



**SPEECH BY RADM (NS) LUI TUCK YEW AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE
SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT (SGEM) 2007 ON 31 JULY 2007, 5.30 PM AT
TIMBRE MUSIC BISTRO**

Good evening

Prof Koh Tai Ann, Chairman, Speak Good English Council,

Parliamentary colleagues

Mr Hri Kumar Nair, Member of Parliament, Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC

Dr Lam Pin Min, Member of Parliament, Ang Mo Kio GRC

Mrs Josephine Teo, Member of Parliament, Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC

Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Member of Parliament, Hong Kah GRC

Dr N Varaprasad, Chief Executive, National Library Board,

Members of the Speak Good English Council

Ladies and gentlemen

1 I am pleased to be here this evening for the official launch of the 2007 Speak Good English Movement, or SGEM, as it has been known affectionately for the last six years. Time flies. It seemed not too long ago that I launched the 2006 SGEM at the National Library.

2 The Speak Good English Movement's key message remains a very simple one – speak good English so that we can be understood, locally and internationally. Our objective is to enable every Singaporean to speak a standard of English that is intelligible to English speakers all over the world; that is grammatically correct and uses standard sentence structure.

3 SGEM was conceived because it was deemed significant and necessary that Singaporeans speak *good* English to access international networks and markets. It was considered important for our children and youth to possess the ability to speak and write good English as this is an advantage for them in a global setting. Because of these reasons, some may view the ability to speak good English primarily as a pragmatic skill that will confer us an advantage in transactions and dealings, prized for its functional or utilitarian value. This is a perception that we ought to change and I will touch more on this later.

4 SGEM started with the objective of ‘encouraging Singaporeans to speak good English’ and the target audience was every citizen in Singapore. The message was that you did not need a powerful vocabulary, or technical knowledge on the intricacies of the English language. You just needed to be able to speak clearly and be understood, wherever you may be, in Singapore or outside of Singapore. *Speak simple English and be clearly understood*, was, in gist, the slogan of SGEM then.

5 And I must say that SGEM has been successful. More people than ever before recognize the importance of good English and are making an effort to speak good English; in schools, taxis, buses, supermarkets and other public places. There have been daily enquiries on the rules of the English language on Stomp!, SPH’s online platform. “English As It is Broken”, a column in the Gen Y page of the Sunday Times is so well received that it has been compiled into a book to be launched this evening. But despite making some headway in our efforts, we cannot afford to be complacent. This was brought home to me when on several occasions in my conversations with residents in the constituency this past year, they lamented the standard of their English and expressed sorrowfully a desire to speak better English. I therefore applaud the WDA’s efforts in putting together the Retailer’s Guide to Good English as it will help a segment of our workforce improve on their use of the language in their daily transactions. Interestingly

enough, in all my dealings, I've not had anyone, not even an expatriate, come up to me and express a wish to speak better Singlish.

6 The focus of the 2007 SGEM is our youth. We continue to reach out to all Singaporeans, especially teachers, parents and frontline staff, but we want to focus especially on our youth. The reason is two-fold. Firstly, to help them understand the need and develop the habit of speaking good English from young. And secondly, to give them the tools to express their emotions, to articulate how they feel, to build and strengthen relationships and establish deeper and more meaningful bonds. To sink deep roots, the English language needs to mean much more to our youth than just a necessity for their education, a skill to help them navigate business and work or to convey instructions to get a job done.

7 So this year, the SGEM has decided to move into the realm of **the language of the heart**. I have come across many youth today, who speak good English and can give any debater a run for their money anytime. In fact, less than a month ago, our national debating team was placed second after a grueling competition at the World Schools Debating Championship held in Seoul. They are to be commended for out-ranking teams such as Australia, Canada, the United States and England.

8 But ask our youth how they feel and the answers many are prone to give will range from 'so-so', 'ok', 'good' to 'bored'. Probe a little deeper and they may tell you how they are analysing an issue. They do not really give answers as to how they feel. It is not easy but I am convinced that there is some value in trying to access the language of the heart. Giving our youth the ability to use good English to build relationships becomes an important element in their development and growth as happy, well-adjusted, enthusiastic and expressive adults.

9 What is the language of the heart? Since we are in Timbre today, let me illustrate from the history of songs.

10 Some of the most powerful songs over the decades have been those that express simple but powerful emotions, those that capture a strong sense of purpose. Their meaningful lyrics express the hopes of a generation and yet have a timeless beauty that spans generations. The words linger in our minds and resonate in our hearts. You may not agree that there's no heaven or religion but the lyrics of John Lennon's "Imagine" is still haunting, especially lines such as "*you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join us, and the world will live as one*". It was a plea for unity and world peace at a time when the world was divided by the Cold War. It helped many express the fears, hopes and longing deep inside them, even when they knew not how to find the words to do so themselves.

11 As for what thrills the youth and the Timbre crowd in this era, I will leave you to educate me.

12 When you hear music which brings a lump to your throat or tears to your eyes, poetry that moves you and causes you to reflect or inspires you to hope for a better world, you are touched by the language of the heart. There's a power in words and language that cannot be fully explained. I've heard of how poems and songs have kept people alive during times of atrocities, when they have been tortured or locked away in solitary confinement. For them, their spirits were buoyed by the poems and songs, painstaking accumulated in their earlier years, each with its own special meaning, which accompanied them through their darkest moments. With these gems, they are never lonely even when they are alone. Take them away and they would feel lonely even when they are not alone.



13 If you take a look at this year's graphic for the 2007 SGEM, it says, 'Rock Your World! Express Yourself. Speak Good English.' Let's bring our youth back to the reason for using language – communication between people. I am happy that this year, the series of events and activities accompanying the launch of SGEM will be held in Timbre. There will be music and lyrics, songs, banter and theatre – acts of expression. Our main partners this year, besides Stomp! and Timbre will include 98.7. I would like to thank all for their contributions and their partnership with us on this effort to uncover the language of the heart.

14 Thank you all and have an enjoyable evening.