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Don't let Singlish distract from goal of good English

Letter from **KOH TAI ANN**
Chairperson, Speak Good English Movement



I REFER to the commentary by Ms Denyse Tessensohn, "Save Our *Shioki*" (May 26).

Singlish, for various reasons, can be attractive to Singaporeans, not least because of the various colourful, even crude non-English loan words from other local languages and dialects. But this should not distract Singaporeans from learning to use and from speaking good English or Singapore Standard English.

Even we Singaporeans sometimes have difficulty understanding the local "pidgin", including non-standard pronunciation of English words. The writer, who is author of *1,000 Most Mispronounced Words*, would know this well.

While we agree that Singaporeans relate emotionally to and often use Singlish words and phrases when with their friends and families, let us not get distracted by the debate over Singlish. The Speak Good English Movement's objective is to promote good spoken (and written) English, such that Singaporeans will be intelligible when using English and can be understood both locally and internationally.

At the recent launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2005, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reinforced this point in his speech: "When we speak to one another or email one another or write papers or articles, we should use standard English. When our English becomes too mutated, we become unintelligible to others. We then have a big problem."

He added: "If instead, we speak in a dialect which only some Singaporeans can understand, then we are handicapping ourselves and cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world."

Not everyone can code-switch with ease. The Prime Minister noted: "It is much easier to speak proper English all the time than to speak sloppily most of the time and then switch to proper English for formal occasions. Because to do the latter is almost like learning two languages."

"We will learn the wrong grammar and language habits when we speak sloppy English and when the occasion arises for us to speak proper English, we will make mistakes without realising it."

On behalf of the Speak Good English Movement, I encourage all Singaporeans to Speak Up, Speak Out and Speak Well! Practice makes perfect.

Those wishing to know more about the movement's activities, resources for improving English and my discussion of issues such as those raised above, including the connection between language and literature, can log on to www.goodenglish.org.sg