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SINGAPORE seems to defy the claim of that old colonialist, Rudyard Kipling, that East and West never shall meet.

Our island is located in the East and, in recent years, has re-emphasised Asian roots and mother tongues. Yet, it is also one of the few countries that retained colonial street names after independence.

Singapore has remained open to Western companies and, indeed, free trade agreements like those with Australia and the United States further that element of openness in commerce.

Leaders like Trade and former Arts Minister George Yeo envisage Singapore as a global city, drawing not just from its Asian roots but also from the influences of the West.

Yet, a number of challenges remain in language, society and politics. Unless these are met, Singapore will face two different dangers. One is that of becoming an Asian backwater, no different from a hundred other cities in the region. The other danger is that of becoming a mere outpost of the West, with no core of its own.

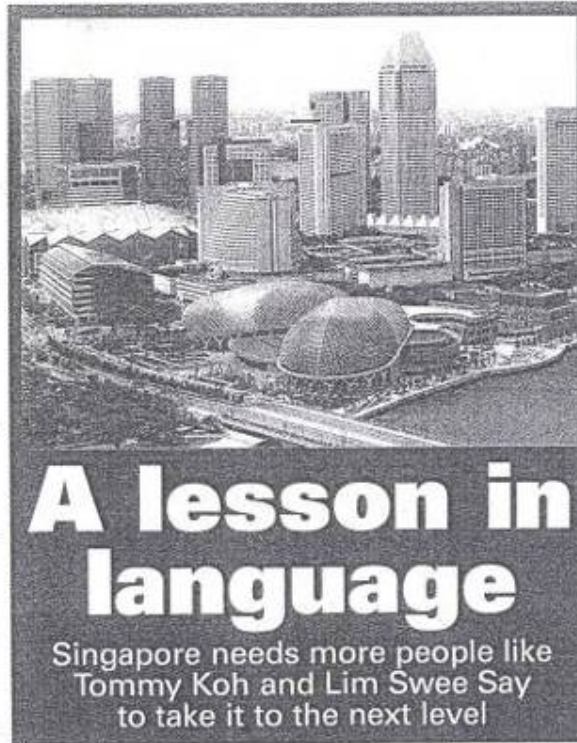
The challenge in language is our bilingual policy. This is well-meant for cultural heritage, as well as for increasing exchange and understanding with China, India, as well as with the surrounding Malay world.

However, while some can master two or more languages, many others struggle.

There is a danger that some will fall in between and speak neither language well. One sign of this is the existence of two language campaigns: The Speak Mandarin Campaign and the more recent Speak Better English Campaign.

Much has been said about the need to speak the mother tongue. In some ways, the utility of English is taken for granted as is its spread among the younger generation.

To the contrary, I think more



A lesson in language

Singapore needs more people like Tommy Koh and Lim Swee Say to take it to the next level

attention must be paid to English in Singapore if we are to maintain this competitive advantage.

Others are catching up. English schools proliferate in China, Vietnam and many other countries. Increasing numbers in these countries are speaking English and more are doing as well, if not better, than the average Singaporean.

In India, while only a small percentage speak English fluently, this amounts to millions of people given the large population of the sub-continent.

As the Indian economy continues to open up, the English-literate

Indian will mean even more competition to Singaporeans.

Bringing English to a next level will mean more than a matter of improving accents, debating Singlish or arguing whether PCK is OK. Fundamentally, speaking English well is connected to habits of mind.

The ability to communicate clearly and discuss ideas and plans.

The ability to generate agreement and accommodate disagreement.

The capacity to be courteous and pleasant in everyday exchanges, rather than being curt and abrupt by accident.

The skill of playing with language, telling jokes, convincing people and winning hearts and minds.

All these relate to a greater comfort and acuity in using English.

An important first step is to recognise the need. At present, too many Singaporeans remain ambivalent about English and those who prefer it. The articulate among us are often associated with glib con artists. We are cautious about those who are phyltel and humorous in language.

Consequently, many speakers tend to overwhelm with statistics or technical jargon.

Few, like Environment Minister Lim Swee Say, weave jokes into the messages they want to communicate. Or, like Ambassador Tommy Koh, convey complex ideas simply.

Fewer still, like China expert Professor Wang Gung Wu, can do so, in either Mandarin or English.

The social challenge is whether Singapore can strike a balance between crediting our own people

and accommodating non-Singaporeans among us. The debate about foreign talent in Singapore is an example of this.

It has been a roller-coaster ride between the heralded arrival of the first foreign and white chief executives for Singaporean companies like DBS Bank and Neptune Orient Lines (NOL) and the recent appointment of Mr David Lim, a former Cabinet member, to the top executive post at NOL.

Some speculate about power politics and even fashions to explain these changes.

Perhaps, the truth is that we need to be more relaxed and neutral on this issue. We should neither favour foreign nor local. We need, instead, to simply be discerning about talent.

A key to this is to have a greater confidence in our own abilities as a people.

One old friend who has moved to a foreign service firm says the "over-seas brand" name has helped win over clients who had never even looked at him when he was at a Singaporean firm.

A very different tale is the Singaporean company that has grown beyond our shores. It is conscious about not over-emphasising its Singaporean-ness. If it did, foreigners would not join it because they would think they had no future with the company.

Singapore as a society and a place to do business should not be divided between expatriate and locals. We must instead be more open, more equal and more cosmopolitan.

An Asian heritage is too important to be locked up in a dusty vault. It should be brought out, into a new context.

One symbol of this is the new Asian Civilisations Museum. This houses excellent collections of Asian artifacts to offer a deeper understanding of the regional cultures and histories around us. Yet the exhibits are housed in an old colonial building at Empress Place, named for the monarchy during the British Empire.

This differs from the colonial plan of the city in which white-dominated government and commercial sectors were kept apart from ethnic enclaves, which were in turn subdivided between different ethnic types.

When he said, "never the twain shall meet", Rudyard Kipling did not mean the two would not meet physically. He meant that there could no meeting on equal terms and no fusion or happy balance between them.

The old colonial enterprise was built on inequality and division. The Singapore of today and tomorrow must be built differently.

The writer is chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA). The SIIA inaugurated recently a series of talks on regional issues in partnership with the Asian Civilisations Museum.