

**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN,
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER &
COORDINATING MINISTER FOR NATIONAL SECURITY,
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF
THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN 2016
2.30PM, SATURDAY, 9 JULY 2016
AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE**

[Speech will be delivered in Mandarin.]

Chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council

Mr Seow Choke Meng

Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon.

The slogan for the Speak Mandarin Campaign is “Mandarin Gets Better With Use”. Officiating the launch of this year’s campaign has given me another opportunity to use my Mandarin. Let me share my own experience of learning the Chinese language.

In the 1960s when I went to school, I studied English, Malay and Chinese in Primary 1 and Primary 2. When I was in Primary 3, Singapore became part of Malaysia. When we were asked to choose the second language to learn, my parents decided that I should learn Malay.

However, they also appreciated the importance of learning Chinese. So they arranged for my cousin to teach me Chinese until I was in secondary school. These were informal lessons, which I did not take very seriously. So I only had a very basic foundation in Chinese.

After that, I did not often use Chinese. When I went into politics more than twenty years ago. I decided to put in effort to improve my Chinese. It helped that I had some foundation, even though not a very solid one. This allowed me to pick up the language again more easily, with the help of my teachers.

Also, my skin was thick enough that I was prepared to try conversing in Mandarin, even though I would make mistakes frequently. The people around me were kind enough to correct my mistakes, and that helped me to improve over the years.

Our language environment in Singapore is quite complex. We have four official languages. Older Singaporeans are generally more comfortable in their mother tongue, and older Chinese are used to speaking dialects.

Even though a larger proportion of households are now using English as the main language at home, most young parents today have some foundation in two languages, and are better equipped linguistically to help their children learn and use Mandarin. Building a foundation in the language from young is important because it will allow you to build up proficiency to the level that you choose, later in life. Whether you use it in casual conversation, speaking to older people, or if you work business in China and the Chinese-speaking region, it is much easier to build on the existing foundation to improve your language ability.

(In English) For those of us who are less comfortable using the Chinese language, I would encourage the following approach: Build a basic foundation when young, as this allows you to build up proficiency later on in life more easily. In line with the slogan for the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the more you use Mandarin, the better you get. So don't be shy, keep trying, and as my experience has shown, you will get better. While I may not have reached the stage of “华文华语多用就可以” (Mandarin Gets Better with Use), I would certainly say “多用才可以” (one can only get better with practice)!

Thank you very much.