

Headline	In Singapore, big demand for classes		
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IN SINGAPORE

Big demand for classes

By MELISSA SIM

THE word on the street in Singapore is often English, but the market for lessons in the language is still growing.

Census 2000, prepared by the Department of Statistics, showed that 71 per cent of Singaporeans aged 15 and above were literate in English, while 23 per cent of people aged five and above said it was the language spoken most frequently at home.

Nevertheless, parents are not taking any chances. A growing number are sending their children for classes at institutions such as the British Council and speech and drama classes at schools such as the

Julia Gabriel Centre.

When Ms Gabriel opened the centre in 1990, it had a few hundred students. Today, her two centres cater to more than 3,000 students. Four child-care centres specialising in speech and drama handle more than 600 students.

"Speech and drama classes provide opportunities for children to talk and engage with language, developing fluency and confidence in expressing their ideas," she said.

"Speech and drama is in high demand because parents realise its importance in language development."

To parents, improving their child's English may be just be a means to an end.

Dr Phyllis Chew, associ-

ate professor at the National Institute of Education and president of the English Language and Literature Association of Singapore, said many realise the link between English skills and good jobs.

This view is echoed by deputy director Martin Hope of the British Council.

"Parents know that their children need to express themselves clearly and confidently in standard English to give them a competitive advantage, both at school and later on in their working lives," he said.

But not all need extra language classes, said Dr Peter Tan, a senior lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature at the National Univer-

sity of Singapore.

"If the pupil has reduced exposure to standard English, the increased exposure will help. However, pupils can obviously read more for this exposure," the father of three said.

And it is not only children who are seeking that extra exposure.

The British Council here conducts language courses and workshops for more than 10,000 adults a year.

Mr Hope said: "Although most Singaporeans have been through an English language system, they want to improve their language and skills levels to respond to the increasing focus on good English communication in life and work contexts."

Working adults, particularly those in the service industry, have also been targeted in this year's Speak Good English Movement.

At the launch of this year's campaign, then Acting Minister for Manpower and Minister of State for Education Ng Eng Hen highlighted the importance of "soft skills" as Singapore diversifies its economy away from manufacturing.

He had said: "Speaking good English facilitates the development of 'soft skills'.

"It gives added confidence to our workers, especially those working in the tourism, hospitality and retail sectors, who will be able to make a good impression and better service tourists and visitors to Singapore."