

Why Are Some Languages, Like Chinese, Harder to Teach and Learn than Others, and What Are the Implications for Effective Language Teaching?

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Abstract:

Both theoretically and practically, all modern languages are inherently more or less equally difficult. Theoretically, they all exist within two rather narrow parameters which determine their minimum and maximum complexity; that is, they have to be complex enough to describe modern life and an individual's or group's past, present and future experience, and yet easy enough to allow for efficient communication among all its educated and uneducated speakers. Practically speaking, all normal children learning their native languages do so at approximately the same rate and with the same competence, progressing from easy to more complex grammar and syntax in the same way. Why then, do some languages seem more difficult to teach and learn than others? All L2 learners must cope with hardened L1 language habits trying to cope with contrasting L2 habits, but **more importantly**, they have to deal with unfamiliar and unique L2 characteristics which, cause **faulty language expectations**. Effective L2 teaching must take these two sources of difficulty into consideration, with special emphasis on a learner's faulty language expectations, making effective teaching somewhat different for each given foreign language. Examples from Chinese and other languages are presented.

Keywords: communication; complexity; expectations; habits; parameters

Learning a foreign language is difficult, because it requires students to make new linguistic choices which they are not used to making in their own language. When L2 does not contain choices which L1 does, there is no problem. It's only when L2 requires new choices that students have problems because they must overcome their hardened L1 habits. Thus, it is not the fact that L1 and L2 are different which produces difficulties. Rather, it's the fact that a student must now make unfamiliar choices.

Every language makes enough choices in order to allow for the necessary complexity and ease of communication mentioned in the Abstract. Choices are different for each language (which is why they are L2s) but only problematic when new information is required.

For example, Chinese has no tense system, that is, there are no morphological changes in Chinese verbs, while English tenses are complicated and drive learners of English crazy.

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So even though the two languages are radically different with regard to tenses, the English-speaker has no problem with tenses in Chinese, since there are no new choices to choose from. The verb “to live” [zhu (4) in Chinese] doesn’t change with the tense. So “wo (3) zhu (4)” can mean “I live, I am living, I lived, I had lived, I will live” etc. The Chinese speaker learning English, however, has a myriad of choices to make to express tenses in English, and thus has great difficulty mastering them.

Another example: Chinese has no masculine/feminine noun distinction, unlike French or Spanish or Czech which also require adjectival and verbal agreement. We all know how difficult it is for English speakers to get used to making those distinctions, but there’s no need for it when learning Chinese.

Nor is there a need for singular/plural distinctions since there is no regular singular or plural marker in Chinese. Shu (1) is book or books. Ren (2) is person or people. Whereas learners of English have to constantly remember to add “s” to make the plural, or even worse, to remember all the common plural exceptions (man-men, mouse-mice, child-children, knife-knives), the learner of Chinese need not worry about those things. **No choices = no difficulty.**

Difficulty 1: New Choices: Tones

But Chinese, like every L2, does present the learner with difficulties where new L2 choices have to be made. The biggest problem is probably mastering the 4 tones of standard Mandarin Chinese.

- The first is a high, level tone: yi (1)
- The second tone is a rising tone: ting (2)
- The third tone is a falling-rising tone: ma (3)
- The fourth tone is a falling tone: mai (4)

Tones (sometimes called “tonemes”) in Chinese are phonemic, that is, a change in tone means a complete change in meaning. English-speakers are not sensitized to tonal changes, and therefore find tones difficult to master and equally difficult to distinguish when others are speaking. But changes in tones are crucial for understanding, especially since many words, unlike the examples above, are phonetically identical except for the difference in tone:

The difference between *buy* and *sell* is the tone: mai (3) vs. mai (4).

The difference between *mother* and *horse* is the tone: ma (1) vs. ma (3)

The difference between *snow* and *blood* is the tone: xue (3) vs. xue (4)

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The difference between *one* and *100,000,000* is the tone: yi (1) vs. yi (4)

The difference between *stop* and *listen* is the tone: ting (2) vs. ting (1)

The difference between *ask* and *kiss* is the tone: wen (4) vs. wen (3)

[As Nicholas Kristof of the NY Times once pointed out in an editorial, Americans doing business in China might use the wrong tones and instead of the intended “May I ask” (qing wen 3 4) they end up with an embarrassing “May I kiss” (qing wen 3 3).]

English speakers, who are not used to tones, are not sensitive to the fact that the difference in tones in Chinese is just as big as the difference in consonants in English. So, while the English speaker considers the difference between *book* and *look* to be strong and obvious, he may consider the difference in Chinese tones to be marginal and not significant, a kind of extra add-on. Thus, teaching the use of tones to an English-speaker learning Chinese is one of the most, if not *the* most, important tasks of the Chinese teacher, and teaching methods and materials must be adapted to this task. It’s not enough to teach students how to make the tones, but also to emphasize the importance of tones, so that learners don’t think of tones as “an addition” to the word, but rather as inherently part of the word itself.

Difficulty 2: Unique L2 Characteristics Resulting in Faulty Expectations

Now, let’s try a little exercise. I’m going to say a sentence about a family living on a cattle farm and you write down quickly what you hear, or just decide on the sentence in your mind. Here’s the sentence:

(orally given) “**The sons raise meat.**”

Now, I’m sure most of you got that right.

Now, I’m going to say a sentence from a lesson in optics during a physics class, and you write this one down:

(orally given) “**The sun’s rays meet.**”

And I’m sure you got this one right, too.

Obviously, these sentences are phonetically identical but morphologically very different (except for the word *the*): *sons* (a plural noun, the subject of the sentence) vs. *sun’s* (a singular noun in the possessive); *raise* (the verb of the sentence) vs. *rays* (the plural subject of the sentence); *meat* (direct object of the verb) vs. *meet* (the verb of the sentence).

However, given the context, they don’t present any difficulty for the English-speaker, or even the advanced English learner. Why is that? It’s because we know what to expect and we have the linguistic competence for each possibility. And perhaps even more important,

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this classic sentence pair (not my own invention, though I'd love to take credit for it) is very unusual in English because English does not, in fact, have many homonyms.

It's the problem of expectations which causes the greatest problems for the learner of Chinese. This is because of a special feature of Chinese: **the omnipresence of homonyms.**

What are homonyms? In fact, there are several explanations or definitions of homonyms.

- a) Words (like the example above) with the same sound but different spelling and meaning: son's/suns raise/rays meat/meet
- b) Words with the same spelling but different pronunciation and meaning: bow (and arrow)/bow (the body motion)
- c) Words with the same sound and spelling but different meaning: stalk (of a plant)/stalk (obsessive following)

For our purposes, we mean a) and c), eliminating b) which is more of a reading problem than an oral problem.

In the widely used New Age Chinese-English Dictionary (The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2005 edition), there are 76 entries for the character "shi." That's 76 different characters for the same syllable. Classically, each syllable in Chinese is a single word, although modern Chinese also has many words made of (primarily) 2 or more syllables. Of these 76 shi characters, 16 are first tones (1), 16 are second tones(2), 7 are third tones(3), and the rest, 37 are fourth tones(4). Therefore, not only must a learner be able to distinguish homonyms using the 4 different tones of Mandarin Chinese, he must also learn to cope with complete homonyms, that is, words with the same pronunciation **and** the same tone, but with completely different meanings.

Below is a list of the most common words "shi." (I have eliminated the less common ones although they could be crucial in more esoteric contexts.)

Shi 1 (First Tone)

Characters: 师施失诗狮尸湿虱

Meanings: teacher/to carry out/to lose/poetry/a lion/a corpse/wet/lice

Shi 2 (Second Tone)

Characters: 十时石实识拾蚀食

Meanings: ten/time/a rock/real/to know/to pick up/to corrode/food

Shi 3 (Third Tone)

Characters: 使史始矢驶豕

Meanings: to use/history/to begin/an arrow/to drive/a pig

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Shi 4 (Fourth Tone)

Characters: 是事室市试式世示势视士适氏释逝柿饰誓嗜

Meanings: To be/a thing, event/a room/a market/to try/a style/the world/to show/power, influence/to look/a soldier/suitable/family name/to explain/to pass/a persimmon/to decorate/to swear/to like

To make matters even more complicated, there are several important words made of up two syllables where both syllables are “shi,” and in several cases the two-syllable words have identical tones. Below is a list of the most common “2-shi” words:

- 失实 shishi 1 2 without foundation, untrue
- 失时 shishi 1 2 miss the opportunity
- 诗史 shishi 1 3 history of poetry
- 施事 shishi 1 4 agent, doer of the action in a sentence
- 师事 shishi 1 4 studying under a teacher or master
- 失势 shishi 1 4 lose power and influence
- 实施 shishi 2 1 to implement
- 石狮 shishi 2 1 stone lion
- 实时 shishi 2 2 real time
- 时时 shishi 2 2 often
- 时事 shishi 2 4 current events
- 时势 shishi 2 4 prevailing circumstances
- 时世 shishi 2 4 the times, present day society
- 实事 shishi 2 4 an actual thing, deeds
- 史诗 shishi 3 1 historical poetry
- 矢石 shishi 3 2 arrows and stones (weapons)
- 史实 shishi 3 2 historical fact
- 史事 shishi 3 4 historical events
- 誓师 shishi 4 1 take a solemn pledge

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事实 shishi	4 2	a fact
适时 shishi	4 2	timely, seasonable
逝世 shishi	4 4	to die
事势 shishi	4 4	situation
事事 shishi	4 4	everything
试试 shishi	4 4	to try
世事 shishi	4 4	affairs of the world
视事 shishi	4 4	assume office, tend to official business

It must be pointed out that there are many other homonyms which illustrate the same problem. “shi” is only given as an example of a very common one. There are many other important ones, like

“yi” (135 characters)	“ji” (123 characters)	“yu” (118 characters)
“xi” (103 characters)	“fu” (98 characters)	“qi” (90 characters)
“li” (86 characters)	“wei” (70 characters)	“bi” (66 characters)
“jiao” (60 characters)	“jing” (44 characters)	

Superficially, one might imagine that with so many phonologically similar words (and conversely, so few phonologically different words) to learn, vocabulary acquisition could be an easier task to master than in languages with many fewer homonyms and many more phonemes. In reality, however, I think the opposite is true.

In order to understand why so many homonyms make is so difficult for a learner of Chinese, and in order to develop the correct teaching materials and strategies to deal with this problem, we need to talk about what I like to call “language expectations.”

Just as we naturally generalize our L1 habits onto L2, causing us problems when we have additional choices to make in L2 which we don’t make in L1, I think it’s also true that we generalize our L1 “language expectations” onto L2, causing us problems as a result of the uniqueness of the L2 structure.

Faulty Language Expectation: The meaning that you learn first is basically the only meaning.

In one of the reading texts in my EFL course at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, the evaluation by the author of a consumer boycott in early 20th-century America was that it was a “qualified success.” In one of the test questions based on the reading, students were asked to describe the success of the boycott, and invariably chose “major success” over the correct alternative “partial success.”

And when I asked the students for the meaning of the sentence:

“They hired the new secretary without qualification.”

students invariably thought it was a bad hiring decision to have a secretary who did not have the qualifications for the job.

Why? Because the students had already learned the meaning of “qualified” as something positive, something good, something complete: *a qualified teacher, a qualified specialist*. Therefore, they assumed that a “*qualified success*” must be something good, something complete. They were so sure of the obvious meaning they already “knew,” that they “molded” the text to fit their understanding, even though there were other indications in the text to show that the boycott was not completely effective.

This was an understandable process for learners of English, because homonyms, like the word *qualified*, with somewhat contrasting meanings, are rare in English. (In another text, a country “sanctioning” capital punishment was invariably interpreted as “punishing, not permitting” capital punishment, since the students all knew that *to sanction* – the first and only definition they knew – meant to disapprove of and punish.)

These anecdotes are interesting but rare, since there are so few such homonyms in English (or in Hebrew, their native language) and so it is logical for English learners to *expect* words they learn to have single meanings, and those are the meanings they expect to remain constant in any new context.

Herein lies one of the special difficulties with learning Chinese. Since Chinese is characterized by the omnipresence of homonyms, learners should never assume that when they learn a new word like *shi*, hearing *shi* again will necessarily imply the same meaning or even be in any way related to the *shi* they have already learned. Students, of course, can be told explicitly not to assume that the new homonym they hear is the one they’ve already learned, but language expectations are too strong to be overcome by mere warnings. Teaching materials must be created that specifically take this problem into consideration. Most Chinese teaching materials today, however, don’t do this. New homonyms are simply introduced in the normal scheme of things with students thinking to themselves, “oh no, not another *shi*!”

Faulty Language Expectation: L2 uses English cognates in describing much of the contemporary world.

Speakers of English understand that English is (still) the most widely used global language, and they often (correctly) expect that both technical and non-technical expressions of modern life use English cognates, thus providing a large store of vocabulary items which don't really have to be learned. After all,

diabetes in English is *diabete* in French and *diabetes* in Spanish.

hippopotamus in English is *hippopotame* in French and *hipopotamo* in Spanish

airport in English is *aeroport* in French and *aeorpuerto* in Spanish

English learners of Chinese, however, will be extremely disappointed to discover that English cognates are very few and far between. Chinese prefers Chinese constructions, so that

diabetes is *tang2niao4bing4*, literally, “sugar-urine-disease.”

hippopotamus is *he2ma3*, literally, “river horse.”

airport is *fei1ji1chang3*, literally, “flying-machine-field.”

Although not cognates, Chinese does provide some logical “explanations” of these terms. Indeed, how many English speakers know where the word “diabetes” comes from?

[According to MedicineNet.com, the word "diabetes" is borrowed from the Greek word meaning "a siphon." The 2nd-century A.D. Greek physician, Aretus the Cappadocian, named the condition "diabetes." He explained that patients with it had polyuria and "passed water like a siphon."]

And where does “*hippopotamus*” come from?

[*hippopotamus* actually means “river horse” – from the Greek: *hippos* (horse) *oh potamius* (of the river) – so that the Chinese preserves the original meaning.]

It could be argued that the Chinese is more informative, descriptive, or interesting, and therefore may help a student to remember the words, but it's more likely that most learners of Chinese would rather have a large store of cognates instead.

Faulty Language Expectation: The important information is at or near the beginning of the sentence.

Chinese does not have relative pronouns, like English and other languages do. Relative pronouns allow one to put the important subject of a sentence in the beginning, followed by “which,” “who,” “that” and then the details. But Chinese, which doesn't have relative pronouns, puts the details first, followed by a particle (“*de*”) followed by the main subject. Thus, the sentence:

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“The guy you saw at the party last night at 8:30 is my cousin.” becomes, in Chinese:

“The yesterday evening at 8:30 at the party you sawed (“de”) guy is my cousin.”

Not having the most important information of a sentence at the beginning causes great confusion for the English student learning Chinese.

Faulty Language Expectation: The L2 speaker describes the world in the same way that the L2 learner does.

Foreign language learning is not only about learning the choices that the foreign language speaker makes. It’s not enough to learn the correct form. One also needs to know how the forms are used in communication. The English-speaker, like all speakers, naturally expects the speaker of L2 to respond to normal situations in the same way as she does. This is a natural language expectation, but causes mistakes and misunderstandings in the real world when L2 speakers violate the “natural” expectations of the learner.

English-speakers, for example, have a certain expectation, when asking and answering negative questions: They expect a positive expression (“Yes”) to mean agreement with the **positive** form of the verb, while a negative expression (“No”) expresses agreement with the **negative** form of the verb.

“Don’t you love me?” “Yes” (“Oh, thank God, she still loves me.”)

“No” (“She doesn’t love me. What did I do wrong?”)

However, if you ask a Chinese speaker the same question in Chinese:

“Ni buai wo ma?” a “Yes” answer (our ever-present “shi” 4) means agreement with the **negative**, that is, “Yes, that’s right, I **don’t** love you.”

So, after you’ve proudly learned to correctly ask the Chinese banker for a million dollar loan in Chinese, using the negative form:

“You won’t lend us the million dollars?” (“Ni bujiegei women yibaiwan meiyuan ma?”), and he answers in the affirmative:

“Shi,” don’t get very happy: he’s just refused the loan!

Conclusion: Is Chinese really harder than other languages?

I would say “no”, “maybe”, and “yes”, based on the above analysis:

No, if one considers the number of additional language choices an English-speaker needs to make in L2. Since there are no verb changes, no masculine-feminine, no singular-plural decisions to make in Chinese, as opposed to French or Spanish, Chinese is easier in these areas. However, the mastery of tones, and other aspects of Chinese which require additional choices not required in French, Czech or Spanish, makes Chinese more difficult. In sum, it doesn’t

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seem that English-speakers have more new choices to make in Chinese than they do in other languages, and I would therefore say Chinese is not harder in this most basic aspect.

Maybe, if one considers the natural language expectations of the English-speaker. The faulty language expectations discussed above

However, learning to change language expectations might not be too formidable a task, given correct explanations and sufficient practice.

Yes, if one considers the enormous amount of English cognates in French and Spanish which don't exist in Chinese. While vocabulary itself should not be the measure of the difficulty of a language (since all modern languages have the amount necessary to describe modern life), it's a very important factor when comparing L2 to L1. English-speaking students learning French or Spanish start off with a tremendous store of similar vocabulary, only requiring some pronunciation changes, due to the large number of cognates. This has great psychological value as well as hastening the language mastery process. For some students, the "challenge" of a language, like Chinese, which is so different in vocabulary from L1, can also provide positive psychological value, but it would be unrealistic to see the great majority of language students choosing the challenge over the convenience of cognates.

Implications for teachers

Of course difficulty is not the only reason for choosing to study a certain L2. Many people believe that mastering Chinese will be essential, given China's global economic significance. Others are challenged by what they see as an "exotic" language. Whatever the reason for someone wanting to learn a foreign language, the teacher can help by developing materials and strategies to deal with the difficulties discussed above.

The main thing a teacher can do is teach students what to expect in terms of difficulties, and create materials to overcome these difficulties effectively. For students learning Chinese, the following should be emphasized:

1. Mastery of tones, with the constant emphasis on the fact that tones are inherently part of the vocabulary, not an "addition" to the "real word." Until students internalize that point, they will never learn tones precisely and will constantly be frustrated by the inability to produce and recognize tone (toneme) differences.
2. Understanding the omnipresence of homonyms, and realizing that one should not be "trapped" into assuming a new homonym is necessarily the word already learned. Expectations of homonyms should be developed by presenting new words with various homonymic possibilities.
3. Sensitizing students to word order differences which result from differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar; for example, how the lack of relative pronouns in Chinese causes sequences radically different from English, which does have relative pronouns.

Although this discussion focused on learning Chinese and some problems specific to that language, the principles described are applicable to all learners of L2, namely:

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1. Make students aware that having new L2 choices is what makes language learning difficult, not just big differences between languages.
2. Teach students to be flexible in their language expectations where L2 expectations are different from those of L1.