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NEWS COMMENT

PARENTS' ROOT OF PROBLEM?

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THE best thing that has emanated from the annual "Speak Good English" movement is not how important the use of proper English is in today's world, but instead, the truth of how badly our standard of the language has deteriorated.

An old chestnut, the campaign, first launched in 2000, generates the usual round of debates on related issues such as the proliferation of Singlish, recruitment of native speakers as trainers and, more recently, foreign workers with limited command of the language. Unfortunately, like most campaigns, the exercise is as good as it lasts. What next, one may ask.

This year's campaign targets young people. Going by the laments over the years of the declining standard of spoken English here, it is the natural group to target.

The committee rightly recognises the changing environment our youth are experiencing, and aims to engage them "on their terms" — via social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

The SMS generation has become careless in their use of the language. Mr Goh Eck Kheng, chairman of the campaign, pointed out the mistaken notion of young people that bad English is acceptable so long as they are understood by their peers. But isn't that what communication is all about, and language is but one of its tools? The end justifies the means, so to speak, however poorly constructed the means?

What our youth do not realise is how this mentality will create a linguistic in-breeding problem that at it's extreme, make us incommunicado with the rest of the world. As it is, much has already been said about the consequences.

The key message of this year's movement is that "good communication skills transcend the use of correct grammar and vocabulary". This is a laudable objective, although I confess that personally I had to struggle with its tagline — "Impress. Inspire. Intoxicate."

However, the initiative seems overly ambitious. Have we overcome the hiccups of retail staff saying "not there mean no got have" and "if got have, you can surely find on the shelf", that we should now be concerned about where they are placing the "but" as to whether it is more proper to say "this dress suits you but it is expensive" or "this dress is expensive but it suits you"?

Each time I ride the train, I quibble internally over whether "priority seat" should accurately be "courtesy seat" since priority connotes a privilege accorded not necessarily to the physically disadvantaged and others who need help, but also to "able" people who are deserving for such reasons as status, affordability and goodwill.

I cringe when parents speak poorly to their children ... the problem is compounded when day-caregivers and teachers speak as carelessly.

Even "reserved" is not quite right, strictly speaking, unless it means no one who does not qualify to be included in the stated category should occupy the seat. Perhaps we should first look at Phua Chu Kang mixing up his numbers when he says: "Please give up this seat to those who need it."

Indeed, we have a whole lot more walking to do before we can run. It is critical that we take stock of the progress of the campaign from one year to another.

Until we do so, we will not be able to effectively remedy persistent problems and build on the strengths achieved thus far. The movement is not like a carnival, which may assume a completely different and unrelated character each year.

Every campaign in its history is a milestone that marks a significant stage in a continuous process of learning. To move forward, it is necessary to continue the journey from where we left off. That is why it is time we take stock of our progress thus far.

We need to take a hard look at the root of the problem. I cringe when parents speak poorly to their children. The problem is compounded when day-caregivers, kindergarten teachers and sometimes school-teachers speak as carelessly.

A TODAY reader put this problem succinctly in a nutshell: "Singapore has a unique phenomenon in that even when Grandma has only 10 words in her English vocabulary, which she pronounces in her Hokkien accent, she chooses to communicate with her grandchild in what she thinks is the English language. The result is an entire generation of kids speaking badly adulterated English."

Ironically, in the days when parents who were not proficient in English would speak to their children only in the mother tongue, the standard of the language was much higher.

The problem will be a hard one to crack, not something that a disparate annual movement can tackle. But, if left unchecked, it can only get worse. That's how a pidgin tongue (Singlish in our case?) evolves as the camel pushes the Arab out of his tent.

The writer has published two books on Singlish among his collection of published works.

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