

Speech by Professor Koh Tai Ann, Chairman, Speak Good English Movement Committee at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement on Tuesday, 25th July 2006, at 11.00 am at the Plaza, National Library

Rear Admiral Lui Tuck Yew, Minister of State for Education, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2006.

This year, the Speak Good English Movement continues with its mission to encourage Singaporeans to speak Good English---English that is intelligible to English speakers all over the world. It is not about accent. It is about speaking grammatically correct English, so as to be understood not only in Singapore, Malaysia and Batam.

At last year's Speak Good English Movement launch, Prime Minister Lee urged all Singaporeans to make the effort to learn and to speak Good English. The better our command of English, the greater our ability to comprehend and communicate in all kinds of linguistic contexts in an increasingly complex, knowledge-based global economy.

Those of us who are weak in a language are disadvantaged in the company of others who speak it well. How many of us are tongue-tied even when we have ideas to contribute, or independent views to express, because we do not have proficiency in the language? Mastery of a language gives us confidence in any

environment. Singaporeans should have an effective command of our respective mother tongues and of English. Proficiency in English widens our opportunities, enables us to function effectively in more arenas, and of course, increases our competitive edge in whatever we undertake.

The ability to speak and use Standard English is also an important social skill. Being able to speak well is achievable by all. It is therefore not only about future employability – although this is of course, a major consideration. As the medium of instruction in our national education system is English, all our children ought to acquire a proficiency of the language in the classroom. It's not only about being understood; it's also about intellectual development, understanding what is being taught, grasping new, even difficult concepts or ideas, expressing and developing what one has learned, holding one's own in discussion and being able to debate.

Parents and teachers therefore have a major role to play to ensure that their children do not speak in sentences that are ungrammatical and unintelligible because they are direct translations from the speaker's mother-tongue or army slang. In the case of army slang, it is the women who don't get it! Anyone who learns a second or foreign language, will learn the standard form, not a dialect or a non-standard variety. We too must learn English in the standard form.

Parents and teachers should immerse children in an environment where adult role models speak Standard English. The home is where children first learn to speak. That is where and when we need to begin. Parents who do not speak English could for instance, bring their children to the local library and community centres for story-telling or story-reading sessions. They can also encourage them to listen to or watch children's English programmes on radio, TV and even videos and other electronic media. Thus, this year, not only will schools and homes play their part in providing a supportive environment for acquiring good English, but our partners like the Society for Reading and Literacy, The British Council, Association of Early Childhood Educators, NTUC Childcare and many others will organize activities that promote the pleasures of learning good English.

Each of us must take it upon ourselves to speak Standard English with our family members, friends and acquaintances whenever we use the language. Our personal example will encourage the people close to and around us to speak Standard English too. We hope that in time, it will be the norm to speak Standard or good English, whether on the playground, at the market-place or at work. Indeed, native English speakers have said that in the region, the standard of English in Singapore is comparatively high. But like anything that is not maintained and improved, it can only deteriorate. Our current advantage is only relative as others are fast learning English too, and learning it well.

I would like to reiterate that the Speak Good English Movement is a 'movement' and not a 'campaign' as we wish Singaporeans to recognise the advantages of being able to speak English well.

We have a host of institutional, voluntary and private sector partners to whom we are most grateful, who have shared ideas with us, and who help us spread the word through their year-round programmes and activities. MediaCorp Radio, Lianhe Zaobao and My Paper, The Straits Times, Singapore Polytechnic, The British Council, MINDEF and the SAF Music & Drama Company, Ministry of Education, the National Community Leadership Institute, the National Institute of Education, the National Library Board, Paul Carr Consultancy, People's Association, Singapore Drama Educators Association, the Society for Reading and Literacy, the Workforce Development Agency and the Asian Storytelling Network. I would also like to specially thank Comfort Delgro and SingPost, our two valued sponsors. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the contributions and the support of my Speak Good English Movement Steering Committee for their hard work and generous contributions to this year's Speak Good English Movement.

Thank You.