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PHOTO: LIM SUI THIN

Why youths prefer Singlish in day-to-day speech

► Nur Amira Abdul Karim

SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD Ang Wei Kiat tops his class in maths and science but flounders in English. Although the Secondary 4 student's Mandarin conversation at home is sprinkled with English, he has difficulty expressing himself fully in English.

Wei Kiat admits that his grasp of English grammar is poor and his vocabulary weak.

He does not speak "high-class English" to his friends and family.

Says Wei Kiat: "Wait people think I very action."

He also makes a distinction between the English he speaks and the "school type" of English.

"The speaking no need to be so good mah."

His best friend, Ong Chee Keong, 17, agrees.

The polytechnic student is fluent in Mandarin but speaks mostly Singlish to his multiracial mix of friends. An aspiring chemical engineer, Chee Keong does not think speaking Singlish hinders communication. In fact, he believes he is understood better by his friends.

"We people are heartlanders mah... we not going to be English teacher or MP or what, so what for? Singlish can already."

Students like Chee Keong and Wei Kiat are among the many individuals whom the Speak Good English Movement is targeting. The movement, which is in its sixth year, aims to encourage all Singaporeans to make a conscious effort to use standard English by following basic grammatical

rules, syntax and pronunciation of standard English so as to be universally understood.

Mrs Joy Lee, a master teacher in the South Cluster and a volunteer ambassador for the Speak Good English Movement, believes that youths' perception about speaking good English has to change.

"She says: "Speaking good English is not about speaking high-class English. It is about speaking in a manner that is acceptable to the speaker and the context you are in. Speaking good English is about clarity."

Nonetheless, the movement has received a lukewarm response from

the youths. GEN Y spoke to. Some youths, like Chee Keong and Wei Kiat, believe that Singlish is sufficient as a medium of communication among Singaporeans, whom they interact with daily.

Says Chee Keong: "Everyone talk English everyday. I know what he say, he know what I say."

Wei Kiat agrees, adding: "Some words cannot translate to good English, right or not? If you try to translate, then lose meaning too. These words are bonding."

However, Wei Kiat does believe in the importance of knowing standard English. To him, the two versions of English belong to different realms —

standard English is for school.

Many youths echo his sentiments. Architecture student Jamilah Abdul Kassim, 21, believes that the Speak Good English Movement is useful for reminding the public of the proper way of speaking and writing English, but that Singlish will never be eclipsed by standard English.

She says: "It's not practical to expect young people to speak proper English all the time. If we all start speaking like BBC commentators, it would be a bit strange and we'd lose our unique identity."

Apart from encouraging youths to speak and write standard English, the

Speak Good English Movement also seeks to reduce the use of slang and abbreviations made popular by youth culture and instant messaging.

YOUTHS, however, do not think that using slang and abbreviations undermines their use of proper English.

Ahmad Ali Haziq, 18, a junior college student, believes that slang is merely used for fun and that youths would not confuse it with proper English that is acceptable for formal use.

He says: "I say 'wassup?' or 'happens?' which are equivalent to 'how are you?' to my friends. But I will certainly not write that down in an es-

say. I doubt any other student would."

Yet, while detractors abound, some youths are conscientious about using standard English in daily conversations and in school.

Some, like Cathy Tong, 18, claim they do not even use Singlish, slang or abbreviations. The sociology student from the University of Sydney says she believes more should be done to encourage young people to give up low-register English.

Says Cathy: "English should be spoken in its pure form, with correct grammar and pronunciation. Speaking it well will get your message across and people will respect you for it. If Singaporean youths continue speaking broken English, nothing will distinguish us from the other youths from less proficient countries."

Others, like writer Danny Wong, 22, believe in the importance of "code switching" between Singlish and standard English.

He says: "It's about using the appropriate form of communication for different occasions. But in order to be able to switch, you have to have the option of switching in the first place."

"You have to be extremely competent in both Singlish and standard English as well, and not just in Singlish."

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— ONG CHEE KEONG, 17