

<b>Headline</b>	Make it 'can write, can speak'		
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## *Make it 'can write, can speak'*

**I**T WILL be a challenge to reverse the shocking decline of proficiency in spoken English among Singaporeans, and to also shore up second language skills. The effort must be made. School is about the best place to start. Language institutes and specialists that Education Minister Ng Eng Hen proposed last week will help show teachers how to improve fluency. The young, however, also need a conducive environment beyond the classroom. Parents, to the extent they are able, have to set as good an example as teachers should. Television and radio need to guard against undoing the effort with sloppy language. Soap opera Singlish, for example, de-

tracts from the goal, whether it helps in cultural bonding or not. The recent controversy over a badly spoken Miss Singapore indicates how strongly some people feel about proper spoken English, as well their angst over how far standards have dropped.

New media proliferation enabling short messaging such as SMS, Twitter and Internet chat has unfortunately led to neglect of correct speech, besides encouraging sentence contractions and a Singlish form of written English. Quality has evidently declined with quantity. More families are using English at home over the last three decades, but speak it less well than the fewer who did previ-

ously. At the same time, because English, such as it is, is inexorably displacing mother tongue in household use, Chinese, Malay and Tamil proficiency is also at risk. The differentiated teaching approach that Dr Ng has outlined aims to halt the erosion. Everybody has to pitch in. Otherwise, it might become a misnomer to call any of these languages a mother tongue in all except the nominally ethnic sense.

In the case of English, comparison with past standards may not be entirely valid, since schools are trying to educate all, not just some, students with English as the teaching medium. Whatever the reasons for the deterioration,

the Education Ministry will have to determine how to deploy its new language research and teaching expertise most effectively. The approach will need to centre on language teachers, but will have to involve all teaching staff. To be effective models to students, teachers have to speak good English in and out of the classroom. Regular speech practice is naturally critical. Show-and-tell, role play and dramatisation have improved speech skills among Primary 1 pupils since 2006 and will be extended to all levels by 2014. Bringing school debates back in a big way might benefit older students. "Can write, cannot speak" must become "can write, can speak".