

Rationale for IOE CI Primary Mandarin Programme of Study

The DfE guidance on KS2 MFL identifies the following attainments across KS2 (my numbering):

1. listen attentively to spoken language and show understanding by joining in and responding
2. explore the patterns and sounds of language through songs and rhymes and link the spelling, sound and meaning of words
3. engage in conversations; ask and answer questions; express opinions and respond to those of others; seek clarification and help*
4. speak in sentences, using familiar vocabulary, phrases and basic language structures
5. develop accurate pronunciation and intonation so that others understand when they are reading aloud or using familiar words and phrases*
6. present ideas and information orally to a range of audiences*
7. read carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing
8. appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language
9. broaden their vocabulary and develop their ability to understand new words that are introduced into familiar written material, including through using a dictionary
10. write phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly
11. describe people, places, things and actions orally* and in writing
12. understand basic grammar appropriate to the language being studied, including (where relevant): feminine, masculine and neuter forms and the conjugation of high-frequency verbs; key features and patterns of the language; how to apply these, for instance, to build sentences; and how these differ from or are similar to English

Challenges and solutions

- The DfE gives no specific guidance on how to achieve these attainments, nor does it suggest any process for assessing levels of attainment.

- The instruction “*by the end of each key stage, pupils are expected to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study*” implies, by default, a freedom to create such a programme of study and apply reasonable assessment criteria relevant to it.
- Unlike the Framework for Languages produced under the previous administration, there is no theoretical under-pinning for the teaching of language associated with this guidance, but there are certain elements in common implicit in the brief introduction to the document.
- Oracy and Literacy are identified as key strands in the *Aims* of the document, and Inter-cultural Understanding may be taken as implicit in the *Purpose of Study*.
- The sub-strands in the old Framework, of Knowledge about Language (KAL) and Language Learning Strategies (LLS), may also be applied to achieving other elements identified in the *Purpose of Study*.

Implementation

- The policy as a whole implies, although is not explicit about, the simultaneous introduction of MFL as a compulsory subject across all KS2 year groups.
- If Mandarin is being introduced as a new language, all will be learning the same material at the same time. This will result in a “staggered” progression over the first four years with unequal levels of attainment by the end of Y6 until the Sept '14 Y3 cohort reaches that point.
- The suggested programme of study therefore is designed to be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to whatever level of learning ability is appropriate to each year group. In particular, teachers should bear in mind the scope for extending elements of Inter-cultural Understanding and cross-curricular study not directly linked to linguistic progress.

A new approach

- This initiative offers an opportunity to reassess some of the existing approaches to the teaching of Mandarin, and to develop new strategies that utilize and emphasize the unique characteristics of the language, both written and spoken.
- The writing system, characters, is seen as one of the great barriers to learning Mandarin, and often finds itself corralled as a problem area to be addressed separately. In fact, particularly with young learners, the fascination of characters is a great attraction and offers a chance to introduce them as an integral part of the language at an early stage.
- Acquiring a large **written** vocabulary of characters will remain a comparatively lengthy process, but Primary Mandarin offers a great opportunity to develop familiarity with the structure and composition of characters, to cement their association with both sound and meaning and to build a significant **reading/recognition** vocabulary.

- Currently characters are overwhelmed by pinyin in the process of acquiring new vocabulary, and reliance on pinyin, unless correct pronunciation is continuously and stringently reinforced, seems almost inevitably to lead to a lapse into anglicization.
- If pinyin can be relegated to the role of “prompt” rather than primary reference, and the principle association the learner makes is between character and sound, a firmer foundation of correct pronunciation can be laid.
- We have an opportunity to approach the problem of the 4 tones in Mandarin in a different way.
- Currently, the standard explanation of the tones to western learners is that they represent four different ways of saying the same sound; in fact, not only is this inaccurate, it also again introduces an unnecessary extra layer of complexity.
- The sounds *mā má mǎ mà* actually represent **four different sounds in their own right**, with the tone being an integral part of the phoneme, not an additional element.
- Pinyin with tone marks is, of course, a valuable *aide-memoire*, but it should not be the primary point of access into learning correct pronunciation.
- Young learners have no difficulty hearing and reproducing Mandarin sounds including their tonal value without deconstructing them, and it is this ability that should be harnessed.
- Of course explanation must be given in order to allow them to differentiate, but the **emphasis** must be on hearing and reproducing, not recording.
- A fundamental tool in a new armoury of Mandarin teaching techniques would be the consistent use of colour-coding for tone in introducing new characters. Thus **all** new characters that are read in the 1st tone might be red, 2nd tone blue and so on.
- This also provides another hook for character recognition and memorization
- The strong visual appeal of Chinese is emphasised and employed in both oracy and literacy, and the distraction of pinyin can be minimized.
- All teaching materials can easily be adapted to this approach, and where pinyin is, inevitably, employed it should, for example in PowerPoints or similar presentations, appear **after** the character and meaning are displayed, not simultaneously; or, at the very least, be shown in smaller and less bold type so it is not the first thing a western eye is drawn to. Flash cards too, can be designed with all this in mind.

The fundamentals of Mandarin

The other vital characteristic of Mandarin, which is at the heart of the language’s potential for opening up new ways of thinking, understanding and communicating for the young learner, is its essentially conceptual nature. The following bullet points present a basic explanation of what this means.

- European languages seek precision of meaning through complex grammar and precise vocabulary, but Mandarin essentially uses context to refine a broader concept into a specific meaning.
- Contextualising words and phrases, and sentence structure, take the roles which, in general, cases, tenses, genders, singulars and plurals play in other languages.

- English speakers are familiar with the idea of one word having several different meanings, but in Mandarin this is at the very heart of understanding the language.
- Whilst there are many words/characters with precise meanings and functions as parts of speech (noun, verb etc), in many other cases a single word/character may embody a concept which only acquires its specific meaning and/or function through its particular context.
- As an illustration, the common word 快 *kuài*: in terms of function, it illustrates the Chinese stative verb in its meaning “to be quick” as well as being a simple adjective (e.g. 快车 *kuài chē* express train/bus).
- in terms of meaning, a simple dictionary search reveals a considerable range, either alone or in combination, including rapid, quick, speed, rate, soon, almost, to hurry, clever, sharp, forthright, plain-spoken, pleased and pleasant.
- Not all of the meanings are necessarily relevant to learning elementary Mandarin, but a surprising number are.
- Most importantly, when an understanding of this aspect of Mandarin informs and underpins teaching, it offers possibilities for wider exploration of concepts and communication, even at a beginner’s level, beyond the simple acquisition of basic phrases and vocabulary.
- This need not involve drastic change to the actual material being taught, rather it should involve opportunities to investigate further the breadth of meaning both in language learning and in inter-cultural understanding.
- Directly related to this in the field of character learning discussed above is the relevance of teaching the structure of characters; understanding of the role of the radical in contextualising the concept embodied by the character is an important link in the process of understanding Mandarin as a whole.

We are currently exploring the potential of Hanban’s YCT (Youth Chinese Test) scheme as a framework for assessment of Primary Mandarin. As a starting point, the following outline programme of study will aim to link this to a simplified version of the Schemes of Work for KS2 Mandarin previously written for the old Training and Development Agency. Particular attention will be given to incorporating the principles outlined above. In addition to HSBC’s generous support of this project, we have recently received substantial new funding from China which will enable us not only to develop high quality resources to support this programme of study, but also to organise substantive and ongoing training for non-Chinese speaking classroom teachers.