

Headline	Good English - whose line is it anyway?		
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Description	Tris Pruetthipunthu opined that some Singaporeans appear obsessed with sounding Western at the expense of grammar and communication, and the current Speak Good English Movement does not appear to address this imbalance. Tabitha Mok opined that the Speak Good English campaign is a good initiative to encourage Singaporeans to use grammatically correct English.		

Good English – whose line is it anyway?

To Singlish or to slang? Youthlnk writers argue over the need to speak English well

Singlish encapsulates culture

LET us abandon the belief that Singlish is bad English.

To me, it is a unique vocabulary that encapsulates decades of local culture. One could throw in the occasional “lah” and jargon like “bo chap” (“can’t be bothered” in Hokkien) to retain a wonderfully local flavour, and still keep to grammatical English.

Singaporeans using Singlish are no different from Britons using unfamiliar local slang. Not every tourist in London knows not to be offended when asked if he’d like a “faggot” (local slang for meatball).

In any country, understanding the culture includes understanding how the language works. Hence I see no need to codeswitch, or eradicate Singlish just so foreigners can understand us better.

Rather, explain Singlish vocabulary to them as they go along. If they are truly cosmopolitan in attitude, I am certain they would be more than delighted to learn.

Liana Tang, 24, graduated with honours in biology from the National University of Singapore (NUS)

Why criticise codeswitching?

LANGUAGE is all about communication – form should thus be less important

than substance. Codeswitching should be welcomed rather than castigated.

Codeswitching is a reflection of how sensitive one is to one’s fellowman by speaking at a level that gets the idea across. Conversely, parroting an accent one has learnt abroad might come off as arrogant.

My “imperfect”, “non-standard” Singaporean English served me well over my 10 months in America and Australia, while many Caucasians here seem puzzled by well-intentioned but ultimately garbled attempts at “proper” accented English.

Some Singaporeans appear obsessed with sounding Western at the expense of grammar and communication, and the current Speak Good English movement does not appear to address this imbalance.

Where Singlish serves as an effective medium, why should we condemn it to pursue a “standard” which might turn out untenable and incomprehensible? Tris Pruetthipunthu, 24, is a final-year law student at NUS

Take pride in ‘neutral accent’

THE Speak Good English campaign is a good initiative to encourage Singaporeans to use grammatically correct English.

But we may not need the campaign so badly as some would have us believe.

When my British housemate’s sister from Manchester came to visit last month, I was appalled by her poor grammar and thick accent. She had to repeat herself many times to be understood.

According to my housemate, this standard of English is the norm in many parts of Britain.

Considering the vastness of Britain and the linguistic influence of Irish and Scottish dialects, it is not surprising that their standard of English varies vastly.

In fact, I know more Singaporeans who have a better command of English, with better grammar and diction, than people from Britain.

So Singaporeans can take pride in what many of my Australian friends refer to as the “neutral Singaporean accent”.

Tabitha Mok, 22, is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Western Australia

Speak good English first

THERE has been talk of codeswitching and juggling Singlish with English in different situations.

But how can that be done if one’s English is atrocious to begin with?

Worse still, some of them are English language teachers. Yes, the very people tasked with teaching the younger generation good English.

As an English language teacher-in-training, I am horrified that a considerable number of my course mates are proficient only in Singlish, with its poor grammar and frightful pronunciation.

These are the course mates who eat “crips” and make remarks about “kluh-varge” – exposing outfits.

If one is good in both English and Singlish, there might be a case for codeswitching. But even then, not in the classroom during English lessons please.

Adrienne de Souza, 21, is pursuing a postgraduate diploma in education at the National Institute of Education

A time and place for everything

WHEN I travelled to Britain on an overseas exchange this year, I instinctively switched to a more standard form of English.

It would be absolutely ridiculous to say “wah lau eh, I speak Singlish got problem, meh?” and expect Britons to understand.

After seven months, I came home to find the Singlish accent strange and foreign. However, within three days, I was back to “lahs” and “lors” again.

After all, asking the coffee shop uncle, “Excuse me, sir, could I have a cup of tea with milk, please?” would earn you only a blank stare.

Like all things in life, there is a time and place for English and Singlish. Ideally, Singaporeans should be able to switch efficiently between both.

It is not a question of condescension, only one of necessity and flexibility.

That should be the rightful aim of the Speak Good English campaign.

Christine Chong, 22, is an honours student in literature at NUS

