



DPM Lee Hsien Loong (2001)

Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2000.

I am very happy to be here with you today for the launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2001.

English is widely spoken in Singapore, more so than in any other major city in Asia. This is an important competitive advantage for us. English is the common language of global business, commerce and technology, and the internet has further strengthened this pre-eminent role.

According to BBC News Online, 23 March, nine out of ten computers connected to the internet are located in English speaking countries and more than 80% of all home pages on the web are written in English. More than four-fifths of all international organisations use English as either their main, or one of their main operating languages. No other language comes anywhere close. The next is German, but fewer than 5% of web home pages are in German.

English usage among Singaporeans has increased dramatically over the past 10 years. More and more, Singaporeans are using English as the language for communication, not only at the workplace and in the schools, but at home as well. According to the Ministry of Education, for example, a decade ago only 25% of Primary 1 students came from English-speaking homes. By 2000, the figure had risen to 40%.

But achieving wider English usage is only half the battle. It is equally, if not more important, to get Singaporeans to speak good, standard English, which will be understood not only by Singaporeans, but by English speaking people all over the world, rather than Singlish, a local dialect unique to Singapore. We need to plug into the global economy, developing ourselves into an attractive hub for foreign MNCs and talent, and linking up with the rest of the world through trade and investments.

Because our language habits are in transition, we must make a special effort to get people to speak Standard English. The younger generation is switching from speaking Chinese, Malay or Tamil, to speaking English. We have to make a choice – either to switch to Standard English, or to switch to Singlish.

If we give up our mother tongues, only to learn and speak Singlish, we will be worse off. Our mother tongues carry with them values, ancient cultural heritages and a sense of identity. To lose some of this, because we need to speak Standard English, an international language of business and science, is painful, but it is a rational trade off to make. But it does not make sense to replace our mother tongues by a Singapore English dialect which is unintelligible to the rest of the world. Then we would be better off sticking to Chinese, Malay or Tamil, for then at least some other people in the world would understand us.

The course of least resistance is to end up with Singlish, because that is what we get when the English language is mixed with Malay words, Chinese grammar, and local slang. But once we are stuck with Singlish, and children grow up learning Singlish as their first language, it will be very difficult to get them to learn Standard English in schools. Singlish will not be cute or amusing, because those speaking Singlish will consider Singlish sentences and words quite normal, and not even know that they are using the words wrongly. And it will be even harder later on to get our whole society to switch languages a second time, from Singlish to English.

We must consciously and deliberately strive to avoid this outcome. We must make the effort to learn proper English grammar, sentence structures and pronunciation. We need not speak with a British or American accent; a Singaporean accent is fine. But Singaporeans must speak a form of English that is readily understood by people all over the world.

Some Singaporeans still question if this is really necessary. There is a certain humour and nuance reflecting the Singaporean psyche which perhaps English may not express as adequately as Singlish. A month ago, a guest editor in The New Paper, Imran Johri, claimed that Singlish was “our national language” and that “its importance is being undermined”. Referring to Phua Chu Kang’s attendance at BEST classes, he asked, “Do the Americans, Australians and the Japanese make concessions on TV for the way they speak?”

But there are 281 million Americans, 127 million Japanese, and 19 million Australians. The US is the most powerful economy on earth, and they have a big influence on the way English is spoken around the world, through Hollywood movies, internet sites, books, music, business and social contacts. They can set standards for the rest of the world.

The Japanese speak a language with ancient roots and literature, and is a vital part of their Japanese identity. Yet they are struggling hard to learn English, so as not to be at a disadvantage in the globalised economy. Australians speak English with an Australian accent, but Australian English is not that different from British or American English.

We are only 3 million Singaporeans. Do we want to start developing a new language all to ourselves? People like Imran Johri who argue that we should keep Singlish as a badge of identity can usually speak and write good English. For them, Singlish is something extra. But many other Singaporeans have not learnt Standard English. Suppose they follow this advice, and learn Singlish instead of Standard English. Will we then write our own school and university textbooks in Singlish? How many technical manuals and international news reports are written in Singlish? Will Singlish help you to write a business proposal? Will MNCs, banks, or even local companies prefer to hire you, if you speak Singlish instead of Standard English?

There is nothing wrong for us to inject a few Chinese or Malay words to our daily usage of English, when we are talking about local things, especially food. Char kway teow is char kway teow, not rice noodles fried with egg, cockles and sweet black sauce; even chao guo tiao does not quite taste the same. Likewise with nasi lemak. But it is wrong to think that we are only Singaporean if we speak Singlish. We want to strengthen our common Singaporean identity, but let us do so in other ways, and not by using Singlish.

The Speak Good English Movement, or SGEM, is thus important. We are off to a good start. The SGEM Committee conducted surveys last year which showed that nine out of 10 Singaporeans agree that it is important to speak good English. We must build on this consensus and acceptance, to get Singaporeans to improve the standard of English.

The Government will do its part. Through its Encouraging the Use of Standard English (ENTHUSE) Committee, the Ministry of Education has taken the lead to improve the standard of English of both teachers and students. Our schools have many programmes and activities such as speech and drama programmes and Speak English Campaigns to encourage the use of proper English among our students.

MOE is also working to upgrade the standard of English teaching in schools. It is revising the English Language syllabi to make them more rigorous and to strengthen the teaching of grammar, and providing training for our teachers who teach English to update and upgrade their skills.

But Government effort alone is not enough. The home environment is very important. As a child spends a large part of his early, formative years at home, this is where he picks up his language skills. Parents can get their children to speak good English only if they try to speak good English themselves. Even if the present adult generation cannot be completely at home with the English language, their efforts to speak proper English will impress on the next generation the importance of mastering good, Standard English, and the younger ones can do better.

Grassroots organisations such as community clubs have a role to play as well. With their extensive networks, they can organise activities and programmes to help raise the standard of spoken English, which can reach out to a whole spectrum of Singaporeans of all ages.

The media also have an important part to play. Our English language television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines must set exemplary standards of English. Their approach should not be just to mirror how people speak, but to set norms which are better than the language we use in our daily lives, but which viewers and listeners can still identify with and aim for.

Our mass media have generally been supportive of the SGEM. Channel NewsAsia has been supportive of the SGEM, and has committed to continuing its support. The New Paper has also come on board to provide regular tips on good English. Even Phua Chu Kang has completed Module One of



BEST, and is speaking better English on screen. These are encouraging developments, and I look forward to the continued support of the media for the SGEM.

When Prime Minister Goh highlighted the problems that would arise if Singaporeans choose to speak Singlish instead of good English two years ago, and followed up by launching the Speak Good English Movement, some people saw this as another Government campaign. They wondered if it would really make a difference and if the initial enthusiasm would eventually fizzle out. But we are in this for the long haul, and we have made good progress. We must press on with our efforts together, and in time, we will succeed in getting all Singaporeans to “speak well, [and] be understood”.

It is now my pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2001.