

Introducing university staff to the language and culture of Chinese students

Heather Trencher



Introduction

When the university was faced with the prospect of a larger intake of Chinese students for the next academic year, I was asked in May 2019 to prepare a CPD session for staff to introduce them to Mandarin, which is the most widely-spoken official language in a large, multilingual and populous country. The following is an outline of how I prepared and conducted the session. This session would also be useful for anyone going to China for the first time for business or pleasure.

Keywords: linguistic awareness, pinyin, characters, grammar

Designing the Session

As a linguist, I am fascinated by the differences between the English and Chinese languages. But soon I realised that merely describing the differences would be neither engaging nor particularly relevant. For example, when considering syntactic features. Wang et al (2013) cited the following:-

“Wang Yin, the famous professor, once said that some linguists compare English structure as “grape structure”, for the trunk of the grape is very short with many fruit attached on it to form very long sentences. Different from that, the Chinese sentences are shorter with phrases in sequential order by themselves just like the bamboo joints. So Chinese is called “bamboo structure”. (Hu Wenzhong, 1999)

Although Chinese and English have the same SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) word order. Chinese sentences go from a general concept to the most specific.

I reflected on my own experience as a student of Mandarin, and decided to focus on some of the aspects I had found most interesting. The aspects I had found rewarding on my own personal journey were when I was able to communicate with others in Mandarin Chinese and also when I started to understand how Chinese characters were formed and how the written language related to the spoken language. As a result of this I decided on four objectives arising from these observations.

Four design objectives

1. Adopt an interactive approach

The first observation was that it is far better to use an interactive approach which allows the audience to feel what it is like working in the two languages, so objective one was to make the session interactive.

2. Encourage active participation

The second observation was that by the end of the session it is necessary to feel you have learnt something and are able to hold a short conversation, so objective two was that the participants should have a short conversation.

3. Focus on relevant content

The third observation is to make the content relevant to the audience, so objective three was to introduce language that would be useful in an everyday context if meeting a business contact in China or booking into a hotel.

4. Evaluate the effects of this linguistic awareness on staff-student relationships

The fourth observation was how this awareness might impact interaction with Chinese students, so objective four was to evaluate how this renewed awareness might impact the relationships staff are able to develop with their Chinese students.



Image 1: Chinese students at the University of Chichester celebrating the end of their Business English Course

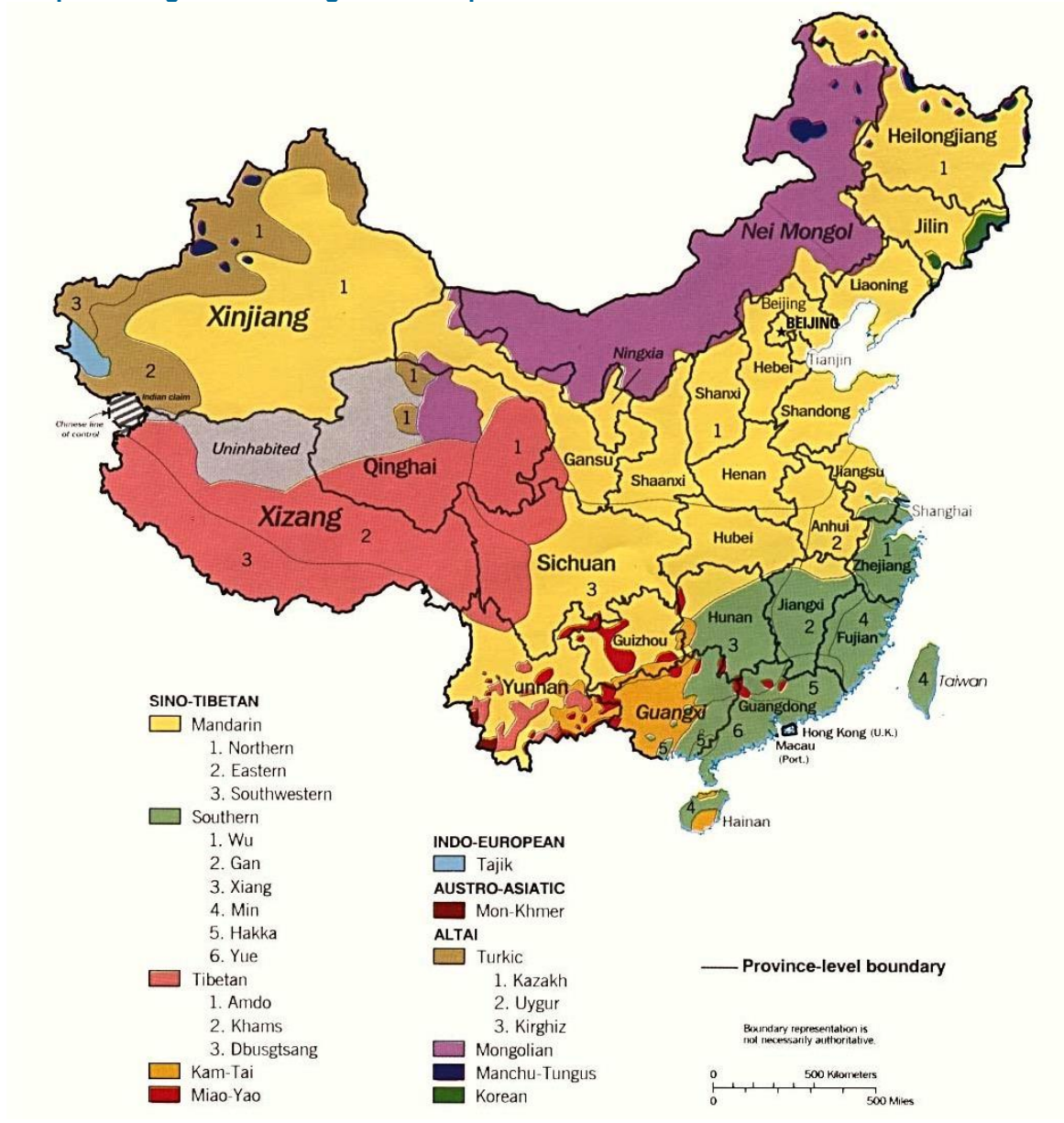
With these four objectives in mind the session was designed around the following eight aspects of the Mandarin language,

- Facts and Figures
- Tones
- Characters and Pinyin
- Grammar
- Greetings
- Numbers
- Months
- Days of the week

In the following pages, I illustrate briefly how I introduced each of those aspects.

Facts and Figures

Fig. 1: Map Showing Chinese Linguistic Groups



U.S. Central Intelligence Agency - From the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_ling_90.jpg Additional source - Library of Congress collection: <https://www.loc.gov/item/90686002/>

In the first part, the objective was to create an awareness that not all Chinese students may understand each other in their first language. In fact many schools in China still give classes in the local language and Mandarin is studied like a foreign language (Greenwood, E., 2007). There are three main languages in China: Mandarin, Shanghaiese and Cantonese. The population of China is approximately 1.6 billion people. The majority speak Mandarin as a first language, but 91 million people speak Shanghaiese and 55 million people speak Cantonese (Greenwood, E., 2007). China also has over 80 different dialects, so although the characters used to write Mandarin are the same, they may be pronounced differently in different parts of China.

Mandarin is a tonal language. There are four tones in Mandarin.

- 1st Tone – high level as in mā - *mother*
- 2nd tone – rising as in má - *hemp*
- 3rd tone – falling then rising as in mǎ - *horse*
- 4th tone – falling as in mà - *scold*

There are more tonal languages in the world than non-tonal languages. Cantonese has eight tones.

Having introduced these facts and figures, I encouraged participants to practise saying the tones by repetition.

Characters and Pinyin

A character is a series of mini-pictures that tell you the meaning of the word. Here are two examples. The first is the character for 'cat' and the second is the pinyin version of the word for 'cat' in Chinese Māo.

猫
māo



Source: trainchinese.com

Image: Paxabay.com

Pinyin is a phonetic system in roman letters to aid pronunciation. It has been used in China since 1958.

There are four character types: pictographs, ideographs, phonographs and combinations of characters.

1. Pictographs look like the object they describe, e.g.:

木
mù - tree

Source: trainchinese.com

2. Ideographs represent an idea, e.g.:

二
èr - two

Source: trainchinese.com

3. Phonographs - Part of the character gives the sound/pronunciation whilst another part gives the meaning.

For example in the character **yuán** – meaning garden, the central part of the character gives the pronunciation and when enclosed by four sides the character means garden.

园

Source: trainchinese.com

4. Putting characters together to make a new character, e.g.: Woman - nǚ - and child - zǐ - together make good - hǎo.

女 + 子 = 好
nǚ zǐ hǎo

Source: trainchinese.com

Participants in the class then practised writing the character for 'good' - hǎo



Grammar

Two interesting facts about Chinese are that:

1. There are no different tenses
2. There are no plural endings

Here are some examples:-

The verb does not change

- shi – to be
- Wǒ shi – I am
- Nǐ shi – You are
- Tā shi – He/She is

There are no verb tenses

- Wǒ míngtiān qu - I will go tomorrow
- Wǒ zuotiān qu le - I went yesterday

Chinese uses a combination of adverbials, context and word order to express time.

This can lead to confusion amongst learners (Jung Chang, 2001)

No singular and plural – Ma xihuan chi pingguo - Horse like eat apple

Greetings

- Nǐ hǎo - Hello
- Nǐ hǎo ma? – How are you
- Nǐ hǎo – Hello
- Wǒ hěn hǎo.- I'm very well.

Participants practised their conversation in pairs.



Hello Kitty – Drawing by Daniel Howard
dannyman.toldme.com Creative Commons

The picture of 'Hello Kitty' was used so that participants could see the character for 'hao' – good and the character for 'māo' – cat, which had been introduced previously. They were then able to identify the character for 'nǐ' – you and 'mǐ' – the diminutive marker.

They then added to the conversation by asking each other's names.

- Nǐ jiào shénme? - What's your name?
- Wǒ jiào - I'm called
- Finally they said goodbye to each other.
- Zàijiàn! – Goodbye
- Zàijiàn! - Goodbye

Numbers

Next, participants were introduced to the numbers and quickly realised how logical they were and how easy it was to combine them with other words to make the days of the week and the months of the year.

1 – yī	6 – liù	12 – shìèr
2 – èr	7 – qī	20 – èrshí
3 – sān	8 – bā	22 – èrshìèr
4 – sì	9 – jiǔ	100 – yībǎi
5 - wǔ	10 -shí	1000 - qiān

Participants were given a list of numbers and had to work out from the above how to say them in Mandarin. This was a paired task. Numbers could then be practised interactively using dice.

With a little more information they were able to work out the days of the week and the months of the year themselves.

- Xīngqīyī – Monday
- Yīyuè – January
- One exception xīngqitiān – Sunday

This work was again undertaken in pairs. It was a sociable activity and the participants supported each other when working out the answers and encouraged each other to say the words.



Image 2: Paired speaking activity.

With additional information some participants were then able to write down and say their date of birth.

- Jiuyǔè sìhào - September 4th (days)
- èrlínglínqinián – 2007 (years)

This task clearly demonstrated how just a little knowledge of Mandarin can be very powerful and a useful asset.

Impact of awareness on staff interaction with Chinese students

The following points linked to the aspects of Mandarin learnt during the session.

Common errors Chinese students make

- Plurals – There are often frequent errors of agreement between nouns and verbs.
- Tenses – as discussed verbs in Mandarin do not change so tense is inferred from context, adverbials and word order.

- Pronunciation - /v/ is absent from most Chinese dialects. There is no distinction between the sounds /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/, /k/ and /g/. People from the south of China find it difficult to distinguish /l/ and /r/. According to Jung Chang (2001). There are many vowel sounds in English which have no equivalent in Chinese. He also states that many Chinese dialects do not have the sound /n/.

Suggestions

- Be clear with times – use the words ‘tomorrow’, ‘yesterday’, ‘next week’, ‘last week’.
- Alphabetical order – many Chinese names begin with W, X, Y and Z. They are all at the end of the alphabet so be mindful when organising activities. Students’ reading speed in English may be slower than home students, so it is useful to allow students access to reading passages before the class so that they can prepare.
- If a video or long listening passage is to be used in class allow student access on MOODLE before the class so that students can listen to it in advance.
- Allow time for students to answer. They need time to process the information.

After completing the tasks and learning a little about Mandarin, it was easier for participants to appreciate some of the language difficulties Chinese students are faced with.

The session was well received and the four objectives were met. Everyone had a short conversation, the session was interactive, the content was relevant both in terms of the teaching context and the participants own lives and the session ended with some practical suggestions to use when planning lectures and seminars for mixed groups with Chinese students.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to **the International Students and staff** in the Business School at the University of Chichester, who took part in the CPD session and particularly **Jo Blackwell, Sue Lavender** and **Dr Rob Warwick** for their encouragement. I would also like to thank **Bob MacKenzie** and the other **attendees at the writing group sessions** for their helpful comments.

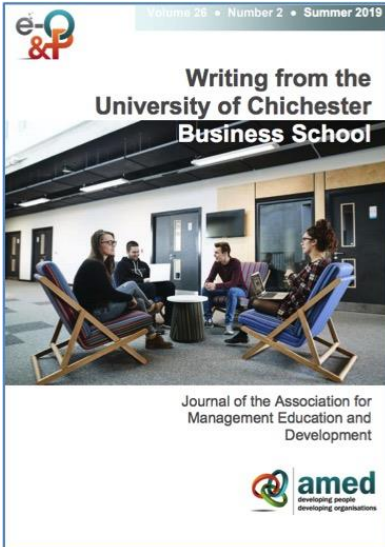
References

- Chang, J. Chinese Speakers. pp 310-324 In Learner English (2001)
- Greenwood, E (2007). Easy Peasy Chinese. Mandarin Chinese for Beginners. DK Ltd., London.
- Shaolan (2014). Chineasy: The New Way to read Chinese. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Yan, T et al (2006). Confidence Chinese Vol. 1. Cypress Books, London.
- Zhang, G. X. et al (2011) Chinese in Steps (Student Book 1). Sinolingua Ltd., London.
- “Differences of English and Chinese as Written Languages and Strategies in English Writing Teaching” Chen J, Wang Y, Ying Wang College of Foreign Languages, Hebei United University, Tangshan, China Jing Chen College of Foreign Languages, Hebei United University, Tangshan, in China Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 647-652, April 2013 © 2013 ACADEMY PUBLISHER.

About the Author

Heather Trencher is a Senior Lecturer in International English in the Business School at the University of Chichester. In addition to teaching Business English to International students, she has previously taught Spanish, translation and linguistics at University level. She also taught French and Spanish at secondary level in the UK. Following a trip to China Heather became interested in Mandarin and is continuing to study the language.

Contact details: htrencher@chi.ac.uk



e-Organisations and People ([e-O&P](#)) is the quarterly online journal of The Association for Management Education and Development ([AMED](#)), registered under ISSN: 2042 –9797. ‘*Writing from the University of Chichester Business School*’ is the Summer 2019 edition in which this article originally appeared. This edition has been produced in collaboration between AMED and the University of Chichester Business School, and can be accessed in full [from here](#). Copyright remains with the author.

AMED is a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing and supporting people and organisations. As an outpost of independence, AMED serves as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating.

For more information: W: www.amed.org.uk, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: +44 (0) 300 365 1247.