

Overcoming the Psychological Barriers 1

When coming to China, we bring a lot of 'baggage' with us. I'm not referring here to your suitcases and backpacks, however, but to your personality make-up.

We come with our degrees, diplomas and doctorates to show that we are intelligent. We may come, too, with some previous language learning successes. "I did well at getting basic Swahili when on a short-term program to Africa," you may recall.

We also come with our attitudes. "I had many Chinese friends back home and it was through them that I got an interest in China," you recount. Then we come with our motivational drives. "I want to become an accepted member of the local Chinese community as quickly as possible," you say.

Finally, we come with our own individual personalities – introvert or extrovert, inhibited or outgoing, anxious or carefree. And soon we discover that our personality plays a large part in the speed with which we master Chinese. It sometimes hinders us doing the very thing that we desperately want to do, such as going up to strangers and talking to them in Chinese.

So let us now take a deeper look at some of these affective factors and see how we can find ways to overcome the negative ones.

High Self-Esteem vs. Low Self-Esteem

What is self-esteem? Basically, it is the extent to which we believe we are capable, significant and successful. We get our self-esteem from the accumulation of accomplishments and failures, as well as other people's assessment of us.

If you are secure in yourself and confident in your ability to master Chinese, you have a tremendous advantage over those who have a low self-image. Confidence is extremely important. A colleague of mine loved learning Chinese and interacting with anyone whom she met, happily chatting to all her neighbors and local shopkeepers. No

emotional energy was wasted on wondering whether she might not master the Chinese language. I don't think it ever entered her head!

The person who believes in their own capability at learning languages will approach the task with a greater measure of confidence and therefore be more open to allowing the new language to go deep into their memory. This person's confidence will not be undermined when they make stupid mistakes.

Uninhibited vs. Inhibited

Closely related to self-esteem is the concept of inhibition. Those who are overly concerned about what people are thinking about them, and can't stand people laughing at them, are at a tremendous disadvantage when learning languages! People with higher self-esteem are more able to withstand threats to their existence (or ego) and hence their defenses are lower, so allowing the language to penetrate deeper into their memory. People with weaker self-esteem maintain walls of inhibition to protect themselves, e.g. by staying indoors, or talking in English rather than trying to practice their Chinese. The problem is that in our early days, just when inhibitions need to be reduced, the anxiety caused through stressful language learning situations (e.g. someone laughing at our faltering attempts to speak Chinese) *increases* inhibition.

I remember a pronunciation class where one of the students found it impossible to make one of the sounds. After a few futile attempts, he was heard to mutter, "What a stupid sound anyway!". He refused to keep trying and kept quiet for the rest of the lesson. This kind of barrier inhibits, rather than facilitates learning. Language learning involves making many mistakes; but mistakes can be seen as a threat to our ego. The lowering of our defense mechanisms involves self-exposure to a degree manifested in few other tasks. When faced with this threat to our ego, it is hard for us to lower our defenses, and yet keeping the barriers up will seriously slow down our rate of learning.

Extroversion vs. Introversion

The amiable, outgoing and talkative person has a tremendous advantage over the quiet, reserved person who has to exert great

effort to open their mouth when in large groups. I envied a friend of mine who loved making people laugh with their faltering attempts at communicating in Chinese. I quickly realized that the 'actor' who enjoys performing before an amused 'audience' has a tremendous advantage because they are continually creating opportunities to hear and use the language. However, once the introvert has found their friend – which often takes a little time – then conversation flows and fluency increases.

Anxiety

Situations in which the language learner feels a high level of anxiety work against effective language acquisition. It seems that, when people are nervous, a 'shutter' goes up inside them which slows the language flow into and out of them, thereby hindering language learning. It also makes recall more difficult. We have all experienced the anxious moment when we failed to recall the vital word we needed, yet as soon as we walked away from the other person, the word popped straight into our mind! I know of one language student who, when seeing a Chinese person coming up to him, would subconsciously say to himself, "I won't understand what that person is going to say to me". And so it happened – just as he predicted it would! A high level of anxiety, by impeding the flow of input into the brain, slows down language progress to a considerable degree. As one linguist put it, "Anxiety brings on the very failure which so concerns them". The person with a low level of anxiety, however, is more open, so new language strikes deeper into that part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. We therefore need to create situations that are relaxing enough to allow the 'shutter' to remain down.

Empathy

One of the problems of communicating in a new language is that the culture is new too. The rules of social behavior are not yet clearly understood by the newcomer. People who possess a high degree of empathy will be more sensitive in their interaction with Chinese people, looking for clues as to how their speech is being received. Especially when learning pronunciation, the empathetic person, who essentially wants to become as Chinese as possible, will be more willing to throw themselves into making those strange new sounds.

To learn a new language is essentially to take on a new identity – to temporarily cease being 'me' and trying hard to be like 'them' ! People who lack empathy are unable to let themselves go, preferring to retain their own cultural identity. There was a time when the English gentleman learning French prided himself on not stooping to adopt the effeminate and obviously degenerate way of speaking that the French have!

Conclusion

What if you lack confidence and are easily inhibited or are introverted, shy or nervous? Forcing yourself to go out and talk with people who happen to cross your path would be too traumatic for you. Telling yourself to be less inhibited or less introverted will not help either. Is there some way that allows you to be yourself and yet enables you to communicate freely? Yes, I believe there is.

You need to find Chinese people who are gentle, caring and empathetic, and set up 'safe places' for communicating with them. You can do this by analyzing how you feel when with different people. Maybe one of your school teachers is especially warm and friendly; or maybe someone else's tutor is very empathetic and caring. Then why not hire them for language practice once a week? Also, when at the local shops or market, as you try to chat with people, some will make you feel a little nervous. Others, on the other hand, because of their gentle, empathetic personality, will allow you to relax and feel free to say whatever you want without feeling bad about your faltering attempts. It is this latter group with whom you especially want to spend time. You might ask them whether they have time during the week for chatting (maybe during their slack time each day), possibly exchanging English for Chinese. If you find it difficult going up to people to ask them, perhaps a friend or colleague could ask for you. It is best, however, if you first find your own conversation contacts as you will sense best those with whom you feel most at ease.

So note those people who make you feel good about your Chinese and spend as much time as possible with them. Why not think now who some of these people might be, and plan your schedule to spend time with them. You'll be glad you did!