

Having Problems Learning Chinese?

Ask Ms Zhou!

A Q&A with Ms Zhou Jing, Principal Tutor, Essence Education Centre

Q1:

My son is in P5 this year. His Chinese exam results have been getting poorer since P3. As he was doing fine in P1 and P2, I am baffled on why he is not doing as well now. He has been attending individual, home tuition classes since P4 but with no great improvement in results. Recently, he even failed his Chinese SA1 - the first time this has ever happened! I want to help him so badly. What should I do to help my son?



A: Over the years, many parents have requested my help with their children's Chinese learning. I can understand a parent's frustration upon learning of your child's disappointing exam results, especially after investing so much time and effort in education. First of all, a child having poorer grades after promotion to a higher education level is a normal phenomenon. This is attributed to the greater degree of difficulty at higher stages of the primary school syllabus. It is especially evident in promotions from P2 to P3 and from P4 to P5. Quoting an old Chinese saying: “对症下药” (which means to prescribe the right medicine for an illness), appropriate steps have to be taken once diagnosis is made. First, identify the area of study your child is weak in. With the help of the school, find out the assessment criteria and mark distribution of the Chinese exams.

Components	Mark	%
Composition [Known as 'Paper One'] Choose from Title-based Compo (命题作文) & Picture-based Compo (看图作文)	40	20%
Language Application & Comprehension [Known as 'Paper Two']	90	45%
Section A: Language Application, Cloze Passage, Comprehension I – All MCQs	-46	-23%
Section B: Dialogue Completion, Comprehension II	-44	-22%
Oral	50	25%
Section A: Passage Reading	-20	-10%
Section B: Picture Description	-20	-10%
Section C: Conversation	-10	-5%
Listening 5 passages 10 MCQs	20	10%
Total	200	100%

Let's take the following PSLE Chinese exam as an example. It has a total score of 200, which comprises four components as the table shows below:

The first thing you should do right now is to take out your child's SA1 paper and find out how much your child has scored for each component, so that you can identify his weakest area of study. This information should be shared with your Chinese language tutor in order to have emphasis placed on improvements in these areas.



Now we are ready to identify the root cause of your child's difficulty in learning Chinese. Every child is unique, and therefore personal learning styles also differ. The difficulties one child faces in learning Chinese no doubt differs from the next child. Weakness in vocabulary, fickle memory, aversion to essay writing and reliance on the English language (for sentence constructions) are some of the common difficulties that I have seen in children. Discuss with your child these identified difficulties and build up his or her confidence with kind words and encouragement.

Finally, look for professional tutors who can assist in your child's learning process. Be mindful of the areas of study that your child needs to improve in, and use these areas as part of your search criteria for a suitable tutor and tuition programme. Though professional tutors are able to provide children with the right level of guidance and supervision, parents have the most important roles in facilitating their child's learning.



A : Many parents think the best way they can help their children learn Chinese is to send them for a variety of tuition enrichment programmes. Despite spending substantially on such programmes, results are usually not forthcoming.

The reason lies in failing to address the root cause of the learning problem. Therefore, ask yourself these questions before signing up for the next enrichment programme:

- (a) What are the key areas of improvement for my child?
- (b) What aspects of a particular enrichment programme can address my child's identified areas of improvement?
- (c) What additional motivational activities can be conducted at home to complement the weekly tuition lessons?

If you are not sure of the answers to any of these questions, talk to the programme consultants or tutors regarding these concerns, prior to signing up.

If you have successfully identified your child's weakest areas, be it Comprehension, Composition or Oral, you may find that your child's main problem is the lack of a suitable learning environment that can nurture his interest in learning Chinese. In this case, the main criteria for an enrichment programme should be:

- (a) The tuition programme must cater to your son's needs, and it should ideally be a combined, weekly programme which helps him improve in his three weakest areas
- (b) The tuition programme should be structured around the school curriculum
- (c) The tuition programme should have a motivational factor in order to sustain your child's learning interest

After making this important decision on the right enrichment programme for your child, you must continue to participate actively in his learning journey and monitor the effectiveness of the programme. In order to attain the improvements you seek, you have to come up with a home study plan for your child and carry it out consistently.

Bear in mind that you will not see significant improvement in your child if he does not revise at home after attending tuition. To maximise results, set a weekly to-do list of home revision activities. Here is an example:

Child's Name	Weekly To-Do List	Subject: Chinese	Term 3 Week 4
School progress: Ms Yang has just finished teaching Unit 12 and started on unit 13			
Mon	Learn Spelling for Unit 12 [to prepare for school's spelling test tomorrow]		
Tue	Read Chinese textbook unit 12 & unit 13 for 15 mins each before sleep		
Wed	Read Chinese storybook for 30 mins before sleep		
Thu	Finish "30-mins Comprehension" practice for Ms Zhou's tuition class		
Fri	Learn a sample script of oral picture description and practise with Mum		
Sat	Do composition correction and highlight good phrases to memorise		

A revision schedule is particularly useful for learning as it reinforces good study habits. For many children, it helps them focus on areas that require more attention. Do not solely rely on tutor supervision for your children, as parents have an equally important role to play in supervising the child during home revision time.

Remember, learning a language is a long journey for every child, so consistency in supervision is the key to success. It takes commitment and diligence by both the child and the parents for the journey of learning to be a success, and a good choice of a tuition programme can help.

Q2:

I have a P3 child who has no interest in learning Chinese. We don't speak Mandarin at home and my son only reads English books in his leisure time. He can neither construct fluent sentences nor express himself verbally in Chinese with ease. He can spell but is rather poor at Chinese comprehension, composition and oral tests. As there are many tuition providers available in the market, I am not sure which one will suit my son. How can I make the right choice for him?



Ms Zhou is an accomplished Chinese teacher who retired from MOE equipped with extensive knowledge and experience after years of teaching at Nanyang Primary School. Armed with a sound knowledge of the MOE curriculum, coupled with insights into the education industry as well as her own impressive educational credentials such as PDGE from NIE and a Master of Education from Monash University, she developed a successful result-oriented Chinese learning system that has helped her students achieve outstanding results in their schools and national examinations as well as earn the trust of many parents. In this Q & A, Ms Zhou addresses common problems parents face in helping their schooling children learn Chinese well.

Should you have other queries, email them to Ms Zhou at: zhou_jing@essenceedu.com