How to use ‘aiyah’? Look it up online, lah

BY ZAKIR HUSSAIN

POSTGRADUATE law student Jack Lee, 35, speaks impeccable English. He always did.

But when he began his national service 17 years ago, in 1988, it was of little help. Often, he could not understand his platoon mates. When they were not speaking Hokkien, they spoke in Singlish.

A former Anglo-Chinese School student, he was from an upper-middle-class, English-speaking family and his friends were all from English-speaking homes too.

Recalling his NS mates, he says: “I couldn’t grasp many of their expressions, so I started writing them down and finding out what they meant.”

That exercise book of Singlish phrases has now become the backbone of what is believed to be the first attempt at a formal online dictionary of Singlish and Singaporean English at www.singlish-dictionary.com.

Modelling on the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), it lists meanings and pronunciation, as well as examples of where and how the words are used.

Linguists, such as Professor Anthea Fraser Gupta of Britain’s Leeds University, see it as a dialect of Singapore English, with its grammar influenced largely by such languages as Hokkien and Malay.

Others say it is a language in its own right, which pay scant regard to the English taught in schools here.

For Mr Lee, Singlish can have a couple of uses.

It can be a word like “kiasu” (afraid to lose), that is used even in such formal settings as Parliament. Or it can be a sentence that...