



S'porean student defends Singlish online after foreigner implies locals who speak the language are incompetent. Her reply goes viral

REPORT: KOH HUI THENG
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Are Singlish speakers incompetent?

That's what one user of an online forum seemed to suggest when posing the question: "Why don't Singaporeans try to speak proper English?"

Posted on the question-and-answer website Quora, it made New York University (NYU) student Grace Teng, 24, see red.

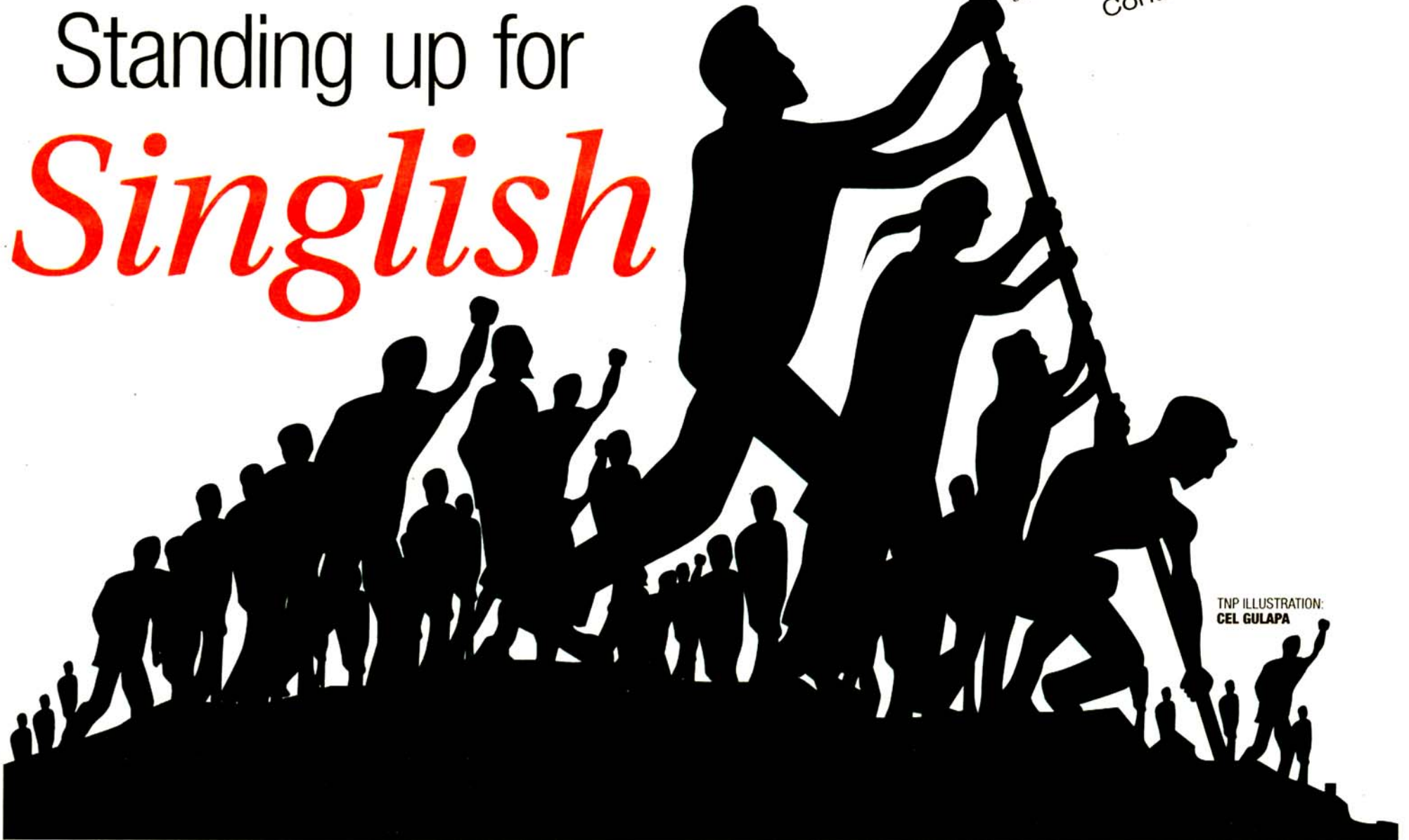
"Oh wow. You're spoiling for a fight," the film and TV undergraduate replied on the forum, before launching into a passionate defence of Singlish on Nov.17.

Her analysis of why Singlish should not be considered "bad English" – thumbed from her mobile phone with nary a typo – has since gone viral, picking up virtual thumbs-up from Singaporeans and expatriates alike.

In the space of two weeks, it garnered about 1,300 votes on Quora. Closer to home, websites and bloggers gave a standing ovation by sharing her reply on various social media platforms.

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Standing up for *Singlish*



TNP ILLUSTRATION:
CEL GULAPA

'If others want to turn it into a flame war...'

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Miss Teng, a proud Singaporean, tells The New Paper on Sunday over e-mail that she is extremely surprised by the reach her response has gained.

The Victoria Junior College and Dunman High School alumnus now hopes her response will spark a debate on the cultural importance of Singlish.

"I'd like for it to open up a more critical discussion of Singlish as a language and as a cultural reference point," she says.

"Most people already know where they stand on Singlish. The question was just an opportunity for a large number of people to express how they feel about it."

And in case you think she is "out there marshalling an army of people to support Singlish", she points out that it is not her aim.

"If others want to turn it into a flame war, it's their prerogative and none of my business," she says.

She was irritated when she spotted the post about Singaporeans speaking proper English on Quora.

And she instantly felt compelled to respond.

"Questions like that annoy me because (of) the assumption that one regional form of English is more proper than another," says Miss Teng, who took a course in linguistics at NYU.

She got even more flustered reading the comments that followed the question, in which the asker wrote: "I understand they (Singaporeans) speak it as a second language, but you'd think after years of British rule and with one of the best education systems in the world, the average Singaporean would try to correct their accent."

So she came out with guns blazing at the idea that Singlish is inferior.

"Singlish, as a language and a linguistic phenomenon, is absolutely fascinating and we should be trying to learn more about it, not pretending it doesn't exist," she says.

And judging by the online reactions, she's not the only one who feels this way.

"Many Singaporeans feel insulted when people of other nationalities tell them they can't speak proper English," Dr Ludwig Tan, vice-dean (Arts and Social Sciences) at SIM University says.



STUDENT: Singaporean Grace Teng, a New York University student, took a course in linguistics.

PICTURE: MARTIN LARA

"In fact, (many) speak and write perfectly standard English, in addition to Singlish.

"It's just that Singlish is more noticeable and more likely to be used to judge a Singaporean's command of English."

Apart from being a unique mode of communication, Singlish also acts as a unifying force for Singaporeans.

Prof Tan says: "Singlish binds Singaporeans of all races like no other language can."

"Nobody feels inferior or superior using it - we don't laugh at, criticise or judge our friends for speaking bad Singlish."

No surprise then, that Singaporeans are making a stand for what they see as an essential part of their culture.

Says Mr Baey Yam Keng, chair of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Community and Youth: "We feel confident about Singlish because it is unique to us. So when others try to put it down, the natural tendency is to defend it."

Perhaps the case highlights Singaporeans' coming of age, identity-wise.

Associate professor Kirpal Singh, who teaches English literature at Singapore Management University, says: "We don't have to justify our use of English to people... we use it in ways that we are most comfortable with, incorporating words from other languages and dialects, and also changing some forms of syntax to suit our Singaporean style."

Still, despite standing up so strongly for Singlish, Ms Teng says the language will do just fine even if no one champions it.

"Singlish doesn't need a defender," she says.

"It's a vibrant language with a large community of speakers who clearly love it, use it and take pride in it."

5 reasons it's not bad English

(According to Miss Grace Teng)

- 1 Singlish shows traits of natural language**
It is consistently spoken the same way by a large group who are, in effect, native speakers of Singlish. So it should be a language in its own right.
- 2 It has its own rules**
Like English, Singlish has its own syntax, grammar and phonology (how sounds are organised in a language). So it is possible to speak bad Singlish, just like it's possible to speak bad English.
- 3 English rules can be applied to Singlish**
Singlish allows you to apply English morphology to almost any word, regardless of origin. "Nuah" (to laze around) can become "nuahed" or "nuahing" and "kope" (take something without permission) can become "koped" or "koping".
- 4 Even the British have their own "Singlish"**
While the Queen's English is regarded as the benchmark, people in different parts of the UK speak Scouse, Geordie, Cockney and Brummie, which are dialects of English.
- 5 Many official languages were once "bad"**
Many languages have their roots in Vulgar Latin, a spoken form of non-Classical Latin. Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, and Romanian were once considered "bad" Latin.



It's not for every situation

We can be proud of our "lahs" and "lors", but experts say that it is still crucial that people speak proper English.

Mrs Wai Yin Pryke, principal of the English Language Institute of Singapore and committee member of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), believes that Singapore should continue to uphold the highest standards for English.

"The danger with Singlish is that because it comes about so naturally

- we hear it all around us - some will incorrectly regard it as English and use it widely," she says.

"The fear is that they will then lose touch with English through a lack of practice.

"Use it or lose it, right?" she says.

The SGEM was launched in 2000 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood.

It came amid concerns that Singlish was becoming the norm.

Mrs Pryke says that because English is a global language of commerce and

business, Singapore, as a small country, needs to be plugged into this network.

She concedes that many feel strongly about Singlish.

"Singlish has grown organically. There are a lot of emotions about it because it is a part of society, and to some, part of the national identity that binds us.

"But we must always remember Singlish is not good English. It doesn't even sound like English - the syntax and vo-

cabulary are different.

"There is a role for Singlish in Singapore, like when you're at the coffee shop, talking to the taxi uncle, chatting with friends - in informal settings."

Mrs Pryke points out that this doesn't mean that Singlish is subpar to English, because there are no grounds for comparisons as the two are different.

"After all, language is to help us with communication, and Singlish achieves that in certain situations," she says.

"While we cannot run away from Singlish, it is important to know how to switch between Singlish and English. That requires a good command of

Local author of Singlish fairy tale says:

'My Singlish is not very good'

REPORT: BENSON ANG
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This little pig... er, we mean book, has garnered some international attention.

This after a page was posted on humour website 9Gag. Since then, it's gone viral with shares on Facebook and other social media sites.

The Three Little Pigs Lah's author is local designer Casey Chen, 42. He says: "I thought a fiction book using Singlish would be interesting because most books on the topic are non-fiction ones.

"I've also loved the tale of the Three Little Pigs since I was a child.

"I am born in the Year of the Pig, and can 're-late' better to the characters."

He wrote the 24-page book in two months at the beginning of this year, while recovering from donating a kidney to his elder brother.

Although the book is based on a children's fairy tale, he admits it is "not very suitable for children" due to its use of graphic language and Singlish.

He says his own Singlish is "not very good", and he had to do a lot of research online to write the book.

"I exaggerated its use to show how funny Singlish can be. If the characters spoke naturally, there'd be no 'oomph'.

He jokes: "Initially, I wanted to use even more phrases. But some were vulgarities and others didn't fit in with the story."

So far, he says, reaction to the book has been "mostly positive".

For example, Nominated Member of Parliament Janice Koh bought 30 copies, which she gave to friends and colleagues.

She says: "They make great gifts, especially with Christmas round the corner.

"I've found that foreigners who are familiar with Singlish find it particularly charming."

"I think the book encourages us to laugh at

ourselves as Singaporeans and to celebrate the quirks that make our culture so distinct and recognisable, Singlish being one of them."

Mr Chen lives with his wife, son, eight, and daughter, one, in a three-room flat in Tiong Bahru.

In the book's introduction, Mr Chen wrote: "For my children... don't let me hear you speak Singlish."

But he clarifies that it is a joke. He says: "I allow my children to read the book. When they grow up, they can speak whatever they want to."

Several Singaporeans have also e-mailed him, saying they enjoyed its use of humour.

People from as far as Europe and the US have also ordered copies.

But Mr Chen has also seen online posts by detractors criticising the book.

"They say only stupid people speak Singlish and even criticise the publisher for 'promoting' Singlish," he says.

"But I'm quite neutral about this topic. Although my book seems to promote Singlish, it also pokes fun at Singlish."

He is happy with the discussion it has sparked off.

He says: "I think Singlish will always be controversial. Some people love it, others hate it.

"But I have no agenda. I just want people to have a good laugh."

The book, launched on Sept 27, has sold over 500 of its 5,000 copies.

It is selling at \$16 at novelty shops like Supermama at the Singapore Art Museum @ 8Q and Shinnpark at The Central.

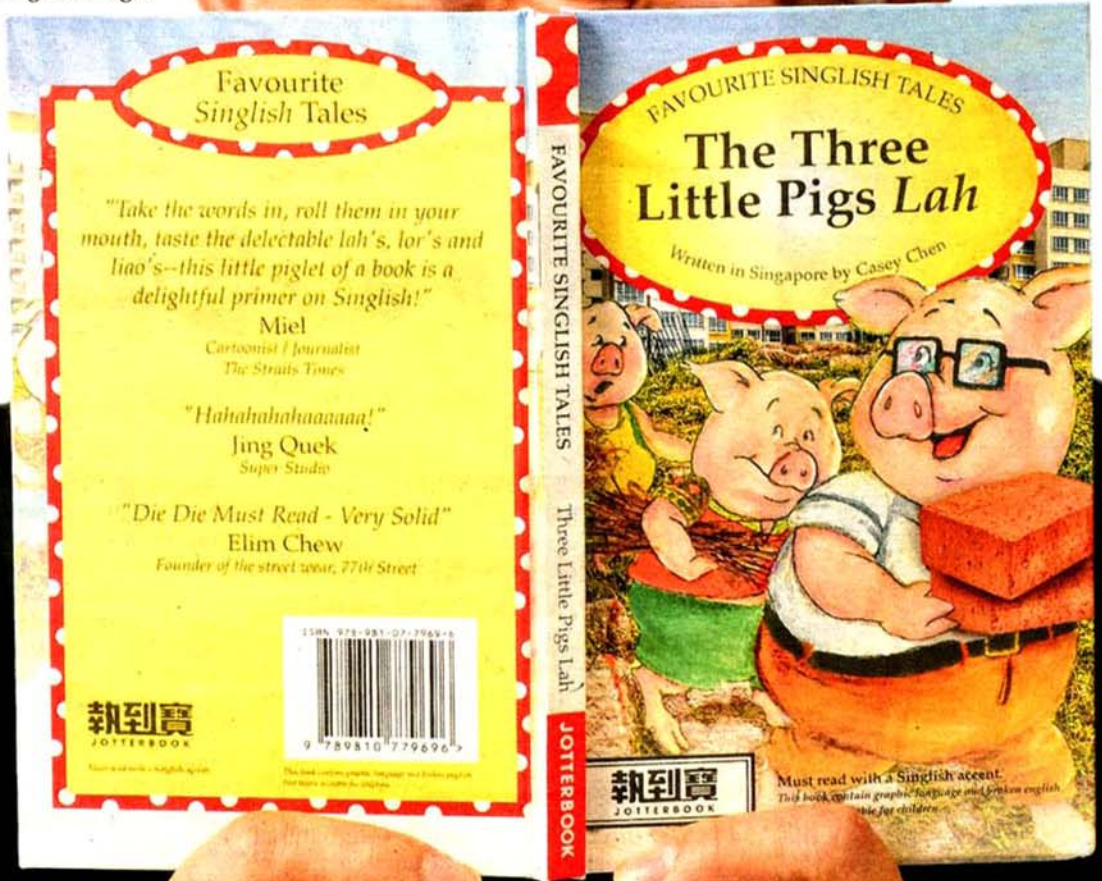
"I think Singlish will always be controversial. Some people love it, others hate it."

— Mr Casey Chen, author of Three Little Pigs Lah

PICTURE COURTESY OF CASEY CHEN



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English."

So yes, there is a place for both Singlish and English, says Mr Baey Yam Keng, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Community and Youth.

"Singaporeans have developed more pride in Singlish because it is part of our identity," he notes.

And that's fine – as long as it comes with the ability to converse in proper English and maintain a certain level of language proficiency globally.

He says: "It's important for us to recognise the differences (between the two languages) and the place that they have in the world arena."

— Additional reporting by Wee Jing Long and Koh Hui Theng