

Pupils to be sent to China on work placements

► Groundbreaking scheme to teach Mandarin as part of engineering diploma

By Richard Garner
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A RADICAL new way of teaching Mandarin could open the subject to thousands of state school pupils. The approach involves teaching the language as part of an engineering diploma – a flagship government course – and includes a two-week work-experience placement with engineering firms in China.

And a focus on learning about the Chinese culture as well makes pupils more attractive to employers, the course designers say. They plan to pilot the diploma at Kingsford comprehensive school in Newham, east London, this September.

Since the Government signalled its intention to give every pupil the right to study a language such as Mandarin in January, a debate has raged over whether there should be a two-tier approach to studying the subject by offering an easier and more accessible paper to UK children approaching the subject for the first time.

Exam boards are against the idea, saying they have never had to do it for other languages such as French, German or even Urdu. But Dr Anthony Seldon, head of Wellington College, which is among the first independent UK schools to teach Mandarin, said the boards' refusal to consider it would imperil plans to increase take-up.

The engineering diploma gets round



Far left, a brave new world for students learning Mandarin in a language lab, and right, they will get a chance to visit China to speak the tongue in a factory

the problem by offering an easier version of the subject which concentrates on the kind of language a student would need to know to take up an engineering career in China. The diploma also includes a current-affairs unit in which the pupils will study news coverage in China to get more of an understanding of China's culture.

Jill Shepherd, founding director of Bamboo Learning, which is developing the programme, said: "If you ask business leaders 'Is Mandarin important?', what they say is 'Yes, of course but what is really important above all is to have someone who understands the culture

of the country.'" At present, Dr Shepherd is still involved in discussions with Ofqual, the exam regulatory body, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority, responsible for developing the curriculum, with a view

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JOAN DESLANDES
HEADTEACHER, KINGSFORD SCHOOL

to getting the course accredited. Now senior sources at Ed Balls's Department for Children, Schools and Families are said to support the idea.

Kingsford became the first state school in England to introduce compulsory lessons in Mandarin nearly a decade ago.

The headteacher, Joan Deslandes, said: "That more and more schools want to teach Mandarin to their students is a reflection of a growing global realisation of the need of young people to understand the language and culture of the country with the world's fastest-growing economy."

Engineering is the one diploma so far to have gained wholehearted acclaim from the academic community, with Cambridge University ready to take students who have studied it.

If the pilot is successful, Mandarin could also form a part of other diplomas on offer, such as creative and media studies and manufacturing and design.

Sir Mike Tomlinson, the former chief schools inspector who held an inquiry into exam reform, said including a language unit in diplomas could help reverse the decline in take-up of the subject at GCSE.