

Targets for Student Learning of Mandarin Chinese

It should be noted that although the views presented here do include some ideas picked up along the way at workshops and college classes, they are based mainly on my experiences learning language (Chinese, French, German, and, of course, English), teaching ESL for nine years, teaching Chinese for fifteen years, and raising two children.

The purpose of this project given me is to recognize what incremental progress, or targets, should be made at various stages through the four years of the learning experience in order for students to attain the desired level of Chinese proficiency. The logical next step, one might assume, would be to measure this incremental learning, allowing us to evaluate the success of the student and of the program.

Unfortunately, assessing success in language learning this way, especially the learning of Mandarin Chinese, fails to recognize both the unique nature of Chinese and the actual process that takes place as students begin to acquire language. The measurement of quantifiable behaviors as the main method of evaluating success learning Chinese, especially in the first two years, does not accurately reflect the reality of how students learn the language. I will briefly explain both what I believe is the actual learning process, the special characteristics of Mandarin, plus the unique requirements of creating a high school Chinese language program. Next, I will offer an alternative model of learning, teaching and assessing. Finally, I will list the targets for student learning of Mandarin Chinese suggested by this model.

The traditional model of learning could be depicted by a two-axis chart, one axis measuring elapsed time and the other the mastery of discrete entities (facts, concepts and skills). As time passes, the number of measurable entities that have been learned should increase in a predictable manner.

One could argue, however, that no language learning easily fits this model, primarily because early language learning is not a matter of being perfect. There are similarities between how very young children and high school students learn language. Imagine a young child beginning to learn his or her native language. No one formally teaches an infant to speak and, contrary to what many might think, children rarely mimic the sounds they hear. They simply make sounds and are rewarded when the sounds they make fit into their parents' native language, thus encouraging them to repeat those sounds. This is a very 'student-centered' process, not one that the 'teacher' has much control over.

This process begins when new parents try to make their infant feel part of a group, thus providing them with the motivation to communicate, by constantly talking to their infant, using simple 'baby-talk' and with little expectation of a reply. When eventually the child does begin to babble, their parents' excitement encourages more vocalization and also lets the child know communication is happening. No one expects the child to speak correctly at this point. Instead of by mimicry or by learning rules, the child acquires the structure of a language simply by internalizing it. For example, my son when quite young once said, "he hitted me." No one had ever taught him the rule of adding '-ed' after a verb to express past tense, yet he had acquired this concept.

In the natural process of learning language, mistakes happen, but given **the intention to learn and frequent exposure to comprehensible language**, young children and our students gradually progress and ultimately become proficient. In addition to those two primary requirements, the intention to learn and frequent exposure, language learning occurs most readily in an environment where being able to communicate with others is valued over competition (except for friendly games that promote learning), where making mistakes is recognized as an acceptable risk over fear of being graded down, where the relevance (the importance of China in our world and the contributions China makes) for learning is clear and where the process is entertaining and interesting.

Looking at language learning as it actually occurs (and not as just another ‘academic course’), we should design classes that frequently offer the opportunity to listen to language that is understandable. We should provide a safe environment that de-emphasizes competition and encourages collaboration between ‘communicators’. We should help students visualize actually using the language by making lessons personal and relevant to their lives. We need to help students recognize the importance of learning the language by introducing culture and the news. We need to make lessons interesting, humorous and as unique as possible. Learning grammar rules and practicing drills (such as substitution, fill-in-the-blank, and true-false) can be useful homework assignments (just to keep the student engaged with the language outside of class), but are less helpful, even though they are more easily measured.

You might be surprised to know many of my tests are collaborative ‘partner tests’--two students working together, cooperating in order to recognize and produce Chinese. I believe when language learners communicate something successfully when ‘it really matters,’ they find the next time to be very easy. In addition, they rarely give up out of frustration. Moreover, students actually enjoy testing! Contrary to what you might expect, since no one is forced to take on another person as their partner, students prepare well so as not to be viewed as weak.

If we are to have targets, we should recognize that the greatest indicators of future success are difficult to measure, like how engaged are they in class, how purposeful they appear, and how often do they try to use the language. My son, who is in all ‘honors’ classes in high school, when young was very slow to speak and often made mistakes. By keeping him engaged and positive, he became fluent. Early language learning, whether at that age or as teenagers, is not that different.

It is true high school students are no longer babies and their capacity to learn (purposefully) is much greater than toddlers. Nevertheless, the fundamental process of learning a language is similar. Although, at the high school level, we certainly can identify many measurable targets, such as growth in vocabulary, the ability to perform basic skills (like express preferences and ask questions), to correctly recognize and use grammatical structures, **our number one priority, which is spontaneous oral communication**, does not necessarily follow gains in those areas. Once a student has started to speak, by the third year, we can then teach grammar rules and require more writing in order to improve and polish their language production.

Mandarin, both oral and written, is significantly different than other languages. Oral Mandarin is devoid of most of the complicated grammar found in other languages. For example, Mandarin has no verb tenses, no subject-verb agreement (I am, he is, we are), no plural, noun or verb, forms, and no gender--all the bane of many a student. Instead, I have found only three difficult aspects of Chinese grammar: strict sentence word order, particles, and verb complements.

Sentence word order is more rigid in Mandarin than English probably because we usually cannot tell from looking at a single character what type of word it is. For example, an English word ending in ‘-tion’ is a noun, in ‘-ly’ is an adverb, and one ending in ‘-ed’ likely is a verb. In most Western languages, there is a kind of Aristotelian logic operating, where the whole can be dissected into its parts which are then analyzed to give us an understanding of the whole, basically the scientific method. Mandarin on the other hand requires us to look at the sentence holistically, much like Chinese medicine views illness. We have to view the sentence as a whole in order to make sense of it.

Particles are characters that have no meaning of their own, but change the meaning of other words or the sentence. There are only about twelve particles, but some serve more than one function; the particle 了 alone could serve five separate purposes, from ‘completed action’ to ‘situational change’.

Verb complements are sounds spoken after a verb that can serve one of four possible functions: express the result of a verb/action taken (*finished* speaking), express the direction

the action takes (stand *up*), describe an action (walked *quickly*), or communicate the subject's potential or capacity to complete the action (*can't* understand).

None of these three exist in English; they are difficult not because they are intrinsically hard, but rather because they are so different from our prior experience. For some students, accommodating to these differences can take a long time. However, as I tell my students, this is not a race and within a few years, most students who had both the intention to learn and were engaged in class will have become comfortable with these differences. By the end of the second year, most grammar already has been introduced, but accuracy using it is still developing.

Because there are fewer specific grammar concepts to learn in Mandarin, there are fewer easily identified targets to identify and measure. Also, the kind of things a student of Mandarin must master are rarely achieved without a period of trial and error. Fast learners are not necessarily better learners over the long run. Regarding what grammar to introduce, in Mandarin we cannot wait until later levels to begin having students listen to language that contains a wide array of grammar concepts because there is very little you can say without using correct word order, particles and verb complements. We can only limit the complexity of sentences. In other words, we don't wait until the third year to teach the subjunctive because there is no subjunctive; however we have to begin teaching about word order, particles and verb complements from day one or little could be expressed.

Lastly, I like to view teaching Chinese as more than teaching individual students and class periods. Although it would be possible to make Mandarin the most difficult course at MIHS, I see this as a 'program' that requires enough interested and successful students to justify its existence. There is only one, at most two, class period of each level. I think of each class as an organic whole that needs to grow at a rate where everyone feels connected, both to me and each other. In the first two years, the emphasis, then, should be on listening and speaking to me and each other. On the other hand, we cannot wait until the third year to begin learning to read and write Chinese characters. I find having students in the first two years be responsible for recognizing or reading characters for all vocabulary introduced, but not for writing them from memory until the third year, they put their energies where it should be, on speaking. Yet, after reading characters for several years, by the third year, characters have become so familiar that writing them is not such a difficult task. In addition, since they now speak fairly well, they know what to write!

Combining the desire to build a program, my description of Chinese language and an explanation of how language learning actually occurs, I have come up with another model of student learning. This model does not look like a positively rising trend line. Instead it appears as an upwardly expanding spiral. In it you can visualize the repetition of previously introduced vocabulary and grammar combined with new vocabulary and added complexity. In fifteen years of teaching Chinese, I have only had one student who learned new vocabulary and grammar linearly. Everyone else required a two step forward, one back approach, just like young children learning their first language.

What is required for students to learn a language? In the first two years of learning Chinese, there are these four givens:

- 1) the single greatest predictor of future success in becoming able to speak spontaneously and accurately is **listening comprehension**.
- 2) the best way to gain listening comprehension is to expand **orally recognizable vocabulary** and that is achieved by playing games with new words and by asking personal questions or giving commands using them.
- 3) students are more likely to listen for comprehension when exposed to language that occurs in **easily recognizable situations** that:
 - a) **are either personal or relevant to their lives.**
 - b) **are entertaining, interesting or unique.**
 - c) **contain words they can understand.**

4) listening to comprehensible language has the un-purposeful effect of **ingraining grammar in listener's subconscious mind**. Grammar acquired in this manner is more likely to be used and used accurately than grammar which is learned through rules or drills.

Therefore, our primary student learning targets for the first two years should be listening comprehension and vocabulary. Conversely, outside of homework, we can de-emphasize teaching grammar rules and the use of drills.

By the end of the second year, virtually all Chinese 'grammar' has been introduced. To not do so would limit expression to boring levels. Yet to expect perfect usage of those concepts is not only unreasonable, it does not fit the natural way people learn language. Nevertheless, **by the end of the first year**, students should have attained these learning targets:

- can read and correctly spell using the pinyin system of spelling Chinese words
- will have learned over 1,000 new words and can recognize about 600 characters
- can correctly respond to questions about stories they have heard at least 85% of the time
- understand the meaning of and can create sentences containing the particle 了 used to express no less than three different functions
- understand the meaning of and can create sentences containing the particle 的 in order to describe nouns, either with adjectives, clauses or locational phrases.
- can distinguish between the three meanings of the English verb 'to be' and can understand and create sentences with the Chinese verb specific to each meaning.
- can identify sentences written in correct and incorrect word order, especially for the proper location in a sentence of the subject, the three different concepts of time, the place where the action happens, place where an object ends up after action happens, accompanying people or things, indirect and direct objects and frequency.
- understand sentences with the particle 把 which is used to move the direct object from its normal location after the verb to just in front of the verb.
- understand function of and can use particles 呢, 吧, 啊, 吗
- can understand and use numbers from 0-999 and, when counting things, can understand and use measure words (one 'piece' of paper)
- can understand and use all question words, like 'who, when and where'
- can discuss, in both positive and negative terms, the weather, making friends, family and family background, shopping, preferences, daily activities, greeting people, school
- can understand and speak about the past, present and future
- can understand and use most auxiliary verbs, like 'want to, should, love to, must, can, able to, would like to'
- can express degree to which something has been done
- can understand and use directional verbs, 'come and go'
- can understand and make 'don't' commands

- can understand all four types of verb complements

By the end of the second year, students will have improved their ability to do the above and:

- oral vocabulary more than doubled and recognized characters tripled
- can understand and use all but one grammar particle and all verb complements
- can understand and give directions, order food in a restaurant, borrow things, congratulate each other, talk about illness, sports, invite someone to go on a date, mail letters
- can express both continuous and progressive action
- are much more accurate in creating sentences with correct word order

By the end of the third year, students mainly improve upon what they have already been exposed to, plus

- double vocabulary again
- accurately create sentences with proper sentence word order 90% of the time
- can understand and use more esoteric sentence structures, especially conjunctions and alternative ways of saying the same thing.
- rely completely on reading characters for all new text
- can understand and express the 'progressive tense'
- write sentences in characters

By the end of the fourth year, students

- solidify and continue to increase vocabulary
- read all new material and write paragraphs in characters
- correctly apply all grammar concepts
- speak spontaneously