

Why Do They Say That Our English Is Bad?

(An Excerpt)

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English teachers in the Philippines often find themselves in a very frustrating situation – no matter how hard they try to teach the rules of written English to their students, the students still commit errors in word order, word choice, subject – verb agreement, tenses, prepositions, articles, punctuations, and the like. Teachers get frustrated when they hear or read sentences such as “They decided to got married,” “What did the students watched?” or “Ana go to the canteen.” It is also alarming because the rules that apply to these sentences are supposedly simple rules that the students should have learned in grade school. Yet, here they are in college, still committing those same errors.

Teachers and linguists alike have sought and probably are still seeking for ways and strategies to teach English effectively especially in the light of teaching English as a second language or as a foreign language. Different research studies have been conducted and different theories have been used to address the situation. One of the topics that the researchers have explored is the recurring errors in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse of second language learners. They believe that studying these recurring errors is necessary to address the supposed grammar problems of the Filipino college students.

In a paper titled, “Why Does They Say That Our Sentences Is Wrong When We Knows English? An Analysis of The ‘Common Errors’ of Freshmen Compositions,” Saqueton (2008) identified some of the common errors found in the essays of first year college students. She provided explanations, using error analysis, language acquisition theories, and Fairclough’s paradigm on the appropriacy of “appropriateness,” as to what caused the “errors.” This is the hope of helping English teachers develop teaching materials and devise teaching strategies that are appropriate for Filipino first year college students of different linguistic backgrounds.

Saqueton (2008) found out that among the student’s essays, errors in the use of verbs are the most common, followed by errors in the use of prepositions, problems in word choice, and problems in subject-verb agreement. There are also errors in the use of articles, conjunctions, pronouns; spelling problems are also evident.

These “errors” are considered errors because of certain standards that language teachers want their students to follow. These standards are the ones prescribed by grammarians. Educators want their students to master Standard English as second language learners of English. The problem here lies in the definition of “Standard” English. Is there really a common standard? If there is, who uses it? Whose standard should be followed?

Answering the question would entail a lot of problems. First, there should be a clear definition of what standard is. What kind of English is Standard English? Dr. Andrew Moody, when asked during the International Conference on World Englishes and Second Language Teaching on how to maintain correctness and consistency when teaching English in the Philippines, said that it would be honest to teach Standard English as if it exists.

That answer alone could raise a lot of issues. It only shows that the concept of standard is problematic. According to Fairclough (1995), there is a need for a particular standard in order to rationalize policies on teaching of Standard English. He further stated that appropriateness figures within dominant conceptions of language variations (234).

Is there an implied claim then that students of English as a second language or as a foreign language speak a substandard kind of English because they do not follow the standards of General American variety? What if they (Filipinos, for example) have accepted English and appropriated it to fit their needs and the context of situation in their own places?

Andrew Gonzales (1985), in his paper, “When Does an Error Become a Feature of Philippine English?” pointed out that until Philippine English is really creolized English is still a second language in the Philippines, and he believed that in teaching any second language, one must accept a standard. However, he also stressed that no matter how hard the English teacher tries, a local variety will continue to develop (186).

There will always be different perspectives on this matter, especially that language issues seem to be a highly emotional matter. Should language education then go for mutual intelligibility rather than subscribe to a certain standard? Educators and language policy planners could go back to Fairclough’s model of language learning. They have to decide how relevant English is to their students, and from there they have to decide what to teach and how to teach it.