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New language programme piloted as part of review to close language divide among pupils

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TWO out of every three Primary 1 pupils at Woodlands Primary come from non-English speaking homes, but after just half a year on a new English language programme, these students are eager to read and confident enough to ask questions and be heard in class.

The school is one of 30 across the island piloting a new Education Ministry (MOE) programme to develop in children confidence and love for English through reading.

Instead of lessons on grammar and punctuation, the students read a book together and learn about the language by asking questions, writing short stories, role playing or using puppets to act out the storylines.

Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew said yesterday it was one of several areas that the MOE-led English Language Review Committee had identified so far since starting its work last September to close the language divide among pupils.

The review committee will look at three areas: syllabus and the way it is taught, teacher training and development, and how agencies like the National Library Board and the media can play a bigger role.

Speaking at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement at the National Library, he stressed that the review was not

meant to fix any perceived decline in the standard of English among students.

In fact, a 2001 international literacy test had shown that Singapore's 10-year-olds who come from English-speaking homes read with more understanding and wrote better English than their peers in several other countries, including Britain and the United States.

Among the older cohorts, the number of O-level passes and distinctions for English has been steadily going up.

But he admitted that students' abilities in English vary considerably, depending on language backgrounds at home.

For example, half of the pupils who entered Primary 1 in January use English as the main language at home, while 37 per cent use only some English at home, and the rest, not at all.

The wide range of language abilities is also evident from the

GOOD TEACHERS NEED NOT BE NATIVE SPEAKERS

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MINISTER OF STATE (EDUCATION) LUI TUCK YEW, saying that enlarging the pool of good English teachers here need not mean hiring native speakers from English-speaking countries

feedback from teachers who reported that many students, especially in neighbourhood schools, tend to use Singlish or a mix of English and mother tongue languages with friends.

The minister said the aim of the review is to bring about a minimum standard of English among all students, so that they will be able to use English comfortably in everyday situations and for work.

But the recommendations, which will be released in October, will also enable those who are good in the language to develop a high level of proficiency or even acquire a mastery of the language that will put them on a par with the best of the best in English-speaking countries.

Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui added that schools here had a core group of good English teachers who are highly proficient in the language and who can teach very well. The review committee will look at how this pool of teachers can be enlarged.

And this may not mean hiring more native speakers from Britain, Australia or other English-speaking countries.

He said: "What we need in our schools is more good teachers. I don't particularly care where they come from. They can be retired teachers who can be enticed back to teach, or from overseas."

In the same vein, he said the discussion should not focus on whether English standards among the young have declined.

"To me the relevant question is, 'Can we be better? Should we be better?' The answer must be 'yes', given the context we operate in, being a globalised economy and the node that we want Singapore to be in, in this economy."

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PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

NEW LEARNING: Princess Elizabeth Primary School pupils read a story with teacher Chew Tuck Wah, 47, as part of a pilot programme that focuses on basic reading skills.

Free copies of Sunday Times for needy students

SUNDAYS will never be the same, at least not for close to 50,000 students from low-income families.

As part of the Speak Good English Movement, The Straits Times has agreed to deliver copies of its weekend edition, The Sunday Times, to these students for a year. The students will be identified by their schools, which can use money from their Opportunity Fund to pay for the newspapers.

The Opportunity Fund is the Education Ministry's \$48 million scheme for underprivileged chil-

dren, under which schools are granted up to \$150,000 each to assist needy students. They can use the money to subsidise enrichment programmes or other schemes that will expand their learning.

Starting this Sunday, The Sunday Times will also run a column in its Gen Y pages called English As It Is Broken, in collaboration with the Education Ministry.

It will highlight some of the commonly misused English phrases.

MARIA ALMENDAR