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CHINA STUDENTS' SECRET

How we aced English

Memorising, reading and dogged practice have made them fluent speakers

By Jessica Lim



CAI Sang had her first English lesson in Secondary 1, chanting the alphabet along with her class in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province in central-western China.

At No. 7 Middle School, the top school in the city, English was taught in Chinese - the students would repeat English sentences read out to them, but everything else was done in Mandarin.

At the end of three years, they were able to construct sentences with words like who, what, where and why.

Cai Sang, 18, came to Anderson Secondary School two years ago with barely a Primary 4 foundation in the language and mimed her way through conversations, gesticulating with whatever props she had at hand.

'I could construct full sentences but would sometimes forget what word went with which object. I would mix up pronouns like 'he' and 'she'. Quite often, I would point at something to explain what I wanted to say, or just revert to Mandarin,' she said.

In Sec 3, she sat for her first English test in Singapore. She failed because she could not understand the questions. She decided that this would not do and started to memorise the Collins English dictionary - 10 pages a day. In six months, she had memorised the entire book.

But she did not know how to use most of the words she had memorised. She sprinkled them 'randomly in essays' until her teacher told her that her expressions were 'extremely weird' and suggested she start with 'simple words and sentences'.

Fine-tuning her strategy, she read classics like *Wuthering Heights* and *Oliver Twist*, hoping they would show her how to use the words in context. She read about three such books a month.

'Soon, I started writing like a classic novelist. I thought that was what my teachers wanted. My essays sounded a bit Victorian, but my teacher said my style was outdated!' said Cai Sang.

She then switched to reading magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* - and scored an A1 for English at the recent O levels.

Today, she speaks English fluently with only a slight accent.

Cai Sang is one of five students from China to whom *The Sunday Times* spoke who have mastered the language in the short span of two years.

Ru Mohan is another.

The 17-year-old from Shaanxi province listens to the BBC, imitates various accents, reads the student newspaper *IN* and cuts out articles.

He, too, started off poorly. Two years ago, he used the word 'neckless' instead of 'reckless' in an essay.

'Everyone makes mistakes. I laughed at myself, but made a point not to make it again,' he said.

He now speaks more fluently than the average Singaporean teenager, rolling off words like 'amicable', 'rudimentary' and 'humiliating' during his interview with *The Sunday Times*.

He, too, earned a distinction for English at the O levels. Unlike Cai Sang, memorising words did not work for him. His mantra: Reading and speaking makes perfect. And he did a lot of that.

'I read at least three hours every day. I also forced my friends to speak to me in English even though at first I did not understand half of what they were saying,' said the only child of a university lecturer and middle school teacher.

He added that speaking to his friends in English helped him to 'test out new words' and made sure he was 'using them in the right context'.

Other students from China, like Shao Shiyu, 17, of Hunan province, remembers getting four out of 25 in her first English test. She headed to the bookstore right after that and grabbed some assessment books.

On her first day at Tanjong Katong Girls Secondary School, she remembers speaking really slowly so that people could understand her.

'Now, it just comes naturally,' said Shiyu, who is now a student at Raffles Junior College.

These students are very dogged in the way they study, said Mrs Lim-Koh Hui Hui, 36, a teacher-mentor to students from China at Xinmin Secondary School, which admits 10 to 15 of them every year.

'They are also extremely focused. It is amazing to be able to get a distinction in just two years of learning English. That puts some of our local students to shame,' she said.

She helps them adapt to the new environment by hiring tutors to bridge the gap when it comes to English. Among the things the tutors do to help the students is to drill them in pronouncing their 'Rs' and 'Ls'.

'We also split them up when we deploy them to classes to facilitate their integration process,' said Mrs Lim-Koh.

'But these students do take the initiative to seek help from their peers and are very proactive in finding out information about anything they do not understand.'

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Drill, drill, drill

Cai Sang reaches for reading material every chance she gets. The Sunday Times sneaks a peek at her timetable.

- 7.15am: Once she reaches RJC, she pulls out Newsweek to read for 20 minutes before assembly.
- 10am: At recess time, she nips to the library to browse through English fiction books.
- 4.30pm: After school and a nap, she reads The Straits Times. She pens down interesting phrases in a notebook which she refers to when writing her English compositions.
- 7.30pm: After dinner, she does her homework and memorises 10 pages of the English dictionary.
- 10.30pm: While brushing her teeth, she recaps the words and phrases she has learnt that day.

- 10.40pm: In bed, she listens to English songs on the radio for 20 minutes before sleeping.