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Dieses Projekt wurde mit Unterstützung der Europäischen Kommission finanziert. Die Verantwortung für den Inhalt dieser Veröffentlichung trägt allein der Verfasser; die Kommission haftet nicht für die weitere Verwendung der darin enthaltenen Angaben.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Difficulties of the English Language



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Introduction

This brief essay is intended as a basic introduction to the numerous difficulties the English language poses to those unfamiliar with it. Rather than being aimed at language specialists, this introduction highlights some of the most prominent issues, together with links to resources that will help you with further research.

Vocabulary Size

English has arguably one of the largest vocabularies. People are not just “happy”, they are “glad”, “delighted”, “joyful”, “cheerful”, “cheery”, “jolly”, “contented”, or a host of other synonyms. Similarly, you may either be “sad”, or “miserable”, “down”, “unhappy”, “desolate”, or many more. To a native speaker, the various nuances and registers of this vocabulary may be clear – a non-native speaker has to try and prioritise the many synonyms in terms of usefulness, to decide where to spend energy and time. To a certain extent, this is a natural process – any word encountered frequently will make it into the vocabulary, but when it comes to writing in an academic register, pupils may well need help with deciding which synonyms are appropriate. Similarly, certain words may work well when learnt together, such as opposites, positive descriptive words, negative descriptive words, classroom objects, etc.

Try this:

Turn vocabulary and synonyms into a class exercise – ask the whole class regularly to discuss a range of vocabulary, and to develop small batches of vocabulary that can help children who do not speak the instructional language well. Below is a possible outcome of one such discussion.

Writing about our Sports Day

The runners were very fast. (Words similar to fast: quick, speedy)

The weather was sunny/rainy/foggy (actual weather description), hot/cold/warm (temperature), beautiful/horrible (opinion).

Spelling and Pronunciation

George Bernard Shaw famously once said that, in English, you could spell “fish” “ghoti”, taking the “f” sound from “rough”, the “i” sound from “women”, and the “sh” sound from “nation”. While this is theoretically true, there is no word in the English sentence that starts with a “gh=f” sound. Nevertheless, it illustrates the trickiness of spelling. English also has a considerable number of homophones – words that sound the same, but might be spelt differently, and have different meanings (our/hour, hear/here, ate/eight). These mean that contextualising vocabulary is important, and to help children recognise grammatical and vocabulary-related signs that might indicate certain spellings.

Try this:

Ask children who struggle to keep a personal notebook for tricky spellings and sentences. Help them to take ownership of identifying which sentences or words they struggle with, and assist them in finding their own example sentences. By taking ownership and making up their own mnemonics, learning spellings will be easier.

Soraya's special words

I ate (past tense) eight bananas (counting) at eight o'clock (time).

SPECIAL – Some People Eat Carrots In A Library.

Hand in hand with spelling goes pronunciation – reading is that much harder if what you see in front of you bears no resemblance to what you are actually supposed to say. “Cough”, “through” and “dough” may all end in “-ough” on paper, but each is pronounced differently. In their special notebooks, children could try making up rhyming poems or couplets, to help them remember.

Grammar

Each language has grammatical peculiarities, and whether or not these are difficult will, to a certain extent, depend on the home language. For example, definite and indefinite articles are notoriously difficult for Chinese learners of English, because the concept does not translate easily to Chinese. Some examples of potentially difficult grammatical concepts are:

- Irregular plurals (wolf → wolves, mouse → mice, foot → feet, fish → fish, person → people).
- Prepositions (“I am *at* school”, “I am *in* school”, “I go *to* school”, but also “under the circumstances”, “ask for” vs. “ask to”, “think of” vs. “think about”, etc.)
- Auxiliary and modal auxiliary verbs (“I will go”, “I want to go”, “I might go”, “I could go”, “I would go”, etc.)

- Tenses (“I write”, “I am writing”, “I wrote”, “I have written” – in particular discrepancies between spoken and written English).

Try this:

Helping each individual child will work best if they understand the classroom language in relation to their own language. Spend time exploring differences, ask the child to articulate where similarities and differences lie. By encouraging the child to make explicit their thoughts and their understanding, they are more likely to be able to analyse language for themselves, and to learn to identify pathways for their own learning.

Further Reading and Resources

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/listen-and-watch> - British Council website with numerous examples

<http://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/en/> - British Council website aimed directly at younger children