



# The Approaches to Teaching English Majors Reading in China: A Case Study of the Comprehensive English Course

Shuyan Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Ocean University, Shanghai 201306, China

[syliu@shou.edu.cn](mailto:syliu@shou.edu.cn)

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the challenges associated with teaching reading to English majors in China, concentrating on the course designated as "Comprehensive English" or "Intensive Reading". Through historical analysis and critical synthesis, it identifies two significant obstacles in the prevailing teaching approaches. First, a discrepancy is noted between the course's static positioning and the dynamically shifting educational objectives. Second, the prevailing approaches such as TBLT, CBI, and POA are found to be misaligned with the specialized educational needs of English majors, thus requiring modification to align with the academic aspirations of English as a discipline. To address the first challenge, the paper advocates a broader scope for the course, extending beyond mere language skills training to cultivate language proficiency, humanistic literacy, and establishes connections with disciplinary knowledge. For the second challenge, a refined approach is presented, assimilating strengths from both traditional and contemporary approaches, and focusing on critical concepts such as learner autonomy, the flipped classroom model, and Barrett's taxonomy of levels of understanding. This customized approach provides efficacious procedures, aligned with the academic goals of English majors, offering implications for teachers and curriculum designers engaged in English major programs in China.

**Keywords**— English major education in China; Comprehensive English course; Intensive Reading course; learner autonomy; flipped learning; Barrett's taxonomy of levels of understanding



## I. INTRODUCTION

In China, the teaching of reading to English majors consists of two distinct courses: Comprehensive English (Intensive Reading) and English Reading (Extensive Reading). The former, as its name implies, emphasizes the acquisition of essential language knowledge and the cultivation of fundamental language skills through the

careful selection of reading materials. On the other hand, the latter course places a primary emphasis on the development of reading skills through extensive reading practice. The Comprehensive English course, with a history spanning over 70 years and the highest number of credit hours, holds a significant position within the undergraduate curriculum for English majors. As a major

course, it plays a crucial role in the teaching of reading to English majors, shaping their language proficiency and overall language education. Consequently, investigating the present challenges and potential solutions associated with this course can provide valuable insights for the reform of related courses.

The traditional method of teaching intensive reading, implemented since the 1950s and 1960s, followed a structured approach that primarily focused on discussing the content of the entire text and subsequently explaining the vocabulary and grammar points (Shu, 2005:3). The main goal of this approach was to facilitate students' comprehensive understanding of the text's meaning while addressing specific language components. This traditional teaching method has faced criticism for prioritizing teaching rather than guiding students in their learning process, and placing excessive emphasis on written language. Moreover, the course primarily focuses on text-based content and adopts an input-based approach, which is predominantly teacher-centered in nature.

New language teaching approaches have been adopted and transformed over time. As noted by Wen (2020:3-4), the development of foreign language education approaches in China has been characterized by a dominant trend of "improvement and transformation," which has had a widespread impact and lasting influence. These changes have occurred in a chronological sequence and encompassed major teaching approaches such as the text-centered approach, Audio-Lingual Method, Communicative Approach, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). New approaches specifically designed for the tertiary level have also emerged in China, including The Length Approach (Write to Learn) (Wang, 2000; Wang, 2017), and the production-oriented approach (POA) (Wen 2020).

Despite the introduction of these new approaches, the influence of traditional intensive reading practices remains significant. This influence can be attributed not only to the emulation of Soviet teaching practices but also to its alignment with behaviorist and structuralist perspectives in language teaching, as well as its resonance with ancient Chinese philology (Qu, 2019:73). As a result, in some contexts, the practice of breaking down texts into isolated vocabulary and grammar components still persists, even as

foreign language teaching methods have evolved over the years.

It is worth noting that while various approaches have been introduced and practiced at different times, the earlier ones have not been replaced by the later ones; rather, they coexist, resulting in an interconnected pattern of approaches. However, despite the coexistence of these approaches, the actual teaching practice of the intensive reading course has not significantly progressed beyond the confines of traditional approaches (Wen, 2008), and the methods employed do not fundamentally differ from those used in general language schools (Qu & Chen, 2018). This lack of clear progression and the absence of consistent and applicable solutions raise questions about the overall approach to teaching reading, signaling a need for further investigation and improvement in the course's design and implementation.

This paper seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the current predicament of the teaching approaches in the course and explore potential solutions that better align with the educational objectives of English as a major. It aims to address the following two research questions:

- (1) What are the factors contributing to the challenges faced by the teaching approaches of the course?
- (2) What are the potential solutions?

## II. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this study is collected from two major sources: national curriculum documents and research papers published in Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals and international journals. The inclusion of these sources provides a comprehensive foundation for the analysis and investigation of the teaching approaches in the course.

To address the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study, a historical and comparative perspective is adopted. This approach enables a thorough review of the development of the course over a period of more than seventy years. By examining the objectives and instructional approaches implemented throughout the course's history, the study aims to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the challenges faced by the teaching approaches.

Furthermore, a content analysis is employed to delve into the principles and processes of a teaching approach that aligns with the educational goals for English majors in general and the specific teaching objectives of the course. This analysis allows for a detailed exploration of the key elements and processes that are essential for effective teaching and learning within the context of English major education.

### III. THE HISTORY OF THE COURSE

To trace the origins of the challenges faced by the teaching approaches in the course, it is essential to examine the development history within the broader context of foreign language education and talent cultivation in China.

The development of foreign language teaching and research in China has been shaped by historical factors, resulting in a deviation from its intrinsic logic (Qu, 2019). Foreign language policies have often been politically motivated and lacked consistency (Chang, 2006). By the time the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, about 49 of the 205 universities in mainland China had English departments (Fu, 1986:64-65). The curriculum then was heavily influenced by Western education, particularly the British and American systems, with a strong emphasis on the study of English and American literature (Li et al., 1988:419). Admission to these English departments was highly competitive, as students were required to have a solid foundation in English acquired during secondary school, enabling them to adapt to the teaching methods employed in Western universities (He, 2003).

However, the early 1950s brought significant changes to the curriculum. First, recognizing the low language proficiency of incoming freshmen (Hu, 2008:18), priority was given to developing practical language skills.

Moreover, due to the increasing prevalence of Russian as the primary foreign language taught in high schools, the English proficiency of high school graduates had declined. Even for those who had studied English, their foundation was generally weak after only three years of high school instruction. As a result, the primary focus for students entering English departments at universities was to learn and master the English language (He, 2003).

Another notable change during this period was the adoption and widespread implementation of the subject-based approach to language teaching, influenced by the Soviet Union. Language learning was compartmentalized into distinct subject areas, such as grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with separate courses designed for each area. This shift had a far-reaching impact, gradually replacing the traditional general education tradition in foreign language departments with a more practical and skills-oriented approach to foreign language education (Wang, 2013).

Within this context, the Intensive Reading course emerged in the English major curriculum as a core course, intended to provide comprehensive language skills training. Over time, the course has been referred to by various names, with the most commonly used ones being Intensive Reading and Comprehensive English. This section explores the course as outlined in different curricula over time.

English major education in China has been guided by six national documents that outline the curriculum, teaching plans, and syllabi since 1950. These documents reflect the developmental stages of foreign language education in China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Table 1 provides an overview of these national curriculum documents and their corresponding talent cultivation goals. The division of the four developmental stages is based on (Wen, 2019).

Table 1 National curriculum documents

Developmental stages of foreign language education since 1949	Talent cultivation goals	Curriculum / teaching plan/syllabus
Exploratory stage (1949-1977)	Skilled talents	Draft Curriculum for Higher Education Institutions: Departments of Arts, Law, Science, and Engineering (1950 Curriculum) Teaching Plan for English Language and Literature Majors (1961 Teaching plan)

Developing stage (1978-1998)	Skilled talents	Preliminary Drafts of the Four-Year Curriculum for English Majors in the School of Foreign Languages, English Language and Literature Majors at Comprehensive Universities, and English Majors at Higher Teacher Education Institutions (1979 Curriculum) Syllabus for the Foundational Stage of English Major Programs in Higher Education Institutions (1986 Syllabus)
	Compound talents	
Accelerating stage (1999-2011)	Compound talents	Syllabus for English Major Programs in Higher Education Institutions (2000 Syllabus)
Innovating stage (2012-)	Compound talents	Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors at Higher Education Institutions (2020 Guidelines)

The 1950 Curriculum introduced a mandatory foundational course called "Basic Readings" as part of foreign language education (Li et al., 1988:421). This course incorporated grammar, dictation, and related subjects, which were either integrated into the classes or offered separately depending on specific circumstances.

In the 1961 Teaching Plan, the "English" course was established as a specialized course, encompassing 1450 credit hours over a period of 167 weeks.

The 1979 Curriculum stipulated the "English Practice Course" as a compulsory subject, with Intensive Reading for English departments in comprehensive universities, Basic English (or Essential English) for schools of foreign languages, and Intensive Reading for Normal universities. The subsequent syllabi provided explicit objectives, principles, and methods for the course.

The 1986 Syllabus introduced the Comprehensive English course as a comprehensive skill training course (Li et al., 1988:468-470). The objectives of the course were to impart fundamental language knowledge, train basic language skills, cultivate communication abilities, and guide students' learning methods and logical thinking. Emphasis was placed on developing the ability to use language effectively in both oral and written forms.

The 2000 Syllabus renamed the course as Basic English (or Essential English), positioning it as a professional skills course (Supervision Committee for Foreign Language Majors, 2000). The aim was to enhance students' overall English proficiency through language foundation training and textual analysis. Compared to the 1986 syllabus, greater emphasis was placed on developing

reading comprehension, as well as oral and written expression skills.

The 2020 Guidelines reinstated the name Comprehensive English, designating it as a professional course (Supervision Committee for Foreign Language Majors, 2020). Its objective was to cultivate students' comprehensive ability to use English language knowledge and skills for communication. The guidelines built upon the 2000 syllabus by incorporating the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills through the application of learned knowledge and techniques. Notably, the course content description for the first time explicitly emphasized the systematic emphasis on language knowledge and highlighted the humanistic characteristics of literary and cultural knowledge.

The analysis of national documents reveals the evolution of foreign language education for English majors in China over various developmental stages. During the exploratory and early developmental periods, the primary focus was on cultivating skill-based language professionals. This educational objective is evident in the course descriptions of the 1950 Curriculum, 1961 Teaching Plan, 1979 Curriculum, and 1986 Syllabus, all formulated during this phase.

As the developmental period progressed, there emerged a shift towards nurturing compound talents, i.e., versatile talent with multiple skills. The 2000 Syllabus, developed during this stage, placed considerable importance on developing reading comprehension and expressive abilities.

In the more recent era, the academic community has

not yet reached a consensus on the objectives of foreign language education for English majors (Wen, 2019), but there has been increased attention to the exploration of English as a discipline (He, 2003, 2004; Lan, 2009; Jin, 2010; Zhang, 2010; Wang, 2013; Zha, 2018; Qu & Chen, 2018, 2019, 2020; Qu, 2019). In addition to fostering language knowledge and skills, the curriculum descriptions in the 2020 Guidelines explicitly propose the integration of language and disciplinary knowledge teaching, emphasizing a comprehensive and systematic approach; the teaching of literature and cultural knowledge accentuates the need for disciplinary and humanities-oriented characteristics. This also reflects a reconsideration of the discipline's attributes following the objectives of skill-based and versatile talent cultivation in English majors.

#### **IV. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE TEACHING APPROACHES**

##### **4.1 The Discrepancy between Static Course Positioning and Dynamic Educational Objectives**

The first challenge becomes evident through two key observations drawn from the examination of the course history. Firstly, regarding the course itself, it originated during a historical period when students had low levels of entry proficiency and required urgent language skills training. Throughout its existence, the course has undergone a series of name changes, including English, Intensive English, Basic English (or Essential English), and Comprehensive English. Nevertheless, its fundamental role as a platform for comprehensive language skills development has remained constant.

Secondly, an analysis of the changes in syllabi unveils a consistent prioritization of teaching language knowledge and honing language skills. Over time, there has been a growing emphasis on language knowledge, skills, communication abilities, and critical thinking. These shifts mirror the growing entry-level proficiency of students and underscore the recent transformation in focus within the English major, transitioning from skills-based and composite talent development to a renewed emphasis on establishing strong academic foundations.

The central challenge in shaping the appropriate

teaching approach for this course resides in the paradox between the course's persistent positioning and the evolving educational objectives. Despite the changing educational goals over time, the course's structure has not evolved accordingly. This lack of adaptation stands as a significant factor contributing to the encountered challenges. The topic has even sparked debate in the early 1990s, with some advocating for the elimination of the intensive reading course (Wen, 2008; Cai, 2010). Despite such discussions, the course remains integral to the curriculum, and the predicament persists due to the unresolved discrepancy between its established role and the dynamic shifts in educational priorities.

Existing literature highlights the lack of clarity in the course's positioning and objectives (Hou, 1994; Lu and Ding, 2002; Kang, 2016; Chen and Cheng, 2015), as well as its connection from other courses (Wang, 1987). Additionally, the course fails to establish specific instructional targets for professional knowledge content, posing challenges in assisting students in constructing a comprehensive knowledge structure (Chang and Jin, 2012). Even with respect to language teaching objectives, the course aims to develop a wide range of language skills, encompassing listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, without providing clear and specific target levels or criteria. Consequently, the course's objectives become overwhelming, impractical, and lack feasibility and focus.

Due to this lack of appropriate positioning and actionable objectives, teachers often struggle to define a sense of purpose and direction for the course. This issue is prevalent across language training courses (He, 2003) and leads to a haphazard approach to instruction. The teaching methods employed in the course lack effective and systematic operational norms (Lu and Ding, 2002; Kang, 2016). Teachers may either adhere to traditional pedagogical methods or rely heavily on their disciplinary background and personal interests, resulting in a significant degree of arbitrariness and making it challenging to ensure effective teaching outcomes.

##### **4.2 The Misalignment of Existing Approaches with the Educational Goals of English as a Major Field of Study**

The second obstacle in determining the appropriate teaching approach arises from the lack of readily feasible

methods that are specifically tailored for English majors and align with the educational goals of English as a major discipline.

For the traditional text-centered approach, it has long been argued that adopting the intensive reading practice as a teaching method has significant drawbacks. For instance, breaking down texts into individual vocabulary and grammar elements deprives students of the opportunity to guess word meanings and understand meanings through context (Short, 1984). Moreover, immersion in intensive reading can constrain students' thinking and make them reliant on analysis and translation, which hinders the broadening of their knowledge base and the development of rapid reading skills (Fu, 1986:127). Overemphasizing language at the expense of other skills also prevents the systematic development and training of other abilities (Cai, 2001; Qu, 2016).

To address these challenges posed by the traditional approach, researches have explored alternative teaching methods that promote a more balanced and integrated approach to language and disciplinary knowledge development. Over time, the traditional approach to teaching intensive English has coexisted with the adoption of these new approaches, the most discussed being CBI, TBLT and POA.

Researches have been conducted on the implementation of CBI, reporting that content-based courses have positive impact on students' reading comprehension, writing as well as their learning of knowledge in content areas (Chang et al., 2009; Chang & Zhao, 2010; Gao & Chang, 2013). Content and Language Integration (CLI) was formulated based on the implementation of CBI in Chinese contexts (Chang & Zhao, 2020). Chang and Xia (2011) conducted an experiment comparing Content-based instruction with Skill-oriented instruction, finding that the former yielded better outcomes in developing language knowledge, language skills, and disciplinary knowledge. This suggests that incorporating meaningful content into instruction can more effectively achieve the objectives of the national curriculum.

However, the implementation of CBI and CLI requires a reconstruction of the English major courses. Take the practice of Dalian University of Foreign

Languages for example. The conventional two-year intensive reading course was substituted by content-based courses like Selective Readings in American Literature, British Literature, Contemporary Chinese Philosophy and World Literature ("Dalian University of Foreign Languages"). Considering that the majority of institutions offering English majors still maintain traditional curriculum settings, the practice of CLI is not entirely applicable to the exploration of teaching approaches for the comprehensive English course in this study. Additionally, Chang (2022) also pointed out that implementing CLI may lead to difficulties in the progressive organization of language instruction, as well as a tendency to overlook language training.

As Wen (2020:76) pointed out, the full implementation of TBLT is fraught with difficulties, as it is impossible to either predict or account for the tasks that college students will need to complete in the future. Consequently, we are unable to formulate a TBLT teaching syllabus, nor is it easy to create teaching materials that are purely based on TBLT. Meanwhile, there is a lack of specific procedures, especially detailed descriptions of the teachers' activities in the three stages of pre-task, main task and post-task. This absence emphasizes the challenge in putting TBLT fully into practice and calls for a nuanced understanding of how to adapt it to particular educational contexts. On the other hand, it is common for teachers to guide their instruction by the contents of the teaching materials and the fundamental principles of TBLT, by designing communicatively valuable tasks that allow students to enhance their ability to use a foreign language through simulated communicative practice.

Wen (2018, 2020) advocated for the promotion of a Production-oriented Approach (POA), emphasizing the integration of learning and application. This approach encourages students to actively engage in the learning process, and apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts. Deng (2018) compared the pedagogical principles, hypotheses and procedures of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) with those of POA, arguing for three strengths of POA. Bi (2019) made the comparison in the design and use of the teaching materials compiled based on the two approaches, concluding that POA-based teaching materials are more suitable in the

context of tertiary English education in China because of its unique features in target users, teaching goals and teaching procedures. Tang (2020) demonstrated the application of this approach in intensive reading courses, and concluded that POA performs better in motivating students to learn more, enabling them to accomplish tasks and enhancing their sense of fulfillment. In a case study conducted by Yi (2020), goals were set for three levels: cognition, language, and discipline knowledge. The findings revealed that using meaning as a guide and analyzing text logic can significantly deepen students' understanding of the text. Moreover, the explanation of complex sentence structures contributes to language learning, while the incorporation of theoretical perspectives from various disciplines fosters the development of critical thinking skills. These insights further underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach in English courses.

While the aforementioned approaches have brought positive changes to contemporary classrooms, there are still challenges in their application. The first challenge stems from the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all approach in language teaching. While the new approaches have shown promise in diverse educational settings, they may not be tailored specifically for English majors. The goals and objectives of English majors differ from those of non-English majors, requiring a specialized approach that addresses their unique needs. While language proficiency is a crucial component, English majors also seek to develop humanistic literacy, which involves an appreciation for the form of language and its aesthetic value. In addition to reading for information and comprehension, English majors benefit from a focus on the stylistic and aesthetic aspects of language.

The second challenge lies in the tendency of the new approaches to swing to the other extreme as they attempt to break away from the limitations of the traditional method. In their pursuit of innovation, some classrooms may overly emphasize the new approaches, neglecting the valuable aspects of the traditional approach that can still contribute to effective language learning. Striking a balance between the old and new methods is crucial to create a comprehensive and well-rounded learning experience.

While the new approaches offer alternatives to the traditional methods, it is important to strike a balance. Swinging to the other extreme, where there is an overemphasis on output and divergent activities, may oversimplify complex texts and themes, resulting in a lack of depth. According to Qu (2016), the text in the comprehensive English course is often marginalized, with its primary role reduced to being a mere topic for discussion. In this approach, the training of critical thinking skills is primarily conducted using supplementary resources that are related to the topic of the text. Consequently, there is a noticeable absence of in-depth interpretation and appreciation of the text within the curriculum. This overlooks the significant potential of the selected texts to serve as a valuable medium for intellectual exploration and development. He (2004) also emphasized the favorable conditions provided by language teaching for cultivating students' abilities and qualities. Language serves as a means of expressing thoughts, and the selected texts used in teaching not only facilitate language expression but also offer intellectual content, convey information, stimulate thoughts, and cultivate thinking abilities. These texts have a subtle influence on students' personal growth and development. However, the significance of foreign language teaching in this regard has not been fully recognized, and the value of reading selected texts is often underestimated, even after two decades.

To put it another way, while designing diverse activities based on themes can stimulate students' interest in learning, an excessive reliance on divergent activities may oversimplify complex texts and themes, leading to a lack of depth. It is akin to being enthusiastic about film and television adaptations while neglecting the original works. Therefore, a comprehensive approach should integrate language proficiency development with intellectual inquiry, promoting in-depth interpretation and appreciation of the text while addressing students' cognitive needs in terms of knowledge and ideas.

Additionally, activities designed for the purpose of output, such as communicative scenarios, may face challenges. For example, in a production-oriented approach, students may be asked to explain how to make dumplings to foreign friends, intending to encourage their

expression (Wen, 2020:107-108). While this topic may motivate students to search for appropriate expressions, it may provide limited cognitive challenges in terms of knowledge and ideas, potentially failing to inspire students' motivation for output. Hence, it is crucial for the learning content and output tasks to go beyond language proficiency and also address students' cognitive needs in terms of knowledge and ideas.

Furthermore, since classroom activities often unfold spontaneously, with group discussions and presentations occupying significant class time, providing targeted feedback and suggestions becomes challenging within the limited time available.

## V. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The proposed solutions for the challenges faced by the teaching approach are rooted in a redefined understanding of the traditional course positioning and comprehensive objectives. By combining the strengths of the traditional approach and incorporating elements from newer methodologies, it becomes possible to devise a practical approach with effective teaching procedures that aligns with the educational goals for English majors.

### 5.1 Refining the Course Positioning and Objectives

When designing a course, it is essential to identify the educational goals and objectives (Fink, 2013:69). In the case of the Comprehensive English course, understanding the nature of English as a discipline is crucial for determining its positioning. English education in China has historically emphasized the utilitarian nature of English (Dai and Zhang, 2007), resulting in foreign language majors being influenced by instrumentalism, which has blurred the concept of the discipline (Lan, 2009).

To address these issues, Qu and Chen (2019) argued that the English major should adjust its disciplinary hierarchy and attributes to align with society's expectations for undergraduate education. The English major is an undergraduate program with both humanistic and professional components, focusing on literature, culture, linguistics, and area studies (Zha, 2018). Jin (2010) emphasized that foreign language education is fundamentally humanistic education, emphasizing mental training and emotional cultivation. Mastery of foreign language skills is essential, as it enables students to engage

with a wide range of texts and cultural artifacts, allowing them to delve deeper into the nuances and complexities of the language. However, it is through the exploration of literature, history, society, politics, and culture that students truly gain a comprehensive understanding of the foreign language and its significance. Therefore, English majors are expected to possess a strong command of the language and a high level of humanistic literacy, which are the core aspects of their education.

The concerns regarding the Comprehensive English course reflect dissatisfaction with it being perceived solely as a language knowledge and skill training course, a course assembled from separate and disconnected components, lacking coherence and integration. There have been researches exploring the unique value of this course, which originated from intensive reading, beyond its function as a skills-based course. The course can be characterized by its focus on intensive reading, emphasizing a comprehensive and profound interpretation of discourse meaning from multiple perspectives (Lu and Ding, 2002). It can go further as to build a strong foundation of knowledge and provide intellectual challenges for students (Han, 2001). By combining the disciplinary attributes and curriculum positioning, Han (2001) suggested that the Comprehensive English course can serve as a valuable transition from purely technical training to a more comprehensive understanding of the discipline, making it an enlightening and engaging foundational course.

While specialized courses in linguistics and literature provide systematic knowledge and research methods, the Comprehensive English course has its own unique mission. English majors often lack a solid foundation in language, literature, and cultural knowledge (He, 2004; Wen, 2019), which can hinder their ability to fully engage in advanced-level coursework without the development of critical thinking habits and understanding of language and cultural knowledge during their early years of study (Han, 2001). Thus, there is a need for a bridging course like Comprehensive English to help students establish a strong language foundation, connect with subject content, and bridge the gap with specialized courses.

The clarification of the disciplinary nature and positioning of the English major course is instrumental in setting effective teaching objectives. The 2020 Guidelines



outline the course objectives, which aim to cultivate students' ability to use English language knowledge and skills for communication, including pronunciation, intonation, word classes, grammatical forms, common word formation processes, sentence patterns, syntactic structures, genre recognition, cohesive devices, rhetorical techniques, writing skills, and critical thinking (Supervision Committee for Foreign Language Majors, 2020:15). While these objectives encompass language knowledge and skills, they lack emphasis and depth in specific areas, leading to overlap with other language skills courses at a similar level.

To address this, carefully selected texts should be chosen to focus not only on traditional informational or skill-based knowledge but also on structural knowledge and intellectual inquiry. The course should provide perspectives from literature, linguistics, and related disciplines, guiding students in exploring and thoroughly studying texts to achieve a profound understanding in both language and ideas.

At the linguistic level, the course should emphasize the recognition of the correlation between language forms and meanings, enabling students to comprehend the complexity of language expression and develop systematic knowledge (Qu, 2016). At the conceptual level, the course should encourage students to delve deeply into the thoughts and cultural implications embedded within the works, cultivating their intellectual skills and habits of thought.

In summary, the potential solutions for the Comprehensive English course involve redefining its course positioning and objectives, aligning them with contemporary educational demands. The course should go beyond language skills training and serve as an enlightening and inspiring course that promotes language proficiency, enhances humanistic literacy, and establishes connections with disciplinary knowledge. By focusing on both linguistic and conceptual aspects, the course can provide a transformative learning experience for English majors, contributing to their holistic development.

## 5.2 A Refinement of the Teaching Approach

As the above-mentioned teaching approaches do not align precisely with the unique demands of English specialization, they cannot be applied wholesale, but must

be approached eclectically, drawing from the strengths of each method. As Wen (2020:77) observed, every pedagogical strategy has its distinct applicability. Educators are thus encouraged to identify and extract components that resonate with their individual teaching objectives, integrating them into their classroom practice.

The refinement of the teaching approach in this paper draws on the strengths of both the traditional and new approaches, with a focus on three key understandings: learner autonomy, the flipped classroom model, and different levels of understanding. By incorporating these principles into the course design, the teaching approach can be enhanced to better meet the needs of English majors and facilitate their language learning and development.

The criticism faced by the intensive reading course for its emphasis on input rather than output is not unique to this specific course but extends to other language skill courses as well. Recognizing this issue necessitates a shift in teaching philosophy, acknowledging that the traditional approach of solely imparting knowledge is no longer sufficient in today's rapidly changing world. In this context, cultivating learner autonomy becomes crucial, as students need to be active agents in their own learning process.

To foster learner autonomy, the proposed refinement aligns with Little's three pedagogical principles, which include the use of the target language, learner control, and reflection (Little, 2022). By incorporating these principles, students are encouraged to set learning targets, choose activities, and document their learning process, thereby taking ownership of their learning journey. Reflection and evaluation play a central role, including self-assessment and peer assessment, further empowering students in their learning process.

Furthermore, the integration of the flipped classroom model serves as a bridge between classroom learning and autonomous learning. By utilizing this model, teachers can optimize classroom time by addressing specific difficulties and providing guidance, while utilizing external resources such as reference books and textbook-based platforms for conventional teaching content. This allows classroom sessions to focus on key aspects and challenges that students may face in their autonomous learning journey.

The flipped classroom model aligns with Talbert's definition of flipped learning, where "first contact with

new concepts moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space in the form of structured activity, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.” (Talbert, 2017)

To facilitate a profound understanding of both language and ideas through the reading of selected works, Barrett's taxonomy offers valuable insights into the levels of understanding that cater to the needs of English majors in terms of information and humanistic literacy. This taxonomy identifies five distinct levels of understanding:

literal comprehension, reorganization, inferential comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation (Richards, 2015:451-452). English majors can navigate these different levels of understanding, progressing from literal comprehension to higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and appreciation. This approach not only enhances their language proficiency but also develops their humanistic literacy, enabling them to engage deeply with the texts and appreciate the aesthetic and intellectual value they offer.

Table 2 presents the learning process that encompasses the aforementioned considerations.

*Table 2 The Process of Learning Activities*

Stages of learning	Learning Activities
Pre-class	<p>Self-directed reading of the text:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students engage with instructional videos on effective learning strategies.</li> <li>2. Students independently read the article, marking noteworthy passages and identifying challenging sections. They utilize various resources, such as dictionaries, teaching materials, courseware, and corpora, to explore potential solutions.</li> <li>3. Students connect their personal reading experiences, compile a list of works that resonate with the text, and provide brief introductions. They share their findings on the platform.</li> </ol> <p>Peer evaluation and teacher feedback on the platform:</p> <p>Students and the teacher provide feedback and comments on perspectives, content, structure, grammar, vocabulary, and other aspects.</p>
In-class	<p>The teacher leads students to think between the lines, to think through and beyond the text (Moreillon, 2007:59), via instruction, questioning and discussion:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the central theme and primary concepts.</li> <li>2. Recognize the organizational structure or pattern of the text.</li> <li>3. Analyze and appreciate the language usage: examine the selection of words, nuances of meaning (from a semantic perspective), and the author's intended effect (from a pragmatic perspective).</li> </ol>
Post-class	<p>Extended exploration of related works with a shared theme through bilingual comparison:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The teacher offers texts, question lists from various perspectives, and introductory materials. Students select topics, collaborate in groups to investigate, upload inter-group evaluations on the platform, and present their collaborative work in the subsequent class.</li> <li>2. Students reexamine the text in the context of the expanded reading.</li> <li>3. Writing practice: students delve deeper into the theme from their perspectives, and attempt to compose their own rendition of the story.</li> </ol>

Table 2 outlines the course structure, which is divided into three stages. The first stage centers on autonomous learning, adhering to the three pedagogical principles established by Little (2022). During this stage, students engage in self-directed reading, where they take charge of setting learning objectives, selecting appropriate activities, and documenting their learning process (Principle 2: learning control). Subsequently, peer evaluation and teacher feedback are incorporated to foster reflection and assessment (Principle 3: reflection). The reflective

component is integrated into the self-directed reading process and further reinforced through peer and teacher assessments. As this learning process encompasses listening, reading, and writing to fulfill all functions of English language acquisition, it satisfies Principle 1, which emphasizes the use of the target language. This stage prepares them for in-depth class discussions by allowing them to develop their initial thoughts and perspectives on the text. The class stage offers an opportunity for the flipped learning approach to be

implemented.

During the class stage, students shift their focus towards analyzing the overall meaning, structure, and language usage of the text. They progress through the stages of literal comprehension, reorganization, inferential comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation. Through collaborative learning and shared insights, students engage in discussions that help them explore underlying principles delve into the text's themes and concepts. The objective of this stage is to cultivate critical thinking skills and facilitate a deeper understanding of the text.

The third stage involves the exploration of works with shared themes in both languages, incorporating literary, translation, and other approaches. Writing activities based on extended reading and collaborative learning are the outcomes of this stage. This stage encourages students to apply their knowledge and skills to express their thoughts and ideas effectively.

Disciplinary knowledge is integrated throughout the course using a jigsaw-like approach. Specific aspects of disciplines such as literature, linguistics, and translation are highlighted based on the language features of the text. Students gradually develop a comprehensive understanding of these aspects through consecutive learning. For example, when examining shades of meaning, the focus is on semantic relations, and students learn to explore semantic, distributional, collocational, dialectal, and stylistic differences, which fall within the realm of lexicology. Such inquiries prepare students for future studies in theoretical courses for English majors.

Throughout the flipped learning process, autonomous learning is integrated with in-class instruction, fostering in-depth thinking alongside the acquisition of language, culture, and related aspects. Students not only acquire information through reading but also learn to assemble and organize knowledge, seeking explanations for linguistic phenomena, and exploring the profound thoughts and cultural aspects embedded in language.

By incorporating these approaches and stages, the course promotes active learning, critical thinking, and a comprehensive understanding of both language and disciplinary knowledge. It encourages students to engage with the texts deeply, explore various aspects of the disciplines, and develop their own insights and

interpretations.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Being a longstanding and prominent course in the undergraduate curriculum for English majors in China, the teaching of reading in the Comprehensive English course holds great significance. However, the challenges faced by its teaching approach extend beyond the course itself and have implications for related courses as well. This paper seeks to address two key questions: the factors contributing to the challenges encountered by the teaching approaches in the course, and potential solutions to these challenges.

A historical examination of the course reveals its origins during a period characterized by students' low levels of entry proficiency and the urgent need for language skills training. Over time, there has been an increasing emphasis on language knowledge, skills development, communication abilities, and critical thinking. However, the course's positioning has largely remained focused on the comprehensive training of skills.

This discrepancy between the static course positioning and the evolving educational objectives presents significant challenges when it comes to determining the appropriate teaching approach. While the traditional intensive reading approach continues to be practiced in certain contexts, there is a growing trend towards the adoption of new approaches. However, these approaches are not immediately suitable without modification, as they are not precisely tailored to meet the unique educational requirements of English majors, thereby failing to align fully with the academic goals inherent to English as a field of study.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to redefine the course's positioning and objectives, aligning them with contemporary educational demands. The course should aim to develop students' language proficiency, enhance their humanistic literacy, and establish connections with disciplinary knowledge. It should go beyond traditional intensive reading approaches and encourages in-depth analysis and interpretation.

Drawing upon the strengths of both traditional and newer approaches, this paper presents a refined teaching approach that integrates the principles of learner autonomy, flipped learning, and Barrett's taxonomy of levels of

comprehension. The proposed approach encompasses three distinct stages of learning, each supported by relevant procedures that align with these key notions. By doing so, the course aims to foster active learning, critical thinking, and a comprehensive understanding of both language and disciplinary knowledge.

The incorporation of learner autonomy empowers students to take ownership of their learning process, making informed decisions about their learning targets and engaging in self-directed activities. Flipped learning bridges the gap between classroom instruction and autonomous learning, allowing students to access foundational content outside of class and utilize valuable class time for in-depth discussions and targeted guidance. Barrett's taxonomy of levels of comprehension serves as a framework for developing students' reading skills, enabling them to progress from literal comprehension to higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and appreciation.

Through the implementation of this refined approach, it is anticipated that the challenges faced by the teaching of reading in the course will be effectively addressed. Furthermore, the insights and findings from this study hold valuable implications for future enhancements not only within the course itself but also for the broader advancement of English as a major discipline.

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