

Headline	Fix the grammar, then talk...		
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"FREE, come over." Say this to a visitor from England or the US, and he will blink.

Or if the visitor overhears "why you so like that one", he would be similarly confused.

While the first is the local way of inviting someone to visit and the second, an expression of mild exasperation, both these phrases, which use English words, are products of literal translations of dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese.

As such, they are incomprehensible to the native English speaker.

Yet, we know that in our daily lives, such home-spun lingual inventions abound and, shudder, are spreading.

The current Speak Good English movement has to contend not just with discouraging the use of English versions of dialects, but also to tackle the language problem at its root.

And this is the poor grounding in English grammar.

I am not averse to people using charming little words such as leh, lah, aiyah and aiyoh. They are colourful add-ons in our patois which need not necessarily pull down the quality of spoken English.

The problem lies in areas such as syntax (the grammatical arrangement of words showing their connection and relation in a sentence), grammar, particularly tenses and subject-verb agreement, as well as pronunciation.

The logical premise must be that if you have poor grounding in grammar, then your spoken language must also reveal this weakness.

Also, if you are not drilled in correct pronunciation, then what comes out of your mouth can be misleading.

Take the word "been", which is often pronounced "bin", or "sheet", which often comes out as "shit". And yes, "mischievous" frequently becomes "mischievous".

That aside, correct syntax is also important. Although this might perhaps be more essential in written English, it would do the student well to be aware that hilarious results can come from faulty sentence construction or word placement.

Take this example: "I leaned back in my chair contentedly, watching the baby playing and puffing away at my cigarette."

Or, "If the baby dislikes milk, try boiling it."

And how about this: "To advance her singing career, she needs to do a solo badly."

Young Singaporeans when in conversation often speak Mandarin interlarded with English words.

Here is a sampling: "Ming tian wo yao qu interview but hai mei you decide yao bu yao qu, leh."

"I have an interview tomorrow but have not decided whether to go or not, leh."

On the few occasions that I have overheard chit-chats in English, I noted that, in most cases, the standard of the

language used is woefully poor – caused usually by the use of incomplete sentences or sentences with faulty tenses.

Observe the fractured English used by many Singaporeans in street interviews aired on television.

What has led us to this sorry state?

It is obvious that something is amiss with the way English is taught in schools. It could be

the syllabus or the method of teaching. Or it could be that students do not take language learning seriously enough.

Why are they not motivated?

Notice that older Singaporeans usually speak and write better English.

One reason must be that we were thoroughly drilled, from primary school on, in getting the cardinal rules of grammar right.

In primary school, our teachers used to make us sit in a ring on the floor while she was in the middle reading to us captivating stories from Aesop's Fables and other books. This kick-started our interest in reading.

In lower secondary school, we had 45 minutes of silent reading weekly. Before the end of each session, the teacher would pick at random a few students to tell the class what they had read.

Grammar lessons were a bore but we plodded through them, using that old language bible known as High School Grammar. It gave us a firm foundation in the subject.

Then, in the upper secondary classes, we had to write an essay each week. The three best essays were read to the class. It motivated many of us to try harder.

Teachers paid a lot of attention to every aspect of the learning of the language then. Do teachers do this with such thoroughness today?

Even if they do, will our kids, enticed by so many distractions these days, have the mood or inclination to really want to learn? I don't know.

All I know is that this language movement will be of little use if the speakers do not unlearn their bad grammar and be more thoroughly drilled to get the fundamentals of the language right.



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