

A Middle Schooler Acquires Chinese (Mostly) on Her Own

By Pu-mei Leng

Pu-mei Leng has been teaching Mandarin as second language for secondary schools since 2005. She currently teaches high school Mandarin at the McDonogh School in Owings Mills, Maryland.

Chloe is currently a ninth grader and a bilingual speaker of English and French who suddenly became interested in Mandarin and made spectacular progress on her own, with very little help from native speakers or teachers.

I met Chloe when I was a supervisor on a short school trip for American students to China and Chloe was in grade six. She had completed about six months of instruction in Mandarin which was done in the traditional way, with very limited oral or aural exposure.

It was clear that Chloe was very interested in the language and in China itself. While she was in China, she kept a notebook, wrote down the signs she saw, and kept notes in English about the places she visited. She also practiced using the small amount of Chinese she knew.

At the end of the academic year, both Chloe and I left the United States. I took a job teaching Mandarin in Hong Kong, and Chloe's family moved to another city. Aware of her deep interest in Chinese and China, before she left I gave her 10 books and 10 movies in Chinese, in case she could not find a Chinese class. Two years later, we were both back in the United States. Chloe's mother asked me to tutor Chloe in Chinese because her interest was still very strong.

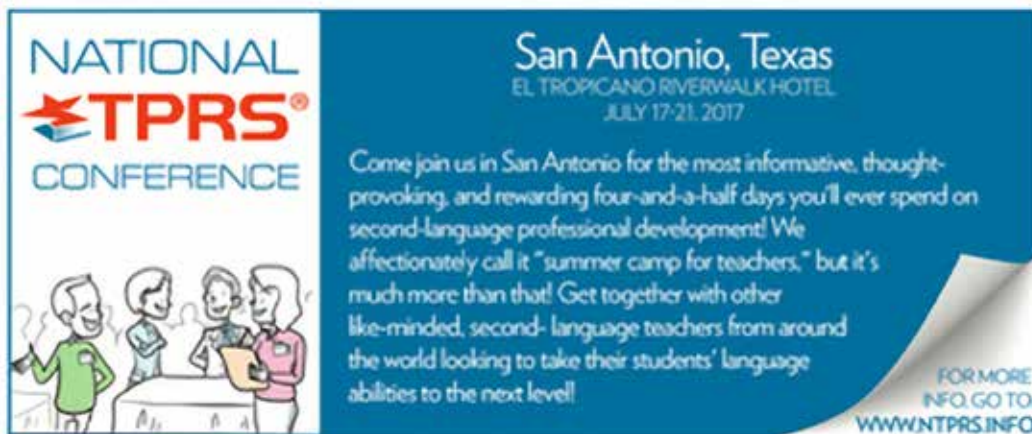
Her competence in Chinese was astonishing. At first, I spoke slowly and used simple vocabulary, but it was clear that her Chinese ability was far beyond that of a young person who had had only one year of a traditional Chinese class in school. During our sessions, we talked about the news, the election, and a film she had seen, and she understood nearly everything, even though there were words here and there that she didn't know. When she spoke, it was slow, but fluent.

I discovered how she did it. She had very limited instruction from a tutor for four months, about once a week, using traditional methodology, toward the end of her two years in another city. But more importantly, Chloe told me that she watched the Chinese movies I had given her over and over and read the books many times. She had no other contact with Chinese until her sessions with the tutor at the end

of her stay. After she started meeting with her tutor, she learned how to download more Chinese movies and cartoons from the internet. The movies were subtitled in Chinese and she got help from her tutor in reading and understanding the characters.

I did not administer any formal test to Chloe, but it was evident to me, a teacher of Mandarin, that she had acquired an impressive amount of Chinese—far more than any student with only one and a half years of traditional instruction.

Advertise in IJFLT and support this free journal. Send complete half or quarter page .pdf ads to ijflteditor@gmail.com. Advertisements that are consistent with IJFLT's mission will be charged half page = \$200.00 or quarter page = \$100.00.



NATIONAL
TPRS[®]
CONFERENCE

San Antonio, Texas
EL TROPICANO RIVERWALK HOTEL
JULY 17-21, 2017

Come join us in San Antonio for the most informative, thought-provoking, and rewarding four-and-a-half days you'll ever spend on second-language professional development! We affectionately call it "summer camp for teachers," but it's much more than that! Get together with other like-minded, second-language teachers from around the world looking to take their students' language abilities to the next level!

FOR MORE
INFO, GO TO:
WWW.NTPRS.INFO

**Podcasts in English for English
language learners**
www.eslpod.com