

SPEECH BY MR LEE HSIEN LOONG, PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT 2005, 13 MAY 2005, 11.15 AM AT HDB HUB

Prof Koh Tai Ann, Chairman of the Speak Good English Movement

Mr David Wong, former Chairman of the Movement

Ladies and gentlemen

The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) marks its 5th anniversary this year. For the last five years, we were fortunate to have Mr David Wong lead the effort as the Chairman of the Movement. Under his stewardship, the movement succeeded in making Singaporeans more aware of the importance of speaking good English. He launched collaborations with partners like the Society for Reading and Literacy to bring story-telling to schools, and to improve our children's ability to speak well. On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank David and his Committee members for all your contributions, and for laying a firm foundation for the SGEM. I am confident that the new chairman, Prof Koh Tai Ann, will lead the movement successfully in its next phase.

It is important for all of us to speak good English, because English has become the lingua franca of international commerce. English is our bridge to the world, and helps Singapore to maximise our opportunities. Further, in a multi-racial society like Singapore, English is the common language that all races share. Today, English, plus knowledge of our mother tongues, has given Singaporeans an important competitive advantage over many other Asian countries.

However, we still need to do better. Although three-quarters of Singaporeans are English literate (according to AC Nielsen Media Index on literacy and language preference), our standard of English is still not good enough.

I recently met the son of an Australian friend of mine. The young man had just graduated from a very good school in Melbourne. I asked him if he had any schoolmates from Singapore. He said there were a few. He then commented that they spoke a strange type of English among themselves. It sounded like English, but he could not make out the meaning at all. In fact, they were speaking Singlish! My friend observed that they did not seem to distinguish between *no* and *not*. It took me a little while to think of an example in Singlish: *Money No Enough* !

As a multiracial society where many languages are spoken, it is inevitable that some non-English words and slang will creep into our vocabulary. The westerners may not know what durians, rambutans and char kway teow are, or that someone who is afraid to lose is *kiasu*. When something tastes very good we say *shiok!*. And those who have done National Service will know that a *wowo king* is someone who cannot shoot straight. These non-English words can be useful additions to standard English vocabulary, especially on informal occasions.

There are other influences on our language too, which English teachers in schools struggle very hard to curb, for example, SMS English, that many young people use. Correct spelling has become a major challenge. That is spelled d-a-t. Have is spelled h-v. Are you become just the letter R and U.

There are good reasons why SMS English uses all kinds of short forms. It is too hard to type out every word in full, on little handphone keypads. But when we speak to one another, or email one another, or write papers or articles, we should use standard English. When our English becomes too mutated, we become unintelligible to others. We then have a big problem. Because in the real world, whether we are serving customers, making presentations, giving instructions to employees, arguing a case in court, negotiating an agreement, teaching a class, or even singing a song or acting in a TV programme, we are much better off doing so in proper, grammatically correct English. Then we can make our meaning clear, and others can understand us, including non-Singaporeans. If instead we speak in a dialect which only some Singaporeans can understand, then we are handicapping ourselves, and cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world.

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A good example is TV programmes. American sitcoms can easily be broadcast and understood in Singapore. But Singapore programmes, like *Phua Chu Kang* or *Police and Thief*, are not as easily exported. A Malaysian audience may appreciate them, but it is not easy for audiences further afield to understand them.

So I believe we should all make the effort, and consciously speak good English at home, at work, or in social gatherings. Speaking good English does not mean using bombastic words or adopting an artificial English or American accent. We can speak in the normal Singapore tone, which is neutral and intelligible. But speak in full sentences, with proper sentence structure, and cutting out all the *lahs* and *lors* at the end of each sentence.

It is much easier to speak proper English all the time, than to speak sloppily most of the time, and then switch to proper English for formal occasions. Because to do the latter is almost like learning two languages. We will learn wrong grammar and language habits when we speak sloppy English, and when the occasion arises for us to speak proper English, we will make mistakes without realising it.

Teachers should be paragons of good, spoken English themselves. Encourage your students to speak good English too. Try different ways to make language classes fun and lively so that the lessons can be easily absorbed. Even pop songs, hip hop or rap can be used as a medium for teaching good English. In fact, one organisation in Japan teaches English through the singing of English pop songs. The textbook is a songbook.

Parents too have an important role. Parents who are English speaking should read aloud to their children more often, so that their children absorb the sounds, rhythms, and grammar of English, at an age when their brains learn language easily and proper habits will be ingrained for life.

Employers too, especially those in the service industry, can play a part, by putting an emphasis on good spoken English at the workplace. Send workers for training if need be. You can even set proper English as a service standard.

Singapore is not alone in pushing for the use of good English. Many countries, such as China, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan and Malaysia, have embarked on ambitious plans to improve their standard of English.

The PRC Chinese are determined to learn English. Since the 1990s, Chinese pupils start learning English formally from the third year in primary school. Many Chinese children start earlier, as kindergartens have started teaching English. The Chinese are hosting the Olympic Games in 2008. They are planning to teach English to five million Beijing residents in time for the Games. They have even devised a quota system for vocabulary-building that is pegged to the occupation of a person. Public servants under 40 must master 300 English sentences. For bus drivers and stewards, the target is 100 sentences. Shop assistants under 40 must pass a diploma test for retail English.

We have two major events coming up, when thousands of important visitors will be gathering in Singapore. In July, we are hosting the International Olympic Council's session to select the city for the 2012 Summer Games. We expect 5,000 visitors, including political leaders and major sports stars. Many more tourists will come to take in the atmosphere. We do not have to set learning quotas like the PRC Chinese. But many of the visitors will understand English, and our people should speak to them in good English, especially people working in the hospitality industry – hotel receptionists, salespersons or taxi drivers.

In September 2006, we will stage an even bigger event when the International Monetary Fund and World Bank hold the annual meetings of their boards of governors here. This will be the biggest ever conference hosted here, with about 16,000 top finance and central bank officials and business leaders attending. Let us be gracious hosts to our guests, greet and serve them using clear and grammatical English, and leave them a lasting impression of Singapore, and make them want to come back to Singapore again.

The new tagline for this year's launch of the Speak Good English Movement is, "Speak up, speak out and speak well." It is an action-oriented tagline which captures the spirit of what we are trying to achieve. That is, the more we consciously use English well, the more this will become second nature and the more articulate we will become. The benefits of good English are much more than you think. It may mean impressing an interview panel and getting a better job with better pay. It may mean convincing a customer who brings you more business. It may mean endearing yourself to a special someone. Whatever you are doing, good English

is a significant advantage. We are no less Singaporean by speaking good English.

It now gives me great pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2005.

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