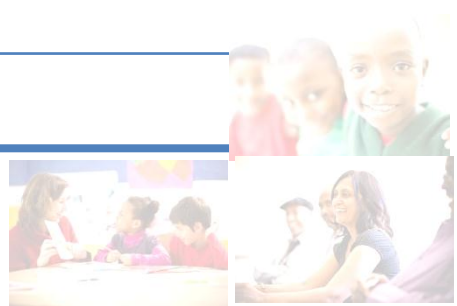




Language information

Chinese



Language information booklets provide teachers of EAL learners with some information on their first languages (or languages of previous education) and on cultural aspects. Typical differences between these languages and English have been highlighted to make teachers aware where these learners might need additional support.

It is important to note, however, that these are guidelines and that individual learners may not find the areas mentioned here difficult.

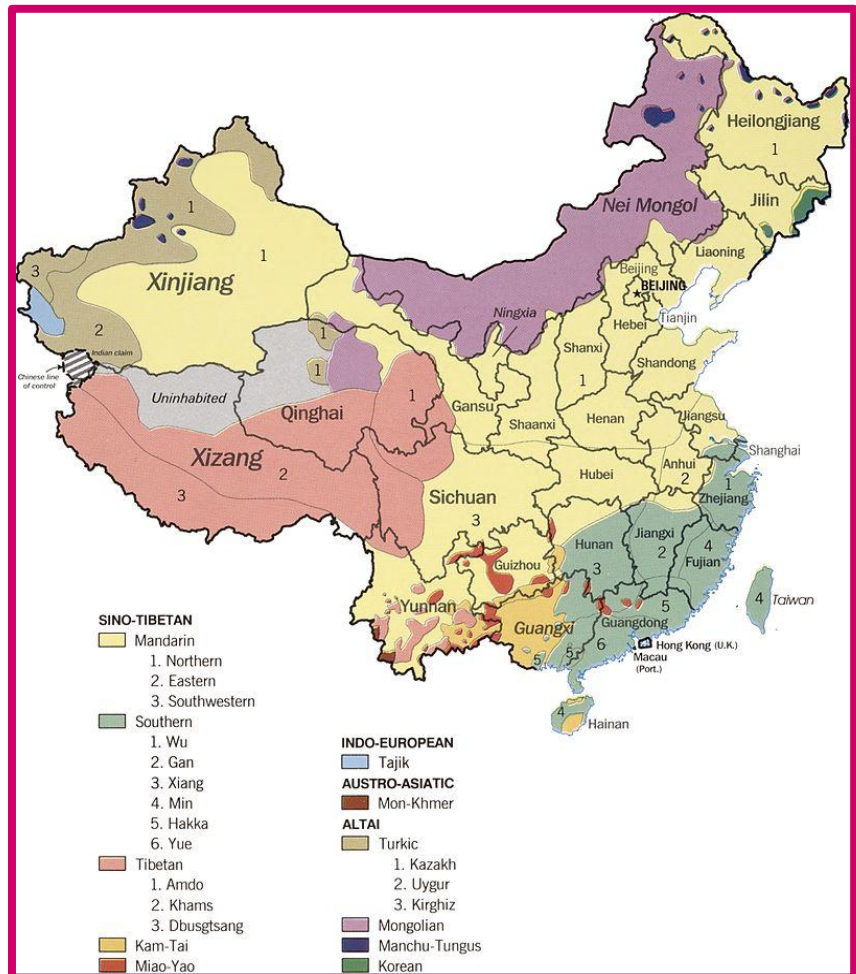
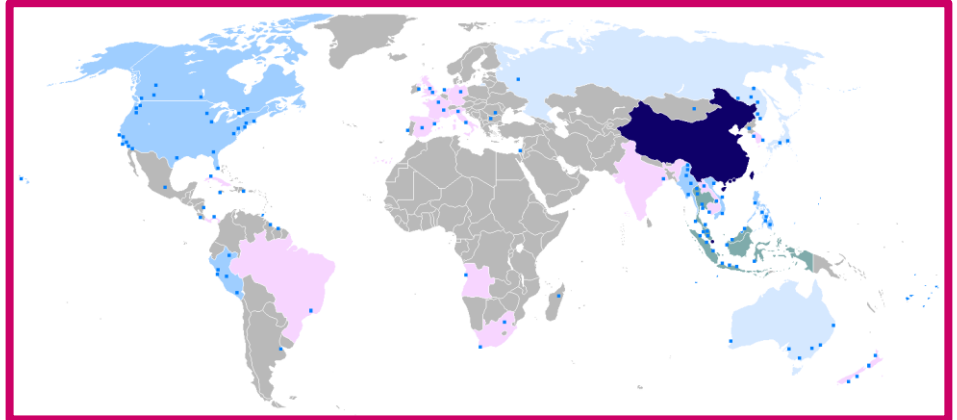
For more specific information on languages and their scripts you may want to visit <http://www.omniglot.com/>.

If you wish to print this booklet for colleagues working with EAL learners from this language background, we recommend you use the booklet settings on your printer.

Chinese - 漢語

Maps

Outside China (which is shown in dark blue) there are significant Chinese-speaking minorities in the world.



Chinese dialects

Writing samples

This is Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the simplified Chinese script used in mainland China:

人人生而自由，在尊严和权利上一律平等。他们赋有理性和良心，并应以兄弟关系的精神互相对待。

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

(Listen to a recording on <http://www.omniglot.com/chinese/written.htm> .)

This is the same text in the traditional Chinese script used in Hong Kong:

人人生而自由，在尊嚴和權利上一律平等。他們賦有理性和良心，並應以兄弟關係的精神互相對待。

Compare the characters in both scripts to find out how they have been simplified in the first sample.

(Rewritten in traditional script by Helen Chow.)

Facts

Language family	Sinitic or Chinese branch of Sino-Tibetan
Number of speakers	1.3 billion
Official language	People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong
Minority language	Significant Chinese minorities are all over the world (see map)
Writing system	Logographic script, traditionally written top to bottom (columns read right to left), now horizontally left to right
Main religion/belief	Atheism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism

Names

The family name is followed by the personal name(s). Women do not change their names when getting married. Children usually take their father's family name.

Families quite often adapt to the European way of putting the family name last when they are in Europe. A lot of Chinese immigrants change their names to English names because Europeans find it hard to pronounce them correctly. Chinese immigrants need to be asked how they want to be addressed. For official purposes (e.g. exams) the name which is on their documents should be used.

Cultural differences

Chinese pupils can be expected to be used to rote memorisation as this plays a crucial role in achieving literacy in Chinese. They may be reluctant to accept typical Western teaching styles which require students to engage and voice opinions and need some encouragement to do this. Teachers are highly respected in the Chinese culture.

Language and people

Chinese consists of eight different varieties which are usually called dialects. People in the northern, western and central regions as well as in Taiwan and Singapore – i.e. 70% of Chinese speakers – speak Mandarin, which has also been adopted as the basis for modern standard Chinese. Cantonese (or Yueh) is the dialect of the south and south-east of China, and of Hong Kong. The other dialects are Wu, Northern and Southern Min, Kan, Hakka and Hsiang. The dialects are, strictly speaking, different languages regarding pronunciation and vocabulary. The grammatical structure, however, is similar.

All dialects share the written language. Speakers of different dialects are unlikely to understand each other orally, but can read the same text. This is due to the logographic script which 'illustrates' words (or syllables) as symbols and does not represent phonemes in the form of letters.

Chinese people in the UK consequently speak one of the dialects (which is Cantonese for people from Hong Kong). They may be literate in traditional Chinese (especially when they are from Hong Kong) or simplified Chinese (if they are from mainland China). When booking interpreters, choosing bilingual books and entering Chinese-speaking pupils for exams, it needs to be established what dialect(s) they speak and which script they can read.

A distinctive feature of the Chinese dialects and many other languages spoken in Southeast Asia is that they are tonal languages, i.e. different tones indicate difference of meaning. There are four tones in Mandarin and six tones in Cantonese.

Education

School education in the People's Republic of China comprises pre-school education, primary education (six years) and middle school education (three years junior and three years senior). Students then move on to vocational training and polytechnic education. Some may attend university courses.

What may be new, unusual or difficult for Chinese speakers when learning English

Phonology

The phonology of Chinese is significantly different from the phonology of English. Many phonemes of the Chinese dialects do not have English equivalents. Chinese speakers therefore have to learn how to pronounce English phonemes and may find this difficult. They often also struggle with stress, intonation and juncture (i.e. discerning word and phrase boundaries). Some typical mistakes are:

- ◆ no contrast between long and short vowels: **feet** instead of **fit**, **pool** instead of **pull**
- ◆ the vowel **a** in **cat** might be nasalised or the word may be confused with **cart** or **cut**
- ◆ the short **o** sound may be replaced with a longer sound or diphthong: **shot** might sound like **short** or **shout**
- ◆ voiced consonants in English are often pronounced as voiceless: Chinese learners may say **tick** instead of **dig**, **rice** instead of **rise**
- ◆ **v** tends to be replaced by **w** or **f**
- ◆ problems with the **th**-sounds: they may be replaced by **f**, **t**, **d**, **s** or **z**
- ◆ problems with **h**, **l** (especially in final positions) and the distinction between **l** and **r**
- ◆ final consonants are often dropped or vowels are added since Chinese words do not tend to end in consonants
- ◆ problems with consonant clusters, especially at the end of words
- ◆ stressing weak syllables in English words and sentences
- ◆ unchanged intonation and clear separation of words so that speech may sound 'sing-song' or staccato.

Grammar

Chinese grammar is fundamentally different from the grammar of Indo-European languages. A text translated word-for-word from China is usually incomprehensible for English speakers (see example in Swan and Smith). This may be one reason for an often observed prolonged non-verbal period in young EAL learners who speak Chinese as their first language.

- ◆ Chinese does not distinguish between different parts of speech; learners therefore may use e.g. adjectives instead of nouns or vice versa and omit verbs when they use adjectives (e.g. **I busy**).
- ◆ Chinese learners are not used to inflections and may lack subject–verb concord (e.g. **they has**).
- ◆ The English tense and aspect system causes a lot of problems as Chinese does not conjugate verbs to express time relations.
- ◆ The **-ing** form and **-ed** form of the verb (present and past participles) are often confused by Chinese speakers. They may say **It was interested** instead of **It was interesting**. They may consequently have problems understanding the passive voice.
- ◆ As modal verbs (**should, could, may, might**, etc.) may not have equivalents in Chinese, learners have problems with **if-** sentences. They may sound abrupt because they do not use modals when making requests. They may say **You come and sit here, please** instead of **Would you come and sit here, please?** Chinese learners of English must not be stigmatised as being rude when they do not follow the English conventions of polite speech.
- ◆ Due to the completely different sentence structure in Chinese, learners may have problems understanding and formulating sentences.
- ◆ Relative clauses are difficult for Chinese learners, especially contact clauses (without the pronoun **which, who** or **that**, e.g. **The shoe she tried on was too small**).
- ◆ Articles (**the** and **a**) are often omitted or used incorrectly.
- ◆ As there is no gender distinction in the pronouns, **she** may be used to refer to a male or **he** to refer to a female.
- ◆ Questions and negative sentences may not contain a form of **do**.
- ◆ The plural **-s** is likely to be dropped.
- ◆ There may be problems regarding word order, e.g. with adverbials, in questions.

Writing

Chinese uses a logographic and not an alphabetic writing system, i.e. Chinese symbols do not represent sounds but words and morphemes (meaningful parts of words). Being literate in a non-alphabetic writing system means that Chinese learners are not used to phonetically decoding alphabetic scripts and phonetic spellings. Learning how to read English may take more time, and word-recognition strategies may be easier than phonetic strategies to EAL learners who are literate in Chinese. Different scripts are used in mainland China and Hong Kong (see page 5).

Vocabulary

Chinese words and idiomatic expressions hardly ever have direct equivalents in English. Learners may therefore use words and expressions inappropriately or in an unidiomatic way. There are very few loanwords in Chinese. This means that Chinese EAL learners cannot make use of their first language when encountering unlearned vocabulary: there is hardly any positive transfer and they may not have encountered as many English loanwords as EAL learners with other first languages.

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