
Title	English in Singapore and the concerns of the language teacher
Author(s)	Soh, Ivy
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 4(2)59-62
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner. The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.



*(Under the banner headline of **Talking Points**, we print comments and notes on experiences and topics likely to be of interest to our readers.)*

ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE AND THE CONCERNS OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

(Excerpts from the text of a talk given to members of the Rotary Club of Singapore East on 27 August 1982.)

The question now that needs to be asked first is *Who uses English?* and the answer is "Everybody", practically, or *nearly* everybody, discounting the few elderly people who did not have the benefit of education, let alone bilingual education. Many enterprising people have been able to 'pick it up' as English is fast replacing Malay as the lingua franca in Singapore.

Whilst statistics reveal that more and more of the local population are *becoming literate in English*, we must not forget the presence and influence of foreign residents and visiting tourists who also communicate in the English language. One of the fascinating aspects of life in Singapore is the *exposure* to the *many kinds of English* that are spoken – British, American, Australian, European, Japanese, Southeast Asian, etc. besides the varieties of local accents that are heard. The opportunities for linguistic enrichment, especially in the domain of English, are ample in cosmopolitan Singapore, with the strongly supporting role of the mass media (albeit with the exercise of judicious selection on the part of the receiver.)

It is at this point that I wish to raise the crux of the problem before we become too sanguine about our linguistic achievements. While it has been observed that English is more widely used amongst the population than it has ever been, there have been more and more *complaints* about its *lack of intelligibility*. Many foreigners have remarked on their first contact with some Singaporeans, that although they realised some kind of English was being spoken, they were barely able to understand it, nor could they make themselves understood. Sad to say, these observations are not merely confined to outsiders as we know by our own experience. Only recently (on 19 Aug 82 in *The Straits Times*) Major Fong Sip Chee was induced to write in the "Forum": "I lamented that beneath the material well-being we now enjoy, it was said that there was a progressive deterioration of the standard of the four main languages in Singapore. This trend was disturbing and must be checked". With reference to English, he said: "... the degeneration, if left unchecked, will gather its momentum and a time will come when... the English-speaking world will not understand our pidgin..."

In giving expression to similar concerns Dr Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education, asked in his opening address at the 1981 RELC Regional Seminar on "Varieties of English and their Implications for English Language Teaching in Southeast Asia": "How can English variations be kept in check in the context where English is learnt as a foreign language? How will *local variation* of the language interfere with the teaching of English?" These questions were asked after he had referred to a study which showed that there was a wide variation in the use of English in the schools. Government policy was made clear in the statement, "We have set for ourselves a pragmatic norm, namely, the English we speak and write should be at least understood internationally."

In the light of all this, what are the tasks and concerns of the English language teacher?

- 1 Clearly, her aims are to teach her pupils Standard English so that they will be internationally intelligible in their communication with others. This pre-supposes that the teacher herself must have a high level of proficiency in English.

- 2 Secondly, with the existence of so many *varieties* of English with their accompanying accents, the skills required in *comprehension of spoken English* need to be *broadened*. This is especially true for Singaporeans in our cosmopolitan environment. In their classroom materials teachers need to present different varieties of English and to sharpen their pupils' listening. This is on the *receptive* side but on the *productive* side, pupils need to learn to speak clearly and correctly so that anyone, including a foreign visitor, will be able to understand them.
- 3 Thirdly, pupils need to develop a better sense of *style and register*. This really involves a social sense – an awareness of the relationship between speaker and listener, the speech situation, the degree of formality and the appropriacy of the vocabulary and tone of voice. For example, it would be inappropriate for a schoolboy to say to his principal: "Hi, how's life?" or a shopgirl to say to a customer: "What do you want?" and later "Haven't got!"

You will notice that I have paid more attention to *oral* skills rather than written because this is where the root of our problem in the deterioration of English standards lies. Our younger generation in Singapore have got into the habit of speaking in "Singlish" most of the time and are only capable of expressing themselves in Standard English or "acrolectal" Singapore English* when speaking to their superiors, usually with much self-conscious effort.

*In his research on the sub-varieties of English which he observed existed on a "Speech Continuum", Platt introduced very useful sociolinguistic terms to describe Singapore English at three levels – the *acrolect* (high), the *mesolect* (mid) and the *basilect* (low). The *basilect* has been described as "a simplified and almost pidginized dialect of English" (Richards). All researchers are in agreement that at the *acrolectal level*, the English of well-educated (English-medium) Singaporeans in its formal variety differs "little in grammar and vocabulary from Standard British English, though with more substantial differences in phonology." (Cited in Jack Richards, "Variations in Singapore English" in William Crewe, *The English Language in Singapore*, Eastern Universities Press, 1977, p 69).

One of the most lamentable and prominent features of Singlish is the *omission of final consonants*. This is a serious problem as it means that final *s's*, *t's* and *d's* are often left unpronounced, with a consequent loss of grammatical markings or inflections. This "de-sensitization" of the ears through poor enunciation is carried over to the writing.

One solution would be to provide far greater emphasis on *Speech Training* than is being given at present in the schools. This would develop better enunciation and articulation habits. Pupils should also from a young age learn to appreciate the sound systems which occur in English as compared to their mother tongue and also be made conscious of the spelling system and its phonetic realisations.

Our students must shed their inhibitions and learn to move up from the "basilectal" or "mesolectal" level of English to the Singapore "acrolect" or Standard English. This is why students benefit so much from participation in story-telling, elocution, drama and debating activities.

by Ivy Soh