

# Mastering Mandarin



Mandarin is the most widely spoken language on the planet (by a long margin), followed by Spanish and English. In addition to its one billion native speakers, more than 500 million people currently speak Mandarin as a second language, according to a report published by the British Council – and thousands of children in Singapore spend hours every week attempting to join their ranks. To discover some of the ways they're achieving their goal, we spoke with three language experts: HUALI XIONG, Head of Chinese at the **Canadian International School**; JOHN RIDLEY, Director of Learning at **Tanglin Trust School**; and SHARON SOLOMON, Founder and CEO of **The Winstedt School**.

*By Katie Roberts*

## What are the benefits of learning a second language?

**John Ridley:** Learning any second language at a young age will give a child a significant advantage in learning other languages later in life. Apart from the very practical benefit of being able to communicate with others in their own tongue, there are several studies that indicate beneficial effects of language learning on general brain development. Also, it has long been acknowledged that being exposed to a second language will broaden the mind, giving people access to a rich literature as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the culture.

## Is there a recommended optimal age to start learning?

**Huali Xiong:** The younger, the better. From my experience, children who start learning when they are young are more likely to develop native, or near native, pronunciation as well as more confidence in communicating with people.

**John:** The infant brain is hard-wired to learn language through recognising and mimicking sounds from parents and others around. We certainly encourage our families who speak two or more languages at home to continue to do this once their child begins school.

### Why is learning Mandarin so difficult?

**Sharon Solomon:** The English language is equally complex! That said, as Chinese is visually more complex than English, the characters may be somewhat intimidating. There are only 26 letters in the English language, but around 620 stroke patterns that make up the different Chinese characters. The amount of visual information contained in just one Chinese character is far greater than in an English word.

In addition, the visual-spatial configuration of Chinese is in complete contrast to English, which is linear. Each character is pivotal and is different to

other characters because of the number of strokes and the spatial configuration. In English, the length of a word is a visual cue, but in Chinese it's a visual feast (or nightmare – depending on who's reading). Visual-orthographic skills appear to be more important when learning Chinese characters than words written in an alphabetic system. However, studies seem to show that the ability to apply strategic knowledge of processing one language to another language seems to occur irrespective of the two different writing systems.

**John:** As well as the challenge of learning characters, the importance of tone in spoken Mandarin presents challenges too.

**Huali:** The way a word is pronounced is unrelated to the written form. Chinese grammar, however, is not so complicated, because there is no verb conjugation and tenses are simple.

### How can parents reinforce what is being taught at school?

**Huali:** It's generally agreed that the best support parents can offer is through supporting their children with their own mother tongue language skills, rather than their "new" language. Asking children to teach you what they learnt at school is also a great way of helping them with their learning.

**John:** Home-learning tasks are provided to build on the lessons in school and are very important in language learning for consolidation. Only a very small percentage of our students have parents who speak Mandarin; to help the others, teachers can post video and audio clips on the school portal that they can use to practise new words and phrases. It's a great opportunity: the youngsters can teach their parents if they practise together.



# TEACHING APPROACHES

**The Tanglin approach focuses on a balanced rather than bilingual curriculum; why is that?**

**John:** The most obvious challenge with a bilingual programme is the amount of time allocated to classes, which naturally comes at the expense of other areas of the curriculum. We pride ourselves on balance in our curriculum and feel that the immersion required to achieve true bilingualism would jeopardise that balance; any more time spent on Mandarin than what our students currently receive would need to be at the expense of something else. The quality rather than the quantity of teaching is what really makes the difference in how well children learn Mandarin. Our focus is on laying firm foundations for future language learning and engendering a love of language.



**Tell us about the research behind the Chinese-English bilingual programme offered at the Canadian International School.**

**Huali:** Children who speak more than one language not only have a competitive edge in tomorrow's job market, but they're also likely to become better learners. Constantly switching between two languages leads to improved cognitive processes such as problem-solving, mental flexibility, focused attention and task-switching. We also expect bilingual children to score better on standardised tests than their monolingual peers, particularly in the categories of mathematics, reading and vocabulary.



**What is The Winstedt School's approach to language instruction for children with learning challenges?**

**Sharon:** Early detection of poor reading-related skills in one's native tongue may help in identifying at-risk readers who may have difficulties in acquiring another language, and Winstedt is mindful of this when students take on an additional language.

We've designed Mandarin programmes that take into account the cognitive skills of each student, given the tailored approach we provide to learning. Students are exposed to Chinese culture and customs. For example, Chinese brush painting is part of the language of instruction, which adds to successful learning and teaching.

If you take the dyslexic learner for example, nothing about language is automatic for him or her. Our learners need to be able to see the individual steps, the many different perspectives and possibilities in order to explain the nuances and specifics of a subject. Every good teacher and student knows this.



### Why is it important to learn Chinese culture and written characters alongside the spoken word?

**Huali:** When learning about the richness of Chinese culture, children also develop an understanding of its customs, traditions and behaviours. This understanding leads to more effective communication. The Chinese characters used in writing Mandarin are known as *hanzi*, and they are important for developing writing and reading skills. Our primary focus is on *hanzi* recognition and the development of strong reading comprehension skills. Once these have been mastered, students will progress to learning how to write *hanzi*.

### Can you offer any tips to keep kids engaged and motivated?

**John:** Learning Mandarin is no different from any other learning context. Children need to be motivated and feel safe and supported, but they also need to be challenged appropriately, so that they know they are making progress. This requires skilled teachers who are prepared to get to know their pupils as individual learners. Frequent exposure to language materials, together with study and revision in small but regular amounts, will greatly help this process.

**Huali:** We use a range of approaches including storytelling, role-play, flashcard games, songs, drawing, movement and presentations. Parents can encourage perseverance by giving their children lots of praise, especially when they are trying hard – not just when they've accomplished something.

### Can you offer some advice on how to engage a tutor?

**Sharon:** Children are often passive observers of the conversation of others, and in some cultures and socioeconomic groups they tend to be indirect participants in conversations, encouraged to speak only when spoken to. A number of studies have found that children learn through observation, or gradual participation, in adult tasks rather than involvement in child-centred activities. It's common knowledge that any language learnt needs to be used constantly – and not just in the classroom – in order to be “fossilised”. Any form of reinforcement in a subject can only help, so look for a good tutor who makes the language easy and fun to learn.

**Huali:** It's important to make sure your child's tutor uses fun and engaging age-appropriate activities. They should speak only in Chinese and focus on writing skills after developing a good grasp of the oral language.

## Three methods of Mandarin learning

### Canadian International School

Students can choose to take daily Chinese language acquisition classes (five times a week) from Junior Kindergarten through to Grade 10. They can then continue in Grades 11 and 12 (International Baccalaureate) at either a standard or higher level. A Chinese immersion programme is offered in Pre-Kindergarten, and a Chinese-English bilingual programme from Junior Kindergarten through to Grade 5 (from August 2016). Intensive mother tongue classes are also available at the after-school language programme. [cis.edu.sg/globallanguages](http://cis.edu.sg/globallanguages)

### Tanglin Trust School

All children from Nursery to Year 6 learn specialist Mandarin, while in Years 7 and 8 the vast majority of students study two languages, chosen from Mandarin, French and Spanish. At the end of Year 8, they choose one language to continue in Year 11 and many choose to continue their language learning into the sixth form. Native and near-native speakers of Mandarin are offered additional enrichment classes with the option of studying Mandarin at a higher level in the Senior School. [tts.edu.sg](http://tts.edu.sg)

### The Winstedt School

Mandarin is part of the curriculum, whilst Mandarin Club is held after school for those wanting additional exposure to the language. Given the nature of Winstedt students, the aim is to make language learning easier for those who struggle. Students are taught in small groups. The teacher follows a highly structured multi-sensory approach. For many, learning a language is not a passive exercise, and it does require a fair amount of physical and mental energy. The language teacher is expected to nurture a love for and an interest in the subject. [winstedt.edu.sg](http://winstedt.edu.sg)

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