

Let the wine flow and you'll soon be fluent

After years of teaching in China, our reader got language learning down to a fine art.



'In vino veritas': tackling a foreign language is so much easier when chilled... Photo: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

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I wouldn't try this secret at the library. Or in the school language laboratory. Read on, to learn it. I do my language learning at home – like, probably, most every other adult.

I recently raced through the Pimsleur I, II, and III recorded language courses, in both German and Chinese in the evenings (while teaching spoken English at a Chinese university in the capital of Shandong Province). I utilised my personal language lab – my laptop, of course.

One must go back through recorded courses, again and again, I believe, permanently to assimilate all, even most, of the material. I find that journeying back through the lessons – especially Chinese – is still a fight. (Each lesson in the 30-lesson segments of Pimsleur I, II, III – 90 lessons in all – is approximately 30 minutes long.)

I felt, from even a few weeks before I departed *Meiguo* (America in Mandarin) for China, that I should

learn more than a few phrases in Mandarin. Having read *The Ugly American* in the early Sixties, I know that foreigners find distasteful US travellers' lack of foreign-language abilities. Therefore, I purchased a couple of recorded Putonghua (standard Chinese) courses, to show respect to those Chinese I met.

During my 10-year sojourn in the People's Republic of China (PRC), I met at least two foreign teacher colleagues of like persuasion. To be sure, their true genius at Chinese renders my competence foolish. (One is Irish, the other a Brit.) However, I did speed through a number of Chinese language CDs and cassettes during my spare time.

Part way into one evening that China university run through Pimsleur, I discovered a device that both relaxes and mightily improves incentive to continue each difficult study-session battle ahead.

Apparently, relaxation is most important in learning. A German-language professor of mine, at a famous American university, played Pachelbel in class, and spoke at an almost hypnotic low volume and slow pace. This Ivy League PhD is known by his students and colleagues to be an expert at relaxation – and quite fluent at his chosen foreign tongue.

Besides relaxation, transcendent incentive is needed to finish any commercial language course. What is the percentage of people who conquer such self-tuition they've purchased? I would guess it's small. Those who would succeed at finishing such popular CD or cassette-tape foreign-language packages need both great relaxation and motivation.

In the PRC, beer and wine are inexpensive. The cheapest wine I could find, near the last school where I lectured, costs less than three dollars. (Cork, not screw-on top – real red wine.) Chinese beer, in big bottles, costs less than a dollar, to just over one dollar. Both wine and beer in China please any palate – especially chilled.

Here's my Pimsleur secret. (It works with any other recorded foreign-language course, as well.) I demolish each formidable language instruction ahead with a glass of cold beer or wine in hand. I've actually found myself happily declaring aloud, in thought – after completing an especially taxing track of recorded teaching – "Hey! I think I'll go ahead and knock out another lesson!"

I don't suggest that language zealots go crazy, yet, I now know that ice-cold beer or wine supply both maximum impetus, (the motivation); and calm (the relaxation).

More simply put, you cheerfully don't care that the odds stand quite against your tackling the next new

unit.

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