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NEWS

Better English calls for better teaching



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SINGAPORE TODAY

ASK a poor speaker of English to repeat his last sentence using Standard Singapore English. If he cannot, it is not because he is clinging defiantly to the use of poor English.

For the most part, those who speak badly know that they do, but do not know how to change.

Do you know anyone who is thrilled at their lack of English proficiency? Those who are not proficient are belittled unfairly when the problem lies elsewhere. And it has nothing to do with the use of Singlish.

It is pointless to exhort people to "Speak Good English" when, generally speaking, they cannot do so because they were badly taught.

In the 1960s, few people spoke English or even had much in the way of educational opportunities. The privileged few spoke English well because they were well taught. But in those days, there was less emphasis on science and maths.

Then it was decided that it was vital to arm people with the "hard" skills and relevant knowledge needed to earn a living. Quality suffered, but more people were taught English.

Today, we have a situation — similar to that in Hong Kong — where there are many people who know English but who speak it badly.

Linguists cannot pinpoint exactly when Singlish emerged, except to say that its rise is linked to the generations that went to school post-independence.

By 1977, falling standards in English had been noted at the ministerial level. Still, even in 1985 it was thought that a 50 per cent pass mark in English (not a second language) was possible for students facing university entry.

An all-out effort to raise the standard of spoken English was launched in 1987, when it was announced that English was to be the language of instruction in schools.

So, it was not that we did not try. Even the disastrous experiment — which seemed so promising to English language teachers around the world — of teaching English using the communicative method (which de-emphasised the rules of grammar in favour of practical communication), was meant to promote better English.

However, an *ST Interactive* survey that was conducted last month found that while many Singaporeans are comfortable speaking English, 42 per cent of those surveyed felt their English was not that



It is pointless to exhort Singaporeans to "Speak Better English", as has been done repeatedly over the years, when many people cannot do so because they were badly taught.

good, leading to difficulties communicating with their foreign counterparts.

Those surveyed use English a lot of the time. What of those who don't?

We have lost a generation, maybe two. We might as well recognise that fact. Some improvement is possible for those who want to improve. But only if they are given the affordable training it will take and opportunities to practice and to have their errors corrected. People would appreciate the encouragement and nurturing.

I have taught keen adult students at the Institute of Technical Education who would love the opportunity to study under well-spoken teachers. And they would be willing to do so even after a hard day's work and to pay the fees out of their own pockets.

But for the next generation, proper education has to begin in kindergarten, with well-trained teachers. And there has to be follow through.

At least the Speak Good English Movement has the Government's backing, and there is greater awareness of this problem after years of warnings from committed English teachers.

As one of these teachers, my nightmare has come true: Some Singaporeans insist that the way they speak is acceptable simply because, embarrassingly, they cannot speak any other way.

Grammar should be made a part of the language curriculum starting in primary school. As should the study of literature, even if it is not an examination subject. How else are we to gain an appreciation of the beauty of the language?

I have listened to teenagers with their "short-hand speech": Punctuated with squeals, snorts, giggles and sound effects such as "boh!" and "eee...".

I wonder whether passionate discussions and heated debates among friends and colleagues on "important matters" — the afterlife, Czechoslovakia, sports, music — will become "cool" again.

Such discussions were among the ways the people I knew honed their language skills. When we took part in such debates, our ideas had to be sufficiently well-focused and well-expressed or they would be shot down unceremoniously.

Reviving these discussions is the next challenge.

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