

Learning a Foreign Language through Text and Memorisation: The Chinese Learners' Perceptions

Xia Yu

Southwest University of Political Science and Law, China

Abstract—Text memorization is a widely used yet under-explored language practice in foreign language teaching and learning in China. The research addresses the need for a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the practices and beliefs of Chinese learners regarding the use of text memorization in foreign language learning and teaching. This paper reports on findings from semi-structured interviews concentrating on the perceptions of text memorisation as a way of learning from the learners' perspective. The data was collected from a group of Chinese learners and teachers (N=62) affiliated with 15 schools and universities at three different educational levels, i.e. junior high, senior high and college, which constitute the major part of foreign language education in China. Qualitative analyses of the data reveal that the practice was perceived to be beneficial not only because it assists learning in a number of ways but because it affords the learners psychological satisfaction built on their sense of achievement and confidence.

Index Terms—text, memorization, Chinese learner, foreign language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

In the special issue of 'Language Education Research in International Contexts' in TESL-EJ (September 2006), Duong (2006) investigated Vietnamese learners' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards memorisation in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and found that memorisation, which, from teachers' and students' perspectives, is classified into good and poor types, can satisfy certain needs of language learners. Indeed, an increasing number of ELT scholars, including some contemporary Western researchers (e.g., Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) have recognised that memorisation, a highly valued way of learning in the Far East, can lead to high levels of understanding if applied appropriately. However, scepticism among Western teachers and methodologists on the purpose of extensive use of memorisation in foreign language learning and teaching (as is the case in East Asia represented by China) has not ceased. The Chinese mastery of English through memorisation is commonly characterised as 'rather quaint, a misguided use of effort and a barrier to communication' (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 185). On the other hand, text memorisation – an extreme use of memorisation and one of the frequently mentioned learning strategies by Chinese learners is drawing increasing interest among Chinese scholars in recent years (see Ding, 2004, 2007; Ding & Qi, 2001; Long & Huang, 2006; Yu, 2009, 2010). This body of research, which largely focuses on the potential facilitative role of this practice in second language acquisition from a psycholinguistic perspective, attempted to make a positive reappraisal of text memorisation as a learning device. However, there is a dearth of documentation in literature as to how this traditional practice is perceived by Chinese learners from an emic perspective.

This paper attempts to address the gap by reporting on findings from in-depth interviews aiming at investigating Chinese learners' perceptions and attitudes towards text memorisation in learning EFL. Firstly, I will clarify the working definition of text memorisation in the current study and sketchily review previous analogous studies. Then, I will move on to the delineation of the methodological particulars of the current study and the detailing of the bio-information of the participants. In the section that follows, I present and discuss at length a number of prominent issues or themes emerging from analyses of the interview data. Finally, I conclude the paper by summarily stating the primary points interpreted from the participants' perceptions or opinions of text memorisation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Defining 'Text Memorisation' in the Present Study

While different versions of definition of memorisation can be found in various studies and dictionaries, I found the following understanding of memorisation is more fair or neutral: 'Memorising is the process of establishing information in memory. The term 'memorising' usually refers to the conscious process' (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p. 226). Based on this understanding and following Stevick's (1982, p. 67) definition of 'memorisation' in language education, text memorisation is understood in this paper as 'working on a body of [textual] material until one is able to reproduce it word for word on demand'. A further understanding of text memorisation can be found in the following statement which distinguishes between 'learning by heart' and 'learning by rote':

When a student ‘learns by rote’, he or she may be able to recite the words, but might not necessarily understand what the words mean. A student who learns something by heart understands the concept of the lesson. The lesson is internalized and becomes part of the person’s working knowledge. (Hendrickson, 1997, p. 29)

What is captured more than anything else in this quotation is the relationship of memorisation and understanding. Taking the position of ‘learning by heart’ rather than ‘learning by rote’, text memorisation is here defined as the attempt to commit a text to memory through verbatim repetition based on the understanding of the content of the text. In contemporary school practice in China, text memorisation is usually preceded by teachers’ detailed explanation of the meaning of and grammar points contained in the text.

Memorising texts to learn a foreign language is a culturally-specific learning practice transferred from traditional Chinese literacy education. It needs to be pointed out that ‘texts’ learned by heart by Chinese learners are not confined to texts in the textbook or course book, rather, they may include any short essays, passages, dialogues, contextual paragraphs and sentence clusters. Moreover, song lyrics, celebrities’ speeches and scripts of films and TV series in English are all included, which are indeed being taken as authentic materials for memorisation by Chinese learners.

B. *Prior Work on the Conceptions of Text Memorisation*

There is a paucity of research on the conceptions of text memorisation although the last decade has seen an increasing number of empirical studies on learning texts by heart published in China (e.g., Long & Huang, 2006; Yao, 2003). Here I would like to mention two of them.

Stevick (1989) performed a interview-based case study with an L1-English learner of Chinese who had reached ‘an extraordinarily high level of competence both in speaking and in reading Chinese’ (1989, p. 21). The informant reported the use of ‘memorisation of texts’ as part of his learning practice. This English learner of Chinese, though brought up in Western culture, was not defensive about this practice at all and repeatedly said it was ‘within reason’. This practice, as he himself put it, ‘gave you an instinct for what is actually said in the language — for how sentences are put together’ (1989, p. 30).

In a more recent study, Ding (2007) reported interviews with three university English majors who had won prizes in nationwide English speaking competitions and debate tournaments in China. The interviewees regarded text memorisation and imitation as the most effective methods of learning English. They said the practice enabled them to attend to collocations and sequences, to borrow these sequences for productive use, to improve pronunciation, and to develop the habit of attending to details of language. Based on these self-reports, the author concludes that such practice enhances noticing and rehearsal and hence facilitates second language acquisition.

Following the tradition of ‘good language learner’ research¹, both of the above mentioned studies sets out to relate the high achievement of the successful foreign language learners to the use of certain learning strategies (for instance, text memorisation). Although such research does provide insights into the kinds of behaviour associated with successful language learning (Ellis, 1994) and offer suggestions as to which strategies are important for language development (Ellis, 2000), one problem inherited in this body of study is that we have difficulty in deciding whether successful learners excel because they use particular valued strategies, or whether they use varied strategies including the valued ones because they are already successful learners.

A small number of studies (cf. Y.-Q. Gu, 2003; Stevick, 1989) have reported the use of text memorisation by successful learners; the present study, however, makes no attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of text memorisation as a learning strategy. Rather, it sets out to learn about how the practice is perceived by Chinese practitioners based on their own experience of using text memorisation in their foreign language learning. Given the cultural specificity of the topic under discussion, interviewing seems to be the most effective way of exploring the insider’s perspective on this cultural practice in terms of its members’ understandings.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Informants*

Participants in the current study were to a large extent ‘opportunistic’ (Holliday, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994) in nature. The first batch of participants was secured by taking advantage of my interpersonal relationship network. They were mainly my colleagues and friends who are language teachers at secondary and tertiary level. I also applied *snowball sampling*, that is, participating teachers introduced me to other willing participants who were either their students or associates. Since there were no quantitative restrictions in this interview-based study, the final number (62) of the participants reflects the availability of the qualified informants. There was no stringent qualification for participants in the current study – only being (1) current full-time foreign language learners or teachers at secondary or tertiary level and (2) having the experience of learning through text memorisation – so that the informants had a wide range of ages (ranging from 12 to 65), affiliations (including public schools and private training institutions), geographical scope (from 12 provinces and municipalities) and learning experiences (including a few who had

¹ In order to discover which strategies are important for L2 learning, this body of research aims to investigate how the ‘good language learner’ tries to learn by ‘identifying learners who have been successful in learning an L2 and interviewing them to find out the strategies that worked for them’ (Ellis, 2000: 77).

sojourned in foreign countries as well as those who have never been abroad). In my opinion, the diversity of the background of the participants would be a plus point in terms of obtaining a broader vista in the analysis of the data. More information about the participants is listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS (LEARNERS AND TEACHERS)

Group(N)	affiliation type(N)	geographical area (N)	experience of studying abroad(N)
Learners (42)	foreign language school /English department ² (7/3) ordinary school	coastal province (9) inland province (33)	3-4 months (9) never (33)
Teachers (20)	public school (16) private institution (4)	coastal province (2) inland province (18)	2 years (1) 1 year (2) 3 months (1) never (16)

The learner participants at tertiary level were diversified in terms of their home provinces where they finished their secondary education. Demographic information on this group of participants is presented in Table 2. Previous studies (e.g. Hu, 2005) have suggested that Audiolingual-featured practices like reading-aloud or memorisation of dialogues and texts are less used in coastal provinces/cities than inland provinces/cities, and this is the rationale underlying the distinction between coastal province and inland province in Table 2. Data from the current study, however, indicates that learners from the two areas showed no difference in terms of perception of memorisation of textual materials.

It needs to be pointed out that although this paper is dealing with ‘learner’s perceptions’, data from interview with teachers is also referred to whenever of relevance because teachers are here treated as advanced learners³.

TABLE 2
DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE LEARNER PARTICIPANTS AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Coastal province		Inland province	
Beijing*	1 (Heysea)	Chongqing*	3 (Tengjing; Eli; Jake)
Shenzhen*	1 (Howard)	Henan	1 (Yunpeng)
Guangdong	2 (Xiaofeng; Zhibiao)	Yunnan	1 (Emma)
Jiangsu	3 (Zhikai; Wanshi; Rock))	Sichuan	2 (Xuying; Xujia)
Shandong	1 (Deqian)	Gansu	1 (Lixia)
Qingdao	1 (Tiantian)	Wuhan	1 (Leila)
		Ningxia	1 (Xiaodong)
Sub-Total	9		10
Total	19		

*Note. 1. Beijing and Chongqing are municipalities rather than provinces; Shenzhen is a special administrative area rather than a province.

2. Those students who are currently studying in the UK are given English pseudonyms.

B. Data Analysis

Data analysis started as the data collection was underway. After each interview, I carefully listened to the recording and made a brief note of the participant’s main viewpoints for reference purposes. All interviews were transcribed in English straightaway. I made a special effort to edit the English translation by listening to the Chinese original recording repeatedly in order to reflect as closely as possible the language the informants themselves used.

The English transcripts were analysed by moving back and forth between the data and categories of meaning which roughly followed the interview guidelines. The interpretation of the informant’s account was cautiously tested against the context of the whole transcript in addition to being loyal to the meaning residing in the single sentence. The intended meaning was often checked by clarification questions during the interview. In other few cases, whenever inconsistency or ambiguity arose during the process of transcription, I returned to the interviewees for validation after the interview through telephone conversations. Email exchanges were also occasionally used to confirm the accuracy of my interpretation of learners’ interview narrative accounts when there was a necessity.

An essential principle followed in the analysis of the data was that the informants’ statements are not taken as true or false, but rather as ‘displays of their perspectives on the issue at hand’ (Silverman, 2001, p. 112). As already mentioned, the focus of the study is an emic perspective of the evaluation of text memorisation as a learning practice.

IV. FINDINGS

This section is organised according to significant themes which were either informed by the interview questions or emerged from the analysis of the data with respect to the learner-participants’ perceptions of their own experiences of using text memorisation in English learning. In the citations I make of the interview data throughout the paper, the coding begins with the participant’s anonymised name. The pseudonym is followed by the identity of the participant, i.e.

² The distinction between foreign language school and ordinary school was made among secondary students and the distinction between English department and non-English department among college students.

³ The current research is part of a bigger project which investigates both learners’ and teachers’ perceptions of text memorisation.

a teacher-participant (TP) or learner-participant (LP) and the educational level s/he was in (JH for Junior High, SH for Senior High and U for university).

A. Perceptions of Benefits of the Practice of Text Memorisation

Many of the learners' perceptions mentioned above are apparently tinted with cultural influence. It should not be surprising that the values and perceptions of learning of the members of a culture have been influenced to a considerable extent by the values and perceptions that they have commonly experienced within their sociocultural group when they enter formal education (Littlewood, 1999). This does not mean, however, that they have been passively moulded by these values or conceptions and therefore unable to make their own judgement or reflection.

The overwhelming majority of the participants expressed positive views on the use of text memorisation in English learning. They offered various reasons why the practice had been beneficial to their English learning. The first concerns the cultivation of the so-called 'sense of language', a pragmatic understanding of which can be found in the participants' accounts:

One thing that I felt especially beneficial from learning texts by heart is that I could choose the right answer in the multiple-choice section without second thought. I didn't know why, but I just made the right choice. This is the effect that can never be achieved by applying grammatical analysis. ... I guess it is about what people often call 'language sense'. (Xujia, LP, U)

'Language sense' is a literal translation of its Chinese equivalent 'yugan'. 'Language sense' or 'feel for the language' is not a new term for Chinese learners (cf. Ding, 2007; Jiang & Smith, 2009) although the definition can vary from person to person. It was also mentioned in a recent study that '... the participants found them [memorising textbook texts, English essays, speeches and song lyrics] useful because they helped them internalise different ways of expressing themselves and gave them a feel for the English language' (Gao, 2007, p. 100). The concept originates from a German word 'Sprachgefühl' whose English explanation is as follows (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*):

- (1) sensibility to conformity with or divergence from the established usage of a language
- (2) a feeling for what is linguistically effective or appropriate

Intangible as it may appear, the 'sense of language' may be noticed at some point by most language users. It is analogous to intuition invoked in dealing with grammaticality judgment tasks. Although it is largely tacit and inaccessible to consciousness, such sense has to be built on considerable language experiences. In the case of Chinese students who claim that they develop a sense of language through learning texts by heart, the subtle feeling for language might be an implicit abstraction and systematisation of language rules based on a reasonable amount of input (i.e. texts memorised). The gradual development of language sense involves, quoting an informant, 'progressing from a quantitative change to a qualitative change' (Hongying, TP, U). One student offered an interesting analogy: 'What we eat is rice, but what is transformed is glucose' (Shuhan, LP, SH). The cultivation of 'language sense' through memorisation, according to a college student, seems to be a long-term task which should not be omitted even at tertiary level: 'In college, it is important to learn many texts by heart as this is essential to develop a sense of language' (Tengjing, LP, U).

The second reason given by the learners is that text memorisation relates to what they call 'forced learning':

It [text memorisation] is a forced learning. You have to consciously put all stuff into your mind [when memorising texts]. ... If you just listen [to English] or speak to someone [in English], you may only learn the bits that you can remember and miss out many other useful stuff. When we learn by heart, we force ourselves to memorise all sentences. It's learning with definite purpose. (Eli, LP, U)

Forced learning, or in academic terms, 'conscious learning' seems to play an important role in adult learning (Takeuchi, 2003), and this is especially true in an FL context where linguistic resources do not come as easily as they do in the SL context. One may wonder why memorisation should be stressed at all, given our experience that retention comes naturally when we are involved in the right way with enough samples of the language. Natural retention, however, 'places a limit on how much the student can get in a course of fixed length' (Stevick, 1982, p. 68). Moreover, different from real-time communication, text memorisation frees the learners from the pressure of spontaneous interaction, which may enable them to notice new forms and eventually incorporate them into their linguistic system. It has been reported from prior research (Ding, 2007) that the practice of text memorisation enhances noticing and rehearsal, a viewpoint with which an interviewee showed agreement:

You can learn the details of the language as the text is ready at any time and it is an off-line process. But listening [to English from radio or TV] can only allow you to know the outline or rough idea of what they are talking about. You have no chance to learn the language per se including the sentence structures they use. After all, we don't have the capacity to snatch all that we need to know in that short time, and even worse, it is unlikely that you know everything they are talking about. (Eli, LP, U)

The third oft-raised comment concerns the building of confidence or a sense of achievement owing to being able to learn a text by heart. I found the following narrative especially interesting:

I went to an English corner on campus when I was a sophomore. ... One day, I approached the most fluent speaker who always showed impatience in talking with me because of my hesitating English. I offered to discuss with him about such topics as intellectual copyright and laid-off workers. He was shocked by my incessant speaking with sensible arguments while he was at a loss to find appropriate English words to express himself. ... But he never knew that I had

just memorised some episodes from China Daily and poured them out to him. (Xiaodong, LP, U)

During the interview, this participant used the word ‘*shuang*’ (a Chinese catchword among young people, meaning ‘feeling super-good’) to describe his exaltation upon the incident. We should not underestimate the psychological impact of this dramatic episode on the learner in terms of his motivation. Learning to speak a foreign language is a psychologically challenging process, especially for adult learners who are conscious of their self-image. This challenge is furthered when the learner is brought up in a social context where loss of face constitutes a ‘real dread affecting the nervous system ego more strongly than the physical fear’ (Hu, 1944, p. 50; see also Brick and Wen 2003):

They fear looking ridiculous; they fear the frustration coming from a listener’s blank look, showing that they have failed to communicate; they fear the danger of not being able to take care of themselves; they fear the alienation of not being able to communicate and thereby get close to other human being. (Beebe, 1983, p. 40)

These above-listed fears are probably all down to a feeling of inferiority regarding their linguistic competence. The practice of text memorisation was seen to help the learner to relieve the sense of inadequacy and build self-confidence:

I feel happy after I memorise something because I feel proud of myself being able to do it. I especially possess a sense of achievement when I perform better than my classmates [in classroom interaction]. The feeling that I’m better than others [in speaking English] motivates me to learn more texts by heart. I enjoy the process most of the time because I can get something out of it. (Zhibiao, LP, U)

Purposeful memorisation may or may not enable one to speed up his/her progress in leaning, but at least it may help learners to ‘sound more confident’ (Duong, 2006) or make them feel they are stepping forward whenever they have memorised a bit of material. A sense of attainment or satisfaction is thus achieved. This may be taken as an advantage compared with relying only on natural retention as result of exposure to enough samples of the language, which is theoretically ideal, but for many people, especially adult learners, also means very slow improvement which means discouragement and frustration (Stevick, 1982). What is more, the psychological satisfaction gained from text memorisation can be from external sources, as in the comment made by a younger learner: ‘*I don’t think it’s boring. I feel contented when my parents praise me for doing a good job [in recitation]*’ (Lijia, LP, JH).

In addition to reporting the general ways in which text memorisation helps, the participants also offered particular reasons why the practice facilitates their language learning. First and foremost, learning by heart helps to learn useful phrases, collocations, sentence structures and grammar. The following comments are typical:

I get to know the sentence patterns through learning texts by heart, therefore, I understand the grammar (Chengcheng, LP, JH)

It helps with fixed collocations, phrases, sentence structures and grammar. (Xiaoqing, LP, SH)

It helps me learn phrases and sentence patterns. It also helps with grammar. (Lixia, LP, U)

It is my personal experience that it is hard to accurately recall the texts which were memorised the other day, let alone a week ago and this was unanimously confirmed by the participants in the interview study. It is conceivable that they can usually retain in their memory sentences or mere phrases and sentence patterns. This is despite the apparently contradictory fact that learners are initially intended to memorise the whole text. Realising the fact that text memorisation eventually leads to the retention of set phrases, one participant raised the following question: ‘*Why do we bother to memorise the whole text rather than simply committing to memory phrases and expressions if the latter does the same job?*’ (Lijia, LP, JH). My speculation is: textual material may be in a better position than fragmented phrases, borrowing Cook’s (1994, p. 138) words, to ‘give the mind something to work on, so that gradually, if one wishes, they may yield up both their grammar and their meaning’.

This process is reported by many participants saying ‘*It [text memorisation] really helps a lot in terms of grammar and sentence structure*’ (Yunpeng, LP, U). An early-stage learner also commented: ‘*I usually refer the newly-learned grammar back to the sentence in the text I have memorised and try to understand its usage in the context*’ (Yangkun, LP, JH). The practice was thought to ‘*help understand the delicacy of the grammar that has been taught*’ (Yangke, TP, SH) because

only through text or dialogue can you understand how foreigners express certain ideas. It is useless if you memorise some disorganised stuff like individual words or phrases without knowing how they are actually used. (Yangke, TP, SH)

As a result, learning texts by heart becomes ‘*learning the whole contents and system*’ (Yangkun, LP, JH), a view shared by a successful Chinese learner who commented that once textual materials are memorised, ‘... they become part of you, the sentence structures, the set phrases, and the new vocabulary’ (Chen Hua, quoted in Y.-Q. Gu, 2003, p. 94). Thus, the learners’ perception of text memorisation found in the study confirms analogous interview data in previous research: ‘By doing so [trying to memorise texts], vocabulary and grammar would not be a problem’ (interviewee 26, quoted in Jiang, 2008, p. 131).

Moreover, text memorisation was perceived to be especially helpful in terms of speaking and/or writing:

I found my oral English improves after memorising texts. (Yixiao, LP, JH)

It helps with writing besides the sentence structure and the grammar. You can construct a sentence by imitating the sentence structure in the texts. (Jingyu, LP, JH)

Learning texts by heart especially helps with speaking and writing. (Xiaofeng, LP, U)

The more texts I learn by heart, the more comfortable I feel with speaking and writing. (Yangkun, LP, JH)

I found my English greatly improved after the process [of text memorisation], especially writing and speaking. (Jake,

LP, U)

It seems that the practice of text memorisation helps the learners most with the 'productive' skills as far as the 'four skills' are concerned. A similar perception was also reported by other Chinese students in previous research. For instance, commenting on the role of 'reading aloud' – an accompanying practice with memorising texts among Chinese learners, a student states:

Reading aloud from model essays ... familiarises students with the rules for combining words into sentences and at last into whole essays The aesthetic patterns absorbed from a lot of reading will work their way naturally into students' writing. (Wang Kui, quoted in Parry, 1998, pp. 87-88)

Two different ways in which text memorisation contributes to language production were mentioned in my data. The first is about efficiency in writing and speaking. Memorised texts are perceived to be serving as a source from which the ready-made materials are available for prompt use:

When I'm translating or writing an article, the sentences just automatically come out of my mind. (Lixia, LP, U)

If you memorise a lot of stuff, you may find some expressions flow out of your mouth. (Rock, LP, U)

The feeling resonates with that reported by the interviewee in Stevick's study: 'I just have countless patterns sort of swimming around in my head' (Bert, quoted in Stevick, 1989, p. 30). A participant further remarked:

... they [memorised texts] are stored in your mind and can be accessible immediately in need. There are many ready-made sentences or expressions there for your use. ... We can take advantage of the memorised stuff without starting from scratch. (Hongying, TP, U)

Thus, prior storage of language samples through text memorisation is considered to make for 'economy of effort' and to speed up language processing in real-time communication (see Sinclair, 1991; Skehan, 1998 for more discussion from a psycholinguistic perspective). One may argue that many sentences in memorised material are much less likely to come up in real-life conversation, but, according to speculation by Stevick (1982, p. 68), they 'may still serve as handy models for what students may want to say in later years':

A student whose memory places at his disposal 'Can you tell me where the snack bar is?' will be less likely in real life to say the incorrect 'Can you tell me where is the post office?' or the correct but abrupt 'Where is the post office?' And he'll probably come out with 'Can you tell me where the post office is?' a lot more smoothly than he could have otherwise. (Stevick, 1982, p. 68)

The second way in which text memorisation benefits production is thought to be the increased accuracy in output: '... borrowing memorised structures or expressions [means one] is less likely to make grammatical errors, especially in real-time oral communication' (Hongying, TP, U). This notion had been implicitly included in Stevick's (1982, p. 68) justifications for the use of textual memorisation (as opposed to retention that comes naturally) in language teaching and learning: 'Naturally, ... means in the short run at least that the degree of correctness in speaking and writing will be reduced'.

Another reason deals with being able to 'memorise new words more firmly' (Yixiao, LP, JH). This is because memorising texts enables one to understand the meaning of a word in a particular context:

A word usually has several meanings. You can easily memorise the particular meaning of that word in that particular context and keep it for a long time. If you memorise the word and its meanings in an isolated way, you forget it the next day. (Huangpu, LP, JH)

Moreover, the usage of the new word is incorporated in the text:

If you only memorise isolated words, you don't know how to use them. There is situation for you to understand where and how words are used if you learn them through text memorisation. (Jake, LP, U)

This may best explain the perceived benefit of memorising texts as opposed to vocabulary lists. Text memorisation seemed to be more favoured as the overall meaning of the text and the way words are used in particular sentences helped sustain the memory of the vocabulary. It also accords with the data collected from another Chinese learner in a previous interview-based study: 'In fact, remembering words in the text makes them difficult to forget' (Interviewee 8, quoted in Jiang & Smith, 2009, p. 292). This idea chimes in with a Chinese linguist's remark:

Learning texts by heart is extremely helpful to me. It works much better than memorising individual words in the sense that memorising on the basis of whole passage or at least whole sentence enables us to better understand word meaning, ... (Zhao, 2002, p. 11; Chinese original)

It is thus agreed that memorising textual materials, whether dialogues or monologues, affords the learner an opportunity to retain a word or phrase along with the context in which it is used so that s/he may obtain a deeper understanding of the vocabulary item, rather than memorising it in an isolated way.

Summing up the reasons offered by the participants why they considered that learning texts by heart had been helpful with their foreign language learning, they centred around two vantage grounds. The first is concerned with the broad ways in which learning texts by heart benefits foreign language learning. Notably, the participants mentioned the cultivation of 'language sense', the facilitation of conscious learning and promotion of self-confidence and a sense of achievement. The second vantage ground around which the discussion was carried out is on specific reasons why text memorisation contributes to language development. These reasons were related to three aspects: (1) Linguistically, it improves the learning of phrases, sentence structures and grammar; (2) In terms of language skills, it especially helps with writing and speaking; and (3) It assists vocabulary learning by enhancing the understanding of new words.

B. General Perception

Of all the participants, only two expressed disbelief or uncertainty about the usefulness of text memorisation in foreign language learning. One showed her aversion to this practice by saying, *'It's definitely rote-learning, nothing different from the ancient system of imperial examination'* (Yuting, LP, JH). Part of the reason of her distaste can be found in the following account:

I feel it [text memorisation] really troublesome because I don't know where I should start to ask questions. Even worse, some words are so long that I'm unable to pronounce them properly, let alone learning them by heart.

It seems that the difficulties she experienced in memorising text made her resistant to the practice. The other one hesitated to sanction this practice simply because it was one of many methods she had tried briefly but which proved fruitless: *'It [text memorisation] seems not working for me. ... I tried many other methods, but they did not work better.'* (Ema, LP, U)

Despite the very few negative voices, the participants' perceptions of the use of text memorisation in English learning are overwhelmingly positive. The feeling at times appears to be so strong that it has led some participants to go so far as to claim:

It [text memorisation] should be more or less helpful in every aspect of English learning. I cannot think of any way in which it does not help. It's simply a matter of degree. (Chengcheng, LP, JH)

It is such a good method that it benefits me in every aspect. (Yangkun, LP, JH)

Exaggerated as these comments may appear, they suggest that the identification with the practice might be prevalent among Chinese learners, even though the data were collected from a relatively small opportunistic sample. I noticed in a recent study (Gao, 2007) on Chinese learners' strategy use in learning English that many participants mentioned the use of textual memorisation and found it useful. For instance, one reported:

We had to memorise and recite every text to him [the teacher]. ... I think that memorisation was good because it kept you speaking English and reading English to maintain the feel of English. (Liu, quoted in Gao, 2007, p. 123)

Quite a few participants in my study expressed their conviction of the overall helpfulness of text memorisation to English learning. Take the following extract, for example:

Sometimes I think I need someone to push me to do some memorisation. I believe if I learn by heart a bit every day, I can improve my English quickly. I really regret that I didn't keep on learning by heart in senior high. (Xiaofeng, LP, U)

This belief was even held by those who do not like this practice:

I'd like to use 'bitter melon' to describe this method [text memorisation]. I didn't like bitter melon at all when I was a kid because of its bitter taste. My grandma told me that this stuff can cool one's body. I forced myself to eat bitter melon every day because my body easily got hot and I often had a nose bleeding. It did miracle eventually – I found myself no longer suffer from nose bleeding. I prefer to liken learning texts by heart to bitter melon. I personally don't like learning texts by heart, but I never doubt its usefulness to English learning. (Xujia, LP, U)

A more emotional description was provided by a participant, who said,

I felt unhappy when the teachers in high school forced us to memorise texts. But now I am really grateful to them. ... My Mom hired a private English teacher for me and she required me to learn texts by heart. She checked regularly. I really hated her at that time. But now I should thank her for doing so. I found many of the articles she forced me to recite were very helpful to my later study, especially when I was taking part in some English speaking contests. (Lixia, LP, U)

These participants gave a positive rating to the practice although they also emphasised the painful process they had to endure in memorising text. The mixed feeling about the 'bitter melon' experience has confirmed the result produced by a analogous prior research (Ding, 2004) which targeted a group of advanced learners of English from a top university in China. Similarly, text memorisation was compared by a participant in Ding's study to 'good medicine that tastes bitter', a Chinese idiom referring to hard, painful experience that brings a desirable outcome. Having been convinced of the value of text memorisation as a 'good medicine', albeit not tasty, a teacher made the following comments which are consonant with the student's account mentioned above:

Sometimes we have to compel them to do this [learning texts by heart]. ... Some students told me later, 'If you had not forced us to do this, we could not have made the progress we have now. In retrospect, you were doing the right thing'. (Jiean, TP, U)

Many other participants, however, see their psychological experience with text memorisation as being changing or dynamic rather than static. Take the following extract for example:

Interviewer: Isn't it a boring and painful experience?

Suhan (LP, SH): ... *The process is painful for some people, but not for others. For me it was painful at the beginning because I don't have a good memory. And at the initial stage, it is mostly mechanical memorisation as you lack for basic knowledge of how that language is used. But it gradually takes less time to memorise as you find a sort of feeling ... memorisation is thus made much easier.*

Interviewer: So it is 'thorny' anyway?

Suhan: *Not exactly. It is a process of evolving from struggle to relaxation. It is not painful all the way.*

Perhaps the most important factor in determining whether people succeed in this task is their attitude toward the undertaking (Stevick, 1982), as in this comment:

It [persistence in text memorisation] depends on individual choice. If it is a painful thing for you and you don't think it's worth doing, how can you invest so much of your spare time doing this? And you have to persevere in for three years. It's obviously impossible. If you see the value of this activity and think it makes sense to you, you can do this. Otherwise, I bet you cannot persevere at this for three months, let alone three years. (Zhikai, LP, U)

This participant is an enthusiast of text memorisation who had been persevering at learning by heart the texts in *New Concept English* for three years and eventually excelled over his peers. He probably speaks for those who 'consider memorisation to be hard work, mildly onerous, but something they can do if they have sufficient reason to' (Stevick, 1982, p. 69).

Although a big part of the data in my study project a metaphor of the practice of text memorisation as 'bitter melon', implying the unenjoyable process they have to endure, some participants expressed a different feeling about the practice. Text memorisation did not bother them at all:

I do lots of [text] memorisation even at college. I never feel the process of text memorisation 'painful'. I like English very much. It's not painful for me at all. ... No one forced me to do so. (Jake, LP, U)

I don't think learning texts by heart is boring. On the contrary, it's very interesting for me. (Yankun, LP, JH)

I don't see it a painful process. Maybe I'm majoring in art and I have good memory. (Xiaofeng, LP, U)

[Although grammar learning has its advantage,] I still prefer text memorisation which is more interesting and effective to me. (Lixia, LP, U)

I'd like to memorise more good articles even now if I don't have so many trivial things to deal with. I find it an enjoyable job. (Wenna, TP, JH)

It appeared that text memorisation not only has not bothered these participants at all, but makes a pleasant experience for them. Recitation sometimes becomes the realisation of the need for satisfying personal desire: 'Some texts are really beautiful and connect to me so that I just want to memorise them. That's it.' (Jiean, TP, U). This would confirm the observation made by Stevick (1982, p. 69): 'Some people find memorizing easy, and may even do it just for fun'. Indeed, some people 'memorise things *inadvertently* after hearing them a few times' (ibid; emphasis original):

The easier it feels the more articles I memorise. I naturally memorise it after reading aloud a few times if it is a short paragraph. (Jake, LP, U)

My interpretation of the facility with textual memorisation felt by this type of learners is that they are usually intrinsically motivated, that is to say, they have a love affair with English. In the words of a successful Chinese learner in a previous study, 'Not that I wanted to recite them; they get memorised after you read them a few times' (Chen Hua, quoted in Y.-Q. Gu, 2003, p. 94).

Another participant just felt that text memorisation was a way of learning she was comfortable with:

It [text memorisation] makes my English learning easier. If I intend to merely memorise words in a list, they cannot get memorised even after much time is spent. If I learn the text by heart, the new words are naturally memorised as they are all contained in the text. ... I felt it more interesting because it involves your reading aloud and you hear your own pronunciation. (Xuying, LP, U)

This comment also lends support to the finding by Marton et al (1996) that Chinese memorisation practices were integrated with understanding and enjoyment. Although these enthusiastic practitioners of text memorisation perhaps represent only a small minority of Chinese learners who are keen in English and/or endowed with talent in learning a foreign language, their passionate comments may lead us to reconsider the issue of whether text memorisation is necessarily an anti-humanistic practice, as it has been portrayed by some Western scholars. A more important question to ask is: If it indeed makes sense to Chinese learners in particular contexts, how can the practice be made less psychologically challenging from a humanistic view of learning? I found the following comment made by a participant rather inspiring and insightful:

Students need to be guided to appreciate the beauty of language so that the process of memorisation becomes that of enjoying the delicateness of language rather than being forced to endure what they may think is pointless. (Eli, LP, U)

Perhaps in addition to communication, language or speaking functions as 'a source of comfort and an outlet for joy and exuberance' (Cook, 1994, p. 138) which I have a strong conviction in and I believe has been experienced by many others. This perspective may help encourage us (learners and teachers) to consider how we can incorporate the pleasurable aspect of speaking into the practice of text memorisation as a learning device.

V. CONCLUSION

If the most widely accepted view of learning in China is indeed that 'it is memory-based' (Maley, 1983, p. 99), it is far from being 'old-fashioned', 'misguided' or even 'stupid' - at least concerning the practice of text memorisation. While many of the perceptions emerging from the inquiry are indeed culturally-rooted and context-bound, the benefits the learners feel text memorisation has brought to their English learning may have contributed much to their positive rating of the practice. The study suggests the need to pay attention to what the 'insiders' (in this case, the practitioners of text memorisation) actually do and say before allowing us to be led by our own preconceptions. Such initiative is expected to - especially when talking about a practice of Chinese cultural heritage - help us to move from excessive emphasis on culture which may, to some extent, 'result in a dismissive attitude towards Chinese learning practice' (Q. Gu & Brookes, 2008, p. 338).

As is clear from the preceding discussion, many of the contributions offered by the learners were thoughtful and well-reasoned. The Chinese learners have their own opinions and judgment about whether and why the use of text memorisation had been beneficial to their foreign language learning in a Chinese context. While it was viewed by many Western scholars as 'unrewarding in learning terms' (Maley, 1983, p. 102) if not harmful, participants' perceptions of the use of text memorisation in foreign language learning were decidedly positive. The participants perceive text memorisation as being beneficial to foreign language learning not only because it linguistically facilitates and expedites foreign language learning in a number of ways but also because this practice psychologically builds their confidence and a sense of achievement. It seems that the practice of text memorisation probably will not be eliminated in years to come, nor will it be denied by Chinese learners.

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Xia Yu received her PhD at the University of Southampton, UK and is currently employed as Senior Lecturer at Foreign Language School, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, People's Republic of China. Her research interests include educational linguistics, formulaic language, teacher education, second language acquisition and foreign/second language teaching. She has published a number of studies in her areas of expertise, which have appeared in scholarly publications in China, Europe and North America.