

Antidote to Rote

An enquiry-based Putonghua course created in Hong Kong is taking the world by storm, writes *Annemarie Evans*

HONG KONG, TAKE A BOW! A new interactive Chinese language course that was developed in the city is rapidly spreading around the world. Mandarin Matrix was jointly devised by Hong Kong educational publishers Professional Publishing People (P3) and the English Schools Foundation (ESF), and trialled across the ESF's nine primary schools. It's now used by more than 200,000 students across 21 countries—and is poised for further expansion.

The course is aimed at primary pupils who don't speak Chinese as their first language and are accustomed to an enquiry-based curriculum. It combines traditional textbooks, teaching materials and guided readers with an interactive online classroom that is designed to entertain and engage children—and to encourage them to complete their homework.

ESF Chinese adviser Wang Xiaoping says the group decided to produce its own course five years ago, when it switched from weekly to daily Putonghua lessons for all primary pupils—and found there were very few books and materials available.

"There was a scarcity of Chinese readers for second-language learners, so that prompted us to develop something of our own," he says. "When I went to school on the mainland, the teacher had a piece of chalk to write on the blackboard and any dictation was done via a large reel-to-reel tape recorder."

However, such chalk-and-talk methods don't suit children who learn their other subjects through enquiry-based approaches and need to be kept engaged, says Wang. The ESF wanted one system for use in all its primary schools alongside other published learning materials, so it linked up with P3 to produce the course materials.

Mandarin Matrix now comprises 335 titles, including 240 guided readers, 48 big



books, textbooks, teachers' packs, flashcards and audio CDs. There are readers aimed at secondary students and at pre-school children aged three and above. The course is used in all ESF primary schools, while most of the group's secondary schools use the advanced readers and the online classroom. Many international schools in Hong Kong have also adopted the programme.

The guided readers range from short books that aim to build a child's first Chinese characters to increasingly elaborate storybooks, as pupils work their way up through seven colour-coded attainment levels. Illustrated by Hong Kong cartoonist Harry Harrison, all the readers are available in both print and online versions.

Each week, the teacher assigns a number of readers for a child to work through along with an exercise and a test, plus online practice in calligraphy. Children learn language related to anything from items of clothing in their bedrooms to cookery, dragons and hobbies. Online readers have buttons next to recently introduced Chinese characters to click on for Pinyin and English translations, and print versions have a list of translations at the back of the book. In total, 1,750 Chinese characters are taught through the course.



LOVE OF LANGUAGE

From left: South Island School students Kabelan Arrumugam and Remi Lever learn Chinese through Mandarin Matrix; the interactive language learning programme is iPad-friendly

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Tests are designed to resemble puzzles and games, while reading is encouraged through an online rewards system. When students complete a reader online, they receive virtual gold coins, which can be exchanged at an online shop for a variety of computer games.

South Island School student Remi Lever, 13, who followed Mandarin Matrix at primary school, says: "The cartoons are gimmicky and funny, and help me to learn. I'm happy to learn off the board, too, but online I can practise my calligraphy and improve my skills."

Classmate Kabelan Arrumugam, 12, who has also been following the programme, says he likes the way he can use Pinyin and English to progress by himself until he can recognise unfamiliar Chinese characters. He's busy spending his gold coins on a game called Chef's Helper. "I like cooking at home," he explains.

"It's a good resource for monitoring the children's progress," says Echo Huang, a Chinese teacher at South Island School. "I can see how long it takes a student to complete a task. The more [online] books they finish, the more 'coins' they make to exchange for other 'goods'." Children are given an allotted time to get through the readers and tasks, so the teacher can pinpoint those children in need of extra help, she adds.

The online classroom was designed to enable both teachers and parents to monitor students' work, says P3's CEO, David Tait. The teacher can log into the system's back end to assign each child homework, and the parent can provide support and see the child's progress at home. "The system also allows us to change the language of instruction," says Tait. As well as English, Mandarin Matrix is available in French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian.

In what is something of a publishing coup, P3 has teamed up with leading international education publisher Cambridge University Press to drive the expansion of Mandarin Matrix. Cambridge will collaborate on the writing and production of future texts, and all products will carry its logo.

Another piece in the jigsaw puzzle was added last year, when P3 signed a deal with the Confucius Institutes, China's agency for teaching Chinese language and culture abroad, to incorporate Mandarin Matrix in its centres worldwide. The Confucius Institute in New Zealand is now preparing to roll out the course, which is aligned with the institute's Youth Chinese Test Levels 1 to 4, across its classrooms nationwide.

In the US, the Confucius Institute at the University of Utah is developing a Chinese language immersion programme based on Mandarin Matrix that will be used in its classrooms across the state. With several other states watching with interest, the little course that was made in Hong Kong may soon become very big indeed. ●