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MENTORING THROUGH ONE'S OWN INQUIRY: EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' HOME READING

МЕНТОРСТВО ЧЕРЕЗ ВЛАСНЕ ПРАКТИЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЇ
ДОМАШНЬОГО ЧИТАННЯ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. Exploratory action research (EAR) is crucial for equipping pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills they need for continuous professional development. The aim of this article is to outline how university teachers can develop their own EAR skills to become reflective practitioners and, in turn, mentor their mentees (pre-service teacher trainees and in-service schoolteachers) in conducting educational research. We believe that gaining field experience should include solving practice problems through exploration, intervention, and reflective analysis.

Methodology. The methodology combines a critical reading of the action-research literature, reflection on our own teaching, and empirical study of our daily work as educators (lesson observation, surveys, and quantitative and qualitative essay analysis). The topic concerned the reluctance of a number of pre-service English teachers to engage in reading for pleasure. At H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, 88 Year 2–3 trainees consented to a questionnaire; 46 Year 2 students of that group also wrote a short essay; and one teaching group of 15 (drawn from the 46) was observed and took part in the intervention.

Results. The project reshaped our understanding of how to support pleasure-based reading. Teachers should prioritise texts that match individual interests rather than one-size-fits-all assignments; help students build confidence by offering graded options and scaffolded support; and create space for students to choose modern genres. It is vital to develop academic reading skills separately from reading-for-pleasure routines so that students do not associate English solely with stress.

Conclusions. The EAR cycle helped us, as teacher educators, better understand the benefits of action research and the challenges our students face at each phase of it. The experience will be invaluable for mentoring and scaffolding their research during teaching practice.

Keywords: exploratory action research, reading for pleasure, intervention, scaffolding.

Мета. Дослідницько-практичне дослідження (EAR) має вирішальне значення для забезпечення майбутніх учителів знаннями та навичками, необхідними для безперервного професійного розвитку. Мета статті – окреслити, як викладачі університетів можуть розвивати власні дослідницькі навички, щоб стати рефлексивними практиками та, як наслідок, підвищити свою здатність наставляти своїх підопічних (студентів та шкільних учителів) у проведенні освітніх досліджень. Автори вважають, що отримання досвіду під час практики в школах має включати вирішення практичних проблем шляхом дослідження, втручання та рефлексивного аналізу.

Методологія. Методологія дослідження поєднує критичний аналіз літератури з освітніх досліджень, рефлексію щодо нашого викладання та емпіричні методи дослідження нашої повсякденної діяльності як викладачів (спостереження за заняттями, опитування учасників та якісний і кількісний аналіз есе). Тема дослідження стосувалася небажання низки майбутніх учителів англійської мови займатися читанням для задоволення. У Харківському національному педагогічному університеті імені Г.С. Сковороди 88 студентів 2–3 курсів дали згоду відповісти на анкету; 46 з них (студенти 2 курсу) написали також коротке есе; одна група з 15 студентів (з тих 46) була залучена до спостереження за заняттями та інтервенцією.

Результати. Проєкт змінив наше розуміння того, як підтримувати читання для задоволення. Викладачі повинні надавати пріоритет текстам, що відповідають індивідуальним інтересам, а не універсальним завданням; допомагати студентам розвивати впевненість, пропонуючи різноманітні варіанти та ґрунтовну підтримку; створювати простір для вибору студентами жанрів сучасної художньої літератури. Вкрай важливо розвивати академічні навички читання окремо від читання для задоволення, щоб не закріплювати асоціацію англійської мови зі стресом.

Висновки. Цикл EAR допоміг нам, як тим, хто навчає майбутніх учителів, краще зрозуміти переваги освітнього дослідження та труднощі, з якими стикаються наші студенти на всіх його етапах. Цей досвід буде безцінним для наставництва та підтримки досліджень наших студентів під час їхньої педагогічної практики.

Ключові слова: дослідницько-практичне дослідження, читання для задоволення, інтервенція, педагогічна підтримка.

INTRODUCTION

Exploratory action research (EAR) has been considered one of the most important aspects of any teacher's professional life, both in everyday practice and in continuous professional development. Determined not to stagnate, modern teachers face many challenges in keeping up with a rapidly changing educational context: the setting, learners' traits, digitalisation, educational reforms, and Ministry requirements. Multitasking has become a relentless and, when it works, rewarding feature of a teacher who wishes not just to survive in wartime Ukraine but to facilitate their students' development and help them become full-fledged citizens of their country, despite forced relocation and tragic events around them. Cases of burnout under prolonged stress have been reported across the educational community, affecting both teachers and students. We firmly believe that engagement in research helps people cope with stressful situations: it lets them solve real problems and feel successful. But this can happen only if teachers and students are equipped with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed for exploration, reflection, and intervention. That equipping is a task for university teachers.

Ukrainian universities have been increasing the number of credits allocated to teaching practice, paying closer attention to students' practical training. However, any mechanical increase will not produce a qualitative change in pre-service teachers' skills unless that practice is accompanied by action research, the development of an inquiry stance, and a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the educational process. As Wipperfurth and Mehlmauer-Larcher put it, student-teachers 'mediate' between theories from different academic disciplines and the concrete 'field of practice,' so that theory and practice are no longer viewed as 'two opposing fields' (Wipperfurth & Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2022).

Scholars argue that university teachers, as experts, can show the pathway to professional development (Smit et al., 2024) and introduce action research as an effective tool for the sustainable development of both individual teachers and the professional community (Wipperfurth & Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2022). Yet not every university teacher has been engaged in EAR. Even those with a PhD in Education do not always distinguish academic research from exploratory action research, and cannot help students define 'a realistic and acceptable scope for pre-service teacher research efforts' (Darwin & Barahona, 2021, p. 11). When university teachers carry out EAR of their own, however, they become better aware of the challenges their mentees face and better placed to address them.

Our suggestions are based on the experience gained by teaching the university methodology course and organizing teacher refresher courses, by supervising pre-service teachers doing their Bachelor's research papers and Master's qualification works, by participating in the joint projects of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the British Council (New Generation Schoolteacher, 2013–2019), and the project of PAELT and the University of Warwick (Mentoring for EAR, 2025–2026).

The issue of teacher trainees' research competence has been the focus of numerous publications for over fifty years, leading to a broad consensus that it is not only an academic activity but also an integral part of teacher education, contributing to the development of reflective practitioners (Nopasari & Muarif, 2025). Its essence has been described by a number of native and foreign authors who defined its composition and the significance of each component (Borozan et al., 2025; Hine, 2013; Hrozan, 2015; Kravchenko, 2018; Kudla, 2020; Liubchak, 2013), as well as the ways and stages of its development (Black, 2021; Holovan, 2012; Kniazian, 2007; Mykhyda et al., 2020; Smith &

Sela, 2005). EAR bridges the gap between theory and practice: students come to understand the rationale behind teaching and learning, while learning to adapt methods and techniques to a specific educational context. As Darwin and Barahona put it, '...action research strategies are an evocative means of bringing nascent student capabilities to the foreground as theoretical knowledge is understood empirically through the reflective and enacting cycles of action research' (Darwin & Barahona, 2021, p. 2). That philosophy of learning by doing, substantiated by constructivists long ago, remains a valid basis for developing professional teachers' skills, including EAR skills.

Other benefits include developing a critical stance (Srivastava, 2022), taking multiple perspectives into account (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), opening to new ideas (Hine, 2013; Messikh, 2020; Nopasari & Muarif, 2025), expanding the methodological repertoire, focusing not on problems but on pedagogical innovations able to solve them (Black, 2021; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008), and collaborating with student-teachers and school and university mentors (Moktar et al., 2024; Yan, 2016), which is conducive to later professional-community engagement. Including EAR in the pedagogical curriculum also enhances the principle of student-centredness, often declared but rarely fully realised. As Black notes, 'Practices involving young people as active agents in decision-making processes are scarce in education and educational research' (Black, 2021, p. 2). When pre-service teachers are engaged in EAR, the curriculum shifts from transmitting and memorising to a learning experience (Banegas & Consoli, 2019; Hagevik et al., 2012; Otto et al., 2009).

Another advantage of student EAR projects is their impact on the future teacher's personality, boosting self-confidence and resilience. Trainees become aware of their personal and professional growth as they respond to challenges, ask research questions, and find answers. They develop that sense of ownership of effective practices that Henson described nearly three decades ago (Henson, 1996). Students see the practical results of their research in improved classroom situations and learners' responses, which encourages further inquiry. Thus, teacher trainees become agents of change, change in the educational system and in their own practice as researchers.

Unsurprisingly, the ability to conduct EAR is now a requirement for validating teachers' profession in most international teaching standards. It is believed to enable 21st-century teachers to adapt to classroom diversity by selecting flexible learning strategies for their students' needs. Preparing pre-service teachers to identify problems, explore the current situation, develop a plan, select appropriate data-collection tools, and analyse and interpret data empowers them to become agents of change (Villacañas de Castro & Banegas, 2020).

Scholars have also identified several challenges in pre-service teacher action research: trainees' limited class-based experience and limited knowledge of action-research methods (Black, 2021; Jakhelln & Pörn, 2019; Sabri, 2022; Tatar, 2012); schoolteachers' reluctance to collaborate due to overload (Ferreira & Ryan, 2013); university teachers' lack of experience in EAR themselves, often leaving them unable to provide a positive role model (Zambo & Zambo, 2007); time pressures and weak university-school collaboration (Bryant & Bates, 2010; Bendtsen et al., 2019; Darwin & Barahona, 2021). Action research in a teacher-preparation programme can also strike stakeholders as too much extra work to add to an already crowded curriculum (Davis et al., 2017; Ponte et al., 2004). Together, these constraints diminish the quality of student teachers' EAR and, more often than not, turn it into a less effective learning strategy, hindering its use later in professional careers (Bryant & Bates, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

In our previous publications (Tuchyna & Kamynin, 2021, 2022) we focused on research competence as one of the components of student teachers' professional methodological competence and outlined the model of its development at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, starting with guided lesson observation in Years 2–4, continuing with action research in Year 4 (Bachelor's programme), and doing EAR while preparing the Master's qualification work.

Following Smith and Rebolledo (2018), we treated EAR as a structured cycle of teacher-led inquiry: the exploration of a classroom puzzle, formulation of multi-perspective research questions, planned intervention, and reflective analysis. To be better prepared to scaffold and supervise our students' action research, we initiated EAR projects of our own within the 'Mentoring for EAR' programme. In particular, we considered a problem that has puzzled teacher educators in our Department of Foreign Philology: why do a number of future English teachers dislike reading? The number has, unfortunately, been growing.

A note on terminology. As we worked, we found that 'extensive reading' (in the Day & Bamford, 1998 sense – easy texts, large quantities, learner choice) and 'reading for pleasure' (a broader cultural-affective construct) were not synonymous in our students' experience. We therefore use 'reading for pleasure' as the broader construct our data engaged, while retaining the term 'home-reading' for the curricular session itself.

The study used a three-stage sample funnel. First, 88 Year 2–3 trainees in the Bachelor's programme consented to a questionnaire. Second, 46 of those (Year 2 students) wrote and submitted a short essay on home-reading sessions. Third, one teaching group of 15 (drawn from the 46) was observed during home-reading lessons. After quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data, the intervention was planned and implemented in that group, followed by reflection and interpretation. We note that the lesson observers were also the intervention designers; we addressed this insider position by triangulating across all three data sources and by debriefing with colleagues.

After discussions with colleagues from our university, from other Ukrainian universities (in Nizhyn and Uman), and from the University of Warwick, we formulated the research topic as: What factors do our students identify as motivating them to engage in reading for pleasure, and how are these factors reflected in their reading behaviours in class?

Following Smith and Rebolledo (2018), we framed the research questions from multiple perspectives to obtain more rounded and credible answers.

Teachers' perspective:

1. Why do we think our students are not motivated enough to read for pleasure?
2. Why do we want to motivate them to do so?

Students' perspective:

3. What do our students think about the reading materials assigned as home-reading tasks?
4. What reasons do they give for enjoying or not enjoying reading for pleasure?

Observed behaviour:

5. How actively do our students participate in in-class home-reading tasks? 6. Do students who report being highly motivated demonstrate different reading behaviours from those who report lower motivation?

Different tools served different perspectives. For our own teaching, we used post-lesson notes (quick jot-downs after each lesson), informal conversations with colleagues, and the literature on the psychology of reading. To capture students' opinions, we used an anonymous questionnaire with closed and open items, reflective writing (an essay 'What determines whether reading in English is a chore or a choice?'), and a post-intervention survey. To observe what students did in sessions, we used lesson recordings, peer observations by colleagues, teacher notes, and reflective discussion. Coding of essays was carried out collaboratively by three researchers; disagreements were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY STUDY

Conversations with colleagues surfaced a shared concern that reading is no longer part of our students' identity or social life. Accustomed to scrolling, memes, and TikToks, students often resist deep reading that requires sustained focus on long texts, and stick to summaries and videos. Many cannot see how the books they read speak to their experiences, ages, or identities. Overloaded with academic reading, they have developed an assessment-driven mindset in which reading for grades dominates reading for growth. We also acknowledged that the fault is not entirely the students': their educational experience has often framed reading as a task, a test, or a translation exercise. Pleasure reading, moreover, is rarely scaffolded into learning.

The cognitive and affective benefits of reading for pleasure are well documented. Children and adolescents who read more for pleasure score higher on cognitive tests and report better mental well-being (Sun et al., 2023). Reading is associated with stress reduction and empathy (Dow, 2022; Varao-Sousa et al., 2018), and bibliotherapy has shown promise in supporting mental health (Gualano et al., 2017). The 'flow' state often reported by absorbed readers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) reinforces this affective dimension. So, it is clear why we want to motivate our students to read more and find pleasure in the process. We now turn to the students' perspective.

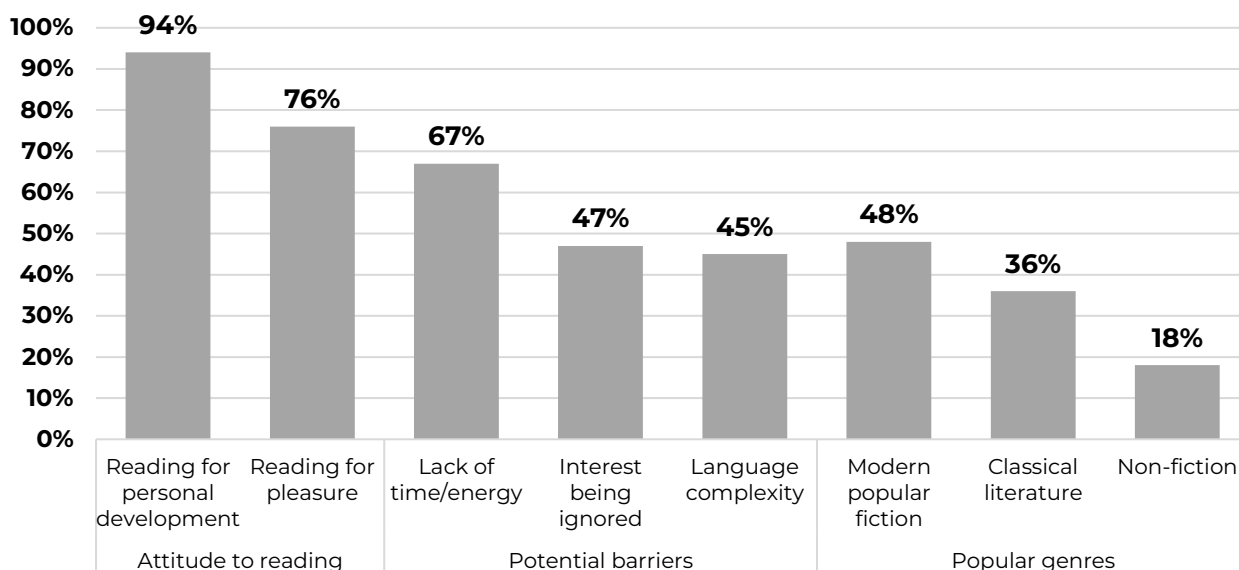
The questionnaire (n = 88) assessed students' attitudes to the literature they encountered during the Bachelor's programme, the feelings those texts elicited, and the genres and topics that engaged them. Crucially, the data refuted our founding assumption: contrary to our preconception, a clear majority of students were aware of the potential of reading for their personal development (94%) and of the fact that reading could be done for pleasure as well as for an academic requirement (76%). The 'TikTok-distracted reader' framing was not borne out: 49% agreed that digital habits (scrolling shorter content) hindered their long-text reading, while 51% did not consider it a significant factor.

What students did identify as obstacles were teachers' choice of books that ignored their interests (47%), inadequate language complexity (45%), and a lack of time and energy after challenging home assignments in other subjects (67%). Genre preferences reflected diversity: modern popular fiction (thrillers, romance, fantasy, horror) (48%), classical literature (36%), and non-fiction (18%).

An interesting point concerned the role model set by teachers who discussed the books they had been reading with their students: 78% of respondents expressed their interest in such discussions. The survey results are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The results of the pre-intervention survey



To probe further, the 46 essays (topic: When reading feels like a chore vs. a choice) were analysed through content coding, frequency counts, and thematic clustering. With $n = 46$, each student represents roughly 2.2%, so the percentages below should be read as approximate trends rather than precise distributions; themes are not mutually exclusive.

The results revealed clear patterns across the dataset, despite each student's unique experience. What makes reading enjoyable is not merely comprehension but a subtle interplay of choice, interest, language difficulty, emotional involvement, and freedom from academic pressure. The most dominant factor was personal interest ($\approx 93\%$). Students repeatedly emphasised that reading becomes enjoyable when ‘the topic resonates with me,’ ‘I wanted to know what happens next,’ ‘I cared about the characters,’ or ‘the story felt meaningful.’ This emotional connection often created a sense of flow in which students ‘forgot they were reading in English at all.’ Interest was consistently more important than language level.

Nearly nine out of ten students ($\approx 89\%$) explicitly contrasted pleasurable reading of self-chosen texts with experiences of reading under compulsion: assigned texts, strict deadlines, forced analysis, pressure to ‘get through pages.’ Such texts were described as ‘boring,’ ‘heavy,’ ‘draining,’ ‘mechanical,’ and ‘a burden.’ Self-chosen texts, novels, short stories, blogs, preferred genres, were experienced as relaxing, enjoyable, and intrinsically motivating. Clear genre preferences emerged in $\approx 84\%$ of essays: romance and YA novels, fantasy, thrillers, detective stories, modern fiction, blogs, and personal essays were associated with pleasure; academic articles, theoretical readings, classical literature in archaic English, and any scientific papers were associated with obligation. Modern narratives felt ‘alive,’ ‘dynamic,’ and ‘easy to follow,’ while academic texts felt ‘dense,’ ‘technical,’ and ‘soulless.’

A major barrier, mentioned by $\approx 78\%$, was excessive linguistic complexity: long sentences, unfamiliar vocabulary, archaic syntax, and a constant need for a dictionary. When a text matched their level, students could guess meaning from context and maintain motivation; when it exceeded their threshold, reading became a ‘slow, tiring decoding task.’ A powerful feeling of immersion (the ‘flow effect’) was reported by $\approx 70\%$: ‘time disappeared,’ ‘I didn’t notice I was reading in English,’ ‘I read longer than planned.’ This state occurred only when interest, manageable language, and freedom of choice

intersected. More than half (~57%) associated academic reading with pressure to understand every detail: stopping frequently, analysing every line, translating compulsively, fearing misunderstanding. Some essays (~41%) revealed how confidence shapes students' relationship with English texts: insecurity about being 'not ready,' pride at finishing their first book, motivation from noticing progress, and a sense of 'empowerment' when they understood without help.

Across all essays, a shared definition emerged. For these learners, reading for pleasure is the freedom to choose the text; the ability to understand without constant translation; reading that is relevant, meaningful, or emotionally resonant; a feeling of immersion rather than obligation; an experience driven by curiosity, not pressure. Reading is a choice when learners can explore, imagine, and connect. Reading is a chore when they decode, analyse, memorise, or race toward a deadline. The clear contrastive patterns are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

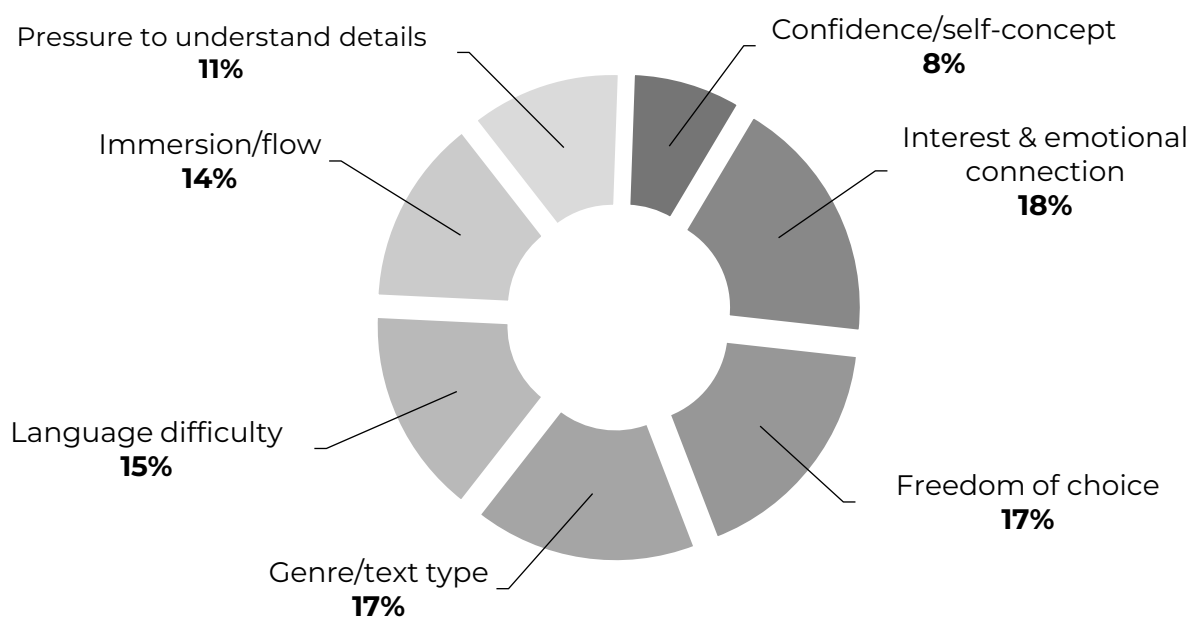
Contrastive patterns: pleasure vs. chore.

When reading feels like a chore	When reading feels like a choice
The text is assigned.	The student selects the text freely.
The deadline is fixed.	Curiosity drives the process.
The topic is uninteresting.	The genre reflects their tastes.
Language is archaic, technical, or dense.	Language is clear enough to follow.
There is pressure to analyse or translate.	Students feel emotionally connected.
Reading is done "to survive the class," "to finish," or "to avoid failing."	Reading is linked to personal development or enjoyment.

The contrast suggests that pleasure is not an inherent quality of a book, but a learner-dependent experience shaped by motivation, mood, and perceived autonomy. Taken together, the survey results and the essay analysis enabled us to highlight the factors that turn reading from a solely academic task into an act of enjoyment. The overall distribution of factors influencing 'reading for pleasure' is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Factors influencing reading for pleasure



Observation of three lessons confirmed that purely linguistic activities did not lead to active engagement from all learners. Although students supported the activities devised by their peers (their home assignment was to do the same in turn), the process felt rather boring. The very fact that the activities they suggested aimed at decoding and analysing the language proves that this has been a common practice in home reading. Students had become accustomed to activities that focused on recalling facts and on developing grammar and vocabulary. The teacher tried to use activities that could serve as a springboard to speaking and reflecting by setting tasks on controversial topics connected to students' experiences, but linguistic activities that tested factual comprehension still prevailed. Lengthy discussions of certain phrases in the text negatively affected group dynamics and shifted the lesson towards a teacher-centred approach.

The fact that the students did not know classical English literature well was revealed again when the teachers asked them about Charles Dickens, mentioned in the novel. Not all of them knew who he was. One girl remembered that she had read his *A Christmas Carol* (in plural), and called him the author of children's literature. Another remembered having read *Oliver Twist* (mistakenly referred to as *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*) and having seen the film. The teacher did well to allow students to choose what they would read and discuss during home-reading sessions. The students' choice of reading material, the modern fantasy novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence* by R.F. Kuang, was a definite plus.

An important negative finding emerged from comparing self-report and observation: some students who claimed not to be avid readers participated actively in class, while others with high self-reported motivation for pleasure reading were not visibly engaged in the lesson. The gap between self-reported affect and observed behaviour deserves further investigation; it is also a methodological caution for any survey-based reading research.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE INTERVENTION

After the exploratory phase, we designed an intervention along two dimensions: (a) the cognitive–conceptual content of classroom work (what students were invited to think about) and (b) the interactional structure (how they engaged, collaborated, and co-constructed meaning). The text was R.F. Kuang's novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence* (2022), already chosen by the group during home-reading.

(1) Content transformation: visualised meaning-making and conceptual scaffolding. We visualised students' thinking processes through Canva-based interactive boards. Key stages of interpretation (plot development, emotional response, identity construction, conceptual questioning) were displayed visually so students could observe, track, and reflect on how meaning unfolded.

A timeline-based representation of the previous chapter turned linear plot recall into dynamic conceptual mapping: students traced causal links between events, located emotional turning points, identified ideological tensions (colonial power, racial prejudice, epistemic authority), and saw how minor details contribute to the novel's larger architecture. An identity-focused infographic structured discussion around components of identity (name, ancestry, language(s), education, social position, emotional memory, allegiance), helping students move from plot retelling to interpretive synthesis.

(2) Activity design: from reproductive tasks to interpretive and affective engagement. We introduced interactive, multimodal, and emotionally resonant tasks. Symbolic visual

prompts (silver bars, bread, books, Oxford, chessboard, sloth, pike) invited students to decode meaning metaphorically: instead of identifying what happened, they explored what these objects represent in terms of epistemic power, colonial hierarchy, intellectual discipline, and identity transformation.

An interactive emotion-tile activity asked students to choose hidden emotions and link them to Robin's and Ramy's experiences as well as their own memories, building affective bridges between self and character.

We reduced mechanical comprehension checks (vocabulary matching, true/false statements, sequencing, character matching) and replaced their dominance with tasks of conceptual interpretation, emotional inference, ethical reflection, and ideological critique. This shift repositioned students from passive reproducers of textual information into active co-constructors of literary meaning.

(3) Classroom dynamics: lowering the affective filter. We integrated pair work and small-group collaboration (groups of three) systematically, on the hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) that smaller, supportive spaces lower the affective filter, increase psychological safety, reduce performance anxiety, and promote communicative confidence.

INTERVENTION FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Lesson observation during the intervention phase, and our reflection on it, revealed the following. The tasks shifted the focus to personal relevance in the analysis of plot, characters, and themes. Controversial themes (e.g., national identity) were built around opinion gaps and so produced interactive engagement.

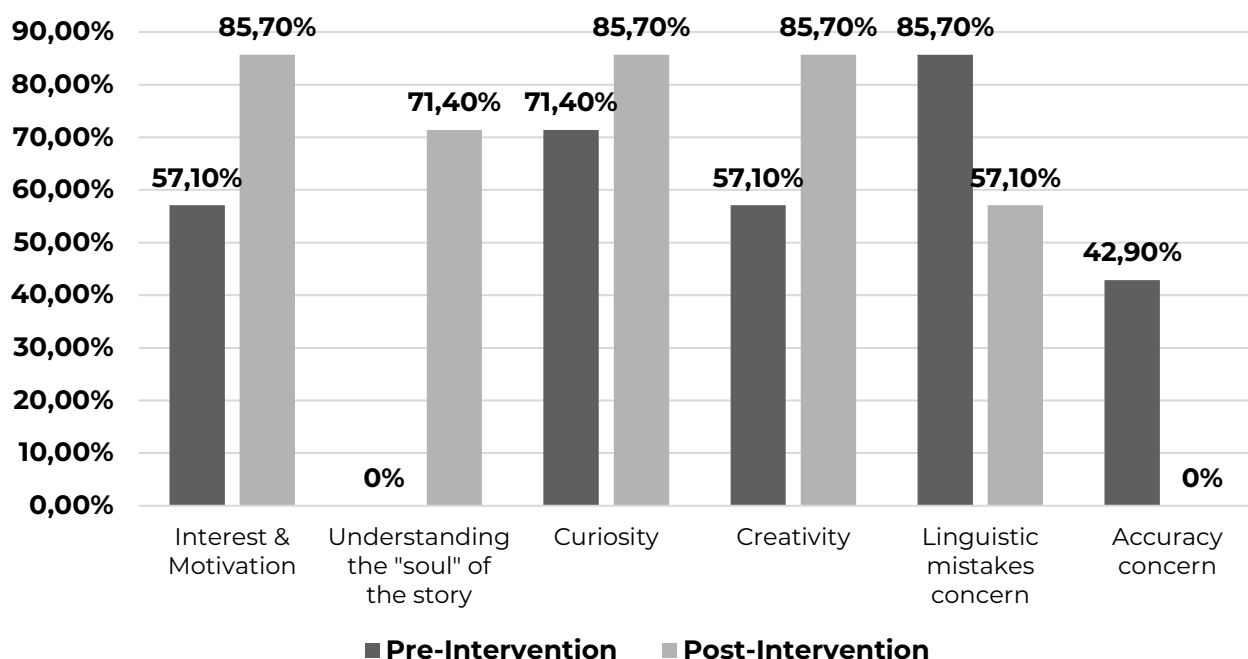
Tasks required not just reading on the lines but also between and beyond them, while learners still had to return to the text to support their views. Observation confirmed growing engagement as the focus shifted from language to conceptual mapping.

Uploading tasks to Canva whiteboards gave constant visual support (verbal and non-verbal: pictures, tables, mind maps) and increased task accessibility. Creative tasks (e.g., generating a portrait of the main character using AI) raised motivation and developed digital skills. Gamification (a Jeopardy game, an artists' competition) sustained interest.

We traced a number of emerging tendencies: a gradual increase in both the quantity and quality of student talk; more extended and reflective contributions; a shift from predominantly monologic teacher-student exchanges toward more dialogic interaction; and the gradual development of peer support in pair and small-group work. This collaborative framework facilitated distributed cognition, enabling students to co-build interpretations, challenge assumptions, and refine ideas collectively.

Taken together, the modifications produced observable shifts in the lesson's learning ecology. The classroom atmosphere moved from reading as an academic burden and a survival strategy toward reading as an intellectual exploration and an emotional journey. Students exhibited heightened cognitive engagement, deeper emotional involvement, increased communicative initiative, and stronger interpretive confidence. The intervention repositioned literary reading as an experiential, dialogic, meaning-rich process.

The post-intervention survey (n = 15) captured changes in students' feelings and attitudes, summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3*The results of the post-intervention survey*

The content-based approach helped improve students' overall attitude toward home reading, reduce anxiety about accuracy, and unlock creativity. By replacing mechanical drilling with narrative-based investigation, students moved from word-for-word decoding toward meaning-focused interpretation. Over 70% of participants reported a decreased reliance on translation tools, and their explanations suggest they now see reading as a tool for 'inspiration' rather than just a 'vocabulary source'.

Limitations. We name several constraints openly. First, the intervention was a single-group design with no control over its composition; novelty effects, demand characteristics, and the additional teacher effort invested in these lessons could each contribute to the observed shift, on top of any effect of the design itself. Second, the lesson observers were also the intervention designers; we mitigated this insider position by triangulating across questionnaire, essay, and observation data, but cannot eliminate it. Third, with $n = 46$, the essay percentages should be read as approximate trends rather than precise distributions. Fourth, the research was conducted within a single department, so generalisations to other contexts must be made with care.

CONCLUSION

The data show that reading in English becomes pleasurable when three conditions align:

1. Autonomy (choice of text): the student chooses what, when, and how to read.
2. Alignment (interest and personal relevance): the topic, characters, and themes feel meaningful.
3. Accessibility (appropriate linguistic difficulty): the text is comprehensible enough to allow immersion.

When any of these elements is missing, especially autonomy, reading shifts from an emotionally rewarding activity to an exhausting academic obligation. This trio echoes self-determination theory's autonomy-competence-relatedness triangle (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and confirms in our context what that literature predicts: intrinsic motivation grows when autonomy, competence, and personal relevance are present.

The project reshaped our understanding of how to support pleasure-based reading. Teachers should prioritise texts that match individual interests rather than one-size-fits-all assignments; help students build confidence by offering graded options and scaffolded support; create space for students to choose genres, explore modern narratives, and experience 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); and develop academic reading skills separately from reading-for-pleasure routines so that students do not associate English solely with stress. We now understand that students do not need to love reading to enjoy it; they need the right conditions to feel engaged, free, and connected.

The EAR cycle also helped us, as teacher educators, better understand both the benefits of action research and the challenges our students face at each of its phases. The experience will be invaluable for mentoring and scaffolding their research during teaching practice; those scaffolds will include guided observations, sessions on data collection and analysis, project templates, and discussions of project outlines. Our experience confirms once again that exploratory action research is a powerful tool in teacher education: it can improve teaching and learning and support students in becoming agents of change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STATEMENT

Generative AI tools were used to assist with the organisation of qualitative data and with English-language editing and stylistic improvement. The authors reviewed and revised all AI-suggested outputs; final coding decisions, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own.

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