Revisiting postmethod pedagogy: Adopting and adapting Socratic circle to secondary EFL teaching

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Since the end of the last century, the English as a foreign language (EFL) community seems to have entered a new era: the postmethod era. Despite fierce debate about its rationality and feasibility, the three pedagogical parameters—particularity, practicality, and possibility—have been influential and applied to various teaching contexts. Under the guidance of postmethod pedagogy theory and the acknowledgement of local knowledge, context-sensitive pedagogy has been garnering attention in recent years. This qualitative study used the lens of postmethod pedagogy to explore a veteran teacher’s implementation of Socratic circle in secondary EFL teaching. Related issues, such as the rationale for adopting and adapting the method, the implementation procedures, and its benefits and limitations, are discussed and analysed. The researcher collected data through semistructured interviews with the teacher participant and three student participants, in addition to pertinent documents including reading materials, teaching designs, and students’ assignments. This study provides evidence of benefits of Socratic circle to EFL learning. The adjustments made to the method indicate the dialectical relationship between method and postmethod, rather than interpreting postmethod pedagogy as repackaged. Implications for EFL teacher education, including provision of professional development on a wider scale, are discussed.
1 | INTRODUCTION

More than 2,400 years ago, Socrates promoted the notion that reflecting on prior knowledge and personal beliefs could enhance one’s reasoning abilities and rational thinking, a procedure known as Socratic questioning (Copeland, 2005). Deriving from it, Socratic circle (SC) has been used in many fields to enhance critical thinking, logical reasoning, communication skills, and learner autonomy (Hassan Bait Ali Sulaiman, 2020). Despite its wide recognition, there has been little research into how SC could be utilised to enhance second language (L2) competence, especially in secondary English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching contexts.

In the past few decades, method, as “a rigidly prescribed body of conventionalized instructional procedures,” has been problematised in that it downplays teachers’ professionalism and creativity and the necessity of adjusting pedagogical practices to contextual features (Scholl, 2017, p. 96). In response to the constraining effects of method, postmethod pedagogy (PMP) was put forward as an alternative to method rather than another method (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Teachers are encouraged to theorise from practice and practise what they have theorised. In doing so, teacher autonomy is highly valued and strongly promoted. Three pedagogical parameters (i.e., particularity, practicality, and possibility) are provided for the implementation of PMP to prioritise the particularity of the teaching context, to legitimise teachers’ theory, and to empower students and teachers, respectively (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). On the one hand, PMP is upheld as empowering and inspiring for teachers; on the other, it is criticised as theoretically ideal but actually impractical (Akbari, 2008; Bell, 2003, 2007). Although an increasing number of studies have been exploring EFL teachers’ perceptions and practice of PMP (Golzar, 2020; Islam, 2020; Kandel, 2019), a scarcity of research has been conducted in secondary EFL teaching contexts.

Closely related to PMP, context-sensitive pedagogy has gained currency in recent years (Carless, 2007; Gray, 2017; Littlewood, 2013). Similar to the parameter of particularity, context-sensitive pedagogy justifies local knowledge and the specificity of teaching contexts. Rather than claiming to be an alternative to method, context-sensitive pedagogy emphasises the flexibility in adopting and adapting methods, based on students’ needs and contextual features (Canagarajah, 2005). The current study explored how a superfine teacher (the highest rank for secondary teachers in China) implemented Socratic circle in his EFL teaching and how the implementation embodied PMP and context-sensitive pedagogy.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Socratic circle

Socratic circle, also known as Socratic seminar, is an “exploratory intellectual conversation centered on a text” (Lambright, 1995, p. 30). It comprises two concentric circles, following the discussion-feedback-reverse pattern: The inner circle discusses the text; the outer circle offers feedback on the discussion; the two circles switch roles. As a student-centred approach, SC foregrounds students’ self-governance and autonomy. Teachers act as facilitators and organisers, whose responsibilities include selecting reading materials, navigating the inner circle discussion, eliciting outer circle comment, and evaluating individual and group performance (Copeland, 2005). In addition to these responsibilities, it is also important for teachers to reflect on the success or failure of the SC activity and think of ways to improve it (Acim, 2018). Regarding the criteria for reading material selection, mind-altering texts, which are powerful in shaping students’ ideology and giving rise to deep thinking, are preferable
(Parker, 2003). To prepare for the SC discussion, the students or the teacher should raise questions about the text. Good questions are derived from readers’ curiosity, without “correct” answers, and conducive to in-depth discussion (Coffey, 2010). The leader of the discussion could be the teacher or the students (Acim, 2018).

Copeland (2005) summarised the benefits of SC in the following aspects: “critical reading, critical thinking, discussion skills, listening skills, team-building skills, vocabulary improvement, and student ownership, voice, and empowerment” (p. 3). In addition, SC nourishes students’ sense of belonging and satisfaction, and enhances argumentation skills (Brown, 2016; Fisher & Machirori, 2021). Naturally, there is criticism against SC when introduced into the classroom. First, it is considered as time-consuming and inefficient, especially in traditionally teacher-fronted environments. Second, due to the open-ended nature of the discussion, topics can be broadly covered and go beyond what teachers are familiar with. Third, SC does not encourage teachers to point out students’ grammatical mistakes and other linguistic problems, which is questionable in predominantly form-focused teaching contexts (Piric, 2015). In response to these negative appraisals, proponents of SC have made the following counterarguments. SC is seemingly time-consuming, but profound discussion with its merits deserves a place in a reading programme. Besides, it is illegitimate to expect teachers to be familiar with any discussion topic. It is sensible, however, for teachers to leave the topics that are not fully addressed for future and further discussion (Byrne, 2011). Another supportive argument for SC takes it as a type of exploratory practice that contributes to “the quality of life in the language classroom,” which is “much more important than instructional efficiency” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 195; emphasis in original). In addition to these contentious issues, SC challenges teachers and students in other respects, such as the skills of active listening and turn taking in conversations (Kayi-Aydar, Endacott, & Goering, 2018).

To date, investigation into implementation of SC in secondary EFL teaching is still largely uncharted territory. This project aims to collect primary data to shed light on this issue.

### 2.2 Postmethod pedagogy

According to Akbari (2008), eclecticism, or “eclectic blending of different methods” (Prabhu, 1990, p. 168), is the primitive form of postmethod pedagogy. PMP compensates for the limitations of applying single methods, based on the condition of informed eclecticism, or principled pragmatism: Teachers are aware of the principal methods and able to blend them or adapt them to the teaching context (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). PMP empowers teachers to “theorize from practice and practice what they theorize,” thereby transforming them to strategic teachers and researchers (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 27). Conventionally, theorists occupied the centre stage of L2 pedagogy, whereas practitioners took the peripheral position: the former creating knowledge-oriented theories and the latter contributing to classroom-oriented and location-specific theories. PMP rejects the notion of the best method, or the concept of method itself, and advocates an alternative to method. The three parameters of PMP, namely particularity, practicality, and possibility, address issues of context-sensitivity, teachers’ reflection and conceptualisation, and empowerment of teachers and students by acknowledging their personal knowledge and individual identities, respectively (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

PMP is groundbreaking in that it intends to bring teachers into a new era where they are encouraged to utilise and conceptualise their personal knowledge and contextualised experience to inform their teaching. Nevertheless, PMP is criticised as a one-size-fits-all approach, an illusion (Ziafar & Namaziandost, 2019) or hypothetical reality (Akbari, 2008). Akbari (2008) argued that PMP requires teachers of high qualifications to make well-honed pedagogical judgements based on students’ prior
knowledge and sociocultural backgrounds. To equip teachers with such qualifications, teacher education infrastructure needs to be renovated, which in actuality is far from easy to achieve. In addition, being linked to critical pedagogy is one strength of postmethod discourse. However, PMP remains a philosophical discussion without providing adequate practical guidance for teachers. Furthermore, many teachers are constrained by various socioeconomic, institutional, and political factors, such as the need to maintain a job, requirements of textbooks and tests, and a heavy workload. All these constraints make it almost impossible for teachers to critically reflect on their teaching practice and carry out transformative education.

Echoing these critiques, Rajabieslami’s (2016) empirical research, which explored TESOL teaching fellows’ perceptions of PMP, confirmed the constraints that practitioners were confronted with and their tendency to follow the convenient route rather than implement PMP without much training or support. Akbari (2008) further argued that, according to the three-stage theory of teacher development (Fuller, 1970, cited in Conway & Clark, 2003), teachers at the first two developmental stages, focusing on the self and classroom control and management, respectively, are not capable of blending varied methods in their teaching practice until they reach the third stage, when they are competent to adopt a holistic approach and formulate their own teaching philosophy. Whether or not teacher development follows such a linear process is worth further discussion, but it is almost certain that to achieve the aforementioned principled pragmatism teachers need time and accumulation of experience. Bell (2003), another critic of PMP, holds the view that method and postmethod are not dichotomous; rather, they are in a dialectical relationship: Methods direct teaching from top down, whereas postmethod influences teaching from bottom up. Empirical evidence shows that teachers have the awareness of going beyond method, regardless of whether they are informed of PMP. Therefore, the advocacy of PMP in a sense underestimates teachers’ intellectual autonomy and professionalism (Bell, 2007).

Other empirical research has collected evidence demonstrating the disparity between theoretical acceptance and actual implementation of PMP. Islam’s (2020) study indicates that in Bangladeshi tertiary education various factors (e.g., syllabus, course books, the evaluation system) hindered teachers and students from exercising autonomy. Teachers were able to achieve the parameter of particularity by tailoring teaching materials to students’ needs. Other than that, they could do little concerning the other two parameters—practicality and possibility. Kandel’s (2019) research, carried out among prospective EFL teachers in Nepal, revealed that although preservice teachers had some awareness of PMP, teacher education was not updated to enable the implementation of it. For instance, teachers were not regarded as knowledge creators but as passive technicians. Golzar’s (2020) systematic review more comprehensively detected the huge gap between theoretical recognition and actual implementation of PMP. For example, both Rajabieslami’s (2016) and Chen’s (2014) studies discovered that, whereas on the one hand practitioners expressed their acknowledgment of PMP, on the other hand they either gave way to the contextual barriers or implemented it in a distorted manner (e.g., being teacher-centred rather than student-centred).

2.3 | Context-sensitive pedagogy

The parameter of particularity in PMP is intertwined with context-sensitive pedagogy. Kumaravadivelu (2006) advocated “think globally, act locally, think locally” (p. 198), which echoes Prabhu’s (1990) claim: “It all depends on the teaching context” (p. 162). In other words, pedagogical discourse should be contextualised, eclectic, and flexible (Canagarajah, 2005). Aligned with context-sensitive pedagogy, local knowledge, which is “context-bound, community-specific, and nonsystematic,” is highly valued and upheld against the dominant discourse (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 4). Similar to PMP, which is
informed by principled pragmatism, local knowledge is not an isolated concept: It coexists and interacts with global knowledge. Highlighting the specificity and peculiarity of the local, context-sensitive pedagogy necessitates reflective, adaptive, and innovative teaching that feeds on and contributes to local knowledge.

Two concrete examples of context-sensitive pedagogy are the situated task-based approach (Carless, 2007, p. 605) and communication-oriented language teaching (Littlewood, 2013, p. 11). These two approaches derive from task-based language teaching (TBLT) and communicative language teaching (CLT), respectively, both adapted to the context of Hong Kong schools. The adapted approaches combine the principles of TBLT and CLT (i.e., the holistic use of language with communicative purposes) and analytic learning, which characterises EFL teaching in the Chinese context (i.e., form-focused language teaching; Littlewood, 2013). Another example, focus-on-form task-based pedagogy, originated from the context of Japanese tertiary education (Gray, 2017, p. 43). This pedagogy integrates explicit instruction, which allows for students’ learning styles associated with sociocultural traditions, and the task-based approach, which adheres to the principles of TBLT. Results show that students benefit from this approach mainly by gaining improved implicit L2 knowledge.

2.4 | Research questions

In order to gain an insight into the implementation of SC in secondary EFL teaching with a lens of PMP, this study aimed to answer the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How is PMP reflected in the implementation of SC in a secondary EFL teaching context?

RQ2: How do advanced students respond to SC in an EFL classroom?

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Participants

Gang (pseudonym) was a superfine teacher (the highest and most honourable rank for secondary teachers in China). He had worked in a key middle school in a suburban district of Beijing for more than 15 years before transferring to one of the top middle schools in downtown Beijing in 2017. In the same year, Gang attended the Famous Teacher Project organised by the Beijing Foreign Language University. Every year since 2012, 10 teachers from primary and secondary schools in Beijing have been selected for this project, which means only highly distinguished teachers had the chance to get the training. In this project, Gang first learned about Socratic circle and found it quite interesting. After some research and self-study, Gang started implementing SC in his EFL teaching and continued doing it for almost 2 years by the time he participated in the present study.

I got to know Gang because I used to work in the same school where Gang worked during this study. In the same year that I left the school, Gang transferred to it. From a former colleague I heard about Gang’s implementation of Socratic circle, which made Gang even more famous—like an expert in his field. When I contacted Gang and asked whether he was interested in this project, he expressed
his interest. I then asked Gang to find some student volunteers for the interview. Three students (Senior Three, age 18) in his class volunteered to participate.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

I collected data through two channels: interviews with the teacher and student participants, and documents related to the reading project (e.g., teaching plans, reading materials with students’ annotations and questions; see the Appendices). The semistructured interview with the teacher was carried out in a meeting room in his school and lasted for 1.5 hours. Due to students’ tight schedules, individual interviews with the student participants were conducted online through WeChat. Each interview lasted 20–30 minutes. All the interviews were carried out in Chinese, the native language of the participants and myself. With participants’ consent, interviews were audio recorded and afterwards transcribed by me.

I applied thematic analysis to the interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By transcribing interview scripts and related documents, I familiarised myself with the data. After finishing the transcription, I highlighted initial codes based on which potential themes were identified. Through building a thematic map, potential themes were reviewed and scrutinised for logic sequence and consistency, which resulted in the refined and defined themes. The final themes (i.e., reasons for SC, teacher role in SC, making adjustments, and students’ response) are used as the headings in the Findings section. The first three themes from different perspectives address RQ1, and the last theme addresses RQ2.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Reasons for adopting SC

Gang had been teaching EFL for more than 20 years, during which time he mostly used textbooks as the only or main teaching materials. With the increasing importance attached to EFL learning and students’ continuous enhancement in L2 competence, Gang noticed that students showed little interest in the textbook, especially the upper intermediate and advanced language learners. For one thing, topics in the textbook were “stale” and therefore unattractive to students; for another, the texts were not linguistically and cognitively challenging for most of them. Consequently, in the reading lessons students had only a superficial understanding of the text without much discussion or analysis of it. Gang did not blame students for this; rather, he thought the situation could be improved only when teachers started thinking about what reading materials could engage students and what type of reading activities could activate and deepen students’ thinking. Driven by these thoughts, Gang began to search for solutions.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, Gang learned about Socratic circle in a teacher training project. To obtain further understanding of it, he searched online and read some related books. When he felt fully prepared, he commenced his implementation with the following rationale:

SC is something unpredictable and exploratory, so there are no specific teaching goals. … Students inspire each other, enrich and deepen one another’s understanding. There is no correct answer to the question. If it is a factual question with a definite answer, then there is no point discussing it.

(Gang, Interview)
4.2 Teacher role in SC implementation

Gang did a lot of preparatory work before carrying out each SC activity. First and foremost, he gave students guidance on how to read the text and raise questions about it. He instructed students to do close reading and annotating: taking notes of thoughts and questions in the margin of the reading sheet. He informed students that questions were qualified if the questions aroused curiosity or led to sharing the questions with others. Students could also note down or underline important expressions and rhetorical devices while reading. Usually, Gang helped students finish the annotated reading after class as a project assignment. Then he collected the reading sheets (see Appendix 1), classified the questions students raised, and selected several questions for the class discussion (see Appendix 2). Gang also gave students guidance on how to make comments to fulfil the outer circle task. He specified that students could comment on the inner circle’s participation, preparation, language use, etiquette, and so on. To further prepare for the discussion, Gang divided his students into groups of six and asked them to complete a story map and then share the map with group members (see Appendix 3), followed by the final SC discussion activity.

Selecting materials was another essential task Gang undertook for SC implementation. Following the instruction of the group leader, Gang first used young adult novels, *Flipped* by Wendelin Van Draanen and *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes. When Gang and his colleagues realised students had difficulty reading full-length novels (mostly because of students’ heavy workload), they started using a school-based textbook, a collection of some classic short stories, including “My Oedipus Complex” by Frank O’Connor and “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway. Although short stories were easier to finish reading, the language could be more difficult to understand than the language in novels. After spotting this problem, Gang decided to provide students with glossaries for the short stories. For instance, he looked up approximately 150 words for the glossary of “My Oedipus Complex.” He explained why he did so:

> If I did not provide the glossary, students would find it too difficult to understand and looking up all those new words is a waste of their time. Providing the glossary could promote their enthusiasm for the reading and the discussion in SC afterwards.
> (Gang, Interview)

When summing up his experience in selecting materials for SC, Gang emphasised the following aspects: the length, the topic, and the difficulty of the text. To be specific, reading materials for SC should not be too long or too difficult (if so, teachers could provide glossaries), covering topics that are profound and interesting for in-depth discussion. As to whether teachers should lead the discussion, Gang gave a flexible answer:

> If possible, have students lead the discussion, because teachers’ authority might negatively influence some students’ participation in the discussion. Another advantage of having student leaders is the feeling of having somebody new at the centre stage. However, if there are no such competent students, teachers need to undertake this task.

From the students’ perspective, the teacher played an important role in SC in the following aspects. First, all three student participants expressed their expectations of the teacher’s opinions on the discussed questions. One of them explained the reason: “Teachers’ opinions must be profounder than ours, especially on controversial issues; teachers can give us some insightful analysis as a result of their rich experience” (S2,
Second, all the students regarded it as necessary for the teacher to provide the glossary, which made the material more accessible. Third, they were unanimous about the significance of the teacher’s presence at the SC activity although he might not lead the discussion. One student gave some detailed explanation: “Without the teacher’s presence, some students might not speak at all. With his supervision, the discussion is more active and livelier” (S3, Interview).

4.3 | The process of making adjustments

Originally, Gang followed the well-established discussion-feedback-reverse pattern of SC, as introduced in Section 2.1. However, problems arose one after another. First, Gang noticed that the inner circle had difficulty answering questions promptly. To resolve this problem, he added another role for the outer circle: discussion assistant. Specifically, each student in the inner circle had two assistants in the outer circle. Before the discussion, a “triangle” with one student from the inner circle and two from the outer circle had a prediscussion. In this way, the inner circle could be more confident in the discussion and the outer circle could engage more in the whole process. Soon Gang detected another problem: Few students in the inner circle volunteered to answer questions. Gang understood this was partly due to cultural tradition; that is, Chinese people are cautious to express their opinions. To improve the situation, Gang came up with two solutions: picking out some speakers who seem to have answers and asking those who raised the questions to sit in the inner circle and express their opinions. A third issue that caught Gang’s attention was that some students in the outer circle volunteered to share their understanding although it was not their turn according to the original rule. Gang displayed his flexibility and adaptability by inviting those outer circle students to share their perspectives in addition to or in place of giving comments (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1** The comparison between the original and the adapted patterns of Socratic circle
4.4 | Students’ response to SC

When addressing the benefits of SC, one student participant mentioned that SC contributed to student autonomy and independence. Rather than passively answering teachers’ questions, students raised their own questions and held the discussion almost by themselves. This self-governance to a great extent led to students’ activeness in the discussion, as one student (S1) revealed:

I think we have more freedom in this type of conversation—we can talk about whatever we want, and the teacher leaves the centre stage to us. Because of the deeper discussion, we have a profounder understanding of the text.

Another student explained how SC improved her spoken English:

In our class, there used to be some students whose spoken English is super good, but they went to the international department in Senior Two. I kind of envy them because my spoken English is not that good, especially when speaking in front of many people … I lack the confidence. SC gave us more chances to speak English. In order to perform better in the discussion, we prepared a lot for it, which resulted in a virtuous circle.

(S2, Interview)

This student added that SC also enabled her to have more discussion with classmates about the text after class. In addition to the positive feedback, another student expressed reservations about the benefits of SC:

I don’t know how many words I could learn from SC. We are not required to remember any words from it. It is an interesting way of learning, but we have the College Entrance Examination to attend. … [T]his might not be the most efficient approach, although it is a good way to develop our English competence.

(S3, Interview)

This student also expressed her concern for those whose English was not very good: “They might feel anxious to be asked to answer the questions.” She then added, “My English is OK, but it is even challenging for me” (S3, Interview).

Compared with the traditional way of using textbooks, student participants generally gave positive feedback on the texts selected by the teacher for SC. One student (S1) said: “Textbooks are too outdated and too easy to be fun, while the reading for SC is much more interesting.” Another student provided some details:

The content of the textbook is quite shallow, but the short stories the teacher selected, including the discussion of the themes and the authors, touch something spiritual that could hardly be covered in the textbook. … I felt I could get into the textual world, immersed in the environment of that time.

(S2, Interview)
As stated above, S3 showed her sceptical belief about SC again: “It is necessary to combine the traditional way with SC, because SC contributes little to the entrance examination in terms of vocabulary and grammar, so it is beneficial but not necessary” (S3, Interview). This feedback affirmed Gang’s worries: The biggest problem Gang encountered in SC implementation was the College Entrance Examination (CEE) which loomed large in students’ minds. For this reason, some students doubted the value and efficiency of SC. Gang tried to persuade students and their parents (at parent meetings) to look beyond CEE, but, as he admitted, without much amendment to the college admission system students’ and parents’ attitudes might not be easily changed.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | SC implementation in secondary EFL teaching

Corroborating Copeland’s (2005) summary of the benefits of SC, the teacher and student participants of the current study pointed out some benefits of SC: enhancement of student autonomy, critical thinking, communicative capacity, and motivation for L2 learning. It is important to note, however, that secondary students vary tremendously in terms of EFL competence. Students participating in the current study were relatively high achievers in EFL learning and overall academic performance, which might explain why SC had been integrated into their EFL learning for almost 2 years. In other secondary contexts where students’ L2 is not proficient enough, SC may not be a suitable choice—as one student participant noted, less competent students might have higher pressure or even anxiety in this activity due to the fear of being asked questions.

SC is well known as a student-centred approach, but to make it more effective and helpful, teachers’ roles cannot be underestimated. Apart from various preparatory work, as Acim (2018) stressed, teachers need to reflect on the success or failure of the activity to keep improving it. In the current study, students expressed great expectation of teachers’ voice and opinions about the questions under discussion. They also valued the teacher’s assistance in keeping the discussion on track. This study contributes to the existing body of literature by adding detailed pedagogical procedures for SC implementation, specifically in secondary EFL teaching contexts.

Compared with the traditional way of teaching EFL through using textbooks, SC possesses decided advantages, as shown in the current research. First, teachers can select materials that are a little challenging, with topics of greater interest for students. Second, the discussion among peers enhances students’ understanding of the text and their motivation for EFL learning. Most importantly, students enjoy the freedom and autonomy in the whole process of raising questions, discussing those questions, and making comments on peers’ performance. However, there is hindrance to the implementation of SC in secondary schools, the most prominent problem being the CEE. In the present study, one student specifically revealed her doubt about SC, which, in her opinion, contributed little to the entrance examination. Piric (2015) pointed out similar problems based on her research carried out in a tertiary institution. Remedial discourse (e.g., “the quality of life in the language classroom is much more important than instructional efficiency”; Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 195) proved to be of little help given that the teacher participant of the current study tried to persuade his students with such rhetoric but almost in vain.
5.2  |  PMP in secondary EFL teaching

5.2.1  |  The awareness of going beyond method

To achieve principled pragmatism as a precondition of PMP (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), teachers need to be aware of a comprehensive range of methods. In the present study, the teacher participant learned about SC in the Famous Teacher Project. Otherwise, he might have been hindered for a longer period from solving the problems he encountered in practice. It is worth mentioning that few teachers have the privilege to get this type of training. Thus the question arises: How can high-level training be made available to the majority of teachers rather than to elite teachers only? There is no easy answer to this question, but this finding corroborates Bell’s (2007) claim that methods are not dead, and they are useful even for practitioners with very rich teaching experience.

PMP is reflected in the SC implementation under exploration in the following aspects and procedures. Rather than rigidly following the original pattern of SC, the teacher redefined the roles of the outer circle and the inner circle as well. For example, Gang created a “discussion assistant” role in the outer circle to facilitate the inner circle’s preparation for answering questions. In the experimental process, the teacher demonstrated a cycle of adopting and adapting a method (see Figure 2). After identifying problems in practice, Gang searched for approaches to resolving the problems. In lieu of rigidly following the method, he problematised it by analysing the incompatibility between the theory and the practice. Finally, based on the particularity of the teaching context, he adapted the method to students’ needs and contextual requirements. In this process, PMP was reflected by developing the method (rather than merely adopting it) and adapting it to the local environment. Meanwhile,
context-sensitive pedagogy was embedded in the adaptation as a guiding principle, prioritising local knowledge and students’ responses and expectations.

However, as Akbari (2008) argued, not all practitioners have the ability or maturity to blend or adapt methods with confidence, sensibility, and flexibility. In the present study, the teacher participant was highly experienced and known as a “famous” teacher. Therefore, to what extent his experience and success in SC implementation could be transferred to other teaching contexts is a question worth discussing. In light of this, further research could be conducted to test whether, or to what degree, less experienced teachers are able to adopt and adapt methods to their specific teaching contexts.

5.2.2 What constrains teachers from going further?

The fundamental aim of PMP is to empower teachers by encouraging them to theorise their practice and practise what they theorise (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). In other words, teachers should be freed from the constraint of using methods to justify their teaching. The teacher participant of the current study demonstrated a high degree of professional autonomy and an exceptional ability to develop a method. Although he did not theorise his practice, his continuous adaptation of SC displayed his strong awareness of flexible use of methods. This finding mirrors the results of Bell’s (2007) research: Teachers have the awareness of going beyond methods whether or not they are aware of PMP. Thus, overemphasis on the importance of methods or PMP may both underestimate “the intellectual autonomy and discernment of the practitioner” (Bell, 2007, p. 142).

In effect, compared with methods, there are more insurmountable barriers confronting teachers. For example, in the present study the teacher and student participants pointed out that the biggest challenge for SC implementation in secondary schools was students’ attitudes towards it, which are largely shaped by the college admission system. The teacher participant informed students of the rationale of SC and its positive contribution to the entrance examination (although it is a long-term effect). However, the pervasive exam-oriented culture permeates almost every sector of secondary education in China (Xue, 2019). Consequently, teachers can change what they do in the classroom but they can hardly change what students regard as useful or efficient. Akbari (2008) claimed that teacher education infrastructure needs to be improved to enable teachers to employ PMP. Adding to this insight, the present study provides evidence that it is also important for related authorities to examine the macro education environment (e.g., the evaluation and admission systems) to allow teacher professionalism and teacher autonomy full play.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the implementation of SC in a secondary EFL class in Beijing. Through semi-structured interviews, both the teacher and some students voiced their perceptions of SC: the procedures of its adoption and adaptation and its benefits and limitations. Teaching materials and students’ assignments were closely studied. Findings from these documents may provide EFL practitioners of similar contexts with some experience obtained and shared by a veteran and ingenious teacher. In addition, this study offers insight into the measures taken to adapt a method to students’ responses, needs, and expectations. However, SC can be implemented in secondary EFL contexts only with the caveat that, for intermediate and lower level EFL learners, SC might be too challenging to achieve the expected effects. Another issue worth considering is how teacher training could be more inclusive to
enable the majority of teachers, not just the elite, to benefit from cutting-edge theories and empirical findings.

Regarding PMP, the current study contributes an experienced teacher’s perspective by presenting how he identified problems in practice, how he attempted to solve the problems by adopting a method, and how he adapted the method to the specificity of the teaching context. Judging from this cycle of adopting and adapting, it is arguable that methods are useful and helpful for EFL practitioners, including very experienced ones, to inform their teaching. Nevertheless, this does not mean PMP is groundless or unnecessary. Rather, the value of PMP lies in the notion that teachers are not method consumers but method developers. It is possible for EFL practitioners to create original theories but, compared with theorists who have limited teaching experience, in-service teachers have the advantage of gaining firsthand empirical knowledge and local knowledge, based on which they can adopt, adapt, blend, or create methods and theories. This wide range of methodological manipulation allows for varied exertion of teacher autonomy. From novice teachers to the most experienced, all enjoy the freedom to use or not to use methods and the freedom to borrow or create what is most beneficial to their students.

Admittedly, this qualitative study has its limitations. First, the teacher participant was a renowned teacher in a local area, which to some extent influences the transferability of the study to a wider range of contexts. However, as an experienced practitioner in EFL teaching, the teacher participant and what he contributed to SC provides us with valuable insight into this method. More importantly, his flexible implementation of SC provokes our thinking about how we could adapt a well-established method to a specific teaching context. The teacher participant’s special status also limits the validity of the judgement made concerning PMP in secondary EFL teaching, because the high qualifications of the teacher may account for higher exertion of PMP. Therefore, it is hoped that future research could be carried out to investigate how less experienced teachers perceive and practise PMP in similar contexts. In addition, how representative the three student participants’ opinions are is worth considering; therefore, the results need to be taken with caution.

7 | THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX 1.

A sample of students’ annotated reading

APPENDIX 2.

Questions selected for a Socratic circle activity
(These questions were raised by students about the short story “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway.)
Q1. Why doesn’t the doctor, Nick’s father, have a name?
Q2. Why are the Indian lady’s screams not important to Nick’s father?
Q3. How do you feel about the whole process of the caesarean section?
Q4. What is the doctor excited about?
Q5. What might cause the Indian man to kill himself?
Q6. Why does the Indian woman bite Uncle George rather than others?
Q7. Why does Nick feel quite sure he would never die?
Q8. What is the influence of the trip on Nick?
APPENDIX 3.

Story map used before the Socratic circle discussion
