

Headline	BAD ENGLISH? DON'T PRAY, PRAY		
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XTRA LANGUAGE DEBATE

BAD ENGLISH? DON'T PRAY, PRAY

If we don't care about the standard, we could one day be buried by it

RAVI VELOO
news@newstoday.com.sg

LET'S find a good cemetery plot for the English language in Singapore and bury it under a gryphon with a headstone, which says: "Why you so like dat?"

Or maybe hang a picture over it of Mr Phua Chu Kang, the finest contractor in yellow boots in Singapore, JB, and some say Batam, with his famous killer line: "Don't pray, pray!"

The final nail in the coffin for standard English could well be the poll by Singapore Polytechnic's School of Business, which revealed this week that nearly half the people between 25 and 29 years old don't think good English is important.

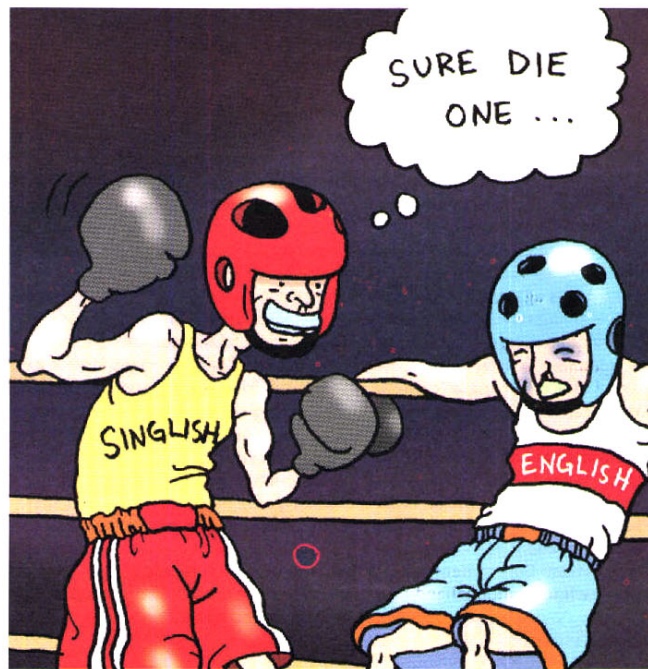
As for the rest of those polled, four out of 10 said the same.

My hat (and trousers) off to the vocal champions of Singlish. You have won. How will Singapore ever come back from the edge, now that we have looked into the abyss and found it quite acceptable indeed?

It's one thing when people can't speak a language well, and want to learn. It's quite another when they say they simply don't care.

International-standard English is in the ICU here, breathing its last to the background of an Avril Lavigne cover of *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, its few faithful friends waiting anxiously outside the room, discussing its fate — in Singlish.

The champions of Singlish — *aiyah*, the broken English that educated people mimic among their friends — *lah/meh/dah* — say it is a colourful homegrown dialect with its own grammar. And even



more fabulous, that it's different from the way Malaysians speak.

That alone could win an Olympic gold in the flyweight section for Best Argument Out Of Your Head With No Evidence.

Remember, these are the same people who say that only educated people can be said to speak Singlish, because they have the ability to speak better English when they want to, something they call code-switching.

In other (English) words, when an illiterate hawker says: "Why you so like dat?", even the Singlish champions say that is broken English. But when an educated person says exactly the same

words, it's Singlish.

This would be a fun nutella-with-fudge argument if the consequences weren't so serious. Singapore isn't just fighting the world for table tennis medals. We're brawling for jobs. And yet half the troops don't think English is important.

The rot began when we lowered the standards to fill up slots. In the 1970s, there were outspoken lecturers criticising plummeting standards, pointing out that the universities were accepting undergraduates who could hardly write or speak decent English.

What happened since?

We let in more of the same and then

sent them out to teach.

The Education Ministry has raised the red flag but its responses are uninspired. One of the things it has done is to bring back retired English teachers to mentor younger teachers. So wait, now we need English teachers to teach the English teachers so that they can teach English?

We all support any work for any retiree, bless their souls. But the logic of the move defies, *um*, logic. Weren't these English teachers from the same batch that would have taught the new English teachers who now need mentoring?

Maybe the question we should have asked is how did we arrive in the Bermuda Triangle in the first place?

Perhaps the answer would be that in some key areas, we need more than manpower numbers. Especially now that we can import talent freely.

Wouldn't it be better for the country if our universities take the line, okay, you can still get in with lousy English, but you had better improve if you want to graduate. Take some lessons. Read a book. Have an aspiration.

Tell them to take all the time they need. Other countries do allow undergrads to sit and resit their papers because the emphasis is on learning more than testing. Let's not rush them out the door.

And then when we send some of these grads to teach, we could lift the standards for passing grades in the schools too.

There are many countries in the world that have grown without an international business language like English. But we know we're not in that position. If we don't care about our standards, one day we may not be burying the language — it may well be the other way around.

The writer is a media consultant.