

Dartford Grammar School

Enjoy learning languages: The Mandarin story at Dartford Grammar School

Background:

Dartford Grammar School became one of the first two language colleges in the country in 1995, offering at that time, the traditional European Languages. The following year the International Baccalaureate Diploma was introduced into the sixth form, teaching French, Spanish and German as the language element. Japanese was introduced in 1998. It was clear that European language learning was unpopular and in decline (until the 'reluctant' rediscovery of languages triggered by the introduction of the Ebacc). Boys in particular did not enjoy learning the European languages and some were choosing to leave the school at 16 rather than take the IB Diploma with the compulsory language element. Something had to be done.

In 2008 I was invited to attend a Headteacher study tour to China by the British Council. My motivation was not the growing might of the Chinese economy nor the emergence of China from behind the bamboo curtain but to explore another way to revitalise the learning of languages in the school. Japanese was popular and the most successful language at that time. Upon my return, the Governors of the school were persuaded to appoint a Mandarin teacher (we had a field of 60 to choose from) and introduce Mandarin into Year 8. It was an instant success and language learning was ignited.

Rationale:

As an IB World School, our mission statement is simple, 'A learning community developing international citizens'. We take every opportunity to present languages as the core of our international curriculum, emphasising communication, understanding and respect for other cultures. Our students enjoy Mandarin (and Japanese) as the characters used to construct sentences generate far more interest than the conjugation of verbs. There are no cognates and the satisfaction gained from sentence construction appears to compensate for the necessary repetition.

Chinese culture is very different to anything experienced in Europe and our students gain a great deal of personal fulfilment from this new experience. They enjoy being different from their friends.

Partnerships:

The 2008 study tour involved a kind of speed dating with potential partner schools. We were fortunate as our first date was with a like-minded school and an enduring annual exchange developed. It is however a disappointment and a frustration that our attempt to build further active links with another school in Beijing has so far been unsuccessful. This is a key priority for us moving forward.

We have been a member of the excellent UCL IOE Confucius Classroom network since 2009. As a Confucius classroom we receive two Hanban teachers each year. They support class based conversation classes, Mandarin clubs, cultural enrichment activities, community and popular parent Mandarin classes and they teach Mandarin in three of our partner primary schools.

As a hub school for ITT we offer training places to several HEIs. We also run school based training courses for any schools who are interested to attend and we share our teaching resources freely.

Staffing:

There are now 4 full time Mandarin teachers in the school (3 non-native and 1 native speaker) and 2 Hanban teaching assistants. Two of these teachers are also able to teach Key Stage 3 French and another Economics. As the bulge of pupil numbers moves through the school, it is likely these teachers will focus exclusively on Mandarin. We have had no trouble recruiting high quality, enthusiastic and UK trained Mandarin teachers so far but we are aware that this cannot be taken for granted. There is always at least one Mandarin trainee teacher working with the department throughout the year.

Curriculum:

This year there are 90 'beginner' Mandarin and 90 'beginner' Japanese learners in Year 7, starting a five year journey towards a GCSE. There are 3, 50 minute periods per week in each of year. In year 8 students are required to choose a second GCSE language from the usual list (including Latin). The rationale for offering the oriental languages as the first choice was to engender an enjoyment of language learning to offset the stifling nature of learning in the traditional languages. By 2020 there will be 450 Key Stage 3 and 4 Mandarin and Japanese learners and approximately 100 post 16 students studying each of these language at level 3. The IB course covers 3 levels, a beginners course, a standard level course (3 x 50 minute lessons, for students who have some prior exposure) and a higher level course (5 x 50 minutes, equivalent to A level)

We are resolute in offering two compulsory GCSE languages to all boys, possibly the only school to do so. The enjoyment our boys feel for Mandarin and Japanese has had a real impact on their appreciation of the benefits of learning languages in general.

There is a full programme of enrichment opportunities ranging from cultural experiences to careers fairs and speaking competitions. We are currently looking at the possibility of an accelerated group of Mandarin learners being entered for GCSE early with the possibility of HSK4 in year 11?

We are at the beginning of a journey to establish stronger links with UK/China businesses with the aim of offering meaningful work experience in the UK or China.

There are 3 Outcomes:

1. The primary objective to use Mandarin to revitalise language learning has been successful. Year 7 pupils and their parents talk with great energy about Mandarin and Japanese and feel that it makes them stand out as being 'different', they feel good about themselves. Based on this success we have changed the way we teach the European languages in year 8 through the introduction of themes and language based, cross-disciplinary creativity weeks.
2. Has the introduction of Mandarin helped our students to become 'international citizens'? Yes, once again, without reservation. We cannot understand, appreciate or influence others if we remain ignorant of them.
3. Using the Ofsted measure of academic achievement the Mandarin GCSE results speak for themselves, in 2013 48% A*/A (86% A* - C), in 2014 64% A*/A (98% A* - C) and in 2015, 85% A*/A (98% A* - C).

Since 2008 the school has adopted a phrase, 'enjoy doing well'. The introduction of Mandarin Chinese has certainly made a significant contribution towards this educational goal.