

RESEARCH WITHIN REACH

singteach

.nie.edu.sg

THE BIG IDEA

Balancing Bilingualism

CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVES

Learning Chinese: More Than a School Subject

PEOPLE

An Immersive Experience in Bilingual Education



CONTENTS

03
Guest
Editor's Note
Dr Sun He (Sabrina)

04
The Big Idea
Balancing Bilingualism

06
Classroom
Perspectives
Learning Chinese:
More Than a
School Subject

08
In Their Own
Words

Bilingualism Education
Beyond Singapore

10
Research
in Action

Nurturing a Love
for Reading Mother
Tongue Books

13
People

An Immersive
Experience in
Bilingual Education



singteach.nie.edu.sg

We believe education research can be practical and relevant to the classroom. *SingTeach* was initiated in 2005 to bridge the gap between research and practice for you, the teacher.

Published quarterly by the Office of Education Research at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, *SingTeach* is an e-magazine dedicated to improving teaching and enhancing learning. Each article is crafted with teachers in mind.

With easy access to tried-and-tested practices that work in your classroom, *SingTeach* puts research within your reach. We hope you'll be inspired.

 Find us at
facebook.com/SingTeach





Dr Sun He (Sabrina)

*Research Scientist,
Centre for Research in Child Development,
National Institute of Education Singapore*

Today, it is common to see our students speaking and writing the English language more often than their mother tongue language (MTL), both at home and in school.

Indeed, studies have shown that there has been a substantial disparity in language use and proficiency between English and MTL since a child's preschool years. This departure from MTL is consistent with the decline of ethnic language usage in Singapore families.

What, then, does this mean for bilingual education in Singapore?

This suggests that schools and the larger society have to play a more prominent role in MTL maintenance.

In this issue of *SingTeach*, we invite teachers, researchers and educators to share interesting insights and unconventional tips on bilingual perception and instruction, as well as emphasize the importance of practice in order to achieve effective teaching and learning of MTL.

In *The Big Idea* article, we explore the concept of balanced bilingualism and why it is important for language proficiency and socio-emotional well-being.

In addition, students from NIE's Malay Language course embarked on an educational visit to Hawaii in October 2018 and they shared their experiences with us in this issue's *In Their Own Words* article.

With better learning motivation and proficiency via various activities such as shared book reading, it is my hope that our students can enjoy a harmonious bilingual education and that can be done with guidance from our trusted educators. Change may take time, but it is definitely possible in time to come.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVES



SNAPSHOT

Bilingualism: Myths Versus Facts and Top Five Benefits

CONTRIBUTION

A Journey Towards Student-centred Learning: Growth, Insights and Possibilities

BALANCING

BILINGUALISM

Cześć!

Hello!

With the prevalence of globalization, getting to know more than one language is common in many societies, but being equally proficient in both is not. NIE research scientist Dr Sun He (Sabrina) elaborates on the importance of being a harmonious bilingual for students in the 21st century.

Today, English is the lingua franca of Singapore for practical reasons—it is used to access education resources and handle business transactions. Apart from English, mother tongue languages (MTLs) are also spoken by many Singaporeans when communicating with their families, especially with those from the older generations.

“Although the utility and practice of English is strong in many societies worldwide and not only in Singapore, it is important that we encourage students to work towards being fluent in both English and MTLs,” Sabrina says.

She adds, “MTLs are as important as English as they give us our identity and allow us to pass our culture and beliefs on to future generations.”

BALANCED BILINGUALISM

The state of being equally proficient in both English and one’s MTL is known as “balanced bilingualism”.

Besides being able to communicate with people from around the world, some studies have also shown that balanced bilingualism may relate to children’s improved socio-emotional well-being and cognitive functioning.

“Language is a reflection of your mind, your school of thought and your philosophy. If children only know one language, they may lack a deeper understanding

of different cultures and their world view would thus be limited,” Sabrina says.

She adds, “But when they have access to different cultures and different languages, they would learn to understand situations from different perspectives—this strengthens their critical thinking skills and shapes their unique philosophy about life.”

Although equal proficiency in English and MTL is an ideal to strive towards, Sabrina acknowledges that in reality, children are likely to be stronger in one language than the other. Nevertheless, this gap in proficiency can be minimized if children receive sufficient language exposure and are motivated to learn both languages.

EARLY EXPOSURE AND THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

“Language learning is a gradual process—you cannot expect to master every grammatical rule in a day and become an expert in a language overnight.”

Efforts to nurture balanced bilinguals should thus begin early, particularly during the first six years of a child’s life, and there are cognitive reasons for doing so.

“When children are very young, they are able to distinguish between many different types of sounds, which facilitates language learning,” explains Sabrina. “Moreover, as children are not yet engaged

in the rigours of formal education in their early years, they would have more spare time that can be devoted to language learning.”

To maximize the early years for learning MTLs, Sabrina recommends that parents and educators provide regular opportunities for children to use the language, whether through reading, speaking or writing. Sabrina also stresses the importance of the home environment in MTL learning given the dominance of English in Singapore society, which tends to limit opportunities to use MTLs.

“If parents don’t use MTLs at home, children will not get to practise using the language and this further limits the chances they have to engage in the language,” Sabrina adds.

MTL LEARNING AT SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Besides early exposure, identifying areas of weakness and fostering motivation are also key in efforts to help children develop proficiency in MTLs.

To this end, Sabrina believes teachers would benefit from a system where they can monitor students’ learning progress in the MTL and consumption of MTL reading materials. In doing so, they can focus on specific areas in which students need guidance and devise appropriate solutions to address them.

One strategy that Sabrina recommends to teachers working with lower primary school students who lacked early exposure to MTLs is picture book reading. “The language used in these texts is easier to understand and they usually include appealing illustrations to help students follow the story,” she explains.

In addition, teachers may also encourage students to participate in programmes by the National Library Board, where children read and discuss MTL books together. Sabrina says, “Children tend to imitate their peers so if their teachers can encourage them to partake in such activities as a group, they may be more motivated to learn MTLs.”

MOTIVATION MATTERS

While the early years are important for language learning, it is not impossible for older children to learn a second language. In fact, Sabrina has witnessed success stories of adult learners becoming proficient in a new language.

So what enables older learners to master new languages? According to Sabrina, the key lies in fostering their intrinsic motivation and tying the language to one’s interests.

“During MTL lessons, for example, teachers can consider using multimedia tools and alluding to pop culture to interest students in the language. They could also engage students in discussions about topics that interests them, such as popular singers or television series,” shares Sabrina.

In doing so, children will gradually develop interest in MTLs and become more motivated to learn and use the language. “As teachers nurture students’ motivation and interest in the language, they can also incorporate learning points about language structure or introduce new vocabulary during the lesson,” Sabrina adds.

“At the end of the day, language is mainly a tool for communication but when you find a good purpose for it, you also open your mind to different ways of thinking,” Sabrina concludes. ■



About the Guest Editor

Sun He (Sabrina) is a Research Scientist with NIE’s Centre for Research in Child Development. Her research interests lie in early bilingual education for English and mother tongue languages.

nichiwa!

!

onjour!

LEARNING CHINESE!

MORE THAN A SCHOOL SUBJECT



In today's globalized world, mastering both the English language and our mother tongue would allow us to be part of the global community and stay culturally rooted. Achieving proficiency in two languages, however, comes with its own set of challenges. A primary school Chinese language teacher of 7 years tells us more.

PROFILING STUDENTS

Whenever Ms Liu Si Ting, a mother tongue language teacher at Fuhua Primary School, receives a new cohort of Primary 1 students in her Chinese class, she will conduct a quick survey to get a sense of each child's language competency.

"I would ask them what languages they speak at home and most would say that they speak a mix of Chinese and English," she says.

In reality, however, English is increasingly becoming the language of choice at home and children tend to use Chinese only when communicating with their grandparents.

"These students tend to be stronger in English than Chinese by the time they enter Primary 1," she adds.

Over the years, Si Ting also observes that there are more students from diverse backgrounds learning Chinese. "These include students who have returned to Singapore after living overseas for some time as well as those of mixed heritage, where one parent is from an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) country such as Vietnam or Myanmar, and

thus have minimal exposure to Chinese culture and language at home," she elaborates.

With varying levels of proficiency in mother tongue languages among students, one challenge that mother tongue teachers have to grapple with today is finding new and innovative ways of teaching the language to weaker students while maintaining high standards for those stronger in the language.

MAKING MOTHER TONGUE LEARNING ENJOYABLE

"Teachers today can tap on various Information and Communication Technology (ICT) channels such as 'Xue Le' (学乐) and 'OPAL', which provide resources such as interactive games, videos and assessments, to make Chinese lessons more enjoyable," she shares. In doing so, students would feel more engaged during lessons and gradually develop an interest in the language.

For Si Ting herself, she will start her lessons by telling stories using an e-book to pique her students' interest in Chinese. An e-book, she notes, creates an immersive learning environment as teachers can facilitate discussions while students can interact with the story through sound, sight and touch.



Although there is still an emphasis on writing, penmanship and pen-and-paper examinations, Si Ting notes that the mother tongue syllabus now focuses more on oral communication, listening and reading. Less weight is given to rote learning and memorization as children are encouraged to develop a continuous interest in their mother tongue.

"I always tell my students that they should enjoy learning Chinese and see the language as part of a larger culture, rather than just as an examination subject to pass," she adds.

USING ENGLISH TO TEACH CHINESE

While teachers are expected to use Chinese to conduct Chinese lessons, students with little to no proficiency in the language often struggle to follow a lesson that is conducted purely in Chinese.

"I am currently teaching a Primary 5 lower progress class, where many students' foundation in Chinese is very weak. To help them understand what is going on in class, I will speak some English so that they know the Chinese equivalent of an English word or phrase," Si Ting shares.

To help students learn the names of fruits in Chinese, for example, Si Ting would say both its English and Chinese names so that they would be able to make the connection. In addition, when testing students on their vocabulary, Si Ting would ask them to read a word aloud in Chinese and explain the meaning in English.

"The use of English is a strategy to help weaker students ease into a new language environment. When they get better at Chinese and are able to follow lessons, they would gradually become more interested and motivated to learn the language," she adds.

Conversely, for average to more advanced students, only the Chinese language is used during Chinese lessons. Adopting a more personalized approach to learning will allow students to learn at a pace suitable for them and motivate them to set realistic goals for themselves.

LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Being an advocate of holistic learning, Si Ting believes that keeping the language and culture alive outside of the classroom can also provide an alternative context to learning.

Many schools today, including Fuhua Primary School, organize various festive and cultural activities to help students to develop a better understanding of their own heritage. One of these is "Mother Tongue Fortnight", an annual event where students engage in a wide variety of activities to learn about one another's heritage and customs.

"Getting students out of their comfort zone and having them go on immersion trips to China can be beneficial too," Si Ting adds. "Within a Chinese-speaking environment, students have no choice but to speak Chinese. They will then realize the value of mastering the language," she adds.

Si Ting recounts the impact of an immersion trip on a Primary 5 boy who was struggling with Chinese. "After the immersion trip, the boy made a spirited presentation to the class about his experiences and his classmates and parents were amazed by his passion and enthusiasm," she shares. "This is one way to help students and parents see Chinese as a living language and not just a mere subject at school," she remarks.

At the end of the day, Si Ting hopes that her students, especially the weaker ones, do not give up on Chinese even as they move up the school system. "I also hope that they have more opportunities, within and beyond the classroom, to appreciate the beauty and richness of Chinese language and culture," she concludes. ■

Check out the links to "Xue Le" and "OPAL" on the online version of *SingTeach!*



About the Interviewee

Liu Si Ting is a teacher at Fuhua Primary School. She has been a Chinese language teacher for 7 years and is experienced in teaching lower primary pupils.



Bilingual Education Beyond Singapore

Bilingualism has long been the cornerstone of Singapore's education system, but knowledge of other countries' teachings on bilingualism is limited. To broaden their perspectives on bilingualism, four student teachers and their lecturers embarked on an educational visit to Hawaii in October 2018. As part of an NIE Malay Language course on Bilingual Learners and Bilingual Education, they experienced a Hawaiian language revitalization programme which examined the societal, political and historical contexts that were important to the educational issues in multilingual societies. The four student teachers reflect on their visits to the Nawahi Lab Public Charter School, the College of Hawaiian Language of the University of Hawaii at Hilo and two museums in Hawaii.

“

Through the visits, I learned the importance of community support and instilling a strong sense of cultural identity in ensuring the success of a bilingual education programme. In the Nawahi School, parents themselves learn about the Hawaiian language and culture during weekly parent-teacher meetings. This way, they have a better idea of what their children are learning in school and how they can support their children's learning from home. I learned that relaying your expectations and school happenings to parents is important in helping a child reach his or her full potential as it ensures continuity in the child's learning both at home and in school. As a future educator, I hope to foster a close partnership with parents to inculcate a shared vision of language learning and incorporate cultural themes in my lessons to cultivate a strong appreciation for the Malay language in my students.

Filzah Binte Hamzah,
NIE-NTU Teaching Scholars Programme,
Year 4

“

It was exciting to learn about a different bilingual education programme offered in Nawahi Lab Public Charter School! One interesting point to note is that the school is part of a ground-up initiative to revitalize the Hawaiian language. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to observe how their classes were conducted and interact with students who were enthusiastic to learn! An immersive environment in school and at home will help the language and culture to thrive. For example, students learned how to make *leis* (a garland in Hawaiian custom) using *ti* leaves. It was an unforgettable experience and I'll work hard to apply the learning points that I've gained from this visit when I become a teacher.

Nur Ardillah Binti Zulkifli,
NIE-NTU Teaching Scholars Programme,
Year 4



(From left to right) Filzah, Syahiratul, Raudah and Ardillah

“

The trip allowed me to further understand the connections between societal, political and historical issues and language learning. I am now inspired to find out more about different bilingual education models practiced outside of Singapore and different teaching strategies language teachers use in their classrooms. The highlight of the immersion programme was one such strategy applied in the Nawahi School: translanguaging. Although lesson materials in the Nawahi School were in English, lessons were executed in either English or Hawaiian, depending on the language skill teachers want their students to develop. For instance, a teacher might ask students to read and write in English but speak in Hawaiian. This allows for a safe learning environment in which students are able to practice both languages concurrently at ease. Although our bilingual education model differs from Nawahi's, some strategies employed are relevant to Malay Language education in Singapore, especially considering our students' profiles today. Hence, I hope to adapt them in my classrooms in future.

Raudah Binte Abdul Karim,
Teacher, St. Joseph's Institution Junior

“

The visit to Hawaii exceeded my expectations. Not only did we learn about the bilingual education system, but we also engaged in discussions on topics such as community efforts and involvement, pre-service teacher courses and publications of literature. Visiting the museums allowed me to experience the traditional sports, performing arts, costumes, food and language of the Polynesians first-hand and the exchange of views and experiences was a meaningful addition. I was impressed by the communities' strong camaraderie in preserving their unique identity and way of life while still being engaged with the wider society. I was also delighted to draw similarities between the Malay and Polynesian cultures, such as their voyaging activities and seafaring nature. Learning, especially in the fields of language, literature and character education, is no longer one-dimensional. Like the Hawaiians in Nawahi School, the emphasis on culture, identity and traditional practices drives the success of their language revitalization programme. With these takeaways, I hope to shape my future Malay Language classes into those that truly embody and empower my bilingual students.

Syahiratul Wathiqah Binte Wathrus Shurul,
NIE-NTU Teaching Scholars Programme,
Year 4

NURTURING A LOVE FOR READING MOTHER TONGUE BOOKS



Extensive reading is key to developing students' mother tongue proficiency as it exposes them to new expressions and reinforces what they have learned during lessons. An NIE Research Scientist investigated the reading habits of bilingual children and shares with us what can be done to promote reading in one's mother tongue.

"Ideally, language should not be a barrier to enjoying stories written in different languages," says Dr Sun Baoqi, a Research Scientist with NIE's Centre for Research in Child Development.

But if a child lacks proficiency in a language and thus struggles to comprehend stories written in it, would he or she even enjoy reading?

The findings of Baoqi's start-up grant study, which examined the reading habits of children in English and their respective mother tongue in one primary school, suggest language proficiency is only one of the many factors that contribute to reading enjoyment.

Understanding the Reading Habits of Bilingual Children

As part of her study, Baoqi administered a questionnaire to over 800 students from Primary 3 to Primary 5. "This is a phase where children are transiting from 'learning-to-read' (i.e., learning to read and write in a language) to 'reading-to-learn' (i.e., using language as a tool to acquire knowledge)," Baoqi explains.

The survey featured questions on students' reading frequency, reading duration and reading enjoyment in both English and mother tongue, their favourite book genres (e.g., adventure, comedy) as well as the number of English and mother tongue books they have at home. "I've also included questions on whether students find reading in English and/or mother tongue challenging and their preferred reasons for reading in English and mother tongue," shares Baoqi.

Focusing on English-Chinese and English-Malay bilingual students in her analysis of the survey results, Baoqi sought to find out the factors that either promote or discourage reading in English and mother tongue (i.e., Chinese and Malay for her study) to uncover patterns in children's reading habits.



Role of Language Proficiency

For many children in Baoqi's study, reading in English is more enjoyable than reading in their respective mother tongue. "This seems attributable to them being more proficient in English than in mother tongue," explains Baoqi.

So what is the link between one's command of a language and reading enjoyment?

According to Baoqi, decoding competence—the ability to decipher and recognize words in a language and a core element of language proficiency—in English facilitates the reading process and opens the door to reading for pleasure.

"Conversely, because many children are less proficient in mother tongue, decoding Chinese or Malay can be a challenge and they may thus not enjoy reading in those languages as much as in English," explains Baoqi.

Despite the fact that students generally prefer reading in English to mother tongue, Baoqi also notes that more Primary 5 than Primary 3 students report reading enjoyment in mother tongue across levels.

"This could be because by Primary 5, students have higher levels of proficiency in mother tongue and are stronger at decoding, thus paving the way for reading enjoyment," says Baoqi.



Suitable Reading Materials and Libraries

While reading for pleasure often hinges on possessing a reasonable level of language proficiency, a lack of proficiency in a language need not necessarily preclude reading enjoyment altogether.

In fact, children in the 'learning-to-read' phase can still experience enjoyment reading in their respective mother tongue, provided they have access to reading materials appropriate to their level of proficiency.

"When students consume reading materials suitable for their proficiency level, they are more likely to feel engaged in the reading process and this would sustain their interest in reading," says Baoqi.

Both public and school libraries stock mother tongue books that cater to different levels of language proficiency. Baoqi observes that students, however, generally prefer the mother tongue book collection at their school libraries. "This is likely because the mother tongue books at school libraries are better tailored to suit each student's level of language competency, and the relative smaller collection in school library is less intimidating for beginner readers," Baoqi explains.

Whether students visit the school or public library to access mother tongue books or not, there is no denying that libraries play an important role in shaping students' reading habits.





READING AND THE HOME

Children's reading habits in English and mother tongue boil down to language attitudes and parents play a key role in shaping their children's attitudes towards both languages.

"If parents display positive attitudes towards mother tongue and use the language actively, children would recognize the value of mother tongue in their lives and the importance of reading in the language," says Baoqi.

So what can parents do to spark their children's interest in reading in mother tongue?

Baoqi recommends that before children enter pre-school, parents should engage in share-book reading, an activity where they read storybooks aloud to their children to expose them to mother tongue and stimulate their interest in reading.

"In doing so, parents would be able to monitor how their children are progressing in learning the language and gauge their proficiency, which would better position them to source for suitable reading materials for their children," Baoqi adds.

Parents who are not proficient in mother tongue should not shy away from engaging in share-book reading. "In fact, parents can use share-book reading to set good examples for their children," shares Baoqi. "For example, upon encountering unfamiliar terms, parents could exhibit a positive response and share the victory of deciphering new words with their children, thus signaling to them that language learning is a positive experience."

Ultimately, when both the home and school environments are conducive to the learning of mother tongue, children would feel motivated to read mother tongue books and they would eventually become proficient in using the language.

Bridging English and Mother Tongue Reading Habits

If a child is already keen on reading in English and/or tends to read books from a particular genre, perhaps insights from children's reading habits in English can inform efforts to promote reading in mother tongue.

In fact, Baoqi's study reveals that children's reading enjoyment in English correlates with their mother tongue reading frequency and duration. "So a child who enjoys reading in English is likely to read longer and more frequently in mother tongue, though he or she may not necessarily experience the same level of pleasure while reading in the latter," Baoqi explains.

Furthermore, a comparison of reading habits in English and mother tongue reveals that students tend to read books of the same genre(s) across two languages. "This means that if a child loves to read a certain genre (e.g., adventure, mystery) in English, he or she is likely to pick up a mother tongue book of the same genre," shares Baoqi.

From these findings, Baoqi surmises that introducing children to mother tongue versions of their preferred English book genres could be a way to spark their interest in reading mother tongue books. Nevertheless, these books still have to be appropriate for their mother tongue proficiency level in order for them to comprehend the story, not to mention enjoy reading it.

Ultimately, reading habits can be nurtured and Baoqi hopes that children will eventually enjoy reading in mother tongue as much as they enjoy reading in English. ■



About the Interviewee

Sun Baoqi is a Research Scientist with the Centre for Research in Child Development at NIE. Her research interests lie in bilingual education and biliteracy development.

An Immersive Experience

IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION



Senior Manager of Education at Resorts World Sentosa, Mr Gavin Lee, promotes bilingualism in his line of work on a daily basis. He gives us a brief insight into his work at the resort's S.E.A. Aquarium and The Maritime Experiential Museum, and how setting the context of bilingualism is important for a learner.

The S.E.A. Aquarium—a large aquarium featuring over 1,000 species of marine life in a variety of habitats, and the The Maritime Experiential Museum—a museum featuring maritime artifacts and history, are two main attractions under Resorts World Sentosa (RWS).

Both these attractions fall under the purview of the Education team at RWS.

What kind of role does the Education team play at RWS, and how does Gavin fit the bill in heading the department?

“I was with the Ministry of Education (MOE) for a long time,” shares Gavin, who was a primary school teacher before he was posted to MOE’s Curriculum Planning and Development Department (CPDD) for a stint as part of his post-graduate scholarship.

“I gave inputs on the curriculum while I was there, and also helped with a couple of the Information Technology (IT) initiatives they were doing at the time,” he shares. Gavin then completed his Master in English Education and his last posting was at the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS).

During his time in ELIS, Gavin took up a part-time Master of Business Administration (MBA) course. Upon completion of his MBA and armed with years of education experience, Gavin joined RWS to head the Education team and has been there for more than a year and a half.

Bilingual Content for the Attractions

Gavin leads the Education team in developing programmes and activities for the S.E.A. Aquarium and The Maritime Experiential Museum.

“We develop bilingual content and activities as part of our educational initiatives. These programmes are tailored not just for schools, but corporate organizations as well,” says Gavin.

The team also develops content and activities for festive events such as Chinese New Year, Halloween and Christmas.

A large part of their work involves creating content for the galleries at both attractions that comprise visuals and facts, both scientific and observational. The content has to be developed bilingually due to a large proportion of Chinese-speaking visitors to the attractions.

Aligning the Programmes with the Curriculum

“When guests visit the aquarium, they will naturally learn about marine science and ocean conservation,” explains Gavin.

Thus, the team tries to align their content with MOE’s Science syllabus as much as possible. One example would be the topic of adaptation of animals which is part of the primary school Science curriculum.

“We then teach the students about adaptations of marine animals,” Gavin says.

When the team develops a programme, it is usually trialed internally with team members.

“Usually it’s quite successful,” remarks Gavin.

“This year, we also aligned the programmes with other syllabi such as the education and career guidance (ECG) syllabus,” he shares. During ECG learning journeys at S.E.A. Aquarium, employees from S.E.A. Aquarium talk to upper primary and secondary students about possible careers at the attraction.

The team has also started working with teachers on the subject of Elements of Business Skills, where the attractions are used as examples to teach the subject.

Collaborating on Mother Tongue Learning Journeys

“A positive trend that we see is that there is an increasing number of language teachers trying to create their own learning materials,” enthuses Gavin. “They also leverage on our attractions to design activities for their bilingual learning journeys.”

One recent example that Gavin shares is of a Tamil teacher who approached him requesting to conduct a bilingual activity at the then-newly reopened The Maritime Experiential Museum.

“The teachers came down and took photos of the exhibits in our museum which are mostly accompanied by English interpretives,” explains Gavin.

These photos were then uploaded to iPads which the students brought around the museum. When they had successfully identified the photos of artifacts, they translated the English descriptive content to Tamil.

“We see that teachers are making the effort to make mother tongue lessons more fun and interactive,” says Gavin. “Even pre-school teachers are getting onboard—they would take the time to prepare simple handouts in Chinese for the children as they walk through S.E.A. Aquarium.”



Setting the Context for Effective Learning

Gavin feels that it is useful to create an interactive and engaging environment for language learning. A scenario or context could be given to make language learning more interesting and meaningful.

“During my schooling days, it was all about memorizing Chinese idioms and phrases for the exams,” reflects Gavin. “Now, the focus is on moving towards an immersive environment of learning with more hands-on activities.”

For example, students can be asked to form sentences based on a context or scenario, such as marine animals eating plastic straws.

“Some pre-school teachers will then ask the students to create sea turtles made out of craftwork,” says Gavin. “This brings the topic alive for the students.”

However, Gavin also cautions that language teachers ought to be aware of their students’

language proficiency. “You can’t give tasks that stretch them too much or use words that are too complex and difficult for them,” he explains.

“It has to be pitched at their level,” he adds.

By knowing their students’ language ability in terms of vocabulary and their cognitive academic language proficiency, teachers will then be able to repackage their teaching in a way that their students can understand, describes Gavin.

Other than reading and writing, another word of advice Gavin has for language teachers is not to neglect the students’ listening skills. “Don’t use words in your language that the students do not understand,” Gavin shares.

Teachers should be conscious and mindful of their own language use, so that they can engage the students and at the same time, reflect on their practice. ■



About the Interviewee

Gavin Lee is Senior Manager of Education at Resorts World Sentosa (RWS). He was a primary school teacher from 2008 to 2011 at De La Salle School where he taught English, Math, Science and Social Studies. He worked at the Ministry of Education from 2012 to 2017 before joining RWS.

Copyright © 2018
SingTeach is an e-magazine by
Office of Education Research,
National Institute of Education, Singapore



www.nie.edu.sg/oer



facebook.com/nieoer



bit.do/oeryoutube



twitter.com/oer_nie



instagram.com/oer_nie