

Mandarin Chinese is the world's most spoken language with over 900 million native speakers. This makes it one of the better languages to learn currently.

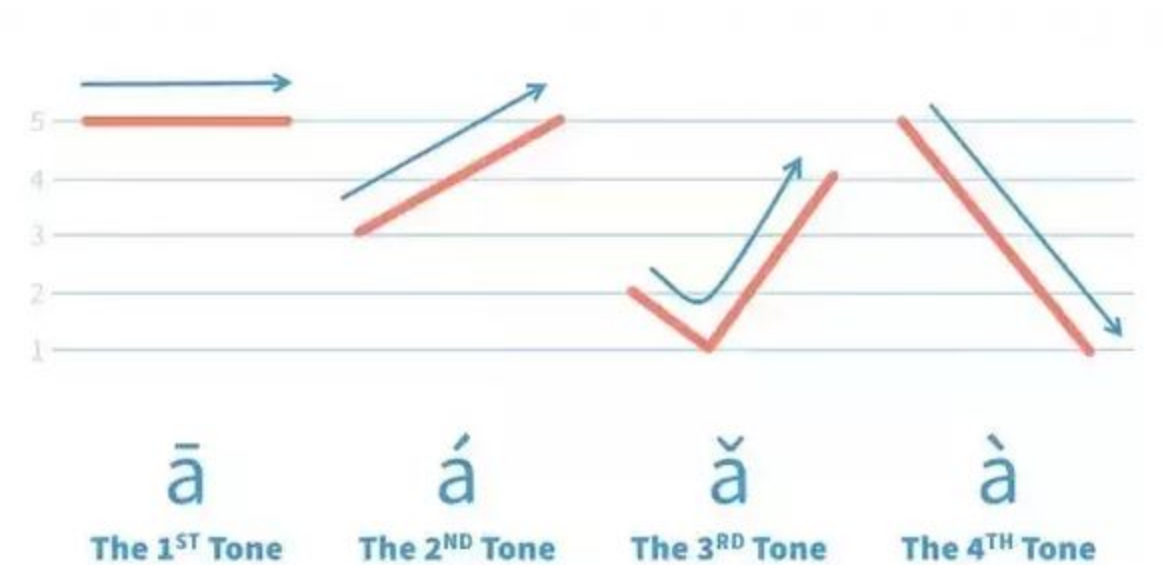
However, Mandarin is also regarded as one of the most difficult languages to learn, especially for English speakers.



Use this guide to find out how to reduce or eliminate the challenges that frustrate other Chinese learners the most. Pick the ones that make the most sense for your goals and style of learning. Also use this guide to help you pick a course that follows this same approach to radically increase the efficiency of your Chinese learning.

Challenge #1: Tones

If you didn't know already, unlike English, Chinese is a tonal language. Every word has an associated tone. When saying these words out aloud, you have to say them with the correct tone. Use the wrong tone and you may find yourself misunderstood.



Tones also exist in English, but they are used in a very different way.

In English, tones are used for emphasis. So the word **me** for example is said in different tones in the following statements?

Was it **me** who did it?
I didn't know it was **me**!
Next time tell **me** about it.

Although the tones used in those sentences are different, the meaning of **me** still stays the same.

In Chinese though, using those different tones would result in completely different meanings, which is a big adjustment coming from English.

Solution:

It is important to get your brain adjusted to this difference. The only way to do this is to expose it to a LOT of listening content. Over time, your brain will recognize patterns and associate the tones correctly. Look for a course that focuses primarily on listening material.

This is why it isn't recommended that you solely use books to learn Chinese. You'll want a podcast or a course with a lot of audio content so that your brain can get used to the sounds of Chinese.

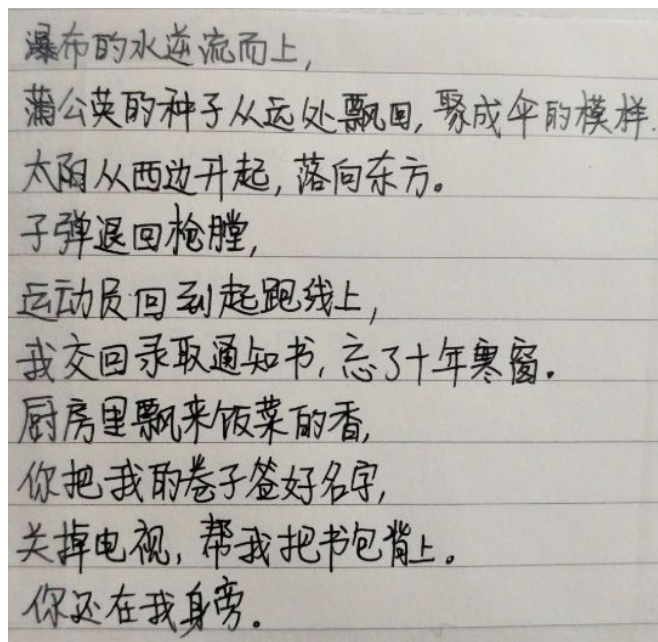
Every time you hear a new word in Chinese, hear it with the tones. A mistake many learners make is to learn the word and then the tone marks that go with that word, meaning you're trying to remember two pieces of information.

Instead, get your brain to associate a word and its tones together. Hear it in your brain the way it's supposed to sound, so that when you have to reproduce it, you reproduce it just the way you heard it originally.

When kids are learning Chinese, they don't know what tones are. They just know it's part of the word, so they too reproduce it correctly with the right tones, since the tones are part of the word.

Challenge #2: Reading Chinese Characters

Characters are unquestionably the hardest part of learning Chinese for most learners. Unlike English, which uses 26 letters of the alphabet to spell out all words, Chinese words are made from thousands of characters. Native Chinese speakers spend years in school trying to learn all these characters. How are second language learners supposed to compete with that?



There are a couple of ways around this. If your eventual goal is to become fluent in Chinese, then certainly you'll need to learn characters at some point. If you're just looking to become conversationally fluent though, you can certainly do so without having to learn a single character.

Solution: Skip characters altogether

Most Chinese courses for English speakers use pinyin, which is a romanization of Chinese characters using English letters of the alphabet along with tone marks. While some effort is required to learn pinyin, as not all words and sounds read and sound like what they would in standard English, it's certainly much less challenging than trying to learn thousands of Chinese characters.

So instead of learning Chinese characters, you could skip them altogether and just focus on pinyin. So instead of learning:

你好吗？

You learn

Nǐ hǎo ma?

which shows you how to pronounce it using English letters, along with the associated tone mark above each word. This is certainly easier to read than using Chinese characters.

If your goal is to become fluent in Chinese though, at some point you will need to commit to learning characters, as there is a whole different side of Chinese that will be presented to you in books, articles, social media posts, texts, emails, street signs and of course restaurant menus. However you don't have to tackle this aspect right away.

Start off with learning to speak and listen to daily conversations. Once you're ready for the next level, you can always come back and start learning characters later.

Challenge #3: Writing Chinese Characters

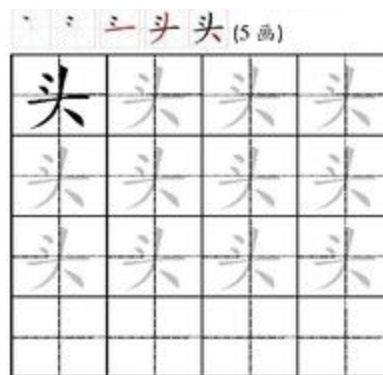
If you thought learning to read thousands of Chinese characters was difficult, just imagine trying to write them out in hand. Chinese characters are made up of individual strokes (from the time you put your pen down to the time you have to lift it up).



The character above looks hard enough to learn as it is. But you also must use the correct stroke order when writing it, or it will look incorrect to a native speaker. This is because traditional Chinese characters were written using paintbrushes, so a stroke looked very different whether you were writing it from top to bottom or vice versa.

Just like words sound very different to native Chinese speakers if they are said in the wrong tone (even though they sound the same in English), characters look wrong if they are written using incorrect stroke order (even though they look the same to English speakers).

The process to learn how to write characters usually requires repeatedly writing the same character over and over to develop the muscle memory to remember it.



This effort would be worth it to develop a skill that you planned to use a lot. It would be a waste though for a skill that is rarely used in modern society. Most communication these days tends to be via typing – on computers or mobile devices using on screen keyboards with pinyin text inputs.

Solution: Skip writing

Many learners find it to be a more effective use of their time to focus just on learning to read characters, which also enables them to type these characters out using pinyin keyboards. So unlike English, where being able to read usually also means you can write out what you just wrote, in Chinese it's possible to be able to read characters but not know how to reproduce them on your own without looking.

Having said that, some learners do find that the act of learning how to write characters also helps with their recognition of characters. Determine if that effort is worth it for you, or if you can get similar results from using flashcards and other modern tools, without the long practice hours needed from writing out character sheets.

Challenge #4: No time to learn

We all have busy lives. Certainly, trying to carve out a few hours a week to attend a local class would be challenging for most people. Even setting time at home to study might be a challenge for some. It's no wonder that many who want to learn Chinese forego doing so due to lack of time.

Solution: Learn on the Go



Thanks to resources like podcasts and mobile apps, you no longer have to carve out time from your busy day or commute to a different location to attend a class. You can do all your learning while on the go, or from the comfort of your own home. Use your commutes or time at the gym to be more productive and learn Chinese.

Not only that, but this form of learning provides additional benefits over traditional group classes:

- **Go at your own pace:** You no longer have to follow the pace of your preset class curriculum. If you find an area difficult, you can spend more time on it until you get it right.
- **Bit sized chunks:** Split your learning into a few minute chunks throughout the day if you have to. You'll be surprised by how much time you actually have available to learn.
- **Measure progress:** Flashcards and other online tools can provide immediate feedback on whether you understand a concept or not. You can now practice certain concepts on your own without the need for a live teacher present.

Challenge #5: No Structure

Did you spend years in school learning a second language that you still couldn't reproduce after many years of study?



Many students fail to learn anything significant from courses that lack proper structure. They find themselves bouncing from topic to topic while not remembering anything. They are forced to memorize lists of characters and vocabulary that they later forget.

Solution: Use a progressive, structured course

A proper structured course will start off with the essentials, then build off those in later lessons. Useful vocabulary is reused in later lessons, resulting in automatic review. The further you progress, the better your Chinese becomes.

Along the way, tools like flashcards and other online exercises can test your understanding of the material so you know when to continue and when to go back and review a second time.

Challenge #6: Can't move on to the next level

Maybe you already learned some Chinese in the past but found yourself stuck at a particular level that you couldn't move on from.

You'll find your learning goes through different stages.

- Stage 1: You're learning a lot of new vocabulary. There's a lot to process. Your sentence structure is iffy.
- Stage 2: You have the basics down pat. You can handle your daily situations fine but can't progress beyond there.

Solutions:

There are different things you can do to get passed stage 2:

- a. Find different ways of saying what you already know. For example, if someone asks you where you're from or what you do, you probably have a canned answer. Try to expand on this with different answers. You can get ideas by asking others the same questions and see how they answer.
- b. Expand your situations: The reason you can handle your current situations fine is because you had lots of practice with them. Try to find other situations where you can use Chinese to get those areas at the same level as well.
- c. Even though it feels that you are stuck at a level, you will probably find that your listening skills may be higher than your speaking skills (or vice versa). Use this opportunity to develop your weaker skills. If your speaking is weaker, try to speak more in situations you wouldn't normally do so. If your listening is weak, try to listen more closely to conversations that are slightly beyond your ability and see what you can pick out. If you haven't begun learning characters, you could also try to learn characters for vocabulary you've already learned.

Challenge #7: Bridging the gap between course Chinese and street Chinese

Some learners may have learned from a course but found they still can't understand when people speak to them on the street. Or maybe your street Chinese is great, but you want to be able to move on beyond that.

The reason is that just like in English, there are formal and informal approaches to conversation. You wouldn't want to only learn how to talk informally, nor would you only want to learn how to talk formally.

In addition, different regions may have their own dialects or vocabulary that differs from the standard Chinese you're learning.



Solution: Learn both approaches

The best way to learn is to constantly practice what you're learning with real people and gauge their reaction. If their reaction seems off, find out why. Perhaps locals don't respond that way, or there is a better way to respond.

If you don't want to be direct, then ask similar questions yourself and see how others respond.

If you hear a word or phrase often that seems unfamiliar, find out the meaning and add it to your vocabulary (if you're hearing it often from others around you, there's a good chance that it's something you could use often too).

Bonus: How to sound more like a native Chinese speaker (and less like a beginner):

In addition to getting your tones right and perhaps mimicing the accents of local speakers in your area, there are a couple of other things you can do to bridge the gap between being a learner and becoming fluent:

1. Filler words. Just like English has some filler words like “Umm”, “you know” and “like” (with younger speakers), Chinese has its own versions. As your Chinese becomes better, you’ll start to learn the filler words that people around you use in their conversations. Adding those to your vocabulary (when you need them, so it sounds authentic) will go a long way towards making you sound more like a native Chinese speaker. Note though, that just like in English, it’s important to know your audience. If you were doing a business presentation or otherwise had to speak formally, you probably wouldn’t want to add these to your speech.
2. Slang. Like English, Chinese is full of slang words, phrases and expressions. Also like in English, they have specific nuances and can only be used in specific situations. If you hear a phrase or expression repeatedly, find out the meaning from the speaker and the context of where it can be used. See if you can incorporate that into your usable vocabulary. Don’t overdo it – start with a few common ones and build your way up from there.



Start Learning

Do these shortcuts make sense for you? Are you ready to start learning Chinese? The CLO progressive system to learn Mandarin Chinese gives you all the tools to utilize these shortcuts in your own learning. Try it out and see how well you do.

CLO Course.

Got a question? Email: info@clcourse.com for more information.