

Mandarin Chinese Tone Pair Drills

These drills are intended for beginner to intermediate students of Mandarin Chinese. While the words for the drills were chosen with specific tones in mind, all words are appropriate for first year students of Chinese. None of them are “nonsense words” chosen merely for the sake of practice; they are all well worth learning. Although the primary grouping of words is tonal, words are also listed in order of difficulty, with difficulty level increasing from left to right.

Note to the Learner

These drills are designed to help students with some foundation in the tones of Mandarin Chinese. They are not designed to help absolute beginners “learn tones” on their own. Basic understanding of Chinese phonetics and tones is assumed.

Usage

Especially for beginners, the best way to practice these drills is under the tutelage of a native speaker of standard Mandarin Chinese. In this way, early formation of bad habits can be avoided. Intermediate students may be capable of performing the drills alone, but would still benefit from the guidance of a native speaker.

These drills are designed to be practiced in a series of steps, which progress naturally in level of difficulty:

1. **Individual One-Character Adjectives.** Beginners still struggling with the concept of tones should focus on this first step. The theory is that since the words are grouped by tones, through repetition students will mentally group these words together and thereby strengthen tonal recall. Also, since the words are grouped according to tone, the student need not focus on the tone mark, but instead on actual pronunciation. All words in this section are extremely simple. Students will benefit from vocal repetition of these words under a tutor’s guidance.
2. **Individual Two-Character Adjectives.** After the student can fairly consistently produce individual tones in isolation he is ready for two-character tone combinations. Two character adjectives provide useful such examples. In addition, their tonal pattern is relatively fixed. Students will benefit greatly from repetition of these fixed

tonal patterns. After the student has gained familiarity with the pronunciation of these adjectives, the two-character tonal patterns learned can easily be applied to nouns, verbs, etc. The vocabulary introduced in this section contains some relatively more advanced words.

3. **One-Character Modifiers + One-Character Adjectives.** This step gently eases the student into the most difficult aspect of speaking Mandarin Chinese: stringing tonal utterances together. The student creates meaningful adjectival phrases by combining a simple one-character modifier with a one-character adjective. This step is deceptively difficult, because although these combinations are nothing more than further two-character combinations, the tonal patterns are no longer “fixed.” In this step, the tutor should pay special attention to combinations with third-tone modifiers (很, 挺) and with 不 due to the variable natures of these characters’ tones in combinations.
4. **Two-Character Modifiers + One-Character Adjectives.** Although the total number of characters read increases to three with this step, it does not really represent a significant increase in level of difficulty. Since the final characters of the two-character modifiers are all second and fourth tone, there are no tone changes involved when making combinations.
5. **One-Character Modifiers + Two-Character Adjectives.** This step represents a significant leap in difficulty because not only must the student recall the “fixed” tonal patterns of the two-character adjectives, but he must also then make necessary alterations when combining with the modifier. Again, the tutor should pay special attention to combinations with third-tone modifiers (很, 挺) and with 不 due to the variable natures of these characters’ tones in combinations.
6. **Two-Character Modifiers + Two-Character Adjectives.** As with Step 4, the only real difficulty posed here is the increased length of the utterance.
7. **Pronoun + Modifier + Adjective.** To increase the level of difficulty and the utterance length, nouns may be added to the modifier-adjective combinations. This step not only drills students on practical utterances, but also reinforces the concept that 是 is not a necessary component of noun-adjective constructs.

NOTES:

1. There are a few possible combinations which will not be natural, such as *不不错 and *特别特别. A native speaker will be very useful in pointing out these less natural combinations.
2. Pinyin syllables are normally joined when they represent a word (e.g. *turan*, *feichang*, etc.), but are separated by spaces on these pages for easier reading.

Characters

One-Character Adjectives

Tone	Adjectives
1	新, 黑, 干, 轻, 酸
2	忙, 长, 强, 红, 油
3	好, 小, 早, 晚, 美, 冷, 短
4	大, 贵, 快, 慢, 坏, 热, 饿

Two-Character Adjectives

Tones	Adjectives	Tones	Adjectives
1, 1	伤心, 糟糕	3, 1	好吃, 好听, 紧张
1, 2	突然	3, 2	有名, 好玩, 狡猾
1, 3	危险, 辛苦	3, 3	好懂, 保守
1, 4	高兴, 方便, 安静	3, 4	好看, 可爱, 满意
1, 0	聪明, 舒服, 清楚	3, 0	暖和
2, 1	年轻, 难听, 难说	4, 1	用功, 自私
2, 2	流行, 无聊	4, 2	特别, 好奇, 热情
2, 3	难懂, 明显	4, 3	性感
2, 4	不错, 容易, 合适	4, 4	重要, 快乐
2, 0	便宜, 麻烦	4, 0	漂亮, 厉害, 客气

One-Character Modifiers

Tone	Modifiers
1	真
2	蛮, (不)*, (很)*, (挺)*
3	很, 挺
4	不, 太

* 不 (bu) becomes second tone when it precedes a fourth tone. 很 (hen) and 挺 (ting) both become second tone when they precede a third tone.

Two-Character Modifiers

Tones	Modifier	Tones	Modifier
1, 2	非常	3, 4	比较
2, 4	不太	4, 2	特别

Pronouns

Tone	Singular Pronouns	Tones	Plural Pronouns
1	他, 她, 它	1, 0	他们, 她们, 它们
3	我, 你	3, 0	我们, 你们

Pinyin

One-Character Adjectives

Tone	Adjectives
1	xin, hei, gan, qing, suan
2	mang, chang, qiang, hong, you
3	hao, xiao, zao, wan, mei, leng, duan
4	da, gui, kuai, man, huai, re, e

Two-Character Adjectives

Tones	Adjectives	Tones	Adjectives
1, 1	shang xin, zao gao	3, 1	hao chi, hao ting, jin zhang
1, 2	tu ran	3, 2	you ming, hao wan, jiao hua
1, 3	wei xian, xin ku	3, 3	hao dong, bao shou
1, 4	gao xing, fang bian, an jing	3, 4	hao kan, ke ai, man yi
1, 0	cong ming, shu fu, qing chu	3, 0	nuan huo (nuan he)
2, 1	nian qing, nan ting, nan shuo	4, 1	yong gong, zi si
2, 2	liu xing, wu liao	4, 2	te bie, hao qi, re qing
2, 3	nan dong, ming xian	4, 3	xing gan
2, 4	bu cuo, rong yi, he shi	4, 4	zhong yao, kuai le
2, 0	pian yi, ma fan	4, 0	piao liang, li hai, ke qi

One-Character Modifiers

Tone	Modifiers
1	zhen
2	man, (bu)*, (hen)*, (ting)*
3	hen, ting
4	bu, tai

* 不 (bu) becomes second tone when it precedes a fourth tone. 很 (hen) and 挺 (ting) both become second tone when they precede a third tone.

Two-Character Modifiers

Tones	Modifier	Tones	Modifier
1, 2	fei chang	3, 4	bi jiao
2, 4	bu tai	4, 2	te bie

Pronouns

Tone	Singular Pronouns	Tones	Plural Pronouns
1	ta, ta, ta	1, 0	ta men, ta men, ta men
3	wo, ni	3, 0	wo men, ni men

Rough Definitions

One-Character Adjectives

Tone	Adjectives
1	new, dark, dry, light, sour
2	busy, long, strong, red, oily
3	good, small, early, late, beautiful, cold, short
4	big, expensive, fast, slow, bad, hot, hungry

Two-Character Adjectives

Tones	Adjectives	Tones	Adjectives
1, 1	sad, a mess	3, 1	delicious, sounds good, nervous
1, 2	sudden	3, 2	famous, fun, cunning
1, 3	dangerous, hard (of work)	3, 3	easy to understand, conservative
1, 4	happy, convenient, quiet	3, 4	good-looking, cute, satisfied
1, 0	smart, comfortable, clear	3, 0	warm
2, 1	young, sounds bad, hard to say	4, 1	diligent, selfish
2, 2	popular, boring/bored	4, 2	special, curious, enthusiastic
2, 3	hard to understand, obvious	4, 3	sexy
2, 4	not bad, easy, suitable	4, 4	important, happy
2, 0	cheap, troublesome	4, 0	pretty, impressive, polite

One-Character Modifiers

Tone	Modifiers
1	really
2	pretty, (not), (very), (quite)
3	very, quite
4	not, too

Two-Character Modifiers

Tones	Modifier	Tones	Modifier
1, 2	extremely	3, 4	rather
2, 4	not so	4, 2	especially

Pronouns

Tone	Singular Pronouns	Tones	Plural Pronouns
1	he, she, it	1, 0	they, they, they
3	I, you	3, 0	we, you (all)

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