

Back to Your Roots

Educators and parents talk about their collective role in nurturing pre-schoolers' enthusiasm for their Mother Tongue Language.

Parents, how important is it to you that your child is bilingual?

Ren Pian: In Singapore, it is vital that children know English. But as a Chinese family, it is also important for our two sons to know the language as well as the culture and traditions. [My husband and I] speak Mandarin at home to them and leave them to pick up English at their pre-school, so both of them are strong in their Mother Tongue Language (MTL).

Adeeb: We live in modern times, but it is important that the younger generation understand their culture and customs. At home, [my wife and I] speak Malay to Nurissa and her three older siblings, so she is fluent in the language.

Chong Ren Pian
34, HOMEMAKER AND MOTHER TO SAMUEL, 6, AND DANIEL KHEW, 4 (CREATIVE O PRESCHOOLERS' BAY)

Educators, why is it important for a child to learn bilingual skills at a young age?

Xiu Rong: A child's brain is like a sponge and can soak up information very fast. When a child is exposed to more than one language, his or her cognitive development is stimulated. Learning MTL also helps a child develop a sense of belonging and identity.

Qin: Children are capable of picking up more than one language. A child who does so becomes more confident and sociable, and won't shy away from interacting with peers and adults.

The MOE Kindergartens conduct Weeks of Wonder (WoW) projects in English and all three MTLs. How do the projects enhance children's appreciation for their MTL?

Reka: Each WoW project lasts two weeks, during which the class investigates a topic that they are interested in. When children choose the topic themselves, they are more motivated to learn. There is also a lot of room for MTL interactions as children engage with their classmates, teachers and parents.

Last year, my K1 class went on an excursion to Gardens by the Bay. After some discussion, they decided to find out more about roses, which are used to make flower garlands for Indian festivals. They visited an Indian flower shop and interviewed the owner in Tamil. We read books and went on the Internet together to learn about

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// Adeeb Fadhil

how roses are grown. A parent volunteer taught the children to make rose garlands and they then went home to make roses using recycled materials with their families. Such experiential learning appeals to the children, and further enhances their appreciation for their culture and MTL.

Xiu Rong: My K2 children recently completed a project on *wushu* (a Chinese martial art) — they got curious after seeing a picture of [the sport] in a book in class. They looked up the benefits of *wushu* and watched YouTube videos of *wushu* performances. They also invited a *wushu* instructor to the centre to interview him in Mandarin, and learned some basic movements from him. This holistic experience makes the learning of MTL fun and enjoyable.

Wei Xiu Rong
42, CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHER, MOE KINDERGARTEN @ BLANGAH RISE

PHOTOS BY: EALBERT HO & HONG CHEE YAN
On Ren Pian: Dress: TEMT, Hat: Forever 21, Necklace & bangle: New Look, Flats: Marks and Spencer. On Xiu Rong: Top, necklace & bracelet: New Look, Pants: TEMT, Heels: Marks and Spencer

Clockwise from left: S Vaithiya Nathan Siva, Nurissa Syafirra Binte Muhamad Adeeb Fadhil, Loy Xing-Han and Yeo Rui Jing

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//Cai Qin

Creative O Preschoolers' Bay adopts a Whole Language Approach to teaching. What does that mean?

Qin: The key is to encourage the use of language in children's daily lives, rather than sit them down and make them memorise words or characters. Each class is assigned an English and a Chinese Language educator. All activities are built around a specific theme which changes every 10 weeks. These themes are chosen based on the children's interest.

For example, when exploring the theme of 'Bread' with the Nursery children, my co-teacher and I realised they like doughnuts. So we decided she would tell them a story about doughnuts in English, and I would build on her lesson and make the treat with the children. This provided a good opportunity to speak to them in Mandarin, and vice versa. There was no need to say to them, "This is what a doughnut looks like" or "This is how to write the word". It was all seamlessly done.

Reka Sherlin John

44, TAMIL LANGUAGE TEACHER, MOE KINDERGARTEN @ BLANGAH RISE



Do you involve parents in their children's learning of MTL?

Reka: Yes! Through family-based learning activities that are part of the MTL curriculum and take place at home, as well as parent engagement sessions every semester, we reinforce the message that all of us — teachers and parents — play an important role in making MTL a 'living language'. It's much more effective if teachers and families work together to help the children learn the language both at home and in the kindergarten. Continuity and partnership with families is important.

Qin: We organise workshops for parents and share tips with them on creating a conducive MTL learning environment at

Cai Qin
47, HEAD/CHINESE LANGUAGE, CREATIVE O PRESCHOOLERS' BAY



On Reka: Striped top, shirt & pants Marks and Spencer; Bracelet & flats Forever21. On Cai Qin: Dress TEMT; Bracelet TEMT. On Adeeb: Shirt & pants Marks and Spencer

home — by engaging children through games and simple tasks, or reading to them often. We also encourage parents to point out signs and words during family outings. This helps children engage with their surroundings and practise literacy skills. The Chinese signages in Chinatown, for example, can stimulate their interest in the Chinese language.

Parents, what do you make of the centre's efforts to promote bilingualism in children?

Adeeb: Nurissa enjoys her classes, and I believe this is because the teachers place an emphasis on nurturing children's curiosity for learning. She is already fluent in Malay but her English is much better now since joining the kindergarten.

Ren Pian: My sons are already comfortable speaking Mandarin but they are slowly catching up with English. What I like about Creative O is its balanced treatment of the English and Chinese language.

You have clearly laid a strong foundation at home for your child's MTL learning. Apart from using the language, do you have any other tips on how parents can cultivate the child's interest in learning MTL?

Ren Pian: Find something your child is interested in and do it with him or her every day; the learning process will happen naturally. Samuel and Daniel love stories, so my husband and I spend an hour every night reading both Chinese and English books to them. If you are not confident in your own language skills, buy audio books.

Adeeb: Think of fun activities to do with your child. Nurissa and I go to the library twice a month and she will borrow a Malay book for us to read together. We also watch Malay movies and TV shows together. Her favourite show is *Upin & Ipin*.

Educators, what advice do you have for teachers to facilitate children's MTL learning?

Reka: It's our duty as teachers to make the class interesting and lively. Using props and hand gestures when telling stories helps. Encouragement from the teacher helps to motivate the children.



Muhamad Adeeb Fadhil

41, DELIVERY DRIVER AND FATHER TO NURISSA SYAFIRRA, 6 (MOE KINDERGARTEN @ BLANGAH RISE)



Xiu Rong: Incorporate real-life experiences into your lessons. Don't just show children pictures of animals in books; organise a visit to the zoo. As long as children see what they learn in class is meaningful and relevant, they will continue to want to learn. Children have different starting points, so adapt your teaching practices to suit their learning needs. Instead of having a one-size-fits-all curriculum, offer small-group learning opportunities for children who need more help in their mother tongue language.

Qin: I agree. Don't be obsessed with keeping to a lesson plan. Each child is unique and learns in different ways and at a different pace. Rather than force children to stick to one language, let those who are weaker in speaking Mandarin use English and repeat in Mandarin what they said. With gentle guidance, they won't be afraid to use the language and will come to appreciate it. ♥



"I like wushu because it gives me strength."

SYAFINAH BIBI BINTE ABDUL LATIFF (HUANG JIA XIN), 6, MOE KINDERGARTEN @ BLANGAH RISE K2 CHILD WHO TOOK PART IN THE WOW WUSHU PROJECT