



The Art of Wrapping Your Mouth—Literally—Around a New Language

Chinese 101
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"Xiuuuuuu!" The lone student's voice bounced off the walls of our classroom on yet another cold Saturday morning, and I was sure her vocal chords were about two repetitions from splitting in half.

"Tzay lai yi tzyh!" *Once again!* Professor Link, one of the most respected Chinese politics and language experts in the US, was having none of it. The pronunciation would be right, even if it took eight classes a week, even if it drove students to tears.

The first class of Chinese 101 seemed so long ago. 40-plus ultraconfident students had shown up, fresh off A+ careers in Spanish, but this was a different animal altogether. Fewer than 15 students remained. Few were willing to accept and endure the most neglected facet of language learning: physical conditioning.

For the Germans, it's the trilled "r" of Spanish or the dreaded "th" of English. Americans just can't spit out the retroflex tongue curl of Mandarin or the open vowels of Portuguese. Then there are the poor Japanese, who seem to have trouble with everything.

But who can blame them? Their language got short-changed with only 112 phonemes, the basic sounds that form the building blocks of pronunciation. In comparison, Chinese ekes out a slightly higher 411 and English boasts an approximate 80,000!

What makes languages hard or easy? It largely depends on how much the phonemes of your mother tongue overlap those of your target language. If you speak English, the jump to Spanish is often little more than tagging vowels on the end of everything—voilà, you can now intelligibly mangle a romance language. The Japanese also have practically no trouble with Spanish, which closely mirrors the sounds they've been using since infancy. Chinese and other tonal languages, in contrast, are just as hard as Sign Language for both English- and Japanese-speakers. It's not our brains or ears that are the problem—it's our tongues and throats.

Upon arriving in China after two semesters of Chinese 101, my fellow Princeton undergraduates could immediately walk the streets and communicate with natives. No existential debates, mind you, but we could find the bathrooms and get food without dog or pig face in it.

80% of students attending the summer language program from other schools had to return to square one and relearn (or rather, retrain) pronunciation. Their twice-

weekly 45-minute classes had been insufficient to stimulate the necessary adaptations in their throats and speech musculature. In a language where *ma* can mean *mother*, *horse*, *marijuana*, or *to scold* depending on the tone, practicing twice a week is like using a Thighmaster to train for the Tour de France. It doesn't work.

As with a new exercise program, you are conditioning your muscles, and your tongue or vocal chords 1) don't change without sufficient stimulus, and 2) don't thicken or elongate overnight (I hope not, anyway). It doesn't matter how smart you are. It cannot be overcome intellectually. If I give you an African language based on clicks, you can work on it for 10 hours in the first day until your jaw flips up and swallows your head—you still won't have the hardware to produce the sounds. It takes time.

This is not bad news. In fact, it's great news. A "bad ear" isn't an acceptable excuse to ditch a worthwhile language—continue to practice and give it some time. Chances are that you need a few more reps with the offending sound and a little recovery in between. Opt for frequent but short sessions when you hit a plateau. 30 minutes six times a week is ten times better than one hour three times per week.

Trust me, when you nail that perfect "Xiuuuuuuuu!", it will feel like the planets have aligned and all the practice will be worth it. If you're learning a language, don't think of it as an abstract mental process of learning, as it is all ultimately physically dependent. Hit the vocal weights and get your rest.