

Embargoed Until After Delivery

Please Check Against Delivery

SPEECH BY MR HENG SWEE KEAT, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, AT THE LAUNCH CEREMONY OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN 2012 ON FRIDAY, 27 JULY 2012, AT 11AM AT THE MOCHTAR RIADY AUDITORIUM, SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Mr Seow Choke Meng, Chairman, Promote Mandarin Council

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

1. It is my honour to be part of this year's Speak Mandarin Campaign Launch. Today, we celebrate 33 years of promoting Mandarin in Singapore.

Learning Mandarin – motivation is key

2. There are many important reasons why we want to support Singaporeans in becoming effectively bilingual. Learning English allows us to access the perspectives and heritage of the English-speaking world, and connects us with the world of science, technology and global commerce. In our multi-racial society, English is the common language that binds us as one people. Learning Mandarin and our other Mother Tongue Languages anchors us to our Asian culture and values, gives us a complementary perspective and increasingly, connects us to the economic powerhouses of Asia. Bilingualism has been and will continue to be a cornerstone of our education system. It will benefit Singaporeans for generations to come.

For online reference
viewing only

3. However, we are also mindful that, as far as the individual is concerned, the motivation for learning any language well has to be more immediate and personal. This is especially so if it is not the language that he already uses most often with family and friends.

4. Many Singaporeans from English-speaking backgrounds have related to me how they gained mastery of Chinese. Some remember being particularly inspired by their teachers, who instilled a love for the language amongst their students with their passion. Some did it because their careers brought them into direct contact with Chinese-speaking environments and clients. They had to brush up on the language very quickly, to understand the market, build relationships and conclude business deals. And many of us did it simply for fun. I have heard of examples of people becoming much better at Chinese simply because they enjoy Mandarin pop songs and want to understand and pronounce the lyrics better when they sing karaoke!

5. For young learners, in particular, motivation makes a major difference in whether they learn the language well. This is why we at MOE focus on helping the next generation become “active learners and proficient users” of the Mother Tongue Languages, or 乐学善用. The theme for the Speak Mandarin Campaign this year, “**文华华语，多用就可以**” encapsulates this spirit very well. I am pleased to give it my full support.

Set the right foundation for ‘latent’ Mandarin speakers

6. If we set the right foundation for bilingualism amongst our young, I believe they will be well-equipped to learn and use Chinese to a good standard, even if their dominant language is English.

7. Recently, the Bicultural Taskforce has spoken about the presence of “latent Chinese users” amongst the young. I agree. I recently met a group of Singaporean university students spending a year in Beijing. They are taking lessons at Tsinghua University and working in Chinese companies at the same time. Most of them are placed as the sole foreigner in a company that otherwise only employed Chinese citizens. You might imagine that only students who had taken Higher Chinese while in Singapore or who were already very fluent users of Mandarin would even think of attempting this programme. But this was not the case. In fact, some of them related that they seldom used Mandarin when they were in Singapore. But they were game for the experience. With the foundation that they had gained in school, they were able to brush up on Mandarin after a few weeks, and settle into an all-Mandarin work

environment in Beijing quite comfortably. This is encouraging. Having planted the early seeds of bilingualism in our students, we have provided them with the latent potential to speak Mandarin and operate in a Chinese-speaking environment.

8. One such bilingual young Singaporean who unlocked his latent potential to become an accomplished and fluent Mandarin speaker is 31-year-old musician Mr Yang Ji Wei. Ji Wei was an ACS boy, and, by his own admission, never all that interested in the Chinese language. But he has always enjoyed music, and fell in love with the traditional Chinese instrument "Sheng" (笙) when he was 10. One thing led to another, and Ji Wei eventually decided to pursue his dream of becoming a professional Sheng player. With almost no working knowledge of China and a limited command of Mandarin, he boldly headed for the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing at age 21. This was quickly followed by a few months of confusion as Ji Wei sought to make sense of what his professors and classmates were saying to him.

9. When the time came for his first examination, he was required to state before a panel of examiners the piece that he would be playing. Ji Wei said, “我要玩的歌是...” The examiners were completely baffled. Only after a while did they realize that he was trying to say “我要演奏的曲子是...”.

10. Despite such early hiccups, Ji Wei persevered and graduated with flying colours. On top of his qualification as a musician, he now has a thoroughly fluent and sophisticated command of Mandarin. He recounted how, as a Singaporean who could speak both English and Mandarin well, he was able to help his Chinese classmates improve their English. At the same time, he was able to help other foreign classmates studying at the Conservatory because they found it much harder to achieve the same standard of Mandarin when they never had the foundation. Today, as a bilingual Chinese orchestra instructor in several of our schools, who can code-switch easily between Mandarin and English, Ji Wei is able to bring Chinese music to non-Chinese speaking students, including players from other races.

11. Let me now speak on how we can encourage Singaporeans to 多用华语.

Keep it fun

12. First, keep it fun. We seek to do so in our schools, and we are glad that many partners and stakeholders in the community have also chosen this approach in promoting the use of Mandarin. The “华文? 谁怕谁!” televised quiz developed in recent years by the Speak Mandarin Campaign is a good example. Another example is an engaging youth platform established by Business China. Called the CL-ing forum, which connotes that learning CL is taking action here and now, it is where students and youths from all walks of life can share encounters of their unique connections with their mother tongue.

13. We have set up the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism to focus on supporting initiatives that enhance the quality of teaching and learning of Mother Tongue Languages and English, especially for pre-schoolers. Besides developing its own initiatives, the Fund recently launched a public call for proposals. I am hopeful that such proposals will incorporate the element of fun in the teaching and learning of the mother tongue languages, including Mandarin. The setting up of the fund is an important statement of our commitment and also the importance of setting a strong foundation for our students as young as possible.

14. The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, an exciting initiative being developed by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, will also provide a good opportunity for Singaporeans to explore their Chinese heritage and enjoy Chinese cultural activities. I am confident that the Centre will also focus on creating a fun and engaging environment to help its users learn and use Mandarin through its programmes and activities.

Expose the young to Chinese-speaking environments

15. Second, expose the young to Chinese-speaking environments. The university students I mentioned earlier are beneficiaries of a one-year programme where they live, work and study in China for the entire year.

16. However, for some time now, we have been investing in opportunities to put even younger students in touch with Chinese-speaking environments. Last year alone, more than 15,000 students visited China and Taiwan for school immersion, cultural exchanges and CCA competitions. The bulk of them are from our primary and secondary schools. We will continue to support schools in making such opportunities available to our students.

17. Business China supports the effort by helping to prepare young Singaporeans before they embark on their studies or jobs in China. The E3 forum is one such initiative. E3 stands for 'excite, explore and experience', and is designed to bring students up to speed with fast changes in China's political-economic and social scenes, preparing them for studies or working life in China. In the last two years, more than 4,500 Singaporean youths, including Malay and Indian youths who have a keen interest in developments in China, have participated in more than 100 forums, seminars and study trips organised by Business China.

18. Besides creating immersion and exchange opportunities, schools have also introduced MTL Fortnights to encourage students to use MTL and learn to appreciate the heritage and culture associated with the language. These programmes have been implemented in partnership with community groups and parents.

Provide the right tools

19. Third, provide the right tools. Technology is a great leveler, and can be used to great effect in leveling up linguistic competencies.

20. One good example is the OracleLand portal for young students. It is a tool designed to help Primary 1 to 3 students improve their spoken Mandarin, and rolled out to all schools in September 2011. The online portal uses multi-media, which makes Chinese Language learning engaging and interactive. Developed in response to one of the key recommendations of the 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee to use information communication technology to enhance students'

learning of the Chinese Language, it aims to equip students with commonly-used vocabulary and sentence patterns to enhance their oral communication.

21. I am also very glad to see that this year's Speak Mandarin Campaign will be marked by the launch of iHuayu, an iPhone application. It offers working executives and businessmen a platform to learn as well as enhance their vocabulary of commonly used business terms in Mandarin. Comprising 50,000 terms, it is a convenient tool when one is in doubt of a word or is searching for a specific term and checking how the term can be used.

22. This application also provides a glossary of terms commonly used in Singapore media, as well as sample scenarios demonstrating how Mandarin is used in different social contexts, for example, business conversations. I am confident that the application will be useful to business users and encourage Singaporeans to actively practise and speak Mandarin.

Conclusion

23. Keeping Mandarin alive requires speakers of the language to constantly use it. 有一句俗语说得好，处处留心皆学问。生活中的每一个细节都有值得我们去学习的地方，而学习语言更是如此。只要我们秉着乐学善用的精神，让华语的学习充满趣味、不断创造机会让青少年活学活用华语、并且及时开发实用有效的工具，我相信我们可以做到，“华文华语，多用就可以”。

24. 谢谢！

For online reference
viewing only