

Catch a tiger by the tongue

As the Chinese economy roars ahead, learning to speak Mandarin may soon be a fixture for Britain's schoolchildren

Sian GriffithsPublished: 15 April 2012, Sunday Times



Pupils learn Mandarin at Brighton college, which pioneered its teaching in the UK (Andrew Hasson)

Felix Fowler's scariest moment so far since arriving in northern China eight months ago came late one night after he had said goodbye to the friends he had been visiting. Setting off in what he thought was the direction for home, he soon realised he was hopelessly lost.

The 17-year-old, who is studying in the city of Tianjin, says: "I had left my mobile phone at home, so had almost no means of communication. I had to navigate my way asking for help with my exceedingly limited Chinese. It really was a case of thinking on my feet. It was one of my craziest experiences, but then it's all a huge learning curve."

Fowler is a pupil at a school for 3-18-year-olds established by one of Britain's leading public schools. The Tianjin school is the first of two in China set up by Wellington college, the boarding school in Berkshire founded by Queen Victoria in 1859 to educate the sons of soldiers. The second, in Shanghai, opens later this year and there are plans for a third.

Felix, whose father is deputy headmaster at Wellington College International in Tianjin, has made friends among the pupils and his favourite dish is now kung fu chicken. Despite the exotic strangeness of his surroundings — “Before coming here I had lived in the UK countryside all my life” — he is reassured by the presence of several western stores and restaurants in the city. “There are lots of pizza places, a Zara store and Starbucks all over the place,” he says.

So far 11 students from Wellington have travelled to China to study and there are plans for many more to spend at least a term there.

Anthony Seldon, the master of Wellington college, explains: “The main reason we have set the schools up is for the opportunities we've already had for our children to spend some time studying in the East.”

According to Seldon, it is crucial that Felix's generation learns Mandarin — China's official language — and understands Chinese ways. Wellington will soon open a centre for Mandarin where, during the annual Sunday Times/Wellington college festival of education in June, all visitors will be offered beginner's lessons by the school's Mandarin teachers.

“We're very much committed to exposing everybody to Chinese culture, so everyone's going to have Chinese immersion lessons as part of their time at Wellington,” says Seldon. “It's not just about learning the language, it's also about learning the culture and learning the economic and social impact of China on their lives, because it is going to be the dominant factor in the lives of all our students.”

'Exam boards are not helping. They plan a ridiculously easy GCSE and A-level for native speakers' Seldon has decided to lead by example: “I'm studying for Mandarin GCSE, which I can sit with the students. I have lessons and homework.”

He says that while state schools have been swift to embrace the teaching of Chinese, the private sector has been slower off the mark, with the exception of Brighton college, which pioneered its study in Britain. Slowly, however, the situation is changing. Across Britain, FGS — French, German and Spanish, the traditional trinity

of school languages — is being supplanted by a new acronym, HAM: Hindi, Arabic and Mandarin, considered the languages aspiring entrepreneurs will need to do business with the emerging economic giants of the 21st century.

Within the past two years 14 private schools have entered pupils for a new exam in Mandarin Chinese. By the end of June, 300 pupils from prep schools across the country will have gained the Independent Schools Examinations Board's certificate of achievement in the subject.

GCSE and A-level, however, are regarded as much more difficult exams for teenagers trying to learn the language from scratch. A* and A grades are awarded only rarely to non-native speakers. Critics say a new, easier GCSE is needed for British teenagers, who are often deterred from taking a GCSE in Mandarin by the fear that they will score only a low C or D grade in the subject, thus jeopardising their chance of a place at a top university.

"The exam boards in Britain are not helping the study of Mandarin advance because they plan a ridiculously easy GCSE and A-level for native speakers," says Seldon.

"Native speakers go along and they get A*s almost by just turning up for the exam. But for those people who are new to the subject it's terribly difficult. It's much more difficult than French or Spanish or Italian. It really is enormously hard because you're having to learn the characters and the way they work, and the sounds with different stresses.

"Parents think the teaching of Mandarin is exciting. They are savvy people who can see the way the world is going. But once they realise their children may not do well in the exam, that will be a disincentive."

British universities have been tardy in encouraging their students to study in the East, says Seldon. He would like to see undergraduates at the Russell Group of universities given the chance to spend a year at a Chinese university, and UK universities setting up outposts in the country. "British universities need to be a lot more outward-looking. They could offer physics and Mandarin degrees, or history and Mandarin."

So how is Seldon doing with his quest to pass a GCSE in Mandarin Chinese? "I can count to 10. I can count to 100," he avers. He knows staples such as "ni hao", which means hello, and "zaijian", which means goodbye.

So what's the Chinese for 10? He pauses. "I'll need to get back to you on that."

