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Good English drive focuses on services

Frontline staff, especially foreigners and older S'poreans, are targets

By Tessa Wong

'SORRY ma'm no hap size, but gotch bigger one. You wan?'

Are retail staff here really speaking English? For the millions of tourists visiting Singapore every year who are wondering, the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) wants to improve the situation.

This year the annual push to improve language skills will focus on the service and retail sectors.

It has found a partner in the Singapore Retailers' Association (SRA), which has launched a series of communication courses for frontline service staff called Service English for Retail Professionals.

While it is open to all, the programme is targeting foreigners and older Singaporeans who are not fluent in English, said Ms Lau Chuen Wei, executive director of the association.

Besides learning how to greet and handle customers in grammatical English, participants, especially those not from here, will also learn how to understand customers speaking in Singapore's uniquely non-standard English.

'Some foreign staff get scared by Singlish, because it's different from what they were taught,' said Ms Lau.

The push is part of this year's more aggressive approach in getting the public to speak better English.

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, chairman of the movement, said it is vital that English standards be improved, with events coming up such as the F1 night race and Youth Olympic Games, which will put Singapore in the international spotlight.

Aside from the helping hand given to service staff, proficiency tests and workplace literacy classes will be available for free to anyone at selected libraries, thanks to a new partnership between the Workforce Development Agency and National Library Board.

There are also classes at the British Council, English lessons on the radio channel 938Live, Web portal Stomp's launch of its second English As It Is Broken book, and campaign advertisements on taxis and MRT trains.

The Straits Times and SGEM are organising the Inspiring Teacher of English Award, to be given in October.

The movement will be officially launched next week by Minister Lim Boon Heng from the Prime Minister's Office. He will reveal the results of a survey on how effective the eight-year-old movement has been and perceptions of the importance of speaking good English.