

Master Chinese in China

One of the trends inherent to the economic growth in China, is the fact that more and more people are taking Chinese language classes. The best way to do that? Go to China and talk to Sally Zhang. She works as Program Director at the Chinese Language Education organization in Beijing. Conveniently located in the middle of Beijing's business center.

Beijing is home to most of her students. "At this moment, we are teaching Chinese to 82 students. Mostly Westerners, but also people coming from Japan and Korea. The continuously increasing amount of students can to a degree be explained, by the steadily increasing number of foreign companies in China. A few years ago, there was only the Chinese bank, nowadays I have five students who work for foreign banks operating in China. These financial professionals need to be able to read newspapers and documents in English as well as in Chinese. Fortunately for them, they work at companies where English is, at this point in time, the most common language."

Difficulties

Be that as it may, the ability to speak a few words of Chinese is still inevitable. But why is the Chinese language so difficult to master for us? "This language uses complicated pronunciations. A different pronunciation has a different meaning. I think that is the most challenging part. The Chinese characters are hard to learn as well. A tip? Try to remember this: a character has basic strokes. After you remember the basic strokes, it becomes easier to learn and write the more complicated characters."

Practice

"There are of course many ways to learn Chinese. Some teachers will push you very hard and after one day they will want you to learn sentences. I do not think this is the right way. If the pronunciation is not good, you will have a lot of problems later on. When you want to learn business Chinese, it is important that you cover some basics first. You need to learn and grasp the elementary grammar, before you can move forward to learning the business Chinese. The only difference is in the words, the grammar is the same." Is that what Sally's Chinese classes are all about?

Personal advice

"Personally I like to learn other languages. Therefore, our teachers must be able to speak at least one foreign language. If you are able to speak other languages as well, you have the ability to identify the differences. For example, if you come from Japan and you keep on making the same mistake over and over again, I can help you out better if I know your language. Because by knowing your language, I would understand why you make this mistake. Some of our teachers speak German and others speak English. The use of English is very limited in our classes though. I think that when you are, for example, from the Netherlands and your Chinese lessons are in English, you have to translate sentences twice. That is very difficult. That is why I use English only in the beginning of the course. The sooner you start talking Chinese in class, the faster you will master it."

Go there

“Further, you need to go to China to seriously practice your tones and pronunciation. The best place to learn, would in my opinion be Beijing. In this city, the Mandarin is ‘accent-free’ and not too much people speak English. This way you are pushed to speak Chinese everywhere, all the time. Before you know it, your Chinese will be at such a level, that you do not need your pocket dictionary anymore!”

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