

I have been studying Mandarin for three years now, and while my language faculties have made progress with every semester, looking back I can identify a clear shift in their trajectory. About one year ago, my ability to write, read, comprehend and converse in Mandarin suddenly accelerated and has been improving much more quickly ever since. I attribute this change to the influx of cultural exposure into my language learning that came at that time. Chinese television, Chinese history, Chinese classical literature and poetry, and conversation with Chinese people became normalized parts of my curriculum, and my language had no choice but to rapidly expand to match the increased depth of cultural experience that came with those opportunities.

I believe that such cultural exposure, which has been the main vitalizing factor in my language learning for the past year, is absolutely crucial to the success of most language learners, especially those who hope to become fluent in their second language. My own experience with learning three different languages supports this belief, and comes as little surprise, given that language and culture are so closely intertwined. Language serves as the building block of culture and the main vehicle of human expression, and to learn language without gaining some degree of cultural literacy is an incomplete and unreliable base on which to build advanced language faculties. Cultural literacy is also very important for appropriate and effective communication, and this is another reason to include it in language instruction to the greatest reasonable extent. It is particularly salient for the teaching of widely spoken, cross-cultural languages, such as English instruction in China, and Mandarin instruction in the US.

Both China and the United States need citizens who can build cross-cultural bridges with communication, and so cultural literacy may be more important now than ever. Yet the opportunities, at first glance, are limited in each country. Each nation's culture and native speakers have relatively small presence in the other— Chinese culture and Mandarin speakers are all but absent in the US except in a few select urban centers, and despite the ubiquity of American culture, native English speakers are likewise rare in China except in the most prominent metropolitan areas. Although English instruction is commonplace in China and has been through several beneficial reforms in recent years, and Mandarin is quickly proliferating in American schools, well-rounded cultural exposure is often either difficult or overlooked in both countries. As my experience will show, this lack of cultural literacy can be detrimental to meaningful and successful language learning.

My experience learning both Spanish and Japanese in high school offers a useful contrast between the effects of the inclusion and exclusion of cultural literacy in language learning. With Spanish, the “target culture” was very easily accessible and was fully integrated with lingual instruction. Particularly in my last three years of study, my teachers regularly exposed students to music, poetry, literature, television, and film from the “target culture”, and actively encouraged us to communicate with Spanish speakers whenever we had the opportunity. Best of all, there were a lot of Spanish speakers at our school, and I had a few Spanish-speaking friends. With so much speaking, listening, and reading rooted in Spanish and Latin-American culture, I became more deeply interested in learning the language, and my proficiency improved, moving closer toward real-life

speech. This has been reflected in very high test scores and in the permanency of my conversational abilities.

My study of Japanese, however, didn't involve as much cultural exposure, and the results contrasted heavily with those of my Spanish learning. There was little target-language cultural material in the coursework— no literature, very little poetry or media, and virtually no communication with native speakers outside of class. This was largely due to the absence of Japanese speakers and culture in my area, as well as the teacher's lack of familiarity with formal Japanese culture. Although I did enjoy learning Japanese, and came to appreciate Japanese artwork on my own time, my proficiency in the language was both limited and fleeting, and all but disappeared when I took up studying Mandarin in college.

My experience demonstrates the difficulty of implementing cultural exposure with languages that are not widely spoken or available through media in the learner's area, and the consequent negative effects on language retention, not to mention cultural literacy. To fix this problem with funding or educational reforms alone would be challenging. Language instruction is hardly a priority for education authorities in the US at this present time, being superseded by the more pressing issues of math, science and English reading education. As for China, its reforms to its English language curricula are causing them to progress towards a competence-centered rather than grammar-centered approach, but even this puts a great deal of pressure on teachers and is difficult to implement in the absence of an English speaking culture.

The search for a solution should begin with an investigation of what efforts in this direction already exist, such as China's new English curriculum, or the Confucius Institute in the US, and an assessment of their efficacy. It will be useful to examine the extent of cultural literacy requirements in English-language curricula in China, and what is considered to be adequate cultural exposure. I will also search for current non-governmental movements that are helping to provide cultural literacy to language students in either the US or China, and examine the current and potential roles of the Internet in bringing cultural exposure and cross-cultural interaction to language students in both countries. Furthermore, I will review pedagogical literature to identify some expert opinions of the role of cultural exposure in language instruction. This further research will allow me to more accurately ascertain the need for specific forms of cultural exposure, and develop a proposition for a creative means to include them in language education.

My proposed outline for presentation of this topic is as follows below. Powerpoint is likely the best format for the presentation, although I may wish to include video elements as well, particularly when describing current cultural literacy efforts.

I. Introduction

- A. My own competence with Mandarin has made very accelerated progress since cultural exposure became part of my language learning.

- B. Elements of cultural exposure: history, conversation with native speakers, classical literature and poetry, television.
- II. Cultural exposure is a crucial, vitalizing factor in successful language study.
 - A. Language is the main building block of culture, and is incomplete without culture.
 - B. It is also necessary for effective communication.
 - C. For these reasons, cultural exposure is particularly important for the successful instruction of cross-cultural languages like English and Mandarin, and for the training of citizens with cross-cultural communicative abilities.
- III. Obstacle of cultural absence in both ETL in China and US Mandarin instruction.
- IV. My personal experience with Spanish and a high level of cultural exposure.
 - A. Teachers' techniques as part of in-class instruction.
 - 1. Spanish-language music in class.
 - 2. Spanish-language poetry and literature for reading.
 - 3. Spanish-language television assigned for homework.
 - 4. Assignments that required students to conduct interviews in Spanish with Spanish speakers, or visit local places where Spanish was spoken.
 - B. Availability of Spanish and Latin-American culture in my area facilitated cultural exposure.
 - 1. My area had a large Spanish-speaking community, including many students at my school. (Many areas in the US are like this.)
 - 2. There are extensive Spanish-language television networks, and many public places where Spanish is spoken.
 - C. The benefits of cultural exposure when learning Spanish.
 - 1. Learning Spanish became much more interesting and fun once I was listening to the music, reading the poetry, etc.
 - 2. My base of vocabulary and proficiency with the spoken language also improved more rapidly, and remained after I had ceased to take classes.
- V. Contrast, using my experience learning Japanese.
 - A. My Japanese teacher did not include literature, poetry, or other cultural elements in language instruction– it was strictly lingual.
 - B. Japanese speakers and Japanese cultural activities were not easily available.
 - C. The scope of culture that I was exposed to was very narrow. My proficiency never developed in a real-speech direction, and it was easily lost.
- VI. Limitations of funding and educational reforms
 - A. The typical response of the US educational system to an educational problem– increased funding– will not happen at this time due to other more urgent educational priorities, and may not work anyway.
 - B. The educational reforms of ETL in China have been a step in a positive direction, but the desired effects are delayed, and the implementation of these reforms puts a great deal of pressure on teachers who are not prepared to teach English as competently as the new curricula demand.

- VII. How much cultural exposure is considered to be ideal by pedagogy experts?
What specific forms of cultural exposure are necessary and helpful?
- VIII. What are the possibilities for cultural exposure for English language learners in China, and specifically rural China? And what are the possibilities for Mandarin learners in the US?
 - A. Non-governmental efforts and their role in providing cross-cultural opportunities for English and Mandarin learners.
 - B. Potential use of the Internet and its role in cultural exposure.
 - 1. How effective would this be in rural areas of China and the US?
 - 2. Examples of specific potential uses.