

More using Singlish in their daily lives, including at work

Study finds over half of respondents see the colloquial language as crucial part of culture

Christine Tan

More people in Singapore are using Singlish more frequently in everyday life, including at work, with 80 per cent of those who are younger saying they speak the colloquial language well.

An increasing number also identify most with English or Singlish, while the proportion of people who identify most with their mother tongue or parents' dialects has dropped, according to a new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

In another finding, mother tongue proficiency has remained stable over the years based on self-reported figures, but ethnic Chinese respondents are more likely to perceive a drop in general mother tongue standards in Singapore.

The increased identification with Singlish represents an attempt to describe a sense of national identity, said Dr Mathew Mathews, head of the IPS Social Lab and lead researcher of the study, which was published on May 25.

The Language Identity and Management in Singapore study draws from the findings of the latest IPS survey on Race, Religion and Language, which surveyed 4,000 Singapore residents in 2024, for comparison with its 2013 and 2018 iterations.

More than half of the respondents in 2024 agreed that Singlish gives Singaporeans a sense of identity, and that it is an important part

of culture that should not be lost.

The researchers noted that the language does what Standard English cannot easily do and "carries the cadences of hawker centres, army camps, classrooms, void decks, workplaces and family gatherings".

Singlish is an important marker of national identity, despite official efforts to discourage its use as it is an "ungrammatical" form of English incorporating words from vernacular languages, said the researchers.

The researchers also noted that attitudes towards Singlish have changed over the years, with Singlish gaining wider acceptance in society and public communication.

The proportion of those who said they could speak the colloquial language "well" or "very well" rose from 46.8 per cent in 2013 to 57.8 per cent in 2024.

"Well" meant they could talk about their family and friends. "Very well" meant they could discuss religion, politics and technology in that language.

Proficiency in Singlish peaked among the younger generation. Some 80 per cent of people aged 18 to 35 said they could speak Singlish at least "well", while only 29.1 per cent of those above 65 said so.

More than half of the respondents said they used Singlish frequently with friends, up from 39.2 per cent in 2013; and 41.5 per cent of them said they used Singlish frequently at work, up from 34.7 per cent in 2018.

When asked which language they identified with the most, about one in three people in 2013 chose English or Singlish. In 2024, this rose to 47.6 per cent, or almost half of the respondents.

But Dr Melvin Tay, a research fellow who also authored the study, said people still disapprove of Singlish being used in circumstances where one would expect formal English, such as politicians' speeches.

"This suggests a mature public instinct for code-switching. Many Singaporeans know that Singlish can build rapport, but they also know that Standard English is needed for clarity, accessibility and international intelligibility," wrote the researchers.

English proficiency hit a decade high, with about eight in 10 of respondents in 2024 reporting that they spoke English well or very well, up from about seven in 10 in 2013.

Similar to Singlish proficiency, younger age groups tended to say they spoke better English, compared with older respondents.

From 2013 to 2024, the proportion of respondents who identified most with their mother tongue or parents' dialects fell from 65.1 per cent to 50.4 per cent.

As English becomes more pervasive in Singapore, the researchers said, it is important to ensure that older residents, lower-income residents or those whose home environments are less English-dominant are not disadvantaged.

About eight in 10 ethnic Chinese respondents reported that they could speak Mandarin well or very well, and about nine in 10 Malays and Tamil-descent respondents said the same for their languages,

remaining largely unchanged from 2013 to 2014.

But ethnic Chinese respondents, along with younger, better-educated and more affluent respondents, were more likely to perceive that general mother tongue standards had dropped compared with a decade ago.

Dr Tay said self-ratings on language proficiency are highly subjective, while judgments about general standards are shaped by people's immediate environment and the media they consume.

Dr Mathews said: "If you've been in school a bit longer and you've been told about standards in terms of language and what's expected, you might be more critical about how language is used."

The use and self-reported proficiency of heritage languages – including the Hokkien and Teochew dialects, and sub-ethnic languages like Javanese – increased in 2024.

This was observed more significantly among permanent residents, who were more likely than citizens to say they are stronger in their heritage languages.

The researchers, including Dr Teo Kay Key, a senior research fellow, and intern Lim Hwee Ting, said Singapore's language story is unlikely to be one of English replacing every other language.

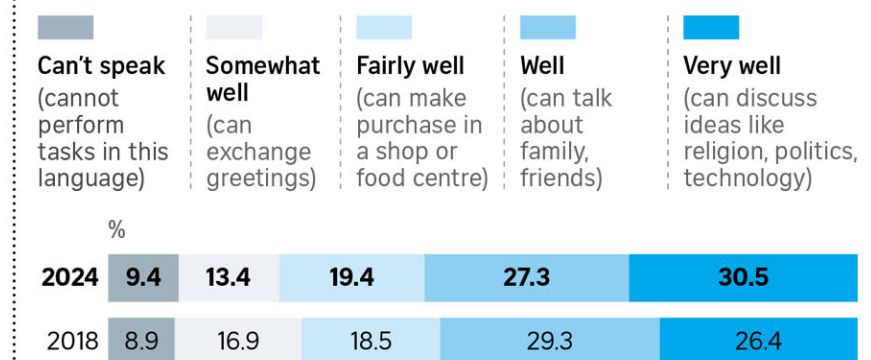
"It is more likely to be a story of negotiated coexistence: English as a common linguistic platform, mother tongues as cultural anchors, heritage languages as vessels of memory, immigrant languages as part of lived diversity, and Singlish as the unruly but beloved vernacular of local belonging."

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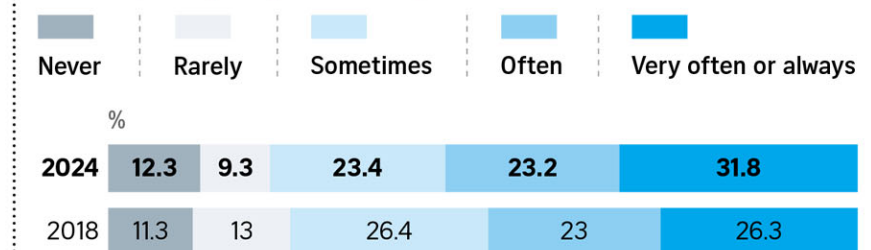
More Singlish in Singapore? Can lah

Singlish, which an Institute of Policy Studies study called Singapore's "unruly but beloved" language, is growing in use and acceptance, and also as an identity marker among residents here.

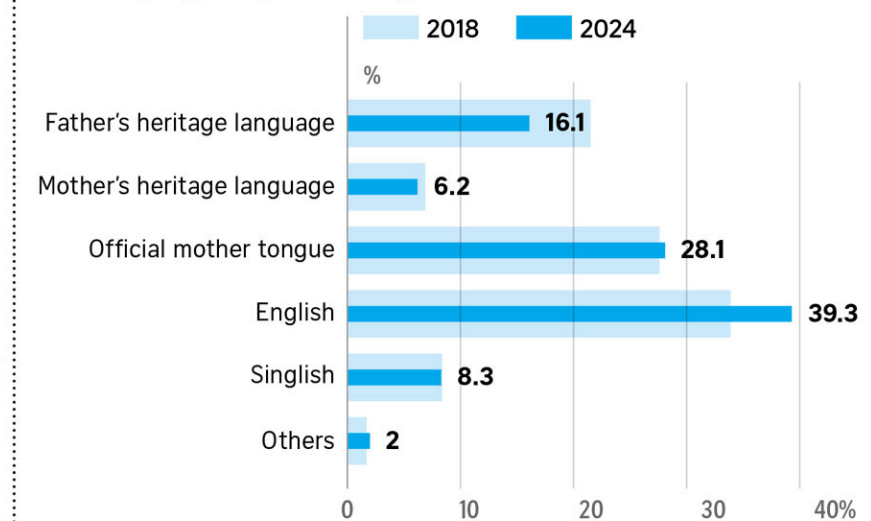
How well can you speak Singlish to perform different tasks?



How frequently do you use Singlish with friends?



What language do you identify with most?



Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS