

**SPEECH BY MR LAWRENCE WONG, ACTING MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH, AND SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT 2013, ON WEDNESDAY 15 MAY 2013, AT 3PM AT TOA PAYOH HDB HUB**

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, Chairman, Speak Good English Movement

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am happy to be here for the launch of the Speak Good English Movement.
2. I would first like to say a word of thanks to our Language Council members and the many partners who have come on-board to support the Movement this year. Your support goes a long way in helping us spread the important message of speaking good English in our daily lives.
3. This year, we are focusing on our youth and young working adults. We hope to drive home the importance of having a good command of English at the workplace.
4. English is our working language, and it is important that we are able to communicate effectively in English. At work, the wrong choice of words can lead to misunderstandings and potentially costly mistakes. The inability to present clearly can lead to your proposal not getting accepted by your bosses. This would be a pity, since many of us actually do have good ideas to contribute, but may stumble when we try to convey them clearly and concisely.
5. Recently, I had a meeting with several Singaporean bankers – these are people who have done well in their careers and are now in management positions in their banks.

6. I asked them how we can nurture more Singaporeans like them to become future leaders in our financial sector. And I was struck by their reply. No one mentioned the need to get a good business degree. Instead, all of them emphasised the importance of communication skills.

7. As they explained to me, the senior managers in banks are typically appointed by merit from a global pool of applicants. And while the Singaporean candidates are usually strong in their technical skills, they may not do as well as their foreign counterparts when it comes to presenting and selling their ideas.

8. It reminded me of my experience studying in the US. Many of the classes are conducted using a case study approach, and a significant weightage of the grade is based on class participation. So whenever the professor asks a question, you will see many hands being raised to answer the question.

9. Singaporean students like me who are put in such a classroom environment for the first time usually find it difficult to adjust. As a friend once said to me, Singaporean students tend to think about getting the right answer first before raising our hands in class and so we are usually slow to respond; the American students take a different approach – they will raise their hands first, and then when their names are called, they will improvise on the spot, and come up with a good answer!

10. Part of this is culture and upbringing. But it has also got to do with confidence in the language, and the ability to express ideas in a clear, coherent and succinct manner.

11. The good news is there are many things we can do to improve our speaking abilities. We are doing more in schools to enhance the way English is taught, so that our children are given more opportunities to speak and gain confidence in the language. Our institutions of higher learning, like the polytechnics and universities, are also putting more emphasis on both oral and written communication skills.

12. For those who are already in the workplace, it may be difficult to go back to school for formal lessons. But there are many other ways for all of us to improve our English skills.

13. The one thing we can all do is to practise, practise and practise. Learning to speak well doesn't necessarily require a tutor. We can practise and develop our language abilities by ourselves – for example, by reading aloud regularly; by preparing talking points in advance and rehearsing, by talking to ourselves and getting comfortable and familiar with the sounds and speed of the language.

14. No one is born a great speaker. Someone once told me this story of the former American President John F Kennedy. As late as the mid-'50s, when Kennedy was a senator, he was known as a lacklustre speaker who came across as shy, awkward, unenergetic and not very interesting. A political commentator wrote that the first time he saw Kennedy speak in the '50s, the then-senator read with his head buried in notes – only his thick hair was visible to the audience. But Kennedy changed. He practised. He improved. And today, if you ask Americans who were some of the greatest speakers of the 20th century, Kennedy would easily be among the top ten on any list.

15. In today's modern world, we have an advantage in learning the English language because there are so many powerful resources at our disposal. In particular, we can easily access language-related applications – like the dictionary or thesaurus – on our smartphones or mobile devices, any time of the day.

16. I use the Dictionary app on my phone regularly to check the meaning of new words, and to make sure that I get the pronunciation right. The Speak Good English Movement also has a free app called “Say It Right”. It offers a guide to better pronunciation, for often mispronounced words.

17. The Movement is also doing several things to help spread its message. This year, the Movement has produced a series of mugs, each with a quick and simple tip on how you can improve your English skills. The Movement has also partnered with our local radio stations – 938Live, Power98, Kiss92, Gold90.5, Symphony92.4 and *Rediffusion* English Channel – so that they can be good examples for their listeners on the use of the English language.

18. Most of all, as we strive to improve our language abilities at the workplace, I hope it will also foster in us a love of the language. There’s something delightful about reading a good sentence or hearing a good turn of phrase – it brings about a feeling that can only be described as “verbal happiness”.

19. The English scholar and poet A E Housman once said that he could recognise great poetry by a certain tingle at the back of his neck. Perhaps not all of us will have that same sensation with words, but certainly everyone will find something compelling and moving about the impact of words, be it spoken or written. So I hope all of you will make the effort to speak good English, not just because it helps you in your workplace, but also because you will find great joy and pleasure in your experience with the language.