

Grammar Guru 11

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Recently, I was asked to address a group of high school students on the topic “Easifying Grammar” – the assumption being that grammar is difficult and we have to make it easy for children. This reminded me of a classroom dialogue:

Teacher: Raju, give me a sentence beginning with I.

Raju: I is . . .

Teacher: Wrong, Raju, you must say I am.

Raju: I am the ninth letter of the alphabet.

Teachers often get paranoid about grammar and forget that grammar is only the means to an end and not an end in itself. Grammar is after all an aid to communication.

Is English grammar difficult? Do we need to make it easy for our children? Yes, at times grammar looks quite illogical and unreasonable. Look at these lines from the poem ‘Why English is so Hard to Learn’:

The masculine pronouns are He, His and Him.

Just imagine the feminine – She, Shis and Shim!

English grammar seems difficult to us mainly because it is different from the grammar of our mother tongue. Problems arise when Tamil grammar rules are applied to English. In Tamil we say *Un peyer enna?* But we cannot ask *Your name what?* in English.

How many of you feel happy when you make

mistakes in grammar? Hardly anyone. We feel ashamed, embarrassed, frustrated, or even angry. But my strategy for you would be: Feel happy when you make mistakes, for mistakes are a sign of learning. If you never make mistakes, you never learn anything. How many of you learnt to bake a cake without burning it even once?

My third strategy for painless grammar would be: **Don’t overgeneralize.**

One who bakes is a **baker**; one who dances is a **dancer**; but one who cooks is not a **cooker**! An **Indian teacher** is a teacher who is an Indian; a **clever magician** is a magician who is clever; but is a **criminal lawyer** a lawyer who is a criminal?

My next strategy is to learn rules as well as exceptions. For example, you can ask me *to* shut up, you can expect me *to* shut up, but you can only make me shut up. After the verb **make**, we don’t use **to**. Another strategy to simplify grammar is: Apply rules fully. Why do many of us ask questions like “Why you are sad?”, “When you are going?”, etc.? Simply because we are not putting the predicate before the subject in questions, even though we have started with the **Wh-**word.

The last but most important strategy is: Don’t think of grammar when you are talking; and don’t talk when you are thinking of grammar. The question is: which is more important – grammar or communication? Definitely, communication. We learn to communicate by communicating; grammar automatically

follows. Here are some classic examples of perfect grammar but hilarious breakdown in communication:

A. *Boy: Er. Dad, I'm having trouble with my homework. Will you do this sum for me?*

Dad: No, Sorry, son, it wouldn't be right.

Boy: Maybe not. But couldn't you try anyway?

B. *Teacher: Hari, Name five things that contain milk.*

Hari: Butter, cheese, ice cream and er... two cows.

C. *Professor: Sam, this essay on the dog is exactly word for word the same as your brother's.*

Sam: Of course, sir, it is the same dog!

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