

“Share Your Experience”
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Level 1 - Chinese School 2017

How did you manage the homework and the weekly schedule? What was your routine?

The homework load and amount of studying we had to do each week was certainly a lot, but I soon learned productive ways to manage, maximize my efforts and time and even have fun along the way. Because our homework usually consisted of four separate assignments, I found that it truly helped to create an overall order, which I followed regularly: mine was a nonlinear or circular routine (which I'd highly recommend). I both started off with and ended with the homework involving studying and memorizing (sandwiching the more straightforward written workbook assignments), so that lines to commit to memory and new vocab could percolate and seep in throughout the evening and then be reinforced at night.

First key, indeed: continual and constant drilling and testing oneself (always aloud, if possible, so as to practice correct pronunciation). Luckily, the curriculum itself is set up in a way that fosters this.

The second key to learning Chinese at Middlebury, I soon discovered, was taking full advantage of the evening office hours, where I was able to work individually with one or more teachers. Attending office hours proved highly beneficial, speeding up my homework, making my studying feel more reasonable and productive and giving me more practice specifically with pronunciation/tones. Suffice to say that the best aspect of the program was the teachers – every single one of them was incredibly enthusiastic, patient and anxious to help, both in and outside of the classroom – so making full use of office hours and all that our teachers had to offer made complete sense.

Finally, throughout the program, I witnessed my own specific study methods evolving, as I found that certain aspects/methods of learning Chinese had become easier, while others had become harder. Thus, also important was being attuned to and flexible as to how best to adapt my study methods accordingly.

Getting through such a demanding program also required application of other crucial study habits: breaking up where I studied (my room, the library, the classroom during office hours) and with whom I studied, either alone or with friends/fellow-students, and determining what study environment would be most conducive when. Some work definitely felt more manageable and fun when done in the company of others – and during office hours, there was certainly a sense of solidarity between all the students who had decided to attend.

Equally important was knowing when to take short breaks, including power naps, if need be, and when to allow myself some downtime for exercise and fun activities, such as those arranged by the Chinese School, e.g. a Chinese film, cultural event/concert, hike, party, bonfire etc., or those that Middlebury's excellent facilities had to offer, e.g. tennis, squash, swimming, practicing music, etc. Luckily, the Chinese School also encouraged students to participate in up to two extra-curriculars during the week, ranging from soccer to Chinese-themed activities (Chinese cooking, calligraphy, Tai Chi, singing Chinese songs, Mahjong). Only an hour each, my two activities (Tai Chi and singing) conveniently broke up my studying without taking up too much time and also provided me the opportunity to interact with students from other levels. Preparing for the big China Night (the Chinese School's variety show) was another fun way I stayed social.



What helped you survive the Language Pledge?

For a beginner in Chinese, as I was, surviving the Language Pledge is perhaps the most daunting aspect of the whole program, especially for the first few weeks, when beginners don't have much vocabulary or grammar to work with. But in hindsight, while those weeks were possibly the hardest and most frustrating, they were also, for the very same reason, the most interesting and exciting, because we were forced to be creative with our communication (relying on few words in tandem with pantomiming) and listen much more than speak; so, for me at least, each new word/expression I picked up and added to my knowledge bank felt like a jewel.

I kept telling myself to emulate a sponge and soak up as much as possible, and during the first week, I determinedly spent extra time compiling my own list of essential vocab and survival expressions (some unique to me) to expand upon the list we had been given. I must admit, though, that the head-first jump into just such an intense program took me by surprise; but what helped me thereafter was promising myself I'd keep up a positive and enthusiastic attitude, treating the Pledge as simply a fun challenge – everything else, after I decided to fully embrace that approach, seemed to fall into place.

As our teachers encouraged, I always tried to just go for it and not hold back, i.e. keep practicing new phrases with fellow students, even if it meant repeating myself over and over; not being afraid of making mistakes; attempting to communicate something a bit more challenging, even if at first it seemed an impossible task; always always asking questions. Besides my teachers, I owe my second biggest thanks to “Pleco,” an incredible Chinese language learning app we all had on our phones. Pleco allowed me to look up quickly and translate words from Mandarin to English and vice versa, as well as compile working groups of vocab flashcards. I used Pleco all the time, for homework, studying and conversing.

Befriending my teachers and making full use of the communal lunches and dinners also helped me survive the Language Pledge: the communal meals were a great way to continue practicing our speaking and listening skills after classes and apply them in a casual, relaxed environment, and they also gave us a chance to get to know our teachers outside of the classroom, which was really great.

I also made it a point to interact and become friends with students from higher levels. Just as they say, it's always best to practice a sport with someone who's better than you, so the same applies to learning languages: my friends from higher levels added an extra layer of learning, support and encouragement that proved beneficial in making it to the finish line.

In the end, the program prepared me sufficiently (even as just a beginner) to navigate and communicate on my subsequent trip to China. Everyone in China was so impressed -- shocked and incredulous even -- by all the Chinese I had learned in just two months. They said I must've been a very hard-working student, but I said it was really the school I'd attended to which I owed everything, because it truly got teaching Chinese down to a fine art. In China, while I was using my Mandarin, my appreciation for the program deepened when I realized that the way our teachers taught us was such that I'd retained almost everything -- truly impressive. The trip wouldn't have been nearly as successful had I not gone to Middlebury. My language skills enhanced and helped everything: navigating (especially when I once saved my family from accidentally getting on the wrong train), at hotels, restaurants, museums etc., and most of all, making connections with our various tour guides -- speaking Chinese with them facilitated faster, more meaningful and lasting connections, and for this I'm grateful.