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SPEECH BY MR LAWRENCE WONG, MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF DEFENCE AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT 2011, ON SATURDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2011, AT 10AM AT JURONG REGIONAL LIBRARY

My Parliamentary Colleague, Mr Arthur Fong

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

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1 I am very pleased to be here today to launch the Speak Good English Movement.

2 This is the 12th year of the Movement. Over the years, we have made good progress in learning and speaking English. But there is still much we can do to improve. We have to consciously and deliberately work hard at this because the linguistic environment in Singapore is complex. We speak not only English, but also our mother tongue languages whether Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Speaking good English, therefore, does not come naturally to many of us, especially if you grow up in a non-English speaking environment.

3 I became acutely aware of my own gaps in speaking English when I first went overseas for my undergraduate studies in the US. In terms of written English, I had no difficulties delivering good essays, or preparing for my final year thesis. All the

years of schooling and training in the rules of the language – grammar, spelling, sentence structure, etc – had given me a strong base to write clearly and effectively, even compared to many of my native English-speaking friends. But when it came to verbal communication, I realized that I was not as effective. It was not because I spoke in a different accent. The problem was that it was so easy for me to lapse into a colloquial form of English which I was comfortable with at home, one which was interspersed with dialect, or with sentence structures directly translated from Chinese, or even with words that I had always mis-pronounced, but which I was not aware of. When I unconsciously slipped into speaking this localised English, only my fellow Singaporeans could understand what I was saying. Everyone else thought we were speaking in a foreign tongue.

4 My experience studying in America took place in the early 90s. Since then, the world has become even more globalised and connected . English has become even more dominant as the language of business, science, diplomacy and academia. And all over the world, including Asia, countries are working hard to improve the standard of English for their students and adult workers.

5 It is, therefore, important that we press on with our efforts to enable every Singaporean to speak standard English – English that is grammatically correct, commonly understood around the world, and intelligible to English speakers everywhere. This must start from young. So I am glad that the focus of this year's Speak Good English Movement is on our children.

6 How can we help our children learn the habits of speaking good English? First, all of us as adults must do our part. Parents, in particular, should be mindful of how we speak and use English around our young. Children tend to mimic their parents' actions, and often their words and language. Therefore all parents play an essential role in shaping the language abilities of their child in their early years of development.

7 Of course, our teachers are also important role models. I am not just referring to English-language teachers, but all English-medium teachers. Because our children look up to their teachers, whether they teach Mathematics, Science or English, and will pick up speaking habits from them too. Our school leaders, therefore, must set high standards of spoken English for the whole school. In adopting such a “whole school approach”, the entire school becomes a learning environment, where students hear and speak good English every day. This is especially useful for children who do not come from English-speaking homes.

8 Some schools are already taking the lead in this area. At CHIJ Kellock for example, there is a conscious effort to speak good English, and to make English learning fun – school corridors are decorated with posters spelling out common grammar mistakes. The school also has a Speak Good English Fortnight to give special focus to this effort, where platforms like story-telling sessions, and speech and drama are used to encourage pupils to speak up and speak well. “Taboo” phrases are highlighted so that pupils are aware of how they speak. The pupils catch on and look forward to new “taboo” words so that they can catch their friends or teachers using them.

9 Just this week, the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) was launched to drive excellence in the teaching and learning of English in Singapore schools. We want our youth to be able to speak and write with clarity and impact, while achieving the best international standards among our most able. The aim is to help our children become effective communicators, so that they will continue to have a distinct edge in the 21st century workplace.

10 Reading is another effective way to acquire a sense of how sentences are put together and communicated. For young children, parents can start by reading books to them, so that they develop an ear for good English. Or, if you prefer, let them listen to audio books, to develop their attention, and stimulate their interest in the language. For children who are able to read independently, parents can

actively encourage and support their reading habits. I am encouraged to learn that on average, 38 million visitors come to our libraries annually, many of whom are families who come every week. Library loans by children at our public libraries have also seen an upward trend for the past 3 years.

11 For our teens, I hope you continue the reading habits you picked up in school. Reading is one of the best ways to learn to appreciate the magic of language and to be able to communicate more effectively with others. All the famous orators of the world, for example, Abraham Lincoln, John F Kennedy, Winston Churchill, etc, were avid and voracious readers. They turned to books as a way of acquiring insights and information from others to figure out what they truly believed in, and to find their own voice and vision. It is good to read widely, and read beyond the narrow ken of what you like. If you are interested in science fiction, good; but also read the classics, mystery, romance. Read non-fiction books too – biographies of leaders past and present, books about the economy, about different countries, and about our world at large. The more you read, the more you know. This knowledge will, in turn, expand your capacity to learn, to speak, and to make good decisions.

12 Finally, as you read and learn new words, it is also important to pronounce these words properly. I used to have this problem, because I would read a lot, and whenever I came across a new word, I would look it up in the dictionary for its meaning, but I did not have the discipline to check the pronunciation of the word. So I ended up mispronouncing words, and only realized much later that I had made these mistakes.

13 Nowadays, it is very easy to check the correct pronunciation of words. Just go to the internet and “*google*” the word, and you can listen to a short audio clip with the right pronunciation, be it the American or British variant. The Speak Good English Movement has also partnered STOMP to jointly create a page called “Say It Right!” This resource features commonly mispronounced words

and shows how these words should be pronounced accurately. This is available on the Speak Good English Movement website and on Stomp's English *As It Is Broken* micro-site. There is also a "Say It Right!" iPhone app, to learn good English on the move. There are currently over 300 words in this word bank and 150 more are slated to be added this year.

14 In short, promoting good English amongst our children is a collective responsibility. All of us must work hand in hand to create an environment where our children can listen to good English all the time. I therefore encourage all adults – teachers, parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunties – to make a conscious effort to speak good English, so that our children grow up learning to speak good English naturally.

15 Raising the standard of spoken English requires efforts that go beyond schools. I am glad that the Speak Good English Movement has been working with a wide range of community groups and partners, such as Comfort Delgro, SMRT, 938 Live, STOMP, ST, My Paper and Clear Channel, to promote and extend its outreach to all Singaporeans. I thank both the existing and new partners for being part of this national movement to promote good English in Singapore and amongst Singaporeans of all ages.

16 In closing, I encourage all Singaporeans to make a conscious effort to create an environment where good English is used all the time, everywhere. All of you can be ambassadors of good English – "How you speak makes a difference" – to yourself, to your children, and to the people around you. It is now my pleasure to launch this year's Speak Good English Movement.