

The Daytona Beach News Journal

www.news-journalonline.com

To print this article, open the file menu and choose Print.

Dec 13, 2007

More American students taking Chinese language courses

By Linda Trimble

Education writer

DELTONA -- Joseph Negron is only a high school freshman, but already has his sights set on attending the University of Florida and hopes learning Chinese will help him win admission to the highly competitive school.

"It's one of the best languages to help me get in," said Negron, one of 24 students taking Pine Ridge High School's first Mandarin Chinese course this semester.

The Deltona school -- which also offers Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish -- is part of a growing number of American high schools offering Chinese and other "exotic" languages.

"It really is an explosion of interest in Chinese programs," said Marty Abbott, director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "It really is the language to add right now.

"People are looking ahead and thinking the Chinese economy is going to be the economy to compete with in the 21st century," Abbott said.

Her organization based in Alexandria, Va., estimates between 30,000 and 50,000 American high school students are now enrolled in Chinese classes, compared to 5,000 at the start of the new century.

Pine Ridge offers the widest range of foreign languages in Volusia County high schools, but Mainland has offered Japanese for several years. Flagler schools offer Spanish and French.

There's good reason to offer a variety of languages, said Soraya Ray, an Italian and Spanish teacher and chairwoman of Pine Ridge's foreign language department.

"If you want your child to be competitive in the market, you don't want him to speak whatever everybody else is speaking," Ray said. "The United Nations doesn't speak just Spanish, French and English."

Ray has played a large role in adding languages at Pine Ridge -- which now offers a career academy focused on foreign languages and international business -- by helping recruit instructors qualified to teach more than one subject.

She didn't have to look far for a Chinese teacher. Zhen Ma, who grew up in Shanghai, had been teaching math at Pine Ridge for the last seven years.

Ray approached her about teaching Chinese and the program was born in August when enough students signed up to justify offering the class. Ma said most of her 24 students enrolled because they think Chinese is "cool."

She gave them an early warning: "It is very hard and sooner or later you're going to find out it's not as cool as you think." But she's been surprised with the students' interest and willingness to work hard to learn Chinese characters, vocabulary and cultural traditions.

Ma said she was nervous and didn't quite know where to start, so she broke the ice by asking students to give her a list of things they'd like to be able to say if they were stranded on a street in China.

The hands-down winner was "where's the restroom," so that's the first thing the class learned to say.

Ninth-grader Angel Estrada, who already knows English and Spanish, makes flash cards to practice the Chinese words he's learning. Estrada said he's interested in China because of the country's rich history and diverse culture.

The language, he said, "isn't too hard if you practice it daily."

Pine Ridge plans to offer another introductory Chinese class next semester and plans to add a second level of Chinese next school year.

Spruce Creek High School in Port Orange also hoped to add Chinese this year but couldn't find a teacher.

"It's something we're going to continue to look at," Spruce Creek Principal Tim Egnor said. "Virtually everyone agrees China is the emerging economic superpower. In the next 20 years, mastering standard Mandarin is going to open doors for kids."

COLLEGE COURSES

A handful of Stetson University students are learning Mandarin Chinese this year from a teacher visiting the U.S. through the Fulbright Program.

Fei Wang, who teaches at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in China, has been in DeLand since August teaching those lessons and taking classes herself to improve her understanding of American culture, research and teaching methods.

"I'm trying to impart my language and culture to American students and I wanted to learn English here," Wang said. She'll be at Stetson until the school year ends in the spring.

"I just want my students to learn to communicate rather than learn Chinese grammar," said Wang, who also spends a lot of class time talking about cultural differences between the U.S. and China.

Stetson also is hosting Fulbright fellows who teach Arabic and Swahili, and offers a Russian major. The Fulbright program, which is sponsored by the U.S. State Department, promotes international exchanges of scholars among the United States and 150 other countries.

Spanish remains the most popular foreign language course offered by local colleges. A recently released report from the Modern Language Association of America showed more than half of foreign language students at U.S. colleges and universities are studying Spanish, but Arabic and Asian language enrollments are growing rapidly.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University offers Arabic on its Daytona Beach campus and plans to add Mandarin Chinese in the near future, a spokesman said.

The University of Central Florida, which has a branch campus in Daytona Beach, offers Arabic, Chinese and Japanese in addition to Latin, Spanish, French, Italian and German.

linda.trimble@news-jrnl.com