

Headline	Language is not a real barrier		
Date	15 August 2003		
Media Title	The Straits Times	Section	Life
Page No	L6	Size	2colx

Language not a real barrier

I AGREE with Ong Soh Chin (Speak English Campaign, Aug 9) that the English language is an important instrument that binds Singaporeans of different races together.

As such, students should be encouraged to communicate in that language more often.

I came from a neighbourhood secondary school where most of the students were more comfortable speaking in Chinese. Whenever I was in a group of Chinese friends, I felt left out. When I reminded them that I could not understand their mother tongue, they would speak in English for two minutes, then resume using Mandarin.

I was not able to remove myself and run to non-Chinese friends because I was the only Malay guy in the class, and there was just one Indian guy. (There were Malay girls too, but I am talking about the boys in my class.)

As much as I detested this experience, I had to accept the reality that people have the right to speak the language that they deem convenient and comfortable.

Forget about racial togetherness if it means having to crack their brains just to string a proper sentence in

English.

Communication problems aside, I am still on good terms with them. Whenever there was an inter-class basketball or soccer match, we played together as a class and forgot about racial differences.

And when I represented my class in an inter-class debate, in which all the team members were non-Chinese, we got the support of the whole class.

These and many other experiences brought me to a conclusion: We may not be able to communicate with each other effectively because of our language barrier, but when the need arises for us to cooperate, I believe most Singaporeans are able to do it.

The whole battle against the Sars virus testified to this.

We cannot possibly expect to be a society which is effectively or even sufficiently bilingual, as desired by Ms Ong.

However, I believe what is more important is that Singaporeans realise that our country is made up of many different races and individuals cannot just depend on their own kind to survive.

KHAIRUL AZMAN