

WHY LEARN CHINESE? **By François Thibaut**

One in four people, almost a quarter of the world's population, speaks Chinese as their first language. Today matters involving Chinese trade, manufacturing and diplomacy are front page news and will continue to be important in the future. I have spent almost 35 years encouraging children to learn French and Spanish and I'm now convinced that parents should consider investing part of their children's critical language learning years pursuing Chinese too.

Many of the students attending The Language Workshop for Children catch my attention. As one example, I have always made a point of observing the progress of Chinese-American students who were sent to the LWFC to learn French or Spanish (and in some cases both languages simultaneously) who were already bilingual in English and Chinese.

We teach a child another language by introducing that language's basic phonetic sounds and guiding him (through various methods and materials) to attach meanings to those sounds and to replicate those meanings in a standard grammatical sequence. As we all know, it is the brain that processes and sorts languages unique sounds and meanings and directs the voice to utter recognizable speech.

Over the years I noticed that my bilingual Chinese-English students were often the first to call out the right French or Spanish answer during visual aid games, but I never understood why. Each of my students parents was equally enthusiastic and committed to doing everything possible to help their son or daughter learn a new language, whether it meant bringing them every single week or making sure they practiced with their take-home materials. But week after week, I saw that the bilingual Chinese-American youngsters often lead the class.

When I mentioned this to a colleague of mine, the director of a children's music program, she told me that her Chinese-American students were very often class leaders too. They grasped musical concepts immediately, consistently called out answers, and could recall musical concepts taught to them in weeks past.

I recently discovered an article suggesting that the answer may lie in a study published by Wellcome Trust. Researchers there concluded that Chinese Mandarin speakers use both the right and the left sides of the brain to process voice melody. French, Spanish, English speakers process music, emotion and voice melody on the right and logic,

math and literal meaning on the left. Applying the Wellcome Trust's findings, the process of learning Chinese may promote enhanced critical thinking and cognitive processing skills.

To work more effectively with Chinese translators, my assistant director and I recently took private Mandarin lessons. She and I found Mandarin grammar to be relatively simple but, predictably, as adult learners pronouncing it was a different matter. A simple Mandarin sound like "ma" can have different meanings depending upon the voice melody used to speak it. "Ma" pronounced with a flat "ahhhhhhhhh" and an elongated "aaaaaaah" says two different things. That is why people speaking Chinese may sound like they're singing. They're not, they're just applying the almost musical pitch and range the Chinese language requires to communicate meaning.

The Wellcome Trust's researchers theorized that the musical pitch, range and voice melody needed to learn Mandarin sensitizes and trains a Chinese speakers brain to learn to discriminate and interpret a far wider range of audial cues, tones, and phonetically based sounds than non-Chinese speakers. Perhaps this tells us why young bilingual Chinese-American students have an exemplary ability to excel in language and music education.

In the early 70's (and into the 90's) at times the LWFC's Spanish classes were empty. Then suddenly in the late 90's demand for Spanish began growing. Today the number of requests for Spanish is greater than that for French. But it's time for Chinese. Not just because it's a sensible choice to prepare a child for a future career, but based upon what I have seen, my colleague experienced, and the Wellcome Trust's findings, studying Chinese early may give a child neurologically-based abilities to recognize extreme variations in pitch, melody and meaning, which translate into abilities to learn language, music and possibly other disciplines.

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