To use or not to use singlish "aiyah! so headache!”

Victoria University of Wellington School of Linguistics and Applied Languages Studies WRIT 101 – Writing English Assignment 2 – Persuasion Due Date: 20 September 2004 Name of Student: Chor Teck Daryl Toy To Use or Not To Use Singlish " Aiyah! So Headache! " + In recent years, there has been much concern on how Singaporeans use English. While some consider Singapore Colloquial English or Singlish as an undeniable part of being a Singaporean, others including the Government, deem it inferior, even condemn it, and support the use of Singapore Standard English almost relentlessly (Tan 2002).

I shall attempt to address the following question, " Should Singlish be accepted and used or be abandoned? " I believewe need to use both Singlish and Standard English in order to be effective life-long communicators. We shall look into this argument in the context ofeducation, the sociolinguistic understanding of diglossia and code-switching, and the role of teachers in guiding students in the language acquisition process. Firstly, let us look at the development of English that eventually led to this language controversy in Singapore.

English is one of the four official languages recognised in Singapore. It is the language medium used in education, in administration, and in the workforce, and is often used at home nowadays, along with the other ' mother tongues'. Some, especially the younger families, have adopted English as their first language. Out of this multi-lingual background comes Singlish, which blends English with the other local languages, accents, dialects and slang. Singlish is used in informal ccasions, especially among children, adolescents, and the less-educated. If we were to spend some time mingling with Singaporeans

and listening to the way we converse with each other, we may catch colloquial phrases like, " Why you so like dat? " " Eeee! You so kiasu one! " " Dun play-play with me! " " Do your work lah! " Such familiar terms can also be detected in local television programmes, like Under One Roof and Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd, and in local films, like Army Daze, MoneyNo Enough and I Not Stupid.

Indeed, Singlish has become an unofficial Singaporean icon, which I think, our friends from other countries can use to identify and differentiate who we are from other Asians! While Singlish is widely used in Singapore, it is often treated with disgust, even disdain and aversion, especially by the highly-educated and ' language-purity' advocates. Singlish is viewed as an embarrassing reflection of Singaporeans being ' uncouth' and ' uneducated', as contrast with Standard English. As former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong once commented, " Poor English reflects badly on us … and makes us seem less intelligent or competent. (Tan 2002) As Singlish is seen as ' poor English', attempts, such as the government-supported " Speak Good English Movement", are set to propagate the proper use of the language among Singaporeans, mainly through the education system. Despite the various efforts made in condemning and even banning the use of Singlish in Singapore, there is no denying that using this locally-conceived language is very much a part of being a true-blue Singaporean. We use it in our daily lives with our families, friends and even at work in our conversations.

Linguists have noted that most children in Singapore would acquire Singlish first from their homes or in kindergartens, rather than Standard English (Gupta 2001, Deterding 1998). In some studies conducted on language

acquisition, it is observed that adults used the low variety of a language to communicate with their children, who in turn use it to communicate with their peers (Ferguson 1959). In accordance to the language phenomenon of diglossia, it is argued that children would acquire language initially through its non-standard, colloquial, low variety, before learning its standard high variety through formal education.

In line with the view mentioned above, some might feel that a little dose of Singlish used sometimes in the formal language acquisition process can help relax the already tense and stressful study atmosphere. Surely it would provide some lighter and humorous moments to the classroom. During my teaching stint in the primary school, I remember that my students would listen amusingly to my teaching, and appreciate my efforts in explaining complex terms with some occasional ' lahs' and ' lehs'.

Students, especially those yet to be competent enough to communicate in English, would find it easier to use a bit of Singlish to speak up in class at the initial stage of their learning. After all, don't most students sometimes find it daunting to use the language they are learning, with an almost gripping fear of being ridiculed for their errors? Surely they would choose to approach the language through its low variety first, before working their way towards the high.

Allowing them to use Singlish as a basis might help to create a safeenvironmentfor our students to eventually acquire Standard English in their languagelearning experience. However, as an English languageteacher, I do advocate the need to use Standard English as part of our linguistic repertoire, since it is the language of administration, economy,

andcommunicationin Singapore, and a channel to communicate with other countries. As teachers, while we teach Standard English with its different genre, conventions, functions and its importance, we should gradually encourage our students to use the language in their lives.

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind in our teaching our students' linguistic background, which includes Singlish. Therefore, I suggest that we should use the sociolinguistic understanding of diglossia and code-switching in the language teaching and learning process. We, as parents and teachers, want our children and students to learn to communicate effectively as they grow. Therefore, we should teach them to identify and realise for themselves the different domains in which they have to switch between using Singlish and Standard English.

We can do so through the means of modelling, conducting observations and discussions, to help them to differentiate the occasions for using Standard English or Singlish, and the various reasons for switching between these two varieties of language. For example, we use Standard English in answering questions, in writing, in presentations, and in sitting for examinations or tests, so as to get good grades as the examiners are able to comprehend what we present in our answers, and be convinced of our competency in acquiring the standard language. We also use Standard English as an essential tool to learn more about the world we live in.

However, we use Singlish instead, when conversing with ourfamilymembers and friends, orderingfoodfrom hawkers, and especially when idly chatting among ourselves. We would be seen as being ' snooty' or ' distant' if Standard English is used for these informal occasions. Using Singlish is also a

way to make us feel at home with other Singaporeans, both local and overseas. In making such references to their prior knowledge and authentic life experiences, we help our students to realise how to switch between Singlish and Standard English according to the different domains.

Thus, students can learn to be effective ' language-variety-switchers', and in turn feel proud of their Singaporean linguistic repertoire (Deterding 1998). To conclude, while we acknowledge the ' popular' use of Singlish among our students and Singaporeans, the use of Standard English should be strongly advocated as well. Singaporeans must realise the importance of learning Standard English, so as to be able to exercise our language repertoire confidently as effective life-long communicators.

Indeed, the mastery of Standard English, together with the use of Singlish and our mother tongues, should imbue in us a sense of pride for our unique Singaporean language heritage. To Use or Not To Use Singlish " Aiyah! " " Headache so much for wat?! " " Use BOTH Singlish and Standard English lor! " Word Count: 1225 words References: Deterding, David 1998. Approaches to Diglossia in the Classroom: The Middle Way. REACT 2 (November), 18-23. Ferguson, Charles A. 1959. Diglossia. In Dell Hymes (ed.) 1964. Language inCultureand Society. NY: Harcourt. 429 – 439. Holmes, Janet 2001. (2nd ed. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. London: Longman. 27 – 34. Expat Singapore Pte. Ltd. Language – Singlish http://www. expatsingapore. com/general/language. htm (13 March 2001) Gupta, Anthea Fraser 2001. Linguistic Ecology of Singapore. Paper given at GNEL/MAVEN Conference " The Cultural Politics of English as a World Language" Freiburg, 6-9 June. Gupta, Anthea Fraser. Language Varieties – Singapore Colloquial English

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