

Learn another language... but maybe not Mandarin Chinese

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A lot of people are learning Mandarin Chinese these days. That seems like a good idea. It's the language with the most native speakers. English has the most non-native speakers, 500 million (with 350 million native speakers).

Mandarin is one of a number of languages called "Chinese" – there are at least six.

In Hong Kong, the local language isn't Mandarin but Cantonese, which is spoken by 70 million people. People speaking Mandarin and Cantonese can't understand one another at all.

It's a very good idea to discover what non-European languages can be like – they're often surprisingly different – and linguistic scientists are always happy when they hear about people learning a foreign language.

Everybody should learn at least one. And it really is best if you can learn it properly, so you can read it and talk to people. But that's hard work. Learning a language is a massive task. Perhaps pupils passing GCSE French or German or Spanish with a high grade should be awarded two GCSEs, not just one.

It would really be excellent if all British people could study, learn and be able to



■ Mandarin Chinese has the most native speakers but it is a pretty difficult language to master says Peter Trudgill.

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speak, or at least understand and read, other European languages like French, German, Spanish, Italian, Swedish.... With these languages, you have a good chance of ultimately being able to read them successfully.

With Mandarin the chances are rather low. The writing system makes that enormously difficult. The language itself isn't particularly hard, though you are starting from scratch, unlike with western European languages where you will know lots of the words already. But the Chinese writing system is so complex that even Chinese-speaking children aren't able to read a newspaper satisfactorily until quite late.

Of course, if you want to go and do business in China, it would be helpful to speak Mandarin. But unless you're very good indeed, it would be much safer to use a professional interpreter as well.

So why don't you learn, say, German or Spanish? You'll find it a lot easier. You can readily travel to Germany or Austria or Switzerland, or to Spain or South America, read the newspapers there, find out what people are thinking, discover their literatures, and get some insight into the way they look at things.

Unless you're a really brilliant language learner and are willing to devote years of your life to learning the language, you're unlikely to get that far with Mandarin.