

Mandarin not so foreign to Seacrest students



Photo by DAVID ALBERS

Mandarin Chinese teacher Dan Xu, a native of Shenzhen, China, teaches how to say the colors of the Chinese flag on Monday, September 29, 2008, at Seacrest Country Day School in Naples. Xu teaches the language to pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students at the school with some classes held as an extra-curricular activity after school. David Albers/ Staff

By KATHERINE LEWIS

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NAPLES — Walking through the hallways of Seacrest Country Day School, one rarely hears “Hello” anymore.

Among some of the younger students, it’s “Ni hao.”

Seacrest Country Day School in East Naples started a program this school year that teaches Mandarin to prekindergarten through third-grade students during the school day. Students in grades four to nine can also learn Mandarin after school as part of a club.

The money to start the Mandarin program at Seacrest was donated by Arthur and Carole Allen, whose daughter Mia is a second-grader at Seacrest. The Allens adopted their second daughter Kenza in May 2007 from China.

“We want her to remember where she comes from. We don’t want her to forget her Mandarin,” said Carole Allen. “And it was really important to us that Mia got to embrace and know where her sister came from.”

While looking for a tutor, the Allens found Dan Xu, the woman who would become the school’s Mandarin teacher.

“It’s just been fantastic,” Carole Allen said.

Xu, a native of Shenzhen, China, said her time at Seacrest has been exciting. She said she hopes that the younger students learn some basics of Mandarin conversation — hello, thank you, the words for colors — and the older students learn conversation and how to write some words. Her curriculum also touches on the culture and history of China.

“I want to communicate with them about the culture. Every class I try to bring something new,” she said. “We are going to talk about numbers and colors, I will teach them the relationship between a good number and a good color.”

Standing in front of first-graders this week, Xu began her lesson by asking the students to repeat the numbers one through 10 with her.

“Some of those numbers are great and some of them are bad,” she said. “Ba (eight) is lucky. So, it is written in red because red is a lucky color. Everything lucky should be in red.”

She continues with the number nine, jiu in Mandarin, which is also a good number.

“Jiu means forever, like a tree is forever,” she said.

When it came to the number four, Xu told the students the Mandarin word “si” was bad. She drew a skull and crossbones next to the word.

“What do you think si means?” she asked the students.

Six-year-old Olivia Harpster raised her hand.

“It means pirate,” she said, recalling a story the class had just read.

Xu told the students it meant something worse than pirates. Si means death, where as wu, the number for five, means empty, so it does not have a color.

Once the students went through the numbers, Xu brought out American and Chinese flags for the students to count. She also taught them how to say America and China in Chinese before allowing them to color pictures of the Chinese flag.

Olivia said she likes when Xu comes to her class.

“I like learning new words,” she said, adding her favorite was ni hao.

Vincent Barbaro, 6, said he liked ba, the word for eight.

“I like it when we count the numbers,” he said.

First-grade teacher Angela Burchett said her students have been very enthusiastic about learning Mandarin.

“She is excellent. I can’t believe how much they have learned in four weeks,” she said. “They took right to it. ... She brings in photos and props to show them. She is just an excellent teacher.”

Xu said in China it is typical for students to learn English. She said it’s not common for students to learn Mandarin in the United States but the Seacrest students are quick learners.

“They are interested. They like to communicate with one another,” she said. “We have siblings in school and the younger one will teach the older one or the older one will teach the younger one. They are very excited about anything I teach them. It is so different to them. I say ‘Ni hao’ hundreds of times a day.”

Leslie Vega, director of development at Seacrest Country Day School, said the Mandarin program has proved very popular. She said the school hopes to expand the program as interest from parents and students grows.

Carole Allen said she knows that the students will benefit from the program.

“All of Asia has such a beautiful background, a beautiful history,” she said. “Being so international and having lives in so many places, we know what happens when you are exposed to different cultures. You benefit from it.”



Photo by DAVID ALBERS-Mandarin Chinese teacher Dan Xu, a native of Shenzhen, China, conducts a counting exercise using Chinese knots with six-year-old Zoe Berg on Monday in Angela Burchett's first grade classroom at Seacrest Country Day School. Xu teaches the language to pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students at the school with some classes held as an extra-curricular activity after school. David Albers/ Staff



Photo by DAVID ALBERS-Mandarin Chinese teacher Dan Xu, a native of Shenzhen, China, conducts a counting exercise using Chinese knots on Monday, September 29, 2008, in Angela Burchett's first grade classroom at Seacrest Country Day School. Xu teaches the language to pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students at the school with some classes held as an extra-curricular activity after school. David Albers/ Staff



Photo by DAVID ALBERS-Mandarin Chinese teacher Dan Xu, a native of Shenzhen, China, works with students to color the Chinese flag on Monday, September 29, 2008, in Angela Burchett's first grade classroom at Seacrest Country Day School. Xu teaches the language to pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students at the school with some classes held as an extra-curricular activity after school. David Albers/ Staff



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