Why Most University Students Don't Write English Well!

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THE simple straight answer to the above query is we're bad teachers. But why university students don't write English well or why we're bad teachers must be explained away.

Let's begin with a close call, as they say in cricket. My wife brings this card to me. Her colleague's daughter's wedding invitation. The card introduces the daughter as 'bridegroom', and the husband as 'bride'. Obviously, a linguistic transvestism has taken place without the surgical operation. More to it is the ignorance of the use of the English language.

Now let's continue with our students. Most of our students write, 'Shakespeare born in 1564'. They omit the 'was', because they take 'born' as an active verb rather than as an adjective to be turned into a passive verb with 'was'.

They correctly write, 'Ali goes to university'. But they incorrectly write, 'Hamlet finally kill his uncle'. My junior colleague, Arif Ul Islam, now in Denmark pursuing a PhD degree, explains to me the reason. The students cannot bridge the cultural gap. 'Ali' is a familiar name to them, so they apply their grammatical knowledge correctly. But 'Hamlet' is a relatively unfamiliar name, so they become uncertain about the rule of the inflection of the verb in the case of the third person singular number in the present tense. He cites a second problem, which is more difficult to overcome. That is the interference of the mother tongue.

He says, in Bangla we say, 'ami khai', 'Karim khai', without any change in pronunciation, though the change is in the spellingsthe first khai has a roshsho e, and the second 'khai' has an anthostho eo. Students ignore the spellings, and stick to the pronunciation, and, when writing in English, they write, 'I eat', 'Karim eat', without adding the '-s' in the second sentence.

There is also another reason, Arif says. They cannot identify the verbs, which are relatively unknown. Say, with common verbs like 'go', 'eat', 'walk', 'sleep', their grammatical sense will probably work correctly, but such words as 'exercise', 'ignore', 'separate', when used as verbs may not be identified by them as verbs, and, therefore, their grammatical sense will not operate correctly. So they will write, 'Hamlet exercise fencing everyday in order to fight the duel with Laertes'.

Another area of our students' confusion is with the use of the stative verb or 'to be' verb. We commonly see a sentence written by them as this: 'In *Hamlet*, there has a Machiavellian villain called Claudius.' In place of 'is' they write 'has' or even 'have'. This confusion grows, I think, out of what they learnt at the earlier stage. In school, children learn both 'is/are' and 'has/have' as meaning simply 'achey' in Bangla. So, 'There is a school at Fatehabad' becomes 'Fatehabadey ekti school achey' and 'Fatehabad has a school' becomes 'Fatehabader ekti school achey'. These two 'acheys', meaning both 'is/are' and 'has/have' become interchangeable to the students over the years. So, instead of writing either '*Hamlet* has a Machiavellian villain called Claudius', or 'In *Hamlet*, there is a Machiavellian villain called Claudius', they write the wrong one quoted above.

Two more areas in English that cannot be easily mastered by our students are 'numbers' and 'articles', and this also happens due to the difference between the sentence structure of Bangla and that of English.

First, the numbers--singular and plural. All uncountable nouns (rice, sugar) and abstract nouns (mind, anger) in Bangla are invariably singular, and so are they in English. But look at the use of 'mind' in English. It is most often uncountable in English as it is in Bangla: 'anyone can slim if they set their mind to it'. Here, the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, from which the example is taken, gives the meaning of 'mind' as 'a person's will or determination to achieve something'. Look at this sentence now: 'employees should keep their minds on the job. 'Minds' is plural now because it means 'a person's attention' (ODE). Bangla word 'mon' for mind is always singular even when the shades of meaning may be different.

Even the difference in use of the countable nouns in both languages is a source of botheration for our students. In Bangla we say, 'Amar baba protidin patrika poren', or 'Ami aam khtete pachanda kori'. Both the sentences will translate into English as 'My father reads newspapers everyday' or 'I like to eat mangoes'. English countable nouns become plural in a generative or common sense, and in Bangla it is just the oppositeboth 'mangoes' and 'newspapers' in the Bangla example sentences are plural in sense but singular in spelling. In Bangla we prefer to cover the plural sense by the adjective 'eto' (many)'eto aam', 'eto patrika', etc. Being influenced by this, our students write, 'many mango', 'many man' rather more frequently than you can imagine. Only in a very specific case do we say in Bangla, 'Aamguli khete bhalo chilo'