

Learning Autonomously: Contextualising Out-of-class English Language Learning

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This paper examines the out-of-class English language learning activities of student teachers in Hong Kong, using questionnaires, interviews and learner diaries. The study found that while many of the students devoted considerable time to studying and practising English outside the classroom, much of this time was spent on more receptive activities such as listening and reading, rather than speaking. Students had a tendency to focus on private rather than public activities which did not involve face-to-face contact. Two students' out-of-class learning activities and their feelings towards using in English are examined in more detail. It is suggested that the reasons for their avoidance involved both individual and social/political factors, principally the implications attached to using English and the fear of negative judgement. However, it is pointed out that despite their negative feelings about using English in public, these were successful English learners who actively sought opportunities to use English in their private domain. It is suggested that the private domain may be a valuable setting for out-of-class language learning, since it is both less threatening to identity and is also easier for the student to control.

Keywords: out-of-class, independent, language learning activities, autonomy, context, identity

Introduction

Recently there has been increasing stress placed on the importance of what is termed 'lifelong education' as a means of enhancing the learning of English. It has been emphasised that language learning is not limited to the classroom, but can take place at any time and in any place, including the home and the community. The use of out-of-class learning may vary from individual to individual. However, as Nunan's studies of successful language learners from a variety of contexts and language learning backgrounds demonstrate, 'the determination to apply their developing language skills outside the classroom' (Nunan, 1991: 175) can play a crucial role for learners in terms of their second language development.

Context is a very important consideration in any study investigating out-of-class learning. Norton and Toohey (2001: 311) suggest that learners of English participate in specific local contexts with specific practices which create English learning opportunities. They also consider that SLA theory has not focused enough on the effects of the specific power relations associated with a particular language on language acquisition and social interaction in that language and point out: 'the conditions under which language learners speak are often highly challenging, engaging their identities in complex and often contradictory ways' (2001: 312).

The Hong Kong context is an interesting and unusual one to study out-of class

language learning partly because of the unique and ambiguous position of the English language there. While Cantonese is the major language spoken as a first language by the majority (over 95%) of the population, English remains an official and very important language. However, its use by the majority of the population has been limited and the attitudes of this majority towards it for the last 20 years have been ambivalent to say the least (Pierson, 1987). While Cantonese is viewed as the language of solidarity and community ties (Cheung, 1985), English is seen as the language of success and is valued as a passport to higher education and better career prospects (So, 1989). It is also valued as an important global language and having a workforce with good English skills is considered as essential for Hong Kong to remain competitive internationally. However, the use of English can be interpreted as a marker of social distance and power (Lin, 1996) and it has been viewed as an imposed and colonial language, a language of superiority (Pennycook, 1997). This situation has become more complex with the return of Hong Kong to China. Thus when someone chooses to use English outside a formal learning environment, the choice carries implications with it. This was certainly the case in this study where students showed great awareness of the fact that the decision to carry out activities in English was not a straightforward choice, but one that carried particular meanings.

The Hong Kong government in the meantime continues to stress the importance of English in its language policy for education which encompasses 'bilingualism and trilingualism' (Li, 1999). While English is still seen as an important language it is also viewed as one that both students and their English teachers are deficient in. A fall in teachers' standards of English has been put forward in the media as a major reason for a perceived fall in students' English standard. Initiatives like the compulsory benchmarking of all English language teachers point to the lack of confidence that the government has in its teachers, while letters to the editor in the paper and discussions in other forums suggest this view is also held by many in the community.

However, the Hong Kong context remains one in which there appear to be many opportunities for using English. English is still widely used for legal procedures and also for internal written communication in many government and corporate contexts (Evans & Green, 2001). Tertiary education is largely conducted in English. Most signs and public documents are written in both languages, there are two English language newspapers and two (mainly English) foreign language television channels. There are radio stations using English and films can be seen in English at the cinema. If one chooses, there is no shortage of chances to use the English language on an everyday basis.

Given both these factors and the benchmarking push, we might expect teachers (especially trainee and young teachers) to be constantly seeking for opportunities to extend their own language repertoire. We would also expect them to demonstrate an awareness of the range of potential English language learning activities available to them in their specific context. However, we might also expect them to feel ambivalent about taking up these language options. To look more closely at this learning context, this paper examines the use made by both novice and more experienced teachers of informal opportunities to develop their English language ability through the resources and opportunities available

outside the formal classroom and considers how their out-of-class English use and practice is affected by the unique context.

Previous Research on Out-of-class Language Learning

Despite the need for studies into out-of-class learning (Benson, 2001: 181), only a few investigations of out-of-class learning strategies and activities have been carried out and many of these have been of second language students studying in the target language environment. Suh *et al.* (1999) investigated the out-of-class learning experiences of eight international students in the USA, and identified watching television, going to the cinema, listening to music and interacting with native speakers as their major out-of-class activities. Similar findings were reported by Brooks (1992).

In a different context, where the target language was a foreign language, Pickard (1996) looked at the out-of-class learning activities carried out by German students studying English in Germany. He found that the students tended to choose activities involving the receptive skills such as reading and listening, rather than the productive skills, but were also influenced by whether the activity was intrinsically interesting to them. Freeman (1999) compared language learning activities of a group of learners of French and a group of EFL learners, both at a British university. He found that both groups spent large amounts of time on out-of-class learning, but that the EFL students spent longer (88% of their language learning time) on these activities. Freeman suggested that this made out-of-class learning an aspect of language learning whose impact needed further investigation. He also pointed out that in order for the time and effort spent on learning the language outside the classroom to have a positive impact, there was a need for students to find the most effective ways to use this time.

Journals and diaries have been used to investigate out-of-class language learning, often these have been investigations of the researcher's own learning. Schmidt and Frota (1986) kept a journal of Schmidt's learning of Portuguese in the target language environment which showed how he used the environment to practise what he had learnt in class. Campbell (1996) carried out a diary study of her attempts to learn Spanish, again in the target language environment and made the point that socialising with both her teachers and others were very important factors in her language development. While these studies were both set in a quite different context to Hong Kong, they are interesting for their use of reflective writing in the form of diaries and journals, a methodology which will be adapted for this study.

There have been some studies within the Hong Kong context, Yap (1998) looked at the out-of-class use of English of 18 secondary school students and also found that students tended to engage in receptive rather than productive activities, including reading newspapers and watching English language television. They found it hard to create opportunities for speaking and writing and most out-of-class activities were restricted to activities taking place within the school environment. Littlewood and Lui (1996) looked at tertiary students' preferred language learning activities outside the classroom with similar findings; receptive rather than productive activities were more frequently carried out. Pill (2001) examined the out-of-class activities of a group of 15 adult learners and

concluded that although learners had access to a wide range of activities in English, they rarely interacted with native speakers. Spratt *et al.* (2002) also looked at the frequency of tertiary students' engagement with specific activities outside the classroom. They found that most of the activities that students reported engaging in related to communication and entertainment such as watching movies and television in English and using the internet.

One aspect that the studies on out-of-class learning have not really considered in detail is whether the students' attitudes to the English language and the attitudes of their communities may affect their creation and use of the opportunities for out-of-class learning. Yet this is an important consideration in a complex context like Hong Kong and is one that will be addressed in this paper.

Benson (2001: 62) divides out-of-class learning into three categories: self instruction, where learners deliberately plan to improve the target language and search out resources to help them do this, for example by using self study grammar books to improve their grammar; naturalistic language learning, where they learn mainly unintentionally through communication and interaction with the target language group, for example when engaged in discussions with English speaking classmates or colleagues; and self-directed naturalistic language learning, where learners create or seek out a language learning situation, but may not focus directly on learning the language while they are in that situation. For example, learners may subscribe to an English newspaper everyday with the underlying aim of improving their vocabulary, but may read it mainly for the news without undertaking any specific learning activities. As we shall see, the types of out-of-class learning carried by students in this study encompass all three of these categories, but focus mainly on the third category. The important thing is that they involve self-directed, active and purposeful involvement with the language outside a formal learning context.

One distinction that needs to be clarified is that between the two concepts of *learner strategy* and *learner activity*. While many of the activities discussed in this paper could be classified as learner *strategies*, it seems clearer to use the term *activities*. As Ellis (1994: 530) has pointed out, the concept of learner strategies lacks one clear definition. In fact Oxford's (1990) definition 'the specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques students use – often consciously – to improve their progress in apprehending, internalising and using the L2' can include many out-of-class activities. However, since this study seeks to look more broadly at all the out-of-class use of English, including activities carried out for pleasure as well as purposefully for learning, it was decided to use the term 'out-of-class activities'.

Methodology

Research questions

The research was conducted in a faculty of education in a university in Hong Kong and investigated trainee and practising English language teachers' reported out-of-class activities in English. Specifically the study considered the following questions:

- (1) What activities did the student teachers and practising teachers report using to support lifelong English language learning?

- (2) Which of these activities were reported to be most widely used?
- (3) Which activities did they believe were most helpful?
- (4) What beliefs did they have about using English outside the classroom?
- (5) Did these beliefs affect their out-of-class activities in English?

Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was devised to investigate students' reported out-of-class activities in English (see Appendix A). The questionnaire investigated a number of different areas including information on the students' language background and educational experiences in English, their attitudes towards using English in different situations, the part it played in their daily lives, the activities they reported engaging in English and the activities they found most useful for improving their English. There were 12 items in total including both closed ranking questions and open-ended questions. The categories and suggested activities used in the ranking questions were based on the findings of previous studies, especially those in the Hong Kong context (Littlewood & Lui, 1996; Pill, 2001; Yap, 1998).

The questionnaire was first piloted with a group of 16 full-time students from the previous year. Some of the questions and suggested activities were revised in the light of their responses and after informal discussions with individual students. It was then sent to all students enrolled for bachelor's degrees (B.Ed) and post-graduate certificates in education majoring in English Language (PCEd). This group consisted of full-time students and also part-time students who were practising teachers. The questionnaire was also administered to a group of full-time primary school teachers on a language enhancement course. A total of 304 questionnaires were given out and 238 were returned. Of these, ten questionnaires were completed by students who rated themselves as native English speakers and these were discounted. The remaining 228 were then used in the study, giving an overall response rate of 75%. A breakdown of the students completing the questionnaire is given below. It should be noted that while a large proportion of the respondents (81.3%) were female, this actually reflected the general gender balance of the courses.

Eight students from the cohort were interviewed to investigate their beliefs about out-of-class language learning and their reported use of language learning strategies and activities. These included four B.Ed students and four PCEd students. Two of the students from each programme were studying full-time, while the other two were already practising teachers studying part-time. They were selected to reflect a range of abilities and included two male and six female students. All students were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended prompts closely related to the research objectives (Cohen & Manion, 1994) and following

Table 1 Number of respondents in different categories of respondents

	<i>Bed Full-time</i>	<i>Bed Part-time</i>	<i>PCEd Full-time</i>	<i>PCEd Part-time</i>	<i>Primary Teachers</i>
No. of respondents	44	17	88	59	20
% of respondents	19.3	7.4	38.6	25.9	8.8

up some of the responses given on the questionnaires. The interview prompts focused on students' feelings about using English, the activities they carried out in English, and the activities they carried out purposefully to improve specific skills. The prompts are shown in Appendix B, but these served as a guide only. If students raised other interesting points or issues these were followed up. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The same students were also asked to keep a journal in which they detailed their exposure to English and the activities they undertook in English during each day, including any actions they did to maintain/develop their English skills and their reflections on these experiences, thus providing retrospective accounts of their independent language learning and enhancement activities and information about the opportunities available to them to extend their exposure to the English language. Diaries and journals are considered to be an important way of obtaining information about students' introspective processes which would otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher (Bailey, 1990; Nunan, 1992). To assist the writing of the journal, students were given specific guidelines (see Figure 1) and asked to write at least one page in their journal each day for a week.

Journal instructions

In this exercise book I would like you to keep a journal for one week.

Please follow these instructions

Please write in your journal each evening for one week about your use of English and exposure to English during the day and any activities you did to improve your English. The following guidelines may help you when writing each day, but you can add any extra information you want:

Exposure to and use of English

Record the times, places and situations where you heard English or spoke in English.

Record all the times, places and situations where you read or wrote in English.

Note down the people you used English with and why you used English.

Activities to improve English

Note down any activities you did which you think could have improved or extended your English (for example if you learnt a new word when reading the newspaper).

Note down any activities you did purposefully to improve your English. How did you carry out these activities? Do you think they were effective? Why / why not?

Reflection on use of English

Briefly write about any feelings you had when using English today and reflect on your use of English during the day.

Figure 1 Journal instructions

Four of the eight students (two full-time BEd students and two part-time PCEd students) completed their journals, with responses varying from two to seven A4 pages which were then analysed by repeated reading and underlining, looking for significant patterns and events.

Findings

The role of English in the students' lives outside the classroom

Despite the fact that these students were either planning to be English teachers or were English teachers already, not all of them regarded the English language as playing an extremely important role in their daily lives outside the classroom. While 16.7% viewed it as very important, using it every day in many contexts, nearly 40% said that it was not very important and they only used it occasionally (see Table 2).

Table 2 How important is English in your daily life outside the classroom?

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Very important: I use it frequently every day in many contexts</i>	<i>Important: I often use it in different situations</i>	<i>Not very important: I only use it occasionally</i>	<i>Not important at all: I never use it outside the classroom</i>	<i>Total</i>
No. of respondents	38	94	91	5	228
% of respondents	16.7	41.2	39.9	2.2	100

Thus a considerable number of the students appeared either to be unmotivated or unable to find many opportunities to use and practise their English outside their study or school environment, even though 60.5% of the students regarded their English as either weak or only fair and 96.5% felt that they needed more practice and improvement as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Current level of English

<i>Statements</i>	<i>My English is weak and I need to improve it considerably</i>	<i>My English is fair, but I still have a lot to learn</i>	<i>My English is good, but there is still some room for improvement</i>	<i>My English is near native speaker and I don't think I need to develop it further</i>	<i>Total</i>
No. of respondents	13	125	82	8	228
% of respondents	5.7	54.8	36.0	3.5	100

Activities carried out to support lifelong English language learning

Respondents were asked about the frequency with which they carried out various activities in English. It can be seen from Table 4 that the most common

Table 4 The frequency of activities carried out in English

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Average score</i>
1. Write emails	1.5
2. Read academic books and articles	1.8
3. Surf the internet	1.8
4. Watch videos/DVDs/VCDs	2.2
5. Watch TV programmes	2.5
6. Read newspapers and magazines	2.5
7. Listen to songs	2.5
8. Speak with colleagues/fellow students	2.6
9. Read novels	2.8
10. Attend meetings	3.1
11. Listen to the radio	3.5
12. Speak with friends	3.5
13. Talk on the phone	3.6
14. Talk to people in shops	3.8
15. Speak with family members	4.1

1 = very often – 5 = never

activities did not involve face-to-face interaction. Students mentioned writing emails, reading academic books and surfing the net as their most common activities. Other activities included watching videos, reading newspapers, watching TV programmes and listening to songs. Students did not read outside their study area as much as one might expect and although they mentioned speaking to students and colleagues in English as a fairly common activity, they rarely found opportunities to speak in English outside their work or study environment.

The interviews suggested that speaking in English was confined to environments where it was sanctioned by the demands of an external body such as the university or a principal. English was otherwise avoided due to the negative connotations its use implied and the possible threat its use might bring to other people's face:

Many people think that English is a more superior language than Chinese, and if you are speaking English to a Cantonese speaker, they may think that oh you are showing off your English. (Betty, full-time B.Ed student)

Of course I won't initiate to speak in English, because otherwise like the people would feel that I am proud or something. (Harriet, part-time PCEd student)

If the atmosphere around us allowed us to speak more English, I'd wish to, to use more English outside classroom,. but I cannot, it's not that easy to have this kind of atmosphere in Hong Kong . . . Because people may think it is you, you want to look superior, you want to look very, very competent in using English, and that's why you're speaking English. But I don't have any

intention to do that, but I would feel that maybe many people may think I am so arrogant, if I speak in English . . . so we rarely use it. (Jackie, full-time PCEd student)

I think it's easier or maybe comfortable when we use English outside Hong Kong than in Hong Kong. When we were in England, natural to use English . . . but when I am talking to my Chinese friends, then I don't think it is comfortable or natural. (Marianne, part-time PCEd student)

The comments above reinforce the link between personal identity or conceptions of self and the language used. In a self-directed context, this can clearly have an impact on the selection of the activities to be undertaken.

Activities found to be most helpful for improving English

When asked to rate the usefulness of these various activities for improving their English, students rated activities associated with reading as most useful including reading newspapers and magazines, academic books and novels (see Table 5).

It is interesting that although writing emails was ranked as the most common activity carried out in English (see Table 4), it was ranked much lower in terms of usefulness for improving students' English. In the interviews most of the students discounted writing emails as a useful English learning activity. They suggested that they wrote emails in English because it was quicker and easier than using Chinese and the language they used was 'not real English but ICQ' and would therefore not be useful for improving their written English.

In an open-ended question, students were also asked to note down any activities they did purposefully and regularly with the specific aim of improving their

Table 5 Perceived helpfulness of activities

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
1. Read newspapers and magazines	1.6
2. Read academic books and articles	1.7
3. Watch TV programmes	1.8
4. Speak with colleagues/ fellow students	1.8
5. Read novels	1.9
6. Watch videos/DVDs/VCDs	2.0
7. Listen to the radio	2.2
8. Write emails	2.2
9. Listen to songs	2.3
10. Surf the internet	2.3
11. Speak with friends	2.4
12. Attend meetings	2.7
13. Talk on the phone	2.9
14. Talk to people in shops	3.1
15. Speak with family members	3.3

1 = very helpful – 5 = not helpful at all

English. A total of 207 responses were noted by students. The most common of these related to listening improvement and included watching television, videos and VCDs and listening to songs and the radio. These activities were reported by 117 of the students. The next most often reported activities related to reading and included reading newspapers and magazines and novels and academic articles. A total of 73 reported doing these activities in a conscious effort to improve their language while nine other students reported that they read to consciously learn vocabulary, underlining words and looking them up and in some cases writing them in a notebook. Only 17 students reported undertaking activities to try to improve their speaking, including speaking to colleagues and native English speakers in English and four students said they had joined clubs in an attempt to be in an English speaking environment. Eleven reported engaging in writing activities including writing articles and emails in English and keeping a journal in English, and seven said that they regularly did grammar exercises from self-study grammar books.

Other activities reported by individual students included 'making a conscious effort to think in English', 'trying to notice and jot down sentence structure patterns while reading', 'talking to myself in English when alone' and 'reading the newspaper aloud to practise my oral English'.

It seems that while the students were aware of many potential ways they could learn outside the classroom, they had a tendency to focus on those activities which did not involve face-to-face contact, what one could term *private* rather than *public* activities; using language in their own private domain rather than the public domain. This differentiation between public and private stance towards language has been discussed by Pennington (1994: 85) who points out that research has suggested that there are differences in the degree to which groups identify with in-group values in public and intimate settings. The students here may have felt that while their outward public stance should be to show solidarity with their own group, and use Chinese, in private more affinity with and use of English could be admitted to. This attitude could present a serious barrier to out-of-class learning.

Students were also asked whether there were any activities they felt they could do to improve their English, but did not do and were asked why they did not do these. Again private, receptive activities were most often identified. Fifty-four students mentioned reading newspapers, novels or academic articles and learning vocabulary through reading. Their reasons for not doing these activities related to either time management or a lack of interest. Several pointed out that they had limited free time and reading in a second language took longer, therefore they preferred Chinese newspapers and novels for both information and entertainment. Twenty-one students suggested that they could listen to the radio or watch TV in English, but said they did not do this because again they saw these as potentially relaxing activities, which would lose their enjoyment factor because they were harder to do in a second language.

Thirty-one students mentioned that they felt they should try to speak more in English, especially to native speakers and the full-time teachers in 11 cases mentioned the native English teacher (NET) in their schools as a potential conversation partner. The reasons they gave for not doing this pointed to the lack of chances they had to find such conversation partners and again to the perceived

awkwardness of speaking in English. For example, one student mentioned that speaking to the native English teacher in her school seemed unnatural: 'I can only talk to her for a short time and it's not rewarding because we have no common topics'. Other students said they had considered getting their Cantonese classmates or colleagues to talk to them in English, but rejected this for similar reasons to the ones discussed above, it made them feel 'strange', 'awkward' and 'embarrassed'.

In general the students recognised a wide range of opportunities to develop their English skills in the local environment, but failed to take them up because of a variety of factors including the pressure of time and the perception that the activities would be more relaxing and enjoyable in the mother tongue. They also felt there were also a lack of opportunities to develop their oral skills in public in the local environment and were not motivated to try to enlarge on these due to negative feelings about using English in public contexts, especially if their potential conversation partners were Cantonese speaking.

The Case Studies

In order to investigate the students' contact with English and their interactions using English in a more in-depth manner, interviews were carried out with the eight case study students and they were asked to keep a journal for a week detailing their use of English and contact with English each day. They were also asked to write a short reflection each day on their use of English during that day and the extent to which the activities might have contributed to their development in English. The discussion here will focus on four of these students.

Betty: 'Reading can really improve my English'

Betty was a full-time student in her second year of study for a B.Ed in English Language Education. She came from a Cantonese language background and neither of her parents spoke any English, but she had studied using the medium of English since kindergarten. She felt quite confident of her English level: 'I can express myself through both speaking and writing', but still felt she 'had further to go' in terms of her English development.

Betty considered that she divided her time between English and Chinese about 50:50 and identified two main public settings where she used English each day; these were both work rather than out-of-work contexts: at the university in her classes and with her private students. She also used English privately at home when studying, for surfing the internet, watching English TV series and reading novels and the newspaper. Many of these home-based activities were consciously carried out to improve her English and she also enjoyed them:

Yes, because I am going to be an English teacher, so I want to improve my English. So, maybe I will, when I watch TV, I'll try to switch to the English channel, and I'll try to read more English books . . . There are some readings that I need to read for the classes, they are all in English, and I like to read fiction, English fiction.

She felt that this reading was the most useful activity she had done outside the classroom to improve her English, since it exposed her to new vocabulary and

sentence structures. She described an episode that happened when she was a schoolgirl which made her aware of the power of reading for her English language development:

because I, one, in summer holiday, I spent a lot of time reading books, English books, day and night, and then I gradually I can, I could think in English. I dreamt in English. Sometimes you can remember the dream. Yes, I remember I was reading Harry Potter, the four series . . . I spent day and night reading and reading, and then I suddenly, I found that I dreamt in English one night. . . . so I think reading can really improve my English.

Her reading habits were developed when she was young, but only in Chinese; later she discovered that reading in English could also be interesting:

And then when I was in, in secondary school, I read a very, very interesting English story and so I started reading English books. I like reading in English because I like the story. I like very exciting and detective stories, so I will keep reading.

Betty was a very self-directed and purposeful out-of-class learner. She was also consciously trying to improve both her listening skills and writing skills, focusing on her listening skills while watching TV and using a specific strategy: 'When I try to watch TV, I will try not to look at the subtitles and try to get the meaning.' She had also agreed to serve as a columnist in the youth section of the local English language newspaper, writing an article every week. She believed this had a significant effect on her writing.

I found that my writing has improved since I do this once a week. Okay, after I have written it, it will be corrected by some professors in the faculty and the editor. So, I will try to get the final version and see what they have corrected . . . so I will see what's the problem and I will try to improve it next time . . . Yes, and I have become quicker in writing in English because in the past, I need a lot of time to organise and think in English and now I have become quicker.

Betty had analysed her own oral production and come to the conclusion that this was an area of weakness:

Because I always hesitate before I speak and my intonation sound is not so good, I think my pitch sounds quite flat and, yes, I made some grammatical mistakes in my speech because I was not aware of it. I think I need to improve in this area.

To improve she had thought of asking her classmates to talk in English with her at lunch time and in their free time, but she felt unable to do so as it would be 'uncomfortable and a kind of showing off'.

Betty's diary (see Table 6) provided further evidence and insights to back up her claims during her interview. It showed that she spent around 49 hours using English during the week. Most of this time was either time spent in class or reading and writing for assignments, or interacting with her private student, but there were also five hours of home-based activity, including watching television, listening to English songs, reading fiction and reading the newspaper.

Table 6 Betty's weekly contact with English (summarised from her diary)

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activities carried out in English</i>	<i>Reflections and notes</i>
Day 1 Thursday	4 hours of interaction in university classes. 1½ hours interaction with private student 6 hours reading and writing and researching on the internet for an assignment	Classes today were a totally English speaking environment, I think my spoken English is getting more fluent and I am more confident in speaking
Day 2 Friday	1 hour relaxation listening to English songs 12 hours (11–11) reading and writing for assignment	I have been writing in English for nearly the whole day. I found it becomes easier for me to express myself in English now after writing several thousand words
Day 3 Saturday	½ hour oral English practice with private student. ½ hour reading English newspaper 8 hours doing assignment, reading and writing in English	Reading the newspaper was not quite effective I forgot new words as I didn't write them down.
Day 4 Sunday	12 hours writing and reading for assignment	Began to think in English after using it for so long today
Day 5 Tuesday	2 hours speaking and listening in class. 1 hour reading in the evening for leisure (but looking up words at times) ½ hour writing emails	I used English in a relaxed and enjoyable way as I chatted with my group mates. Later I read English for leisure, not for homework
Day 6 Wednesday	1 hour with private student 1 hour watching English TV ½ hour reading for pleasure	Another day using English for enjoyment, not study. I think my English would improve better if I used it more in everyday life
Day 7 Thursday	½ hour talking in English on the phone to non Cantonese speaking friend 2 ½ hours writing an article for local English newspaper	I wrote for the newspaper with the purpose to improve my writing skills. After several months of being a columnist, my writing skills have improved. I can write more clearly and finish more quickly

Marianne: 'Learning English is a non-stop process'

Marianne was a part-time PCEd student who had been teaching in a local secondary school for four years. She had studied using the medium of English since secondary school. She considered English to be an important aspect of her life and was positive about learning English: 'The feeling to English is good, because if I got improvement in English, I am proud of it.'

While she was confident of her English level: 'I think I'm able to communicate clearly, whenever it's spoken or written,' she still had plans to improve her writing, extend her vocabulary and develop her fluency, strongly believing that learning English was a 'non stop process'.

Marianne considered that she used English for speaking mainly in class with her students. She rarely spoke in English outside the classroom except in staff meetings when the native English teacher attended.

In this situation, I think that's very natural even I talk to a non-native speaker in English, but . . . if it is not in that context, it seems quite strange usually to talk to a Chinese in English . . . I think it's unnatural.

Marianne calculated that about 30% of her time outside the classroom was spent using English. This included activities done for practice and just as relaxation. She listened regularly to the television and radio in English and she chose an English newspaper rather than a Chinese one as a conscious way of improving her English. She also read novels in English partly for enjoyment but the idea that she might also be improving her language remained in her mind:

So for TV programmes, I think it's for pleasure. For reading newspaper, it's conscious decision for practising English. And for listening radio, I think it's half and half, I enjoy listening, the process. And the movies of course is to improve my English . . . Reading? I think it's for both things.

She felt that writing emails in English was another way to improve her English. In addition she was writing a diary in English as a 'kind of practice'.

During the week she kept her learning diary, she spent about 22 hours on activities in English, divided equally between hours related to her studies and leisure activities such as reading, watching television and using the internet. As we can see in Table 7, her reflections suggested that these activities were carried out purposefully and that her main focus was vocabulary building.

Marianne suggested that reading was the major out-of-class activity she carried out and linked this preference to the ease of access and control for this activity: 'I'll spend most of the time on reading, and it's easier for me to control this activity'. She believed the range of activities she was carrying out was improving her language:

I see the improvement . . . for vocabulary, so when you read the newspaper or magazines, you find that okay, now you can, you don't have to use the dictionary all the time . . . I think the things I have done at least, the reading, the listening to the radio, the watching television, those are some of the things that have maintained my level.

The two cases discussed above demonstrate trainee teachers actively engaged in improving their language using a range of out-of-class learning activities, but focusing on those which are in the private domain. Two possible reasons for this have been suggested. One is the connotation attached to using English among Cantonese speakers in the public domain. The other is the relative ease of both access to material and also the degree of control which can be exerted over the learning process. In other words, by restricting their use of English to this domain, the students exposed themselves to fewer risks, either interpersonally or through the criticisms of other teachers

However, there were other factors which had a great impact in out-of-class use of English, as can be seen in the case of Rosemary.

Table 7 Marianne's weekly contact with English (summarised from her diary)

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activities carried out in English</i>	<i>Reflections</i>
1 Monday	½ hour listening to the radio. ½ hour chatting to NET 1 hour teaching English to students 1 hour reading novel 1 hour reading local English newspaper 1½ hours on ICQ	Knowing more vocabulary didn't mean I could use the same amount of vocabulary. I lacked the chance of using the newly learnt vocabulary I read in the newspaper. Listening to the radio not only provided me a chance of practising, but also a way to learn more vocabulary. It seems to me that the terms I had heard from the radio news were more 'unforgettable'
2 Tuesday	1 hour teaching English to students 1 hour reading novel on train 1 hour watching TV ½ hour reading magazine 1 hour reading newspaper	Watching the English TV programme allowed me to have more understanding of the informal language used in daily conversation.
3 Wednesday	2 hours teaching in English ½ hour reading newspaper	Reading the newspaper is still an important vocabulary building activity for me because I see the words in context
4 Thursday	1 hour teaching in English 2 hour panel meeting in English ½ hour watching TV 1 hour reading newspaper ½ hour writing emails	Participating in a discussion gave me an opportunity to practise and polish the interaction skills.
5 Friday	½ hour listening to radio 2 hours teaching in English 1 hour marking in English	Listening to the radio I learnt more terms of current affairs, which I can re-use in the future
6 Saturday	½ hour listening to radio ½ hour talking to NET 1½ hours teaching 3 hours reading for assignment	My aim today again was vocabulary building through listening to the radio
7 Sunday	8 hours reading and writing in English for assignment.	Today, my main task was to write up my assignment. I would like to read the newspaper for pleasure, but I didn't do it at last.

Rosemary: 'I am an English teacher, supposed to be good at English'

Rosemary was a part-time PCEd student who studied using Chinese as a medium of instruction at school and had been teaching in a local secondary school for four years. She considered that around 30% of her time was spent using English, including teaching, reading and leisure activities especially watching TV. She always chose the English rather than the Chinese channels and watched a variety of programmes, especially documentaries and series. She also used English on the internet especially for emails and read both the

newspaper and novels, choosing English over Chinese for her nightly recreational reading.

She claimed that she felt quite confident about her English but was 'uncomfortable' about speaking in English. She worried about both her lack of practice and her reluctance to practise:

I think I really don't have lot of chances to speak outside the classroom . . . I know some teachers in other schools, they would use English even outside the classroom . . . But in our school, we don't use English. Even though the principal and also panel chair ask us to 'try to use English among your colleagues', we don't.

The reasons for this reluctance to use English in a public setting seemed to relate to two factors, firstly the belief we have already encountered that it was unnatural to use English in a Chinese setting, and secondly a fear of criticism, accentuated by her awareness that as an English teacher she was meant to provide a model of good English. Rosemary remembered how she once joined the Toast Master's Club to improve her spoken English

I really enjoy it . . . You know, I have trouble when speaking in front of a big audience, not students, the whole school when I need to speak in English, I feel a little bit uncomfortable.

She remembered giving a speech there and finding it a surprisingly easy experience, in contrast to her feelings about speaking in English at school:

I came out and talked about art, and then I talked about music. I felt comfortable because it's quite strange, because they don't know me. When they don't know me, I think I would feel comfortable when I use English. It's because of my profession, I am an English teacher, supposed to be good at English, and speaking English. Then when I went to the meeting, they didn't know me, that I am an English teacher, so I felt a bit comfortable.

It seems that Rosemary worried about people judging her as an English teacher and having high expectations. At the Toast Master's Club no one knew she was an English teacher and so she felt much more comfortable to speak in English. Her confidence had been eroded by her feeling of being judged on her public performance in the English language:

When people didn't know me I am an English teacher, they would think my English may be quite good as a Chinese speaker, a Cantonese speaker. I feel comfortable. So when I am using English in, in school, in front of the students and other teachers, I feel very uncomfortable . . . And also the principal always criticised us. He thinks our English, the English standards of our English teachers is not very good. He is a fluent speaker, quite good, I think quite good. But he always emphasised that 'I am not an English teacher and so my English is normal, but your English should be better'. So, it's quite difficult when we need to use English in front of him.

This incident is interesting because it re-emphasises the importance of considering contextual considerations when examining out-of-class learning. Factors like opportunities may be important, but they need to be considered in tandem

with other more complex factors like the student's view of the language and her personal identity and the student's view of what she says about herself to others by using English in certain situations. These feelings may override the desire to create practice opportunities.

A final example illustrates that the complexity of this and also the importance of the individual context of each student. One interviewee, Mary, differed from all the others by showing a great deal of enthusiasm for using English in public settings, even with other Cantonese speakers. Through the interview it emerged that this was because although she was Chinese and spoke fluent Cantonese, it was not her first language:

I started to learn Cantonese when I was eight, so my Cantonese accent is not fully Cantonese, so people may find that 'oh, you're not, you're not really a Hong Kong local person', so I was a bit embarrassed, and sometimes not willing to speak to people in Cantonese. But then I found that my English allowed me to improve, I mean it helps me to improve my confidence and it can help me to clear the barrier between me and other people. Maybe Hong Kong people or students will find that if you are able to speak in English or your English accent is English enough, then they will accept you or respect you more than if you speak in Cantonese which is not Cantonese enough for them.

For Mary the negative judgements of her Cantonese were a stronger factor than any uncomfortable feelings about showing superiority by using English. She received more acceptance and respect through using English rather than Cantonese. Again this illustrates the need for studies of out-of-class activities to be context-related. This does not just mean examining the local context, but extends to considering the student's personal context and personal construction of their identity.

Implications and Conclusions

Previous studies on out-of-class learning, especially in the Hong Kong context, have tended to focus on the fact that students favour 'passive' receptive activities for their out-of-class learning and have suggested various ways to get the students to engage more with the productive aspects of the language, especially speaking. However, without addressing contextual factors in which the language use is taking place, this is easier said than done. While students in this study suggested practical reasons for not conducting activities involving face-to-face interaction, the actual reasons for their avoidance may have been more complex and involved both individual and social/political factors.

As the discussion above has demonstrated, the students actually felt constrained when using English in public contexts for various reasons to do with their social identities, principally the implications attached to using English and the fear of being judged by a society prone to critical judgements of its English teachers.

Nonetheless it is worth bearing in mind that these were successful English learners. As a group of potential English teachers, they had all achieved fairly high levels of English and many were continuing to develop the language. Perhaps we tend to emphasise the public use of English as a means to improve

too much. These students used a variety of activities and learning strategies and had a good relationship with English in their private domain. English as we saw in Betty's case, was a rich source of entertainment and enjoyment, and through the medium of reading and writing for an audience she had developed and extended her language skills. Marianne rarely spoke in English, but had a focused self-learning programme to develop her vocabulary through reading and listening to the radio and television. The private domain may be a valuable setting for language learning and it is one which is both less threatening to both group and personal identity and is also easier for the student to control. Its value for out-of-class learning should not be underestimated.

While this study has focused on only one group of learners, it has implications which extend beyond this specific context, since it highlights the importance of considering not just opportunities for learning, but also students' attitudes and society's attitudes. These factors may inhibit or facilitate the taking up of specific learning activities in the second language. English is learnt in a variety of contexts and the meanings attached to using English outside the classroom vary within these contexts, so this is an important area for future studies of out-of-class learning to investigate.

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Appendix A: English Learning Activities Questionnaire

This survey is being carried out to investigate the types of strategies and activities used by PCEd and BEd students to improve their English language skills outside the classroom. All responses will remain anonymous. Please try to answer all the questions.

1. What is your first language? _____
2. What programme are you studying? (Please circle)

PCEd part-time
PCEd full-time
BEd full-time
BEd part-time
3. Please circle your gender.

Male	Female
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4. Please circle your age group.

18–25
26–30
31–35
36–40
41–45
> 45

5. Tick the boxes to indicate the medium(s) of instruction you experienced during your education.

	EMI	CMI
Primary		
Secondary		
University		

6. Circle the statement which best describes your current level of English

- a. My English is weak and I need to improve it considerably
- b. My English is reasonably good, but I still have a lot to learn
- c. My English is good, but there is still some room for improvement
- d. My English is near native speaker and I don't think I need to develop it further.

7. How important is English in your daily life outside the classroom?

- a. Very important: I use it frequently every day in many contexts
- b. Important: I often use it in different situations
- c. Not very important: I only use it occasionally
- d. Not important at all: I never use it outside the classroom.

8. How frequently do you carry out the following activities **in English**?

	<i>Very Often</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Some-times</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Watch TV programmes	1	2	3	4	5
Listen to the radio	1	2	3	4	5
Listen to songs	1	2	3	4	5
Read newspapers and magazines	1	2	3	4	5
Read academic books and articles	1	2	3	4	5
Read novels	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with colleagues/fellow students	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with friends	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with family members	1	2	3	4	5
Surf the internet	1	2	3	4	5
Watch videos/DVDs/VCDs	1	2	3	4	5
Talk to people in shops	1	2	3	4	5
Talk on the phone	1	2	3	4	5
Attend meetings	1	2	3	4	5
Write emails	1	2	3	4	5

9. Please indicate how **useful** you find these activities for improving your English.

	Very useful			Not useful at all	
	1	2	3	4	5
Watch TV programmes	1	2	3	4	5
Listen to the radio	1	2	3	4	5
Listen to songs	1	2	3	4	5
Read newspapers and magazines	1	2	3	4	5
Read academic books and articles	1	2	3	4	5
Read novels	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with colleagues/fellow students	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with friends	1	2	3	4	5
Speak with family members	1	2	3	4	5
Surf the internet	1	2	3	4	5
Watch videos/DVDs/VCDs	1	2	3	4	5
Talk to people in shops	1	2	3	4	5
Talk on the phone	1	2	3	4	5
Attend meetings	1	2	3	4	5
Write emails	1	2	3	4	5

10. Do you do any activities **specifically** to improve your skills in English?
Please circle:

Yes / No

If your answer is yes, what are these activities and how often do you do them?

11. Is there anything you think you should/could do to improve your English, but don't? If so:

(i) Please briefly indicate what this is.

(ii) Please briefly explain why you don't do this.

12. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly agree		Strongly disagree		
I use English everyday for a variety of social and work or academic purposes	1	2	3	4	5
I rarely use English outside a classroom setting	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable when I use English in a social setting	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable when I use English for work or academic purposes	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable when I use English with Cantonese speakers	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable when I use English with non-Cantonese speakers	1	2	3	4	5
I look for opportunities to use and improve my English in everyday life	1	2	3	4	5
I avoid using English except when it is really necessary	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for spending time to answer this questionnaire. Your co-operation is very much appreciated.

Appendix B: Interview Prompts

Personal details

- (i) First language/ language(s) spoken at home
- (ii) Programme
- (iii) Teaching experience (if relevant)
- (iv) Medium of Instruction at primary school /secondary school/ university

Feelings and beliefs about using English

- How important is English in your life?
- How confident do you feel about your English ability? Are there any specific areas that you would like to improve?
- Why do you want to improve your English?
- Do you ever use English with non-Cantonese speakers? Do you feel comfortable doing this? Why?
- Do you ever use English with Cantonese speakers? Do you feel comfortable doing this? Why?
- Do you feel comfortable when you use English for work/study-related reasons with non-Cantonese speakers? How about with Cantonese speakers? Why?
- Who do you mostly use English with? (colleagues/students, family friends, officials, etc.)
- Do you look for opportunities to use English or do you avoid it whenever possible? Why?

Activities carried out in English

- What percentage of time do you spend using English in a typical week including time at home, at work/university, and elsewhere? (Just give a rough estimate)
- In what kinds of situations do you find that you use English rather than Cantonese?
- What activities do you usually carry out in English?
- Which of the activities you have mentioned do you find most useful for improving and extending your English?

Activities carried out specifically to improve English

- Which of the above activities do you do with the main aim of improving your English?
- Do you purposefully engage in any particular activities to try to improve your oral skills/listening skills/ reading skills/writing skills/vocabulary /grammar in English outside the classroom? If yes, what are they?
- Are there any other activities you are currently doing or have done in the past to improve your English skills? What are these?
- If a friend told you that he/she wanted to find ways to improve his/her English without enrolling for a course, what activities would you advise him/her to do? Do you do any of these activities yourself? Why / why not?