Local app speaks Malay, Mandarin and English

Here is a quick way to learn a different language.

Say you have “Saya seorang pensyarah” shown as text.

You can have it automatically translated into English and then have it read out as “I am a lecturer”.

Or vice versa.

This can happen in a few seconds with a smartphone application developed by researchers at the School of Computing, National University of Singapore (NUS).

In other words, think of your smartphone as a personal translator which tells you how the phrase should be pronounced.

Project leader Dr Ng Hwee Tou (inset) said: “The app combines natural language processing and speech processing in one system.

“As far as we know, this is the first locally developed app that automatically performs a two-way speech-to-text translation in three languages.”

The languages are Malay, English and Mandarin.

Other iPhone or Android apps perform only speech-to-speech translations, like Trippo, VoiceTra, Jibbigo and Talk To Me, or only text-to-text translations, like Dragon Dictation, or just text-to-speech like Speak It. There is no app that does automatic speech-to-text-to-speech translation.

In a demonstration, Dr Ng spoke into the iPhone in Mandarin and the Chinese characters appeared in an instant on the screen. The translated English text was then read out automatically and accurately.

The system currently works as an app on the Apple iPhone platform but Dr Ng plans to port it to Android, BlackBerry and Windows 7.

There are also plans to add more languages.

The app runs on 3G or Wi-Fi.

Dr Ng said the team plans to put the app on trial in the next few months.

“There’s a possibility that the app will be free to users and our revenue will come from advertisements,” he added.

By Hellen Tan