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Wah! Singapore tries to purge "Singlish".

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SINGAPORE, July 2 (Reuters) - "Speak English. Can or cannot lah?"

Singapore launched its annual exercise in linguistic engineering on Wednesday with its **"Speak Good English Movement"** aimed at stamping out "Singlish", a local patois that borrows from Chinese and famously ends most sentences with "lah".

It's an uphill battle.

Although most Singaporeans speak English they often banter in shops, at home or with friends in a punchy native appropriation that adds words from Chinese, Malay or Tamil - the nation's three other official languages - with frequent Chinese grammar.

To outsiders, the results can be mystifying.

Frustration with a teacher might elicit the response: "This guy whole day talk so cheem; I really catch no ball." If you upset someone, they might fume: "Why you always like that one lah?"

It's the fourth and largest campaign in as many years to purge the unique slang from the multi-ethnic island of four million people, and government officials said on Wednesday that proper English was crucial to engage with the global economy.

But many Singaporeans, about 80 percent of whom are ethnic Chinese, often resent government pressure to surrender the words, phrases and tonal inflections that for decades have defined Singaporean culture.

A survey by AC Nielson released by the government on Wednesday showed that 67 percent of Singapore's professionals, managers, entrepreneurs and businessmen preferred to speak in English, but this dropped to 46 percent for white-collar workers.

"We just have to inculcate new habits and try not to speak English with Chinese or other colloquial syntax," Lee Boon Yang, Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts, told a gathering a library to launch the campaign.

With no natural resources, Singapore relies heavily on foreign investment and its well-educated workforce to sustain economic growth. Widespread use of English is often cited by foreign companies as a significant reason to set up base here.

Under the latest campaign, local personalities will urge citizens to speak in simple and clear English and to read more, while the message "You don't have to use big words to speak good English" will appear in Chinese, Malay and Tamil media.