

Teaching Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language

Key pedagogical issues

The Department for Education has established an Expert Group to advise on the implementation of the Mandarin Excellence Programme in schools. To help schools deliver the programme, the Expert Group has drawn up some recommended pedagogical approaches, drawing on good practice experienced by the group's members.

1. Understanding Mandarin as a language

- As Year 7 students begin the programme, students' cultural awareness and understanding will differ and misconceptions may exist which will need to be clarified and explained at the start of the course.
- The differences between Chinese (Mandarin) and other languages, including other Chinese languages such as Cantonese, must be explained.
- Students must be made aware at the start of their study about what Mandarin consists of in terms of script and tones and how it differs from languages such as English.
- Students should also be made aware of the differences between the Mandarin and Cantonese languages; and between traditional and simplified characters.
- Students should be given an introduction to China and to countries and communities where Mandarin is spoken and how the language and script have developed.
- This introduction gives students context to their studies and a holistic understanding of the importance of Mandarin in today's global world.
- An immediate cultural understanding of the language will engage students and ensure they are all well-informed.

2. Introduction to strokes, initials and finals

- Students should be instructed on the different strokes used to write Chinese characters and the accurate way each stroke is written.
- The correct stroke order should also be taught in terms of general rules when writing characters.
- The formation of characters should be introduced to students in terms of how radicals and phonetics make up a key part of each character and can provide meaning/pronunciation.
- The initials and finals used in the pinyin, and therefore pronunciation of each character, should be taught.
- The tonal system and rules related to changes to tones should be taught.
- Wherever possible students should be given opportunities to try calligraphy, to help them understand the importance of stroke order.

3. Introducing characters

- Characters should be introduced at the initial stage of students learning Mandarin.
- The etymology and formation of a character including the radical should be discussed and analysed with students.
- Characters should be introduced first to students alongside the oral pronunciation with correct tones. This should be through teacher-led instruction and practised through choral repetition.
- Pinyin should be introduced immediately after the character has been introduced.
- Placing great importance on characters as central to learning Mandarin at the beginning will ensure students understand the necessity of learning to read and write characters, and understand that just knowing pinyin is not acceptable. Whilst knowledge of pinyin is helpful for aural and oral communication purposes, students need to understand that pinyin is not always an accurate representation of the sounds of Chinese and may result in negative transfer from their native language. Characters are needed for reading and writing, which are fundamental parts of learning a language, in particular Mandarin.
- From the very start, when completing reading exercises, students should be given the characters without pinyin, so as to encourage students to focus on characters, not pinyin.

4. Use of pinyin

- Distinct use of pinyin with tone marks should be introduced as a second stage, with students being shown the characters and hearing the pronunciation and tone first. The pinyin and tone marks should be visually shown after each character so students can clearly see the pronunciation and tone mark to use.
- When writing out new characters, students should always write out the character and pinyin with tone marks.
- Pinyin should not be used above characters in reading comprehensions at all, unless a new word is introduced which teachers want students to take note of.
- Students must form an early habit of relying solely on characters when reading and understanding a text.
- Teachers should consider briefly covering some of the 'problem' sounds of pinyin, e.g. the different pronunciation of 'i' when it follows z, s, c, zh, sh, ch and r, contrasting its sound after other consonants.

5. Learning characters

- Students should be expected to learn approximately 15 new words (10 - 15 new characters) per week.
- Students should be tested on their written characters and pinyin with accurate tones on a weekly basis through vocabulary tests.

6. Stroke order

- Students should be explicitly shown the correct stroke order of each character when first introduced, and be expected to write the character with the correct stroke order.

7. Tones

- Students should be taught the correct tones for each character when first introduced and they should practise the correct intonation.
- Students should be taught how to link tones in tonal pairs, then groups of words, and finally phrases / sentences.
- Students should be assessed on tones through their weekly vocabulary tests as part of writing characters and pinyin, and through speaking assessments.

8. Radicals

- Students should be introduced to each radical when it first appears in a character.
- Students should be encouraged to find and recognise radicals in subsequent characters which are taught or which they come across in their studies.

9. Culture

- The Chinese language forms a huge part of Chinese culture and students should be given many opportunities to learn the cultural importance of certain characters and the etymology of characters. References to culture in characters can be linked to modern day cultural ideas as well as more traditional concepts.
- Key phrases, idioms and 'chengyu' should be introduced throughout the programme to enhance students' understanding of both colloquial and formal language, and as a method of understanding Chinese history and culture.
- Cultural issues relating to different topics should be introduced to students alongside relevant language at key points in the year and celebrated.
- Understanding the culture of China, both traditional and modern, enhances student engagement, increases their enjoyment of the language and can give real purpose to their learning.

10. Use of Target Language

- Clear target language teacher instructions and students' classroom language should be directly taught early in the course and applied consistently throughout the programme.
- Target language is not expected throughout the lesson but should be used wherever possible, consistently ensuring that students understand.
- Target language is not expected when teaching grammar early in the programme.
- The level of target language used in lessons is expected to increase as students progress through the programme, but assessing understanding in English will be required.

11. MFL pedagogy – developing language

- The MFL pedagogical teaching strategy of Presentation – Practise – Production should be used to develop and embed new language.
- Use of translation as a teaching / learning tool is encouraged.
- Students should be encouraged to understand Chinese word order in 'Pidgin English', in order to build an 'interlanguage', scaffolding learning.
- Use of role play and dialogue, preferably reflecting real world scenarios and using cultural input, should be a key part of teaching.
- A range of activities including individual, pair and group work should be used in lessons, including a variety of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities.
- Wherever possible, students should be introduced to, and learn, songs and raps in Chinese, to boost memory of the key Chinese phrases taught.

12. Teaching the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing

- In general, students should practise all four skills in equal measure. They should, however, understand that writing may need more time-intensive practise than the other skills.
- Students should generally practise new language (characters and grammar) through the following stages: 1. listening, 2. reading (receptive skills), 3. speaking, 4. writing (productive skills).

13. Grammar

- Grammar should be clearly instructed and taught to students in English and through the three E's method of Expose, Explain, Experience, with teachers using their judgement on the order of these elements, depending on the needs of students.
- Student should practise the new grammar fully through a variety of activities before moving on to produce their own sentences.

14. Stretch and challenge

- Extension activities should always be given to students as part of every activity which encourage higher level thinking skills.
- Students should be given regular opportunities to creatively use language to communicate through speaking and writing.
- Students should be taught extra, higher level language in addition to language that is in the textbook so as to provide challenge and encourage high expectations.
- Extensions for students could include higher level vocabulary to learn; colloquial phrases; idioms; chengyu; creative production of language; and higher level reading exercises with cultural references, in which students are not expected to recognise all the characters, thereby developing their understanding of both gist and key details.

- Pupils can also be encouraged to keep a journal or blog in Chinese and/or create their own videos in Chinese.

15. Assessment

- Students should be regularly monitored through formative assessment in each lesson.
- Weekly vocabulary tests should take place to assess character learning and assessment of tones.
- Each skill (listening, reading, writing and speaking) should be checked through a summative assessment on a regular basis, and at least two skills should be formally assessed each term.