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» SPEAKING GOOD ENGLISH

# My tutor the TV



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I DON'T know why I speak good English. I don't know why I write good English. But in light of the recent angst over the topic, I feel obliged to say something. (God willing, it will be grammatical.)

Anything analysed to death will die — that has always been my motto. But the English debate has obviously stirred up a hornet's nest as letters continue to stream in to The Straits Times' Forum page — not all, I might add, are syntactically sound. Like food and CPF, English is a topic that strikes at the heart of many Singaporeans.

I have read the discourses and the analyses and witnessed the bristling over "native English speakers" having a better command of the language than us. I have scratched my head.

I don't claim to have the answers but I do know my grasp of the language is not based on grammatical rules or any deep awareness of diphthongs or triphthongs. At some point, yes, I must have had some basic education in sentence construction in school. But I don't mull over verbs and tenses before I open my mouth.

In fact, it was not in school that I learned good English. Rather, it was in school that I picked up bad English.

Because my peers counted from one to "tree", I dropped the "h" sound from that number. Because they pronounced "restaurant" as "res-TOR-un" instead of "rester-ront", I followed suit.

Even my teachers were culpable. I had a Home Economics teacher who, pointing at an indigo-coloured tome, would ask me to pass her the "broo" book. She also told us to pour the "myuk" into the scrambled eggs and commanded us to "lub the black-blodd" after class.

But they had no deleterious effects on me because I knew they were wrong. Why? Because I had already had a solid grounding in the language by the time I set foot in the classroom.

While my parents are not fluent in English, I had an uncle who was. But I also had my books and my television. I was brought up during a time when TV was not seen as evil and parents were not made to feel guilty for using it as a babysitter. So I would sit for hours in front of the goggle box, absorbing everything, for better or worse.

Prime time then was not dominated by local productions. So I took in English as spoken by American friends such as Charlie's Angels, Starsky And Hutch and Mork And Mindy; as well as by English friends like Dad's Army, Poldark and The Duchess Of Duke Street.

They did not teach me the rules, but the things they said sounded wonderful and correct and I picked them up subconsciously. More importantly, they showed me how to use the language in a lively, entertaining manner. I instinctively picked up cadences and syntax.

I also lapped up children's programmes like The Wonderful World Of Disney and cartoons like Bambi and Sleeping Beauty. Two of my staples were Sesame Street and The Electric Company — because they were American educational programmes which catered to that country's large Hispanic population, I also inadvertently learned how to count from one to 10 in Spanish.

To a large extent, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew is right. If I had grown up with Phua Chu Kang as my prime-time diet, I would be speaking a decidedly different type of English today.

In the midst of all the babble, everybody agrees that a basic understanding of the principles of English is necessary.

Where the pundits part ways is who should be the purveyor of English, and how it should be purveyed.

I think kids should be nabbed when they are young and impressionable. It is never too early to start them on the path to good grammar and pronunciation; or good anything, for that matter.

Kids, however, have the at-

tention span of a gnat. They need to be taught discipline, and this is where the classroom and educational policies come in.

But they also pick up a whole lot more when they are having fun. I picked up practically everything I know today from TV, movies and books. I know a friend who, while in law school, picked up valuable tips for her thesis from watching LA Law.

Today, educational TV programmes have become more sophisticated. A very young child can pick up a lot of good from shows such as Blue's Clues and Dora The Explorer.

But alas, television as a medium has become hopelessly fractured. And prime time is filled with programmes that do not always promote good English.

Still, parents today have a godsend in the form of home entertainment. They can stock up on DVDs and do some good old family bonding by watching a movie with the kids. The idea is to expose them to idiomatic English so they can speak it naturally and know when something sounds right or wrong.

I know it all sounds so simple. But, really, it is. And I am trying to follow my own advice by brushing up on my abysmal Mandarin.

Mind you, I did not make up my mind to do this. It just happened by chance when I started engaging in regular karaoke sessions with my friends. I would pick the English songs while they would pick Chinese numbers.

As they sang, I would follow the lyrics on the big screen and soon learned to connect sounds to the characters. Paired with lilting melodies, the tunes, as well as the words, would stick in my head. I would get my friends to explain the difficult words to me and, over time, my Mandarin has steadily improved.

Amazingly, karaoke has accomplished what 10 years of Second Language classes failed to do — made an alien language fun and come alive.

I am, of course, a decidedly slower learner than the average kid. But if I can now master Sandy Lam's Zi Shao Hai You Ni, I don't see why our kids cannot pick up good English.

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