



Dr Lee Boon Yang (2003)

Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communication & The Arts, Official Launch of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) 2003, 2pm, Woodlands Regional Library

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

I am pleased to be here at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2003.

For most Singaporeans, English is an important language. It is the language of administration. It has become the principal language of commerce. It is used in academic exchanges. It is the language for our diplomatic interactions with friends throughout the world.

In the infocomm age, English has also become the language of the Internet. In multi-racial and multi-lingual Singapore, English has become a working language enabling Singaporeans of different communities to live, work and play together effectively. English has helped to link our communities and strengthen social cohesion. At the same time our use of English as a working or business language has enabled us to tap into the global economy for investments and jobs.

Not many people will dispute the position of English as an international language. Countless statistics and reports are available to show the importance of English. I will not repeat these details. But I would like to point out a recent report in The Straits Times (March 10, 2003) which said that more and more people in China were flocking to sign up for English lessons. I thought that was interesting.

Chinese people in China, who far outnumber the number of native English speakers in the world, are not being complacent. Instead of taking comfort that Chinese is spoken by nearly a fifth of the world's population, they are taking steps to learn English. They have concluded that for China to be successfully engaged with the global economy and international community, they must also master an international language. Hence they are learning English because they realize the advantages it will bring them – both socially and economically. What I want to point out is that they are learning to speak English, as it is understood internationally.

So what is the challenge for the Speak Good English Movement? It is not to convince you to speak English since many Singaporeans already do speak English. It is to encourage you to speak good English.

What do I mean by Good English? First let me tell you what it isn't. Good English is not about using long, difficult words. Good English does not mean we have to use complicated sentence structures. It certainly has nothing to do with speaking with an American, British or Australian accent.

Good English is about speaking simply and clearly and in a way that can be understood not only by fellow Singaporeans, but by English speakers around the world. It is about communicating our thoughts in a way that will be understood by the listener. That sounds simple enough but in practice it is not so straightforward.

As an example, when English-speaking foreigners come to work in Singapore, initially many have difficulty trying to understand us. On the expatsingapore.com website, there is even a webpage dedicated to explaining the “peculiar brand of English” that Singaporeans use. If expatriates here have to come up with a guide in order to understand us, how are we going to make ourselves understood by people around the world? When we do not use standard, grammatical English in our speech, we run the risk of being misunderstood by non-Singaporeans.

Last Friday, I attended the launch of the Singapore’s leading watercolour painter, Mr Ong Kim Seng’s book “Mastering Light and Shade in Water Colour.” In his speech Mr Ong explained how he was approached by the American publisher, International Artist Publishing Inc, to write a book about his prize-winning watercolour technique. Mr Ong confessed that he was a little taken aback considering his command of the English language.

He said “Writing informal letters and in conversation is alright with a little colloquial but to write a book for the markets in the US, UK and Europe needs proper readable English”. Mr Ong hit the nail on the head. So he recruited an assistant who helped to polish up his writing to ensure that his writing will be fully understood by readers all over the world. That was the key to selling his book worldwide.

Mr Ong may have been recounting his experience in connection with writing a book. But I was struck by how relevant his remarks were to our effort to get Singaporeans to speak good English so that whomever we meet in Singapore or wherever we go, when we speak, fellow English speakers will understand exactly what we say.

But does that mean we must all go back to school? Certainly not. We do not have to take courses or go back to school in order to learn how to speak well. All it requires is conscious effort to speak in the proper, grammatical English that we all learned in school. For instance, it is not much harder to say “I have it too” instead of “I also got”; or “That’s mine” instead of “My one.” We are not talking about learning a new language. We just have to inculcate new habits and try not to speak English with Chinese or other colloquial syntax.

Which brings me to my next point: That we need the cooperation of every Singaporean for this movement to be a success. In order to speak English well, we have to create an environment in which speaking good English is the norm.

In a Singapore Press Holdings' (SPH) survey of 550 Singaporeans conducted last year, 66 per cent believed that the standard of spoken English among Singaporeans has improved. Almost three-quarters, or 73 per cent of those interviewed, felt that their own level of spoken English had improved.

The survey also asked the respondents aged between 10 and 39 to rate their own standard of English. The results were heartening: 55 per cent rated their spoken English as "average"; 27 per cent, or almost a third, considered theirs to be "good" while 8 per cent felt theirs was "very good". Only 10 per cent rated their spoken English "poor" and "very poor" and 1 per cent did not speak English at all.

These responses suggest a growing confidence and command of spoken English. But more needs to be done.

In the same survey, 60 per cent said that they made an effort to speak good English when they were talking to their superiors, such as their boss or their teacher. But the number falls dramatically when it came to talking to family members, neighbours and even sales people: Only 20 per cent made the effort to speak good English to neighbours; 28 per cent with family members, and 43 per cent with sales people.

It is not uncommon to hear some Singaporeans speak impeccable English when they are at work, or with their friends. But when they are speaking to a hawker at the hawker centre or to a sales person in a shopping mall, they lapse into broken, ungrammatical English.

It would appear that they do this so that people will not think that they are arrogant or that they are "westernized". This in itself is not a bad attitude. It reflects consideration for the other person's feelings.

However, this practice, despite having a well-meant face saving reason, may inadvertently be perpetuating bad English. We should make an effort to arrest this trend. We must make speaking good English acceptable at all levels. Those who already speak good English should not be shy about doing so. In the same way you would not speak broken English to a child learning to speak, you would not want to pass on bad speaking habits to those whose command of the English language is not so good.

If you can speak good English, please speak out at all times. This way those who do not speak English well can learn from those who do – not the other way around. In fact, I believe that the fastest way to speak good English is to have lots of opportunities to hear good English spoken around us.



Even if you do not see the immediate value of speaking good English, by doing so, you will be creating an environment in which good English is the norm. This will help your children and generations after.

Since it was launched by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong three years ago (in 2000), the Speak Good English Movement has come a long way. In the SPH survey, 94 per cent of those interviewed said that the Speak Good English Movement has motivated them to speak good English when conversing with others. In addition, 97 per cent said it should be continued to help Singaporeans speak better English.

I am happy to note that the movement is not only being continued, but programmes will be extended and expanded this year. I hope that every Singaporean will heed the message to Speak Well and Be Understood.

It now gives me great pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2003. Thank you.