

ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION

Speech delivered by H.E. Mr. Paramasivum Pillay Vyapoory, G.O.S.K. on
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I am indeed very happy to partake with you all in this ESU family dinner. I consider it a matter of pride and great satisfaction to have been an active member of the ESU and to continue nurturing a cordial relationship with this prestigious institution.

I say this because I believe that the *raison d'être*, the vision and the mission of the Union which is to promote the English Language, is of utmost importance for the country, for its economic growth and development. Indeed the work that the ESU has been doing over the past 23 years since its existence has been most praiseworthy and has responded to a felt need; that of promoting the English Language.

I do not need to stress the fact that in this modern competitive world, communication is a key driver to economic advancement and the number one language of communication is none other than English, the *lingua franca* of the world.

As it was written in the English Language Day message sent to schools in 2013 - I **quote** *“English is the modern lingua franca, the language that the Japanese Sports*

official will speak to the Nigerian athlete at the Olympic Games in China, the language that the Indian taxi driver will speak to the Russian group of tourists visiting the Taj Mahal, the language that the Chinese doctors at the Guangshu Medical University will use to lecture to students from Mauritius. English is the international language of diplomacy, commerce, education, science and technology, the internet and even the music world” end of quote.

While the adoption of English in the world is on the rise, both in quantity and quality, what is the situation in Mauritius? But before I talk about this let's see what Sarita Boodhoo wrote in an article in an ESU newsletter about how the world is giving due importance to English.

Quote: *“In China many parents are getting their pre-schoolers enrolled in the new sector of English courses. More than 400 foreign English language teaching companies are trying a breakthrough in China. What is more amazing is that some pregnant women are even speaking English to their foetuses, so great is the English Language fever!. In Prague, English is being introduced through songs and colour games early to preschoolers of two year olds and three year olds. Why such enthusiasm for English? The world has opened up and English is the language. It means more job opportunities. Formerly only elites like diplomats and CEOs needed to master English at work. Today, with growing call centers all over, no longer is Speaking English one of important skills. It is the skill”. End of quote.*

Let's come back to the situation in Mauritius? In Mauritius we are fortunate that, through the course of history, English has been established as the official language, the language of government and that of education. However, it is sad to say that despite the fact that English is taught at all levels in the education system, the level of quality of spoken English leaves much to be desired and according to reports from the Mauritius Examination Syndicate, the pass rate and grades in English language at CPE, SC and HSC levels are going down.

Furthermore, in a report following the forum chaired by Dr. Roshni Moneeram earlier this year *"on the decline of the English Language in Mauritius"* I read this and **I quote:**

"The quality of communication skills of school leavers and graduates is often insufficient to allow them to perform in professional contexts, the more so since the expectation that they would perform by international standards has also risen in the past 10 years. Despite the long standing presence of English in Mauritius, we seem to be missing the coach and our students and graduates are the ones who are paying for it. Where do the pitfalls lie?" **End of quote.**

I agree entirely with these assertions. I can venture a number of causes for this situation and suggest some remedial actions alongside.

1. To start with, the average Mauritian child has practically no exposure to the English Language at home. It is not spoken by the parents. TV and radio programmes in English are not tuned in, if by chance there is a programme.

And we know that language is acquired through exposure to the language. Vocabulary and grammar are picked up in a natural manner just by hearing the language.

In general local radios do not broadcast programmes in English.

I suggest that there should be a serious campaign to promote greater exposure to the language at home. There is the need to convince the parents and the media to play their part.

- 2 At school, because teaching is exam-oriented, emphasis is on reading and writing. Not much opportunity is given to speaking. And listening is not catered for at all.

The Ministry of Education can come up with policy to encourage rectors, Head Teachers and teachers to provide greater opportunities to students to practice speaking English, to listen to quality programmes in English and to have activities whereby students speak the language and speak it correctly; **speak it so that the listener can get the whole message with ease.**

- 3 There is the need for teachers to upgrade the quality of their spoken English. This is where the English Speaking Union, the Toastmasters Clubs, the British Council and the American Embassy can come in.

I have spoken to the Minister of Education about a project to improve spoken English in the schools and she welcomes the idea.

All in all, Ladies and gentlemen, it is my conviction that when children get greater exposure to the language at home and at the school through songs and stories at the preprimary and lower primary level, to films and literacy activities such as theatre, discussions, debates at higher primary level, secondary and tertiary level, when teachers will themselves speak the language correctly with the appropriate pronunciation, would stress, sentence stress, and articulation, students will be able to learn the language, speak better and write better. Performance in the written English Language paper will improve, the speaking skills of the school leavers and young graduates will improve and with improved mastery of the English language the individual will perform better at work and the country will prosper.

Our Children have great potential. We know the weaknesses of our system and we know the remedies. What is needed is action. Results will follow. Everyone has his part to play. The ESU has its part. I am willing to play a part to bring change for the better.

Thank you.

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