

# THE BUSINESS OF LEARNING NEW SKILLS

From speaking well to creating a work of art – these are skill sets that can be learnt in a methodical way. Voice training school Be The Voice Academy and art school Global Art show that these educators mean business.



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## SPEAKING VOLUMES

THE eldest student of Be The Voice Academy, a voice training school at Alexandra Retail Centre, is a 70-year-old man running for the presidency of one of Singapore's golf clubs. He thought that he would win, and wanted to whip his victory speech into shape.

For many students like him, curriculum during training sessions include learning when to pause, articulation and musicality – or when to emphasise certain words. "This is because you want people to hear your words – first time, every time," says Brian Lee, the founder of the school.

Students who seek to improve the presentation of their voice at Be The Voice range from six to 70 years old, and hail from all walks of life. Some are trying to ace their school oral exams, while others are members of corporate circles seeking to improve their skill set. "Students, adults, CEOs, receptionists," says Mr Lee. "The works."

Training sessions are either individual or in groups. For example, Johnson and Johnson

frequently sends their staff to the academy to improve their presentation skills.

When Mr Lee was asked for the number of students that the academy currently has, he replies: "You know what, I never really count. But I look at my schedule, and it's full everyday – and I'm happy."

The school also teaches presentation skills, such as how to stand, where to put your hands, and how to make effective Powerpoint slides. This is despite Mr Lee's stand that they are secondary to speaking well. "If you look at the slides, you realise the slides mean nothing. Nobody actually goes to a presentation to see your slides, they go there to listen to you speak," he says. "So if you're not projecting with the voice, how do you expect people to trust you, to be enthusiastic?"

Learning how to train others on how to speak began from developing a speaking ability of economic value himself. As he worked at the Republic of Singapore Air Force, he was also commentator for airshows of the then newly

formed aerobatics team Black Knights in 2008, as well as when they had to perform at the year's National Day Parade. He read the script that he wrote as the aircraft cavorted in the Singapore airspace.

In 2009, he had his first taste of voice training when he started coaching the emcees of the Singapore Armed Forces for the National Day Parade. "That's when I started to formulate my formula," says Mr Lee. "If I'm going to teach people, I need to break down my stuff – articulation, pronunciation, flow, musicality. It was a training process. We took about eight weeks."

The parade ended on a high note with the emcees receiving a special mention for their efforts. That was when Mr Lee thought: "If I could train some of my SAF soldiers, I can virtually train anyone how to speak well." In March 2013, he started reading the news for the radio station 93.8 Live. He still does that twice a month to this day. Being accepted into the broadcast industry after taking the voice tests "was validation that I can do what I am supposed to do", he says. He set up a website and travelled to students' houses to give voice coaching lessons – but that stopped after he found an office space at Bukit Timah Plaza later that year. In 2014, Be The Voice moved to Alexandra Retail Centre.

Mr Lee is still looking to open new branches but pressing challenges include accommodating the need for more teachers as a result, and rising rent across Singapore. "I'm very particular and very passionate about the type of training we provide. Whoever I want as a trainer has to be really up to scratch," says Mr Lee. It is difficult to find someone who both speaks

Among the other voice training schools in Singapore, Be The Voice focuses more on individual training than group classes, which is more common.

For group sessions, "it would be easy to get people to sign up because they will be paying a couple of hundred dollars rather than \$2,000",

well and enjoys teaching others too. Currently, all voice coaching sessions are taught by Mr Lee only.

Another key challenge for the school is getting itself known in corporate circles, despite some success already. Either companies do not know that such training exists, or there is a tentativeness about whether it would benefit their staff in the slightest.

So "they're a bit cautious, because it's not a common thing", says Mr Lee.

"A lot of the middle management or just entry-level management ... haven't seen the importance yet. Usually the people who come just got promoted and have to do lots of presentations. That's when they start to panic," says Mr Lee.

"I think a lot of corporate training sessions that are held today are the 'me-too' types," he adds, "meaning the anagram, personality profiling, team building, presentation skills. Everybody does that. But nobody really does voice training as part of a corporate training programme."

Mr Lee takes not more than 15 students at one time. "When I started training, many people approached me and said hey, we will take your business, put 200, 300 people in the room, and you can give a talk and make a lot of money and all that," says Mr Lee, who rejected their offers.

"My friends always tell me it's a bad business model. For example, I can have four people in a classroom easily, charge half the amount, and I will actually make twice the amount of money," he says. "But to me, I just need to make enough money to survive and pay my rent and be a little bit happy. It's not about really becoming super rich and all that. To me, it is about helping people." ■



PHOTO: GIN TAY

**THE VOICE ▲**  
Mr Lee is dedicated to helping people in the way that they speak, because speaking well is tied to work performance

## METHOD TO MAKING ART

IT may be argued that artists owe their artwork to spontaneity and inborn talent, but Global Art believes that there is a method to creativity.

The art school, with 28 outlets scattered across Singapore such as at HarbourFront Centre, has a selling point – a systematic approach to teaching art – which can be sampled in a free "trial" session. The child's drawing faculties are tested as teachers give them instructions, which often yield instant results and parents impressed enough to decide to send their children for more classes.

"There's a direction for your kids," unlike other art programmes that assign work to students seemingly at random, without first developing foundational skills at drawing and colouring, founder Patrick Tan says.

The curriculum – which caters to children from three to 18 years old – has international presence in countries such as Australia, Hong Kong, India, and the US. Mr Tan, the former boss of the branches at Pahang, Malaysia, was the first to enter the Singapore market in 2003, and the first to take it out of Malaysia. He thought that it was a waste if it was reserved only for Malaysians. Singaporean students appeared to him as entrenched in a society that places

more emphasis on academic performance than creative thinking, and needed it just as much.

This belief can be traced back to Mr Tan's interest in art when he was young. He nurtured it by winning every art competition in his primary school. His father, who believed in his abilities, allowed him to learn under the instruction of a watercolour artist until he left for college. Because he still dabbled with painting and drawing in his free time when he got married, he joined Global Art to be a teacher with the encouragement of his wife.

"Although the programme was not as good as it is now, I was very impressed already," says Mr Tan. It was a result of years of research since 1999, and "along the way, overseas partners gave ideas on how to improve it" as well.

Although he opened branches across Pahang, he stopped running them after setting up shop in Singapore. At first, he was not certain if Singaporean parents would be receptive to spending money on art classes. But when the first branch at Marine Parade Central was set up, he described the turnout as a "boom". A hundred over students attended classes in the first few months, and the number went over 200 at by the end of 2003.



PHOTO: ALPHONSES CHERN

**A METHODICAL APPROACH**  
Global Art's selling point is its systematic approach to teaching art

The teaching system used is made up of basic, intermediate and advanced levels of learning. "It is something like learning ABCs, then learning how to write words, then from words you can write an essay," Mr Tan explains. A student's progress made across their time at Global Art can be tracked with the school's app where parents can view their children's artwork as they are produced.

Although parents can view only the work of their children, the photo gallery on the app is public for all to see. It shows off pictures entered for Global Art's three annual competitions – consisting of one competition within the centre, another within Singapore, culminating to an

international round against students from Global Art schools around the world.

In 2017, a student from Mr Tan's centre won in the 16 years and under category at the Global Art international competition. She drew an astronaut surrounded by futuristic elements under the theme, My Dream City.

"For the older kids who have completed the foundational skills, they are now more focused on drawing. Visual communication – it means if the kids want to draw or colour anything, they must send a message," says Mr Tan. "It is different from abstract art."

They also teach students with Down's Syndrome. "We accept them. For English, math, they may have to go to special centres, but for art – art is okay," he says.

The centre's *modus operandi* in teaching – which Mr Tan maintains is different from other schools with its methodical pace – is what needs to be brought across to parents. "When people walk in, they think it is only an art school. Teachers need to explain to parents what we are about and what we teach," he says. "A challenge is to train these teachers to know what we do. To show them and others not to just look at only our appearance." During meetings, he reminds the teachers of the need to communicate how they are different from other local art schools.

Another challenge is keeping up with the high rental in Singapore shopping centres. "Art is not the main curriculum for students," says Mr Tan. Enrichment classes for the subject

is often the first to go for parents when the economy turns ugly. But Mr Tan is undeterred. "Give the best to the students," he maintains. "The only thing we can do is train the teachers."

Training takes place four times a week for Global Art, and teachers attend as many times as they wish, free of charge. "Their boss, their franchisee, will pay," he says. "We are more concerned about the quality of the teachers. If you want to be a good teacher, it's very simple – just look back on the teacher you like the most, and follow what the teacher does."

Teachers have to pass Global Art's grading exam – comprising practical aspects and two test papers on theory covered during their training sessions – before signing a three-year contract with the school.

And if he has left a mark on his students, they have also left an impression on him. "Students who are now 20-over years old sometimes come over and say, 'Hi teacher.' When I see their name, already I know who they are," he says. This is what colours the future as he considers opening Creatif Academy art courses, which are also under the Global Art brand and viewed as diplomas in Malaysia. "I like my students," he says. "When they improve, I feel very happy." ■

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