



Col (NS) David Wong (2003)

Speech by Col (NS) David Wong, Chairman of the Speak Good English Movement, Official Launch of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) 2003, Woodlands Regional Library.

Introduction

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

This year marks the fourth year of the Speak Good English Movement. When Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the movement in the year 2000, he spoke of the importance of speaking good English in order to communicate with the world. Speaking good English, he added, would not only reflect well on ourselves as individuals, it would also benefit us as a nation.

Since then, Singaporeans have come to recognise the need to speak well, and have been taking steps to improve their spoken English. The good response to our programmes is testimony to this. For example, last year, more than 170,000 people called our Phone-In Lessons to learn how to speak Good English. These lessons – which are still available on our website goodenglish.org.sg – continue to be looked up by Singaporeans.

In addition, Singaporeans have responded enthusiastically to the seminars, workshops and courses organised by SGEM partners over the years. I have been told that English courses such as those that were organised by the People's Association, the British Council and the National University of Singapore's Office for Continuing Education, were very well received.

Year-Long Programme

All this shows us that Singaporeans have the desire to upgrade themselves and improve their standard of spoken English. That is why this year's programmes have not only been expanded, they have been extended as well. For the past three years, programmes and activities were held over one month; this year, programmes will run the entire year.

By holding events and programmes all through the year, they will be more accessible to Singaporeans; there will be more learning opportunities for those who are seeking help with their English. We also believe that through constant and consistent efforts, Singaporeans will be reminded to speak well.

Reaching Out to a Wider Audience

Apart from having a longer run for our programmes, we are also making a concerted effort to publicise our message to larger audiences. We are not only targeting those that speak English, but also those that prefer to use their Mother Tongues.



A survey conducted by AC Nielson showed that 67.4% of PMEBS (professionals, managers, entrepreneurs and businessmen), preferred to use English. But when it came to white-collar workers, the figure fell to 45.6% for skilled workers and 37.7% for unskilled workers. The number was even less for blue-collar workers – 16.6% for skilled workers and 3.9% for unskilled workers.

In order to reach out to these Singaporeans, our publicity drive as well as various promotional materials will be carried in the Chinese, Malay and Tamil media – which includes radio, television as well as print media.

We need to bring home our message that English is important to all Singaporeans. While recognising that our Mother Tongue languages carry with them important values, our cultural heritage and a sense of identity, we also want to instil in Singaporeans the importance of speaking good English.

Community Partners

The reach of our movement has also been expanded by the inclusion of more community partners. This is in line with our belief that the push to speak good English should be a community- and people-driven movement and not a top-down campaign.

The National Library Board is one such partner. In the past three years, the NLB has supported the Speak Good English Movement, but this year, it takes on the added role as the movement's secretariat – helping to organise and coordinate all the activities and programmes that will be held at libraries and at other venues with other partner organisations.

Taking on the NLB as a strategic partner makes sense because it has the reach and the resources to attract the movement's target audience of Singaporeans aged between 15 and 40. It is also in line with the NLB's ongoing mission to expand the learning capacity of the nation.

The movement can also tap into the NLB's comprehensive network of libraries which include the National Library, two regional libraries, 20 community libraries, and 39 community children's libraries. NLB will also be teaming up with various partners and community organisations to hold activities and programmes – in libraries and in other locations.

One such activity was The SDEA DRAMAZing Race, which was held on March 22. The race saw 29 teams – of 5 students each – race to 8 different libraries. There, they were assessed on their usage of English as well as their knowledge of the story of Oliver Twist. The students who took part not only enjoyed themselves, but they also learned the value of teamwork and cooperation and got to put their problem-solving skills to the test. More importantly, it showed them that learning English can be fun. As an added treat, we have with us today, a few members of the cast of Oliver! the musical.



The race, which was spearheaded by our movement, was organised jointly by the NLB and the SDEA, which stands for Singapore Drama Educators' Association. It was also partly sponsored by IMG and supported by the SMRT. We hope to see more of this type of joint collaboration with various community partners in our future programmes.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by emphasising that this push for Singaporeans to speak good English is a people-driven movement and not a top-down campaign. We hope to inspire you through our publicity drives and events, but in order for the movement to be truly effective, the initiative must come from the people.

All of us can play a part. You can start by speaking good English to each other. Or you can even organise your own mini-movement in the home, school or office by encouraging family members, friends and colleagues to speak good English. Those in a position of leadership can help by setting an example. Every little bit helps.

Every Singaporean must recognise the importance of speaking good English and make the effort to do so. Our standard of English as a nation may not improve overnight, but if we work at it, I am confident that we will achieve what we set out to do – to Speak Well and Be Understood.