

Mastering Mandarin in a downtown Vancouver office in around 200 hours

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More from Joanne Lee-Young

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Emily Nguyen is on a mission to master Mandarin, doing just an hour-a-day lesson in a downtown Vancouver office, plus some homework, until she clocks about 200 hours. That would be speedy.

Western diplomats and journalists heading off for a foreign posting where reading, writing and speaking conversational Mandarin is required usually get 2,000 hours, with half of those being fully-immersed in the language. To compare, the number of hours allotted for English-speakers to learn French or Spanish is 800 hours.

In Nguyen's case, she isn't getting ready to live elsewhere or even go on a trip. She teaches acrylic painting at Arts Umbrella, the Granville Island-based art school for kids.

"It's a big institution for helping a lot of newcomers from China to assimilate because it's not a traditional school," she said.

Many of the students in her classes "are Chinese," she said. "There are certain things, important things that you need to be able to do when communicating with parents and students if their English is limited."

With the goal of helping her young students and their families feel comfortable and secure — knowing full well that these are five-year olds who will quickly learn English — she joined other Vancouver residents in starting a 30-day Mandarin course at the downtown offices of New Occidental Education and Technology or [Noet.ca](#).

Already, she can read passages of Chinese characters at the level of a student who has studied for between six months to a year at a university in North America or who has been in an immersion program in mainland China for three months, said Evan Chiles, who specialized in language acquisition and neurolinguistic research at the University of Washington before heading to Kunming in southwestern China to learn Mandarin himself.

Most students memorize lists of characters, slowly adding a few at a time, knowing there are literally thousands more to learn, all the while trying to link seemingly random combinations of pictorial lines and strokes to romanized words, and writing both sets of foreign codes over and over again, ad nauseam, hoping to commit them to memory.

For Nguyen, it's been more pain-free as she has been focused on Noet's seemingly-magical box of just 16 key components.

"When you learn a language, you learn individual components," said Chiles. "In English, they are letters that are based on pronunciation. With Chinese, the component aspect exists in meaning and you can build off association from one character to another from this. This is what makes this method special and so fast."

"With most other methods, you have no connection from the look of a character to what it means," said instructor Patrick Yan.

Another student, Caitlin Jeangrand, is the first person in her family to learn Mandarin as a second language with this method. Her parents and grandparents all, at some point, moved from Vancouver to Taiwan to study Chinese the old-fashioned way.

"My grandfather, who speaks like a native speaker, did engineering at (the University of B.C.), and in his last year, took Mandarin for fun, fell in love with it and got sponsored to study in Taiwan," she explains, adding she never thought she might be able to gain proficiency in Mandarin without also moving to Asia at some point.

Old China hands like to quip that it actually takes 2,000 years to really learn Mandarin, and while Chiles acknowledges that this new method is about learning enough quickly so as to not be stumped in frustration early on, he adds: "There's been a pretension to learning Mandarin that doesn't have to exist if it can be easier to learn."

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I appreciate wanting to learn another language, this would typically be used for travel, but to learn a language to make student communication easier, this kind of defeats the purpose of moving to a country and trying to assimilate, no? If I moved to China and had my kids in an arts class I would want them to be spoken to in Mandarin, what an opportunity to learn. We only make these future generations English skills worse by pandering to them in a language they already speak,
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