

All in all I had a wonderful time at the National University of Tainan last semester. While there I progressed a great deal in my speaking, listening, reading and writing of Mandarin. Moreover I increased much in my understanding of Taiwanese culture as I was able to experience Taiwan firsthand in its most historic city. And my life was enriched with all the good students, teachers and locals I met and befriended during my time in Taiwan. My only serious complaint about my last semester at the National University of Tainan is that the program almost entirely lacked courses designed for students wishing to pursue Mandarin as a second language.

Aside from the Mandarin course offered by the language center and the independent study course, all of my classes were taught entirely in Mandarin (if not Taiwanese, in the case of my Taiwanese opera course) designed for students with at least near-fluency in Mandarin. As a consequence, although I gained cultural insights and new friends in these courses, they helped me learn Mandarin almost none whatsoever. I was generally exempt for the class's standard homework, test, paper and presentation assignments as these were geared for helping the students learn the course material whereas I was only able to work on my basic language skills. For the most part it was all I could do just to show up to class every day, listening to the teacher to catch the occasional word or phrase, asking a nearby student for help or simply reading in an elementary Mandarin textbook to learn on my own apart from the lecture. Almost all the work I did outside of class involved either reading in my elementary Mandarin textbooks, practicing writing Chinese characters or simply looking up new words to increase my vocabulary. While I learned much using this method of study, my studying had virtually nothing to do with my classes directly. In other words, most of what I was learning I learned through self-study.

The two classes I took in which I learned the most Mandarin were the course offered by the language center and the independent study course. In the course offered by the language center I was taught Mandarin much in the way I would expect to find an intensive language course taught in the United States: an elementary Mandarin textbook, simulated dialogues, pronunciation and grammar exercises and the like, taught with English as the median language. The teachers were all very nice and helpful and we even got to go on an excursion to Old Street in Tainan, where the teachers gave us a guided tour sharing with us knowledge and insights that only a local would have. In the independent study course I was paired with Ellen, a Taiwanese student who had very good English and essentially acted as my tutor during class time. Most classes we would start with pronunciation exercises the teacher had given us to go through; then I would ask her a series of questions concerning Chinese vocabulary and grammar I would have prepared before class. I probably learned more Mandarin in my independent study course with Ellen than I did in just about every other course combined. She even helped grade my essays for my Chinese I class. If it were not for these two classes, I would have learned next to nothing about the speaking, listening, reading and writing of Mandarin that I did not learn completely on my own.

Certainly if I had to do it over again I would still choose to attend the National University of Tainan, but I could not recommend this program to anyone who is not at least near-fluent in Mandarin. My experience in the classroom was far short of what one would expect to find as a foreign exchange student. At the Heinrich-Heine Universität, the National Pingtung University of Education and the Universität Graz I found programs far better suited for students wishing to learn Mandarin as a secondary language. But of course, what I gained from my time at the National University of Tainan was far more than what I found in the classroom alone. I met wonderful people all over the classes – teachers and students alike – who were very friendly and more than willing to extend every favor to me that they could. Frequently I went out with classmates, neighbors and teachers to lunch where I could further practice my Mandarin and enjoy their good company, and more than once they treated me. And during this time I felt myself truly living Taiwanese culture such that I will always feel like Tainan is my second home.