



## Mandarin and English

### Language background

Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world, with more than one billion speakers. It belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and differs significantly from English in its writing system, sound system and grammatical structure.

Mandarin is written using Chinese characters, which represent meaning rather than individual sounds. Unlike English, which uses an alphabetic system where letters represent phonemes, Mandarin writing uses thousands of characters that correspond to words or parts of words.

Mandarin grammar and phonology also differ greatly from English. Mandarin is a tonal language, meaning changes in pitch can alter the meaning of a word. Mandarin also does not mark tense, plurals or articles in the same way as English. These structural differences can influence pronunciation, grammar and spelling patterns when Mandarin speakers learn English.

### Key linguistic differences from English

- Mandarin uses Chinese characters rather than an alphabet
- Mandarin is a tonal language
- Mandarin does not use articles such as "a" or "the"
- Mandarin does not mark plural nouns with -s
- Mandarin verbs do not change form to show tense
- Mandarin syllables rarely contain consonant clusters
- Mandarin has fewer vowel contrasts than English
- Mandarin pronunciation distinguishes between /r/ and /l/ differently from English

### What teachers may notice in English

Teachers may notice patterns such as:

- omission of articles such as a or the
- omission of plural -s
- verb tense inconsistencies
- difficulty producing consonant clusters
- confusion between /r/ and /l/ sounds
- phonetic spelling patterns when writing English

These patterns are often predictable forms of language transfer between Mandarin and English



## Why this happens

Mandarin uses a logographic writing system, meaning characters represent meaning rather than individual sounds. When learning English, pupils must adapt to an alphabetic system where letters represent phonemes.

Mandarin also does not use articles such as a or the, so learners may omit them when producing English sentences.

Plural nouns are not marked in the same way in Mandarin, which can lead to omission of the -s ending in English.

Mandarin verbs do not change form to show tense in the same way as English verbs. Instead, time is often expressed through context or additional words. This difference can influence how learners use English verb tenses.

English also allows consonant clusters such as school, spring or strong. Because Mandarin syllables usually follow simpler sound patterns, learners may simplify or avoid these clusters when speaking English.

## Classroom strategies

- explicitly teach article use in English sentences
- highlight plural noun endings during reading and writing
- model verb tense patterns clearly
- practise pronunciation of consonant clusters
- provide structured sentence frames
- encourage oral rehearsal before writing

## Strengths to leverage

Mandarin-speaking pupils often bring valuable strengths to the classroom, including:

- strong visual memory for written language
- strong attention to detail
- persistence when learning new vocabulary
- strong listening skills
- familiarity with complex writing systems

## Reflective questions for teachers

- Are missing articles affecting sentence clarity?
- Are plural endings being omitted in writing?
- Are pronunciation patterns influencing spelling?