

Teaching Your Child Chinese

By Vanessa Dodge

In this age of globalization, multiculturalism and a shrinking world, there can be no doubt that the bilingual or multilingual person has a significant advantage over those who solely speak their “mother tongue.” Given its proximity to Latin American and growing population of Spanish speakers, there are many opportunities for children to learn Spanish in Northern California. Besides numerous extra-curricular programs, Spanish is routinely taught in schools and there have been an increasing number of language immersion programs at the elementary school level. However, given that over 1 billion of the world’s population of nearly 7 billion are Chinese, and that China has the second largest economy in the world (behind the United States), children who have facility with English and Chinese will likely have a multitude of unique opportunities open to them when they reach adulthood. In addition, the U.S. government has selected Mandarin, English, Spanish, and Arabic as the four strategic languages for students in the 21st Century.

While there are 52 different languages spoken throughout China today, Putongua, or Standard Mandarin, is the country’s official language (except in Hong Kong and Macau, where the official language is Cantonese). As with any language, one of the best ways to learn Mandarin is for parents who are fluent in it to speak it in the home. However, what if the parents don’t speak Mandarin, but want their children to learn? Currently, there are numerous resources available, including books, CDs,

DVDs, computer programs, and websites, some of which are detailed at the end of this article.

One such resource is the popular Nickelodeon program for preschoolers, Ni-Hao, Kai-Lan. The show and website (www.nickjr.com/ni-hao-kai-lan/) introduce viewers to Chinese language and culture in the same way Dora the Explorer and Go Diego Go! did with Spanish language and Latin culture.

Kai-Lan, her Grandfather YeYe, and animal friends Rintin, Tolee, Hoho, and Lulu not only teach the under-five set about Chinese language and culture, but also about the connection between mind and body, seeing another person’s

perspective, being a good part of a group, and other social and emotional goals.

Says Mary Song-Mali, mother to five- and three-year-old girls, “Both of my girls love Ni-Hao Kai-Lan! They don’t get to watch it that frequently but it’s great to hear them say a few words in Chinese. My three-year-old often tells me how I mispronounce “thank you” when I try to mimic her. My older daughter’s school is offering a class in Mandarin Chinese, which she is excited about taking because of this show. I only wish it was more than a 5-week, once a week class. I’d like my kids to learn Spanish fluently but any interest in a different culture or language is so great.”

Magali Forsyth also sings the program’s praises. “It works! I was just talking about it with other parents at the private French class my four-year-old son takes. We all have the same

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experience with it: our kids know words in Chinese even though we don't speak any."

What about the school-aged child?

In large cities with multicultural populations such as San Francisco, Chinese language schools and programs are not hard to find. Though here in the North Bay there are also options.

The Healdsburg School, an independent school for grades K-8 located in Healdsburg, offers Chinese Mandarin as one of its required courses for all students.

Montgomery High School in Santa Rosa also offers Mandarin as an elective to Juniors and Seniors. More on these two programs can be found online.

Based in Petaluma, weLearn Tutoring offers after-school courses in Chinese Mandarin to children in grades 1-8. The organization also offers group and private lessons for beginning, intermediate and advanced students.

Eunice Leung, of weLearn Tutoring has been teaching Chinese since 2002 and is passionate about bringing the Chinese language and culture to elementary students. Currently, weLearn conducts after-school enrichment courses at three Petaluma elementary schools, including Grant, Liberty, and River Montessori. Leung says that about 95% of her students do not have Chinese "roots," but all have a desire to learn that amazes her. "Their progress empowers and inspires me to continue delivering Mandarin Chinese classes to young students," she says.

When introducing the Chinese language to students, Leung uses innovative

techniques to teach fundamentals, including songs, stories, games and more. "Fun is the key in programs for young students," Leung says. "With adults, practicality is the focus."

When asked how Mandarin differs from English (the latter often being ruefully described by non-native speakers as "illogical" or "without rules"), Leung explains, "Mandarin has

thousands of years of history. It has firm rules in terms of the writing system, pronunciation, and grammar."

Even though there are firm rules, Mandarin presents unique obstacles for the student. "There are four tones in Mandarin Chinese pronunciation," Leung says. "The tones are used to distinguish words from each other. Mastering the tones of each character is one of the biggest challenges for non-native speakers."

Mary Jane Seborg, whose eight-year-old son takes Ms. Leung's class at River Montessori, says that her son loves it even though it is sometimes a struggle to get him to practice what he has learned outside of the classroom. "He takes great pride in the fact that he knows some Mandarin," she says, "and when he was asked to share something about himself in his third-grade class, he told everyone that he can speak and write Chinese."

Lola, a Windsor parent, says that her toddler loves the CD of Chinese songs that they listen to, and that she hopes to enroll him in Chinese classes when she feels he's old enough. "I just feel," she says, "that in this day and age, a second language would be the greatest gift I could ever give him." ☺

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