



# BEING BILINGUAL

INSTILLING A LOVE FOR LANGUAGES IN CHILDREN AND HOW EDUCATORS, PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY CAN SUPPORT THEM.



Children from Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Pre-School using visual aids for Chinese character recognition.

## A Rich Environment to support MTL

There is value in focusing on MTL at an early age. Madam Shahidah Ayooob Angullia, Director of Ilham Child Care, says children are capable of so much more than we think. The key is to be consistent and to have fun. “Amazingly, children are able to learn these languages effortlessly and more importantly, apply what they learn to everyday interactions with the different people they meet,” she says.

Research shows that a language-rich environment helps a child develop and acquire a new language, so here’s what you can do to encourage your child in learning MTL.

## Infant



Studies show that infants are already creating a brain map for language sounds. This is why it is important to talk to your infant in both English and your MTL, even though he may not appear to understand.

## What you can do:

- ▶ Sing songs and read books in different languages for exposure.
- ▶ Describe your daily activities to encourage vocabulary development.
- ▶ Have conversations with your infant even if they are just gesturing or cooing.

One is never too young to develop a love for languages. What better time than in the early years, especially in the first three years of life? During this time, a child can build an estimated 1,000 trillion synapses, through the experience he encounters, according to brain research.

In Singapore, bilingualism is especially important. It is also an essential part of what makes us unique as a nation. Children who learn another language are better able to connect with people and relate to their ethnic customs and traditions. “Learning your mother tongue is about survival and knowing who we are. It is used to transmit the culture’s traditional values,” says Ms Tham Kum Fong, Principal of Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Pre-School. “It affirms the bond between parents and children, and the ties within the family. Learning their mother tongue gives our children the sense of belonging to a culture. They get to know their roots as well as increase their self-confidence and self-respect.”

To help children learn Mother Tongue Language (MTL) effectively, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed the *Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework for MTLs* to support the teaching of Chinese, Malay and Tamil Language. The NEL

Framework for MTLs supports early childhood educators in planning and implementing activities to engage children aged four to six holistically and meaningfully (see diagram). Other resources from MOE include the *NEL Educators’ Guides for Chinese, Malay and Tamil Language* and the *NEL Teaching and Learning Resources for MTLs*, which include the *NEL Big Books*. “These help children develop a strong foundation of language and literacy skills which enable them to listen and understand, speak and convey, recognise and read, as well as make marks, draw and write,” says Kum Fong.



Children of Ilham Child Care learning not just language but also about traditions and culture

# EC Landscape

## Toddler

During this period, language acquisition is very rapid, with a toddler learning on average two to three new words each day. A typical child develops language fluency by the end of this stage at around the age of three.



### What you can do:

- ▶ Use books and outings to spark a sense of curiosity about the world (and learn new words). "Parents should model speaking in both English and the MTL — this sends the message that we value both English and the MTL. To make it a living language, there must be daily conversations.
- ▶ Allocate a specific time in the day (such as dinner time) for the family to converse in their MTL. Children will then learn to switch language codes to be fluent in both languages," advises Ms Narayanasamy Pushpavalli, Principal of Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten.

## Pre-schooler

By now, a pre-schooler uses complex sentences and creates his own words, if he can't think of the right word that expresses what he wants to say. He also asks a lot of questions. Encourage this habit as it promotes language acquisition.



### What you can do:

- ▶ Encourage your child to respond to the text by making comments, predicting events and asking questions. Experts recommend using an interactive reading style at this age. When you tell your child to be quiet and listen, you are actually interfering with his development!
- ▶ Expose your child to different cultural events. "It is good to expose the child to as many forms of interactions as possible for that language, be it during play dates, or from books and educational videos etc," says Shahidah. "With constant exposure, it will be easier for the child to pick up the language and be comfortable using it. ♥"

**With constant exposure, it will be easier for the child to pick up the language and be comfortable using it.**

Madam Shahidah Ayooob Angullia



Children at Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten develop language skills through observation

## MORE TIPS ON HOW EC EDUCATORS AND FAMILIES CAN WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LOVE FOR THEIR MTL

- ▶ Provide activities and books to help families connect home activities to classroom MTL learning.
- ▶ Invite family members to share about their ethnic culture or assist in simple MTL activities in class (e.g. story-telling).
- ▶ Attend or participate in community events related to the local ethnic culture.
- ▶ Share tips with family members on how to encourage the use of MTL at home.

Check out these pre-school resources to further support your child's development in MTL and other areas.

▶ For Educators  
[www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/resources-for-pre-school-educators](http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/resources-for-pre-school-educators)

▶ For Parents  
[www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/resources-for-parents](http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/resources-for-parents)



## OVERVIEW OF NEL FRAMEWORK FOR MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGES

### VISION

Children as active learners, who enjoy using Mother Tongue Language, communicate with confidence and appreciate the local ethnic culture

### LEARNING GOALS

1. Have an interest in learning Mother Tongue Language
2. Develop foundational language and literacy skills
3. Be aware of the local ethnic culture



Children are curious, active and competent learners

### OBJECTIVE

1. Communicate
2. Culture
3. Connection

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Mother Tongue Language is a living language to children
2. Teaching Mother Language should cater to diverse learners
3. Learning of Mother Tongue Language is active and interactive, taking place in authentic settings