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Advice from an American immigrant in Taiwan to his
fellow immigrants

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Abstract

In this paper, Daniel Steve Villarreal, Ph.D., renders advice to his fellow immigrants in the Republic of China (Taiwan). The writer has lived the immigrant and foreign resident experience several times, both as an immigrant and as the child of an immigrant. As a child, he lived in Germany and vacationed in Italy with his American soldier father and World War Two war bride Italian mother (war bride: wartime wife of a military man). Later, he served in Spanish-speaking countries as a US Army officer, including a tour of duty in Honduras where he represented US interests abroad. Dr. Villarreal immigrated to Taiwan in 2009 and has been a permanent resident of Taiwan and an APCR-holder for several years (APRC: Alien Permanent Resident Certificate). He has taught English, and sometimes Spanish, in diverse Taiwanese venues and studies Mandarin Chinese part-time. The writer's advice to fellow immigrants includes guidance as to how to navigate a foreign culture, system, and language. These recommendations include professional counsel on: acquiring the local language when study time is limited; balancing acculturation and assimilation with maintaining one's home language and culture; leveraging one's native language and skills; navigating local bureaucracy; developing social and professional networks for mutual benefit to immigrants and natives alike.

Keywords: immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, language learning, networking

Introduction

As an American who has traveled outside of the United States, lived overseas, served in Spanish-speaking countries as a United States Army officer, and most recently, immigrated to Taipei, Taiwan, I have been “the American guy” and “the foreign guy” in a variety of settings. I recall what one of my military superiors, Major Larry Lemon, told me in Honduras, where I was a Liaison Officer with the Honduran military forces in La Ceiba, Atlántida (northern Honduras). A Liaison Officer is a representative of one military organization to another (think of me as being sort of a mini-Ambassador on a very small scale). Major Lemon advised me that as the only American living with the Honduran Army’s 4th Infantry Battalion—and also being required to make purchases for US forces in the local community—I ceased to be simply “Dan Villarreal”. He said that since I was likely the first or only American that many Hondurans would meet, I was, in fact, “the US Army” and “the United States of America” in their eyes. I took Major Lemon’s advice to heart and I must have done something right, because I ended up having a housing development named after me in Honduras (la Colonia Villarreal). Based on this and other successes as “the American guy”, I am passing on whatever information I can to my fellow immigrants here in Taiwan as to how to best not just survive, but also thrive, as “the foreign person” in the Republic of China.

I will give my best advice—based on years

of training and experience—on a variety of topics that are of importance to immigrants. As of this writing, I am an APRC-holder (Alien Permanent Resident Certificate) with an Open Work Permit and my Mandarin Chinese is still a work in progress. As someone who immigrated here in the summer of 2009 and who has lived and worked here continuously since then, I will offer advice on:

- Learning Mandarin Chinese in order to survive here;
- Adapting to local language and culture while maintaining one’s own cultural identity;
- Making use of one’s own native language and other abilities brought from home;
- Dealing with local bureaucracy such as the medical system, and
- Personal and professional networking.

Another bit of advice that I will pass on—again, from my military experience—is from a US Army Adviser to me as a Company Commander in the US Army Reserve (USAR: a part-time part of the Army). Sergeant First Class Peter Aguón told me, “Sir, use all your resources!” I will echo his sage advice and remind you of a current version of this wisdom as you read this paper: Google is your friend! As you read, be sure to do your own research and tailor my advice to your own situation based on your nationality, immigration status, work situation, and other important factors.

Acquiring the local language when time is limited

“Professor Dan, how can I learn English

quickly?” Just substitute “Mandarin Chinese” for English and this is certainly, as we Americans say, “the question of the hour!” Let me start off by saying that despite the “hacks” (easy shortcuts) that some people want to sell you online aren’t always a solution. However, it is possible to develop a sort of “Survival Chinese” via the use of a couple of simple resources: recorded self-study lessons and a good phrasebook. Before my first trip to Asia in the summer of 2006— a teaching job at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology—I would take a 30-minute morning walk near my apartment complex in Austin while doing a 30-minute Mandarin Chinese lesson from a CD version of today’s Pimsleur Mandarin Chinese program (Wikipedia, 2021). By the time I arrived in Taipei, I was armed with about 7 or 8 hours of self-study and also an excellent phrasebook (Rough Guides, 2011). Between these two resources, I was able to use my Pimsleur skills to say “Do you have...?” and to fill in the missing words with the phrasebook.

At the time, I was a quite busy Ph.D. student studying Foreign Language Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Since then, my Mandarin Chinese studies have always competed for my time with graduate school or work, so my learning has had to be both time-efficient and effective. The mainstay of my current Mandarin Chinese studies has been 1-on-1 lessons with no tests and no homework at both the Mandarin Training Center (NTNU MTC, 2021) and the

International Han Institute (IHI, 2021). I also studied for one summer at the International Chinese Language Program (ICLP, 2021). The program was excellent, but it consumed a lot of time and money. Furthermore, I recently studied with an updated online Pimsleur Mandarin Chinese app (Pimsleur, 2021) that includes audio lessons and additional exercises. Again, I was able to take a superb 30-minute Mandarin lesson while doing my daily walk. Thus, I recommend that busy immigrants who are likewise studying or working do a combination of self-study complemented with a phrasebook and 1-on-1 lessons with flexible schedules. Such lessons may be available in one’s local communities if programs like IHI or MTC are not viable for whatever reason.

Leveraging one’s native language and skills

All of us arrive here with a variety of languages spoken and various professional skills. Space limitations do not allow exploring this topic— how to make use of your language fluency and other skills in workplace situations. However, as a school-trained retired Texas Licensed Court Interpreter and a current language teacher, I will make some suggestions as to how you can tie your languages and other skills into your job searching. The first piece of advice is to remember that knowing a language is not enough; one must have a skill that makes use of that language. This can be as simple as using your

experience in retail sales to work in the service industry in businesses that serve immigrants of your nationality (small stores that sell Indonesian goods come to mind). Many years ago, I worked as a salesman in a Radio Shack (retail consumer electronics sales of products such as computers and cell phones, similar to 3C in Taiwan). I worked in Salinas, California, a city with a large Mexican immigrant population and used my Spanish skills to earn larger commissions than my non-Spanish-speaking colleagues.

Another example is in language teaching, but again, teaching skills are needed along with simply knowing a language. In Taiwan, the previously-mentioned International Han Institute (IHI, 2021) offers training in how to teach Mandarin Chinese. Another option is to teach your language online. There are many companies in that business, such as Amazing Talker (Amazing Talker, 2021).

A person skilled in two languages can look for work as a T&I professional (Translation and Interpretation). Translating means to rewrite something in another language; interpreting means to repeat something from a Source Language (the language that was just spoken) into a Target Language (the language of the listener). The T&I profession is quite involved, too much so to be able to explain it in a paragraph or two. However, if your time and finances permit, there are various universities that teach these skills in Taiwan. They tend to be Master of Arts programs in English-Mandarin Chinese T&I, such as the

MA program at National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU, 2021). There are also a variety of translation platforms that hire bilinguals for freelance work, such as Gengo (Gengo, 2020).

Navigating local bureaucracy

There are four major tools that can help in navigating Taiwanese officialdom, such as the income tax reporting system, the medical care system, and much more. These tools are:

- Mandarin Chinese language skills;
- English language skills;
- The Internet;
- Taiwanese and other bilingual friends who are familiar with the system.

Acquiring Mandarin Chinese skills, along with resources to help someone whose first language is not Mandarin, is covered in depth in a previous section of this paper. In this section of the paper, I will discuss learning English or improving one's current English skills. Why English? After all, this is a Mandarin-speaking country. This is a very valid question, and the short answer is that in many Taiwanese institutions (hospitals, Immigration, Taxation, etc.), English language services and websites are generally available. However, services in other languages are, as we Americans say, "scarcer than hen's teeth!" In other words, do not expect to find a doctor in the hospital who speaks Vietnamese, a Spanish-speaking Taxation Bureau employee, or a Korean-speaking nurse at a local clinic. If your

Mandarin skills are lacking, you will need to be able to communicate with Taiwanese people in English.

Hence, here are some tips about learning English or improving your English skills. First, if time and finances allow, you can search for a private school (a cram school that is located at a convenient location near your home or workplace). Sign up for a course with an excellent teacher that uses a good textbook.

Another option is language exchange. Language exchange is an agreement with a language exchange partner to meet somewhere and take turns speaking each other's languages ("Let's meet at Starbucks every Wednesday night at 6:00 PM. We'll speak English for 30 minutes and then we'll speak Spanish for the next 30 minutes"). At the Mandarin Training Center, mentioned above, there is a bulletin board on the seventh floor where people who want to teach a language, learn a language, or set up a language exchange can post a notice ("I'm a Japanese student at MTC and I would like to exchange Japanese for Italian").

Yet another option is self-study using a variety of resources. Pimsleur, also previously mentioned, has a wide variety of languages available, including beginning English conversation lessons for Mandarin or Spanish-speakers (the narrator speaks Mandarin Chinese or Spanish and the native speaker voices in the exercises speak English). In many of the conversation courses that I teach, I use a

newsletter called Breaking News English, which is free (Breaking News English, 2021), although I do ask students to donate a small amount to the writer to say "thank you" for the use of such a first-rate resource. Breaking News English has articles and a variety of exercises and is well-suited for self-study or group study.

Finally, I will suggest some exercises for English self-study that I used throughout my training to be a Spanish-English court and medical interpreter. These exercises were quite simple, yet immensely effective. They were reading out loud and shadowing. Reading out loud is exactly what it sounds like: find something that is just a tiny bit too hard for yourself and read it out loud. Use good public speaking skills: sit or stand up straight, make eye contact with imaginary members of your audience, project your voice, and take your eyes off the written page periodically. Shadowing is similar to what happens when someone plays a popular song on the radio and everybody in the room sings along: find an audio passage of something spoken, such as an exercise in a TOEFL textbook. Plug in your headphones and hit "Play" and then simply repeat what is said, word-for-word, the way it is said. In both sets of exercises, you are using active skills as you listen, read, and speak. They are both very powerful techniques to help you get closer to your goal of having native-like English skills (Villarreal, 2018).

The Internet is, as mentioned, also a

powerful source of information on whatever you need to know about Taiwan. There is a plethora of websites and social media pages inhabited by expatriates, such as Forumosa (Forumosa, 2021). Forumosa has information on studying Chinese, working in Taiwan, and much more. Quite a few of Taiwan's government services have websites that are easy to find (National Health Service, Taxation Bureau, many national universities, and many more). Again, Google is your friend!

Finally, I will mention the importance of developing a wide network of friends, both Taiwanese and non-Taiwanese, who can help you when you don't understand how something works. I've been helped on several occasions by my contacts on Line, Facebook, and so forth. I will explore networking more in depth in the next section of this paper.

Networking, social and professional

Few of us succeed alone. Whether we are helped by parents, coworkers, classmates, friends, or others, we tend to survive and thrive with the help of many others. However, this help can be random at times. Networking skills help systematize the mutual assistance that we both give and receive. Thus far in this paper, I have mentioned some possible sources of networking opportunities, to include church organizations, social media platforms, and many more. Again, Sergeant First Class Aguón's sage advice to use all of my resources come to mind many years

after I first heard him utter those words.

Networking can take on some aspects of multitasking. For example, I always have business cards with me. Thus, a chance encounter, a church social event, and just about any interaction can turn out to be an opportunity to exchange contact information and to build my network (while becoming part of my new contact's network). I strongly suggest that if you are in a line of work that has professional organizations with conventions and other professional events, that you join and participate actively. I have found work and freelance business via my annual attendance at ETA-ROC (the English Teachers Association—Republic of China Convention) (ETA, 2021). I always attend, I usually present, and I make it a point to eat lunch and make small talk with attendees whom I've never met before. A mainland Chinese attendee I met has not only hired me for copyediting work, but she has introduced me, via email, to her Chinese friend, resulting in yet more freelance work. On another occasion, my daily exercise habit paid off by helping me find a very career-enhancing and lucrative job at my local Trinity Language Center branch in Neihu. I walked in from walking for exercise, business cards in hand, and landed work teaching TOEFL skills (the Test of English as a Foreign Language standardized test). Later on, I attended Trinity's in-house BULATS training session and learned yet another set of test preparation skills, one that helped me in my university teaching (Villarreal, 2016).

Again, being a self-starter and having business cards handy saved the day.

I have previously mentioned church affiliations in this paper. On Wednesday mornings, I attend a men's Bible study at the American Club of China (or more recently during the pandemic, on Zoom), and on Sundays, I attend a church near my home where lunch is served after the service. I get to enjoy the company of Taiwanese and immigrant friends alike over breakfast and lunch, and many of us are in contact via email, Line, Facebook, and WhatsApp. When I had to stay in the hospital recently, I received unsolicited help with transportation, funding, and food brought to my hospital room due to these connections. Again, none of this was asked for, and all of it was due to my having developed strong social and personal networks through my church attendance and Bible study.

Taiwan offers unlimited opportunities for personal and professional networking. As well as what is mentioned elsewhere in this paper, immigrants can find fun activities ranging from Toastmasters' public speaking and leadership training to Tai Chi classes in local parks. I will reiterate that it is incumbent on immigrants to be willing to extend a greeting to fellow participants in the events and at the venues where they interact with others. Again, be sure to use all your resources!

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