

# The Discreet Horrors of the English Language

A humorous interpretation of why English is so “difficult” to learn

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Let me state a simple fact: the teaching of English has become the world’s greatest and fastest growing industry. Classrooms are jammed with millions of eager learners wishing to master and speak this language which was considered as “the inadequate and second-rate tongue of peasants” for centuries. English today has become the most important and successful language in the world, a sort of “Mercedes” of languages.

But little do people know how difficult it is trying to manipulate the intricate complexities of the English language. Combat experienced teachers (here I mean the English teachers on the front, who battle with students day after day) will tell you that, despite the universal impression that learning English is relatively easy, it is not. For most students, this language appears to be an incoherent code of inconsistencies. Simply put, a total disaster from a learning point of view.

Hard to believe? Think about this simple sentence, used when meeting people for the first time: *How do you do?* The questioner will be taken aback if you reply, with impeccable logic, *How do I do what?* For when you analyze it closely, you will realize that not only does this form of greeting not make sense (the question is incomplete), but the answer *How do you do?* compounds this silly absurdity.

This is only for starters. Trying to teach phonetic and spelling rules to a foreigner can best be described only as a grotesque nightmare. For instance, if the English teacher were to write an agglomeration of letters like *tchst*, *sthm*, and *tchph*, you would come to two conclusions: 1. these letters are totally unpronounceable. 2. the teacher must be going out of his mind and should be fired for incompetence. Yet, these letters are used every day in words like *matchstick*, *asthma*, and *catchphrase*.

When using the so-called phonetic rules, you have less chance of pronouncing words correctly than hitting the jackpot when playing with a one-armed bandit in Baden-Baden. The following examples demonstrate these absurdities more clearly:

Written	Pronounced
<i>ache</i> =	eik
<i>busy</i> =	bizi
<i>bury</i> =	beri
<i>enough</i> =	in af
<i>read</i> =	red or ri:d

And then you have the additional problem of which pronunciation is correct. Consider the simple word *girl*. The strict phonetic rendering in America would be *gurl*, *gel* in London and

Sydney, *gull* in Ireland, *gill* in South Africa and *gairull* in Scotland. The only conclusion you can come to here is that English spelling and pronunciation are so treacherous and maddeningly erratic that it is a waste of time to think of rules. The most intelligent strategy for a learner is just to stumble along, hoping one day to understand and even master English's shameless and charming contradictions.

But adding insult to injury, the learner is caught right in the middle of the American and British firing line when it comes to which nation uses the language more correctly. Most foreigners, when listening to BBC English, would describe it as seemingly elegant, highly sophisticated and refined, fit to be spoken only by the elite. On the other hand, the American manner of speaking, as best personified by AFN (*American Forces Network*) broadcasts, often seems more like someone chewing gum and trying to make a cheap and vulgar imitation of the Queen's English.

Historically, the British have always felt they were superior in the use of their language. The famous English lexicographer and writer, Samuel Johnson, well reflected this hostile attitude back in 1769 when he wrote that Americans were "a race of convicts and ought to be thankful for anything we allow them short of hanging". Whether you agree with this or not, the point is that the foreigner is forced to learn that in Britain, you write programme, favour, cheque, night, whereas in America, you write program, favor, check, nite. Should you have the bad luck to use British spelling in America or vice-versa, you might well be castigated or in the worst scenario tarred and feathered, an experience I would wish on no one.

Teaching and understanding legal English can be added to your list of one of the world's greatest tortures. Lawyers are proud of their so-called precise formulations, but when analysed closely they are nothing more than mumbo-jumbo. They resort to wonderfully over-engineered double-talk such as "the party of the first party," "for and on behalf" and "including but not exclusive to." It is as if lawyers do not understand each other without these meaningless redundancies, but worse of all, students have to learn this if they have to sign contracts in English.

Yet all the problems mentioned above are really peanuts compared with the learning of the famous 'present perfect' tense, the *bête noire* of all English teachers. This is the most tricky grammar for all foreigners, their "Waterloo".

For some inexplicable reason, students find saying a sentence such as "I live in London since four years" absolutely splendid and sincerely believe it to be aesthetically pleasing to the ears of native speakers. Little do they know that such a sentence has the same shocking effect on native English speakers as throwing ice cold water into their faces.

Now when the teacher explains that the correct way is "I have lived in London for four years", the students look at the teacher as if he were suffering from some strange disease. Not only do these students find it hard to accept this rule, but in addition they will insist that they have never heard of it, even though they might have had many years of English lessons. If the teacher is patient and has a winning personality, a miracle can sometimes happen: the students actually do learn to use the present perfect correctly.

The second "Waterloo" among foreign students of English (especially among the Germans) is their almost obsessive fetish of putting 'would' in the subordinate clause of a conditional

sentence. "If he would buy the new 190, he would be the happiest man." is the type of sentence that would make Prince Charles and BBC speakers hit the ceiling in rage, telling you to leave Great Britain immediately and not to come back until you have learned to say it correctly (which by the way is "If he bought the new 190, he would be the.....").

And this brings me back to my main point: Due to its incoherent and crazy logic, learning English for the foreigner is an extremely difficult enterprise. It is precisely for this reason that it should be limited to those students who not only possess exceptional intelligence, but also have a high resistance to pain and frustration. And how would one go about choosing such exceptional people? Are you still reading? You are one of them.



"Do I really  
possess  
exceptional  
intelligence?"