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*ChinesePod* is a language learning website that provides daily language course podcasts to teach spoken Mandarin Chinese to adult learners of Chinese as a second language (L2).

Learners who are interested in using the podcasts to learn Chinese need to obtain a monthly subscription. The prices for subscription vary, depending on which one of the five subscription packages (Basic, Premium, Praxis, Guided, Executive) learners select. Prices range between $5 and $199 a month. New podcasts are uploaded on the website daily and automatically downloaded to subscribers’ portable media players such as iPod or personal computers. Learners can also download the podcasts onto any MP3-compatible software or device. Additionally, individual tutoring with a native Chinese speaker via daily phone calls is available to Guided and Executive subscribers.

Each podcast provided by *ChinesePod* is co-hosted by one native speaker of Chinese and one native speaker of English who introduce lesson dialogues and explain new vocabulary and key sentence structures. The podcasts posted online so far include more than 1,200 lessons ranging from beginning to advanced proficiency levels. The daily podcasts are accompanied by text expansion exercises to consolidate learning outcomes. As the material developers suggest on the website, the goal of teaching Chinese through a variety of topics in podcast format is to enable listeners to learn Chinese in a convenient and motivating manner and to cater to an individual learner’s study plan and needs.

A major strength of *ChinesePod* lies in its support for social interaction and communication. Building on the sociocultural approach to second language acquisition which emphasizes language learning processes as they occur in social interactive settings (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000), the founders of *ChinesePod* aim to create an open community where language learners can interact with each other through postings, comments, and a *Question & Answer* section. The *Community* section on the website provides an excellent channel for Chinese learners across the world to communicate with each other. This “community of practice” type of learning culture makes language learning more effective and engaging (Wenger, 1998). Subscribers who have common language learning goals or who are from diverse language learning backgrounds can share in sociocultural practices that may emerge and evolve as they strive toward their Chinese language learning goals. This social interaction process is believed to facilitate language acquisition (Wenger, 1998).

A second major strength of *ChinesePod* involves its focus on the global communicative approach to the instruction of pronunciation. Although a generic introduction of segmental (consonants and vowels) and suprasegmental (tones) aspects
of Mandarin Chinese pronunciation is provided on the ChinesePod webpage, they are not taught in isolation in the daily podcast lessons. Rather, as the global communicative approach to teaching pronunciation suggests (Naiman, 1992), the podcasters emphasize the instruction of prosody (such as stress and intonation) rather than individual sounds. This approach can enhance learners’ ability to communicate in Chinese in a more linguistically and pragmatically appropriate manner because prosodic features of the Chinese language carry important functional meanings that are associated with specific contexts.

Yet another distinctive feature of ChinesePod pertains to its provision for different speech rates and foreign-accented L2 speech input. Research in L2 speech suggests that fluency features such as speech rate and the degree of foreign accent may affect perceptions of comprehensibility by individual listeners (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 2001; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006). Research regarding the effect of speech rate on the perception of L2 speech development (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 2001) suggests that the alteration of pace in the native Chinese podcaster’s speech rate may help learners to better comprehend the content of the daily podcasts, particularly for lower-level learners. Additionally, the English-speaking podcasters speak Chinese with a noticeable foreign accent. Nonetheless, their accent does not appear to interfere with the overall intelligibility of their speech in Chinese. Thus, although subscribers are listening to the foreign-accented speech of the native English-speaking podcasters, they may develop their perceptual skills in differentiating various Chinese pronunciation at the same time. Given that most ChinesePod subscribers are learning Chinese for business purposes, it may be beneficial for them to be exposed to different foreign-accented Chinese speech as learners will inevitably encounter accented speech in the real world. However, it should be noted that lower-level learners could develop inaccurate Chinese pronunciation if they model their pronunciation after that of the English podcasters. Thus, subscribers need to be mindful in this regard while listening to the daily podcasts.

Several drawbacks of ChinesePod will now be addressed. First of all, when learners are practicing reading aloud the new vocabulary, no corrective feedback is provided to monitor their pronunciation. Unlike other language learning software, such as Connected Speech (Egbert, 2004), in which a speech recognition mechanism is built into the software to provide feedback on suprasegmental features such as intonation and stress, such functions are not available in ChinesePod. Perceptual training studies in L2 speech suggest that feedback or visual display of pitch contours on different aspects of speech, such as segmental accuracy or prosody, can help L2 learners better produce phonological features of the target language (Carey, 2004; Hardison, 2004, 2005; Wang & Munro, 2004). Other research also shows that speech-recognition-based language learning software is beneficial to the learning of pronunciation (Egbert, 2004; Hincks, 2003). Therefore, future development of ChinesePod should consider building in state-of-the-art speech recognition mechanisms to provide timely feedback for its users.

A second drawback of ChinesePod concerns the lack of visual input in the podcast format, which might have facilitated the learning process. ChinesePod only provides audio podcasts for listeners; a video podcast is not available. Furthermore, the daily dialogues and vocabulary are presented in a traditional listen-and-repeat fashion. Recent research on the role of gestures and facial cues in the development of L2 perception and production skills has provided positive evidence of their contributions
(Goldin-Meadow, 1999; McCafferty, 2004; Sherman & Nicoladis, 2004; Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005). Future development of the website should include incorporating short video clips of the situational dialogues acted out by the podcasters themselves or native speakers of Chinese. Such video clips can capture nonverbal cues, including the actors’ lip movements, hand gestures, or facial expressions, to enhance comprehension.

ChinesePod is a useful website to supplement the instruction of Chinese in foreign language learning contexts and is particularly useful for English learners of Chinese as the lessons are taught bilingually in Chinese and English. The podcasts cover a full range of proficiency levels and can be used with different levels of Chinese instruction accordingly. The wide variety of topics covered and the large number of available online podcast lessons make ChinesePod an optimal resource site for Chinese language teachers. Based on students’ interests, needs, and levels, various teaching and learning purposes can be achieved: introducing the Chinese language, learning business Chinese, getting familiar with Chinese popular culture, and the like. Learners and teachers of Chinese will find these podcasts interesting and helpful for enhancing learning motivation and autonomy.
References


(Received 15 May 2009) (Revision received 26 July 2009) (Revision accepted 30 July 2009)