

An Introduction to Mandarin Chinese Grammar for ESL Professionals

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Importance of Mandarin

- Number of Mandarin speakers
- Number of ESL learners with Mandarin as L1

Chinese Language (Mandarin)

- Standard Mandarin, based on the dialect of Beijing.
- Romanization: Pinyin
- Tonal language—each syllable has a tone
- Pinyin tone marks

Some Common Grammar areas for the ESL Learner

- Word order

Some Common Grammar areas for the ESL Learner

- Prepositions
- Question words
- Verb tense
- Singular/Plural
- There is/There are
- Subject verb agreement

Prepositions

Zai (“at”)

- “Zai” is a “Coverb”.
- A Coverb” is a transitive verb which comes before the main verb of the sentence and is similar to a preposition in English (John DeFrancis (1976, page 83)).

Zai (“at”)

- S + Zai + Place word + V
- S + Zai + Place word + VO

Zai (“at”)

- S + Zai + Place word + V
- Wo **zai daxue** xuexi.
- I **at university** study.
- I study at the university.
- S + V + Preposition + article + Place word

Zai (“at”)

- S + bu + zai + Place word + V
- Wo bu zai daxue xuexi.
- I not at university study.
- I do not study at the university.
- S + do not + V + Preposition + article + Place word

Zai (“at”)

- S + Zai + Place word + VO
- Tamen **zai zher** mai shu.
- They **at here** sell books.
- They sell books **here**.
- S + VO + Place word

Zai (“at”)

- S + bu + zai + Place word + VO
- Tamen bu **zai zher** mai shu.
- They not **at here** sell books.
- They do not sell books **here**.
- S + do not + VO + Place word

Question Words

- Shenmo (what?)
- Nar (where?)
- Ma (question particle)

shenmo (what?)

- S + Zai + Place word + V + shenmo?
- Tamen **zai zher** mai shenmo?
- They **at here** sell what?
- What do they sell **here?**
- Question Word + auxV + S + V + Place word ?

Nar (where?)

- S + Zai + nar (Place word) + VO?
- Ni **zai nar** chi fan?
- You **at where** eat (food)?

Where are you eating?

- Question Word + auxV + S + V?

Ma (question particle)

ma

- S + Zai + Place word + VO + ma ?
- Tamen **zai zher** mai shu ma?
- They **at here** sell books (question particle)?
- Do they sell books **here?**
- Do + S + VO + Place word?

Verb Tense

Verb Tense

- Mandarin uses particles (such as “le” for past) or context, such as time words, to indicate verb tense. There are no separate verb tenses in Mandarin as there are in English.

Xuexi (“study”)

- S + Zai + Place word + V
- Wo **zai daxue** xuexi.
- I **at university** study.
- I study at the university. I am studying at the university.
- S + V + Preposition + article + Place word

Lai (“come”)

- S + Time word + V + V + O
- Ta mingtian lai mai shu.
- He tomorrow come buy book.
- He will come tomorrow to buy books.
- S + V + Time word + to V + O

You (“have”)

- “You” as a verb.
- (“have”)

You (“have”)

- S + V + O
- S + you + O
- Wo you shu.
- I have book.
- I have a book.
- I have books.
- S + V + article + O
- S + V + O + s (plural)

Singular/Plural

- Most Mandarin nouns do not indicate singular or plural. Number is indicated by context.

You (“have”)

- S + V + O
- S + you + O

- Wo you shu.

- I have book.

- I have a book.
- I have books.

- S + V + article + O
- S + V + O + s (plural)

You (“have”)

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O
- Wo you yi ben shu.
- I have one (measure) book.
- I have one book.
- I have a book.
- S + V + number + O
- S + V + article + O

You (“have”)

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O
- Wo you san ben shu.
- I have three (measure) book.
- I have three books.
- S + V + number + O (s)

You (“have”/“there is/there are”)

- “You” as a verb.
- (“have”/“there is/there are”)

You (“have”/“there is/there are”)

- Place word + V + quantifier + N
- Place word + you + quantifier + N
- Zher you hen duo shu.
- Here have many books. (Here there are many books.)
- There are many books here.
- There are quantifier + N(s) + place word
- There V + quantifier + N(s) + place word

You (“have”/“there is/there are”)

- Place word + V + quantifier + N
- Place word + you + quantifier + N

- Niu Yue you hen duo che.

- New York have (there are) many vehicle.

- There are many vehicles in New York.
- There are quantifier + N (s) + prep. + place word
- There V + quantifier + N (s) + prep. + place word

SV agreement

- There is no subject verb agreement in Mandarin.

You (“have”)

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O

- Wo you san ben shu.
- Ta you san ben shu

- I have three (measure) book.
- He(She) have three (measure) book.

- I have three books.
- He(She) has three books.

- S + V + number + O (s)

Ta (He/She)

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O
- Ta you san ben shu.
- Ta you san ben shu
- He have three (measure) book.
- She have three (measure) book.
- He has three books.
- She has three books.
- 3rdperson S + V(s) + quantifier + N(s)

References

- DeFrancis, J. *Beginning Chinese* (1976). (2nd revised ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.