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Norton academy in San Bernardino excited to learn Mandarin

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Second-grade English instructor Renee Rosas teaches vowel sounds and syllables to her students on Monday at Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy in San Bernardino. (**Micah Escamilla** Correspondent)

SAN BERNARDINO - Two languages down, one to go.

Students at Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy are already buzzing in both English and Spanish about a program to teach Chinese culture and language - some already are throwing in a handful of Mandarin phrases.

For now, Anya Peterson, a first-grader at the school, bubbles up most when she's speaking English.

"I'm excited," she said. "The more languages I know, the more friends I can have."

Anya hopes to gain one new friend starting in November when a graduate student from Jiao Tong University in Shanghai stays at the Peterson house.

But the two visiting teachers, who will provide 30 to 45 minutes of Mandarin instruction per week, are only the first stage.

The program is scheduled to pick up in the 2012-13 school year, and is funded by a grant from the Confucius Institute, part of the Chinese Ministry of Education.

If funding continues - it must be renewed every year, Principal Jan Corea expects students to become proficient.

"When we visited China to meet with our sister school there, all the children could speak to me in English," Corea said. "Even though I'm fluent in Spanish, I felt a little ashamed, knowing that's an advantage they have over American students.

"Our goal is that our students here at Norton will have a full understanding of Chinese."

Norton is one of three schools in the Los Angeles area to receive the grants, something the institute's partners at UCLA attribute to its existing dedication to teaching foreign language.

Classes at Norton - now a K-5 charter school, with an additional grade added every year - are already taught partly in Spanish, something parents say doesn't detract from a great understanding of English and other subjects.

And, according to parent Dawn Middleton, it leads to a sense of completion in her first-grade son Jayden.

"He's great at judo and other things, and he loves them, but there's this sense of pride in him (when Jayden speaks Spanish) that I've never seen anywhere else," said Middleton, who is also president of the school's Parent Teacher Organization. "I hope that will expand as he learns Chinese, and as he opens up more cultural bridges."

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