

**Navigating the Existential Crisis from Literature to Real Life:  
A Text-to-Self Pedagogical Approach and Its Potential for  
Existential Literature Instruction**

**Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen**

[nhungnguyen.hp220894@gmail.com](mailto:nhungnguyen.hp220894@gmail.com)

Yangzhou University, China, & FPT University, Vietnam

**Khoa Dang Truong**

[khoa.truong@monash.edu](mailto:khoa.truong@monash.edu)

Monash University, Australia

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**Corresponding Author:**

[khoa.truong@monash.edu](mailto:khoa.truong@monash.edu)

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Amidst the existential crisis in contemporary society, young individuals worldwide find themselves susceptible to self-inflicted harm or even self-destruction in response to their psychological ruptures and injuries, while lacking the requisite self-awareness and the patience to persevere on the journey of self-understanding. In this article, we draw upon Rosenblatt's (1995) notion of Literature as Exploration to propound a text-to-self pedagogical approach to reading Haruki Murakami and Can Xue and to teaching contemporary existentialist literature. Comprising three strategies, namely The Art World in My Eyes, The Mind Film, and The Literary Conversation, this approach encourages students to engage deeply with the portrayal of death in the writers' flagship novels that view death as an unwavering companion to young individuals' life journey and growth. Based on Rosenblatt (1995), the three strategies, and our survey-based analysis of 2,000 Vietnamese high school students' existential perceptions, we propose a model for literature instruction through promoting students' transition from literary interpretations to self-discovery and self-realization of death associated with the existential crisis. This four-stage model, we expect, will get students poised to

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

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reconcile with their lost, solitary, and vulnerable ego, actively befriend their 'inner child', and develop into individuals with healed hearts and positive worldviews.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, particularly over the past three years, due to the adverse repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the existential crisis has surged to prominence. Violent deaths such as suicide have manifested as a recurrent phenomenon, springing from the inexorable psychological turmoil that plagues young individuals in contemporary society. Psychological traumas, triggered by the rupture of personal value systems, have exacerbated this predicament. Acts of self-harm (Hawton et al., 2012) and self-cut (Puskar et al., 2006) have been on the rise, becoming the most frequently queried keywords on global social media and the Google search engine. The existential crisis has exerted a profound influence on humans' mental well-being, a realm distinct from the physical health domain encompassing fields such as medicine and biology. Thus, it is a pressing concern that demands immediate attention. Addressing the existential crisis should transcend the confines of humanity-related disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and philosophy; rather, it is a collective responsibility that extends to individuals of all backgrounds in society.

In the society of the spectacle, marked by the proliferation of digital information and the pervasive ubiquity of social media platforms in all aspects of life, online material containing deleterious content related to human existence is not censored stringently (Stratton, 2020). This is especially the case, given a dearth of censorship authorities and counselors with profound knowledge of psychology and existential philosophy. Such a conundrum, as Stratton (2020) also points out, has caused the escalation of issues associated with the existential crisis, such as psychological damage or even suicide, particularly amongst the youth demographic. However, young individuals vulnerable to mental health problems struggle with devising coping mechanisms, often due to their inability to fathom the

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

intricacies of their inner selves and the expansive forces at play within (Bilsen, 2018). This predicament engenders the perilous distortion of their personal development trajectories and, in its most dire manifestations, their tragic propensity to inflict harm on themselves or even commit suicide. In many countries, this scenario has materialized, marked by lamentable incidents occurring as the youth grapple with a loss of orientation and a deficit in their acumen to discern and confront their internal psychological crises. They find themselves entangled in an intricate struggle to identify their own emotions and succumb to distressing behaviors, potentially harming themselves and others (Hetrick et al., 2020).

In this context, our article joins collective efforts against the existential crisis by drawing upon contemporary literary works that feature the nuances of characters' violent deaths. As a requisite subject in academic curricula across the world, literature is entwined with the intricate voyage of personal growth and maturation experienced by school students, part of the vulnerable group amidst the existential crisis. Literary death, as Hakola and Kivistö (2014) comment, "reaches outside literature's own realm and discusses death-related social issues and emotions that are recognizable for the reader" (p. ix). In this article, we propose a text-to-self reading approach to literature instruction through which the existential crisis and its extreme aftermath—violent death—resonate with young readers, especially school students. This pedagogical approach facilitates students' introspection and self-discovery through engagement in prominent literary works of the time. We posit the incorporation of the literary oeuvres of Haruki Murakami (hereafter Murakami) and Can Xue into the pedagogical landscape of modern literature. Our overarching goal is to furnish a conduit to self-comprehension through the act of reading, empowering students to confront and heal the deep-rooted emotional wounds residing within them. This comprehension, from our perspective, can be achieved through an exploration of the nuances of literary characters' violent death, as conveyed in the works of these two literary luminaries.

### **Why Murakami and Can Xue?**

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

The eminence of a distinguished writer is gauged through the prism of their intellectual prowess; a great writer is also a great thinker. It is this quality that our chosen writers, Murakami and Can Xue, epitomize. International media have extolled Murakami and Can Xue as trailblazing authors who confront the complexities of human existence in contemporary society. Their literary oeuvres have been enthusiastically embraced by a global readership and have found their place in the hallowed halls of Harvard University's academic curriculum.

Our foray into Murakami has revealed his impacts on Western academic institutions, where his presence is palpable within the curricula of illustrious universities in the United States. In our talk with Karen Thornber, Professor at Harvard University's Institute for World Literature, she unequivocally affirmed, "Can Xue and Murakami are both well known in the US. Many of my graduate students work on these writers, so we read them together for oral exam preparation, and/or they discuss them in their dissertations" (Thornber, personal communication, August 14, 2022). Research on Murakami's works has garnered significant attention among scholars worldwide. However, the exploration of his characters' death has not been subjected to systematic examination as an independent scholarly endeavor; instead, it has predominantly found its place in sporadic research papers on some aspects related to the death of these characters (e.g., Edward, 2023; Islam, 2018; Miah, 2020).

### **Death in the flagship novels of Murakami and Can Xue**

In our pursuit to investigate and assert the authentic values of survival and death in an aesthetic context, we have harnessed the conceptualization of death in the works of Murakami and Can Xue. This characterization of death is instrumental in probing characters' journeys, wherein they seek to unravel the reasons for their survival, confront the challenges that beset them, and devise solutions to these dilemmas. In relation to these matters, we firmly concur with Emmanuel Mounier's assertion that "it is not "death" that is a philosophic problem, but the fact "that I do die"" (Mounier & Blow, 1948, p. 9). This observation resonates strongly with the characters in these novels.

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (Murakami, 2000), we encounter a character named Naoko, entwined in a tragic bond with her childhood sweetheart, Kizuki. Kizuki forever remains at the eternal age of seventeen, followed by Naoko's death in the wilderness a few years later as she opts for the liberation she believes can free her from the immense void in her heart and from her failure to grasp the 'lesson of maturity'. Fortunately, Naoko and Kizuki are sheltered from the depths of this suffering by the solace of their lifelong companionship until Kizuki's untimely departure at the age of seventeen. Despite this, the suffering is present, the lesson is present, and the more it is evaded, the more acute the mental anguish becomes. This somber tale reflects Sartre's philosophical perspective that "man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is" (Sartre, 1989, para. 18). Indeed, existential pain is an inevitable facet of the human experience—"the idea of death is being thought as an incorrigible essence in the portrayal of Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*" (Miah, 2020, p. 120). Miah (2020) also highlights that the deaths of Naoko and Kizuki (Naoko's boyfriend) can be attributed to psychological functional disorders formed during their childhood, as viewed through the lens of Emile Durkheim's egoistic suicide drive (Durkheim, 2002) and Freudian psychoanalysis (Feud & Strachey, 1989). For the two young souls in the novel, their harrowing journey through psychological turmoil ultimately propels them towards a tragic and horrific death. Furthermore, Durkheim (2002) argues that social factors are interconnected with the prevalence of suicide in the modern world. Relatedly, when scrutinizing the fatalities of the two characters in *Norwegian Wood*, Edward (2023) emphasizes issues revolving around notions of freedom, solitude, and loss of freedom.

Despite not featuring the death of Murakami's characters, Mohammed (2020) brings to the fore the innate psychological intricacies unfolding within the fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura in *Kafka on the Shore* (Murakami, 2006). Central to this analysis is a profound dissection of Kafka's psychological fixation on sin and guilt, viewed through the Freudian psychoanalytical lens. Likewise, Byrne (2011)

focuses principally on Kafka's psychological trauma arising from his inner insecurities. Extending this issue, Ningtyas (2018) and Lekshmi and Soubhagya (2020) rivet attention to the somber facet of human existence and especially the deleterious repercussions of psychological trauma on suicide rates, self-inflicted harm, and even self-annihilation among the literary characters.

In Can Xue's novel *Five Spice Street* (Xue, 2009), Mr. Q's decision to end his life at the age of forty, driven by his love for Miss X, resonates with the theme of choice. As Can Xue writes, "Q lies unmoving in the crack of a tree trunk—probably for his whole life—and can't make use of their "drawing swords to help him"" (p. 284). Though he chooses this lamentable final scene for himself, and later might regret it, there wasn't time to reconsider, for he had "gone crazy heading toward death" (p 284). His decision, prompted by an insurmountable heartache resulting from his unsatisfactory love, appears as a desperate attempt to escape the inescapable—helplessness, impasse, and despair. In both of these novels, the characters' psychological torment leads them to embrace a tragic end, highlighting the deep and often harrowing aspects of human existence.

These characters, while navigating the labyrinthine corridors of their existence, perceive maturity as a beacon of potential hope. However, in their quest to fulfill this aspiration, they often find themselves abandoned in desolate deserts or compelled to traverse vast, solitary oceans before venturing into adulthood. They persist in the face of adversity, enduring the rigors and trials that accompany the journey toward maturity. Their path resembles a leap into the unknown—a precipice marked by jagged cliffs, treacherous crags, or an abyss of water filled with an array of unpredictable obstacles such as sand, rocks, and shells, never yielding the anticipated treasures or the comforting embrace of life's proverbial mattress. This struggle encapsulates the existential quandaries that beset young individuals who grapple with the arduous rites of passage into maturity—they navigate the arid landscapes of loneliness and the insatiable sexual desires of solitary existence. Through these tribulations, they glean profound insights into their inner selves, where their ego acts in tandem with their instinctual (id) urges

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

while also striving for a harmonious accord with their superego. Simultaneously, they do not deny the inherent value and significance of the instincts that consign them to the recesses of the unconscious, wherein these manifest as enduring memories.

The recurrent portrayal of death as an image and symbol in the thoughts of Murakami's and Can Xue's literary characters serves as a means to elucidate the writers' perspectives. It underscores the notion that death transcends mere cessation of an individual's physical and biological functions. Indeed, "abrupt physical death is (nearly) always accompanied by a second, longer and even more painful form of death that takes place in the mind of the survivor who has lost his loved one" (Hakola & Kivistö, 2014, p. viii). Additionally, it exerts profound influences over the equilibrium of the societal fabric, as the circumstances surrounding a person's death invariably mirror governing social norms (see Hakola & Kivistö, 2014). Notably, the quandary that human life may appear purposeless due to the inevitability of death gives rise to issues related to the existential crisis. It is this crisis that is associated with deaths resulting from psychological trauma.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **What is a text-to-self approach?**

In proposing the approach to fostering self-awareness of existential issues such as suicide and death through reading Murakami and Can Xue, we have drawn on the transactional theory put forward in *Literature as Exploration* by Louise Rosenblatt (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1995). This theory places at its core a reader-text transaction—the reader's response to a literary work (Roen & Karolides, 2005). This theory underscores the pivotal role accorded to the reader and their act of reading itself in infusing life into the work by drawing upon their existing knowledge and personal life encounters (Larson, 2009; Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). According to Rosenblatt (1938, 1978, 1995), the reception of a text evolves into an aesthetically immersive experience for the reader as they associate their personal experiences with diverse cultures and perspectives from the text. The reader, while

reading in a reciprocal dynamic, assumes the responsibility of filling in the ‘blanks’ inherent in the text (Iser, 1980), thus constructing holistic textual meaning that aligns with their conceptualization and personal tastes. The presence of these ‘blanks’ has become a familiar literary technique in the narrative artistry of both Murakami and Can Xue, justifying transactional aesthetic reading as a fitting approach to understanding subtle meanings in their works.

Grounded in the transactional theory, we propose a text-to-self approach to delving into literary characters’ death in the novels of Murakami and Can Xue. With the purpose of stimulating school students’ profound introspection of the self, this approach unveils a promising avenue for both inquiry into their personal development trajectories and its practical implementation in school curricula. Through this approach, students are drawn into an intellectual odyssey during which they use their critical thinking (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017) to excavate underlying logic and intricate interconnections interwoven within the textual fabric. It is a comprehensive approach to cultivating their adeptness for coping with psychological intricacies endemic to their age. It aims to instill in their minds the spirit of courageously confronting rather than evading these issues. In proposing this approach, we are inspired by the esteemed Paulo Coelho’s renowned aphorism in his masterpiece, *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1988), which states: “If you conquer yourself, then you conquer the world”.

### **Three text-to-self pedagogical strategies: The Art World in My Eyes, The Mind Film, and The Literary Conversation**

Drawing upon Rosenblatt’s (1995) *Literature as Exploration* and the insights of Richard Beach and James Marshall in their seminal work *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School* (Beach & Marshall, 1991), we advocate for a reader-response approach—positioning students at the heart of the learning process. On this ground, we propound a text-to-self pedagogical approach constituted by three interrelated strategies for student readers to engage with existentialist literature, particularly the flagship works of Murakami and Can Xue. These strategies include (1) *The Art World in My Eyes*, (2) *The Mind Film*, and (3) *The*

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*



Literary Conversation. In parallel with our inquiry, we echo Beach's (1993) emphasis on a literature pedagogy that amplifies students' central role and initiative in responding to a literary text, which completes the layers of meaning within the text, thereby transforming it into a world uniquely shaped by their perspectives.


In setting forth this three-strategy pedagogical approach to literature instruction, we expect that students are immersed in an exploration of death implied in the novels of Murakami and Can Xue. Through this journey, they can gain invaluable insights and experiences in confronting and responding to their own psychological crises, ultimately enhancing their personal growth and self-awareness. In addition, we hope that the approach will contribute to enriching students' learning experiences and encourage them to exhibit initiative, positivity, curiosity, and critical thinking, not only within the broad realm of existentialist literature but also in relation to distinct literary genres. Through their active engagement, responses, and unique interpretation of texts based on their existing knowledge, emotions, experiences, beliefs, and value systems, students can not only acquire knowledge but also develop essential skills and mastery of the learning process.

The integration of the approach into the teaching of literature, from our standpoint, enables the transformation of the educational endeavor into an experiential journey for students. To meaningfully participate in this endeavor, student readers harness the wellspring of their literary and life experiences to imbue meaning into the text and craft personal interpretations. This takes on heightened significance when confronting the psychological crisis endured by today's youth. As Rosenblatt (1995) posits, "[when] we participate in imaginary situations, we look on at characters living through crises, [and] we explore ourselves and the world about us, through the medium of literature" (p. 71). By exploring Murakami's and Can Xue's literary works in this manner, student readers gain a deeper understanding of both their inner selves and the (in)tangible worlds that envelop them. In what follows, we will delineate the three text-to-self strategies in detail.

### Strategy I—The Art World in My Eyes: Confronting and finding the root cause of the inner vulnerability of the student reader’s ego

*The Art World in My Eyes* is an advanced reading comprehension strategy employed to critically assess the artistic dimension within a literary text. In this capacity, student readers adopt the roles of vigilant observers, astute witnesses, and deeply empathetic participants. They harness the knowledge gleaned from their literary studies to engage in astute observations and articulate their emotional responses to the tapestry of senses, including hearing, seeing, imagining, and dreaming that are woven into the fictional world. In effect, this strategy allows students to depict the artistic world (i.e., a literary work) through their personal immersive commitments, thus rendering it vivid and intimately their own. Moreover, the strategy serves as a potent vehicle for eliciting profound emotional reactions, ranging from fervent affection to visceral aversion, from gnawing anxiety to smoldering resentment, from seething rage to boundless compassion, and from sheer astonishment to profound wonderment, particularly in the context of a literary work delving into the labyrinthine journey through psychological trauma and the conceptualization of the characters’ death.

Read the passage and present your opinion: In front of me is the confidant and the contemplation full of doubts of teenager Toru Wantanabe while facing the death of his best friend, Kizuki.

<p style="text-align: center; color: blue;">I seem to see:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: blue;">I seem to hear:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
	
<p style="text-align: center;">I seem to feel:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">I seem to remember:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

**Figure 1:** Students’ feelings about the death of Toru Wantanabe’s confidant in Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*

*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

To implement *The Art World in My Eyes* strategy, teachers could carefully choose and present an exemplary passage in a literary masterpiece that illuminates the intricate nuances of the characters' death. Here, we favor an emblematic passage from Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (Murakami, 2000), for students to read, contemplate, and analyze. This passage delineates the profound impact of Kizuki's death on the ego persona of Toru Wantanabe. In the wake of Kizuki's abrupt and bewildering death, Wantanabe's soul languishes in an unhealed emotional void, leaving him disoriented and adrift in the vast expanse of life for ten months. Experiencing an overwhelming sense of frustration and suffocation, Wantanabe insists on relocating outside of his hometown. He expresses his poignant belief that nothing else holds significance in his existence, while also being aware that "there remained inside me a vague knot of air" and that "death exists, not as the antithesis but as a part of life" (Murakami, 2000, p. 22). This awareness permeates the psyche of the seventeen-year-old Wantanabe, whose heart bears the indelible scars of profound wounds wrought by the shattering loss of his cherished confidant, Kizuki.

The objective is to impart to students the finesse of literary analysis, enabling them to unearth the underlying emotional substrates (e.g., pain) inside their ego. This strategy entails a two-fold process. Upon an initial encounter with the text, students are tasked with a preliminary reading session, followed by a more profound, emotionally charged revisit. Subsequently, they scrutinize the text with reference to provided guidelines on a study sheet (Figure 1), expressing their interpretation of the read content. Leveraging this strategy for the chosen passage in *Norwegian Wood*, students are afforded the opportunity to recollect and reflect upon their personal experiences, a process catalyzed by their exploration of the artistic universe within the work. It is through this exploration that they fill in the 'blanks' (Iser, 1980) in the work with cogent logic, while also engaging with the work as active participants rather than passive readers. This strategy equips students with the tools to cultivate a profound awareness of their inner selves, enabling them to interpret their own life experiences with heightened acuity and fostering a

nuanced appraisal of both the positivity and negativity that unfold in the artistic sphere within the work.

### **Strategy II—The Mind Film: Proactively responding to the psychological trauma of the student reader’s ego**

*The Mind Film* strategy empowers student readers to swiftly encapsulate their personal interpretation of what occurs in a literary text upon their exposure. As words flow from the page, they evoke a cascade of thoughts and emotions associated with the text that, in essence, crystallize into a ‘film’—a mental cinematic experience. In presenting this mental imagery, they need not delve into exhaustive particularities; they may expeditiously write down what is on their mind or read it out loud. Subsequently, they can refine and embellish the mental film, building upon their initial visualizations and impressions.

To construct their ‘mind film’, students listen to a poignant narrative from Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (Murakami, 2006) being read out loud. It narrates the brutal death of Miss Saeki’s childhood sweetheart, the eldest son of the Komura family, at the age of twenty. His life is abruptly ended due to a grievous misconception—he is mistakenly identified as physically similar to the leader of a group of students in opposition to those occupying the campus. He dies in bad shape—“his skull was caved in, his ribs broken, his lungs ruptured. They tossed his corpse out on the street like a dead dog” (Murakami, 2006, p. 163). Yet, a sense of disillusionment shrouds this tragedy, as the culpable students are eventually charged with manslaughter and receive meager prison sentences. Although his death is gradually diluted, Miss Saeki bears the brunt of this tragedy, enduring severe psychological trauma. She stops singing and buries the song *Kafka on the Shore* as a painful reminder of the two and as a somber monument to their love. Driven by her anguish, she retreats into solitude in her room, ignores all phone calls, severs all her external ties, and turns her back on the outside world—one that had not only torn her beloved from her but also returned him in a broken state. She decides to leave the opulent but tragic place and lives in seclusion for almost two decades, as a haunting testament to her loss and heartbreak.

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

Following their textual encounter, students promptly document the unfolding events from their “mind film”. They are tasked with the expeditious transcription of their emotions, attitudes, thoughts, and reflections, following each sentence they engage with. This practice serves as a mode of self-dialogue, fostering an intimate conversation between the reader and the writer, Murakami. By using their initial mental imagery and imaginative constructs, students craft their own film, replete with a climax and their distinctive perspectives and experiences. In this film, they reflect on themselves, locate their existential bearings, and label their emotions, especially those that develop when they experience stagnation, bewilderment, disorientation, inadequacy, or self-negation. In this transformative process, the role of the teacher turns into that of a sagacious guide, ensuring that the students’ film ultimately culminates in a felicitous denouement and that it addresses the profound existential quandaries that are very much with the students. This film should orient them towards striving for authentic optimism in life, rather than succumbing to self-inflicted pessimism and tragic death as Murakami’s characters.

As students construct their own ‘mind film’ in response to the psychological trauma of their ego, they might exhibit a composite of emotions and initial visualizations, interwoven with the unfolding circumstances, events, and words in relation to characters’ death in the literary work. This synthesis, particularly evident when the students scrutinize the portrayal of death, draws from the symbiotic interplay between the “personal unconscious” (Feud & Strachey, 1989) and the “collective unconscious” (Jung, 1981). Consequently, the students embark on self-discovery, understanding the depths of their souls, their innermost drives, and their emotional tribulations and confronting the inexorable transformation of psycho-physiological attributes that accompanies their maturation. In this transformative endeavor, they develop the capacity to identify their emotions, summon resolute responses to the fractures in their souls, and actively engage in self-repair, instead of evading adversity and negativity or inflicting harm upon their physical selves and the ‘spiritual child’ inside them.

*The Mind Film* strategy, when employed for instructional purposes, reflects philosopher Nietzsche's famous maxim: "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger" (Nietzsche, 1990). What the teacher should do is, above all, make it salient to students that it is essential to see positivity in negativity in their 'mind film', just like what *Norwegian Wood*'s main character, Toru Wantanabe, says in the closing page of the novel: "Hey, there, Kizuki, I thought. Unlike you, I've chosen to live - and to live the best I know how. Sure, it was hard for you. What the hell, it's hard for me." (Murakami, 2006, p. 288).

### **Strategy III—The Literary Conversation: Developing student readers' skills to help themselves and others**

Undertaking *The Literary Conversation* strategy, students engage in discussion about a literary work from the perspectives of characters or the writer, or they express their unique perspectives on themes, ideologies, or events elucidated within the text. This creative, imaginative dialogue serves as a crucible for nurturing their critical thinking, shedding light on how previous generations have grappled with and devised solutions to perennial human quandaries and challenges, some of which may in turn sow the seeds for myriad contemporary dilemmas that remain unaddressed.

To pedagogically utilize this strategy, the teacher can instruct the students to complete a study sheet containing a four-viewpoint diagram as a scaffold (Figure 2) about Can Xue's *Five Spice Street* (Xue, 2009). At the center of this diagram lies a core issue or a significant question. The students immerse themselves in the literary text under the supervision of the teacher and subsequently furnish their own analyses of the focal subject being discussed. To do this, the students need to be scaffolded to achieve adept comprehension of the theme of death, as masterfully depicted in Can Xue's novel. Subsequently, they are guided to conduct the *Every Persona: A Journey from Trauma to Adulthood* talk show in groups of four to six participants each, wherein they co-construct a literary conversation while acting out the roles of the characters in the novel. Each persona within this conversation represents a trajectory from trauma to the threshold of adulthood experienced by

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

the characters. Engaging deeply in this talk show empowers students to associate it with their own existential crises through reflection and to confront and actively address the crises. This aids in fostering their self-healing capabilities and their ability to provide assistance to others also grappling with comparable mental traumas. This strategy serves as a conduit for delving into the intricate psychological intricacies that transpire during their process of personality formation and refinement.

Imagine the characters in Can Xue's *Five Spice Street* are going to have a conversation with one another. This conversation is about Ms. X, a character who has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What do you think the other characters would say about Ms. X.? If you were to engage in this conversation, what would you say? Take notes and then act out the conversation.

1. With Mr. Q	2. With Ms. X's family
..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....
Who is Ms. X?	
3. With the neighbors	4. With yourself
..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....

**Figure 2:** A four-viewpoint diagram for *Every Persona: A Journey from Trauma to Adulthood* talk show

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Survey on Vietnamese high school students' existential perceptions in applying the text-to-self pedagogical approach

To formulate a systematic integration of the three-strategy text-to-self approach into the high school literature curriculum in Vietnam, we initiated a survey about students' existential perceptions. This survey included a sample of 2,000 high school students hailing from high schools around the country, from the northern provinces to the central and southern regions. Table 1 shows the frequency of responses.

**Table 1.** Vietnamese high school students' existential perceptions

Questions	Yes	No
1. Do you have a dream to become a transcendent person?	75.6%	24.4%
2. Does your dream appear at the age of 16-17?	50%	50%
3. Does that dream exist permanently in you?	73.7%	26.3%
4. Are you aware of yourself possibly falling into a psychological crisis?	67.8%	32.2%
5. Do you have negative thoughts and are you always disappointed in yourself?	67.3%	32.7%
6. Do you think of self-harm?	48.1%	51.9%
7. Do you find it hard to name your feelings?	69%	31%

The table reveals a striking trend wherein a substantial proportion of students, precisely 75.6% (1,512 out of 2,000 students), harbor aspirations of transcendent self-realization. What is particularly noteworthy is that a significant contingent, comprising 73.7%, consistently harbored this lofty ambition as a perpetual fixture of their thoughts. This data unequivocally portrays the prevailing ethos among high school students in Vietnam, characterized by big dreams, ambition, and a commitment to forging a prosperous future for both themselves and their careers.



However, the prevalence of students nurturing ambitious aspirations and their corresponding success is proportional to the rate of those experiencing adolescent psychological crises. Specifically, a substantial number of students, constituting 67.8% or 1,356, confronted psychological turmoil during their formative years. Moreover, for 69% of students (1,380 out of 2,000), they found it challenging to name their emotions and understand themselves. Additionally, 67.3% (1,346 out of 2,000) reported having negative thoughts and a sense of disappointment stemming from their unfulfilled aspirations. Furthermore, a worrisome percentage—48% (960 out of 2,000) of students contemplated self-harm as a preferred coping strategy when confronted with insurmountable challenges.

The survey revealed a prevailing issue among high school students in Vietnam today—the majority experience a conspicuous absence of self-awareness coupled with a precarious inability to navigate internal psychological crises. The ramifications of this predicament are severe, extending to the unsettling specter of self-harm and, potentially, harm to others around them. A pivotal question that emerges is: Where has this phenomenon sprung from? From our insider perspective, there are multifaceted factors, both subjective and objective, that have possibly accounted for this predicament.

The current deficit in students' understanding of their own selves can be attributed to an interplay of familial, educational, and societal influences. On the familial level, many parents fail to timely monitor the subtle shifts and evolutions within their children's inner lives ("Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child's Spiritual Development but Struggle with Effectiveness", 2003). Even more disconcerting, some parents make comments and comparisons that inflict grievous injuries upon their children's future ambitions and spiritual well-being. Consequently, this pervasive lack of attentiveness, coupled with peer pressure ("Peer Pressure", nd), might exacerbate the sense of isolation and frustration experienced by students within their homes, ultimately culminating in detrimental reactions towards themselves and others. A dearth of nurturing, educational guidance, emotional sharing, and adequate care are potential drivers of their

negative attitudes towards and perceptions of life. On the educational front, the general education system appears to neglect the cultivation of students' inner selves and offers scant attention to addressing their needs for psychological counseling (Opdenakker, 2021). Instead, it prioritizes the imparting of knowledge and rigid examination-centric evaluation criteria. This myopic approach fails to accommodate the multifaceted facets of students' emotional and intellectual development. Societally, the prevailing ethos remains indifferent, perpetuating the presumption that students should conform to established norms and conventions, deeply entrenched in the traditional ideologies of preceding generations. Simultaneously, from a subjective perspective, students themselves are complicit in this predicament. Many still refrain from discussing the existential crisis lurking within their individual ego, driven by an overpowering fear of revealing their uncertainties and inadequacies in relation to their self-understanding. Consequently, they find themselves ensnared in a perplexing quandary, uncertain about the trajectory of their lives and the path forward.

Although our data analysis lacks interview data from relevant stakeholders, from a complex tapestry of circumstances and influences above, we, those engaged in education, especially within the realm of literature instruction, propose the integration of the multifaceted text-to-self pedagogical approach into the literature curriculum. This approach seeks to integrate the teaching of literature with the objective of guiding students throughout their exploration of their own selves. We tentatively expect that this synergy can address the pervasive existential crisis that afflicts Vietnamese society as well as other similar national contexts, fostering a generation of self-aware and emotionally resilient individuals. In the following subsections, we will elaborate on how this approach can practically be translated into literature instruction in Vietnamese high schools.

### **The need for a text-to-self pedagogical approach to teaching literature in Vietnamese high schools**

The data presented above, instrumental in guiding our preliminary assessment of Vietnamese high school students' existential cognitions, serve as the

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

foundational rationale for our proposal to incorporate the three-strategy text-to-self pedagogical approach and the literary works of Murakami and Can Xue into the high school curriculum in Vietnam. Firstly, high school students are at a critical stage in their psycho-physiological development (see Hayden-Wade & Leslie, 2005)—a juncture ripe for the exploration of topics such as death associated with the existential crisis traditionally considered as taboos in education, particularly in literary teaching and learning. Yet, death, precipitated by the ever-encroaching psychological crises afflicting individuals at increasingly tender ages, is an issue we should no longer evade. To cultivate awareness, instigate informed action, and hone the indispensable skills necessary for students to confront and proactively address the daunting specter of the existential crisis—both for themselves and their peers—we could confront these issues head-on through the prism of literature education. This proactive engagement not only contributes to instilling positive values within the social fabric but also nurtures a generation equipped with the resilience to surmount such existential challenges. Secondly, it is imperative to recognize that high school students represent the future custodians of our nation. By imparting the right guidance during their formative years and implementing timely interventions, we contribute to fashioning a human force that is not only physically robust but also mentally resilient. This promises to elevate the quality of our national human capital, rendering it more competitive on the global stage and thus propelling our nation towards international eminence. Finally, actively studying works that address the issue of the existential crisis through the lens of character deaths such as the novels of Murakami and Can Xue is an inherent imperative within the pedagogy of literature that corresponds to contemporary tastes, characteristics of modern-day students, and the readership at large in today's society.

### **Proposed procedure for implementation**

#### *Stage 1: Initial assessment*

In this initial stage, the teacher administers a psychological assessment to students using a self-awareness questionnaire, such as ours above, yet with tailored

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

modifications. This assessment serves the purpose of gauging whether students are grappling with the typical psychological crisis often encountered during their high school years, alongside pinpointing their specific demands and objectives. Subsequently, the teacher constitutes graphical representations illustrating the state of the age group's psychological struggles and metrics showcasing students' capacity for self-comprehension. To address the evident deficiency in their ability to tackle their own psychological crises due to a lack of self-awareness, the teacher introduces a thematic topic for the high school literature curriculum. On this ground, the teacher formulates an initiative that cultivates the students' self-understanding through the examination of character deaths in the literary works of Murakami and Can Xue. This focused initiative seeks to empower students with the vital contextualized skills needed to navigate these challenging phases of self-discovery effectively.

*Stage 2: Focused instructional plan design*

The teacher introduces an instructional plan centered around the promotion of students' self-understanding through the examination of character deaths in the literary works of Murakami and Can Xue. The teacher's proposal for the lesson needs to be meticulously tailored to align with the overall educational objectives, the breadth of content coverage, and the precise count of participating students. After establishing a foundational grasp of these conditions, the teacher adeptly draws upon Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory to craft a thematic instructional plan. This plan is ingeniously designed to nurture students' proclivity for active engagement in studying literature and experiential learning. Crucially, the teacher needs to ensure that the lesson plan unmistakably delineates its overarching objective: to equip students with the skills needed to discern, apprehend, and apply insights and competencies to comprehend the subtle conceptions of death in the chosen literary works. This empowers them to subsequently address and effectively cope with the complex existential issues manifesting within their own selves. The teacher's instructional plan should adhere to the following guidelines:

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

**Subject matter:** Ensuring that both the teacher and the students have a sound grasp of the subject matter, specifically focusing on the concept of death as portrayed in the novels of Murakami and Can Xue.

**Holistic skill development:** Emphasizing the cultivation of a diverse skill set throughout the learning process, encompassing: Creative reading abilities tailored for contemporary existentialist literature, reading comprehension skills for understanding and utilizing literary perspectives on death as a means to fathom intricate human psychological crises, articulating emotional responses while engaging in reading comprehension. competencies in addressing contemporary issues of the self and devising effective solutions, and skills in relation to teamwork, collaboration, research, and problem-solving.

**Task clarification:** Clearly defining the tasks assigned to both the teacher and the students throughout the instructional journey.

**Learning outcomes:** Specifying the expected outcomes for students, including the creation of study sheets (see Figures 1 and 2) and the organization of talk shows centered around the theme *Every Persona: A Journey from Trauma to Adulthood*.

**Assessment parameters:** Establishing a comprehensive set of criteria to assess the quality of student products and the effectiveness of each group member's contributions to collaborative activities.

### *Stage 3: Instructional implementation*

The teacher facilitates the high school literature talk show aimed at advancing students' self-understanding through the examination of character deaths in the literary works of Murakami and Can Xue. In this stage, the teacher draws on the prepared lesson plan, assigning specific tasks to students. These tasks are tailored to foster pre-reading endeavors, with a forward-looking orientation, that pivot around the existential crisis depicted in the portrayal of death within the novels.

In the teaching session, the teacher employs dynamic pedagogical strategies to empower students as active participants within the learning process. These strategies include *The Art World in My Eyes*, *The Mind Film*, and *The Literary Conversation*, as suggested above. It is important that students diligently adhere to the teacher's guidance while utilizing study sheets and orchestrating the talk show. The show transitions from a mere exploration of the literary characters' dilemmas to collaborative endeavors to deal with the students' own existential issues.

To ensure the effectiveness of the session, the teacher needs to meticulously craft a comprehensive teaching plan for the show, demonstrate a profound understanding of developmental psychology, and remain ready to manage unforeseen circumstances or inquiries pertaining to the psychology of adolescence. The thematic learning session is expressly designed to align with the knowledge and skill requirements previously delineated for the teacher. It also places a significant emphasis on students' emotional development, aiming to cultivate appropriate attitudes and resilience among the students when presented with existential crises in their lives.

#### *Stage 4: Consolidation and reflection*

In this stage, after the culmination of the learning process and thematic exploration, the teacher orchestrates a summative session where students engage in a reflective process. They are prompted to retrace their exploratory journey while underlining the paramount importance of the subject matter: the literary characters' death as an aftermath of their existential crisis. This entails instilling in students an unwavering commitment to confront, rather than evade, the comparable psychological crises endemic to their age. The aim is to equip them with the competencies necessary for self-comprehension, subsequently empowering them to assist others in navigating the labyrinth of existential turmoil.

To cap off their literary exploration and reflection, students are afforded the freedom to employ diverse mediums of expression, ranging from composing letters addressed to 'the inner child' within themselves, crafting perceptual essays,

devising intricate mind maps, indulging in the art of painting, or even composing music. Through these creative avenues, they distill and share their thoughts, newfound knowledge, and skill sets, all of which have been honed and refined during their engagement with the show.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, through our proposal of employing text-to-self reading methodologies to problematize the concept of death in the literary works of Murakami and Can Xue, we aspire to ameliorate the existential crisis and its repercussions such as self-harm or violent death among not only Vietnamese students but their counterparts in many other parts of the world. We have uncovered the underlying causes of self-inflicted harm, including self-cutting, that afflicts the youth in contemporary society. These afflictions are, in part, attributable to the prevailing lack of self-awareness, emotional discernment, and pervasive psychological fractures experienced by the young generation. Consequently, they find themselves ill-equipped to confront the gradual erosion of their mental and spiritual well-being—the looming existential crisis.

In relation to young people's existential crisis, Murakami and Can Xue emerge as trailblazers' contemporary existentialist literature; they enable characters to directly confront and express their psychological dilemmas, be they personal or communal, and especially the issue of death. As an extension of this endeavor, we propose the inclusion of Murakami's and Can Xue's literary oeuvres into the high school literature curriculum in Vietnam and hopefully in other educational contexts across the world. To make the teaching of these novels effective, we suggest teachers leverage the three text-to-self pedagogical strategies we describe in this article: *The Art World in My Eyes*, *The Mind Film*, and *The Literary Conversation*. Through this integration, we anticipate that students, by identifying with the existential crisis the characters in the novels undergo, embark on a journey of discovering and understanding their delicate, vulnerable selves, a basis on which their stronger, more positive selves come into being through deep reflections and the cultivation of positivity on the part of the teacher. This inner transformation, we

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*Nhung Thi Hong Nguyen*

*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 13 No. 2 2023*

expect, will potentially protect them, especially those who are vulnerable, against abrupt physical death as well as a more agonizing form of death caused by the loss of their beloved (Hakola & Kivistö, 2014).

The theory of Rosenblatt (1995), encapsulated in the notion of *Literature as Exploration*, provides the theoretical bedrock for the pedagogical approach we put forward in this article. In bringing this approach to the fore, our hope is for modern literature instruction to forge a deeper connection with the lives of high school students, to become an enthralling, captivating force that ignites their intellectual curiosity, and to prompt their proactive engagement and application of skills to comprehend both themselves and others, in terms of vulnerability, death, survival, resilience, and revival. Ultimately, what we expect to see is how students can, through their literary immersion, nurture their own core values and contribute to catalyzing the advancement of society's growth, progress, and civilization.

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