

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

Appropriate for grades 1-4

Students will understand the following

Objectives:

1. In spoken Chinese, tone as well as words communicates meaning.
2. The Chinese languages use a writing system made up of symbols, called characters, rather than letters; each character has its own meaning.
3. Chinese names are made up of several characters.
4. A name in Chinese characters can be rewritten as a word with letters of the English alphabet. Then we can pronounce the Chinese name and figure out what it means.

For this lesson, you will need

1. Examples of Chinese characters from a printed source such as a Chinese newspaper or from an online source such as zhongwen. A complete listing of names in Chinese can be found at http://chineseculture.about.com/library/name/blna_f_c.htm
2. Paper, thinned down black paint and brushes.

Procedures:

Discuss with students two of the major differences between the Chinese and English languages. If you have students or teachers of Chinese descent in your school, try to involve them in the following instruction and demonstration:

- In spoken Chinese, a speaker uses different tones to change the meaning of a syllable. For example, the syllable ma said as you slowly move your head back and forth from left to right means "mother," but the syllable ma said deep in your throat as you drop your chin to your chest means "horse."
- In written Chinese, a word appears not in letters but as one or more pictures, which are called characters. Explain that because most people outside China cannot read Chinese characters, linguists had to come up with a system for writing Chinese words with the letters we use in English. So in addition to having characters that name each person, place, and thing, Chinese can also give each name in letters that we recognize.
- Teach your primary students—or invite someone else at school or from the community to teach primary students—the basic words that they as children would find useful: for example, the words for mommy, daddy, please, and thank you. Have them write the words in Chinese characters and in English on the board, as well as a pronunciation guide.
- Using the website listed above, have each child look up their names on the computer. Have them copy their names, using traditional black ink and brushes if possible.