

# IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

## How do you say that? Learning and Teaching in China

by Christine Coussell

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Learning a complex language such as Chinese in an authentic setting has made learning Chinese fun and enabled me to use it daily, however imperfectly.

I began learning at a Chinese university in the south of China in the 80's when I was already in my 30's. With only School Certificate French and German and Stage 1 Maori under my belt, it was not exactly extensive language learning experience! I spent two years full-time studying there, initially in a class of six and later in slightly larger classes. One of the most rewarding aspects was being in classes with many other nationalities: English, Japanese, American, Swedish, Canadian, German and Australian-born Chinese. I learned so much about the world and world views, as well as other people's language learning experiences. It was more normal to speak several languages than it was to be mono- or even bilingual, like most Kiwis, which opened my eyes at that time.

One of my current classmates is a Brazilian-born Chinese who is studying Chinese as her fourth language! At home she speaks her dialect, at school and work it's Portuguese. She studied English at school and now in her late 30's, she has begun to learn Chinese. She is learning how to read and write standard Chinese as well, because the dialects have no written language.



After two years of language study, I taught English for three years in China before returning to NZ for 15 years, doing other jobs, teaching and studying. This was a period when I lost a lot of vocabulary, but more seriously, when I forgot my tones and formed bad habits, which my teachers are currently trying to help me undo - not such an easy task! Today, I teach English at a medical university in Tianjin.

So how has being in an authentic setting affected my language acquisition?

Firstly, now I live in the north and I hear standard Mandarin Chinese spoken every day (in the south, where I first learnt Chinese, the local dialect was more often used), and today, there are more TV programmes to listen to and some are targeted at foreigners learning Chinese, something that was unavailable in the '80's.

We have found people are incredibly helpful and so delighted with our most pathetic efforts – they are always so encouraging. The best teachers outside class are the taxi drivers who will give you a language and culture lesson all in one for the price of a trip, which starts at NZ\$1.50 for flag fall. As they do not speak any English, there is a certain necessity in communication which quickly

forces progress. Also, going to the market can be a wonderful adventure, but you need to allow plenty of time to be taught and drilled on the names of the vegetables and fruit, counting out the money you pay for it and checking the change. Numbers are one of the first things you learn. Within the first month of study, my husband, a total beginner, was able to bargain extremely successfully for furniture at the enormous furniture market simply on the basis of tai guile (too expensive), gei wo pianyi yidianr (give me a little cheaper) and the numbers.

Living in a Chinese university apartment complex we have not learned about renting an apartment and all that goes with it, but we do have wonderful service personnel and our own cleaning lady who speaks little or no English, so we get daily practice. Our cleaning lady comes once a week and at first was very reluctant to spend time helping us with our homework. 'I'm not a teacher. I can't help you'. We finally persuaded her by saying that it was part of her job and we really needed someone outside class to talk to. Now her first question each week is: 'Do we have any homework today?' She's a brilliant help and is so disappointed if there is none.

After I have finished teaching my English class I often ask if anyone is willing to help me with my Chinese homework. I usually have far too many helpers, as a teacher who is also a student is rather a novelty and piques their curiosity as well as respect. They love to correct me once they get over their initial shyness. This raises a cultural issue. It's very important in Chinese culture to know a person's status in relation to you.

When we first meet in NZ we often ask 'What's your name?' and 'What do you do?'

We tend to define ourselves by name and job, and sometimes family. In China people ask 'How do I address you?' (Wo zenme chenghu nin?), 'What is your job?'

(Nin/Ni zuo shenme gongzuo?), 'How old are you?' (Nin/Ni duoda nianji?), and 'How much do you earn?' (Nin/Ni de gongzi duoshao?). After having the answers to all these questions they know how to relate properly to you. For example, although I teach English at a university, I am also a part-time language student at a language school. Even the directors of the school call me by my title and family name, Teacher Fan, because of my social status. This need to define social relationships goes all the way back to Confucius, 2500 years ago.

Learning in an authentic setting, you also discover that what you learn in the textbook isn't always what is used in the marketplace. For example, when enquiring about price you learn to ask: Duoshao qian? (How much money (is that)?)? But if you want the best price in this area you need to ask: Zenme mai? (How do I buy that?). When I lived in the south I discovered there were three price levels: the lowest for locals who spoke the dialect, the highest for foreigners who spoke little or no Chinese, and a middle level which both I, as a foreigner who spoke moderately fluent Chinese, and my Beijing Chinese neighbour both paid. We were both considered to be lao wai (outsiders).

It is also much more difficult to learn Chinese characters in an academic setting than in an authentic setting where you see them every day and have opportunities to read not just your textbook, but noticeboards, advertisements, TV subtitles, shop windows, price labels, billboards, newspapers, bus timetables and so on. Seeing the words in many contexts has helped me to understand some of the richness and diversity of the language. It has also made me aware that although modern Chinese is written left to right, horizontally, just like English, if you are visiting a tourist attraction, especially a historical one, it may well be written vertically, right to left, in the traditional style, or right to left horizontally. By the time I've worked it out, even assuming I know all the characters, my friends have moved on or got bored! Still another challenge in such

situations is that many of these places still use the traditional, complex characters which are not taught in class. However, the longer one spends here, the easier it is to make the transition, especially after a few visits to Hong Kong.

Let's think about the other side of the desk. In the past I have taught English major students, but I am currently teaching medical majors non-specialist English. One thing I have noticed in the 20 years between my first and second teaching stints in China is the huge improvement in the standard of English and the far more widespread use of the language. For example, no student graduates from our university without passing a basic level of English. There is the TEM (Test for English Majors) and the CET (College English Test) at different levels as well as other local exams and the usual international exams such as TOEFL and IELTS. There are far more signs in English which are generally more accurate than in the '80's, though there are still a number that make you smile or scratch your head in bewilderment. Some menus are now in English, though that may not be too helpful as Chinese dishes generally have poetic names that give little or no clue as to the ingredients!



You may well ask: 'How has learning Chinese helped you as a language teacher?' There are many ways in which it has been helpful. Some of these lessons apply to other Asian language speakers as well. Firstly, understanding the differences in grammar helps me to understand why Chinese students repeatedly make certain mistakes and therefore what content areas to focus on in classroom teaching. For example, there are no articles in

Chinese so it is hard for Chinese students to understand the importance we as English speakers place on them and they frequently omit them altogether. Another key difference is that Chinese use context and some language markers, such as *le* to indicate tense – there is no such as thing as tense within the structure of the verb itself. For example: *Wo qu mai dongxi* could mean I am buying something I have been to buy something, or even I am going to buy something at a later time. It all depends on the context. (No wonder the students struggle with the rather complex issue of English verb tenses.)

It behoves us as language teachers to be able to explain in clear grammatical terms how and why we use certain tenses in certain situations. For example: why do we use the present perfect I have been to town instead of the simple past I went to town)? Chinese teaching of language still majors on the grammar translation approach, and though there has been a move towards more modern teaching methods and there is a lot of talk about 'Integrated learning' and 'Communicative language' it is still mostly lip service. Recent indications are that the grammar translation approach is experiencing a resurgence. Along with a clear grammatical explanation we need to give lots and lots of practice, and insist on accuracy. These grammar lessons are best given in the context of an interesting topic and taught in an integrated way. Firstly, as students read interesting articles with good grammar and then write and speak about these topics they start to model their own

language on them and their peers will also start correcting them. Secondly, I understand the difficulty my students have with some English sounds. I remember how my tongue ached trying to make sounds in Chinese that simply don't exist in English. I realise how important it is to teach the position of the tongue and teeth, and whether or not the sound is aspirated or unaspirated. The cultural sensitivity about poking one's tongue out means only the bravest will initially get the 'th' sounds correct.

Good things take a lot of patient coaxing and practice. The hardest word of all seems to be usually. Students from different areas may also have difficulty with particular sounds. For example, students from certain parts of the south replace an h with an f, so my friend told me her name was Fuang You Fua. After a few moments of confusion I asked her to write her name in characters and realised it was actually Huang You Hua. Other letters that are frequently used incorrectly are the initial r, l, n, s and sh for southerners and r, y for some northerners. For example, people sometimes say yen for the Chinese ren (person) or si (four) for shi (ten), or luli for nuli (hard working). Although they can say these sounds they may be less frequently used in their dialect and hence they don't use them in Chinese, so when they learn English they also tend to omit them or use them interchangeably. So much meaning in Chinese is conveyed by the tones. However I find that many students use a rather flat, high tone when it comes to English, and so need training in appropriate intonation. Finally, studying Chinese has also enabled me to help my students find more appropriate translations of expressions. Although I seldom use Chinese in class, there are times when it is appropriate and helpful. When other methods have failed I allow them to tell me what they want to say in Chinese, and then help them translate it into an appropriate English expression. This avoids the trap of inappropriate literal translations such as this one on the new buses: Service for New XXX 'Feel Delighted on Public Transport'

The more Chinese I learn the more I become aware of how much I still have to learn about this fascinating language, these extraordinary people and this amazing culture.

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