





“I first read Philip Lee’s work in the Letters Page of *The Straits Times* in mid-1970s. He wrote well. We decided to hire him. He is a compelling storyteller, and has a charming, easy-to-read, style. In the 33 years Philip wrote for *The Straits Times* and *The New Paper*, as well as *Streets* when it was in circulation, he built a faithful following. He is an enjoyable read.

– Cheong Yip Seng, former Editor-in-Chief, English and Malay  
Newspapers Division, Singapore Press Holdings

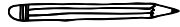
“Philip Lee is one of a rare breed of human beings, someone born with journalistic flair. He also has his own brand of charm.

That adds flavour to his writing.”

– Peter Lim, former Editor-in Chief, English and Malay  
Newspaper Division, Singapore Press Holdings.

“I have long found myself cheered by Philip Lee’s  
optimism, wit and way with words.”

– Paul Jansen, CEO, SPH Search



“I was News Editor of *The Straits Times* when Philip Lee first joined the paper. At the time, copy handed in by reporters had, generally, to be edited heavily, if not re-written altogether, before they could be used. It was quite a pain. Indeed I recall that some stories were written so badly that I had to vomit blood over them. Not literally, of course, but close. Philip was one of the few exceptions. His copy was, without fail, clean, clear and highly readable. Not a comma was out of place. Just about the only rare instances when I had to touch up his stories was when he over-reached a little in his choice of colourful phrases or ornate words. Still, when it came to capturing the essence of a news event, with all the important nuances, he was utterly dependable. Which explained why he was usually assigned the most important stories to cover, much to the envy of his colleagues. Some 30 years on, Philip is still reporting and writing, within a unit in SPH’s Marketing division which, by a curious twist of fate, I head. Though I do not now edit his copy personally, I have kept close track of his work. He has lost none of his writing skills.

The scribe in him is very much alive and well...”

– Leslie Fong, Executive Vice-President (Marketing),  
Singapore Press Holdings



“I have always enjoyed reading Philip’s columns. His articles were thought-provoking, often spiced with wit and humour, and his masterly command of the language made for stimulating reading. His coverage of parliamentary debates were often accompanied by a deep analysis of the issues of the day in his *From the Gallery* columns.

His ability to express his thoughts sensibly and concisely over a broad range of subjects has contributed to his reputation as one of the better journalists of our time.”

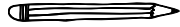
– Tan Soo Khoon, former Speaker of Parliament

“Before the blog, there was the plog – Philip’s log. It is writing that goes beyond the usual button-down newspaper columns. It offers the forthright, honest, cheeky observations of a journo who might well have been a leprechaun in another life.

His trail of work leads to hidden treasures too.”

– Ivan Fernandez, Editor, *The New Paper* and

*The New Paper on Sunday*



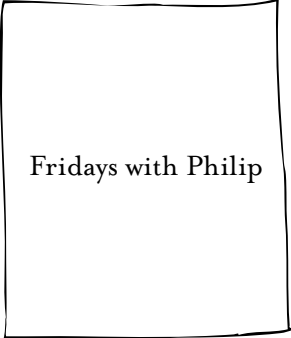
“Philip Lee’s columns show a love for language and a free-ranging mind. Although written originally for adults, this collection will also be helpful as supplementary reading for students.”

– Dr. Cherian George, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

“There are reporters, and there are writers. I read the former for information. I am drawn to the latter by the byline because the writer often rewards me with insight. Philip Lee is both reporter and writer. The pleasure he provides goes beyond information and insight. He delights. What flows from the keyboard is often a perspective that is refreshing because the author is a character who is unabashedly exuberant, utterly curious. Younger colleagues on the information shopfloor often ask if ours is a dying trade. My reply often has been to point them to the direction of the little man at his desk, glasses perched on beak, utterly engrossed in an esoteric pastime – solving *The New York Times* crossword puzzles. Hope flows when there are still wordsmiths who care about words, who take pleasure in a good turn of phrase, who celebrate people.

Philip is one such wonder.”

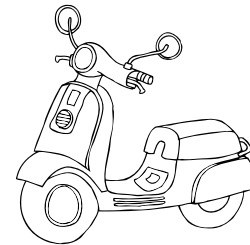
– Ken Jalleh Jr, Creative Director, *The New Paper*;  
Founding Editor, *The New Paper on Sunday* and *Streets*



Fridays with Philip

PHILIP LEE

FRIDAYS  
WITH PHILIP



AN EPIGRAM BOOK

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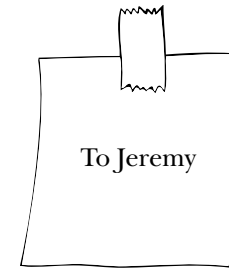
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## PREFACE

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It was only after I joined *Streets* in 2002 that I found time to write a weekly Friday column in the newspaper. Alas, this stopped when the newspaper ended its run at the end of 2004.

Most of the years I spent with *The Straits Times* since 1974 were consumed by long hours chasing the news. In the first seven years the pace was hectic. The running slowed down when I started newsdesk supervisory work. I wrote columns only on a few occasions.

In *Streets*, my weekly pieces were ruminations on issues of the day or nostalgic trips into the past. Some were also of the personalities I encountered. But I also devoted many columns to discussing the standard of English among Singaporeans and identified some of our weaknesses in this language. When I joined *The New Paper* as Copy Editor in 2005, I re-started the Friday column.

The columns on language which I wrote for both newspapers turned out to be the most popular if I were to judge by the number of responses I got from readers. I have included a selection in this book. There are also a few pieces I wrote in *The Straits Times* in the 1980s and I have included some here.



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I have roughly arranged the columns by subject matter and not by their dates of publication.

Since the issues I addressed were diverse and varied, I have titled this book, *Fridays with Philip*, which, I know, doesn't say anything about anything.

I might not have started on this project had it not been for the constant cajolings from my sister Lily as well as my long-time alter ego, Tina Yeo, who nagged often but gently, that I should shake a leg and move.

My colleague, administrative manager, Zain Afridi, was instrumental in making me shake that leg. He had kept copies of my columns in a thumb drive and told me that all I had to do was to select them and get going. I thank them all.

Needless to say, I am also grateful to the Singapore Press Holdings for the green light for this project. I also thank the editors, as well as former Speaker Tan Soo Khoon and Dr. Cherian George, author of *The Air-conditioned Nation* and other books, for their generous comments about my work.

To Ken Jalleh Jr, founding editor of *Streets*, who gave me the opportunity to start my Friday columns, I say, "I owe you more than a few beers."

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Gratitude must also go to Edmund Wee of Epigram who readily said yes when I asked if he was interested in publishing this book.

I hope this will turn out to be a wise decision.



Philip Lee  
2008

LINGUAL LINKS OF QUIDNUNC AND ULULATION  
I WORRY ABOUT OUR ENGLISH STANDARDS FIX THE  
GRAMMAR, THEN TALK STILL NOT "SPICKING" GOOD  
ENGLISH GOSH WE CAN'T LEAVE GOD ALONE WHEN  
WE SPEAK HEADING TO PISAN? OH, YOU MEAN  
BISHAN GOODBYE FIVE-FOOT WAY, HELLO HELLO  
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-FOOT WAY, HELLO PAVEMENT LINGUAL LINKS

LANGUAGE

## LINGUAL LINKS

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TWENTY FIVE YEARS ago, I lived in a point-block flat next door to a young Mandarin-speaking couple. For 10 years, we observed basic neighbourliness. Whenever we met in the lift or car park, we would say hello. On festive occasions, we shook hands and expressed seasonal felicitations. When I moved house 10 years later, this neighbour and I exchanged our last handshake – with the usual smiles and good wishes. But we never really became friends.

Yet during that period, I got on famously with another Chinese family living in a unit diagonally from ours on this same floor. I even had friends on the lower floors. They were all English-speaking – Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and a Malay family.

I have often wondered if language was a reason why this Mandarin-speaking neighbour and I never hit it off. We were both Chinese but I speak pathetic Mandarin. He hardly spoke in English, expect to utter the routine, “Hi, good morning” and all that. So I didn’t know how conversant he was in it.

Could the language factor also be why it has been so hard for the Chinese and Malay communities here to befriend each other in more meaningful ways?

It has become all too clear these days that the Chinese are becoming more Chinese, and the Malays more Malay. Look around you. We live in a multi-racial society but any visitor would think this is a Chinese country. The language of the streets is Mandarin. On the buses, almost all TV Mobile programmes are in Chinese. In heartland coffee shops, television sets show only Chinese programmes. If there are two TV sets, viewers get to watch Channel U and Channel 8.

Yet in most of these shops, there are also Malay and Indian foodstalls, and, presumably, Malay and Indian customers. At community centres, Mandarin is used in many committee meetings.

Even in the offices of commercial houses and government departments, Chinese workers speak to one another in Mandarin, unintentionally making their non-Chinese colleagues feel left out.

And the Malays have become more Malay, or Muslim, than I have ever known them to be. The advent of the tudung, a rare thing 20 years ago, is a highly visible statement that they are different. Fundamentalist teachings of their faith, featured in a growing number of religious classes, make many embrace

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customs, or adopt ideas, they had never bothered about before.

When the clandestine machinations of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) were made public, my first reaction was: What has happened to the Malays? I have never known them to be like this. Most Malays here, I am more than convinced, do not condone what the JI has done.

If you ask me, of all the communities in Singapore, the Malays are the easiest to make friends with. I grew up knowing so many Malay friends, both here and in Malaysia. I find them easy-going and hospitable. At the risk of stereotyping any community, I will say that Malays are warm, spontaneous, fun loving, gregarious, family-oriented and artistic.

The Chinese are intense, ambitious, self-oriented, materialistic and sometimes too sensitive. They are also loyal, industrious and family-oriented.

This difference in community personality is already something to bridge, leave alone other hurdles.

To get to know anyone, it is not enough to say hello and good morning. My experience with that neighbour of mine is a case in point. Friendship or understanding between any two persons can only grow through verbal communication, frequent meetings and shared activity. This is also true for a community. And using a common language helps no end.

Some have said that Mandarin-speaking people do switch to English in conversations or during a meeting when a non-Chinese is present. But the non-Chinese participant wouldn't feel any great sense of belonging to the group. He knows they would have preferred, were he not around, to speak in Mandarin.

He will still feel he is the odd one out.

Years ago, the language of the streets here was Malay. Chinese, Indians and Malays used this in daily informal exchanges. No one felt left out. Conversations might have been in bazaar Malay but still, this helped kindle warm feelings as everyone spoke a tongue all shared and understood.

Then, inter-communal relations were so relaxed that the Chinese, Malays and Indians often cracked race-laced jokes about one another without anyone taking offence. Indeed, the butt of the joke often laughed with the rest – and sometimes delivered an equally piquant riposte. Try that today.

So can we introduce English as the lingua franca in public places, just as Malay was in the days of old? That should be the obvious solution but I think no authority would initiate such a move today.

But my firm belief is this:

**Speaking a common tongue  
in public places pushes out  
consciousness about race  
and its attendant differences.**

It should be a language that all, in varying degrees of proficiency, can speak and understand.

January 24, 2003, *Streets*

*Author's note: Programmes on TV Mobile today feature Chinese and English programmes but no Malay or Tamil ones.*

## OF QUIDNUNC AND ULULATION

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FRIENDS SAY I talk too big sometimes. They chide me for my verbal grandiloquence even in casual conversation. They accuse me of churning out pompous and indigestible verbiage that molests the sensibilities of most people who prefer to use simple and comprehensible words in everyday communication. My spoken language is artificial, another acerbic-tongued critic said. Nobody speaks like this.

Well, it is about time somebody did.

They press on: As a journalist I should know better than to delve into the realm of the polysyllable – and regurgitate ponderous words which obfuscate the expression of lucid thoughts. Simplicity, they aver, is the golden rule in perspicuous writing.

Yes, yes, I know. But in speech, I am sometimes deliberately different.

But why?

Well, tell me, what is to become of the thousands upon thousands of words which have never seen the light of day because they are never uttered by mortals content to use the same hackneyed words and phrases, now rendered glabrous through overuse? Why, some of the spurned words are the Koh-i-Noor of the language but are languishing unknown, unread, unenunciated and keeping company with silverfish in tomes of dusty dictionaries.

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It is for these forgotten ones, incarcerated in their lexical Gulag, that I have decided to give some air and some exercise in their silent prison yard.

There are about 850,000 words in the English language although some say there are more than a million. Of these, only about 200,000 words are in common use. So what is to become of the more than half a million words, now mildewed through long storage and moribund through neglect?

Are they, to borrow the words of Virginia Woolf, destined to “decay in the eternity of print”?

Words are only strange if they remain unused. And it is not as if only polysyllables get buried in anonymity. Take “feral” for instance. Why is its synonym “ferocious” preferred to this? Or that lovely word, “erubescens”, which means “reddening or blushing”.

I can understand if there would hardly be an occasion to use “antidisestablishmentarianism” but surely verbal gems

such as “etiolate” (make pale through deprivation of light), or the onomatopoeic word “ululate” (howls or wails, like those of a monkey) are useful descriptions which, if used often enough, could become as easy on the ears as “everyday”.

Some years ago, a group of young journalists asked me what would be the one word to encapsulate the most important attribute of a reporter.

I said: “**QUIDNUNC**.”

They laughed at the odd-sounding word and asked: “Is that an English word?” Now, if they had known that the word describes a person who is a busybody, someone who wants to know what’s the latest, they would have realised how apt my reply was.

I have seen “maudlin” used now and then but not often enough. When someone becomes maudlin, he is tearfully sentimental because he is drunk. See, one word captures three human conditions: inebriation, emotional pusillanimity and being lachrymose.

I could go on but my friends will detest me for what they see as artifice – this display of verbal ostentation. Ah, well. But I forgive them in the spirit of this axiom: Aberration is the hallmark of homo sapiens while longanimous placability and condonation are the indicia of supermundane omniscience.

In (ho-hum), prosaic terms, this means: To err is human; to forgive, divine.

May my detractors grant me a similar munificence of spirit.

February 18, 2002, *Streets*

## I WORRY ABOUT OUR ENGLISH STANDARDS

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WE IN SINGAPORE are in a language dilemma.

While the Chinese language campaigners have been robustly championing the cause, not much has been heard from the other camp – the people who once promoted the use of better English.

The dilemma is this: Research has shown that most people can only master one language. And we have been told: Pick the language you want to be conversant in and learn to master it. So which one should we master?

I shall not go into the oft-expressed reasons why it is vital for young Chinese Singaporeans to have a better grasp of Mandarin. It is well known. Nor will I belabour the point that an above-average command of English is essential for a global

city such as ours. This has also been discussed to death.

A survey here has found, to my surprise, that more young Singaporeans now speak English at home. Yet, why is it that their command of the language, at least from my experience, is for most merely so-so, and for others, very poor indeed? By command, I mean speaking and writing.

One reason could be that language spoken at home tends to be informal. But what if our kids now switched to their mother tongues at home as has been recommended? And what if their parents got them to learn their mother tongue as the first language in primary school? Can they hone their skills in English later in secondary school? I wonder.

All I know is that those six years in elementary school are vital for a sound grounding in any language. There is a risk that having become comfortable in one language, they may pay scant attention to English since it is a second language. We all know how we ignored the second language in school. I don't think this attitude will change, unless the student is very disciplined and motivated. It is not going to be easy for students to hone their skills in English, both spoken and written, when Mandarin, Tamil or Malay, had held sway for the first six years of their school lives – indeed even longer if they had used the language at home from infancy and had also attended kindergarten.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, in speaking about this subject at the recent launch of the Speak Mandarin campaign, used the examples of his children as students who managed to attain proficiency in both languages. He believes, despite

students learning Chinese as the main language in primary school, they can strengthen their English proficiency in secondary school, university and later in working life. Yes, but I don't think the improvement will be significant if the language had not been used intensively during the pre-teen years.

Mr. Lee's children are among the exceptionally bright ones. There are, of course, many other bright children who can master two languages, but I have grave doubts the majority of kids in Singapore can do this.

I am not pro-English or anti-Mandarin. I am merely wondering whether this emphasis on the mother tongue, which has much to commend it, will subliminally reduce the importance of English, our working language and the language of the world, in the minds of the young.

In university or in work life, speaking and writing in English does not mean proficiency will improve. The user could well be using the same bad English throughout and indeed I have seen the written work of many graduates who expose such a weakness.

The fundamentals of a language have to be learnt from young and mastery over it can only come through constant reading, writing and speaking in it. If not, some may begin to express themselves in fractured English like many in Europe and some countries in Asia are doing. English is usually the second or third language there.

Examples, picked from the internet, and which have become very popular reading material, attest to this.

For example, an information booklet in Japan about using a hotel air conditioner: Cools and heats – if you want to condition

of cool air in your room, please control yourself.



In a Nairobi restaurant: Customer who find our waitresses rude ought to see the manager. On the menu of a Swiss restaurant: Our wines leave

you nothing to hope for. In an East African newspaper: A new swimming pool is rapidly taking shape since the contractors have thrown in the bulk of their workers. Hotel in Vienna, Austria: In case of fire, do your utmost to alarm the hotel porter.

**Hotel in  
Vienna, Austria:  
In case of fire,  
do your utmost  
to alarm the  
hotel porter.**

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These examples are hilarious and yet they are also telling. They show how important and how difficult it is to have a good grasp of any language for clear and unequivocal communication, and what can happen if this fails.

I have had many occasions in my long work life – as a teacher, a journalist, a voluntary editor of publications and a voluntary language tutor, as well as being privy to letters written to newspapers – to assess the standard of written English of Singaporeans, and I say in a majority of cases it falls short of satisfactory.

Remember, most of these written works were from people who had used English as the main language, right from Primary 1. And this is why I worry – that with English being second language until the end of primary school, will standards ever be raised?

December 17, 2004, *Streets*

## FIX THE GRAMMAR, THEN TALK

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“FREE, COME OVER.” Say this to a visitor from England or the US and he will blink. Or if the visitor overhears “Why you so like that one?” he would be similarly confused.

While the first is the local way of inviting someone to visit and the second, an expression of mild exasperation, both these phrases, which use English words, are products of literal translations of dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese. As such, they are incomprehensible to the native English speaker. Yet, we know that in our daily lives, such homespun lingual inventions abound.

The current Speak Good English movement has to contend not just with discouraging the use of direct English translations



from dialects, but also to tackle the language problem at its root. And this is the poor grounding in English grammar.

I am not averse to people using charming little words such as leh, lah, aiyah and aiyoh. They are colourful add-ons in our patois which need not necessarily pull down the quality of spoken English. The problem lies in areas such as syntax (the grammatical arrangement of words showing their connection and relation in a sentence), grammar, particularly tenses and subject-verb agreement, as well as pronunciation.

14 The logical premise must be that if you have poor grounding in grammar, then your spoken language must also reveal this weakness. Also, if you are not drilled in correct pronunciation, then what comes out of your mouth can be misleading.

Take the word “been”, which is often pronounced by many Singaporeans as “bin”, or “sheet”, which frequently comes out as “shit”. And yes, “mischievous” becomes “mischieviuous”. Or “seat” which is almost always pronounced as “sit”. “Whereas” has, for some odd reason, become “where else”. I have also often heard the word “perhaps” pronounced as “per helps.” And the pronunciation of “entrepreneur” has been distorted in more ways than one. One variation is “enterperner”.

These aside, correct syntax is also important. Although this might perhaps be more essential in written English, it would do the student well to be aware that faulty sentence construction can have hilarious consequences. Take this example: “I leaned back in my chair contentedly, watching the baby playing and puffing away at my cigarette.” Or, “If the baby dislikes milk, try boiling it.”



And how about this: “To advance her singing career, she needs to do a solo badly.”

Young Singaporeans when in conversation often speak Mandarin interlarded with English words. Here is a sampling: “Ming tian wo yao qu interview but hai mei you decide yao bu yao qu, leh.” “I have an interview tomorrow but have not decided whether to go or not, leh.”

On the few occasions that I have overheard chit-chats in English, I noted that, in most cases, the standard of the language used is woefully poor – caused usually by the use of incomplete sentences or sentences with faulty tenses. Observe the fractured English used by many Singaporeans in street interviews aired on television. What has led us to this sorry state?

A grammar gaffe such as this one happens all the time: “My neighbours tells me that they too heard the family quarrelling.” or, “Last year, they fight often; this year also they fight.” I overheard this myself and the man is a university graduate.

Notice that older Singaporeans usually speak and write better English. One reason must be that we were thoroughly drilled, from primary school on, in getting the cardinal rules of grammar right. In primary school, our teachers used to make us sit in a circle on the floor while she was in the middle reading to us captivating stories from *Aesop’s Fables*, *The New Royal Reader*, and other books. This kick-started our interest in reading.

Grammar lessons were a bore but we plodded through them, using that old language bible known as *High School Grammar*.

It gave us a firm foundation in the subject. Then, in the upper secondary classes, we had to write an essay each week. The three best essays were read to the class. It motivated many of us to try harder.

Teachers paid a lot of attention to every aspect of the learning of the language then. One teacher even taught us phonetics. I don't know how much attention is paid to learning grammar in school today and how motivated students are.

All I know is that this language movement will have little impact if the speakers do not unlearn their bad grammar and be more thoroughly drilled to get the fundamentals of the language right.

July 11, 2003, *Streets*

## STILL NOT "SPICKING" GOOD ENGLISH

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HOW MUCH PROGRESS has the Speak Good English Movement made, as it enters its fifth year today? It is hard to say. But I continue to hear bad English spoken every day.

If I were to write down the title of the movement and ask some Singaporeans to read it to me, I'll bet that six out of 10 will pronounce the first word as "spick" when it should be said in a slightly stretched way, like "speek", or what is called the long vowel.

For its fifth year celebrations, the movement will introduce "good English icons". They are "a cross-section of Singaporeans who recognise the importance of speaking good English, who speak it every day, and who wish to share their experiences ..."



These speakers include rappers, TV and radio personalities, a taxi-driver, as well as parents and children.

When it comes to speaking English, many Singaporeans suffer this double jeopardy – bad grammar and poor pronunciation.

On grammar, I am convinced that if they take some trouble to learn the tenses and understand subject-verb agreement, half their grammar problems will be solved.

On pronunciation, I remember that when I was in upper primary school, teachers took great pains to make sure we pronounced words well.

Every pupil in class went through weekly tongue twisters such as these:

“She stood on the balcony inexplicably mimicking him hiccupping but amicably welcoming him in.”

Or: “Amidst the mists and coldest frosts, with barest wrists and stoutest boasts, he thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts.” This was to train us to pronounce words ending with “sts”.

We must convince the young that good diction, or the manner of enunciating a word, is a worthwhile endeavour.

Once I heard a young friend pronounce “blood” as “blurd”. I told him it should be said with a slightly elongated “ah” sound, like “blard”. He and his pals laughed. He said: “Uncle, we are not ang mohs, lah.”

That’s one of the problems the movement faces. Many Singaporeans are so comfortable with their monotone English that they are resistant to change. They think pronouncing an

English word correctly is an affectation.

Watch local TV featuring interviews in English, and one detects many forms of language lapses.

I have sometimes been disappointed by wonky grammar and poor diction by some schoolteachers interviewed on TV.

If these educationists speak this way, then their kids will surely inherit these lingual lemons.

The Ministry of Education can help by increasing classroom hours for English, both in grammar and pronunciation.

But first, primary school teachers themselves must improve because they play the most vital role.

How they speak and teach English will set the language’s standard among their students.

May 13, 2005, *The New Paper*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**P**hilip Lee has been a journalist since 1974 when he left the civil service to join *The Straits Times* as a reporter. He spent the first seven years covering politics, the civil service and reviewed local plays. He rose over the years to become Associate News Editor, News Editor (*The Sunday Times*) and Chief Copy Editor of *The Straits Times*.

In 1990, he left for a new life in Vancouver, Canada but returned in 2000 to work again as Copy Editor with *The Straits Times*. He also had stints as copy editor with the tabloids, *Streets*, and *The New Paper*. He works as a writer with the Special Projects Unit in the Marketing Division of Singapore Press Holdings. He cooks, enjoys *The New York Times* crossword puzzles and sings the oldies when in the company of song-loving friends.



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“Philip Lee’s columns show a love for language and a free-ranging mind. Although written originally for adults, this collection will also be helpful as supplementary reading for students.”

Dr. Cherian George, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

Since the early 1970s, Philip Lee has been active in the newspaper business, chasing stories for *The Straits Times* with vigour, passion and a note pad in hand.

In 2002, he joined *Streets* and began writing a weekly column for the now defunct daily. His columns, published every Friday, discussed nostalgic events of the past, opined on the burning issues of the present and analysed the idiosyncrasies of interesting individuals he interacted with on the job. But the most popular of his topics were his thought-provoking commentaries on the proper use of English prose and language.

The columns ended their print run when the newspaper decided to pull down its shutters in 2004. A year later, *The New Paper*, where Philip was then a Copy Editor, wanted to bring the Friday column back to life. The column ran with much success, garnering a large readership while it lasted. *Fridays With Philip* is a collection of the most compelling picks from all his columns to date.

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