

Schoolkids say Mandarin's a real tongue twister

■ Right — Colin Chui with Martin Christ and Glenn Leslie.
 ■ Below — some Chinese phrases you can have a go at!

FORGET "bonjour monsieur", "guten morgen mein Herr" and "buenos dias senor".

Greeting your teacher in French, German or Spanish is old hat, or so it would seem. The latest language school pupils are getting their tongues in a twist over is Mandarin!

As China's official language, it's spoken by more than half the country's 1.3 billion-strong population.

In the last five years the number of non-Chinese speakers of the language is said to have soared to 30 million.

Brush up

The Scottish Qualifications Authority has recently added Mandarin to its list of subjects and it's taught in 10 schools and colleges across Scotland, with the first exams due to be sat next year.

At the independent Merchiston Castle School for boys in Edinburgh, 100 pupils aged between eight and 18 take lessons.

A group of 12 recently joined the owners of the city's Xanadu Chinese Restaurant, Irene and Colin Chui, for lunch. Accompanied by teacher Mrs Michelle Hsu-McWilliam, the idea was for them to brush up on their Mandarin while chatting about the meal.

By Kirsten Mann

Nǐ hǎo
你好
"hello"

Zài jiàn
再见
"goodbye"

Xiè xiè
谢谢
"thanks"

The group of 16 and 17-year-olds has been learning Mandarin since the start of term nine weeks ago.

German-born Martin Christ came to Scotland at the start of term hoping to improve his English.

So you can imagine how surprised his parents will be when he returns speaking Chinese!

Explaining why he took up Mandarin, Martin (16) says, "It's a great opportunity

to learn about a culture which is totally different from our own. China is very important in economics and it'll be worthwhile being able to speak to business partners in their native tongue.

"I'm hoping to study biology at university. China is really big in the scientific sector so I hope in the future I'll be able to communicate with Chinese scientists about research."

He claims Mandarin is a logical

language to read. "It's easy to see what the different characters represent. For example, one tree is 'tree', but when there is more than one the character means 'forest'."

According to Mrs Hsu-McWilliam, there are 3000 characters in common use but around 600 are enough to read and speak the language and pass a basic exam.

Pupil Glenn Leslie (16), from Edinburgh, agrees the characters are easy to memorise.

"So far the symbols have been really simple — a person, for example, looks like a stick man," he says.

"The Chinese are trying to restrict the number of characters, so when new things come along they adapt those already in existence. 'Train' is made up of the symbols for electricity and cart."

Speaking the lingo, it seems, is a different matter.

"So far we've learned how to introduce ourselves and talk about ourselves, about numbers and practical things like how to order food."

Brave

"Unlike in English there are no tenses but there are four different tones — angry, neutral, romantic and questioning. These give each word a different meaning so it's quite difficult to learn."

"In the past I have used French and Spanish when I've been on holiday so I'm sure I would be brave enough to give Mandarin a try if I was ever in China."

"I've just tried to order a drink and it took a few attempts but the waitress understood me in the end!"

Glenn says there's another good reason for learning. "We have Chinese friends in Edinburgh and their Mandarin is getting a bit rusty so we're helping them keep in practice."

And for any of you still wondering how to greet your teacher in Mandarin, try "Ni hao laoshi" (sounds like nee how lowshee) which means, "Hello teacher!"

