

# Journal for Distinguished Language Studies

Volume 8 (2021-2022)



# **Journal for Distinguished Language Studies**

**Volume 8**

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The purpose of the *Journal for Distinguished Language Studies* (ISSN 1547-7819) is to provide a forum for exchanging information about teaching to and reaching near-native foreign language proficiency for teachers, learners, and professional language users. Areas of interest include research, theory, and practical application.

The *Journal for Distinguished Language Studies* was published annually from 2003-2010 by the Coalition of Distinguished Language Studies, which closed in 2010. In 2020, editorship of the JDLS passed to MSI Press LLC. A bridge volume (Volume 7: 2011-2020) was published in late 2020. The current issues are published bi-annually in even years by MSI Press LLC in Hollister, California. Subscriptions are available and can be facilitated through [orders@msipress.com](mailto:orders@msipress.com) or by fax/phone, 831-886-2486.

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To nominate a candidate for the 2023-2024 Friend of Distinguished Language Proficiency Award, send a short justification related to Level 4 contribution(s) and, if available, a CV to the JDLS editors.

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## EDITORS' NOTE

The *Journal for Distinguished Language Studies* (JDLS) is a refereed volume published in 2003 by the Coalition of Distinguished Language Centers (founded in 2002) under the direction of Dr. Betty Lou Leaver and Boris Shekhtman. After transitioning to a new publisher, MSI Press LLC, JDLS has published a bridge issue (Issue 7) covering the years 2011-2020 when the journal was on hiatus as a result of the previous publisher experiencing difficulty in funding publication. Following the bridge issue, the JDLS now moves to regular biennial publication.

JDLS is the only journal to focus exclusively on the highest levels of language achievement: that is, native-like or near-native. This level is labeled “distinguished” by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and “Level 4/advanced professional proficiency” by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR). Descriptions can be found on the ACTFL and ILR websites.

The purpose of the journal is to create a robust international movement to promote language learning to the near-native level of proficiency. The editors seek contributions in the areas of theory, research (quantitative, qualitative, case studies, action research), and applications. The journal typically has published a balance of articles in all three categories. Published papers develop theory, share applications that work (based on the experience of those who teach that level), and report on the research needed for proper evaluation and assessment of theory and application.

The editors particularly welcome articles on the following areas:

- current status of Level 4 proficiency research in each of the four skill areas;
- teaching methods to/at/above Level 4 proficiency in each of the four skill areas;
- the role of culture in achieving Level 4 proficiency in each of the four skill areas;
- and
- assessment to/at/above Level 4 proficiency in each of the four skill areas.

The articles published here represent original work. They have not been previously published elsewhere or submitted to another journal or collected volume. The editors welcome questions or input at any time.

- **Editor**, Yalun Zhou, Ph.D., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York, USA
- **Associate Editor**, Donna Bain Butler, Ph.D., Delaware State University, Delaware, USA

Issue 8 contains five research articles, one superior language learner personal story, five book reviews, and two memorials dedicated to outstanding Level 4 contributors: Carl Leaver (publishing support) and Zoltán Dörnyei (L2 research, theory, and practice). Among the five research articles, Cleret explores how debating is used in senior professional military education at the French War College in Paris to help officers attain native-like English language competence. Bernhardt suggests that learners aiming to achieve distinguished levels of proficiency should focus on expanding their vocabulary and advocates for instructional designs that provide extensive input through reading, listening, and watching. He emphasizes the importance of evaluating materials based on vocabulary and individual learner needs, rejecting standardized proficiency goals, and promoting learner-centered approaches to instruction. Franke's article explores the role of persistence, study abroad, motivation, and learner autonomy in the pursuit of distinguished speaking proficiency in foreign languages, emphasizing the personal nature of this pursuit and highlighting the importance of engagement in the target culture and extended immersion experiences. Leaver discusses the significant gap between proficiency levels in language learning and the development of cusp tables to identify critical proficiency elements for advancing from one level to another, utilizing formative assessment and learners' zone of proximal development to determine personalized next steps. Corin and Entis provide examples of formative assessment in practice for learning and instruction at upper levels of proficiency.

In addition to the five research articles, Kubler's personal story recounts his unexpected journey of majoring in Chinese, achieving high proficiency levels, and using Chinese as his primary professional language in both government and academic careers. Lord reviews the book *Lessons from Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency: Motivation, Cognition and Identity* (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022); Garza reviews Dörnyei and collaborators' other book, *Stories from Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency* (Mentzelopoulos, Dörnyei, and Trotignon, 2023), showcasing the personal narratives of thirty diverse learners who have achieved remarkable nativelike proficiency through different motivations and paths. Rice reviews the book, *Mastering Italian Through Global Debate* (Bertola & Carletti, 2022), introducing the pedagogical approach of global debate to achieve Level-4 proficiency and assessment criteria. Fees reviews the book, *Mastering Spanish through Global Debate* (Knapp, Hines-Gaither, and Ruscitti-Tovar, 2022), designed to develop advanced Spanish skills aligned with the Superior level proficiency set by ACTFL. Last, Wei reviews *Practices that Works: Bring Learners to Professional Proficiency in World Languages* (Garza, 2021), an update of the book, *What Works*, published by the Coalition of Distinguished Language Centers in 2008, aiming to demonstrate the achievability of professional proficiency, providing guidance on how to attain these results, and emphasizing the importance of including world language education in every educational curriculum and individual's awareness.

Dr. Yalun Zhou, Rensselaer Polytechnical University

Dr. Donna Bain Butler, Delaware State University



## FRIEND OF DISTINGUISHED LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AWARD

The Coalition of Distinguished Language Centers, which established the *Journal for Distinguished Language Proficiency*, presented an annual Friend of Distinguished Language Proficiency award to individuals who had significantly contributed to the mission of the journal of promoting the acquisition of native-like second-language proficiency. With its acquisition of the journal in 2020, MSI Press LLC, with the guidance of the JDLS advisory board, has continued the award. Recipients of the award to date are listed in the JDLS masthead.

Anyone may recommend an individual to be considered for the award by contacting one of the journal editors or advisors with a description of the ways in which the individual has promoted distinguished language proficiency through service, career, publication, or in other ways or a combination thereof.

The following “friends of distinguished language proficiency” have been selected in the recent competitions. For this volume, they were asked to provide biographical statements that they would like to share with readers.

2011-2020

### **Dr. Ray Clifford**

Ray Clifford’s career has included both government and academic assignments, and in both of those venues he has sought to promote the value of high-level language proficiency. His research includes exploring the relationship between superior language proficiency and cognitive development, the acquisition of language in non-traditional settings, and the advantages of using criterion-referenced tests to assess individuals’ language proficiency. While Chancellor of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, he instituted a classification system for language jobs that replaced the traditional focus on the frequency of the communication tasks encountered with an emphasis on the infrequent, but critical communication tasks that required nuanced, accurate communications. At Brigham Young University, he instituted a university-wide language certification program

that is based on students' tested proficiency rather than on the number of classes they have taken. In all his assignments, he has demonstrated that the measurement of language proficiency is an essential component of instructional program management.

### **Dr. Madeline Ehrman**

(posthumous biographical statement prepared by Betty Lou Leaver)

For many years, Madeline Ehrman served as Director of Research, Evaluation, and Development at the School of Language Studies, Foreign Service Institute of the U. S. Department of State, a division which she helped co-found. She headed a staff responsible for institutional research, staff and program development, language proficiency testing, and learning style consultations for incoming students and those having special difficulties. Prior to that, she served as acting associate dean, as chair of the Asian and African languages department, and regional language training supervisor in Bangkok. More recently, she concurrently served as an associate at the National Foreign Language Center and as an associate at the Center for the Advanced Study of Language. Her Ph.D. in clinical psychology was followed by training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy at the Washington School of Psychiatry. She co-developed the E&L Cognitive Styles Construct, a learning styles identification instrument in use at a number of institutions in several countries plus in U. S. government language programs. She has published a number of textbooks for Southeast Asian languages, multiple articles and book chapters on language learning topics and interpersonal relations, and four books: *Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition* (with Betty Lou Leaver and Boris Shekhtman, Cambridge University Press), *Interpersonal Dynamics in Second Language Education: The Visible and Invisible Classroom* (with Zoltan Dörnyei, Sage), *The Meanings of the Modals in Present-Day American English*, and *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties* (Sage). She spoke a number of languages, including Thai and Cambodian, having worked with Indochinese refugee operations. Madeline succumbed to cancer in October 2015. Following her death, the U. S. Department of State established the Madeline E. Ehrman Fellowship in Second Language Acquisition for scholars whose work addresses efficient and effective second language training for adults.

2021-2022

### **Dr. Christine Campbell**

Christine Campbell is President, Campbell Language Consultants and was Teacher, Department Chair, Dean, Assistant Provost, and Associate Provost at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) for 30 years. In her last position at DLIFLC, she headed a directorate that practiced transformative teaching and learning. Her recent publications, in edited volumes, have focused on this topic, including a co-edited award-winning volume, *Transformative Language Learning and Teaching* and a forthcoming co-edited volume, *Open Architecture Curricular Design*.

**Dr. David Wilsem**

Arabic presents especial challenges to students aiming to acquire native-like proficiency with it. By now, the reasons for that are known: Arabic has diglossia. That is, its spoken varieties are in some ways strikingly different from its written form. If that is not challenging enough for learners of the language, the challenge is compounded by the near universal practice in Arabic-language programs, requiring students to begin their study with the written form of the language, which is not usually declaimed aloud in everyday conversation, before providing them with some instruction in a spoken variety, usually a semester or, with luck, two. Some programs provide no instruction in spoken Arabic at all! I like to say that such an approach is like teaching students to fly before they learn to walk! Given that, my experience in learning Arabic was atypical. I began my study at the University of Arizona with an intensive summer program in a Gulf Arabic dialect before continuing to tackle the intricacies of Arabic writing. The program at Arizona is, even to this day, unusual for its providing instruction in no fewer than three regional dialects of Arabic, with one of them, four full semesters. I was fortunate to spend my second summer with the language in an intensive study-abroad program at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan, a partnership between that university and the University of Virginia. I returned to the fall semester at my home institution far ahead of my classmates in my facility with both the spoken and written varieties of the language. Soon after that, I joined the intensive year-long program at the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) at the American University of Cairo. I distinctly recall the moment when I recognized that I had achieved full functional proficiency. A few months into intensive study, I was stopped on the street by someone who asked me for directions. I answered in Egyptian Arabic without hesitation, giving detailed instructions. As the scene dissolved, I said to myself, "I've got it!" Because of my experience with learning spoken Arabic first and enjoying the opportunity to study the language in its natural environments, I developed a strong belief in the imperative of learning a spoken form of the language first – the so-called 'colloquial-first' approach, which remains a minority stance in the Arabic-teaching profession – and in the efficacy of study-abroad. For that reason, I have spent my career teaching in and directing Arabic study-abroad programs, emphasizing the local dialects. To be sure, living in the Arab world for thirty years, teaching at American universities in Cairo, Beirut, and Sharjah, has enhanced my proficiency, but those gains have been incremental, building upon my fastest and most profound achievements in attaining native-like proficiency in Arabic, which came in my early years with the language. In closing, I should repeat what I tell all students in the orientation sessions with which they begin their intensive study-abroad: I began my road to native-like proficiency with Arabic in graduate school at the age of thirty-one. If I can do it, others surely can!

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## **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

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## How I Attained “Near-Native” Proficiency in Chinese

Cornelius C. Kubler (Williams College, USA)

### The Beginning

I grew up in a German-speaking family in Daytona Beach, Florida and studied Spanish, French, and Latin in junior and senior high school as well as a little Italian and Esperanto at the local YWCA. Thus, foreign languages – specifically, European languages – have been an important part of my life since childhood. However, never in the world would I have imagined that I would end up majoring in Chinese and linguistics in college, test twice in Chinese at the ILR S-4/R-4 level in the civil and foreign service of the U.S. State Department, and use Chinese as my primary professional language throughout my two careers as State Department official and college professor.

What happened? Well, the summer before my freshman year at Cornell University, I traveled to Ithaca, New York for a special six-week program in Attic Greek and French existentialist thought. Through pure serendipity, I was assigned as roommate to a Chinese-American fellow from Brooklyn, New York. I quickly became good friends with David, who would sometimes teach me a few words of spoken Mandarin, demonstrate how Chinese characters worked (日 **rì** “sun” + 月 **yuè** “moon” → 明 **míng** “bright”), and regale me with stories of his childhood in Taipei. When I was hungry, he would invite me to taste dried cuttlefish, pineapple cakes, and other snacks his mother periodically sent from New York City Chinatown; and when I was sick, he would offer me 川貝枇杷膏 **Chuānbèi Pípa Gāo** “Sichuan fritillaria and loquat syrup” from his traditional Chinese medicine kit that his mother had packed in his suitcase before he left for college.

When the time for fall term course registration arrived, I decided—because of David’s influence but against the advice of one of my professors—to drop Greek and instead take Chinese 101, which would have the added benefit of satisfying the requirement for the linguistics major of one semester of a non-European language. In truth, my intention was to take a semester of Chinese and then turn my attention back to European languages and linguistics. But that plan would turn out very differently.

## Learning Chinese at Cornell University

I quickly got hooked on Chinese. I found Chinese fascinating in how it differed from the Indo-European languages with which I was familiar: no noun declensions or verb conjugations, no tenses, no obligatory singular or plural distinction for nouns, a classifier for every noun, and adjectives and prepositions that were really verbs! Knowing German and French helped me with some of the sounds of Mandarin, for example, the vowel **ü** as in 綠 **lǜ** “be green”, which is like the **ü** of German **Tür** “door” or the **u** of French **tu** “you (familiar).” My having a good ear for sounds facilitated acquiring the four tones of Mandarin, which I didn’t find so very difficult, except that when learning the pronunciation of each new vocabulary word, I had to learn not only the correct consonants and vowels but also remember the proper tone.

When we began learning how to read and write, I found Chinese characters fascinating but hard; I think my auditory memory is better than my visual memory. It took me what seemed like forever to remember all the strokes of relatively basic characters like 壞 **huài** “be bad” (19 strokes) and 讓 **ràng** “let” (24 strokes). I would first write out each character 20 to 30 times and then test myself by covering up the Chinese in the vocabulary list: Could I write the character correctly from memory by looking at the English meaning? At first it would take me two to three hours to memorize 10 characters, though this gradually got a little easier as I became more familiar with the various components of Chinese characters, which often repeat themselves in new permutations.

First-year Chinese was very well taught at Cornell. The curriculum our professor, Nicholas C. Bodman, had devised was highly effective, emphasizing a strong foundation in spoken Chinese for most of the first semester before introducing the elements of the Chinese writing system and practicing the skills of reading and writing several months later. Professor Bodman taught three hours of “lecture” a week, where he would explain Chinese pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and culture to us in English from the perspective of the non-native learner; two native-speaking lecturers, Mrs. Ni and Mrs. Wang, who were stellar pedagogues with warm, supportive personalities, taught drill class five hours per week, during which they emphasized accurate pronunciation and grammar and practiced communicative skills with us. This model, now often referred to as “fact class” coupled with the even more important “act class,” is a model I have tried to follow all my life in learning and, later, teaching and supervising various languages.

The textbooks we used, from the well-known “Yale Chinese Language Series,” were all accompanied by open-reel tape recordings, which I drilled with intensively in the Cornell language laboratory for at least 1-2 hours every day. During my seven years in residence at Cornell, I spent literally hundreds of hours in the language lab, reveling in repetition drills, substitution drills, and transformation drills in Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Japanese. Even though in certain circles today the word “drill” has almost become a dirty word, I am totally convinced that the drill work I did with native-speaker audio recordings played a major role in my linguistic development and is a big part of the reason why I have relatively good pronunciation in these languages for a non-native speaker.



## Acquiring Chinese in Taiwan

In the spring of 1971, I learned that I had won a scholarship from Rotary International Foundation to spend a year at National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taipei, Taiwan as a Rotary Undergraduate Scholar. With good intentions but insufficient understanding of the difficulties for an English speaker in learning Chinese, Rotary stipulated that I must study at a regular Taiwanese university rather than a language school for foreigners, so that I might be able to mix and mingle with local citizens and implement the ideal of citizen-to-citizen international exchange. And so, in September of that year, after having studied Mandarin for only four semesters, I moved to Taipei to begin my freshman year as a student in the Department of Chinese at NCCU. I lived in a clean but spartan dormitory with four Taiwanese and one overseas Chinese roommate from Vietnam and took courses including Freshman Chinese, Chinese General History, Political Thought of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Ethics, Music, and Physical Education.

Classes at NCCU were almost exclusively lecture style, though a few instructors would address an occasional question to the class as a whole. I didn't realize it then, but this type of instruction resulted in my listening comprehension gradually improving but my having little opportunity to practice speaking about formal, academic topics. Comprehending the accented Mandarin of my instructors proved to be a major challenge. My homeroom teacher, who was also the one who taught us the lecture section of Freshman Chinese, was a younger man from Taiwan with only a moderate Taiwanese accent in his Mandarin, which I could manage. However, the professors in my other classes were mainland émigrés from Sichuan, Jiangsu, and other provinces of mainland China who spoke Mandarin with such heavy local accents that even my Taiwanese classmates would sometimes complain they couldn't understand what their professors were saying! Reading the cursive characters my professors would scribble on the blackboard was another source of difficulty, since in my American university Chinese classes, we had been exposed only to printed-style characters.

That fall semester at NCCU I felt completely overwhelmed, as if I had been thrown into the ocean and was trying to keep my head above water, with one breaker after another crashing against me from all directions. By far the biggest challenges were the semi-classical style in which most of my textbooks were written as well as the quantity of reading involved. I was frantically memorizing huge amounts of Chinese just to pass tests and exams without really understanding what I was memorizing. I would spend many hours each day in the library looking up characters and copying them and their pronunciations and translations into vocabulary notebooks, but without enough time to learn all those good words I was looking up.

Fortunately, my frustrations about my academic progress at NCCU were in large part made up for by the friendships I quickly formed with my roommates and other students on campus. My classmates were warm and supportive, frequently offering to lend me their class notes, correct my Chinese, or explain the meanings of language or customs I didn't understand. My fluency in informal, everyday Chinese improved through the many bull sessions we had, where we would talk about all the typical topics that young people

discuss—schoolwork, family, international news, gossip, relationships, and future plans. With my closest friends I would occasionally discuss, in hushed tones, topics which in Taiwan in the early 1970s one had to be discrete in discussing, for example, Communist China and the Taiwan independence movement. As the first semester came to a close, I took stock of my situation and concluded that, as much as I appreciated the friendship of my classmates, to remain at NCCU for the spring semester just wouldn't be an efficient way to continue my study of Chinese.

I had heard of a Jesuit missionary language school in Hsinchu – about two hours south of Taipei – by the name of Chabanel Language Institute. I went to visit, was much impressed by the faculty and facilities and, with the reluctant agreement of Rotary, moved to Hsinchu in January 1972 to continue my studies. Though I missed socializing with my old classmates at NCCU, I partially made up for this by taking some meals in the cafeteria at nearby National Chiao Tung University, where I made several new friends. Over the next few months, I also made several other new friends on the train between Hsinchu and Taipei, where I would still travel occasionally for Rotary meetings or to visit with NCCU friends.

At Chabanel I was fortunate to receive four hours a day of tutorial training including Short Radio Plays, Chinese History, Introduction to Classical Chinese, and Beginning Taiwanese Hokkien. The teaching methods were excellent, strongly influenced by the audio-lingual method. There was a well-equipped language laboratory, where I drilled with audio recordings several hours each day. Many of the teaching materials employed at Chabanel were prepared and published in-house and were impressively high in quality, no doubt at least in part the result of the training in modern linguistics that some of the Jesuit fathers had received.

The high-quality tutorial training I received during my six months at Chabanel had a huge impact on me in a number of ways. First, it helped me consolidate my Mandarin language proficiency at the high-intermediate level and prepared me for graduate studies in Chinese. Second, it was at Chabanel that I was introduced to Classical Chinese, which I was to study for a number of years afterwards and which I have taught frequently with great professional and personal fulfillment. Third, my semester at Chabanel was the first time I had the opportunity to study a non-Mandarin Sinitic language – Taiwanese Hokkien, which whetted my interest in Chinese dialectology, a major focus of my scholarly research but also very useful for the pay-off in comprehending Mandarin spoken with different local accents.

### **Back at Cornell, Middlebury, and Teaching for the First Time**

Since I had a three-year graduate fellowship waiting for me, I decided to return to Cornell to enroll in the graduate program in linguistics. From 1972-1975 I took courses in general linguistics, Chinese linguistics, modern Chinese language, Classical Chinese, Cantonese, and Taiwanese. I also wrote an M.A. thesis on the topic of Europeanized grammar in modern written Chinese, for which I did a great deal of research using primary sources in Chinese. At Cornell I was fortunate to have the opportunity to learn

from eminent specialists in Chinese linguistics and literature including my first teacher of Chinese, Professor Bodman, as well as John McCoy, Tsu-Lin Mei, and Harold Shadick. I spent the summer of 1973 at the Middlebury College Chinese School, where I studied Fifth-year Chinese in an intensive immersion format. The best language lab I have ever been in was at Middlebury, where each booth was completely separate in its own soundproofed room with closeable door. I still remember the many hours I spent in that lab, delighting in the sonorant voices of Beijing Mandarin recorded by instructors from the Yale Institute of Far Eastern Languages.

It was also during this period at Cornell that I taught Chinese for the first time, serving as Teaching Assistant for Chinese 101-102, for which I taught the three weekly grammar lectures as well as being responsible for overall course coordination. As Bill Hopkins (2020: 9) so aptly put it in Volume 7 of this journal, “Nothing helps you learn a subject so much as teaching it does.” By having to explain Chinese phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary to others, I gained a deeper understanding of the language myself as well as increasing my confidence in using it. However, after three years back in the States, I was hungry for more exposure to Chinese in country. Since it was not yet possible for Americans to study in China in the mid-1970s and since I had had such a positive experience studying in Taiwan during my junior year, I made the difficult decision to leave Cornell with a Master’s degree in June 1975 and return to Taiwan.

## **Second M.A. and Ph.D.**

From 1975-78 I studied as a graduate student in the Graduate School of Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University (NTU) for a second M.A. Again I lived in a university dorm but this time, as graduate students, we were only four in the room. I took courses in Chinese literature, intellectual history, syntax, dialectology, and historical linguistics, for all of which I had to do large amounts of reading. However, unlike my earlier undergraduate experience in Taiwan, this time I was prepared, as my listening comprehension of accented Mandarin, writing ability, reading speed, and proficiency in Classical Chinese had all improved.

Under the guidance of the internationally known linguist Ting Pang-Hsin, I wrote my Master’s thesis titled 澎湖群島方言調查 *Pénghú Qúndǎo Fāngyán Diàochá* *A Dialect Survey of the Pescadores Archipelago*. The research for that thesis, which I conducted over a period of over two years, was the most adventurous thing I have ever done in my life, since it involved surveying different subdialects of Southern Min at 88 fishing villages on 17 different islands in the Taiwan Strait, some less than one square kilometer in area with a population of only a few hundred speakers.

After receiving my M.A. from NTU in 1978, I returned to Cornell to study Japanese in the well-known FALCON program directed by Eleanor H. Jorden, whose innovative ideas about East Asian language pedagogy were to have a great influence on me in the years to come. Upon the conclusion of twelve months of super-intensive Japanese language training in Ithaca followed by an additional summer in Japan, I pursued one more year of coursework for the Ph.D. in linguistics at Cornell. Even though I still had my dissertation

—on the topic of language contact in Taiwan—to complete, I decided that after so many years in school, it was time to find a job.

### Learning Chinese on the Job

My first full-time position was at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI), where American foreign service officers and other government personnel are trained in over 70 languages and cultures. At FSI I took advantage of the opportunity to continue learning Chinese on the job, in accordance with the famous saying in the *Analects* of Confucius: 學而時習之不亦說乎? **Xué ér shí xí zhī bú yì yuè hū?** "Is it not a pleasure to learn something and often put it into practice?" My professional Chinese improved substantially during my years as supervisor of FSI Mandarin and Cantonese training from 1980-81 and again from 1988-1991, when I had concurrent responsibilities as chair of the Department of Asian and African Languages. Much of each day I was involved in class observation, teaching, and individual and group meetings with the native-speaking instructors who hailed from all over mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. I was also deeply involved in materials preparation and testing in Mandarin, Cantonese, and (for part of the time) Japanese at all levels from S/R-0 to S/R-5.

In 1981 FSI sent me back to Taiwan to serve as principal of its field school for advanced Chinese in Taipei, with additional responsibilities for the American Institute in Taiwan Chinese language program and the Consulate General Hong Kong Post Language Program. I was intensely involved for six years in all aspects of student instruction, instructor recruitment and training, and curriculum development, frequently observing classes and evaluating proficiency tests in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese at all levels, especially the 2+ to 3+ range. I frequently chaired meetings with faculty and staff and also began giving lectures at local universities. All of this work was most useful in raising and consolidating my proficiency in Chinese for professional purposes.

After eleven extremely busy but exhilarating years at FSI, I was hired in 1991 by Williams College, a highly selective liberal arts college in Williamstown, Massachusetts to serve as chair of their still fairly new Department of Chinese. In my new career as college professor, most of my language teaching was only at the S/R-0 to S/R-2 levels, with the possible exception of Fourth-year Chinese, some of the materials for which ranged up to S/R-3. Therefore, teaching Chinese at the college level didn't contribute much to raising my own proficiency. However, our Chinese faculty meetings were always conducted in the language, which was of some benefit, and I frequently attended professional conferences in Asia, where I made many presentations in Chinese on Chinese and had the opportunity to listen to presentations by native Chinese-speaking colleagues. I also interacted with presenters at Q&A sessions or informally during breaks and dinners. Moreover, for a total of six years while on sabbatical leave from Williams and also during many summers, I served as visiting professor at various universities in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where I taught graduate courses on Chinese linguistics and language pedagogy. Without doubt, these activities also contributed substantially to maintaining and strengthening my own proficiency in the language.

## What I Did Right

In my study of Chinese – full-time from 1969 through 1978 and part-time ever since, I think that, sometimes by plan and sometimes just fortuitously – and always with the support of countless numbers of kind and helpful Chinese, Taiwanese, and Americans to whom I am forever indebted, I ended up doing a lot of things right.

I was lucky to have excellent teachers in the Cornell Chinese program who had high standards but were adept at motivating students like me to study hard through their obvious concern for each of us as individuals and their frequent praise and encouragement. They corrected my pronunciation and grammar patterns diligently and were skilled at both conducting drills and facilitating communicative language practice in their classes. It's so important for learners to develop good pronunciation and grammar habits early on, since it's difficult if not impossible to correct entrenched mistakes once they have fossilized.

In my learning of Chinese, I frequently employed both audio and video materials, everything from pronunciation exercises and grammar drills to radio news broadcasts and television soap operas. Based on my experience learning and teaching Chinese over six decades, I have found grammar drills to be an essential step in helping learners attain or approach the ultimate goal of fluent, native-like communicative competence. Drills can help learners improve their pronunciation, internalize the new vocabulary and grammar structures to which they have been introduced, and develop their fluency. At the same time, drills can increase learners' confidence in speaking Chinese.

At Cornell, NCCU, and NTU, I took many courses in Classical Chinese, the standard written language of China for thousands of years, which has strongly influenced modern written and spoken Chinese. Proficiency in Classical Chinese is very useful for raising one's level in written Chinese and even for high-level spoken Chinese, since many ancient quotations and proverbs, as well as Classical Chinese-influenced grammar constructions, are still used frequently in formal speech and constitute precisely the kind of language that is associated with the S/R-3+ and 4 levels. In addition, I took numerous courses on the linguistic structure of Chinese, which made me more sensitive to the complexities of Chinese phonology and syntax, directly or indirectly helping me further strengthen my proficiency. Here I again agree with what Bill Hopkins (2020: 9) wrote about the utility of taking courses on the linguistic structure of the language you're studying.

At Cornell and in Taiwan, I also took many courses on Chinese literature and history, which helped provide important background information that was helpful in making sense of Chinese culture. In Taiwan, I studied several years of Taiwanese Hokkien, and at Cornell I took two years of Cantonese. Knowledge of these Sinitic languages, both of which are related to Mandarin much as the Germanic or Romance languages are related to each other, proved to be of considerable help in improving my listening comprehension of Mandarin spoken with a southern Chinese accent, which one hears frequently. During my first decade of Chinese study, I regularly read Chinese newspapers and engaged in pleasure reading of short stories, novels, mysteries, and books by Chinese authors about their experiences studying abroad in America, all of which contributed toward strengthening my reading comprehension and speed.



University courses can be useful for developing high-level listening, reading, and writing skills, but they don't do much for improving speaking. It's important to be cognizant of the huge difference between the informal conversation of classmates in a dorm (which might be S-2 or 2+) and the formal discourse of educated native speakers delivering a briefing on international news or giving a televised interview on a professional topic (which would be S-5). From my observation of thousands of learners of Chinese as a non-native language, I conclude that most adult learners won't attain high-level speaking proficiency without a long period of formal instruction. You need a strong, experienced teacher to correct you and systematically extend your proficiency range. Even when studying at the university in Taiwan, I still took one to two hours per week of tutorial classes at a language school. What to do in these private lessons? Try to "activize" the material learned passively in the university classes. Deliver briefings, oral reports, and mini-lectures on the subjects taken up in your other classes, or on current international and domestic news or topics of professional interest. Instructors must have high standards and be unrelenting in their criticism; moreover, they shouldn't be satisfied with correct but lower-level speech and must insist that you keep reaching for the next rung of the proficiency ladder.

Spending a sufficient amount of time in country, in frequent and close contact with native speakers in both formal and informal situations, is also essential. I was fortunate to be able to study, work, and travel for a total of 17 years in many parts of Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong, which allowed me to interact on a daily basis with people from all walks of life: from farmers and small business people to diplomats and academicians. This experience was most useful in improving my listening comprehension of different dialects, of which China has many. To acquire true conversational fluency in informal register, you need to create a living situation for yourself where, for at least two or three years, you are interacting closely with native speakers, for example, living in a dorm or apartment, as I did in Taiwan for several years. And to become good at formal register, you need practice in giving briefings, oral reports, talks, and lectures, as I was lucky to have the opportunity to do through my teaching and lecturing.

Due to my bicultural background, I was completely willing and usually able to adapt chameleon-like to my surroundings, which probably made native Chinese speakers feel more comfortable in interacting with me and thus afforded me additional practice and experience in using Chinese. Because I had good pronunciation and a non-threatening, low-key personality, people were willing to make friends with me. Even during periods when I was back in the U.S., many of my Taiwanese and Chinese friends would write me cards and letters; this proved useful in helping me become familiar with Chinese handwriting, including the cursive and semi-cursive forms of characters. Because these written materials were from good friends, I was strongly incentivized to figure out what they were writing me. And, naturally, I wanted to write back to them, which provided good opportunities to practice writing – both in handwriting the individual Chinese characters and in the even more important skill of composition.

My wife, whom I met in Taiwan during my junior year abroad 51 years ago, is a native speaker of Chinese. Since our relationship began in Mandarin, we have become

accustomed to conversing in that language most of the time. This has, without doubt, been beneficial for me in maintaining and gradually improving my overall proficiency and I'm thankful to her for putting up with my non-native Mandarin all this time. I have found speaking Chinese as home language can be helpful in developing listening comprehension and informal speaking skills at a broad S-2 or 2+ level, but it doesn't help much in raising one's proficiency in professional vocabulary or formal grammatical and discourse structures at the S-3 level and beyond. Most people imagine if you have a spouse from another country whom you regularly speak to in their native language, you must be extremely fluent in that language, but this is not necessarily true. The truth is that most conversation within the family is at a level no higher, and often lower, than S-2+: mealtime conversation, discussing what clothes to wear, talking about daily schedules, arranging activities for the children, going shopping, and so forth. Pillow talk doesn't regularly rise to the S-4 level!

### **What I Should Have Done Better**

Though I was fortunate in many ways and did a number of things right, I'm also keenly aware of some of my mistakes and personal limitations. For one thing, I have a bit of a reserved personality and, especially when with people I don't know well, tend not to talk so much; but the fact is that, in general, the more you talk, the more fluent you become. Though I'm a reasonably good writer, I don't consider myself particularly articulate in speech in any language. Yet in training learners in different foreign languages for almost 50 years now, I've found that if they're highly articulate in their native language, they're generally more likely to become articulate in any foreign languages they learn, given a suitable learning environment and, of course, the requisite diligence on their part.

Since testing at the higher levels on the ILR proficiency scale requires a certain degree of articulateness, when I myself have been scheduled to take language proficiency tests, I've had to adopt extreme measures by anticipating questions in the days leading up to the test and systematically preparing and practicing answers; and I've had to make almost superhuman efforts by reading large quantities of newspapers and magazines and watching many hours of television news broadcasts, after which I force myself to practice summing up current events, especially the intricacies of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, in the style of an educated, articulate native speaker. Now, I certainly can't share the following piece of advice with my underage college students, but I've found that drinking one (but definitely not more than one) glass of Merlot about half an hour before the test helps me have greater confidence and produce a greater amount of fluent discourse than otherwise would be the case!

Another impediment standing in the way of my attaining higher proficiency is that I've been so busy for decades with work responsibilities, I now seldom read Chinese for pleasure. Though I regularly read Chinese reports, journals, and books on linguistics and language pedagogy as well as no end of professional and personal emails, cards, and letters, I seldom read short stories, novels, histories, or other books aimed at the general reader. Moreover, as we all know, a good language learner should at all times be a careful

observer of society. While I sometimes do that when in Asia, far too often I'm thinking about distant issues and am insufficiently focused on the here and now. This personal trait, which I've found difficult to change, has also been to my disadvantage.

So, have I truly acquired near-native proficiency? On the one hand, I can comfortably, confidently, and (almost always) effectively use Chinese for both daily life activities and the professional purposes that apply to me. I can think and speak in Chinese for hours on end and not seldom find myself dreaming in the language. Over the years, I've interpreted on numerous occasions for ambassadors and other high-level State Department officials, college presidents, and VIPs, including once for former Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she visited China. I've often participated in and not infrequently chaired meetings in Chinese, and I frequently deliver lectures, teach graduate seminars, and take part in M.A. and Ph.D. thesis defenses at Chinese and Taiwanese universities. Still, sometimes I wonder what "near native" really means; perhaps I'm really only a rather broad and fluent S-3+ most of the time?

### **Conclusion**

Though I would never have thought when I was growing up that I would spend most of my professional life so closely involved with Chinese language, society, and culture, in looking back as I approach retirement sometime in the next few years, I'm grateful to have had the opportunities I've had. I know that my proficiency in Chinese – and the friends it has enabled me to make, the fascinating people it has allowed me to meet, the places it has allowed me to visit, and the experiences it has allowed me to have – have made my life richer and more interesting and have helped me make a modest contribution to American society and the societies of the Chinese-speaking countries. And, by Jove, I'm not quite done yet!

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### **About the Author**

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