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Abstract for Plenary Session

Do Teachers Need to Speak Standard English?

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One of the core dimensions of language teacher competence, according to Richards* (2009), is the development of appropriate linguistic competence. This competence includes the ability to use comprehensible language, to provide explanations, instructions and feedback in the target language, and to provide a good language model in the classroom. While the majority of teachers in Singapore are linguistically competent, a number of them speak a variety of English that is different from the standard variety, and are, as a result, considered unable to provide a good language model.

In this paper, I will first describe what are widely seen as “non-standard” features of English used by English medium teachers in Singapore. These features will be drawn from various sources, including from a recently compiled corpus of Singapore classroom discourse (SCORE – Singapore Corpus of Research in Education). The unique features of English used by English medium teachers at the phonological, lexical and syntactic levels will be highlighted and compared with the features of standard English. I will then discuss concerted efforts by key stakeholders to curb the spread of “non-standard” features of English in the school contexts. These efforts include various initiatives at the national level by the Ministry of Education, at the pre-service level by the National Institute of Education (NIE) and at the school level. I will conclude by reflecting on my own efforts and those of my colleagues at the Teachers’ Language Development Centre of NIE to help our student teachers become more aware of their own speech and develop the ability to speak standard English.

*Richards, J.C. (2009). Exploring the Professional Development of Language Teachers. Public lecture delivered at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 4 September 2009.