

## **Self-directed English language learning through watching English television drama in China**

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This paper presents a case study of a group of Chinese ESL learners in China who study English by immersing themselves regularly and rigorously in English television drama. A self-directed learning pedagogy has been developed and discussed, which seems to have signposted an effective and economic way for ESL learners to improve linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence beyond the language classroom.

Keywords: ESL learner; self-directed language learning; pedagogy; identity; English television drama (ETD)

### **Background**

This paper discusses a method of intensive English language learning beyond the classroom. ESL students in China have long been regarded as “deaf-and-dumb” English learners, that is to say, with poor listening and speaking skills even after studying the language for a long period (Cui & Hu, 2007, p. 217; 219). Those achieving high marks in English in College Entrance Examinations and in the College English Test are not necessarily good English language users. Many Chinese ESL learners travelling or studying abroad often find themselves anxious because of their weak listening and speaking skills and ill-informed about western cultures and customs, which inevitably results in unpleasant culture shock (Hu, 2008). However, solutions to the unprecedented demand for English language competence development do not come only from ESL teachers and educators, but are equally discussed and provided by ESL learners themselves. Some enthusiastic ESL learners in China endeavour to develop a self-directed naturalistic learning pedagogy through consuming popular English language television dramas (henceforth, ETD or ETDs) on the Internet, such as *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-),

*Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-), etc. This learner-initiated approach to learning English beyond the classroom indicates that students do not only perceive English as integral to ensuring their personal well-being in their own futures, but also vital for an in-depth understanding of western social values, which will empower them to become world citizens.

The above-mentioned ETDs are imported from overseas and archived in online public media websites in the People's Republic of China, where they are given bilingual subtitles in English and Chinese, while preserving the original English soundtrack. The first ETD, *Man from Atlantis*, was introduced into China in 1980, the year after U.S. President Richard Nixon's first visit to China. Over the past three decades, more than one hundred popular ETDs have been shown to Chinese netizens, television drama fans, as well as English teachers and learners. However, only in the last ten years has ETD become legally and publicly accessible on personal computers. China's top online video sites (e.g., *Tudou*, *Youku* and *TV sohu*) compete in the import of ETD in both speed and quantity, in order to slake Chinese ESL learners' thirst for western popular culture and self-accessed multimedia language learning resources. Bednarek (2010) pointed out that dialogue featured in ETD can have a significant influence on ESL learners in non-English speaking countries, for this is one of the best opportunities for them to hear English spoken (p. 10). In a recent corpus-based study, Quaglio (2009) found that television dialogue in *Friends*, a classic sitcom, shares the core linguistic features that characterize face-to-face conversation (p. 71). The increasing availability of online subtitled ETD can provide fairly accurate examples of the relationship between certain structural forms and their functional correlates for ESL purposes. Immersing themselves in these shows rich in authentic and functional use of the English language, ESL learners might be able to acquire skills and knowledge both implicitly and explicitly.

The extensive exposure to large amounts of L2 input can feed ESL learners' implicit learning mechanisms and develop their competence without conscious awareness (Dörnyei, in press). In addition to the benefit of input flooding, ESL learners can actively identify the significant parts that they feel they personally need to learn or strengthen. They can pay close attention to pronunciation and intonation, the semantics of words in contexts and gestures and facial expressions in particular situations, which are less frequently taught or difficult to teach in ESL classrooms.

Although research on studying abroad (Jackson, 2008) showed positive results, with ESL learners gaining a great deal of confidence in their English language ability after spending time in overseas countries, it's not cost-free. Unlike ESL learners in Hong Kong and many other non-English speaking countries, ESL learners in mainland China often have difficulties in obtaining visas to travel and study abroad. In addition, formal study abroad programs usually require candidates to pass international standard English proficiency tests (such as IELTS, TOEFL or GRE) before they set foot outside China, which to some extent has prevented many ESL learners from going abroad to study English. For this reason, ESL learners have sought alternatives, including watching ETD at home, as a remedy for their insufficient exposure to English speaking societies. They dwell in the imaged English-speaking community of ETD where they can get free access to L2 input and immerse themselves in English speaking surroundings, almost as if they were "abroad".

Nevertheless, few studies have been done on how Chinese ESL learners experiment, design and discuss their personalized routes to enhancing their English competence. In an early study, Gao (2008) discussed how Chinese netizens debated the best way to learn English, through examining their language learning ideas, and called for more research on autonomous study by language learners. On the basis of previous

studies, this paper is conceptually informed by a recent study on language learning beyond the classroom (Benson, 2011). Four distinct dimensions were put forward for outlining language learning outside the classroom setting: location, formality, pedagogy and locus of control (ibid). Learning foreign languages independently while watching television is regarded as self-directed learning, in which the learner sets up a naturalistic learning situation, and switches the focus of attention to enjoyment or learning something other than the language itself. Nunan (1991) pointed out that studies have showed that learners who achieve high levels of proficiency often attribute their success to out-of-class learning. For adult learners, foreign language learning is often a matter of self-improvement or recreation, in which they have far more room for manoeuvre than in a formal classroom setting.

### **This study**

This study attempts to describe five ESL learners' personal experience of learning English through ETD. The five participants are Zhang, Liu, Jiang, Chen, Fu, two male and three female, aged between 25 and 29. They have all passed CET-4 and two have passed CET-6. Their reported English language learning duration was as much as 15 to 20 years. They reported watching ETD for between 3 and 6 years. None of them has been abroad, except for Zhang, who has been to the United States for a short exchange period. All of them expressed a wish to go overseas to study or work in future, preferably to the United States.

The five participants all majored in Chinese and were currently Chinese language teachers in universities in Beijing, teaching Chinese as a foreign language to international learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds. In fact, they were initially recruited for a project which intended to elicit their opinions on using English as a lingua franca in their multilingual classrooms (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2012). These

Chinese language teachers believe that a mastery of English is essential to ensure success in teaching Chinese language to international students who have limited prior knowledge of Chinese language but who share English as a common language. When the researcher asked about the methods they used to preserve and improve their English proficiency during and after leaving university, their answers were remarkably uniform. They attributed their progress in English language learning to an intensive watching of ETD and a careful study of its dialogue. The investigation was carried out during March and October 2010. Being identified for this study in March, the five participants agreed to record their schedules for watching ETD and to share their study notes with the researcher. They were invited for a second interview to take place by July, mainly to check their schedules, and a third interview by October of the same year. The participants were informed of the freedom to withdraw from this research at any time they wanted, but none of them did so, as they saw watching ETD as helping their personal advancement rather than as a forced task. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and lasted for approximately forty minutes. Each interview focused on the interviewee's experience of and reflections on watching and using ETD as learning material to develop a self-directed learning pedagogy. This study sought to answer the following three questions: (1) why do the subjects learn English through watching ETD; (2) how do they learn; and (3) what are the achievements that they have made from using this approach?

### **Analysis**

Many recent studies (Gao, 2011; Gu, 2010) about Chinese ESL learners have described public enthusiasm for English language learning and unabated mania for western culture in and outside school. Participants in this study showed similar zeal for English, which was fuelled by an organized study of English through a self-designed method. Several

reasons were identified for learning English through ETD. First of all, participants felt they needed to keep up their English proficiency in case it was required in future for study, work or travelling opportunities. For example, Jiang and Liu argued

It feels like recharging. I always need to watch ETD from time to time. And I'll need it more when it comes to job interviews, presentations, and translation work. I don't have an English-speaking environment so I found one for myself. (Jiang)

ETD is free online and many of my friends have recommended me to watch it. [...] If I stop watching it for a few weeks, I feel my English is degrading very quickly, which makes me feel as if I'm losing the world. Proficiency in English is my recipe to keep ahead of others. (Liu)

It seems Jiang and Liu indicated an urge to put English on the agenda of life-long learning in order to pursue excellence in their career goals. Other participants gave similar explanations for watching ETD. Secondly, ETDs were seen as the best genre for independent English learning. Participants argued that ETD surpassed news reports, radio programs, and short stories from their textbooks, all of which are usually delivered by professional broadcasters and writers in a standard or literary way, and are therefore seen as less communicative and less authentic. Liu and Chen argued that the language in ETD more resembles everyday communication:

It's full of real dialogs, very conversational. It's about ordinary people and their everyday life. It's the best channel to see people living with the English language. [...] It's the most dynamic learning resource. (Liu)

Now that I don't need to study English for examinations, I want to learn something that I can use. I need something about life, an individual's life, like how to respond to offensive words smartly, and how to express my emotions, and how to hedge my answers. I've got all that I need from ETD. (Chen)

They believe that the best way to learn a foreign language is to learn it through real-life communication. It seems that classroom teaching materials are primarily textbook-oriented and test-driven, with the focus on form rather than meaning and on accuracy rather than communication. Such standard teaching materials lack a realistic and meaningful context and fail to deal with contemporary issues that are relevant to learners' lives, and therefore do not help extend English learning beyond classrooms. Thirdly, ETDs are rich in popular culture in various social contexts. As Zhang said, ETD to him was "always a great thrill, something new and shocking, and something to open his eyes". He further explained:

ETD has plenty of popular topics, such as crime, cosmetology, hi-tech, time-travel, behavioural analysis and so on. I'm always fascinated by their advancement in modern technologies in ETD. [...] I'm so fed up with reading classical literature, and hearing political and economic news reports, which are so boring and have nothing much to do with my future. (Zhang)

Zhang argued that ETDs captured personal concerns shared by a large number of viewers ranging from family issues to career goals. In other words, language is not created in a social vacuum; the situations lived by the characters reflect a facet of real social life which has contributed to their immense popularity. Fourthly, ETDs express universal values while not concealing controversial social and moral issues. Fu, for example, argued that ETDs enriched her new concepts of life through conversations hardly heard in Chinese society.

ETD gave me an alternative attitude toward divorce, sexual orientation, baby adoption and religion. There isn't much space for us to hear discussion about these issues in China. [...] I have learnt some new terms such as artificial insemination and surrogate mothers. (Fu)

Attracted by the contexts and values contained in these dramas, the study participants



did not seem to have stopped at simply enjoying an entertainment while sitting comfortably on the sofa; instead, they intended to learn something serious. Therefore, a self-directed learning pedagogy was developed. As Benson (2011) pointed out, language learning beyond the classroom always involves pedagogy. Every individual's methods differ from each other slightly, but employ some common techniques. The researcher moved on to elicit how these participants use ETD to study English. Through examining the interview transcripts, seven aspects were identified which constitute the learning pedagogy. Given that there are dozens of ETDs available online, participants suggested that the first step is a careful (1) *selection* of ETD that can be used as a learning resource.

It's important for you to start from the one on your level. Many would choose to begin with *Friends*. Some advanced students would start from *Desperate Housewives* or *Lost*. [...] Avoid those involving too many technical terms or too fast speech delivery. (Liu)

Early ETD fans in China spent a decade following *Friends*, and used it as one of the few authentic inputs that provide communicative contexts for independent English language learning. In recent years, ETD fans have preferred to spend a considerable amount of time on a complete series of one ETD. One series of ETD usually involves around ten seasons, and there are 24 episodes in each season. In general, each episode lasts for around 40 minutes, and this means the whole series would add up to a total of 400 hours of natural L2 exposure. However, it's far from enough to "watch" it just once, as Jiang pointed out. Participants emphasized the importance of (2) *repeat* and the techniques of using (3) *subtitles*. As Jiang instructed:

First, watch one episode or a complete season for understanding the plot with Chinese subtitles or bilingual subtitles on. Then watch it again only with the English subtitles. Read the English lines quickly. [...] When you are comfortable

and familiar with all the content, turn off all subtitles and see if you still understand what they are saying. (Jiang)

Participants seemed to understand that only internalized L2 input would improve their English acquisition. They watch with Chinese subtitles first to grasp the plot, then with English ones to read the speech visually, and lastly they move on to practice their listening skills. It's also a process whereby they gradually increase the exposure to L2 by dropping off the support from subtitles. Furthermore, participants believe that it's equally important to keep written records for reference afterwards and for controlled practice activities. Some participants introduced their methods for (4) *note-taking*, not necessarily in an exercise book with a pencil. For example, Chen said:

Open up a word file and resize the window to fit half of the screen. Draw a two-column table with long enough rows. Play the show on the other half of the screen. Whenever you hear something you feel useful to learn, pause the player and type down the English in the left column and the Chinese translation in the right one. (Chen)

In this study, participants showed their notes either online or on paper to the researcher, some of which were very informative and very reflective. Note-taking is not simply for documenting the vocabulary and useful terms they come across, but also for a close-up study of the pronunciation, intonation, and tempo of a certain character's way of speaking that they chose (5) *imitation*.

Sometimes, I find their pronunciation's very funny, so I repeat after them right away. [...] I'd pause it or even go backwards for a few seconds and imitate their way of speaking so that I can speak as fluently as they do. [...] I enjoy imitating their intonation, which is way too awkward to do in the classroom. (Zhang)

After figuring out the motives and reasons for expressions, familiarizing themselves with the new terms, and warming up tongues through imitation, some participants

started on a controlled (6) *practice*. Participants explained that this is the most exciting part of the ETD pedagogy. Fu gave an example:

I learnt the term “beauty sleep” from *White Collar*. Since then I don’t say its Chinese equivalent. I have used this English term in my blog and even when I talk to my colleagues. And they all find it interesting to say it this way. [...] I stay behind class to chat with my students in English about their life in China and I’ll try to use expressions I learnt from the show as much as possible. (Fu)

It seems participants were eager to know if their English has been improved. Through actively seeking opportunities for practicing English after watching ETDs, their use of English increased. Last but not least, participants all take part in the (7) *online study group*, which provides the most up-to-date vocabulary translations, reference to certain issues, documentation of scripts, etc. For example, Zhang said:

Sometimes I download the scripts and highlight the part I want to learn. I’ve been using resources shared by other ETD fans when I first joined the study group. And now I upload my study notes and vocabulary annotation for helping others. The whole process of taking notes and sharing notes, and participation in the discussion has helped me remember many useful terms. I’m now a semi-pro in studying English through ETD. (Zhang)

The online study group of ETD serves as an information hub, archiving all useful resources for download and study. Some participants even downloaded the original soundtrack and put it into their iPod for practicing listening skills on their way to work or whenever they have some spare time. ETD fans build their learning community through online discussion forums, sharing their annotated notes of key vocabulary they feel it is worthwhile to learn and quotes of the lines which describe their feelings or personality traits in English. It seems out-of-class language learning does not exactly follow the pattern of English teaching and learning at school, which overwhelmingly focuses on developing individual students’ linguistic competence. These participants

attached equal importance to developing their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence as well.

Regardless of some difficulties identified in following the plots, participants in this study reported some achievements brought about by this self-directed learning pedagogy. The realism of ETD provides a wealth of contextualized linguistic and authentic cross-cultural information, listening comprehension and fluency practice beyond the classroom. Participants felt that watching subtitled English language programs helped result in various types of language acquisition. The most prominent impact occurred on their listening and speaking skills:

It's even better than travelling in the U.S. for a week. When I finished watching and studying three seasons of *Lost*, I felt my listening skill has been greatly improved. I'm now having fewer problems understanding my students' questions in different accents of English in class. (Zhang)

My students said my English has an American accent. They asked me if I learnt English in the States. I was so happy to hear this. [...] No, though I wish I had been abroad. They found it unbelievable for someone to speak English so well without ever having been to any English-speaking countries. (Liu)

ESL teaching to non-English majors in mainland China seems to include little exposure to and knowledge of varied English. Taking into account the rate at which English is spreading, two billion people, a third of the entire human population, will have a degree of facility in the English language by 2010-2015 (Graddol, 2006, p. 14). It is important that these Chinese language teachers have some prior knowledge of world Englishes. ETD provides an opportunity for exposure to different native speaker voices, slang, reduced speeches, stress, accents, and dialects. In addition, the study participants argued that they have developed a sense of awareness of the linguistic features of English:

I think it's because I have heard "truth", "thank", "think", "through" so many times that I find the [θ] sound isn't so odd to me anymore. I can easily pronounce [θ] now. And I can also identify anybody who's not making a correct sound. (Jiang)

Besides the increase in linguistic awareness, participants also reported some improvements in confidence and fluency. The language of ETD is rich in meaning-focused and formulaic language (such as lexical phrases, idioms, collocations), which can help them acquire an automatic fluency. For instance, Fu gave some examples:

I have a better understanding of many English words that I had learnt before. I feel more comfortable in using them now. I can remember many useful expressions, for example, "I see what you mean but...", "Would you mind if I...", "You've got to be kidding me." I'm also getting fluent somehow. (Fu)

The growth of ESL learners' L2 acquisition requires voluminous experience with rich and natural input, because the meaning of a word cannot be fully grasped unless the word is encountered in varied situational contexts. In addition to linguistic competence, participants argued that their knowledge of English and western culture was enriched:

It seems they use "hit" in many different ways. When they wanted the bartender to give them more wine, they said "hit me". I thought it meant "punch my face". [...] If they stop by some place, they say "hit the pharmacy". I think but for watching so many shows, I'd never know this. (Zhang)

They say "please" and "thank you" all the time, even to their kids. I learnt their way and I say "thank you" more than before. [...] It makes me sound well-educated and polite when I speak English. (Fu)

There was also an impact on their language identity. It seems a second language identity in English is enhanced, which serves as a reference to their Sinophone identity (McDonald, 2010). A sense of belonging is generated in the speaking of English:

English is not that alien or mysterious to me. But rather, it's a good reference for me to examine the difference between Chinese language and English. [...] I always hear my teachers say "those who know no foreign language know nothing of their mother tongue". I teach Chinese language to foreigners. If I don't understand the difference between Chinese culture and western culture, I won't be able to teach Chinese culture very well. [...] (Liu)

Scholars (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992) argued that foreign language education in a cross-cultural context can subvert an ESL learner's native identity. However, though English as a value-laden language might inevitably force its idiosyncratic values upon its learners, it also offers different perceptions that can liberate learners from the constraints of their "own culture and the habituated thinking paradigms in which we are trapped inescapably in the process of socialization" (Qu, 2011, p. 302). In such a rapidly globalizing world, people may need to be prepared to see and be able to handle misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication. Though ETD is mostly produced in the United States and the United Kingdom, it reflects current local social issues as well as international current affairs. As China's economy rises, two of the most popular ongoing ETDs recently portrayed a "Mandarin Chinese craze" in the United States.

I'm so surprised but proud to see them learning Chinese on the show [...] In *The Big Bang Theory*, season one, episode 17 (January 2009), Sheldon learned Mandarin. And in *Desperate Housewives*, Season five, episode 23 (May 2009), Tom Scavo registered himself on a Chinese course for potential business opportunities with China. (Chen)

As discussed earlier, this paper takes the four basic parameters as proposed by Benson (2011), to define the five participants' language learning beyond the classroom and summarises them as follows: (1) location: this is "out-of-school" and "post-school" English language learning; (2) formality: informal and independent; (3) pedagogy: a

self-instructed pedagogy was developed in a naturalistic way; and (4) locus of control: it's self-directed, where learners make most of the decisions about their learning themselves.

## **Conclusion**

This study described how a group of ESL learners learn English through watching English television drama at home in China. However, ETD can also offer endless opportunities for pedagogically sound activities to take place in the context of classroom language teaching. Some ESL teachers and educators seem to have realized that their students do not see ETD as purely a form of entertainment, but as a truly valuable learning resource. The recent interest in bringing natural conversation to ESL learning has led some scholars to recommend the use of English television dramas in the ESL classroom, especially for pragmatic language teaching and learning (Washburn, 2001). In two Chinese high schools in Beijing, Huang (2007) found that the sitcom *Friends* was positively accepted as teaching material by students, serving as a “new” and “fun” way to learn English, and helpful in achieving their future study goals other than exams. Similarly, in a selective college English course in China, Liu and Shen (2011) found that 95% of their students indicated they would continue to learn English through watching ETD, 75% reported improvement in their listening skills and 84% said they have a better understanding of western cultures. Provided that the potential pedagogical benefits of ETD are acknowledged by instructors, numerous examples of features that characterize natural conversation can be illustrated with a television show such as *Friends*.

All in all, this paper suggests that ESL teachers and educators should consider refining the self-directed ETD pedagogy for those who wish to learn English on their own. ESL learners could learn better if they had enough explicit initial input from their

teachers or from books, for instance, on how to choose the most suitable ETD, what they need to do before, during and after watching the show, and how to practice afterwards. Investigation of the benefits derived from using ETD in self-directed English language learning would seem an appropriate avenue for further research. It would be interesting to describe and document students' learning trajectory and arrive at a theory of language learning beyond the classroom. This study shows that English language learning does not end with leaving school, but continues in some way or other thereafter in a process of life-long learning (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 174). Learning English serves as an arena where out-of-school and post-school education takes place, and this needs to be further promoted and facilitated.

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