

Who are the High Achievers?

When we finish the two-year language course, there is a strong temptation to be content with the level we have reached. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, on most occasions, although we are unable to fully enter into what is being said around us, we are able to 'get by'. Secondly, our Chinese friends will often simplify their sentences or explain things that we don't quite understand. Furthermore, when we listen to Chinese people speaking, although we often realize that we would never have said it their way, we still continue to say things the way we've always said them.

It is important for us – if we truly want to be accepted by our Chinese friends and work colleagues – to be perpetually dissatisfied with the level we have reached. We need to realize that, while it is true that we have been sweating it out over those language textbooks for the last two years, we are only at the beginning stages in the areas of vocabulary, idiom, usage, appropriateness and style. We still have a long way to go!

To put it another way, we are now at the level called 'Limited Work Proficiency'. This means that we can engage in superficial discussions on current events and can talk about ourselves, our family and our work. We can also handle limited work requirements, but need help when things go deeper. We have achieved this level by hard study! But to get to the level where we can really function adequately in our job takes strong motivation plus good opportunities for using what we've learnt and acquiring more.

Seeing that so many foreigners in China plateau out at an inadequate level, who are the ones who continue to press on? Who are these 'high achievers' in Chinese?

Those who live in a good environment – and use it

The more educated the people are with whom you regularly mix, the more likely the range of topics of conversation will be challenging to you and will thereby spur your Chinese on.

A friend of mine who works in an orphanage came to my apartment one evening. It just so happened that some university students were in my home having a discussion on current events. I invited my western friend to join in the discussion. After the students had left, my friend remarked, "I haven't talked in Chinese at that level for ages. It was so demanding!"

Not that simply living among more highly-educated people is sufficient – you must be willing to *use* the opportunity that it affords you. Let it challenge you! Then, take up the challenge to spur you on. So stay in 'learner mode' and always be asking your Chinese friends about new words and phrases, attending lectures, watching the news on TV (and even recording it, playing it back and discussing the content with a Chinese friend).

Those who allow their personality to reinforce their learning

Peter, a good friend of mine, is insatiably curious (and friendly). Walking along the street with him one day, he spotted some unusual objects outside a shop. So he went straight up to someone standing nearby and politely asked them what they were. His curiosity enabled him to continue to expand his Chinese on a wide range of basic, everyday topics.

Now, I'm not like Peter, but I do have one admirable trait – the perfectionist streak in me. I simply have to know the right word or the correct way of saying something! When I was working for a Chinese business corporation, I often asked my Chinese secretary for the proper way to say something. I would then go and use that word or phrase straightaway so that it would immediately become mine! If there was a right word for something, I wanted to know it!

Some people are highly motivated, but feel guilty that they aren't using traditional study methods. I remember once talking with a frustrated western colleague. He told me that by the side of his bed was a pile of textbooks which he desperately wanted to review, but for which he could never find the time in his busy schedule. His sense of guilt was really getting him down! As we talked, he mentioned that he always carried his mobile phone around with him, and if someone used a new word, he would always look it up in Pleco. Since it seemed

to me that he already had an excellent method of increasing his vocabulary, I suggested that he throw away all those books and stop feeling so guilty!

Those who enjoy studying – and have the time for it!

If you are one of these people, be thankful! One problem, however, is that higher level textbooks mainly cover Chinese literature and history (which is O.K., of course, if that is what you want). However, a more useful source of study materials is the wide range of children's books in Chinese. These will help you make the jump to Chinese magazines and books written for adults.

Conclusion – are you a lifelong learner?

The person who is a lifelong learner betrays an attitude of heart as well as of mind. They are always actively exploring the language; they have an insatiable curiosity – always asking, observing, reading, noting down. They are highly motivated. And if you persevere like them, you too will become a 'high achiever' in Chinese!