

Understanding the Out-of-class English Learning Choices of Students in Taiwan

Charles Allen Brown

Hokkaido University

*Research Faculty of International Media, Communication, and Tourism Studies,
Japan*

e-mail: bairenyuan@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Research has established that successful foreign language students often seek out opportunities to supplement their language studies with out-of-class language practice. Little is known, however, about the forms of out-of-class English studies in which successful English learners in Taiwan engage with the reasons for these particular choices being especially unclear. To address this gap, this project considered the out-of-class English learning choices of 79 university English majors in Taiwan. Findings based upon ethnographic interviews with these individuals indicate that they believed out-of-class English practice to be important due to the limitations associated with their formal language study. Despite this impetus, their choices of settings and interlocutors for English practice were constrained by beliefs about language circulating in the society, in particular social censure associated with English use in public places and with other Taiwanese. As a result, they tended to practice English in online venues, within the confines of the home, with like-minded peers, and with those perceived as foreigners. These results extend our understanding of out-of-class English study by addressing it as a socially-situated phenomenon, foregrounding the sorts of constraints that even highly-motivated language learners may face in their efforts to build their language proficiency.

Keywords: *EFL, Taiwan, sociolinguistics, learner autonomy, linguistic imperialism, lingua franca English*

1. Introduction

This project examines the out-of-class English learning choices of 79 university English majors in Taiwan. Research pertaining to the habits of individuals such as these who are successful in acquiring foreign languages suggests that they employ many strategies to enhance their language competencies, including seeking learning opportunities outside of the classroom. Investigations into the out-of-class learning strategies of students in EFL contexts have been heavily biased toward quantitative studies, however, relying upon research tools such as questionnaires. By drawing upon ethnographic interviews with a relatively large number of participants, the project discussed here creates a richer, more situated, and more emic picture of students' out-of-class English learning. Such an approach sheds light on how choices about out-of-class English learning – and by extension language learning success – represents a socially-situated phenomenon. Given the need to better understand what makes some language learners more successful than others, this research is especially warranted.

1.1 Out-of-class Language Practice and “Good” Language Learners

Researchers have long sought to understand why some language learners are so much more successful than others. Much of this research has focused on cognitive differences among learners in order to understand their success in language acquisition (Ellis, 2004). Another fruitful area of inquiry has been the language learning strategies employed by successful learners (Fewell, 2010). Rubin (1975), in some of the earliest work on this topic, detailed a number of important traits of such individuals including their tendency to seize upon a variety of opportunities – including out-of-class learning – to practice the target language. Benson (2001, p. 26) notes the prevalence of such out-of-class learning as well as learners' drive and creativity in identifying these opportunities. Nunan (2000) posits five steps of learner autonomy with the highest stage involving independent efforts on the part of the learner to make links between language inside and outside of the classroom. It is evident, then, that self-directed out-of-class learning can have an important role to play in language learner success and that this phenomenon is worthy of careful investigation.

Research about English language learners in East Asian contexts does confirm that out-of-class learning can form an important aspect of their study repertoire. This work reveals not only the creativity of learners in locating and exploiting language learning resources, but sheds some light upon how their beliefs and preferences about language learning impact their choices for out-of-class learning as well. Hyland (2004) investigated the out-of-class English learning of student teachers in Hong Kong. She found that learners preferred private, and receptive, target language learning experiences over more public ones. She theorized that this is because the private domain represents a less threatening learning environment. Nunan (2000), investigated the out-of-class learning of students and found that they appropriated a number of opportunities, such as some in Hong Kong who frequented popular tourist spots in the belief that such venues would present opportunities to interact with foreign speakers of English. Wu (2012) drew upon questionnaires in

investigating out-of-class learning among students in Hong Kong, relating these choices to motivation and perceptions of their value in terms of learning outcomes among students. In Japan, one project investigating out-of-class English learning among students documented the types of activities involved as well as postulating connections between choice of these activities and learner perceptions of their value in terms of fostering English learning (Doyle & Parrish, 2012).

The out-of-class learning choices of English students in Taiwan are poorly understood, however. This is despite the fact that English is important for students in Taiwan. The status of English is evidenced by the fact that the term “foreign language” typically is synonymous with English in school curricula in Taiwan (Chern, 2006). All students in Taiwan have been required to study English from the elementary school level through college since the mid-1990s (Chang, 2008). The fact that students engage in English study from elementary school and in many cases take part in English-intensive pre-schools and kindergartens also is indicative of its importance (Chang, 2016; Liao, 2000). English in Taiwan especially enjoys a strong utilitarian dimension. The demonstration of English competency is crucial in gaining admission to high school and university (Brown, 2016; Cheng, 2011). The language is also critical in job interviews, promotions, and on the job (Chang, 2004; Chen, 2003; Chen & Hsieh, 2011). This suggests the presence of a large number of individuals with some level of English competency in Taiwan with whom to potentially practice the language. On the other hand, Taiwan is decidedly an EFL context since English has no traditional role in the society. Other languages, most notably Mandarin Chinese, Taiwan Hokkien (also known as “Taiwanese”) and the Hakka languages meet the daily communicative needs of most people (Heylen, 2005). This implies opportunities for English practice “on the streets” may not be as plentiful as might be supposed and that students wishing to practice English out of class must actively locate the resources to do so.

Existing research about out-of-class English learning in Taiwan suggests that three main types of such learning may take place. The first is English cram school study. While extremely popular, the students in such for-pay venues are generally school-aged children enrolled by parents in an effort to provide an advantage in school and on university entrance exams (Ke, 2014). The second type of out-of-class English study entails out-of-class learning opportunities created by teachers. In particular, the use of technology by teachers in the creation of such out-of-class language learning venues in Taiwan is well documented (Kuo, 2010; Lee, Shen, & Tsai, 2010; Yang & Chen, 2014). The third type of out-of-class English learning are those opportunities created by learners themselves.

Research into out-of-class English study initiated by adult English learners on their own in Taiwan is scant, however. Shen, et al. (2005) employed questionnaires to learn about the out-of-class English study of college students in Taiwan. Among their findings, they discovered that such individuals employ a variety of out-of-class learning methods and that the use of such learning activities correlates with exam scores. Tsan (2008) drew upon similar methods to investigate the language learning strategies of English language learners in Taiwan, finding that English majors

employed a wider variety of strategies than their non-English-major counterparts. Such research does suggest that successful language learners in Taiwan may be more adept at drawing upon a variety of learning methods - including out-of-class learning - in their studies. What is missing thus far is a robust understanding of the reasons underlying these choices. As a response, in this project I sought to learn not only about the forms of out-of-class English practice in which successful learners engage but also the feelings of these learners themselves about appropriate forms of out-of-class English practice, the origins of such feelings, and how these feelings guide their construction of strategies for out-of-class English study. As a result, I address the following two research questions in this study.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the out-of-class activities chosen by successful English learners in Taiwan for English practice?
2. Why do these individuals choose these particular activities?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

Since the goal of this project is to understand the habits of successful language learners, I selected participants who were all present and former university English majors. In addition, the fact that I conducted face-to-face interviews with each participant in English meant that that participation in this research was predicated upon a high level of English competency. I recruited 79 participants for this study. These individuals ranged in age from 18 to 49.

2.2 Data Collection

In this study I sought to understand out-of-class learning activities of successful English learners with no a priori assumptions regarding the forms that such practice might take. This goal is reflected in my methodological choices. I relied primarily upon one-on-one, open-ended interviews in this project. Patton (1987) makes a distinction among three types of interviews depending on the degree of structure from informal conversation-type interviews having a loose structure to interviews that strictly follow a pre-determined series of questions. In the middle of this continuum are interviews employing a guide of topics to be discussed, but with no set series of questions to be strictly adhered to. Such an approach combines structure with flexibility, and I adopted it in this research. This allows for unanticipated results to emerge, fostering findings more closely aligned with issues of importance to participants themselves rather than those tending to accrue from the researcher's own a priori research agenda. This lends potency to the results.

Following the advice of Seidman (1998), in order to avoid merely eliciting generalizations that may be laden with ambiguity, and therefore of limited use, in interviews I sought to employ questions and follow-ups so as to elicit accounts of concrete events, experiences, and descriptions. The manner in which individuals talked about this concrete material was at least as important as the topics that they talked about since I learned much about beliefs implicit as individuals made sense of

their own socio-cultural worlds. Braun and Clarke (2006) speak to this in their dichotomization of themes manifest in interviews into semantic and latent forms. While the former entails attention to the actual content of what is said, they note that “a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (pp. 80-81). This echoes Mischler's (1986) contention that effective ethnographic-style interviewing reflects more than simply a question/answer “data dump” of truth. In the case of this project, such an approach allowed me to better understand the beliefs associated with forms of out-of-class English study.

Also, I avoided leading questions and those tending to frame responses in favor of more open questions. Where I was interested in being certain to “cover” specific topics, I withheld those questions until later in the interview to see if the issues would arise in the course of my talk with the participant. Such an approach is also advisable because issues emerging spontaneously from participants themselves with little framing on the part of the interviewer can be assumed to be more salient and meaningful to these individuals themselves. Overall, this strategy as a whole was valuable in this study revealing how participants' social lives, a broad realm, articulated with out-of-class English. I later transcribed these interviews as well as creating an index of this material for later data analysis. This “indexing” step involves creating a “tag” associated with sections of text having a common topic in order to generate an “inventory of meaning” as an initial step in later data analysis (Gläser, & Laudel, 2013).

2.3 Data Analysis

An inductive approach is at the heart of the data analysis method used in this project. Charmaz (2001) describes the inductive approach as a method in which “you start with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and develop progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain and to understand your data and to identify patterned relationships within it” (p. 335). This project is also informed by some aspects of the grounded theory approach. Such a method involves the inductive creation of codes or themes giving rise to emerging theory; these are then constantly compared with the data in a process of continual refinement (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To accomplish this refinement, this research drew upon the philosophy of *analytic induction* as a central feature of data analysis. Analytic Induction involves the creation of tentative, emerging theoretical explanations of phenomena in which dis-confirming instances in the data are continually sought in a process of incremental refinement in creating explanations to describe social reality (Erickson, 1985; Becker, 1998, p. 198-212). The result was a body of emerging general statements that were constantly refined by comparing them with the entire corpus of collected data.

3. Results

In the following section, I present the major forms of out-of-class English use/practice evidenced in this study along with a discussion of each. I begin, however, with a discussion of results pertaining to perceptions of the reasons for engaging in out-of-class English in order to frame what follows. Given the importance in this study of honoring the voices of individuals themselves, I provide a number of interview excerpts in the following sections. To best convey the voices of participants, I have not made changes in their language. It is understood that they are language learners and/or speakers of the “China English” variety of the language. In all cases I (“Chuck”) was the interviewer.

3.1 The Importance of out-of-class English

One finding of this study was simply the impression among participants of the importance of practicing English outside of class. Many participants saw out-of-class work with English as necessary for advanced language learning because the amount of language exposure associated with formal classes was not sufficient. No matter how good classes might be, most participants felt that they were not enough and accepted out-of-class learning as a personal responsibility. In this excerpt, the interviewee indicates these beliefs, noting both that the formal university language education was not sufficient and also that the burden of overcoming this limitation fell upon the learner herself.

Chuck : Now, when I asked you that question if you thought that your education prepared you to, um, use English well, before you answered you were shaking your head like that.

B : Nn:, um, I think, uh, I think our, our course in this department are not enough to prepare our future, so we have to, uh, prepare by my, by ourself. Un, to learn this language. Yes.

Chuck : Are you doing that?

B : Yes, I read Times every day and, listen English songs or watch [English television].

Chuck : Okay. You’re, you read the New York Times.

B : Yeah.

Chuck : Okay. So, you said you felt like the courses in the department were NOT enough to prepare you, um.

B : Un, un, yes.

Chuck : How do you feel about that?

B : Mm:, mm, I think that is the meaning for us now, but we have to [inaudible] onto the limit to find a chance by ourself, yeah.

Interestingly, some participants also blamed their own failure to use English outside of class for their perceived lack of language improvement.

In addition to formal classes representing an insufficient *amount* of target language contact, many participants felt that the *type* of language associated with formal classes was also problematic, representing another reason to pursue learning outside of formal educational contexts. They viewed formal English teaching as valorizing a

narrow subset of language competencies and used out-of-class learning to overcome the limitations of such an approach. In particular they perceived a focus on academic reading/writing and declarative grammatical knowledge at the expense of other language skills. Participants strongly attributed this focus to the need to prepare for high-stakes university entrance exams. Since these exams place a premium upon explicit grammatical knowledge and the modalities of reading and writing, the washback effect associated with them resulted in teachers emphasizing these areas of the epistemology of English. The feeling that their exposure to English in their formal educations was biased in this way was almost universal among participants. The following excerpt illustrates this perception.

- Chuck : Okay. Um, just considering your English education in Taiwan overall, do you think that your English education in Taiwan prepared you to use English well?
- Y : No.
- Chuck : Okay, can you explain that?
- Y : Uh, because I think they mainly focus on, uh, writing and reading. And they, uh, they don't teach, uh, teach us on oral speaking. So I think most student in Taiwan have, uh, uh, good reading ability, uh, good writing ability. But they don't have a good oral ability.

Overall, participants tended to see the classes as an important and necessary component of their English learning, but felt strongly that it was simply insufficient. To compensate, they actively sought out chances to practice listening and speaking. Having established the notion that individuals deemed out-of-class English to be important, I turn now to a discussion of the forms of out-of-class English practice in which they actually engaged.

3.2 English in Media Resources

Individuals in this study made extensive use of the Internet for English practice. One striking aspect about this use of Internet resources was that individuals often appropriated a wide variety of sites not specifically intended for language learning in order to practice their English. These included online forums and social sites such as Facebook, Amigo, or Chatroulette. Another resource used was Penpal World, a site for finding international email pals. Others cited the use of online multi-player games as an English learning resource. In the excerpt below, one participant discusses the appropriation of a dating site and a backpacking site as English learning resources.

- J : Um, I use many different web sites. They have some web site reading like we have some magazines. And if I want to make friends, I go to something like, um, dating website
- Chuck : Okay.
- J : It's not, it's, it's called dating website but not really date. You meet people from there and talk to them, exchange cultures and if one day you become very familiar with them, you become their good friends. You go to the country. You can live their house or

backpacker's web site. [inaudible], you know. Yeah, something like that.

Chuck : Backpackers web site?

J : You know if you are backpacker go to website and you will see lots of people from different kind of background. You talk to them and, uh, you will see the comments people give to them five star, four star are they good for you to make friends with them.

This appropriation and transformation is noteworthy because participants did not use English learning sites, but sought out those sites in which language was being used for “real world” goals. In many ways, this parallels the objectives of communicative language teaching and, in particular, the advocacy of employing authentic materials in pedagogy (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Participants also drew upon movies and radio broadcasts to practice English. One participant noted that as a young student she scripted out a request for an English-language radio call-in show and eventually followed through with calling to make her request. Viewing English-language television broadcasts and movies represented another common activity among these individuals. This popularity was related to the easy availability of these media. Many English-language television programs are broadcast in Taiwan. Access to such media is also facilitated by Internet platforms such as YouTube and peer-to-peer downloads among participants. Individuals often disabled the Chinese subtitles in these materials in order to focus on the spoken English. For many, this represented a challenging task. Individuals noted that the language used in such media as movies and television dramas diverged significantly from that encountered in their English classes, being less formal. One important theme in this study was the wish among participants to understand such language, an issue that I return to later. Several individuals expressed pride in their ability to understand such materials without subtitles as with the following participant who saw this ability as setting her apart from others in Taiwan.

Chuck : How do you feel that your knowledge of English helps you? In other words, you know, maybe some people don't know English but you do so do you have some advantages over them?

A : Yeah. They are. I mean, now I, my English, my major is English so now I have been learning English for ten, more than eight years. And now I can watch movies without subtitles.

In this interview, the participant touts her ability to understand English in the “natural” context of movies and television shows. She relates this to her long-term study of English. In this interview she noted that she had employed such media as learning materials for many years before attaining this ability.

3.3 English with Family Members

In addition to Internet resources, family members represented an additional avenue of out-of-class English practice. One participant and her mother employed English to conspire against the father who did not understand English. Another sometimes incorporated basic English into phone calls with her mother since the mother

understood the language somewhat. Others used English with siblings. In the excerpt below an individual notes that she and her sister sometimes engaged in English language play, in this case rhyming games.

- Chuck : At the time that you were a high school student learning English, did you use English outside of the class?
- K : Yeah.
- Chuck : When?
- K : Mm, sometimes with my sister.
- Chuck : Tell me about that.
- K : Hoh, um, it depends on our, uh, if we are, if we are happy [laughingly] we will use English. Um, or we will, like, uh, we will rhyme because we also listen to some English songs and
- Chuck : Uh-huh.
- K : and some English songs will rhyme, like *-sion*, *-sion*, *-sion*, so we will, when she say something ends with a *-sion* I will also say something with a *-sion*. [laughs slightly] Yeah.

This particular use of English articulates well with the body of research into the value of language play in language acquisition (Cook, 2000). In terms of pedagogy, such activities mirror teaching approaches such as the use of “jazz chants” to teach English. Such rhyming games, songs, and chats are seen by many as valuable because of their role in teaching the rhythm and grammar patterns of English as well as for their affective/motivational value (Graham, 1992).

Notably, use of English with parents depends in part upon the educational levels of the parents. In this study, the educational attainment of parents ranged from elementary school to those holding graduate degrees from institutions in English-speaking countries. Since the study of English prior to the 1990s began in junior high in Taiwan, only the more educated parents in this group would likely be able to use English with their children. This was confirmed by the reactions that I received when I asked participants whether their parents had ever taught them English. Some waxed at length about various ways in which their parents had used English with them while others simply viewed this question as absurd.

3.4 English with Peers

Other out-of-class English practice was associated with acquaintances outside of the family. One participant discussed her habit of practicing English over the phone with a close friend who was also an English major at the same university. They made phone calls explicitly for this purpose. Another participant discussed setting aside time to practice with his roommates. He noted that “we have English hour. We, we said from twelve to one o'clock, we have to speak English. We have to chat to each in English, like that.” In other cases, however, individuals in this study noted that their friends – even other English majors – resisted speaking in English. The following interview excerpt is indicative of this phenomenon as one participant discusses her limited chances to practice English speaking.

- L : Yeah. And, uh:, I don't have a chance to practice oral because my

- friends [laughs] don't want it [laughs].
- Chuck : Your friends don't what?
- L : Don't want to practice it.
- Chuck : Uh, are they=
- L : Because they think speaking Eng, English is very very tired.
- Chuck : Uh-huh.
- L : Make, makes them tired or something. They, they, they like to choose speak in Chinese.
- Chuck : Are they English majors?
- L : Yeah [laughs].

It is notable that this lack of opportunity to speak in such cases is due not to a lack of English ability on the part of peers since they were English majors. As a result, use of English with peers was actually more limited than might be expected among university English students given that they encountered classmates possessing high English ability on a daily basis.

3.5 English with Foreigners

Social norms regarding language use represented an important factor impacting the use of English with peers in this study. Most notably, individuals in this study indicated that social norms restricted their use of English in public. In particular, a number of individuals in this study avoided using English because they felt that doing so would be negatively viewed in Taiwan society. The following interview excerpt illustrates this phenomenon.

- Chuck : Did you try to speak English with your classmates, or?
- R : Mm. Mm, I maybe just a simple sentence because, because we, if we, if we speak English in our class maybe other classmates will think you are showing off. So I, I do not, uh, speak English many times because other people might think you're, uh, showing off.
- Chuck : They'll think you're showing off?
- R : Yeah. Mm. Because English is not our mother language. Yeah. They, they do have some negative impression.

In this excerpt, the participant fears attempting to use English because it will be viewed as “showing off” in Taiwan. A number of individuals noted this same feeling. Especially, many noted their own discomfort in using English with other Taiwanese people. This suggests the role not only of peer pressure but of personal identity in the use of English. One individual noted, for example, her joy in using English on a trip abroad. When I asked her to explain, the following exchange ensued.

- C : Yeah, because it not weird. Not weird using English in abroad.
- Chuck : What do you mean?
- C : In Taiwan it's very weird.
- Chuck : To use English?
- C : Yeah.
- Chuck : How 'bout right at this moment?

C : Because you're native English speaker. I should use English.

This excerpt also illustrates the belief that using English with “foreigners” represents an exception to the taboo against speaking English in public. These beliefs also relate to ideologies connecting perceptions of the use of English and race in Taiwan. Light-skinned individuals of European ancestry are strongly associated with English (Brown, 2016). As a result, use of English with such people in public venues is viewed as acceptable, expected, and even laudable.

Perceptions regarding the inadequacy of formal classroom English in Taiwan also drove efforts on the part of study participants to interact with native-speakers of English. They saw such interaction as a chance to engage in “real” English use as a remedy for the perceived narrow test-prep focus of formal English education in Taiwan. As a result, individuals in this study often sought out foreigners with whom to speak English. Some also noted that they were disappointed that their university was located in a rural area since there were few such foreigners with whom to interact.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study illustrates the manner in which choice of specific forms of out-of-class English practice were related to the social terrain inhabited by participants, a group of 79 present and former university English majors in Taiwan. In particular, three sets of factors impacting the actual out-of-class study taking place among English students in Taiwan can be induced from the results of this study. The first of these factors was the perception of need for out-of-class class study. Individuals especially felt that the test-prep focus of formal English education upon literacy and explicit, declarative grammatical knowledge left them with lower proficiency in speaking and listening and also left them with less control of informal language. As a result, they hoped for opportunities to especially practice these skills.

As present and former university English majors, the opportunities to engage in such practice would initially appear ample. Yet, practicing English was not simply a matter of striking up conversations in the target language with their English-speaking peers. These individuals actually navigated a treacherous socio-linguistic-ideological terrain fraught with the potential for interpersonal friction based upon English use. They deployed their social skills by discriminating carefully in selecting out-of-class practice in light of perceived social norms. Some felt “odd” when using English with fellow Taiwanese or they were themselves rejected when initiating English use among others holding such beliefs. Those using English in public places ran the risk of censure as clumsy “show offs” unless speaking with non-Asians.

As a result, actually locating willing interlocutors was a delicate social process, and individuals in this study had to be selective about English practice. Preferences for out-of-class English study in online venues, in the confines of the home, and among like-minded acquaintances represented a response to negative attitudes toward the use of English in public and, especially, among other Taiwanese interlocutors. Speaking with “foreigners” in addition to entailing a chance to interact with an

exalted linguistic model, also represented a socially-acceptable, socially-condoned, and even lauded use of English. Using English on the Internet or within the confines of the family home also represented “safe” forms of language practice in light of this social reality.

Clearly, whether as practitioners, administrators, or policy-makers, we ignore the socio-cultural milieu of our students at our own peril. For example, a teacher expecting students to practice English with peers but unaware of possible potent social norms associated with doing so may come away baffled and frustrated. On the other hand, these findings suggest forms of resistance to the kind of linguistic imperialism feared by some scholars in relation to the dominance English (Phillipson, 2008). The norms regarding use of English in public and – especially – with other Taiwanese would seem to impede English from usurping domains of language use already fulfilled by other codes in Taiwan society.

Still, the desire to speak with “foreigners” is indicative of the continuing power of ideologies regarding the rightful ownership of English. Critical applied linguists have sought to challenge such perceptions that the ownership of English is rightfully rooted in the traditional English-speaking societies – and in those groups most strongly associated with these locales, especially on the grounds that English as a true world language must be taught so as to validate and to prepare students to encounter all of its varieties (Canagarajah, 2006; Kachru, 2005). Yet, this study documents the ongoing potency of traditional beliefs about the ownership of English and indicates that scholars especially must redouble their efforts at forging strong links outside of the academy in order to educate individuals on such issues.

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About the Author:

Charles Allen Brown

Hokkaido University

Research Faculty of International Media, Communication, and Tourism Studies

Kita-17 Nishi-8

Kita-Ku, Sapporo

Japan, 060-0817

Phone: (81) 011-707-3711

e-mail: bairenyuan@yahoo.com