



The Cambridge School

Mandarin Primer for Parents

What is “Mandarin”?

In 1958, the Chinese Government proclaimed that a combination of the pronunciation used by the people of Beijing and other northern cities become the standard speech of China (which has many different dialects). This official language of China is called *pǔtōnghuà* in Chinese and *Mandarin* in the West and is spoken by more than a billion people worldwide.

PART I: MANDARIN FUNDAMENTALS

FOUNDATIONS FOR HEARING AND SPEAKING MANDARIN: TONES

Mandarin is a tonal language, not a phonetic one like English. It does not utilize an alphabet; rather, each pictorial character is a word unto itself or a part of a word and each is pronounced with one of four different tones, which can dramatically alter the meaning of the word (e.g. the word, ~~ma~~” said with two different tones can mean either ~~horse~~” or ~~mother~~,” not a confusion you want to create!). Therefore, correct pronunciation of tones and correct recognition of tones is critical and takes a great deal of practice. The earlier one can pick up the tones orally and aurally, the better, which is why we focus on getting the kids to recognize and speak the different tones starting in Kindergarten.

The four tones are as follows:

Tone 1-Flat —

Tone 2-Up/

Tone 3-Curve √

**Tone 4-Down **

The 5th tone is called ‘light’ tone (which has no mark)

Changing the tone will often change the meaning of a sound. For example, see how the different tones can change the meaning of what looks like the same transliterated word, ba and ma (tone marks are above the ~~a~~” in each word):

bā (八) means eight bá (拔) means to pull

bǎ (靶) means target bà (爸) means father

mā means mommy

mǎ means horse

Some characters with different meanings may share the same sound and the same tone. For example:

他 tā – he 她 tā – she 它 tā – it

FOUNDATIONS FOR READING AND PRONOUNCING MANDARIN: PINYIN

For those who are familiar with the Roman alphabet and are in the early stages of learning to read and correctly pronounce Chinese characters, it is critical to learn *pinyin*. What is Pinyin? Since Chinese had no symbols to represent the pronunciation of the words, in 1958 the Government of the People's Republic of China introduced a system to Romanize the pronunciation of Chinese characters and this system is called *pīn yīn* (拼音). Literally, *pin* means "spell/spelling" and *yin* means "sounds;" therefore, *pinyin* means "spelling according to sounds" i.e. transliterating Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet to aid in pronunciation. Pinyin study begins in the 1st grade at Cambridge in order to provide solid foundations for further Mandarin study.

The *pīn yīn* system consists of the following:

- 23 Initials (i.e. consonant sounds at the beginning of a syllable)
- 24 Finals (i.e. vowel sounds at the end of a syllable)
- 16 Special sounds (i.e. whole syllables)

Once you know your tones and pinyin, students can then figure out how to pronounce each Chinese character by reading the pinyin.

The pronunciation of each Chinese character consists of only one syllable that has up to three components:

(one initial) + one or two finals + a tone marking

For example: b + ā → bā means eight

FOUNDATIONS FOR WRITING MANDARIN: STROKE ORDER

i. Strokes and Stroke Order

- A stroke is a single brush of pen on the paper. (e.g. 一, 与) All Chinese characters are written with one or more strokes.
- Every stroke should be written in a specific way. For example, the horizontal stroke in character 一 has to be written from left to right.
- For all characters with more than one stroke, they must be written in a particular stroke order. The general principles for writing Chinese characters is *left to right, top to bottom, and outside to inside*.
- While at first glance, it may seem that stroke order would make writing Chinese characters harder than necessary by requiring students to remember one more thing, having a definite stroke order actually makes it easier to remember how to write them. The "motor memory" you develop from following the same order every time helps develop a rhythm that flows through until the end of the character. In contrast, just attacking a character with a random stroke order each time might leave you with lots of half-completed characters!

- While writing simple characters begins in Kindergarten, writing more complex characters with the proper stroke order begins in earnest in 2nd grade.

FOUNDATIONS FOR BUILDING VOCABULARY: CHINESE CHARACTERS hàn zì(汉字):

There are two types of Chinese characters—Traditional and Simplified. Traditional characters are more complicated than simplified characters e.g. in simplified characters: open the door 开门 (kāimén), in traditional characters: 開門. Simplified characters are used far more widely around the world, including in mainland China and in most Mandarin programs for students of the Chinese language. Traditional characters are used mainly in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

As when learning any foreign language, students must build their Mandarin vocabulary by learning to recognize Chinese characters. We hope they will learn the most widely used and basic 1000-1200 characters by the end of their grammar school years, which should allow them to conduct simple, everyday conversations with ease and provide them with a solid base for future study.

While learning Chinese characters does require a lot of memorization, there are root words, called “radicals” that can help make learning characters easier. Radicals are analogous to the Latin and Greek roots used in English that help us figure out the meaning of words in English (e.g. *bio* means life, *logy* means the study of; therefore, biology is the study of life).

Radicals

- Chinese characters can be decomposed into components called radicals [*bushou* –literally meaning “section header”]. In other words, all characters contain a particular component called radical or side because it’s usually literally to the side of a character.
- Many radicals are often single, simple characters in and of themselves that are then used to build more complex characters. For example, the simple character 口 (which means mouth and kind of looks like an open mouth or opening), is used as a radical in most other characters relating to mouth such as 唱, meaning *sing*.
- Radicals are very important to the meaning and writing of Chinese characters. Here are two examples. First example, the character 林 means “forest”. Since the radical 木 means wood, doubling wood would make a forest.
- Another example, the character 人 (rén) means person. In every personal pronoun, it is used as a radical, a root, a base for all other words that have to do with people.
- Another example, female 女(nǚ) is the radical used in the word mother 娘 (niáng) or big sister 姐 (jiě)
- Pictogram: fun history of Chinese words

The good news...

Chinese grammar is much simpler than European languages (and far easier than the Latin grammar our students are or will be learning). For example, you will see no tenses, plurals, or subject-verb agreement, so that’s something to be grateful for!

Part II: HOW IS IT BEING TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOM?

Highlights by grade level...

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| K5 | Introduction to the sounds of Chinese. Mastering the four tones; Building vocabulary, recognizing simple Chinese characters; (No Textbook) |
| 1 st . Grade | Focus on learning and mastering Pinyin; Building vocabulary; recognizing more Chinese characters; learning basic strokes (Textbook – Easy Chinese for Kids) |
| 2 nd . Grade | Focus on recognizing and writing Chinese characters Building vocabulary; Reading without Pinyin; Writing Chinese characters with proper stroke order (Textbook – My First Chinese Reader 1) |
| 3 rd . Grade | Focus on recognizing Chinese characters Building vocabulary and sentence patterns; Simple grammar; Reading without Pinyin; Writing more complex Chinese characters (Textbook- Easy Steps to Chinese 1) |
| 4 th . Grade | Focus on recognizing Chinese characters Building vocabulary and sentence patterns; Grammar; Writing Chinese characters; Writing composition following model paragraph; Reading stories in Chinese (Textbook – Easy Steps to Chinese 1 & Easy Steps to Chinese 2) |
| 5 th . Grade | Focus on recognizing Chinese characters Vocabulary and sentence patterns; Grammar; Writing Chinese characters; Writing simple compositions and reading short stories in Chinese. |

PART III: HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD GET THE MOST OUT OF THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL'S MANDARIN PROGRAM EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW MANDARIN YOURSELF

As you know, becoming fluent in Mandarin is not the primary goal of our school; our classical and Christian distinctives are and our Mandarin program is simply one part of that. Therefore, we do not, cannot and will not spend as much time on Mandarin as other charter and private schools do that have chosen to make Mandarin their focus.

However, we do hope to provide our students with solid foundations in this challenging language when they are young and are best able to absorb and learn new languages. And you'd be surprised at just how much they are able to absorb and learn in just an hour of focused class time per week. However, precisely *because* we only offer an hour per week of Mandarin instruction, we need your support and help to make every minute count.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

The main thing you can do at home is encourage your child to review their vocabulary words (Chinese characters) for the week (about 10 words/week) for as little as five minutes a day.

Almost everything we do in class is slowed down or diminished unless the entire class has a common and growing vocabulary to work with. Just make it a regular part of the homework routine and ask if they've done their Mandarin review each night. The easiest way to do this is to cover the English translation of vocabulary words in the text book and point to a character and see if the child can recognize it and tell you what it means. They may not pronounce it correctly and/or you may not know if they are pronouncing it correctly (the teacher will correct pronunciation in class), but at least you can see if they can recognize the characters and know what they mean. It's that simple. This small effort will go a long way to helping them.

A FEW OTHER RESOURCES:

OUR MANDARIN TEACHER, GRACE LAW: If you have questions or need more help, feel free to drop our Mandarin teacher, Grace Law, a note in her mailbox in the main office or email her at gracezhang1@gmail.com. She wants your children to succeed and enjoy Mandarin and is happy to answer questions and to help in any way possible.

YOUTUBE VIDEOS: For those in 1st grade this year who will be learning pinyin, or students who are new to Cambridge and Mandarin this year, or students who need to solidify their pinyin skills, here is a link to a good youtube video that reviews pinyin.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwyQK62tO_U

PARENT PAGE OF WEBSITE: Chinese Character worksheets and pinyin worksheets are available in the parent portal on the school website for you to print out and practice at home.

NOTE ABOUT MANDARIN TEXTBOOKS, CDs and WORKBOOKS: Please note that your child will be assigned a Mandarin textbook starting 1st grade and up and will be responsible for keeping it in good condition not losing or scratching the CD as we plan to use these textbooks for several years. If they lose or damage the textbook or CD, parents will be asked to pay for replacement costs (even if just the CD is lost or scratched, we have to buy a whole new textbook because they only come with the textbook). Also, if your child forgets to bring his or her Mandarin textbook and/or workbook to class two times (i.e. took it home to do homework, but forgot to bring it back for class), you will be required to purchase an extra set to keep at home.

It is our sincere desire that this Mandarin Primer for Parents has helped you to understand some of the fundamentals of the language and what and how we are teaching it here at Cambridge and how you can help.