

## The English Language: Oral vs Written

“Hey ..how ya doing? Haven’t seen....oh my....look at you! Who is...don’t tell me, let me guess. Okay...then just, well....you know what I mean!” When people speak conversational English with friends, there is little concern over whether or not the words spoken are arranged in a proper sentence structure. In fact, spoken sentences tend to be run-ons without definite endings, the subjects are changed without transitions, and rarely is there a summary or conclusion to tie the comments together. The difficulty comes when an inexperienced English speaker wants to put thoughts and ideas on paper. The casual unstructured format of conversational speaking is not the same as the formal structured format used in writing. These two styles of communication are really two different languages, and learning one doesn’t guarantee knowledge of the other. The speaker’s ability to transition accurately from speaking a language to writing it is evident when a formal essay is attempted. Writing an essay requires that the English language adhere to certain rules. In order for the inexperienced writer (tutee) to put thoughts into writing, correct syntax needs to be learned and practiced. Grammatically correct sentences are expected for college level essays. Conforming to the disciplines of the written English language can be difficult, and syntax can become the inexperienced writer’s Achilles heel. To help the inexperienced writer compose a college level essay, a tutor can address the problem of sentence error with simple, direct questions, examples and illustrations.

Conversational English is an informal style of speaking the English language. Words may be omitted, shortened or changed to “slang”. The thoughts behind most verbal conversations are impromptu, random, and often formed as they are spoken. A speaker may have an agenda in mind, but overall, little planning or organization is required for two or more people to engage in a casual dialogue. The freedom allowed the conversational speaker makes transitioning to the structure of writing more of a challenge. If someone were to transcribe a verbal conversation, punctuation would be the biggest challenge. Speakers use extra words such as “um,” “ah,” “you know” and “like” when speaking, making it hard to know when one sentence ends and another begins. The listener, however, is often accustomed to these “extra words” and will overlook the distraction or fill in the missing parts themselves. There is a lot of give and take between the two people engaged in communication. In the

Wikipedia online article, “Nonverbal Communication: Difficulties for Learners,” by Givens, it is concludes that “ An audience is simultaneously processing both verbal and nonverbal cues.” This is very different from the relationship of the essay writer and the reader. These two (may) never meet, and the response the reader has to the essay is never seen by the writer. If while writing, the writer can imagine the response of the reader (listener), it’s more likely the sentence structure will exhibit a clearer syntax.

In a live conversation, the listener is the speaker’s audience, and that person is able to instantly respond back to the speaker both visually and verbally. The listener is able to give verbal cues or signals to the speaker when agreeing with what’s been said, or the listener may immediately ask questions for clarification of the speaker’s point. Visual signs, such as facial expressions and body gestures, can be given in response to the speaker’s message. The authors, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli give credence to this view in their book, “Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors” (BGWT). They describe the listener as being active because of the use of body language. “An active listener.....communicates....by posture and eye contact...leaning slightly forward...and looking directly at [speaker]” (BGWT). They go on to say that the listener uses “gestures of friendliness and approval, like nodding or smiling in agreement” (BGWT). This interaction allows the speaker to immediately adjust the message to meet the listener’s needs. In comparison, the writer of an essay typically does not know the reader or what the reader’s response is. There is no immediate, live interplay between the two. Instead, the writer must anticipate the reader’s needs and write in such a way that clearly expresses the intent of the essay. The authors of the book, “The Practical Tutor” (TPT), Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith, make this point: “Inexperienced writers make syntactical errors for a variety of reasons, chiefly because of differences between spoken and written English. They write elliptically without anticipating reader’s needs.” To convey a message clearly in print, well planned and organized sentences are required. It may appear as though the strict format of the written word is challenging the freedom of speech. On the contrary, the clarity of proper syntax offers the author more power to influence the reader. The expression of speech is empowered by proper syntax.

Transitioning from verbal English to its written form is like learning another language, but the tutor can ease the difficulty by teaching the tutee to respond to a few, simple questions. Meyer and Smith have laid out a simple, straight forward plan in their book. Here are some basic questions they suggest asking the writer. Let's say the tutee has written a rough draft: "What is the action in this sentence?" "Who is doing what?" By asking the tutee this, the main point of the sentence will be identified. The main action of a phrase should be clear to the reader. In the sentence, "My mother went down to the city to visit her sister," it's clear who is doing what. But it is unclear in this one: "My mother and sister in the city visited." By asking the writer to identify who is doing what, the tutor can help guide the tutee to rewrite a more accurate sentence.

Another question to ask the tutee is: "How many ideas are in this sentence?" In the above example, there are two ideas: The mother went to the city, and the mother visited her sister. "How are they related?" The mother went to the city to visit her sister who lives in that city. The reader can understand the relationship; therefore the two ideas belong together in one sentence. Here is an example of a sentence combining two unrelated ideas: "The city was 50 miles away and there were a lot of stray cats running around." The reader will be confused by this statement. Unless the writer can show a connection between the city and the cats, the two ideas should be written in separate, more explicit sentences. If the information is irrelevant to the meaning of the essay, it should be left out altogether. Such unnecessary details will confuse or distract the reader. Meyer and Smith encourage the combining of sentences when it improves the quality and clarity of the sentence. The reader's understanding of what is being said is an important issue to be concerned with. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the content of the sentence.

Next is the verb tense question: "When is the action taking place?" By asking this question, the tense of the verb will be tested. Verb tense is one of the most common errors of the inexperienced writer. Here's an example of verb tense error: "Marsha can shop at the Outlet Mall if she had the credit cards. If the action happened yesterday, the verb "had" remains the same but the verb "can" is changed to the past tense form "could." If the action is happening now, it will be written in the present: "Marsha can shop at the Outlet Mall if she has the credit cards." If the writer is inconsistent with

verb tense, it may confuse the reader. It should be clear when the action happens, and this can be established by using accurate verb tense in an essay.

Another helpful question to ask is, "Who is speaking to whom about what?" Example given: "Mr. Thomas and John are friends, and he wants to know if his friend will join him for a walk." In this sentence, it is unclear who is addressing who. Here is a revision: "Mr. Thomas wants to know if his friend, John, will join him for a walk." Now it's clear: Mr. Thomas is speaking to John about walking. According to TPT, "The inexperienced writer's lack of confidence hinders their writing experience....[and they] may compose over general, vague, or ambiguous statements." The tutor can be aware of this tendency, and ask the tutee direct questions to identify the specifics.

This last question is useful when the sentence meaning is obscured or vague: "What's another way to say this?" This offers the tutee an opportunity to express more opinions without feeling criticized. As the writer is free to expound, the tutor picks up on key words and phrases that will provide for a better sentence. Example given: "The children feel alone because they are away from their family and they miss also all their friends." When asked to say it differently, the tutee will elaborate on the thought. The tutor can respond positively when hearing words that better describe the idea being expressed: "The children are homesick? That's a good way to say it." In response to the question, the following version could be written: "The children are homesick for their family and friends." It is often the use of too many words that muddy the meaning of the sentence. The authors of TPT suggest using fewer words to express the idea. The tutor can ask these (above mentioned) questions in an effort to clarify the meaning of the tutee's unclear sentences. Once it is understood how to use these questions, the tutee can learn to incorporate them into the thought process of writing. By asking these questions, the writer will stay focused on the clarity of the sentence's message, and syntax will undoubtedly improve.

My own personal experience has shown me how much an ESL student struggles to write sentences in English. When translating thoughts, whether those thoughts are in English, Japanese, or Chinese, the tutee's biggest challenge is formatting the sentence correctly. I found a quote from an affirming online article, "English

as a Foreign or Second Language,” from Wikipedia: “Language learners often produce errors of syntax and pronunciation.....thought to result from the influence of their mother tongue, such as mapping its grammatical pattern inappropriately into the second [targeted] language.” Both Japanese and Chinese languages are known to be difficult to transfer into English. To encourage my tutees, I let them know that many American born, English speaking adults struggle with syntax, as well. I, myself, am unsure of when and where to place commas. During our tutoring sessions, we discussed syntax quite often. I found that I was not prepared to explain the grammatical rules of English. I quickly scoured through the resource material there in L-47 to refresh my knowledge. It’s a good idea for a writer, regardless of experience, to own a pocket size grammar guide.....and use it! I am still in the process of refreshing my knowledge of the English language. I want produce sentences that are grammatically correct, and I want to feel confident about my writing skills. I am better prepared to tutor English, now that I've learned to ask a few simple questions for clarification.

English has two very different formats: oral and written. When English is spoken, it is much more casual and loosely structured; it is communicated audibly and directly to the listener; its subject matter is created in a spontaneous manner. When English is written, it has much stricter guidelines to adhere to. The tense of the verb, in conjunction with the subject, is of utmost concern. Presenting the information in an articulate voice and creating cohesiveness between the ideas of the essay is essential for the reader’s understanding. Most English speakers learn the language through casual conversations with family and friends instead of from an English teacher. This makes learning proper syntax a common problem for Non-Native and Native speakers alike. However, the errors picked up by the conversationalist speaker can be easily addressed with simple, direct questions and examples. The resources on this matter are plentiful which makes the prognosis for correcting syntax problems very good.

Work cited

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