

Where and How to Practice

Are you suffering from language indigestion? Do you daily stuff your head with new words and grammar, but find few opportunities to *practice* your Chinese? If this is your problem, here are a few hints which should help you balance input with output.

WHERE to practice ...

1. Friendly stall operators & shopkeepers

Find those who are happy to chat with you and spend time talking with them, especially during their slack time each day. Ask other students where these people are and share the information around!

2. Sports & Recreation

Basketball, soccer and jogging in the college sports ground are all opportunities to get to know Chinese college students in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, when you've finished playing, go off and have a meal together!

3. Long-distance train and bus journeys

Fellow-travelers often have little to do and, seeing a foreigner sitting next to them, are happy to enjoy a conversation – so long as you get it going!

4. Hire someone for conversation practice

Especially if you are somewhat shy or find starting up conversation with people a little difficult, this is well worth trying. Why not ask a friend to find someone who would be willing to have Chinese conversation with you on a regular basis? Tell them that they are being paid not to use English, or can use it only in emergencies!

5. Exchange English conversation for Chinese conversation

If you find it difficult hiring a talker, then agree to exchange 30 minutes of English conversation for 30 minutes of Chinese conversation.

6. Chat with children on the street

Children don't get embarrassed in the way that adults do! You will find that they are more accepting of you, are willing correctors, have clearer pronunciation, and speak at your level.

7. Eat out

Enjoy a relaxed atmosphere with plenty of time for chatting in pleasant company.

8. Hire househelp

For families, this is an ideal way for you to obtain extra practice. Especially for mothers who find it difficult to find the time for study and practice, the 'baomu' is a great person to have around! So, when choosing one, your first consideration should be whether she speaks standard (biaozhun) Mandarin and also whether she is a happy chatter.

9. Take the baby out in a pushchair

White-skinned babies and young children attract Chinese people like flies! If you are single, when a friend takes their baby round the park, offer to go along with them!

10. Caretakers & Cleaners

In China, there are many people whose job is simply to sit at a desk in the entrance of a building. These 'fuwuyuan' often have little to do all day. Find the friendly ones and chat with them.

11. Invite someone to your home to learn a new skill

For example, if you want to learn how to cook Chinese food, invite a Chinese friend round to your home to show you how to cook.

12. Hospital waiting areas

Hospitals in China are full of bored people waiting to be seen by the doctor. Just sit there and chat with those milling around you!

WHO to talk with ...

Be on the lookout for those with whom you feel most at ease and relaxed – and then major on them. When we want to increase in fluency, it is important to find people who are friendly and

accepting of us and who, therefore, don't make us feel embarrassed when we make a mistake. So analyze how you feel when with different people, and only spend time with those who put you at your ease. Also, ask other language students where these people might be. (see the article *Are You an Optimal Monitor User?*)

HOW to make the most of each opportunity ...

The key: PLAN AHEAD! You must be ready for each opportunity and be prepared to get the conversation going. But how?

- a) have a topic ready to talk about – maybe a 'topic for the week'.
- b) have your school textbook with you and ask someone about something in one of the lessons.
- c) have something which you need to do, e.g. buy a train ticket.