

## ***The Challenge Of Language-An Interview with Ruh-Shan Jin***

*by Nancy Toombs*

Language learning is an every day challenge for almost every missionary. They need language to flourish in daily life, and in intercultural ministry. In Taiwan this is a big task that absorbs a lot of missionary energy.

Many language learners and missionary leaders are asking for help. Among other things, people would like to have a better idea how they are doing, get encouragement, and find ways to have even greater success. They may not realize it, but they are looking for a “language coach”.

When a person enters a new culture, the first thing they need is to be able to communicate, so they find a native speaker with some English skills who becomes their “language helper”. Language helpers may or may not have great skill with grammar and pronunciation, but they enable the newcomer to begin to find their way around and conduct basic tasks. As the learner becomes more proficient, it is invaluable for learners to consult with a competent “language coach.” As language acquisition specialists like to say, using language is both a mental exercise and a physical skill.

A good coach provides helpful feedback. Coaches both evaluate progress and encourage the learners’ best efforts. It is a delightful challenge for the language coach to join you in identifying, anticipating, and overcoming obstacles and plateaus. If you are a language learner, consider three key areas: pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure. For pronunciation, a coach can direct your attention to pronunciation errors before they become fixed habits. For vocabulary, a good coach can help you build confidence in your use of existing vocabulary, while expanding your range by moving you out of your comfort zone into the unfamiliar. And for sentence structure, a language coach can help you identify unfamiliar Chinese sentence structures and strengthen your comprehensive foundation, giving depth and breadth to your language.

Meeting with a coach is not a replacement for language classes or language practice sessions with other native speakers. Just like athletes in training, language learners need to put in many hours of consistent training over a long period of time. Coaching just provides perspective and focus to this effort. This is especially important if the learner desires to move beyond the basic transactional functions of language into in-depth conversations. This is the ultimate goal for an effective and enjoyable ministry of preaching or teaching, as well as engaging in issues of the heart and spirit.

Coaches should be competent, experienced, caring, and skilled. If you are interested in finding a language coach like that, the Center for Counseling and Growth has a person you will want to meet! Since February 2002, Ruh-Shan (Ruth) Jin (pinyin Ru2Shan1 Jin1) has been available without charge to missionary language learners as a coach, mentor, friend, and language evaluator. Listen to some of her story:

*“ Lifelong issues of pain and bitterness in my mother’s life were a strong influence on me for many years, how I wished that somehow I could have helped my mother to walk out of her pain, because I loved her very much. However, the real help eventually came from God. By God’s grace, just one month before she died in 1998, she became a Christian. By then, I’d prayed for her for a long time and almost given up.*

*My father was really a good father to my sister and me. In his time not having a son was a big issue in the Chinese society. But he cherished us two daughters just like sons and gave us the chance to develop our potentials. We both graduated from college, and I went on to study abroad. My father became a Christian shortly after I became one in 1989.*

*My major was in German and this launched my language career. After graduation, I lived and studied in Germany for 8 years. Not only do I understand the difficulties of communication in a different language, I also understand culture shock from first hand experience!*

*I met and married a Taiwanese man while in Germany. When we returned to Taiwan, I began teaching German and doing oral translation in the business world, as well as translating articles and a book from German to Mandarin. More recently, I also did translation for a TV series.*

*At University my minor was in English. When I came to CCG, I set aside my German and began to actively use my English training because, at that time, all but one of the staff were native English speakers.*

*Working at the center I have learned a lot from my coworkers and I have found that working with missionaries is a tremendous grace from God. They are devoted Christians and love this country even more than some of our own people. From them I also have learned how to seek to please God more and how to plan my life in a better direction --- towards God’s will. I began my career at CCG as a supervisor of volunteers, as well as their accountant. At present, I serve as a language coach for the Center. My plans for the future include a trip to Thailand in March to attend a 2003 Language Coaching Conference.*

*My husband and I have three girls aged 21, 16 and 15. They are wonderful children and my husband and I are very proud of them and also very thankful that God gave us these three unique treasures.”*

Through Ruh-Shan, the Center aims to provide a high quality non-profit service to the ministry community that integrates counseling skills with language coaching. Ruh-Shan provides *consistent evaluation and support* as a professionally trained, Chinese-educated native speaking language coach. She is a committed believer, an experienced language learner herself, and natural caregiver, with God given counseling skills and a listening ear. If you know of others like her, why not introduce them to Ruh-Shan? If you are learning language or coaching other language learners, why not come by and meet her, or go to tea together? The phone number at the Center is: (04) 2236-1901.

One of the things Ruh-Shan can do is provide formal evaluation of your current language ability. Ruh-Shan uses *the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI)*, which is also used by US government agencies, to assess the general level of speaking proficiency in a second language. The SOPI is a semi-direct, tape mediated performance based test of oral proficiency. It is low pressure and administered only when you feel that you are competent and comfortable with your language ability for the level to be tested. If you take the test, you will receive a written report, including evaluation, encouragement and recommendations, and the chance to discuss it personally with Ruh-Shan. Formal evaluation of your language ability is recommended every six months for full-time learners.

In addition to formal evaluations, *Ruh-Shan and the team at the Center for Counseling and Growth* hope to provide language learners, helpers, teachers, and coaches, with the following resources:

- enrichment and encouragement of new arrivals,
- ongoing support from professional Christian counselors for the adjustment challenges, whether only linguistic or also emotional and spiritual,
- access to current materials and resources for learning language and guidance in evaluating the quality and usefulness of available materials,
- opportunities for networking with others in similar roles, and
- facilities for language-related meetings and consultations.

Are you feeling overworked, lonely, tired, or stuck as a language learner or coach? Do you just need an informed, caring assessment of how far you have already come and what lies ahead? In either case, consider using the holistic approach of the Center for Counseling and Growth as a primary resource in your language learning journey. I believe that you will like the godly wisdom and gentle encouragement offered by Ruh-Shan as she helps you to persevere and find joy, productivity, and success, even in Chinese!

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Author notes: Nancy Toombs is a visiting short-termer with CBI. In her other life, she is a member of the Global Impact Committee at Calvary Baptist Church in Los Gatos, CA, in private practice as a Marriage and Family Therapist, wife of a computer engineer, and grandmother of 2.

Ruh-Shan Jin is a language coach on the staff of the Center for Counseling and Growth. She is also the mother of three teenage girls, wife of a chemical engineer, and the informal caregiver for the rest of the CCG staff.