

What's the Remedy?

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In this article I am going to describe, and give extracts from, the exercise book of a student learning English in the Fourth Form of a Malay-medium school on the East Coast. The period covered in this exercise book is from January 20 to August 19 of one year and every example quoted is taken word for word as the student wrote it. Every exercise given by the teacher (or teachers) during this period has been commented on, although we realize that the students were almost certainly using one if not two other exercise books at the same time for other kinds of work. My intention is to show that the teacher's choice of items to be learnt did not help the student to learn English at all.

The first exercise, on January 20, was a filling in of blanks with either *do* or *does*. Out of fifteen items, this student got eight wrong. The first four items read like this:

1. Do he know where we live? Yes, he do.
2. Do every car have an engine at the front?
3. Do you want this or does you brother want it?
4. Where do she work now? I doesn't know.

Possibly, we may be dealing here with the worst student in the whole class, but with such evidence before his eyes we would expect the teacher to go on practising the same difficult structure until his pupils

had mastered it. On the following day, January 21, the exercise is changing short sentences into negative; e.g.

Basi knows him.

Basi does not know him.

Out of 12 similar items, our student got 11 right. We might wonder why this kind of practice was not given orally instead of in writing, but the next exercise, on January 25, makes us wonder even more at the syllabus this teacher was following, or not following. The exercise is labelled "Sequence of Tenses" and would seem to indicate an enormous jump forward in the complexity of what was taught. This exercise was uncorrected, but the first three items, exactly as the student wrote them, will show how extremely lost the whole class must have been.

1. I am sure you will find it.
I am sure you would find it.
2. I know she will lose it if she is no careful.
I knew she would loose if she is no careful.
3. If my father wanted it, he will probably buy it.
If my father want it, he would probably bought it.

What did the teacher do, faced with such incomprehension? Go back to the simpler tenses and drill them? There is no evidence in this exercise book that that was done. The next exercise, on February 11, was on the

apostrophe. We quote the first three items from an exercise book:

1. These pens are not yours; they are Kassims.
These pen's are not your's, they are Kassim'.
2. Mens shoes are bigger than ladies shoes.
Mens' shoes are bigger than ladies' shoes.
3. Is it Davids or Eng Hocks?
Is it David's or Eng Hock's?

The second half of the exercise gave the instruction: "Rewrite these sentences in a better way". The first item was –

This is Ali's and Ahmad's cat.

but the poor student did not understand what was wanted, and produced –

This cat belongs Ali's and Ahmad's.

() other items were equally wrongly rendered, and pages of re-writing the correct versions had to be given.

After that, on February 25, comes an odd exercise which would seem to show that the teacher, in dictating this definition, had forgotten all the grammar learnt at the training college:

A noun is a naming word and then follows that familiar list (copied down) of irregular plurals such as: knife knives; ox oxen; etc. There was no attempt made by the teacher to link these nouns with the previous work done on apostrophes, though this would have been an excellent opportunity for the revision of the badly learnt "men's shoes, ladies' shoes, etc." With the next exercise, on March 5, a new tack is started. It is labelled "Present Continuous tense", and the first four items as this student wrote them, are as follows:

1. What it is? It is a pen.
2. I am going to school. Where are you go?
3. He is swimming in the river? What is he doing?

4. Where are they play? They are playing a football.

We can scarcely blame the teacher, if all the rest of the class was like this, for leaving this uncorrected, but we can certainly blame him for not teaching the Present Continuous tense, and indeed the Simple Present with *do/does*, very thoroughly indeed before he went on to more difficult items. However, by March 25, he had decided that his students knew these tenses, and also the Past and the Future with *shall*, for he gave an exercise: "Make sentences in the Present, Past and Future tenses using these verbs: jump, die, eat, drink." Our student produced, for the verb *die* –

His father die. Ali dead yesterday. She shall die when she not past the examination.

Did the teacher, with this evidence in front of his eyes, stop here and do some very long and hard oral re-drilling of both Past and Present tenses? This exercise book gives no indication at all of what ought to have been done was done, because on March 31 the exercise was concerned with prepositions. We quote the first four items as rendered by our student of this filling in of blanks exercise:

1. The dog ran to the road.
2. The river flows under the bridge.
3. He spoke to me from Urdu.
4. He is afraid for the dog.

The student got five prepositions right out of ten.

Then, on April 1, the teacher gave the class a test, and, quite properly, made it a free composition on a simple subject – My Best Friend. We might have preferred a subject that would allow the use of the Past tense, which was supposed to have been taught, or revised, in this class. The effort of our student is reproduced as it stands, and we can understand why the teacher did not correct it:

Test. 1 April 69

My Best Friend.

I have one best friend. She names Hasnah, she lives near my house in Ketcher. She learn at Ketcher Secondary School in form four Malay Medium. She is beautiful girl, and she is a

Very Serious. She lives with her mother. She have two sisters and one brother. Her brother learn at Chong Hua in Kota Bharu.

She is very active in my class, but she not like to dance. She can play anything. And she can ~~good~~ play a football. She is very good girl. She is very active in ~~sports~~ sports, and she is a good-player.

~~The~~ hobbies is drawing because she likes to draw. She go to school by car. ~~Her~~ uncles have a car. She have any cousins, and she ~~can~~ not likes to baby. She is young girl. When in holiday she go to stay with her father at Kota Bharu. Her father is miliona. But she ~~cannot~~ do not ^{like} ~~want~~ to stay with her father.

When I go home

After such a proof of the failure of the teaching given this class, did the teacher go back to revise these elementary structures obviously so badly learnt? From this exercise book, it does not seem so. After a vocabulary list on April 28, the next exercise on May 8 deals with indirect speech! In spite of all the evidence that the students could not use either the Simple Present or the Simple Past tenses, the teacher decides to teach them – Indirect speech! The exercises on May 13 and 15 are devoted to it. The exercises on May 21, on May 22, and on May 26 are given over to copied down examples of the sequence of tenses in main and subordinate clauses, and instructions for producing such sentences as –

He will think that she was there.
We nurse him that he may live.

After a short exercise, on June 2, on prepositions, we come on June 5 to an exercise in which our student got ten right out of ten. The students were asked to underline the phrases in the sentences given, e.g.

He is a man with one friend

Correct answer: He is a man with one friend.

But the next exercise was to replace an adjective by an adjectival phrase, and this proved too difficult:

a white shirt

Student's work Her shirt is a white colour.

(Teacher's correction: a shirt with a white colour)

On June 10 examples of adverb and adjective clauses were written down, and on June 11 the class was asked to identify the adverb or adjective clause in given sentences. Our student got one right out of ten. The grammatical difficulties of such labelling was nicely illustrated by item No. 1, which was:

I don't know how he did it.

Which one of us could pick an adverb or adjective clause out of that?

In June, on the 23rd, the teacher went back (in des-

pair?) to asking the students to make short sentences negative: e.g.

She mended them.
She did not mend them.
She does not mend them.

The next two exercises, on July 20 and on August 9, I shall not refer to, as I do not understand what was asked for in one of them, and the other is a stray comprehension exercise supposedly meant to have been written in some other exercise book. On August 10, the students are back with indirect speech, this time commands. What teaching and practice was done orally before this written exercise was given? Not much, to judge from our student's efforts:

“Hurry up!” he told us.
He told me that hurry up.

Of six such items, only one was correct. And in the August 17 exercise in indirect questions with which this particular student's exercise book ends, there were only two right out of four items.

My intention in thus summarizing this Form IV student's exercise book was not, of course, to show how many mistakes she made, but to show that, no matter how many mistakes she made, the teacher paid no attention to them, and learnt nothing from them. The student worked hard, and the teacher worked even harder, as the regularity of the exercises and the amount of correction done, demonstrate, but no one could claim that, from January to August, the student had learnt any English. If the class, like this student, showed that it

could not write simple short sentences using the present, or the past, tense, then the teacher immediately went on to complex sentences with subordinate clauses using a variety of tenses. If the class was puzzled by something, the teacher left it unpractised and went on to something more difficult still.

What I suggest for a remedy is that the teacher of such a class as this Malay-medium fourth form should give, as the first piece of work in the year, a composition; it could be on a simple subject such as: My best friend and what he (or she) did last week. That composition is not corrected or returned to the students; it is merely there to provide the teacher with evidence of where he ought to begin teaching. And if any headmaster, inspector or other teacher said, “Why are you not following the Form IV syllabus in English?” that composition will provide the answer: “The students don't know the use of *do/does* and can't produce a correct past tense, and find *a/the* extremely difficult, etc. Therefore I will begin by giving them numerous exercises on these points until they have learnt enough. The proof that they have learnt will be the free compositions in which they use these structures accurately.” No teacher with any commonsense, or thought for their students, can take refuge in the complaint that the students ought to have learnt such simple things in earlier years, when the evidence is that they haven't learn them at all. If the whole of this January to August period were devoted to teaching these three essential things, then the students would learn some English, and the teacher would have done some real teaching.