

# Mastering Mandarin in Months

How to Master the Chinese Language  
*in Months* Not Years

By Kyle David



## Contents

About the author .....	7
Who is this for? .....	7
What is Chinese? .....	8
Is it difficult to learn Mandarin? .....	9
Learning Mandarin in China .....	10
Immersion .....	10
Dialect and L1 interference .....	11
English speaking population .....	12
University, Private School or Tutor? .....	13
University .....	13
Private School .....	14
Hiring a Tutor .....	14
Funding Your Studies .....	16
Teaching English .....	16
Study abroad program .....	17
CSC Scholarship .....	17
Learning Mandarin at Home .....	18
Enroll in a language class .....	18
China schools .....	18
Find a language partner .....	18
Movies, TV, podcasts and online communities .....	18
Speaking and Listening .....	20
“Splitting” your brain open .....	20
It’s the tones, stupid .....	20
Perfect practice .....	20
Acquire a taste for humble pie .....	21
No one will understand you in the beginning .....	21
Make mistakes .....	21
Learn to think in Mandarin .....	21
Reading, Writing and Characters .....	23
Origin of characters .....	23
Traditional versus simplified .....	23
The best way to learn characters .....	23
Writing characters .....	24
Recognizing and recalling .....	24
Handwriting and the HSK .....	24
Motivation and General Tips .....	26
General principles .....	26
Find the joy in learning Mandarin .....	26

Wait for the “click” .....	26
Techniques .....	27
Listen to the basics of the language until it becomes automatic .....	27
Label things in your home .....	27
If you are in China, buy a small notebook to write down new terms.....	27
Buy music on DVDs and CDs .....	27
Make flash cards.....	27
If you are in China, chat with locals .....	28
Listen for key words.....	28
Speak with fluency .....	28
Combine formal studying with extensive exposure to Mandarin .....	29
Combine determination with a deep passion for learning .....	29
How to Master Mandarin in Months.....	30

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## Mastering Mandarin in Months: How to Learn the Chinese Language in Months Not Years

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HIT National University Science Park, 434 Youzheng Street, Suite 303, Nangang District, Harbin, 150006, China

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*For all of our teachers, all around the world.*

## About the author

Kyle David is the Dean of Studies of the Will-Excel TESOL Institute (<http://www.WillExcelTESOL.com>) located in Harbin, China. He has been teaching English to speakers of other languages since 2005 and living in China since 2006. Kyle is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, being able to speak, read and write. He is a freelance writer for The World of Chinese (<http://www.theworldofchinese.com>), a Chinese language and culture magazine based in Beijing and published by the Commercial Press. He also writes for China Geeks (<http://www.chinageeks.org>), a popular China blog which translates articles on current events and analyzes modern China.

## Who is this for?

This is an approach to language learning. It is a mentality serious students of Mandarin Chinese should adopt if they truly want to master Mandarin in months, not years.

While there are many excellent textbooks on the market today (I give my recommendations below), almost all textbooks fail to teach students *how* to learn. My overall objective in writing this book is to share with others my approach to learning Mandarin which helped me develop oral fluency in just six months.

While casual language learners and those curious about learning Mandarin will benefit greatly from reading this book, the contents herein have been written specifically for the student who wants to learn Mandarin Chinese as quickly as possible.

Lastly, while the focus is on learning Mandarin, the techniques discussed here can be applied to learning any other language.



## What is Chinese?

Let's start this off by ensuring that readers are clear on a few terms. First off, there is no such language as "Chinese". Chinese is actually a family of languages also referred to as Sinitic languages. (Sinitic is an adjective derived from sino-, the pre-fix commonly used to indicate "Chinese". The sino- pre-fix is derived from the late Latin Sinae.) The Chinese family of languages is comprised of thirteen sub-languages.

The most common sub-language, and that generally referred to when people talk about learning "Chinese", is Mandarin. Mandarin is spoken by approximately 850 million people, and is the official language of the People's Republic of China. In general, throughout the country anyone under the age of thirty-five to forty who has attended school will be able to speak Mandarin, though how well they actually speak it varies from region to region. More on this later.

So, to split hairs, when you hear people talking about learning Chinese, they are likely referring to Mandarin, as no such language as "Chinese" exists, and not one of the sub-languages, or, as they are sometimes (incorrectly) referred to, dialects. The linguistic definition of a dialect is a "variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary" ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). To provide an example, speakers of American English say "French fries" whereas speakers of British English say "chips". Americans from Boston are likely to drop the "r" sound when they pronounce the word "car" whereas Americans from the south may draw it out. These are examples how one language, English, varies in phonology (or sound) and vocabulary.

What are commonly referred to as "dialects" throughout Chinese are actually mutually unintelligible languages. Speakers from the northeast who grow up speaking Mandarin cannot understand Cantonese, and vice versa. Likewise, speakers who grow up in the south speaking Cantonese cannot understand those from the Shanghai region who speak Shanghaiese, also known as Wu. These three languages, indeed as well as the other sub-languages, are completely different languages. They are not dialects.

### Section Summary:

- ✓ There is no such language as Chinese
- ✓ Chinese is a family of many sub-languages
- ✓ Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghaiese and other Sinitic languages are not dialects, they are completely different languages

## Is it difficult to learn Mandarin?

No. Mandarin is not as difficult a language to learn as most people believe. The reputation Mandarin has for being so difficult is largely attributed to its system of reading and writing, which differs greatly from the Roman alphabet which English uses.

The Defense Language Institute (DLI), a United States Department of Defense education and research institution, lists Mandarin as a Category IV language. DLI states that on average Category IV languages take up to four times as much time to master as Category I languages such as Spanish and French.

One reason why so much more time is required to learn Mandarin is that its language distance is much further from English than Indo-European languages such as Spanish and French. Languages belonging to the same family share sounds, grammar and vocabulary. Mandarin and English, being languages which belong to different families, have almost nothing in common.

With that said, the DLI's estimate on amount of time necessary does assume that learners are striving for fluency in all four aspects of language learning (speaking, listening, reading and writing.) As such, learners initially interested in only learning to speak Mandarin will find they progress quite quickly, as oral Mandarin is not very difficult.

Almost every learner of Mandarin starts off learning pinyin. Pinyin is the Romanized version of the sounds which make up the Mandarin language. Beginning with pinyin allows you to begin speaking right away without having to spend any time learning Chinese characters. Almost all beginner-level textbooks include pinyin, as do most dictionaries. With a little practice and the right teacher, anyone can develop standard pronunciation through learning pinyin.

Another aspect of learning Mandarin which makes people believe it to be difficult is its use of tones. Mandarin is a tonal language, meaning that each word has a specific tone in which the word is pronounced. Changing the tone on a word can completely alter its meaning.

### Section Summary:

- ✓ When people refer to the difficulty of learning Mandarin, they are almost always referring to its writing system.
- ✓ While learning to read and write Mandarin does take a lot of time, learning to speak Mandarin does not.
- ✓ Developing standard pronunciation is easy with proper instruction and plenty of practice.

## Learning Mandarin in China

Where you will study Mandarin is almost as important as how you will study Mandarin. Choosing a location that is not conducive to cultivating good language learning habits means you will spend much less time studying than you would like. In this section we will discuss learning Mandarin in and out of China.

Learners who study Mandarin in China will find that they develop much faster than those who study in their home countries. This is because those in China are immersed in the language, meaning they not only have 24/7 access to the language via TV, radio, etc., but they also have countless opportunities to use the language in their day-to-day lives. It is quite common for someone who studies six months or less in China to surpass their counterparts who spend four years or longer learning at the university level outside of China.

Before we look at choosing a location within China, let's look at an example of how choosing one location over another will help you reach fluency much faster. Caroline chooses to study in Harbin, Heilongjiang province at the Harbin Institution of Technology. Harbin is renowned for speaking with the most standard Mandarin in all of China. While a very large city, it has a very small native-English speaking community. Most Chinese locals in Harbin do not speak any English. James, on the other hand, chooses to study at Fudan University in Shanghai, where the Shanghaiese dialect is spoken alongside Mandarin. Both Shanghai and Fudan are known internationally. Shanghai is a very large city, with a massive native-English speaking community, and Fudan is a huge university with a large Mandarin-learning student body.

Imagine that these two students are studying the same amount of hours each week, using the same curriculum and have teachers who teach using the same teaching style. Let's also imagine that both students have similar personalities, learning styles, and study habits. Which student do you think will reach a higher level faster?

The answer: Caroline. Why? Three reasons: immersion, standard pronunciation, and student body. Let's examine these issues below.

### ***Immersion***

Know this early on: A classroom is merely a place where you are given the tools necessary to succeed. The best classrooms at the best universities with the best teachers cannot make you put into practice what you use in the classroom outside of the classroom. The more opportunities you have to practice outside the classroom, the greater the chances that you will succeed in reaching your language learning goals.

As Caroline lives in an area with a very small English-speaking community, she will practically be forced to speak Mandarin every day. Cities such as Harbin generally have very few English-speaking locals. This means that Caroline will have to speak Mandarin in order to communicate when she goes grocery shopping, visits restaurants, takes cab rides, etc.. There will also be fewer locals pressuring her into speaking English. It is also much more likely that most of her friends will be Chinese locals who cannot speak English.

By having no other choice than to speak Mandarin day in and day out, Caroline will very quickly learn to think in Mandarin. This will quicken her response time and make her sound more natural when she speaks as she will no longer need to translate back and forth from English to Mandarin.

### ***Dialect and L1 interference***

Harbin locals only speak Mandarin. Mandarin is their mother language. They do not speak any other “dialect” of Chinese. On the other hand, Shanghaiese is the mother language in Shanghai, not Mandarin. (Review our discussion above on the how “dialects” in China are actually mutually incomprehensible languages, and do not have much in common.) This means that most Shanghai locals grow up as children speaking Shanghaiese, and begin learning Mandarin once they start school.

In language learning, the most common source of errors for any learner is L1 interference. L1 simply means “language one”, or mother language. For example, an American’s L1 is English. A Russian’s L1 is Russian. In China, a locals L1 is usually whatever local “dialect” is spoken. A native of Guangdong (the province bordering Hong Kong) will likely speak Cantonese as his or her L1. A Shanghai native will likely speak Shanghaiese as his or her L1.

L1 interference is when a learner’s mother language causes them to make an error in L2, or his or her second language. For example, a student whose L1 is Mandarin and L2 is English is likely to pronounce the word “volleyball” as “wolleyball”, replacing the “v” with a “w”. This is because the “v” sound does not exist in Mandarin. The student’s brain and mouth makes up for the inability to produce a “v” sound by replacing it with the sound/mouth movement which most closely resembles that sound. In this case, “w” is closest to “v”.

In Shanghai, many locals do not pronounce words ending in –g correctly, often times negating to pronounce the –g sound. For example, the word for “class” or “course”, kecheng is often pronounced kechen. Many Chinese from the south also fail to correctly pronounce consonant + -h initials (e.g. sh, ch, zh).

How does this apply to you learning Mandarin in Shanghai? Well, if your teacher is a local from Shanghai, grew up speaking Shanghaiese, and learned Mandarin in school, she’s learned Mandarin as an L2, and it is very likely she speaks Mandarin with a Shanghaiese accent. As you learn from this teacher, you’ll be speaking your own foreign-accented Mandarin with a Shanghaiese accent.

Essentially, you'll be speaking Mandarin with two accents. Starting to see the problem here?

With Mandarin already being a pronunciation-sensitive language, you want to speak with as standard an accent as possible, meaning you want to sound like a Chinese from northeast China, not like someone from southern China.

To be fair, anyone teaching Mandarin at a university or public school, or anyone offering tutoring services in Mandarin, is likely to speak standard Mandarin (though not guaranteed). It is also likely that most big cities will be comprised of people who come from all parts of China, and communicate with one another using standard Mandarin. With that said, the majority of the population will be made up of locals, and remember what we said above? It is not just about having a good teacher with standard Mandarin. It is about having an environment in which you can immerse yourself in standard pronunciation. Having a teacher who speaks flawless Mandarin can be counterproductive if none of the locals do. It would be like learning American English in Scotland.

### ***English speaking population***

Being immersed in standard Mandarin is more than half the battle. However, another issue you should seriously consider is the native-English-speaking resident population and student body of the place you are choosing. Quite simply, the more English speakers a given location has, the more English will be spoken. Beijing Language and Culture University in Beijing, for example, is comprised largely of non-Chinese. This means that should you decide to attend BLCU, you could be tempted to speak more English and make more English-speaking friends than you would elsewhere.

It all comes back to immersion and opportunities to practice. If you are immersed in and speaking the language every day, your skills will develop quickly. If you are immersed, but hang out only with other English speakers, and spend little time actually using what you are learning in the classroom, your skills will not develop quickly.

#### **Section Summary:**

- ✓ You will master Mandarin ten times faster in China.
- ✓ Choose a location where Mandarin is the L1 (e.g. northeast China). Avoid areas where a “dialect” is spoken by the locals.
- ✓ Immerse yourself in the language. Make local friends. Avoid English speakers.

## **University, Private School or Tutor?**

Once you have decided on a location, you need to decide what your main medium of instruction is going to be. In general, you have three choices: university, private school or hiring a tutor. In this section, we will examine the pros and cons to each of these mediums.

### ***University***

The main advantage to choosing a university is that it is very likely you will have experienced teachers, an organized curriculum, and the option of studying either language classes or for a degree. You may also have the option of getting credit for the language classes you take. For example, if you study one year at BLCU, you may be able to have these credits transferred to a degree program at a different university later on.

It is worth noting here that the teaching methodology of most Chinese teachers varies greatly from that of their western counterparts. In the West, our teaching largely revolves around communicative teaching, where the teacher makes students the center of the classroom. Teachers adhering to a communicative curriculum are likely to emphasize student involvement via class discussions, role plays, and other such student-centered activities.

Chinese teachers on the other hand tend to take a “pour-the-water-in-the-jug” approach. In other words, the instruction is likely to be lecture-based, with minimal teacher-student and student-student interaction. Regardless of where you choose to study, this is likely the type of instruction you are going to receive. This makes it even more imperative that you practice as much as possible outside of the classroom.

Another potential issue regarding this topic we have not discussed is that of motivation. University students who choose to study abroad for a semester or two in order to fulfill the language requirement for their university degree may not have the same motivation to study as you do. While you may be very serious about showing up on time, listening to the teacher, taking notes, and practicing what you are learning, study abroaders may only be interested in developing a social life. This can affect not only the overall performance of the class, but also your teacher’s motivation. How would you feel as a teacher if half or more of your class seemed more interested in socializing than learning?

A second disadvantage to studying at a university is that a large class with many students may mean that your curriculum is inflexible. In other words, your teacher must teach to the masses, or average level, instead of teaching to individuals. Those who are ahead of the average students may get bored as they do not feel challenged, while those who are behind may fall further behind as the

teacher may not have an opportunity to work with them one-on-one in order to catch them up.

Lastly, universities generally carry a high price tag, with tuition being quite expensive. As you are browsing different universities, you may gawk at “how cheap” the tuition is in comparison to universities in the West. However, the typical private school (see below) is generally much, much less expensive than the average university.

### ***Private School***

Private schools offer more advantages than universities. In addition to also having experienced teachers, classes are smaller, and tuition is much less expensive. Most private school classes cap classes at around eight to ten students, and charge between US\$100 – 200/month tuition.

One main disadvantage of studying at a private school would be working around the school’s schedule. For example, private schools are likely to have many classes at beginner and low-intermediate levels, but may not have many classes for intermediate or advanced students. Joining in an existing class would be cheaper than having the school open a new one just for you. With that said, the latter would likely still be cheaper than most universities.

### ***Hiring a Tutor***

It is highly recommended that regardless of which study medium you choose that you also hire a tutor. Universities will rarely be able to give you the individual attention that you need, particularly in the beginning when you need immediate feedback on developing proper pronunciation habits. Even private schools with their smaller class sizes still have many students to teach. Hiring a tutor is a great way to ensure you get individual attention, and have someone who can answer all of your questions, or spend extra time helping you break through trouble spots.

Another advantage to hiring a tutor is that you get to dictate the pace and content. Perhaps you do not want to spend thirty minutes per class working on pinyin, and instead want to focus on developing the ability to clearly express opinions, talk about your career, etc. A good tutor should be able to cater to your specific needs, and even let you develop your own curriculum. Tutors will also work around your schedule, and should be able to meet whenever you want to meet.

The most inexpensive tutors are university students. University students will often work for 15 – 30 RMB/hour outside of major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. These tutors are looking to make a little extra cash with their spare time, while also gaining valuable work experience to put on their resumes. Of course, many university students also like the opportunity to converse with non-Chinese and learn about their cultures.

The major downside to hiring a tutor, especially a university student, is that they may not be experienced, nor may they even be studying to be a teacher as part of their degree. As such, they will not know how to teach. (Note that just because someone speaks a language natively does not

mean that they can teach that language.) As such, tutors are most effective when they have a curriculum to follow. As mentioned above, tutors may be a great supplement to your university or private school course.

Of course, you do not need to be enrolled in a formal institution to study. In this case, however, it is strongly recommended that you browse various textbooks and choose one which appeals to you. We strongly recommend the New Practical Chinese Reader, a six-volume series published by Beijing Language and Culture University Press.

The minor downside to hiring a tutor as your primary medium for study is the lack of commitment. Many people find having a structured schedule and environment pressures them into studying. Those who are not self-disciplined may find it too easy to cancel classes, skip homework assignments, and just stop studying.

A final note about tutors: do not settle for average instruction. Do not be afraid to be direct with your tutor if his or her teaching style is not appealing to your learning style. Be up front with your needs and expectations. If a tutor is not working out, do not be afraid to let them go and hire someone different.

#### **Section Summary:**

- ✓ If you decide to study at a university, choose one in a smaller city with a small non-Chinese English-speaking community.
- ✓ If you choose a private school, do your research on the school to make sure it is a good fit for you personally.
- ✓ Definitely hire a tutor, regardless of the study medium you choose.
- ✓ We strongly recommend choosing the private school route with a private tutor on the side.



## **Funding Your Studies**

Up to this point, we have assumed that if you really want to go to China to study, finances are not an issue. Unfortunately, for most people financing the trip is a big concern, and relocating to China, for however long, may not be as simple as just buying a plane ticket. In this section, we will discuss three ways you can finance your trip to China to study Mandarin: teaching English, study abroad programs through your university, and the China Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarship.

### ***Teaching English***

Right away, you may be thinking to yourself, “Didn’t I just read that I should avoid English as much as possible when studying a new language?” Ideally, yes, you should avoid English as much as possible when studying a new language. Unfortunately, you may not be in a position financially where you can afford to not work. If such is the case, teaching English may be a great opportunity for you to not only finance your trip to China and your studies, but also to earn some extra cash on the side.

The key to teaching English as a means to financing your studies lies in choosing a school that does not monopolize all of your time. In other words, you probably do not want to work for a school that requires any more than 20 – 24 hours of teaching per week.

You are likely to find that as a new teacher, you will spend a lot of time learning how to teach. You can greatly minimize the amount of time required to develop into a good teacher, and hence devote more time to your Chinese studies, by investing in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certification course. Not only is such certification necessary in order to gain access to the best jobs in China, but the Chinese government requires proof of participation in such a course in order to issue you the documents you will need to lawfully work in China.

A good TESOL course will not only teach you how to become a good teacher, but will also introduce you to Chinese culture and language. My institute, the Will-Excel TESOL Institute, located in Harbin, China, offers a Chinese government-accredited TESOL Diploma program. The four-week course includes 160-hours of TESOL training, which includes 20 hours of Mandarin instruction with a native Chinese speaker, free accommodation, meals, transportation to classes, and job placement assistance. You can learn more about this course by visiting our website at <http://www.WillExcelTESOL.com>.

It is worth reiterating that you should spend as much time outside of work studying and speaking Chinese as possible. Many foreign teachers—the term used by locals to refer to a non-Chinese English teacher—fall into a rut of spending all of their free time with their English-speaking colleagues and therefore only speaking English. Avoid this as much as possible and try to optimize

your exposure to Chinese. For example, while you should only speak English in the classroom with your students, after class you can ask your Chinese colleagues to speak to you only in Chinese.

Once you have learned the basics of becoming a good teacher, and you have familiarized yourself with your school's curriculum, you will find that you have a lot of extra time to devote to your studies.

### ***Study abroad program***

Many universities partner with other universities abroad in order to offer their students study abroad options. If you are currently enrolled in a degree program at a university, visit your university's head office and ask about study abroad opportunities in China.

### ***CSC Scholarship***

According to their website, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) is a Chinese government organization which provides "financial assistance to...foreign citizens wishing to study in China in order to develop the educational, scientific and technological, and cultural exchanges and economic and trade cooperation between China and other countries...." Essentially, the CSC is a soft-power arm of the government which gives out scholarships to foreigners interested in studying abroad in China.

The scholarship generally covers all tuition, housing costs at the affiliated university, a meal allowance, monthly stipend, health insurance, etc.

You do not need to be currently enrolled in a university or degree program to qualify. You can learn more about the scholarship at the CSC website (<http://en.csc.edu.cn/>) and at <http://www.chinese-forums.com>. As a community of Chinese language learners, Chinese-forums.com runs a thread each year devoted entirely to the CSC scholarship which can answer just about any question you may have about the scholarship, application process, etc.

#### **Section Summary:**

- ✓ Teaching English is a great way to finance your studies, gain valuable work experience, and earn money.
- ✓ Your university likely offers study abroad opportunities. Ask and see what your options are.
- ✓ The Chinese government gives away scholarships each year to people like you looking to go abroad and learn Chinese in China.

## **Learning Mandarin at Home**

Even for those who have the financial resources to relocate to China, studying abroad may just not be in the cards. This section will provide a few tips on how you can learn Chinese at home without having to travel abroad.

### ***Enroll in a language class***

Chinese is becoming one of the most popular languages chosen by students as their second language. As such, universities and community colleges around the world are beginning to offer Mandarin classes. Search on the internet for your nearest university or community college and see whether or not they offer Mandarin classes. Anyone can enroll in local universities and colleges as a non-degree-seeking student and take language classes.

### ***China schools***

If your local university or college does not offer Mandarin classes, your next step is to look for communities of expatriate Chinese. Most big cities have China schools, which are schools established by expatriate Chinese. These schools largely cater to other Chinese abroad who wish to maintain a sense of their cultural identity abroad. These schools often also offer language classes to the local community.

### ***Find a language partner***

Many websites exist which link people all over the world together on a language-learning platform. These websites are generally known as “language exchange” sites. The objective of the websites is to network people who want to learn a new language from a native speaker. Signing up is free, and doing so allows you to search each site’s database of users. The medium of choice these days seems to be Skype.

A language exchange works by each party spending time teaching the other party their native language. If you wanted to learn Mandarin, for example, you would find a native Chinese speaker (you can choose one who is from northeast China) and contact them through the website. You would then agree on a time to meet via Skype. If you arranged to chat for one hour, you would teach your language partner English for half an hour, and they would teach you for the other half hour.

Language exchanges are a great idea for meeting new friends, learning about different cultures, and, of course, practicing your new language skills.

### ***Movies, TV, podcasts and online communities***

There are countless resources online for learning Mandarin. Chinese websites like YouKu

(<http://www.youku.com>) and Funshion (<http://www.funshion.com>) allow you to stream TV and movies in Mandarin. The largest (and, in our opinion, best) podcast website is ChinesePod (<http://www.ChinesePod.com>). It should be mentioned here that ChinesePod is based in Shanghai. My only qualm with ChinesePod is that the some hosts are not consistent in their use of standard Mandarin as outlined above. However, overall ChinesePod is still the best resource for learning Mandarin on the web.

You can also find a great Mandarin-learning community at <http://www.Chinese-forums.com>. Signing up is free, and the forum is full of wonderful people eager to help you with your studies.

**Section Summary:**

- ✓ Search your local area to see where Mandarin classes are offered and enroll.
- ✓ Find a language exchange partner online.
- ✓ Take advantage of the wealth of free resources available online.

## **Speaking and Listening**

We mentioned above that there are four language skills to develop when learning a new language: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this section and the next, we will discuss the best approaches for learning these skill sets. Here, we will look specifically at speaking and listening.

### ***“Splitting” your brain open***

Robert Stockwell, a linguist at the University of California (Los Angeles), wrote that between any two languages there are six primary differences. While we will not discuss all six here, there is one which you should be familiar with prior to embarking on your journey to learn Mandarin.

Robert Stockwell defined the “split” difference as the process the brain goes through when learning to hear new sounds, and the mouth to produce new sounds. During this process, your brain is “splitting”, or learning to differentiate between similar sounds. Linguistically, after a certain age our brains stop learning to hear new sounds. Patricia Kuhl, when giving a talk at the 2011 TED convention, spoke further about this concept, citing studies suggesting that our brains stop learning to differentiate between sounds as early as seven to nine months after birth.

So, how does this apply to you? Essentially, this means that it will take time, practice, attention, and a lot of exposure to the new sounds in Mandarin before your brain learns to hear a new sound. Most learners new to Mandarin cannot differentiate between the different tones right from the start, and it takes time for new learners to be able to correctly identify which tone they are hearing. This, however, is not impossible, it just takes time and, most importantly, practice.

### ***It’s the tones, stupid***

Once you have a good grasp on pinyin, you will want to start focusing on getting the tones right. Mastery of pinyin is worthless if you cannot master the tones, and vice versa. In order to speak standard Mandarin, you need to invest as much time into learning the correct tones that go with each word as you would the pinyin.

In short, when you learn a new word, learn the correct tone. Do not move on until you know the tone. As you are learning new words, it may help to move your hand or finger in the air (as if you were sketching or doing a math problem). This type of kinesthetic approach to learning is likely to help you develop better pronunciation habits at the outset.

### ***Perfect practice***

The old adage that “practice makes perfect” should be changed to “perfect practice makes perfect”. If you practice a new skill incorrectly, you will never be perfect. You have to practice perfect technique in order to achieve perfection. As such, when you are practicing speaking, make sure you are paying attention to pronouncing words carefully and with the correct tone. Even though you

may speak slowly to start, with time you will eventually be able to speak just as fast, and just as clearly (perhaps even better!) than natives.

### ***Acquire a taste for humble pie***

It is said that if someone is told they should run for president three times, they will start to believe it. A mainstay of Chinese culture is showering others with praise, whether or not they deserve it. Teachers are always told by their students and students' parents that they are excellent teachers. Doctors are praised for having a fantastic knowledge of their specialty. Even cab drivers are praised on their knowledge of city streets and knowing the fastest routes. In China, Chinese will find some reason to praise someone else, even if they are not sincere.

As such, regardless of how horrible your Chinese is, you are going to be praised and told that it is fantastic. It would be a good idea to completely disregard this praise. The last thing you want to do is become complacent with your studies, as the more complacent you become, the more likely you are to stop studying and stop striving towards perfection. If you want a completely unbiased opinion on how good (or bad) your Chinese is, do not ask a Chinese person. [Chinese-forums.com](http://Chinese-forums.com) (linked to above) has several "rate my Chinese" posts where you can attach a recording. You will get honest feedback there.

Also, do not be surprised if you hear others laughing as they repeat what you have just said. You are going to be mocked... a lot. As you practice you will pronounce things incorrectly. Making mistakes is part of the learning process. For some reason, the Chinese get a kick out of repeating pronunciation errors made by language learners.

### ***No one will understand you in the beginning***

Unless you have prior language learning experience, or have a natural gift for picking up Chinese, it is very likely no one except your teacher will understand anything that comes out of your mouth for the first month or so. Be prepared to be confronted with blank stares, hand gestures, shrugged shoulders, or people responding to your inquiries in English while you learn to grasp pinyin and tones. Nothing in life comes easy, and being understood in Chinese is no exception.

### ***Make mistakes***

Making mistakes is an inevitable aspect of learning any new skill or language. You are going to make mistakes, and a lot of them.

However, you should welcome the mistakes you do make, as they are a testament to the learning process. When you make a mistake, you learn through trial and error how to do something correctly. Do not be afraid to make mistakes!

### ***Learn to think in Mandarin***

As English and Mandarin are two radically different languages, both rooted in very different cultures, expressing one's self is not just about saying what you want in Mandarin, but saying it in

a way that the Chinese themselves would say it. For example, if you were to bump into a person in the supermarket in America you would say, "Excuse me". Westerners in China usually first learn "dui bu qi" to express this. However, a more natural way of expressing your apologies in Chinese is by saying "bu hao yi si", which literally means "no good meaning", or, more appropriately, "I'm embarrassed."

Part of learning to speak Mandarin should also be learning to think and express yourself as a Chinese person would. There is no one textbook on the market that will teach you how to think like a Chinese. This is something you will only learn from experience and practice.

### **Section Summary:**

- ✓ It will take time to learn to hear and produce new sounds. Be patient.
- ✓ Learning to produce tones correctly is just as important as learning to pronounce pinyin correctly. You absolutely must focus on developing a standard accent.
- ✓ Remember: Perfect practice makes perfect.
- ✓ Do not let all the praise go to your head. Most praise is just small talk. People with below par Chinese get praised all the time.
- ✓ Do not expect everyone to understand you right away.
- ✓ Learn how to express yourself in Chinese as the Chinese do.

## **Reading, Writing and Characters**

If you are learning Mandarin with the intent on reaching fluency, then you will need to begin learning to read at some time or another. In this section, we will look at reading, writing and Chinese characters.

### ***Origin of characters***

When historians refer to the age of “Chinese civilization”, they are, in fact, referring to China’s writing system, or characters. Characters begin as ideographs, much like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, and slowly over time evolved into what you see today. The first characters were found engraved on turtle shells and the shoulder blades of oxen—these are called oracle bones. Oracle bones were used by the ruling elite class of China’s ancient dynasties as a mode of divination; a way of speaking with their dead ancestors. Shamans would transcribe a question onto a bone and then heat the bone over a fire. Once the bone reached a certain temperature, it would crack. The direction of the crack would answer the shaman’s question.

### ***Traditional versus simplified***

Today there are two forms of characters: traditional and simplified. Simplified characters are used throughout most of mainland China, whereas traditional are used mostly in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Which type of characters you choose to learn is a personal choice. However, serious learners of Chinese will likely want to be able to read both. For example, someone who knew only how to read simplified characters would be unable to appreciate the wealth of literature, history, etc. that comes out of Hong Kong and Taiwan, as most of those books are written in traditional characters. Also, those interested in learning classical Chinese will find knowing traditional characters beneficial. Most Chinese seem to be able to read both scripts.

### ***The best way to learn characters***

There is no easy way to learn Chinese characters. Mnemonics seem to stretch too far, and learning radicals with their meaning and pronunciation components will only help you understand a handful of exceptions. The best, and only proven, method of learning Chinese characters is via brute force—rote memorization.

There are two software programs which you can download to help you A) memorize a given character (or word), and B) keep it in your memory. The first is Zhongwen Development Tool (ZDT), which can be found at <http://www.zdt.sourceforge.net>. The other is Anki, which can be found at <http://ankisrs.net>.

ZDT is a flashcard program and dictionary. You can create new decks based on whatever you are learning. Study and review a deck until you can go through it in its entirety without making a mistake. Review the deck once a day for three to five days. Then import the deck into Anki.



Anki is a spaced repetition program. Essentially, the best time to review material is right before you forget it. Anki figures this out through a logarithm and then reminds you when it's time to review. This helps new material stay in your head longer.

Through these two programs, it will not be difficult for you to memorize characters. Of course, it is still important that you practice reading frequently. You can start with textbooks and gradually work your way up to news websites, blogs, etc.

### ***Writing characters***

Just as with reading, there is no secret to learning to write Chinese characters. The only time-tested method is brute force, rote memorization, and a lot of practice. Thankfully, writing practices the recall aspect of your brain, which we are going to talk about right now.

### ***Recognizing and recalling***

Imagine you are at the movie theater and you are looking at a movie poster for the movie "Terminator". Who is one of the lead characters? Do you remember his name? You know, that body builder from Austria who used to be the governor of California? Can you spell his name? Probably not. However, if I showed you his name, you could likely read it without any problems.

The reason you can recognize Arnold Schwarzenegger's name but not spell it (without spell check as I just did) is because you have probably had adequate opportunities to read his name, in films, headlines, movie posters, etc., but have never had any occasion in the past to spell his name. Your ability to read his name and identify it with a person is the ability to recognize. Your ability (or inability) to dig into your brain and produce something from memory is the ability to recall.

When learning Mandarin, it is important that you train your memory to be able to both recognize and recall new vocabulary words and characters. When you are learning to read, you are practicing the ability to recognize. When you write a character, you are practicing the ability to both recall and recognize. As such, learning to write a character will make a much stronger impression than simply just learning to read it.

You should also do the same with choice vocabulary. We say "choice" because you may not be interested in recalling the Mandarin name of every Hollywood actor and actress. Merely being able to recognize important names when hearing or reading them may be enough. The same applies to learning synonyms. Unless you are planning on studying for the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) there is no reason why you need to be able to recall a dozen different ways to express "happiness".

### ***Handwriting and the HSK***

Two brief notes. First, if you want to develop perfect, native-looking handwriting, it is best to have a native Chinese speaker check and correct your form. Learning to write Chinese characters is probably the most tedious aspect of learning Mandarin, and takes a long time. In the digital age, it

is not always necessary to be able to write by hand, though it is certainly convenient for filling out forms and impressing locals.

Lastly, we mentioned the HSK above. I want to take a moment to explain what this is. The HSK is the Chinese government's standardized test for non-Chinese and Chinese minorities. Non-Chinese people seeking a non-language degree (e.g. history, engineering, etc.) need to pass a certain level in order to gain admission to Chinese universities. Depending on the level, the exam tests one's reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammar. The lower level tests only require a small amount of reading, grammar and listening, but no speaking or writing. The higher-level tests require a bit of each.

At the time of this book's publication, two versions of the HSK exist: old and new. The government is supposed to be phasing out the old version, which has eleven levels, and gradually phase in the new version, which only has six. You can learn more about the HSK at: <http://hsk.org.cn/index.aspx>

#### **Section Summary:**

- ✓ The Chinese writing system is the oldest legacy of Chinese civilization.
- ✓ The only way to learn characters is by rote memorization.
- ✓ ZDT and Anki are the best programs available to help you learn characters. Both are available for free online.
- ✓ When you learn a new character or word, it is best to learn both to recall and recognize.
- ✓ If you want to develop “beautiful” handwriting, it is best to have a native speaker help correct your form.

## **Motivation and General Tips**

I have included a passage from a post made by the user “wushijiao” on Chinese-forums.com titled “Some advice for beginners”. The post provides tips on motivation and getting started. For brevity reasons, I have edited some parts of the original post. You can read the original post by visiting <http://www.Chinese-forums.com> and searching in the “General Study Advice and Discussion” section.

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When he was a kid, the great basketball player Magic Johnson used to wake up before dawn in the cold Michigan mornings to go out to the basketball courts to shovel snow. After shoveling, he’d play both before school and after. Charles Barkley, similarly, used to spend an hour a day jumping over a four-foot high fence. Over and back, over and back, until his legs were tremendously strong and he could out rebound anyone. Both of these guys later went on to become NBA legends. Of course, they both had natural talent and were born a bit on the tall side, to say the least. But more than that, their secret to success was “Conan the Barbarian”-like determination and a love for the game.

If you want to become a Mandarin-speaking superstar, then like Magic and Charles, you’ll have to put in a tremendous amount of work and develop a love for the process itself.

According to a random survey I found on the Internet, people considered Mandarin to be the hardest language in the world. There’s no doubt, it’s hard and will take a lot of work. So the most important thing to keep in mind is that you can learn it as long as you develop a passion for it. I’ll first go over some of the general principles and then get into some techniques for learning.

### ***General principles***

#### **Find the joy in learning Mandarin**

Like people who become great athletes or accomplished musicians, you will have to spend thousands of hours studying and practicing. Many people give up. You will only be able to get through the frustrating initial phase if you are able to find the joy in learning Mandarin.

#### **Wait for the “click”**

“I’m an idiot.” “I don’t get it.” You’ll probably say this to yourself many times when first starting to learn a language. Don’t worry. Everybody feels this way. At some point if you keep studying diligently you’ll probably experience a “click” in your mind. All of a sudden all the confusion will go

away and things will become crystal clear.

## ***Techniques***

### **Listen to the basics of the language until it becomes automatic**

When I first started, I listened to the pronunciations of the pinyin and tones a million times. In the car. At home. Listen to it as many times as it takes until you know each pinyin and tone combination well.

### **Label things in your home**

Before I came to China I labeled all the things in my apartment with their corresponding Mandarin characters, pinyin and tones. So every time I went out the door, I could look at that object and see “menkou” (door). Every time I looked at my computer, I saw “diannao”. This helped drill vocabulary into my head.

### **If you are in China, buy a small notebook to write down new terms**

When I first came to China, I brought my small notebook with me wherever I went. When I saw a new character or learned a new word, I'd write it down. One of my first meals in China was a bowl of hot soup, with vegetables, noodles and a ton of fiery spice. I asked the people what it was called. I mistakenly wrote down “malatan”, because that is how I heard it. Later I found out it was “malatang”. However, when people saw my book, they generally laughed their butts off, and pointed out all of my mistakes. In other words, my poorly written book served as a conversation piece and I had many Chinese people teaching me for free.

### **Buy music on DVDs and CDs**

When I first arrived I went to the store to buy a bunch of CDs, in order to try to find the Chinese Radiohead or Pink Floyd. However, I ended up buying VCDs (for karaoke). This turned out to be a wonderful blessing in disguise because I was able to listen to the lyrics of the songs while reading the characters. Anybody who has unfortunately heard the Macarena knows that music can easily get stuck in your head, whether you want it there or not. Mandarin words from my Wang Fei's VCD were stuck in my head, and because I saw the characters go by karaoke style dozens of times, I learned many characters fairly painlessly.

### **Make flash cards**

On one side write the character, on the other the pinyin and English. Words in Mandarin are usually comprised of two characters. For example, if you plan on not dying, you should probably learn the word shui (water). The word hand is shou. You can combine these to make shuishou,

water hand means sailor. So, in order not to forget shui, learn it in another context. You'll probably want to buy a bottle of water, which is yi ping shui. If you've learned a bit of Chinese history, you might have heard of the Taiping Rebellion, a wacky rebellion against the Qing Empire led by some David Koresh-types. Anyway, the ping of Taiping is roughly means peace, fair or level. When combined with shui, it becomes shuiping, or level (as in, "My Mandarin level is not very high").

The point is, for every new character I learned, I tried to memorize it in two different contexts. This increased my chances of remembering it. Also, learn the characters for the Mandarin words you already know. For example, Beijing is the "North Capital." Nanjing is the "South Capital". Clearly, jing means capital. Similarly, beifang means northern part, or northern part of China, while nanfang means southern part, or southern part of China. But you'd better learn fang in at least one more context, so learn difang, with di meaning ground.

### **If you are in China, chat with locals**

Say nihao (hello), but also say something else to show the person that you can speak Mandarin. For example, I sometimes comment on the weather. Then you can go from there. You can practice your set phrase with your teacher until you can say it perfectly. This is important because most people assume that foreigners can't speak Mandarin, so they probably won't start the conversation.

### **Listen for key words**

When somebody speaks, maybe you'll only understand 20%. Don't worry. Listen for the key words. Then rephrase what you think the person just said using words that you know. Then from the facial expression, you'll be able to see if you got it right or not.

### **Speak with fluency**

"Fluent" is a concept that is hard to define, and a place that I may never reach. But what I call "speaking with fluency" is another thing that can even be done by beginners. Here's a drill that you can do. Take some semi-complex words in English or whatever your native language is. Then use small and basic words to define it. For example:

Dictionary: if you don't know a word, you can find it in this book

Extradition: when a bad guy from my country is in your country, and my country wants him back

Watermelon: it's a big fruit (use your hands to demonstrate); it is sweet and red.

Bank: a house where people put their money

So when you speak, you may not know the word or concept in Mandarin, but you can probably think of some small words that can express the same thing. In this manner, you can have fairly meaningful conversations after only a few months of study.

## **Combine formal studying with extensive exposure to Mandarin**

In basketball, the best players are the people who have gone through formal training with coaches showing them how to pass properly, how to box out, how to shoot with the right arch, how to work as a team. But the best players also play a lot of hoops in their free time, play “horse”, play “21”, watch basketball on TV, cross train, and lift weights. This is comparable to studying Mandarin, with the textbooks and classrooms comparable to formal coaching and playing in organized leagues. The playing on your own is comparable to chit chatting, watching TV and movies, listening to music and the radio, reading the paper, scanning the Chinese Internet, studying on your own, writing characters again and again.

## **Combine determination with a deep passion for learning**

People loved to watch Magic Johnson play not only because he was good, but also because he was so creative, happy and passionate about basketball. People loved to see Stevie Ray Vaughan play guitar because he was inspirational. He used to play so hard and with so much passion that he would even tape his calluses back on after they had fallen off. If you can find this sort of passion and enjoyment in learning Mandarin, I have no doubt that you will improve and get something meaningful out of it.

## **How to Master Mandarin in Months**

If you want to learn Mandarin in months, not years, follow this advice:

- ✓ Move to China.
- ✓ Choose a city which speaks Mandarin as its L1, and has few non-Chinese people.
- ✓ Make local friends. Avoid speaking English.
- ✓ Enroll in formal classes at a university or private school.
- ✓ Hire a tutor to reinforce what you are learning in the classroom.
- ✓ Practice perfectly.
- ✓ Accept praise with a smile and then throw it away. Never become complacent.
- ✓ Speak, speak, speak and then speak some more.
- ✓ Read, read, read, and then read some more.
- ✓ Make learning Mandarin not just a hobby, but a passion.
- ✓ Enjoy the journey. Learn to love learning.