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Speaking of good English...

By Paul Tan

WITH this week's launch of the annual Speak Good English Movement, the spotlight remains trained on the English language and Singaporeans' ability to speak and write it well.

Many Singaporeans cannot tell the difference between standard English and its non-standard variant, Singlish. There are many reasons for this.

One is the poor standard of English that students are exposed to at school. But even if the Education Ministry hires more qualified 'native English speakers' and improves its training of English-language teachers, especially those posted to primary schools, there are still other challenges.

For example, even if the Education Ministry manages to hire enough good English teachers, it will still have its hands full getting the English language standards of teachers who teach other subjects up to scratch.

After all, apart from Mother Tongue subjects, all other subjects in the school curriculum are taught in English.

Last week, one reader wrote to the ST Online Forum to say she was appalled by the spoken English used by mathematics teachers at an Education Ministry event, claiming it was 'full of grammatical errors'.

Linguists posit that the language models we are exposed to as children and teens shape our own grasp of the language. While the Education Ministry cannot influence the family environment, online or broadcast media, the least they could do is to ensure that all teachers teaching in the English medium speak and write the standard variety.

Indeed, the National Institute of Education, which trains teachers here, should consider modules such as basic phonetics and pronunciation for all school teachers, not just those who teach English.

Nonetheless even after equipping all teachers with the necessary language skills, the next challenge would be to convince students that standard English is empowering, even necessary, in today's globalised economy.

How does one do this when Singlish is everywhere?

While there needs to be more research on this, anecdotally it appears that young people have some

attachment to Singlish and that it has become a marker of identity. In fact, there are accounts of foreign students who have to learn Singlish to be accepted by their peers.

This is perhaps not so surprising - the same observations have been made of other young speakers of non-standard variants, like Aboriginal English in Australia.

Dr Peter Tan, senior lecturer at the English Department of the National University of Singapore, offers this perspective: 'Children change their accents and speech styles more easily because it's important for them to fit in. So teachers might repeat the importance of speaking standard English till they're blue in the face, but if you're likely to stand out from your peers or sound uppity, it will be an uphill struggle for the child.'

It would indeed take a skilful teacher to promote and showcase one model of English without resorting to restrictive language policing.

There is, of course, a school of thought which states that educators should come down more firmly on non-standard English, to send a strong signal to students.

After all, our national leaders have urged Singaporeans to drop the 'lahs' - whether at work, home or social gatherings.

The truth is, rooting out non-standard languages is near-impossible, especially when they are tied to one's sense of self.

Today, there are many thriving variants of English all over the world which exist alongside the standard version.

What would perhaps work better would be positive reinforcement - a celebration of role models in schools and more creative ways to promote usage of standard English, whether through newspapers in the classroom, music, debates or literature.

English-language teachers can ask students to discuss their relation to Singlish and why they may feel excluded from an 'in' group if they were to raise their use of standard English.

This would be a good starting point for teachers to explain the differences between the two, and when the use of the non-standard variety can be tolerated: for instance, in informal situations, for humour and so on.

Schools can also take a leaf from the principles of teaching English as a second language or even as a foreign language for students who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

One last practical suggestion: To frame future discussions, banish terms like 'native English speakers'.

Does the term refer to someone from England, the birthplace of the language? Obviously not, because the vast majority of Americans, Australians and Irish consider themselves proficient native speakers.

This is made even more complex when you consider former colonies such as Singapore, Malaysia, India or the Philippines, with sizeable populations of highly competent users of the language.

Clearly, the English language has sunk its roots in these countries, and is used to significant degrees as the language of administration, business and cultural expression.

Or does 'native' mean a group of people whose first linguistic exposure was to English and who grew up speaking it? This is often used interchangeably with the notion of 'mother tongue'.

But one may not be proficient in one's mother tongue. Witness the many Singaporeans who learnt Chinese dialects when they were children but went on to an English-medium school and whose command of the dialect remains rudimentary at best.

Hence the best phrase to use should be 'highly proficient users of English', which would not be tied to nationality or ethnicity.

Schools should, of course, welcome foreign teachers who can enrich the classrooms with their different world views and help students appreciate why standard English is vital for communication, especially beyond our shores.

Hopefully, with a clearer sense of what standard English is, Singapore can more confidently engage with the world and perhaps, in due course, move past demonising its colloquial cousin.

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