

**Transcript of Speech by Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State,
Ministry of Communications and Information & Ministry of Education, at the
2017 Inspiring Teacher of English Awards Ceremony
On Friday, 13 October 2017, 7.00 PM, The Pod, National Library Building**

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, Chairman, Speak Good English Movement

Mrs Kelvyna Chan, Divisional Director, Curriculum Planning & Development Division
2, Ministry of Education

Mr Dominic Nathan, Associate Editor, The Straits Times

1. Thank you for inviting me back.
2. I think we should give another round of applause to the young ladies from TKGS and their teachers who put together this rather excellent skit. I must say, as someone who has, occasionally, in the follies of youth, engaged in debates on the appropriateness of the oxford comma, I've never seen punctuation become such a source of humour. I have to hand it to whoever wrote the play. It was very well done.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN OUR PAST

3. The English language has a rather unusual place in our national fabric; in our social structure; in the story that we tell about our Singapore. When we became independent, we had a history of colonialism under the British. And yet, despite having other possibilities for what would be our working language, we chose to make English our working language.

4. The story of that choice is well-known. It stands as a reminder, then and now, of a particular model of nation-building; a social compact; and a national narrative that perhaps we don't pay that much attention to today – especially not through the lens of English.

5. But at that time, for English to become our working language, our medium of education, to become widespread as it is today in Singapore, required sacrifice. It required every ethnic community to take a little step back and contribute to the common space through language. It required a general sense that the next generation would do this better than they would.

6. Because in that generation, you did not have that consensus or facility in the English language across social class, across occupations, across ethnicities. And yet, it happened. It happened because there was an acceptance that it was better for the next generation to do that.

7. That position and that decision has had ramifications across the years. But what a decision it was for us to choose the language of our colonial masters – and master it! All in pursuit of a particular sense of nationhood that required sacrifice from everybody. For everyone to learn how to speak a common language.

8. That was not something we had in common with each other, but we *made* it something we had in common with each other. And we made it in common with each other not in one generation, not in two, still not yet completely in three, but an ongoing process even today, 52 years on.

9. It stands as reminder of a particular model that we have chosen not just for language but for so many other things. About what we can put forth and sacrifice; to give back; to contribute; to help to build. It was not about now, but for the next generation, and the next, and the next, going forward. It is a singular achievement.

ENGLISH IN OUR PRESENT

10. And if you look today at the ability of our students in the English language the performance of our students is remarkable. That we took a language that was not native to any of the people that were coming to this land, and we didn't just pragmatically deal with it.

11. We mastered it, and we wrestled with it, and we tackled it to the ground, and we beat it up with a bit of Singlish and made it our own, and our students outperformed the best in the world. It's a remarkable story. How many countries have done that? To have taken the language of their formal colonial masters, and had such great success with it?

12. We've done that because we've had good teachers of the English language. Repeatedly, generation after generation, as we are reminded here today. Where that commitment to, and love for, language has been passed on down, together with the ethos of teaching that we have in our education service.

13. But where has it brought us to today? In my role at the Ministry of Education, there are some things that I do which amaze me, with respect to what Singapore is able to do with the English language.

THE VALUE OF ENGLISH ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

14. I have visited a lot of schools and have held dialogues. And I have also travelled overseas because there is a lot of interest in what we do in education, so we get invited to attend all kinds of events. And there I am, surrounded by diplomats

and ministers, teachers and university professors from nations around the world. And I am standing there as a representative of Singapore. And I'm speaking English. And I am as facile, as confident, as engaged as the Englishmen in the room.

15. That is reflective of the trust that they have in Singapore. Where at some regional fora, Singapore is asked to settle the issues around a document or a statement. If Singapore clears it, it's okay. We settle both the legal aspects as well as the language aspects.

16. When the informal work of the politicians on an international stage is conducted – usually over lunch, over coffee, as opposed to on the stage in the auditorium – they have no hesitation approaching me and my team. It's not just me; it's the entire delegation. They ask all these questions – nuanced questions – about our policy, about our social compact, about the structure of our country, our people.

17. And many of the other national delegations do not do this. Not that they can't speak English. But they don't have such confidence to do so. And their interlocutors don't have the confidence that they won't be misunderstood and cause a diplomatic incident that undo the negotiations that they have had so far. That might break the bonds that they are trying to build.

18. And so they come, they join the formalities, they sit at the committee tables, they go up and deliver a prepared speech. All of that they do. But they don't joke around the water cooler. They don't chit chat over dinner. They make formal statements, they receive formal statements.

19. And what a remarkable thing it is for our entire delegation that we can do this. Not through any special effort of who we are. But because we had English teachers and an education system that prepared us in that way.

20. And when we go overseas, we are also sometimes interviewed by the local press. Because they know they can get a good story out of us. They can interview us, and grill us, and go down to the last nuance. All that impresses me. It impresses me to no end, because I find that few countries in the world are like that.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH IN OUR SCHOOLS TODAY

21. But it pales in comparison to what I experience when I visit our schools. When I visit our schools, I sometimes hold national education dialogues. I have visited JC_s, Polys, the universities – I was just at Tembusu College last night. When I visit these schools, I meet the students for a discussion.

22. Before I went into MOE, there was this stereotype I was given that our students don't speak up and speak out and engage. People will tell me, when you go there, make sure you're not wearing a tie, make sure that you're accessible, and open up to the students. I don't know where the people giving me this advice are coming from.

23. Because it's the complete opposite – I can't hold them back. I'm sure you can't hold them back either. The students engage me and ask me fierce, probing, relevant, critical questions. If they don't like my answer, they *tell* me they don't like my answer. They come back at me with, "did you mean this?" "Have you acknowledged that?" This is not perfunctory. This is not a matter of form.

24. I'm not suggesting that every last student has that full confidence and capability in the English language that we would like them to have. But enough of them do. That when we use this medium of dialogue and discourse, they engage in it full throttle, and are willing to use it as a tool or a weapon to make a political office holder understand their views. Unashamedly, the dialogue goes back and forth.

25. And what happens is, it becomes clear very quickly that they are extraordinarily well-informed. They are not making stuff up. They understand the world out there. They can talk about race relations. We talked about a film that I made with Channel News Asia. Many of them watch it as a primer for the dialogue with me, and it almost inevitably sets up the dialogue for certain subjects.

26. But over and above that, they understand what is happening in Charlottesville, in France, in Catalonia. These are things that they bring up. They discuss events in Jakarta, Malaysia. They bring it up, and they discuss it, and they try to draw the relevance to what's happening here in Singapore. Which means that they access the world of news, and the whole vast ocean of information that they can get on the internet – largely in English – and they do so with a confidence that is only going to serve them well moving forward.

27. The English language is an opportunity for them to be global citizens. To benefit from the best information available in the world, and as an opportunity for them to engage with a tool of debate and discourse here in Singapore, sharpening their minds. It's remarkable.

28. Because it shows just how far we have come, and the city-state that we have become. That our young children are able to do this, and do so with confidence when a political office holder stands on the stage in front of them.

THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE

29. Where does that take us forward? Well, we aren't done yet. There are children who don't quite have this opportunity. Who haven't quite read enough books. Who don't have the confidence to take this step into the world of information and news. And we must close that gap. Even as the best and brightest and most capable of our students are able to leap off and engage in the world as I've just described, we must make sure that this opportunity gets presented to as many Singaporean students as possible. And we still have some work to do.

30. Which is why we need good teachers. Good, excellent teachers like yourselves who inspire good practice in other teachers, and who inspire the students to work harder and do better, and to engage with the English language.

31. If you read the Straits Times today, there's an article about Sing Lit coming of age. You have a sense today that there are authors of Singapore English Literature mentoring the next generation. For a few generations now, we've had teachers mentoring other teachers. We now have authors and performance artists mentoring the next generation, performing Singapore-developed content in English to national and international acclaim, as well as commercial and literary critical success.

32. Is this a marker of us – of Sing Lit – coming of age? I would like to blow that particular trumpet but let's not give ourselves too much praise. I think it is *coming* of age, and I think we still have a significant amount of work to do to make sure it remains a pervasive opportunity for as many Singaporeans as possible moving forward.

33. But the fact that we can even start to think about that! After a very short period of time – from 1965 – we have socially transformed a language as a nation. A language has transformed us. And we have grappled with it and transformed that language to make it our own. That there is such a thing as Singapore English Literature. It has become something of our own. It is something to celebrate.

34. Read that article in the Straits Times. I think it's something that I find very heart warming. Share it with your students and inspire them to participate in that process of developing our Singapore English language going forward.

CONCLUSION

35. Congratulations to all teachers past, present and future, for driving the excellence that we have in our education service. For mentoring each other, and for inspiring our students, and the future of Singapore.

36. Thank you very much.