

Education

## Teaching Mandarin for a 'Chinese Century'

by Eric Weiner

*"With China emerging as an economic superpower, some educators believe that learning Chinese -- the most widely spoken language in the world -- will give students an edge."*

Day to Day, February 6, 2006 · At the Duncan Middle School in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., a sort of linguistic wrestling match takes place every afternoon pitting about a dozen students, ages 12 to 14, against a formidable foe: Mandarin Chinese.

The students put up a good fight, but Mandarin seems to be winning, judging by the pained expression on the face of young Chelsea Kirby. "It's hard," she says, "especially the symbols."

Those symbols -- or characters -- make up the Chinese pinyin alphabet, and there are at least 3,000 of them. Then there are the tones... the dreaded tones. Change the tone, explains teacher Parkhee Fu, and you change the word. The word "ma," for instance, can mean either horse or mother, depending on the inflection of the tones. "You don't want to call your Mom the wrong thing," says Fu.

So why are these students wrestling with this notoriously difficult language? Some say they are here "by accident" or because they thought it would be an easy A. Oops. One student, though, seems to know exactly why he's here. His name is Pedro Rittner and he's 12 years old --12 going on 30, it seems. "I think this class is very good because Chinese is a growing language. Businesses like banks are shipping jobs overseas to China and so learning Chinese will be a real advantage."

Rittner is a public school student taking part in a pilot program, one of a handful nationwide. Joseph Lee, the school's principal, says last year only about 16,000 children in the United States studied Chinese -- a language spoken by 1.5 billion people. "We have to catch up," says Lee.

On his desk is a copy of Thomas Friedman's best seller *The World is Flat*. The book's message? Americans should prepare to compete with an emerging China

and India. That's the primary push behind learning Mandarin. With China emerging as an economic superpower, some educators believe that learning Chinese -- the most widely spoken language in the world-- will give students an edge.

Proponents of teaching Chinese in public schools point to the experience of U.S. automakers and their early forays into the Chinese market. The American firms lost ground quickly to smaller Korean automakers. "It was the Koreans' knowledge, not only of the culture, but of the language and the ways of doing business in China, that gave them the upper hand," says Michael Levine, head of education programs for the Asia Society. "It wasn't so much the quality of their product as it was the quality of their preparations to make the deals."

With that in mind, Washington has stepped in. A Senate bill would pump more than \$1 billion into Chinese-language programs and help train new teachers. Right now, there simply aren't enough to meet demand.

Some school systems aren't waiting on Washington -- in Chicago, for example, more than 3,000 students are already studying Chinese beginning in kindergarten. Many of the students are Latino, and program director Robert Davis says that for them, Chinese is just another language. "I go into these kindergarten classes and the teacher is saying 'This is an orange,' and then they are saying it in Spanish and then in Chinese, and it just flows. It's spectacular."

Not all parents, however, find this push for Mandarin so spectacular. Theresa Hanson wonders how Chinese language skills will help her son, a middle school student in Florida. "Honestly, I don't see where is going to use Chinese, even though they have become a powerhouse," she says. "Everybody is going to speak English. I'm sure the Chinese all speak English."

It's estimated that 100 million Chinese are indeed learning English, and critics say American schools should focus on teaching math and science. Languages come and languages go, but those basic skills are always needed, they say.

But Chicago's Davis counters that China is simply too big to ignore. "We want our students, even if they don't go to work for Motorola in China, to understand what is going on in China. If nothing else, this is just going to expand horizons for them."

For some parents, it's never too early to expand those horizons. They are hiring Chinese-speaking nannies to care for their infants to hopefully give the children a head start in what some are already calling the "Chinese Century."