

7 Suggestions to Learn Chinese Quickly

So many may ask me for “a strategy to learn Chinese.” Responding is always complicated; because everyone has a different situation: there are those who live in China and those who live in their own country; there are those who already speak five languages and those who only speak English; there are those who intend to study Chinese full time and those who have an hour a day to do so.

What I’m going to do is give you very general suggestions that, in my opinion, apply to all the cases I’ve described. Enjoy!

1. Motivation

The most important piece of advice that I can give you to learn Chinese is that of finding the right motivation. When you finish reading this email it is possible that you will feel super-motivated and will be thinking of studying five hours a day for the next thirteen years.

But learning a foreign language requires consistency and, if you don’t have enough motivation, one tends to forget the initial objectives and will soon return to the same old routine (which in place of studying means spending two hours a day on Facebook).

If you don’t have strong motivation (such as passing the HSK3 test within three months) you have to create some. Set for yourself a long-term goal (for example being able to understand a Chinese film with Chinese subtitles) and give yourself a time limit (like a year for example).

Next announce it to the world. Tell it to your girlfriend (or boyfriend) and to your friends, post it on Facebook or your personal blog. Give a hundred Dollars to your brother and tell him that he will have to give it back within a year only if you reach your stated goal. Do something, in short, to make your life difficult in the event that you fail to reach your goal.

2. Grammar

It is pointless to try to get around it. You'll need to learn a bit of grammar; and anyone who says that Chinese "doesn't have grammar" is a fool. I'm not saying that you have to study all exceptions to the language, however you at least have to know the basic structure.

To begin I recommend [Chinese Grammar Wiki](#), which among other things is free. If you really can't do without a "book", then take a look at "*Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar: A Practical Guide*".

Always remember that you aren't absolutely obligated to follow the order of the book. Take a look at the index and study the rules that you think can help you right away.

When you try speaking in Chinese, take note of the talking points that block you or keep you from expressing yourself fully. In half of the cases you're lacking the proper grammatical structure (while at times what you're lacking is the vocabulary).

3. Immersion

The best advice I can give you for learning Chinese would be to move to a Chinese village - or a neighborhood in a Chinese city - where nobody speaks English. But even if this isn't possible there's still much you can do to "immerse yourself" in the language, especially now that the Internet is available to all.

For example, stop watching films in English. I often hear that Northern Europeans (Belgians, Dutch, Swedes etc) are better at foreign languages. I think it is a load of crap. Their "secret" is that, being from countries with a relatively low population, translating movies – or worse TV shows, – isn't economical. As a result they're forced to watch the film in the original language with subtitles.

Get a hold of your favorite movies and TV shows and watch them in Chinese with subtitles. If it's a film you've already seen, you'll manage to follow the story even if your Chinese is still at a basic level. With time you'll begin to get an ear for it and you'll be able to substitute English subtitles with Chinese ones and eventually eliminate them altogether.

[Here you'll find a series of free resources to learn Chinese](#), among which are several options relevant to videos.

4. Learn to write Chinese characters

Besides those that say "Chinese has no grammar", there are also those who will try to convince you that "you can learn Chinese while avoiding the characters." The problem is that Chinese is entirely based on characters.

I know it might seem rhetorical, but the most obvious advantage to learning to write the characters is that... you learn to write.

But, in my opinion, the most important point is a different one. There are many characters that are maddeningly similar. Take for example 青, 请, 清, 情 and 晴. They all have a similar pronunciation (qing, but with a different tone). Their meaning however is as far off as you can imagine: “green,” “ask,” “pure,” “feeling” & “clear” (in a meteorologic sense), respectively.

If you learn to recognize but not reproduce the characters (that is, to write them) it is easy to get confused when you try to read them. Especially when these characters are used to form more complicated words.

You might object that you're not interested in learning to read Chinese; you'd rather just speak it. Besides the fact that I don't know anyone who can speak English or French decently without also knowing how to read it, there's another problem.

Chinese words are all formed by a few hundred syllables such as “qing”, “dong”, “chao” or “zhu”. The fact that these are relatively brief sounds and that, moreover, these sounds are extremely different than what we are used to, makes it so that it is much more difficult to remember a word in Chinese than to remember a word in English or German. The best solution I've found to remember Chinese vocabulary words is to learn how to write them: imprinting the characters in your memory will make it much easier to grasp vocabulary.

What is the best way to learn how to write Chinese characters? [I used and still recommend Skritter.](#)

5. Review

To speak Chinese in a satisfactory way you'll need to memorize many vocabulary words (verbs, names, adjectives and much more).

To get the best results I recommend that you download Anki or Memrise, two "smart" flashcard program that allows you to remember the words you'd like to learn in an efficient manner.

[Here you'll find a review of Anki and Memrise.](#)

6. Prepare a detailed plan

- Set a goal that is clear, simple, and measurable.
- Decide how much time you will take to reach it.
- Evaluate how much time per day you can dedicate to studying the language. Be honest with yourself; this is not a competition.
- Is your plan doable? For instance, if you don't know even one word in Chinese and you set a goal of reading a novel in the original language within three months, you'll probably have to study an average of twenty hours a day, which is out of the question. Set a realistic goal!
- Prepare a weekly schedule, put it in writing and keep it in view. I for example have a file on my computer desktop called to-do so that every day all it takes is one click to know what I have to do instead of wondering what my priorities are while losing myself in an article of the The New York Times and a conversation on Skype.

7. Evaluate the results

- Since you're not a robot every once in awhile you'll miss a study session. Don't despair. Get yourself a calendar and write a big OK next to every day you stuck to your plan and a NO next to every day you didn't study. With time your brain will rebel against seeing "No" so many times and the "OK"s will start to increase.
- Choose one day a month (for example the first of every month) to evaluate your progress. Are you studying enough? If not, what's the reason? Do you think you should change something? Initial plans are never perfect and you'll probably have to make some adjustments. No problem, just take note of your mistakes and impressions, modify your plan, and start again.

Last but not least... Sapore di Cina's resources on studying Chinese

[Click here](#) to read our best articles dedicated to Chinese learning and [here to discover the Chinese course we recommend](#).