

An ELL Teacher's Guide for Helping Chinese-Speaking Students

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Introduction

If you want to understand the world, you need to understand Asia. That, in turn, means setting foot in China and India. Together, those two countries account for one-third of humanity and much of the world's recent economic growth. They reflect two of our richest civilizations, two broad religious traditions and a vast share of the world's artistic heritage — and its future.

Nicholas D. Kristof is a columnist for The New York Times. Jan 8, 2012

China is like no other place. It is a country on the fast-track yet steeped in ancient traditions. In 1999, a good friend of mine who had been traveling to China and studying Mandarin offered to lead a few friends on a three-week journey. She said the country was changing so quickly that we needed to see it in order to better understand the complexities and contradictions presented by modernization. It was a time of rapid economic expansion and before major developments across China to prepare for the Beijing Olympics (Summer 2008). For three weeks, we crisscrossed the country on trains and explored Beijing; the edge of the Tibetan Plateau; and the Longmen Buddhist Grottoes (UNESCO World Heritage Centre) and Shaolin Monastery (birthplace of Chan Buddhism and the cradle of Shaolin *Kung Fu*), both in Henan Province. At that time, I was deep into studying *Karate* and *Kajukenbo*, a mixed martial art from Hawaii. Since that trip in 1999, I have continued my research to learn more about the region, and I also began my exploration of the Chinese language.

Fast-forward to 2006 when I accepted a full-time position at Harold Washington College (HWC). One thing I knew when I started teaching at the City Colleges of Chicago was that I would get to have a sabbatical at some point. I had spent thirteen years teaching English Language Learners (ELL) at St. Augustine College, a bilingual Spanish/English private, two-year college, before arriving at HWC. St. Augustine did not have sabbaticals, so many summers during those years, I created small sabbaticals for myself and traveled to Latin America to study Spanish. Homestays and intensive language programs in various Central and South American and Caribbean countries enabled me to become nearly fluent in Spanish. It was not only the key to being a better teacher for my Spanish-speaking students, but it was a key into the culture, which in some respects was more important.

When it came time to write my first sabbatical proposal, I knew exactly what I wanted to do: travel to China and study Mandarin Chinese¹. I have spent a good deal of my life studying languages yet studying on location is one of the most effective ways to absorb the language and culture. In 2013 and 2014, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel and study at CLI (Chinese Language Institute) in Guilin, Guanxi Province, China. While the pandemic has prevented me from going back and studying in person, I have been able to continue my studies with my teachers via Zoom.

¹ Mandarin Chinese is the official language of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, as well as one of the four official languages of Singapore. Please note that I use Mandarin and Chinese interchangeably throughout this Guide.

It is an understatement to say that learning Mandarin Chinese poses significant challenges. In the past, my Chinese teachers loved to tell me that Chinese grammar is so easy. What they really meant was: compared to reading and writing Chinese characters (*hànzì*/汉字/漢字²) and learning the four tones³, Chinese grammar was not that bad. They also loved to brag how Chinese has no verb conjugation; and they are right. Nevertheless, Chinese grammar is very different from English and quite difficult. There is not much that one can compare between the two other than, at times, the syntax follows *subject, verb, object* order. To illustrate some simple examples, the world revolves from East to West in China, so logically they say *Eastnorth*! The niceties of *please* and *thank you* are often relegated to exchanges between strangers, and sometimes these phrases are not used among close family and friends. Moreover, verbs often come at the end of a sentence, such as in the following direct translation: *I am easy in class to fall asleep*.

As I began studying Mandarin Chinese thirteen years ago, I quickly found many insights into my students' speaking and writing. From simple verb errors and syntactical problems to subtle pronunciation differences between /sh/, /s/ and /x/, bits and pieces were becoming clear. The part that I could not easily delve into was the cultural counterpart.

While the ELL classes at Harold Washington College are not homogenous, Chinese students make up a large percentage of the program. In fact, some lower-level classes are eighty to ninety percent Chinese. This guide presents some of the basic grammatical structures that *interfere* with Chinese students learning English. It is intended to help teachers of Chinese students understand some of the basic grammatical structures of Mandarin. A small guide as such cannot be comprehensive, yet it will hopefully help elucidate some of the pitfalls Chinese-speaking students encounter on their path to learning English.

The first part of the guide consists of basic grammatical structures including verbs, adverbials, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, and more. Following is a brief introduction to the most troublesome pronunciation issues Chinese students face. Towards the end, I include information about how the culture informs the language or vice versa, basic character information, and some survival Mandarin Chinese.

² *hànzì*/汉字/漢字 – The word *hanzi* refers to the Chinese character. On Mainland China, simplified characters are used. In Taiwan, they use traditional characters. In this manual, I will use the simplified characters in my translations.

³ The first tone is level, and it is represented as *ma1* or *mā*. The second tone is rising. One starts from a lower pitch and rises, and it is represented as *ma2* or *má*. The third tone is falling rising. It starts neutral, goes to a low pitch and then rises slightly. It is represented as *ma3* or *mǎ*. The fourth tone is falling, and it is represented as *ma4* or *mà*.

In the grammar section, please note that each entry is made up of three parts:

1. The Poorly Translated Structure OR the Issue
2. Translation Table:

English	Mandarin
Structure in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Pinyin</i> (the official Romanization and phonetic system for transcribing standard Chinese in Mainland China.)• <i>Hanzi</i> (Chinese <u>simplified</u> characters, used in Mainland China) and the direct translation in English.• The sentence translated into how the Chinese reads in English.

3. Explanation and/or Cultural Note

Basic Grammar

Verbs and Verb Tenses

In Mandarin, verbs are not conjugated. They do, however, have words to indicate tense and aspect.

The Simple Present

English	Mandarin
I like studying French.	Wǒ xǐhuan xué Fǎwén. 我喜欢学法语。 I like study French.
I have English class every day.	Wǒ měitiān dōu yǒu Yīngwén kè. 我每天都有英文课。 I every day have English class.

Explanation: The simple present in Chinese and English work in a somewhat similar fashion. The adverb of time goes right after the subject in Mandarin.

The Present Progressive: zài (在) or zhèngzai (正在)

English	Mandarin
What are you doing?	Nǐ zài zuò shénme? 你在做什么? You ING do what?
We are studying. I'll call you later.	Wǒmen zài xuéxí. Wǒ wǎndiǎn gěi nǐ dǎ diànhuà. 我们在学习。我晚点给你打电话。 We ING study. I later give you call.

Explanation: Since there is no ING form of the verb, the words *zài* or *zhèngzai* serve to indicate that an action is/was in progress at a specific time.

(Question marks are used the same way in Mandarin.)

The Simple Past

English	Mandarin
I went to my friend's house last night.	Zuótiān wǎnshàng wǒ qù le wǒ de péngyou jiā. 昨天晚上，我去了我的朋友的家。 Yesterday evening I went my friend's house.
We saw a foreign movie last month.	Wǒmen shàng gè yuè kàn le yī bù wàiguó diànyǐng. 我们上个月看了一部外国电影。 We last month saw a foreign movie.

Explanation: Again, since there is no verb conjugation, Mandarin indicates that an action happened in the past by using the *le* (了) particle. If there is one verb, it usually comes right after the verb, but if there are various actions in the past, it can come at the end of the sentence. But wait, there are exceptions to this that depend on certain phrases and time expressions. For example, *le* (了), can sometimes be used to indicate the future!

The Future

English	Mandarin
We are going to Shanghai tomorrow.	Wǒ míngtiān yào qù Shànghǎi. 我明天要去上海。 I tomorrow will go Shanghai.
The teacher is giving us a test next week.	Lǎoshī xià gè xīngqī huì gěi wǒmen yí gè kǎoshì. 老师下个星期会给我们一个考试。 Teacher next week is going to give us a test.

Explanation: To indicate a future action in Mandarin, *yào* (要) is used before the verb. As with many words, this is just one meaning/function of *yào* (要) .

The verb BE or shì (是)

English	Mandarin
Tom is a teacher.	Tom shì yī wèi lǎoshī. Tom 是一位老师。 Tom is one (位 <i>Measure Word</i> ⁴) teacher.
Rose is not American.	Rose bù shì Měiguó rén. Rose 不是美国人。 Rose not is American country person.

In terms of the simple present, this is the equivalent in Chinese except for the article.

English	Chinese
Marine is tall.	Marine hěn gāo. Marine 很高。 Marine very tall.

Explanation: In Chinese, the verb *to be* translates to *shì*, and it is used to modify a noun, but it is not used with an adjective.

This can mean Marine is tall or Marine is very tall. When there is subject/noun + adjective, the

⁴ Measure Word – See section on *Measure Words* for more information.

be (是) is dropped. In Chinese, they never say *Marine is tall*. However, sometimes, they add *be* (是), which means we are emphasizing it. It is true that she is really tall.

When students translate to English, they tend to omit the verb when describing with adjectives. This is also why Chinese speaking students use the adverb *very* a lot. They will say *She very tall*, which for them means *she is tall*.

Adjectives in Mandarin

English	Mandarin
She is a very nice friend.	<i>Tā shì yī gè fēicháng hǎo de péngyǒu.</i> 她 是一个非常 好的朋友。 She is a very nice <i>de</i> friend.
This is my hat.	<i>Zhè shì wǒ de màozi.</i> 这是我的帽。 This is I + <i>de</i> (my) hat.

When an adjective comes before the noun, you use *DE* (的). This will translate into Chinese students overusing the possessive *S* on adjectives in English.

Some Creative Syntax

I am a French country person.

English	Mandarin
She is American.	<i>Tā shì Měiguó rén.</i> 他/她 是美国人。 She/he is America country person.
He is Chinese.	<i>Tā shì Zhōngguó rén.</i> 他/她 是中国人。 She/he is China country person.

Explanation: The first time I came across this phrase, I was baffled. Was my student trying to describe a person who came from the countryside in China? This is exactly what I thought. After a short exchange, I realized she wanted to say the person was Chinese.

I am difficult to learn to how to write in English.

English	Mandarin
It is easy (for me) to fall asleep in class.	Wǒ zài shàng kè de shíhòu hěn róngyì shuì jiào. 我 很容易在上课 的时候 睡觉。 I <u>in class when am easy</u> to fall asleep..
It is hard (for me) to study with other students.	Wǒ hěn nán gēn biéde tóngxué xuéxí. 我 很难跟别的 同学学习。 I am very hard with other classmates study.

Cultural Note: As one can understand, the English use of expressions *I am hard* (for a man) and *I am easy* (usually for a woman) are both phrases to avoid. Choose how much of an explanation is appropriate for your class. I have always resisted explaining the former but have explained the latter.

Time Expressions and Adverbials

Dates and Years

The Date in Chinese:

The order of dates in Chinese follows the general pattern from large to small, as do other time expressions.

English	Mandarin
Wednesday, July 22, 2013	èr líng yī sān nián qī yuè èr rì shí èr xīng qī sān。 二零一三年七月二十二日星期三。 two zero one three year, seven month, twenty-two day, Wednesday

Explanation: The order in Chinese is year, month, day, day of the week.

Side Note: In China, Monday is considered the first day of the week.

The Year

English	Mandarin
2013 twenty thirteen or two thousand thirteen	2013 èr líng yī sān nián. 二零一三年。 two zero one three year

Explanation: In Mandarin, it is customary to say each number of the year. It's important to teach students that there are multiple ways to say the date/year in English, but that we don't say each number.

Also, time expressions are always placed in the beginning of the sentence. If there is a subject, they go right after it. They generally follow the order of large to small (year ♦ month ♦ day).

English	Mandarin
I will see you at 7:30 tomorrow evening.	Wǒmen míngtiān wǎnshàng qī diǎn bàn jiàn. 我 明天晚上七点半见。 We tomorrow evening 7:30 pm see.
English	Mandarin
Today, I am very busy.	Wǒ jīntiān hěn máng. 我今天很忙。 I today very busy.

Explanation: The subject comes before the time expression, and the verb comes at the end of the clause.

Subject + Time Expression + Verb

Adding Location to the Mix

English	Mandarin
This week, I read two books at the library.	Wǒ zhè gè xīngqī zài túshūguǎn kàn le liǎng běn shū. 我这个星期在图书馆看了两本书。 I this week at the library read two books.

Subject + Time Expression + Location + Verb

Adding Manner to the Mix

English	Mandarin
This week, I read two books very quickly in the library.	<p>Wǒ zhè gè xīng qī hěn kuài de kàn le liǎng běn shū.</p> <p>我 这个星期 很快<u>地</u>看了两 本书。</p> <p>I this week <u>quickly</u> read two books.</p> <p><i>Mandarin uses 地 (de) to show the word form is an adverb.</i></p>

Explanation: The basic sentence structure in Mandarin follows this pattern:

Subject + Time Expression + Location + Manner + Verb

Connectors

Coordinating and Subordinating Conjunctions

English	Mandarin
I like Chicago, and I like Shanghai.	<p>Wǒ xǐhuan Zhījiāgē, yě xǐhuan Shànghǎi.</p> <p>我 喜欢 芝加哥, 也 喜欢 上海。</p> <p>I like Chicago, and like Shanghai.</p> <p>Yě (也) means "also" or "as well as."</p>

Explanation: In Mandarin, they seldom use coordinators such as *and*, *but*, or *or* in between independent clauses. Instead, they add a connector such as *and* to connect the nouns as in the example above. Sometimes, however, they will use another type of connector like *while* (see below) to connect the clauses. Occasionally, they will use *but* (see below) to connect the clauses.

English	Mandarin
I went to Chicago, and my sister went to New York.	<p>Wǒ qù le Zhījiāgē, ér wǒ de jiějie qù le Niǔ Yuē.</p> <p>我 去了 芝加哥, 而 我的 姐姐 去了 纽约。</p> <p>I went to Chicago, while my sister went to New York.</p>
I like coffee, but I did not drink coffee this time.	<p>Wǒ xǐhuan kāfēi, dàn shì zhè cì méi yǒu qù hē kāfēi.</p> <p>我 喜欢 咖啡, <u>但</u> 这次 没有 去 喝咖啡。</p> <p>I like coffee, but this time I didn't go drink coffee.</p>

Explanation: In Mandarin, they connect nouns and verbs with an *and* equivalent, and in many cases, the grammar functions like English. The following is an example of items in a list, which is the same as English.

English	Mandarin
I bought a book, a skirt, and some dumplings.	<p>Wǒ mǎi le yī běn shū, yì tiáo qúnzi, hái yǒu yī xiē jiǎozi.</p> <p>我买了一本书，一条裙子，还有一些饺子。</p> <p>I bought a book, a skirt, and some dumplings.</p> <p><i>Measure Words⁵ (MW):</i> běn is the MW used for books, tiáo is the MW for clothes and xiē is the MW for dumplings.</p>

Sentence Connectors (In addition)

Issues with the Sentence Connector *In Addition*

English	Mandarin
In addition to the classes for my major, I have to take Chinese language.	<p>Chu lé zhuān yè kè yǐ wài, wǒ hái děi xué Zhōngwén.</p> <p>除了专业课以外，我还得学中文。</p> <p>In addition to major classes (addition/outside of), I also have to study Chinese.</p>
In addition to speaking Chinese, I speak a little French.	<p>Chúle huì shuō Zhōngwén yǐwài, wǒ hái huì shuō yī diǎn Fǎwén.</p> <p>除了说中文以外，我还会说一点法文。</p> <p>In addition to Chinese, I speak a little French.</p>

Explanation: In Mandarin, the equivalent phrase of *in addition* has three parts to it. **Chulé ... yǐwài + hái**. The part that resembles *in addition* is in two parts, and they surround the first point. In the second clause, there is another connector (**hái** = also) that must be used. There is no need to repeat the subject in the second clause as is customary in English. In Mandarin, however, the subject can come only in the second clause, and not in the first clause.

⁵ Measure Words: See the *Measure Words* section for more information.

The Special Case of *Although* and Other Subordinator-Coordinator Combinations

English	Mandarin
Although I really like Chicago, I prefer Shanghai.	Suīrán wǒ zhēn de hěn xǐhuan Zhījiāgē, kě shì wǒ gèng xǐhuan Shànghǎi. 虽然我真喜欢芝加哥，可是我更喜欢上海。 <u>Although</u> I really like Chicago, <u>but</u> I like Shanghai more.
Although I like grammar, English grammar is too hard.	Suīrán wǒ xǐhuan yǔfǎ, kěshì yīngwén de yǔfǎ hěn nán. 虽然我喜欢语法，可是英文的语法很难。 <u>Although</u> I like grammar, <u>but</u> English grammar is very hard.

Explanation: *Although* is NOT the only subordinator in Mandarin that requires a coordinator combination. When teaching subordinators, it is important to mention that a coordinator such as *but* never follows a clause with *although* or any subordinator.

Because

English	Mandarin
Because I am a student, I need to do my homework.	Yīnwèi wǒ shì xué sheng, suǒyǐ wǒ yào zuò zuòyè. 因为我是一个学生，所以我要做作业。 Because I am student, so I need to do homework.

Explanation: As in the case above, when beginning with the subordinator *because*, the second clause must have the coordinator *so*, which is the exact opposite from English grammar.

Odds and Ends

There Is/Are

Mandarin uses the verb *to have* to indicate the English concept of *there is/are*.

Plurals

The only plurals that exist in Mandarin are with the pronouns for *we*, *you*, and *they*. Otherwise, a singular noun is the same as a plural noun. There are, however, plural forms to indicate many, some, several, etc.

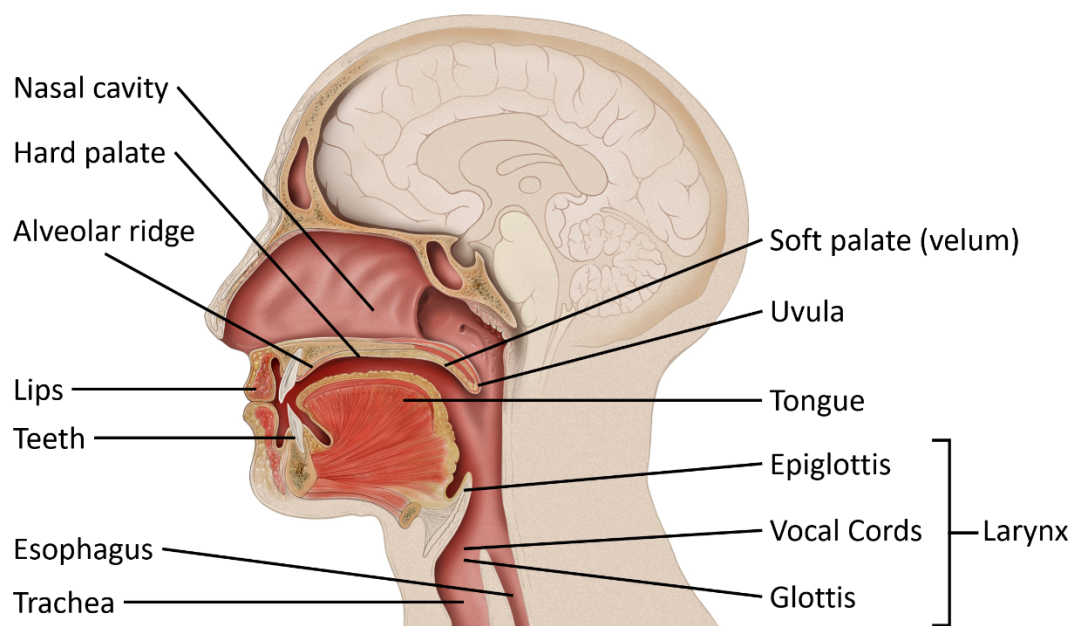
Measure Words

Mandarin does not have *articles*, but they have a whole classification of words called *measure words* that are used to indicate the type of noun in the sentence. These little measure words are also one of the most troublesome parts of the grammar for language students.

The somewhat close equivalent in English would be words like *set*, *pair*, *flock*, *school*, *loaf*, etc. This list represents just a fraction of the complete list. There are only a couple of exceptions of nouns that don't require a measure word because they have it built in.

English	Mandarin	Character
a person	yī gè rén	一 个人
a book	yī běn shū	一 本书
a pen	yī zhī bǐ	一 枝笔
a piece of paper	yī zhāng zhǐ	一 张纸
a shirt	yī jiàn chèn shān	一 件衬衫
a pair of pants	yī tiáo kùzi	一 条裤子
a class	yī jié kè	一 节课
		Measure words are indicated in red, and the nouns are indicated in blue.

Phonology



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While English pronunciation is quite difficult, there are a few sounds (/j/, /x/, /q/ and /r/), mostly palatal, that cause the biggest problems for Chinese ELL students. These three sounds are often confused with /sh/, /ch/ and /j/, but they are produced in different parts of the mouth.

English	Mandarin
/ch/, /sh/ and /j/	/j/, /x/, /q/ and /r/
The tip of the tongue is at the hard palate just behind the alveolar ridge.	The tongue stays low in the mouth and tip is by the lower teeth by the gum line. To make the sound, the tongue blade raises to touch the alveolar ridge.
The tip of the tongue is producing the sound.	The tongue blade is making the sound, so they are dorsal sounds.

English	Mandarin
/j/, /ch/ and /sh/	/zh/, /ch/ and /sh/
Sound comes from the tip of the tongue hitting just behind the alveolar ridge. (See diagram)	Sound comes from the tip of the tongue hitting the back of the hard palate. (See diagram)

English	Mandarin
/r/	/r/
In English, /r/ is classified as a lingua-palatal liquid. The only other liquid in English is /l/.	In Mandarin, the /r/ is retroflex.
To make the English /r/ sound, the tongue is kind of crunched and raised to the hard palate.	To make the Mandarin /r/, the tongue is elevated and the tip is way back beyond the alveolar ridge.
The throat is also a bit constricted.	There is nothing remotely like this in English.

Language and Culture

Pronouns: He, She, and It. Which Do You Mean?

Ever wonder why Chinese students cannot figure out the pronouns *she* and *he*? In Mandarin, both pronouns he and she share the same *pinyin* (pronunciation). Even *it* shares the same *pinyin*, yet all three have different *hànzì* 汉字.

English	Mandarin
she	tā 她
he	tā 他
it	tā 它

There is another theory that suggests that the *hànzì* for *she* (她) is a relatively new addition to the language created around one hundred years ago, and, therefore, is still having a hard time gaining traction (Kristianstad, H. & Mattison, J. 2007).

Directions

Directions in China revolve around the East –West axis. One could say that their world and perspective follow an East – West mindset compared to the North – South of the United States. In fact, the term for *things*, such as “*I need to buy some things.*” is translated into I need to buy some *dōngxī* (east west). In other words, a person is going out on the east – west axis to purchase things.

English	Mandarin
The Southwest	xī nán 西南 west south
The Northeast	dōng běi 东北 east north

A Note on Directions: I asked many people about giving directions and why many Chinese do not know how to read maps or really give accurate directions even in their own hometown. The first issue is around “saving face,” which is extremely important in Chinese culture. Saying the phrase *I don’t know* can be embarrassing, especially in a group of family or friends. Therefore, instead of saying they don’t know, many Chinese will offer a vague sense of how to get somewhere when asked. The second point is that for many decades there was little freedom of movement within the country. In 1958, Mao Zedong (founder of the People’s Republic of China) imposed a *hukou* (户口 household registration) system in order to control the flow of citizens from the countryside to the cities. The *hukou* system actually codifies social inequities by dividing citizens into two classes (urban and rural) and dictates where citizens can receive social services, like education and health services. While the creation of factories along the eastern coast in the 1970s relaxed some restrictions as people flocked there for work, there were still limits on relocating one’s family. In order to travel, Chinese citizens needed permission from the local government. While some of these restrictions have continued to be relaxed over the years, often spurred by government development initiatives, the central Chinese government remains focused on maintaining stability while promoting economic growth. One issue the central government faces with *hukou* system reform is ensuring the compliance of local officials. Sometimes local governments find ways around providing rural migrants with the social services entitled through the *hukou* system.

Please and Thank You

Saying please and thank you is often uncommon among friends and family members. The Chinese believe that if you are a good friend or a member of the same family, saying these phrases is not

necessary. Of course, you will help your friend! These phrases are mostly reserved for strangers with whom a person does not have a close relationship. If a person said thank you to a friend, they may think, *What! Am I not your friend that you need to say this?* However, there is a distinction for formal contexts that involve elders and those in positions of power. In these contexts, it is very important to say *please* and *thank you*.

Family Names

Here is a quick hint how you can figure out if your students speak Mandarin or Cantonese, besides asking them!

Cantonese is the second most spoken language on Mainland China after Mandarin, and it is the main spoken language in Guangdong Province located in southern China. Even though students are taught in Mandarin in Guangdong, Cantonese is spoken at home. Unlike Mandarin's four tones, Cantonese has six tones (though some will say traditionally it had 9 tones). Students from these two language backgrounds will have unique challenges with the pronunciation of certain English sounds.

The following is a list of the spelling differences between Mandarin and Cantonese names.

Mandarin	Cantonese
Huang	Wong
Chen	Chan
He	Ho
Li	Lee
Zhang	Cheung
Zhou	Chow
Wu	Ng
Lin	Lam
Liu	Lau
Mei	Mui
Xie	Tse
Tan	Tam

This is just a brief list, and there may be exceptions. Nevertheless, this will give teachers an idea of the language background of their students. Students who grow up in Guangdong Province, the Cantonese speaking province, all learn Mandarin when they enter school. Chinese speaking students may also know other regional dialects.

Basic Hanzi – Chinese Characters and Radicals

What is a Radical?

Radicals are the building blocks of Chinese characters. Each character can be made up from one or many radicals. Most agree that there are 214 radicals that were codified in the 18th Century in the Qing Dynasty.

radical	pinyin	meaning
人	rén	person
女	nǚ	woman
心	xīn	heart
手	shǒu	hand

Many people think that characters resemble their meaning, but this is a fallacy. There are some that do have a history of evolving from pictographs. In the list above, in my opinion, the only character that remotely resembles its meaning is 人 rén (person).

There are over 100,000 characters (*hànzì* 汉字) in Chinese, but most official sources site the number as just over 50,000 because so many ancient characters are no longer in use. A comprehensive modern dictionary will rarely list over 20,000. An educated native Chinese person will know about 8,000 characters. In order to be considered fluent (e.g., easily communicate with Mandarin speakers and read newspapers), one should know between 2,000 – 3,000. While some characters are based on pictures, many are pictophonetic: one part meaning (radical) and one part sound.

Survival Mandarin Chinese for ELL Teachers

English	Mandarin
Hello	Nǐ hǎo (pronounced Ní hǎo due to two consecutive third tones)
How are you?	Nǐ hǎo ma?
My name is _____.	Wǒ de míngzì shì _____。
I am an English teacher.	Wǒ shì yīngwén lǎoshī。
What is your name?	Nǐ jiào shénme míngzì?
Where are you from?	Nǐ cóng nǎlǐ lái de?

Hello everyone	Dàijiā hǎo
Class is beginning.	Shàng kè.
Class is over.	Xià kè.
Thank you	xiè xie

Glossary

Mandarin	<p>This is the official language of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. The etymology of the word dates back to the early 1500s and refers to a Chinese official. Today, Mandarin is the term for the language spoken by around four/fifths of the Chinese population. It is, of course, spoken in many other Asian countries including Singapore and Malaysia.</p> <p><i>Is it a dialect or a language?</i> The Chinese use these terms loosely or <i>incorrectly</i>. There are fifty-five <i>minority</i> (as they are called on the Mainland) groups in China, and each speaks its own language. Many of these languages are as distinct as German and Spanish, so dialect would be an inappropriate term.</p>			
Chinese	Chinese is often used to mean Mandarin, yet it actually refers to the entire group of languages that exist in Mainland China.			
character	Character refers to one individual word in Chinese.			
Pinyin	<i>Pinyin</i> uses the Roman alphabet as its base and is the phonetic transcription for written Mandarin. It was developed in the 1950s under Chairman Máo Zédōng to improve literacy.			
Radical	The building blocks of the language. (See above)			
Tone	Mandarin has four tones, each with a different pitch. There is also a fifth neutral tone that does not carry a tone mark. The following example is with <i>mā</i> , a word used frequently to describe the tonal system. Cantonese, by contrast, traditionally has nine tones, but three of them have similarity to other tones. This has led some to say there are six tones.			
	mā - 妈 mother	má - 麻 hemp	mǎ - 马 horse	mà - 骂 to scold
	māo - 猫 cat	Máo 毛 - surname (as in Chairman Máo Zédōng), spear, reeds, very drunk, bangs, or mane	Mǎo 茆- type of water plant, riveting, round yellow dirt mount in NW China, or still water	Mào 冒 - surname, hat, hardworking, jade, or envious

One can see that Mandarin gives homonyms a new meaning! English has around 3,000 sound combinations (syllables) while Mandarin only has around 300. In a traditional dictionary, one might find a multitude of words with the same *pinyin* but different characters.

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Appendix

The following section focuses on cultural lessons and classroom implications. These are observations I have made during my trips to China and from teaching Chinese speaking students for many years.

Political Taboos

Many travelers to China know this as the “3 Ts” that stand for Tiananmen Square, Tibet, and Taiwan. Today, we can add to the list an “X” for Xīnjiāng and “HK” for Hong Kong. Xīnjiāng is China’s westernmost province that is undergoing a (*Hanification*) Sinicization of the Uyghur Muslim population (Khatchadourian, 2021). There are also global concerns about the detention of over 1 million Uyghurs (including other Muslim minorities such as Kazakhs and Uzbeks) in Xinjiang internment camps, officially called “vocational education training centers” by the government. Of course, there are more taboo topics, but these are currently the infamous ones. Chinese society is still very closed compared to its communist neighbor Vietnam. In Vietnam, people appear to chat more freely about the government and equal rights (*my own anecdotal evidence*). In China, by contrast, many people do not feel free to discuss the 3 Ts or other current events. In fact, the political climate under Xi Jinping has gone in the opposite direction. There is more government scrutiny of everyday actions and widescale crackdown on social media (Mozur, 2019). Peter Hessler, a writer for the *New Yorker*, who has lived on and off in China for years, had his teaching contract at the Sichuan University Pittsburgh Institute terminated in 2021. Due to the Great Firewall and the Chinese government’s control of the internet and media, which leads to misinformation and sometimes concerted efforts at disinformation, many are simply not aware of these events while others hesitate to discuss them for fear of government retaliation. One of my Chinese students who is extremely educated and curious told me that she had only heard references to the June 1989 events in Tiananmen Square but had not really understood what had happened until she reached the United States and could search online. In China, typing the words *Tiananmen Square* into a browser will

result in nothing. The same is true for Tibet. This is just an example of the complexity of Chinese life. Teachers need to understand how to broach these subjects if they arise in the classroom. A few years ago, one of my Chinese students wrote an essay about the effects of the Cultural Revolution on her family, but when it was time to post it to the class blog, she told me that she was not comfortable sharing it. Even when students immigrate to the United States, some are still wary of the government's eyes. This student told me that the Chinese Communist Party extends its arm well beyond the country. In the past couple of decades, that arm has gotten longer and more sophisticated.

Taiwan's relationship with Mainland China is also becoming an increasing concern. Taiwan has been run independently since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Mainland China; however, the Mainland government sees Taiwan as part of China and hopes to see a "peaceful reunification" in the future (though the PRC has never ruled out the possible use of force). Over the past few years, tensions have risen partly due to Hong Kong's resistance against Mainland control (see below) and partly due to U.S. – Taiwan relations and the continued commitment of the U.S. to support Taiwanese defense capabilities. The Mainland government wants to maintain its *One China* principle (i.e., the PRC is the sole legal government of China and Taiwan is part of China) and fears that Taiwanese will start demonstrations against the Mainland government following Hong Kong's lead.

It is important for teachers to know that Taiwanese students have little in common in terms of social upbringing with students from the Mainland. The majority of Taiwanese consider themselves Taiwanese (66%) as opposed to Taiwanese and Chinese (28%) (Delvin & Huang, 2020), but if one asks a student from the Mainland, they might not even know that the Taiwanese feel this way. From the Mainland's perspective, Taiwan is a part of China. Teachers need to know how to deal with these issues in a sensitive manner.

In addition, many students from Hong Kong also do not refer to themselves as Chinese. They prefer to be called *Hong Konger* or *from Hong Kong*. In the past three years, there has been an exodus from Hong Kong due to the increasing control of the Mainland government and due to a proposed Hong Kong Extradition Bill that led to widespread protests in 2019. After the British relinquished control over Hong Kong in 1997, the Mainland government promised that the policy of "One Country, Two Systems"⁶ would be in place until 2047. Nevertheless, the Mainland government passed the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020, which gives the Mainland government more power over Hong Kong including the establishment of crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organizations; any open speech, verbal promotion or intention of HK secession from China is

⁶ *One Country, Two Systems* refers to the two different political systems that the Mainland government agreed to as Hong Kong was returned to China. The Mainland would continue to use a communist system while Hong Kong would continue to follow a democratic system until the year 2047.

also considered a crime. In addition, the Law enables extradition for criminal cases to be tried in Mainland China.

If anyone ever had a doubt about how China would eventually engulf Hong Kong and remove the freedoms it had, one only needs to be reminded of the countdown clock that was in Tiananmen Square from 1994 until June 1997 that had the words “The Chinese Government Regains Sovereignty over Hong Kong” (Osnos, 2014).

Saving Face and Other Social Issues

The words “I don’t know” are seldom heard in Mainland China. If you ask for directions, no one will ever say they don’t know. Instead, they will offer a vague description with a lot of hand gestures indicating the path. This is especially true if the person is near family or friends. Fourteen years of teaching Chinese students, I have seen how this plays out in the classroom, a place where students are surrounded by their friends and, occasionally, a family member. Teachers need to set the stage in the beginning of the semester and remind students that it is just fine to tell the teacher they don’t know an answer. I have seen this type of avoidance on quizzes and tests as well. Instead of leaving something blank or writing a short reply, many will tend to write about whatever they can connect to the question. Sure, all students, regardless of nationality, do this, but it tends to be more common among my Chinese students. I always remind my students that a short answer is often more appropriate than a circuitous route that ends nowhere.

Direct Language (and Culture)

This next section relates to linguistic features of Mandarin and how this affects students’ mannerisms and their writing. In Chinese, there are no equivalent words or phrases for *can I*, *would you*, and other modals of suggestion. Instead, what often happens is that Chinese has small words that act as *tone softeners*. In other words, Mandarin is a very direct language, and this often transfers to human interactions. One day on my last trip to China, I was walking down a somewhat touristy area, and a woman called out to me “hello bananas.” Later on, I heard “hello chopsticks.” What they were really saying was “Hello. Do you want to buy some bananas?” In the classroom, this manner of speaking is widely common among Chinese students. Their answers are often brief and lack depth. For many students, writing with tone or description is also a problem; they neglect to add elaboration to their written assignments. Teachers need to pay special attention to these issues and develop lessons and provide examples to help students adapt to a more Western descriptive style.

Writing and Culture

It is no surprise that academic writing in China differs greatly from what is taught in institutions of higher learning in the West. Chinese students face tremendous obstacles as they try to master English. The spoken and written language poses huge challenges with barely one cognate between

the two, but so do the cultural differences. In an essay “Chinese Essay Writing: A Special Challenge for Universities in the West,” Mattison and Kristianstad (2007) quote Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi who argue that “The culture the learner brings to the classroom is more than a background influence. It determines how the learner perceives learning and how s/he evaluated his/her own performance and that of other students” (Kristianstad & Mattison, 2007).

ELL teachers need a better understanding of Chinese culture and classroom culture to help manage these challenges. My students have often told me that when they were in high school and even the university, their professors tended to have set answers ready for their questions, but since it is not customary to ask questions, professors have it all planned out. They anticipate the questions and deliver rote answers.

In Western education, teachers usually wait for students to ask questions, and if they don’t, they continue. The problem for many Chinese students is twofold: they are so accustomed to not participating that they will not get their questions answered, and they are worried about saving face. In my ESL 100 course (Advanced Reading and Writing), I hold in-class conferences for each essay to ensure my students understand my comments and how to proceed. Jin and Cortazzi also suggest that offering students small group work and one-on-one sessions with the teacher is a great method to counter these challenges.

Since many ELL professors are aware of the tendency toward rote learning in Asian cultures, they have tools to allow for critical thinking in the classroom. Teachers have various methods of teaching and test creation that do not rely on rote memorization for success.

The differences between approaches to writing in China and the United States are steeped in the culture of the two places. I have learned this over the years from talking to my students, from attending conferences, and from my own research (e.g., Kristianstad & Mattison, 2007). About a year ago, one of my Chinese writing students came to my office for additional help. She was an international student and very academically prepared. She even entered our program at the 100 level, which is somewhat uncommon for Chinese students. It was the second essay of the semester, and she was having a hard time grasping the concept of putting the thesis in the introduction paragraph and beginning the body paragraphs with topic sentences. During our conversation, she explained to me that in Chinese writing, the main argument comes at the end of the paper. Professor Larry Su (Harold Washington College) also discussed this at a City Colleges of Chicago faculty development session some years back. Kristianstad and Mattison (2007) explain that compared to the *low context* culture of the West, China is a *high context* culture. In a *low context* culture, the authors state, meaning needs to be straightforward and explained by the writer. The argument’s reasons are stated logically and in order whereas in Chinese writing, there is room for ambiguity, and “inference and implicitness are the source of meaning” (Kristianstad & Mattison, 2007). Finally, in Chinese writing and thought, it is more common to follow deductive reasoning, which is opposite from the

West. This is why my student could not understand why she needed to place the argument in the opening of the paper; it was a foreign concept for her. She wanted to begin with broad information and then work her way down to the crux of the argument. These issues are not insurmountable; nevertheless, teachers need to be aware of these differences and specifically address them in the classroom.

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