

# What Is The Impact of Institutional Affiliation on Singaporean Pre-University Students' Attitudes Toward and Uses of Singlish?

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of socioeconomic class, represented through institutional affiliation, on Singaporean pre-university students' attitudes toward and uses of Singlish. By surveying students from separate academic streams (Junior Colleges and Polytechnics) in Singapore as proxies for socioeconomic status, the research explores whether class influences perceptions of Singlish's role in Singaporean society. Using a mixed-methods survey that combined Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and short-answer responses, the study finds that both groups broadly agree that Singlish functions primarily as an informal and private language of solidarity, echoing existing scholarship on its role in shaping local identity. With a total sample size of  $N = 22$ , descriptive statistics indicate that no statistically significant differences were found between groups in either frequency of use or overall attitudes toward Singlish. On a micro-level, however, Junior College (JC) respondents were more likely to highlight Singlish's perceived drawbacks in international or professional contexts, while Polytechnic students more frequently framed it as an authentic cultural marker. These findings suggest that while institutional affiliation may influence nuance to some degree in language attitudes, Singlish ultimately serves as a unifying resource among Singaporean youth, with variations reflecting individual negotiation of identity across communally experienced lines more than socioeconomic stratification.

**Keywords:** Singlish; Language; Sociolinguistics; Dialects; Students; Singapore; Attitudes

## INTRODUCTION

Singapore's language landscape is defined by a longstanding tension between the state-endorsed Standard English and the vernacular vitality of Singlish. Originating through colonial contact and evolving from a multilingual substrate, Singlish has become a linguistic emblem of local identity and cultural expression (1). While Standard English is held as the prestigious

norm for formal contexts, Singlish thrives in everyday communication, serving both as a communal language and a site of ideological contestation (2, 3).

Rather than directly measuring socioeconomic class, this study examines institutional affiliation as a contextual factor that is commonly associated with class-based socialization in Singapore's education system. In Singapore, institutional placement functions as both a reflection and a reproduction of class position: admission to Junior Colleges typically corresponds to higher academic achievement and access to cultural capital, while Polytechnic enrolment is frequently associated with more vocational orientations and middle-income social backgrounds (4). Examining linguistic attitudes across these two groups therefore provides a useful,

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though imperfect, lens for understanding how class-based socialization patterns shape linguistic identity among youth.

Accordingly, this study asks: How does institutional affiliation shape Singaporean pre-university students' attitudes toward and uses of Singlish? By reframing the research objective in this way, the study avoids overstating socioeconomic claims while still engaging questions of class-related linguistic ideology.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Academic Environment of Singlish Research**

The study of Singlish has undergone significant shifts over the past five decades. Early accounts in the 1970s and 1980s, such as those by Platt and Weber, framed English in Singapore through the lens of a post-creole continuum, positing a graduation from Standard Singapore English (SSE) at the acrolectal end to basilectal Singlish (5). This model captured the structural variability of English use but implicitly reinforced a deficit perspective in which Singlish was seen as “deviant” from a more prestigious norm. Gupta’s intervention repositioned this binary through a diglossic model, suggesting Singlish and SSE were not merely points on a continuum but functionally differentiated codes— with SSE used for formal and institutional communication, and Singlish reserved for informal, intimate contexts (6). This early descriptive work was important in establishing Singlish as linguistically systematic rather than a random corruption of English.

From the 2000s onward, research began shifting from descriptive linguistics to sociopolitical critique, reflecting the heightened visibility of state ideologies. The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), launched in 2000, positioned Singlish as a threat to Singapore’s global competitiveness, thereby reframing the variety within discourses of national survival. Scholars responded by analyzing Singlish as a site of ideological struggle. Wee, for example, examined how state policies relied on such linguistic purism to delegitimize Singlish, while Alsagoff explored its paradoxical commodification in media and advertising as an index of authenticity (7, 8). This body of work highlighted the tension between top-down language management and bottom-up identity practices, moving research into the terrain of symbolic power, resistance, and nationhood.

However, much of the existing research on Singlish has not systematically addressed how variables such as ethnicity, home language environment, or neighborhood

composition interact with class and educational background in shaping linguistic attitudes. Deterding notes that ethnic variation remains an underexplored yet significant factor influencing phonological and lexical features of Singlish, while Cavallaro and Serwe argue that family language practices often mediate how young Singaporeans internalize state language ideologies (9, 10). These insights suggest that what appear as class-based differences in language attitudes may, in part, reflect broader intersections of ethnicity, family linguistic capital, and community context. Acknowledging these overlapping variables is thus crucial to interpreting how institutional affiliation operates within the larger ecology of sociolinguistic variation in Singapore.

The academic environment of Singlish research, therefore, reflects a trajectory from structure to ideology. While earlier work established its grammatical and phonological legitimacy, more recent studies emphasize its role in negotiating identity, belonging, and authority within a globalized city-state. This evolution sets the stage for further investigations into the everyday social meanings of Singlish, particularly how younger Singaporeans navigate the tensions between stigma and pride in their lived linguistic practices.

### **Key Debates**

Despite differences in emphasis, existing research broadly agrees that Singlish occupies a complex symbolic position. It is at once stigmatised and celebrated: previously officially derided as “broken English,” now seemingly widely embraced as a badge of authenticity and solidarity.

Goh situates Singlish historically, tracing its emergence from colonial legacies and its entanglement with Singapore’s post-independence modernisation (1). He shows how Singlish represents both grassroots hybridity and state anxiety, embodying the contradictions of a multilingual, globalised society.

Leimgruber, in contrast, offers a more contemporary, speaker-focused perspective, showing that young, educated Chinese Singaporeans increasingly view Singlish as a legitimate variety in its own right rather than a deficient form (11). This suggests a generational reframing of Singlish from a “problematic” deviation into a marker of distinct Singaporean identity (11).

Yet, this embrace is far from universal. Cavallaro, Ng, and Seilhamer demonstrate that many Singaporeans continue to draw sharp boundaries between Singlish and Standard English, with the latter associated with prestige and upward mobility (2). Their findings suggest that

educational background and class shape attitudes: while Singlish is accepted in private, informal domains, it is often rejected in professional or public ones. This aligns with Wee's analysis of how state rhetoric constructs Singlish as socially and economically dangerous (7). Meanwhile, Alsagoff illustrates the paradox of Singlish being officially suppressed yet strategically deployed in advertising and media to project relatability and "local flavour" (8).

Together, these studies highlight three recurring themes: first, the structural legitimacy of Singlish as a systematic variety; second, its contested ideological status within state and societal discourses; and third, its pragmatic use in demarcating social boundaries and identities. However, what remains less explored is how these dynamics manifest among younger Singaporeans, whose daily interactions are deeply shaped by both institutional settings and peer-group norms.

### **Positioning This Study**

While existing scholarship has illuminated the structural, ideological, and historical dimensions of Singlish, fewer studies have examined how youth across distinct educational pathways negotiate its use in everyday contexts. Institutional environments such as Junior Colleges and Polytechnics function not only as sites of academic instruction but also as spaces where linguistic norms, expectations, and symbolic values are reinforced.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant, survey-based approach supplemented by quantitative measures. The primary research instrument is a Google Forms survey designed to capture both demographic information for determining socioeconomic status (SES) and attitudinal and behavioral data relating to Singlish use. The target population comprises students from contrasting educational contexts: various junior colleges and Polytechnics across Singapore. These institutions were selected to provide a comparative perspective across different perceived SES backgrounds and academic environments.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and no identifying information—including the names of institutions—was collected. The survey involved

only anonymous responses and posed minimal risk to participants. All data were de-identified prior to analysis to protect participant confidentiality and ensure ethical data handling.

### **Structure of the Survey**

The survey first gathers information relevant to SES indicators, including type of pre-university institution attended, type of housing, parents' occupations, and parents' highest levels of education. These variables were chosen as they serve as reliable proxies for SES in the Singaporean context, where housing type, parental education, and occupation are strongly correlated with income and social class.

Then, the questions focus on the three thematic areas central to the research question. The first theme addresses students' personal use of Singlish, probing frequency, contexts of usage, and preferred linguistic features. This section is designed to uncover patterns of usage in various interpersonal and situational contexts, such as family interactions, peer communication, online platforms, and formal environments.

The second theme explores students' general opinions on the role of Singlish in local and societal contexts. This involves evaluating perceptions of Singlish's cultural significance, its appropriateness in different settings, and its function as a unifying linguistic identity across Singapore's multiethnic society. Respondents are also asked to assess whether given example sentences are recognizably "Singlish," which allows for the examination of linguistic awareness and recognition of structural features. Attitudes toward Singlish were measured using a five-item Likert-scale instrument developed for this study.

Participants responded to statements addressing whether Singlish should be restricted to informal contexts, whether its use fosters a sense of connection among Singaporeans, whether it constitutes an important part of Singaporean culture, whether it conveys unprofessionalism, and whether it should be promoted publicly or internationally. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Negatively worded items were reverse-coded prior to analysis so that higher numerical values consistently reflected more positive attitudes toward Singlish. A composite attitude score was calculated for each participant by averaging responses across all five items, producing a continuous measure of overall attitudinal orientation toward Singlish.

The third theme examines attitudes toward Singlish

as part of Singapore’s international image. Questions here address willingness to use Singlish with foreigners, opinions on Singaporean celebrities using Singlish in global media, and perspectives on whether the government should present Singlish internationally as part of the nation’s cultural identity. These questions are intended to capture the perceived tension between local authenticity and global presentation, especially in relation to Western audiences, who are often considered aspirational benchmarks in Singaporean discourse.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The survey also offered a final open-ended question as an opportunity for respondents to share personal qualitative insights, though no respondents took it up. The survey was distributed via social media platforms and through personal networks, with targeted outreach to friends and contacts in both educational streams to ensure diversity in SES representation. Data collection took place over a three-week period, with regular reminders issued to encourage sustained participation. The responses were then coded, grouped by SES indicators, and analyzed to identify trends, contrasts, and underlying attitudes across the socioeconomic spectrum. Given the small sample size, the study prioritizes descriptive analysis and effect-size interpretation rather than inferential statistical testing.

**RESULTS**

The survey yielded 24 responses from students attending Junior College (JC) and Polytechnic institutions with 13 from JCs and 11 from Polytechnics. One respondent from each group was discarded due to clear lack of engagement with the survey, with 12 JC (~55%) and 10 (~44.5%) Polytechnic students remaining.

This leaves a total sample size of 22 students, enabling a comparative analysis of attitudes toward and usage of Singlish between the two groups.

Polytechnic students reported a slightly higher mean frequency of Singlish use ( $M = 4.50, SD = 1.90$ ) than their JC counterparts ( $M = 4.07, SD = 1.59$ ) on a 6-point scale (0 - Never, 6 - Always) (Table 1). Variability within both groups was substantial, with overlapping distributions suggesting similar overall usage patterns across institutional affiliations. Given the small sample size ( $N = 22$ ), results are reported descriptively rather than inferentially.

Mean attitude scores were similarly closely aligned across groups. JC students ( $M = 2.45, SD = 1.37$ ) and Polytechnic students ( $M = 2.36, SD = 1.56$ ) on a 5-point scale, where higher values represent more positive attitudes. The t-test revealed no statistically significant difference,  $t(22) = 0.16, p = .88$ . Across both groups, scores clustered around the neutral-to-slightly-negative range, particularly with respect to formal or prestige-associated contexts.

Given the small sample size ( $N = 22$ ), the robustness of independent-sample t-tests is limited, as assumptions of normality and equal variance could not be adequately tested. Accordingly, results are best interpreted descriptively rather than inferentially. Reporting effect sizes and confidence intervals provides a more meaningful representation of group differences than p-values alone, though these also indicate minimal distinction between groups.

While the quantitative results did not show significant differences, individual open-ended responses revealed richer dynamics. Across both groups, a recurring theme was the framing of Singlish as an informal, in-group variety that fosters rapport and cultural identity. 80% of JC students frequently emphasized appropriateness

*Table 1. Comparative t-Test Results: JC vs. Polytechnic Students’ Attitudes Toward Singlish (N = 22)*

Measure	Junior College (N = 12)	Polytechnic (N = 10)
Mean frequency of Singlish use (0–6)	4.07 (SD = 1.59)	4.50 (SD = 1.90)
Mean attitude toward Singlish (1–5)	2.45 (SD = 1.37)	2.36 (SD = 1.56)
Primary perceived domain of Singlish use	Informal/private	Informal/private
Common concern raised	Professional appropriateness	Professional appropriateness
Qualitative emphasis	Situational boundaries	Habitual everyday use

*Note: Values reported are descriptive statistics only. Given the small sample size, no inferential claims are made. Qualitative categories are derived from recurring themes in open-ended responses.*

boundaries, with a negative association with Singlish in formal contexts, stating reasons such as “it might come across as rude in formal situations” and “I do not want to give off the impression that I cannot be professional.” Polytechnic students expressed similar awareness but were more likely to describe Singlish as integral to their natural speech patterns, with explanations such as “It’s just how we talk” or “It’s easier to connect with [their] friends when [they] speak in Singlish”.

Interestingly, both groups also expressed ambivalence toward Singlish in professional settings. Though both JC and Polytechnic respondents linked Singlish use to “carelessness” or “sloppiness” in formal contexts, a small subset of Polytechnic respondents had a more positive attitude, noting that it could function as a marker of relatability in customer-facing roles.

## **DISCUSSION**

Rather than revealing clear institutional divides, the findings indicate that JC and Polytechnic students share broadly similar attitudes toward and patterns of Singlish use. Although Polytechnic students reported a marginally higher mean frequency of use, the lack of statistical significance suggests that institutional type is not a decisive factor in shaping how young Singaporeans perceive or use Singlish. Instead, the data point to a more generationally shared linguistic repertoire, in which both JC and Polytechnic students recognize Singlish as a natural part of their communicative toolkit.

The qualitative responses reinforce this interpretation. Across both groups, Singlish is described as a relational language, a signifier of familiarity, solidarity, and “insider” status among peers. Many respondents demonstrated conscious register awareness, actively adjusting their speech according to audience and setting. This reflects the sociolinguistic principle of code-switching, where speakers strategically shift between varieties (Singlish and Standard English) to achieve social or communicative goals (12).

The findings are consistent with the hypothesis that Singlish is widely understood as an informal and context-bound variety. This supports the notion of a diglossic situation in Singapore, where Standard English occupies the “High” (H) domain (formal, academic, professional), and Singlish the “Low” (L) domain (casual, interpersonal) (6). Both JC and Polytechnic students’ neutral-to-negative average attitude scores indicate that while Singlish holds cultural value, it is not perceived as appropriate for high-stakes or prestige contexts such as

academic writing, job interviews, or official speeches.

The shared perception across groups also echoes Rubdy’s observations that Singaporeans, regardless of educational background, have internalized the message of the state’s “Speak Good English Movement”, whether or not they use Singlish extensively in private domains (3). This suggests a linguistic duality: Singlish is simultaneously seen as emblematic of Singaporean identity and as a potential liability in formal arenas.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, these findings suggest that Standard English continues to function as the dominant legitimate language within institutional and professional fields (13). Singlish, by contrast, appears to carry covert prestige: valued privately as a marker of authenticity, solidarity, and local belonging, yet constrained in public-facing contexts (“[Singlish] is how people know we are from Singapore”). This tension helps explain respondents’ ambivalence toward Singlish, particularly when engaging with perceived “outsiders” or international audiences.

Importantly, the similarities across JC and Polytechnic students complicate assumptions that more academically prestigious institutions necessarily produce more conservative linguistic ideologies. Instead, peer culture and shared national discourses surrounding professionalism and global intelligibility appear to exert a stronger influence than institutional norms alone.

At the same time, attributing linguistic attitudes primarily to institutional affiliation risks oversimplifying the sociolinguistic landscape. Prior research highlights the significant roles of ethnicity, home language background, and community networks in shaping Singlish variation (2, 9). The absence of these variables in the present study limits the extent to which observed patterns can be interpreted as class-based effects.

Future research incorporating these intersecting factors would provide a more comprehensive account of how language, identity, and power interact in Singapore’s postcolonial context.

## **CONCLUSION**

A number of limitations must be borne in mind when interpreting these results. First and perhaps most importantly, the sample size of the present research was limited, with the study’s participant pool restricted to students from Junior Colleges and Polytechnics. While the survey responses provided valuable insights into how students from these institutions view and use Singlish, the relatively small pool of participants means

that observed averages and attitudinal trends cannot be assumed to hold across the wider youth population. Not only that, though JCs and Polytechnics are distinct from one another, these are still the two “highest” educational streams in Singapore. This means that students from other lower-status educational tracks were not represented in the data. In fact, the apparent similarities in perceptions between JC and Polytechnic students may be partly reflecting the absence of perspectives from youths in comparatively lower SES contexts. As a result of such imbalance, the study cannot fully capture how attitudes towards Singlish vary across the broader socioeconomic spectrum. Thus, in relation to the impacts and scope of the research question, the results culminate as more of a suggestive trend rather than statistically generalizable, or even fully conclusive.

Second, the study is subject to the observer’s paradox. Though the survey method ensured some degree of anonymity, respondents may still have provided answers that aligned with socially desirable norms, or what they perceived the researcher expected, rather than offering candid reflections of their actual practices and attitudes. This is inevitable due to the expectation that their responses will be publicly viewable in future. This risk applies both to their general responses as well as to their implicit signaling of socioeconomic status, which is itself difficult to capture without direct and potentially intrusive questioning.

Lastly, the survey design itself imposed constraints on the depth of insight available. While the inclusion of multiple-choice questions provided broad patterns of response, a lack of follow-up elaboration questions in certain sections, particularly those addressing the use of Singlish on international platforms, limited the ability to probe respondents’ reasoning in greater detail. As a result, potentially rich insights into how students negotiate global perceptions of Singlish were lost.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the study’s findings should be approached as exploratory rather than definitive. They underscore the need for future research to involve larger and more diverse samples, incorporate open-ended or interview-based methods to encourage engagement and provide opportunities for participants to elaborate on their attitudes in greater depth.

Though there are still minute differences between responses from JC and Polytechnic students suggesting that Polytechnic students demonstrate higher frequency of use for Singlish and a more positive affect, whereas JC students approach it with greater concern for

situational appropriateness and exhibit relatively lower attachment, any contrast between responses from the respective academic streams are empirically negligible and therefore need further, more in-depth research as aforementioned to be explored as demonstrative.

Thus, while Singlish functions as a unifying, informal medium within peer networks, it is consistently regarded as inappropriate in formal and academic contexts. This contrast reflects broader sociohistorical influences, including the lingering societal impact of colonialism, contributing to a degree of self-consciousness or reluctance when presenting Singlish to individuals or organizations who possess more power, particularly Western interlocutors. Furthermore, participants’ accounts suggest that Singlish assimilates elements of the diverse cultural sources from which it originated, producing a hybridized linguistic form that simultaneously embodies inclusivity and cultural flattening. These patterns illustrate that language practices are not only shaped by generational norms but are also mediated by institutional pathways and social positioning.

By situating Singlish more deeply within the intersection of identity, class, and postcolonial consciousness, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how Singaporean youth as a collective navigate linguistic, cultural, and social boundaries, highlighting the ways in which local language practices serve as both markers of belonging and instruments of negotiation in contemporary society.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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