

# Chicago Tribune

-----  
**THE `IT' LANGUAGE**  
-----

**China's growing influence drives demand for classes**

By Grace Aduroja  
Tribune staff reporter

September 27, 2005

Steve Smith, a business development manager for IBM, has a sure-fire way to give his career a boost--learning to speak Chinese.

"We know that it's going to be a big part of our lives in a way that it has not been before," said Smith, 50, who has studied the language for four years at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn.

Mandarin Chinese, the most widely spoken form of the language, has become the new "it" language among students, business executives and others trying to gain increasingly useful career and life skills, experts say. Although instructors say the bulk of their students are professionals like Smith, kids from kindergarten to college are studying the language.

That such a challenging language has become all the rage speaks to the global influence of China's rapidly expanding economy. Locally, 2,500 students are learning Chinese in 20 Chicago Public Schools. Those numbers are dwarfed by the thousands of children learning Spanish in more than 100 city schools, but administrators say the Chinese program is growing dramatically: Before the end of this school year, they will offer Mandarin in 10 more schools.

Enrollment in Chinese classes at New Trier High School in Winnetka has tripled, to 120, in the last two years. And when the College Board surveyed administrators nationwide about a new Advanced Placement Chinese curriculum, 2,400 high schools expressed interest, about eight times the number expected.

"It's just something I would like to use later," said New Trier junior Alex Hegevall-Clarke, who was first exposed to the language during a business trip with his father. "It looks a lot harder than it really is."

American companies have been sending droves of executives to the Far East in hopes of jumpstarting operations in the nation of nearly 1.4 billion.

These opportunities have caught the eye of students hoping to get an

edge on the competition. And schools, eager to offer people the latest tools for career success, are responding.

"A lot of students pick Chinese because they will catch the eyes of the people reading the job and college applications," said New Trier Chinese teacher Julia Kessel. "They kind of see that China is coming--economy and job opportunities."

The new Advanced Placement Chinese curriculum--developed by the College Board, which administers the SAT standardized exam--drew interest from roughly 2,400 of the 14,000 high schools polled, compared with about 300 schools interested in each of the Japanese, Russian and Italian AP courses that soon will be offered.

"The results for Chinese were truly astounding," said Thomas Matts, director of the world languages initiative at the College Board, which administers AP testing. "We know that currently, no more than 200 high schools in the country offer training in Chinese as it is."

The Chicago Public Schools has eight such high schools. According to the Asia Society, a non-profit cultural awareness group, the Chicago Chinese program already is the largest public school offering in the country, even before offerings increase by 50 percent this year.

"It really shows how quickly people are awakening to Chinese," said Robert Davis, manager of Chicago Public Schools' Chicago Chinese Connections Program. "Chinese is the most spoken language in the world right now."

And now language programs have focused on finding qualified instructors, as the demand has exceeded the supply of trained Chinese teachers.

It isn't an easy language for native English speakers to learn. The same word can have up to four meanings depending on the pitch used--either a flat, up, down-and-up or down tone.

For instance, the word "ma" spoken with a high, flat tone means mother. But that same word said in the down pitch becomes a derogatory term. These subtleties, along with the intricate characters that don't follow phonetic patterns, make the language a difficult one to master.

But that hasn't detracted from its growing popularity.

American colleges and universities are trying to meet the demand by offering and expanding Chinese language classes. Between 1998 and 2002, the last year the data were collected, the Modern Language Association reported student enrollment in two- and four-year college Chinese courses jumped 20 percent, to 34,153 students.

In the same time, enrollment in Spanish courses increased 13 percent, to nearly 750,000.

"There just isn't a capacity to teach the demand," said Michael Levine, executive director of the education division of the Asia Society. "Anecdotally, interest in Chinese at the collegiate level

... is growing at a faster pace than between 1998 and 2002."

When New Trier High School senior Jonathan Benjamin visited the University of Southern California and Georgetown and Vanderbilt Universities this summer, he checked out Asian study programs, sitting in on language classes and talking to program administrators.

"That's how I [pared] my college choices down," said Benjamin, who plans to double major in Chinese and Japanese, both languages in which he is highly proficient. "It's the focus of my studies, so I looked at schools that had good language programs."

Private language courses also are starting to take notice of the demand.

This summer, a day camp at North Central College in Naperville welcomed 23 children with little or no experience in the language. Only four children enrolled in a similar Japanese program.

Berlitz, a private language institute, reports that in the last two years Chinese has passed German, French and Portuguese to become the third most popular language taught in their nationwide program, behind English and Spanish. The bulk of students are professionals who are taking private lessons to learn the language as a career enhancement.

IBM's Smith said learning Chinese will help him in business, but he also has an interest in the country's history and culture.

"I find China to be the most exciting country," he said.

Another group eager to study the country's culture is the growing number of parents adopting babies from China.

Z.J. Tong, president of the Chicago Chinese Cultural Institute, said: "If you talk to people around you, everybody knows somebody or somebody's friend who is adopting a girl from China."

-----

[gaduroja@tribune.com](mailto:gaduroja@tribune.com)

Copyright (c) 2005, Chicago Tribune