

Mother tongue • Kindergartens allocate more time in trial

To study if more exposure can build a stronger foundation for mother tongue languages (MTL), the Education Ministry (MOE) is adding an extra 30 minutes of Chinese, Malay or Tamil learning each day at two of its kindergartens in Hougang and Elias Park.

This will mean children will spend up to 1½ hours learning the

languages each day, up from the current one hour. The extra 30 minutes will increase the overall schooling hours and not be added at the expense of other subjects. The impact of the pilot will be evaluated to see if it should be expanded to more MOE kindergartens.

[SEE THE BIG STORY • A2](#)

Ms Jacinta Lee, 36, with her sons Rayson, four, and Rayler, two, at Mulberry Learning@ Fusionopolis, a Chinese-immersion pre-school which her sons attend. Children there are exposed to Chinese around seven hours a day and have weekly activities like traditional Chinese calligraphy. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH



IMPARTING IMPORTANT VALUES

We speak English at home, so we decided to put the boys in a Chinese pre-school... Our mother tongue languages are very important as they define our identity and ethnicity, and teach us values like respect for the elderly.



BUSINESSWOMAN JACINTA LEE, on why she enrolled her two sons at a Chinese-immersion pre-school in Fusionopolis a good distance away from their home in Mountbatten.

and did not want her children to go through the same experience.

“We speak English at home, so we decided to put the boys in a Chinese pre-school,” she said. “Our mother tongue languages are very important as they define our identity and ethnicity, and teach us values like respect for the elderly.”

The national census data in 2020 showed that 48.3 per cent of Singapore’s resident population aged five and above speaks English most frequently at home, up from 23 per cent in 2000.

Associate Professor Sin Joo Ee, who heads the Master of Early Childhood Education (Chinese) programme at Singapore University of Social Sciences, said it is a good move to increase the exposure to MTLs among pre-schoolers as the early years are a critical time for language development in children.

“Furthermore, it’s important to ensure that pre-school teachers have sufficient language proficiency and teaching resources, and that they use a variety of activities and teaching methods to stimulate children’s interest and enthusiasm for learning their mother tongue,” she said.

Parents can also promote children’s proficiency and interest in their mother tongue through activities such as reading, singing nursery rhymes, language games, and daily communication, she added.

Dr Sun He, senior education research scientist with National Institute of Education, said that studies have linked the total amount of language input received at school – usually measured by the length of time that children stay at school and the number of hours of language instruction per week – to the second-language vocabulary development of bilingual children.

In her own 2020 journal article involving 457 Singaporean pre-schoolers, she found that external factors such as family and pre-school environments played a more significant role than inherent child traits in fostering bilingual children’s MTL vocabulary development.

“Notably, the amount of MTL input children received at school significantly predicted their MTL vocabulary growth,” she said.

chinsf@sph.com.sg

More mother tongue language learning at two new pre-schools

MOE to study impact of kids spending extra time on mother tongue language activities

Chin Soo Fang
Senior Correspondent

A small-scale pilot will be launched at two new pre-schools by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to study the impact on young children when they have more exposure to mother tongue language (MTL) activities.

From 2025, Kindergarten 1 children attending the upcoming MOE Kindergarten @ Hougang and MOE Kindergarten @ Elias Park will have an extra 30 minutes of Chinese, Malay or Tamil learning each day.

Currently, MOE kindergarten children spend one hour on MTL activities daily. With the pilot, the daily MTL curriculum duration at the two centres will go up to 1½ hours. The extra 30 minutes will increase the overall schooling hours, rather than be implemented at the expense of other subjects, MOE said.

“The pilot aims to build

a strong MTL foundation for our children from a young age, and nurture their interest to learn MTL,” said a spokesperson for MOE in response to queries from The Sunday Times.

The ministry will evaluate the impact of the pilot to see if it should be expanded to more MOE kindergartens.

Some other pre-schools also conduct about one hour of MTL lessons daily for their students. Their operators say there is no intention at the moment to increase the curriculum.

At PAP Community Foundation’s (PCF) 354 Sparkletots centres, children in K1 and K2 (aged five to six) get an hour of formal MTL lessons daily, while those in N1 and N2 (aged three to four) have 20 to 30 minutes.

MTL educators also communicate with children in their mother tongue languages during other activities, such as during play, bath and mealtimes.

Ms Angela Yang, PCF’s director



From 2025, MOE kindergarten children at two upcoming centres will spend 1½ hours on mother tongue language activities daily. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

of professional and education development, said parents play a huge role in a child’s MTL journey. Hence, PCF has developed resources such as e-books and an upcoming Home Learning Portal online to help parents engage their children with home-learning activities, including MTL resources.

NTUC First Campus, which runs 20 Little Skool-House (LSH) cen-

tres and 158 My First Skool (MFS) centres, said its centres conduct about seven to eight hours of MTL lessons per week on average.

Ms Thian Ai Ling, MFS’ general manager, said it also offers reading and learning content through its microsite so that children can learn the languages at home, with parental support.

Some pre-school operators al-

ready offer their students significantly more exposure to Chinese.

Mulberry Learning’s 17 bilingual pre-schools typically expose children to the Chinese language around four hours a day. It also has a Chinese-immersion pre-school called Mulberry Learning@ Fusionopolis that exposes children to Chinese around seven hours a day.

Mr Peh Yi Han, chief operating officer of Global EduHub, the educational group which runs Mulberry Learning, said the Chinese-immersion pre-school, which was opened in 2020, currently has about 70 children, including non-Chinese.

Apart from learning over 3,000 Chinese words, 35 Chinese poems and 90 idioms by the age of six, these children also have weekly activities like traditional Chinese calligraphy, and learn about moral values through the Confucian principles of “Di Zi Gui”, or standards for being a good student and child.

Businesswoman Jacinta Lee, 36, enrolled her two sons – Rayson, four, and Rayler, two, at the Chinese pre-school in Fusionopolis even though she lives in Mountbatten, which is some distance away. She remembered struggling with Chinese during her school years,