Nurturing Early Learners
A Curriculum for Kindergartens in Singapore

FRAMEWORK FOR MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGES
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Bilingualism is a cornerstone of Singapore’s education system. It offers our children an edge in an increasingly globalised and competitive economy. It affirms our cultural identity as we understand and appreciate the values, customs and traditions of our culture. In addition, recent research in cognitive science shows that bilinguals are able to think critically and multi-task.

Our children should be given opportunities to learn English and the Mother Tongue Language (MTL) in their early years. With the right support and encouragement, our children will become confident users of MTL. They will enjoy using MTL to interact with their friends, family and community and they will readily participate in the ethnic culture, growing in appreciation of its customs and traditions.

To do this, we must grow in our understanding of the teaching and learning of MTLs for early learners, keeping abreast with the changing sociolinguistic landscape of Singapore especially with more children coming from families who use mainly English at home. To this end, the NEL Framework for Mother Tongue Languages supports teachers in planning and facilitating engaging and effective MTL activities by providing a set of vision, objectives, learning goals and guiding principles. It paints the possibilities for an enriching MTL learning environment where children are engaged and enjoy learning and using their MTL.

Together, let us enable our children to develop a lifelong interest in MTL learning.

Indranee Rajah (Ms)
Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Law and
Ministry Of Education
Research indicates that the early years are a significant period for children's language development - they are able to learn a language with greater ease at a younger age. Hence, as part of our on-going efforts to improve the quality of pre-school education in Singapore, and particularly in the teaching and learning of Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs), the Ministry of Education developed the NEL Framework for Mother Tongue Languages. Extensive consultation was conducted with local and overseas language experts, teachers, early childhood trainers and an advisory group comprising practitioners and local language experts to shape the key aspects of the Framework.

The teaching and learning of the MTLs at the pre-school level must take into consideration the complex sociolinguistic environment in Singapore and be developmentally appropriate for early learners. As such, the Framework underscores the importance of laying the foundation for listening and speaking skills, introducing the local ethnic culture through MTL, and promoting the use of MTL to connect with friends, family and the community. It also introduces learning goals that children should achieve at the end of Kindergarten 2 to ensure that they enjoy learning MTL and acquire foundational knowledge, skills and dispositions to facilitate their continued learning at the primary level.

This Framework will be translated into the respective MTLs and be accompanied by an Educators' Guide for each MTL, to support teachers in translating the principles into quality classroom practices. MOE will also develop a set of teaching and learning resources for each MTL to help pre-school centres nurture and develop children's knowledge, skills and dispositions. I hope that this Framework will guide and support pre-school educators in enriching the children's learning of the MTL and in the process ignite in them a lifelong interest for their MTL.

Loke-Yeo Teck Yong (Mrs)
Director, Education Services Division
Ministry of Education
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“Singapore’s bilingual policy has served us well. Knowing Mother Tongue Language helps to centre us as an Asian society and retain our Asian roots and values, and gives our people an edge in the global economy... We must do our utmost to maintain our linguistic heritage and advantage.”

Chapter 1

Introduction

The learning of Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs) is integral to the development of children’s thinking and learning. To this end, the NEL Framework for Mother Tongue Languages, published by the Ministry of Education (MOE), guides the teaching and learning of the three official MTLs in pre-school centres for children aged four to six. The Framework articulates a broad set of vision, objectives, learning goals and guiding principles that are appropriate for the teaching and learning of all three MTLs.
Introduction

Desired Outcomes of Education


The NEL Framework lays the foundation for children to achieve the Desired Outcomes of Education and the Key Stage Outcomes of Pre-school Education. The Desired Outcomes of Education set the direction for Singapore’s education system in its aspiration for what our children can become:

- A **confident person** who has a strong sense of right and wrong, is adaptable and resilient, knows himself, is discerning in judgment, thinks independently and critically, and communicates effectively.

- A **self-directed** learner who takes responsibility for his own learning, who questions, reflects and perseveres in the pursuit of learning.

- An **active contributor** who is able to work effectively in teams, exercises initiative, takes calculated risks, is innovative and strives for excellence.

- A **concerned citizen** who is rooted to Singapore, has a strong civic consciousness, is informed, and takes an active role in bettering the lives of others around him.
Key Stage Outcomes of Pre-school Education

At the pre-school level, the Key Stage Outcomes of Pre-school Education spell out the developmental outcomes for children. They emphasise the holistic development of children, preparing them to become lifelong learners. At the end of pre-school education, children should:

- Know what is right and what is wrong
- Be willing to share and take turns with others
- Be able to relate to others
- Be curious and able to explore
- Be able to listen and speak with understanding
- Be comfortable and happy with themselves
- Have developed physical co-ordination, healthy habits, participate in and enjoy a variety of arts experiences
- Love their families, friends, teachers and school

To help children achieve the Key Stage Outcomes of Pre-school Education and the Desired Outcomes of Education, the NEL Framework for MTLs recommends ideas for teachers to consider in planning, and implementing their MTL curriculum as well as observing and assessing children's learning.
“A key element of 21st Century Competencies is communication skills. Our bilingual policy remains a cornerstone of our education system. English will continue to be a dominant working language internationally. Our Mother Tongue Languages will allow our young to remain connected to our Asian cultural values and heritage, and have an edge in an increasingly globalised world.”

Bilingual Policy in Singapore

The bilingual policy is a cornerstone of our education system. It requires all students to study the English Language (EL) and their MTL. As a result, EL has become the common language of communication across the ethnic groups. The bilingual policy also promotes the study of MTLs as it plays an important part in affirming a sense of cultural identity among Singaporeans, ensuring the transmission of values from generation to generation. From an economic perspective, the use of both EL and MTL has helped Singaporeans access information and opportunities in Asia and the West. Hence, promoting the use of EL and MTL offers both cultural and economic advantages, ensuring the survival and success of Singapore’s multi-cultural and multi-racial society.

Review of MTLs Teaching and Learning (2010)

The Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee (MTLRC) led by the Director-General of Education was formed in January 2010 to ensure that the bilingual policy remained effective and relevant. The findings of an extensive survey reported that there was a rising trend of English becoming a dominant language used in homes. It was also found that the language spoken at home had an influence on student’s attitudes towards and proficiency in MTL – fewer students from English-speaking homes liked learning MTL.

The report highlighted the need to plan MTL teaching and learning activities that would cater to students from different home language backgrounds and of different MTL proficiency levels, enabling students to learn MTL to as high a level as possible.
Research on MTLs Teaching and Learning

There are cognitive benefits in learning two languages. According to brain-based research, bilingual children have greater focus and develop their concentration skills to a greater extent than their monolingual peers (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012). Such children are able to maintain focus on a task and achieve their goals (Bialystok & Majumder, 1998). This is one of several cognitive benefits\(^1\) that would help children become more successful in school settings (Best, Miller, & Naglieri, 2011).

In addition, brain-based research increasingly shows the importance of learning MTL at a young age. According to recent research findings, children who learn both EL and MTL before the age of eight have a greater chance at acquiring both languages at a higher level than their peers who start later (Kuhl, 2011). This is also based on several factors such as family influences and support in the child’s MTL learning (Ren & Hu, 2013; Dixon, Wu, & Daraghmeh, 2012; Abu Bakar, 2005; Li & Rao, 2005), how often MTL is heard and used, and how much importance is given to the use of MTL (Dixon, Wu, & Daraghmeh, 2012).

Taking into consideration the findings from the 2010 MTLRC Report as well as recent brain-based and MTL research findings, the NEL Framework for MTLs seeks to guide the teaching and learning of MTLs, so that our children will have a strong foundation for MTL learning.

\(^{1}\)Other cognitive benefits are the ability to think critically and multi-task (Bialystok et al., 2012).
Figure 1: 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

OBJECTIVES
1. Communication
2. Culture
3. Connection

Children are curious, active and competent learners.

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

The NEL Framework for MTLs centres upon the belief that children are curious, active and competent learners of MTL. Teachers who share this belief of children are a step closer in fulfilling the vision, objectives and learning goals of the Framework. The vision of MTL teaching and learning informs the objectives. Both the objectives and guiding principles help teachers to plan their classroom teaching. As teachers use the guiding principles to teach in class, they bear in mind the learning goals so as to work towards fulfilling the vision of MTL teaching and learning.
Our Belief about Children as Learners of MTL

The understanding of who children are, what they are capable of and how they learn shapes the classroom practices of teachers. This has an impact on how effectively they scaffold and extend children’s thinking and learning. It would also enable teachers to make informed decisions to plan and facilitate meaningful learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom (MOE, 2012b, p. 26).
Children are curious, active and competent learners of Mother Tongue Language.

Curious learners

Children are curious learners who learn by exploring their environment. They observe the customs and traditions associated to the local ethnic culture and how MTL is used in conversations in different settings and in environmental print (e.g. stall signs, advertisements and pamphlets). Being curious learners, they continue to discover and learn more by interacting with people around them when they use MTL to communicate on a daily basis.

Active learners

Children are active learners who learn by doing. Children learn MTL through listening and speaking the language in a language rich environment and in authentic settings. They become familiar with MTL and the rich heritage of the local ethnic culture through participation, exploration and experimentation involving real-life experiences.

Competent learners

Children are competent learners who can learn almost anything given the right support and environment. Although they enter pre-school centres with different home language backgrounds and MTL abilities, the support from teachers and family members as well as a nurturing environment play a part in assuring children that they can confidently use MTL to interact with their family and community.

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2 Local ethnic culture is defined as the customs and traditions that are specific to each of the three Singaporean ethnic groups (i.e. Chinese, Malay and Indian).
Our Vision

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

The NEL Framework for MTLs envisions that children would become interested in learning more about MTL and use it on a daily basis. Besides knowing how to communicate in MTL, children would also be given opportunities to know the local ethnic culture.

Hence, the learning of MTL would give our children a sense of cultural identity in Singapore and enable them to relate to their family members, friends and community.

Our Objectives

To achieve the vision, the Framework outlines the following three objectives for pre-school MTL teaching and learning: Communication, Culture and Connection\(^3\).

\(^3\) These are aligned with the objectives of the 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee Report and adapted for pre-school children, keeping in mind their developmental growth.
1. Communication  
To develop children's foundational language and literacy skills in the following:
- Listen with understanding
- Speak with confidence
- Recognise print and read with assistance
- Make marks, draw symbols and write letters/characters to represent ideas

2. Culture  
To develop an awareness and nurture children's appreciation of the local ethnic culture in the following:
- Festivals, customs and traditions
- Folk tales and stories

3. Connection  
To develop and strengthen children's bond with family members, friends and community in the following:
- Actively participate in festivals, customs and traditions
- Use MTL in daily life and share about experiences in learning MTL

Learning Goals

The NEL Framework for MTLs aims to give a strong start to our children in learning MTL and to become lifelong MTL learners. To accomplish this, teachers need to provide opportunities for children to achieve these three learning goals by the end of Kindergarten 2 (K2):

Learning Goal 1:  
Have an interest in learning Mother Tongue Language

Children with an interest in learning MTL are motivated to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know about MTL with their peers and teachers' support. When children enjoy and are engaged in learning MTL, they pay greater attention to what they have to learn, developing MTL foundational language and literacy skills and becoming aware of the local ethnic culture.
Active participation in Mother Tongue Language activities*

Children actively participate in MTL activities when they feel that they are in a safe and secure environment to speak the language.

Some children may not be comfortable speaking in MTL when they are learning MTL as a second language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). However, they are able to actively participate in MTL activities by performing actions such as pointing, nodding, gesturing or shaking their heads. When children have been learning MTL for some time, they are able to give a verbal response and participate actively in MTL activities by attempting to use MTL in their responses or conversations.

*MTL activities refer to activities conducted in MTL. They could involve learning experiences to enable children to acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions related to the MTL or the use of MTL to conduct activities in other learning areas such as Aesthetics and Creative Expression or Motor Skills Development, etc.
**Enjoy Mother Tongue Language activities**

Children enjoy MTL activities and express their enjoyment in many ways. They may make up words in MTL, have an interest in a particular MTL book, retell or act out a story.

When children enjoy MTL activities, they also tell their family members about the MTL activities they enjoy or are excited to learn more about the local ethnic culture and festivals.

**Learning Goal 2:**
**Develop foundational language and literacy skills**

Children who have developed foundational language and literacy skills are able to communicate with people confidently. The Framework identifies four foundational language and literacy skills that children should have at the end of K2:
Listen with understanding
Developing children’s listening comprehension skills is the first step towards developing their reading comprehension in the later stages (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005).

When children are given opportunities to hear language being used in a variety of contexts, such as in conversations, rhymes, songs and reading of storybooks, they build their capacity to listen attentively and increase their understanding of MTL. They discover new words or phrases when they listen to the conversations around them.

Speak to convey meaning
Children develop confidence in expressing themselves when their talk is valued and they are encouraged to respond and verbalise their thoughts and ideas.

Through interaction and learning through play, children explore the use of different words and phrases in different settings such as role-playing of doctor
and patient roles in a clinic setting (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010). They are also encouraged to communicate in a variety of sentence structures from simple statements (e.g. “I want a crayon.”) to questions (e.g. “What is that?”). This develops children’s speaking skills and lays the foundation for them to understand how oral language and print complement each other. Furthermore, generating and communicating ideas through speaking supports these same competencies of writing in the later stages. Hence, developing children’s speaking skills is crucial in their later development of both reading comprehension as well as writing skills.

**Recognise words and read with assistance**

Children are encouraged to cultivate good reading habits and to explore more picture books in MTL and appropriate reading materials. Cultivating a habit of reading will help children to become lifelong learners of the language (Duncan, 2010).

When reading picture books, children are actively engaged in constructing meaning of what they have read with the aid of teachers or their peers. Children will also have the opportunity to recognise simple words and phrases presented in the picture books. Children gain confidence from being able to read a simple picture book and this motivates them to learn more about the language (Bair, 2001). In addition, they will gain an awareness of some basic features of MTL and use that knowledge to read the words or characters that they frequently encounter in their immediate environment such as the classroom, home and neighbourhood.
Make marks, draw symbols and write letters/characters to represent ideas

Children enjoy scribbling, mark-making, drawing and using symbols to convey their ideas. They explore the lines and shapes of letters or characters by drawing them in the sand or using clay to form an outline. Gradually, children develop their fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination and good posture for writing. They will also come to the understanding that these lines and shapes form letters or characters and in turn, putting letters or characters together will form words (Neuman, 1999).

Children also enjoy sharing with a willing audience, be it their teachers or friends, what they have drawn or scribbled. This encourages them to communicate in MTL and develop the understanding that drawing and scribbling can represent their ideas. Children are not expected to know the sequence of writing strokes for a character or letter if they have yet to develop their fine motor skills. Nevertheless, they can observe and gradually learn from their teachers who should be good role models in holding a pencil in the correct way and writing with the correct sequence of strokes.

Learning Goal 3:
Be aware of the local ethnic culture

The learning of MTL is closely intertwined with the customs and traditions of the culture. When children are given opportunities to learn about traditions and folktales and actively participate in culturally related activities, they become aware of certain moral values as well as various aspects of the ethnic culture such as festivals.
that are relevant to Singapore’s context. These moral values that are often depicted in culturally related stories or practices can be made relevant to the everyday life of children when children are given opportunities to retell and talk about them as well as put them into practice.

Be aware of customs and traditions
At a young age, children are aware of their cultural identity and the ethnic group that they belong to (Vandenbroeck, 2000).

Children are able to develop a positive sense of identity when they know the customs and traditions of their culture and have developed a sense of individuality and belonging to the social world. Knowing one’s customs and traditions is a step towards building a positive sense of identity. A child with a positive sense of identity develops resilience and overcomes the challenges of growing up (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). Children should actively participate in these customs and traditions through authentic and relevant settings.
**Interact with friends, family and community**

Children who are learning MTL often depend on not just their teachers but also family members, friends and trusted individuals in the community to guide them in learning the language (Rogoff, 1990).

Language learning does not take place only in the classroom but it can occur at any time and place (Hyland, 2004). Likewise, children can learn more about the local ethnic culture through their friends, family and community, especially when children are able to actively participate in the customs and traditions with them. This provides opportunities for children to share their experiences with their friends, family and community and reinforces their learning. Through such interactions, children can be fully engaged in learning MTL and experience MTL as a living language that is of relevance to their daily life.

Table 1 provides a summary of the three learning goals and key knowledge, skills and dispositions that children should acquire at the end of K2. The table also provides a list of examples of how children’s learning would look like for each learning goal. These examples are not exhaustive and teachers can add on to the list based on their observation and understanding of children’s MTL learning.
Table 1: Mother Tongue Language Learning Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Goal 1 - Have an interest in learning Mother Tongue Language</th>
<th>Children's learning can be observed, for example* when they:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key knowledge/skills/dispositions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actively participate in Mother Tongue Language activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Follow the actions in a song, play games and/or respond to stories read to them</td>
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<td>• Ask questions during Mother Tongue Language (MTL) activities</td>
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<td>• Request for help in learning during MTL activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Attempt to use new words in a conversation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Attempt to start a conversation by using common greeting phrases or asking simple questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Draw peers' or adults' attention to print/songs/games in MTL that they are aware of, or can be found in their immediate environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoy Mother Tongue Language activities</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Make eye contact while listening to stories and songs or having a conversation with others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Talk about, draw or act out stories</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Talk about learning experiences that were conducted in MTL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Recite catchy phrases of a song or rhyme, or perform the actions of the song</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Show interest in books (e.g. point and look at pictures in the book closely, comment or ask questions about the story)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Play with rhymes like producing rhyming words</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Make up words, phrases or sentences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Draw and create marks or symbols to express ideas and information through MTL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Request for folk tales and traditional childhood songs/rhymes to be read or sung more than once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Want to find out more about the local ethnic culture such as the festivals, customs, art forms and food</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The examples of children's learning and development are neither age-specific nor exhaustive. Teachers have the flexibility to provide appropriate learning opportunities based on their children's abilities, interests and developmental needs. Children can achieve these knowledge, skills and dispositions listed above when teachers provide adequate guidance and scaffold their learning.
### Learning Goal 2 - Develop foundational language and literacy skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key knowledge/skills/dispositions</th>
<th>Children’s learning can be observed, for example when they:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen with understanding</strong></td>
<td>• Make eye contact when being spoken to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understand simple messages and instructions</td>
<td>• Respond when called by name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understand the main idea in a conversation</td>
<td>• Follow one- or two-step verbal instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perform appropriate movement and actions when singing songs or reciting rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Respond to a simple message and main idea of a conversation through gesturing (e.g. nodding or pointing) and appropriate facial expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speak to convey meaning</strong></td>
<td>• Use non-verbal (i.e. posture, eye contact) cues when communicating with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Express personal needs and wants</td>
<td>• Use one- or two-word utterances with gestures to express needs and wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ask and respond to simple questions</td>
<td>• Use appropriate tone and volume when speaking (e.g. speaking in a polite manner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Share personal experiences with others</td>
<td>• Use familiar greeting phrases (e.g. “Good morning”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate in simple short conversations</td>
<td>• Name objects in the classroom and pre-school centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ask questions to learn more about their friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Make a simple introduction by giving their name and age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Share experiences (e.g. a family dinner outing, a class excursion or a favourite book/ television programme) with others in simple phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Convey simple messages to their teachers, friends and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recognise words and read with assistance</strong></td>
<td>• Recognise familiar words in the classroom, pre-school centre (e.g. words on labels and word walls) and the centre’s immediate surroundings (e.g. shops’ signboards, posters and food labels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognise familiar words</td>
<td>• Recognise their own name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have print and book awareness</td>
<td>• Handle a book in the correct way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Point to the first word on a page of a story book to indicate where the teacher should start reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The examples of children’s learning and development are neither age-specific nor exhaustive. Teachers have the flexibility to provide appropriate learning opportunities based on their children’s abilities, interests and developmental needs. Children can achieve these knowledge, skills and dispositions listed above when teachers provide adequate guidance and scaffold their learning.”

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## Learning Goal 2 - Develop foundational language and literacy skills

### Key knowledge/skills/dispositions

- Show understanding of story/rhyme

### Children’s learning can be observed, for example** when they:

- Point to words as teacher reads the story
- Respond to the story read to them with facial expressions
- Sequence some events in the story (e.g. by drawing or putting pictures in the correct sequence)
- Retell key events in a story
- Talk about their favourite character in the story (e.g. why they like the character) or favourite part of the story
- Use pictures (e.g. book illustrations, simple picture cards) as clues to talk about the meaning of simple words or phrases
- Have an awareness of some of the features of the MTL print such as:
  - The sound of each of the 12 vowels and 18 consonants in Tamil
  - The letter sounds in the Malay alphabet
  - Parts of a Chinese character that give clues about the meaning of the character

### Make marks, draw symbols and write letters/characters to represent ideas

- Show control and manipulation when holding a fat pencil/ marker
- Show proper posture and hold a fat pencil/ marker with correct pencil grip
- Show understanding that drawing and writing symbols on a page is a way to explain information about a topic

### Use a fat pencil/ marker to make scrabbles and letter/character-like forms

- Create letter/character-like forms by tracing the forms in sand and through finger painting, etc.
- Use symbols to represent ideas (e.g. draw circle for moon, triangle or rectangle for sandwich)
- Verbally explain in words or phrases the ideas or information represented by different forms of writing when asked by friends or the teacher
- Attempt to sequence the strokes in a letter/character according to what they have observed

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**Learning Goal 3 - Be aware of local ethnic culture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key knowledge/skills/dispositions</th>
<th>Children’s learning can be observed, for example when they:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Be aware of customs and traditions** | • Retell, draw or role-play traditional stories or characters  
• Express their thoughts/ideas on the moral values that the story/rhyme/proverb portrays  
• Ask questions of how festivals are celebrated; how traditional meals/desserts are prepared, etc.  
• Explore the local ethnic culture through traditional art, music and food by actively participating in culturally related activities and visiting local heritage centres  
• Share some details of how customs relevant to Singapore’s context are carried out (e.g. customs about welcoming the new year) |
| **Interact with friends, family and community** | • Use appropriate language to address and greet people  
• Talk about daily experiences that include family gatherings, meal times and outings  
• Ask simple questions to know more about their family members’ background and interests  
• Share experiences (e.g. a song learnt in a pre-school centre or a field trip) with others in simple phrases  
• Tell their family and friends about what they have learnt and like about MTL  
• Participate in activities (e.g. festival celebrations, appropriate cultural performances) organised by the community (e.g. community centres/clubs, National Library Board, National Heritage Board) that promote the local ethnic culture |

**The examples of children’s learning and development are neither age-specific nor exhaustive. Teachers have the flexibility to provide appropriate learning opportunities based on their children’s abilities, interests and developmental needs. Children can achieve the knowledge, skills and dispositions listed above when teachers provide adequate guidance and scaffold their learning.**
Guiding Principles

To fulfill the vision and achieve the objectives and learning goals of MTL, teachers can consider these three guiding principles in designing and implementing a quality MTL curriculum:

1. Mother Tongue Language is a living language to children.

When children listen to and use MTL in a variety of contexts and authentic situations, MTL becomes a living language to them as they see the relevance of MTL to their everyday routines and events.

For MTL to be a living language, MTL can be used in daily classroom activities as well as routines. It can also be used to introduce or explain a concept in a learning area. In addition, it can be used to highlight certain aspects of the local ethnic culture when, for example, children are shown how to greet an elder in a culturally appropriate manner.
2. The teaching of Mother Tongue Language should cater to diverse learners.

The survey in the 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee Report revealed that there is varied level of ability in MTL among students in mainstream schools. In the pre-school setting, one can also observe this varied level of ability in children where there are children with little knowledge of MTL as well as children who are fluent MTL speakers within the same class.

Hence, teachers need to consider the child’s home language background and language abilities when planning activities and to differentiate teaching strategies in the classroom for children of different abilities in MTL.
3. Learning of Mother Tongue Language is active and interactive, taking place in authentic settings.

The learning of MTL should be conducted in an active and interactive manner where children are able to use MTL to communicate with their peers, teachers and family members.

As they actively convey ideas, needs and wants through MTL with different people, they will receive feedback that is timely and relevant. A child’s communication with different individuals in a variety of contexts reinforces what a child has learnt or presents opportunities to discover new MTL phrases and words. Teachers can facilitate the child’s learning by being good role models of the language and providing such opportunities for children to learn and practise MTL.

Within an authentic setting, teachers need to also provide purposeful, explicit learning opportunities especially in the area of vocabulary building (for both oral communication and early reading skills such as recognising familiar words). Research has shown that a balance between providing explicit learning opportunities and opportunities that introduce language implicitly such as through purposeful play results in better language learning for children (Mauralis & Neuman, 2010).
Planning the MTL Curriculum
Planning the MTL Curriculum

MTL learning experiences can be enhanced by dedicating resources and time to plan the MTL curriculum.

When planning the MTL curriculum, consider these questions:

- What are the beliefs and teaching and learning principles of teachers?
- How can teachers plan for appropriate learning experiences?
- How can teachers facilitate children’s learning experiences?
- How do teachers know if children have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions for MTL?
Planning the MTL Curriculum

What are the beliefs and teaching and learning principles of teachers?

Having a common set of beliefs and principles of MTL teaching and learning among teachers would enable them to plan and facilitate appropriate MTL learning experiences for children. It is important to know the beliefs and principles of teachers in one’s pre-school centre. Their beliefs and principles may be shaped by their own experiences which may differ among individuals.

To determine a common set of beliefs and principles, teachers can refer to the belief, vision, objectives, learning goals and guiding principles articulated in the NEL Framework for MTLs. Within a pre-school centre, there should be opportunities to communicate and clarify this set of belief, vision and guiding principles with all teachers.
How can teachers plan for appropriate MTL learning experiences?

To plan appropriate MTL learning experiences, teachers should:

- Consider children’s interests, needs and abilities
- Determine the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children need to acquire
- Organise the learning environment

Consider children’s interests, needs and abilities

Teachers should consider children’s interests, needs and abilities when planning the MTL curriculum and activities. Tapping on children’s interests and prior knowledge would engage children and motivate them to learn MTL. Keeping in mind children’s abilities is also important when teachers plan and scaffold their learning.

As family members know their children well, they can offer valuable information about them. By exchanging information about their children’s interests, needs, abilities, daily experiences and progress, teachers can collaborate with families to help children make connections between what goes on in the pre-school centre and at home so as to enhance their learning of MTL.
Determine the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children need to acquire

Teachers can refer to the three learning goals recommended in the NEL Framework for MTLs when determining the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions for children to acquire.

When teachers plan and determine the knowledge, skills and dispositions for specific age groups, they have to consider a range of different learning experiences. Having an overview of the knowledge, skills and dispositions would help teachers scaffold children’s MTL learning and establish a coherent and connected focus of MTL teaching and learning with the other learning experiences in the pre-school centre.
Organise the learning environment

A conducive learning environment can encourage and extend children’s MTL learning.

There are three aspects to consider when organising the learning environment:
  • The physical environment
  • The interactional environment
  • The temporal environment

The physical environment

A prominent space in the pre-school centre and the classroom can be used to display a range of MTL-related materials, information and resources to arouse children’s interest.

Language games, picture books as well as digital resources that cater to children’s language learning needs can be placed within their reach. Children’s work can be featured and updated so that children can reflect upon what they have done and take pride in what they have accomplished. A possible physical arrangement of classroom space is that of learning centres. Learning centres are ideal places for children to practise and reinforce their MTL learning.
Planning the MTL Curriculum

The interactional environment

The interactional environment refers to the emotional and social aspects of the environment. Children in class are watching and listening to everything that teachers say and do. In a positive, supportive and nurturing interactional environment, children are willing to take risks, explore confidently and make decisions. Creating such an environment is important in helping children to become confident communicators of MTL.

The temporal environment

The temporal environment refers to the time and space for activities. It includes the routines and transitions between activities. MTL learning experiences for children can be extended to include these routines and transitions. When unplanned learning opportunities for MTL arise, time and space need to be made available in order for teachers to be able to respond to these unplanned learning moments.

How can teachers facilitate children’s MTL learning experiences?

Teachers need to bear in mind the guiding principles stated in the NEL Framework for MTLs (pp. 39-41). In addition, teachers also need to consider early childhood theories, approaches and practices to inform their facilitation. As such, the iTeach principles are critical considerations of a quality kindergarten curriculum. The six key principles in iTeach guide teachers to plan and design a variety of learning experiences to help children learn and develop holistically.

The six iTeach principles are:

- integrated approach to learning
- Teachers as facilitators of learning
- engaging children in learning through purposeful play
- authentic learning through quality interactions
- children as constructors of knowledge
- holistic development
Figure 2: The iTeach Principles

- Teachers as facilitators of learning
- Integrated approach to learning
- Children are curious, active and competent learners
- Engaging children in learning through purposeful play
- Holistic development
- Children as constructors of knowledge
- Authentic learning through quality interactions

How do teachers know if children have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions for MTL?

Teachers can consider focusing their observation and assessment of children’s learning in MTL in terms of the three learning goals stated in this Framework. MTL teachers can observe, document and interpret information to find out what children know, can do and understand with regard to these learning goals. This will in turn inform teachers’ future planning, as well as enable teachers to recognise and use teachable moments to build on children’s learning. This also provides credible information to share and communicate with parents about children’s progress in MTL learning.

In summary, observing and assessing children’s MTL learning is an ongoing cycle that involves the following processes:

- Collect and document information
- Interpret the information to inform planning
- Compile and organise the information
- Share information with families

Information gathered from observing and assessing children's MTL learning can help teachers plan and facilitate their activities. In addition, such information can be shared with parents, so that they can appreciate their child’s development and continue to provide support for their learning at home.

Collect and document information

Teachers can collect information on the child’s exposure to MTL at home. Singapore faces a changing language landscape with more children coming from families that speak English as the dominant language. As such, children enter the pre-school centre with varying levels of exposure to MTL at home. Teachers can find out such information about a child’s exposure to MTL from the child’s parents and family members. Knowing that a child has little exposure to MTL and support in learning MTL would require teachers to plan and develop activities that would cater to their
learning needs. This would also apply to children who have received much exposure and support in learning MTL where teachers can plan and develop activities that would extend their learning.

During activities and through continued conversations with the child’s parents, teachers can collect information about children’s MTL learning. Teachers should use several ways to provide evidence of children’s progress in MTL learning. Examples of how teachers can collect evidence are through:

**Taking photographs/ video-recordings of children at work**

Photographs and video-recordings help to capture a specific literacy behaviour in a variety of contexts. Whether it is about enjoying a big book reading during circle time, exploring the centre’s surroundings or engaging in functional role-play in the dramatic corner, photographs and video-recordings should reflect a date and be accompanied by explanatory notes. In addition, teachers can review the video-recordings and observe the social interactions among children, taking note of their listening and speaking skills as well as their ability to engage in conversation.
Collecting children’s work samples
Teachers can collect work samples that show the child’s acquisition or progress in acquiring a specific knowledge or skill.

Samples of children’s work that teachers can collect are those that demonstrate children’s MTL knowledge in completing an authentic, real-world literacy task. These could include birthday cards and posters with simple letters/characters. A work sample would need to be accompanied by the teacher’s anecdotal writing that provides the context for the work done. The note should be dated and highlight the knowledge or skill that the child has acquired or is in the process of acquiring.
Gathering feedback from children on their learning
Getting children to reflect on and share what they have learnt about themselves and of their peers provides teachers with another perspective on children’s learning and development. When children have an opportunity to recount their learning during an activity by viewing a photograph or a video clip, teachers can understand the child’s motivations and rationale for certain responses and behaviours. Such information can guide teachers in their future planning of activities.

Using a checklist to track children’s development
A checklist serves as an observational tool that specifically indicates what behaviours to observe. It is a convenient means to keep a record of children’s development. Through a checklist, teachers can learn whether children consistently demonstrate a certain skill or are only able to do so on a particular day. They also learn what are the activities and materials that provide opportunities for children to demonstrate a certain skill or knowledge. Hence, checklists can be used over the year. They are not used in isolation and should be accompanied with photographs, work samples and anecdotal writing. Doing so would enable teachers to get a better understanding of children’s MTL learning.
Interpret the information to inform planning

To form an objective interpretation of children’s overall MTL progress, teachers may ask themselves the following questions:

- Is there sufficient information about the child’s learning and development in the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions for MTL?
- Are these patterns of development and not isolated instances of achievement?
- Does the child need guidance from his/her teachers, friends or family members or can he/she independently demonstrate a skill or knowledge?
- Have children’s developmental characteristics been taken into account?
- How does the child’s prior experiences in MTL and language learning influence his/her MTL learning and development?
- Is there evidence from multiple sources (i.e. the child, his/her peers, families, other professionals and the child’s work) to make an informed decision about the child?
- What are the follow-up actions required to develop a specific knowledge, skill or disposition?

Compile and organise the information

Teachers will need to compile and organise the information collected (e.g. through the use of portfolios) to reflect the children’s development and learning. A portfolio is not a folder to file children’s activity sheets and work samples; it is a systematic and organised collection of evidence used by the teacher, child or parent to monitor the child’s learning and development.

A child’s portfolio may contain the following items:

- Letter to the parent detailing the purpose of the portfolio
- Child’s particulars
- Observation notes, photographs and video clips
- Selected work samples
- Summary report of child’s progress
- Teacher’s plans for the child
- Parent-teacher meeting notes
Portfolios can be shared online (e.g. through websites, photograph-sharing platforms and blogs) for parents to access.

**Share information with families**

Children benefit when teachers and families share information regularly. To help families support children’s learning at home, it is important for teachers to keep families informed of the learning that takes place in the pre-school centre. By showing parents samples of the child’s work, photographs and video clips accompanied with explanatory notes, parents are able to see what is going on in the classroom with their child. In addition, teachers can suggest ways that parents could work with their child at home that would help to reinforce the child’s MTL learning in the classroom.

For more information about observation and assessment of children’s learning, teachers can refer to the “Nurturing early learners: A curriculum framework for kindergartens in Singapore” (MOE, 2012b) on pages 55-58.
Developing a Vibrant MTL Learning Community
Chapter 4

Developing a Vibrant MTL Learning Community

To sustain the positive outcomes of the MTL curriculum in the long run, pre-school centres can establish a vibrant MTL learning environment. This environment promotes the use of MTL and its importance within the pre-school centre and the community. Such an environment would also enable pre-school centres to have easier access to best teaching and learning practices as well as resources that they would not have been aware of at first. Establishing a vibrant MTL learning community takes time but when it is accomplished, it can invigorate the teaching and learning of MTL in the long run.
Developing a Vibrant MTL Learning Community

To create a vibrant MTL learning community, teachers can:

- Develop a professional learning community
- Engage family members and the community

Develop a professional learning community

MTL teachers need to continually learn and extend their professional knowledge, so that they can stay relevant in our fast-changing world and keep abreast with new educational trends. Their professional learning takes place on an ongoing basis as teachers are reflective practitioners (as stated in the NEL Framework, MOE, 2012b, pp. 59-61). They reflect on their teaching practices to further enhance children’s MTL learning experiences.

Professional learning can come in many different forms. In addition to attending workshops and conferences, professional learning can take the form of professional sharings, work attachments, peer observations and mentoring. Such a professional
learning culture can be established within a pre-school centre and across pre-school centres. The use of information communication technology (ICT) platforms can be a way to foster such a learning culture and community amongst teachers given the constraints on time and space that teachers face.

In addition, teachers can tap upon individuals in the community who are keen to develop MTL teaching and learning resources for children. Teachers are able to work collaboratively with these individuals to produce MTL teaching and learning resources that would be developmentally appropriate for children and cater to their centre’s children’s learning needs. Sharing on the use of such teaching and learning resources among MTL teachers could also be a form of professional development that would engage MTL teachers in enhancing their teaching practices.

**Engage family members and the community**

Family members have the strongest influence on children’s MTL acquisition in the early years.
Developing a Vibrant MTL Learning Community

Family members provide children with their first social relationships, models for behaviours and roles, and a set of values and beliefs. They are also a child’s language resources and meaning-makers. Family members are the essential link to their child’s language development (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2011; Chu & Wu, 2010). Their attitudes, goals and behaviour influence the child’s initial language development and the extent to which the child values the learning of MTL.

There is much evidence (Crosnoe, 2010) to show that parental involvement can promote children’s learning and achievement. Parents who are involved in their child’s language learning create a language learning environment at home by providing books and other learning materials such as language games or music compact discs (CDs). They participate with their children in community events related to language learning (e.g. story-reading at the public library). They are also interested to know what their children have learnt, support their child at home with language learning activities, and participate in activities organised by the pre-school centre (e.g. festivals and cultural events). Such involvement helps children understand that their parents value their learning of the language.

Building a good relationship with the community also has its advantages. The festivals celebrated by other pre-school centres and primary schools are opportunities that pre-school centres can use to engage children in learning MTL. Children benefit from the interactions between them and their elders or older peers. Other cultural events and resources can also be found at museums such as the National Museum of Singapore and the Asian Civilisations Museum. All of these are valuable platforms and opportunities to extend children’s learning of the local ethnic culture. They help children see the relevance of MTL in their lives and enable them to connect with their community.
There are several ways that pre-school centres can engage families and the community:

- Offer family members information on how to select appropriate books and learning resources in MTL
- Provide activities and books to help families connect home activities to classroom MTL learning
- Invite family members to share on 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
Conclusion

With adequate support and encouragement, children are able to learn MTL and use it with confidence. The pre-school years are crucial in developing children’s curiosity and sense of wonder towards MTL and the local ethnic culture. Teachers play a vital role in providing the opportunities that would actively engage children in learning MTL.

The NEL Framework for MTLs is designed to guide MTL teaching and learning through the articulation of a broad set of vision, objectives, learning goals and guiding principles that are appropriate in the context of children growing up in Singapore. This in turn will enable teachers to create nurturing learning environments to appropriately support children’s acquisition of MTL. It is a resource for reflecting on one’s MTL curriculum and the role of MTL teachers. The NEL Framework for MTLs invites pre-school MTL teachers to think about and customise their curriculum, so that children will become confident users of MTL who appreciate the local ethnic culture.


Full report:


