

Right now, English comes first for swim star Tao Li

TAN YO-HINN

yohinn@mediacorp.com.sg

TAO Li became the first Singaporean to reach an Olympic final at last year's Beijing Games.

She finished fifth in the 100m butterfly, but don't expect her to make a splash at the 5th Singapore National Swimming Championship – currently being held at the Singapore Sports School until this Sunday.

Tao Li is keen to pursue a diploma in Sports Management and Exercise Science, but must first pass the International English Language Testing System test to qualify.

To meet her goal, the China-born 19-year-old has been feverishly brushing up on her English the last three months, ahead of the tests in July.

"The academics have chewed into her," said her coach Peter Churchill, at the Sports School yesterday.

"We've given up three to four training sessions a week (so that she can study). She's got half the energy for training due to all the late-night studying. As such, she's not recovering well enough as she usually does from the hard sessions.

"And if you turn up for training tired, mistakes and injuries happen ... the only way is to pass her exams ... The main issue now is can we get her up and going in the fly in the next six months."

Tao Li's dip in form was evident on the first day of the national championship on Wednesday, when she finished fourth in the 100m freestyle.

Her preparations for next month's Fina World Championship (July 19 to Aug 2) in Rome have also been af-

fectured, and her initial target of around 57.5s in the 100m butterfly has been shelved.

"Her main purpose now is to go to Rome and keep in contact with those she'll be swimming against over the next three years (leading to the London 2012 Olympics) and to see where she stands physically. She will also start preparations for the SEA Games," said Churchill.

Today, Tao Li will compete in the 100m backstroke and 100m butterfly heats, where she holds the national records of 1:03.17s and 57.54s, respectively.

At the last SEA Games in Thailand, she won three gold medals.

Despite her current form, Churchill believes she will be in Laos in December to defend her titles. "She knows she's just got to finish top two in all her events to swim at the SEA Games. For her, times aren't the issue, it's more just as long as she's there, and she'll deal with the training afterwards."

Meanwhile, in the second day of competition last night, Swimfast Aquatic Club's Ng Jia Hao set a new men's 100m breaststroke national record of 1:04.46, re-writing the previous mark of 1:04.84 posted by Kenneth Goh in 1998 to meet the SEA Games "A" qualifying mark of 1:04.66.

Three other swimmers also booked their places for the SEA Games, including Quah Ting Wen, 17, who clocked 4:16.69 to win the women's 400m freestyle. Twenty-four hours earlier, she qualified for the 100m freestyle when she touched home first in a new national record.

Log on to www.swimming.org.sg for full results

