



**SPEECH BY DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,  
YOUTH AND SPORTS, GUEST OF HONOUR FOR SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT  
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HARBOURFRONT CENTRE**

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

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

1 Good afternoon. It is somewhat daunting to be here today to launch the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) 2010. The poor Guest-of-Honour will be under even greater pressure to speak “Good English”!

2 The best role model of “Good English” that I know of is Professor Tommy Koh. One of the enduring lessons I have picked up from him is to make short speeches, with only three points. Today, I shall endeavour to do just that.

3 I will leave just three questions in your mind. First, why do we use English? Second, why do we insist on “Good English”? Third, what do we mean by “Good English”?

4 First, why we use English in Singapore. It is certainly not our mother tongue. We use English because it is currently the language of science, technology, commerce and the internet. In other words, it is a portal to knowledge. We use English because we are a multi-lingual, multi-racial society – and English is the neutral language that enables all of us to communicate with each other. We also use English because Singapore is a small and open city, and we need to be relevant to the world – to provide goods and services; and to trade with all corners of the globe. English is the most common second language in the world.

5        Consequently, we need to remind ourselves that in Singapore, we use English for pragmatic reasons. If history had turned out differently, and we could achieve the same utilitarian objectives in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, or any other language, we could well be speaking some other language today. I always bear this point in mind when people become over-zealous in championing any particular language, including English.

6        If we appreciate why we use English, then the answer to the second question becomes obvious. We have to use “Good English” in order to communicate with others, to make sure we are understood, and we understand others.

7        The third question is more difficult. What do we mean by “Good English”? I do not believe in putting on a false accent, using big words, complicated sentences, or the various other ways that the language is “massacred”. I believe it simply means simple, grammatical, intelligible English that other people can understand.

8        I am not a talented speaker who is capable of speaking differently on different occasions to different audiences. There are many far more talented people capable of doing that. However, I suspect that most Singaporeans are like me. We are only capable of speaking one way. And if we can only speak one way, we should ensure that the one way is what we call “Good English”.

9        I used to think that I’m a good debater. I travelled overseas to take part in debates, and I quickly realised that there are many debaters who are far more proficient in using the language. It made me think if I was really intellectually inferior. But after a while, upon reflection, I realised that it is simply a matter of exposure. If the environment which I grew up was not richly endowed with the language and the way it was used, in the fullest sense of the word, it will always be a leap too far.

10       We are doing this for our children. There are many people who champion “Speak Singlish”, or to create their own language. But I appeal to you to think about our children and understand that for the majority of us, we can only speak in one way, and therefore, let’s give them the best chance possible. And let’s give them an environment in Singapore in which to speak good English, good Mandarin, good Malay, good Tamil, and any other language that is spoken. Let’s provide the best environment possible for our young children, so that they can ultimately do better than we can.

11 So I ask you to put aside some of the more emotional elements that language engenders in all of us, and to understand that we do this for pragmatic reasons. Eck Kheng is right to emphasise to keep it simple, be it whether you are ordering food, giving directions, or asking the taxi driver to bring you to a destination, or in the office, or in the home. Let's do our best to speak in simple, grammatically correct English, and I think we can all ultimately be richer for that.

12 I want to congratulate the SGEM for what they are doing this year. They are working with many commercial partners, pre-schools, as well as *Beautiful People*, a volunteer initiative that has created a platform for mentors to share skills and spend time with teen girls who come from family service centres, welfare homes and youth outreach organisations in Singapore. This is a key element in making sure that people who are disadvantaged, or who come from dysfunctional environments, will not be further disadvantaged by poverty of language.

13 So I wish you all the best and I encourage all Singaporeans to join me in making a commitment to create an environment where good English is used all the time, everywhere. Thank you.