

Walking together: students helping students

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三人行必有我師焉

Where there are 3 people walking together, there must be a teacher for me amongst them. (Confucius)

ABSTRACT

Mandarin classes at Plymouth University have given a boost to the confidence and communication skills of Chinese student helpers. They are also proving to be an effective way of bringing UK and Chinese students together to enhance the student experience. This article recounts the experience of using Chinese student volunteers to assist in Mandarin classes and describes the value of this venture for those involved.

The first experience of teaching Mandarin Chinese at Plymouth University was when the summer pre-session co-ordinator decided to arrange a micro-teaching session using Chinese students as teachers and some academic and administrative staff as learners. The idea was to give the students insight into teaching methods and presentation skills, and to give the staff insight into our international students and into the experience of learning a very different language. The students revelled in their new role, and all involved had a great deal of fun. The cordial relationships established with the staff continued into the new academic year and at least one member of staff went on to take up Mandarin lessons when they were set up as part of an extra-curricular offer for staff and students the following year.

Extra-curricular Mandarin classes in Plymouth University started in October 2010, after I mentioned to the Head of the English Language Centre that I had studied Teaching Chinese as a Second Language for my Bachelor's Degree and had about two years part-time teaching experience in China. She immediately saw the opportunity to continue and develop the experience started in the summer pre-session and to provide volunteering experience for our Chinese students and it was decided that Mandarin would be taught in the evenings. Since then, we have not looked back: the teaching of Mandarin has expanded steadily each year. Figure 1 shows the numbers of students and staff members who have participated in these classes in each academic year in detail.

Academic Year	Students	Staff	SMU summer school students	Elective module	Total
2010/2011	14	7	N/A	N/A	21
2011/2012	15	17	60	N/A	92
2012/2013	30	18	55	8	111

Figure 1: Mandarin learners at the University of Plymouth

* SMU = Shanghai Maritime University. This class prepares Plymouth University students who are going to Shanghai for a month during the summer, providing basic language and cultural knowledge.

About half of the Mandarin learners are English students, the other half are European and international students. Nationalities have included: Jamaican, Romanian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Moroccan, Norwegian, Thai, South Korean, South African, Spanish, French, Dutch, Latvian, and American and more. They study different subjects across different disciplines in the university, which include Business Studies, Geography, Medical Science, Art, Computer Science and other subjects.

The classes are taught by a qualified teacher and Chinese students join the class as “Chinese teaching assistants” for the last half hour of the class to conduct one-to-one practice with the Mandarin learners and then to join in discussions. This is completely voluntary and the Chinese students receive a certificate at the end of the term. So far, more than 200 Chinese students have been involved in and benefited from this scheme.

The classes do not just focus on pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, but also introduce the underlying concepts of the language, the core values of Chinese traditional and modern culture and bring contemporary issues and facts into the lessons. Thanks to the tremendous cultural diversity in the Mandarin classes, sometimes the classroom turns into a ‘United Nations conference room’. It is always so enjoyable to watch the learners discussing, comparing and debating during the lessons and, as this is done in English, it gives Chinese student helpers a great opportunity to improve their English by discussing topics that they are very familiar with. They participate confidently as they are ‘experts’, a position they do not normally occupy while studying in the UK, and they feel ‘legitimized’ in their contributions as the learners are very keen to hear what they have to tell them.

The Mandarin classes took on an extra dimension when the Mandarin Tandem Scheme was introduced in 2011. The main objective of this scheme, on the one hand, is to improve the communication between Chinese and British students, as the majority of Chinese students admit that they have difficulty in meeting English students and integrating with them (McMahon, 2011; Gu, 2009). On the other hand, it is a great opportunity for the Mandarin learners to get extra practice with a native speaker on a one-to-one basis. As part of the scheme, ‘The Mandarin Tandem Scheme Task List’ (Fig. 2) gives Chinese students and Mandarin learners’ reasons and motivation to meet each other after the class to try to complete the task list; a prize being offered to the first pair to successfully complete all the tasks.

Although not everyone can win a prize, anyone who has attempted is a winner. I witnessed many amazing stories such as two English girls cooking a roast dinner for their Chinese Teaching Assistants who had never heard of an English roast; a Chinese boy who taught his Mandarin learner to sing a love song in Mandarin; and a shy, quiet Chinese girl who said teaching Chinese to a ‘foreigner’ was the most exciting experience she had had while studying in Plymouth. Some long-lasting relationships resulted from these activities, and a number of the Mandarin learners then decided to go to travel, work or study in China.

The first tandem group to complete the following six tasks (before the date of the final class) will win a prize.

- Go to a Chinese market together
- Sing a Chinese song together
- Cook for each other once
- Watch a Chinese film together
- Mandarin learner gives a 15 minutes presentation on a topic from Chinese history or culture

Figure 2: Mandarin Tandem Scheme task list

As someone who used to be an international student and now works full time to support international students in Plymouth Business School, I fully understand how difficult it can be to study in a completely different culture and to use a second language. I also understand how challenging it can be to try to improve international students' experiences. The experiences with the Mandarin classes have shown that one simple but effective way to do this is to create opportunities for students to come together to do something meaningful. Considerable thought and care went into creating the ideal balance of activities, but once set in motion, the students themselves carried the project forward.

Although it is good to see that the number of Mandarin classes is expanding, and that both Mandarin learners and Chinese students are benefiting from these classes, this is just the beginning and there is still much more that can be achieved. More resources, better organisation and more support are definitely needed from the university in order to improve students' learning experience and to move the learning of Mandarin up to the next level. With China predicted to become the world's leading economy by 2050 (Graddol, 2010), both Mandarin classes for UK students and a greatly enriched student experience in the UK for Chinese students should be seen as an essential part of that which UK HEIs offer.

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