

Passion is key for E&P's success in the education business

Educator Amanda Lian's love for educating young minds is evident from her vision and teaching style, writes **CHARMIAN KOK**

WITH her vivacious nature and optimistic outlook in life, it's hard to miss Amanda Lian when you walk into the Orchard branch of E&P Training Centre. Ms Lian, the owner and co-founder of the training centre – which specialises in mental arithmetic and total brain development – exudes a passion and love for what she does.

Ms Lian started the company in 1991 with a business partner who was introduced to her by a mutual friend. With a starting capital of less than \$20,000, they founded a school which offered children's enrichment programmes focused mainly on mental arithmetic.

"Back then, few people in Singapore have heard about mental arithmetic and we were the first company to offer it to students," Ms Lian told BT. Being the pioneer company to offer abacus and mental arithmetic courses in Singapore, it was well-received by both students and parents, Ms Lian said.

Before starting the programme proper, Ms Lian conducted a two hour-long seminar in order to publicise the course to parents. The response was overwhelming – it attracted well over 2,000 participants and by the end of the seminar, E&P received 800 applications for 300 places in the school. "We invited children from Taiwan to demonstrate their mental arithmetic skills. The parents were so impressed with the demonstration and naturally they wanted the same results for their children as well," Ms Lian said, explaining the success of the seminar and programme. In the short span of four years, the number of students attending E&P went up from 300 to 3,000.

Ms Lian's love for children and educating young minds is evident from her vision for the company and teaching style. At E&P Training Centre, Ms Lian makes it a point to make learning enjoyable for children. Learning materials and books used by the school are produced especially by Ms Lian and her teachers and they incorporate fun elements into homework. "Children never like doing homework, so we have to add in things to attract them to do it. This makes it more fun and engaging for them," Ms Lian said. Although there are yearly tests for all students, for grading and assessment, teachers entice and motivate students by using a reward system which allows students to

accumulate points and exchange for gifts. Ms Lian's enthusiasm for what she does did not come automatically. Prior to starting E&P, she never considered a career as a teacher – she did not even like children.

It was a chance incident – when she had to relieve one of her sick teachers – that changed her views. "After teaching them for a longer period of time, I found their innocence and sincerity very touching. Most of the time, they are the ones teaching me how to teach them." Since then, Ms Lian has not stopped teaching.

Not only is her enthusiasm for teaching the key to the company's success, it has also helped pull her through some difficult times. E&P's exponential growth was interrupted during the 1997 Asian economic crisis, when student enrolment fell drastically. Later on, she also faced problems with her then business partner as he started to divert capital away from the company to other investments. "I was very upset and did not know how to handle the situation," she said. "It was a tough time for me."

A helping hand

Thankfully, all was not lost for E&P as many of the students' parents extended a helping hand, offering their services as lawyers, contractors, accountants and so on. At its lowest point, the company had only 500 students in 2002. The enrolment has since grown to 1,000.

Ms Lian's winning strategy for E&P is simple, yet hard to duplicate. To her, maintaining teaching quality and high standards is of the utmost importance. This is reflected in both her stringent requirements for teachers as well as her selection criteria for franchises.

"I am very strict with the teachers. Teaching quality is very important and I personally train all teachers and assess their progress. If they fail to improve after two or three years, they will be replaced," Ms Lian said.

She finds that potential teachers having patience, and generally the right attitude, is most important. She said: "I believe that teachers have a social responsibility. They need to be able to impart values to children, not just teach mental arithmetic." E&P's franchise in Indonesia, which started in 1995, has 2,000 students spread over four different centres. The school is currently exploring the possibility of opening a new franchise in China.

Because of her success, Ms Lian has had many franchise requests over the years, but she chose to turn down



YEN MENG JIN

Fun factor: Ms Lian (in the middle, wearing white) makes it a point to make learning enjoyable for children

several of them. "I felt some of them weren't suitable for E&P. Their intentions for starting a franchise and their attitude towards children's education are important. It cannot be merely about making money," explained Ms Lian.

In order to ensure the highest quality and standards in all her franchises, Ms Lian goes to great lengths to train the teachers. Besides providing courses on abacus and mental arithmetic, E&P also focuses on helping each child to achieve holistic development through a "Total Brain Development" programme.

Acknowledging that each child's learning ability varies, E&P offers courses in thinking and logic skills, problem solving and memory concentration. The school has invested in a range of psychology tests to help students understand their own learning abilities and characters.

In the near future, Ms Lian hopes to expand E&P training centres in Singapore to four or five, and intends to open six to eight centres in China. This will increase the current number of schools from 15 to 28, doubling revenues to \$3 million.