



PM Goh Chok Tong (2000)

Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2000, 10.30am, Institute of Technical Education Headquarters Auditorium.

Last year, in my National Day Rally speech I highlighted the problems that will arise if Singaporeans continue to speak Singlish instead of good English. This sparked off a spirited debate. The debate was useful. It raised awareness of a language situation which we all had come to accept as normal. Some supported the need to speak good English but others defended the place of Singlish in our society. Some said that Singlish, with its smattering of Chinese and Malay words, is unique to Singapore. Singlish allows us to identify each other as Singaporeans.

If Singlish were only “a smattering of Chinese and Malay words”, there would be no problem. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Singlish uses Chinese syntax and Singlish speakers often use literal translations of Chinese phrases. This means that the sentences are not only ungrammatical and truncated but often incomprehensible, especially to foreigners. Classic examples would be: “You got money, sure can buy one.” Or, “This is my one” derived from “zhe shi wo de” .

The importance of Good English

The ability to speak good English is a distinct advantage in terms of doing business and communicating with the world. This is especially important for a hub city and an open economy like ours. If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage. My concern is that if we continue to speak Singlish, it will over time become Singapore’s common language.

Poor English reflects badly on us and makes us seem less intelligent or competent. Investors will hesitate to come over if their managers or supervisors can only guess what our workers are saying. We will find it difficult to be an education and financial centre. Our TV programmes and films will find it hard to succeed in overseas markets because viewers overseas do not understand Singlish. All this will affect our aim to be a first-world economy.

The Issue

Last year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) reported on the standard of spoken and written English of our students. MOE identified the following problems.

(a) Sixty per cent of our children start school with little exposure to English at home. This suggests that if Singlish becomes more widely used, it could hinder our children’s competence in English.

(b) Primary school pupils of average and below-average ability cannot differentiate good English from Singlish. Those who fail English at the PSLE make grammatical errors and have problems writing and speaking English.

(c) Secondary students use Singlish with their peers but switch to English when speaking with their teachers. Many find grammar a problem.

(d) Pre-university students in general speak good English although students of average ability do make some grammatical errors. Some polytechnic students lapse into Singlish, possibly because they are used to speaking in a mix of English, Singlish and mother tongue with friends. And university students often use Singlish in semi-formal situations like ECA meetings; and

(e) More importantly, the report noted that the polytechnics attributed the popularisation of Singlish by the media as one of the factors leading to the use of Singlish.

Target the Young

In promoting the Speak Good English Movement, we should not disparage people who can only speak Singlish. Many of them belong to a generation that did not have the chance to get a good grounding in English. Many, in addition to their own dialects had to learn to speak Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. They picked up English along the way and so it is understandable if they do not speak good English.

But we should not condemn the younger generation to a similar fate. Younger Singaporeans are not only better educated but have the advantage of being educated in English. They can speak good English and should be encouraged to do so. They should not take the attitude that Singlish is cool or feel that speaking Singlish makes them more “Singaporean”. They have a responsibility to create a conducive environment for the speaking of good English. If they speak good English, others will follow suit. If they speak Singlish when they can speak good English, they are doing a disservice to Singapore.

Let me give you an example of how a person can speak proper English when exposed to others who do. Some years ago, I played golf in Zimbabwe when I had some spare time before my meetings. I was impressed by the excellent English spoken by my African caddy. For example, when he found me putting badly ever so often, he asked politely, “Would you permit me to test your putter?” He tried it and advised me that it was too heavy. In Singlish, we would have said, “Can try your putter or not?” After the game, he asked me, “Would you have some used balls to spare me?” I was so impressed by his elegant English that I gave him all my used golf balls and some new ones too. In Singlish, it would be “Got old balls give me can or not?” My Zimbabwean caddy did not complete his secondary school education. He picked up his English from the white Zimbabwean golfers.



Community Involvement

MOE is revising the syllabi for Primary and Secondary pupils to enhance the teaching and learning of English in schools. MOE will introduce the new syllabi together with a revised General Paper syllabus, with emphasis on critical and creative thinking skills, next year. MOE has already started conducting courses on English grammar for English language teachers. MOE has also worked with the Regional Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore to promote the use of good English. Last month, RELC launched the first of the "Grammar Matters", a series of five books on proper English.

But MOE alone cannot ensure that young people will speak good English. Parents, older siblings, grassroots leaders, supervisors and teachers must not only encourage those under their influence to speak good English but must lead by example. In this way, even Singlish speakers will make the effort to learn to speak good English and be understood.

The Speak Good English Movement must extend its reach to the heartlands. Habits formed in the homes and the community will have far-reaching impact. Some 40 grassroots leaders have taken the lead to brush up their English by attending a "Speak Good English" course at the National Community Leadership Institute over six Saturdays. We need such motivated citizens to carry this Movement forward.

The Role of the Media

During my speech last year, I singled out the TV character, Phua Chu Kang, as an unwitting factor for the propagation of Singlish, especially amongst our youths. The popularity of Phua Chu Kang and the readiness of younger viewers to embrace his Singlish expressions show the strong influence of the media in shaping our outlook and culture. Surveys bear this out.

Let us now turn the table and make the media an important tool in our drive to get Singaporeans to speak good English. The media can develop creative programmes to make the learning of good English fun and interesting. TV, radio and the newspapers can highlight the problem in a humorous vein. The cartoons in The New Paper are a good example.

I am happy to learn that Channel NewsAsia has agreed to adopt the Speak Good English Movement as it ties in nicely with the station's own goals. Plans by TCS, RCS, Safra Radio and the English newspapers to run programmes in support of the Movement are indications that they understand quite clearly why Singaporeans must speak good English. I believe your idea to use a light-hearted approach to spread the Movement is the right one. Let us laugh at ourselves as we correct our bad habits. It is time we stop saying, "You see me no up."



Conclusion

The many measures underway will help raise the standard of our English. It is best we learn to speak good English from young. Learning to do so when we are old is more difficult, but it can be done and is worth the effort. We need to learn it diligently and use it often in order to be good in it. We also need to encourage each other to speak it well. Results will not show overnight. But if we make a determined effort, I am sure we will see improvements in a few years' time. On this note, it is now my pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement.