

Publication :	Sunday Times
Date :	06 August 2006
Page:	Page 28 and 29
Journalist :	Felix Soh
Headline:	What if we're understood only in S'pore, Malaysia and Batam?

What if we're understood only in S'pore, Malaysia and Batam?

Speaking good English is necessary if we are to be understood and not lose out, says Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew



► Felix Soh

INCIDENT No. 1: A Singaporean job applicant with good credentials is interviewed by an international panel.

His speech is peppered with expressions in colloquial, non-standard English. Panel members are flummoxed.

The Singaporean in the panel has to intervene and translate what the candidate says for the other members.

Incident No. 2: A Singaporean teacher studying for his degree in Australia works with fellow students to research a group project.

He single-handedly packages the research and prepares the presentation materials. It is a presentation with pizzazz. But he does not have sufficient confidence in his command of the English language to do the actual presentation.

Instead, he passes on the task of presenting the material to the Australian member of the group, who makes a big impact and takes the lion's share of the credit.

The crux of the issue and the moral of these stories: Be understood or you lose out.

It is for this reason that the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) has taken the bold step of adopting an unconventional tagline for this year's theme: Be understood, not just in Singapore, Malaysia and Batam.

It is a provocative tagline. And a cheeky one, too, citing as it does a catchphrase used by the eponymous protagonist of the television comedy, Phua Chu Kang, who brags about how good his contractor company is with the line: "Best in Singapore. JB



look at things not only from a single viewpoint but also from a variety of different viewpoints. That is what literature is able to do."

Emotional literacy

THE pragmatic, economic imperative for speaking a standard form of English is just one side of the coin.

There is another compelling reason. This is what RADM Lui termed "emotional literacy", which he said allowed Singaporeans to connect with a spectrum of people.

"If I may be allowed to paraphrase Rudyard Kipling, it is almost as if you are able to talk to kings and dine with the common man," he said.

"With language, we are able to express ourselves more deeply in different ways that will make us more interesting to people."

He added: "When we are able to, with the richness of language, convey the depths of emotion — whether it is the heights of happiness or maybe even despair, disappointment or setbacks — that allows for a richer relationship."

This is where cultivating a love for literature came in.

He explained: "Literature allows us to empathise better with people. Yes, we may not have experienced it ourselves, but we've read about it and we have reflected on it because we're exposed to a range of different books."

RADM Lui said that good literature is like walking through numerous galleries of life. When you enter into them, you are illuminated by something both enchanting and insightful.

"When you read widely, you're exposed to that range of emotions. It becomes a part of you though you have not experienced it for yourself.

"When you connect with people and communicate with them, you are better able to bond with them more at the emotional level

and some say Bahasa."

The show has been singled out for criticism because of its characters' use of non-standard English or, to be specific, Singlish.

The SGEM tagline paints a nightmare scenario, one of Singaporeans speaking a patois that is barely understood beyond the shores of Malaysia and Batam.

The two real-life case studies above were cited by the Minister of State for Education, Rear Admiral (NS) Lui Tuck Yew, to demonstrate how Singaporeans had been disadvantaged because their spoken English was not understood.

In an interview with The Sunday Times, he said Singaporeans were short-changing themselves by being strong in substance, but not in style.

"We tend to be very brusque and abrupt in the way we communicate. Sometimes, that doesn't allow room for that connectivity between people to take place.

"At the end of the day, what you want to be able to do with language skills is to communicate ideas and connect with people.

"If you don't develop your language skills fully and adequately, there is a tendency to short-change yourself. You can be a really good candidate, full of substance and yet you are not able to project yourself in a manner that leaves a favourable and lasting impression."

Imagine if Jack Neo's movies had been scripted in a Mandarin equivalent of Singlish and could not be understood in places like China and Taiwan, he said.

"That would be really sad."

English in schools

RADM Lui has been tasked with the job of improving the teaching and learning of the English language in schools.

He heads the ongoing English Language Review Committee



A RICHER RELATIONSHIP can be forged when one is able to express the depths of emotion, be it happiness or despair, says RADM Lui.

PHOTO: EDWIN KOO



On the value of literature

"We all hated to be Shylock. But the Shylock that was on stage was really able to connect with the audience. He pleaded a case as to why he had to act the way he did. I learnt through watching the play that sometimes you need to take multiple perspectives and to look at things not only from a single viewpoint but also from a variety of different viewpoints. That is what literature is able to do."

On the importance of communication

"If you don't develop your language skills fully and adequately, there is a tendency to short-change yourself. You can be a really good candidate, full of substance and yet you are not able to project yourself in a manner that leaves a favourable and lasting impression."

On the use of Singlish

"I'm concerned that a good number of our younger people are resorting to colloquial English. This form of English may be quaint. Yet those who do not live in Singapore will have great difficulty understanding it."

that focuses on three areas: syllabus and the way English is taught; teacher training and development; and how agencies like the National Library Board and the media can play a bigger role.

That he has a great passion for the job was evident during a one-hour interview.

Although a chemistry graduate who was in the science stream in junior college (where he did physics, chemistry and double maths), he confessed he now has great difficulty recalling the Periodic Table and the Laws of Thermodynamics — "simply because it is not something that I've used or am using in my daily life".

Literature, on the other hand, wasn't a subject he fell in love with right from the beginning. But gradually, inspired by "a very good teacher" in secondary school he did.

"So I dare say that the impact and influence of an outstanding teacher extends well beyond those few years that teacher and student come together," he said.

Shakespeare, even poetry, came alive for him and was raised to another level when he first attended his first Shakespeare play while studying in the United Kingdom.

He said: "That was The Merchant Of Venice, which I had studied in school. We all hated to be Shylock. But the Shylock that was on stage was really able to connect with the audience. He pleaded a case as to why he had to act the way he did."

"I learnt through watching the play that sometimes you need to take multiple perspectives and to

than at the intellectual angle."

Last month, RADM Lui announced that from next year, schools will offer a new English literature syllabus to encourage more students to take up the subject at O level.

Under the new syllabus, they can study the same texts for the N and O levels. Also, more Singaporean literature will be included in the list of O-level texts they can choose from, as students may find it easier to relate to local authors.

Standard of English

IS THE current standard of English in Singapore a cause for alarm?

RADM Lui replied: "The spectrum is actually quite wide. The standard used by some of our best students and teachers certainly ranks very well, even if I compared it with what I've been exposed to in the United Kingdom or when I was living in the US.

"But having said that, it is certainly not uniform throughout society. All I have to do is sit in some coffee shop in the constituency and interact with some of the younger people, and I get quite a range and quite a mix."

"I don't want to say whether it has declined or not, because I'm not sure I've evidence of that. In a sense, some of the international benchmarks that we've been using show that we've done reasonably well."

But he added: "Yet at the same time, when I periodically dip into the different places frequented by people, I'm concerned. I'm concerned that a good number of our younger people are resorting to colloquial English."

"This form of English may be quaint. Yet those who do not live in Singapore will have great difficulty understanding it."

The problem, he said, should

>>> CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

be approached from two angles.

One is to encourage Singaporeans to speak standard English — certainly in an international setting — rather than lapse into colloquial terms and into Singlish. By speaking standard English, the chances of Singaporeans being understood are much higher, he pointed out.

The other angle is for the Ministry of Education to cultivate oral skills in primary schools, especially during “show and tell” sessions.

“We want to develop in our students from a young age the tendency not only to be prepared to ask questions but also stand up and make comments and put across their points of view,” he said. They should be able to do this in as interesting a manner as possible to engage the audience.

He stressed the importance of stories and story-telling, saying: “There’s so much information out there. We need to be able to present what we want to say in a manner that stays in the mind of the listener.”

Role of teachers

TEACHERS obviously play the pivotal role in raising the standard of English, with parents and the media as active partners.

A point made regularly by principals and heads of department was that the responsibility for the standard of English does not rest just with English language teachers.

During the entire school day, the kind of language used by the mathematics, science and other teachers also matters.

RADM Lui recalled how, during a visit to a primary school, a mother tongue head told him even mother tongue teachers needed a certain standard of English.

“This was because, like it or not, they sometimes need to revert to English in order to bring certain points across or explain certain things to their students,” he said.

“She said she didn’t want the work being done to raise the level of English undermined by certain teachers not equipped with the right set of tools and skills to convey messages.”

As such, the focus of the ongoing English Language Review is not on English language teachers alone but also

what the National Institute of Education (NIE) can do to raise the overall standard of English among all teachers.

But RADM Lui pointed out: “I don’t want to leave the impression that the level of English among our teachers is alarming. That would be grossly unfair.

“The levels of our best teachers certainly rank very highly. We’re able to train our own debaters so that they are of world standing. We were in the semi-finals of the World Debate recently, losing out only to the eventual champions.

“If you look at the leading benchmark reading exercise, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), involving a random selection of people in our schools, we have done well. That is testimony to the very good work that teachers are doing in schools.”

He added: “But it is also fair to say that that proficiency is uneven. We need to recognise that. This then begs the perennial question of whether we need native English-speaking teachers and so on. The term we really want to use is that we need highly proficient English teachers.

“I reiterate the point that I’ve no particular preference where they come from. But I know, having looked at some of the data, that we are not producing enough of our own.”

The subject of Singlish

IN ANY discussion on the standard of English in Singapore, the controversial and often emotional subject of Singlish invariably rears its ugly head.

In a Sunday Times report last week, teenagers said they preferred speaking Singlish in their conversations, without realising that many of them didn’t have the oral skills to code-switch from Singlish to standard English.

There is a discussion thread in Stomp, The Straits Times’ interactive website, that is titled Make Singlish Our National Language.

Asked to comment on the negative impact of Singlish on the standard of English in Singapore, RADM Lui said: “It is a controversial subject. Therefore, we want to treat it carefully. I know a lot of people have an emotional attachment to Singlish. I can quite understand it and yet I think it is damaging to our efforts to speak standard English.

“We go back to the point that we want our people to be able to speak standard English because of the opportunities that are then available to them not only locally, but internationally.”

He said that the percentage of Singaporeans able to code-switch effectively is very, very small.

“We cannot say that we are already so highly proficient in our use of standard English that we can afford to code-switch. That’s being championed by a small minority who may be able to do so, yet do not fully understand some of the difficulties that others have.”

Singlish is not something that should be encouraged, because it confuses the general public, he said.

“What we want to expound is for people to become proficient users of standard English, used and spoken in a way that allows them to be understood internationally. That’s the benchmark we want to try to attain. Not accented, but spoken in a way that’s simple yet grammatically correct, with proper sentence structures. That’s really what we want to aim for.

“If we confuse ourselves with Singlish, it is almost like learning a different language, even though it may come naturally. We will then have less room and less time for good, proper, standard English.”

And what about PCK, alias Mr Singlish?

Said RADM Lui: “I watch Phua Chu Kang. I’m amused by it. But I think it will be really unfortunate if we take this exaggeration and allow our young to believe that this really is the way we want our people to speak under any and all circumstances.”

He suggested that it would be useful for teachers and students on the one hand, and parents and their children on the other, to take episodes of PCK and discuss the issues involved.

“They can say, ‘All right. Yes, we’ve been entertained, but so what? Do you want to go through life speaking like that?’ And even if this is acceptable for a contractor, and I’m not saying it is, is that all you aspire to?”

He added: “Don’t forget, our contractors are also fighting for jobs internationally. If you speak like Phua Chu Kang, you are not going to get deals.

“You will get a lot of laughs. And they are not laughing with you. They are laughing at you.”