



Foreign athletes flex Mandarin muscles

By CHEN XIAO
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SHENZHEN — The results of the Chinese-language center's classes for foreigners speak for themselves — and do so in intelligible Chinese.

While their tones are often off for such words as “nihao” (hello), “xiexie” (thanks) and “zaijian” (goodbye), the foreign first-time learners are not at all afraid of trying their Mandarin. And they are making progress.

“I've always been interested in the language,” Canadian volleyball team therapist Luc Campbell said.

“It's my first time to China, and I just want to be able to communicate — at least a couple of sentences — with the local people.”

In about 40 minutes, Campbell went from knowing zero Chinese to grasping the basics of the four tones, the pronunciations of some words and numbers, and even a handful of characters.



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Canadian volleyball team therapist Luc Campbell is learning Chinese.

“Chinese is so different from English, so, yes, it's difficult,” Campbell said.

“But they did a good job teaching, and I had fun. So I'll definitely come again later.”

He took a page of notes during the class, which was taught by He Ke, who has years of experience teaching

Chinese at home and abroad.

“Most foreigners find Chinese pronunciation to be weird, and the same goes for the relationship between the characters and pinyin,” He said.

“So I usually start by explaining the basic rules and then teach them the tones, how to read pin-

yin and even how to write some simple characters.”

Athletes can usually get one-on-one language training, but the instruction style shifts to classroom mode when a group shows up, He said.

He and the other teachers use what they call their “secret weapon” — a palm-sized device designed to help beginners learn Chinese.

Its functions range from assisting learners grasp basic pronunciations to drilling them on daily conversations.

“Some learners who are good at the high-tech stuff can learn the language using only the machine,” He said.

“It's highly interactive and challenging. And when you start to learn a foreign language, you simply have to love the challenges.”

The center's teachers adapt their teaching styles according to different students' interests, He said.

“Some students, like Campbell, are more interested in speaking,

so we focus more on teaching him that,” He said.

“We do other activities for those who come just for fun.”

Slovakian tennis player Peter Miklusicak, for example, is more interested in characters.

“I learned how to write my name in Chinese today,” Miklusicak said, proudly showing the piece of paper on which he scrawled it.

“Uh — but can you tell me how to read it?” he asked.

Miklusicak seemed to have come for fun. And he seemed to be having it.

In addition to a teaching area, the 20-square-meter room also has spots designated for studying calligraphy and viewing tea ceremonies.

“There are more than 100 foreign friends coming to either learn Chinese or have fun every day,” the center's manager, Ma Guanghao, said.

“More importantly, by introducing the language to foreign friends, we also spread Chinese culture.”



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