

English Language Competence

by

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The subject I dreaded most in grade school was English. I remember diagramming sentences while wondering what relevancy it had. My parochial school class diagrammed sentences constantly. It almost seemed like that is all we did. I even had convinced myself that Sister Mary Grace enjoyed making us needlessly suffer.

In college, I presumed everyone had endured the same nightmare. While I was not enthused about writing, I never struggled with a term paper. I rarely gave grammar, spelling, punctuation or even speech a second thought. I assumed it was just something we all knew how to do.

During my junior year of college something peculiar occurred while I was eating dinner with a family friend who was an extremely successful business executive. Our friend mentioned his biggest regret was that he could not write well. He stressed the importance of English competence and how it would improve his job productivity. I never heard anything like it. I would have thought it was completely preposterous except that it came from a man who had done it all. I wondered why someone with all the ability in the world, who could punch his own ticket to any job, would wish he could write. He had achieved much in life without English competence. What more could he possibly accomplish?

After graduating, I took my first job in Minneapolis. Naturally, I was proud of my western Pennsylvania heritage. I remember defending the Steelers' honor at every turn. I recall using local colloquialisms like "gumbands" whenever I had a chance. And I also recollect having fun speaking the way we sometimes talk locally using the words "yins and ain't". Although those were two words I was never allowed to use in my home while growing up, I became careless. Unfortunately, it would come back to haunt me.

One day I was demonstrating a computer spreadsheet at a very important meeting with many prominent people from around the world. English was not the native language for some in attendance. The demonstration was going well when suddenly the word "ain't" slipped out of my mouth. Everyone seemed to look at me like I was a total imbecile. Someone made a smart remark. It was very embarrassing. It also cost me respect in my sphere of business opportunity. I vowed that incident would never happen again.

Thus the importance of English competence started to boomerang in my head. I began to understand what our successful friend was addressing some years ago. I learned the hard way that it was very important to speak and write well.

They say a mind is a terrible thing to waste. Perhaps there is no greater manifestation than being intelligent yet unable to communicate thoughts and ideas. While we might

improve our chances of succeeding by executing correct grammar, the greater good is that we show respect for ourselves when we take advantage of the opportunity for understandable expression of what we think, know and believe.

Although I still have a long way to go, I attribute some of the modest business success I have achieved to English competence. When I came to Apollo Trust Company, the ability to write may have been the first thing that impressed my boss. Her confidence in me grew over the years in part because I could put a subject together with a predicate. It sounds simple but I never took it for granted.

The importance of English competence looms larger today as we compete in a global society. English has become the predominant language in some international arenas like the Internet. In fact, it is not unusual for me to communicate with people in foreign lands that send me scrambling for a dictionary.

Like most businesses in the Kiski Valley, we are inundated with resumes. It is disheartening to see so many with spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. Whether it conveys sloppiness or ignorance to an employer, poor grammar deprives many of opportunity.

Proper English is good for business and great for character. It can help build confidence and self-esteem. Maybe Sister Mary Grace really wanted me to be my best when she made me conjugate all those verbs.



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