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### **Singapore continues drive to 'Speak good English, lah'**

Government hopes program will help eradicate Singlish from vocabulary of teachers, parents, service industry workers as well as young people  
Associated Press

Laden with bags, Lorinda Hollis just wanted to go home when she hailed a taxi after a recent shopping excursion in Singapore. But she ended up lost and frustrated because she couldn't understand her Singaporean driver, even though he was speaking English.

"We were going in the wrong direction from my home, and he just kept saying, 'can, can?' and using expressions that confused me, like 'lah' and 'mah,'" said Hollis, 36, a Texan who moved to Singapore 15 months ago.

English is one of four official languages in this former British colony that is a hub of Asian trade and culture. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the others.

The linguistic diversity has meant the English spoken in Singapore has its own flavor, sometimes borrowing words and phrases from other languages, sometimes evolving unique new ones into a slang known locally as "Singlish."

In an effort to address communication snags, Singapore has just launched a drive to promote the use of proper English, saying the wealthy Southeast Asian city-state should strive to be understood globally.

The push targets teachers, parents, service industry workers and young people.

Retail assistants will be given pamphlets encouraging them to replace Singlish expressions with proper English.

The Singlish "Can fit or not?" should be replaced with "Is this the correct size?" the pamphlet suggests, and "No more this color" should become "We no longer have it in that color."

But speaking Singlish can be an effective way of building rapport with local customers, said May Lee, 24, a former sales assistant at a clothing store.

"Of course when I speak to foreigners I will speak proper English, but if I use 'atas' English with local customers, they will be put off," Lee said, using the Malay term "atas," which means highbrow.

The drive comes amid a debate about whether foreign native English speakers should teach the language in Singapore instead of locals. The suggestion raised concerns about jobs being lost to foreigners, and that students could be confused by foreign accents. Supporters said foreign native speakers could help strengthen the teaching of English and reduce the use of Singlish in classrooms.

English is the medium of instruction in Singapore, and is used in commerce and government. Decades of bilingual education policy have resulted in English literacy in three-quarters of Singaporeans - one of the highest rates in Asia.

Cambridge-educated Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says this has given Singapore a competitive advantage over its neighbors.

Over 7,000 multinational companies have offices in Singapore and a major destination for Asians who want to learn English. But with other Asian countries fast acquiring English proficiency, Singapore can't afford to let its standards slip, its leaders say.

Much-loved by its speakers, Singlish follows its own syntax and is peppered with Chinese, Malay and Indian expressions. For example, when Hollis' cab driver said "lah," he was using a Malay expression commonly attached to the end of a sentence for emphasis - though it is sometimes also used as an imperative, as in, "Do it, lah!"

The expression is not to be confused with "mah," a Chinese expression to say that something is self-evident. "I didn't understand a word he was saying," Hollis said. In Singlish, she might have expressed the same idea by saying "I catch no ball."