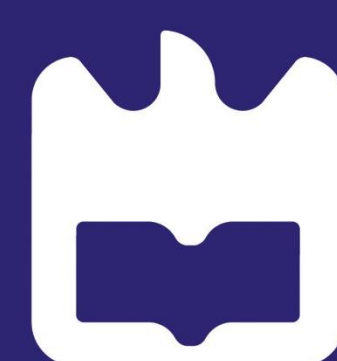




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Teaching Mandarin Chinese in Primary Schools of São João da Madeira

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese language has increasingly gained much importance around the world, and Portugal is becoming one of the countries who is investing and combining efforts to promote the language nationwide. In São João da Madeira, a very important industrial city in the North of Portugal, is continuously developing commercial and economical relations with Chinese enterprises and investors. This contact was perceived by the City Hall Mayor, Castro Almeida, as absolutely vital and essential for the near future [1]. Based on this background, a political initiative took place to promote the teaching of the mandarin language. In other words, the main objective was to implement the Chinese teaching in the primary schools of São João da Madeira, in order to have “an enormous competitive advantage for the local enterprises, that in a period of ten years, 200 or 300 locals will be able to speak the language fluently.” [2] The Department of Languages and Cultures from the University of Aveiro, specialized in mandarin teaching for many years, was invited to cooperate in this ambitious project. To emphasize the importance of this political initiative, the Secretary of State of the Basic and Secondary Education, João Grancho, officially accepted the establishment of mandarin as a curricular subject in the schools of that region. The project has started in January and has been carried out smoothly and successfully during the first semester of 2013. The predictions aim to the extension of this initiative for the forthcoming years.



Fig 1. João Grancho, Castro Almeida and journalists observing the mandarin class in February 2013. [3]

There are currently 5 mandarin teachers from the University of Aveiro going, in a weekly basis, to São João da Madeira to teach approximately 300 students of 15 different classes. With the purpose of having interactive lessons with the children, a consistent methodology of culture and language components was developed and put in to practice in each and every single lesson. Fostering the intercultural consciousness is one of the main objectives of this project. The permanent use of activities related to the Chinese culture (e.g. Brush writing, how to use the chopsticks, explanation of traditions and customs etc.) are strengthen with pragmatic and practical exercises such as, Chinese maths and the counting of numbers with just one hand from 0 to 10. Since the mandarin language is an idiom so unknown and with no close resemblance to any western language, the oral and the audition part cannot be ignored or bypassed. With 4 different tones, mandarin becomes a tonal language, in which every sound and tone can have a different meaning.

Therefore, to facilitate the understanding of the phonetic system, the oral interaction between teacher-student and student-student is regularly used. As speaking the language is much easier than writing it with the characters, the cheering songs make a huge difference when it concerns to the memorization process. Once learned, they are very rarely forgotten, and the students often use it as a last resort. There is no denial that children love games, and this is a fact that needed to be utilized and explored to catch their attention. Being so, very popular ones like Chinese Bingo and Chinese matching games, were also used to introduce all the enthusiasm and excitement necessary to learn a new language.

The project has been accompanied by not only the regional, national and international media [4] but also by the Portuguese Ministry of Education who has visited the classes twice this year.

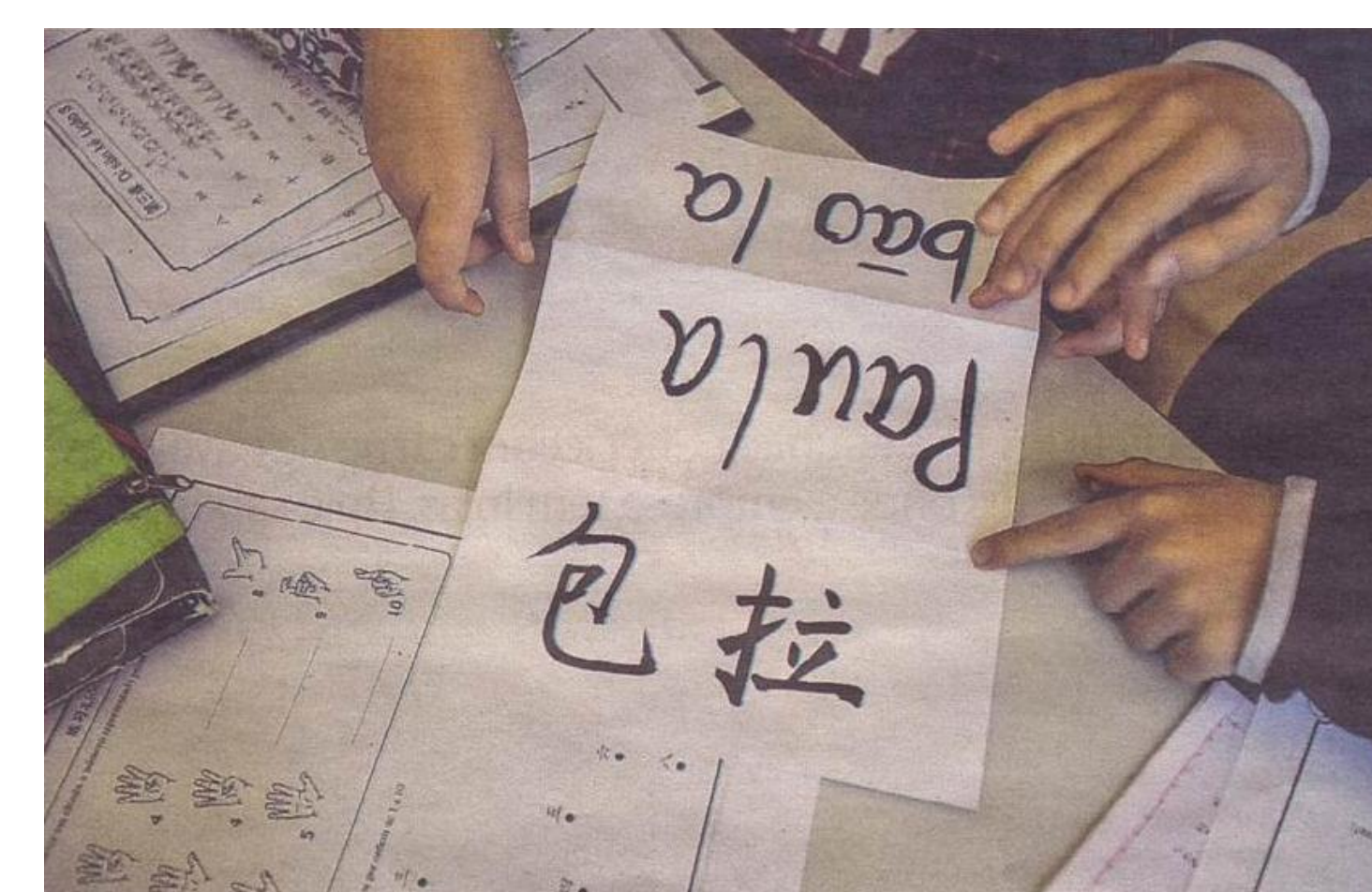


Fig 2. Card name of a student with the Chinese characters, Portuguese name and pinyin

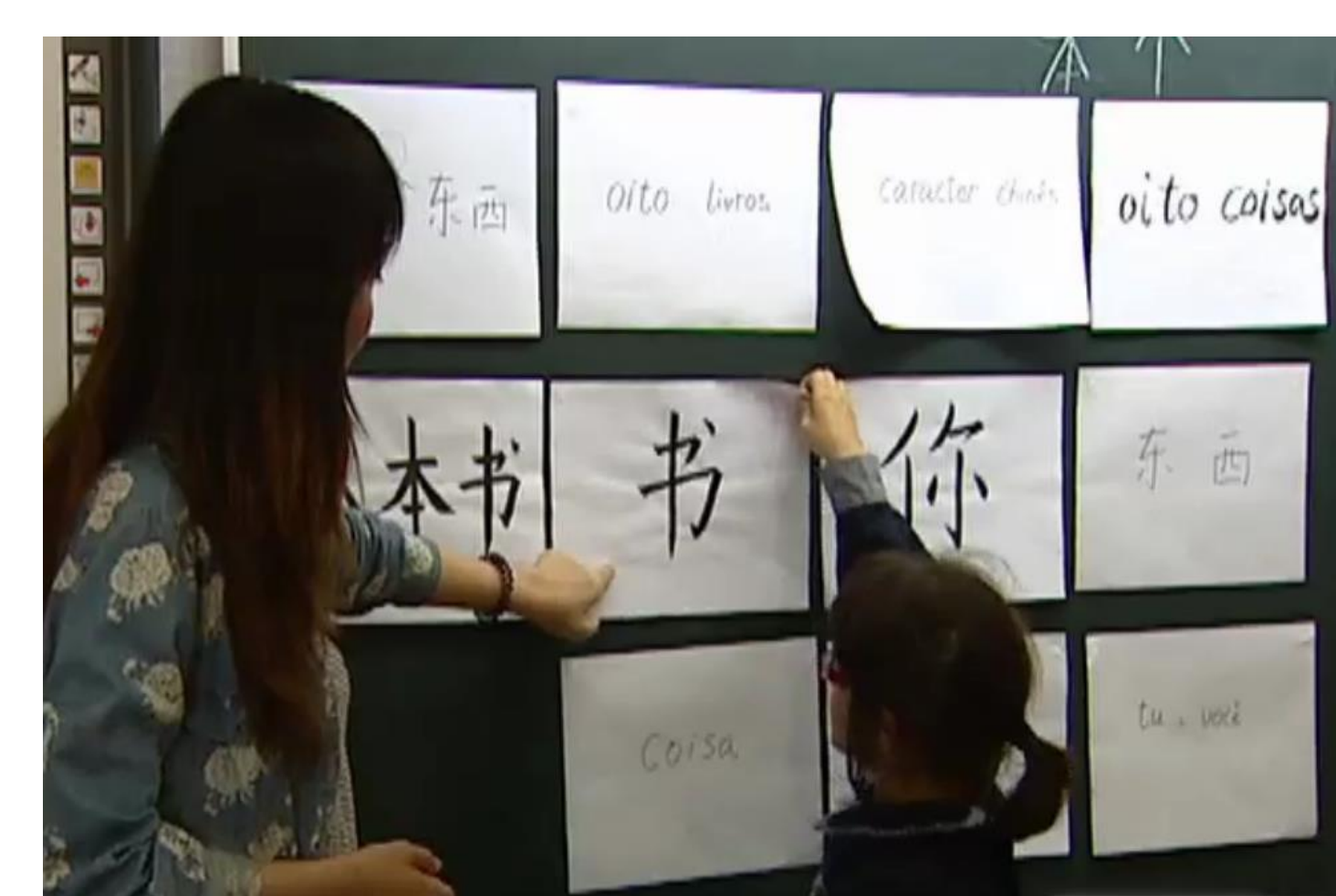


Fig 3. Students matching characters with Portuguese words

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we must praise all the institutions and individuals who have supported this project, specially the Department of Languages and Cultures (UA) for their great supervision, the Ministry of Education for all the confidence given to this pioneer project in Portugal, the City Hall of São João da Madeira for the encouragement and prearranged facilities, and obviously, all the schools and directors that strove and sacrificed for the success of this project and the learning process of their students.

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