



Teach Mandarin as an Everyday Language, Not Just for Exams, Says Minister Ong Ye Kung

Description

In a speech delivered on **25 April 2026**, Health Minister **Ong Ye Kung** made a compelling case for rethinking how Mandarin is taught and used in Singapore. Speaking at a community event, the Minister said that encouraging children to speak Mandarin in their daily lives requires treating the language as an everyday medium of communication — not merely as an examination subject to be studied and scored.

The remarks are likely to resonate deeply with many Singapore parents who have long grappled with the challenge of making Mandarin feel natural and relevant to their children in a predominantly English-speaking environment at home and at school.



Making Mandarin a language of daily life is at the heart of Minister Ong Ye Kung's call.
Photo: Pexels

What Did Ong Ye Kung Say?

Ong Ye Kung's message centred on the importance of creating the right environment for children to use Mandarin naturally. He noted that if Mandarin is only encountered in the context of school work, assessments, and tuition, it risks becoming associated with stress and obligation rather than with identity, connection, and daily life.

The Minister highlighted that language acquisition is deeply social. Children are far more likely to develop fluency and confidence in a language when they hear it at home, use it with friends, and encounter it in the media they consume not just in the classroom.

This echoes a broader national conversation about Singapore's bilingual education policy, which has been debated and refined since the 1970s. The balance between maintaining Mother Tongue proficiency and reducing academic pressure on students has been a persistent tension in Singapore's education landscape.

Why This Matters for Singapore Families

Singapore's bilingual policy requires all students to take a Mother Tongue Language (MTL) subject alongside English Mandarin for Chinese students, Malay for Malay students, and Tamil for Indian students. Mandarin, given its global economic significance and cultural weight, has often been the focus of intense debate.

Many parents have reported that children find Mandarin more difficult than English, particularly if English is the dominant language at home. Tuition spending on Mandarin is among the highest of any subject in Singapore, suggesting that the current approach centred around examination performance may not be producing the desired outcomes of genuine communicative fluency.

Key Challenges Parents Face

- Many Singapore Chinese households have shifted to English as the primary home language over the past two generations
- Children have limited exposure to Mandarin media, social contexts, and peer interactions outside of school
- The high-stakes examination culture means parents and children focus on grades rather than actual usage
- Mandarin proficiency levels vary widely within classrooms, making teaching at the right level challenging



Minister Ong Ye Kung's remarks are part of a broader national conversation on Singapore's bilingual policy. Photo: Pexels

What Could Change?

While Minister Ong Ye Kung's remarks were not a formal policy announcement, they signal an ongoing willingness at the governmental level to evolve how Mandarin education is approached. Possible directions include greater emphasis on conversational and applied Mandarin skills, more Mandarin-language content in media and entertainment targeted at young Singaporeans, and community programmes that create natural Mandarin-speaking social environments outside of school.

Reactions from Parents and Educators

The remarks have generated discussion on social media and parent forums in Singapore. Many parents expressed agreement with the Minister's diagnosis but questioned how practical change would look, given that many parents themselves are not comfortable speaking Mandarin at home. Some educators pointed out that systemic change – including revising assessment formats – would need to accompany any shift in messaging if real behaviour change is to follow.

For now, the conversation continues – and for Singapore families navigating Mandarin education, it is worth watching how policy and practice evolve in the coming school years.

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