

*The Influence of Formative Assessment in “Reading Critically” Course on English Major Students’ Self-regulated Learning of Vocabularies in Linguistic Academic Articles<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the influence of formative assessment in “Reading Critically” course on English major students’ self-regulated learning of academic vocabularies in linguistics. “Reading Critically”, the new course for English majors developed by Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), derives from many educators and policymakers’ recognition that mere language proficiency is insufficient for language majors to meet the needs of society. Therefore, it adopts a content-based instruction (CBI) approach. The first semester of this course uses linguistic academic articles as reading materials to simultaneously enhance language proficiency, introduce relevant knowledge, and nurture critical thinking ability. In this multiple-case study, data collected over one semester (where linguistics is the focus) were drawn from semi-structured interviews and stimulated recalls with 8 students at BFSU. Tseng et al.’s Self-Regulating Capacity in Vocabulary Learning (SRCvoc) was the analytical framework. The study highlighted the positive influence of formative assessment in helping students adjust learning goals, increase goal commitment, control concentration, curtail procrastination, and select conducive learning environment when learning vocabularies in linguistic academic articles. However, results also showed the students’ inability to control boredom, anxiety, and other disruptive emotions caused by the formative assessment when learning these vocabularies. This study seems the first to apply SRCvoc to CBI context in higher education. It is also the first to empirically investigate the influence of formative assessment in this curriculum, which may be adopted by other English departments in China in the near future. It provides a nuanced understanding that may help improve the curricular design.

Keywords: Self-regulation, CBI, vocabulary learning, formative assessment, SRCvoc

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## Introduction

### Self-regulation in the broad context of English major education reform in China

According to Sun and Li (2011), English education can be classified as in Figure 1.

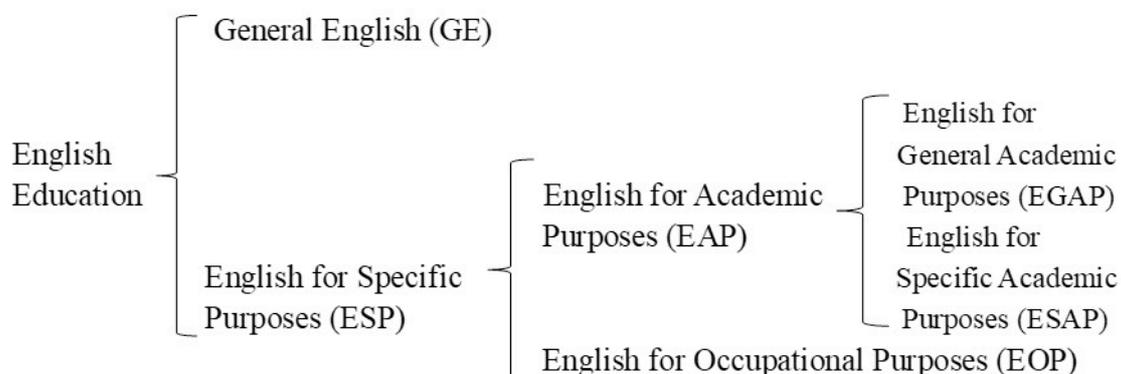


Figure 1: Taxonomy of English education (summarized from Sun & Li, 2011)

Traditionally, English major education spent 67% of time on nurturing language proficiency (premarily GE). ESP including courses on literature, linguistics, international relations, journalism, etc. only took 33% of time (Sun & Li, 2011). Moreover, the limited education concerning ESP was highly unsystematic, leading to students' fractured and scattered knowledge in many fields.

In recent years, this situation has been challenged. Following the progress in primary and secondary school English education, GE proficiency of students entering university as English majors has improved substansively, rendering it unnecessary to spend that much time on language proficiency (Sun, 2015). Besides, increasing academic, economic, and cultural communication around the globe demands not only the participants' language proficiency, but also their specialized knowledge in a relevent field (Sun, 2015). Furthermore, English major's critical thinking ability is also fundamental in being a world citizen and meeting the requirements of the labor markets (Sun, 2015).

Thus, the direction of English major education reform is to strike a balance among 3 aspects: language proficiency, specialized knowledge in humanities and social sciences, and critical thinking ability (Sun, 2015).

As for the way to reach it, the consensus among English educators in China is to promote ESP through Content-based Instruction (CBI), which enhances ESP proficiency (especially EAP) and teaches knowledge in humanities and social sciences simultaneously (e.g. Sun & Li, 2011; Sun, 2015; Cai, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Ma, 2011; Huang & Guo, 2011). Furthermore, students' self-regulated learning is highly advocated in this process because self-regulation is intrinsically related to critical thinking ability. "Critical thinking is the premise of self-regulated learning, enhances self-regulated learning, and can be nurtured through self-regulated learning." (Sun, 2015).

Therefore, the essence of English major education reform in China can be summarized as such: to nurture students' critical thinking ability through the

promotion of self-regulation in learning both language itself and the content, i.e. the specific knowledge in humanities and social sciences.

### **“Reading Critically”: the curriculum and the formative assessment**

Following this idea, School of English and International Studies (SEIS) of BFSU designed a new course called “Reading Critically”, using academic articles in linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and original literary texts (one for each semester) as reading materials to simultaneously improve students’ language proficiency, accumulate specialized knowledge and nurture critical thinking abilities.

The first semester, which focuses on linguistics, includes topics such as universal grammar, functions of language, language acquisition, language and thinking, language and gender, language and politics, language and media, etc. (each unit covers one topic). Each unit has 6 sections: passage A (article introducing fundamentals in the field), preparatory work (open questions guiding background survey), critical reading (open questions guiding critical thinking about text A), language enhancement (questions concerning new vocabularies, phrases, complex sentences and translation in text A), text B (another article providing complementary information for self-study), intercultural reflection (suggested essay topics related to the unit).

There are generally 2-3 formative assessments during one semester. Typically, the assessment consists of the following 6 sections: vocabulary (meaning and spelling), vocabulary (word formation), Chinese-to-English translation, text understanding, reading comprehension, and short essay questions. The first two sections both focus on vocabularies in academic articles learned.

Formative assessments are assessment for learning (AfL). They are part of the instruction that provides students and teachers with evidence and feedback based on which they can regulate their learning and teaching (e.g. Iowa Department of Education, 2019; Berry & Kennedy, 2008; Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). Ideal AfL provides feedback on not only *what*, but also *how* students learn (Bowen & Ellis, 2015).

However, as a new curriculum, there has been no empirical investigation on how students make use of the feedback provided by this assessment to self-regulate not only *what* they learn but also *how* they learn.

Vocabulary in these academic articles seems a proper focus in a study on the effectiveness of the formative assessment in guiding students’ self-regulated learning for 2 reasons. On the one hand, after the notion of self-regulation was first proposed by Dörnyei (2005), the first instrument measuring students’ self-regulation focuses on vocabulary learning (Self-regulated Capacity of Vocabulary Learning (SRCvoc), Tseng et al., 2006). Also, throughout the years, many empirical studies have used this instrument to study students’ self-regulation in vocabulary learning. Thus, a rather well-established framework of self-regulation is ready. On the other hand, self-regulated learning of vocabularies in academic articles stands at the intersection of all three focuses of the English major education reform in China: language proficiency, specific knowledge in humanities and social sciences, and critical

thinking. Vocabulary is of crucial importance to second language proficiency development (Tseng et al., 2006); the acquisition of vocabulary is also the acquisition of knowledge underlying the vocabulary (Snow & Matthews, 2016).

### **Self-regulation and SRCvoc: introduction and critique**

Self-regulation is the learner's own dynamic and active effort to manage their learning strategies as are mediated by different learning situations (Dörnyei, 2005). As a validated instrument to measure self-regulation, Tseng et al.'s SRCvoc (2006) contains the following constructs:

**“Commitment control**, which helps to preserve or increase the learners' original goal commitment (e.g. keeping in mind favourable expectations or positive incentives and rewards; focusing on what would happen if the original intention failed).

**Metacognitive control**, which involves the monitoring and controlling of concentration, and the curtailing of any unnecessary procrastination (e.g. identifying recurring distractions and developing defensive routines; focusing on the first steps to take when getting down to an activity).

**Satiation control**, which helps to eliminate boredom and to add extra attraction or interest to the task (e.g. adding a twist to the task; using one's fantasy to liven up the task).

**Emotion control**, which concerns the management of disruptive emotional states or moods, and the generation of emotions that will be conducive to implementing one's intentions (e.g. self-encouragement; using relaxation and meditation techniques).

**Environmental control**, which helps to eliminate negative environmental influences and to exploit positive environmental influences by making the environment an ally in the pursuit of a difficult goal (e.g. eliminating distractions; asking friends to help and not to allow one to do something)". (Tseng et al., 2006).

In this framework, in most cases, I refer to the 5 controls and their definitions as *goal-oriented* because they describe a psychological trait that the learner pursues; while in most cases I refer to the examples provided below each control as *way-oriented* because they describe a way to achieve certain goals. Moreover, I also propose that the mapping between *goal-* and *way-oriented strategies* should be contextualized, i.e. *way-oriented strategies* should not be assigned arbitrarily to *goal-oriented strategies* as mere examples as is in Tseng et al. (2006) (Xue, unpublished essay).

Since its establishment in 2006, SRCvoc has been applied to various empirical studies, most of which primarily adopt quantitative method (e.g. Luo & Weil, 2014; Rochecoust et al., 2012; Hitt & Veliz, 2015; Granfell & Harris, 2015; Gunning & Oxford, 2014; Ziegler, 2015; Ardasheva, 2016). Even when both qualitative and quantitative methods are used, results from the qualitative approach tend to be underexplained (e.g. Teng & Chang, 2016). Therefore, the field calls for more empirical study applying SRCvoc using qualitative approaches to gain a more detailed and nuanced understanding and a fuller landscape (Rose et al., 2018).

Among the limited qualitative study (e.g. Rose & Harbon, 2012; Veliz, 2012; Lam, 2015), Rose and Harbon (2012) developed interview questions based on the framework provided by SRCvoc. However, in their results and discussion section, they actually mixed students' psychological challenges, *goals*, and *ways* to achieve such goals together.

To prevent such mixture and the arbitrary assignment of *way-oriented strategies* to *goal-oriented strategies* as mere examples, and taking into account the English major education reform in China, the features of the new curriculum and the assessment, and the methodological status quo in self-regulation empirical research in second language acquisition, the main research question of the current study is: how does the formative assessment of "Reading Critically" course affect students' self-regulated learning of vocabularies in the linguistic academic articles studied? This question can be broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. Are student's psychological challenges and goals in learning these vocabularies with respect to the 5 facets in SRCvoc different before and after the formative assessment? If yes, how? (Here, challenges and goals are intrinsically related. If the student recognizes a challenge, then he or she must have already felt the necessity to overcome it, which is one of his or her goals.)
2. Are students' ways to cope with the challenges and thus achieve the goals different before and after the formative assessment? If yes, how?
3. Are the mappings between psychological *goals* and *ways* different before and after the assessment? If yes, how?

## **Methodology**

To ensure validity and comparability, the current study follows the methods of Rose and Harbon (2012), while preventing their drawbacks stated above.

## **Participants**

Participants were 8 first-year university students at BFSU (all native Chinese speakers). They were taking their first semester of "Reading Critically" course (focusing on linguistics) at the time of the study.

Following Rose and Harbon (2012), the first interview of this study was used to identify the participants' English proficiency and level of self-regulation, in order to take into account the variable of language proficiency in further discussion and to make sure that their levels of self-regulation could represent the majority of the cohort. The questions to identify level of self-regulation closely followed Rose and Harbon (2012). The only changes were to change Japanese kanji learning into the learning of English vocabularies (due to the word limit, question list is available on request). Beside, another question on the student's self-reported English proficiency was added to this list. Here, self-report of English proficiency as compared with their peers was used as the criterion because no available English test results seemed reliable. As first-year university students, many of them had not taken TOEFL or IELTS before.

Besides, Gaokao (university entrance examination in China) English test varies largely among different regions, rendering it an inappropriate criterion.

According to the interview, the students were divided into 3 English proficiency groups (see Table 1). The participants had no knowledge about it. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Participants' English proficiency

English proficiency	Participants
High	Cindy, Emma
Medium	Sophia, Lydia, Jane, Ashley
Low	Erica, Nicole

### Data collection

Following Rose and Harbon (2012), participants were interviewed many times throughout a period to obtain more details and a fuller picture. In the current study, participants were interviewed individually on a weekly basis. Each interview lasted 15-30 minutes depending on how much time the participant had that week and how much they had to say.

To ensure validity and comparability, the interview questions were adapted from Rose and Harbon (2012). These questions were based upon the 5 facets in SRCvoc. The only changes was that Japanese kanji learning was changed into the learning of vocabularies in the linguistic academic articles studied in this course (due to the word limit, question list is available on request).

Besides in-depth interviews, once before and after the formative assessment, the interview was changed into stimulated recall session. In the stimulated recall session, participants were asked to bring a piece of written work that they produced when learning vocabularies in the linguistic academic articles on their own. Then, they were asked to recall any thoughts or feelings they had when producing this written piece. If they mentioned anything related to the 5 facets of SRCvoc, then more probing questions were asked for further elaboration.

Furthermore, more than Rose and Harbon (2012), the author emphasized that all challenges, goals, and ways to meet goals that they reported must be self-motivated, i.e. not instructed or required by the teacher (other-regulated).

### Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted in an abductive manner on the transcripts, which is a combination of inductive and deductive approaches in different steps of coding (Graneheim et al., 2017).

The codes and categories under the theme of *way-oriented strategies* in learning vocabularies in linguistic academic articles were established inductively before they were mapped deductively onto the 5 facets in SRCvoc based on the functions these strategies had according to the participants' remarks. While codes and categories concerning psychological challenges and goals when learning vocabularies in

linguistic academic articles were first formed in a grounded manner, they were later mapped deductively onto the 5 main categories indicated by SRCvoc. The final system of codes is presented in Figure 2.

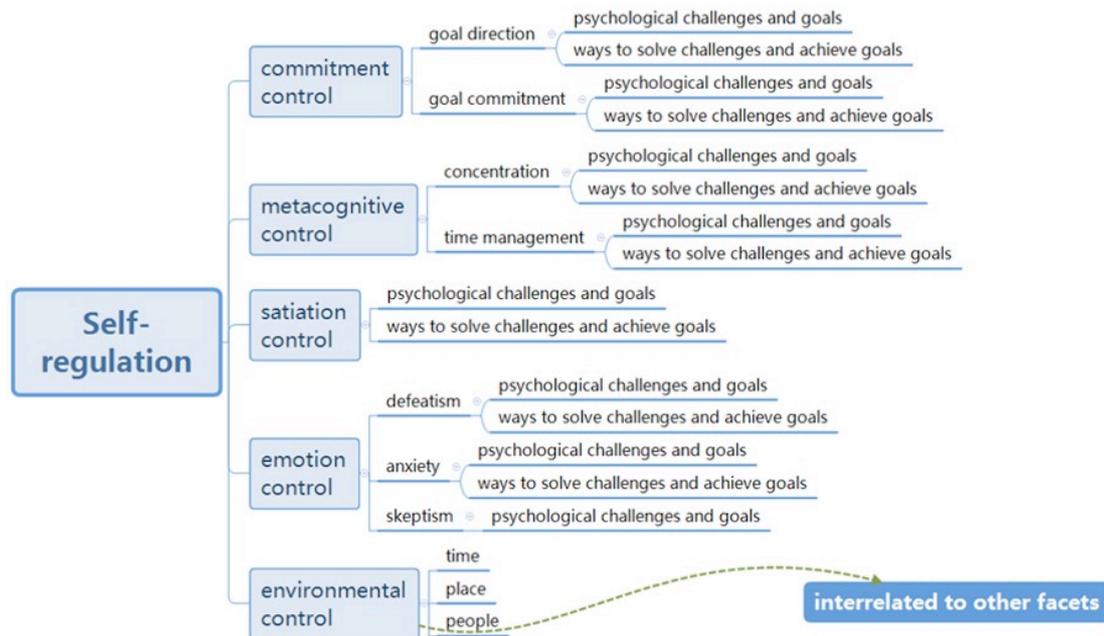


Figure 2: The coding network

## Results

### Commitment control

The formative assessment can guide the students in their goal direction setting and in turn facilitate their goal commitment.

*Goal direction.* For the high proficiency students, before the assessment, they did not know what to focus on and thus focused on everything. This led to overwhelming workload and inability to remember many things. For example, Cindy reported that this course contained academic articles of 2000-3000 English words. This was a giant leap from high school English. Due to such a giant leap, she was totally at a lost at first and thus tried to focus on everything including academic terms, phrases used in academic articles, structures of such articles, background of the topic covered in a unit, etc. Emma reported similar situation. She was fond of making word lists to memorize the vocabularies. At first she made word list for everything she encountered including academic terms, new vocabularies, word formations, and all meanings of a vocabulary in the dictionary, etc. Though she paid immense effort to memorize them all, this goal was hardly met. However, after the assessment, they self-managed to discover the correct focus based on the questions in the assessment. For instance, Cindy abandoned focusing too much on the academic terms because “the test questions seldom oriented around them”. Instead, this time she only included new vocabularies, useful phrases, different meanings of a vocabulary and word formation in her word lists because they were more test-centered. On the other hand, Emma developed some implicit

knowledge on the type of vocabulary that was more likely to be tested. According to Rebuschat and Williams (2011), implicit knowledge is the knowledge that can aid the participants in their performance but cannot be consciously verbalized or described by them. Likely, Emma reported that she “got a feeling that this vocabulary was very likely to appear in the test, so much more attention was paid to it without knowing why”. Moreover, she made word list for each type of words separately to facilitate her memory.

For the medium and low proficiency students, the major challenge before the assessment was that the learning goal was too blurred, also due to the giant leap between the current course and high school English course. Therefore, they did not do many things themselves aside from teachers’ instructions. For example, Jane, Ashley, and Nicole highlighted the new vocabularies and looked them up in the dictionary as was required by the teacher. However, they did not have a clear goal to work towards on themselves. Nevertheless, after the assessment, their behaviors tended to be similar to those high proficiency students. They all made word list of only the words that were more likely to be tested instead of focusing on nothing.

*Goal commitment.* The improve in goal commitment seemed closely related to goal direction setting. Before the assessment, the high proficiency students often felt overwhelmed due to the giant goal and their inability to realize it. This led to anxiety, self-skepticism, and sometimes even defeatism. Such negative emotions impeded their goal commitment. In face of this challenge, they sometimes resorted to some techniques to maintain their learning commitment in general, yet not specifically related to “Reading Critically” learning commitment. Cindy, for example, read stories of some student stars and learned information on postgraduate program application on Wechat public accounts to give herself motivation. After the assessment, since the adjusted goals were more reasonable and applicable, they became more committed to the goals and developed some techniques that enhanced learning commitment specifically related to this course. For instance, Emma developed a peer-competition scheme with her roommates, reporting that healthy competition facilitated her goal commitment to a large extent. Besides, she also read extensively on the topics covered in the units because “reading and thinking like a linguist” made her feel more advanced and thus more committed to the current work.

For the low and medium proficiency students, before the assessment they committed to this course very little. Erica and Jane, for example, reported that they worked for the sake of work itself. Nevertheless, after the assessment, they became more committed and developed some practical techniques to maintain their goal commitment. For example, Lydia and Nicole mentioned rewarding themselves if they successfully finished the task of the day. Sophia, on the other hand, reported that she would show off to her high school friends by telling them that she was learning an advanced science called linguistics to remain committed.

### **Metacognitive control**

*Concentration.* Similar to goal commitment, high proficiency students became more concentrated on the tasks after the assessment because their goals were more focused, more reasonable and more achievable. The observable behaviors used to maintain concentration were very similar to those used to maintain commitment. For example,

before the assessment, they read stories about student stars, learned information on postgraduate program application to stay concentrated on their study on the whole. Yet after the assessment, they used peer-competition and extensive reading on related topics to stay concentrated. Moreover, they also mentioned balancing self-study and group study.

Likewise, low and medium proficiency students became more concentrated because their goals became clearer after the assessment. They also employed some current-reward techniques to stay concentrated, e.g. Sophia and Ashley permitted herself to eat a candy when she finished the goal; Nicole liked to write down all the tasks on a list and loved the feeling of crossing off a task when finishing them. Also, Erica often reminded herself of the last exam to stay concentrated because she did not want the bad result to happen again.

*Time management.* Students at all proficiency levels demonstrated better time management after the assessment. Before the assessment, students had to stay up late to finish the giant goal. Ashley sometimes had to stay up until 2 o'clock. However, after the assessment, since their goals became more practical and focused, students at all proficiency level reported breaking their bigger goals into smaller ones and smaller steps so that they could be fit into time fragments of the day. Nicole reported that she could finish the smaller tasks when doing sports, before going to bed, and when eating meals.

### **Satiation control**

Students at all proficiency level experienced some difficulty in satiation control after the assessment. High and medium proficiency students reported that they read other academic articles on the related topics by themselves and wrote reading journals on their own before the assessment, partly because at that time they did not know what to focus on exactly. Such extensive reading gave them great pleasure and they became more interested in this course because it broadened their horizon. However, after the assessment, Emma reported that though she got a clearer goal, she felt she was put into a framework and had less space to self-explore and self-read, so this course was not as interesting as before. She felt like after the assessment she was studying mainly for the next assessment. Jane also reflected that only focusing on what would be tested resembled high school again. Among the high and medium proficiency students, only Cindy mentioned a technique, i.e. sentence-making in which the content can be designed according to her daily life and own interests.

While students with high or medium proficiency seemed to have difficulty in satiation control only after the assessment, their low proficiency peers seemed to have such challenges both before and after the assessment. Before the assessment, they reported being easily bored because they did not know what to focus on and had no idea about what the course should be aimed at. Erica described her situation as “studying in a fog”, which could be very boring. Nevertheless, after the assessment the situation did not change much. They were still easily bored because “the task requires too much repetition and memorization”, reported Nicole.

## **Emotion control**

Emotion control is another aspect that most students had difficulty in. Students at all proficiency level experienced defeatism, anxiety, and skepticism both before and after the assessment, but for different reasons. Before the assessment, for high and medium proficiency students, the defeatism mainly derived from their rather gigantic goal and the lack of focuses, while the source of defeatism for their low proficiency peers was mainly the giant leap from high school English course to this course. High and medium proficiency students were primarily anxious for not being as outstanding as their peers; whereas low proficiency students were anxious because they feared that they may not catch up with their peers. On the other hand, students reported skepticism over what they truly learned as English major students. Jane complained that nobody really told them what they should learn aside from mere vocabularies and phrases and that the current learning mode still resulted in rather shallow and unsystematic knowledge in linguistics.

After the assessment, students at all proficiency level experienced defeatism in face of the assessment result because most of them got only 70-85%. What's more, students at all proficiency level reported anxiety towards the next assessment. Nicole was afraid that the bad result would happen again. Moreover, the skepticism over what they truly learn as English majors became even more intense after the assessment. For the high and medium level students, they reported that they spent most of the time studying the vocabularies and phrases in the texts while neglecting self-reading on the related linguistic topics. As for low proficiency students, they began to doubt the meaning of studying vocabularies in this course and human nature. Erica argued that since human are not mere recorders, they should not spend that much time on memorization and repetition.

As for observable external behaviors to cope with such negative emotions, the students mainly tried learning vocabularies in more relaxing environments such as before going to bed, when doing sports and when eating meals. Low proficiency students also tried studying together with peers of similar proficiency level because they can communicate more about problems in common and ways to cope with it.

## **Environmental control**

Similar to what Rose and Harbon (2012) found, environmental control seems not an independent construct. The reasons why students chose a time or place to study, or some people to study with were to fulfill some other goals related to the other constructs. For example, some of the low proficiency students studied with peers of the similar proficiency level in order to reduce anxiety (emotion control); some students chose to study in more relaxing environments to reduce anxiety (emotion control); other students chose to balance self-study and group-study to best maintain their concentration (metacognitive control), etc. Therefore, the empirical evidence of the current study yields the similar doubt as Rose and Harbon (2012), i.e. perhaps environmental control is not an independent construct and that the taxonomy of SRCvoc may also suffer from "definitional fuzziness".

## **Discussion**

### **Pedagogical suggestion**

Since the assessment had positive influence on students' commitment and metacognitive control, yet was not so effective in facilitating students' satiation and emotion control, I draw the following suggestions for the future pedagogy and promotion of this course to other English departments in China and worldwide:

1. Instructors should communicate the 3 focuses of English major education reform in China more often and in deeper depth to students. Many students' skepticism, too gigantic goal, or too blurred goal were derived from their lack of understanding of the reform. Communicating more about the essence of the reform to students may promote students to the participators or even the facilitators of the reform instead of only being the passive beneficiary or receiver of the reform;
2. The content and focus of the assessment should be improved. The first two sections of the assessment should give more focus on the academic terms studied in the articles to encourage self-reading of extra materials and reading journal writing. The current question type promotes high-school-style vocabulary learning;
3. Instructors should pay more attention to students whose English proficiency is less advanced when first entering the university by, for example, giving them more emotional support. Since there are many foreign language high schools in China, whose students already have a relatively high English proficiency level before entering university, the students from other common high schools should be given more emotional support to make sure nobody falls behind;
4. Instructors should give more suggestions to students on how to self-regulate their own learning (not instructed homework). Even though self-regulation is largely about learner's self, students are not born with this ability and this ability needs to be nurtured. Teacher-guided self-regulation ability nurturing is different from teacher-instruction (Thomas & Rose, 2018);
5. Given the large gap in English proficiency level between students graduating from foreign language high schools and normal high schools in China, it seems reasonable to divide students with different English proficiency into different classes and provide instruction with different focuses. A test before the start of the course seems necessary in achieving this goal.

### **Limitations and suggestions on future research**

As are many qualitative studies, though the results of this study may not be generalized, it provides a nuanced and detailed understanding of the students' psychological challenges and techniques to cope with them when learning this relatively new course. However, this study is not free of problems. First, the number of participants is very limited and all participants are female students. In future studies, more participants could be included and the number of female and male participants could be more balanced. Besides, the current study is only about the first semester of the course (which focuses on linguistics). Thus, future research on the effectiveness of

this course can be extended to other semesters (focusing on literature, sociology, and philosophy). A remaining question would be: whether the pattern of self-regulation found in the linguistic semester will also be found in the other semesters. In other words, whether the specific subject in humanities or social sciences is also a factor influencing students' self-regulation. Such studies would be needed to draw a full landscape of this course as a whole, which may help improve this curriculum and introduce it to other English departments in China and worldwide.

Moreover, the current research provides evidence of the interaction among the 5 constructs in SRCvoc as well as the interaction between *goal-* and *way-oriented strategies*. For example, environmental control may not be an independent construct and some *way-oriented strategies* can be used to fulfill goals related to more than one type of control in different contexts and for different individuals. Therefore, I would encourage future studies to probe into the contextualized and individualized interaction between the 5 types of controls in SRCvoc as well as between *goal-* and *way-oriented strategies*. These attempts may potentially improve the theoretical framework of SRCvoc.

## **Conclusion**

The current study finds that the effectiveness of formative assessment of “Reading Critically” course is rather paradoxical in different aspects.

Initially, the students had rather gigantic or blurred goals concerning this course, which in turn led to challenges in goal commitment, metacognitive control, satiation control, and many negative emotions. After the assessment, students' goal direction became more focused and clearer. This led to better goal commitment and metacognitive control. Therefore, students were indeed *learning self-regulated learning* through this process and were indeed making progress. Yet negative emotions concerning the course and the assessment as well as the challenge in satiation control were not solved. It seems that the assessment's focus on language proficiency impeded the students' free pursuit of specific knowledge in linguistics because they had to compensate the time of self-reading in this field for the repetitive memorization of vocabularies and phrases likely to be tested in the next assessment.

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