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## **TEACHING CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A LEARNER'S POINT OF VIEW**

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Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: a Learner's Point of View

For most Westerners Chinese is too intimidating a challenge to even begin. In Shenzhen, China, the manufacturing capital of the world, most foreigners have no knowledge of the Chinese language past 'hello'. Those few that do have a decent command of the spoken language have no knowledge of how to write or read the language. A very select group of foreigners in Shenzhen have command of spoken and written Chinese, and they have spent years acquiring these communicative skills. In the article we would try to find a better way and demystify learning Chinese and get quicker results in fluency for a greater number of those seeking to learn Chinese as a foreign language. The author of the article shares the experiences he had had as a foreign language learner, a teacher and a foreigner living in China. The first thing the author would recommend to teachers of Chinese is the immortal Latin phrase "know thyself". Teachers should know their strengths and weaknesses and be on a constant search to improve themselves and their lessons.

*Key words:* Chinese, a flexible teacher, to know oneself

Over the past 20 years I have learned three foreign languages fluently: Spanish, German and Russian. Now I am undertaking the task of learning three foreign languages rolled into one: Chinese, Chinese, Chinese.

Am I being dramatic here? Surely Chinese is just one language like any other? The reason I am describing Chinese at three foreign languages is that it contains three distinct components that, in my opinion, require the time and effort of a learning a European language to a native English speaker. The three components I am referring to here are 'hanzi' written characters (1), the sound that they represent (2) and the tones that are used to convey meaning (3).

For most Westerners, Chinese is simply too intimidating a challenge to even begin. Here in Shenzhen, the manufacturing capital of the world, I would say over

95% of the foreigners I met have no knowledge of the Chinese language past 'hello'. Those few that do have a decent command of the spoken language have no knowledge of how to write or read the language, instead relying on the Anglicized 'pinyin' alphabet to write pidgin messages via e-mail and text messages. A very, very, select group of foreigners I have come across in my time here have command of spoken and written Chinese, and they have spent years acquiring these communicative skills.

Is there not a better way? Can we demystify learning Chinese and get quicker results in fluency for a greater number of those seeking to learn Chinese as a foreign language? Most certainly. In this brief writing, I will share the experiences I have had as a foreign language learner, a teacher and a foreigner living in China.

The first thing I would recommend to Chinese teachers is the immortal Latin phrase 'temet nosce' – know thyself. Know your strengths and your weaknesses and be on a constant search to improve yourself and your lessons. This holds true for all teachers, but when dealing with foreigners, it becomes increasingly important. Without assessing yourself, you have no starting point to begin your educational journey with your students.

In the city of Luhansk, I had my first every Chinese lesson. The teacher was very nice and friendly, but I eventually stopped going to her lessons. Why? Allow me to state the problems that led to me studying on my own.

The teacher was very young and I believe it was her first teaching assignment (if this low level of experience holds true with Chinese teachers abroad, this problem may be affecting thousands of classes and perhaps millions of students). The class was comprised of myself, a handful of girls from Turkmenistan and our Chinese teacher in a Ukrainian classroom (quite the snapshot of globalization!). Classes centered on rote learning. Tediously going through the tones with a wall chart and writing characters again and again in the right stroke order.

The textbook (which I must say is quite good and I still use from the Beijing Language and Culture University Press) was followed page by page and exercise by exercise.

The predictability of the lessons led to low energy in the classroom and eventually led to disinterest. Why were these lessons not connecting with us? Like I said before, each teacher must know themselves, which will then lead to knowing their students. Our young teacher never left China before her assignment in Ukraine. She had little knowledge of America and Turkmenistan. Why did she not take the first lesson to get to know us? It would have broadened her knowledge and helped to tailor lessons that were relevant to us. Instead of starting with the book on day one, the first lesson could have been better served by trying to connect with the students and see what our learning styles were. Ultimately, we were taught as if we ourselves were Chinese, which was doomed to failure.

So step one is for teachers of Chinese to assess themselves and to see how they can best connect to their language learners. Does the Chinese teacher in Germany know anything about the German educational system? What about the Chinese teacher in Canada? How can those teachers thrive in their environment? To know that you have to adapt your style to the place you find yourself in instead of trying to import a classroom from China is the first hurdle. Finding the best ways to learn for individual students is the second.

As mentioned before, learning by rote is doomed to failure from now on. In 2015, students need to employ creativity in learning to be globally competitive. While I still use a traditional method of textbooks for doing things like reading dialogues and learning grammar, my primary method of language acquisition is via my iPad. Apps such as ChineseSkill, Mindsnacks Mandarin, Memrise, Chinese Flashcards, Learn Chinese Language Mahjong and others are challenging and fun ways to expand my knowledge. As I have learned as a teacher, there must be a balance in learning. On one hand, there is the drudgery of rote learning that bores students to tears and scares away many people from learning Chinese. On the other hand is the danger of making learning too much like playtime where everything must be learned through gamification. The challenge of the teacher is to keep it fun and interesting while giving substance to the lesson.

How do we do this? For me the answer lies in training teachers. I remember my first days in front of a classroom of my young Kazakhstani sixth graders. I will never forget the blank stares at some of my first lessons! Clearly, it was trial and error, but I never stopped trying to figure out how to see the lesson from their eyes, not just mine. After a first few painful lessons, I adapted my ways and, just as importantly, explained to the student how they can adapt. They were used to rote which was getting them nowhere. By the end of the year, many students felt proud that they could speak English without feeling embarrassed or getting red-faced.

In conclusion, I would say to all the Chinese teachers reading this, to lose their rigidity and gain some flexibility. Education is going through a technological revolution but the core competencies of engaging students, being relevant and problem-solving will never go away. Try to see learning Chinese through the eyes of your foreign student. This perspective will go a long way in bringing success to your lessons, and eventually more foreign Chinese speakers in the world!

Леннарц О.

Викладання китайської мови: точка зору людини, яка вивчає мову

Більшість людей у всьому світі побоюються вивчати китайську мову. В Шеньчжені (КНР), промисловій столиці світу, більшість іноземців, що працюють там, не можуть спілкуватися на китайській мові. Люди, які ж володіють розмовною китайською мовою, не можуть писати або читати. В статті ми спробуємо розвіяти міф про труднощі вивчення китайської мови і довести, що отримати швидкі результати можливо. Автор ділиться досвідом, який він отримав в якості людини, що працював викладачем англійської мови і в якості людини, що вивчав китайську мову як іноземну. Автор нагадує вчителям, безсмертну латинську фразу - пізнай самого себе. Вчитель повинен бути гнучким педагогом, знати свої сильні і слабкі сторони і бути в постійному пошуку, щоб постійно підвищувати свій професійний рівень. Перший урок з іноземної мови слід присвячувати знайомству зі студентами, розпізнанню їхніх стилів навчання, встановленню контактів ними. Процес навчання мові слід бачити очима студентів – це запорука успіху.

*Ключові слова:* китайська мова, гнучкий педагог, пізнати самого себе.

Леннарц А.

Преподавание китайского языка: точка зрения человека, который изучает язык

Большинство людей во всем мире опасаются изучать китайский язык. В Шэньчжэне (КНР), промышленной столице мира, большинство иностранцев, работающих там, не могут общаться на китайском языке. Люди, которые же владеют разговорным китайским языком, не могут писать или читать. В статье мы попытаемся развеять миф о трудности изучения китайского языка и доказать, что получить быстрые результаты возможно. Автор делится опытом, который он получил в качестве человека, который работал преподавателем английского языка и в качестве человека, который изучал китайский язык как иностранный. Автор напоминает учителям, бессмертную латинскую фразу - познай самого себя. Учитель должен быть гибким педагогом, знать свои сильные и слабые стороны и быть в постоянном поиске, чтобы постоянно повышать свой профессиональный уровень. Первый урок иностранного языка следует посвящать знакомству со студентами, распознаванию их стилей обучения, установлению контактов с ними. Процесс обучения языку следует видеть глазами студентов – это залог успеха.

*Ключевые слова:* китайский язык, гибкий педагог, познать самого себя.

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