

March 7, 2005**SLASHING OF CHINESE-LANGUAGE SYLLABUS****Interest more vital than environment**

MY TWO girls are studying in Beijing International School (Biss), which was founded by Singaporeans. Four years ago, when they were studying in a Singapore school, I faced a lot of problems coaching them in Chinese, even though my husband and I are Chinese-educated.

I provided the environment for them to speak at home and communicated with them in Mandarin. However, as I understand English, they always replied in English, knowing I would have no difficulty understanding them.

I bought many Chinese story books but they were not interested in them.

After they enrolled in Biss, they began to take a keen interest in Chinese. The reason is obvious: There are no examinations to stress them. Furthermore, the teachers are not confined to the syllabus and are free to introduce engaging topics.

The teachers, who are from China, encourage students to write essays with computer-aided software. The students recite poems, perform plays, view DVDs, and visit places of interest in Beijing and nearby.

They can present articles on any topic they choose. It can be related to everyday life, such as the arrival of spring, Chinese New Year or Chinese culture.

Today, my two girls can write decent essays (which at one time I thought they copied from books) and simple poems. My younger girl even tried to edit a booklet of poems and articles written by her classmates.

They listen to Chinese songs and my elder girl has even taken an interest in Chinese classical songs. I also enrolled them in Chinese painting and calligraphy classes.

Recently, I attended a workshop conducted by their Chinese teachers and I was surprised to find my girls acted very well in the play. The topic of the play was given to them before the workshop. I had never heard my girls speak so many Mandarin words in their lives.

I applaud the decision of the Singapore Government to cut down the Chinese-language syllabus and the number of words to be learnt by students. It is better to master the basics first rather than dump it all on students and make them shy away from the language.

These days, there are just too many things for them to learn. In our time, we did not need to study the many things they have to learn now. It is not wise to be a jack of all trades and a master of none.

One last point. My daughters study in an international school where the language is primarily English. It is therefore interest, rather than environment, that led them to investigate the beauty of the Chinese language.

With the right environment, but without the interest, they would not have achieved the standard they have today.

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