

REVIEW OF *ACTIVECHINESE: CHINESE LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR THE BUSINESS WORLD*

Title	ActiveChinese : Chinese Language Skills for the Business World
Platform	Windows® 98, ME, 2000, XP; Mac OS X
Minimum hardware and software requirements	Display: 800x600 minimum, 1024x768 preferred, with 32-bit color depth (millions of colors). Connection: Broadband (cable modem, DSL, or LAN). Browser: IE 5.5, 6.0, Firefox 1.0 Plug-ins: Macromedia Flash 7.0 or later. Settings: Browser must have cookies and JavaScript enabled and pop-up blocker disabled for www.activechinese.com ; computer must have audio and microphone enabled. Audio: Speakers. Voice Over IP software: suggested to have a Skype (www.skype.com) account for working with tutors in real-time.
Publisher	ActiveChinese, Inc. One Market Street, Spear Tower, Suite 2260 San Francisco, CA 94105 http://www.activechinese.com/
Support offered	FAQ; Online contact form; Online one-on-one tutor
Target language	Chinese
Target audience	Beginner to Intermediate
Price	Depends on which of the four courses (<i>Ice Breakers</i> , <i>Adjusting to the New Environment</i> , <i>Cultivating a Deep Understanding</i> , <i>Chinese Business World 1-2-3</i>) and the package options the learner selects, with the prices ranging from USD \$99.00 to \$599.00.

Review by Scott Chien-Hsiung Chiu, [Michigan State University](#)

The learning process is no doubt more efficient when language learners are focused, engaged, and in charge of their own learning. Such language learners usually have specific goals for their own learning, and, furthermore, they are motivated and responsible for planning their learning activities, evaluating their performance, and monitoring their overall learning processes (Little, 1999, 2007); in short, such learners can be called autonomous. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications and computer-based educational materials have been widely regarded as supportive of learner autonomy (Warschauer, 2002; Weasenforth, Meloni, & Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). Nevertheless, the perceived potentials for fostering autonomy in the electronic learning environment are not fully realized until hypermedia interactivity is improved and broader access to the Internet is available (Hémard, 2006). Benefiting from the increasing availability of Internet technology and exploiting the enhanced interactivity of *Rich Internet Applications* (RIAs)¹, *ActiveChinese* introduces an online virtual classroom, *Chinese Language Skills for the Business World*. It incorporates the latest technology in multimedia design on the Internet, and, on its website (<http://www.activechinese.com/intro1.jsp#Intro1>), it promises to "provide a 24/7 visual and audio learning tool for 21st century Chinese learners" and make "learning Chinese thus much easier than ever before" (para.7). As an Internet-based language learning environment, *ActiveChinese* combines up-to-date features of interactive websites, such as *Flash* animation and RIAs, and the benefit of video-conferencing, such as *Skype*.

ActiveChinese is a self-contained language learning website that provides a Chinese learning environment for beginning to low-intermediate adult learners of Chinese as a second or foreign language, particularly

those who have an interest in Chinese language skills for business purposes.

Design and Modules of *Active Chinese*

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the opening portal of *ActiveChinese* consists of five principal components, which are displayed on the navigation bar. Each lists different aspects of the program's language learning resources, namely, *Lesson Plan*, *Resources*, *Live Tutor*, *Community*, and *Culture Shocker*. By placing the five resource components on the navigation bar, the authors have created a navigational architecture that allows users to easily select the different online learning resources and materials for their needs.

The screenshot shows the main portal of the *ActiveChinese* virtual classroom. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for 'Today', 'Lesson Plan', 'Resources', 'Live Tutor', 'Community', and 'Culture Shocker'. The main content area features a large illustration of a woman's face on the left. To the right, there is a lesson titled 'Title: What's the theme of the party?' with a video player and a 'Play Now' button. Below the video player, there is a dropdown menu showing 'Lesson 14: Throwing a party' and a 'Technical Help >>' link. The page is divided into several sections: 'My Account' (Status: Full package, with links for 'Buy Now' and 'View our lesson catalog'), 'My Lesson Plan' (Click HERE to see all lessons and downloadable materials!), 'My Resources' (links for 'Personal Vocabulary', 'Vocabulary', 'Pinyin', and 'How to Write Chinese Characters'), and 'My Vocabulary' (Search Vocabulary, with radio buttons for 'Chinese-English' and 'English-Chinese'). At the bottom, there is a 'Culture Shocker' section with an image of a woman and text about reality television, and a 'Read More' button. The footer contains copyright information and links for 'Home', 'Privacy Statement', 'Terms & Conditions', 'Contact Us', 'Support', and 'Other Chinese Resources'.

Figure 1. The main portal of the *ActiveChinese* virtual classroom.

- *Lesson Plan* lists all available lessons and their learning materials, including written exercises, lesson content, transcripts, audio files, and video files. Learners can access forty-two lessons in *the Lesson Plan* section, and additionally, they can monitor their learning progress and the activities most recently completed in each lesson.
- *Resources* is divided into five sub-units, comprising learners' personal vocabulary lists, vocabulary from each lesson, rules of the Chinese Pinyin² system, explanations of how Chinese characters are composed, and a Pinyin keyboard that allows learners to manipulate syllable combinations and listen to their own pronunciation.

- *Live Tutor* offers users the option of scheduling a tutoring session with Chinese tutors in Shanghai over the telephone or through Internet connection options, such as *Skype* or *Google Talk*. 30-minute tutoring sessions are available around the clock.
- *Culture Shocker* describes cultural issues, facts, and interactions, such as trying to get directions by asking people in the street or leaving tips at restaurants; the scenarios are depicted in a series of eight comics, along with verbal explanations by an animated tutor.
- *Community* is a virtual space for learners to exchange their learning experiences in an online forum, or blog. Examples from *Culture Shocker* and other downloadable materials, such as [Adobe Reader Chinese fonts](#), are also available .

Lesson Content

ActiveChinese features a 24-hour live tutoring service, *Flash*-animated materials in each lesson (which include dialogues, culture points, drills, and self-assessments), an e-book of lesson transcripts, drills and writing exercises, and downloadable audio-visual review materials. Learners are able to plan their own learning activities and select the online resources available to them. They complete lessons at their own pace according to their own schedule, with no risk of missing any part of the lesson. In addition, they can monitor their learning progress and practice the target language by themselves or with a tutor over the Internet, all of which represent key points in autonomous learning. In the following, this review focuses on the *Flash*-animated lessons and the tutoring sessions.

In *Lesson Plan*, forty-two *Flash*-animated lessons have been categorized into beginning, advanced beginning, and low intermediate proficiency levels, as well as lessons for business Chinese at the intermediate level. It is not specified how these proficiency levels were defined although it is clear that the different levels are based on the difficulty and complexity of the lesson content. With the help of an online tutor, users have to decide on the lessons that match their needs, as well as their level of Chinese proficiency. Each of the lessons follows the same organizational pattern and consists of six sections which provide practice in oral communication and listening. Each lesson starts with a short introduction to the context and the goal of the lesson provided by a virtual tutor. After the introductory section, the lessons continue with a *Flash*-animated movie clip of situational dialogues based on daily themes and topics for the different proficiency levels, such as "self-introduction" and "going shopping" for beginners, "at the restaurant" and "visiting a Chinese family" for advanced beginners, and "handling an emergency" and "farewell at the airport" for the low-intermediate level.

To improve learner skills in business Chinese, the program offers twelve intermediate level lessons focusing on business situations, such as "holding a meeting", "business banquet", "business negotiation", "interview", "the first day at work," "technical problems in the office," "marketing research," "advertising," "visiting the factory," "placing an order," and "payment and delivery." The dialogues are presented by two or more animated characters playing the roles of typical Chinese restaurant waiters, government officials, and business people. In *Lesson Plan*, the forty-two lessons are categorized into four different proficiency groups but listed in a sequential order, from Lesson 1 to Lesson 42. The content of each lesson focuses on a specific communicative situation, and it can be assumed that learners do not need to follow the sequential order of the lessons but can select the topics in which they are most interested first and go back to other units later.

Support for Lesson Learning

Each dialogue can be viewed and listened to in three modes: (1) at normal conversational speed without English translation in order to improve learners' listening ability in real-life situations; (2) in a slow-paced mode with English word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence explanations by a virtual tutor to assist comprehension; and (3) with dialogues broken down into phrases and accompanied by the added feature that learners can play each of the phrases or record their own pronunciation to compare to model pronunciation.

In the normal conversational mode, the speed at the beginner level is slightly slower than that at the higher levels. The *Flash* animation in the dialogues not only simulates real-life settings but also shows in detail objects that are typically associated with these situations, for example, the moon cakes and gift boxes one encounters when visiting a Chinese family on the day of the Moon Festival. *Flash* animations of the dialogues are designed to give learners the feeling of being in a real-life setting. However, the rationale for using *Flash*-animated materials rather than videos of real people in real-life situations is not clear, and *Flash* materials usually take a lot more time and effort to produce than videos of real people. When looking closely at the lip movements of the animated characters, one can notice that they do not correspond to the sounds uttered by the characters. This might be a drawback since research has found that visual cues have an important effect on the learning of L2 pronunciation (De Bot, 1983; Hardison, 2005). Mismatch of lip movements and speech sounds could have a misleading effect on speech perception (Hardison, 1999). Therefore, target language input with the visual cues of these animated dialogues may not facilitate L2 learners' pronunciation, although the main goal of these contextualized animated dialogues might not be the practice of pronunciation but the introduction of a situation for target language use.

A feature of the slower-paced mode is the illustration of Chinese tones, which resembles a music score in which notes are represented by arrows going from left to right and high to low, indicating the pitch contour of each word and pitch change of the tone (Figure 2). This technique is often used in teaching Chinese tones. The unique feature of mode 2 is the animated graphic representation of the tones of each word in the sentence. In general, Tone 1 is always at the highest pitch in a speaker's pitch range, as shown in the arrow on the far right in Figure 2, and Tone 4, as shown in the first arrow in Figure 2, drops from the highest pitch to the lowest pitch.



Figure 2. Visualization of Chinese tones.

The third mode of dialogue presentation is a practice mode, which provides users with the opportunity to replay individual sentences and to practice the dialogues at their own pace. As shown in Figure 3, *ActiveChinese* allows users to record their own voice and compare it to a recorded model in a mouse-over mode, which provides learners with an opportunity to practice and monitor their pronunciation. Users also have the option of turning the Pinyin or English translation (English subtitles) on or off. However, they do not receive any feedback on their pronunciation from the program like other products, such as *MyET*. Instead, they have to compare their own oral language output to the model speech themselves. Having learners monitor their own speech output might support autonomy; however, research on feedback in auditory training has demonstrated its importance, raising the question of the adequacy of self-monitoring (Engwall & Bälter, 2007; Logan, Lively, & Pisoni, 1991).

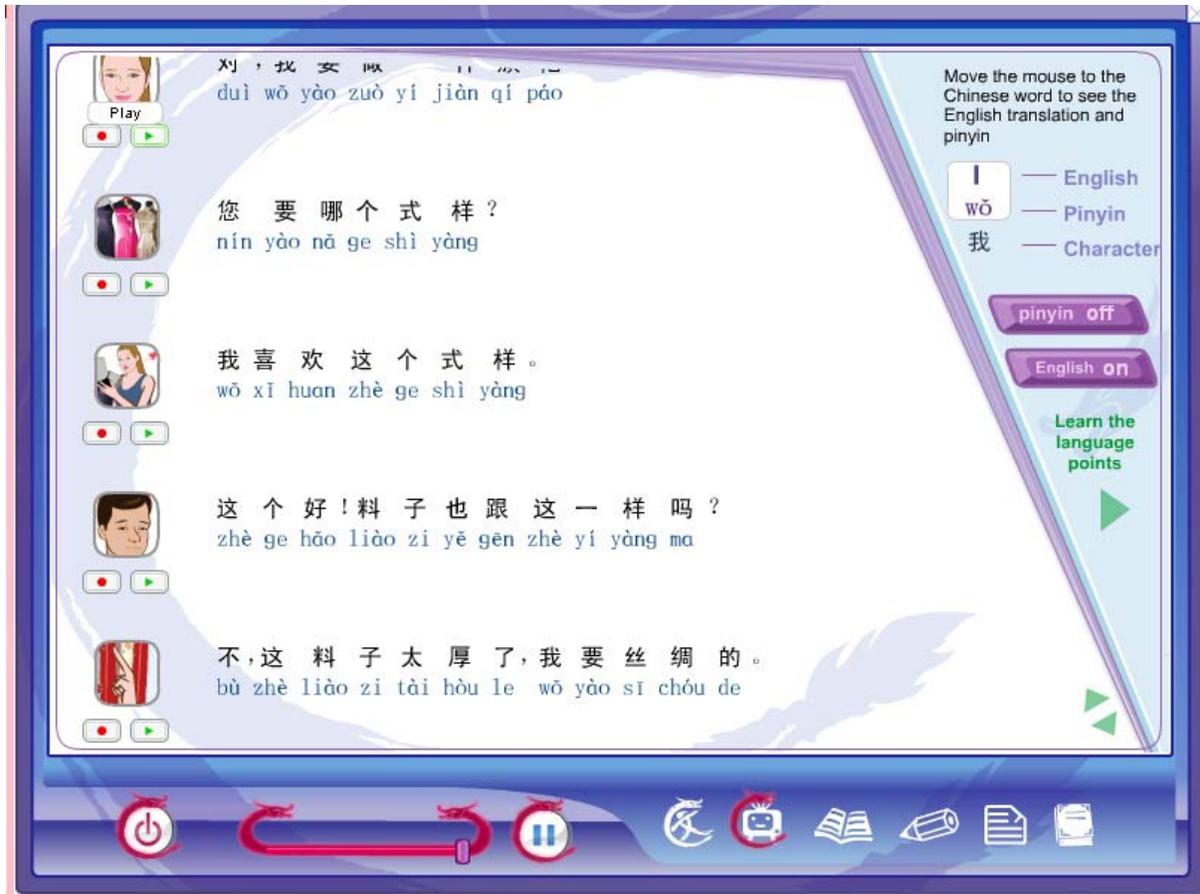


Figure 3. Pronunciation practice of sample dialogue.

In addition to the lack of feedback, another problem surfaces in the recording of model pronunciation with respect to tone sandhi³. For example, as shown in Figure 4, the expression *ni hao* is composed of two Tone 3 words next to each other. Tone sandhi should apply here, meaning that the first character should change from Tone 3 to Tone 2. This occurs at normal conversational speed, but not in the slow, or practice, mode. In Figure 4, learners should be able to see and hear the tone change in the first word. Lack of tonal alternation in the word-by-word mode can be misleading for beginning learners and might in fact foster incorrect pronunciation patterns.

After each dialogue, a series of language points are addressed by a virtual tutor, who explains orally in English, cultural and linguistic points related to the dialogue. For example, in the episode "Visiting a Chinese family," the culture and language points focus on kinship terms, which in Chinese are related to the complicated cultural concept of family and could be unfamiliar to learners from Western cultures. In

the latter part of the *Flash*-lessons, exercises and self-assessments are provided, which allow users to practice and use the target language from the lesson. Overall, the *Flash*-lesson materials follow a procedure similar to a presentation-practice-production (PPP)⁴ sequence, in which learners are provided with a context of language use, guided to practice the target linguistic forms, and then encouraged to develop their language ability by producing the target language in other contexts. While the selected target features in *ActiveChinese* might be too easy or even uninteresting, especially for learners who have already learned some Chinese or who are heritage speakers of Chinese, the diverse number of topics and language points at each level allow learners to select their own foci for learning and practice. Learners can, therefore, take responsibility for planning their own learning activities and monitor their progress.



Figure 4. Tone sandhi not reflected in word-by-word presentation.

Live Tutor

An innovative feature of *ActiveChinese* is its 24-hour online, one-on-one tutoring sessions, which can be found under the tab *Live Tutor*. Instead of going through the *Flash*-lesson materials on their own, learners can schedule a tutoring session with a tutor in Shanghai who can provide guided tutoring through each lesson's pronunciation aspects, language points, and exercises. The tutoring session can take place by regular telephone through a landline, or it can be arranged through Internet communication programs, such as *Skype*, *Yahoo Messenger*, *MSN Messenger* or *Google Talk*. This personalized service can also compensate for the potential downside of pre-selected materials in the lessons. The live tutor can respond to learners' questions instantly and is more flexible than the FAQ section on the website in helping with learners' questions or needs. In addition, the Chinese tutor can assess a learner's proficiency level and recommend an appropriate lesson sequence. It is not clear, however, if and how the tutors have been trained in assessing learners' language ability or in Chinese language pedagogy.

I asked a beginning learner of Chinese to go through a live tutoring session by talking with a native Chinese instructor from Shanghai via *Skype*. During the twenty-minute trial session, the tutor guided the learner through the lesson materials in English, responded to the learner's questions, and suggested a timetable according to which a beginner course package might be completed. The learner found it to be an interesting and pleasant language tutoring experience. In general, *Live Tutor* can assist learners in monitoring their learning and provide an opportunity to practice spoken Chinese with a native speaker. As research has emphasized, target language use (Little, 2007) and learners' awareness of developmental processes are essential elements of developing language learner autonomy (Hémard, 2006).

Resources, Community, and Culture Shocker modules

In the *Resources* section of the website, learners can listen to the pronunciation of each Chinese consonant and vowel in isolation. The writing of Chinese characters is explained through pictures, and stroke order is illustrated with animation. Another beneficial resource is the personal vocabulary book that learners can create for their own reference. Learners can add words from both the vocabulary in the lessons and from the built-in dictionary, which is searchable in both Chinese and English. The program also allows learners to generate vocabulary items in the form of flashcards which they can study online (see Figure 5) or print out. While this function enables learners to develop memory-related strategies through mechanical means, a drawback may be the lack of context or sentence examples for each word. Generally speaking, *Resources* provides learners with additional relevant information and materials that not only encourage learners to select external resources to expand their knowledge of Chinese but also to develop different learning strategies.

The screenshot displays the ActiveChinese website interface. At the top left is the logo for ActiveChinese, with the tagline "Chinese Language Skills for the Business World". To the right of the logo are navigation links: "Home | My Profile | Log Out" and a personalized greeting "Welcome Scott!". Below the header is a red navigation bar with buttons for "Today", "Lesson Plan", "Resources" (which is highlighted), "Live Tutor", "Community", and "Culture Shocker". The main content area has a light blue background. It starts with "Flashcard Settings: English to Characters" and a dropdown arrow. Below that, it says "You are playing 1 of 3". Two large white boxes are shown side-by-side. The left box contains the text "to thank" and the right box contains the Chinese characters "謝謝". Below these boxes are two links: "Next >>" and "Remove". At the bottom of the flashcard area are two blue buttons: "Shuffle Cards" and "Create New Cards". The footer of the page contains a horizontal line followed by the text: "© 2006 ActiveChinese Home | Privacy Statement | Terms & Conditions | Contact Us | Support | Other Chinese Resources".

Figure 5. Sample online vocabulary flashcard.

Community is a virtual community for registered learners who are interested in sharing and interacting with other learners online. Learners can find information on cultural issues as well as lesson content. The "Blogs" and "Discussion Forum" in this section allow learners to reflect on their own language learning and share experiences with other registered learners. Such a virtual community of learners has the potential of promoting learners' autonomous learning by addressing principles of learner involvement and learner reflection (Little, 2007). However, the content in *Community* is variable and not as organized as in the other sections on this website. Learners logged onto the website need to log in again to the forum to post messages, and the dearth of posts and responses shows that online discussion activities are not frequently used. It would be desirable to have a community moderator who could help to keep the site active in order to make full use of this community function.

The last tab, *Culture Shocker*, contains information about cultural aspects of living in China that may be unfamiliar to foreigners. Information about *Culture Shocker* can also be found in *Community*. Nevertheless, this apparent repetition is not redundant but highlights cultural information about the rapidly growing and changing China. Instead of perpetuating stereotypes about ancient Chinese culture, *Culture Shocker* portrays life and customs in contemporary China (Figure 6) through 40 comics. For example, *Culture Shocker 9* points out that the way people exchange business cards in China is a crucial aspect of their business relationship. It is expected that business people pass and receive business cards with both hands and address the person with his or her job title and name immediately after receiving the card. Such information is particularly helpful and important for learners who want to develop successful business relationships with Chinese people. While the use of comics might trivialize the cultural information, they are more visually interesting than text only culture vignettes and might be a way to mitigate culturally sensitive information, such as China's one-child policy, which is addressed in *Culture Shocker 18*. The comic shockers and explanations are presented in English instead of Chinese. Although it would be desirable to contextualize language within culture knowledge and vice versa, cultural information explained in English might be more suitable for lower-level learners who want to acquire information about modern Chinese culture.

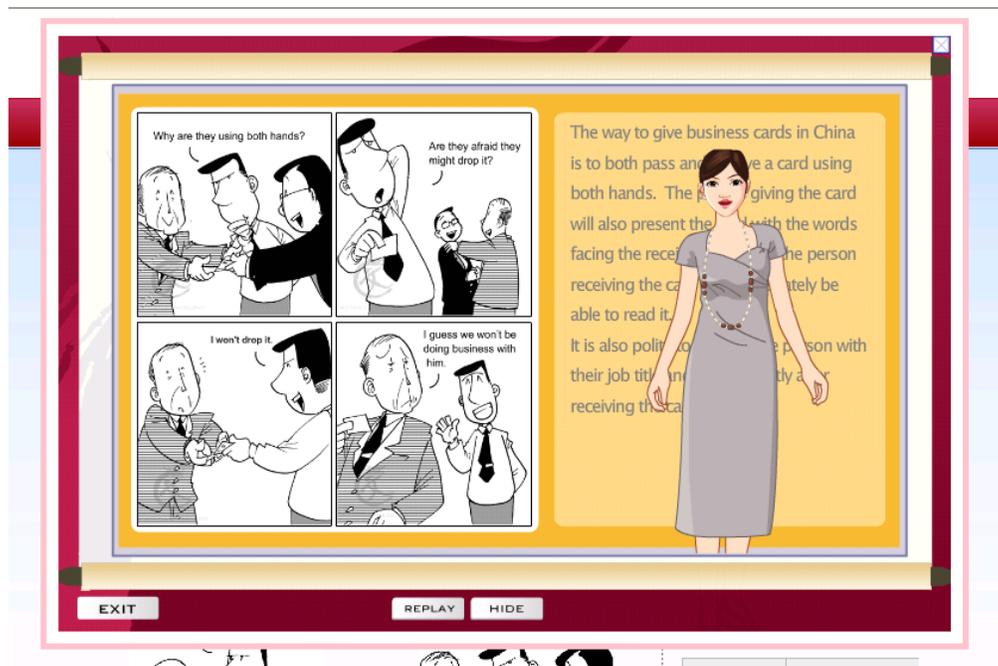


Figure 6. A *Culture Shocker* example.

Summary

ActiveChinese introduces an Internet-based language learning environment which combines traditional materials and hypermedia with communication technology. Overall, *ActiveChinese* presents a promising language learning environment in a self-contained website that incorporates interactive technology and links learners with appropriate learning resources to foster their autonomy. The strengths of this program lie in the situational dialogues and the simulation of daily life, the graphic representation of Chinese tones, the variety of linguistic and cultural points, and online live tutoring sessions. *ActiveChinese* allows learners of Chinese to determine their own pace and focus on learning materials that fit their needs. Beginning or low-intermediate adult learners of Chinese, particularly those who want to acquire some Chinese language skills and cultural knowledge for business purposes, will find this program intuitive and approachable. Distance learners who are in a Chinese-as-a-foreign-language environment or a self-study setting can benefit from the direct communication with native Chinese speakers and interaction among learners provided by this commercial package. The website can also serve as supplemental material to a regular in-class program as instructors and learners will find that the variety of everyday topics and cultural points easily fits into their curricular needs or individual interests. Although the lessons are designed for beginning to low-intermediate learners of Chinese, the content and materials are flexible and can be used by a learner at any level desiring instruction in a particular area or skill that *ActiveChinese* addresses. The practical purpose of learning a language is to communicate and interact with people. *ActiveChinese* emphasizes the communicative purposes and interactivity of language learning and, therefore, turns learning Chinese into an active experience.

NOTES

1. Rich Internet Applications (RIAs), introduced by Macromedia (now Adobe http://www.adobe.com/resources/business/rich_internet_apps/), are web applications with functionality and features that offer a more interactive experience for web users (also see <http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/about.php> for language learning applications).
2. Pinyin, more formally called Hanyu Pinyin, is the most common Standard Mandarin Romanization system in use and uses the Latin alphabet to represent sounds in Standard Mandarin (see <http://www.pinyin.info/index.html> for details).
3. There are a few rules for combining tones when speaking, called tone sandhi. Sometimes tones change based on other tones in nearby syllables. The most common change occurs when two Tone 3s are next to each other: the first Tone 3 changes to Tone 2.
4. The PPP model (presentation, practice, production) is a second-language teaching method that sets up a situation, conducts drills, and leads to original performance (de la Fuente, 2006). Typically, in the first stage, presentation, the targeted forms are in context (cf., the *Dialogue* sections of the *Flash* lessons). In the second stage, practice, learners repeat the target items and practice with predetermined or focused structures (cf., the *Drill* sections). Then, in the production stage, learners produce the forms and expressions they have learned in an open situation such as in a role-play (cf., the Expression part in the *Drill* sections and *Self-Assessment* sections).

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Scott Chien-Hsiung Chiu is a Ph.D. student in the Second Language Studies Program at Michigan State University. He has worked as a research assistant in the Rich Internet Applications project at the Center

for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) at MSU and is also an instructor of Chinese at the Lansing Chinese School.

E-mail: chiuchie@msu.edu

REFERENCES

- Engwall, O. & Bälter, O. (2007). Pronunciation feedback from real and virtual language teachers. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 20(3), 235-262.
- De Bot, K. (1983). Visual feedback of intonation I: Effectiveness and induced practice behavior. *Language and Speech*, 26(4), 331-350.
- de la Fuente, M. J. (2006). Classroom L2 vocabulary acquisition: Investigating the role of pedagogical task and form-focused instruction. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(3), 263-295.
- Hardison, D. M. (1999). Bimodal speech perception by native and nonnative speakers of English: Factors influencing the McGurk effect. *Language Learning*, 49(2), 213-283.
- Hardison, D. M. (2005). Second-language spoken word identification: Effects of perceptual training, visual cues, and phonetic environment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 26(4), 579-596.
- Hémard, D. (2006). Evaluating hypermedia structures as a means of improving language learning strategies and motivation. *ReCALL*, 18(1), 24-44.
- Little, D. (1999) Developing learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: A social-interactive view of learning and three fundamental pedagogical principles. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 38, 77-88.
- Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 14-29.
- Logan, J.S., Lively, S.E., & Pisoni, D.B. (1991). Training Japanese listeners to identify English /r/ and /l/: A first report. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 89(2), 874-886.
- Warschauer, M.(2002). A developmental perspective on technology in language education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(3), 453-475.
- Weasenforth, D., Meloni, C., & Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2005). Learner autonomy and course management software. In B. Holmberg, M.A. Shelley, & C.J. White (Eds.), *Distance education and languages: Evolution and change* (pp. 195-211). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.