

Published: Sunday August 3, 2014 MYT 12:00:00 AM

Updated: Sunday August 3, 2014 MYT 9:51:08 AM

Learning language and culture

BY JEANNETTE GOON



Courses provided at The Language Tree are designed for those who want to learn Chinese as a second language and thus are not limited to only Chinese students.

Email [Share](#) 0 Facebook 2 [Tweet](#) 2

FOR most of us, learning the Chinese language as children was torture.

Long hours of writing multiple copies of a single character, forcing one's tongue to shape unfamiliar sounds and getting punished when unable to perform. This is the stereotype of Chinese language classes.

The founders of The Language Tree, however, believe that learning a language should be fun. The centre focuses on teaching Mandarin as a second language

and one of its founders, Luisa Lim, emphasises that it is not a tuition centre for those who go to Chinese vernacular schools.

The centre provides a variety of courses for a wide range of age groups – from toddlers to working adults to retirees.

These even include an interactive audio-visual course that utilises popular Chinese cartoon and sitcom series for learning.

“If you learn the fun way, it’s easy,” Lim says. Not a native Chinese-speaker, Lim has also taken the course along with the students at the centre.



Lim: At interviews, if you are able to speak Mandarin, the interviewer’s ears immediately perk up.

Her co-founder Raymond Chan says that the courses provided at the centre are not exam-focused, but communication-based, explaining that their adult students do not have to write the Chinese characters. Instead, they can type their assignments out.

Chan and Lim’s reasons for setting up the centre were pragmatic. Both were expatriates working at banks in Hong Kong and, never having studied the Chinese language, did not know how to speak it.

“We saw that we were missing out on opportunities,” says Chan.

He adds that it is important to know the Chinese language, especially because the economy in China is so large and continues to grow at a fast rate.

“It’s important to learn the language if you want to capture that market,” he says, adding that there are differences in culture, even between native Chinese and Malaysian Chinese.

Lim says that knowing Mandarin, as well as understanding Chinese culture, also gives one an edge when job-seeking.

“At interviews, if you are able to speak Mandarin, the interviewer’s ears immediately perk up,” she says.

At first, the partners got themselves a teacher who gave private tuition at homes.

“But we were getting nowhere so we went to China to learn,” says Chan.

While they were there, they realised that the programme – which taught Chinese as a second language, rather than a first – was very effective. Thus, they decided to bring parts of it back to Malaysia.

“The syllabus is from China but we cherry-picked the best parts to utilise here,” says Chan, who shares that the centre’s head teachers are from China, and specialise in teaching Mandarin as a second language.

He stresses the fact that all the programmes at the centre teach “putonghua”, which is a standardised version of Chinese (Mandarin) and is the official language of the People’s Republic of China.

“When we interview teachers, we first assess their ability to speak, as well as their teaching ability,” said Lim, adding that there are a few rounds of assessments before the teachers are hired.

“There has to be quality control,” she says.