

How to Study

Humanly speaking, *you* – the language learner – are the most important factor in the language learning process. Success or failure will, in the end, be determined by what you yourself contribute. It is vitally important, therefore, that you take charge of your language learning program. Plan your study time – and stick rigidly to it. Program in talking time – either straight after class or in the evenings – and either go out and talk or invite friendly local people to your home for a chat. Try to maintain this balance between 'input' and 'output' right from the start.

People learn in different ways. Some need to be very analytical: they need a rule for everything. Others are more intuitive: they gather examples and imitate. Some need lots of repetition, others less. You know yourself best and therefore will need to experiment in order to discover what works best for you. Here are some ideas which should prove helpful to you:

PREPARING FOR CLASS

Learning a new language involves remembering many rules about grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Although your textbook and teacher will organize this information in certain ways, you will still need to systematize the material for reference and review. It is also vital that you establish a regular schedule and stick rigidly to it. Strict self-discipline is essential to mastering any language – especially Chinese! However, ensure variety in your studies by 'ringing the changes' from time to time. Don't keep on with the same old thing until you are bored with it. Here are some suggestions which should help give you a varied approach to learning Chinese. Try them out and discover the ones which best suit you:

Vocabulary

- a. Write the vocabulary items on individual cards or slips of paper, or download pictures from the internet (<http://images.google.com> or <http://image.baidu.com>) and print them out; then add the translation on the reverse side.

See how many words you can remember from the English definition by turning them over one by one; then try it the other way round. (This game is more fun if played with two or more people.) Separate out the ones you find hard to recall and carry them around with you in your pocket, reviewing them while waiting for buses, standing in line to buy tickets, etc.

- b. Learn the words in the context of the sentences in the dialogues of your textbook.
- c. Say the words out loud as you study them.
- d. Write down the words you find most difficult to memorize on a separate sheet of paper and give extra time to them.
- e. Record the words and their definitions; then listen to it several times. Use the 'pause' button to test yourself.
- f. Associate words with pictures.
- g. Group them by generic categories, e.g. furniture, foods, etc.; or according to the situations in which they occur, e.g. under 'weather' you can put rain, sun, cloudy, etc. Another way is by function, e.g. greetings, partings, thanking, conversation starters, etc.
- h. Make sentences using the new vocabulary (and grammar patterns) ready for use in class.

NOTE: with Chinese words, it is as important to remember the tone as it is to remember the pronunciation; if you can't remember the tone, you've forgotten the word!

Dialogue

Always try to obtain recordings of the dialogues and the new vocabulary of your textbooks. First listen to the recording of the dialogue just to get a feel for the content of the lesson. Use the 'pause' button on your player to give yourself time to absorb the content. Only when you have listened to it several times and have understood the meaning should you try reading along with the recording. This will aid fluency and intonation. Listen to the recording as many times as possible before class – you can't listen to it too often!

Grammar

Some people perform better when first given a rule and then told to use it to make sentences. Others prefer to be given lots of input and

deduce the rules for themselves. Find out which method works best for you. Keep a notebook in which to write down the major grammar patterns. Then use this for review, adding any new information you may acquire. Memorize the key sentences in the dialogues. If there is something in your textbook you don't understand, leave it for a while. A week or so later, you'll probably suddenly discover that you understand it now!

Ear or Eye?

Use both your ears and eyes. Experiment to see if some tasks are better accomplished through the eye while others are better accomplished through the ear. For example, you may find that listening to recordings helps you improve your oral comprehension and memorization of dialogues; but you may retain vocabulary better if you use flash cards. Remember that applying the same strategy to all tasks does not work. Especially try to find strategies that will help you compensate for your weak areas.

USING CLASS TIME TO YOUR BEST ADVANTAGE

It cannot be over emphasized that the key to getting the most out of class time is to be thoroughly prepared – not only by being familiar with the content of the lesson but by having any questions prepared beforehand. In group classes, try to work out a pace with your teacher which is neither too fast nor too slow. If you have tutorials with your teacher and are properly prepared, it may help if you suggest to your teacher where you would like to be by the end of the lesson. If there is something you would like to particularly work on (e.g. a difficult grammar pattern or sound), ask your teacher if you could spend extra time on it after class (and remember to show your appreciation!). Keep the classroom atmosphere as congenial as possible. Learn to laugh at yourself. And don't forget to thank your teacher for correcting you. Throw yourself into the activities and imagine yourself communicating in real-life situations. Try to think in the language right from the start.

Note each teacher's strong points and build on them, i.e. save your questions on grammar for the teacher who can explain it more clearly; get the teacher who is sharp on pronunciation to keep a close watch on your sounds; and the one good on correcting tones to work

with you on them. Have a pronunciation 'check-up' once a month: ask a teacher to note down all your regular pronunciation and tonal problems and then work on them one at a time. Make beauty your aim!

Try to be as creative as possible. Experiment with grammar rules and vocabulary. Don't just use the sentences in your textbook – try using words in new contexts. When going over the new vocabulary in class, you may find it helpful to see if the word usage is the same in English as in Chinese (e.g. the Chinese word for 'dormitory' has a wider meaning in Chinese than in English). Experiment by making sentences using the word in a particular context and see if it is acceptable. In group classes, in order not to frustrate the other students in your class, some of this should best be done in your tutorial class.

AFTER CLASS – REVIEWING

Plan your review time. Review one lesson each day. Think how you can use software to help you review.

Talk to yourself as you walk around or prepare a meal. Listen to the recordings over and over again as you ride your bicycle or bus, or do mundane things. Write a story using the new vocabulary and grammar patterns and get your teacher to correct it. Note the vocabulary you had difficulty remembering when in class and work on it specifically. This is where flash cards and software come in handy. Write up your notes on the new grammar patterns in your notebook.

Find a sympathetic Chinese friend with whom you can practice regularly what you have just learned. And when talking with your Chinese friends, deliberately use the new words and grammar patterns just learned – don't be lazy and use only what you already know. Your aim is to try out what you've learned recently on anyone who will listen!

SOME OTHER USEFUL IDEAS

Try and make your learning of the Chinese language as enjoyable as possible by inventing games for practicing Chinese. Note how others

learn – especially the good language learners – and try out their ideas yourself. Ask other students how they arrange their notes, grammar rules and vocabulary. Ask them how they organize their practice, where they seek out native speakers, etc. If you can possibly learn with someone else, you will be able to help each other and practice together.

Try out these ideas:

1. Label objects in your dormitory or apartment, e.g. furniture, utensils, rooms, etc.
2. Attach vocabulary lists to the walls of the bathroom and toilet.
3. TV programs teaching English to Chinese young people are helpful as they usually use simple Chinese, often translate the English into Chinese, and tend to speak at a slower pace.
4. Hold an imaginary conversation with yourself – small children often do this to great advantage.
5. Before going out to buy something, rehearse beforehand the things you will probably need to converse about; you will find that this will make the communication process easier and more rewarding. Then, having purchased what you wanted, go over in your mind the conversation you just had and try to note what errors you made.
6. Record yourself reading the dialogues in your textbook as this will make you more aware of your common errors and therefore what you will need to work on.
7. Maintain an insatiable curiosity – every situation is a learning opportunity! Try to use everything around you to reach your language goals.
8. Keep a small notebook with you at all times or use your mobile phone to note down new words as you hear them.

(The ideas for this article came from a variety of sources; one in particular is the excellent book 'How to be a More Successful Language Learner' by Rubin & Thompson. This book is a goldmine of useful ideas on how to learn a language.)