

Learning Mandarin

Are you determined that your child learns Chinese?
Rebecca Simpson explores the benefits and
the reality of learning Mandarin



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“The illiterates of the 21st Century only speak one language,” said my glamorous new European friend. I was an Australian backpacker, fresh off the plane. She was French and spoke three languages. Her comment wasn’t meant to be mean, nor was it directed at me but it cut deep. I’ll never forget it.

Fast forward a decade and as a mother of two, living in a foreign land, I can say with some experience it seems she was right – the illiterates of this century only speak one language. I’m one of them, but I’m damned if my kids will be.

A second language is a powerful gift to give a child. The third, fourth and fifth fall with greater ease after the second.

We illiterates should be so lucky! Living in Hong Kong, many parents will decide that learning Chinese is a priority for their child. But what’s the reality of learning Chinese for those kids without any previous exposure? And what’s the difference between Putonghua and Cantonese; simplified characters and traditional characters?

Never fear, *Playtimes* has you covered with the basics of learning Chinese in Hong Kong.

Chinese languages taught in Hong Kong

First things first, let’s clarify the language of Chinese languages – it can be very confusing! Parents doing their research will





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soon find there's multiple terms used when referring to Chinese languages. That's because there's more than one Chinese language and each is referred to simply as Chinese. Here in Hong Kong we speak Cantonese. This is a different language to what is spoken in most of Mainland China. In Mainland China, the primary language is Putonghua, also known as Mandarin.

	Spoken	Written
China	Putonghua	Simplified Characters
Hong Kong	Cantonese	Traditional Characters

While Putonghua/Mandarin and Cantonese are both Chinese languages, they are distinctly different and a fluency in one does not correlate to a fluency in another. It's important to note that here in local Hong Kong

schools, the curriculum is taught in Cantonese and Putonghua is taught as a separate language to study. While a lot of Cantonese-speaking students will also have some level of proficiency in Putonghua, this is because they have formally studied the language, not because one relates to the other.

Anita Shum, founder of Mini Mandarins Learning Centre says, "Putonghua is the most spoken language in the world. As a parent, if you are choosing a language to add to your child's skill set, you will likely want to choose a language that is widely spoken, and that offers benefits both socially and economically." Anita believes that beyond the immense communication potential of speaking Putonghua, learning this Chinese language can give a child opportunities in China's business world, "For example, with China being both an

important exporter and importer of global goods, people who speak Putonghua will be in a better position to participate in business opportunities with China." She continues, "Many international schools also recognise this, and place great emphasis on Putonghua in their curriculum."

The benefits of learning a language

Ideally, it's best for a child to begin to learn a new language before the age of seven, according to Anita, "Learning a second language at a young age is cognitively as easy as learning a first language. Before seven-years-old children can acquire native-like fluency, in contrast to an adult language learner." That's comforting for parents of children who have only been exposed to a single language to date. Anita explains, "They learn naturally, absorbing the sounds,

structures, intonation patterns and rules of a second language as intuitively as they did their mother tongue.”

In contrast, adults must learn by memory and then translate from their mother tongue. Any parent who’s watched their preschooler learn Chinese will attest to the difficulty of learning Chinese as an adult. It’s immensely challenging and adults are reliant on their memories to recall complex Chinese characters.

For those with children over the age of seven, all is not lost, albeit their learning will be slower and their articulation less convincing than a younger sibling. Anita explains, “Older learners lose the ability to hear and accurately reproduce new sounds by age 8-12 years and tend to have an ‘accent’. Younger learners benefit from flexible ear and speech muscles that can still hear the critical differences between the sounds of a second language, as well as reproduce them with native-like quality.”

Cathy Zhang, head of Chinese learning at Chinese International School, agrees there are many tangible benefits of learning Chinese, “A lot of research finds that learning another language changes a child’s brain, they are more flexible and smarter in many ways.” She continues, “Learning Chinese is both challenging and fun for a child. It opens a door to understand Chinese people and culture.”

The reality of learning chinese

Learning Putonghua is difficult, that much we’ve established. Experts like Anita tell us that to see success it really comes down to the old saying, practice makes perfect. Anita shares her expertise, “The key to learning any language - not just Putonghua - is constant practice, and an environment that immerses the child in the language. Parents must be dedicated to providing a Mandarin language environment. To learn a language, you must practice it, you must converse with others.”

Cathy has some practical advice for non-Chinese speaking parents who are looking to support their child as they learn Chinese. She encourages parents to build a regular study habit and commit to the long-game of learning a language, “Be aware that it is a long-term commitment to the program. Be patient with your child’s learning pace and progress.” She also notes encouragement is key and that parents should look to the plethora of learning tools available, “Make the best use of learning tools to support Chinese language learning such as quizlet, Pleco, Pinyin or Zhuyin. There are also resources such as animated books, podcast, movies, or Chinese readers that will be recommended by the school.”

Extracurricular activities like learning a sport or playing an instrument, and even play dates in Chinese, are a great way for young students to practice. Luckily here in Hong Kong there are activities such as these held in Mandarin. Anita also has some suggestions for at home activities, “Providing songs, cartoons, and books in Putonghua is a good way for non-speaking parents to support learning at home.”

She also warns parents not to fall into the common trap of believing their children don’t know Putonghua, or are not learning enough, because they won’t speak Chinese to them. “The truth is, they will not speak with you even though they understand, simply because they feel more confident and comfortable speaking the language you always have been using to communicate. To better understand your child’s language level, speak to their teachers, as most likely your child will be willing to speak with them freely in Mandarin.”

Mandarin’s role in the modern career

China is the world’s second-largest economy and it’s set to outpace the

US before long. As China expands it will offer even more opportunities for future employment. The possibilities are immense, not just in trade but in fields that include medicine, education, technology and beyond. Having a Mandarin education and a level of professional fluency provides young students, and in turn young adults, seeking careers a huge advantage. Anita enthuses, “Any person who is multi-lingual is more likely to be a valuable asset to employers who are looking for individuals who can bridge language and culture gaps, and extend the reach of the company into global markets.” She speaks about the professional opportunities for Mandarin-speakers, “From working directly and comfortably with people in a given region, to tailoring products, services, and communications to that region, individuals who are multi-lingual are a huge asset. And the more fluent you are, the more value you bring to the table.” ^{pt}

Next month, Rebecca will take a more in depth look at ways to learn Mandarin.



TALK LIKE A LOCAL

English	Cantonese	Putonghua
Hello	nei5 hou2	nǐ hǎo
Thank you	ng4 goi1 / do1 ze6	xièxie
My name is...	ngo5 giu3	wǒ jiào
Sorry	deoi3 ng4 zyu6	duìbuqǐ
I don't understand	ngo5 ng4 ming4	wǒ bù míngbai