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**CAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA BE IMPROVED BY
THE INCORPORATION OF ENGLISH LITERATURE?**

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ABSTRACT

The English language has become the first foreign language in Chinese education, but examination-oriented teaching and learning have created various challenges for English education at Chinese secondary schools. English literature teaching and relevant research have gained popularity in many countries in Asia and Europe. Teaching English through literary texts has also been conducted experimentally in Chinese secondary schools in some areas of China where English education is relatively advanced. This study aims to explore the possibility that English language teaching in Chinese secondary education can be improved by the incorporation of English literature.

The study adopted the method of narrative literature review to explore the advantages and challenges of teaching English literature in the ESL context. Research on teaching English literature at Chinese secondary schools is still at the initial stage, and therefore the study reviewed the studies from China and around the world, especially Asia and Europe, in the last ten years. The study found that teaching literary texts in ESL could have positive impacts on secondary school students' learning motivation, language proficiency, cultural awareness, and critical thinking, as well as enrich pedagogical approaches and activities. Also, the study showed that teaching English literature at secondary schools had challenges caused by factors, including the literature itself, text materials, teachers and students.

The study concluded that incorporating English literature teaching into Chinese secondary schools had the potential to improve the quality of English language teaching. Some recommendations for practice, research and policy were proposed better to implement English literature teaching in Chinese secondary schools, and the limitations of the study were also listed for future research.

Keywords: English literature, secondary schools, advantages, challenges, teaching approaches

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 English as a global language

English has been recognised as a global language, “a language which achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role recognised in every country” (Crystal, 2003: 3). English is the mother tongue in Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and several Caribbean countries (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997). English is also the official language in India, Singapore, Nigeria, and Ghana, where it is used as a medium of communication in government, media, law and education (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997; Rohmah, 2005). English is now the language most commonly taught as a foreign language in more than 100 countries, including China, Russia, Germany, Spain and Egypt, where universities and schools are starting to use it as their primary foreign language (Crystal, 2003; Rao, 2019).

Such language dominance is closely linked with the political, economic, technological, and cultural powers of the United Kingdom and the United States. Britain was the world’s leading industrial and trading nation at the beginning of the 19th century (Crystal, 2003). Its colonial expansion established English around the world (Graddol, 1997). The USA (a previous British colony) had grown into the most productive and fastest-growing economy in the world by the beginning of the 20th century (Crystal, 2003). The world presence of the English language was maintained and promoted through the economic, technological and cultural influence of the American superpower (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997).

With increased globalisation, English is the most extensively used language in almost all significant sectors around the world. It is the primary language used in business, trade and commerce, and cultural fields (Crystal, 2003; Rao, 2019). English also plays an official or working role in international relations, with one-third of international organisations using English for all documentation and communication, such as the UN, WHO, UNESCO, OPEC, WTO, etc (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997). In addition, English has become the

main language of science and technology (Nunan, 2003g and “85 per cent of the scientific journals are published in English” (Rao, 2019: 67). English is the language mostly used on the internet, the media and press (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997). According to Rao (2019), “56 per cent of all the internet sites are designed in English” (p. 74). English has also long been recognised as the language of international travel and international safety (Graddol, 1997). Moreover, English plays a crucial part in promoting entertainment through the film, television, and music industries (Rao, 2019). English is the medium of the world’s knowledge and plays a predominant role in the field of education around the world (Crystal, 2003; Rao, 2019). According to Crystal (2003), since the 1960s, English has become “the normal medium of instruction” in higher education in many countries (p. 112).

1.2 English education in China

The development of English education in China

English had become the most popular foreign language in China with around 400 million learners by 2010, approximately one-third of China’s population (Wei & Su, 2012). The acquisition of English has reached an unprecedented level—a complete reversal from its previous status. Pan (2015) explained that the acquisition of English had previously very little credibility or respect owing to China’s 19th-century Sino-centric position. After the Opium Wars (1839-1840 with Britain, and 1856-1860 with France), China ended up in a peripheral position within the Euro-centric capitalist world system. In an attempt to reassert its position, English language teaching was then introduced to school education for the first time in Chinese history. With the initiation of “the Self-Strengthening Movement” (1861-1894), the learning of English was designated as “an intermediary tool for the transfer of practical knowledge” (Pan, 2015: 61). Indeed, during the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), English was regarded still as a tool, a medium that obtained necessary Western subjects and knowledge, rather than as a living language for direct communication (Pan, 2015). The English classroom then emphasised grammar and word-for-word translation and was instructed in the

language of Chinese, and this tradition persisted up to the start of the twenty-first century (Pan, 2015).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Russian was the main foreign language in schools due to China's strong alliance with the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. After the Sino-Soviet schism, China pursued stronger economic ties with the West. English therefore replaced Russian and extended to secondary schools nationwide, as the major foreign language in the curriculum (Lam, 2005; Pan, 2015). However, the heyday of English was short-lived, as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) swept over the nation, outlawing the study of foreign ideas and languages. "Foreign language learning suffered the same distrusted and abolished fate as scholarly studies in Chinese" (Lam, 2005: 77). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, China's new paramount leader, advocated economic reforms and opened China to the outside world (Pan, 2015). Deng announced the agenda for the "Four Modernisations" of agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology, which soon evolved into the "Reform and Opening policy" (Dillon, 1998: 109, cited in Lam, 2005). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of English grew rapidly, because English was considered useful for the modernisation of the country (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Shortly after the Reform and Opening policy was implemented, English, along with Chinese and mathematics, became one of the compulsory subjects for tests in the National College Entrance Examination (Pan, 2015). As China actively engaged in globalisation from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, such as joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 and holding the 2008 Olympic Games, English has become the predominant foreign language in Chinese education (Bolton & Graddol, 2012).

English curriculum, programmes, and assessment in China's education system

English has therefore become the first foreign language formally incorporated into the Chinese education system, and its learning has been advocated at all levels. Regarding the official policy of the Ministry of Education of the

People's Republic of China in 2001, English education begins in the third grade of compulsory education, with at least four periods per week (Nunan, 2003). In secondary education, English is the required test subject in both High School Entrance Examination (*Zhong Kao*) and National College Entrance Examination (Gao Kao). Both exams mainly assess students' reading, writing and listening skills, as well as their knowledge of the language system such as grammar and vocabulary, rather than their communication ability (Zhang & Liu, 2014). In 2012, over nine million students took the National College Entrance Examination (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). In higher education, all students at colleges and universities are required to study English whether they major in English or not, and even non-English majoring students are required to sit the College English Test before graduation (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Also, since 2001, all colleges and universities under the control of the Ministry of Education have been required to teach mainly in English in such courses as information technology, finance, economics, etc (Nunan, 2003). Meanwhile, the private education industry has expanded rapidly and operates at all levels, such as language schools and tutorial colleges where youngsters and older students complement their school studies (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). This test-based, prescribed way of teaching English now dominates the whole Chinese education system. The English language is now a test, rather than a living language of another culture or nation in a global world. China's political and economic power depends on good international language competencies, treating English as a living language that is spoken by real people, not just grammar.

1.3 English language teaching (ELT) in Chinese secondary education

The high-stakes status of the current model of English language teaching has meant that there has been some thought given to educational reform. Since 1949, ELT at the secondary level has been at the forefront of educational reform (Hu, 2002). For instance, the secondary English curriculum has been updated constantly since the mid-1980s (Hu, 2002), and the latest English Curriculum Standards were revised in 2020. With new English textbooks continually being published, innovative pedagogies—like communicative

language teaching and task-based instruction—have been promoted (Hu, 2005). However, current language teaching still puts examinations first because following the implementation of the Reform and Opening policy, English is the compulsory test subject of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) (Pan, 2015). Indeed, NCEE has been the main access route to university places for a huge population of secondary graduates (Hu, 2002). Compared with 5 per cent of the whole age group in 2002 (Hu, 2002), the gross enrolment rate of higher education researched at 57.8 per cent in 2021 (MOE, 2022a). Still, helping students to pass the NCEE and enter higher education is the most important task for senior secondary schools.

Such examination-oriented teaching and learning have created the following challenges for English education at Chinese secondary schools. First, the high-stakes exam has a considerable washback influence on how teachers conceptualise and approach English language teaching (Zhang & Liu, 2014). Traditional grammar-and-vocabulary-oriented teaching methods remain widely used in Chinese secondary schools, with these characterised by systematic analysis of grammar, rote memorisation of vocabulary, and emphasis on reading and writing. Other more innovative teaching methods, like communitive language teaching, have failed to receive widespread popularity (Lei & Qin, 2022). Second, to better prepare for NCEE, the teaching materials depend on textbooks that are remote from students' interests and experiences and lack of authentic language materials (Lee *et al*, 2018; Wu, 2001; Zhang & Liu, 2014), with this creating an obstacle to developing students' cultural awareness. Third, examination-oriented teaching and learning hamper the development of students' English communication and critical thinking skills (Pan & Block, 2011). Additionally, high-stakes testing pressure and test-oriented instruction undoubtedly have negative impacts on students' motivation and engagement in English learning (Yu *et al*, 2022).

Effects of English literature teaching

English literature teaching could have potentially positive effects on the aforementioned challenges in English language teaching and learning. To start

with, teaching English with literary texts can promote students' language skills and linguistic knowledge (Bloemert *et al*, 2019; Khatib *et al*, 2011a; Zhen, 2012), such as improving students' reading accuracy and reading rate, and enhancing their translingual competence. Also, English literature as authentic language material not only helps students access more Western cultures and histories but also facilitates cross-cultural comparisons, thereby promoting intercultural and critical cultural awareness (Bloemert *et al*, 2016; Byram, 2014). Moreover, literature can contribute to students' motivation and engagement (Paran, 2008), and function as a change agent to develop emotional intelligence, critical thinking skills and positive interpersonal attitudes (Ghosn, 2002). Teaching English by incorporating literature provides teachers with more options for pedagogical innovations (Zhen, 2012), such as a language-based approach (Lazar, 1993), a personal-response approach (Ling *et al*, 2016), and a Comprehensive Approach (Bloemert *et al*, 2016), etc. The activities, like individual reflection and group discussion, that teachers can incorporate into literature lessons easily adhere to the interactive student-centred principles of communicative language teaching (Van, 2009).

Research gap

It is evident that China has shifted its attitude toward English teaching because of its political and economic interests (Pan, 2015). It is noteworthy that since 2000, the updated national syllabuses for secondary education have accentuated teaching cultural knowledge and raising students' awareness of English-speaking cultures (Hu, 2002; Pan, 2015). This is because China as a global superpower has seen rapid economic growth and a surge in worldwide commercial, technological, and cultural exchanges. For instance, China's GDP growth rate was 8.1 per cent in 2021, with 462.81 billion US\$ net trade in goods and services (The World Bank, online). Also, according to Hu (2011), China, as one of the five science and technology powers in the present-day world, has edged into the ranks of the advanced countries in some major research areas, especially in physics and chemistry as well as communications. The more Western culture is understood, the more advantages and power young people will have. The latest Curriculum

Standards for English foreground the development of cross-cultural communication competence, and the provision of more opportunities for future studies and career development in associated areas of the English language (MOE, 2022c).

However, if English continues to be taught in a highly instructional way focused solely on passing a prescribed examination, this will be to the detriment of these aims and objectives. Students do not like mechanistic teaching, and acquiring a foreign language cannot just be managed through grammar or rote learning. English teaching and learning would be much more effective if it is more immersed in the culture, people, emotions, and human stories (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). To enhance students' enthusiasm for English learning and develop students' interests, as well as learning about more Western cultures, elective classes like "English Literature Appreciation" and "English Drama and Performance" have been added to Senior High School's English Curriculum Standards of 2003 edition (Wang & Chen, 2012) and the 2017 edition (Wang & Luo, 2019). Nevertheless, many schools do not offer such optional courses due to a shortage of resources or staff or not seeing the value of these elective courses to the National College Entrance Examination (Wang & Chen, 2012). Another prevalent issue is that teachers lack confidence and capability in implementing the teaching of English literary texts due to their stereotypes about the difficulty of literature teaching and lacking relevant training (Sun, 2023).

Secondary ELT directly impacts the largest number of English learners in the Chinese formal education system (Hu, 2002). According to the latest educational statistics data released by the Ministry of Education, there are around 90 million registered students in Chinese secondary education, which is larger than any other level (MOE, 2022b). Notwithstanding its paramount importance to the nation's English proficiency, there is limited research on ELT in Chinese secondary education (Gao *et al*, 2014; Hu, 2002; Lei & Qin, 2022; Yu *et al*, 2022). As for the research on English literature teaching at the

secondary level, it is still at the initial stage (Sun 2020, 2022, 2023; Tsang *et al*, 2020).

Research questions

To address this research gap, and help stakeholders in Chinese secondary education better know about English literature teaching and find more effective pedagogical approaches, the paper will explore the following research questions:

- 1) What are the advantages of teaching English literature in ESL?
- 2) What are the challenges of teaching English literature in ESL?

This study is organised into five chapters, including this introductory chapter. Following the introduction, the second chapter focuses on the methodology used for this study. The third and fourth chapters present the findings for the research questions respectively, by reviewing and analysing relevant studies from China and throughout the world. The fifth chapter concludes the main outcomes and proposes recommendations and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER TWO METHODOLOGY

In the previous introduction section, the researcher briefly reviewed the development of English as a global language in the world and the process of English as the first foreign language in China, as well as the building of the English curriculum, programmes, and assessments in the Chinese education system. After outlining the issues of English language teaching and learning in Chinese secondary education, the researcher then pointed out that English literature could be a way of revitalising the teaching and learning of English in China. To ensure that the research project produced tangible results, a detailed and rigorous research design was a vital step in the early stage of the research process (Cohen *et al*, 2018). In the following research methodology chapter, the researcher will elaborate on how these questions are to be

explored, what research methods are to be used, and the justification for adopting the methodology.

2.1 Research paradigm

This research project aimed to explore English language teaching and learning, specifically enhancing ELT at the secondary level by involving English literature. Rooted in the social sciences, the research focused on studying teachers' and students' attitudes, motivations, and behaviours about English literature as well as the ways that these could be affected. Therefore, the research took a constructivist ontological position premised on all knowledge being subjective and socially constructed based on individuals' experiences, beliefs, and interactions with the environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Furthermore, the research would combine the constructivist ontology with an interpretivist epistemological perspective. The researcher believed that there was no universal truth about the benefits, drawbacks, and best approaches to teaching English literature, which was socially constructed with multiple interpretations of different realities and experiences, and this belief fitted well with an interpretivism paradigm (Cohen *et al*, 2018; Lincoln *et al*, 2011). Though interpretivism is criticised for its high level of subjectivity (Cohen *et al*, 2018; Lincoln *et al*, 2011), this paradigm could facilitate a better understanding of this educational research through individuals' personal and subjective perspectives (Curtis *et al*, 2014). These general considerations about the nature of knowledge and its generation informed qualitative methods to be applied in the research project, as detailed in the following chapter.

2.2 Research method

The method adopted in this research was derived from the worldview of constructivist and interpretivist described above. Qualitative methods were more suited to the interpretivist paradigm because qualitative research viewed the truth as a subjective reality that different people experienced in different ways (Ryan *et al*, 2007). The research employed the qualitative

method of narrative literature review, which involves “the selecting, chronicling and ordering of evidence” to produce more interpretive and reflective accounts of findings (Dixon-Woods *et al*, 2005: 47). Narrative literature review was interpretive in nature, and thus the research method was line with the paradigm outlined above.

Narrative literature review, also known as traditional or extended literature review, was adopted in this research due to the rest reasons. First, as one of the two main types of literature review, narrative reviews aimed to “provide the reader with a comprehensive background for understanding current knowledge and highlighting the significance of new research” (Cronin *et al*, 2008: 38), compared with systematic literature reviews tending to accumulate knowledge and eliminate bias (Bryman, 2012). This matched with the primary purpose of this research project to help the stakeholders better understand the teaching of English literature. Second, traditional reviews attempted to summarize and synthesise the findings of a number of studies, whilst systematic reviews tried to identify, evaluate, and synthesise all the literature with more explicit and rigorous criteria (Cronin *et al*, 2008). Given the time constraints of this dissertation, narrative literature review was relatively more appropriate. Based on the reasons discussed, narrative literature review was the best research method for this study.

2.3 Literature search

Notwithstanding the differences between systematic literature review, narrative literature review was still a big project involving substantial amounts of reading and synthesising of the sources, like the existing journals, books, and other published texts on a given topic. To cover the research questions, it was essential to be specific when searching the literature. It was advisable to classify the research questions into a set of themes and search relevant literature regarding the themes. To facilitate literature research, sub-themes would be created according to the theme in a more detailed way. The literature search direction was based on the research questions, which made the research process more rigorous.

To narrow down the studies to be reviewed, an initial, iterative scoping review was conducted to assess the size and scope of available research literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The databases' thesaurus function was also used to generate alternative keywords (Cronin *et al*, 2008). Additionally, truncation of search terms was employed to widen the scope of the keywords used, as well as account for international spelling differences (Cronin *et al*, 2008). The search terms and phrases were compiled for the Boolean search in the databases selected to use in the literature search. As per the definition of the University of Glasgow's Library, the databases applied to literature search are five of the key databases in the field of education and English literature. They included the Australian Education Index (ProQuest), British Education Index (EBSCOhost), ERIC (EBSCOhost), Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education, and Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature.

The Boolean search terms used for the literature search were listed for each research question in the following table (Table 1). Because the research on English literature teaching in Chinese secondary education is still at the initial stage (Sun, 2020; Tsang *et al*, 2020), the literature reviewed in this study included two parts: the sources from the research in China, and those from the worldwide research, mainly from Asia and Europe. Therefore, when searching for international sources, the keyword "China" or "Chinese" would be deleted.

Table 1. Search terms for the literature search

Main Keywords	Research question 1	Research question 2
“(Chinese) secondary school* OR “(Chinese) high school** OR “(Chinese middle school** OR “(Chinese) secondary education” AND “English teaching” AND “English literature” OR “literary text**”	advantage* OR benefit* OR function* OR role* OR effect* OR motivation OR cultural awareness OR critical thinking OR teaching approach* OR teaching method*	disadvantage* OR challenge* OR controvers* OR drawback* OR problem* OR issue*

2.4 Selection and critical appraisal of studies

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in the literature selection to reduce the selection bias and make the research more focused and manageable (Jahan *et al*, 2016). First, the studies should be peer-reviewed to improve the reliability and quality of the research (Jesson *et al*, 2011). Second, the sources were limited to the texts published within ten years to ensure that no outdated literature was used in the study (Jesson *et al*, 2011), but influential works were the exception to this rule (Cronin *et al*, 2008). Third, the sources should be written in English as stated in the dissertation

requirement. Furthermore, the publications were excluded in the selection, such as book reviews, newspaper articles, websites, PhD or master's dissertations, because these sources could be not academic enough to be cited in the dissertation and thus affect the accuracy of the research content.

A staged appraisal process was conducted because numerous studies were obtained through the database search (Cronin *et al*, 2008). In an initial appraisal round, all the sourced journals were judged by a brief check of the titles and keywords in the database result list. In a second round, the abstracts of the remaining papers were evaluated to identify papers to be examined in depth. Subsequently, additional studies in the identified papers' references were studied in-depth manually. Finally, 30 published works were advanced to be scrutinised on the full-text level.

2.5 Analysis and synthesis of findings

To find answers to the two research questions, all the identified articles were thoroughly read, and the qualitative data was analysed, interpreted, and synthesized with the method of thematic analysis. This approach was appropriate to identify and interpret key features of a data set because it was a systematic process that led to high-quality and rigorous analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Besides producing rich data, the thematic analysis also was applied to various paradigms and data sets, which met the need for a literature review in assessing a wide range of studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This research project adopted the six-step thematic analysis structure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was to familiarise with the data by repeatedly reading the studies and noting down initial ideas for codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second step was to generate initial codes by systematically coding notable elements of the data across the entire data set and collating data related to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third step involved searching the coded data to find themes, which were patterns of codes linked by a shared core idea and collating the codes into prospective themes by compiling all data connected to each potential theme

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth step was to review and refine themes to ensure that they worked appropriately with the coded extracts and the whole data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth step was to define and name themes, which then led to the last step of the analysis—producing a scholarly report of the findings by selecting “vivid, compelling extract examples” related to the research questions and literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87). As emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2006), this thematic analysis was a “more recursive process, but not a linear one” (p. 85).

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are a key area of concern either in primary or secondary data research, and researchers must ensure to work ethically in all aspects of their research and minimise negative consequences (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). Regarding the three indispensable values stated by Cohen *et al* (2018: 127), “non-maleficence, beneficence, and human dignity”, the researcher strived on the following two aspects to demonstrate an ethical stance throughout the dissertation.

On the one hand, besides citing and referencing all the sources used in the research, the researcher would follow the suggestion of Cohen *et al* (2018: 138) and tried to avoid “overstating or understating what the data shows”. This study was a narrative literature review of published works on a certain topic, and the common ethical defect of secondary data reviews was to sacrifice the relevance or integrity of the cited studies (Erwin *et al*, 2011). On the other hand, the researcher illustrated in detail what procedures and methods were conducted to ensure the rigour, credibility, and transparency of the research. By clearly presenting the study to the readers, they would be able to understand, access, and apply the findings to their daily personal or professional experiences (Cohen *et al*, 2018).

2.7 Limitations

The research method of narrative literature review is often criticised for the selectiveness of the literature to be reviewed (Cronin *et al*, 2008) and the transparency of the selection process (Dixon-Woods *et al*, 2005). This study strived to mitigate this issue and limit bias by adopting the principles of a systematic literature review. However, the bias would be not eliminated, because the search, selection, appraisal, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of literature was conducted by the researcher alone and the findings were influenced by the researcher's interpretation which was informed by the individual's experiences and environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another limitation of the study was that the reviewed literature was restricted to the sources published in English. A huge number of studies were not carried out in English, as stated in the two literature reviews of Gao *et al* (2014) and Lei and Qin (2022), including the studies published in other languages rather than only English, which could have impacted the findings of this research project.

The methodology chapter explored the research paradigms and methods to conduct this research project, together with the accounts of literature search and selection as well as ethical considerations and limitations of the research method. The following two chapters are the core section of the paper— literature review, where the two research questions posed in the introduction chapter will be explored in turn.

CHAPTER THREE ADVANTAGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN ESL

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018: 120), “knowledge is cognitively constructed from experience and interaction of the individual with others and the environment”. Literature is an ideal medium for getting various knowledge in the complex process of learning English as a secondary language

(ESL). There are various views about the meaning of literature, but this study, citing Calafato and Paran (2019), employs “a straightforward definition of literature as literary texts, such as short stories, poems, plays, dramas, novels, and novellas” (p. 29). Through diverse genres of literature, readers are immersed in various types of authentic language materials. Reading stories with different social and historical backgrounds, students learn more about different cultures. Through the characters’ stories, students can make their own reflections while experiencing different lives, emotions, and growth of the stories. Because literary texts are dealing with emotions, people, dilemmas, etc, this will encourage more pupil response and therefore more interaction. Through teaching activities like group discussions and learning tasks like reading journals, students can have more communication and interactions with their teachers and peers.

The following section investigated the advantages of incorporating English literature into English teaching in the ESL context. Because there is limited research on teaching literature in Chinese secondary education (Sun, 2022; Tsang *et al*, 2020), the researcher explored evidence from relevant international studies as well.

3.1 Boost learning motivation

Teaching English literature has the potential to promote students’ motivation in learning English. Sun (2020) explored the perceptions of eight students and five EFL teachers toward a two-year extensive reading (ER) programme in a Chinese secondary school, where students’ reading material was original English novels, like *The Alchemist*, *Animal Farm*, *the Kite Runner*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. According to the findings of the semi-structured interview, teachers and students believed that the extensive reading of the novels had positively impacted the readers’ interest or motivation for English learning. First, ER-related writing encouraged students to keep reading novels and facilitated students’ reflections on the reading. For example, after reading *The Kite Runner* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students compared fathers in the novels and freely expressed their ideas. Students regarded ER-related writing

as “an irreplaceable channel of communication” with teachers due to its feature of “heart-to-heart” and “free of time and space limitation” (Sun, 2020: 210). Second, vocabulary was considered a source of difficulty in ER, yet the challenge it presented also served as a motivator to read, especially for those advanced and upper-intermediate English learners. For instance, the student reading the novel *Splinter Cell*, took the difficult vocabulary as motivation to challenge himself. Additionally, teachers’ encouragement made students motivated to their novel reading. Students expressed that the teacher’s encouragement helped them read without any fear.

Though the number of participants in Sun’s (2020) study was relevantly small, a similar finding was shown in a large-scale investigation conducted by Tsang *et al* (2020) of 1,190 secondary-level Hong Kong students’ views on the benefit of literature. The 27-item questionnaire results showed that literature learning, especially short stories, has positive effects on learners’ confidence and motivation. The data from three large-scale international research projects also overwhelmingly confirm this. In the Indonesian study by Afdian and Wahyuni (2020), 77 per cent of senior high school students stated that “literature in English can motivate their willingness in learning English” (p. 166) because they believed that literature in English could help their future English learning. According to another Indonesian study conducted by Damuri and Wahyuni (2021) with 144 rural high school students, 90 per cent of students maintained that literature could boost their interest in learning English, especially short stories—the genre that they were more familiar with. The students surveyed (mostly from a rural environment) expressed a positive attitude toward literature in English because they thought literature was a fun and motivating lesson (Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021). In the research of Sentürk and Kahraman (2020), 57 Turkish middle school students were divided into two groups—the experimental group and the control group—to investigate the effectiveness of the use of short stories in English language teaching. After 3 weeks of learning English with short stories, the experimental group had more positive attitudes to the use of short stories regarding the significant changes

demonstrated by the increase of Item 3 “Literary texts are enjoyed” and Item 6 “Literary texts are long to be read” (p. 547).

Accordingly, teaching English through literature has the power to motivate learners to explore the language of English and enhance language competence. More literature reviews have reached the same conclusion, such as Keshavarzi (2012), Khatib *et al* (2011a), and Paran (2008).

3.2 Improve language competence

Teaching English literature in ESL can contribute to improving learners’ English language skills and abilities. According to Sun’s (2020) investigation of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of ER programme and its implementation in a Chinese secondary school, a semi-structured interview of all the participants, including teachers and students, revealed that the extensive reading of English novels was “helpful, essential, favourable, or very important for English learning” (Sun, 2020: 208). Teachers and students agreed that the novel reading programme improved learners’ vocabulary and reading abilities. ER was beneficial in exposing students to authentic expressions and promoting them to use the English language correctly. Two of the eight student participants even stated that ER sometimes allowed them to express themselves more precisely in English than in Chinese. Also, through students’ reading journals, the researcher found that ER-related writing encouraged students to keep reading and deepened their reading comprehension as well as improved writing skills and communication with their teachers. Therefore, the ER programme based on original novel reading had positive effects on “improving various aspects of students’ English studies, including reading, writing and vocabulary” (Sun, 2020: 213).

The language benefits of literature in foreign language education were also explored by Tsang *et al* (2020), who conducted a questionnaire of 1,190 Hong Kong secondary four to secondary six students or secondary-school graduates within six months of graduation. Those participants with at least eight to ten years of English learning experiences explored their views on the benefits of

two frequently-occurring genres—short stories and poems (together with songs). Regarding the descriptive statistics, the students perceived that both types of literary texts were effective in their language development, despite some differences. The finding showed that except for listening abilities, short stories improved their vocabulary and reading abilities the most, “followed by writing abilities, grammar, and overall English proficiency”, whilst poems only played a role in facilitating reading abilities and vocabulary (Tsang *et al*, 2020: 11).

Moreover, empirical studies from some Asian and European countries support the conclusions with more qualitative and quantitative data. Afdian and Wahyuni (2020) conducted the questionnaire and interviews with 22 Grade 11 Indonesian high school students on their attitude towards literature in English. 100 per cent of students agreed that they learned new vocabulary when they read literature in English, and they claimed that “literary works such as poetry, novel and short story contained many words and enriched their language sources” (Afdian & Wahyuni, 2020: 163). Also, 95 per cent of the students believed that English literature lessons could help them improve their English proficiency (Afdian & Wahyuni, 2020). Among all the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing, most of the students believed that speaking was improved the most because they always read aloud literature in English and imitate in English, with this impacting favourably on their pronunciations.

Likewise, according to Damuri and Wahyuni (2021), out of the surveyed 144 Indonesian rural high school students, 76 per cent thought they could improve their English language proficiency by learning literature, and 80 per cent learned new words when reading literary texts like short stories or poetry. Damuri and Wahyuni (2021) stated that literature could improve students’ basic language skills, which could be seen from the increasing ability of students in listening, writing, speaking and reading. In terms of listening ability, students could understand a variety of meanings in different interpersonal oral texts and monologues in short stories and poems. Also, the

familiarisation with English pronunciation helped students respond quickly to the meaning of each word. When studying poetry and short stories, students were required to read texts in front of the classes, which helped students to practice their reading skills and improved their English reading fluency. Through drama learning, students needed to master roles with dialogue, which boosted their confidence to speak in front of the class.

In addition, 81 bilingual-secondary-school teachers' views on teaching foreign languages through literature explored in the study of Bobkina *et al* (2021), are in line with students' perceptions in the previous two studies. These teachers from Spain valued the importance of literature in "the beauty of language, varieties of language and authenticity", and stressed that literary texts helped students enhance language proficiency and develop reading and writing skills and vocabulary (Bobkina *et al*, 2021: 154).

Two more studies further demonstrate the language benefits of literature with a quantitative score comparison between the experimental group and the control group. In a study of Jordanian secondary students' proficiency in English conducted by Smadi and Al-Zawahreh (2013), Grade 11 students were randomly assigned into two groups—an experimental group involved in ER programme based on literary texts, and a control group. In the experimental group's English class, ER programme was executed with various tasks in the last 30 minutes of each lesson (each period 55 minutes). Students first chose texts among teachers' provided reading materials and then filled out the pre-reading record with the reasons for their text selection. After ten minutes of reading the selected material, students reflected on the items in their post-reading records. During the last ten minutes of the extensive reading session, following-up activities related to what students read were carried out with teachers' help when needed. Students were encouraged to do activities, such as "text reporting, debating, role-play acting, and feedback discussion" (Smadi & Al-Zawahreh, 2013: 96). The study's quantitative data indicated that the experimental group's mean scores were substantially higher than those of the control group, particularly in writing, speaking, vocabulary and reading

comprehension. Though the findings of this study did not show any significant difference in the students' grammar proficiency, the study of Sentürk and Kahraman (2020) added that the inclusion of short stories in language could boost the students' grammar knowledge. In the study, 57 student participants from Grade 7 and Grade 8 were allocated into two groups: the control group taught English with traditional textbooks, and the experimental group taught English with three short stories for three weeks. According to Sentürk and Kahraman (2020), the experimental group outperformed the control group in grammar tests, and the difference in grammar scores of the experimental group further exemplified that the use of short stories in the teaching process had a positive impact on students' grammar knowledge.

Consequently, students' language competence can be improved when they are exposed to various literary texts and engage in different activities related to their authentic materials reading. Further literature reviews and studies came to the same conclusions, such as Paran (2008), Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010), Khatib *et al* (2011a), Duncan and Paran (2017), and Bloemert *et al* (2019).

3.3 Enhance cultural awareness

According to Baker (2012: 65), cultural awareness is “knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be developed by the language learner and then utilised in understanding specific cultures and in communicating across diverse cultures”. Lack of relevant cultural background knowledge may make it difficult to understand texts or learn language in a broad sense (Sun, 2022), and therefore developing students' cultural awareness is essential to language acquisition. Literature is the ideal medium for an in-depth investigation of the target culture (Bagerkazemi & Alemi, 2010), and literature has the potential to promote cultural and intercultural awareness (Van, 2009; Khatib *et al*, 2011a).

The Chinese researcher Sun conducted a longitudinal study of extensive reading implementation in Chinese secondary schools. In her two studies in

2020 and 2022, Sun collected evidence from teachers' and students' views on the effectiveness of literature to develop learners' cultural awareness. According to Sun (2020), teachers and students pointed out that the original novel reading programme enhanced their cultural awareness. Also, in Sun's (2022) case study of *The Outsiders* reading programme which explored teaching young adult literature in secondary L2 classrooms, students expressed that the colloquial language in the novel helped them understand the local culture and customs (Sun, 2022). Therefore, Sun (2022) stressed that literature had positive effects on promoting L2 learners' understanding of the culture embedded in the stories. Likewise, Tsang *et al* (2020) provided more evidence of this benefit. In their study, the majority of 1,190 surveyed Hong Kong secondary-level learners perceived that both poems and short stories had positive effects on "the knowledge of the world such as different cultures and others' lives" (p. 16). A limitation of these three studies is that they did not provide sufficient concrete illustrations about how literature enhanced learners' cultural awareness.

Although literature teaching in Chinese secondary EFL classrooms and relevant research is still at the initial stage (Sun, 2022; Tsang *et al*, 2020), international studies in recent years also support the findings of the Chinese research. Duncan and Paran (2017) conducted a research project on the effectiveness of literature on language acquisition and intercultural understanding in the high school context. This research consisted of case studies of three different IB schools in Europe and a 118-item questionnaire distributed via an online survey to 497 DP schools. According to the survey results of 264 respondents, the language teachers (including 72 English teachers) considered literary texts as important for understanding the culture of the taught language (Duncan & Paran, 2017). Teachers exemplified the cultural advantages of literature with different interpretations. For example, literature was really good for their cultural awareness of "the classics of the time, writers and the different genres", and the background of a novel (Duncan & Paran, 2017: 51). Literature made them "feel more certain of the ideas and the past" or "get further in a culture", such as British Culture and

American Culture (Duncan & Paran, 2017: 51). In the questionnaire and focus group of the case studies, students also pointed out that literature helped them to learn about the history and culture of a country and get a sense of culture (Duncan & Paran, 2017). Also, in the study of Bloemert *et al* (2019) exploring students' perspectives on the benefits of EFL literature education, over half of 635 surveyed Dutch secondary-school students thought their EFL literature lessons helped them gain more historical, cultural, and social knowledge. Bloemert *et al* (2019) inferred that studying literary works in foreign language classrooms could enhance students' intercultural and critical awareness because students encountered stories and themes from other historical, cultural and social contexts. Besides, the views of 81 bilingual secondary school teachers, which were explored by Bobkina *et al* in 2021, further echoed the findings of the previous research. Those English language teachers from Spain highly agreed that the use of literary text was “a valuable tool for accessing information about cultural and intercultural aspects of the target language and the English-speaking countries” (Bobkina *et al*, 2021: 154).

Therefore, as a facet of culture, literature can enable learners to experience different cultures and increase their cultural awareness. When students have a better understanding of specific cultures, they have an in-depth learning of the language. With increased cultural awareness, students will not only learn language knowledge and skills but also prepare themselves for future cross-cultural communication and interactions.

3.4 Promote critical thinking

Literature is a good tool to help language learners to develop critical thinking skills (Van, 2009). Greek thinkers such as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato introduced the notions of critical thinking to promote human reasoning skills. Socrates developed the Socratic Method, a well-known process of questioning, to help people in the identification of inconsistencies and assumptions in their present beliefs and reasoning systems (Shukri & Mukundan, 2015). John Dewey (1993) is the first to define critical thinking as “reflective thinking...active,

persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p.99-116). There is no one agreement on the absolute definition of critical thinking, but Facione (1990) generated a consensus on the definition of critical thinking by bringing together the ideas of 46 authority figures.

“We understand critical thinking to be a purposeful, self-regulatory judgement that results in the interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based”.

(Facione, 1990: 3)

Khatib and Alizadeh (2012) conducted a study with 34 Iran students to explore the effectiveness of employing literary texts in reading comprehension classes to enhance critical thinking skills. The students were divided into two groups—the control group using non-literary texts and the experimental group using literary texts extracted from different literary books and short stories. Both groups were instructed with the same five-step model proposed by Xu (2011) to promote critical thinking in teaching English reading classes. The five steps included:

“(1) pre-reading—introduction of background or cultural knowledge to students, (2) comprehension of the text and explicating the main idea of each paragraph, (3) analysing the logic of the text, (4) evaluating the logic of the text, and (5) writing”.

(Xu, 2011: 139-140)

Regarding the data from T-test and paired t-tests, Khatib and Alizadeh (2012) concluded that Xu’s (2011) five-step model could improve learners’ critical thinking skills and that the use of literary texts could improve their cognitive levels and reading comprehension. Reading literary texts, students needed to do more imaginative and creative thinking as well as reasoning and inference (Khatib & Alizadeh, 2012). Although all the participants were all advanced students regarding their English proficiency, this research was supported by two more studies. According to Bloemert *et al* (2019), 178 Dutch secondary school students (around a third of 635 participants) expressed that EFL

literature classes were beneficial in promoting their critical thinking and personal development. Likewise, in the case study of Sun (2022), the participant teacher mentioned that the reading assignments based on the novel *The Outsiders* stimulated students' personal opinions and critical thinking. For instance, focusing on a citation about the character Dally in the novel, the task “*free-writes*” allowed students to freely give their own interpretation based on specific questions, like “Think about Dally’s background and personality...What makes him a good guy or a bad guy? Use reasons and examples” (Sun, 2022: 8).

Hence, teaching English literature in ESL could enhance learners' critical thinking. Another two literature reviews highlighted this point as well, such as Khatib *et al* (2011a), and Shuri and Mukundan (2015). Critical thinking skills are advanced-level thinking skills, which prepare learners not to take things for granted and facilitate the skills of inference, deduction and prediction based on textual evidence (Khatib *et al*, 2011a). In this way, critical thinking can deepen students' understanding and comprehension of literary texts and the English language.

3.5 Enrich pedagogical approaches

Integrating English literature into ESL teaching has the potential to expand pedagogical approaches. Based on the benefits of literature on language learning, cultural awareness and personal growth, studies showed that certain practitioners and language scholars proposed various pedagogical approaches to teach literature for specific purposes.

3.5.1 Lazar (1993): three approaches

Lazar (1993) suggested three approaches to teaching literature in his influential book *Literature and Language Teaching*: a language-based approach, literature as content, and literature for personal growth. The language-based approach focused on studying the language of the literary text from the aspects of grammar, lexis and discourse. Through this approach,

students could have a better understanding of the knowledge of English and improve their language proficiency in English, as well as analyse and evaluate literary texts both critically and aesthetically. Literature as content, as “the most traditional approach”, concentrated on the social, political and historical background of the texts, literary genres, and rhetorical devices (Lazar, 1993: 24). Students could learn English through the course content, especially through reading assigned texts and literary analysis related to them. Literature for personal growth validated students’ interpretation of literary texts in light of their personal experiences, feelings, and knowledge. This approach helped students actively involve in English learning “both intellectually and emotionally”, and promoted their growth and development (Lazar, 1993: 24). These three approaches were very important but broad and general in nature.

3.5.2 Ling *et al* (2016): six approaches based on the three models by Carter and Long (1991)

Ling *et al* (2016) reviewed six specific approaches in their investigation of types of English literature teaching approaches preferred by teachers from Malaysian secondary schools: information-based approach, paraphrastic approach, stylistic approach, language-based approach, personal-response approach, and moral-philosophical approach. Those approaches were rooted in the three models by Carter and Long (1991): the cultural model, the personal growth model, and the language model, which are “widely used for secondary language literature teaching” (Ling *et al*, 2016: 2).

The cultural model emphasised languages as cultural property and required students to analyse a literary piece from a variety of angles, including social, political, literary, and historical. This model was similar to the approach of literature as content recommended by Lazar (1993). The cultural model was related to the information-based approach, which valued literature as a source of facts or information (Ling *et al*, 2016). The information-based approach was teacher-centred and demanded teachers to deliver various

contents of literary texts to students, like the historical, political, cultural and social background (Ling *et al*, 2016).

The language model was founded on the premise that literature provides a wide range of contextualised linguistic elements that might be systematically practised through a variety of activities, regardless of literary quality or reader-text interaction. The language model included a paraphrastic approach, a stylistic approach, and a language-based approach (Ling *et al*, 2016). The paraphrastic approach focused on paraphrasing and rewording the text in simpler language or translating it into another language, which was also teacher-centred and did not provide students with engaging tasks and activities. The stylistic approach entailed literary critics and linguistic analysis, which assisted students to comprehend the text meaningfully and develop language awareness and knowledge. The language-based approach incorporated literature with language skills to improve students' language proficiency, which was student-centred and activity-based for productive language usage.

The personal growth model highlighted the learners' own response to and interaction with literary texts, as well as their own feelings, experiences and opinions, which advanced language acquisition and cultural understanding as well as promoted personal growth. The personal growth model included a personal-response approach and a moral philosophical approach (Ling *et al*, 2016). The personal-response approach encouraged students to connect their experiences with the text themes and promoted students to relate the subject matter of the texts with personal life experiences. The moral-philosophical approach helped students to identify moral and philosophical values in the literary text.

3.5.3 Paran (2008): four-quadrant models and extended approaches

Surveying the existing research and evidence from practitioners about the approaches, Paran (2008) created a four-quadrant model which synthesised different approaches to L2 literature teaching. The four quadrants

respectively represented (1) focus on literary knowledge and skills and language learning, (2) focus on language learning, (3) focus on literary learning, and (4) extensive reading. The presentation of four diverse approaches reflects the characteristics of various teaching environments for secondary language. Paran (2008) stated that this model was simplified and other elements like the issue of culture and reading could be entered into the literature teaching.

Paran (2008) also reviewed the extended approaches focusing on the literature and language. One was, for example, the reader-response approach, which was similar to the personal-response approach discussed above, associated with such activities as readers' journals, group discussions and projects. Incorporating technologies into literature teaching was another method, such as film and video, electronic media, and electronic means of communication (e.g., emails), and the webs and its resources. Additionally, Paran (2008) detailed the stylistics approach, an important approach which had been taken in the teachers' manuals and important textbooks in the past thirty years. One of the contributions of the approach was that it promoted students' language awareness because it was an essential branch of applied linguistics and focused on text analysis. However, the stylistics approach also faced controversy because it had not yet included a thorough investigation of literature teaching and language learning of second language learners. The problems of this approach in the EFL context were also echoed in the literature review by Van (2009), such as teachers' lack of knowledge about literary device terminology, students' limited communicative abilities and their lack of exposure to and sensitivity to various registers in daily life.

3.5.4 Bloemert *et al* (2016): a Comprehensive Approach

Based on Paran's (2008) idea and taking into consideration approaches like Cater and Long (1991), Bloemert *et al* (2016) proposed a Comprehensive Approach model to L2 literature teaching, which included the text approach, the context approach, the reader approach, and the language approach. The text approach focused on the formal elements of literature by closing reading

or familiarising students with the terms used in theoretical literary discourse. This approach, which emphasised the aesthetic value of literature, could strengthen students' sensitivity to literary texts through literary language and conventions, as well as their abilities to identify and distinguish between different styles and types of texts. The context approach focused on the cultural, historical and social elements of literary works, which was similar to the cultural model. This approach could encourage intercultural and critical cultural awareness as well as a sense of tolerance and understanding. The reader approach emphasised the reader as “an independent maker of meaning”, which encouraged students to think critically and enhanced students' translingual and transcultural competence (Bloemert *et al*, 2016: 175). The language approach focused on using literature “as a vehicle presenting genuine and undistorted language” to undertake extensive reading or textual mining (Bloemert *et al*, 2016: 175). This approach assisted learners in reading more quickly, comprehending what they read and learning new words. It could also enhance students' knowledge of syntactic patterns and help them develop a sense of the coherence and cohesion of texts as well as learn to use the language appropriately.

3.5.5 Application of pedagogical approaches for different purposes

As the previous four studies showed, the introduction of literature into English instruction allowed teachers to employ additional pedagogical approaches based on their specific teaching objectives of language competence, culture awareness, personal growth, and literary learning (See Table 2).

Table 2. Pedagogical approaches to teaching literature for specific teaching objectives

Teaching objectives	Improve language competence	Enhance culture awareness	Promote personal growth	Support literary learning
Pedagogical approaches	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Language-based approach 2. Paraphrastic approach 3. Stylistic(s) approach 4. Language approach 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Literature as content 2. Information-based approach 3. Context approach 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Literature for personal growth 2. Personal-response approach 3. Moral-philosophical approach 4. Reader-response approach 5. Reader approach 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Text approach

The use of authentic texts, especially literature, as an EFL resource in classrooms has grown in popularity, particularly in Europe and Asia (Calafato, 2018). Existing empirical research and literature reviews from four countries in Asia and Europe, including Malaysia, China, Russia and the Netherlands, further demonstrated that teachers utilized different teaching approaches to instruct literary texts regarding diverse teaching aims and students' English proficiency. According to Rashid *et al* (2010), Ling *et al* (2016) and Affendi and Aziz (2020), Malaysian ESL teachers preferred the information-based approach, the moral-philosophical approach, and the paraphrastic approach. This was because teachers believed these literature teaching approaches could improve less proficient students' understanding of literary texts and prepare them for the Malaysian Certificate of Education Examination. Those

students scored below Satisfied Band for both the School Based Oral Assessment and the writing test outlined by the Ministry of Education. Additionally, the findings of Bloemert *et al* (2019), Calafato (2018), and Sun (2023) revealed that teachers from the Netherlands, Russia and China used the language-based approach the most. This was because the teachers perceived that the language-based approach was accessible and inspiring for students, as well as satisfied students' language learning and literature demands (Calafato, 2018). Besides, another case study by Sun (2022) found that L2 literature could be studied in an integrated and comprehensive way rather than being limited to a language-focused method.

Furthermore, teaching English through literature not only enriches pedagogical approaches but also encourages teachers to design various and effective teaching activities. Take the case study of Sun (2023) for instance. Though the language approach was widely utilised in all four ER programmes, the teacher participants conducted varied instructional activities in each programme. In Case 1: *Harry Potter* books (by J. K. Rowling), the teacher Hu guided students to learn how the author depicted snow, after being assigned specific lexical tasks and outdoor activity on a snowy day. In Case 2: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (by John Boyne), the teacher Ju held a summary/reflection writing competition. In Case 3: *Flipped* (by Wendelin Van Draanen), the teacher Ku gave students three options for a book report, including "writing a summary, writing something that touched them or provoked them thinking, or making a connection with their own life" (Sun, 2023: 153). In Case 4: *The Alchemist* (by Paulo Coelho), the teacher Yu also integrated writing assignments into the reading programme. Students were required to keep a three-section reading log, including "language accumulation, plot introduction, and personal opinions" (Sun, 2023:154). Accordingly, teaching English through literary texts provides more options for pedagogical innovations and facilitates interactive, student-centred and communicative language teaching.

In summary, reviewing relevant studies from China and around the world, abundant evidence demonstrates that incorporating English literature in ESL teaching has the potential to boost learning motivation, improve language proficiency, enhance cultural awareness, promote critical thinking, and enrich pedagogical approaches. Meanwhile, literature also has wider educational functions of fostering personal growth, such as supporting moral education (Tsang *et al*, 2019; Afdian and Wahyuni, 2020; Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021), and increasing emotional intelligence (Ghosn, 2002; Khatib *et al*, 2011a, 2011b).

CHAPTER FOUR CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN ESL

The previous chapter found that teaching English literature in ESL had advantages in language learning, cultural awareness, critical thinking and pedagogical approaches. This chapter explored the challenges of teaching English literature in ESL. Reviewing existing literature and synthesising collected data, it was clear that the following four factors should be taken into consideration due to the difficulties they caused in literature teaching. The factors included the complexity of literature, text materials, teachers and students.

4.1 The complexity of literature

There is a common belief that literature is particularly complex and inaccessible for second or foreign language learners and may even be detrimental to the process of language learning. Reviewing studies like Savvidou (2004), Khatib *et al* (2011a) summarised the main criticisms levelled against teaching literature in EFL/ESL. For example, semantic changes and deviation from normal phonetic and phonological systems could be pitfalls. Additionally, literary concepts and notions, such as different genres and conventions, might cause problems. The syntactic difficulty inherent in literary texts also makes reading a challenging task, such as the irregularity of syntax in the poems. Besides, lexical differences in literary texts add more

issues, such as the words “thee and thou” which were not practised in today’s English (Khatib *et al*, 2011a: 204).

According to the case study conducted by Duncan and Paran (2018), the perspectives of the language teachers from three European IB schools on the challenges of reading literature were consistent with the findings of Khatib *et al* (2011a). The interviewed teachers highlighted that many literary texts were “too difficult to students either conceptually or in terms of vocabulary as well as language structures” (Duncan & Paran, 2018: 5). Similarly, Calafato and Paran (2019) demonstrated the same claim on the language difficulty caused by literature’s syntactic and lexical complexity. Also, Sun (2020) found that vocabulary was the most common problem perceived by the student and teacher participants, though challenging vocabulary was a source of motivation for advanced language learners. In addition, according to the review conducted by Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) on the controversy of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom, they noted that literature was detached from the readers’ immediate social context, which made teachers reluctant to use literature in their language teaching. For instance, “I” in literary texts may not be the same person as the writer.

Aside from the linguistic and literary differences and idiosyncrasies, cultural barriers in literature also hinder teaching English literature in ESL. Invoking McKay’s (1982) claim, Khatib *et al* (2011a) stated that literature was replete with specific cultural notions, making it difficult to comprehend and interpret. This was because the cultural topics and the literary texts were different from those in the current times or places that language teachers and learners lived in. Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) also supported the counterargument of using literature in English teaching in their literature review. The researchers presented that the literature was extremely dense with cultural content, which contributed to its conceptual difficulties and hindered rather than helped learners acquire the target language (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). Additionally, in their investigation of English teachers’ perceptions of the use of literature in English language teaching,

Zengin *et al* (2019) also emphasised that cultural concepts in literary texts might obstruct learners' comprehension of the text.

4.2 Text materials

Literary materials enjoy their popularity for their advantages of motivating learners and enhancing readers' language knowledge and cultural awareness (Zhen, 2012). However, literary materials could be too linguistically demanding for secondary language learners to understand texts and improve reading skills, and challenging texts might make learners frustrated and lose interest in reading literature (Sun, 2020). Studies show that material selection and the lack of appropriate and effective teaching materials is another main challenge for teaching English literature in the context of ESL (e.g., Zhen, 2012).

According to Khatib *et al* (2011a), material selection was one of the main issues to be criticised against literature in ESL, because literary texts were usually difficult for teachers and students to select. When choosing literary texts, teachers should consider “the language proficiency, gender, age and background knowledge” of their students as well as the text itself (Khatib *et al*, 2011a: 204). In the systematic review of Affendi and Aziz (2020), the researchers further detailed two more problems associated with the text selection of the literary materials: one was contexts and themes, and the other was language style. The reviewed studies on students' perceptions of text selection revealed that students had negative attitudes towards the text used in the literature classroom. That was because themes and issues presented in the literary texts were irrelevant to their social background, and the texts used were culturally and contextually foreign to students (Affendi & Aziz, 2020). For example, citing the studies done with students from rural areas in Malaysia with low English proficiency, Affendi and Aziz (2020) presented that those students had negative attitudes towards texts with difficult language styles because texts like poetry were hard to grasp. Different from the findings of Affendi and Aziz (2020), the rural high school students in Indonesia had a positive attitude towards literary texts that did

not refer to rural life and they enjoyed learning short stories, songs and riddles due to their familiarity with these genres (Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021). Besides, exploring 152 Russian EFL teachers' text preferences in literature teaching in contemporary Russia via a semi-structured questionnaire, Calafato (2018) found that the selection process was not smooth due to considering different criteria and teachers faced serious problems when choosing appropriate texts. According to the data, teachers first considered students' English ability, and then the text's ability to hold students' interest, closely followed by the text's age-appropriateness, vocabulary content, length and social and cultural context (Calafato, 2018). This means that teachers have to match literary difficulty with English-level difficulty. A text suitable for Chinese teenagers might be very hard to understand because of the more sophisticated language, but it would be at their interest level.

Apart from the selection of appropriate literary texts, another notable problem is the dearth of English materials. According to Abdelrady *et al* (2022), 53 per cent of surveyed teachers from Sudan claimed that lack of good study material for literature had an impact on literature teaching in vocabulary acquisition. Over 50 per cent of surveyed students and teachers agreed that inadequate quality of instructional materials had led to the poor implementation of the curriculum (Abdelrady *et al*, 2022). The researchers advocated improving physical facilities, particularly the school library, which had been found to positively enhance pupils' achievement. Similarly, in the case study of Sun (2023), this issue of English material shortages was reported by the teacher Yu from a formerly poverty-stricken county in Jiangxi province of China. The teacher expressed her advice to provide more English original novels, magazines and newspapers in the school library because she believed that would support teachers' reading and encourage students to read English materials as well. Sun (2023) stressed that the scarcity of authentic materials might not be common in urban cities like Beijing but did exist in other contexts like the economically disadvantaged county in the case study of the teacher Yu. Therefore, Sun (2023) also suggested that related authorities should work to improve school libraries or provide alternative resources.

4.3 Teachers

Teachers play a key role in teaching English literature in ESL, but the inadequacy of qualified teachers and lack of teaching training concerning literature teaching remains an issue to be solved inside and beyond the context of Chinese secondary schools (Green, 2005; Paran, 2008; Sun, 2020). In the study about integrating extensive reading in the task-based curriculum of Hong Kong secondary schools, Green (2005) highlighted the issue that few teachers had gained sufficient training in implementing extensive reading schemes. This issue was echoed by the findings in an evidence-based survey conducted by (Paran, 2008). According to Paran (2008), foreign language teachers generally received no training in using literary texts in the classroom, which prevented them from having the methodological capacity to do so and sustain teacher-centred teaching methods. The teachers' voices from Sun's (2020, 2023) two studies further supported the findings of the previous two research. According to Sun (2020), all the interviewed secondary-school teachers felt like "blind people" due to their limited literature teaching experience, and they did not know where to go when facing the obstacles (p. 213). These Chinese ESL teachers were expected to receive training on selecting appropriate reading materials, designing relevant activities, carrying out related evaluations, motivating students as well as giving students sufficient guidance independently (Sun, 2020). In the case study conducted by Sun (2023) to seek an in-depth understanding of four literature reading programmes in Chinese secondary schools, teachers from three cases (a total of four cases) expressed their need for related training in English literature teaching. They expressed similar concerns and confusions either in the semi-structured interviews or their reflective journals, such as

"I know so little about literature and performance...If I had more knowledge of literature and play, I would give them (students) more instructions and they would make greater progress", "I did not think I did well in maintaining their (students') reading interest...I have no idea how to improve it", and "I don't know how to teach a novel...I want to change but don't know how".

(Sun, 2023: 152-153)

These teachers' expectations echoed Zhen's (2012) statement that effective accessible approaches to literature teaching were in high demand.

Moreover, international studies in recent years are in accord with the findings in the issue. Affendi and Aziz (2020) conducted a systematic review of 18 journals on the challenges and teaching approaches of teaching English literature from 2009 to 2019 in Malaysia. They found that teachers had limited knowledge of literary materials and teaching approaches, which made it difficult for students to fully understand teachers' explanations of literary text and compounded students' learning challenges in literature classes (Affendi & Aziz, 2020). Citing relevant research on teacher preparation for English literature teaching, Bobkina *et al* (2021) noted that due to a lack of teacher preparation, the functions of the literature in EFL in Spanish national and regional curricula remained questionable. They also stressed that the inadequate preparation hindered EFL teachers' ability to use literature effectively and demotivated EFL students (Bobkina *et al*, 2021). Additionally, the finding of the study conducted by Abdelrady *et al* (2022) echoed the argument of Bobkina *et al* (2021). Abdelrady *et al* (2022) had a questionnaire with 79 Sudanese EFL secondary school students and 14 teachers to explore the attitudes and perceptions of these students towards learning literature to enrich their vocabulary. They found that the majority (79 per cent) of the EFL teachers lacked adequate training in teaching literature and vocabulary acquisition (Abdelrady *et al*, 2022: 5). To overcome the challenge of lacking experienced and well-qualified teachers, Abdelrady *et al* (2022) advised that all teachers should receive training through workshops to facilitate the sharing of experiences amongst teachers.

4.4 Students

As the key stakeholders in English teaching, students also bring various challenges to teaching English literature in ESL. According to Zhen (2012), the English proficiency of Chinese students varied greatly, which made it difficult for teachers to carry out their teaching plans and achieve their predetermined objectives. Also, students' expectations or experiences of reading in a foreign

language developed a fear of unfamiliar vocabulary (Duncan & Paran, 2018). Besides, teachers' interviews in the case study of Sun (2023) highlighted that students' lack of time to reading literature and related activities was a major problem. The exam-oriented nature of the Chinese education system, like the National College Entrance Examination and High School Entrance Examination, caused high pressure and heavy workload for secondary school students. Students had no time to read novels and do related activities after class because they devoted most of their time to written homework or subject competitions (Sun, 2023).

In conclusion, in the process of integrating English literature into teaching English in the ESL context, it is essential to consider the challenges from the complexity of the literature itself, text selection and material shortages, and the diverse problems of teachers and students.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter of the dissertation presents an overall evaluation of the study by highlighting the key findings, recommendations and implications for future research and practice, as well as its limitations. To explore the possibility that English language teaching in Chinese secondary education can be improved by the incorporation of English literature, this present research employed the method of narrative literature review by analysing relevant publications yielded in the past ten years. Considering the limited research on teaching literature in Chinese secondary schools, the review sources were expanded to worldwide studies, especially those from European and Asian countries, with the purpose of finding answers to two research questions: (1) What are the advantages of teaching English literature in ESL? (2) What are the factors to hinder teaching English literature in ESL? Based on the findings of the two questions, the results presented by previous researchers in secondary-level literature teaching in the ESL context can be summarised below.

Teaching English literature in ESL has five main advantages. Firstly, it has a positive impact to increase students' motivation in learning English (Afdian & Wahyuni, 2020; Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021; Sun, 2020; Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020; Tsang *et al*, 2020). Secondly, teaching English literature in ESL can enhance and improve learners' language proficiency and develop their English language skills and knowledge (Bobkina *et al*, 2021; Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021; Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020; Smadi & Al-Zawahreh, 2013; Sun, 2020; Tsang *et al*, 2020). Thirdly, teaching English literary texts in ESL has the potential to promote learners' cultural and intercultural awareness as well as facilitate their future cross-cultural communication and interactions (Bobkina *et al*, 2021; Bloemert *et al*, 2019; Duncan & Paran, 2017; Sun, 2022; Tsang *et al*, 2020). Fourthly, teaching English literary texts helps students to develop critical thinking skills and deepen their English language learning (Bloemert *et al*, 2019; Khatib & Alizadeh, 2012; Shuri & Mukundan, 2015; Sun, 2022). Lastly, integrating English literature into ESL teaching contributes to enriching pedagogical approaches and encouraging interactive and student-centred teaching activities (Bloemert *et al*, 2016; Calafato, 2018; Ling *et al*, 2016; Sun, 2022, 2023).

As mentioned previously, it is not easy to get these positive outcomes through teaching literary texts in ESL, due to the challenges caused by the four factors of literature, text materials, teachers and students. To start with, literature itself is complex for its linguistic and literary differences and idiosyncrasies and cultural barriers (Khatib *et al*, 2011a). Also, text selection is challenging because both the texts and the students' diverse background knowledge must be considered (Affendi & Aziz, 2020; Calafato, 2018; Damuri & Wahyuni, 2021). Meanwhile, there is a paucity of English material in certain relatively disadvantaged areas, which exacerbates the problem of a lack of appropriate and effective teaching materials (Abdelrady *et al*, 2022; Sun, 2023). Furthermore, the shortage of qualified teachers and lack of literature teaching training remain unresolved issues (Affendi & Aziz, 2020; Bobkina *et al*, 2021; Green, 2005; Paran, 2008; Sun, 2020, 2023). Additionally, the challenges of students should be taken into consideration, such as various

English proficiency, fear of unfamiliar vocabulary, and a lack of time to read literary texts and complete relevant tasks (Dun &Paran, 2018; Sun, 2023; Zhen, 2012).

Although teaching English through literature face controversy due to these challenges, there is still a future for incorporating English literature into English language teaching in Chinese secondary education. On the one hand, the advantages of teaching literary texts have the potential to solve the problems of English language teaching in Chinese secondary education. On the other hand, literary texts such as young adult literature have been utilised experimentally in EFL classrooms in Chinese secondary schools in areas where English education is relatively advanced (Sun, 2022). Therefore, as for the research question “Can English language teaching in China be improved by the incorporation of English literature?”, the answer should be “Yes”.

5.1 Recommendations

Indeed, it must be acknowledged that there is still a long way to go in terms of incorporating English literature into English language teaching in Chinese secondary schools. Here are some recommendations to deal with the challenges of teaching English literature in Chinese secondary schools.

As for the issue of text selection, to start with, teachers should engage students in material selection, because either allowing them to choose texts for themselves or including them in the selection process can enhance students’ motivation and willingness to learn the language (Luukka, 2019; Smadi & Al-Zawahreh, 2013). Also, teachers should choose texts based on teacher-driven criteria, because recommendations from colleagues can be particularly helpful (Luukka, 2019), and teachers in different schools all choose the same literary works (Duncan &Paran, 2018). Accordingly, in the Chinese context, text selection can follow a pattern of combining EFL teachers’ recommendations and students’ free choices. In terms of genres of literature, teachers can choose short stories, because students are more familiar with this type of literary text and they are not as time-consuming as

other genres like novels and plays (Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020; Tsang *et al*, 2020). Teachers also can use young adult texts, because their inherent linguistic and literary simplicity will benefit a wide range of learners (Van, 2009) and young adult texts have positive impacts on teenagers' character education and worldview and human relationships (Sun, 2023).

As for the complexity of literature, teachers can overcome those challenges in several ways. For example, they can select the works that best suit the students' current and potential level of literary knowledge or teach new literary concepts before students read relevant texts (Khatib *et al*, 2011a). Teachers also can use simplified books, easy texts, or young adult texts to address the problems of linguistic and cultural complexity (McKay, 1982). Besides, teachers can utilise literary texts with complex syntax structures as practice sources for intermediate and advanced learners (Khatib *et al*, 2011a). In addition, teachers can incorporate technology like film and media into literature teaching to moderate and ease the complexity of literary texts and the difficulties of English literature teaching. This is because watching films of literary works, writing emails to the authors of the novels they read, using the web and its resources, and doing online tasks, these activities via modern technologies make teachers and students feel easier to teach and learn English literature (Paran, 2008). Apart from the efforts to text selection and text usage, providing more teaching training on literary knowledge and literature teaching is another effective way as well.

As for teacher training, it is essential for authorities to develop and consolidate teacher training programmes that include literature and innovative teaching approaches and activities both in initial teacher training programmes and for continued training (Bobkina *et al*, 2021; Duncan & Paran, 2017). Firstly, in the Chinese context, it is essential to promote pre-service and in-serve teacher training schemes and upgrade the curriculum of normal universities and colleges that train teachers. Secondly, aside from literary knowledge, training on pedagogical approaches should be prioritised in teacher training programmes and training courses, because these are what

literature teachers have been voicing and expecting (Sun, 2020, 2022, 2023; Tsang *et al*, 2020). Meanwhile, researchers and scholars should also put more effort to research on teaching approaches. Although there are many pedagogical approaches proposed for teaching literature in ESL as discussed previously, research on approaches is still a weak area in China (Zhen, 2012). Thirdly, teachers should be provided with more training workshops, which will facilitate their sharing of teaching experiences (Abdelrady *et al*, 2022). In this way, those teachers with substantial teaching experience in literature can assist novice teachers and less-experienced teachers in improving their teaching skills and abilities. Teachers with more appropriate training will be more positive and enthusiastic about literature teaching and employ diverse innovative methods and activities to support students' learning of English through literature.

Apart from teacher training, governments and institutions at all levels can also work on the following measures to support teachers in the implementation of English literature teaching. Firstly, it is necessary to include English literature in the English curriculum of Chinese secondary education and set it as part of the content tested in the NCEE (Gao Kao). Although English literature as an elective class has been added to Senior High School's English Curriculum (Wang & Luo, 2019), schools have not offered the courses because they have not seen the relevance of these optional courses with the NCEE (Wang & Chen, 2012). Including English literature in the NCEE can make schools and teachers attach more importance to literature teaching and make students benefit from learning English through literature. Secondly, authorities can implement more pilot schemes for teaching English literature in some areas or schools where English teaching is advanced like the places Sun (2020, 2022, 2023) stated in her case studies. China is a large country with complicated contexts and environments, and therefore, it will be better to promote English literature in secondary schools all over the country when pilot schemes run successfully. Thirdly, it will be helpful to establish a staged reading programme from primary schools to secondary schools. On the one hand, this programme can assist pupils in reading literary texts that are

appropriate for their level of English proficiency. On the other hand, this will help students to overcome the apprehension and fear of reading English literature due to the challenge of the language, especially vocabulary. Fourthly, governments should provide schools with more financial support to promote English literature teaching and learning. With more financial support, schools can improve physical facilities, particularly the library, and offer more teaching training opportunities, which better support both teachers' literature teaching and students' literature and language learning. Fifthly, schools should give special attention to the workload of the teachers who deliver literature teaching, because literature teaching is time-consuming (Ducan &Paran, 2018; Sun, 2023). Teachers normally will set writing assignments with literature reading, and giving comments and feedback on the writing related to literature reading is a challenging and time-consuming job (Sun, 2023). Additionally, the class size is relatively large, which will make teachers overwhelmed and even resistant to delivering English literature teaching. Finally, governments should encourage schools and teachers to engage in international exchange programmes with teachers from other countries where English is taught as a first language or second language. Teachers will benefit a lot by communicating with those who teach English literature in the context of English as a first language or second language.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the fact that this research project did answer the research questions it set out to address, it was not without limitations. Firstly, this study is a narrative literature review conducted by the researcher alone using secondary-hand data in a short amount of time. As stated in the methodology chapter, this study still has bias because the data processing, including search, selection, appraisal, analysis, elevation, and synthesis, was impacted by the researcher's personal experience and environment. Secondly, all the studies reviewed in the research are in English, and the amount of research published in other languages like Chinese was not included, which could be the shortcomings of the findings of the research. Thirdly, this study used limited studies from China and the studies of Sun (2020, 2022, 2023) were

repeatedly cited. There is indeed little available literature on teaching English literature in Chinese secondary schools because relevant research about English literature teaching in Chinese secondary education is at the initial stage. Although the Chinese researcher Sun's findings were based on her longitudinal study on extensive reading programmes in different places of China and supported by many current international studies, these studies were small-scale experimental studies that their findings were suggestive rather than widely generalisable. This limitation further demonstrates the urgent need for more research on English literature teaching in Chinese secondary schools. Moreover, in the cited Chinese research, there are limited illustrations about how or in what specific way literature teaching promotes students' language learning, cultural awareness and critical thinking. This is particularly worth further investigation and discussion in future research because that is what Chinese ESL teachers have been expecting to know while preparing for their English literature teaching.

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