

Comparative Analysis of Language Education Issues in China and the United States——Interview With Professor Laura Hedrick-Hanson From the University of Missouri

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Laura Hedrick-Hanson is a full-time teacher in the field of English culture at the Center for Asian Affairs at the University of Missouri. She used to be a tutor in Shanghai, China, and has a certain understanding of language learning in China. She has rich experience in language education, especially English teaching, and has deeply thought about the problems, causes and countermeasures in language education and learning in China and the United States. She can fully mobilize everyone's interest in expressing herself actively in teaching us "Voice of Columbia", so that students don't have to worry about making mistakes and can express themselves. Every class is filled with an extremely warm discussion atmosphere. I have never encountered such an interactive English class before, so I am interested in interviewing.



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1. Zhang: Would you please talk about your life and teaching experience in China? Which experiences have left a deep impression on you? Briefly talk about the differences and similarities between the urban cultures of China and the United States that you have experienced?

Laura: In 2018, I worked as a private tutor for a family in Shanghai. My job was to provide their young

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daughter with a foundation for her future English education. I was only 19 years old at the time, and I had never traveled outside the U.S. before.

I'm originally from a rural area of the American Midwest. So, I experienced not only culture shock from moving to a new country, but also from living in a big city for the first time. For example, I had never taken a city bus or ridden a subway before I moved to Shanghai. I was not used to being around so many people, and I was definitely not used to being the only person in the crowd who looked like me. In addition, I could barely speak a word of Chinese when I arrived. I felt like an alien experiencing Earth for the first time!

To be honest, my family and friends in America were scared for me to live in China. We hear so much negative propaganda about your country in the United States, as I'm sure you do about our country. And while some stereotypes are true, the Chinese people I met challenged my preconceived notions in some amazing ways. Everyone I encountered was incredibly hospitable and curious. There was a deep sense of history and tradition everywhere I looked. I had enlightening conversations with strangers, simply because they wanted to practice their English skills!

In addition, I was surprised that I felt safer and more comfortable living in a collectivist society. For the first time in my life, I felt how valuable it is to consider how my actions will impact not only the people around me but also generations in the future. Americans simply do not have this concept, so I'm grateful to China for teaching me this lesson.

I developed an entirely new concept of the world during my time in China. Being an outsider for the first time was a truly humbling experience. I gained so much perspective and empathy for others. In my career as a foreign language teacher, I now feel that I have a deeper understanding of what my students are going through. I use the skills and perspectives I learned in China every day, in both my career and my personal life.

2. Zhang: When you were teaching in China, how efficient did you find Chinese students in learning English? Did it meet your ideal expectations? Many Chinese students find it difficult to learn English. What do you think are the reasons for the difficulty? What obstacles are difficult to overcome?

Laura: Because I worked as a private tutor rather than a classroom teacher, I think my view is rather narrow. But I'll answer this the best I can.

Learning a new language is never easy. It takes even the most motivated scholars years to feel somewhat competent. But I think that Chinese students face some unique challenges when learning English.

I think the biggest obstacle is a lack of access to quality English resources, including books, videos, study materials, etc. When I was in China, I noticed that even in a city as cosmopolitan as Shanghai, it was very difficult to find effective English learning resources. Ideal resources are authentic, interesting, and appropriately challenging. Improved access to real materials from English-speaking countries would motivate students greatly, and in turn, open up the world to them.

Additionally, I feel that students do not always see the value in what they're learning during English class. Educators and parents need to find fun and useful ways to connect the target language to their students' lives. This might mean reading English storybooks together, connecting students to English-speaking pen pals, helping students create social media posts or videos in English, etc. Find ways to take English outside the classroom!

3. Zhang: Do you know about the situation of American students learning foreign languages? Compared with foreign languages such as Spanish and Italian, do they think Chinese is easier or more difficult? What is the reason?

Laura: In America, foreign language education is highly inadequate. Unfortunately, students usually do not begin learning another language until middle or high school. Spanish is definitely the most common foreign language, but French, German, and Japanese are popular as well. European languages, especially Spanish and German, are popular because they are related to English.

Chinese is not a commonly taught language in America. Chinese and English are very different from each other, and I think Americans are intimidated by the challenge of learning a language with tones and a different writing system. But we must consider geopolitical reasons as well, given the economic and political rivalry between America and China. A common American sentiment is that China is our competitor, not our collaborator. Therefore, many Americans don't feel that it is worthwhile to study Chinese. Those with more extreme beliefs may even feel that learning Chinese would be traitorous or a threat to our national security.

4. Zhang: Would you please compare and talk about the similarities and differences between Chinese and American students in learning foreign language knowledge from the aspects of student quality, learning methods, and tutoring environment?

Laura: As I mentioned, Americans usually only begin studying a foreign language in middle or high school. Students generally study languages for only an hour of the school day, perhaps with a little bit of homework in the evening. Once a student has learned the conversational basics of a language, that is considered "good enough". Unless a student continues studying their target language at university, this is likely as far as they will get in their foreign language education. *(But of course, America is a large, diverse country. I am mostly speaking from my own experience here.)*

In my experience, Chinese parents, teachers, and students are generally much more committed to foreign language education. I know that it is common for students to receive extra tutoring outside of school. People may even seek out English language movies, TV shows, and books to practice their skills on their own. I would say that this attitude is unfamiliar to most Americans.

5. Peng: What good suggestions do you have for beginners? What books, videos, and literature materials do you recommend? What are some generally effective methods and countermeasures?

Laura: At the beginning level, learners need to focus on increasing their input. In language teaching, input refers to any exposure to the target language. Begin listening to music, watching movies, and reading simple texts in English. Even if you cannot understand everything, you can begin to feel the rhythm of the language and start building your vocabulary.

I would also advise beginners not to neglect the importance of speaking. In many beginning language classrooms around the world, it is common for students to remain quiet until they feel they can confidently speak up. The problem is that students will never truly feel confident speaking unless they begin to do so early and often. Beginners should participate in role-plays with a partner, practice reading aloud, and learn to make small talk.

I also encourage beginners to read or listen to children's books. You may feel a little silly at first, but I promise that it's worth it. Illustrations will aid comprehension, while simple vocabulary, sentence structure and storylines allow beginners to focus on building their basic language skills. It's fun, too!

If accessible, I recommend online resources like "BBC Learning English" and "Voice of America." These websites have very high-quality learning materials, including videos, articles, podcasts, vocabulary lists, grammar instruction, and more.

6. Peng: What do you think of learning foreign language knowledge by watching movies and listening

to music? Can the leisure and entertainment learning method replace the conventional classroom education environment? Is there a contradiction between the two? How should we choose and balance?

Laura: Simply put, watching movies and listening to music cannot replace conventional learning and interactive activities. Current research shows that, after puberty, it becomes nearly impossible for most people to learn a new language solely through exposure or immersion.

However, I do believe that leisure and entertainment methods can be powerful complements to traditional learning. Exposure to music, movies, and TV shows helps learners gain awareness of unfamiliar sounds, observe native speaking patterns, and learn useful vocabulary. Most importantly, it's fun!

For learners who would like to try these methods, I would recommend reading subtitles or even slowing down the playback speed. You can also try writing down what you hear then checking your work. Gradually, you can challenge yourself to try watching or listening as you normally would.

7. Xu: What do you think of the international summer camps that are often held in China and the United States? Are these international activities of great help to students mastering foreign languages?

Laura: These opportunities are very interesting to me! It's true that students will certainly not become fluent in another language over the course of a summer. But we should take every opportunity we can to make language learning fun and immersive for students. In addition, camps like these expose students to people from other cultures and backgrounds. They learn to collaborate and build cross-cultural understanding. Motivation increases greatly when we provide students with a personally meaningful context in which to practice their target language. Overall, I highly recommend any experience which encourages language and cultural exchange.

8. Zhang: Would you please give an overall evaluation of the similarities and differences between Chinese and American students in learning and mastering foreign languages? What is the essential reason? What are the generally effective methods and countermeasures? What are your expectations for the future?

Laura: In my opinion, the most important factors for learning any language are motivation and a positive attitude. Successful language learners show commitment and are comfortable making mistakes in the pursuit of growth.

In my view, Chinese learners tend to be fearful and hesitant, pursuing perfection rather than growth. On the opposite end of the spectrum, American learners tend to be complacent; they are not taught to see the value in learning a foreign language, nor are they motivated to reach proficiency.

Neither of these attitudes is ideal. I think that we must seek to reach a healthy balance. As educators and parents, it is our responsibility to help students develop positive attitudes towards learning.

Thank you for your interview. Hoping that the language education and cultural exchange between China and the United States will achieve higher quality progress.