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## Proper English? When setting permits

I LAUD the effort of the people in the Speak Good English campaign. Their motive, if I understand correctly, is to help upgrade the English speaking ability of service staff, so Singapore can better serve tourists in communication with them. Indeed, speaking clear English is an ambassador to a successful tourism movement. I recall times when I felt I could have been better served overseas, especially when I needed clarification before deciding what to buy.

When it comes to speaking among local people, especially in non-business settings, many of us find difficulty. On the one hand, we know we have to speak grammatically correct English; on the other, we have to put the other party at ease, and not appear snobbish by uttering words and sentences which are regarded to be of foreign origin because we are not English.

I am Chinese and 48 years old. In reality, many local conversations are peppered with dialect and 'Jack Neo/Phua Chu Kang jargon'. These sorts of 'rojak' sentences promote closeness. If social conversation is all about closeness, then insistence of using only grammatically correct English in society goes against the flow of things.

I am an English tuition teacher. In class, my students are to use proper English and I make an effort to correct their 'lahs' and 'lors', but deep in me I know the key to success is for one to be able to switch between proper English and Singlish when the situation calls for it. Singlish is another language for me to use to converse, to go about daily life with comfort and ease, unlike English. Between the two, Singlish is less tedious to use.

I am of the view that it is an uphill task, almost like reaching for the stars, to achieve a perfect standard of spoken English. To the Englishman, English is his mother tongue and his society requires him to speak only mother tongue to be socially pleasant - but we are not.

All is not lost. At least we declare to the world that we are trying to serve it better, to let ourselves be better understood, and we will go all the way to use proper English because we welcome the world to our beautiful island of multiracial 'dissent'.

I shall speak proper English when the setting permits.

Sio Puay Soon