

Yale-NUS profs speak Singlish? Steady lah!

Joanna Lee

Can speak Singlish *a-not*?

Eleven foreign academics apparently can – after taking a crash course in Singapore’s unique colloquial language.

The faculty members – including some from the United States, India and Australia – are due to start work at Yale-NUS, a new liberal arts college that will open in August.

So to help familiarise themselves with the local culture, the 11 of them took a class taught by PhD student Ng E-Ching.

The 34-year-old Singaporean guided them through the various intonations and words – helping them to distinguish a “lah” from a “leh” and get to grips with terms such as “kiasu” (afraid to lose).

Ms Ng conducted the lesson at Yale, the American Ivy League school in Connecticut, which is setting up the new college in partnership with the National University of Singapore (NUS).

But the class, which took place earlier this month, was not plain sailing for everyone.

In Singlish, a verb repeated once – as in “try try only” – means doing something briefly. But when repeated twice – as in “try try try still cannot” – it means excessive action, she explained.

This prompted Yale-NUS dean of faculty Charles Bailyn to ask, wide-eyed, whether using a verb four times had yet another meaning.

The academics also took part in role-playing games in which 17 Singaporean volunteers helped them to act out scenarios such as talking to bus drivers while touring the city.

Two of the faculty members

even performed monologues from local playwright Alfian Sa’at’s play *Cooling-off Day*.

Yale undergraduate Wong Qi Han said it was heartening to see the faculty being enthusiastic about the lesson.

“Even though they knew it was unlikely that they would have to utilise Singlish in their everyday work, they still wanted to learn it well to better connect with students,” said the 22-year-old, who is also from the Malaysian and Singaporean Association at Yale.

The class was sponsored by the association and Rojak, an informal reading group that helps Yale-NUS faculty members familiarise themselves with South-east Asia.

The college said last Friday that a 50-strong faculty will welcome its inaugural batch of 150 students. It also plans to hire a total of 100 faculty members over the next several years who will teach among three divisions – sciences, social sciences and humanities – rather than traditional academic departments.

Dean Bailyn said: “I do think that those of us who are coming to Singapore should do whatever we can to understand the society we are joining, and that includes being able to understand and correctly interpret what is being said around us.”

Back in Singapore, students from the college’s inaugural batch, such as Ms Maria Ivanenko from Boston, are also learning Singlish.

The 18-year-old, who picked it up earlier this month at the Experience Yale-NUS Weekend, made clear she thinks the new school has the wow factor – in Singlish, of course.

“Yale-NUS College, ah,” she said. “Damn power, sial!”