

Voices

i say

FOR THE YOUNG, 'SINGLISH' RULES

DENYSE TESSENSOHN

FOR everything that we are prepared to do to improve the standards of spoken English in Singapore, I fear that the majority of the younger generation see no need for it.

Teaching academically-brilliant pupils at a premier school, I was disheartened to note how their problem with basic pronunciation was not uniformly a matter of importance to them.

A sprinkling wrote that “formal speech” was a useful asset with which to make a good impression; but most were confident that they would be understood locally and saw no real need to improve.

In contrast, pupils from China, India and Indonesia had a different attitude. They were deadly keen to know all their mistakes and how to improve.

They distanced themselves from “Singlish” and chose the American or English models to emulate.

I was reminded of the People’s Re-

public of China students I used to teach in their intensive English classes prior to entering university here: They all already knew phonetics!

While their vocabulary was lacking, their pronunciation was easier to correct by pinpointing the exact sound they were garbling.

Yet, six months after entering university, they ruefully told me that “Singlish” was so rampant among their teachers and classmates that their own spoken English had deteriorated.

It makes you think.

We are surrounded by highly successful poor speakers with big cars and expensive tastes.

How far did the well-spoken English language teachers go?

If your parents, family and friends speak colloquial English all the time and cannot do otherwise, three problems have to be immediately faced.

One, you probably speak as they do, and to admit it is tantamount to admitting there is something “wrong” with you and them. This should not be the message; there is nothing to be ashamed of, and it is not your fault.

Two, if you are able to speak “beautifully”, they sound pretty awful in contrast and soon may sneer at you for your “false accent”.

Three, assuming you can find a teacher who can correct you, how much can you afford to pay more teachers to reinforce your improved spoken English?

This uphill battle for those who really want to improve is exacerbated by a

certain deliberate use of “Singlish”, which is seen as a defiant flouting of what is perceived as yet another new rule: To speak “Good English”.

It is also thought to be “cool” to flaunt a sub-cultural “language” that is clearly out of sync with what adult authority figures require. I am aware of pupils who deliberately use colloquial English when they are capable of much better standard English.

We must not be complacent in this war to restore good English to Singaporeans.

Just because the Ministry of Education is initiating and backing several programmes to teach grammar and invest in teacher training, does not guarantee us a population that will, in a few years, be speaking correctly and well.

Many good teachers admit they speak rather poorly – at least, they will willingly go for re-training.

There are many others who think they speak well when even their pupils recognise their mistakes – there is a serious problem with helping these teachers improve.

Colloquial English must not be condemned as it has its place. But plain good English – with grammar and pronunciation in place – is not “formal English” nor is it yet cherished by the young.

So much rests on the younger generation wanting to speak better English. If they cannot be convinced that it is desirable and possible, we will fail.

The writer is an author and educator.