

SensibleChinese
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SPEAK

Chinese
Today

Our System

Okay here it is, the big reveal: the solution to all of your problems with learning Chinese. I'm going to stop teasing you and reveal the one thing that all successful language learners know.

What you need is a system that allows you to make mistakes—lots of them and fast. The system will then take your mistakes and process them using a complex neural network built upon many hours of training data. After near instantaneous processing, the system will be able to provide customized personal feedback and corrections, all targeted to help you iron out your mistakes and learn Chinese in record time. Imagine this targeted system all for the price of a cup of coffee or maybe even for free.

This super advanced system is...*drum roll*...another human being. Specifically, a Chinese speaker.

There are somewhere between 800 million and 1.2 billion Chinese speakers on this planet.

Sorry to tease. But the truth is this: **The best way to learn to speak Chinese is to speak Chinese.**

This sounds ridiculously simple and really it is. However, it's not the method that the majority of us use to learn a language. Instead we spend our time learning about the language. We study textbooks, memorize word lists using fancy apps, click on images on a computer screen and hope that these activities will work in conjunction to one day allow us to speak fluently in a foreign language.

This is not the case. Instead, by relying on increasingly sophisticated computerized methods to learn Chinese we are practicing a different skill—namely the skill of using computerized Chinese learning software.

This is a totally different skill than being able to communicate in Chinese which, I assume, is your underlying goal.

If your end goal is to ace computerized flashcard tests then by all means practice this skill by using computerized flashcard software. That's the perfect method to achieve that goal, but not for learning to speak and communicate in Chinese.

We tend to spend most of our learning time practicing different skills: vocabulary memorization using flashcards, reading dialogues from textbooks, completing listening exercises, etc. These are all useful supplements but should not be the complete learning method. Instead the core of your practice needs to be based around the skill you are trying to obtain: speaking and communicating in Chinese.

The best way to learn to speak Chinese is to speak Chinese.

By fully appreciating this simple fact and—more importantly—acting on it you'll progress much faster in your goal of speaking fluent Chinese.

How to get more speaking practice

I think you already know deep-down the importance of getting real life speaking practice. Even if you know this, chances are you aren't acting on it. Very few language learners do. The main reason (I've found) is that it requires exposing yourself to failure—and worse, failure in front of another human being.

It's much safer to stay at home and work through software than to go out and talk to a real human being in Chinese. But you are wasting your precious time doing this.

Learning requires failure, feedback, and correction. This is true of all learning, but let's look briefly at this in the context of language acquisition.

First the learner must say or write something (output). If the learner is right that's great, she moves onto her next sentence. She hasn't learned anything yet. You don't learn anything by getting things right. I can say “n h o” in Chinese a million times correctly and get no better at understanding “n h o.”

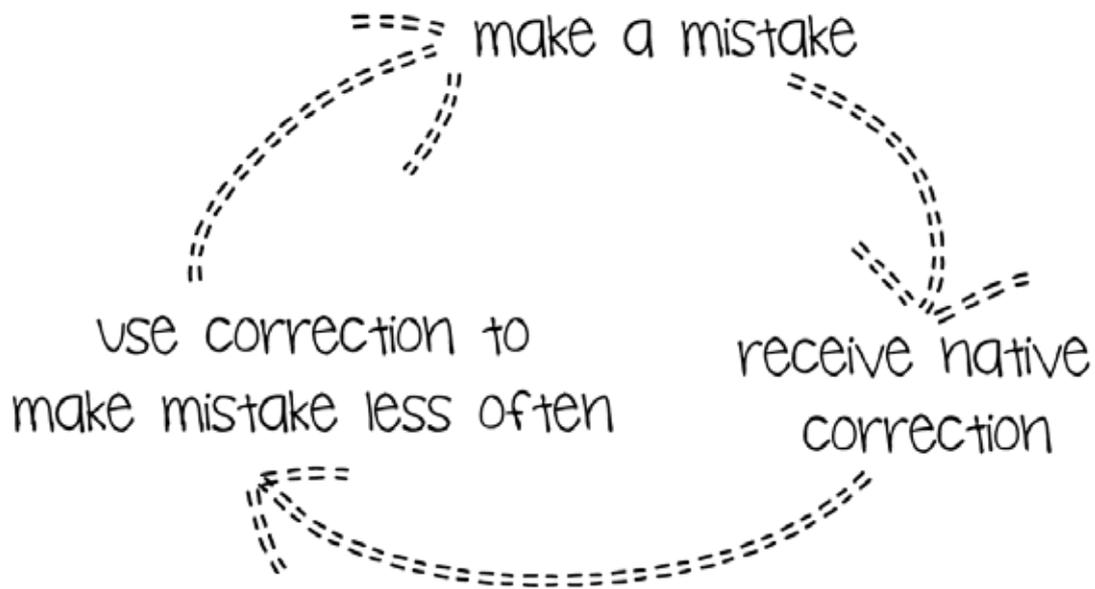
In the next sentence our learner gets something wrong. Uh-oh. She's a failure right? Not in the least. She's learning and mistakes are the only way to learn anything.

But to learn from her mistake our learner must have feedback. Her mistake must be corrected. Most of the time this requires a native speaker or teacher to provide the feedback.

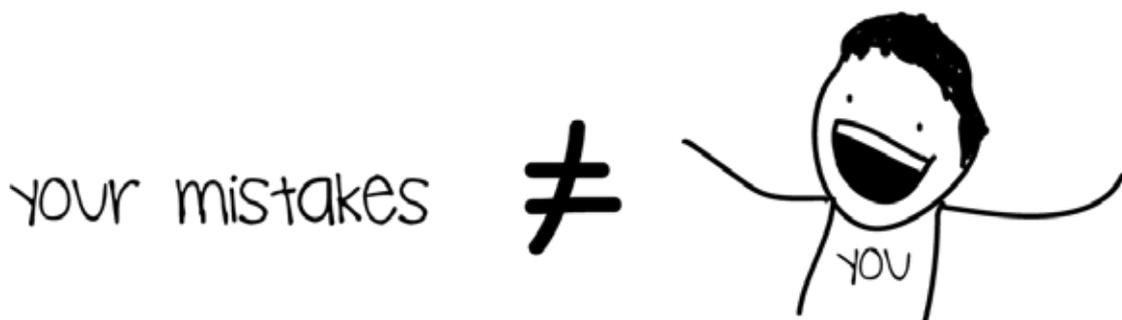
The learner listens to the feedback and then next time she says the sentence she tries not to make the same mistake. If she manages this and doesn't make the mistake again in the future we can conclude that she has learned the sentence.

Our learner will continue this process of making mistakes, receiving feedback, and making corrections all the way through her learning process.

Language Learning Loop



The only way to learn, therefore, is to make mistakes. Unfortunately, so many of us are afraid of making mistakes. We think that it reflects poorly on us—we fail to do something and thus we are failures. This is nonsense.



The only way to get good at anything is to try, fail, and learn. Again and again. Those who we think of as “naturally talented” (a slippery term) are generally just very good at making a lot of mistakes, very quickly, and learning from their mistakes immediately. The process of their learning is so fast that it’s almost imperceptible, which makes these learners seem like born geniuses.

The faster you learn to make mistakes in Chinese, the faster you can learn the language. Each mistake is an opportunity to learn, so it's important not to worry if you make many.

mistake
+
correction
=
learning

The second element here is feedback. If you keep making mistakes but there's no way for you to know you've made a mistake then how can you learn?

The only way you would be able to tell you've made a mistake is if you already know the skill well, in which case you would not need to learn it. Instead, you need some form of external feedback, someone or something that knows more than you and can provide useful feedback.

To be fair, software systems can provide this sort of feedback. The problem is that they only provide the feedback in very particular situations, limited by the technology underlying the systems.

Flashcard systems provide feedback by having you try to remember a word and then showing you the correct one. That's a valid form of feedback and a decent way to learn a lot of vocabulary in a short time. More sophisticated systems like Duolingo, Memrise, Busuu, Babbel and even Rosetta Stone are basically dressed up versions of this basic feedback system. You are able to see or hear a word, make a choice, and determine if you are right or not.

The problem here is what you are being tested on and therefore what you are making mistakes in and receiving feedback on. In these contexts, you are mainly learning Chinese characters, words, or at times sentences, generally in isolation from any other meaning.

This is not how we actually communicate with human beings, by simply dredging up set sentences from memory and spitting them out at our conversation partner. If we actually communicated like this we would sound, unsurprisingly, like a computer.

The other (huge) problem is that none of these systems provide reliable spoken feedback. Most of them have a “speech recognition” system, but all are totally inadequate. Without going into too much detail, it’s simply very tricky to implement Chinese voice recognition, primarily because of the tonal nature of the language.

But don’t believe me! Go and test this with Rosetta Stone or the software package of your choice. When prompted to say a word into your microphone try saying nonsense. It might pass—it’s scary how often any sound at all is enough to trigger a “Correct!” response. If the system is a bit more savvy, try to make the general shape of the sound, but without being totally audible—replace “**nǐhǎo**” with “**meemow**” or “**weelao**”—and chances are you’ll pass. If you don’t, then the system you are working with is a bit more intelligent. For a final test just jumble all the tones, “**nǐhǎo**” as “**nìhào**”.

If that doesn’t get a positive response from the software then write me. I’m serious here; when someone cracks this they’ve made a wonderful tool and the lives of Chinese learners around the world are about to get a lot easier!

So, to learn anything we need to make mistakes and to receive feedback and corrections. To actually make this relevant to the skill of speaking Chinese we need to make mistakes whilst speaking Chinese and receive feedback whilst speaking Chinese.

Sorry to sound like a broken record, but this simple fact is still not appreciated by most language learners and even if it is understood it isn’t acted upon. You are going to be different; by the end of this you’ll have set up a regular schedule for getting speaking practice.

My French failure = Your Chinese success

To talk about how I came to this “realization” and used it to learn languages gives me more credit than I deserve. I think we all know deep down that the only way to learn a language is to use it; the only way to learn to speak Chinese is to actually speak it.

The problem is that this is scary. Strangers are scary. Talking in a foreign language to strangers is even more scary. It’s much easier to learn from a book, a piece of software, or even sitting in a group class big enough for you to hide in.

Personally, the big “aha” moment for me came from comparing the process of learning French and Spanish. I learned French for years at secondary (high) school in the UK. I probably had a couple of hours of practice with the French language per week for 7 years. I must have been fluent by the end of that, right? Absolutely not.

We spent all of our time learning about the language, learning the grammar, memorizing vocabulary lists, reciting passages in a large group setting in-class. The only time we ever got to speak French would be if the teacher (mercilessly) singled one of us out in class or during the dreaded “oral exam” that came at the end of the year. This speaking exam was terrifying for students. We were expected to give a short presentation in French, answer a couple of questions, and even have a “free form” conversation.

The exam was actually testing the most important skill, that of being able to communicate with a French speaker, but it was too little and too late. One 10-15 minute session per year, filled with dread, to top of a year spent not speaking French.

Now that I look back at it the irony is cruel—to test us on a skill that we simply were not being taught during the classes: actually speaking and communicating in French.

So, come the end of my 7 years of French my level of speaking was approximately that of most English school-kids: rubbish. I could haphazardly order a croissant or deliver (with great panache!) a memorized speech about the importance nuclear power in France and that was it.

If, God forbid, the French speaker I talked to didn't have any croissants I'd be in trouble. If their opinion on nuclear power differed from that in my carefully prepared presentation then I'd be unable to defend myself or, more likely, even understand them!

Seven years, countless hours, and nothing to show for it. This might sound a lot like your previous foreign language experience. This does not mean (as many British people are led to believe from their performance at school) that you are “bad at learning languages.” There's no such thing so this isn't a valid excuse.

The fact is that the way languages are traditionally taught just does not prepare us for communicating in the language. It's just not the focus. Therefore, as soon as we make first contact, after all those years of “preparation” in class, we fail and therefore think we are failures. The traditional methods of teaching do you a disservice.

This criticism is not only levelled at traditional language classes, but also new learning technologies that give the impression of progress whilst keeping you away from actual native speakers. Tapping answers to vocabulary questions on your phone may feel very productive but what you are doing is getting better at tapping answers on your phone.

You'll get good at whatever you spend your time practicing—it's that simple. The upside of this is that if you practice speaking you will—you guessed it—becoming good at speaking.

This was my experience when I learned Spanish. This time I actually moved to a Spanish speaking country (Guatemala) with the intention of learning Spanish. This isn't 100% necessary (as I'll discuss), but certainly doesn't hurt.

The main change was not one of location but one of attitude. Thankfully, I had realized that after 7 years of traditional classes and “study” I couldn’t speak French. So I didn’t take classes in Guatemala. Instead, I found people to talk to—some were actual teachers who could give better explanations of how the language worked but the majority were just normal people.

I think in that first week I had spoken more in Spanish than I had during 7 years of French “study.” And my Spanish level soon became far superior to my French within days and weeks, not years.

Being able to communicate and have fun with the language provided the foundational groundwork for everything else. Grammar, vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and all the other pieces that we usually practice when studying a language fell easily into place as a result of learning to communicate.

By using the language, I got an intuitive grasp of the grammar and how things “worked.” When I came across the particular grammatical usage of a word in a grammar book I would therefore have something to hang the grammatical knowledge on. It was a feeling of, “Oh, that’s why we use that verb like that,” or “Aha, that’s why he said it like that,” rather than trying to memorize dry and abstract concepts.

Similarly, learning vocabulary is something that takes up an inordinate amount of time when studying in a traditional style. When I practiced through speech, it came naturally. If I wanted to use something or buy something I’d ask what it was called, listen, and repeat the word a few times, continuing to revise the word simply by using and talking about the object or concept. Useful words for objects and concepts I relied on frequently would be naturally revised during day to day usage.

Within 3 months, I could carry on any conversation I needed to without much difficulty, as well as comfortably watch TV and read relatively basic novels in Spanish—all by using the language rather than studying it. Compared to all the time wasted learning French for nothing, this period had taught me a new language.

Where you learn is not important

Aha! I hear you say. “You were in a foreign speaking country so it’s easier to pick up a language.” Yes and no. It’s a common misconception that it’s necessary to move to a foreign country in order to learn its language.

To quote Benny Lewis, “it’s more about attitude than latitude.” You can head off to China with the intention to learn Chinese and easily spend years there without progressing past “**nǐhǎo.**” There are plenty of foreigners in China at this level.

It’s quite possible to move to a foreign country and then get scared. Again, there is the issue that people are scary and speaking a foreign language is scary.

There’s even the added scariness of being in a foreign land. What if you upset the staff at the local shop with your awful Chinese, they refuse to serve you, and you inevitably starve to death? It’s possible to concoct all sorts of crazy nonsense when surrounded by a culture that is so different; the human brain can be very inventive when it comes to fear responses!

Some people, when in a foreign country, go into lock-down mode. They seek out other ex-pats, other English speakers and go to English speaking bars and cafes. They manage to block out the “foreignness” of the country and make a bubble of “Englishness.” In Beijing this has gone so far that there are giant walled compounds of housing to the North East of the city entirely populated by Westerners, well stocked with western supermarkets and restaurants, enough to create the illusion that you are in an American suburb rather the capital of China.

This is a problem created by attitude. Being unwilling to go out and talk to people and being scared of making a fool of yourself in front of native speakers will not help you. It doesn’t matter where on earth you are unless you can break through that block. And if you can break through that block then you can find native speakers both in your hometown and online, which will be the basis of the suggestions to come.

Some people go as far as to say that it's actually better not to go to the target language country, that you can better learn a language via online conversation partners and face to face language exchange in your hometown.

This view is a bit of an overreaction to the previous view that 'you must go to China to learn Chinese.' It's also a reaction to the tendency of many people to go in language lock-down in foreign countries and only talk with their compatriots.

The truth is there are certain nuances that you can only pick up by living in the country. Certain details about China would be very difficult to absorb without ever setting foot there. There are certain questions about language and culture that you can only ask if you've been living in the country and observing the differences—these are the small things that you wouldn't otherwise think to ask about.

In China it might be small things like, "Why do films come so late to China?" or "What do you call those small shops at the bottom of apartment buildings that sell pancakes?" or "What's the deal with drinking hot water?" These are little tid-bits that it's hard to pick up without being immersed in the environment.

One good argument I've seen is that it's best to pick up the rudiments of the language from the comfort of your own home (online) or via language partners in your hometown and then go to the target language country. This is a good idea as it reduces the chance of becoming spooked by the "foreignness" and going into lock down mode. If you hit the ground running and are able to put together basic questions and hold simple conversations, then everything is a lot less intimidating. Picking up those skills outside the country makes sense if you worry about language lock-down.

Your attitude to language learning overrides any small advantages or disadvantages that come from your physical location. This is becoming more and more true as the internet opens up communication channels between Chinese language learners and Chinese speakers. The best place is where you are right now if you have the right attitude.

Getting a language partner : your options

So how are we going to actually start this process of getting speaking practice? This section deals with the nuts and bolts, going through the different options and the resources available to you.

Here's the thing with speaking practice: you need someone to talk to. There's currently no technological solution that replicates this or makes it easier. You're just going to have to get over it and take the plunge. What technology has done is made it easier than ever to find Chinese speakers and set up speaking sessions with them.

The key thing here is to find someone you can talk to on a regular basis. How regular depends on your own learning goals and what else you have going on in your life. Regularity and getting into a good study habit is almost more important than the frequency though as a long standing regular speaking routine will add up to a lot more practice over time than a week long splurge.

There are basically four options here, only three of which are viable.

- 1. Friend/relative/boyfriend/girlfriend*
- 2. A professional teacher*
- 2. A language exchange partner*
- 4. Informal tutor*

The following sections are going to go through these in detail and then make some suggestions. Keep in mind that every learner's experience is different. I hope though, that regardless of your situation, you'll recognize a solution that works for you.

Again, regularity, is what you should be aiming for here.

1. Friend, girlfriend, boyfriend, family member.

I'm going to bring this one up first and dismiss it quickly.

The key thing is to have someone you can practice your Chinese speaking with on a regular basis. This will get annoying with a loved one or a friend.

Whilst this may seem like the easiest option right now it's really not a great idea. You need to be able to offer something back to make this work—in the case of a teacher or tutor you'll be paying them, in the case of a language exchange partner you'll be helping them learn English.

Without this reciprocal value for both parties, it's unlikely that the arrangement will last for long and you'll be back at square 1, looking for someone to practice with.

“Wait, but my boyfriend/girlfriend/best friend/mum/etc. really wants me to speak Chinese and will definitely help me!” I hear you say.

That may be so, but imagine how much better it'll be if you go off and learn Chinese and then come back and impress them. Later, when you are able to hold a decent conversation, definitely chat with them. Until then, this arrangement can really put a strain on a relationship and is likely to break down quickly.

2. Professional Teacher

A professional teacher will be the easiest in terms of scheduling. You pay your money you get your time. This makes setting up a regular speaking session very simple.

The internet has made this even easier now so there's really no excuse for not finding someone to talk to, whether a teacher or conversation partner.

To find a professional teacher your best bet right now is probably iTalki. There are other services out there (too many!) for finding teachers but iTalki is one of the largest, has a solid base of Chinese teachers, and a transparent review system. Importantly, it also has trial lessons which are vital for finding the right teacher for your requirements.

If you want to use a company other than iTalki just type “online Chinese teacher” in Google and you’ll be inundated with options. The main problem with professional teachers will be that they already have a set method for teaching and may be unwilling to stray from said method.

The reason you are getting a language partner is to practice speaking. You can work on grammar, new vocabulary, dialogues, characters and all the rest of that “study” material on your own. In fact, it’s probably better to do so. Instead, you are looking for someone to practice speaking with.

What teachers are very good at is helping with initial pronunciation and tonal work. Language partners and informal tutors will (probably) not be as capable at explaining the nuances of the language.

Once you nail down the basic foundational pronunciation and tones you should insist on switching to speaking practice.

3. A Language exchange partner

A language partner is a Chinese speaker you’ll practice Chinese with in return for helping them learn your language. If you are a native English speaker or have a high level of English you are in luck: there are many Chinese speakers looking for English-speaking language partners.

If your native language is not English but another language, it is likely there will still be many opportunities to find a language exchange pal, so don’t worry! All that follows is relevant regardless of what language you speak, but for the sake of convenience I’ll refer to the exchange between a Chinese and an English speaker. As you are reading this in English this is likely to be true anyway!

A language exchange partner is not a teacher. They are someone who is interested in learning your language and wants to practice, much like you. As such, arrangements with language partners are nearly always at no cost to either partner. Instead of paying cash you are offering your personal services as an English speaker.

The benefits of a language exchange partner is that it is easier just to chat with them. Unlike a teacher, a language exchange partner will be less likely to try to “teach” you. That’s not to say that they won’t, some people are just natural teaching types!

Language exchange partners are also really easy to find. You are in luck that you want to learn Chinese—there are a lot of Chinese speakers out there! And not just in China, but also likely in your home town. If you are in a city you’ll have very few problems finding a partner to practice with.

If there are no Chinese speakers in your area (which is possible, but it’s likely you just haven’t looked very hard!) then finding an online language exchange partner is even easier. There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese speakers looking for help with their English online. Conversely, there are relatively few English speakers attempting to learn Chinese—this works in your favour! If you post a message on one of the sites I’ll link below you’ll be inundated with requests. So, no excuses!

Language exchange partners are less likely to “teach” you, they are free and available in great abundance. Sounds like we are done then, right? Just find a partner and we’re home and dry!

Hold your horses! Working with a language exchange partner comes with its own difficulties, so let’s look at these before we rush off!

First off, because the relationship is based on mutually helping one another learn a language rather than on the exchange of cash it is more likely that your schedule will get disrupted. Language exchange partners are normal people with normal lives; things will come up, they’ll get busy and sometimes they’ll decide that they’ll put off learning English this week.

The problem is that this means that your Chinese practice gets put off. It's not just your partner who will do this, you are equally likely to cancel sessions because life gets in the way. Because money is not being exchanged it feels easier to make these sort of cancellations. It's already a far more casual relationship, so declining a session doesn't seem like a big deal.

This is probably one of the best aspects of having a real professional teacher. Often you'll book 10 or more sessions in advance with a professional teacher; this helps to enforce a more rigid schedule. Also, you'll feel a lot guiltier cancelling a session with a professional teacher, normally if you do they don't get paid (or the payment is rolled into a later session). Guilt has the psychological effect of keeping you on schedule. With a more informal language exchange partner it's much easier to get off course.

Even if you can set a steady schedule and stick to it language exchange is fundamentally less efficient at improving your Chinese. This fact is unavoidable: if you are spending half your time in Chinese and half in English, you are working at 50% efficiency. So in 2 hours of language exchange you'll only practice Chinese for 1 hour. In that same two hour slot with a professional teacher you could—you guessed it—speak Chinese for 2 hours!

This is a result of language exchange being “free.” However, it's only free in the sense that you don't hand over any cash. It is not free in terms of time. You are “spending” your time helping someone learn their language rather than spending money on a teacher or tutor.

Whether this is a good deal for you depends on how much value you put on your time. If you are a lawyer who gets paid \$800 for an hour of work, obviously your language exchange is not free—you may actually be losing money. If you spend 2 hours together (1 in English, 1 in Chinese) then the cost of your Chinese practice was \$800, which is the cost of your one hour helping your partner with their English. It is likely that you would be better if you just paid cash for a teacher.

If, on the other hand, your value per hour is less than the average cost of a Chinese lesson (say you make \$10/hour and a Chinese lesson is \$15/hour) then it makes sense to do language exchange and exchange your time for Chinese speaking practice.

Apologies if this is a bit mathematical, but it's essential to know the value of your time in order to work out the best method for utilizing your time and money for learning Chinese (and indeed many other activities in life).

If it still makes sense to get a language exchange partner then the next step is making sure your sessions are fair and that both partners get value from the session. Set ground rules early on and stick to them. Practice one language at a time and then swap half-way through the session. Use a timer if necessary to enforce your rules.

If the session is an hour long then go for 30:30 minutes. If longer than an hour, you might want to change languages more than once. For instance, in a two hour session you could start with English, then Chinese, English, Chinese, etc. This depends on how long you can both manage to talk in your foreign language before becoming exhausted. If talking Chinese for an hour fries your brain (and it will initially!) then switch half-way through the hour into more relaxing English. This will allow your brain to recover for the upcoming 30 minutes of Chinese.

Finding a language exchange partner online is easy nowadays thanks to the internet. There are countless language exchange sites on the internet and they are all free. All offer online exchange partner programs and some sites also help you find people in your geographic locale. Most of these sites are very similar in what they offer so check a few out to determine which suits you best.

*iTalki (<http://www.italki.com>)
Conversation Exchange(<http://www.conversationexchange.com>)
Wespeke (<http://en-us.wespeke.com/>)
Verbling (<https://www.verbling.com/>)
Tandem Exchange (<https://www.tandemexchange.com/en/>)
My Language Exchange (<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/>)
Livemocha (<http://livemocha.com/>)
Language For Exchange(<http://www.languageforexchange.com/>)*

Meetup.com (more group based rather than one-on-one) – good if your Chinese is at a good conversational level; those with fewer skills should stick with one-on-one for now to reduce the chance of just sitting quietly.

4. Informal tutor

I've saved the best for last—the “informal tutor” is a hybrid between the language exchange partner and the teacher. In the previous sections, I listed the problems and difficulties with these other options; the informal tutor is an arrangement that helps to reduce these issues.

Remember, the priority here is to get on a regular schedule of Chinese speaking practice. The language exchange partner is great because they are less likely to try to “teach” you Chinese and less likely to insist you stick to a textbook or curriculum. On the other hand, language exchange partners are an inefficient way to learn Chinese because of the need to help them learn English too. They may be less reliable than professional teachers because the relationship is personal rather than professional.

The informal tutor is a solution for getting the regularity of a professional teacher without adhering to structured lessons. A tutor is basically someone you pay for their time and their ability to speak Chinese.

Like a teacher, you'll be paying for the tutor's time. However, because tutors are generally not professional teachers they are almost always cheaper than a teacher.

For the most part, tutors are Chinese university students looking for a side job. They may be training to be teachers (or not) and if so, they won't necessarily be studying to be Chinese teachers.

The fact that a tutor is not a professional teacher is not a bad thing. Your speaking partner isn't meant to teach you Chinese, instead they are someone with whom you can converse in order to practice your spoken skills.

But why pay at all when you can go and find a “free” language exchange partner? Well, paying your tutor means that you get to spend 100% of your time with them practicing Chinese, not 50%. Also, it also makes it more likely that they'll actually show up, which will help you get into a regular schedule.

The informal tutor is actually the route I would personally suggest you take because it matches our objectives so well. If we wanted a teacher to go through grammar concepts and help us plod through a textbook, then a professional teacher would be more suitable. However, if we just want someone we can chat with in Chinese, then the informal tutor is the best option.

Interestingly iTalki has actually realized that informal tutors are a useful midpoint between the time consuming language exchange and the rigid teacher. iTalki now has a category called “Informal Tutoring”!

Just to give you an idea, at the time of writing this eBook, iTalki has 77 professional Chinese teachers and 234 informal tutors. The scheduling tool on iTalki makes it very easy to set up multiple sessions and get your speaking schedule set up in minutes. Prices range from between \$3/hour to \$10+/hour, for both informal tutoring and teaching.

Wait! I don't have that kind of money!

Having a private teacher or even a less expensive tutor may seem like an extravagance. In fact, where you live it might be. If I was to go and hire a private Chinese teacher here in London I'd probably be looking at spending at least £20/hour (\$30+). This would get very expensive very quickly.

With services like iTalki we can find the same quality of teachers and tutors for a fraction of the price; I personally still keep up sessions 3 mornings per week for an hour each time at a cost of around \$10/hour.

If this still seems like a lot of money let's compare it to other methods of learning Chinese.

First, let's compare an online tutor to the cost of a language class. I looked at taking a Chinese course here in London at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies). The beginner's course is £415, which covers 24 hours of total tuition. That's £17/hour which is the same as \$25/hour.

So, I could comfortably sit at home, in my pyjamas, on my laptop, with a cup of coffee learning

Chinese one-on-one for \$3-10/hour. Another plus is that if—for whatever reason—I'm not getting on with my teacher I can simply find another.

Or, I can slug across town in the rain (this is London!) a couple of evenings a week to sit in a large group class, not getting much personal attention, practicing speaking with 20+ non-native Chinese classmates and paying \$25/hour for the privilege.

If my teacher isn't very good or I don't find that I'm learning from their teaching methods then there isn't that much I can do. I'm stuck, especially if I paid up front and the school is being difficult about refunding me. Even if I get out of the class with my money I'm probably too late to find another class that hasn't already started. So my Chinese learning is put off until the next term comes around.

Hmm. So maybe having a private teacher or tutor isn't such an un-affordable luxury. Maybe it's just common sense!

To be fair, London is pretty pricey. Therefore, I encourage you to compare these numbers with your local prices. Find a course, get its total price, and divide that by the number of hours of the course.

It's likely already WAY more expensive than \$10/hour, but if it's not, factor in travel expenses, the time you spend going back and forth, and all those extra costs.

I guarantee it's still going to work out cheaper getting a private teacher on-line.

Final recommendations:

If the cost is still too high I'd recommend getting a language exchange partner so that your cost is \$0—or perhaps the cost of a cup of coffee at the cafe you meet your language partner.

Otherwise, if you can make the \$3-10 investment I'd highly recommend going that route. As for the decision between a teacher and a tutor, I'd recommend getting a teacher to get through the initial “hump” of Chinese pronunciation and tones and then finding a less expensive tutor just for practicing speech. If you find you click with the teacher and he/she doesn't mind simply talking (rather than working through a strict curriculum) then by all means stay with the teacher.

These are my recommendations; I think they will help you most quickly progress in a cost-effective manner. However, adjust this to your personal circumstances—you'll probably find far more creative ways to match your needs as a language learner!

All that I would caution is this: whatever your decision, you must get regular speaking practice. That's the most important aspect here. If you are trying to save a few dollars by working with a language exchange partner but the end result is that you don't meet, then it's going to take a lot longer to reach your language goals.

Working with your speaking partner

Whether you are working with a language exchange, professional teacher, or an informal tutor, I'm going to refer to them all as speaking partners from this point on. The reason for this simplification is that the main reason for meeting is to practice speaking—it doesn't matter if you are paying them or not or whether they have teaching qualifications. The purpose here is to have someone to speak with in Chinese.

First of all, don't worry if this is your first time speaking Chinese. Chances are that your partner will have better English than your current Chinese level. The reason for this is that English is taught in Chinese schools whereas Chinese is still rare in the West.

If you have to drop into English to explain something then do so. It's not a failure. Communication is the key here. As you improve you'll be able to use less and less English. One day you'll feel comfortable enough to set a no-English rule for yourself. The key thing is to keep on a regular schedule and if no-English is scary enough to knock you off that schedule, then don't follow a no-English rule. It's that simple.

On your first ever session you might want to prepare some of the phrases I put together here:

Day 1 Speaking Script **<http://bit.ly/1He2C15>**

That's a very basic introduction and the opening of most of the Chinese conversations you'll be having. There's no need to use this but if it helps calm your nerves please do.

For the very first session the only important thing is that you speak some Chinese and take that very important first step. Most people don't even get that far, so whatever you manage in your first sessions is a huge leap forward.

For your first session, I suggest you just head over to iTalki and set up a 30 minute trial run. These trial sessions cost a fraction of the normal cost and are a great way to test out lots of teachers and tutors.

Prepare some of the phrases that I've provided and maybe have them printed out next to you. Work through them for 30 minutes.

If you are not an absolute beginner, then instead prepare something you'd like to talk with your teacher about. The most obvious topics are those pertaining to yourself and your teacher. Prepare a little introduction about yourself and jot down some questions you might want to ask your teacher. Switch into English if necessary.

Don't worry about anything else on this first session, just get talking, secure in the knowledge that you've just taken a massive leap forward in your Chinese journey.

Beyond the first session

Beyond your first session you'll need to work out how to make sure that your sessions are regular and productive. How you do this depends a lot upon whether you are using a teacher, tutor, or language exchange partner.

In terms of regularity, working with a teacher or tutor you pay solves the question of regularity. Once you've paid for your sessions, it is now up to you to turn up and stick to the habit.

Once you see your progress and the value of these speaking session hopefully you'll be hooked. If, however, you find yourself dreading the sessions, test out different teachers/tutors and see if you can find someone better suited to you.

If you are working with a language exchange partner scheduling will be trickier. Try to find somewhere easy for both of you to reach and set a time that is convenient for both of you. If the scheduling is inconvenient for either you or your language exchange partner, your sessions are more likely to come to a halt.

Don't be afraid to try out lots of different language partners. iTalki offers trial lessons at discount rates. Take advantage of these trials to test as many different teachers as you can.

The rating system and the student feedback will help you work out the better teachers on the system, but to see if they fit your learning style you'll need to work with them. Use all your trial lessons to do this cheaply before making a decision.

For language exchange partners it is often a good idea to have a few anyway. You may not be able to find an individual who can meet twice a week (or however many times you want to meet) but if you have 2 language exchanges, each once a week, this is doable.

Meetup.com is a good way to find “mass language exchange” events where you can talk to lots of Chinese people at the same time. If that appeals to you and you live in a larger city (most meetup.com activity is in large cities) then definitely explore that option as well. If there’s nothing in your area, perhaps set one up and find like-minded language learners.

Once you’ve found a teacher/tutor/exchange partner you think you can work with you should set some ground rules. Set these as soon as possible—the first meeting or even before by email if possible.

Tell the speaking partner what you expect and what your goals are. If you would like to meet X times/week then make that clear. You both need to be in agreement, otherwise the arrangement won’t last long.

With paid teachers you have more flexibility, but there’s the additional problem of the teacher wanting to stick to a curriculum.

This is a problem you may well come across with professional teachers that is less common with informal tutors. The teacher may want to stick to a textbook or curriculum that they’ve been teaching for years.

However, we’re looking primarily for a speaking partner, not a full teacher. We can cover textbook material ourselves and get high quality teaching material from sources like Yoyo Chinese, ChinesePod, or Chinese with Mike. We therefore want to be spending our contact time with Chinese speakers doing one thing: speaking Chinese. Not learning grammar, reciting dialogues, memorizing words. Just speaking.

Some teachers will take issue with this as it’s “not how I teach” so just make it very clear during your first contact that you are looking for someone to practice speaking with. If the teacher doesn’t agree, don’t worry; there are hundreds of other possibilities.

Part of the reason I recommend more informal tutors is because they are not tied to certain teaching methods or materials and usually more than happy just to chat in Chinese with you.

More rarely you'll also find language exchange partners who will want to teach you. Politely tell them that you just want to practice. Explain that as long as they can understand you that everything is fine, even if the grammar isn't exactly in place or you used a weird word. Communicating is the goal—you'll iron out all the small pieces in time.

On the same note, set a ground rule that the partner ought not to interrupt, especially if you are just pausing to think of the correct word. Some people can't help but interrupt every few seconds to correct a tone, a mispronunciation or a weird piece of grammar. But as long as you are understandable (and you must be for them to be able to correct you at all!) then ask that they let you speak.

Ideally, your partner should listen to you and later (when you've finished) a particular thought or during a lull in the conversation, bring up your most common mistakes. Perhaps you mix up the 2nd and 3rd tone a lot and have been doing so over the last hour—this is a useful piece of information. What isn't so useful is being corrected every single time you mess up the tone as this breaks the flow of communication.

It's best to set these rules early on so that they don't become an issue. Setting them before you start speaking (in English if necessary) means that your partner hopefully won't even interrupt or try to teach you in the first place.

If you are doing a language exchange then these rules apply to you too. Don't interrupt, hold back that teaching instinct, listen for common errors, and make a note to come back to them later.

The best way to get a language exchange partner to follow these basic rules is to embody them. Be a great language partner and they'll soon start to emulate you, improving the exchange experience for both of you.

Whether you are working with a teacher, a tutor, or a language exchange partner you'll know quickly whether this is someone you can work with to learn Chinese. Some people just "get it" when you explain that you want to focus on speaking and some won't get it at all. Some will continue to interrupt and correct no matter how many times you plead with them not to.

Take the time to keep testing out speaking partners until you find the right fit. You'll know when it happens and it'll be well worth all the effort of searching.

Next Steps and Homework

There's not a great deal more I can say to encourage you to get yourself a language partner. It's my opinion that a tutor is the best value for time/money that you can get but I've outlined the other options as well for you. Which choice you go for is not as important as the act of choosing.

Now is the time to put down this book, head online and find a Chinese language partner. Reading this on your phone or computer? Great – even easier! It's time to make a choice and find a language partner.

So, your homework.

- 1. Head to iTalki.com (or any other language partner site) and sign up for an account.*
- 2. Fill in your profile honestly and completely.*
- 3. Have a browse through possible language partners who are Chinese and want to learn your language.*
- 4. Send requests to 5 possible teachers/tutors/language exchange partners.*

That's it for now. This should take 5-15 minutes. A few hours or a day later you'll have some responses from the 5 you contacted. In fact you'll likely have more from other users who liked your profile.

There will be those of you who read these final paragraphs and do what I've suggested. There are those who will not. In a year's time those who took the first step towards getting a language partner right now will have more improved Chinese. It's that simple.

So, stop reading and just go do it.