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English is all about communication

AS A journalist who has lived in Singapore for nearly 15 years, I feel entitled to add my half-penny's worth to the debate on good English.

English is a very complicated language and, in many ways, it's a bane on Singapore that it should be the lingua franca. Malay, by contrast, is among the easiest languages in the world to learn as it has

no tenses, no conditional and no passive voice. However, we are stuck with English and should make the best of it. It is no crime to speak Singlish. Indeed, in the early days of Empire, civil servants were rewarded for their proficiency in pidgin.

Contrary to popular belief, pidgin is not a matter of "here missee, drinke tea". Rather, it is the skilful transposition of the English language into the

form of the native host tongue. Thus, if I say "I eat already" I am only reflecting the Hokkien or Malay structure.

English is about communication. It has never been about oneupmanship. While many of the Forum writers are justifiably proud of their grasp of the language, they should remember that the old woman in the market who could never write to The

Straits Times can be just as proud if she is able to communicate with a tourist and explain to him why *pak choi* is more expensive this week.

I could take the writers to my own county, Somerset, and sit them down in a pub. They would not understand a word.

And this is the point. We need to establish a language for all. It does not need to be technically brilliant — Simplified English was vaunted in the 1970s but died an untimely death. Among its innovations was the replacement of the complicated question tag with the standard Singapore (and Welsh) "isn't it?".

Most Singaporeans speak very acceptable English. It is unseemly to correct them on small points of grammar. This was a trait among the Anglo-English in India who perfected their language to a fault but earned the derisive label "chi-chi" for their troubles. We should all speak this beautiful language in the way we feel most comfortable.

If, as a professional writer, I have any complaints, they are aimed at the education system. In editing countless articles written by Singaporeans I have noticed one trend that is easily corrected. This is the poor sequence of tenses.

So my message is simple. Forget about the quality of spoken English. Nobody cares. Learn the proper sequence of tenses when writing and, above all, drop the gratuitous use of the conditional voice. Then, we will all be able to communicate better.

Astute readers will notice the phrase "half-penny's worth" in my opening paragraph. This is pronounced variously, as either "haypney's worth" or "hayporth". Does anyone care? No? Good, we are making a start already.

JOHN WALKER