contacts Annie so that their love story can continue.
Number of events	Count how many accurate events are retold and award scores according to the rubric.
Number of words	Use the Word Count function of WORD and award scores according to the rubric.

APPENDIX L
VOCABULARY ACQUISITION TEST

Vocabulary Acquisition Test
(Time: 25 minutes)

Part I. Multiple-Choice Questions

Directions: The following are 25 multiple-choice questions about the vocabulary in *Annie on My Mind*. Please pay attention to the underlined words and write down your answers on the answer sheet. Each question is worth 2 points.

1. What does MIT refer to in the novel?

- A. Michigan Institute of Technology
- B. Missouri Institute of Technology
- C. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- D. Maine Institute of Technology

2. What does piccolo as in Mr. Piccolo's name mean?

- A. A kind of tree
- B. A kind of musical instrument
- C. A kind of fruit
- D. A kind of metal

3. What does the fund drive mean?

- A. the organized activity to raise money
- B. the drive that is called fund
- C. the activity of driving to raise fund
- D. the fund and the drive

4. What does IRT refer to in the novel?

- A. Interborough Rapid Transit
- B. Information Resources and Technology
- C. Informal Retelling Technique
- D. Information Resources Transformation

5. What does suspension mean in the novel?

- A. Suspension is a state of being late
- B. The system of springs and shock absorbers by which a vehicle is cushioned from road conditions
- C. A state or feeling of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen
- D. Temporary removal of position for a specific period of time

6. What does Kleenex mean?

- A. A brand name for scissors, nail cutters, and knives
- B. A brand name for facial tissues, hand towels, dinner napkins, and wet wipes
- C. A brand name for soft drinks
- D. A brand name for baby formula

7. What does rotten mean as in "she feels very rotten" in the novel?

- A. unhappy and guilty about something
- B. badly decayed and no longer good to use
- C. jealous and revengeful
- D. intimidated and desperate

8. What does immorality mean as in the sentence "Immorality in one way leads to immorality in others"?

- A. Immorality means living forever
- B. Immorality means sin that good people avoid
- C. Immorality means arrogance
- D. Immorality means a lack of confidence

9. What does the Board of Trustees of Foster Academy mean?

- A. Student parents who are responsible for making rules and financial decisions
- B. Teachers who are appointed to supervise the school affairs
- C. An appointed or elective board that supervises the school affairs
- D. Students who are appointed to take part in the decision making process

10. What does the word “Metropolitan” mean as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art?

- A. Modern
- B. Relating to a large city area
- C. Historical
- D. Relating to fine arts

11. Which is the synonym of overtly?

- A. Excessively
- B. Openly
- C. Obsessively
- D. Efficiently

12. Which is a synonym of tentatively?

- A. uncertainly
- B. presumably
- C. definitely
- D. persistently

13. What does medieval mean?

- A. of or relating to medical conditions
- B. of or relating to the Middle Ages
- C. evil
- D. whimsical

14. What is a daffodil?

- A. a kind of food
- B. a kind of small tree
- C. a kind of medicine
- D. a kind of flower

15. What does a ferry mean?

- A. a subway
- B. a boat
- C. a car
- D. a bus

16. Which is NOT a synonym of preliminary?

- A. initial
- B. preparatory
- C. additional
- D. beginning

17. Which is a synonym of shabby?

- A. stable
- B. unhealthy
- C. weak
- D. worn

18. What does campaign mean in the novel?

- A. several related operations aimed at achieving a particular goal
- B. military operations for a specific objective
- C. the competition by rival political candidates and organizations for public office
- D. a race between candidates for elective office

19. What does spontaneous mean?

- A. at the same time
- B. said or done without having been planned or written in advance
- C. continuing without interruption
- D. acting or moving or capable of acting or moving quickly

20. What does tongue-tied mean?

- A. disappointingly unsuccessful
- B. having dry mouth
- C. unable to articulate clearly
- D. difficult to hear

21. What does recital mean in the novel?

- A. the act of giving an account describing incidents or a course of events
- B. a public instance of reciting or repeating something prepared in advance
- C. a detailed statement giving facts and figures
- D. performance of music

22. What is a choir screen?

- A. a church structure found in the museum
- B. a stage structure found in a performance hall
- C. a cafeteria structure found in public schools
- D. a castle structure found in legends

23. What does run you through mean as in "Stand and fight or I'll run you through!"

- A. to stab you
- B. to chase after you
- C. to throw you to the ground
- D. to stomp on you

24. What is a spear?

- A. a knight's weapon with a pointed head
- B. a long spoon
- C. a singing technique
- D. a person who serves a knight

25. What does the Parlor refer to in the novel?

- A. a storage room in a private house
- B. a shop or business providing specified goods or services
- C. a room for receiving visitors and having meetings at school
- D. a person who works in the church

Part II. Word definitions

Directions: The following are 25 words from *Annie on My Mind*. Please provide the Chinese meanings of the words specific in the novel, and write down your answers on the answer sheet. Each word is worth 2 points.

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| 26. heterosexual | 39. lavender |
| 27. to chuckle | 40. academy |
| 28. cactus | 41. to blush |
| 29. Nana | 42. to preside |
| 30. opponent | 43. homosexual |
| 31. chorus | 44. attorney |
| 32. recruitment | 45. Metropolitan Museum of Art |
| 33. sparrow | 46. to pierce |
| 34. goose bumps | 47. architect |
| 35. earlobe | 48. infection |
| 36. encyclopedia | 49. knight |
| 37. committee | 50. Renaissance |
| 38. expulsion | |

APPENDIX M
VOCABULARY ACQUISITION TEST ANSWER SHEET

Vocabulary Acquisition Test Answer Sheet

(Time: 25 minutes)

Name:

Total Score:

Part I . Multiple-Choice Questions (50 points)

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Keys										
No.	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Keys										
No.	21	22	23	24	25	Score:				
Keys										

Part II. Word Definitions (50 points)

Score:

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 26. | 41. |
| 27. | 42. |
| 28. | 43. |
| 29. | 44. |
| 30. | 45. |
| 31. | 46. |
| 32. | 47. |
| 33. | 48. |
| 34. | 49. |
| 35. | 50. |
| 36. | |
| 37. | |
| 38. | |
| 39. | |
| 40. | |

APPENDIX N
VOCABULARY ACQUISITION TEST ANSWER KEYS

Part I . Multiple-Choice Questions (50 points)

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Keys	C	B	A	A	D	B	A	B	C	B
No.	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Keys	B	A	B	D	B	C	D	A	B	C
No.	21	22	23	24	25					
Keys	D	A	A	A	C					

Part II. Word Definitions (50 points)

- | | |
|-----------|-------------|
| 26.异性恋 | 41.脸红 |
| 27.偷笑, 窃喜 | 42.主持, 管理 |
| 28.仙人掌 | 43.同性恋 |
| 29.奶奶、外婆 | 44.律师 |
| 30.对手 | 45.大都会艺术博物馆 |
| 31.合唱队 | 46.刺, 穿 |
| 32.招生、招募 | 47.建筑师 |
| 33.麻雀 | 48.感染 |
| 34.鸡皮疙瘩 | 49.骑士 |
| 35.耳垂 | 50.文艺复兴 |
| 36.百科全书 | |
| 37.委员会 | |
| 38.开除 | |
| 39.薰衣草 | |
| 40.学院 | |

APPENDIX O
READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Reading Comprehension Test
(Time: 25 minutes)

Name:

Total Score:

Part I. Multiple-Choice Questions

Score:

Directions: The following are 20 multiple-choice questions. Each question has only one correct answer and is worth 2 points. Please circle the correct answers.

1. What is the main conflict of this book?

- A. The stance of Liza's school against lesbian love
- B. The lack of support from Liza's family for her relationship with Annie
- C. Liza's self-realization of her sexuality and its effects on herself as well as others
- D. Liza's refusal to accept the fact that she might be gay

2. What causes Liza to notice Annie that first day when they meet each other?

- A. Annie's beautiful smile
- B. Annie's appearance
- C. Annie's interesting remarks about the sculptures
- D. Annie's singing

3. What is the weather like when Liza and Annie meet for the first time?

- A. Sunny
- B. Raining
- C. Snowing
- D. Not mentioned

4. Why does Sally start her ear-piercing clinic?

- A. To help girls at Foster become more beautiful
- B. To raise money for Foster Academy
- C. To make money for herself
- D. To practice her ear-piercing technique

5. How aware is Annie of her sexuality before meeting Liza?

- A. Annie suspects that she likes girls as well as boys
- B. Annie has always known that she is gay
- C. Annie never thought she was gay
- D. Annie knows that she might be gay

6. How does Chad react when Liza tells him the truth about her and Annie?

- A. He yells at Liza saying he is ashamed of her
- B. He cries immediately in front of Liza
- C. He says nothing because he cannot accept Liza's sexuality
- D. He hugs her even though he feels sad

7. What does the story imply the reason is for Chad's bloody nose?

- A. He is bullied at school
- B. He fights with students at Foster to defend his sister's honor
- C. He falls when his mind is occupied with Liza's relationship with Annie
- D. He plays soccer to forget about his sister's scandal

8. Which of the following does NOT describe how Liza sees Annie's school?

- A. Annie's school is like a prison
- B. Annie's school has an awful smell
- C. Annie's school is very small

D. The design of Annie's school is like one for a military bunker

9. What is Annie's family's attitude toward Liza?

A. Annie's family does not like Liza because she was punished at school

B. Annie's family likes Liza, but they don't want them to be romantically involved

C. They think Liza would ruin Annie's life

D. They genuinely like Liza because she is a good friend to Annie

10. What is Liza's family's attitude toward Annie?

A. They genuinely like Annie and support her romantic relationship with Liza

B. Liza's family likes Annie, but they don't want them to be romantically involved

C. They feel superior to Annie because she comes from a lower-class family

D. Liza's family pretends to like Annie because she is Liza's friend

11. Which teacher is on Ms. Poindexter's side against Liza and Annie?

A. Ms. Stevenson

B. Ms. Baxter

C. Ms. Widmer

D. Ms. Winthrop

12. Why do Sally and Walt volunteer to work for the fund-raising campaign?

A. Sally and Walt want to prove that they are top students at Foster

B. Sally's parents encourage them to do that

C. Sally feels it's her fault that the fund-raising campaign is in danger

D. Sally and Walt want to run for Student Council President

13. Why is Annie upset when Liza gives her an African violet as a gift?

A. African violets are taboo in Annie's culture

B. African violets remind Annie of some past bad memories

C. Annie feels sorry that she does not have money to get Liza a present

D. Annie feels that African violets are bad luck for Thanksgiving

14. What is the underlying cause for Annie and Liza's big fight in March?

A. Annie wants to stay in front of the medieval choir screen longer, but Liza wants to go to the Temple

B. Liza and Annie say nasty things about each other

C. Liza's family does not want her to see Annie any more

D. There is a misunderstanding between them caused by their sexual desire and uncertainty

15. Why does Sally go to Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's house to look for Liza?

A. Sally wants to catch Liza and Annie

B. Sally is worried about Liza because Liza was absent for an important meeting

C. Mrs. Poindexter sends her there

D. Ms. Baxter sends her there

16. Why does Liza's mom make Liza wear a dress for the hearing?

A. A dress would be most appropriate for a formal occasion like the hearing

B. Liza looks prettier in a dress, and the Board of Trustees would like her better

C. She wants Liza to look more girly so that people will see Liza as an ordinary girl

D. All women are required to wear a dress for the hearing

17. What does Liza decide to do at the end of the story?

- A. Mail the letter
- B. Throw away the letter
- C. Answer Annie's phone call
- D. Call Annie on the phone

18. What happens to Ms. Poindexter after the hearing?

- A. She gets a promotion
- B. She maintains her position
- C. She is removed from her position
- D. She retires

19. What happens to Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer after their hearing?

- A. They maintain their positions
- B. They help raise enough money for Foster
- C. They are fired
- D. They retire

20. Why are Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer willing to help Liza and Annie?

- A. Both of them are Liza's teachers, and they think Liza is an excellent student
- B. They like Liza and Annie very much and wish them well
- C. They understand how difficult it is to be gay and in love
- D. They disagree with Ms. Poindexter on Liza's punishment

Part II. Short-Answer Questions

Score:

Directions: There are 20 short-answer questions in this part. Please answer the questions and write down your answers beneath the questions. Each question is worth 2 points.

21. Where do Liza and Annie meet for the first time?

22. What does Liza want to be?

23. What leadership position does Liza hold at Foster Academy?

24. According to the novel, what is Annie's talent?

25. What does Annie's father do?

26. Whom does Annie live with? Please list all family members.

27. Whom does Liza live with? Please list all family members.

28. What problem does Foster Academy face?

29. What is Liza's first problem at Foster Academy?

30. What are the punishments for Liza's first problem?

- 31. What happens to Liza's leadership position after her first problem?**
- 32. What is Liza's second big problem in the story?**
- 33. What is the punishment for Liza's second problem?**
- 34. Why is Liza upset and nervous about the punishment for her second problem?**
- 35. What is the theme of the books Liza and Annie find in Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson's upstairs bedroom?**
- 36. What is the special relationship between Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer?**
- 37. What kind of pets do Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer have?**
- 38. Why is it at Ms. Stevenson's home that Annie and Liza are caught?**
- 39. Does Liza tell her mom everything about the physical relationship she has with Annie? Why or why not?**
- 40. Which university does Liza finally attend?**

APPENDIX P
ANSWER KEYS TO READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Part I. Multiple-Choice Questions

1-5 C D B C D 6-10 D B C D B 11-15 B C C D B 16-20 C D C C C

Part II. Short-Answer Questions

21. Where do Liza and Annie meet for the first time?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

22. What does Liza want to be?

Architect

23. What leadership position does Liza hold at Foster Academy?

Student Council President

24. According to the novel, what is Annie's talent?

Singing/Music

25. What does Annie's father do?

Taxi /Cab driver

26. Whom does Annie live with? Please list all family members.

Grandma, Mom, and Dad.

27. Whom does Liza live with? Please list all family members.

Mom, Dad, and younger brother Chad.

28. What problem does Foster Academy face?

Foster Academy may have to close because of a lack of fund.

29. What is Liza's first problem at Foster Academy?

Breaking the reporting rule for Sally's ear-piercing incident

30. What are the punishments for Liza's first problem?

Suspension and hearing for holding her Student Council President position

31. What happens to Liza's leadership position after her first problem?

Liza is still allowed to hold her Student Council President (leadership) position

32. What is Liza's second problem at Foster Academy?

She and Annie get caught making love at Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's house.

33. What is the punishment for Liza's second problem?

Suspension and hearing for expulsion

34. Why is Liza upset and nervous about the punishment for her second problem?

Because the possible negative results of the hearing will appear on her record, and that will prevent her to go to MIT.

35. What is the theme of the books Liza and Annie find in Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson's upstairs bedroom?

Gay, Lesbian, or homosexuality.

36. What is the special relationship between Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer?

Lovers

37. What kind of pets do Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer have?

Cats

38. Why is it at Ms. Stevenson's home that Annie and Liza are caught?

Because Liza takes care of their cats when they are away, and Liza and Annie make use of that space to explore more about their romantic relationship.

39. Does Liza tell her mom everything about the physical relationship she has with Annie? Why or why not?

She doesn't. She lies to her mom because she does not want to worry/hurt her mom.

40. Which university does Liza finally attend?

MIT/Massachusetts Institute of Technology

APPENDIX Q
ESSAY

Essay

Name _____ Student No. _____ Class _____

Directions: Comment on the novel *Annie on My Mind*. You need to go beyond the facts of the novel and describe your own thoughts and feelings evoked by the story. Some topics you can choose from include but are not limited to what you think about the author, the plot, the setting, the theme, and the characters. Please be specific and provide reasons for your ideas. You will have 30 minutes to write this essay in English.

APPENDIX R
ESSAY SCORING RUBRIC

Essay Scoring Rubric

Student Name _____ Student Number _____ Scorer _____

Categories	No.	Subcategories	No. of Sentences
Critical Responses	1	New learning: Statements describing new understanding of story components	
	2	Difficulty understanding text: Statements pertaining to comprehension errors	
	3	Critical analysis of text's ideas: Judgments of text's ideas, structure, or style	
Personal Responses	4	Engagement: Statements pertaining to interest and curiosity in the plot	
	5	Cognitive engagement: Statements pertaining to the text's ability to elicit thoughts, speculation, or analysis	
	6	Affective responses: Emotional responses to characters, events, and themes in the text	
	7	Empathy with events or characters: Statements indicating the reader has adopted or understands the perspective of the author or character(s)	
	8	Relating to personal experiences: Statements connecting events or themes in the text to personal life experiences	
Total			

Adapted from Schraw, Flowerday, and Reisetter (1998)

APPENDIX S
ESSAY SCORING PROTOCOL

Essay Scoring Protocol

Directions: Please ignore any language errors and focus on ideas when assessing the essays. Here are the steps for you to follow:

1. First, read the essay in its entirety.
2. Divide the essay into idea units.
3. Evaluate each idea and exclude idea units that do not belong to any categories.
4. Put the remaining idea units to their specific categories.
5. Count how many sentences each idea entails, excluding irrelevant and redundant sentences.
6. Give each included sentence one point. The total number of counted sentences will be the final score of the essay.

APPENDIX T
IRB ACCEPTANCE LETTER



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

DATE: January 19, 2017
TO: Li Pei
FROM: Oakland University IRB
PROJECT TITLE: Impact of Virtual Literature Circles on Chinese University
EFL Students' Independent Reading
REFERENCE #: 978836-2
SUBMISSION TYPE: New project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: January 19, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: January 18, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7
IRB MEETING DATE: February 16, 2017

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Oakland University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The submission packages include the following approved documents:

- Application (IRBNet # 978836-2)
- Consent Form Version January 19, 2017 which has been published as a Board Document under Reviews in IRBNet. The IRB approved consent document MUST be used in recruitment and consent of participants in the research.
- Posttest measures (IRBNet # 978836-1)

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and assurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure. Do not collect data while the revised application is being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this committee. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 18, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

Please retain a copy of this correspondence for your record.

If you have any questions, please contact Kate Wydeven M.S. at (248) 370-4306 or kwydeven@oakland.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Oakland University IRB's records.

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