

Post-Secondary Arabian Gulf Students and Their State of English: Common Grammatical, Spelling, and Pronunciation Errors

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ABSTRACT

Having hardly learnt any English or having at best learnt wrong English (which is worse than no English) during their junior and secondary school years and having little or no exposure to English outside their classrooms, and partly due to certain weaknesses and shortcomings in what the teachers teach and how they teach, college students in some Arabian Gulf countries, with few exceptions, of course, continue to make (even after five years of English) silly, sloppy, lousy, and awkward errors/mistakes—grammatical, spelling, and pronunciation—in writing as well as speaking. The density of such errors is ridiculously high. This article provides some details and makes some suggestions about how to help students improve.

No, I don't mean more of the same as a remedy. No more of dull grammar, mere pronunciation, and dry (full or half) sentence scribbling practices in isolation, with no context of what should be a longer reading and writing exercise. That is, there shouldn't be any more courses in basic grammar and mere pronunciation, as there shouldn't be any more of what's very basic and rudimentary writing class. The way writing is being taught for year after year by some too "user-friendly" teachers, asking for less than little and simple, involves no reading by students and entails no more than a few scanty and skeletal word-to-sentence level exercises. Such easy teachers, settling for too less, get their writing students do laughably easy and simplistic work. They get them do so in narrow, boring, mechanical, microscopic, and atomistic lessons, instead of having them (students) produce page-long (or longer) assignments in their own English on a weekly basis.

Any routine mechanization of teaching writing isn't worth it. It is hopelessly reductionist, below what students deserve to accomplish in view of their time and money spent in the pursuit of their college level education. Although students are in a non-English speaking setting with a very limited exposure to languages other than their own Arabic, they're still sure to fare better if they're challenged to go through a process of innovative critical as well as creative writings in prose. This would involve them doing English over descriptive narratives, to be tasked during the week. At the same time they need to be assigned interesting readings in personal, subjective,

autobiographical, comparative, and critical or argumentative essays on a variety of topics beginning with their campus, country, and culture—their everyday life—on towards to include the common global topics of everybody's concern—social, environmental, political, and religious.

Any shortsighted and short-circuited teaching route is no more than preventing students from gaining proficiency and upward mobility in English as their second language, which is the world's first language and as such its local language. In fact, they need to pursue and persevere in improving their knowledge of English with such a passion that they should target to take both Arabic and English to the same level. It's the level when and where they would let their command in one compete with their excellence in another, the gap between the two thinning, narrowing, and shrinking as rapidly as possible, or slowly but surely.

To achieve such a goal, it is suggested that all the above fantastically simple courses—as simple as "A for Apple, B for Boy, C for Cat"—be revised to have students engaged in substantial amount of readings in both critical and creative prose, such as short stories, essays, and chapters from novels, and write (say, 1-2 pp. long) essays in critical appreciation of the text they'd read either in classroom or as part of their self-study, analyzing the themes, ideas, and characters in an attempt to write a piece of expository prose.

Even though students are likely to make many grammatical, spelling, and punctuation mistakes in

their short essays, let them still produce/struggle with essay-length or at least a-couple-of-paragraph-long answers in all courses across the curriculum, to be sure (not just one or two), so that a culture/practice of reading and articulation of thoughts and ideas in writing is at first created and then promoted over the years. In the long run, through the academic terms and semesters, students will be expected to find themselves alerted, with the help of their teachers, of course, and able to overcome the dense fog and smokescreen of the clutters and mechanical errors they were once supposed to fall prey to. The way it is, that is, if the status-quo is maintained, there is no rosy future for them or the society at large in the area of language acquisition and they will just be additions to their existing cohorts without actually adding quality to the job market, be it a school or an office. Are the few exceptions who are quite bright and promising enough to let the future hold promise for all or at least the majority to come?

Despite whatever importance and merit they may have, multiple choice (MC), fill in the blanks (FiB), and true-and-false (T&F) questions, like Thomas Hardy's use of (lucky but mostly tragic) coincidences in his novels, are at best blind and chance-and-luck-and-fate-and-fortune-based, rather than merit-and-understanding-and-comprehension-and-intellect-based. They're getaways for students and giveaways to them. Such testing tools are really silly. They're a demotivating disaster that increases students' passivity, complacency, and tendency to take advantage of and dependence on an easy and unchallenging way out. Such methods/strategies hinder, impede, retard, reduce, dull, and blunt students' interest, eagerness, curiosity, motivation, and willingness to accomplish an overall success or achieve a solid development. If not maximized/optimized through innovative uses, they pull and drag the stakeholders down, just as the bodily complexities and encumbrances gravitate the upward-flying soul/spirit down to the ground, philosophically/spiritually speaking. MCQs, FiBs, and T&F questions can of course be used for different categories of students in a different setting where they've already achieved a certain level of confidence and competence.

(Sometimes it's the unqualified, undemanding, lax, lenient, grade-inflating and excessively and superfluously student friendly teachers who are responsible for a diminished and diminutive delivery of course materials. Rumor has it that some linguistics teachers allegedly write their graduate level exams, for example, in pragmatics, asking students only to write short and simple definitions of basic concepts without having them (students) attempt analytical and

illustrative essays, requiring them to explain and argue on issues in the academic areas concerned/in question. A former colleague of mine, Dr Connor Quinn, who was an MIT and Harvard graduate, claimed that if a student didn't and couldn't write and express her/his thoughts and arguments in paragraphs, s/he would never be able to write and produce an essay.)

Coming back to initial undergraduate years, no lessons, tests, or exams ought to be less than a production/composition of an essay-length text. Lessons should consist of prose in various genres as suggested above. To repeat, I suggest that the present courses in grammar, pronunciation, and writing be completely done away with and be substituted by extensive reading and writing courses in intellectual explication and exemplification of themes and ideas expressed therein—courses in critical or creative prose displaying lively and dynamic motion and application of language, which is the most common and most widely used form of human communication.

Despite the fact that our students are taught and do indeed take all their courses in English during their roughly 5 years of undergraduate study, their proficiency in language remains extremely low and lamentable, embarrassing and unacceptable. With the exception of those (the ratio, whatever that is or may be, should be in reverse proportion) whose presence and participation in class make for greater interaction and engagement and who are thus a great classroom delight, most of the students in selected subjects write and speak in brute and broken English. It is sadly true that even a single simple sentence in clear and clean English complete with correct tense forms and subject-verb agreements is beyond them, let alone a complex or compound sentence, which is way beyond their capacity and construction. Their grammar, spelling, and pronunciation are all terribly awful.

Examples: "Teacher, what mean?," "What's mean?," "Teacher, what different?" or "what's different between ...," "I/we should *to* do/go/know," "He is married *from* her," "Teacher, you're my *superadvisor*. I want to open my table (of courses) for *regis*" (meaning, "You're my academic advisor. I want **you** to please open my table or study plan"), "Teacher, open my eduwave" (in an impolite commanding tone), and "Teacher, this/that course conflict, cannot *regislanguistic*." It is shocking to see how students get wrong the grammatical construction of even the frequently asked questions, such as the above. We the instructors should make sure we do care to correct them to have them say, "What's the *meaning* (of this or that)?" or "What does it mean?" or "What's the *difference* between...?"

Some or many of these foundation level wrongs and awkward expressions are a carryover from what they must have learnt from teachers at school and which, once permanently and indelibly impressed onto their upper chamber, are not easy for them to unlearn, undo, and get rid of. Despite the fact that they are taught and reminded again and again to use the preposition 'on' before day and date, like 'on Monday,' 'on my birthday,' 'on the 15th of January,' they make no mistake in making the mistake of 'in Tuesday,' 'in my birthday,' and in the 15th, for example. It is as difficult for them as the modern rocket science to distinguish between 'on' for the shorter units of day and date and 'in' for the longer units of month and year. They can see that, while reading anything in English, they never saw 'in' but saw only 'on' before day and date. They must know how to use and trust their two eyes, which are perhaps their best and most reliable teachers, their most loyal and faithful companions!

Some of our students have a tendency to use transitional words unnecessarily too frequently and too indiscriminately. They are not supposed to use 'Therefore,' 'In addition,' 'Moreover,' and 'Additionally' in every other sentence, starting from the very opening/introductory paragraph. They are supposed to avoid using them often, in every paragraph, including especially the very first paragraph. Too much use of these transitional markers makes them mechanical and hackneyed, sometimes even redundant. Excess of anything is bad. Students should be very selective and judicious in using them. They may make use of them only once in a while, as infrequently as possible, so that those transitional words retain their striking charm and dynamic function to stress the point students wish to make.

If possible, students should be completely and radically talked out of them at first (to drain out the swamp) and, instead, be encouraged to frame their sentences in such a way that the transition is nonetheless suggested or made obvious, as it is on the pages of a book where one can hardly see those transitional markers, except in a long while. If students open a book, they can find for themselves that those transitional terms and expressions are hardly there, only few and far between, in rare cases and contexts.

As has been said above, a full and complete (simple) sentence, let alone a beautifully constructed one in complex or compound form, is a rare commodity either in speech or in writing by our students. Their way of self-expression and academic discussion remains retarded and handicapped at the level of a few isolated and disjointed words. They have a serious deficit/deficiency in their reading fluency, in their range and stock of words, and in their writing

practices. One reason is that their exposure to English outside the classroom is extremely limited. They rarely cultivate/inculcate the habit of doing the light and fun readings through/over the illustrated popular little (weekly) magazines and daily newspapers, which actually provide the best and most effective means to improve language, grammar and vocabulary. Reading simple and entertaining materials is not only refreshing beside the relatively serious academic stuff, but also very useful to walk away with a good, in fact, great grasp of English.

Another reason for students' language deficiency is that they must have gotten the foreign language fundamentals wrong from their junior high and secondary high schools. Yet another reason is that they face little or no competition either in the classroom or in the job market, which leaves them feel passive, complacent, and indolent with inadequate preparation and preparedness for the future. There can be no quality without competition.

In addition, we the teachers also are accordingly lax and lenient in making the classroom instructions and exam questions as challenging and demanding as they should be. I believe we ought to be on the tougher and stricter side, modestly though, rather than being soft and liberal in grading the exams, especially in relation to the top grades.

The majority of our students do not even know and are not aware of the full and correct names of the college/faculty and/or the department they belong to, the discipline of their major, the courses they take, and their instructors. They are going through the process to graduate without doing enough of reading and writing. Their reading and writing skills proceed at a snail's pace, if at all (which can hardly be called a progress) and still remain at a pale and sickly level/stage by the time they get out of the University with an undergraduate/bachelor degree. In the end their academic bud may never fully grow or sprout into a full and healthy plant to bear fruits and flowers.

There are a number of courses in English, such as grammar, pronunciation, and writing, for which students do not have to read anything at all or, though writing in name, get engaged in doing enough writing exercises. Such courses help them in the improvement of neither their grammar nor their pronunciation nor their written expression, all of which should ideally be reflected through a series of passages, paragraphs, and short essays. Our Honorable Chancellor Dr Ahmed Al-Rawahi keeps reminding us from time to time that our students should be able to write in passages, paragraphs, and short to longer essays in all their tests and exams, from the skills to the content courses.

Sometimes we as teachers are too easy with students so that we can remain popular with them. That leaves us without having to take the trouble of reading their in-class essay type assignments. As such, the purpose of these courses is squarely defeated. Consequently, along with other factors, students can hardly read well, write well or speak well using standard English vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. They are far from being able to construct a complex or compound sentence. All such courses ought to be replaced by academically extensive and rigorous content-based courses, matched with considerable amount of in-class lessons and assignments.

To begin with, students, while speaking, need to use English, as a rule of thumb, even with their Arabic-speaking teachers and advisors, who ought to do the same. In fact, it is the teachers who should show the way by setting examples themselves first. By speaking in English with their students in their offices and exam venues, not just in classrooms, teachers may help students feel encouraged to express themselves in English, however broken that English may initially be. It is worth quoting and worth remembering that Dr Khalfan Hamed Alharraasi, HoD DFL at the University of Nizwa, rightly reminded his academic staff that “Those who can speak Arabic, please minimize this to nil if possible. We would like the target language to be taught through the target language” (e-mail dated 13 November 2016).

Faculty not doing so stand in the way of the students trying to enhance and improve. They become an impediment in students’ furthering their learning through the medium of English. At present there is no coherent and consistent continuity between the classroom lectures/instruction and the office conversation/discussions. As a result, students’ efforts at improvement and advancement stumble and flounder at the very outset and remain in a state of limbo and limping throughout. (Higher administration and human resource offices are entirely a different matter.)

We need to help students know, use, and be aware of the following grammatical/mechanical matters during our course delivery, especially courses in reading (essays and stories) and writing about them, but not in flat, isolated, lifeless, dry, dull, and detached examples of individual words and sentences. These common errors/mistakes have to do with the basics of: (1) third person singular ‘s’; plural ‘s’; possessive (apostrophe) ‘s’; contraction ‘s’ (as in s/he’s, that’s, it’s, what’s) and ‘s’ at the end of various disciplines as physics, mathematics, optics, economics, statistics, linguistics, so on; (2) subject-verb agreement: am/is/are; has/have/had; (3) parts of speech in all eight or nine forms; (4) tense shift: past/present/future (constant use

of the present indefinite only); (5) conjugation of a verb in all the twelve forms of the three main and major tenses and the knowledge of the sequence of tenses, again in twelve forms; (6) person shift and narration of speech using ‘that’; (7) active voice and passive voice; (8) independent/dependent clauses; (9) simple, complex, and compound sentences; (10) parallelisms; (11) introductory, adverbial, prepositional phrases; (12) appositives; (13) comma splices/fragments and sentence combining; (14) problem of leaving a space between the word and the comma; (15) problem of not leaving a space between the article ‘a’ and the word (noun) that follows; (16) difference between hyphen (-), dash (--), and a colon (:); (17) lack / abuse of capitalization; (18) awkward way of putting the comma or the full stop outside the quotation marks; and (19) when and how to use quotation marks.

Students should have learnt and be able to apply some of the above even at their secondary school. It is true we do teach some of the above in English I & II, but it is also true that we do not teach many of them. Even those items that we teach do not land well with the students. They do not pay much attention to acquire and digest them because there is something wrong about what we teach and test and how we teach and test. We teach and test them in a detached and isolated and dry and dull manner, in an atomistic, anemic, and microscopic way, not through having students go through essays and stories closely and thoroughly to get the ideas and arguments and not through having them write and reproduce their understanding, comprehension, and appreciation in paragraphs and essays. Both the teaching and the testing methods, the way we do them here, are faulty and frivolous.

People of certain nationalities in the Arab region tend to pronounce *p* as *b* and the vice versa. Students need to be helped with their spelling and pronunciation with regard to *p* and *b*: for example, laptop/~~lab~~top; published/~~pup~~lished; appropriate/~~aprobriate~~/abrobriate; approve/~~abrove~~; improve/~~imbrove~~; describe/~~descripe~~; description/~~describition~~; map/~~mab~~; paper/~~baper~~; group/~~groub~~; blamed/~~plamed~~; husband/~~huspand~~; and bring/~~pring~~. They need to be aware of their wrong use of the letter *e* as in ‘famouse,’ ‘focuse,’ ‘talke’ and ‘poeme’ as they need to be alerted to their missing of the same letter *e* as in ‘befor.’ They need to be attentive to their wrong use of the plural *s* in ‘everything’s.’

Students need to fix their spelling and pronunciation with regard to the letter *g* as in ‘go,’ ‘good,’ ‘great,’ ‘God,’ ‘game,’ ‘colleague,’ as opposed to ‘college,’ ‘message,’ ‘language,’ ‘garage,’ ‘registration,’ ‘biology,’ ‘psychology,’ and so on. Although students should be familiar with the words ‘register,’

‘registrar,’ ‘registration,’ ‘courses,’ and the ‘clash’ or ‘conflict’ of timings between the courses they would like to take, unfortunately, they can hardly form full and clear and complete sentences using these words, as evident during the add-and-drop week when they laboriously express their registration needs in frustratingly awkward and embarrassing fragments and half-and-quarter-and-dime sentences.

Students need help with regard to their funny misspelling and ridiculous mispronunciation of the following everyday words, including ‘pronunciation’ itself, which they mispronounce and misspell as ‘pronunciation,’ mistakenly aligning and confusing it with its verb form, *pronounce*. Similarly, they mispronounce the word ‘excuse’ (as in ‘excuse me’ or the ‘excuse letters’ they often hand in) with *c* as *cee*, not as ‘*exkuse*’ with *cas k*, as in ‘clash,’ ‘conflict,’ or ‘connect.’ They do the same with regard to ‘archeology’ in which *ch* becomes either *cee* or *she*, but not *k*, as it would be in ‘*arkeology*.’ Despite the pronunciation courses they take, many students are not aware that the *h* of ‘honor’ and ‘hour’ remains silent, as the *b* of ‘doubt’ and ‘subtle.’ They mispronounce the simple words such as, ‘asked,’ ‘informed,’ ‘walked,’ ‘based,’ and the like. Instead of correctly pronouncing as ‘askt’ or ‘walkt,’ they pronounce these words with a heavily accented *e* before the *d* of the past or participle form. Putting aside the exceptions to the rule, the same is generally true with both the young and adult learners of certain nationalities in the Arab region.

Even some teachers, again from certain nationalities, suffer from the same flaw and pronounce these words woefully wrong. Naturally, students learn wrong from them as they have previously learned wrong from some of their school teachers. As a past HoD, I, together with my superior, the former Dean of the College, who is now Pro-VC (Academic), used to decide against recommending applicants for teaching/academic positions with similar pronunciation defects as it was clear from their telephone/Skype interviews. Some teachers describe students as ‘colleagues’ of each other; they in fact teach them that they’re ‘colleagues’ of each other. How could that be? Isn’t it wrong and ridiculous? We teachers are colleagues of each other as we work together, engaged in the same profession. Similarly, workers and professionals in the same professions or occupations, making a living, are colleagues or coworkers or office mates of each other, but not the students, who are studying together as classmates or batch mates or room-mates (at the hostel/dormitory).

Students, with hardly any exception, mispronounce ‘took’ as *talk* or *tauk*; ‘page’ as *peg*, ‘change’ as *chang*

or *chaing*; ‘challenge’ as *challeing*; ‘register’ as *regis*; ‘prerequisite’ as *prequisht*; ‘supervisor’ as *superadvisor*; ‘sign’ as *sign*, ‘fair’ as *fire*, ‘mile’ as *mil*, and ‘doubt’ and ‘subtle’ with *b*. They do not know, care to know how, or find it hard to spell and pronounce common words such as signature, substitute, linguistics (pronounced as *linguisticor linguistic*), sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, paragraph, translation, interpretation, and registration. I’m sure students, regardless of junior or senior, wouldn’t pass the spelling and pronunciation test of these words and subject names.

In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins of Phonetics describes the poor and illiterate, but also rude and disrespectful flower girl Eliza as speaking in cockney style “kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days.” Higgins says, “A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don’t sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.”

In just a matter of few months, Professor Higgins, with the help of Colonel Pickering, who is also another phonetician and a linguist of Indian dialects, and through his laboratory-based scientific speech lessons, trains and transforms Eliza into acquiring perfection in pronunciation so that she could pass off as a duchess at an ambassador’s garden party or a lady’s maid or shop assistant. In the end Eliza is indeed able to cross the class line and, clean and pretty and better dressed, marry a man of middle class. Higgins himself being a sort of unpredictable eccentric could not, however, change Eliza’s rough and rugged rebelliousness as much. Anyway, we both the teachers and the students can feel inspired and encouraged by Higgins’ method of teaching genuine science of speech—be it English or Arabic—on a real fast track.

Regardless of who are what—freshman, sophomore, junior or senior students—, those who are bright and comparatively better are so from the beginning, from the first year through the final year; but those who are weak and dull remain so throughout, showing no improvement. However, they know they would pass anyway and pass with quite a good grade indeed! While the teachers may be flexible and not so stringent (they are already too lenient and liberal to the point of giving students inflated grades) towards giving them the lower and middle grades only, it is imperative that teachers avoid being too nice and kind towards awarding the higher or top grades unless students receiving such grades do really excel in every aspect

of (the art) of writing and deserve to score high by all standards.

What happens is that, fortunately or unfortunately, faculty let their grace, mercy, consideration and compassion to be big and broad enough to cover and extend to all, good or not so good, just as God lets His kind and blessed rain or shine fall on everybody, good or bad. Students take this for granted and so feel no need to face competition, be competitive, and do better. Situation, environment, and circumstances are such that they do not expect any context for competition. And, to reiterate, there can be no quality without competition! Like economies, businesses, and political systems, academic performance also goes down without competition among the colleagues and cohorts.

One tip, one solution may be is to ask students to read and discuss on their own a good amount of fun and light stuff on a host of plain and common topics (related to campus, society, celebrities, culture, media and media personalities, politics and political leaders, public figures/intellectuals, religion, fashion, and lifestyle as written about in the dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies, and monthlies). They may be asked to write about interesting and controversial issues in frequently held essay competitions and debate about them in frequently held debate competitions, side by side with the academic materials at the same time! One or two hours of extracurricular activities daily do actually open and sharpen our brain in a refreshing and reassuring way. Limiting/confining our brain to mere exams and academic courses clogs and blocks it to the detriment of our acquisition of knowledge, education, and intellect, whether as students, teachers, or members of the society in general.