

BOOK BOOM



Chinese lead teacher Ni Xue Jing engaging a class of Kindergarten 1 children while reading a Chinese book on Hari Raya Aidilfitri at My First Skool in Fernvale (above). NTUC First Campus has produced 62 Chinese books depicting scenes of daily life here, while PAP Community Foundation (PCF) has published 20 mother tongue language books (top), mostly in Malay and Tamil. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI

There is growing demand for mother tongue language books with a local spin as they have settings familiar to young kids

Local picture books for young children in their mother tongue languages have surfaced in the market in recent years, with home-grown authors hoping to encourage reading beyond the English language from an early age.

The unique thing about these books is that they are set in the local context, with language and scenes familiar to pre-schoolers.

Pre-school operator NTUC First Campus (NFC) has produced 62 Chinese books since 2017, depicting scenes of daily life.

They contain pictures of local sights such as Housing Board flats, bus interchanges and markets as well as attractions like Gardens by the Bay and the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort.

Some of the books, which have been used by children across NFC's 146 My First Skool centres as part of their regular reading programme, are available at bookstores such as Popular.

Dr Connie Lum, director of NFC's mother tongue language curriculum and professional development, says prior to coming up with its own reading content, it obtained such materials from overseas such as China or Taiwan.

"But we realised that the context of some of the books are different. For example, they contain words that are not commonly used here."

NFC wanted to create resources for its pre-school children to learn and use the Chinese language in their daily lives using interactive and relevant materials, she says.

So, along with the books, 11 early childhood specialists from NFC's

child development department have written 45 Chinese songs and designed accompanying teaching aids and games.

The latest series of six books about festivals here, such as Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Deepavali, was published last December.

Earlier series include topics on numeracy, good habits and daily living, as well as one in line with NFC's anti-bias curriculum, which aims to help children appreciate different cultures and occupations.

The series of books on good habits was translated into Malay and Tamil in 2018, and NFC hopes to do the same for more books. Two more series in Chinese, on numeracy and science, are in the works.

The books have short sentences and focus on repetition to help the kids recognise words and develop confidence in reading.

"The books are rich in illustrations. This is very important for kids because we use pictures to engage them first, so they know the context of the story," says Dr Lum.

Meanwhile, the PAP Community Foundation (PCF) published 20 mother tongue language books, mostly in Malay and Tamil, last year. Another six titles will be completed this year.

Ms Angela Yang, deputy director of PCF's professional and education development, says it intentionally produced more books in these two languages as suitable books for pre-school children in both languages are rather limited.

It also wanted its teachers to have more teaching resources in Malay and Tamil. The books are

written by PCF's mother tongue language specialists and used as part of its pre-school curriculum.

There are currently no plans for the books to be sold to the public.

Says Ms Yang: "We believe that the best time to lay a strong foundation for bilingual learning is during the early years of a child's life."

"To capture the children's interest and achieve better resonance, the books include local familiar scenes, including popular icons such as the Merlion."

The titles come in cloth books for infants aged two to 18 months, hardboard books for those aged 19 months to three years old, and big books for children in nursery to Kindergarten 2 levels.

For younger children, teachers also use songs in the respective mother tongue languages with the books as music helps with language development, says Ms Yang.

The lyrics were written by PCF's language specialists, and the songs were jointly composed with Asian music and entertainment company Ocean Butterflies Music.

Book publishers have also seen more demand for locally produced books in the mother tongue languages for young children.

Mr Yeoh Cheng Poh, head of education at Marshall Cavendish Education, says sales for its flagship mother tongue pre-schooler series, Learning Chinese With Fun, jumped by nearly 50 per cent in 2020 compared with 2019. Last year, this increased by another 20 per cent.

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Tips for reading to kids

Set aside time regularly for reading in your child's mother tongue language so it becomes a habit, says Dr Connie Lum (below), director of NTUC First Campus' mother tongue language curriculum and professional development. Here are her other tips:

- At the start of the session, look at the pictures in a book first instead of diving straight into reading. Parents can ask the child questions about what he or she observes in the pictures, and if he or she recognises any scenarios, places or activities.
- Use actions and gestures while reading to make the story more engaging and lively.
- When your child tries to read, he or she might make mistakes in pronunciation. Do not correct him or her immediately, says Dr Lum, because it will affect his or her confidence in the language. Affirm his or her efforts, and repeat the lines to him or her using the correct phrasing or intonation.
- Parents can come up with activities such as simple games or art and crafts based on books they have read with their children to reinforce words learnt or introduce related vocabulary.



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