

Learning to speak Mandarin and understanding Chinese culture is different not difficult

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Abstract

Learning Mandarin is considered to be difficult, and acquiring a deep understanding of Chinese culture is thought to be near to impossible. I have redesigned the conventional way Mandarin is taught so that learners are able to speak Mandarin with confidence very quickly. This method of learning Mandarin helps participants understand Chinese cultural rules and therefore be able to behave appropriately in a business context with Chinese people. I have identified and applied some key points of Michel Foucault's works that have influenced the theoretical underpinning of my business Chinese Language and Cultural Advice (CLCA). Foucault's works on discourse and power and knowledge have enabled me to develop a teaching methodology to make Mandarin and Chinese culture easily learnable and therefore accessible.

Michel Foucault's work provides a toolbox to help us understand why things are the way they are. These tools are not solutions to problems; rather a lens or several lenses to help us view and understand our world from different angles.

I applied Foucault's work in my business Chinese Language and Cultural Advice (CLCA). His work provided me with a base on which to develop a new way of teaching Mandarin. Through this new way of teaching Mandarin, learners also learn about Chinese culture. The underlying theory is that if a learner of Mandarin understands the fundamental grammatical structure of the language, they then have access to Chinese people's thinking and behaviour.

The concepts I applied in the development of the new way of teaching Mandarin were Foucault's notion of what is normal and how this can influence the development of discourse; the connection between power and knowledge relating to surveillance; and his analysis of the prison system regarding the population of criminals who still remain criminals after their prison sentence (Foucault 1975).

As China is now one of Australia's major trading partners, it would seem crucial for Australian business people to have a basic understanding of some Mandarin such as being able to pronounce Chinese names correctly. Language and cultural knowledge give business people an important edge in the highly competitive international business world.

An effective Mandarin course for Australian business people would be one that teaches them to use the language in business settings with Chinese business people. To achieve the goal of helping people speak the language with native speakers, there has to be a course that achieves the goal and is available to all people who want to learn Mandarin for practical everyday use. However, conventional teaching methodologies result in the average competent learner needing 3.5 times longer to learn Mandarin than a European language (Orton, Fleming, Ure, & Kirby 2008).

To take this barrier away the discourse needs to shift from 'Mandarin is difficult' to 'Mandarin is different'. With a new discourse Australian business people will be more able to learn Mandarin successfully and quickly and become more internationally competitive. A

dividing line in a genuinely globalised world will be those who speak some Mandarin and those who do not, just as speaking English became important in the recent past.

Most westerners learn Mandarin using traditional Chinese or western academic methods. Chinese methods rarely suit western learning approaches. The western courses are usually designed to produce scholars of Chinese and if this is their purpose they may be very effective. However 94 per cent of students studying Year 12 Mandarin are from a Chinese-speaking background (Orton, Fleming, Ure & Kirby 2008), suggesting very few non-Chinese first language speakers are learning Mandarin. Of the 2800 Year 12 students studying Mandarin in Victoria, less than 200 are from a non-Chinese-speaking background (Orton 2008).

My personal experience of learning Mandarin in the traditional way made me realise there needed to be a new way of thinking about Mandarin language learning. My subsequent studies of Foucault enabled me to develop the method on which the CLCA Mandarin teaching system is based.

The purpose of the CLCA method is to teach western business people to be able to speak some Mandarin with their Chinese business contacts. It is crucial for Australian people to speak some Mandarin because of the Chinese concept of '*guanxi*', which can be partly understood through the Chinese saying 'friends before business'. By making the effort to have even a basic conversation in Mandarin, a friendship is more likely to be developed and therefore a business relationship can occur.

For this change to occur, firstly Mandarin has to be perceived as normal to learn, and for this to happen it needs to be highly valued and to have a purpose. To achieve this perception of value business people need to know that learning some Mandarin will have a benefit such as enhancing their business prospects. Secondly, to change the dominant discourse there needs to be an instruction system that reflects a new discourse that meets the needs of the contemporary business world.

Mandarin needs to be perceived as the normal thing to learn (Foucault 1975). To illustrate this point I use three examples: the learning of French, the perception that everyone speaks English, and computer use.

For many centuries it was normal for Anglo-Saxons to learn to speak French. Even today, whether we can speak French or not, most of us correctly identify a written or spoken word as being French. The learning of French has to some degree become normal. Even today French is still a popular language to learn in the Year 12 curriculum (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations nd). By contrast many of us looking at Chinese characters may not know if they are simplified or traditional, or even if the language represented is Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese or Korean. This lack of knowledge also applies to spoken Mandarin. Basic understanding of a language that is the main language of one of our closest trading partners has not yet been normalised.

We think that since English is the international language we do not really need to put much effort into learning other languages. Australia is a multicultural country and yet most Australians are monolingual. When we deal with international cities such as New York and London and in much of Europe we need only speak English.

We are now in a different situation because China is fast becoming a central global business hub. Among the general public in China such as taxi drivers, at the airport and in restaurants it is difficult to find someone who speaks English. Speaking Mandarin for daily use is important in China as it is in these basic conversations that '*guanxi*' (the building of relationships) occurs, which plays a crucial role when dealing with Chinese business people.

Finally, more than 20 years ago it was novel to be able to use a computer, and anyone who could use a computer was perceived as 'different'. Computers were difficult to use as they had complex operating systems such as DOS. Now the use of computers has become normalised. Making this possible was the introduction of simpler operating systems such as Windows. Computer classes were set up to teach business and non-business people. Today if you are not computer-literate your employment opportunities are reduced and you can become socially isolated.

My objective in developing the CLCA method is to change the way of thinking, which is that Mandarin is difficult, and to develop a new discourse that will give learners an effective and easily understandable way of learning Mandarin. The CLCA method helps learners to find the link between the familiar and the new. Participants are given many examples of how Mandarin is structured using comparisons with English. When links with their own language are made the Mandarin examples make sense. These differences are explained in such a way as to enable learners to gain an insight into how Chinese people think and behave.

The CLCA system of teaching Mandarin gives power to the participants. There are no examinations, or surveillance, as Foucault (1975) would call this. There are 16 stages, and each stage takes ten hours. Participants are encouraged to identify their own level so they can choose to go up to the next level when they feel ready. The power to select their correct level does not rest with the language trainers or CLCA.

If the goal of a Mandarin learning system is for learners to speak some Mandarin, and they cannot, where does the blame for this failure lie? When the prison system did not achieve its goal, which was to get the crime rate down, issues inside the prison structure were blamed for this lack of success, as opposed to the underlying structure of society (Foucault 1975). When we have very few people able to use Mandarin, and learners who find Mandarin difficult to learn, we blame the difficulty of the language, or the enormous commitment the learner needs put into learning the language. The real issue is in the underlying structure of the learning system and the methodology by which the language is taught. Like the prison system, the blame for failure is put in the wrong place.

My purpose has been to design an effective Mandarin learning program for business people and others needing to speak Mandarin. There are several elements that such a Mandarin learning program needs in order to achieve this goal. These include an easy method to pronounce Chinese sounds that are unfamiliar in English; an understanding of the way time is represented and how hierarchy is manifested in Chinese language and therefore culture.

Through studying *Discipline and punish* (1975) in which Foucault tracks the development of the prison system and discusses normalisation, power and knowledge I was able to understand how language contributes to the construction of society.

The CLCA Mandarin learning system achieves its goal by making language learning easy and effective for the learner. In my business I have not only articulated the need for a new learning system; I have achieved it. By doing this I have taken Foucault's work a step further and created a course that exemplifies this new discourse of teaching Mandarin. Through CLCA and my own learnt experience I can make changes to the way people view Mandarin.

Leonie McKeon lived in Taiwan where she studied Mandarin, taught English as a second language and edited a series of children's ESL books. She returned to Australia and studied anthropology, which included studies of Michel Foucault's works. In 1998 she won an entrepreneurial scholarship to commence her business Chinese Language and Cultural Advice (CLCA). leoniem@clca.com.au

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