



SPEECH FOR DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE TEO CHEE HEAN, GUEST OF HONOUR FOR SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT LAUNCH 2009 FRIDAY 28 AUGUST 2009, 4-6PM, LASALLE CAMPUS GREEN.

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, Chairman of the Speak Good English Movement

Colleagues in the Public Service

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon.

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN, MEAN WHAT YOU SAY

I am very pleased to be here today to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2009. The Speak Good English Movement is now into its tenth year, since it started in 2000. Its key message remains the same – for Singaporeans to recognise the importance of speaking good English, and to encourage Singaporeans to do so.

Why Speak Good English?

2 English has always been important to Singapore as a language for business and social development. It was a language that allowed Singapore to prosper and thrive as a trading nation. English enables us to communicate more easily with others – when they come to Singapore, or when we interact with them in an international setting. Since we became an independent nation, the English language has also served as an important tool for the purpose of nation building as well as a bridging language for our multiracial society.

Now, you may ask, why put a standard to the English we speak? As long as we can communicate with one another, isn't that good enough?

3 English has become the language most often used in international business and official settings. It is widely used in conferences in ASEAN, Asia and Europe. From China to Korea to our neighbours like Thailand, people around the world are working hard to learn English. They know that to be plugged into the global community, they need to be able to speak English well. Singapore had a head start in business and trade because we chose English as our working language. Indeed when I meet overseas counterparts, they often ask how we have been able to achieve the good standard of English in Singapore. We need to keep this competitive edge by continuing to speak well and communicate effectively in English.

4 I need not emphasise how important it is for Singapore to continue to be relevant and competitive in the world today. Singapore will be host to many upcoming international events. The Formula One races, the Youth Olympic Games and the opening of the Integrated Resorts will see Singaporeans interacting with many overseas visitors.

For the Youth Olympic Games, we have more than 3000 youth volunteers who will be at the forefront acting as our nation's ambassadors. If our volunteers can speak the languages of our visitors, that would be best. But more often than not, we use English to bridge our language differences. It is thus essential that our young volunteers are able to communicate in English, the world's common language, with fellow youths from other countries.

What Does Speaking Good English Mean?

5 Speaking good standard English, then, enables us to communicate effectively and to be understood. We can say what we mean, and mean what we say. There are two simple steps:

First, know our grammar rules and express ourselves in grammatically correct English. A solid foundation in the simple rules of good grammar provides us the framework on which to build good usage and to understand where we have gone wrong.

Second, know our vocabulary and express ourselves in simple and plain language. Communicating well does not mean using big words or long sentences. When we can speak clearly, we will also be able to speak more confidently and this is the key to effective communication.

6 From my experience, if we are not clear in our communication, our intended message might not get across, resulting in unnecessary misunderstanding. Communicating clearly is not only a matter of efficiency, it is also an important way of showing respect for the person we are communicating with. If the recipient understands and immediately gets our intended message, no time is wasted in repeated attempts to clarify or rectify a mistake made because of bad communication.

The IRAS is a good example. It simplified its forms and the language used so that the instructions and questions in the forms can be easily understood. Legal jargon was rephrased and explained clearly. As a result of these changes, the information collected from tax forms has been reduced from 8 to 2 pages. Multiply this by the millions of tax returns and statements that the IRAS receives and sends, and you can see how both the taxpayers and the IRAS were able to save time and money because of the clearer communication from the public service to the public.

7 Studies have shown that language structures are set by the time children are 12 years old. Parents and teachers have a vital role in building the foundation of our children's language pattern.

Growing up, I was fortunate to have good role models and teachers of English. Reading good books and listening to good examples of English usage are excellent ways of learning good grammar and vocabulary. This helps us to understand how words and phrases are strung together to convey different meanings and nuances. We pick up different styles, and develop analytical and communication skills that are critical if we want to impress, inspire and influence. There is no point having a bright idea if we do not have the skill to persuade others of its value, and cannot translate it into action.

8 In Singapore, we are very lucky to have a vast amount of books and resources available in our libraries. I encourage all of you, not just the parents, to visit our libraries where you will find books that appeal to different reading needs.

9 The Speak Good English Movement will also be partnering MediaCorp 938LIVE in a radio programme for employers, managers and the working population that will show how English can inspire and motivate. The Movement will also partner The Straits Times for the second "Inspiring Teacher of English Award". This award is supported by the Ministry of Education and recognises passionate, innovative and inspiring English teachers who have made an impact on their students and continue to do so in their daily teaching of the language.

10 In support of the Speak Good English Movement, STOMP runs the popular online column "English As It Is Broken" where readers can submit questions about the language as well as signboards in broken English. Taking this one step further, the Movement will embark on a programme to reach out to organisations to ensure all the signboards that they put out are in good English. This will create an environment where Singaporeans are exposed to good English all the time, no matter where they are.



11 Today, more than ever, English is connecting the world. Social media like blogs, Facebook, Twitter and chats are connecting youths all over the world like nothing before. Recognising this, I am glad to hear that the Movement is using new media to reach out to its target audience of tech-savvy and highly connected young people. As Chairman Mr Goh Eck Kheng has described, this initiative is designed using social media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook to entertain whilst weaving in English tips and anecdotes in a fun and interesting way.

12 English has played a key role in the social and economic development of Singapore. We have built a good foundation in English. Now we need to take it to the next level of communicating well and expressing ourselves better. I encourage you to help us share the message that we all can have fun with the language and speaking good English can help us to impress, inspire, influence and be more than just understood. Being able to say what we mean, and to mean what we say will enable us to do that.

Thank you.