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## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Bringing fun and meaning into grammar learning: A case study of a secondary-level EFL class in Hong Kong

Congchao Hua<sup>1</sup> and Bin Li<sup>2\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Popular culture materials are generally believed to have positive effects on L2 learning. This study examined the effectiveness of popular culture materials in enhancing Hong Kong EFL students' grammar learning. In a quasi-experimental design, 20 secondary school students were taught grammar in two ways: with the use of popular culture materials, and without using such materials. The participants were given tests prior to and after the grammar lessons to measure their gains from the two teaching methods and to compare such gains, if any. A semi-structured interview was conducted afterwards to gather EFL learners' views on the use of the new instructional materials in grammar class. Our findings in pre/post tests showed that the adoption of popular culture materials had improved the participants' performance on the target grammar items. Thus, our selected materials proved an effective tool to help the EFL learners with their grammar learning. Findings from the interview confirmed that the participants were generally positive and supportive towards the use of popular culture materials in the grammar class, but they also expressed necessity of traditional approaches to grammar teaching.

**Subjects:** Education; Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning

**Keywords:** popular culture materials; EFL Grammar teaching; secondary-level EFL learners in Hong Kong; learning outcome; learner attitude

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study investigated the use of popular culture materials in teaching English grammar in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The results of our quasi-experiment reveal that these materials facilitated the learners' acquisition of the target grammar items. This may indicate that popular culture materials are an effective and fun tool to enhance learners' motivation and therefore helpful to their grammar learning. In addition, the results of our structured interview show that the learners were generally positive and supportive towards the use of diverse and meaningful materials in the English grammar class. However, to cater to learners of different proficiency levels and to their expectation of language learning, it is necessary and more effective to integrate the traditional approaches such as pattern drilling in grammar teaching.

## 1. Introduction

English, as an official language in Hong Kong, is taught as a compulsory course in secondary schools (Luk, 2012). However, EFL learners in Hong Kong are generally believed to lack self-motivation in learning English (Cheung, 2001). One of the reasons for their low motivation is that textbooks serve as the major reference and resource for English learning, and their exposure to the authentic usage of the English language and to the English culture is often limited because Cantonese is “the key language for oral communication in many settings in Hong Kong” and “English remains an important language of the workplace, especially for written communication” (Bacon-Shone, Bolton, & Luke, 2015, p. 7). In view of this disadvantage, “Learning English through Popular Culture” was added as an elective module to the New Senior Secondary English Language Curriculum and the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide in 2009 by the Education Bureau, and has been promoted in secondary classrooms ever since (DeCoursey, 2012; Luk, 2012; Luk & Lin, 2015; Man & Poon, 2009).

The adoption of popular culture materials in the second language (L2) classroom is generally proven to have positive impacts on L2 learning (e.g. Fukunaga, 2006; Kelsen, 2009; Man & Poon, 2009). However, empirical evidence for the learning outcomes is still lacking (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012). To address this research gap, our research aimed at examining the effectiveness of “learning English through popular culture” in secondary-level EFL learning (grammar learning in particular) in Hong Kong. Hopefully, our findings may provide insights into the use of popular culture materials in similar L2 contexts.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *The use of popular culture materials in the L2 class*

Although popular culture is defined differently (cf. Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Browne & Wada, 1998) and takes various forms, researchers in the field of L2 pedagogy generally believe that the benefits of popular culture materials are multifaceted: they may help language learners acquire L2 literacy, improve their L2 linguistic competence and foster their motivation.

Popular culture materials like music, movies, newspapers, magazines and cartoons support L2 literacy learning (Gilles, Andre, Dye, & Pfannenstiel, 1998; Rucynski, 2011), as such materials tend to appeal to young language learners and may help engage them in learning the target culture (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012; Fukunaga, 2006; Rucynski, 2011).

Besides, materials of popular culture can serve as an ideal means for L2 learning (Cady, 1995; DeCoursey, 2012; Domoney & Harris, 1993; Fukunaga, 2006; Iwasak, 2009). On the one hand, as popular cultures are appealing in both content and form (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012), such materials may help L2 learners notice the linguistic features of the target language (Ellis, 1999), including pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (Fukunaga, 2006). On the other hand, popular culture materials provide L2 learners with exposure to real-life language in concrete situations (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Kilickaya, 2004; Nikitina, 2011). As a result, such materials challenge the traditional, static descriptions of the target language (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012) and may help learners learn to use the L2 linguistic forms in specific contexts (Fukunaga, 2006).

Moreover, the most widely discussed benefit of using popular culture materials is that they may motivate L2 learners (Chen & Chen, 2009; Cheung, 2001; Domoney & Harris, 1993; White, 1985). As “a hook to draw students’ attention” (Fukunaga, 2006, p. 220), popular culture materials are believed to increase L2 learners’ intrinsic (Domoney & Harris, 1993; Robinson, 2011) and extrinsic motivations (Cheung, 2001), for such materials would allow them to learn the target language on the basis of their “daily experience, personal values, attitudes and feelings” (Cheung, 2001, p. 60). Popular culture materials are considered to be especially effective in motivating learners who lack interest in L2 learning (Kilickaya, 2004) or are not used to unauthentic materials (Iwasak, 2009).

Despite the large body of opinion that popular culture materials are beneficial to L2 teaching and learning, empirical evidence is limited. The most researched popular culture materials adopted in the L2 class are songs (e.g. Chen & Chen, 2009; Domoney & Harris, 1993; Kerekes, 2015; Luo, 2014; Man & Poon, 2009; Moi, 1994; Robinson, 2011; Saricoban & Metin, 2000) and videos (e.g. Fukunaga, 2006; Iwasak, 2009; Kelsen, 2009; Rucynski, 2011; Tatsuki, 2000), both of which have been proven to have positive effects on L2 learners such as focusing learners' attention and increasing their commitment to learning (Failoni, 1993; Fukunaga, 2006), improving learners' motivation (Kelsen, 2009; Moi, 1994; Robinson, 2011), stimulating production (Tatsuki, 2000), increasing learners' confidence (Luo, 2014) and improving learners' L2 proficiency (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). However, there is a general lack of empirical research on the learning outcomes brought about by the use of popular culture materials (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012).

## **2.2. L2 grammar teaching: traditional approach and new trends**

Although researchers (e.g. Krashen, 1983) in favour of naturalistic language learning are against grammar teaching, many other researchers (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 1991; Ellis, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2014; Massia, 2012; Swan, 2006) feel the necessity of explicit L2 grammar teaching. According to Ellis (2006), grammar teaching has always been and will continue to be at the centre of L2 teaching.

The importance of EFL grammar teaching is confirmed by both teachers (Debata, 2013; Zhang, 2009) and learners (Ciechanowski, 2009; Wang, 2010). For a long time, secondary school EFL teachers in Hong Kong have been teaching grammar adopting the traditional PPP approach (presentation, practice, production) (Carless, 2007). In such classes, teachers tend to teach grammatical rules directly and deductively (Andrews, 2003; Tang, 2004) and learners thus learn grammatical forms in a sequential order, and consolidate such grammatical knowledge by doing drill-like activities and large amounts of exercises in workbooks (Wan, 1996).

This approach of grammar teaching is not unique to the Hong Kong EFL context. It also prevails in the EFL classes in many other contexts (Adair-Hauck, Donato, & Cumo-Johanssen, 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 2014; Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). It is rather common that a majority of grammar teachers are addicted to the deductive approach (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012) and view grammar teaching as passive transmission of knowledge about trivial aspects of the target language (Adair-Hauck et al., 2005); hence, students are deprived of the chance to establish their identities or express their feelings in the learning process (Larsen-Freeman, 2014). The reasons for the popularity of the traditional drilling approach is that it makes teachers feel more confident and comfortable (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012), saves time and provides learners with sufficient chance for practice (Richards & Reppen, 2014), and helps learners pass exams (Carless, 2007; Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). However, one serious problem with this prevailing approach is that little attention is paid to developing EFL learners' grammatical ability (Richards & Reppen, 2014). Consequently, L2 learners generally find it hard to apply the grammatical knowledge they have learned in class to real-life communication.

To get out of this dilemma, new voices are calling for reform in L2 grammar teaching under the influence of communicative language teaching. There is growing consensus that instead of isolated grammatical forms (which are the focus of the traditional grammar class), L2 learners should be taught meaning and use of grammatical structures in concrete contexts (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Collins & Lee, 2005; Ellis, 2006). In other words, L2 grammar classes should be communicative and develop L2 learners' grammatical ability (Richards & Reppen, 2014) or "grammaring" (Larsen-Freeman, 2014). To achieve this aim, form, meaning and context should all be taken into consideration (Richards & Reppen, 2014).

The current trend of L2 grammar teaching is to strike a balance between form-oriented and meaning-oriented instruction (Ellis, 2006). However, although the notion of communicative grammar teaching is quite popular among L2 teachers, in practice a great majority of them still resort to the traditional approach of grammar drilling (Celce-Murcia, 2006; Ellis, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2014; Richards & Reppen, 2014). To change the situation and contextualize grammar teaching (Collins &

Lee, 2005), meaning-based teaching materials should be introduced into the L2 grammar class. Apart from this, for L2 grammar teaching to be effective, teachers have to try hard to make their classes fun and interesting (Soleimani & Khandan, 2013; Tütüniş, 2012). This is where popular culture materials play a role, which is still underresearched.

Among the literature to date on popular culture materials in L2 grammar class, a majority focuses on the use of audios and videos. Failoni (1993) argues that songs provide a context and a new perspective for L2 grammar learning and thus motivate learners. Bartle (1962) points out that songs are helpful for L2 learners to revise grammar and remember grammatical points. Salcedo (1996) suggests that music videos are an effective way to reinforce L2 learners' mastery of tenses. Fukunaga (2006) reports the positive role of animated cartoons in learning JFL (Japanese as a Foreign Language) grammar. Other researchers have explored the use of stories in grammar class (e.g. Adair-Hauck et al., 2005; Nazari & Allahyar, 2012), finding that popular stories help learners understand the use of grammar in authentic discourse (Adair-Hauck et al., 2005) and motivate learners in an effective way (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). However, most research studies in this line tend to be conceptual or qualitative and evaluation of the effectiveness of popular culture materials in the L2 grammar class is lacking.

To bring fun and meaning into the L2 grammar class and to answer Duff and Zappa-Hollman's (2012) call for empirical research on the learning outcome brought about by popular culture materials, the current study aimed at examining the relation between the outcome of EFL grammar learning and the use of popular culture materials. More specifically, the research questions were formulated as follows: (1) Does the use of popular culture materials lead to any change in the young EFL learners' performance on English grammar? (2) What are the young EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of popular culture materials in the English grammar class?

### 3. Research method

The major aim of the current research was to evaluate the effectiveness of popular culture materials in EFL grammar learning. To meet this end, this research adopted a quasi-experimental design that used a pretest-posttest paradigm as a tool to measure the degree of changes in the participants' performance. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted after the experiment to explore the participants' views and opinions on the use of popular culture materials in the EFL grammar class.

#### 3.1. Participants

An intact class of 20 EFL students in a secondary school in Hong Kong participated in the study. Nine of the participants were females and 11 were males, all aged 12 or 13. They were all native Cantonese speakers in the first year of compulsory secondary education and their English proficiency was a little above the elementary level.

#### 3.2. Teaching materials

The grammar points were question words and prepositions. The teaching materials included two chapters from students' textbook *Longman Activate JS1A*, a textbook for junior secondary school students approved by Educational Bureau of Hong Kong, and two selected pieces of popular culture materials, including a newspaper article about the cartoon character "Sponge Bob" and a map of the theme park Disneyland in Hong Kong. These two pieces of materials were selected because Sponge Bob and Disneyland are symbolic figures of American popular culture. They are widely accepted among both children and adults in many parts of the world, and elements of Sponge Bob and Disney characters are pervasive in our daily life.

#### 3.3. Instruments

The instruments adopted were four sets of tests and a semi-structured interview.

Each set of tests contained a pretest and a posttest, both consisting of the same eight blank-filling questions (see Appendix 1).

The interview comprised 10 general questions and some probing questions to elicit the participants' answers to the “what”, “why” and “how” of the use of popular culture materials in the EFL grammar class (see Appendix 2).

### **3.4. Procedure**

The teaching was conducted by a student teacher in normal class periods involving all 20 students. Two sets of lessons were carried out for reviewing the two types of grammar items—question words and prepositions. Each set contained two 30-min lessons, the first with the use of popular culture material and the second without it.

More specifically, the first set of lessons focused on question words. In the first lesson (Lesson 1a), the class reviewed the form, meaning and use of *who*, *what*, *when* and *where* with the use of the newspaper article about the missing of an inflatable SpongeBob. After the teacher had presented the four question words, the students were required to read the short article and then answer *wh*-questions containing the four target words. New words in the article were listed and explained with their Chinese translation. Later, drawing on the information in the article, the students were asked to practice using the four question words by doing a role-play, with one acting as a policeman and the other as the owner of the missing SpongeBob.

In the second lesson (Lesson 1b), the class reviewed another three question words *why*, *which* and *how*, but without the use of popular culture material. The lesson was given strictly following the layout in the textbook and traditional teaching techniques of grammar elicitation, sentence making and drill practice dominated the class. The students did have a chance for doing role-play with a communicative purpose, but the topic was the one given in the textbook, the missing of three paintings, which seems to be detached from the learners' daily life.

The second set of lessons focused on prepositions. In the first lesson (Lesson 2a), the class reviewed the form, meaning and use of *at*, *on* and *in*. Like in Lesson 1a, after the teacher had introduced the target grammatical items, the class used the map of Hong Kong Disneyland for practice. The students were asked to do a role-play, in which a tourist asked a tour guide for locations and directions of the various attractions in Disneyland. In the second lesson (Lesson 2b), the class reviewed four other prepositions—*between*, *next to*, *in front of* and *behind*. The teaching method adopted was similar to that in Lesson 1b.

A pretest was conducted before each lesson and a posttest immediately after each one, totalling four pairs of tests. Following the experiment, three students were randomly selected by drawing their numbers from the class list and participated in the semi-structured interview individually. The interview was conducted in Cantonese as the participants would feel more comfortable and express themselves better in their first language. All three interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Scores (out of 100 points) of the four pairs of tests were entered into paired samples *t*-tests, whereas the interview transcriptions were analysed and interpreted by the interviewer and the authors.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Pre- and posttests**

Means of the test scores (Table 1) reveal that the respective mean gains for Lessons 1a and 2a were 14.45 and 3.70, whereas for Lessons 1b and 2b, the mean gains were 1.60 and 1.55, respectively. Of the four lessons, Lesson 1a yielded the greatest mean gain, followed by Lesson 2a, Lesson 1b and Lesson 2b. Besides, there were also more participants who did not gain or even performed poorer after the two lessons without the use of popular culture materials. This may suggest that the participants' performances were somehow associated with the choice of teaching modes.

**Table 1. Mean scores of all students in all lessons in pretests and posttests**

Lesson	Pretest*		Posttest*		Gain
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1a	63.60	14.03	78.05	4.25	14.45
1b	63.70	14.62	65.30	14.12	1.60
2a	64.25	13.15	67.95	12.70	3.70
2b	65.15	13.40	66.70	14.17	1.55

\*The 100-point scoring system was adopted.

Four paired samples *t*-tests were run to evaluate the respective effects of Lessons 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b. Specifically, for Lesson 1a, the *t*-test indicates that the participants performed significantly better in the posttest ( $M = 78.05, SD = 4.25$ ) than in the pretest ( $M = 63.60, SD = 14.03$ ),  $t(19) = -4.767, p < .05, d = 1.066$ . For Lesson 1b, the *t*-test reveals no statistically significant difference between the participants' performance in the pretest ( $M = 63.70, SD = 14.62$ ) and in the posttest ( $M = 65.30, SD = 14.12$ ),  $t(19) = -1.946, p > .05, d = .435$ . For Lesson 2a, the *t*-test shows a significant improvement in the participants' performance in the posttest ( $M = 67.95, SD = 12.70$ ) as compared with the pretest ( $M = 64.25, SD = 13.15$ ),  $t(19) = -4.713, p < .05, d = 1.054$ . For Lesson 2b, the *t*-test indicates a moderate difference between the participants' performance in the posttest ( $M = 66.70, SD = 14.17$ ) and in the pretest ( $M = 65.15, SD = 13.40$ ),  $t(19) = -2.922, p < .05, d = .653$ . This suggests that Lessons 1a and 2a significantly improved the participants' performance on the target grammatical items, whereas Lessons 1b and 2b did not significantly improve their performance.

As the 20 participants all undertook the two sets of lessons, another two paired samples *t*-tests were calculated to check their competence in the target grammatical items prior to the lessons. For the first set of lessons on question words, the *t*-test indicates that there was no statistically significant difference between the participants' performance on *who, what, when* and *where* (the focus of Lesson 1a) ( $M = 63.60, SD = 14.03$ ) and their performance on *why, which* and *how* (the focus of Lesson 1b) ( $M = 63.70, SD = 14.62$ ) in the pretests,  $t(19) = -.070, p > .05, d = .016$ . For the second set of lessons on prepositions, the *t*-test also reveals that the participants did not perform significantly differently on *at, on* and *in* (the focus of Lesson 2a) ( $M = 64.25, SD = 13.15$ ) than on *between, next to, in front of* and *behind* (the focus of Lesson 2b) ( $M = 65.15, SD = 13.40$ ) in the pretests,  $t(19) = -.801, p > .05, d = .179$ . Thus, for each set of lessons, the participants' proficiency in the target grammatical items was consistent. This rendered, the statistics from the four lessons suggests that the lessons adopting popular culture materials (Lessons 1a and 2a) yielded significantly better gains than the lessons not using popular culture materials (Lessons 1b and 2b), with Lesson 1a resulting in a greater mean gain than Lesson 2a.

#### 4.2. Interview

The second aim of this study was to find out students' attitudes to the use of popular culture materials in the EFL grammar class. Of the three informants, A (a girl) was strong in English, B (a boy) had average proficiency in English, and C (a girl) was also proficient in English but her English ability was a bit weaker than A's. Their performances in the two pairs of tests for Lessons 1a and 2a are shown in Table 2.

When asked about their difficulties in English learning, all three informants mentioned grammar among other problems with word spelling, understanding fast speech and reading comprehension. However, apart from the shared difficulties in learning grammar, their preference varied regarding English popular culture materials and their opinions differed on the use of popular culture materials in the English grammar class.

As regards the type of English popular culture they enjoyed out of class, Student A preferred movies, songs and TV programmes. Student B said that he "seldom have contact with English in leisure time", and when asked what his very limited contact with English was in his spare time, he replied

**Table 2. Interviewees' scores in Lessons 1a and 2a in pretests and posttests**

	Pretest	Posttest	
<i>Student</i>	<i>Lesson 1a</i>	<i>Lesson 1a</i>	<i>Gain</i>
A	83	89	6
C	67	85	18
B	44	62	18
<i>Student</i>	<i>Lesson 2a</i>	<i>Lesson 2a</i>	<i>Gain</i>
A	77	72	-5
C	67	74	7
B	45	45	0

"Star Wars". Student C, in comparison, favoured cartoons and TV programmes. As for the frequency of their contact with English popular culture materials, Student A replied "two hours every day", Student B replied "seldom" while Student C answered "Sometimes".

When asked about their opinions on the application of popular culture materials in the English grammar class, Student B replied "lessons should not be like this", the reason being that popular culture materials "don't help much". In contrast, Students A and C shared a different attitude from Student B. They both considered grammar classes with popular culture materials "interesting", and helpful, in that they "could learn English by watching the subtitles" (Student A) and "would participate more" (Student C).

Although both Student A and Student C expressed positive attitudes towards the use of popular culture materials in the English grammar class, their reasons differed. Student A welcomed such classes because she thought that she could "learn more vocabulary", while Student C explained that such classes would be "more interesting and motivating". In addition, the two informants also disagreed on the forms of popular culture materials that can be incorporated into English classes. A thought that English songs and movies would be proper for English lessons, while C considered English games and pictures appropriate.

Concerning personal preference for specific approaches to grammar teaching, the three informants again had different opinions. Student A regarded popular culture materials as "helpful", and suggested an integration of popular culture materials and the traditional drilling approach in the English grammar class: "the teacher can use the High School musical in class, and then ask us to do some worksheets after watching it". Similarly, Student C also proposed a combination of the traditional approach and the new approach using popular culture materials: "Sometimes the lesson should be taught in a traditional way, but if teachers can use more interesting materials to teach grammar, the lesson will be less boring and students will like their lessons more".

From their replies, it can be inferred that both Students A and C preferred lessons with popular culture materials, but at the same time they felt it necessary to have traditional form-focused practices in the English grammar class. Student B, by contrast, was not in favour of implementing popular culture materials in the English grammar lesson, despite his significant gain in Lesson 1a. In his opinion, the traditional way of teaching grammar with exercises and drilling would be more effective because "in that way, I can be more aware of what I should pay attention to and what I should learn".

In short, the results of the interview show that students with relatively higher proficiency levels preferred the incorporation of popular culture materials in the English grammar lesson, while students with average proficiency level may not be very enthusiastic about it. Besides, all informants expressed their positive attitudes to the traditional way of grammar teaching.

## 5. Discussion and pedagogical implications

Students' gains in their average scores in the tests suggest that teaching grammar with the use of popular culture materials can be more effective than the traditional form-focused grammar teaching. This can be attributed to the benefits of learning authentic language in context (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2012), and of associating language learning with learners' life experience (Fukunaga, 2006). The use of the article about SpongeBob in Lesson 1a and the map of Disneyland in Lesson 2a both provided the participants with opportunities for meaningful discussion and communication. As most students had watched the cartoon series SpongeBob and many of them had been to Disneyland, talking about them was more related to their personal experiences. This increased involvement raised their interest in participating in the grammar activities, which may have attracted more of their noticing on grammatical forms and functions (Ellis, 1999; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). The repetition of the target grammatical items during the activities may also have enhanced the salience of language features and therefore contributed to the internalization of these grammatical forms. Besides, the participants' improved performance can also be attributed to their increased motivation, which has been repeatedly reported as a positive effect of popular culture materials on L2 learners (c.f. Chen & Chen, 2009; Cheung, 2001; Domoney & Harris, 1993). In the current study, the learners' increased motivation could be a result of willingness to share some fun experience they had had with SpongeBob or at the Disneyland. Judging by the participants' more active participation in Lessons 1a and 2a (as reported by the teacher), it seems not an inflation to say that the article and the map, both contain topics that are popular, interesting and familiar to the participants, had brought enjoyment into the grammar lessons and motivated the participants to a large extent.

Although Lessons 1a and 2a yielded significant gains in the participants' mean scores, the effects of the two lessons were not the same: Lesson 2a resulted in an average gain of 3.70, and Lesson 1a an average gain of 14.45. Thus, it seems that Lesson 1a had a greater effect on the participants' performance. This difference can be attributed to the different forms of popular culture material used in the two lessons. In Lesson 1a, an article was used, whereas in Lesson 2a, it was a map. As the article contained more verbal information than the map, in Lesson 1a, learners got enriched input and thus had more chance of noticing and paying attention to the target grammatical items. By contrast, Lesson 2a, with only limited verbal information on the map, was output-based. When describing and discussing the map, students were directed to the content in their output. Besides, most of the input they received was from their peers and some might have been inaccurate. Therefore, this result may imply that for lower intermediate EFL learners, activities that provide more quality input are more effective than those providing more opportunities for output.

The test results also reveal that the difference in effects within the second set of lessons (3.70 vs. 1.55) is less marked than that within the first set of lessons (14.45 vs. 1.60). Apart from the wide gap in effects between Lesson 1a and Lesson 2a discussed above, there are other possible explanations for this narrow difference between Lesson 2a and Lesson 2b. One explanation is that for L2 learners, question words are more salient than prepositions in communication. The former mostly appear at the beginning of a sentence and receive stress, while the latter may appear at more varied positions with few chances of prosodic emphasis in speech. Thus, question words may attract more attention than prepositions in interaction. Equipped with such advantages in communication and instruction, the pair of Lessons 1a and 1b focusing on question words resulted in better gains than the other pair.

Apart from the above factors, age is another factor that affected our research results. As both topics of the popular culture materials chosen for the grammar class appeal to children, our young learners showed great interest in the new materials in class, which contributed to the positive results of Lessons 1a and 2a.

The results of the interview suggest that popular culture materials in grammar class are in general welcomed by Hong Kong EFL learners who enjoy English (i.e. in English and of English-speaking countries) popular culture materials out of class. Student B, who was a boy and not good at English, did not favour the use of popular culture materials. The reason for his attitude may be that he felt

less confident and more hopeless with a new method of teaching and learning. This echoes with Duff's (2001) and Alptekin's (1993) arguments that popular culture materials may pose a threat to L2 learners if they are not familiar with the content and linguistic forms of the popular culture.

Another noteworthy finding of our study is that our young learners expressed the need for traditional form-focused practice. This is consistent with Schulz (1996) and Peacock (1998), who both found that traditional grammar practice were still popular with tertiary-level L2 learners. Though communicative language teaching has been implemented and promoted in Hong Kong schools for decades, faced with pressure from written tests and examinations, students may feel more secure in explicit, analytic and deductive teaching and learning. Thus, they see fun teaching as “desserts” but not the “staples” in classrooms. Based on the research findings mentioned above and the specific EFL context, it is safe to say that the popularity of popular culture materials among EFL learners does not mean that the traditional grammar practice could be totally replaced. Instead, it lends support to the argument for a balance between form-based and meaning-based L2 grammar teaching (Ellis, 2006).

Moreover, our findings from the interview also reveal that the direct reason for (dis)favouring the adoption of pop culture in grammar teaching is related to language proficiency. Students who are better in English would welcome new pedagogical ideas as they are more confident in learning and accommodate well with new teaching modes. In contrast, students who feel learning English difficult may appear resistant to new teaching approaches, for changes in the teaching mode may increase their difficulty in leaning.

In addition, our findings also raise a question on the role of gender in the classroom implementation of popular culture materials. As it so happened that in our class, all that were strong in English were girls, while boys' average proficiency levels were lower in both pretests and posttests, and the interview results indicate that boys and girls had different preferences for the types of popular culture materials. However, with limited resources, we could not further investigate the relationship between young learners' gender and their attitudes to the new approach to grammar teaching.

In summary, the results of this study provide empirical support to the approach to teaching grammar in specific context proposed by a large number of researchers (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 1991; Collins & Lee, 2005; Ellis, 2006). In other words, learning English grammar through popular culture is workable. However, as pointed out by Ellis (2006), traditional grammar drilling should not be left out. By promoting joyful teaching, we are not trying to completely replace one method with another. On the contrary, we emphasize that a balance should be maintained in the teaching of form, meaning and function.

Based on the above findings and discussion, a few pedagogical implications could be drawn. Firstly, popular culture materials can be incorporated into the L2 grammar class as they can bring about improved learning outcomes. With the use of appropriate popular culture materials, EFL learners tend to stay more focused during the learning process, which in turn results in better noticing, understanding and learning of target items (Ellis, 1999). Besides, since the introduction of popular culture elements into the EFL grammar class could increase motivation (Chen & Chen, 2009; Cheung, 2001; Domoney & Harris, 1993; White, 1985) and promote enjoyable learning (Soleimani & Khandan, 2013), it is highly likely that such materials may also motivate learners and bring enjoyment in other EFL classes. For example, they can be used in developing EFL learners' communicative skills, such as listening and speaking. Therefore, popular culture materials deserve a position in EFL syllabi.

However, practitioners should be careful with the selection of popular culture materials. The interview results indicate that EFL learners' interest in and acceptance of popular culture materials are dependent on their English proficiency level, and presumably their age and gender as well. More-advanced learners may have more contact with L2 popular culture materials in their spare time. Less-competent learners may steer away from these because they are less accommodating to unfamiliar materials due to limited linguistic competence. Therefore, popular culture materials used in

the L2 class should not be too demanding as far as linguistic features are concerned, and their contents should be familiar to learners and appropriate to their proficiency level (Alptekin, 1993). Teachers should provide help, such as explaining new words and cultural concepts when necessary (Rucynski, 2011). Besides, as different genders and age groups prefer different types of popular culture, teachers should choose materials that are gender and age appropriate. Last, instructional materials should be frequently updated as popular culture is constantly changing.

Moreover, it is necessary to incorporate form-focused and meaning-focused activities (Soleimani & Khandan, 2013) in the L2 grammar class. Positive effects of popular culture materials should not be interpreted as an exclusion of focus-on-forms practice, for learners feel the need for grammatical accuracy as well as fluency. To improve the effectiveness of grammar teaching, the key does not lie with one particular approach (Ellis & Shintani, 2013; ), but rather with the teacher's choice from a repertoire of approaches (Richards & Reppen, 2014) according to the teaching target and the students' overall features such as age, gender and proficiency level.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the use of popular culture materials can be effective in the EFL grammar class. We also found that young EFL learners generally accept the incorporation of popular culture materials. Both findings lend empirical support to the implementation of popular culture materials in L2 teaching and the proposal of teaching L2 grammar in contexts.

Our study is not without limitations. With a small group of participants, the results may not be very representative of EFL learners in general. The interview was conducted with only three students from the group. Their responses may not have provided a full picture of overall opinions of EFL learners in Hong Kong or in other contexts. Besides, there was no delayed posttest to examine the retention of the participants' gains. Therefore, we suggest that further research should recruit more L2 learners with different educational backgrounds and language proficiency levels, and also test if effects of the method would still retain in a longer period of time. Such extension of the current study will guarantee a more representative research result.

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## Appendix 1. Pretests and posttests

### Pre- and posttest for Lesson 1a:

Fill in the blanks using **who, what, when, where**

- (1) Where do you go to school?
- (2) What kind of ball game do you play?
- (3) What does your father do?
- (4) Where can I find the new CD of Eason Chan?
- (5) When can I come to your home?
- (6) Who is your English teacher?
- (7) When do you wake up?
- (8) Who can tell me: What does an architect do?

### Pre- and posttest for Lesson 1b:

Fill in the blanks using **why, which, how**

- (1) Why do you turn on your computer?
- (2) Which bag do you like?
- (3) How much is this T-shirt?
- (4) Why are you late?
- (5) How long have you been in this country?
- (6) Which answer is correct?
- (7) Why did she cry?
- (8) How do you go to school? By bus or MTR?

### Pre- and posttest for Lesson 2a:

Fill in the blanks using **at, on, in**

- (1) Shanghai is in China
- (2) I put all my books on the shelf.
- (3) This old lady lives in a small house.
- (4) We had lunch at KFC yesterday.
- (5) I am waiting for you at the bus stop.
- (6) Mother hangs the picture I draw on the wall.
- (7) Nobody is in the room!
- (8) You can find the word “naughty” on P.12.

### Pre- and posttest for Lesson 2b:

Fill in the blanks using **between, next to, in front of, behind**

- (1) Candy is hiding behind the tree.
- (2) Between February and April is March.
- (3) The teacher is standing in front of the desk.
- (4) Do you know the girl standing next to Joyce?
- (5) We have a recess between lessons.
- (6) Where is the toilet? It's next to the book store.
- (7) She is always shy when she has to speak in front of a lot of people.
- (8) Who is hiding behind you?

### Appendix 2. Interview checklist

- (1) Do you have any difficulty in learning English? If the answer is “yes”, what are they?
- (2) Do you like English popular culture? Why or why not?
- (3) Can you give some examples of English pop culture you like or dislike?
- (4) How often do you contact the pop culture forms you have mentioned?
- (5) Do you think it fun to learn English grammar through English popular culture?
- (6) Which approach do you prefer, the new one using the popular culture or the traditional one? Why?



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