

SPEECH BY MR JASON LEOW, CHAIRMAN, SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT AT THE INSPIRING TEACHER OF ENGLISH AWARD CEREMONY, 7PM, THURSDAY, 11 OCT 2018, AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY, SINGAPORE

Ms Indranee Rajah, Minister, Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister for Finance & Second Minister for Education

Mr Wong Siew Hoong, Deputy Director-General of Education, MOE

Mr Dominic Nathan, Managing Editor, English/Malay/Tamil Media Group, Singapore Press Holdings

Ms Chang Hwee Nee, Chief Executive, NHB

Principals, teachers, ladies and gentlemen

A very good evening

#EnglishinSG: it's our language

My name is Jason Leow. I am a corporate affairs professional by day, often by night too, with a past in the Singapore and U.S. media. I started working life in the Straits Times newsroom where I first covered community news. In the early 2000s I was sent to China to run the bureau. I later joined The Wall Street Journal. Today I head up a corporate affairs team in a uniquely Singaporean institution, called GIC, which safeguards and grows our country's reserves.

After focusing on my career for many years, this year I agreed to take on the role of Chair of the Speak Good English Movement as a way of working with the community. Started 18 years ago, the Movement continues to capture the public's imagination and remains plugged into many communities.

When I told friends and contacts about my new chairmanship, I was asked if I would start wagging my finger at people who mispronounce English words and break grammar rules. Am I *also* going to become an activist against Singlish, on top of being a grammar nazi? They **really** wanted to know.

I draw comfort from the fact that the Movement still gets talked about.

In this digital age, remaining a talking point when people are flooded with messages and information, is itself an achievement. It shows that awareness of the Movement remains prevalent.

Tonight, I wish to give you a new angle to think about the Speak Good English Movement. This being my first outing as Chair, I think you will forgive me for sharing a little about the Movement.

Yes, we promote the use of good English. We may occasionally quote from the rule book, but I don't wish to impose rules or police language use.

I appreciate everyone's struggle with learning English in Singapore.

To my mind, our use of English needs to be situated against everything else that is happening in Singapore: Nearly all of us are learning or speaking a second language, or a dialect. This takes energy and can be frustrating. Some say their second language is English. Others speak Singlish thinking that is standard English. But some of us can code-switch.

As Chair, it is my responsibility to tell you there is a difference between English, Singlish and Broken English.

My mandate, however, is not to teach. Teachers already do a great job at that.

I hope, instead, to stir up some discussion about the place of English, and the value of good English, in Singapore. Think of it as #EnglishinSG.

Personally, I believe it helps to show up at work with good English. I think it's career-destroying if you cannot write and speak to be understood, especially in this age of co-creation in the workplace.

But make no mistake. English wasn't always my first language.

It's ironic that I worked in the English-language press for many years. I actually grew up speaking Khek and Mandarin. My role models were my Hakka grandparents on my father's side, and my Mandarin-speaking grandparents from my mom's.

My first brush with English was in kindergarten. I don't remember learning to speak English there. When I entered primary school, I was traumatized because I heard only a foreign tongue spoken, and that was English.

Fortunately, I have an aunt who gifted me with many books and encouraged me to watch The Electric Company and The Muppet Show. An alumna of SCGS, she was one of very few relatives who did not go to a vernacular Chinese school. She understood the importance of showing up in life with good English.

Like me, many of you could have struggled with the language. For English to come alive, we should celebrate everyone's experience, and the quirks we have brought to the language. I don't think we need to measure everyone against our own ideal standard.

As educators, you will agree that we should be happy with anyone who tries to learn, speak or love some good English every day. As Chair, I hope to highlight our diversity of experience learning, speaking, struggling with or mastering the language.

#EnglishinSG is, in fact, our language. Let's tune in to how we sound, use and show up to one another.

The Speak Good English Movement has organised the Inspiring Teacher of English Award since 2008. We thank our teachers for flying high the flag of good English. Tonight, I congratulate all the winners as they join the alumni of inspiring teachers, who work very hard every day, so that students can love the language and benefit from a good command of English.

Thank you.