

**SPEECH BY RADM (NS) LUI TUCK YEW, MINISTER OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH
MOVEMENT ON TUESDAY, 25 JULY 2006 AT 11.00 AM, AT THE PLAZA,
NATIONAL LIBRARY**

Good morning,

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

Steering Committee,

Members of the Committee,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Boys and girls.

1. If I were to follow the tone of the creatives for this year's campaign, I would first have to say, "I very happy to come this morning" and put a cross next to it, followed by the standard version, "I am pleased to be here this morning". Thank you for the invitation to mark the 6th anniversary of the Speak Good English Movement. In Singapore, because of the pressure of time, we tend to be very economical with our words. We cut out verbs and adjectives and leave gaps for our listeners to fill in. We leave out tenses, ignore subject-verb agreements and plural nouns. This has caused our language to be functional and one-dimensional. In turn, our communication tends to be brusque, unclear and at times very puzzling to foreigners.

2. The Speak Good English Movement's message is a very simple one – speak good English so that we can be understood, not just locally but internationally. This year's tagline says it all: ***Be Understood. Not only in Singapore, Malaysia and Batam.***

3. Our objective is to enable every Singaporean to speak standard English that is intelligible to English speakers all over the world. A simple definition of 'Standard English' is English that is grammatical, using standard sentence structure and is commonly understood around the world. And I would like to emphasise that speaking good English is not about accent.

4. This year's movement is about getting Singaporeans to recognise and use standard English. Most of us, at some point or another, would have conversed in a style of English which has sentence structures adapted from or influenced by our own mother tongue. In many such instances, we ourselves may not be aware that we are not speaking standard English. For instance, we would say, "Don't disturb me, can or not." Instead of "Please don't disturb me". We need to avoid lapsing into English with sentence structures that are directly translated from Chinese, Malay or Tamil.

5. Over the years, our people have made good progress in learning English. English has been key to Singapore's competitive edge in a globalised economy. However, our neighbours and the Asian economies are working hard to improve the standard of English of their workforce. The Chinese in PRC are learning English in droves and a percentage of them are highly proficient users of the language. As the economy diversifies and as we look towards opportunities outside of Singapore, it is imperative that we take the learning of English and our mother tongue very seriously.

6. Singapore's demographic landscape is changing fast. In 1996, 1 in 3 pupils in Primary One came from homes where English was the main language. Now, 1 in 2 pupils in Primary One speak mostly English at home. However, we realise that many Singaporeans are not aware that they are not speaking Standard English. This in turn impacts the way their children pick up English.

7. Parents are very important role models, particularly so in the early years of a child's development. I would encourage parents to read good books to their children so that their children develop an ear for good English. If they are not comfortable with English, they can speak their mother-tongues with their children so that their children will develop the ability to communicate well in their mother-tongue.

8. Many of Singapore's journalists, teachers and even principals like Mrs Magdalene Bheem from CHIJ Toa Payoh Primary come from non-English speaking homes and they are extremely proficient speakers and users of the English language. They tell me that their teachers, their schools and their love for reading contributed greatly to their proficiency and to who they are today.

9. We need to perpetuate this proficiency in the use of the English Language. MOE is therefore undertaking an English Language Review to find ways to level up the standard of English amongst our students from different language backgrounds. Following from the Mother Tongue Reviews, the English Language Review underscores the need to strengthen bilingual

education and raise language proficiency for our students. As part of the cycle of syllabus revision which occurs every six years, the scope of this review includes areas such as curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training and development, as well as community support and initiatives.

10. Our target is to have all students attain foundational skills, particularly in grammar, spelling and pronunciation. They should be able to use Standard English comfortably, in everyday situations and in their everyday interactions. Those who have the interest and aptitude should develop a high level of competency, in both speech and writing. Some of our best should attain a standard on a par with, if not better than their counterparts in English-speaking countries.

11. The English Language review team has been consulting widely with students, teachers, parents, principals, employers and representatives from kindergartens, post-secondary institutions and universities. Of late, the public has also raised several suggestions in the media about how we can improve the standard of English amongst our students. I would like to invite all of you to continue to give us your feedback and ideas on how we can work together towards these goals.

12. When we speak to Singaporeans who have a good grasp of the English language and ask them how they have acquired their language skills, they will tell us, 'It is reading at an early age'. At a panel discussion I had with

educators this morning, I am reminded anew how important it is for children to be introduced to stories and to develop a love for books from a young age.

13. One direction we are taking is to encourage children to read during their pre-school years. When they go to primary school, teachers will then use differentiated instruction to cater to their language backgrounds. We would like pupils to be exposed to a wide range of age-appropriate literature, graded readers, and speech and drama. We will also harness IT and use voice recognition software to engage a new generation of learners.

14. It is for this reason that the Ministry of Education piloted the SEED-EL programme in 30 schools at the start of this year. SEED-EL or Strategies for Effective and Engaged Development in English aims to strengthen reading skills and develop a positive attitude towards reading in the foundation years. Children learn phonics and grammar in the process. Shared reading, guided writing and conversations on what is read develop in them a confidence in and love for the language and start them on a lifelong relationship with books.

15. The key to enhancing the standard of English in schools is teacher quality. We have a core group of good English teachers who are highly proficient speakers of English and who can teach very well. However, teacher competency is uneven. The current review will focus on ways to enlarge our pool of good English teachers and strengthen our teachers' ability to teach and model the language well.

16. We intend to invest a lot more in building teacher capacity to ensure our teachers are able to instil in children a love for the language. Currently, MOE provides a range of courses like phonics, spoken English and grammar for teachers. We may explore customising these at cluster level to better meet the needs of teachers. Teachers must be good role models for their students. When teachers are passionate about their subjects and the language, they will be able to enthuse students to look at English as more than a subject they must score well in.

17. I am excited about some initiatives which MOE and SGEM are partnering *The Straits Times* on. The first is to get *The Sunday Times* delivered to students who come from lower income, non-newspaper reading homes. This is to provide them and their families with reading material on a regular basis and encourage them to acquire the reading habit. Our schools can support this effort by paying for these subscriptions via the Opportunity Fund. Teachers can take time to discuss segments from Generation Y page, StOMP or the entertainment and feature pages and help students plug into the world within and beyond Singapore.

18. The second initiative with *The Straits Times* is a column in the Generation Y page of *The Sunday Times* entitled “English as it is Broken”, a brainchild of ST Deputy Editor, Mr Felix Soh. I understand that the Editors intend to make the column short and snappy and adopt a tone that is light and fun. Some of our Master Teachers of English will help them with this column. I am looking forward to reading the inaugural column this Sunday.

19. The third is a collaboration with *The Straits Times* on an English teacher award which will acknowledge good, inspiring and effective English teachers. Their stories will be featured in *The Straits Times*' Little Red Dot, IN and YOUTHink, and *The Straits Times*' Media Clubs will interview them to provide ideas for other teachers to model after. So do look out for the nomination forms later this year and nominate your most inspiring teachers.

20. The media plays a very big part in influencing our language and thinking skills. I am happy to see that they are our partners in many of our initiatives to promote good English. The SGEM Resource Group comprises senior members of the media. I was told that this year's tagline and strategy originated from some discussions with this resource group.

21. Some other examples of initiatives by the media include the very successful English@work by 938 LIVE which has been going on for the last 2 years and *Capital 95.8*'s 'Bilingual Duo', hosted by deejays Wong Lee Jeng and Liang Ping. Starting this week, *Zaobao Sunday* and *My Paper* will also be creating features to promote English such as 'Lingo', which is based on our common mistakes in speaking English. You can see many of these examples on the stands around The Plaza.

22. Certain mispronunciations can lead to unintelligibility, for example, wishing someone a pleasant *fright* instead of a pleasant *flight*. I am glad NIE has designed a two-hour phonetics course to acquaint Singaporeans with the

International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA) so that the layman can check the pronunciation and stress pattern of any word in the dictionary. This will contribute greatly to Singaporeans pronouncing words accurately.

23. Language is not just a tool for passing examinations and conducting business. Language builds relationships. It is a lifeskill which all Singaporeans should have. We are good at using a lot of “do” words or instructional language which may sometimes be lacking in finesse when we wish to convey how we feel and think. Many of us lack the ability to connect with another human being at a deeper level.

24. We need emotional literacy to create the social glue that holds us together as a people and as a nation. The language of the heart, of feelings and emotions is the key to connecting with our parents, children, colleagues, our neighbours and especially, our loved ones.

25. This year, partners like the Society for Reading and Literacy, British Council, PCF Kindergartens, Association of Early Childhood Educators and NTUC Childcare and many others, will champion the learning and sharing of the language of the heart. They will be running programmes that will focus on the nuances of emotive words like sadness, anger, fear and love. How many of us know more than two or three descriptive words to tell another person that we are angry or sad? When our children tell us they are “ok”, what does ‘ok’ mean? With our partners taking this on and creating fun and experiential

leaning in the process, we hope to, in time, become a nation with the ability to use a wider spectrum of expressive words.

26. Raising the standard of spoken English requires efforts that go beyond schools. I thank our community groups and partners for their support and commitment. I would also like to take this opportunity to urge all of you who are here today to be ambassadors of good English. To the students present here today, I urge you to bring this message back to your friends in school. I have been told that students from many secondary schools attended SGEM-organised workshops and will perform a version of the skit we will enjoy today at assembly to spread the Speak Good English message.

27. In conclusion, I would like to encourage each one of us to make a conscious effort to use standard English. To speak English well requires some conscious effort but I am sure the benefits will be worth it. Then, we will truly **“Be Understood. Not just in Singapore, Malaysia and Batam.”**

28. It is now my pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2006. Thank you.