

Learning and wrestling with the 'screwed up' English language

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As an English tutor, I conduct my sessions on the premise that the English language, at its basics, is "screwed up." Now before my English instructors stone me with grammar workbooks and 2,000-page literature texts, allow me to elaborate.

No one can doubt the uniqueness of English. Though separated from continental Europe, England, in its early development, was subject to Roman invasion, German and Danish settlement and Norman conquest, and became a mixing bowl for diverse languages. Toss in the ingredients of American ethnic groups and the language makes a delightful sponge cake. In what other language can the "Jack of all trades" *ask* for small friends, *inquire* about another's insurance policy and query as to the existence of T.V. evangelists? What of that "elegant woman," "slick chick" or "voluptuous broad" walking down the street?

Nor can one doubt the richness in English and American literature the respective countries have produced. The language has given life to such courageous characters as Beowulf, Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist and Horton the Elephant. Through them we learn about stamina, virtue, suffering and glory—the human condition. We also experience vicariously eras past and present, and the lives of kings, princes, slaves, orphans, salesmen and forbidden lovers. Fantasy and science fiction readers play out in their minds the

adventures of hobbits, extra-terrestrials and space travellers.

The mere sounds of English merit attention. Soft sounds of euphony lull us to sleep in William Wordsworth's poetic line, "in slumber do my spirits seal." William Blake's guttural verse, "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/ in the forests of the night," jars us awake. The Beatles' onomatopoeia of a walrus please us. The range in sounds in the English language out-orchestrates the San Diego Symphony.

Why then do I, an English tutor, contend that the English language, at its basics, is "screwed up?" By "basics" I refer to the nomenclature and the rules of grammar and spelling. The wonderful thing about a community college is that re-entry and foreign students, as well as those who want a second chance at education, can learn or relearn the basics, establishing a foundation for future study. We have learned the rules from elementary through high school, but for some of us, they are dim lights in the fog bank of memory. For foreign students, the prospects of learning the intricacies of English are even dimmer. The problem inherent in basic English courses, however, is that instruction usually covered in several years of schooling is condensed into one semester. Students not able to keep up get easily lost and confused.

The first thing a student studying the basics generally learns is the definition of a noun: a person, place or thing. With this well-established, the student begins picking out people, places and things in a sentence. Given the sentence, "John threw the ball," and asked to identify the direct object,

however, the student dwells in confusing silence. After being pointed out the word "ball," the student will exclaim, "But I thought that was a noun!" Thus the student begins the laborious process of categorizing name under name. Next the student revamps his definition of verb tense—past, present, and future — adding to the list the terms "progressive" and "perfect," and the naming continues.

Hampering the student's ability to write is his incorrect usage of speech. He says in conversation, "Me and him went to the store," and he writes, "Me and him went to the store." The student learns of his error in pronoun usage, and then adds to his list of names the subject, object, possessive and reflexive cases of pronouns. Forgetting that a speaker's pitch, rate, facial expression and gesture aid another's comprehension, the student in writing runs his sentences together. Add to the list punctuation pauses: period for regular stops, commas for "California stops" and exclamation marks for "slam on the brakes so not to hit kitty" stops. My own writing was once plagued with double negatives: Pink Floyd's musical line, "We don't need no education," had reverberated in my ears much of my teenie bopper years.

Further complicating matters is the lack of simple sentences in English composition texts. In a chapter devoted to subjects, the student is given the sentence, "Carving birds has been her hobby for years." Thinking that "carving" is an action verb—he knows that a verb shows action — he is informed that the word is a subject, and thus he adds to his list verbals,

which further includes the subheadings of gerunds, in this case, and infinitives and participals. He also adds linking verbs, adjectives, subject complements, and prepositional phrases. I borrowed the bird-carving sentence from a workbook titled "English Simplified."

Finally, we come to spelling. Thorstein Veblen wrote in 1899: "English orthography satisfies all the requirements of the canons of reputability under the law of conspicuous waste. It is archaic, cumbersome, and ineffective, its acquisition consumes much time and effort; failure to acquire it is easy detection." Roughly translated, spelling damned hard to learn. Homonyms create more problems. I once wrote on a blackboard, "The knight in shining armor rode off into the night," to illustrate the complications. A math major recommended that we use only the word "nite," eliminating the silent consonants, and adding a numerical subscript to indicate a particular definition. Perhaps, if you like numbers.

The only advice a student can offer to a student grappling with grammar and other aspects of the English language is "don't despair." Even the most brilliant can debilitate English, as is attested by English course syllabi. Further, instructors across the curriculum require students to set pen to paper, from A for Anthropology to T for telecommunications (look for zoology under B for biology in the Grossmont catalog). One cannot escape rules because they are essential to writing, and writing is essential to college success. The turmoil is worth the trouble. Is that a cliché?