Dialects find a voice

Long in decline, Chinese dialects are being picked up today by some younger Singaporeans who want to bridge the gulf with the elderly, or just rediscover their roots.

But what if you find you’re not one of the fortunate senior citizens? His group mate Ng Chew Hui, for instance, picked up some Hokkien phrases from his parents for his community service. But he later also found himself digging deeper into its cultural heritage and the history of Hokkien people.

The decline of dialects, he laments, “is a loss for the younger generation as they will not know their heritage. How can the previous generation, which is only fluent in dialects, pass down the stories and traditions?”

He’s team is trying to get more students to become fluent in Hokkien. “We’ve really come to the realisation that a lot of students are under the impression that Hokkien is only for the old,” he said.

The National University of Singapore (NUS), which is home to a Hokkien community, has started to include courses in Hokkien in its curriculum. This is part of a larger effort to promote the use of Singapore Hokkien, which is spoken by the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore.

FAMILIES IMPORTANT

Can associations, meanwhile, are doing their part, but they feel that community groups are limited in what they can do. The Singapore Hokkien Association, for example, has language classes once or twice per week for about 20 participants. But the interest is mainly among Chinese immigrants.

The Singapore Hokkien Association, which regularly organises Hokkien drama performances for its 600-strong membership, also found lacklustre response from the young.

In its first year, the Klang Tiong clan club, said, “We don’t organise activities for youths as much now as it has not been very good.”

The young people are not keen any more and only come with their parents when there are special occasions or during festivals.

The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan and Singapore Hokka Chong Association think the lack of interest among families makes it more effective for youngsters to learn dialect from their elders.

Cai gieng Hou hoisam yihng sik neih

Ai chia png mai? Zois sia

Ho kiu mo kien gi

Boh ho yi shu

What do these phrases mean? Turn to pg 4.

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The only one in our group who could speak dialect fluent and was really a connection to the past, he recalled.

Two years on, the 18-year-old is proud to say that he can do more than ask a friend, “Is something wrong?” (do you want some water?)? He’s even off to fluent Hokkien about his designs at school.

The old folks, in turn, joke with the younger about having a “closer bond” (more like a grandchild). One of them even asks him to teach her how to read and write.

The older generation, however, seems to enjoy the company of the younger generation. “It’s good to have someone to talk to,” said one of them.

One of the ways that the older generation is learning from the younger generation is through the use of technology. For example, many of the older generation are now learning how to use social media, particularly Facebook, to stay connected with friends and family.

The younger generation is also learning from the older generation. They are learning about the history and culture of the Hokkien diaspora, and how it relates to their own identity.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the dialects are not only important for the elderly, but also for the younger generation. They play a key role in connecting the past and the present, and in preserving the cultural heritage of the Hokkien community.

As the National University of Singapore continues to promote the use of Hokkien, it is hoped that more students will be encouraged to learn and speak the dialect. This will not only benefit the elderly, but also promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the Hokkien community.