

Reflections of a “mature” language learner

For those of us who spend our lives instructing others in the global lingua franca to which we happen to have been born, perhaps it does us good, every now and then, to be thrust into a situation where we are the dependent, powerless ones. It is a salutary reminder of how uncomfortable it feels when even mundane tasks are “unmanageable without substantial assistance” as Beattie (2004) puts it.

I have always believed that when working in a non-English speaking environment it is essential to make at least some effort to learn the local language. It makes a huge difference to relationships if one can demonstrate even some minimal effort to reach out on others’ terms. Consequently, after a month in Indonesia and a fortnight in Japan, I made sure I was able to at least exchange the basic pleasantries in Indonesian and Japanese.

However, I expect to be in China longer, so in this situation I am not happy with such a minimalist approach. Although I accept that I may never be able to conduct a university lecture or read the classics in Chinese, I would like to be able to hold at least a simple conversation and to be able to read at least basic signs and other information in the language among which I live. Apart from this intrinsic motivation to achieve this goal for my own satisfaction, I am also motivated from without by the fact that the level of English in China is still generally low, so if I want to be able to communicate beyond the level where gestures will suffice, I am clearly going to have to put some effort into it.

I did not have much Chinese to start with. Two standard phrases (ni hao – hello, and xie xie – thank you) about sums it up. Chinese, of course, is not an easy language for westerners to learn. It is not possible to relate new vocabulary to something familiar as it is when learning another European language, it is not possible to get any idea of sound from the Chinese characters, and the tones add a whole extra dimension of difficulty. Of course, some learners simply ignore the tones, but changing the tone changes the meaning of the word. Si with a downward intonation, for instance, means 4, whereas with a falling/rising intonation it means death – the reason the number 4 is unlucky to Chinese. So it is really not possible to speak Chinese at all well without coming to terms with the tonal system. The tones also make Chinese dictionaries difficult to negotiate for those of us used to English conventions.

Am I too old to learn Chinese? Should I just give up now and save myself a lot of bother? Without going into exact details, it is a long time since I left the Critical Period (Lenneberg, 1967) behind, and there is depressing research evidence to suggest that younger is generally better when it comes to language learning (for instance Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003). However, there are also some studies (for instance Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, & Moselle, 1994) which suggest that turning 20 does not signal automatic death to language learning ability, and I personally know an American who, at the age of 59 decided to come to China to learn Chinese. Six years later, she converses

fluently with the local people in their own language. So maybe I shouldn't be so quick to conclude I am past it.

Of course, if we "mature" ones need to look for excuses, it is no doubt fair to say that learning a language is more difficult as we get older because our lives are more complicated. When I was learning French at school, for instance, that was what I did with my life. As Burling (1981), however, points out, much more is expected of an adult. When I was young I didn't have to worry about holding down a job, paying the mortgage, sorting out the kids, connecting the phone, cooking dinner, buying the stuff I need for dinner, going to the bank and the million and one other things which take a huge amount of my time and energy now. By the time I have finished all this, I am tired, and the brain simply goes on strike at the thought of learning vocab and, like a naughty child, refuses to co-operate. Finally I give up and watch a doco on Chinese sugar figurines on CCTV9, the only English language programme available.

Then, of course, there is the complex issue of identity, increasingly recognised as a powerful determiner of motivation (Norton, 1997). As we mature, our sense of who we are (and are not) becomes more established, and we tend to become less willing to accept change of any kind. Our language is one factor which contributes to our sense of who we are. In my case, I have spoken English all my life. Do I really want to change, since linguistic shift will also involve all kinds of subtle (or even not so subtle) changes in the ways others view me and the way I view myself? I am actually not absolutely sure in my own mind about the answer to this question, and this inevitably affects my commitment.

Some of my young Chinese colleagues have taken me under their wing and are ever willing to patiently give me the Chinese vocabulary I need, to help me to practise pronouncing it, and to act as more knowledgeable others steering me through my unilluminated Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). They have given me the phrases I need to go shopping at the market, to manage taxi drivers, to catch a bus to the zoo and to ask for a receipt at the bookshop. They tell me I have a quick ear, and I find myself surprised at how any scrap of praise is balm to the bruised ego and helps to renew flagging motivation, as Sinclair Bell (1995) also discovered.

Not that I have made no progress in the five months that I have been here, you understand. I have kept a notebook of useful expressions. I can ask the man at the market for a jin (500 grams) of rice or eggs (yes, they weigh the eggs here, and lettuce leaves, too), but somehow it is the unexpected that continues to catch me completely tongue tied. For instance, every now and then I have people burst into my office and let forth a flood of Chinese. Since my attempts (in English) to explain that I do not speak Chinese seemed to go totally uncomprehended, I asked one of my colleagues for the Chinese version: *dui bu qi, wo bu hui shuo han yu*. Next time it happened, however, I couldn't remember this face-saving formula on the spot, and I couldn't find the piece of paper I had written it down on under the mass of other stuff on my desk, so I tried to mumble what I could remember while the tirade continued unabated. Finally my visitor stopped mid-tone and looked at me wide-eyed. Then he gave me a thumbs-up with a wide grin, said "OK" and disappeared. When I finally found my piece of paper I roughly translated what I had been

mumbling as something like: “Excuse me Chinese language, me total idiot, you are welcome”!! Never mind, one failure doesn’t make a permanent disaster. I now have my piece of paper sellotaped where I can’t lose it, and have managed other similar encounters with more dignity. I am even getting so I can manage without the piece of paper. So, how about that!!

In spite, however, of some small victories, I cannot look back on my semester in China with a great sense of achievement as far as learning the language is concerned. Although Krashen’s (1981) Acquisition Hypothesis, whereby comprehensible input is the necessary and sufficient condition for language development, was good in theory, the reality is that acquiring language this way takes a long time – time an adult usually has not got. It seems clear to me that if I want to learn more than a few basic expressions in Chinese (and I do) I am going to have to set the time aside and attend classes, and discipline myself to do the homework and learning involved. As Schmidt (1983) concluded, for adults to learn a new language successfully they must be prepared for some hard work. So, that’s something to look forward to next semester!!

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