



Dr Ng Eng Hen (2004)

Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Acting Minister for Manpower and Minister of State for Education at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2004, 11am, Arts House (Old Parliament).

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning

It is my pleasure to be here today at the launch of the **Speak Good English Movement** 2004. The theme for this year – English@Work – reflects the movement's targeted approach in reaching out to specific groups of Singaporeans. In addition to the continuing focus on children and students, the Speak Good English Movement, or SGEM, this year targets working adults, particularly those in the service industry.

Why the service industry? One reason is that this industry has grown rapidly in the past ten years. From 1993 to 2003, the service industry created 480,000 jobs for Singaporeans, replacing the manufacturing and construction industries as the main source of new jobs. A survey conducted by the Singapore Tourism Board showed that there will be about 4,000 job vacancies in the hotel sector alone by the end of this year.

According to the Manpower Ministry's Labour Market 2003 report, for the month of December last year there were 8,300 private sector job openings in the service industries – or 64% of the total private sector vacancies. In particular, one in five vacancies was from transport & communications. So, the service industry will continue to grow, create new jobs and fuel the economy.

What does this mean for Singapore workers? As we diversify our economy beyond manufacturing, we will need to take a different tack in skills training. In the past, emphasis was placed on technical skills training – which was necessary for Singapore to compete for high-tech manufacturing jobs. Now, it is time for us to focus on refining the "soft skills" that are crucial for jobs in the service sector, such as customer relations, people management and presentation skills. Speaking good English facilitates the development of "soft skills". It gives added confidence to our workers especially those working in the tourism, hospitality and retail sectors who will be able to make a good impression on and better service tourists and visitors to Singapore.

The growth of the service sector brings many new opportunities, but it also presents us with some new challenges. I fully recognize that many workers feel more comfortable conversing in other languages. However, because we are an open economy, speaking good English will help workers enhance their employability in the service sector where the need to communicate clearly in English is an asset.

I am confident that the Singapore worker is up to this challenge. . Our workers have been rated Number 1 by US-based research agency BERI for a record 22 consecutive years since 1980 (source: Productivity Digest). But a word of caution – others are catching up. Recognising the value that English language ability adds to their workforce, other countries in the region are making the English language part of their schools' curriculum. In addition, adults in the workforce, including both professionals and older workers are signing up for crash courses in English.

In a few years' time, countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Korea and China may catch up or even surpass us in their English language ability. We have a good head start – more than 70% of Singaporeans aged 15 and above are already literate in English (Actual figure – 71%, Population Census 2000, Dept of Stats). If we redouble our efforts, we will be able to maintain our competitive advantage.

Cultivating good speaking habits has to start from a tender age. Children emulate their parents and teachers; they learn through the examples set for them. When parents and teachers speak good English, children and students will instinctively pick up good speaking habits too. Hence this year, the movement also aims to point parents, educators and childcare providers to resources they need in order to speak better English, so that they can serve as good role models for children.

Similarly, service industry workers are well-placed to serve as role models for speaking good English because their frontline jobs bring them into constant contact with Singaporeans from all walks of life. When frontline workers speak well, they set a precedent for the rest of us to follow. For example, when a taxi driver, a waitress or librarian greets you in good English, many of us would reply in good English too.

This is also the Movement's key message – that it is not difficult to speak good English. The ability to speak well can be learned, and with a bit of practice, anyone can speak good English. Last year, 260 WISH (Women Learning English) programme graduates proved just that. These housewives, aged 30 to 72 years of age, did not speak a word of English before they started on their 6-month Basic English course. Today, they are able to conduct basic conversations in good English. Most importantly, they had great fun learning English under the tutelage of women volunteers from the Society for Reading & Literacy.

Recently the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) also initiated a new programme, Functional Literacy for Our Workers (FLOW) to give workers specific workplace literacy skills. FLOW is aimed at overcoming a common problem among the less educated workers. About 18 such workers aged between 50 and 60 years attended the pilot programme at Baxter Healthcare where they learnt basic English through singing, story-telling and diagrams. After completing the first module of FLOW in March this year, the workers can now speak in simple sentences and are more receptive to learning English.



Another similar class in NUH has been started for 7 healthcare attendants, aged 40 to 50 years on 4 Feb 2004. FLOW will help equip adult workers who have little or no basic literacy so that they can start on the path of continuing education and learning and keep themselves employable.

Every Singaporean can play a part in the Speak Good English Movement. How we speak can influence the people around us, whether they are family members, friends or colleagues. So, if each person does his or her part in speaking good English, we will be so much closer to becoming a nation that speaks good English. I encourage all of us to take the first step. Start speaking good English today, and be a living example of how it can be easy to Speak Well and Be Understood.

It now gives me great pleasure to launch the Speak Good English Movement 2004. Thank you.