

INTRODUCTION

During my first year at college, I joined Harvard's Chinatown ESL program as an English teacher. As an avid language enthusiast, I felt that teaching English to Chinese immigrants in the greater Boston area would be a great way to maintain my Chinese while living my dream of being a language teacher.

I soon realized that the teaching materials used by the program had little to no basis in effective language pedagogy, and that both students and teachers were frustrated as a result. Given my experience in language acquisition, I saw this curricular deficiency as an opportunity for program improvement, and as chance for me to finally present my language learning insights and strategies in the form of an instructional course book.

I began writing the first chapters of *1000 Sentences to Start Speaking English: Level 1* in the spring of 2016. Each week, I would write one chapter's worth of lesson material and hand it out to my students during our weekend classes. I also created accompanying audio recordings to every practice sentence in the lesson materials. By the end of the program's 8-week course, I compiled the 8 weeks' worth of materials into a book with accompanying audio. I have since written Levels 2-3 of *1000 Sentences to Start Speaking English*. Levels 4-5 of will be completed by spring of 2018. The new materials were incredibly well-received by the students. My class size grew from 8 students to 82, and the audio recordings have been played back over 10,000 times.

Although originally designed for the adult Chinese immigrants participating in Harvard's Chinatown ESL program, the *1000 Sentences to Start Speaking English* series is meant for any Chinese-speaking person seeking to speak English as fast as possible. I have done my best to include what *I* would personally look for in a language learning resource if I were to self-study English, which means that the material is structured such that the student can get through the book with or without the guidance of a teacher. While the book, along with its audio component, will introduce the student to the four essential skills of language learning (speaking, listening, reading, writing), the emphasis throughout is on acquiring the spoken language.

The Method

Speaking a new language is a skill. Producing the sounds of the target language with accurate pronunciation with native-like fluidity requires dedicated training and practice. Just as a basketball player practices the same motions hundreds of thousands of times so he can execute them with precision during a game, or a jazz musician repeats his scales over and over so that his improvised solo is as fluid as possible during a concert, language learners must develop muscle memory and coordination of the lips, tongue, and mouth so that our extemporaneous speech can be expressed fluently, without awkward pauses or stuttering, during conversation.

There are two key components to developing spoken fluency. The first is developing muscle memory in the speech organs (tongue, lips, teeth, and vocal cords) to accurately

pronounce the sounds of the target language at an appropriate speed. This is akin to a pianist who practices scales and arpeggios to develop muscle memory in the fingers. The second is developing the creative ability to form sentences. This is akin to a jazz musician who is able to effortlessly improvise and string together different licks. Both of these components are equally important; a jazz musician who can play all his scales perfectly but lacks the creativity to improvise is just as useless as one who has the most brilliant creative ideas but lacks the technical expertise to express them. In order to speak a new language, we must become familiar with the grammar and syntax in order to effortlessly form sentences, and develop sufficient facility with our speech organs to say these sentences out loud.

The sentence-based method used in this book is meant to train the mind-muscle connection through strategic repetition. In the groups of sentences below, the bolded words train muscle memory through repetition, and the underlined words train creativity through strategic changes to grammar and syntax.

I want to go to the <u>store</u>.
I want to go to the <u>bank</u>.
I want to go to the <u>restaurant</u>.

<u>I need to</u> go to the store.
<u>I have to</u> go to the store.
<u>I should</u> go to the store.

<u>I don't</u> want to go.
<u>She doesn't</u> want to go.
<u>We don't</u> want to go.

These simple sentences can be easily combined to form longer sentences with useful connecting words:

We need to go to the store **today**, **but** he doesn't want to go **because** he wants to go to the restaurant.

The next question is how to choose which sentences to train. On the next page I have summarized what I believe are the 12 most important aspects for learning a new language in a short amount of time. This book follows several of these principles. Notably, verbs and sentence patterns are highly emphasized over nouns. The main reason for this is that the most important verbs are the most important verbs for all language learners: "to be", "to want", "to need", "to have", etc., whereas the most important nouns may be different for everyone. For example, a student may wish to [learn words like "student", "teacher", or "book", while a missionary may wish to learn words like "religion", or "church". Therefore, I focus on sentence structures that are widely applicable to common situations.

1. Pronunciation

Learning the pronunciation and writing system of the target language is always the necessary first step before starting to speak. If the target language has an unfamiliar writing system, try to find resources that use a transliterated writing system, like 'pinyin' for Mandarin Chinese. Listening to audio can be helpful to learn accurate pronunciation.

2. Pronouns

Pronouns are used in almost every sentence. Learn the most important declensions, which are usually the nominative (subject pronouns), accusative (direct object pronouns), and dative (indirect object pronouns). To save time, focus on the most important pronouns, which are usually 'I', 'you', and 'it'.

3. Top Verbs

Mastering the most important verbs (auxiliary/modal/handle) will allow you to converse in any context.

TOP 10 VERBS IN ANY LANGUAGE:

to be, to have (to)*, to want*, to need*, to be able to*, to go*, to know*, to do, to understand, to think/believe

4. Important Irregulars

Learning all the exceptions to all the rules is not reasonable. Therefore, only learn the irregular conjugations for the most important verbs in the most important tenses. This principle also applies to other rules/exceptions. Do not learn them unless they will be used frequently.

5. Tenses / Moods

Only learn the most important tenses. Present tense is by far the most important. Other tenses may be learned quickly given the language. For example, some languages use the infinitive as the imperative, or use a single word to signify the future tense. Only focusing on the conjugations for 'I', 'you', and 'it' can save time. Other tenses/moods are not needed for basic speech.

6. Word Order

Learn the word order for the 3 most important simple sentences: declaratives, negations, and interrogatives. If it is different, learn the syntax for handle verbs, and using conjunctions like 'but' and 'because' to join two simple sentences.

7. Interrogatives

Learn the basics: who, what, where, when, why, how, how much. Some language may have other interrogatives – only choose the most relevant ones.

8. Articles and Nouns

Learn how to use nouns. This may require learning articles. Articles are more complicated in some languages than in others, but they are important omitting or misusing articles in a language that has articles can result in foreign-sounding speech. Ex. "I go to restaurant to eat sandwich."

9. Possessives

Possessive adjectives are very useful. Focusing only on "my" and "yours" can save time.

10. Demonstratives

Both demonstrative adjectives and pronouns are important. Learning these will enable useful sentences like "I want that" or "I want to go to this place".

11. Other Useful Words

These include the basic 'yes'/'no'; conjunctions like 'but' and 'because'; indispensable prepositions like 'to', 'in', 'for', and 'from'; adjectives like 'also', 'a lot', and 'very'; and the numbers.

12. Top Nouns

Learning nouns is the lowest priority because they are easy to learn. With a simple dictionary app, you can look up any noun you want. It is hard to generalize what the most important nouns are because this will depend greatly on the context and situation of the learner. For example, a student would want to learn words like 'university' and 'student', whereas a businessman would want to learn words like 'meeting' and 'business'.

For the student

As a language learner, there are a few important points to keep in mind throughout the learning process, especially when trying to acquire the spoken language:

- **Speaking a new language is a *skill*, not a *subject*.** You should treat your experience learning a language as you would learning to play an instrument or a sport as opposed to learning a subject like science or history. You will improve by *doing* with your body, not just by learning with your mind.
- **Aim for fluidity.** Fluid speech is uninterrupted by pausing, stuttering, and hesitation. Treat every phrase that comes out of your mouth as an important opportunity to improve. You should aim to speak with the same ease and fluidity of a native speaker (speed and accent will come later). If you hear yourself say a sentence interrupted by pauses and hesitation, take the time to repeat that sentence again until you can say it as fluidly as a native speaker.
- **Self-evaluation is your most valuable tool.** Constantly ask yourself, “Why does my speech not sound like a native’s?”, “Which word or sound am I saying wrong?” and “What is the difference between what I am saying and what the native speaker is saying?” Be aware of your mistakes and make changes to improve. If you can develop the ability to recognize your mistakes without relying on someone else, your progress will grow by leaps and bounds.
- **Have a high tolerance for ambiguity.** Language is full of exceptions and contradictions. It takes a lot of time and exposure to develop the intuition and feel for a language. If you don’t understand something at first, trust that you will eventually. Treat your brain like a handwriting recognition software. The software needs to see hundreds of examples of handwriting from many different people before it can recognize words on its own. Similarly, your brain needs to see the same sentence patterns over and over again before it can make sense of them and start creating its own sentences.

There are several methods that you can use to structure your speaking practice:

Rapid Translation

Using the “Sentence Pattern” sentences in the book, cover the English side with a piece of paper. For each sentence, say the Chinese translation out loud, and then immediately say the English. The goal is for your English to sound as fluent and smooth as your Chinese. Don’t look at the English unless you are unsure of how to say something. To challenge yourself further, don’t say the Chinese out loud – translate to English immediately after reading the Chinese in your head. The purpose of this exercise is to develop your ability to translate in your head and then speak as quickly and fluidly as possible, since this is the same process that happens during extemporaneous conversation.

Substitution and Combination

Take a sentence that will serve as the basis for this exercise. Repeat it until you can say it fluidly. Then, substitute the nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and practice each one until you can say it fluidly. Then, combine two of your shorter sentences using connecting words like “and”, “but”, “because”, and “so”. The possibilities are endless. See the example sentences in the “The Method” section.

Reading out loud

Reading out loud is a good way to focus on pronunciation and fluidity without having to go through the mental gymnastics of translating. Unless you speak perfectly, you should never read anything aloud just once. Repeat and repeat until you can say the sentence or passage fluidly. Use the audio component to check your pronunciation. For an added challenge, memorize a passage and then repeat it out loud without reading.

Shadowing

Listening to the audio recordings, preferably using headphones, repeat what you hear immediately as you hear it. This takes practice, but it will force you to speak at the same speed as a native. Practice until your pronunciation becomes as accurate as possible. This technique was first described by Professor Alexander Arguelles.

Audio Dissection

This technique will help you achieve 100% listening comprehension, rather than only being able to understand the general meaning of what you hear. You can read about the details in my article here: <https://www.languagemagazine.com/audio-dissection/>.

Predicting Conversations

Just like musicians rehearse before a performance, language learners can rehearse before a conversation. If you know that you are going to encounter a particular situation, try to predict what you will have to say as well as what you will hear as a response so that you can prepare for the conversation before it happens. For example, if you know you are going to meet someone for the first time, practice how you will introduce yourself, and then predict how they may respond: “How did you learn English?”, “Where are you living now?”, “Where do you work?”.

Talking to Yourself

Speaking practice doesn't require someone else to speak with, just like a basketball player can still work on his game without his other teammates. You can talk to yourself in the shower, in the car, when you're walking, or when you're taking public transportation. Come up with simple sentences (using techniques like substitution and combination) to describe what you're doing or thinking, and then repeat for fluidity. You don't need to speak loudly, but it is important that you speak out loud and not just go over the sentences in your mind.

For the instructor

As a language instructor, there are a few important points that I have found helpful in my personal experience:

- **Get to know your students.** Be curious about their story and understand their motivations. Don't just blindly follow the curriculum set forth in the book; modify the content of your lessons based on the observed level of your students. Getting to know your students also means being accessible to them and creating a two-way learning experience. Making yourself available for questions and even assigning homework and providing feedback shows that you are invested in their progress.
- **Encourage fluidity.** Language instructors are like sports coaches. If a coach sees his team mess up during a play, he will stop them and make them rerun the play until they can execute flawlessly. Likewise, if we hear a student say a sentence interrupted by pauses, stuttering, and hesitation, we must resist the urge to say “good job” and move on, and instead take the extra 15 seconds to say “good try, now say it again more fluently” and wait until they demonstrate improvement. In order to help students develop the physical skill of speaking, language classes should be structured more like sports practices or music lessons than like history or science lectures.
- **Be prepared.** Being prepared means coming into class having a clear vision of what you want to accomplish. Plan in advance a set of activities that you can do with your class. Being prepared also means preparing to answer students' questions. Learn Chinese language terminology to avoid awkward circumlocutions when explaining English grammar rules. Here are some useful ones:

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|--|---|
| ▪ Part of speech: 词性 (ci2xing4) | ▪ Pronunciation: 发音 (fa1yin1) |
| ▪ Noun: 名词 (ming2ci2) | ▪ Tongue: 舌头 (she2tou0) |
| ▪ Proper noun: 专有名词 (zhuan1you3ming2ci2) | ▪ Lips: 唇 (chun2) |
| ▪ Verb: 动词 (dong4ci2) | ▪ Mouth: 口 (kou3) |
| ▪ Adjective: 形容词 (xing2rong2ci2) | ▪ Sentence: 句子 (ju4zi) |
| ▪ Pronoun: 代名词 (dai4ming2ci2) | ▪ Letter: 字母 (zi4mu3), 字 (zi4) |
| ▪ Adverb: 副词 (fu4ci2) | ▪ Word: 词 (ci2) |
| ▪ Preposition: 介词 (jie4ci2) | ▪ Pronunciation: 发音 (fa1yin1) |
| ▪ Article: 冠词 (guan4ci2) | ▪ Accent: 口音 (kou3yin1) |
| ▪ Definite/Indefinite: 定/不定 (ding4/bu2ding4) | ▪ Consonant: 辅音 (fu3yin1) |
| ▪ Object: 宾语 (bin1yu3) | ▪ Vowel: 元音 (yuan2yin1) |
| ▪ Subject: 主语 (zhu3yu3) | ▪ Tense: 时态 (shi2tai4) |
| ▪ Conjugation: 词形 (ci2xing2) | ▪ Present tense: 现在时 (xian4zai4shi2) |
| ▪ Demonstrative: 指示词 (zhi3shi4ci2) | ▪ Past tense: 过去时 (guo4qu4shi2) |
| ▪ Possessive adjective: 物主形容词 (wu4zhu3xing2rong2ci2) | ▪ Infinitive: 不定式 (bu2ding4shi4) |
| ▪ Sentence pattern: 句型 (ju4xing2) | ▪ Future tense: 将来时 (wei4lai2shi2) |
| | ▪ Person (1st, 2nd, etc): 人称 (ren2cheng1) |

There are several activities that you can use to structure your language classes. See the “For the Student” section for additional activities that you can guide your students through:

Group Repetition

This activity aims to give every student in a large class the opportunity to practice speaking. You will say a sentence in English, and the students will repeat after you. Choose which sentences you train using the substitution and combination methods outlined above. For longer sentences, it is useful to break down the sentences into digestible and meaningful chunks, working backwards. For example, “I need to buy food today” would be broken down as: today → food today → buy food today → I need → I need to buy → buy food today → I need to buy food today. For an added challenge, you should speak Chinese and have the students repeat the corresponding English. This is much harder for learners, since the students have to translate and are no longer simply repeating what they hear.

Ear training

This activity is meant to help students understand 100% of native-speed speech. Start by saying a sentence at native speed and see what proportion of students can repeat what you said (note that just asking students to translate what you said is not a good measure of comprehension, since it is possible and often much easier to translate into another language without being able to repeat back what was heard word for word). Aim for 10-30% comprehension. Then, repeat the sentence multiple times, starting very slowly, and gradually increasing the speed each time. Throughout this process, students should be actively listening, trying to hear and understand every single word that you say. Don’t be afraid to repeat a sentence up to twenty or thirty times. Although it may seem monotonous to us, hearing authentic speech at a slow speed is a valuable learning opportunity for students. As you increase the speed, explain pronunciation changes that occur when natives speak. For example, “I want to go to the hospital” said at native speed often sounds like “I *wanna goda the hospiddle*.” Explicitly pointing out these pronunciation changes will greatly help students to decipher fast speech. Once you have completed this process for one sentence, repeat the activity with another sentence that has the same structure but different vocabulary. For example, the first sentence may be “I asked my mother to go with me to the restaurant today” and the second maybe “My brother asked me to go with him to the park yesterday.”

Audio dissection

This technique will help students achieve 100% listening comprehension, rather than only being able to understand the general meaning of what they hear. You can read about the details in my article here: <https://www.languagemagazine.com/audio-dissection/>. I recommend using a split-screen set up where half of the screen shows the audio/video and the other half contains a word document where you can type what students hear and guide them through the process of transcribing the audio.

Dictation

Say a sentence out loud and ask students to write down what they hear. Although this is partly a writing exercise, you can modify the activity to train speaking by having students simply repeat what you say to them out loud.

Find the Error/Homework Review

Say or write down a sentence with one or more errors and have the students identify the mistake. This can tie into reviewing common mistakes made on homework assignments.

Reading out Loud/Monologue Practice

Having students read a passage from a textbook for the first time in class is usually a waste of time, since reading something aloud only once does not develop muscle memory. Instead, assign a passage for homework, and use class time to have students recite the passage that they have practiced reading. This way, you are evaluating the results of their speaking practice, rather than their ability to read something that they have never seen before. Make this more challenging by having them recite the practiced passage from memory rather than reading.

Individual Fluency Practice

Go over a sentence or two in class, and give students 30 seconds – 2 minutes to practice repeating the sentences over and over to themselves to develop muscle memory. At the end of the dedicated time, see how many of them are able to say the sentences fluidly. As a form of motivation/comparison, I sometimes do the same activity with a difficult Chinese sentence while they practice their English, and then at the end of the dedicated time the students can see how my ability to say a new sentence compares to theirs.

Paired Dialogues/Dialogues with the Teacher

Go over a dialogue in class and have students pair up and practice together. The emphasis should be on reducing pauses, stuttering, and hesitation.