Cool Speak on Sunday

My love-hate affair with the Chinese language

Felix Tang, 23, a Singapore Management University student, grew up loving Chinese. But then a teacher killed his love for the language and he never thought he would want to speak it again. Until recently, he tells WONG SHER MAINE.

How did you grow up to be equally comfortable in English and Chinese?

My father, an information systems lecturer, would speak English to me, while my mother, a Chinese teacher, would speak Mandarin. They spoke to each other in Hokkien but my first languages were both English and Chinese.

You loved Chinese — even when you had to mug for Chinese exams in school?

Yes. I enjoyed Higher Chinese at the schools I studied, Tao Nan Primary and Victoria School. At Tao Nan, we did not just study the characters but were also immersed in the culture. We would read poetry, for instance.

From Secondary 1 to 3, I still enjoyed the subject. I particularly remember a trip I made in Secondary 3 to China. That was the highlight of my experience in learning Chinese. As my mother would always say, Chinese is not just another language, but it’s also about our roots.

I also had a very good Chinese teacher from Secondary 1 to 3 who made it easy for me to enjoy the language. She would tell us the stories behind Chinese idioms and phrases.

Why did you start disliking Chinese?

When I had a different Chinese teacher? Frankly, I can say my interest in Chinese was undone by that one teacher.

We went back to merely memorising words. Coupled with the mounting pressure of the exams and the increasing number of assessments I had to do, I started losing interest in the subject.

In that sense, it’s very important that we groom Chinese teachers who are not just competent in the language, but are also able to bring the students to another level beyond just learning.

In the end, I flunked Higher Chinese. I didn’t study at all. When I went to Tampines Junior College, my Chinese teacher hated me because I could not be bothered.

I remember at a meet-the-parents session, she cried in front of my mother because of my attitude. She felt she could not do anything with me.

I got a B3 grade for my Chinese at O-level and I wanted to stop studying Chinese altogether. My mother was very disappointed but I had had enough.

So what made you embrace Chinese once again?

At the end of my first year in SMU, I went to a conference in Hong Kong and met delegates from Taiwan and China.

Because there were many debates and discussions, I started speaking Mandarin again. At first, it felt awkward, but I got into the hang of things after a week.

What shamed me and made me feel that it was important to keep in touch with Chinese, was that there were students from Russia and Israel speaking Mandarin. And here I was, a Singaporean, supposedly bilingual, with a mother who teaches Chinese, and they were speaking better Mandarin than I was. They could express themselves better in Mandarin than I could in English.

How are you brushing up on your Chinese now?

I keep in touch with the friends that I made during the conference. We chat using the Internet, in Chinese.

I listen to Chinese orchestra music and am increasing my collection of Mandarin songs. I now read Lianhe Zaobao regularly and I watch the Chinese news. Even my mother has noticed the difference.