

Four English-learning ideas for the “Wei-Chat” generation.

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This article is dedicated to all the students of Class 13-05, English Department, Wu Lu Mu Qi Zhi Ye Da Xue. They are true torch-bearers of the “Wei-Chat” generation!

Introduction: As everyone knows, the “smart phone” has become a part of almost everyone’s life. This is especially true in the college classroom in China, where students use it constantly as a social networking tool. However, the potential of the “smart-phone” for improved English-learning (both in and out of the classroom) has not been fully realized. This article is written with the “Wei-Chat” generation in mind, and is divided into two parts. The first part deals with three underlying concepts that will help college English learners to better use their English outside of formal “classroom time”, and not just in the classroom. The second part shares some ways in which the “smart phone” itself can become an active tool in learning English in daily life. The author believes that, in spite of the obvious benefits of computer and communications technology, social, cultural and psychological variables tend to suppress these benefits. Therefore, this article is written in the hope of allowing college English-learning students in China (and other countries, too) the chance to by-pass these variables, and achieve more successful English-learning outcomes, using their “smart phones”.

Body:

Part One: Three English-learning concepts.

Sub-introduction: Most college students today are not really the masters of their fate, especially when it comes to issues like career, choice of academic major, or integration of classroom knowledge with actual life. This is especially true of those students studying English, since English is not only a “foreign language”, but also a foreign concept to everyday society. In many cities of the world, it is common to see people walking down the street, talking to each other in various languages; using a foreign language in the public arena is considered a common, everyday event. However, in many other cities in the world, speaking and using a foreign language in the public arena is considered strange, even deviant. The social and cultural variables that encourage or suppress the public use of a foreign language are very strong and pervasive. Therefore, the student of foreign languages has three choices: to submit to social pressure and only use foreign language in the classroom, or with some foreign friend; to openly oppose the social rules, and thus incur conflict; to

interface personal language-learning with society in certain areas, and on a more low-key level. The following three concepts are one way of navigating one's way in a sometimes ambivalent society.

(A) Synthesize language; synthesize knowledge. “Zong he yu yan, zong he zhi shi”. 综合语言，综合知识。

Much of the “classroom knowledge” that is acquired today is memorized for retrieval and output in exams. Usually, this knowledge enters the brain's memory in one form, and comes back out in one form. There is little alteration of the idea to fit new situations or frameworks, and thus, little or no “outside the envelope” thinking. Thus, thinking fits exams, and exams fit thinking.

Synthesis means the re-combining of certain elements into something new. One example is taking crude oil from the ground, heating and chemically treating it, and making plastic. Plastic is, after all, “oil, in another form”. So, why not do the same with ideas, and with language? When synthesized, one or two ideas can be re-made into several new ideas. Parents marvel at the speed at which their young child learns language. One day, the father teaches the child to say, “This is chocolate cake”. The next day, the mother says, “Tomorrow, we will have lunch at your grandmother's house”. Both parents are very surprised when their child suddenly says, “Mummy, why can't you make chocolate cake as delicious as my grandmother's?” Both parents look at each other in shock and say, “Where did she learn to say that? Did you teach her?” The truth is, neither parent did; the child took what language information she already had, and synthesized it into something completely new. All children, the world over, do this in their “mother-tongue”, and no-one tries to stop it. So, why not do this in a foreign language? Since the synthesis of language is a natural process, there can be only be one reason why people do not do it when speaking a second language – some psychological or social or cultural factor is stopping them from doing it.

Therefore, it is necessary for foreign language learners to deliberately cultivate an attitude inside themselves that says, “It is right, proper and normal for me to synthesize all the language and knowledge I use in my daily life *in English*, just as I do it (without thinking about it) in my mother-tongue.” When one's vocabulary and language experience are used in this way, the results are far-reaching. Why? Memorized language only returns itself; however, synthesized language expands itself many times over. Thus, even a college student whose English is “very poor” can do a lot with what limited language is available, when she uses synthesized language, and not only memorized language.

Synthesizing language alone is not enough; one should also synthesize knowledge itself. Too often today, most students are not encouraged to expand on what they already know at a simple level; instead, they should re-create, expand, re-combine, and synthesize knowledge itself; they should deliberately try to “think outside the box”, or “think outside the envelope”, and take their ideas to the very edge

of the cosmos. Such an attitude towards thinking is not as common as it should be in general life, and it is certainly not common among college English-majors. We should all look at ourselves very carefully, and ask, “Why is this so?”

So, synthesizing language (what one says in one’s daily life), and synthesizing knowledge (what one thinks, in all areas of life) should become normal, standard cognitive practice among college foreign-language students in China today. The payback will be exponentially profitable.

(B) **Two brains; one heart**. “Liang ge nao zi; yi ge xin”, 两个脑子，一个心。

Belief in one’s cultural values (cultural identity), as well as love of country (patriotism, nationalism) are important aspects of any society, but when applied too strongly they are lethal to effective foreign language learning. This phenomenon is more easily observed in big countries, with one dominant language and cultural system. (Smaller countries, with a wide variety of sub-populations and languages, and a history of grass-roots cross-cultural social interchange, are less likely to be this way.) For examples, compare China and the United States, with places like the Netherlands, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, around 1910. The author believes that, after many years of teaching English to college students, some of the major variables suppressing effective foreign language learning are not linguistic, but social and cultural.

This poses a problem. The very act of learning and using a foreign language involves a certain “turning away” from one’s own cultural norms. “The best learner of a foreign language is the traitor, for of all people, he has that essential skill for learning a foreign language successfully – the act of turning away from his group values.” This may be theoretically correct, but it is not a good thing to do! How then, can foreign-language students learn their chosen foreign language, in a culture that has from time immemorial been suspicious of “things foreign”?

The “two brains; one heart” paradigm tries to resolve this problem. It works as follows. All foreign-language students are to imagine themselves as having one heart, and two brains. The “heart” represents their cultural values given to them by their birth-society, all patriotic values, the opinions of the ruling elite, the lessons of history, and so on. These values are immutable, and are not to be altered by any foreign or outside influence – hence the term, “one heart”. The heart is the bedrock of a person’s values. Since it will not be altered, the individual has a certain inner stability, which various moral crises will not disturb.

The “brain” becomes two brains. One is the “Chinese brain”, which operates like everyone else’s, and processes information and opinions in the usual manner. The “English-learning brain” is operationally separate from the “Chinese brain”, and has the barest minimum of links. Here is an analogy that all teenage members of the “Wei-Chat” generation will recognize: as (almost!) young adults, their parents allow them to go anywhere in their city, play with their friends, and go out shopping; the only “control” is the occasional phone call, asking, “Where are you now? What are

you doing? Who are you with? Come home by ten o'clock.” The teenager is still under (the barest of) parental control, but is assumed to be a new “adult-in-the-making”. Thus it is with the “English-learning brain”; it is free to process knowledge in English *free from mother-tongue linguistic interference or cultural influences*. This point is important, as learning a new language requires one to build a whole new cognitive infrastructure, free of mother-tongue influence. One of the reasons why many students have trouble learning their new language is that the mother-tongue influences are so strong, the new language has no chance to grow up into a separate identity. (Just look at what happens when parents do not allow their child to grow up.) So, why not start from the very beginning, and acquire a new, cognitively autonomous brain to do all this? This idea may sound extremely threatening to the mainstream culture in this country – hence the assurance of “one heart”. Again, it must be stressed that the major impediments to successful foreign language learning in China (and other big countries, too) are social and cultural (as well as psychological), and *not* linguistic.

If you learn a second foreign language, then make a “third brain”!

(C) **My English; ‘their’ English.** “Wo de ying yu; ta men de ying yu”, 我的英语; 他们的英语。

Many college students today in China (and elsewhere, too), do not really know why they are studying English. The usual answers are, “My parents want me to become an English teacher in my home-town, and get married”, or “I must pass an exam”. This conceptual framework is insufficient, as it makes English-learning the consequence of external obligation (“they say I must”), and not internal motivation (“this is what I want to do for myself”). Most students are extremely unwilling to let others know what they really want to do, for fear of being “put down”; they are afraid of envy-based peer criticism. Thus, the proverb, “人怕出名, 猪怕壮” is proven true. (“Men fear fame; the pig fears becoming fat.”) One must have a reason to study English that satisfies one’s true aspirations; however, how can one protect oneself against peer interference?

The “my English; ‘their’ English” paradigm attempts to solve this problem. The foreign-language college student maintains two sets of ambitions – one for self, and one for public expectations. These two sets of ambitions are never linked; they are deliberately kept separate from each other. As more and more children of the “Wei-Chat” generation today are discovering, it is like maintaining separate and compartmentalized relationships with Mummy and Daddy, after the parents’ divorce.

Examples of “my English” are limitless. They can be, “I want to become a translator of pulp-fiction novels, working late at night”, or “I want to be an interpreter for trade delegations going to Africa”, or “I want to read the poems of John Donne in my free time”, or “I want to be like San Mao, marry a foreigner, and travel the world with my spouse”, or “I want to open my own weekend training school”. It could even be something simple and easily attained, like, “I want to be able to use

English-language computer games.” Whatever the ambition, two things are always the same: (a) the dream comes from the student’s heart, and (b) nobody else is told about the dream. Half of learning a language is “I want to”; the other half is mere sweat and effort. Therefore, inner motivation should be identified, and then carefully protected from the envious.

Examples of “their English” are fewer and simpler to identify. They are, “I need to pass the CET-4 exam this summer”, or “I need to get good grades, to please my family”, or “I need to get a job as an English teacher in my home town”, or “I need to win this departmental debating competition”. Society will always be breathing down one’s neck for proof of participation and loyalty, so it is necessary to have satisfying “ambitions”. However, remember this: these ambitions are for “public consumption”; they are not one’s true life. In this society, only plans that are laid and executed in stealth come to fruition. Thus it is, with one’s English-language ambitions.

Sub-conclusion: Perhaps these ideas may seem viciously cynical to many readers. However, the author has considered these ideas for a long time, and shared them with many students. The general consensus among the author’s students appears to be supportive of these ideas. The author is tired of teaching English diligently, only to have psychological, social and cultural variables rob him and his students of the “just fruits of hard effort”! It is time to protect the harvest; else, why labor in vain?

Part Two: Various ways to use your “smart phone” for learning English.

Sub-introduction: It has been the author’s frequent experience in class to find the students able to use their “smart phones” for all sorts of social networking tasks or phone-Internet shopping use; however, when asked to use their phones for some English language application, such as looking up a word on the dictionary or sending an English-language text message, all sorts of “I cannot do this!”-type problems arise, and they arise consistently. A few students have even been offended: (“You want me to use my social and cultural patrimony... for *this*?!”). The author firmly believes these problems are the consequence of the “social / cultural vs. English-learning disconnect” (i.e., social or cultural prejudice), and not for lack of knowing how to use the “smart phone”.

The “Wei-Chat” telephone infrastructure was designed for social networking (and social monitoring too, it should be noted); its users come from all parts of society. However, it is the college student population that has really adopted “Wei-Chat” as its social home and playground. Perhaps no one really thought that “Wei-Chat” could also be used for other applications (e.g., as a platform for using English, on a common, everyday basis). Perhaps it is this dynamic of “something so close to the pulse of the nation, yet so foreign” that is so shocking and threatening to certain users of

“Wei-Chat”. However, from an educational curriculum / materials perspective, “Wei-Chat” is one of the best teaching aids to appear in many years. The author believes that this “golden opportunity” should be cultivated and used. After all, English spoken in the academic “ivory tower” with some foreign teacher, but rarely used in real life is ultimately worthless.

(D) *Some ideas*: Here are some ideas on how to use your “smart phone” when you are “on the go, on your own” – anywhere outside the relative safety of your English classroom. “Wei-Chat” allows *you*, the college student, to make *all of society* your language field-laboratory (and your social playground, too!). Here, at last, is a way to make English-learning fun, for now the game is about *living* English, and not just learning English.

So, Class 13-05, and all students all over China, here are some ideas for you to play with. Discuss them on “Wei-Chat” (and on “QQ”, too)!

(a) *For reading*. “Smart phones” are very good for reading “on the go” (e.g., when on a crowded bus going to work, or in a boring class). First, look up “on-line, English language novels”, or “on-line, English language short stories”, or “on-line, English language articles” on Bai Du (百度). Down-load those materials you like onto your “smart phone”. Remember, what you read should be (a) easy, (b) interesting to you, and (c) “free-ware” (i.e. public domain). Use “large font” for easy reading. Please remember, there are a lot of interesting materials out there. If you are traveling abroad, check out what they have (within reason).

Find out if your “smart phone” provider has any “applications” dealing with reading materials.

To the “smart phone” companies, the author asks, “Please make interesting English-language reading materials available on your product services list!” The potential market is enormous.

(b) *For writing*. Why not write short messages to your friends in English? Such things are possible already in Chinese (by texting, and by using your finger to “write” on the phone-screen itself).

However, there is a third way you can communicate by writing. Take a small piece of blank note-paper (5 cm. x 5 cm.), and write your message on it with a pen. Take your time, and compose a well-written message. Then, using the camera in your “smart phone”, take a photograph of your message, and send it as a “.jpg” file to your friend. Do not use the normal, “texting” method. (This method is like sending social photographs to your friends.)

Students have trouble thinking about “what topic” to write about. You are not “writing about” anything; you are living out your normal, everyday life! Write down whatever life gives you at that moment. Remember, it is not about “practicing my English writing”; it is about “living my normal, everyday life in English, using writing”).

For this method of “writing, using English” to succeed, you need someone to write to. If your classmates are not interested, then search farther afield. Somewhere, in China, there is someone “out there” who is willing to communicate with you in English writing. However, the best persons are your close friends, with whom you conduct the daily commerce of daily life.

(c) *For listening.* There are many good ways of using your “smart phone” to improve your listening ability.

You can listen to popular English songs, and follow along by reading the two-language sub-titles. This is already popular today, with many people.

You can watch films on your “smart phone”, also using the sub-titles. Please consider the following method: (a) first, watch the film in spoken Chinese, with Chinese sub-titles; (b) watch the film again, in spoken English, with Chinese sub-titles; (c) watch the film again, in spoken English, with English sub-titles.

It would be very helpful if the “smart phone” applications department would make a special software available, that would automatically re-play the past five or ten seconds of the film’s running time again and again, so that difficult sentences can be played and re-played, and re-played, until they are clearly understood.

However, the best way of improving your English listening ability on the “smart phone” is to listen to “audio-books” (有声读物). These can be found on-line, and down-loaded to your “smart phone”.

Again, it would be very helpful if the “smart phone” companies included more “audio-books” on their applications menus. The present offerings are insufficient.

Another method of using the “smart phone” to improve your listening is to talk with people, in English. However, it is hard to find willing partners.

(d) *For speaking.* This is where the “Wei-Chat” technology is very, very good. As everyone knows, all college students talk with each other on “Wei-Chat”. The conversation is a “delayed-action” conversation; sometimes, several minutes pass by before an answer comes back. This dynamic is *perfect* for practicing one’s English speaking, since one has plenty of time to consider what one wants to say, before actually saying it. One can think carefully about what to say, and even “practice” the sentence a few times, before actually recording and sending it. This dynamic should be fully exploited by college English-learning students.

Who should one talk with? Certainly not with a foreigner! One can use a close friend, or else find a willing “Wei-Chat” friend from another part of the country, and get down to work. Remember, this exercise is not about “learning English”; it is about using English in a natural, everyday context. Foreigners really should not be a part of these “Wei-Chat” dialogs-in-English; they are about Chinese people playing in English, and living in English, on their own.

So, go out, play, live life, and have fun!

(e) *For translating.* For some reason, many college students have trouble translating words on their “smart phone”, when asked in class by the teacher. They

either go “on-line” through Bai Du to access an on-line dictionary (where they have “phone-signal” reception problems, or else take a long time). Many students do not have a dictionary already inside their “smart phone”.

There is no excuse for this! People, please buy a good Chinese-to-English dictionary, and a good English-to-Chinese dictionary, and put them on your own “smart phone”! Arrange these dictionaries so that you can quickly and easily open them in class, and find the word within 15 seconds! There is no excuse for anything less. Discuss with your friends, and the “on-line, chat-rooms”, and your teachers to find out which software dictionaries are the best; settle for nothing less. Dictionaries are meant to be at hand, ready to use, and quickly available. Anything less is not acceptable. Do not accept anything less.

When researching software dictionaries for your “smart phone”, please pay attention to the attached “spoken voice” that allows you to listen to the word you want. Be careful! Some dictionaries have very bad pronunciation!

Sub-conclusion: These are some ideas for integrating one’s “smart phone” with common daily English-learning tasks. It is hoped that students of the “Wei-Chat” generation will “peer-review” them, use them, and suggest many others! The possibilities are almost limitless.

Conclusion: This article was written with the “Wei-Chat” generation in mind. This current generation of college students is clearly defined and recognized by its constant attachment to the “smart phone”. Almost no-one today (except the author!) goes anywhere without their “smart phone”. It supplies an increasing range of social functions in today’s “connected” world. However, very few college students use (or want to use) this powerful technology in the area of using foreign language in their daily life outside the classroom. Such an application is frequently seen as socially deviant. Many times, the author has been met with blank stares and subtle (sometimes, outright) opposition from his students. This is an example of “social folkways” out-trumping practical common sense. Therefore, this article was written to show college students learning English in China today some ways they can adapt their thinking to cope with these social conditions, as well as some ways they can use their “smart phones” to their advantage when learning English. Although the author heartily dislikes the “smart phone” (he is a social isolate), he readily endorses the “smart phone” as an excellent tool for “on the go”, daily use of English. The author therefore hopes that this “Wei-Chat” generation will try out some of these ideas for themselves, and see if they work (whether or not their social peers approve!).

Finally, the author would like to thank all the members of Class 13-05, from the English Department of Wu Lu Mu Qi, Zhi Ye Da Xue. It has been a pleasure teaching you, and interesting watching you at play with your “smart phones”, using “Wei-Chat” as your personal playground!