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Some S'poreans don't understand govt's thinking about move to raise standard of English

Numerous reports in The Straits Times on improving the standard of English among Singaporeans have culminated in the story "Why youths prefer Singlish in day-to day speech" (ST, July 30).

From this report we can conclude that there is a discrepancy between the thinking of the government and that of the average Singaporean on this issue.

I laud the practical approach of Rear-Admiral (NS) Liu Tuck Yew, Minister of State for Education, in eschewing dated methods that emphasise the teaching of grammar and his recognition of the varied needs of pupils coming from different language backgrounds.

However, it is a pity that this enlightened approach is not warmly received. I suspect there could be two reasons why this is so.

Firstly, though the Ministry of Education has expended a lot of effort in solving the problem of Singlish, or Singapore Colloquial English, as academics call it, it has not clearly communicated to the public what its target of "good standard English" is.

This is apparent from the ideas held by some people that it is about accents, the use of slang expressions and abbreviations. It would also help those supportive of the policy to have a more concrete idea of what they are working towards rather than to have a vague conception of the target as some antithesis of Singlish.

Secondly, the Ministry has not been proactive enough in shaping public discourse about our language education. For too long, it has been conflated with national identity, class loyalty, ethnic pride, economic necessity etc, serving only to polarise views further.

The ministry could use its clout to guide Singaporeans' attention back to the truly pertinent matters such as pedagogical soundness of any change made to our bilingual education system.

I believe that the ministry is generally correct in its course of action, but it could benefit from reducing resistance from some quarters by bringing them around to its thinking.

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