

## Attention English Language Learners: There is No Such Thing as Grammar

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Grammar is linear and English is abstract. Latin grammar with its hundreds of  $1 + 1 = 2$  rules is too concrete to adequately characterize English writing, much less speaking. “Adjectives describe nouns” is a good example of an overplayed grammar rule that simply does not ring true.

*Merry, Happy, Joyous, Cheerful, Glad...* are all synonyms, so they mean the same thing, and they are all adjectives, which means they describe nouns. But only one of them describes the noun *Christmas* or the noun *Birthday*. *Happy Christmas* and *Merry Birthday* do not exist in North American English, even though the grammar is perfect.

English is put together differently from Latin.

To further compound the issue, English has a habit of using the same word in many different roles. “Match” can be a *noun* describing something that lights a candle, a *verb* as instructions in a classroom exercise, or an *adjective* to describe another noun as in “match point” or “The couple is a good match.” In English it is the *context* or surrounding words that give individual words their meaning.

### The Impact of Grammar on ESL – Ivan’s Story

Ivan is an engineer from Russia. He is very well educated and has a fine mind. There is not much about ‘English’ grammar that Ivan hasn’t been taught. Truth be told, he knows more grammar than most English teachers, but he is reluctant to speak, even when he knows the answer. Although he was the best candidate for promotion in his job, Ivan kept getting passed over because of his spoken English. His company paid his tuition for a college speaking course as a last-ditch attempt to get the best value out of this otherwise fantastic employee.

The course taught the differences between written and spoken English and the mechanics of how speaking English really works. Ivan learned about the limitations of grammar and abstract nature of language. When he learned that words have another level of meaning different from their literal interpretation, Ivan began to talk.

For several weeks Ivan took notes and studied the speaking concepts he had never heard of before. On the fourth week, Ivan waited until all the other students had left then he quietly asked me, “Teacher, what means ‘way’?”

“I’m not sure Ivan.” Mentally I scrambled to assemble all the possible versions of *way*, *weigh*, *why* that I could think of. “Do remember the sentence?”

He replied, “My co-worker says it, ‘**Way cool**’ with no sentence.”

“Oh, in that case ‘way’ means **very** and ‘cool’ means **wonderful**. Good listening!”

In that moment, something clicked for Ivan. He no longer struggled to make sense of every word he heard and he tried other ways to glean meaning from conversations. He became more confident and open in his ability to express himself. As it turns out, he has quite a dry sense of humor. Sometime after the course ended, I learned through LinkedIn that he was promoted to Project Manager.

### **A Lesson in Collocations**

English is not driven by grammar. It is made up of thousands of little word groups called *collocations* that go together for no reason and create images or mental pictures.

*Merry* only collocates with a few other words. ***Merry Christmas, merry widow, eat drink and be merry, merry-go-round, the more the merrier*** and perhaps a few more. The point is the groups of words that naturally include *merry* are finite. There is no *merry wall* or *merry floor*. There is no *merry widower*. Playing on these fixed groups of words is what defines humor and wit in this language. Before students can express themselves fully, they have to learn how the language works, and English works with collocations.

Relying too heavily on grammar renders students’ work wooden and unnatural.

#### Last Night

Last night my husband and I ate dinner at home. I cooked chicken and my husband washed the dishes. After dinner we drank coffee and watched TV.

If my student produced a grammatically perfect paragraph like that, I would be ecstatic. However, no native speaker would use those words, because grammar is not what makes the English language tick. Collocations do.

#### Last Night

Last night my husband and I had dinner at home. I made chicken and my husband did the dishes. After dinner we had coffee in front of the TV.

### **English is Idiomatic**

**Blue moon** means *rarely*; **touch and go** suggests *urgency*; **a stitch in time** implies *prevention* and so on. Such is the abstract nature of English. No one is born with any notion this leap of logic takes place. Everyone has to learn it.

### **How do Native Speakers Learn?**

An insightful primary school teacher in the USA conducted a revealing experiment with her Grade One students. Using a list of common sayings, including **Strike while the iron is hot, No news is good news, A penny saved is a penny earned**, the teacher gave her class the first half of the expressions and let her students finish them. The children's answers were delightfully literal. **Strike while the ... bug is close. No news is... impossible. A penny saved is... not much**, indicating English-speaking children do not develop abstract language facility until sometime after the age of six.

Native speakers begin to broaden their agility with language in elementary school with corny jokes and riddles. **What's black and white and read all over?** Time honored riddles hold the key to a new world of intellectual flexibility. *Sleeping Beauty* gave us **Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go**; *The Wizard of Oz* gave us **This isn't Kansas anymore**; and *Gone with the Wind* gave us **Frankly, my dear**. These small fixed groups of words are an integral part of North American culture and form the basis of the English language. Collocations are how native speakers communicate with each other and know instinctively that "**way cool**" has nothing to do with direction or weather.

Newcomers need to experience a similar process to achieve fluency in English. Read children's stories to students and teach them to listen for groups of words that make pictures. **Once upon a time, fall in love** and **happily ever after** are the glue to this language and this culture. Learners need to be taught about the "other level." Once students know it is there, they can find it on their own. Then our job is done.

## Summary

Be careful of leaning too hard on Latin grammar. What students gain from learning to write, they lose from speaking as they are so terrified of making grammar mistakes that they don't talk at all. Grammar is an artificial set of rules imposed on English to facilitate very basic written language. Students need to understand the differences between written and spoken English and the power of small fixed groups of words to convey images.

In class they struggle to perfect "Good morning. How are you?" and in the hall they hear, "**Yo. Whasup?**" We are indeed not in Kansas anymore. Teaching grammar is the best way I can think of to prevent students from speaking English.

And there it is in white and black.