

# Optimal Language Learning

## The Strategies and Epiphanies of Gifted Language Learners

Noumane Rahouti  
and  
Lawrence Baines

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

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# Introduction

Every year, a flurry of new books are published that promise to teach mastery of a foreign language in a relatively short time span. Consider some recent titles:

*Fluent in 3 Months: How Anyone at Any Age Can Learn to Speak Any Language from Anywhere in the World* (Lewis, 2014).

*Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language Fast and Never Forget It* (Wyner, 2014).

*How to Learn Any Language in a Few Months While Enjoying Yourself: 45 Proven Tips for Language Learners* (Nicholson, 2014).

*How I Learned to Speak Spanish Fluently in Three Months: Discover How You Can Conquer Spanish Easily the Same* (Oakfield, 2016).

*How to Learn a Foreign Language in Four Months: Proven Methods for Fluency* (Penn, 2016).

Most books that promise fast and easy second language acquisition are not based on research of any kind. Rather, they combine homilies about the importance of developing a positive attitude with a mandate to “really listen,” and the vague assurance that the process toward fluency will be effortless. While it might be appealing to hear that language learning is easy, unfortunately, it is not. Despite the confident assurances of charlatans selling language books, there is no getting around the intense, complex work involved in becoming fluent in another language.

Of course, the audience for quick and easy bromides for language success may largely comprise people who have tried—and failed—to learn another language. Rather than base a language learning system on false promises of instantaneous fluency, *Optimal Language Learning* takes a different

approach. *Optimal Language Learning* investigates the vast, (mostly) unbiased body of research on language acquisition in concert with close analyses of the techniques of individuals who have developed a remarkable affinity for becoming fluent in foreign languages.

The techniques of these *language mavens* are brought to light and thoroughly examined to demonstrate how real experts get to be experts. Learning a new language is not quick or easy, but unlike popular no-mess, no-fuss methods, *Optimal Language Learning* is actually effective.

*Flow* is a term coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that means “the psychology of optimal experience.” The opposite of flow is *negentropy*, the equivalent of going nowhere, encountering zero success, slamming into a brick wall. It is negentropy, not flow, that happens too often when many of us attempt to learn a new language.

If you can imagine yourself participating in an activity you love when your mind and body are totally focused on the activity-at-hand, and the task is so challenging that it requires your total concentration and maximum effort to succeed, then you are imagining yourself experiencing flow (Azizi & Ghonsooly, 2015).

People can achieve flow through a variety of experiences—mountain climbing, solving complex scientific problems, running a marathon, writing a story, performing surgery, playing a musical instrument, and—learning to speak a language. The concept of flow has been effectively applied in professional sports, in the boardrooms of corporations, in medical schools, in clinics, and in in the military. *Optimal Language Learning* applies the concept of flow to language acquisition.

For language mavens, learning a new language is a flow experience. For those of us seeking to learn a new language, flow is key. If language learning can be turned into a flow experience, then our time and energy will be meaningfully spent.

Chapter 1 briefly discusses learning theory and psycholinguistics in the context of language learning. Chapter 2 explains the importance of high quality experiences and how the theory of flow can inform how language is acquired. Chapters 3–7 highlight the language learning techniques of five language mavens—Andrew, Emma, Rebecca, Genevieve, and Scott—who possess an uncanny knack for languages.

Like most language learners, these individuals began with a vague curiosity about languages, but unlike most language learners, they took their language skills way beyond basic communicative skills into fluency. Chapter 8 analyzes the similarities and differences among the five language mavens and suggests implications for teaching and learning language.

Only 7 percent of American college students take a foreign language. The number of enrollments in language classes at universities in the United States

declined by 111,000 between 2009 and 2013 (Friedman, 2015). Traditional approaches to language study have not been overwhelmingly successful, as less than 1 percent of Americans are proficient in a language that they studied during their K–12 years (Saiz & Zoido, 2005).

Had these five language mavens been solely reliant on traditional approaches, they would have never reached the heights that they achieved. Instead, they took matters into their own hands, took control of their learning, and gained fluency. This book explains how they did it.

## Chapter Three

# Andrew

“If you want to learn the language, you have to use it over and over in context.”

—Andrew Crane

L1=English

L2 (fluent)=Chinese

L2 (some familiarity)=Spanish and Arabic

Andrew teaches in a Center for English as a Second Language (ESL) at a university. He is twenty-eight years old, and he is in his second semester of a master’s degree in world-languages education. After an experience as an ESL teacher in China, he is fluent in Chinese and is exploring the possibility of teaching Chinese in K–12 schools in the United States.

His journey to China marked a turning point in his approach to languages and, in a more general way, in his academic and professional life. He grew up in an upper-middle-class family in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He went to a public school, which he described as being “very good and very diverse, although the majority of the kids were white.” He has two older sisters, one younger sister, and since his father remarried, Andrew has a half-brother and three stepsisters. His stepmother is Colombian “so half of the family is Hispanic.”

Andrew says, “Risk-taking involves not being afraid of change.” Most of the people in his home state are scared of change, he says. He is the opposite. He is scared of “non-change.” He admits that the members of his family generally live conservatively and avoid taking unnecessary risks, which probably influenced him to be different.

His mother has left her hometown only a few times in her life. He perceives his brothers and sisters as “not really being into languages.” From a very early





**Figure 3.1** Andrew with a Group of Some of his Students in Blue Uniforms in Changsha, Hunan, China.

age, he knew he would leave home at some point in his life. All he had to do was to wait for the right opportunity.

### INTEREST IN LANGUAGES

Although he does not recall the exact moment he started to be interested in foreign languages, Andrew recalls that video games and animated movies from Japan fascinated him as a child. The “manga culture,” as it is called,

made him curious about the meanings of the Japanese script that would flutter across the screen.

As he got older, Andrew started reading literature written by Japanese authors, such as Yukio Mishima and Haruki Murakami. Although the readings were in English, his interest in Japanese literature helped stimulate an interest in cultures and languages. As an adolescent, he tried learning Japanese through self-help books and audio, but he gave it up because there were no opportunities to interact with native speakers, no chance to practice.

In seventh grade, Andrew had a social studies teacher, Mr. Smith, who taught geography by connecting it with culture, a connection which made the class lively and interesting. As an undergraduate student at the university, he continued his study of geography, which gave him a genuine sense of the world while it kindled his interest in traveling.

When he got to the university, Andrew decided to enroll in Spanish, “but it did not do anything.” In addition to completing the work for class, Andrew tried memorizing long lists of vocabulary words, which led him to increase his lexicon. However, the opportunities to practice Spanish inside and outside of class were scarce. “Learning from the book was not enough,” he explains.

He decries the overreliance on English that his university instructor used to teach Spanish. “How many people are actually speaking Spanish? How do you pick up patterns if you don’t hear it constantly?” Because of the lack of exposure to the language and the uninspired strategies of his university Spanish instructor, Andrew quickly lost interest.

“They don’t teach you in a way where you put together sentences in your mind.” Students were not expected to be creative. In fact, experimentation was actively discouraged. Andrew says, “Once you learn the vocabulary list, take the test and move on, you forget.”

Despite his disenchantment with Spanish class, Andrew received straight A’s. What would have changed his opinion about Spanish would have been “more repetition [of Spanish] in class, more engaging activities, and going to a country like Mexico.”

In addition to his underwhelming experience with Spanish, Andrew thought he made poor choices during his time pursuing the bachelor’s degree. Because he did not have a precise idea of what he wanted to do, he enrolled in classes that were neither closely related nor countable under a specific degree program.

As a freshman, he was “pre-med,” anticipating a future career in the health sciences, but he did not enjoy science courses very much. Then, he took some classes in which he had a genuine interest—sociology and religion. Taking classes in these subjects intensified his interest in cultures, human interactions, and, to a certain extent, languages.

Eventually, Andrew graduated with a bachelor's degree in multidisciplinary studies. He is "not proud of it" because he thinks his degree lacks coherence, and is only a "bunch of credits pasted together."

When discussing learning a language, Andrew compares it to learning to play the guitar. Music "is another type of language," he says. Music is a "combination of sounds that make a meaningful piece." Just as with language, the guitar produces different tones, and it is possible to "play the same thing in ten different ways."

One creates music on the guitar by varying the combinations of chords, rhythms, and speed. By mastering only four chords on the guitar, it is possible to create an endless variety of melodies and songs. When learning a language, once some fundamental "chunks" are learned, it is possible to relay those basic chunks into longer, more complex communications.

Andrew sees his interest in language as part of an ongoing fascination with cultures and traveling. He does not see himself as a "language person" per se, but his life experiences have led him to languages. "It is not like I was born for languages," he said. In fact, when he first set foot in China, he could not speak any other language but English.

## MOVING TO CHINA

Upon graduation from college, Andrew decided to look for job opportunities outside his home state. Eventually, he winnowed down the possibilities to two choices. The first job involved working in a vineyard in Oregon. The prospect of living in a beautiful area of the country, interacting with nature, and earning a good salary was very attractive. The second job involved working 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in a business office.

Although the salary was good, the sedentary nature of the job and the nature of the work were not appealing. Just as he was deciding to move to Oregon, Andrew received an email that, according to him, "looked like a fraud." Its subject line was, "Go to China and teach!"

Although the email seemed like just another piece of spam, Andrew decided to investigate. One of the things he learned during his investigation was that, to move to China, he needed to get a work visa.

As he was gathering information on the work visa, he learned that the opportunity to teach in China was "not a scam," but a legitimate possibility for employment. He applied, got the job, and obtained the visa. His initial plan was to stay for a year. "I saw an opportunity to go abroad, and I just took it. I was ready." Deciding to go to China was an "impulsive decision." In Andrew's view, his spontaneity is both an asset and liability.

Before going to China, Andrew did not set goals for himself, or at least, he did not have goals pertaining to learning the Chinese language. His basic

plan was to travel to a foreign country, teach English, and then travel around from there as much as possible. While Andrew acknowledged the need to understand Chinese to be functional in his everyday life, he believed that English was going to be “enough to get around.” He admits that, “I did not know what I was doing.”

Andrew explains that it is beneficial to have a mentor or friend proficient in the language who can answer questions that inevitably arise. When he first arrived at the Shanghai airport, he was lucky enough to become friends with a fellow teacher who had been in China for four years and knew the language well. They exchanged contact information.

Since they lived close to each other, they would talk daily, usually about aspects of the language and local customs. This unplanned mentor relationship helped Andrew a great deal. “It is not like I wanted to be as good as him,” he said, but seeing an American speak Chinese so well made him realize that gaining mastery over Chinese was not an insurmountable undertaking.

## FUNCTIONAL CHINESE

An old, Chinese man on a train once advised Andrew that, when learning a new language, “Your facial skin needs to be thicker than the Great Wall.” Having thick skin and being fearless are traits that were common among the people Andrew encountered in China who had successfully learned the language. He notes that other traits that seemed to help were being extroverted and having a natural curiosity.

Once he arrived in China, Andrew decided to learn the language by studying topics that were related to “realistic situations such as going to the bank, buying train tickets, or buying food at the supermarket.” He reasoned that, if he studied a host of practical phrases, then he would have more opportunities to speak to people while conducting his daily activities.

To refresh his memory when walking around in public, he would always carry a notebook and write down new words as he encountered them. The notebook was also used to record notes to himself, to jot down general observations, or to record phrases overheard in conversations.

After learning new vocabulary terms and grammatical rules, he would write sentences using those new words and rules as he felt an urgent need to “apply the language” right away, to make it stick. He realized that, if he learned vocabulary words but did not practice them in this manner, they would be lost—like he lost the meanings of the Spanish words that he had furiously memorized as an undergraduate in college.

In the early stages of learning Chinese, Andrew found it necessary to practice writing new vocabulary words at least an hour per day to make him

feel like he was making progress with the language. In his experience, it typically took three days of practice before he could remember a new word well enough to use it without referring to his notes.

He stresses the importance of repetition when learning from a book or through oral communication. “If you say a word once, you will inevitably forget the word. If you say a word a thousand times, you will remember it for many years.”

As a neophyte to China, Andrew also tried to learn as many cultural aspects of the language as possible. “In Chinese, it is customary to learn about the regional differences in cuisine, the customs of the 56 minority groups, the major festivals, and famous works of literature.” He made a conscious effort to make cultural references to food while dining at local restaurants, to recite poems during meetings or class talks, and to get into discussions with Chinese of a particular region about their local culture. When he was mingling with Chinese in daily life, he felt a little strange in that he always seemed to be “performing,” rather than simply “being” part of the community.

After a few months, Andrew learned a few key phrases in Chinese. He had memorized phrases such as “nǐhǎo,” (你好, “hello”) or “duōshǎo qián” (多少钱, “how much money”), and he was more or less understood on the street. However, he still had a hard time understanding some native speakers. For example, when he got into a taxi with his American friend who was



**Figure 3.2** Andrew Discussing Spring Festival Paper Cuts with Artist in Shigu Ancient Town, Yunnan, China.

fluent in Chinese, the friend would do all the interacting with the taxi driver while Andrew would fall silent. Andrew knew that the journey from knowing selected chunks of the language to gaining mastery would require a significant amount of effort, but that night in the taxi, he decided that he would become proficient in Chinese.

Coincidentally, shortly after this decision, the apartment where he was living had an extended power outage. As a result, there was “no light, no access to the Internet, no TV, nothing.” Because he had nothing to distract him, Andrew decided the time was right to begin studying Chinese intensively.

Rather than play around on the Internet or watch TV, he started spending long hours, sometimes as many as eight hours a day, studying. He would study before work, walk over to the school to teach (the school was conveniently located next to his apartment), return home, and begin studying again.

The notebook with which he was taking occasional notes became his constant companion. He would systematically draw and memorize “about 40 characters in three days.” He would write characters in his notebook ten times, and then flip the page and rewrite them from memory.

After memorizing a character and its corresponding tone(s), he began an extended study of grammar. He would combine newly learned words with a new grammatical rule. He would go outside after studying and practice with locals the sentences or words he had just memorized. He would ask them questions such as, “Where is the library?” to start a conversation and then proceed from there as an excuse to keep the exchange going.

The content he was using did not vary much because he memorized sentences in chunks. “I would say the same things over and over.” Although many of his “trial conversations” with locals were successful, he would still practice words and phrases repeatedly so as not to forget what he had just learned. Although it was “tedious work,” Andrew considered this intense repetition as absolutely necessary for his continued growth.

## LANGUAGE EPIPHANY

One day, when practicing his sentences with a clerk in a grocery store, Andrew suddenly realized that he was finally able to have a normal conversation with a native speaker. He explained that, “it is not like from one day to another; I understood everything,” but the move to competence was startling nevertheless.

It gave him the confidence to start experimenting with the language and to try out new ideas. He would combine several sentences together, try out new words, ask questions, and actively negotiate meaning.

“Suddenly, things started to click. That’s the best way to describe it ... It all hits you all at once. You can put together all these words in your speech, and everything speeds up.”

One interesting breakthrough was understanding not only his areas of strength, but also where he was falling short. Being functional in the streets reinforced his decision to study on a regular basis. When the electricity in his apartment was fixed a week later, he decided to forego his usual entertainments so that he could continue his focus on learning Chinese.

Although Andrew was not fluent in Chinese at this point, he characterized this short, concentrated bout of studying during the power outage to be the turning point in the evolution of his language proficiency. In describing his epiphany, Andrew stressed two aspects of the experience as key:

1. His willingness to be creative as soon as things started to “click.”
2. His consciousness about the exact moment that he became conversational in Chinese and the abruptness of the epiphany.

Andrew explains that, if he possessed the skills before the epiphany, he did not exploit them, so, in effect, they did not exist. His competence with Chinese “popped up really fast” and, as his results improved, he became ever more driven to master the language.

When signing up to go to China, Andrew’s original plan was to work for a year and then return home. At the end of his first year, he reflected that, for much of his time in China, he had been in survival mode, just trying to get by. He had overcome a series of challenges, including becoming conversant in a difficult language, pretty much on his own, and he had successfully worked as a teacher of English in a local school.

Although Andrew did not know how much longer he might stay, he wanted to extend his Asian adventure. In China, there was “always something to do,” at least compared to his hometown, and his experiences, by and large, had been pleasant. Secondly, he was starting to enjoy teaching, which was “a whole new experience that was challenging and fun.” Finally, he was getting better at the Chinese language, and he wanted to see how far his learning might take him.

The challenge of the language was tied up with the novelty of living in a foreign culture. Andrew ended up staying in China for two more years, and during those two years, he made a transition in his study routine, moving from a reliance on books and notes to a focus on interactions with locals.

Although he still used books, they became secondary to primal experience. Rather than experiencing a “second epiphany,” he felt that the additional expertise he acquired over the next two years was layered atop the foundation



of his “first epiphany,” which was created out of the desire to speak well, aided by intensive study, and instigated after an extended loss of power at his apartment.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Andrew liked the city where he worked because it was diverse, and he spent a lot of time socializing with people who were French, British, and American, as well as Chinese. Some of his newfound friends were journalists, and they influenced his perceptions of the culture and the society. They also encouraged him to record his experiences through photographs and written descriptions. “I got really good at photography,” he says.

As with music and language, Andrew also sees parallels between photography and language. For example, he notes that no two people see buildings, flowers, or sunsets in exactly the same way. He tells the story that, one day, he walked by a beautiful garden of flowers and decided to take a picture.

He had an image in his mind of the kind of photograph that he wanted to take, so he found a ladder, climbed to the top rung, and took the picture that “he had in mind.” His perspective of the flower from atop the ladder would be quite different from a photographer standing on the ground. Andrew notes (with nonchalant profundity) that differences in perspective determine differences in outcome.

Andrew contends that photography requires being active, rather than passive. Instead of waiting for the right shot, the right angle, or the right moment, a good photographer creates it. When learning Chinese, Andrew explains, it was essential to be creating the “right moments” by going outside and talking to people rather than waiting for the “right moments” to come so that “you can use a newly learned word.” Exposure is not enough. A language learner must be active, not passive.

Both photography and language learning rely upon repetition. Learning certain language skills requires sustained repetition. Repetition is tolerable and beneficial as long as it culminates in a meaningful experience or an opportunity to apply what has been learned. A photographer may take the same kind of photo repeatedly, but at some point, there has to be a purpose—a photo framed and displayed at home or entered into a contest.

For repetition to be effective, there must be an evolution from replication to application. Once repetition is able to engender an appropriate, automatic response, a creative response becomes possible. It is with the engagement of the creative mind that learning takes off.



## THE RETURN

In his third and final year in China, Andrew became a kind of local celebrity. He was in high demand as a speaker to large assemblies of students at universities and to auditoriums full of teachers and K–12 students. He was interviewed on the radio and was featured on TV. Andrew wound up teaching English for several schools and agencies. One of the last agencies for which he worked promised him a big paycheck, but never delivered it. He filed a complaint with the agency and the local police department. At first, his complaints were not taken seriously, but eventually he received reprimands and threats of bodily harm that seemed quite serious. So, Andrew felt that he had no choice but to flee the country.

In addition to teaching two Chinese courses at a high school and teaching English at a Center for ESL at the university, today Andrew is “playing around” with Arabic and thinks he might want to explore teaching English as a foreign language in the Middle East in the near future.

He confesses that he likely will not be able to master Arabic while living in the United States because there are too few Arabic speakers. “Language needs to be immediately applicable,” he says, used “consistently in a real context.” When immersed in a language and culture, learning is “not studying but fun.” Unless he decides to move to a country where Arabic is the dominant language, Andrew predicts that he will lose both his vocabulary and his desire to learn Arabic.

As an instructor of Chinese in the United States and an instructor of English for non-native speakers, Andrew relies upon what he learned from his struggles to learn the rudiments of Chinese. Because he found success in learning “chunks” of language, he introduces words in meaningful combinations. For example, he teaches a verb with an object, first separately, then together. His goal is to have his students “automatize” certain foundational chunks in the target language so that they can move on to creative uses of the language and eventually, learn to construct sentences of their own.

As he emphasizes the practicality of language, he concentrates on high-frequency words, especially in the beginning, to build a knowledge base. For one lesson, for example, he teaches vocabulary suitable for a restaurant because the most likely place for his American students to speak Chinese, apart from hanging out with a group of Chinese students, is in a Chinese restaurant.

Although not ideal, speaking Chinese at a Chinese restaurant would at least give students the opportunity to use the language in authentic ways. However, he notes that most students are reticent to speak because they do not want to embarrass themselves by making mistakes. To learn a language, Andrew implores, a student must do “his or her part of the job,” step out of the bubble, and enter the real world.



**Figure 3.3** Andrew at the Helm of an Ox-Driven Rickshaw During a Rapeseed Flower Festival in Luoping, Yunnan, China.

## ANALYSIS

Andrew's approach to language learning started out haphazardly but became increasingly systematic over time. When he was first exposed to foreign languages, he did not have the metalinguistic skills to become an autonomous learner. With his experience in China, he had to develop sophisticated language skills just to survive.

He would acquire vocabulary, memorize certain sentences, and replicate these words and phrases in real contexts to create an experience with the

word. As for grammar, he believes that patterns can be acquired with regular exposure to the language, which is called *implicit grammar instruction* in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), as opposed to *explicit instruction*, which relies on teaching the rule first.

Andrew's Spanish classes at the university tended towards explicit instruction, offered few interactive experiences, and did not allow him (or other students) to control any aspect of their own learning. Although he was a good student who could recite endless lists of Spanish vocabulary on demand, Andrew quickly became bored because the content and the degree of difficulty never changed. The number of words he knew increased, but the challenge was static, centered on committing words and phrases to memory. While Andrew learned grammatical rules and a few phrases in Spanish, most instruction was in English, making the class artificial and "mind-numbing."

The accumulation of Spanish vocabulary meant little without application. His Spanish instruction was input-based. He received information, but was required to produce little in response. Freire would say that, in the case of his Spanish class, Andrew was the object rather than the subject of his education. If the class had been taught in Spanish, if students had been required to create sentences of their own, if a shift would have been made to practical usage, Andrew might have developed "an ear for the language" as well as a love for it.

Obviously, Andrew never experienced flow in his Spanish class, and as a result, he did not look for opportunities to practice the language outside of class. His disgust over the non-engaging style of the instructor carried over to a general disinterest in Spanish language and culture. Andrew did not consider learning Spanish an enjoyable activity, so he saw no reason to pursue it, though his stepmother, and half-brothers and sisters were from Columbia and were fluent speakers of Spanish.

An advantage of plopping down in a country where you do not speak the language is that you receive regular instant feedback when you interact with locals and you are able to monitor your proficiency daily. In Andrew's case, he started his study of Chinese by identifying specific interactions of daily life, such as "buying food at the supermarket." According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Andrew was *preparing the kind of interaction* he was going to have. As his skills evolved, he created ever-higher goals.

The initial goal was to be functional and understood by local Chinese, so Andrew acquired and tried to master "chunks" of vocabulary and grammar. The next step was to move into being creative with the language. To assess his relative success, he used the abundant and immediate feedback of the people on the street with whom he interacted every day.

Andrew's ability to gain some degree of control over his experience is highly correlated with the confidence needed to "play around" with the

language. Being creative with the language means actively manipulating it. Language researcher Swain (2005) argued that language use has a prominent role in learning a L2 because interactions involve both receiving input and producing output.

Routinization and practice lead to automaticity, which makes the cognitive load of moving to fluency much easier. Initially, through intensive study and continual self-monitoring, Andrew was able to develop his own stepping stones to learning the language. From his practice of rehearsed sentences, Andrew moved to a regimen of daily, prolonged interactions with native speakers, which allowed him to keep moving the bar higher and higher. He went from being able to greet people and introduce himself to being able to take a taxi and buy items in a supermarket to moving almost effortlessly through daily life.

Although linguists might attribute Andrew's success with Chinese as testimony of the veracity of socio-cultural theory (SCT) or the "output hypothesis," his experience can also be viewed in terms of flow. Flow theory does not contradict SLA theories; rather, flow theory helps explain language acquisition at the individual level.

While the output hypothesis and SCT are theories that take place in the objective world, flow is a subjective state that depends on the learner's perception of his or her emotions and the intensity of engagement while performing a particular task. Flow explains how a language learner can gain skills that enable mastery far beyond what they might have imagined.

In Andrew's case, learning a language was situated within the broader context of learning how to live in a completely new environment. Andrew needed to be functional in the target language if he wanted to survive. However, he needed other skills as well, such as being sociable, learning correct etiquette, and navigating his job as teacher within the context of being a single young man in a foreign land.

At the end of his first year, Andrew started to exert some control over the Chinese language. Possessing new skills and enjoying the feeling of having acquired them, he decided to increase the challenge by staying in China for two more years. In a way, language became just one part of larger skill set that involved integrating into Chinese society as a full-fledged member, at least to the extent that a white foreigner could become a full-fledged member of Chinese society.

Andrew managed to adapt to his environment, identified the necessary skills he would need, then set out to acquire them. Once he acquired a certain skill, he would use the newly acquired skill to go after more complex skills.

Over time, a connection emerged between his love of language and his love for photography that went beyond an interest in culture. As he began

to blossom as a speaker of Chinese, he also began to grow as an artist and a photographer.

Recently, Andrew published a book for students beginning their study of Chinese called *Practical Chinese: Beginner Level I*. The book distills for language learners the kind of preparation that he wished he had had before coming to live in China.

Andrew's photographs have quickly gained a large Internet following, and he has won a few awards, including one from *National Geographic* magazine. A collection of his photography can be found at <https://andrewjcrane.wordpress.com/>.