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Should we preserve Singlish?

Our Singlish vocabulary is what binds us and it deserves preservation, argues author Denyse Tessensohn in "Save our Shioik!" (May 26). The responses from readers vary ...

Letter from JO-ANNE LEE

LET US EXPLORE WITH SINGLISH
I AM proud to be a Singaporean, and one of the many who can speak the "proper" English that the Speak Good English Movement so highly desires in our society, and at the same time, the "lazy Singapore slang" that I have so much joy using while conversing with friends, fellow workers and clients — Singaporeans, of course.

Let me reiterate how unique we have become because of this.

Firstly, my sparse knowledge of Mandarin and dialects are all learnt from colloquial slang. I marvel at the fact that the Chinese speak a smattering of Malay and *vice versa*. We're so comfortable with the friendly banter and we don't realise how much we bond because of this.

Some of our sentences have hardly any English words in them. Case in point: "Wir lah! Bway tahan ah, so susah!" ("Goodness, it's impossible to do this because it's so difficult!")

I learned this on a trip to New York. While dining out with friends, I couldn't

help but overhear the conversation at the next table. I was trying to pinpoint if they were Malaysians or Singaporeans because of their use of "lah", "alamak" and other colloquial expressions. It was only when they mentioned Tampines that I knew.

So, Ms Tessensohn is spot-on in saying that we share a similar lingo with our northern neighbours. I felt an instant sense of Singapore identity in that foreign land and we struck up a conversation as if we were old friends.

The other unique trait that I take pride in is how effortlessly most Singaporeans can switch between formal and informal settings, and between languages. While there are those who choose not to use English while conversing, most are bilingual and can make do with simple words.

I agree that teachers must know the proper structure, syntax and semantics of English, but I'm not sure how the notion of "native speakers" (as raised in earlier discussions) comes into play.

An Italian man speaking English may not speak in perfect sentences, but I still understand him.



I have nothing against using Malay or Hokkien words occasionally, with close friends and relatives. Indeed they do lend an air of intimacy and sense of identity with those we are close to.

However, if we use these words in a business or work context, we will not be able to cultivate a brand of English that is understood throughout the English-speaking world.

We end up corrupting the language and no other English speakers would understand us. Do we really want that? I suggest that we keep the "shioik" at home.

I love Singlish and I believe our history is too short for us to attempt to cut it down before it fully evolves.

My suggestion is this: Teach Singaporeans the proper rules of English, but allow us to explore with Singlish.

That's what creativity is about, isn't it?

Letter from BENJAMIN GAN

LEAVE THE 'SHIOK' AT HOME

I READ with mixed feelings Ms Denyse Tessensohn's commentary.

On one hand, these words are key identity markers, while on the other, they will add another banana skin on the slippery road to better English.

Letter from FLORA ANG LAY HUI

TEACH GOOD ENGLISH FIRST
ALTHOUGH these words and phrases "should be pro-actively preserved and promoted with the younger generation", as Ms Tessensohn argues, I think the younger generation should have a strong foundation in standard English first. Then they can move on to familiarise themselves with our colloquial English.

Being exposed to standard English at a young age is akin to inculcating the right values at a tender age. This way, our rich cultural heritage will be preserved and our younger generation will also be able to speak the international language well.