

Why is Learning Chinese so Difficult?

As China continues to become a major force in the business world, a record number of people are attempting to learn Chinese as a second language. However, many are falling at the first hurdle as they realise just how difficult Chinese is to learn to almost any degree. So, just what are the factors that make this fascinating – but complex – language so difficult to master?

For a start, Chinese plainly doesn't use the Latin-based alphabet that make-up the western-Germanic languages, including English. The Chinese language is written as a collection of characters known as logographs, which were used to write Chinese languages as well as those from a larger territory that had been historically impacted by Chinese culture. This distinct difference in written forms, and the sounds associated with them are a fundamental barrier for anyone hoping to learn the language. But there is more too.

At a fundamental level, the average person only needs just around 2,000 of the more than 50,000 characters in Chinese to read a newspaper in a straightforward and non-specific way. This means that you can get by in Chinese with very little knowledge. It is widely believed that this notion is based on the fact that more than 95% of the characters found in any given newspaper are easily among the top 2,000 most common ones.

What these definitions fail to mention, though, is that even with all those recognisable characters, you'll still encounter an abundance of new phrases. Let's illustrate this with a simple example in English: by knowing words such as "up" and "tight" doesn't automatically mean that you can deduce the word "uptight", which is disassociated with either of the two root words. And so it is with Chinese characters. Reading comprehension in any language requires more than just memorising a lot of words; it also requires understanding how those words fit together in a variety of settings and how small characters and syllables combine to create the words that we know. Then there are the tonal variations.

The fact that the Chinese language is tonal is the primary factor that contributes to the difficulty of learning it for non-Chinese speakers. There are four distinct tones that are used in Mandarin, which means that the manner a word is spoken can give it one of four different meanings. This tone, also known as pronunciation, is the primary source of difficulty for virtually all new speakers of Chinese, which is one of the reasons why Chinese is such a challenging language to acquire. These tonal variations are not something that can be simply learned – they have to be lived in everyday conversation to be appreciated. Regardless of how good a linguist you may be, getting tonal values right means conversations with other Chinese speakers rather than the rote learning of what you think those tones are.

The Chinese writing system is another factor that contributes to the difficulty of learning the Chinese language. The Chinese language, in contrast to the vast majority of other languages spoken throughout the world, does not employ any type of finite alphabet or Romanised lettering system. Instead of using phonetic letters to represent words, Chinese is ideographic, which means that it employs symbols or Chinese characters to represent words. Examples of phonetic letters are a, b, and c. Over the course of the Chinese language, there are literally thousands of characters, each of which has its own distinct meaning and pronunciation. As a consequence of this, those who are not native speakers of Chinese are need to be able to recognise around 10,000 Chinese characters in order to even attempt to read a Chinese newspaper.

It might be difficult to write the characters as well. The calligraphy methods that were originally employed to paint letters on scrolls and structures gave rise to the exquisite and delicate succession of strokes used to write the Chinese language.

Because Chinese children are taught this writing style from an early age, the knowledge has been stored in their muscle memory for years. If a non-native student ever wants to become completely literate in Chinese, mastering the sequence in which the strokes are written is crucial since it can determine whether the handwriting is readable or not.

The only real upside to learning Chinese is that the grammar is pretty easy. It is fortunate that the syntax of the Chinese language is rather straightforward, which means that new speakers may start pronouncing whole sentences in a relatively short amount of time once they have mastered the precise pronunciation of the four tones.

The Chinese business market is booming and is likely to continue to do so for decades to come. That is a major reason why Chinese as a language matters. Picking up Chinese isn't easy, but it is satisfying. Give it a go; see what you can do in a short time and I assure you, you will quickly become fascinated with the language. Once that happens, you are already on the home straight.

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