

Grammar is not as Important as ESL Students have been Led to Believe

By: Judy M. Thompson

Learners of English as a second language are so concerned about making grammar mistakes they are afraid to practice. No one learned to play guitar by reading a book. They had to play it. No one learned to speak a new language by reading, either; they had to speak it. It seems fairly straight forward. Why is it that adult newcomers are so reluctant to talk and learn to speak English? Because they do not want to risk making grammar mistakes and looking foolish. This is a damn shame, because speaking English successfully does not require any grammar at all. Learners have been misled about the importance of grammar for speaking English. Grammar is important for *writing*, but for speaking, important words carry the day.

The Impact of Important Words in ESL – Pablo’s Story

Pablo was new to Canada and to our ESL classroom. He was a handsome young man from Columbia and a born gentleman. He was bright, educated, friendly and polite. Everyone loved him. One day he came to class more than an hour late, which was unusual. When he found his seat, he sat down, immediately stood up, sat down, then stood up again – which was even more unusual.

“Pablo, do you have something to tell the class?” He did.

Using broken English and animated gestures, Pablo told his story.

We learned he lived on the outskirts of town and he waited for his bus that morning at the usual time. The only other person at his stop was an elderly woman. Without warning, she made a deep coughing sound, grabbed at her chest and fell to the ground. Pablo was stunned and completely alone.

The poor student had been in the country for only three weeks, and someone was going to die because he did not speak English. He ran to a nearby industrial building and banged on the lobby window. A security guard saw him and opened the door. Pablo told him, “Woman, heart, bus!” with an appropriate array of gestures, and the security guard called 911 on his cell.

I asked my flustered student, “How long did it take the ambulance to get there?”

“Five-and- half minutes,” he answered.

“How is the woman?”

He smiled and nodded, “I think fine.”

Everyone cheered, but I wasn’t quite finished. “How much grammar did you use?” He touched his thumb to his forefinger making a circle and indicated – zero.

The Lesson: Grammar isn't Important

The timing of Pablo's adventure couldn't have been better. In class we were learning about *important words* and *unimportant words*. In spoken English, words are not all equally important, and perfect grammar can be unimportant, too.

Important Words: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and negatives

When people are talking, important words carry the meaning and these words are pronounced louder and more clearly than unimportant words.

Unimportant Words: articles, pronouns, conjunctions, modals and the verb "to be"

These are known as "grammar words" and they are very important when people are writing, but in speaking, not so much. In normal conversation, unimportant words are unnecessary and consequently reduced to tiny grunts.

"Da ya wanna ha va COFFEE?" is effectively communicated with the important word alone – COFFEE?

Intellectually, my students accepted that, but they did not really grasp the lesson until Pablo saved a woman's life using three important words. A tremendous burden is lifted for students when they realize their grammar does not have to be perfect in order for native English speakers to understand them.

Pablo did not come back to school the next day. In fact, we had not seen him for several months when he stopped by the school one day to say hello. "Where have you been?" we all wanted to know.

"I get a job," he said. "I thought I need grammar for understand me. But not!"

Summary

In spoken English, words are not all created equal.

Important words carry the day.

Grammar is not important in speaking English.

People can understand when grammar isn't perfect, so practice speaking English now.

Don't wait until someone is dying before you get a job.