Speaking with… Professor Don Snow

Interview by Mark Critchley

Don Snow has an MA in English (TESOL) from Michigan State University, and a PhD in East Asian Language and Culture from Indiana University. He has taught language, culture, and linguistics for over two decades in various parts of China, as well as in the United States, and is currently Director of Shantou University's English Language Center. He is the author of several books on language teaching, including More Than a Native Speaker: An Introduction for Volunteers Teaching English Abroad (TESOL Publications, revised edition 2006), and Encounters with Westerners: Improving Skills in English and Intercultural Communication (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, revised edition forthcoming in 2014).

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You have written at length about the challenges for English language learners in China, especially when trying to develop their speaking skills. What have you found to be the critical success factors that make this work?

To be proficient in a language, just learning in class time is not enough. The students who become really proficient are those who take it on themselves to do more. Of course, there are some casualties along the way however, like one student who decided she would improve her English by reading *Robinson Crusoe*. She had heard it was a great story, but when she tried to read it she found it too hard and too boring. Students need to learn how to choose materials wisely, how to design a project that will build the skills that they need, and especially when learning a language via self-study, they need to learn how to build internal motivation in order to achieve sustainability. Therefore students need to be taught to strategise … after all, who's making the decisions?

Generally, Chinese students have very little experience in thinking through these decisions; and before coming to university they have had virtually no experience of English for communicative purposes – it has all been test-focused. They have deep-rooted habits and perceptions as to what language learning is like, and what it is for. For speaking in particular, it's all about having the confidence, and making the choice of whether to engage or not. There is a strong tendency to avoid, but only when they choose to engage can their skills snowball.

You are a great believer in effective learning via small, focused self-study programmes - what you call Language Learning Projects (LLPs). Where should we start with one of these?

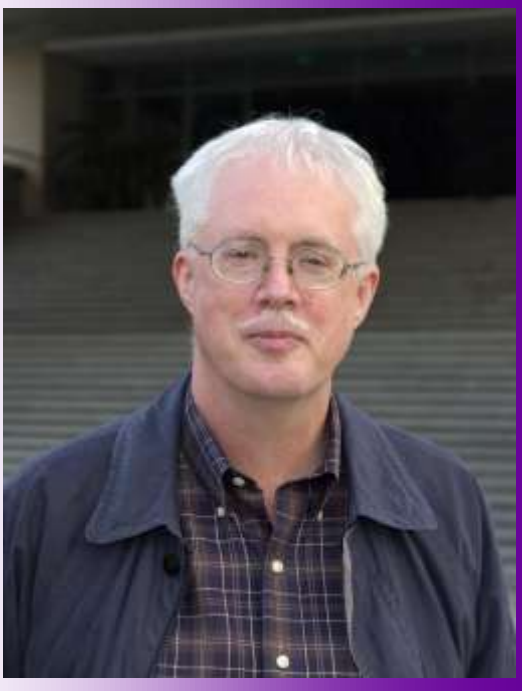
Start with a small reading project. It is easy to find materials for this. Next, you could work on a listening project – this should be within that 'sweet zone' where you can understand the material enough without too much trouble, but it still stretches your skills. When it comes to speaking, you could actually talk to yourself. Some find this artificial, or believe they can't improve this way. That's simply not true – it can be effective. However, it is a) harder to sustain, and b) harder to judge one's progress.

Learners shouldn't normally start off on their own. I recommend forming a group with two to three friends. People find it difficult to manage this publicly in China because it is viewed as "showing off" or "unnatural". One good setting, however, is a regular role-play -

same time, same place every week, or more often - or else a discussion group, where members watch a movie and talk about it. To ensure its success you need to find others who will commit to it, but this is a very powerful way of sustaining momentum, since members must read the article, etc. before their meeting.

What would you recommend for someone who is living overseas and trying to develop their spoken skills? What is your experience of this, for example?

For someone on their own in a country trying to learn the language (like I did with Cantonese) it is often still not easy. You have to go and find people who will talk to you ("practice opportunities"). The problem for me was not so much talking to people in baby Cantonese as knowing what they say when they respond. To overcome this barrier I recorded comic radio skits in Cantonese, and listened to them repeatedly for the best part of a year. It was the best thing I ever did. Other successful learners do the same: for example, watching the weekly dialogue programme on CCTV9, or something similar. The key is not just having a plan, but having a plan that you can sustain. In designing self-study programmes, the element of interest is crucial. Students need to pick materials they really like, so that they are drawn to study rather than repelled.



In the university context however, language learning is not fully autonomous. There is the teacher in the background guiding, even though they want the students to take progressive responsibility.

Yes, the teacher might say, "I want you to work on your reading. You choose, but let's talk a little bit about making good choices here" ... or … "you can choose whether to work on your reading or listening, but it must be a receptive skill". This starts them off on strategising for themselves, giving them the opportunity to start taking some control. Then, by the time they leave the Language Centre (LC), they are able to plan what they need to do in order to develop their English skills even further.

Our LC has a Learning Management System (LMS) called ICE, which is full of self-study resources to help students develop language skills independently. How could such a system be used to support an LLP?

If I am preparing students to undertake an LLP, the LMS is used to introduce the components and to get them to think through the issues. It is especially important to help students learn to choose study goals, given that they would often set themselves very broad goals, working on all the skills at once... and end up seeing little progress in anything. This leads to the sustainability issue: if they see no progress, then why waste the time? So, they should be encouraged to work purely on their reading or on vocabulary building for a while. This helps them see progress, and encourages them to keep going.

Not all LLPs require the use of materials, but when they do, learners should choose something interesting to them - especially when choosing realia instead of something from a textbook. This is particularly relevant for learners who have built a fairly good foundation, but who still have not developed functional skills. They are making a leap into a new and somewhat challenging learning environment, and anything that makes the task a little easier really helps.

Thirdly, when the teacher launches them into doing study on their own, students usually resort to the textbook as a kind of substitute

teacher instead of setting and following their own goals. The trick is to get students to use the textbook as a tool for attaining their own goals, as opposed to a replacement plan.

Another piece of advice is to practise in a way that is as close as possible to what they really want to do. If they want to build their speaking skills, they should practise *talking*; if they want to focus on listening skills, they should listen to lectures, etc. There is often a mismatch between method and goal that needs to be attended to. For example, if their goal is to build extensive listening skills, stopping to look up every new word up in a dictionary is not the best approach, as this reduces the amount of actual listening they do.

The next point is the study plan: to have goals that are realistic. Some say: "I'll do two hours per evening", or "I'll do it in my free time". Who do you know who ever has free time?

The last thing is planting progress markers. Motivation is sustained where a student can see progress. From intermediate level onwards, progress becomes ever harder to pinpoint. Concrete markers can be: "How many pages can I read in an hour?" Other markers are more subjective: "How comfortable do I feel watching this without subtitles?" So, the study plan and progress markers should therefore feature centrally in the LMS. The subjective or 'affective' measures are as important as the concrete measurements. These are the life and death issues. It's not just a case of *can* I do it, but how comfortable do I feel doing it?

Let's talk about intercultural competence now. I believe that you teach a course at Shantou University on this. What does it mean exactly, and why is so important?

Virtually any time someone uses English in the real world, it will be for intercultural communication. It can be direct, like talking to a Canadian, or indirect like reading a book from another time and culture (back to *Robinson Crusoe* again). A goal of language teaching is that students can interact effectively with aliens from other countries and cultures. It's not just a matter of learning the culture of English-speaking countries; they may be doing business with people from Russia ... or Saudi Arabia. So, in situations where they'll interact with people from a culture they don't know much about, they need intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence is therefore the useful set of skills or habits that help us communicate effectively with people from anywhere, and these have to be learnt. Our Intercultural Competence course at Shantou University is mainly a language course, but it's where we instil these basic skills and habits. For example, when I as an American am conversing with a Russian, I don't have much control over the messages that person sends to me, but I do have control over how I process or make sense of those messages. So, when interacting with someone from a culture I don't know, I need to make sense of what they are saying more carefully than with someone from my own culture. After all, they are from a different world. It is a little like driving a car – under normal circumstances you are not consciously aware of all the movements you make to control the vehicle. If you hit a patch of black ice, you need to be much more aware of what you are doing. Similarly with intercultural communication, the first step is recognising the situation; the second is bringing the interpretation process to conscious awareness. Our normal pattern is to do most of our sense-making very automatically. Psychologists talk about System 1 and System 2 Thinking, and in the popular book by Daniel Kahneman (2011), he refers to Fast Thinking and Slow Thinking. The basic idea is that we do most of our thinking on automatic pilot, using System 1. It's instinctive, fast, and generally fairly accurate... *if* you are in a familiar situation. But when you hit that ice you need to be *very aware* of what you are doing, so the trick is to help learners bring the interpretation process to conscious awareness, and get into the habit of thinking more carefully, i.e. bringing System 2 into play.

This subject content is taught through a series of exercises, called "Critical Incident Exercises" (CIEs). You give students a problem scenario in the form of a story, and they have to give different explanations for why the foreigner in the situation did or said what they did. Here, you are building the habit of very consciously addressing this interpretation question, rather than just jumping to conclusions. A second very useful habit is

forcing people to come up with multiple interpretations. The natural tendency is to jump to a conclusion; and normally you go for the most 'obvious' one (meaning the one that is most likely in my culture). We don't want to eliminate that option from consideration – it may in fact be right - but if we can build the habit of considering multiple possibilities, that broadens the range, and increases the chance that you are going to imagine how the other person would look at the situation, or at least imagine what some of the other possibilities are. Therefore, in class exercises participants come up with five possible explanations, and then we share them and talk about them. This is very helpful partly because it slows their interpretation processes down and also makes students more conscious of the process.

And then the last part is making careful selections. The set of options has been created and participants need to think through which options are more likely, and for what reason. Returning to the System 1-System 2 idea, System 2 is where you think more consciously and more carefully about things, but it also costs more in terms of time and effort. Consequently we don't use it as often. However, you need to get into the habit of employing it more in intercultural situations. So, this last process of evaluation is about generalising carefully and mindfully. As an example, it is so natural and so easy to be cheated in the market by one particular vendor from, say, Xinjiang, and then quickly drift into talking about "those Xinjiang people". Before you realise it, you have labelled a whole nation...

Intercultural communication is not just about ideas. The point is to turn ideas into habits, to do something often enough that the habit kicks in in real-life situations. Could I prove that this actually works? No, but I have a wonderful story:

I used to be involved with an NGO that brought foreign teachers to China, and we did a lot of training using CIEs as part of their orientation process. People thought that doing so many such exercises was a little strange, but didn't object too much because it was a fun way to spend an hour or two. However, in the exit interviews we did with teachers when they completed their term and were about to leave China an interesting pattern emerged – I don't remember specifically asking people about the training, but they would often say, "Hey, you remember all those exercises we did when we first came to China...?" One interview particularly sticks in my mind where a teacher recounted: "I was on a bus in rural Anhui Province. We stopped somewhere, and this peasant woman got on. She had a chicken in a big cage, and she came up to the seat next to me and before she sat down she put the chicken on my lap. Then I heard this little voice in my head: 'Now, think of five possible explanations for why she put the chicken in on your knees...'". So, I believe this training really helps if you do it often enough.

This is highly relevant to Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) students who must adapt quickly to another culture, since over 2,000 of them study in the UK every year. Although XJTLU provides preparatory lectures, and awareness videos made by Liverpool students, CIEs will also prepare them to handle unexpected circumstances.

CIEs build another basic skill: being aware of expectations and managing them. Often the problem is not that someone goes somewhere and something bad happens, instead the problem is that they expected one thing but something else happened, totally disorienting them.

In my textbook *Encounters with Westerners*, I cite a Chinese scholar named Chen Xiangming. For her doctoral dissertation, she studied 17 Chinese graduate students in their first year at universities in Boston, as they went through the process of adapting to life in the United States. They had originally thought Americans are easy to get to know and that their own English was pretty good, so it would not be any problem getting to know people. When they actually arrived, they found that making quick casual acquaintances wasn't difficult, but they assumed that these would immediately translate into deeper friendships... and of course that did not happen. They realised that functioning in an English class is very different from listening to two Americans chatting in a bar. So in the study, they went from "Oh, these Americans are very easy to make friends with", to "None of them care about us - they don't *want* to be our friends!" By the end of the year, sadly, none of them had any

significant relationships except with Chinese or other international students. Part of the problem here lay in the expectations, and it is likely that the Chinese students in this study gave up more quickly because they initially expected making American friends to be easy.

There is probably a recognisable pattern that international students go through emotionally, but then hopefully manage to overcome.

Textbooks on cross-cultural adaptation often mention a 'double-U' adaptation pattern in which sojourners initially have good feelings when arriving in a new culture, based in part on the excitement of being in someplace new and interesting, but later go through a low period when they become fatigued as a result of the demands of living in an unfamiliar culture. While the actual experience varies a lot from person to person, it is not unusual for sojourners to go through some kind of culture shock experience. I wish that many got over it, but a great many do not. With regard to Chinese students going to the West, many give up trying to make Western friends fairly early on, and retreat into a house with all-Chinese classmates, where they eat Chinese food and only interact with "foreigners" in class when they have to. Some of this relates to what we were talking about earlier with independent language learning: "My English Gaokao score is good, but do I feel comfortable enough that I will engage with my foreign classmates in a social activity when I have the opportunity?" In many cases they won't.

Perhaps the onus is too much on the student, and the host organisation should have more responsibility to integrate them?

In the last couple of decades, universities have become better at setting up international offices, and do a better job of hosting students. Yet with the large numbers of Chinese students involved, many still drop through the cracks, and *everybody* needs to chip in: the host should do a better job at hosting; the students should try harder to reach out instead of expecting to be hosted; we as teachers need to do more to ensure that students have reasonable expectations.

Further reading

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