

Maintaining Motivation During Language School

For the language learner, motivation is an important topic for the vital reason that the motivated learner will always surpass the unmotivated learner in performance and outcome. People have an innate need to be competent and effective in their work and motivation is a key factor in helping them reach their goals. Furthermore, learners who leave full-time language study motivated about their Chinese communicative ability are more likely to continue acquiring the language, hence becoming lifelong learners.

Two sources of motivation are 'internal' and 'external'. Internal motivation – "I want to get good Chinese" – is the motivation that the newcomer brings with them, and strongly affects how they go about learning Chinese. External motivators include your organization which hopefully encourages you to 'aim high', language teachers who teach Chinese in a way that you find interesting, textbooks that give you what you need for communicating, and Chinese friends who encourage you.

It is important to realize that motivation doesn't guarantee success. Other factors, such as opportunity, ability, and quality of instruction are also important. But motivation will enhance high ability and good instruction, for people work longer, harder, and with more vigor and intensity when they are motivated. Concentration increases comprehension – for greater alertness produces better learning.

Some Motivating Questions

1. Do I come with a positive attitude to learning Chinese?

It is worth asking yourself questions such as, "What are some of my fears and apprehensions about learning Chinese?" Write them down and then check them out with other learners to see whether or not they are justified. While learning Chinese, spend time interacting with positive language learners – those who are enthusiastic about learning Chinese! Hopefully it's catching! Also spend time with Chinese friends who by nature are encouragers – those who continually make you feel good

about your Chinese. Think through what are your personal strengths and abilities as related to language learning – both personal character traits as well as natural learning strategies.

2. Do I believe that the content of the course will meet my needs for living and working in China?

Few learners ask themselves this extremely basic question. And if the answer is negative, then it is imperative for you to get hold of a copy of *Chinese Made Easier* in order to supply you with the everyday words that you will be needing for handling daily living in China.

To find out about the quality of the textbooks used at your Chinese language center, ask other students for their comments and opinions. If you discover that the grammar explanations aren't clear enough, borrow a copy of H.S. Cheung's 'A Practical Chinese Grammar' (published by Chinese University Press in Hong Kong).

Be clear on your goals and objectives. Some issues worth thinking through are: "I want the course to help me" (complete the sentence). "An important goal for me is ...". "When I've completed my Chinese studies, I want to be able to: a) ..., b) ..., c) ..." .

3. As I live here in China, am I stimulated to learn Chinese?

Are my teachers stimulating to be with – or is a particular teacher's teaching method frustrating me? Then think about hiring a private tutor instead. Am I finding it stimulating being with my Chinese friends each day – or am I spending too much time with my English-speaking friends and colleagues? Then re-schedule your time. Am I finding the course stimulating – or does it seem to drag on interminably? Then get hold of some helpful textbooks and study them instead (ask other students which textbooks they have found helpful). Am I stimulated to press on because I sense regular progress – or does my goal seem far off and unreachable? Then break down your goal into smaller bites. Am I stimulated to go out each day into the local neighborhood and talk with friends and storekeepers – or am I

finding that my shyness or nervousness hinders me from going out and talking with people? Then ask friends or colleagues to introduce you to a friendly 'talker', and set up a safe and secure place for practicing Chinese where you won't feel threatened or embarrassed.

4. Am I enjoying learning Chinese?

It's important to continue to enjoy learning Chinese and not to let it drag or become boring and tiresome. So keep a diary in which you jot down occasions when you sensed real progress, whether in handling daily living needs or making new friends and deepening relationships with those whom you've already got to know. Then read through it when feeling in need of a boost! Don't keep on with the same old boring routine – ring the changes by getting fresh ideas for how to learn from other language learners, e.g. new places to go for practicing Chinese (friendly shopkeepers), neighborhoods where people are more friendly to outsiders, people who are more empathetic to struggling newcomers. If you're dragging yourself through each language learning day, maybe it's time for a vacation!

Emotions that need immediate attention: apathy, boredom and anxiety. Emotions to be encouraged are: alertness, excitement, optimism, curiosity, and confidence. Can you think of any others?

5. Do I sense real progress?

Am I feeling more confident and competent in Chinese? People have an innate need to be competent and effective in what they do. We can't take being ineffective for too long. So ask your teacher for a pronunciation 'checkup' once a month. Also ask the director of the Chinese language center for an assessment as to how you are progressing compared with the average student. Also use the Self-rating Checklist of Speaking Proficiency in the article *Where am I Going? How am I Doing?*. Finding out exactly where you are along the road to your goal isn't easy, but if you can know objectively that you are progressing well, that will be motivating.

If you are experiencing obstacles to progress, try to find practical ways to remove them, e.g. if your living situation affords little regular contact with Chinese people, consider ways of improving this.