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THE EFFECTS OF THE DALTON PLAN-BASED INSTRUCTION ON LEARNER AUTONOMY IN READING PERFORMANCE AMONG CHINESE COLLEGE ENGLISH COURSE LEARNERS



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ENGLISH COURSE LEARNERS

QI TIANXIU

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SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

2025



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of Dalton Plan-based instruction on learner autonomy and reading performance among non-English major students enrolled in college English course in China. It addresses the limitations of teacher-centered instruction in College English courses, particularly its failure to cultivate learner autonomy, which contributes notably to students' poor reading proficiency. The Dalton Plan-based instruction in this study included weekly individual sessions and monthly class conferences, tailored to address student-reported issues in reading assignments. A quasi-experimental design was employed to achieve the research objectives. Participants included 62 second-year medical students from a university in China, with 32 assigned to the experimental group and 30 to the control group. The experimental group received Dalton Plan-based instruction, while the control group followed conventional classroom instruction. Quantitative data, including reading test scores and Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) scores, as well as qualitative data from self-reports and semi-structured interviews, were collected and analyzed. The findings revealed that Dalton Plan-based instruction effectively enhanced both reading proficiency (post-test $M_{\text{experimental}}=148.09$ vs $M_{\text{control}}=134.27$; $t(60) = -2.13$, $p = .037$) and learner autonomy (post-test ALS $M_{\text{experimental}}=44.88$ vs $M_{\text{control}}=41.60$; $t(60) = 2.182$, $p = .033$). Key aspects of learner autonomy, such as responsibility and time management, improved. Additionally, the instruction positively influenced students' awareness, attitudes, and role perceptions in learning, as well as their reading habits, such as planning, amount of reading, reading scope, and motivation. A positive correlation ($r = 0.365$, $p = .040$) was found between reading proficiency and learner autonomy. The study suggests that Dalton Plan-based instruction may be a valuable approach for fostering learner autonomy and improving reading performance in College English course.





KESAN PENGAJARAN BERASASKAN PELAN DALTON TERHADAP PRESTASI BACAAN DAN AUTONOMI PELAJAR DALAM KURSUS BAHASA INGGERIS KOLEJ

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidik kesan pengajaran berasaskan Pelan Dalton terhadap autonomi pembelajaran dan prestasi pembacaan dalam kalangan pelajar bukan major Bahasa Inggeris yang mengambil kursus Bahasa Inggeris Kolej di China. Kajian ini menangani batasan pengajaran berpusatkan guru dalam kursus tersebut, terutamanya kegagalannya dalam memupuk autonomi pembelajaran, yang menyumbang secara signifikan kepada kelemahan kemahiran membaca pelajar. Intervensi pengajaran berasaskan Pelan Dalton dalam kajian ini merangkumi sesi individu mingguan dan persidangan kelas bulanan, yang disesuaikan untuk menangani isu yang dilaporkan pelajar dalam tugas pembacaan. Reka bentuk kuasi-eksperimen digunakan bagi mencapai objektif kajian. Seramai 62 orang pelajar perubatan tahun kedua dari sebuah universiti di China terlibat sebagai peserta, dengan 32 orang ditugaskan ke kumpulan eksperimen dan 30 orang lagi ke kumpulan kawalan. Kumpulan eksperimen menerima pengajaran berasaskan Pelan Dalton, manakala kumpulan kawalan mengikuti pengajaran bilik darjah konvensional. Data kuantitatif, termasuk skor ujian pembacaan dan skor Skala Pembelajaran Autonomi (ALS), serta data kualitatif daripada laporan sendiri dan temu bual separa berstruktur, telah dikumpul dan dianalisis. Hasil kajian mendedahkan bahawa pengajaran berasaskan Pelan Dalton berkesan dalam meningkatkan kedua-dua kemahiran membaca (*post-test* $M_{\text{eksperimen}}=148.09$ vs $M_{\text{kawalan}}=134.27$; $t(60) = -2.13$, $p = .037$) dan autonomi pembelajaran (*post-test* $ALS_{\text{eksperimen}}=44.88$ vs $M_{\text{kawalan}}=41.60$; $t(60) = 2.182$, $p = .033$). Aspek utama autonomi pembelajaran, seperti tanggungjawab dan pengurusan masa, menunjukkan peningkatan. Di samping itu, kaedah pengajaran ini juga mempengaruhi secara positif kesedaran, sikap, dan persepsi peranan pelajar dalam pembelajaran, serta tabiat pembacaan mereka seperti perancangan, kuantiti pembacaan, skop pembacaan, dan motivasi. Satu hubungan positif ($r = .365$, $p = .040$) telah ditemui antara kemahiran membaca dan autonomi pembelajaran. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa pengajaran berasaskan Pelan Dalton boleh menjadi pendekatan yang berharga untuk memupuk autonomi pembelajaran dan seterusnya meningkatkan prestasi pembacaan dalam kalangan pelajar kursus Bahasa Inggeris Kolej.





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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALS	Autonomous Learning Scale
CE	College English
CET	College English Test
DPAQ	Dalton Plan Application Questionnaire
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ER	Extensive Reading
IR	Intensive Reading
IL	Independent Learning
LA	Learner Autonomy
SH	Study Habits

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in academic achievement and broader life success. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading proficiency is often regarded as one of the most essential predictors of academic success and future career opportunities (Benson & Voller, 2014; Murff, 2019). For EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, mastering reading skills is not only vital for educational progress but also for personal development. It can influence long-term goals such as career advancement, active participation in their children's education, and the pursuit of higher education (Marshall, 2002; Pustika & Wiedarti, 2019).

However, the ability to read effectively is shaped by more than just cognitive abilities. Non-intellectual factors, such as learner autonomy, self-regulation, and



independence, are equally significant in enhancing reading performance. Traditional teacher-centred methods, which prioritize the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, may not sufficiently promote the development of these non-cognitive skills (Tram & Kha, 2022). In such environments, students often become overly reliant on teachers for guidance, limiting their opportunities to take ownership of their learning and hindering the cultivation of autonomy.

In contrast, learner-centred approaches, which emphasise individualisation and the nurturing of autonomy, offer a promising alternative. Individualised instruction recognizes that students vary in their language proficiency, motivation, learning styles, and experiences (An et al., 2020; Matsuyama et al., 2019). By addressing these individual differences, educators can offer more tailored support, empowering students to take control of their learning process and cultivate the skills required for independent reading.

At the college level, fostering learner autonomy is particularly critical. Unlike high school students, who often receive direct supervision and guidance, college students are expected to take greater responsibility for managing their own learning. The ability to self-regulate becomes a key factor in academic success and future professional and personal growth. Therefore, helping college students develop autonomy in reading is essential to their overall language learning process (An et al., 2020; Tsai, 2021).

This study explores the impact of Dalton Plan-based instruction on promoting learner autonomy and enhancing reading performance among College English course





students in China. By integrating the core principles of the Dalton Plan—responsibility, self-directed learning, and collaboration—this research seeks to address the limitations of traditional teacher-centred instruction. The study aims to investigate how the Dalton Plan can foster more autonomous, proficient readers and contribute to a more effective learning experience in EFL contexts.

1.2 Background of the Research

1.2.1 College English and College English Learners

College English (CE) is a mandatory course for all non-English major college students in China. It is designed to provide comprehensive training in the four key language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, due to the limited classroom hours allocated to CE—typically 3–4 hours per week—teachers often place greater emphasis on reading, which accounts for a significant 35% of the national College English Test (CET). This heavy focus on reading is also reinforced by the *College English Teaching Guide* issued in 2020, which highlights the integration of reading with students' specialized fields of study. As a result, students are increasingly expected to use English as a tool to read subject-related literature, thereby enhancing their expertise in their respective majors (The College English Teaching Guide, 2020).





1.2.2 The Evolving Role of Teacher

In recent decades, research in language education has shifted from a focus on “teaching” to a focus on “learning” (A Hsu, 2011; Huba, M. E., 2000). This paradigm shift has led to a redefinition of teachers' roles, moving away from being the sole providers of knowledge toward becoming facilitators, counselors, and helpers in the learning process. In a learner-centred environment, the responsibility for learning increasingly shifts to the students themselves, with teachers playing a supporting role (Morrison & Navarro, 2012; WS Luan, 2008).

As facilitators, teachers are tasked with designing activities and creating learning environments that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. This approach not only enhances autonomy but also caters to the diverse needs of learners (Prapaisit & Hardison, 2009). In China context, learner autonomy of Chinese EFL learners has been prioritized as an educational objective of CE (College English) learning and teaching since 2007 (Cai, 2017). CE teachers are expected to provide guidance while promoting student independence, fostering an environment where learners can become more self-directed and autonomous.

1.2.3 The Dalton Plan in Education

In China, the Dalton Plan has been introduced as a potential instructional approach to enhance learner autonomy and improve overall learning performance (Huang, 2022; Tian, 2017). Initially developed by Helen Parkhurst in the early 20th century, the Dalton





Plan is not a rigid method but rather an instructional framework that diverges from traditional teacher-centred classroom instruction (Parkhurst, 1922). Its core element is the use of assignment contracts between students and teachers. These contracts are tailored to individual students' needs and abilities, allowing for differentiated learning experiences. The seriousness of the assignment and students' responsibility for it are established through giving the students assignments in the form of contracts, meantime, students have a clear objective of what to do.

The Dalton Plan promotes autonomy by encouraging students to manage their time, tasks, and learning goals. As such, it aligns well with the demands of modern education, where independence in learning is increasingly necessary in the information age (Moosavi, 2019; Richard, 2000). Studies by Hanior (2017) and Vorobiova (2019) demonstrate that the Dalton Plan improves student performance compared to traditional lecture-based methods, such as the “chalk and talk” approach. Moreover, researchers have found that applying the Dalton Plan in language teaching can significantly improve learners' language proficiency (Babuščáková, 2008; Geraskevich, 2021; Vorobiova, 2022).

1.2.4 The Dalton Plan and College Education

While the Dalton Plan has been successfully implemented in many secondary and high schools, its potential for college-level instruction remains underexplored. College students, being more mature both psychologically and cognitively, are better positioned to benefit from this instructional model. Zhang (2018) argues that the Dalton Plan could



help address several persistent challenges in Chinese college education, such as low student satisfaction, suboptimal learning outcomes, inadequate support for individualised learning, and limited development of critical thinking and innovation skills.

Given that learner autonomy and independence tend to increase with age (Benson & Voller, 2014), college students are likely to respond well to the Dalton Plan’s emphasis on self-directed learning. This instructional approach may not only enhance their language proficiency but also equip them with the skills needed for lifelong learning and professional success.

1.3.1 Problems

Despite significant progress in foreign language education since China’s Reform and Opening-up, substantial challenges remain in the teaching and learning of College English (CE). Over the past four decades, China’s English education system has expanded rapidly, with English now taught from the early years of primary school through to higher education. This expansion has been accompanied by substantial investment in curricula, textbooks, and teacher training. Nevertheless, the dominant mode of instruction at all levels remains the traditional, teacher-centred classroom model. In this model, the teacher is the primary authority and knowledge provider, while students are largely passive recipients of information. Although such a model can



be effective for delivering content efficiently, researchers (Benson & Voller, 2014; Y. Han, 2015; Ho & Crookall, 1995) have consistently argued that it does little to cultivate learner autonomy or foster independent learning habits—qualities that are increasingly recognised as essential for success in foreign language acquisition.

The consequences of this approach are evident in the current state of learner autonomy among Chinese EFL students. Liu (2023) found that students generally demonstrate a relatively low degree of self-direction in their English learning, often relying heavily on teachers to set learning objectives, provide explanations, and assess progress. This dependence limits students' opportunities to develop the self-management skills—such as setting personal goals, monitoring comprehension, adjusting strategies, and evaluating performance—that are crucial for sustained language improvement. The lack of autonomy has a direct negative impact on language proficiency, as supported by empirical research (Deng, 2007; Myartawan & Latief, 2013) showing a strong, positive correlation between autonomy and proficiency. In other words, students with higher levels of autonomy tend to achieve better outcomes in English, while those without it are more likely to stagnate or regress. These findings suggest that without meaningful changes to teaching methods, particularly in fostering self-directed learning, CE students' language development will continue to be constrained.

Teacher-centred CE instruction also fails to respond effectively to the diverse needs, proficiency levels, and learning preferences of students. As Xia (2018) observed, such an approach often delivers uniform instruction regardless of students' existing abilities, learning pace, or personal goals. This lack of differentiation has tangible





consequences: in Xia's survey, 44.4% of students reported feeling that their English proficiency had not improved—or had even declined—over their four years at university. Such stagnation can lead to disillusionment, with students losing motivation to engage meaningfully in learning tasks and teachers feeling frustrated at the apparent ineffectiveness of their efforts. The issue is particularly acute in the area of reading proficiency, a skill central to academic success. Cai (2016, 2017, 2018), director of the College English Guiding Committee in Shanghai, has repeatedly pointed out that many university graduates in China are unable to read academic texts in English within their own fields of study. He attributes this partly to the “time-consuming and low-efficiency” nature of current CE courses, which prioritise mechanical vocabulary exercises and translation over the development of independent reading strategies.



The overreliance on teacher explanations not only slows reading progress but

also undermines the development of metacognitive skills needed for effective reading. Students are rarely trained to self-plan (e.g., set reading objectives), self-monitor (e.g., identify gaps in understanding), self-regulate (e.g., adjust reading pace or strategy), or self-evaluate (e.g., assess comprehension against their goals). This lack of strategic autonomy is a major factor in poor EFL reading performance (Zhang & Seepho, 2013). As a result, many CE students struggle to handle complex academic texts, interpret nuanced arguments, or read efficiently, which further hampers their academic and professional development.





1.3.2 The Dalton Plan as a Solution

The Dalton Plan

The Dalton Plan, originally developed by Helen Parkhurst in the early 20th century, was conceived as an alternative to rigid, lecture-based instruction. It was designed to address the limitations of uniform, teacher-led education by promoting differentiation and cultivating students' responsibility for their own learning. Central to the Dalton Plan is the transformation of curricular content into *assignment contracts*—agreements between teachers and students that specify learning objectives, expected outcomes, and timelines. This contractual framework shifts the primary responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student, encouraging learners to plan their own study schedules, make decisions about learning strategies, and monitor their own progress. In doing so, the Dalton Plan moves away from the constraints of teacher-centred classrooms, replacing them with a more flexible, learner-centred environment that fosters autonomy, independence, and intrinsic motivation.

Theoretical and Practical Feasibility

The theoretical foundations of the Dalton Plan are rooted in its two core principles: *freedom* and *cooperation*. Freedom refers not to the absence of structure, but to the carefully balanced autonomy that allows students to choose their learning pace, sequence, and, in some cases, resources, within the parameters of agreed learning goals. Cooperation reflects the belief that education is both an individual and a social endeavour: while students are accountable for their own progress, they are also encouraged to collaborate with peers, share insights, and contribute to a collective





learning community. Zhang (2018) emphasised the relevance of these principles in higher education, arguing that they nurture not only an independent learning spirit but also a sense of responsibility to the broader academic and social context—objectives that align closely with contemporary university goals. Importantly, these principles remain highly compatible with modern educational reforms and the demands of 21st-century learning, despite the Dalton Plan's origins more than a century ago (Babuščáková, 2008).

A key strength of the Dalton Plan lies in its capacity to accommodate individual differences in learning pace, style, and prior knowledge. As Vorobiova (2019) observed, it departs from the “one-size-fits-all” structure of traditional classrooms by enabling students to set personalised goals and follow customised learning pathways. Teachers, in this model, act as facilitators and mentors rather than mere transmitters of knowledge, providing targeted feedback, guidance, and support when necessary. This role shift not only empowers learners to take ownership of their studies but also encourages them to develop metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring, self-regulation, and self-evaluation—skills that are particularly critical in foreign language learning. Tian (2017) notes that the Dalton Plan creates conditions conducive to self-directed learning by embedding responsibility into the daily routines of students.

Evidence from Parkhurst's archival notes (1910s–1950s) also suggests that the Dalton Plan is culturally adaptable, having been successfully implemented in varied educational and cultural contexts. This adaptability makes it a strong candidate for integration into Chinese College English courses, particularly in the domain of reading instruction. A feasible adaptation for the Chinese CE context might involve modular





reading assignments with negotiated deadlines, opportunities for students to select supplementary reading materials relevant to their academic interests, and regular one-to-one or small-group learning conferences between students and instructors. Such measures could be implemented without dismantling the current curriculum framework, thus ensuring institutional compatibility while embedding greater learner choice, self-pacing, and individual accountability.

Research supports the Dalton Plan's effectiveness in promoting learner autonomy and improving academic performance. Studies have found that it not only enhances students' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning but also fosters cooperative skills and peer support networks (Babuščáková, 2008; Moosavi, 2019). These attributes are particularly relevant to EFL reading instruction, where autonomy plays a decisive role in proficiency development (Nemati & Branch, 2016; Reza & Hossein, 2023; Zarei & Gahremani, 2010). By enabling students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their reading activities through structured but flexible assignments, the Dalton Plan directly addresses the autonomy gap that undermines current CE reading instruction. In this way, it offers a theoretically robust and practically adaptable solution to the persistent challenges of low learner autonomy, limited differentiation, and weak reading proficiency in Chinese College English courses.

1.3.3 Research Gap to Be Filled

This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Dalton Plan-based instruction in the context of reading in College English course, specifically examining whether this





approach fosters learner autonomy and improves students' reading proficiency. While there is some theoretical research on the Dalton Plan's application at the college level in China, there is a notable lack of empirical studies that explore its practical impact on students. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing concrete evidence on whether the Dalton Plan can enhance both learner autonomy and reading performance, contributing original insights to the field of English language education in China.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to implement Dalton Plan-based instruction in the reading component of a College English (CE) course to assess its effectiveness in fostering learner autonomy and enhancing students' reading proficiency. Four key instruments will be used to achieve these objectives: the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS), tests, self-reports, and interviews. The specific objectives of the study are outlined as follows:

- 1) To explore the effects of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learners' reading performance.
- 2) To explore the effects of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learners' autonomy.
- 3) To identify specific dimensions of learner autonomy impacted by the Dalton Plan-based instruction.
- 4) To explore learners' perceptions on the impact of Dalton Plan-based instruction on their autonomy.





- 5) To examine the correlation between learner autonomy and reading proficiency among the CE course learners under the Dalton Plan-based instruction.

1.5 Research Questions

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of Dalton Plan-based instruction in the reading component of a College English (CE) course. Based on the research objectives, the following questions will be addressed:

- 1) What are the effects of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learners' reading performance?
 - a) Is there any significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the control group (traditional instruction)?
 - b) Is there any significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the experimental group (Dalton Plan-based instruction)?
 - c) Is there any significant difference in the pre-test reading scores between the control and experimental group?
 - d) Is there any significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group?
- 2) What are the effects of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learners' autonomy?
 - a) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the control group (traditional instruction)?



- b) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the experimental group (Dalton Plan-based instruction)?
 - c) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group?
 - d) Is there any significant difference in the post-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group?
- 3) What specific dimensions of the learners' autonomy are affected by the Dalton Plan-based instruction?
 - 4) How do learners perceive the impact of Dalton Plan-based instruction on their autonomy?
 - 5) What is the correlation between learner autonomy and reading proficiency among the CE course learners under the Dalton Plan-based instruction?
- a) Is there any significant relationship between reading performance and learner autonomy among the CE course learners under the Dalton Plan-based instruction?

1.6 Research Hypothesis

The following hypotheses will be tested:

- 1a) Is there any significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the control group?
- H0: There is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the control group.



H1: There is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the control group.

1b) Is there any significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the experimental group?

H0: There is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the experimental group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading scores for the experimental group.

1c) Is there any significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group?



H0: There is no significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group.

1d) Is there any significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group?

H0: There is no significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the post-test reading scores between the control and experimental group.





2a) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the control group?

H0: There is no significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the control group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the control group.

2b) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the experimental group?

H0: There is no significant difference in pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the experimental group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ALS scores for the experimental group.



2c) Is there any significant difference in the pre-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group?

H0: There is no significant difference in pre-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group.

H1: There is a significant difference in the pre-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group.

2d) Is there any significant difference in the post-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group?

H0: There is no significant difference in the post-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group.





H1: There is a significant difference in the post-survey ALS scores between the control and experimental group.

5a) Is there any significant relationship between reading performance and learner autonomy among the CE course learners under the Dalton Plan-based instruction?

H0: There is no significant relationship between reading performance and learner autonomy among the CE course learners under the Dalton Plan-based instruction.

H1: There is a significant relationship between reading performance and learner autonomy among the CE course learners. under the Dalton Plan-based instruction.



1.7 Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the study, focusing on the Dalton Plan as a pedagogical approach to foster learner autonomy and enhance reading proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It explores the principles and constructs of the Dalton Plan, its application in instruction, the presumed psychological features of learner autonomy cultivated through this approach, and the relationship between learner autonomy and EFL language proficiency. By synthesizing these elements, this framework provides a foundation for the research design, emphasizing how the Dalton Plan facilitates autonomous learning and its impact on reading performance in Chinese EFL learners.





1.7.1 The Dalton Plan

1.7.1.1 Principles of the Dalton Plan

1. Freedom

Freedom is the first principle of the Dalton Plan. In her book *Education on The Dalton Plan* (Parkhurst, 1922), freedom was embodied in the following two aspects:

- (1) Freedom “to continue his (learner’s) work upon any subject in which he is absorbed without the interruption” (Parkhurst, 1922, p.19). Here interruption refers to the disturbance brought by class bells (timetable). Therefore, in the Dalton Plan instruction, the traditional timetable was cancelled, instead students were permitted to learn at his own rate of speed. According to researchers (Lee, 2000; Vorobiova, 2019), the most important characteristic that distinguishes the Dalton Plan is students’ managed budget of time by themselves.
- (2) Freedom of choice. In the Dalton Plan instruction, students were given the freedom to choose from a certain number of alternatives of assignments to work on. Choosing for oneself promotes motivation, concentration and discipline, by this way students are given the chance to practice his skills in planning his learning and managing his time and they also get used to responsibility (Van der Ploeg, 2013)

2. Cooperation

The second principle of the Dalton Plan is cooperation, Parkhurst preferred to call it “the interaction of group life” (Parkhurst, 1922, p.19). According to her, students in the





old educational system often lived outside his group, leading to their being antisocial after they left school, whereas real social living is cooperation and interaction, therefore neither students nor teachers can “isolate themselves, nor escape their due share in the activities and in the difficulties of others” (p.21). In the Dalton Plan instruction, the cooperation was mainly embodied between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves.

1.7.1.2 Constructs of the Dalton Plan

1. Assignment

Assignment is the core of the Dalton Plan. Vorobiova (2022) asserted assignments are the substantial basis of this learning system. Parkhurst emphasized the successful application of the Plan largely depends on the effective compilation of assignments. A well-constructed assignment can serve as an assistant teacher (Parkhurst, 1922). Teachers were required to adhere to the following principles in compiling the assignments:

- (1) There should be at least three categories of assignments (ranging from minimum to medium to maximum in both quantity and degree of difficulty) for the students to choose from, allowing them to select the one that best suits their abilities. Assignments are given monthly, providing students with an overview, while the tasks within assignments are further sub-divided into four weekly ones (in the Dalton Plan, one month equals four weeks).
- (2) Students' interests are considered. In the Dalton Plan assignments, there are “interest pockets”, which are helpful suggestions from teachers. These





suggestions are worded carefully aiming to arouse students' interests. Parkhurst claimed "interest pockets" give life to the assignments (Parkhurst, 1922).

- (3) Inter-relation between subjects is reflected in compiling the assignments. Parkhurst was convinced that there is a connection among all subjects and that it was a mistake to separate them. In her book *Education on the Laboratory Dalton Plan*(Parkhurst, 1922), she wrote:

If, for example, a particularly interesting theme is assigned as a problem in science or in history, the English teacher should find in it good material for an essay, a debate, or for an oral conference
(p.62).

2. Laboratory



Laboratory refers to subject-specific classrooms. In the Dalton Plan, each subject had one classroom where students worked on their assignments. Parkhurst named these subject-specific classrooms as "laboratories" in the hope that school would function as a sociological laboratory where the students themselves were the experimenters (Parkhurst, 1922). All available resources, including books, were integrated into the corresponding subject classroom to support students' learning activities.

3. House

House is the community system made up of groups with mix-aged and mix-graded students, where students with different grades and levels discussed current affairs happening at school or in the world. For the grades before high school, it is something





like administration class, while in high school, it functions as a small mix-aged community (Chen, 2018).

4. Graphs

In the Dalton Plan, graphs were used to record the students' progress. The purpose of utilisation of graphs was to build the students' sense of responsibility of time allotment. As aforementioned, the managed budget of time was the most important characteristic of the Dalton Plan. Parkhurst believed without a method to track what students have done, they were "apt to devote too much time to a favourite subject and not enough to others" (Parkhurst, 1922, p.134).



It should be noted that the constructs of "Laboratory" and "House" were not included in this study due to their limited applicability at the college level. The rationale for their exclusion is detailed in the following section of Operational Definitions.



1.7.1.3 The Dalton Plan-based Instruction

In this study, the Dalton Plan-based instruction serves as the primary intervention (independent variable) designed to foster learner autonomy(dependent variable) and improve reading proficiency(dependent variable) in EFL learners. The implementation was structured through a combination of weekly individual sessions and monthly class conferences. Students in the experimental group received weekly online individualized





guidance, which was tailored to their specific needs based on self-reports submitted each week during the completion of their reading assignment contracts.

This instructional approach represents one of three individualized instruction program types identified by Gibbons (1970): active, responsive, and permissive. As an active, tutorial-based form of individualized instruction, the Dalton Plan falls into the first category. To complement the weekly sessions, five monthly class conferences (workshops) were held for the entire experimental group to address common issues reported by students.

Within this instructional approach, students were given the freedom to work at their own pace, and the conventional timetable was eliminated. The assignment contracts were designed to foster a sense of responsibility in students, while the weekly self-reports allowed for continuous tracking of their progress and identification of any difficulties. The weekly online individualised sessions provided differentiated support based on each student's needs, and the monthly class workshops offered comprehensive feedback and addressed common challenges.

1.7.2 Learner Autonomy

Over the years, various definitions of learner autonomy have emerged, with Holec's (1981) definition being the most widely cited in the field of language learning (Benson, 2007). While Holec's definition addresses the key aspects of learning processes expected of an autonomous learner, some researchers (Little, 2007; Murase, 2015)





pointed out its limitations, particularly its lack of attention to the cognitive and psychological mechanisms that underlie effective self-management of learning.

Recognizing the importance of the psychological dimension, Macaskill & Taylor (2010) emphasized that understanding the psychological characteristics of autonomous learners is essential for fully explaining autonomous or independent learning. To this end, they developed the Autonomous Learning Scale, identifying ten key features of autonomous learners: (1) taking responsibility for their own learning, (2) motivation to learn, (3) deriving enjoyment from learning, (4) being open-minded, (5) managing time effectively, (6) planning well, (7) meeting deadlines, (8) being comfortable working independently, (9) showing perseverance when facing challenges, and (10) being low in procrastination (p.11). Further expanding on the psychological



aspects of learner autonomy, Murase (2015) categorized it into three dimensions: motivational, metacognitive, and affective. The features of learner autonomy that stem from these dimensions include the capacity to self-motivate, take responsibility, control one's learning, use metacognitive strategies, and regulate emotions.

The current study builds upon these theoretical foundations to examine how learner autonomy develops within the specific context of College English reading instruction implemented through the Dalton Plan approach. By synthesizing Macaskill and Taylor's (2010) psychological indicators with Murase's (2015) dimensional framework, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this alternative pedagogical model fosters the psychological aspects of autonomy in Chinese EFL learners.





1.7.3 Presumed Psychological Features of Learner Autonomy Cultivated Under the Dalton Plan-Based Instruction

The Dalton Plan is rooted in motivational psychology. The characteristics it aims to cultivate in students align with the psychological features of learner autonomy. In this study, the specific traits that the Dalton Plan-based instruction intends to develop in students are as follows:

1. Responsibility. This is the foremost quality of an autonomous learner. The Dalton Plan shift the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the students by transforming what students should learn in the form of assignment contracts. Once these contracts are signed, a seriousness for the assignments and a responsibility to shoulder are established. In Parkhurst's words, "freedom and responsibility together perform the miracle(Parkhurst, 1922).
2. Motivation. An autonomous learner is one who is motivated to learn. The Dalton Plan is an unconventional instructional approach based on motivational psychology(Parkhurst, 2005). According to Van der Ploeg (2013), in the Dalton Plan students' prolonged motivation don't stem from the content of work, which most of time may be uninteresting, but from "the work as work" (p.84), he wrote:

The assignment is "a real job", experienced as "my work", with emphasis on "my": that is what motivates and facilitate concentration and discipline (p.85).



3. **Enjoyment.** Autonomous learners unanimously feel the enjoyment brought by learning. Parkhurst(1922) was convinced the teachers can enjoy the pleasure of teaching and students can enjoy the pleasure of learning under the Dalton Plan. For students, the pleasure in learning may be brought by their immersion in work without the interruption of the timetable, or maybe from the sense of achievements attained by completing the work with one's own efforts, one's own time allotment.
4. **Time management.** Autonomous learners manage their time wisely and economically. Just as aforementioned, the most important characteristic that distinguishes the Dalton Plan is a managed budget of time(Vorobiova, 2019). Freedom, as the first principle in the Dalton Plan, is mainly embodied in students' own plan of their work at a rate which suits them best. Under the Dalton Plan, a student "gradually gets the idea that his time is his capital, to be spent, indeed, but to be spent systematically and judiciously"(Parkhurst, 1922).
5. **Open-mindedness.** Autonomous learning doesn't equal to isolated learning, which means learners keep themselves alone and have no interaction with other people. Autonomous learners are learners who are open-minded, namely, they tend to take others' opinion into consideration or ask help from others in their learning. In the Dalton Plan, this personality of students is emphasized in the form of cooperation between students and students by working on some work together or by more capable students giving a hand to less capable ones, as well as between students and teachers by students reporting to the teacher the



progress of the work or by teacher's individual or collective guidance to him or her.

6. **Deadline-meeting.** Deadline itself is a somewhat plan for autonomous learners, who plan everything ahead in order to finish work on time. In the Dalton Plan, teachers give school assignments on the basis of time division, namely, a monthly assignment is usually divided into four weekly ones (Monday to Friday), so each Friday may be a deadline for a weekly assignment. However, it has to be pointed out that there exists much flexibility in finishing the assignments, students are allowed to be faster or slower in the speed according to their capacity.



1.7.4 Reading Proficiency

Reading proficiency is commonly assessed through two main indicators: the use of reading strategies and reading test scores. Proficient readers tend to utilise a range of strategies that help them understand texts more effectively, showing flexibility and persistence when confronted with difficult passages. Meanwhile, reading test scores provide a quantifiable measure of a reader's ability to comprehend and interpret texts, often serving as a benchmark for their proficiency.





1. Reading Strategy Using

Readers with high proficiency are usually high degree strategies users. Studies revealed that higher proficiency readers used more strategies, while low proficiency readers used fewer strategies or use them less frequently (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 1994; Nguyen & Cam, 2008; Sheorey et al., 2008; Tavsancil et al., 2019). Results of the research work (Ahmad M. M. Abdelhafez, 2006; Valizadeh, 2021) indicated strategies training helped develop EFL learners' reading skills and raise their language proficiency levels. Proficient readers used reading strategies to persist in reading when they encountered difficulty in comprehending text (Alfassi, 2004).

2. Reading Test Scores

The other yardstick usually utilised to measure reading proficiency is reading test scores, as employed in prior research (Altay & Altay, 2017; J. Huang & Nisbet, 2014; Kremmel et al., 2017; Lie, 2007). While some studies (Al-Jarf, 2019; Karakoç & Köse, 2017) treat reading test scores as operational definitions of reading proficiency or performance. When properly validated and implemented, such scores can serve as practical metrics for establishing baseline proficiency levels and evaluating post-intervention gains in reading ability.

In this study, reading scores were used to assess students' reading proficiency, as one of the focuses was on exploring the effectiveness of Dalton Plan-based instruction in students' reading performance. This approach transformed classroom teaching and learning into autonomous reading with the teacher's guidance. However, the training of reading strategies, which is usually a part of classroom instruction, was





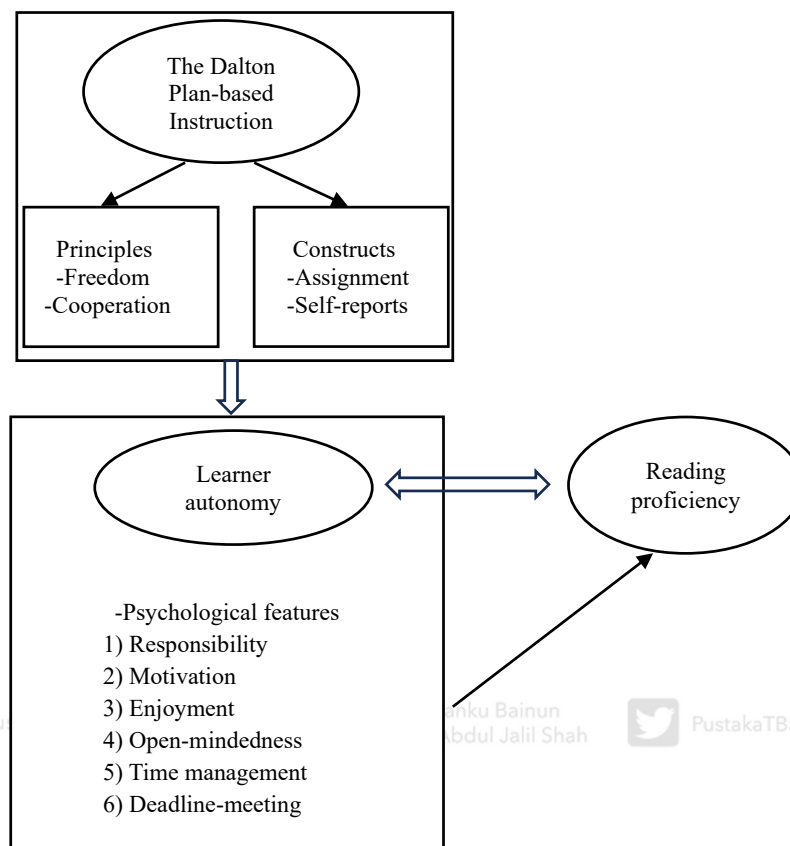
not significantly involved in the intervention. Therefore, the use of reading strategies was not employed as a direct measure of reading proficiency.

1.7.5 Relationship Between Learner Autonomy and EFL Language Proficiency

There is widespread agreement that success in foreign language acquisition largely depends on the extent to which students develop and exercise autonomy in their learning (Benson & Huang, 2008; Deng, 2007; Nguyen & Cam, 2008; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). The findings of the research by Ngurah & Myartawan (2013) revealed that learner autonomy and language proficiency in EFL had a significant, strong, positive relationship. Regarding EFL reading, studies, studies (Nemati & Branch, 2016; Reza & Hossein, 2023) have also shown a strong and positive relationship between learner autonomy and reading proficiency. Consequently, helping students become more autonomous in their second or foreign language learning has been one of the prominent themes in the literature on EFL/ESL theory and practice (Benson, 2018).

Based on the integration of the findings and theoretical insights discussed above, the conceptual framework for this research is presented in Figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1*Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework illustrates the key components of Dalton Plan-based instruction and their relationship to learner autonomy and reading proficiency in EFL learning. At its core are the two foundational principles of the Dalton Plan—freedom (self-paced learning and choice in assignments) and cooperation (interaction among students and teachers)—which drive the implementation of its constructs: assignments (personalized contracts) and graphs (adapted as self-reports for progress tracking). These constructs are theorized to cultivate six psychological features of learner autonomy—responsibility, motivation, enjoyment, open-mindedness, time management, and deadline-meeting—which collectively contribute to enhanced reading proficiency (measured through test scores). The framework demonstrates how



the Dalton Plan's student-centered approach fosters autonomy, thereby potentially improving EFL reading outcomes.

1.8 Operational Definitions

To clarify the key concepts used in this study, the following terms are operationally defined:

1.8.1 The Dalton Plan and Its Adaptation in This Study

The Dalton Plan is a pedagogical approach that reorganizes the teaching-learning process by emphasizing student responsibility and individualised instruction. According to Stary & Weichhart (2017), the Dalton Plan consists of two primary instruments: an assignment structure and feedback graphs. In this study, the Dalton Plan-based instruction was centred around these two elements, with specific adaptations to suit the context of the research.

Under the Dalton Plan, students take responsibility for their own learning by completing assignments that are agreed upon with the teacher. The teacher provides individualised tutoring based on the challenges faced by the students, and progress is tracked using graphs that display each student's rate of advancement. In this research, Dalton Plan-based instruction focused on the two fundamental elements mentioned: assignments and progress graphs. The progress graphs were adapted into weekly self-





reports where students documented their progress and the difficulties they encountered while completing the assignments. The self-reports also functioned as orientation in implementing weekly individualised sessions and monthly class conferences.

Adaptation in This Study

Helen Parkhurst, the originator of the Dalton Plan, highlighted its adaptability, asserting that the plan could be modified to fit the practical circumstances of different schools as long as its core principles were maintained (Parkhurst, 1922). In this study, the adaptations were in the following ways:

1. Scope of Application: The Dalton Plan-based instruction in this study was applied exclusively to reading comprehension within a College English course, rather than across all subjects or components of the course. As a result, the assignments were focused solely on reading tasks.
2. Progress Monitoring: The traditional use of progress graphs was replaced with weekly online self-reports that addressed both progress and problems, offering a more comprehensive view of the students' experiences.
3. Instructional Methods: The teacher's instruction was delivered through online, individualised weekly guidance and monthly face-to-face class conferences. This approach differs from the original Dalton Plan, which involved individualised tutoring and weekly class conferences focused primarily on subject content.





Elements Retained from the Original Dalton Plan

1. Assignment Flexibility: As in the original Dalton Plan, this study offered three categories of assignments varying in workload. Students could choose the assignment that best suited their abilities. Additionally, the assignments were designed to incorporate reading materials related to the students' major fields of study, maintaining the interdisciplinary approach emphasized by Parkhurst (1922).
2. Cancellation of Conventional Timetable: The traditional classroom timetable was eliminated, allowing students the freedom to complete their work at their own pace and convenience. This approach aligns with Parkhurst's critique of conventional timetables, which she believed disrupted students' concentration (Parkhurst, 1922).



In conclusion, this study implemented the Dalton Plan using two of its four core elements: assignments and feedback graphs (modified as self-report forms). The other two elements—the laboratory classroom and the house—were excluded due to practical reasons. The availability of online resources, accessible anytime and anywhere, made the laboratory classroom unnecessary, while the mixed-age house concept—originally intended for social interaction—was also deemed unnecessary at the college level, since college itself functions as a small society with ample interaction. The choice to focus on these two elements was based on the theoretical framework proposed by Stary & Weichhart (2017), which identifies the assignment structure and feedback graphs as the foundational components of the Dalton Plan. This adapted Dalton Plan framework directly informs the design of the instructional intervention examined in this study, as detailed in the following subsection.





1.8.2 The Dalton Plan-based Instruction

The Dalton Plan-based instruction in this study refers to the instruction based on the adapted version of the Dalton Plan as described in Section 1.8.1, consisting of weekly individual sessions and monthly class conferences. The individual sessions just targeted the students in the experimental group who reported problems in their self-reports, those who did not report problems in the weekly reports were not included. These individualised sessions mainly consisted of restating (the problems), inquiring, explicating, suggesting, and encouraging. But it was rather flexible depending on the nature of the problems. The monthly class conference was for all students in the experimental group, focusing on the activities related to everyone. It included reading activities designed by the researcher such as reading some passages together and then discussing and sharing what they read, teacher's feedback of the general progress, teacher's explication to problems commonly reported, and students' discussion on the teamwork assignment of article writing based on their major-related literature reading. The success of this instructional approach hinges on its ability to foster learner autonomy, which is operationalized in the next section.

1.8.3 Learner Autonomy

In the context of language learning, learner autonomy can be explored through four inter-related dimensions: technical, psychological, socio-cultural, and political-philosophical (Murase, 2015). This research focuses exclusively on the psychological dimension of learner autonomy for several reasons. First, the Dalton Plan, an





unconventional instructional approach, is rooted in motivational psychology (Parkhurst, 2005). Second, Macaskill & Taylor (2010) emphasized that the psychological characteristics of autonomous learners are crucial, arguing that psychological conceptualization is both essential and sufficient to explain autonomous or independent learning. Many researchers also contended that autonomous learning is fundamentally a psychological trait of individuals who are capable of independently directing their own learning (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010).

This research explored the psychological features of learner autonomy under the Dalton Plan-based instruction in reading comprehension in CE course using the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) developed by Macaskill & Taylor (2010), which is an ideal tool to explore the psychological features of learner autonomy quantitatively. In addition, theories by Murase (2015) who categorized psychological dimension of learner autonomy in language learning into metacognitive, motivational and affective sub-dimensions, were utilised to analyse the results of self-reports and interviews qualitatively. The development of learner autonomy through this approach is ultimately intended to enhance students' reading performance, as defined below.

1.8.4 Reading Performance

In this study, the variable "reading performance" is operationally defined as the reading scores obtained from standardized reading tests. The literature indicates that reading proficiency is typically measured using national or state standardized assessments (Connors-Tadros, 2014). Additionally, many schools assess reading proficiency





through grade equivalents or by evaluating students' performance on specific tests (Daggett & Pedinotti, 2013). Several researchers (Al-Jarf, 2019; Altay & Altay, 2017; J. Huang & Nisbet, 2014; Karakoç & Köse, 2017; Kremmel et al., 2017; Lie, 2007) have used reading test scores as a primary measure of reading proficiency.

For this study, reading proficiency was specifically measured using scores from mock reading tests equivalent in difficulty degree to the College English Test Band 6 (CET6), China's national standardized English proficiency test for university students that assesses reading comprehension through various text types and question formats. While the mock CET6 test scores provide a measurable benchmark for reading proficiency within the study's context, the operational definition acknowledges the broader applicability of standardized test scores as a common metric in educational research. These scores were collected both before and after the intervention to assess changes in reading proficiency. The intervention involved implementing Dalton Plan-based instruction, where traditional classroom teaching was restructured to emphasize autonomous reading. Students were expected to complete reading assignments independently, with guidance and support from the teacher. The reading scores before and after this instructional redesign were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention on students' reading proficiency.

Together, these operational definitions establish a clear framework for investigating the relationships between Dalton Plan-based instruction, learner autonomy, and reading performance.





1.9 Research Significance

This research is significant for several reasons. First, although there is a substantial body of research on the Dalton Plan's application in primary and secondary schools, very little work has been conducted at the college level. This study fills that gap by exploring the use of Dalton Plan-based instruction in EFL teaching at the college level in China. It stands out for its innovation and originality, as few experimental studies have examined the effectiveness of the Dalton Plan in college students' EFL learning.

Second, in China, much of the existing research on College English (CE) courses focuses on teaching content, methodologies, and testing standards, with limited attention given to instructional form. This study introduces Dalton Plan-based instruction as an alternative to conventional classroom teaching, providing a novel approach to address challenges in CE courses.

Third, from the students' perspective, this instructional approach provides a novel pedagogical experience that diverges significantly from conventional teacher-centred methodologies. The implementation of the Dalton Plan facilitates the development of enhanced learner autonomy and self-directed competence in reading comprehension. Notably, this cultivated independence may demonstrate transferability across multiple English language domains, including listening comprehension, written expression, oral communication, and translation skills. By allowing students to take ownership of their learning pace and focus areas through individualized contracts, the Dalton Plan enables deeper engagement with academic materials, thereby potentially contributing to holistic language proficiency development.





Fourth, the findings of this research could provide valuable insights for CE course teachers. Currently, many rely on traditional teaching methods that often yield unsatisfactory results. Dalton Plan-based instruction offers a more flexible approach, allowing for differentiation among students and providing more individualised support. This method enables teachers to adjust the pace of instruction according to students' diverse abilities and needs, fostering a more cooperative and harmonious teacher-student relationship. By replacing rigid, top-down instruction with student-centered contracts, individualised guidance, and class conferences, the Dalton Plan encourages ongoing dialogue, mutual respect, and collaborative goal-setting between teachers and learners.

Lastly, for university administrators, the Dalton Plan-based instructional method could serve as a complementary addition to traditional classroom teaching, which may be rigid due to the large number of students and the diverse range of majors, language levels, and backgrounds. Relying solely on conventional methods is impractical for accommodating such diversity. Adopting Dalton Plan-based instruction as a supplementary approach would allow students with higher English proficiency to learn more independently while still receiving guidance from teachers. This would create a more flexible and supportive educational environment for CE courses, better meeting the needs of students and teachers alike.





1.10 Chapter Summary

This research work addressed the effects of the Dalton Plan-based instruction on learner autonomy in reading performance among CE (College English) course learners in one university in China. The study aimed to determine whether implementing Dalton Plan-based instruction in the CE course enhances students' learner autonomy, thereby improving their proficiency in English reading comprehension.

The first part of this chapter is the introduction that autonomy and independence in reading process account for some of the variability in reading performance, and a student-centred teaching and learning environment is needed to cultivate the learner autonomy. The second part presents the background of the research, focusing on the current situation of College English (CE) course, the shift of roles played by students and the teacher in EFL context, and the application of the Dalton Plan in modern education. The statement of problem is demonstrated in the third part, which consists of three sections, the first section is the problems of the lack of learner autonomy training and differentiation of students in conventional classroom teaching, and also the poor reading proficiency among CE course learners due to the lack of learner autonomy training in traditional classroom teaching; the second section presents the Dalton Plan as a solution to problems; the third section is the gap to be filled in this research.

The fourth part deals with the objectives of this research, which is to apply the Dalton Plan-based instructional form in reading in CE course to see whether it is conducive to building students' learner autonomy and improving their reading proficiency. The fifth part and the sixth part present the research questions and research





hypotheses respectively. The seventh part is the conceptual framework of this research, in which the main conceptions involved in this research are presented, the Dalton Plan-based instruction, the principles and constructs of the Dalton Plan, the psychological features of learner autonomy presumed to cultivate, domain of reading proficiency involved, and relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency are covered.

The eighth part is the operational definitions, which covers the Dalton Plan based on the two basic instruments of assignment and progress graphs, the Dalton Plan-based instruction consisting of weekly individual sessions and monthly class conferences, psychological features of learner autonomy, and reading performance or reading proficiency measured by reading test scores. The ninth part of this chapter presents the significance of the research, in which the originality of the research and its presumed benefits to students, teachers, and administrators are listed. The tenth part is the summary of this chapter.

