



**SPEECH BY MINISTER LIM BOON HENG, PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT 2008, 26 AUGUST 2008, 2PM AT METRO, THE PARAGON, LEVEL 3**

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, Chairman, Speak Good English Movement

Members of the Speak Good English Movement Committee

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon!

1 I am very pleased to be here this afternoon to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2008. We host many visitors every year. English is the most widely spoken language. Thus it is important that we speak good English. As Singapore hosts more and more international events, like the Youth Olympics and the F1, and as we develop more tourist attractions like the IRs, it becomes even more important that Singaporeans are able to converse in good English.

2 China is a good example. It has just successfully hosted the Olympic Games. For several years the Chinese people prepared themselves to host the event. China's race to learn and master English is captured in the movie, 'Mad About English'. The Chinese did it for both national and personal pride. Incidentally, it is filmed by a Singaporean, well-known broadcast journalist, Lian Pek. The movie, a docu-comedy, is not just about fun, as we see each colourful character struggle to achieve their common goal. Learning English for them doesn't just mean better communication, it is also a skill and resource that they are developing for their livelihood.

3 In support of the Speak Good English Movement, the *Singapore Polytechnic School of Business* conducted a survey last November. They found that 66% of adults between the age of 15 and 39 years claimed their standard of spoken English has improved in the last two years. Their main motivations were a desire to express themselves better, and to be better understood. When asked for the strongest influence for their motivations, respondents say they make an effort to speak proper English always, or most of the time, when

conversing with: superiors and clients, customers or business associates. Respondents also said that the major barriers for the speaking and use of good English are (i) a non-English speaking environment and (ii) the poor standard of English spoken and used by service staff. As they say, iron sharpens iron. We either learn the best or the worst from people we work, live and interact with. Therefore, it is important that we raise the standard of speaking and using good English as a nation, starting with our workplaces and our homes.

4 In 2008, the Movement's focus is on service and retail staff. They are our front-runners when Singapore hosts international events. The experience they give to our international visitors is very important. They are also the people we meet and interact with everyday. Being able to speak good English is important for service staff to communicate effectively with customers. They are aware of this. More than 80% of the respondents in the Singapore Polytechnic survey are in favour of courses, workshops, talks and seminars to improve their English.

5 In response to this, the Speak Good English Movement will be working with the *Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA)* to provide such programmes. Currently, WDA has a *Workplace Literacy Series* under its *Employability Skills System*. This is a literacy programme to improve the English language proficiency of Singapore's workforce. The *Workplace Literacy Series* levels 4 and 5 are widely accepted as an alternative to the GCE 'N' & 'O' levels, and to date, it is recognised by a total of 317 employers and training institutions.

6 *METRO* and *TANGS* are two organisations which are sending their staff to WDA's literacy programme. Their management recognise that fluency in the use of good English improves their image and therefore their business. It also creates better communication across different departments. I urge all employers to follow the example of *METRO* and *TANGS*.



7 The *Singapore Retailers Association* will be launching a new training programme targeted specifically at raising the levels of spoken English among frontline retail staff. “Service English for Retail Professionals” is also supported by *SPRING Singapore*, and aims to help retail workers gain confidence in their ability to converse in English with customers. This programme will be launched in October 2008. So, do look out for it!

8 Singapore is home and employer to many nationalities since its founding in 1819. More have come in recent years. Many new arrivals do not speak good English at all. They will learn faster if we have an environment where Singaporeans speak and use good English all the time. While we focus on service staff speaking better English this year, we must not forget that it's just as important, if not more important for Singaporeans to speak properly in order to get the service that they want.

9 Employers must take the initiative and provide support for their staff who are facing challenges finding resources or avenues to learn to speak and use good English. And employees need to step forward. If we do not admit that we do not know, we will never learn. It will always be difficult in the beginning and people will laugh, like we laugh at the Chinese learning to speak English in the movie, “Mad About English”. The laughter and the embarrassment should not stop us from improving ourselves and in the process make a better life for ourselves in this society. As an English teacher said in the movie, “You have to lose face to gain face.” [INSERT CLIP FROM “MAD ABOUT ENGLISH”]

10 The Movement will also be launching *English As It is Broken 2* today. I was told there has been much interest in *English As It is Broken* on *STOMP* with many people writing in to inquire about the correct use of the English language. Even more encouraging, the first book sold a record-breaking 26,000 copies, and was number one on *The Straits Times* non-fiction best-sellers list for 10 months! This tells us that people want to learn and we have to make the information and resources available to them.



11 This year's theme for the Speak Good English Movement is, "I CAN!". There are times when Singaporeans complain, but if we stop to take stock of our achievements, all that we have accomplished in the short time we have been a nation, we should look back and say that nothing is impossible. So yes, I can, you can and we can, speak and use good English, as individuals and as a nation: and the world is our oyster.

12 I hope that beyond the audience here today, people from all walks of life, and especially employers and employees will be mad about English. It not only allows us to communicate better, in the world today, it is also a skill and a resource that will open doors for us. Enjoy your learning and don't stop telling yourselves, 'I CAN!'

Thank you.