

Where am I Aiming for?

In the busyness of your language learning schedule, have you ever stopped to ask yourself the important question: "Am I actually learning what I need?"

Too often we are so taken up with getting through the Chinese curriculum that we fail to ask ourselves this most basic yet vital question. In other words, for the work which I've come to China to do, am I acquiring the Chinese vocabulary that will enable me to function adequately?

In the article *Where am I Going? How am I Doing?*, we looked at levels of proficiency in Chinese and thought about a simple way of measuring progress. Now you may be asking, "What's the difference between those 'levels of proficiency' and what we are thinking about here?"

It is important to note that levels of proficiency simply indicate a degree of comprehension and fluency in Chinese; the tasks measured are of a general nature. Now we need to look at our language learning from another aspect – that of broadening our language in the areas where our needs and interests lie. The language curriculum gives you a foundation in everyday conversational Chinese – the basic core – as well as covering some aspects of Chinese culture. However, if you plan to live in China for some while – to make it your home – this is hardly adequate for normal living. In order to live comfortably (linguistically speaking), you will want to broaden your Chinese in two major areas – firstly as regards your work, and secondly in the area of your personal interests – for what we are interested in is what we will want to talk to others about. So, why not decide now in which areas you would like to expand your Chinese? Then set about finding the resource materials on these subjects.

"But," you might be saying, "that's all very fine, but after I've completed the basic Chinese language course, I won't have any textbooks from which to get the language I want."

Our problem is that we become so used to getting our Chinese from textbooks that we seem to think that this is the only way to acquire Chinese. So let me offer some practical suggestions:

If your interest is Chinese cooking, first buy a Chinese cookbook. (Even better is if you can find one that has the recipes in both Chinese and English). Then invite a Chinese friend round for the evening and cook one of the dishes together (having first gone out with them to buy the ingredients). As you cook, chat about what you are doing, and you will soon discover that your knowledge of Chinese cooking terms is expanding rapidly. There are also television programs on Chinese cooking. Watch them with a Chinese friend and then discuss the content together.

What about Chinese painting and calligraphy? Find someone in the arts department of a local university who would be interested in teaching you. If you can find some books in English which give you the background and basic terminology, so much the better; or possibly one of your Chinese teachers may be interested in teaching you.

Should your interest be sports, try to join in with those who are playing it on the college campus. Also make sure you watch the game on television whenever possible.

If it's Chinese music, go to some of the concerts held either in college, local cultural centers or concert halls. There you will meet people with the same interests who can keep you informed about future concerts.

For other interests, if the college where you are studying Chinese has a department that teaches that topic (e.g. business or computers), try to make friends with students or professors in that department and see if you can audit some of the classes.

So, basically, having decided on your work needs and interests, look around for suitable materials and friends who share your interests. Reading magazines, attending lectures, watching television, reading English-language books and talking with friends with common interests are all useful resources. And as you start to broaden your

Chinese, you will discover that you are becoming a more interesting person to your Chinese friends and you will also feel much more at home in China.