

Keeping Cantonese alive through song, stories and play

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Fiona Falcone has started the first playgroup for Cantonese speaking families. Find out how she went about it.

On the 9th March 2011 I changed from being a suited commuter, laptop in one hand, coffee in the other to being a spew covered young mum, baby in one hand, Gina Ford manual in the other. Along with the baby came the usual parental neuroses, generally summed up as 'Am I doing this right?' but one in particular had me and Gina Ford stuck for answers: 'How am I going to teach this little thing to be Chinese?'

I am a BBC, with patchy Cantonese, married to an Italian, living in London. We planned to speak 3 languages at home but, cooing at my little baby, I realised I was going to have to do some work to hold up my end of the language bargain. I started by making the massive brain switch and committing myself to always speaking Cantonese to the baby.

As each day progressed my existing Cantonese became more fluent but I realised I was filling in for vocabulary gaps by circumventing words ('arrogant' became 'love yourself too much'; 'proud of you' became 'I love you'; etc). It wouldn't take long for the baby to outgrow my Cantonese. I realised that if we wanted to do this, I had to get another Cantonese input in my baby's life.

I turned to my mother, who is notoriously lazy, and I managed to coerce her into coming to London once every other week (she lives 2 hours away) for two days to speak to the baby in Cantonese. So far so good, but after a couple of months I realised that this too wouldn't be enough. My mother hasn't lived in Hong Kong for over 35 years, she has dated Cantonese and, nowadays code switches even with her Cantonese speaking friends.

I started to look around for Chinese playgroups, sensory classes, mother and baby groups and found... nothing. How could this be true? London has over 100,000 Cantonese speakers, numerous Chinese schools and several organisations supporting the Cantonese elderly. Why didn't we seem to care about our very young? I ranted and raved for a while and then came to a realisation. I could do something myself.

So, I did what everyone in my generation does when faced with a problem. I went online. I found a few forums, dimsum.co.uk being one of them, that catered to BBCs or Cantonese learners. However there was nothing tangible. No playgroups, no music sessions, no children's movies, no library reading sessions, just one Cantonese speaking nursery that only took kids from the age of 2 (a long time after those language learning synapses would have fused together).

I grumbled about it for a few months, worrying that with no access to a young Chinese community my baby wouldn't know how to be Chinese, until I realised I could do something about it myself. It started with an open invitation to my garden for a few mums I'd met online, all with young babies, all trying to keep Cantonese language and culture alive in their families. We chatted, haltingly tried to sing a few nursery rhymes we remembered from our childhoods and complained about Chinese school together.

We agreed to meet again, next time for dimsum, and I posted our meet on Facebook and the same online forums in case there were other mums out there like me. Well, for that dimsum we had 16 RSVPs, I booked a table for 10 and on the day nearly 30 people turned up, all with their children.

We had printed out some song sheets so we could have a Cantonese nursery rhyme sing-along and we had a mum with fluent Cantonese tell the story of Mid-Autumn Festival. Even though we were all crowded in together, enthusiasm was so great that our little meetup morphed into PlayCantonese, a Cantonese playgroup now well into its 5th month.

Based in Central London, PlayCantonese now welcomes Cantonese speakers and learners to help each other teach their young children Cantonese through song, stories and play. It's a communal event, asking for volunteers to contribute a song, story or game each time.

We sing Cantonese nursery rhymes (did you know there are Cantonese versions of London Bridge is Falling Down and Frere Jacques?), read and discuss a story in Cantonese and play a game or have a show in Cantonese. It's not just the activities that are important, each session sees the children making friends with each other, playdates are arranged and dimsum is booked … PlayCantonese is seeing a little community grow around it.

The last PlayCantonese session saw people travel from as far as Coventry to sing along with us and was so overbooked we had to start a waiting list. We have lots of plans for the future, including planning music lessons in Cantonese for the kids, building our website to give online support for those who can't reach London and, of course, reaching out to more families.

So, what now? As other mums saw what we were doing and how easy it was, we got volunteers offering to run baby sing-song groups, movie afternoons and trips to the zoo. I hope that PlayCantonese will evolve as my son grows. I plan to find music and kungfu teachers to teach in Cantonese (so that our kids can listen to a wider range of vocabulary in a realistic environment), organise trips to Hong Kong together (allowing the kids to port their playmates with them) and do simpler things like invite families round to our house to cook Chinese food together.

It wasn't hard to start to PlayCantonese and it gets easier as more enthusiastic volunteers come onboard. Together we are creating a strong community of Cantonese speaking families that will grow with our children and who knows where it will go in the future? I write this article, not to boast, but to encourage and parent struggling to keep up their end of the multi cultural bargain to go online and then meet a few people face-to-face… you never know where it could lead.

I also hope that there are other enthusiastic parents out there who will come online, put together their own communities and keep Chinese language and culture alive so that, perhaps, in many years to come, my grandchildren will be wondering how to keep Cantonese alive for their children.

For more information on PlayCantonese email info@playcantonese.com