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# *Alamak... Don't get it? Good communication is more than grammar*

From Singlish to emojis, the rules of language are shifting. Drama may just be the training ground for students in real-world communication.

**Ee Ling Low, Nora Samosir and Lionel Wee**

Effective communication requires being adaptable, say the writers. This means knowing how to adapt the way we use language according to the topic, the people we are interacting with, and whether we are communicating through speech, in writing or online via social media. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Recently, the oft-mentioned "alamak" and "tapau" were among a list of words deemed untranslatable that were added to the Oxford English Dictionary. It will come as news to anyone who has ever gasped in exasperation or taken their lunch to go. This also reminds us of a news report back in November 2024 that stood out: The Singapore Civil Defence Force is training an artificial intelligence (AI) model to handle incoming calls and medical emergencies using Singlish.

These are very interesting developments because they remind us of an important fact: Effective communication requires being adaptable. This means knowing how to adapt the way we use language according to the topic, the people we are interacting with, and whether we are communicating through speech, in writing or online via social media. Being competent in just one variety of English, even if that variety happens to be standard international English, is simply not good enough.

An AI model limited to standard international English will not be intelligible to those who are not familiar with this variety. Its inability to adapt will reinforce the perception that it is robotic and unemotional. This problematic perception applies even more so when the speaker is human.

The inability or unwillingness to adapt one's variety of English gives the impression that the speaker is socially awkward and perhaps even insincere. Someone who uses the exact same greeting ("Hello, how are you?") all the time – when interacting with a new acquaintance, with old friends, or even with family members – will soon have to deal with questions about whether there is something socially odd about them.

It is therefore necessary to be aware that language conventions regarding correctness and appropriateness do change over time. For instance, the term "LOL" is not only acceptable but also normalised in text messages so that spelling it out has become communicatively odd or marks the user as being dated.

Being adaptable in communication is like knowing the appropriate footwear to use depending on the situation. You need different footwear if you are going to a formal dinner, on a trek, spending time at the beach, just strolling around the park or chilling out at home. Speaking only standard international English and nothing else is like trying to go through life wearing only formal leather shoes. It would be not just very uncomfortable but also socially unacceptable.

As educators, we advocate that adaptability in communication must receive greater attention. The National Institute of Education (NIE) has a course that is compulsory for all student teachers. It focuses on communicative adaptability by developing student teachers' awareness of how language choice, tone (including the use of emojis) and body language need to be considered based on key factors like purpose, audience (for example, parents, colleagues and stakeholders), culture and context for their oral and written communication. This is extremely important in today's context where a wrong move can potentially lead to a social media post going viral in a matter of seconds.

The world is now one where people and information (in the form of short text messages) are both highly mobile. This mobility is accelerated by developments in social media and advancements in digital technologies. As a result, communication conventions are changing faster than ever before and this makes it even more important that we cultivate the ability to interact appropriately.

In writing this opinion piece, for example, we, as academics have had to adapt our academic writing to one that resonates in broad print journalism. The need to be adaptable communicators, therefore, signals a key pedagogical challenge for language education.

**THE CASE FOR DRAMA**

A 2012 NIE study found that drama helps students gain more confidence, self-awareness and empathy. These are very important and relevant attributes in developing effective communication skills.

Why then is drama not more widely incorporated into the education curriculum?

At present, it is often treated as part of a school's extracurricular offerings and therefore considered to be something that is "nice to have" but not "critical". We would like to see a change in this mindset because effective communication is the ultimate lifelong learning skill. Honing such a skill should not be just left to each of us as individuals.

One way forward is to treat communication as performance. The use of drama for language learning is not new but it should be more widely adopted.

Activities such as role-play drama games have been known to facilitate language learning. Role play, for example, prepares learners by helping them rehearse various real-life situations, such as ordering food, going shopping, being interviewed or even just engaging in casual conversation.

In addition, role play can make the process of language learning enjoyable. Learners can have fun while building up their confidence in communication. And confidence is especially critical when the goal is not just learning a language but learning to be adaptable in communication.

However, being an effective communicator is not just about the language alone. We should also take into account non-verbal communication cues such as facial expressions, gestures, clothing and settings. Again, the use of drama is valuable here because it helps learners to think of resources in terms of props and staging, all of which can help them be more effective communicators because learners are encouraged to approach the issue of communication strategically.

Ideally, there should also be greater support for language teachers. The inclusion of theatre studies in language pedagogy will help these teachers create the kinds of learning experiences that are crucial for communication. Such an approach needs strong institutional support.

If we agree that the ability to use language in order to participate effectively in society is important, then being able to adapt how one communicates is not just an optional competency; it is essential. And here, drama can most certainly help.

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