

Take a peek inside Doss Elementary's Chinese language immersion class

By Brooke Blanton

If you walk by portable #4 of Doss Elementary before 10:40 a.m., you will hear nothing out of the ordinary. But walk past the same portable later in the day, which holds the same second grade students, and you will hear something most Texans aren't accustomed to: Mandarin Chinese.

Doss Elementary School in Northwest Austin is home to the first Mandarin immersion program in Austin ISD; it began with the 2013-2014 school year, serving 61 students in kindergarten, first and second grades. Each year, the program will add a grade, in time for the oldest students to continue their Mandarin studies at Murchison Middle School and Anderson High School, if they choose.

Nancy Chiu teaches the Chinese half of the day, focusing on Chinese fluency, math and science. Her own experience in primary school was a different model than the one in which she now teaches. As a student in Taiwan, children were put into either A, B or C classes, which corresponded with best, average or poor ability. According to Chiu, the C students usually did not continue to higher education but instead attended vocational schools. As she thinks back, she admits that her classmates with learning disabilities were probably all placed in C class, securing their destiny.

Chiu's teaching partner, Celia Smith, is in charge of language arts, social studies and reinforcing math and science. Smith shares a classroom with Chiu, and the two teachers share their time with the 20 second grade students.

Upon seeing the immersion classroom, it becomes obvious that this is not the typical elementary school classroom, or at least half of it is not. On one side of the room are posters with the lyrics to The Star-Spangled Banner and shelves packed full with books, educational games and displayed artwork. The students' most recent artistic assignment was a personification poem where they had to pretend to be a natural element: "Things to do if you are snow/Be beautiful and fall from the sky."

On the other side of the room is where things really get interesting; the walls are covered in Mandarin characters, flash cards and posters teaching basic Chinese fluency using numbers and colors and animals.

Smith's instruction is from 8 a.m. to 10:40 a.m. Then, the students attend their art, music or PE class. Afterward, they return to their usual classroom for Chinese immersion with Chiu—or *laoshi*, meaning "teacher" in Mandarin—until 3 p.m., with lunch and recess included in this time.

On a typical Thursday morning in language arts, Smith reads to the students from a book called "The Lemonade War" while they eat a snack. Then Smith transitions into writing instruction, where students are asked to write about a time when they helped another person. One second grade student writes that he helped his younger brother with his Chinese homework.

Not long after, the students are in full-Chinese mode; Chiu does not speak a word of English to the children. The class begins with a Chinese song, sung in unison. When Chiu asks a question, about half the time it is answered in English; however, as the year goes on, the students' ability to produce Chinese responses increases.

For Chiu, every opportunity is a chance to teach Chinese. When one little girl tells her *laoshi* that her knee is feeling better, Chiu repeats it in Chinese for the whole class to hear, pointing to her knee to aid the mini-lesson.

With so much to learn during the day and the necessity of having to reinforce math and science terms in English so that the students can be successful on the English-only STARR test, there are not many chances for breaks. "That's the biggest challenge," Smith says. "Having time to do everything."

Because of their increased classroom responsibilities, these second grade students have more homework than their non-immersion classmates: thirty minutes each day for Chinese homework, in addition to Smith's homework.

"All of their independent reading, almost all of it, has to be done at home. I just don't have time for that in here," Smith says. "All the parents are very supportive."

The parents are supportive because they can see, even now, how their children benefit from learning a second language. For many, the motivation behind immersing their children in Mandarin is for future economic benefit. Around 800 million people speak Mandarin in the world, according to the British Broadcasting Corporation. In the United States alone, there are over two million Chinese speakers.

However for one parent, a higher-paying job is not why she wants her second grade student in the program, but instead to connect her back to her Chinese roots.

Caroline Heath was born in the Guangdong Province of China and lived for two years in a social welfare institute in Yangchun before she was adopted by Jena Heath and her husband. For the first two years of Caroline's life, she was hearing and had begun to speak Chinese.

"I have always felt very strongly that she should have her native language," Jena Heath says. "She's lost so much. That was one thing I could give her."

Heath explains that she once saw a documentary about adopted Chinese children who, when returning to China, did not speak a word of their native tongue.

"I always found it very heartbreaking," she says. Heath plans to take Caroline to visit China in the future.

Heath, who teaches journalism at St. Edward's University, believes that Caroline shouldn't be the only one in the family learning Chinese, so she has also been learning her daughter's language. But it wasn't until the immersion program at Doss that Caroline really started to accelerate in her fluency.

"She has outpaced me," Heath says. "She's way beyond me and that's in less than a year."

Caroline thrives in Chiu's Chinese class and says her favorite part of class is learning how to write the Chinese characters.

"Ms. Chiu wants us to learn how to write the new words," Caroline says. "We get whiteboards and markers, and she teaches us what strokes and what order to write."

Heath says Caroline is speaking Chinese all the time, such as when she asks for something to eat or when she talks about her best friend on the way home from school.

In addition to furthering the language, the immersion program has grown Caroline's confidence. This is important to Heath, because she wants her daughter to accept being Chinese as part of her identity.

"In terms of her understanding and feeling good about being Chinese, I think it's been really good for her," Heath says. This sort of outcome is what Chiu hoped would come from her instruction. Instead of becoming fluent, Chiu primarily wants her students to enjoy the experience, embrace

different cultures, be proud of themselves and have fun.

Maybe a few of the children will grow up to lead a Fortune 500 corporation and be able to speak fluently with their Chinese colleagues. Maybe some will study abroad in Beijing when they're in college. Or perhaps some will find a Chinese pen pal who can teach them about life on the other side of the world. No matter where their Chinese instruction takes them, these children are getting an early lesson in global studies that will teach them tolerance and understanding —valuable skills that will last them a lifetime.

Words to know

English as a Second Language: ESL programs help native speakers of foreign languages reach proficiency in English. This can be a classroom with students from varying native languages.

Bilingual education: Similar to ESL, a bilingual classroom aids English proficiency but all the students are native speakers of the same language.

One-way dual language: All of the students in the class are native speakers of the same language and are taught in their native language and in another language.

Two-way dual language: The students in the class are native speakers of two different languages and are taught in both of those languages.

Gómez and Gómez Dual Language Enrichment (DLE) model: Developed by two retired Bilingual/Dual Education professors in 1995, this dual language model teaches subjects in only one language, as opposed to the same subject in both languages.

Language programs in the Austin area

Austin ISD offers Dual Language programs at 65 elementary schools. These include one- and two-way Spanish/English programs, as well as a one-way Vietnamese/English program at Summitt Elementary and the Chinese Immersion program at Doss Elementary. According to the AISD website, the one-way Dual Language Program will be phased in every year until 2015–2016, when it will be offered at all AISD elementary schools with bilingual services.

Pflugerville ISD has Spanish Dual Language programs at nine elementary schools. These include Caldwell, Copperfield, Delco, Dessau, Highland Park, Parmer Lane, River Oaks, Ruth Barron and Springhill. All nine campuses offer the one-way DLE program and three of them (Caldwell, Highland Park and Ruth Barron) offer the two-way DLE program, as well. PISD also offers a Spanish Immersion program for native English-only native speakers at Riojas Elementary and a Vietnamese one-way bilingual program at Wieland Elementary. The district currently has a Task Force committee that is exploring the possibility of expanding a Spanish DLE program at the secondary level.

Round Rock ISD has Spanish Dual Language programs at 12 elementary schools. These include Anderson Mill, Berkman, Bluebonnet, Caldwell Heights, Callison, Gattis, Herrington, Purple Sage, Robertson, Union Hill, Voigt and Wells Branch and offer either one-way, two-way or both. The district's ultimate goal is to have all schools running a two-way program, but funds and personnel do not currently allow it.