



SPEECH BY MR S ISWARAN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF TRADE & INDUSTRY AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AT THE SECOND INSPIRING TEACHER OF ENGLISH AWARDS PRESENTATION CEREMONY ON THURSDAY, 22 OCT 2009, 7.15 PM AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY BUILDING

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, Chairman, Speak Good English Movement,

Ms Ho Peng, Director General of Education,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Principals, Teachers, and Students

Good evening,

1. Tonight we recognise the commitment and contributions of our English Language teachers by conferring The Inspiring Teacher of English Award. This award, organized by the Speak Good English Movement and The Straits Times, and supported by the Ministry of Education, celebrates English Language teachers who ignite within their charges an abiding love for the English language.

2. Now more than ever, there is an important need to cultivate in our students fluency and proficiency in English, and a keen appreciation of the language. English is the “Lingua Franca” of global commerce, science and technology. Effective communication in English is a basic requirement of the highly interconnected economy and society of the 21st century. The ability to express ourselves clearly and accurately, in both the spoken and written form, is a valuable asset.

3. Effective communication is not just about grammar or textbook accuracy. It is about conveying one's message or intent with clarity and a sense of context. Indeed, it has been said that the ability to express an idea is almost as important as the idea itself. In that regards, the current slogan of the Speak Good English Movement is apt for it emphasises that the use of language should "Inspire", "Impress" and "Intoxicate".

4. In Singapore, we have come a long way since we adopted English as the language of business and commerce, as well as for instruction in our schools. Our schools have made steady progress in the teaching and learning of English. Our students consistently perform well in international competitions such as the Commonwealth Essay Writing competition, the Angus Ross Prize for Literature and the World Schools Debate Championships. At a broader national level, we have recorded significant improvements in international studies such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) between 2001 and 2006.

5. Notwithstanding these accomplishments, we cannot be complacent about our relative proficiency in English. Most of us are not native speakers of English and we are immersed in a bilingual, if not multi-lingual, milieu. Techno lingo and other forms of patois pose an additional challenge. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us, as individuals and as a society, to undertake a deliberate and sustained effort to continually strive to improve the standard of English in Singapore. It has been a traditional source of strength that we must safeguard and nurture for the future. This does not mean that every student needs to be an eloquent speechmaker; rather, we

must strive to ensure that our students are able to convey their thoughts clearly and confidently in standard English.

6. Indeed, we are not alone in this quest. Many countries are concerned with precisely the same problem - the need to sustain the command of standard English, particularly among their youth. Hong Kong is allowing more schools to increase curriculum time in the English medium in schools, in a refinement of its policy on medium of instruction after 11 years. Even in the United Kingdom, there is concern over 'word poverty' - that a limited vocabulary and the inability to adjust what they say according to the context and needs of their audience, hamper the ability of their young people to communicate effectively.

7. Raising the level of English Language proficiency will depend on the motivation to improve and an immersion in an appropriate linguistic environment. It is a goal that must be embraced by all and an effort with many dimensions. It entails a societal effort from parents, the community, businesses and the media to set the tone. Such a collective initiative from all segments of society will help raise general English proficiency and fluency in Singapore.

8. The Ministry of Education can also play a catalytic role, and the establishment of the English Language Institute of Singapore is an important aspect of this effort. The Institute will train EL teachers in the newest and most effective Language pedagogies, and provide a range of custom-designed courses in written and spoken English for all EL-medium teachers. In the long term, the English Language Institute of Singapore can serve as a teaching and research hub for EL learning in Singapore,

and beyond.

9. Ultimately, our teachers and schools play an essential role in motivating our students to speak well and in fostering an environment within which English is well-spoken. Our schools are committed to maintaining a conducive EL environment. This is achieved when teachers role-model standard English in conversing with students and others, and demonstrate the need to continually develop their own proficiency in English with a creativity and passion that their students will strive to emulate. The cornerstone of this effort is the expertise and passion of EL teachers throughout Singapore.

10. This brings me to our award winners. Tonight's awardees are here because they have clearly demonstrated the ability to inspire both their students and their colleagues. By sharing their expertise and passion and, where necessary, offering their guidance and support, our awardees, and other teachers like them, can develop a truly collegiate spirit towards the development of English. Such camaraderie and commitment will be vital to nurturing a whole school culture of English proficiency and fluency.

11. Each of tonight's 10 award winners has demonstrated the qualities and commitment essential for fostering such a culture. I will mention three examples.

12. Mdm Jaswinder Khosa of Huamin Primary School has many years of teaching experience but retains the same enthusiasm and passion that motivated her on her very first day of teaching. The secret behind her youthful vigour and excitement is simple: Mdm Jaswinder always demands the best of herself and seeks to evoke the best in each of her students. She continually renews her teaching and leads others through sharing best practices in her cluster, as well as at national and international forums.

13. Mrs Yvonne Cheen-Tay of Hong Kah Secondary School comes from a family of teachers. Her secret is to touch her students' hearts so as to motivate and encourage them. Her classes adopt her practice by sending notes of encouragement to each other. Both Mrs Cheen-Tay and her students keep personal logs which they also share among themselves. Mrs Cheen-Tay has summed up her caring philosophy in one simple phrase, "As long as I can touch one student, it's worth being a teacher."

14. Mr Ong Chin Meng, of Anderson Junior College is, apparently, an 'accidental' teacher. Whilst pursuing a PSC Scholarship in Science, he was required to take some EL modules. Much to his surprise, he fell in love with the language and consequently switched to Arts. Growing up in a Mandarin-speaking home has given Mr Ong very real insights into the challenges many of our students may face in acquiring proficiency and fluency in English. These insights are reflected in his lessons which appeal to a wide range of learning styles and give his students many opportunities to learn from each other.

15. Each of these 10 awardees has his or her own ways of engaging students and making the most routine of lessons memorable. Our goal of good English for all must be sustained by the passion, drive and skill of such inspired and inspiring English Language teachers and specialists. To the award Winners, I congratulate you and urge you to continue to infect others with your enthusiasm and passion for English.

16. I would also like to express my appreciation to The Straits Times and the Speak Good English Movement for co-organising the Inspiring Teacher of English Award. Since 2000, the Speak Good English Movement has worked unflaggingly towards raising the standard of Good English in Singapore. Their sponsorship and co-organisation of the Inspiring Teacher of English Award recognises the efforts of all EL teachers who strive each day to practise and enliven the qualities of inspiring teaching. It also recognises the pivotal role our English Language teachers play in instilling and furthering the use of good English among all Singaporeans.

17. Finally, I would like to thank all of you for your presence here tonight and your support for this award. I am confident that the inspiring examples of our Award recipients will imbue us with a renewed and abiding passion for the English Language.

Thank you.