

Measuring Progress

What Level in Chinese am I aiming for?

Right at the start of your Chinese studies you need to decide on your language goals, i.e. what level in Chinese are you hoping to obtain? This means that you need first to look at your work needs, i.e. for the kind of work you have come to China to do, what level of proficiency in Chinese will you need in order to be able to function adequately? Then having decided on the level you wish to obtain, be determined to press on until you have reached your goal. What, then, are these different levels?

LEVEL 1: Survival

Level 1 will enable you to carry out minimal activities of daily living. You should be able to handle routine shopping, order a simple meal, ask and give directions, deal with travel requirements, tell the time, and be able to introduce yourself.

LEVEL 2: Conversational

Level 2 will enable you to interact with people in routine social situations and for limited work requirements. You should be able to engage in superficial discussions on current events, talk about yourself, your family and your work. You can handle limited work requirements such as giving simple instructions or simple explanations and descriptions. At Level 1 most of the things you could say had been specifically prepared. By Level 2 you can speak extemporaneously (although in a limited way) about many topics.

LEVEL 3: Minimum Professional

Level 3 will enable you to speak Chinese with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to satisfy normal social and work requirements. You can handle professional discussions within a specialized field. You can participate effectively in all general conversations, and you can discuss topics of interest with reasonable ease. Your vocabulary is broad enough so that you rarely have to search for a word and you use the language well enough to establish close friendships.

LEVEL 4: Full Professional

Level 4 will enable you to use the language fluently and accurately with vocabulary that is always extensive and precise enough to enable you to convey your exact meaning. You can understand and participate in any conversation with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary. Your speech is as effortless as your mother tongue, and you are always easy to listen to.

LEVEL 5: Native

Level 5 will mean that Chinese react to you as they do to each other. Your speaking proficiency is equivalent in every way to that of an educated Chinese person.

Having read through these five levels of proficiency, now look again at the work you have come to China to do and decide which level you must aim for in order for you to be able function effectively.

How Am I Doing?

"That's all very fine," you may be saying, "but how do I know how I'm getting on? Right from the very first sentence I blurted out, my Chinese friends told me "Your Chinese is spoken very well". And six months later they're still saying the same thing! Then those tests on my school work which my teachers give me – I find that they seem to give little indication as to how I'm really getting on in Chinese."

The self-rating checklist of speaking proficiency set out below should help you to know how you are progressing. It is very simple but very effective. Read each statement carefully and then ask yourself honestly whether or not you are able to perform that task in Chinese to a reasonable degree. If your answer is 'Yes', then check (tick) it off. Work through the statements one at a time until you are unable to check off any more. This will then indicate at which level you are at present. Approximately three months later, get it out again and start from where you left off last time, seeing how many more tasks you are able to perform compared to before. If you feel that your progress has plateaued off, get the chart out and remind yourself just how far you have come in Chinese – this ought to be an encouragement to you that you are progressing even though you may not feel so!

SELF-RATING CHECKLIST OF SPEAKING PROFICIENCY

LEVEL 1

(You are at Level 1 when you can confidently check each of the following Level 1 language activities)

I can initiate conversations and use appropriate leave-takings to close conversations.

I can order a simple meal.

I can ask and tell the time of day, day of the week, and the date.

I can go to the market and ask for vegetables, fruit, milk and meat, and I can bargain where appropriate.

I can ask and tell how to get from where I'm living to a post office, park, restaurant or hospital.

I can give directions to a taxi driver.

I can make a social introduction of someone else and also briefly introduce myself.

I can understand and correctly respond to questions about my age, marital status, nationality, occupation, and place of birth.

I can get the bus or train I want, buy a ticket and (most important!) get off where I intended to.

I can use the language well enough to assist a newcomer in all of the above Level 1 situations.

LEVEL 1 PLUS

I have a Level 1 Plus proficiency because I can do all the Level 1 activities and at least three of the following Level 2 activities.

LEVEL 2

(You are at Level 2 when you can confidently check each of the following Level 2 activities)

I can give detailed information about the weather, my family, my childhood home and my present living arrangements.

I can take and give simple messages over the telephone.

I can give a brief autobiography and also talk about my plans and hopes for the future.

I can describe my most recent job or activity in some detail and also describe my present role as a language learner.

I can describe the organization I belong to.

I can hire household help, agreeing on salary, hours, and special duties.

I feel confident that my pronunciation is always intelligible.

I do not try to avoid any of the grammatical features of Chinese.

I feel confident that people understand me when I speak in Chinese, at least 80% of the time. I am also confident that I understand at least 80% of what Chinese people tell me on topics like those of Level 2.

I could use Chinese well enough to assist a newcomer on any of the Level 2 situations.

LEVEL 2 PLUS

I have a Level 2 Plus proficiency because I can meet at least three of the Level 3 requirements.

LEVEL 3

(You are at Level 3 when you can confidently check each of the following Level 3 items)

I now have sufficient vocabulary and grasp of the grammatical structure to complete any sentence that I begin.

I can speak at a normal rate of speech, with only rare hesitations.

I can confidently follow and contribute to a conversation between Chinese people when they try to include me.

I am able to correctly understand any information given to me over the telephone.

I can understand a speech or discussion on a topic of interest to me.

I can speak to a group of Chinese on my professional subject and have confidence that I am communicating what I want to.

I can understand opposing points of view and can politely describe and defend my position.

I could cope with a social blunder, an undeserved reprimand by an official, or a plumbing emergency.

I can describe the geography of both my home and host countries.

I could serve as an informal interpreter for a newcomer in any of the Level 3 situations.

I feel that I can carry out the professional responsibilities of my work in Chinese.

LEVEL 3 PLUS

I have a Level 3 Plus proficiency because I can meet at least three of the Level 4 requirements.

LEVEL 4

(You are at Level 4 when you can confidently check each of the following Level 4 characteristics)

I practically never make grammatical mistakes.

I can always understand Chinese people when they talk with each other.

I can understand humor and language puns, and I can actively participate in fun and humorous situations.

My vocabulary is always extensive and precise enough for me to convey my exact meaning in professional discussions.

I feel I have a comprehensive grasp of the local cultural knowledge bank.

I can appropriately alter my speech style for a public lecture, or a conversation with a professor, an employee or a close friend.

I could serve as an informal interpreter for a VIP at a professional or social function.

I feel that I could carry out any job assignment as effectively in Chinese as in English.

LEVEL 4 PLUS

My vocabulary and cultural understanding are always extensive enough to enable me to communicate my precise meaning.

Chinese people feel that I share their knowledge bank well enough to talk about and defend any of their beliefs or values.

LEVEL 5

Chinese people react to me just as they do to each other – I am usually considered an insider.

I sometimes feel more at home in Chinese than in English.

I can do mental arithmetic in Chinese without slowing down (assuming that I can do mental arithmetic in *English* without slowing down!).

I consider myself to be completely bilingual and bicultural, with equivalent ability in English and in Chinese.
I consider myself a native speaker of Chinese.

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