



RADM Teo Chee Hean (2002)

Speech by RADM Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Education and 2nd Minister for Defence, Official Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2002, 3.45pm, Victoria Junior College Performance Theatre.

Col David Wong

Chairman, Speak Good English Movement

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very pleased to be here with you this afternoon at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2002.

English is widely spoken in Singapore today. In this, we are in good company. Not only is it the mother tongue of more people than any other language except Mandarin, English is also the most widely taught foreign language and the most widely used second language.

In China, the effort to master English has taken on a new urgency, with the country's accession to the World Trade Organisation last year, and in preparation for staging the 2008 Olympics. The Hongkong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC), in a recent survey among expatriates in Asia (Asian Intelligence, Issue 602, 20 Feb 02) found that more businessmen prefer to conduct their business in Singapore than in Hong Kong because Singaporeans speak better English. This is an advantage we should strive hard to maintain.

Importance of English

The thirst for English across the globe exists for a reason. English is the international language of scientific and technical discourse, as well as the language of global business and diplomacy. It is the language of the Internet. Given its widespread use, the ability to speak good English is clearly a distinct advantage when doing business and communicating with the world.

This is especially so for a country like Singapore, which is both a hub city and an open economy. Speaking good English translates into a key competitive advantage for us as we vie in the global marketplace for trade, talent and investment. It enables us to escape our small geographical confines and reach out to the rest of the world.

Economic Imperative

As Singapore seeks to expand the service sector in areas with great potential, such as healthcare, education and tourism, speaking good English will help us achieve this goal. In the hospitality and service industries, where image is all-important, speaking good English is nothing short of a necessity.



Since we learn English in order to communicate with the world, it only makes sense for us to speak and write English that is understood by other users of the language. This is the simple but important objective of the Speak Good English Movement, which was started in 2000 to help create an environment that would encourage the use of good English.

Good Progress

Today, two years after its launch, I am glad that we have made progress. A Singapore Press Holdings survey conducted last year showed that 44 per cent of respondents were aware of the Movement, up from 32 per cent the previous year.

Of this, 66 per cent said they were motivated by the Speak Good English Movement to speak good English. An overwhelming majority of those surveyed agreed that speaking good English enhanced their image, while more than two-thirds recognised that good English is crucial to Singapore's progress. Almost 9 in 10 respondents felt we should speak good English rather than Singlish. (The figures are 92%, 68% and 88%, respectively.)

Total Effort

To speak a language properly, it is vital to have a conducive social environment. We can only excel in a language if people around us speak it well and if we use it often enough. Each of us, as parents, teachers, community leaders, students and the media, have a role to play in upholding good language skills so that we can inspire others by example.

Since the launch of the Speak Good English Movement, the Ministry of Education has conducted courses for English Language teachers in primary and secondary schools to update and upgrade their skills. The broadcast media has also reduced the use of Singlish. Characters in popular TV sitcoms like *Living with Lydia* and *Mr Kiasu* speak English that is readily understood by everyone, including foreigners. Phua Chu Kang has attended BEST classes, and his progress is commendable.

I am also glad that grassroots organisations such as community clubs have been organising activities and programmes to raise the standard of spoken English. These are channels through which parents can pick up the right language habits. The People's Association (PA) has been at the forefront of efforts to teach English at the grassroots level, with courses like "Conversational English" and "I Can Speak English".

Another notable course is WISH (Women learning English), an adult literacy programme run by the Society for Reading and Literacy since 1989, in collaboration with the PA and the National Library. This programme teaches housewives and grandmothers basic and functional English for day-to-day communication. This in turn helps them read to their children and grandchildren, monitor their schoolwork, communicate with teachers and hold jobs that require simple English skills.



Light Touch

I am glad that the Speak Good English Movement has always adopted a light-hearted approach in encouraging people to speak good English. Activities like skits, debates and toastmaster competitions show that learning English can be painless and fun. Looking at this year's calendar of more than 100 activities, I am certain the festival will be just as exciting and successful.

For its part, the Ministry of Education, through its Encouraging the Use of Standard English (ENTHUSE) Committee, has come up with creative and challenging activities like the Speak Good English Quiz, Raps on Speak Good English, IT Creative Relay Writing Competition using CD-ROMs and A Way with Words Competition. If the enthusiasm our school children displayed for the recent Storytelling Competition and the Inter-School Scrabble Competition is any indication, I am certain our students will participate enthusiastically in the programmes and activities that have been planned.

(This year's storytelling contest attracted participants from 269 primary and secondary schools, making this a 69 per cent increase over the 159 schools that participated last year. The Inter-School Scrabble Competition held at the Woodlands Regional Library attracted 450 students from 90 schools.)

But the learning of good English will not be confined to the Speak Good English festival. As in the past, the festival will be followed by year-long activities by various groups to support and sustain the initiative.

As we launch the Speak Good English Movement 2002, we can be heartened by the fact that the social environment for learning good English is better today than at any time in the past. We must build on this progress and press on with our effort to get all Singaporeans to "speak well and be understood".

It now gives me great pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2002. Thank you.