



Dragon Mandarin

中国风汉语

Difficulties of learning Chinese Mandarin

a) How difficult is it to learn Chinese?

We bet everyone has told you how difficult Chinese is. The fact is: learning a language, ANY language, is hard. If you're going to go through all that work anyways you might as well be able to tell people that "you speak Chinese". In fact, we don't think learning Chinese is much worse than learning German or French (and it sounds so much cooler). Chinese has no tense, no subject-verb agreement and no gender. Learning to read the characters is difficult, but Pin Yin is no harder than learning to read any western language and the characters have roots that repeat. The thing that makes Chinese seem so difficult for Westerners is just that it's so different from any language that we know, but that's the beauty of it! Learning Chinese is challenging but it's also one of the most rewarding learning experiences you'll ever have. You'll never know until you try!

b) What are the main difficulties in learning Mandarin Chinese ?

The written system

The Chinese written system is very difficult to learn. There is no alphabet and every word is represented by a different sign. You need to learn at least 1000 signs to be able to begin reading a newspaper.

The vocabulary

Learning Chinese vocabulary is difficult as there are no similarities with vocabulary from Western languages. You need to learn everything from scratch.

The word order

There are no big grammar difficulties in Mandarin but as there are no flexions, everything is based on word order. If you miss the precise word order, your sentence has no sense.

c) What is easy to learn in Mandarin Chinese?

The tones and the pronunciation are much easier than you might expect. In the beginning, the grammar is so easy that you do not have to concentrate on it.

d) Are some aspects of Mandarin Chinese that are easier than expected ?

Yes, to master a bit of the spoken language is much easier than people would expect. It is probably easier than many European language such as German or Russian.

However making complex sentences is much harder. Mandarin is a precise language where word order is very strict.

e) **How soon can you understand bits of spoken chinese ?**

You can quickly understand part of sentences in movies or when you listen to people talking. But understanding the whole conversation, or following a movie without subtitles is way more difficult.

f) **How soon can you follow kung fu movies in Mandarin Chinese?**

You can quickly understand bits of conversation. Don't forget that there are no flexions whatsoever in Mandarin. Words are not transformed when they enter a sentence. However following the whole movie is another challenge.

g) **How soon can you understand Chinese Mandarin signs on the street or in shops?**

This is hard. If the spoken language is much easier than what people would expect, the written language is as hard as it looks like. Recognising signs in the street is not easy at all. Many signs will include characters for personal names or name of places and those are often very specific. Moreover, fancy fonts or written characters are often used and they don't make the reading easier.

h) **How soon can you read menus in chinese restaurants?**

This is easier than reading the signs on the street. You can learn the characters for the type of food (beef, chicken, fish,...) . You will probably not be able to understand everything but you can know what the dishes are made about.

i) **How does learning Mandarin Chinese compare to learning German or Spanish ?**

It is a completely different experience. You have no similarities of vocabulary with your language. The structure of the language, based on syllable and not on words is different. Everything that you know is something that you have learnt. There are no shortcuts. On the other hand, Mandarin grammar is definitely easy, probably easier than German for instance.

Writing system

a) **How do you look up Mandarin Chinese words in a dictionary?**

You have different types of dictionary in Chinese. Each has different function :

Pinyin-English / English-Pinyin: This is as easy to use as any bilingual dictionary. This is the dictionary you use when you heard a word and want to know its meaning, or when you want to use a word that you don't know.

Characters-Pinyin-English : This is the dictionary you would use if you are reading Chinese. It is much harder than you might expect. You first have to find the key of the character you are investigating. There are 214 keys and they are not

always easily recognizable in the character. Then, inside a key section, characters are classified according to the number of stroke that constitute them. Finally you have to go through all the characters with the same key and same number of strokes until you find yours. Next to the character, you will have the Pinyin version, and the English translation. This is a real hassle and thanks to modern technology, you have computer programs that can help you. With Clavis Sinica, you can cut and paste any Chinese text and on clicking on the character you don't know, you get the Pinyin, the English translation, his key, his traditional / simplified version,... You also have programs that can recognize characters that you have previously scanned, for instance with a Datapen.

Pinyin-Characters or English-Characters : These are useful if you want to write Chinese. You also have computer programs that can assist you in writing. You write in Pinyin and the character is appearing. If there are different characters for the same Pinyin, you can choose the one you want. You have other dictionaries such as Simplified-Traditional characters, and different combination for Mandarin-Cantonese. These are not very useful for students.

b) How difficult is it to write Mandarin Chinese?

Writing Chinese is very, very difficult. And if you are not using a software, in my humble opinion it is well-nigh impossible to write it correctly unless you spend years studying it. Thanks god, you have computer programs that can help you. With such assistant, you write in PinYin and the characters are presented to you. Even a beginner can do it.

c) Can I learn Mandarin Chinese only with Pinyin ?

Of course, but you will never be able to read newspaper articles or books on paper. There are softwares that take a Mandarin Chinese text and convert it into Pinyin though.

d) What is Pinyin?

Pinyin is the most widely used romanization system. It is a transcription in western alphabet of the Chinese characters. When you learn Chinese, you start by learning Pinyin to get the right pronunciation.

Vocabulary

a) Once you have found a Mandarin Chinese word in the dictionary, how easy is it to pronounce?

If you have the Pinyin with the tone, you can know at 100% how the pronunciation will be. The Pinyin system has been made for that.

Using the language

a) Are chinese people forgiving when you make mistakes in Mandarin

Chinese?

There are not so many foreigners who learn Chinese. By knowing a bit more than the complete basic, you will be welcomed. Chinese speakers will automatically detect your mistakes, especially the tone mistakes.

b) **How useful is a knowledge of Mandarin Chinese for travelling in China ?**

It can be very useful. Mandarin Chinese is really the common language in China. Even in regions where people speak another dialect, they will be able to communicate in Mandarin.

c) **If you are fluent in Mandarin Chinese, can you read a text written by a Cantonese Chinese speaker?**

Most Cantonese speaker will write in standard written Chinese which is based on Mandarin. This is the case of most Hong-Kong newspapers. Some texts are written based on Cantonese with some characters which are specifically Cantonese, but you should be able to understand most of it with the Mandarin knowledge.

d) **If you travel to Taiwan, Singapore or Hong Kong, how useful is it to speak Mandarin Chinese?**

Taiwan

In Taiwan, Mandarin Chinese is the official language. Even if many people will speak the Taiwanese dialect, they normally also speak Mandarin. Taiwan still uses the traditional characters. Reading will thus be difficult if you have learnt the simplified.

Singapore

Mandarin is an official language of Singapore and the simplified characters are used. This is the most widely spoken Chinese language spoken, even if some Cantonese dialects are also used. English is however much more widespread than in China or Taiwan, so the usefulness of Mandarin Chinese is reduced.

Hong-Kong

Even if the use of Mandarin Chinese is increasing in Hong-Kong, the basic Chinese language spoken there is Cantonese, not Mandarin. English is also widely spoken and people will not think it natural to speak Mandarin with Westerners.

e) **Are there regional variations in Mandarin Chinese?**

There are many (perhaps hundreds of) Mandarin dialects. As the official language of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore, Mandarin has many regional variations which are usually referred to as Mandarin dialects.

Mandarin Chinese is also spoken in Malaysia, Macau, Hong Kong and many countries where there is a sizeable Chinese population. This makes Mandarin the most widely-spoken language in the world.

Studying Mandarin Chinese

a) **What goals can you reasonably set when learning Mandarin Chinese?**

Sky is the limit. The first goal for most people is being able to have a standard conversation with a Mandarin Chinese speaker. This is reasonable. To have advanced conversation with complex sentences will require much more work. Mastering the written system is the real challenge. This takes years and nobody ever learns all the characters.

Learning the spoken language is much more gratifying than learning how to write.

b) **How do you choose between Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese?**

If you do not have specific reason to learn Cantonese, such as family or friends..., learn Mandarin. It is much more widespread and also easier.

c) **What learning tools are the most useful ?**

You need high quality tapes, such as Pimsleur, some conversation with Chinese speakers to correct the tones and the pronunciation. A phrase book, to improve the small talk. A good English-Pinyin dictionary.