



# FOSTERING Bilingual Learning

**Ms Michelle Liang, Executive Principal at My First Skool at 518 Jurong West St 52, takes the lead to improve her centre's curriculum and teaching practices.**

**RECOGNISED FOR ITS** strength in fostering bilingual learning, My First Skool at 518 Jurong West St 52 is one of 52 pre-schools in Singapore to have achieved the SPARK Certification (Commendation). Introduced by the Early Childhood Development Agency this year, this new category is awarded to pre-schools with a well-designed curriculum, strong pedagogies and a conducive learning environment.

The pre-school's Executive Principal Ms Michelle Liang, 32,

says, "Being SPARK-certified since 2012 has motivated the centre to adopt better teaching practices such as purposeful play and questioning techniques. As a result, the children are eager to learn languages other than the one they speak at home."

Ms Liang advocates three main areas of focus to promote bilingualism in children. To create a conducive and unbiased learning environment, Ms Liang advises that centre leaders first need to demonstrate "a respect for diversity; and a respect for different cultures, languages and practices". At My First Skool, children are encouraged to interact with teachers and their peers in whatever language they are comfortable with. "This allows children to practise the respective languages comfortably," explains Ms Liang.

Curriculum is the second area of focus, and the centre takes pride in its "Skool Ready" and "Skool aCe" programmes.

"Skool Ready" is English-based and encourages children to discover the world using scientific process skills such as observation, classification and inference. Through a trip to the supermarket to identify healthy food items, for example, children acquire language literacy components such as listening, speaking, reading and writing when they record their experiences and have discussions with their educators.

Under "Skool aCe", the Chinese curriculum, children acquire Mandarin speaking skills through stories, board games, rhymes and poems. The centre also implements the NTUC First Campus' character-building programme, conducted in Mandarin, to inculcate values in children through day-to-day activities.

"Centre leaders also need to be able to identify and provide resources that best promote bilingualism," says Ms Liang. This could mean resources like the *Thumbs Up Little Junior* publication supported by the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism, audio books or exposing children to plays and dramas.

The third area of focus is to create ample opportunities for children to be exposed to both languages. Ms Liang says, "This includes interaction with people, materials and ideas, so children can practise communicating with others."

Ms Liang feels a sense of achievement whenever parents tell her how their children are able to switch between two languages at home. "Research shows that bilingualism enhances brain development as a child mentally switches between the different linguistic codes," she says. "This strengthens the mind's cognitive abilities in planning and solving problems — a valuable life skill that children need to acquire." ♥



Role play in the classroom is a wonderful opportunity for children to practise their languages.



Centre leaders need to identify resources that can aid children's learning.



Finalist Sarah Chua from Yuquan Preschool talking about her love for drawing.

**STAGE CONFIDENCE, CONTROLLED** delivery and a genuine understanding of the stories they have to tell — these were some of the qualities the eight finalists of the YMCA Mandarin Speaking Awards 2015 (Pre-school Category) had in abundance. As chief judge Mdm Wang Lee Jeng said, "Most of them are from English-speaking homes, so it is wonderful to hear them speak Chinese fluently and finish the presentation in a fluent manner. It gives us a positive message that learning Chinese is manageable."

The YMCA Mandarin Speaking Awards, now in its ninth year, is aimed at helping young people acquire the confidence to speak Mandarin well in public, while nurturing their interest in the language. YMCA also organises the Plain English Speaking Awards, and has plans to develop the same for the other mother tongue languages.

On the addition of the pre-school category to the awards this year, the organising committee's chairman, Mr Kenneth Tan, explained, "One of the ways to improve a language is by actually speaking it ... and generally, the consensus is [to] start young." A total of 58 entries were received, and from these, eight pre-schoolers were selected to take part in the finals.

Minutes before the pre-school finals began at the YMCA Singapore on 28 April 2015, the finalists — aged between four and six — showed no sign of stage fright or nerves. When it was their turn, each child calmly used the allotted time (two to three-and-a-half minutes) to tell their story to an audience of about 50, mostly made

up of friends, family and teachers. Most of them talked about a family member or something they love, such as cars and drawing. The three judges had a tough time selecting the winners, but five-year-old Lauren Wong from Far Eastern Kindergarten clinched the top spot with her confidence in using Mandarin. One of the judges, Mrs Sim-Tan Eng Ping, a Senior Early Childhood quality assessor with the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), commented that Lauren was "very balanced in different aspects". Mrs Sim-Tan said, "She was confident, had clear pronunciation and told an interesting story on how she communicates and relates to her grandfather — quite touching in a way."

Lauren is an example of how a child can be effectively

bilingual when exposed to English and Mandarin from a young age. "I don't really speak Mandarin at home — only with my *popo* (grandmother)," she said. First runner up Leong Yu Sing, four, also from Far Eastern Kindergarten, and second runner up Clarice Wu Ruoci, five, from Everland Childcare & Development Centre, also piped in on how they had to practise every day, at home and at school for the competition.

And their efforts have paid off. Yu Sing exclaimed, "I am happy to win! And I love to tell stories!"

Said Mrs Sim-Tan, "There are no shortcuts to learning a language. You have to use it daily. At a young age, children learn through play, their daily lives, and their conversations and interaction with people. I think that is a fun way of learning a language." ♥

## Look Who's Talking!

Pre-schoolers display their linguistic prowess at the YMCA Mandarin Speaking Awards.



The winners: (From left) Leong Yu Sing, Clarice Wu Ruoci and Lauren Wong.

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