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LREI News

Learning Chinese in Private School

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On September 22 at 8:45AM the class bell rings at the downtown Private high school LREI. In the second floor library, a small group of students gather. They are 10th graders. They come from all different backgrounds, but they have all chosen to study Chinese. Their teacher, Guo-Qing Zhang Heaton uses Chinese spiced with English to help convey to the students the meaning of the a simple conversation being taught. The students then begin using these simple Chinese sentences to answer the questions in the textbook. One of the students Susan Donahue sits right up next to the teacher. This is her second year studying Chinese and she says she always looks forward to her Chinese class. She works hard at it and gets good grades. She says the reason she is learning the language is for the intellectual challenge. In the future she wants to study business or Chinese history.

"I know that my knowledge of mandarin will help me in either of these careers greatly." She has seen a lot about China in the media and she is very interested to get more information. She says "China s a country rich in traditional history. During ancient times the Chinese were well ahead of Europe in terms of technology and medicine. As of now China is dealing with over population. The Yangtze River is being destroyed for building opportunities. A rare freshwater porpoise may become extinct because of the destruction at the river. Pollution is also a big problem..." She goes on. I was very surprised to find this kind of detailed knowledge about China in a student still only in the 10th grade. She

says learning Chinese is very difficult, but if she works hard and pays attention, and looks at it with a long view, there is great value in the endeavor. She says that this next summer she and her friends want to travel to Beijing to see the great wall and taste all sorts of different foods.

LREI initiated its Chinese language program at the beginning of last year. This is the second year so 9th grade is Chinese 1 and 10th graders are in Chinese 2. Each class has around 10 students, almost none of whom have any Chinese background. Even the one who does was born in the US and so came into the class speaking no Chinese at all. All the students have different reasons for having chosen to study Chinese, but in general, there seem to be three basic reasons. First, there are those who have a strong desire to learn it because they have some family or friend connected to China and this has sparked their interest in Chinese culture. The second group are those who see it as a practical choice. They see the economic power of China and the massive trade with the US making clear the future usefulness of Mandarin. Third, there are students who for one reason or another could not continue with their study of French or Spanish and therefore choose Mandarin as a way to fulfill their language requirement. This last category of student has set out on what will surely to prove a very torturous journey.

When learning Chinese, the students invariably want to be given Chinese names, for example ShiXin or ChiYao. The students know their meaning and these very traditional names are for them fresh, new and exciting. Learning to write their own Chinese name is important to them.

The Real Feelings of These Kids

The students all know some things about China. Some seem to know much more than others, but with regard to learning the language they are all agreed: Chinese is hard. So why are they learning it? I handed sheets with this question out to all the students and these were the responses I got back:

"I take Chinese because it is important in business and it is fun. China has many people and it's thriving in business. It is big with many cities. I have heard it's a very festive country. Chinese is very hard." - Hayata

"I take Chinese because it seems like an interesting language to speak. I know that China is big...and I'm sure I know other things which I can not remember. I also think it's ridiculously difficult because of the characters." - Soleil

"I am 15 years old. I live in New York. Chinese is a very difficult Language for me to learn. My father often goes to China so I know some things about Chinese culture. I like Chinese food and have taken Kung Fu for two years. Chinese seems like is a very important language to learn, as China grows stronger." - Ben

"I take Chinese because I live in Chinatown and I have lived there since I was a baby. More than half of the tenants in my building are Chinese and tell me stories about ancient China and Daoism." - Henry

"I'm learning Chinese because I really like Chinese culture. I read a lot of Chinese literature in translation. I especially love The Three Kingdoms. My favorite character is Guan-Yu because he is very honorable and he is a Kung-Fu master. I don't like Tsao-Tsao because he is treacherous and evil." - Jimmy

The students also mentioned that China has been able to maintain its culture through thousands of years of history and is likely to go on for thousands yet to come. They'd like to understand this and want to know more.

Writing Chinese Characters is Difficult

The 9th grade students just started learning Chinese. They are really fresh and are enjoying the newness of the experience. The 10 grade students are into it deeply enough to realize how difficult it really is. It's starting to dawn on them how profoundly complex learning Chinese will be. They are beginning to see how many Chinese words sound almost exactly alike and how many characters they are going to have to learn. These realizations have perhaps killed some of their earlier enthusiasm. Of the four things they must learn, listening, speaking reading and writing, writing is clearly the

most daunting.

Chinese characters, built as they are into a square forms from component elements and radicals instead of strung together in a phonetic sequence of alphabetic phonemes, presents a whole set of challenges. How does one properly compose and balance characters with vastly different stroke counts? How does one execute the strokes in the right sequence with proper form? Because of inexperience with these matters, the word "ta" meaning he, which is made up of a combination of two component elements – the "person" radical and the character "ye" meaning also – may get inadvertently split up and become "person, also" instead of "he." Or in another example, I saw a character that had been broken apart with a hyphen as one would do in English resulting in "mother" being rendered onto "woman-horse" on two separate lines. In order to address these problems the teacher had prepared special boxed writing papers for the students to practice with, and at the same time she introduced the students to Chinese pictograms and etymology to help give them a sense of how Chinese characters are constructed and to convey to them the functional differences from written English.

When the students turn in their homework, the teacher carefully checks their work, but she does not expect them to engage in the traditional Chinese learning methods, full as they are of wrote memorization exercises. These teaching method are foreign to American educational practice. These private school students are always very lively and active so this makes traditional Chinese teaching methods inoperable. She has devised her own cyclical methodology for getting the stuff into the kid's heads, however, with a kind of built in guided repetition that takes place mostly during class time.

Using What You Have Learned

For children raised with the linear written systems employed by all western languages, the formality and rules of written Chinese present a formidable challenge, but the students work really hard trying to learn to speak.

When I arrived in the 9th grade class the students immediately greeted me in Chinese, and having had only a mere 3 weeks of study under their belts they were overflowing with willy nilly stabs at conversation. They were showing off what they knew.

Of all the things they do, their favorite is going with their teacher to Chinatown where they can greet everyone they pass in Chinese, ask prices and try to order food. They like nothing better than to put whatever they know to the test.

They seem to want most to use Chinese to satisfy their own personal proclivities. They are avid for slang and they are mischievous with their enthusiasm, nagging their teacher unsuccessfully to give them the best Chinese word for "stupid" or "Get out of here!"

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