

Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education and National Development
Dr Syed Harun Alhabsyi's Congratulatory Speech for the
Inspiring Teacher of English Awards Ceremony 2026
The POD @ National Library Board
29 September 2026, 1600 – 1800

Mr Jason Leow, Chairman of the Speak Good English Movement
Mr Jaime Ho, Editor, The Straits Times
Mr Lim Han Ming, Deputy Managing Editor, The Straits Times
Distinguished guests
Friends of the education community
Ladies and gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

1. A very good afternoon to each and every one of you. It is truly my privilege to join you in celebrating our English Language educators today.
2. This is the 19th year of the Inspiring Teacher of English Award. I thank the Speak Good English Movement and The Straits Times for the steadfast partnership with the Ministry of Education in recognising our outstanding educators who inspire in their students not only a love for the language, but also the confidence to use it well.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE: VOICE, UNDERSTANDING AND CONNECTION

3. English holds a very distinctive place in Singapore's story. It is our common language across ethnicities and cultures – a bridge that holds and binds our varied experiences. Beyond our shores, it further connects us to global conversations, and to people whose lives and perspectives may differ greatly from our own.
4. Today, even more importantly, with the use of the English Language, we exchange ideas faster, and in greater volume than ever before. Yet amid this abundance, two essential abilities can quietly become lost: the ability to express ourselves clearly, in our own voice, and the ability to listen with empathy. Neither of these develops by accident. Both must be deliberately cultivated in our students through the good work of our English educators.
5. These abilities matter even more as our students grow up in a world where AI can, in and of itself, generate fluent texts on demand. But fluency is not the same as meaning, and words without intent or understanding do not amount to genuine communication. AI may help us organise ideas, develop drafts and explore possibilities. But the human qualities at the heart of good communication – the ability to speak with purpose, to listen with empathy, and to respond with sensitivity – we must take care not to lose them, and by the same token, we must take care to ensure that our students develop these traits.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS: GUIDES, DESIGNERS AND MODELS

6. This is where English Language teachers play a very critical role. The English classroom is not simply a place where students learn to speak and write competently. It is where they find their voice through the beauty of the language and learn to use it responsibly.

7. As their English Language teachers, you are guides who nurture in your students the confidence to express their views while embracing the openness to perspectives different from their own.
8. You are designers who create purposeful opportunities across speaking, writing, and listening so that students can test ideas, weigh the evidence, refine their thinking and communicate with clarity and persuasion.
9. And you are models who show students, through your questions, through the texts that you get them to engage with and the way you listen and respond, what it means to engage others with discernment, respect and humility.
10. As I was digging into the depths of my memory of English class, I must confess that I approached the English classroom with much trepidation when I was younger, for I knew that in interacting with an English Language teacher, words carried weight. You know that when they speak, they ensure that there's much nuance in their choice of words, adverbs, or adjectives. And even as they speak to you gently, you will recognise that the words spoken do not merely land on the ear, but also pierce the heart and soul.

RECOGNITION OF AWARDEES

11. This relationship between teacher and student, built through countless interactions of conversations and words of encouragement, cannot be replaced. The imprint you leave extends beyond what your students know today – in fact, some of us carry the memories throughout our lives. It shapes how your students use language to understand the world, relate to others, and in turn uplift others and contribute to society.
12. Today, we celebrate eight educators who bring these ideals to life. Let me share their inspiring stories.
13. The first is Mr Benson Pang, who teaches English at Jurong West Primary School. Benson's classroom runs on curiosity. He uses documentary clips, stories and real-world scenarios to build a classroom culture of inquiry and dialogue. His students learn not merely to answer his questions, but to pose their own, and to follow their curiosity towards deeper understanding.
14. The second is Mdm Rafidah Bte Ridzuan, a Senior Teacher at Tampines North Primary School. Rafidah believes that every child can and wants to learn, and that joy opens the door to learning. Her students explore adjectives in the school's butterfly garden, write under the trees, and recite poetry in a *Poetry Café*. She turns the world around them into a classroom, helping each child experience English with delight and grow in confidence.
15. The third is Ms Sasha Kaur Dhillon, who teaches General Paper at Temasek Junior College. Sasha designs her lessons in which student voice cannot be outsourced. Her students bring in articles that matter to them, debate rigorously, and engage with views different from their own. Through her 'Singapore A-Z' inquiry project, they investigate issues firsthand. Writing from that richer understanding, they learn to argue with greater clarity and conviction.
16. Our final story is of Ms Zheng Kankan, a Leadership Award recipient and Subject Head, English Literature, at Maris Stella High School. For Kankan, Literature is a space where students grow in empathy, cross-cultural awareness and critical thinking. She leads

her team with that same conviction: co-creating resources and close-reading routines that prioritise student inquiry and connection, and building an empowering culture where teachers can share, question, and refine their practice.

17. These stories of our four award recipients show us that excellent teaching is both skilful and deeply human.

CONCLUSION

18. To every English Language teacher here, I just want you to know that the work you do is not easily measured, but the effects are profound and run deep in the lives of students. It lives on in the students who find the courage to speak, the confidence to write, the patience to listen and the wisdom to reconsider other points of view.
19. My heartiest congratulations to all nominees, award recipients, the school leaders in attendance, colleagues and families who have supported them.
20. Keep sharing, keep learning, for the best teachers themselves remain deep learners and students of their craft. Continue to empower your students to communicate confidently, thoughtfully and ethically. You are not just teaching a language. You are shaping how the next generation will think, listen, connect, and contribute to future generations.
21. Thank you so much for having me, it is my privilege.