

Some Good Language Learners

Here are profiles of three good language learners and three poor language learners:

Tim - an Outstanding Language Learner

He worked hard at his studies. Even though Tim is an exceptionally gifted language learner, he spent many hours each day in either preparing for class or reviewing lessons learned.

He regularly put himself in situations where he could hear and use Chinese. Each day he spent 2-3 hours visiting his local friendly shopkeepers to chat with them. Even in his early days in China, he wasn't afraid to use the little he had to go out and buy things. And when communication broke down, he would go back to his teacher and try to find out why. He also went regularly to the local park and teashops for conversation practice. Sometimes he would take his teacher to the shops or market to help him practice the content of the lesson.

He spent time improving his listening comprehension. He didn't spend all his practice time just looking for opportunities to talk to people; some tasks were simply for improving his listening comprehension. For example, he would often watch selected television programs or online video clips geared to his present level.

As soon as he learned a new word, he brought it into the conversation. He understood that by focusing attention on a new word, especially in the context of a conversation, it is more easy to retain in one's memory than simply learning words from a vocabulary list in a textbook. So in this way, he got new vocabulary into his long-term memory more quickly and efficiently. I remember one time we were traveling on a long-distance bus together. In our conversation – we were talking in Chinese – I had used three words which were new to him. Not only did he repeatedly bring them into our conversation, but as we arrived at our destination, he repeated all three words back to me!

He used everything around him to help reach his language goals. For instance, during breaks between class, he would chat with the teachers. Also, he would often invite his Chinese friends out for a meal.

Tommy – a Slow Beginner with a Good Ending

Tommy had all the potential for not getting Chinese! Lacking in language learning aptitude, somewhat conservative and rather shy, he preferred tasks which used his hands rather than his head. He could easily have given up when, after only a few weeks of language study, he realized just how slow he was progressing. And whereas his wife enjoyed studying Chinese as well as going outside and chatting with the neighbors, in the early days Tommy didn't really enjoy either. And yet he made it. In fact he got Chinese well. Why?

First and foremost, he had a good attitude. Although he's not the bookish type and doesn't really enjoy the classroom, yet he knew that he had to work hard at his studies – in fact harder than the average language student if he was going to get anywhere in the language. And he did.

Secondly, he was willing to face up to his weak areas – and do something about them. So when he found that memorizing vocabulary didn't come easily to him, he re-doubled his efforts by using flash cards and forced himself to review at regular intervals those words that didn't stick easily.

Also, recognizing his somewhat shy personality, especially when in a new and uncertain environment, yet at the same time knowing that fluency only comes through much practice, he was willing to spend 20 minutes after language school each day talking with someone who understood his low level and who therefore kept the conversation simple. For although Tommy is somewhat shy, this doesn't mean that he isn't a 'people person'. What he prefers is making deeper relationships with fewer people. So when he found people with whom he really related well, he would spend much time with them talking on many and varied issues.

Tommy had the advantage that he had learned another foreign language before coming to China. That one hadn't been easy for him either, yet eventually he got it to a good level. This proved to be of real help when learning Chinese because it enabled him to recognize his learning curve, and most important, that whereas learning that language had been an uphill struggle, he did eventually make it, thus giving him hope for learning Chinese.

The end result was that, after six months of struggling with learning Chinese, he gradually obtained the self-confidence needed to help him progress faster and hence fuel motivation to press on.

Joachim - a Learner who Spent much time on the Street

Joachim was a learner who, right from the start, loved looking for people to chat to! Being warm, friendly and outgoing, he would go up to people in shops, markets and local parks and simply begin chatting with them. The presence of a Chinese person meant yet another opportunity for practicing his Chinese! And he enjoyed every minute of it! If he got himself into a situation where he couldn't understand what the conversation was about, he would simply say (in Chinese), "I'm sorry, I must be going now, but I've enjoyed getting to know you!" – and then leave. Also, between classes, he would spend the time chatting with his teachers because he knew that they understood his level of Chinese and so would keep the conversation simple.

Joachim had an agile mind that allowed him to use the little vocabulary he knew in a creative way. And when he didn't know the correct word, he would be happy to act it out. One day he wanted to buy some glue. Not knowing the word, he said that he wanted something that puts two things together. The shopkeeper was still mystified as to what he wanted so Joachim drew a picture and gradually the shopkeeper understood! Joachim's friendly approach helped tremendously. When he made a mistake, he would laugh about it along with everyone else! Joachim knew that, because he was only a beginner, he would naturally make many mistakes. He also recognized that other people not only were willing to accept him as he was but were also willing to help and encourage him. So he used this to his advantage.

He is also someone who is willing to learn by trial and error. What works for him he continues to use; what doesn't work, he simply discards. He tried using flash cards (because he was told that this is a good way to memorize vocabulary). He found that this method didn't suit his approach to learning Chinese and so dropped it, simply writing out those words he found difficult to memorize on slips of paper. He also found that trying to memorize vocabulary in the evenings didn't work for him. So he switched to the early morning and soon discovered that vocabulary stuck much quicker. He also knew that he couldn't sit down at his desk for hours on end poring over his textbooks; soon he was up and off looking for people to practice with. He realized that vocabulary retention is more efficient when actually using it in conversation rather than simply sitting down at his desk and going through new vocabulary over and over again. This doesn't mean, however, that he didn't spend time preparing for his lessons; in fact, for every hour of class he spent an hour going over the lesson beforehand. But once he had done this, he was off outside!

Some Who Didn't Make It – And Why

Like Tommy, John had a low language learning aptitude. Yet whereas Tommy's humble attitude allowed him to be open to advice and be willing to take the punishing daily humiliation of continually being corrected by his teachers, John's psychological defenses resulted in him projecting the blame for his slow progress on to the language teachers and the textbooks, rather than on to himself. By blaming others instead of making himself responsible for his slow progress and taking the necessary remedial action, he cut himself off from the very people who could have helped him succeed. Hence slow progress resulted in loss of motivation and the will to press on.

Jim failed to grasp a key point which Donald Larson makes in *Guidelines for Barefoot Language Learning*: "People who develop competence in another language do so because they go at it intensively". Coming to China and discovering that learning Chinese was much harder than he had originally imagined, he decided to miss class whenever he felt in need of a break from language study. Sad to say, what was learned rapidly (intensively) was also lost rapidly;

unable to sense that he was making much progress, he soon lost all motivation to continue studying Chinese.

Jack's problem was that, although he covered the language material in class at a good pace, he never found communicating with Chinese people easy. Words were difficult to recall, and his sentences never came out smoothly. Talking with people outside on the street was always a struggle for him. His dormitory room was the only 'safe' place and he therefore retreated there after class each day. It wasn't that others hadn't tried to help him find friendly people to talk with; he simply couldn't or wouldn't discipline himself to go out and practice.

An excellent book on the subject of good language learners is Earl W. Stevick's book *Success with Foreign Languages* (published by Prentice Hall). Stevick looks at seven outstanding language learners – how they approached learning a foreign language and why they were so successful at it. It is an interesting and helpful book as it makes you realize that there is not just one way to learn a language; finding the right approach that works best for you is therefore vitally important – and this very readable book will help you do just this.