There's learning to speak a language, and then there's capturing the essence of the words.

And no, they aren't always the same thing, according to Lang Sun. This has become increasingly apparent in Vancouver, especially in the workplace where bilingual Mandarin/English speakers find themselves struggling to interpret for colleagues—even when they are proficient at both languages.

"With translation and interpretation, you need to capture the essence of ideas. You can find a dictionary to translate word for word, but at this time electronic tools are not able to capture the essence of the ideas," says Sun, director of Asia Pacific Languages at the University of B.C. Continuing Studies.

To meet this gap, UBC Continuing Studies is starting a new Mandarin/English translation and interpretation course on Sept. 24.

The course is intended to teach two-way translation and interpretation (from Mandarin to English and vice versa) with a focus on the business environment.

With Mandarin being the second most commonly spoken language in Vancouver, it's little surprise that those who speak it often find themselves acting as the de facto interpreter at work.

But when cultural context is as important as the words themselves, it's all too easy to misinterpret—which can cost companies sales and opportunities.

Jennifer Hsu, a seasoned translator and interpreter who has worked for all three levels of government as well as high-profile companies, will teach the course at UBC.

Hsu says translation (written) and interpretation (oral) is more about the mastery of cultural references than mastery of language.

"For example, as an interpreter, it's very hard to translate jokes," she says. "Based on my experience, I remember one time when I was with a delegation visiting a very famous Canadian company designing software systems controlling satellites.

"The speaker was trying to explain how a particular radar system works. So here we had a guy in his mid-30s, a very typical North American young man who was into Star Trek. And he started off by saying, 'What we have here is a Klingon cloaking device.'"

On another occasion, Hsu recalls accompanying a Chinese delegation to the Bay, where the company speaker was proudly showing off the latest kitchen gadgets designed for the "June Cleavers in our hearts."

Hsu says these are the types of situations that catch interpreters off guard, which is why her course will have a heavy focus on cultural nuances.

Marc Dupont is among the small group of students that has signed up for the course.

The Montreal native has been learning Mandarin for 14 years and often acts as a casual interpreter for his company when dealing with Chinese business partners.

"It's exhilarating. I'm a bit of a nerd, but I get a rush when I do it because I love it," he laughs. "But it's always difficult because it's Chinese and it's tremendously difficult, but it's a lot of fun."

Dupont, who lives in Vancouver, says that without a deep understanding of the culture, it's incredibly easy to make communication errors while trying to navigate business negotiations.

"It's not only language mistakes, but cultural mistakes and the thing with Chinese — and you hear this a lot, but it's so true — you really need the cultural background," he says. "There are so many proverbs and you need the cultural history behind the proverbs to use it properly and you need a lot of cultural and historical awareness in order to interpret what your counterparts are going to say in order to know how to handle negotiations in Chinese. Let me put it this way, you can't really learn the language if you don't learn the culture at the same time."

And while the 35-year-old who works in the energy sector isn’t planning to become a full-time interpreter, he says this course will help him improve his skills.

"At the level I'm at right now where I can't take advanced Chinese, I have tutoring and I have language partners and this is the kind of class I have to take right now unless I go to China and take classes there," he says.