Ms Michelle Liang, savs. "Being SPARK-certified

since 2012 has motivated the

centre to adopt better teaching

and questioning techniques. As

learn languages other than the

one they speak at home."

bilingualism in children. To

practices such as purposeful play

a result, the children are eager to

Ms Liang advocates three

create a conducive and unbiased

learning environment, Ms Liang

advises that centre leaders first

need to demonstrate "a respect

different cultures, languages and

interact with teachers and their

peers in whatever language they

are comfortable with. "This allows

children to practise the respective

for diversity; and a respect for

practices". At My First Skool,

children are encouraged to

languages comfortably,"

Curriculum is the

second area of focus.

and the centre takes

pride in its "Skool

Ready" and "Skool

aCe" programmes.

explains Ms Liang.

main areas of focus to promote

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

**ECOGNISED FOR ITS** strength in fostering bilingual learning, My First Skool at 518 Jurong West St 52 is one of 52 preschools 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,

Centre leaders resources

"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.

> Mandarin speaking skills through stories, board games, rhymes and poems. The centre also implements the NTUC First Campus' character-building programme.

values in children through day-to-day activities.

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, 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

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." 💖

Under "Skool aCe", the Chinese curriculum. children acquire

conducted in Mandarin, to inculcate

"Centre leaders also need to

audio books or exposing children

achievement whenever parents tell her how their children are able to switch between two languages at home. "Research shows that bilingualism enhances

finalist Sarah (hua from Yuquan Preschool talking about her love for drawing. up of friends, family and teachers. Most of them talked about a

family member or something they

The three judges had a tough

love, such as cars and drawing.

time selecting the winners, but

from Far Eastern Kindergarten

clinched the top spot with her

confidence in using Mandarin.

Tan Eng Ping, a Senior Early

Agency (ECDA), commented

said, "She was confident, had

interesting story on how she

communicates and relates to

in a way."

Childhood quality assessor with

that Lauren was "very balanced

clear pronunciation and told an

her grandfather - quite touching

Lauren is an example of

how a child can be effectively

in different aspects". Mrs Sim-Tan

the Early Childhood Development

One of the judges, Mrs Sim-

five-year-old Lauren Wong

TAGE 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 preschool 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 preschoolers were selected to take part in the finals.

Minutes before the preschool 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

ONE OF THE WAYS TO IMPROVE A **LANGUAGE IS BY ACTUALLY SPEAKING** IT ... AND GENERALLY. THE CONSENSUS IS [TO] START YOUNG.

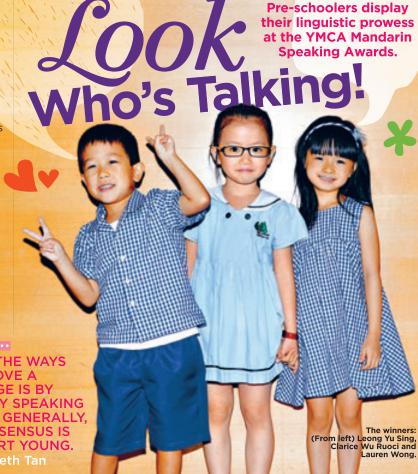
Giving KUDOS

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." 💖

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/ MARK LEE