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Singapore urges better English

The Associated Press

SINGAPORE: Singaporeans will lose jobs to other Asians if they don't improve their English, the government warned Wednesday as it kicked off its annual Speak Good English campaign.

"Other countries in the region are making the English language part of their schools' curriculum," said Ng Eng Hen, the manpower minister. "In a few years' time, countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Korea and China may catch up or even surpass us in their English-language ability."

English is one of Singapore's four official languages, along with Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Most Singaporeans speak a British-accented English inherited from colonial times, and 71 percent of Singapore's four million people are already literate in English.

But people here also speak a patois — known as Singlish — which is a mishmash of Chinese dialects, Malay, Tamil and English. "Wah lau, you makan yet?" means "Have you eaten yet?" and "Hey he talk cock, lah" is "He talks a lot of nonsense." Or "So kiasu, one" is "He is really aggressive."

Fearful that foreigners wouldn't understand locals, the government first started its Speak Good English campaign in 2000 to combat Singlish. This year's campaign is aimed at the service industry as Singapore tries to woo more tourists.

The campaign is among a slew of government-sponsored drives — like the Singapore Kindness Movement and Romancing Singapore — aimed at modifying local behavior. Some Singaporeans consider the campaigns condescending.