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By George! We haven't got it



► Colin Goh

IF SO many of you are writing in to me to comment on a topic, I guess it must either be one that's important to you, or you're sadists who just want to see me *langgar* official policy again.

Anyway, just to get you off my case, here's my two cents (or should I say "tuppence") on the current proposal to import more native English speakers to improve the perceived inadequacies of our youngsters.

Some of you may find this odd, considering I wrote the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* and am also behind the Channel Cosmo Beng podcasts on TalkingCock.com, but I actually support the teaching of better English, or to be more precise, the better teaching of English.

My only real beef is the censorship of dialogue in the media to conform to grammatical standards, because all it creates are movies and television shows with unbelievable characters who spout unbelievable things.

I certainly don't advocate bad grammar in business communications or official letters, so get it straight: I love the English language and I do want kids to appreciate how versatile, powerful and useful a tool it can be.

But I'm deeply sceptical about the "exposure" theory of language — that the solution is simply to expose kids to "proper" usage.

For example, many years of native English teachers didn't do very much for Hong Kongers, and here, despite being saturated with American programming, we still don't speak like Los Angelenos.

I'm also concerned about the cultural implications of importing foreigners to tell us the proper way to do things.

My mother, a former English teacher herself, still rolls her eyes about the last time we imported native speakers, some of whom had no teaching qualifications whatsoever — some were even just supermarket cashiers — and the only reason they were *recruited* was 'cos they could na'er on loike some bloke from Sarf London or summat, in-nit? And if our English standards now aren't up to scratch, well, then they didn't really help, did they?

So we need real teachers of English, not just folks who happen to be English, or who speak English grammatically.

We need people with the right pedagogical training and understanding of English, and not just geography or P.E. teachers who get arrowed because the schools are under-resourced.

It doesn't really matter if they are local or international — but they must be culturally sensitive. I'm just concerned that we'll be re-inscribing colonial stereotypes if we play+ the part of the savages who need the Mighty Bwana to civilise us.

We could easily undo decades of struggling to find value in ourselves if we become an SPG nation and re-associate our former colonial masters with cultural superiority. Our challenge, as Raja Rao said so powerfully in his foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*, is how "to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own".

All of this led me to wonder: I know a lot of good, local English speakers, many of whom speak even better than some of my Brit university mates, that is, we have a pool of Singaporeans who could teach our kids English, only with fewer cultural risks.

The trouble, as I discovered when I went down the list of friends who were really "powerful" in English — people who weren't just able to speak it grammatically but who could wield it like a weapon — is that the vast majority became lawyers, not teachers.

And it's not because they particularly love the law or its salary either. Many have left the legal profession to do other less lucrative stuff — selling cakes, flowers, writing, and, um, making films.

But when I called them up, few were willing to enter the teaching profession and share their skills. There was the strong perception that the life of teachers is exceptionally tough — there are few financial incentives, little admin support, and it's not something that middle-class parents encourage their high-achieving children to do.

So here's something for the Ministry of Education to think about — is there any way to attract our own English speakers rather than importing a load of 'Enry 'Igginses?

We really should look to ourselves for our own solutions. There's a phenomenon in psychology called the Pygmalion effect — when people perform better if they're made to think they're clever, rather than just dumb receptacles.

As I recall, Pygmalion was also a play about one native English speaker trying to teach another native English speaker that his version was superior to hers, only to learn that what made her a lady wasn't being taught to speak like one, but being treated like one.