

MB's Speaking Practice Guide

Even if you live in China or have a Chinese spouse, we find that targeted speaking practice with a paid tutor is the most efficient and reliable method of improving your speaking skill. We've therefore focused the entire guide around finding and using tutors in the most productive way possible. *That said, many of the tips in this guide can be applied to a free language exchange partner or indeed any native speaker you end up chatting with.*

Tutors are not essential when you are starting out, but you will eventually want to work with them. We generally recommend that you first complete Phase 5 of [The Mandarin Blueprint Method](#), which means learning how to read, write, and speak the most common 1,000 words. This gives you a nice foundation to work with, and your paid sessions will be a lot more fruitful as a result. However, if you'd like to jump in only knowing '你好', that's fine too!

Before you go and book your first session, let's first understand what a tutor is really for, where you can find them best ones, and what you can actually do with them.

What we use tutors for

For 'activating' passive vocabulary

Although speaking and writing are predominantly products of input, they still need to be practiced separately and extensively if you want to produce the language with fluency and accuracy.

Go into a session and try to have meaningful and exciting conversations using the words you've been learning through listening and reading. Push your limits of what you know and ask a lot of questions about how to use any unfamiliar words.

For pointing out mistakes

The biggest strength of native teachers is their highly attuned sense of Mandarin created by many thousands of hours immersed in the language. They can tell when something is wrong instantly, just as you can for your native language. More importantly, they can offer example sentences for how to use words correctly.

To provide encouragement & motivation

Genuine encouragement is when a tutor notices where you've improved and tells you at the appropriate time. It is not barking the words “真棒! zhēn bàng" ("Great job") over and over again. During your first few classes, try to notice how your tutor corrects you.

How do tutors provide motivation? By giving you the opportunity to apply your growing knowledge of Mandarin and have meaningful interactions with native speakers, which is a key reason for learning a second language.

To find level-appropriate and engaging content

Most tutors won't do this for you without a direct request. When you do ask for resources, they usually have a lot of recommendations, and they are more adept at navigating the Chinese internet. Use them for these valuable resources.

Finding tutors

Look in the right places

Here are my favorite resources for online tutors:

TOP CHOICE: Italki - By far the biggest selection of teachers (highly varied quality), affordable, and a straight-forward booking system.

Tandem & Hellotalk - These both have a similar feel to social media chat software like Whatsapp or Wechat. They are very similar apps, and it's down to personal preference which one is better. You can do video calls, audio calls or just text back and forth. They are both fantastic resources for building your portfolio of tutors and language

exchange partners. However, they are often used as dating apps, so bear that in mind.

Examine reviews carefully

The best standard by which to judge a tutor is retention, not necessarily the number of positive reviews. If a tutor has less reviews but clearly students are staying longer, then that's a better choice than someone with many positive reviews and students but low retention.

Establish what you want

Really think about what you want from your tutor and your sessions together. What are your learning goals and how can your tutor help you reach them? Do you have anything in particular you would like your tutor to do? Think about that and write it down.

My personal goal is try to have as many meaningful conversations on as many different topics as possible, with some reading and writing practice thrown in regularly. Importantly, my tutor must provide me with not only corrections (sent to me in writing so I don't have to type everything out myself), but also key phrases and ways of producing the language that can help me sound more native. I also prefer tutors with great English or proficiency in more than one language. I do this so I know they understand how languages are truly acquired, not so I can speak English during our sessions.

You could post your goals and expectations on your profile, make a pdf with bullet points, or even record a screen-share going through them. Perhaps, if you do this in your target language, correcting the screen-share could be your first session! Very meta.

Do lots of demos

Now you've established what you want it's a great idea to line up a bunch of demo sessions over a few days and decide if they're a fit for you. They should already have received your goals and expectations or at least read it on your profile, so you can confirm everything with them and see where else the session goes.

Here are some things you might want to double-check with your tutor in the demo session:

- How do you prepare for class?
- Do you give homework?
- Do you specialize in anything?
- How do you correct mistakes?

Here are some things to ask yourself after the session:

- Did they listen to what you requested before and during class?
- Did they ask the right questions to keep the conversation going?

- Do they know when to correct you without interrupting the flow of the conversation?
- Are they good at listening or do they tend to interrupt you while you're trying to formulate thoughts? Did they continue to interrupt after you asked them not to? (a pet peeve of mine!)
- Did they try to figure out your level and teach based on that?
- Did you get on well with each other?

One session can often be enough, but if you aren't quite sure then the second class will make it clear. Make suggestions on how you would like them to improve for the next session and if they didn't listen to your suggestions or corrections you know for sure that tutor isn't for you. Remember, there are lots of tutors to choose from and you are a customer, not a friend (yet).

Create & maintain a team of tutors

No two tutors are the same. They have different personalities, specialities, strengths, and weaknesses. So, it's nice to have a few of them purely for variety alone. However, tutors also come and go so it's good to have at least two on the go at all times.

Before sessions

Prepare a speaking cheatsheet

Gather a list of “classroom phrases” to use in-session (Speaking Session Phrases Cheatsheet). You can also use this cheatsheet to note down what words or phrases you’d like to try and use in the upcoming session. [Here’s](#) a cheatsheet we made for you specifically for practicing Mandarin.

Create a study plan for multiple sessions

Make a learning plan to use with all of your tutors, or you will likely end up just chatting about general topics, which gets dull pretty fast. Here are some things you can do:

- Work your way through listening or reading content from [The Mandarin Blueprint Method](#), or any other great resources you’re currently using such as ChinesePod, Mandarin Companion, The Chairman’s Bao, etc. You can [shadow](#) the content in class and get live corrections or further help with certain words & phrases.
- Prepare a list of words or phrases from the [HSK](#) you’d like to master. You can practice using them in your sessions and create example sentences to review later.
- Prepare a list of language functions you would like to improve on, for example: agreeing and disagreeing, apologizing, asking for

assistance or directions, asking for permission, classifying, giving instructions, comparing, criticizing, negotiating, etc.

Your tutor should prepare appropriate words and phrases to go through with you in class. Use our fun speaking activities (mentioned in the next section) to make acquiring your target language way more fun.

During sessions

Use these speaking activities

[Here's a list of activities](#) you can use with your tutor during sessions to keep things fun and engaging. They can be applied to whatever you're learning.

Make sure your tutor takes notes

Throughout your session, your tutor should be making notes on anything you need to improve, without constantly interrupting the flow of the conversation. She will usually also write out relevant words and phrases into your chat window as they come up. Once the conversation has either concluded or hit a dead-end, the tutor can go through them with you and do supervised practice to fix any recurring issues. You can make your own notes by adding to your cheatsheet.

Ask questions

Conversations are two-way. Use this opportunity to improve your listening and get to know your tutor at the same time.

Listen first

Try not to think about what you are going to say as you're listening. Focus on listening first, even taking notes while you do so, then focus on responding afterwards.

Don't try to impress the teacher

If you're a little more advanced, don't try to show off your expansive vocabulary. Keep things simple and use simple language you know well. This makes everything more "real" and relaxed.

Relax

You will never speak perfectly, and neither will native speakers! Getting worked up, nervous, or uncomfortable is only going to lower your results.

Don't guess too much

Don't feel bad about making mistakes, but don't try and make up how a word or phrase is used if you don't already know. If you do this too much, your mistakes could turn into bad habits, and you really don't want that. Just ask (using Mandarin) when you don't know how to say something. Or, you could give it a shot, then follow up with “可以这么说吗?”

Embrace your mistakes

Just don't make the same mistake many times as it may form bad habits. Notice them, take notes, make flashcards and ask your tutor to help you fix them through practice. However bad you might think you are, your tutor has almost certainly heard worse!

If you get nervous...

Try looking at their "3rd eye" (the spot in the center of their forehead), looking off to the side briefly, or turning off the video completely.

No need to apologize

If you make a mistake simply keep talking, try to correct yourself, or ask your tutor.

Be open and honest, without a filter

Have an opinion about something that might offend certain people or cause an uncomfortable debate? No worries. As long as you're respectful you'll be fine. Use this as your outlet for this kind of thing.

Pause and pace

Try to maintain a steady pace of speech, perhaps at around 70-80% your normal speed. Listening immersion outside of class will also help you judge where to pause naturally during speech.

Use filler words

People (tutors included) don't like you to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, so if there's too long a pause they may interrupt you to help you save face. However, if you add in some Chinese filler sounds, it sounds more like you're just gathering your next thought. Generously pepper the following sounds (individually or in combination) throughout your speech pretty much wherever you like to give yourself some extra time and not get interrupted:

这个 zhèige... "that/uh..."

那个 nèige... "this/uh..."

就是 jiùshi... "it's like/uh..."

嗯 ěn... "uh..."

怎么说呢 zěnmē shuō ne...? "How to say..."

然后 ránhòu... "and then/uh..."

Use conversation connectors

You will keep your listeners' attention if you know some key expressions that will make the conversation flow. [Download 418 of them here.](#)

Practice reading aloud

Spend a few minutes reading a paragraph/dialogue/series of phrases out loud. Get feedback on pronunciation, intonation, speed, tones, etc.

After/between sessions

Re-read your notes

Go over what you've learned in between sessions and maybe even spend another few minutes after class to make further notes and questions for next time. Your notes may not only be about the content but about the tutor's performance.

Talk to yourself

This is far more effective than it might seem. Try to narrate what you or someone else is doing out loud. Often you'll find gaps in your knowledge when you can't say a certain thing. Note that down or record a voice message about it so you can ask your tutor.

Make flashcards out of your teacher's notes

Did your teacher give you an example sentence for a new word or did she help you make one? Make a flashcard out of it! This is especially effective when you get your writing corrected. Make your newly corrected Chinese sentences into flashcards for ultra-personal (and therefore memorable) reviews.

Update your study plan

Cross off what you've learned and check/update what you want to learn next session.

Prepare for your next session

Decide on what you'd like to talk about next time and spend a few minutes preparing so you get the most out of your time. Look up some important vocabulary, check some example sentences, find areas you need most improvement on, etc.

Continue with your main learning activities

Remember: practicing with your tutor is not your main learning activity. Keep progressing through The Mandarin Blueprint Method, and any other resources you are using. Continue to learn characters and get regular comprehensible input through (listening & reading). Note down things you need improvement on as they come up in your regular learning activities so you can practice with your tutor in your next session.

Now get out there, book a few demo classes, and start speaking!