



English Society of Maria College

Essay Competition Results (Students Group)

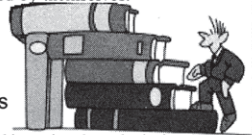
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Title : What are the best ways for students to learn formal English in Hong Kong?

Criteria of adjudication

1. Those entries with 5 or more mistakes on grammar or diction were disqualified.
2. About 90% of the entries failed in this respect. Only 10% of the entries could come to the second round of adjudication.
3. Qualified students were invited to sit for a 40-minute written test to clarify their essays finished by themselves.
4. All winners will be individually notified to collect their prizes.
5. The English level of the top two winners by far exceeds that of the rest of the entries.

The following are **extracts** of winning entries :



Champion - by C. K. Mak Age : 16. Original 610 words

For students to acquire a satisfactory command of formal English, it is necessary that they read a lot of everything written by authoritative sources – the quality newspaper, science, fiction, classical literature, and so forth. It has to be said, however, that although the richest and most colorful usage of the English vocabulary evocative of the most vivid imageries are present in **classical literature**, it **does more harm than good to read it alone** and too little of anything else. For, in modern everyday use, the objective is to relate ideas clearly so that people would understand immediately, and literary English is inapplicable in this field. If students were to read classical literature alone without consultation with the grammar textbook, their writing would certainly contain excess circumlocution and would be for the sake of language itself instead of content. There is also one of the reasons why authoritative writers generally agree that the English standard in England has declined. According to G. Orwell in "Politics and the English language", "...Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can..." Also, nowadays the style that journalists in **Hong Kong English newspapers*** write in **tends to be excessively colloquial**. Students should avoid writing colloquial and informal compositions as colloquialism greatly reduces persuasiveness and is equivocal. Therefore, students must not indulge excessively in newspaper and classical literature too early to the extent that their writing using formal English becomes affected. They should, however, be encouraged to read articles and essays written by famous writers, as some of these are the epitome of formal English usage.

Grammar textbooks such as those in use in most Hong Kong schools are also necessary for the proper learning of formal English. They improve one's grammatical accuracy and soundness of compositional structure, the prerequisites of a decent piece of writing, if one can grasp and utilize the rules described. In official letters, these are of particular importance as the respect a person commands often depends on his/her writing skills. Also, **increased grammatical knowledge can help students differentiate between formal, colloquial and literary writing**, so they can avoid mistakenly writing colloquial or literary phrases in formal compositions.

For students to write better formal English, they should be more **acquainted with the correct usage of English grammar and increase their vocabulary and command of the various sentence structures through wide-scoped reading**. Classical literature should be tackled only after one has acquired a good knowledge of the above and has had sufficient practice in writing in the formal style. Increased grammatical knowledge will ensure a better grasp of the different styles of writing and avoidance of colloquialism and the integration of literary phrases in formal writing.



1st Runner-up - by Victoria C. Age : 18. Original 1250 words

The best illustration of the possible English fluency that can be attained by any person at any time is obvious – a **solid grasp of formal English can be gained by being completely immersed in English itself**. It is possible to cite a number of examples of fluent, high standard English users who were first exposed to English in their late teens, upon relocation to England, the United States or Canada. Does this mean that the only hope of salvation for troubled students of English is immediate departure for one of these countries? No, but the phenomenon sheds light on practical tactics that can be implemented to otherwise raise the standard of formal English. The differences in language fluency between the student who goes overseas and the Hong Kong student who proceeds through the education system illuminate ways in which students of Hong Kong can best learn English.

Obviously, a move to a country where English is widely spoken necessitates usage of English. **The chief motive of the English learner is to be able to communicate and to interact with others**. If necessity is the mother of invention, it is also the mother of dedication. True yearning for acquisition of proper English is hard to arouse if it has dubious relevance to one's well-being. First and foremost, therefore, is the stipulation that English must inspire her students. This is no easy task to put into action. It is therefore well worthwhile for schools to designate certain occasions such as assemblies or announcements and certain events such as talks or performances to be conducted solely in English. When there is no alternative, there emerges in individuals a sink or swim mentality. This mentality, if not excessively emphasized, results in the victory of the swim mindset.

There are other, softer methods of English induction as well. For example, English can be proven to be an imperative contribution to successful jobs and lifestyles by means of exhibitions and displays. **English can subtly be bred into students' minds as a natural necessity for future plans ranging from acceptance into the selective Hong Kong University to exemplary service at McDonald's**. A final practical method of exposure to English involves information technology. Students will inevitably understand the importance of English if they are exposed to the world of computing, for English dominates this revolutionary specimen, with Chinese typing taking three times as long as typing in English and being three times less applicable to programs, to the World Wide Web and to social proceedings such as the ever popular chatting tool, ICQ. The notion that English is useful, beneficial and expedient stands to become ingrained into the minds of students as a matter of fact.

Linguist Noam Chomsky believed in a universal grammar said to contain grammatical forms true to all languages. This may apply to languages if they are reduced to their most basic rules. But expressing a thought in English by translating it from its Chinese origin illustrates the difficulties the translator faces. Complex ideas must be switched around, with the adverb, the adjective and the noun all changing places. "Them" becomes "he" or "she", a simple word to render past tense is now an array of suffixes each with differently appropriate application. What emerges from the ruins of grammatical translation is so vastly different from the idea itself that it may be wrongly expressed and completely misunderstood. But hopefully, audio-visual activities, which demonstrate proper English, can pre-empt such problems.

*Newspapers reflect and reveal the solecistic waywardness of 'the half-educated' general public in a much dramatic fashion. As any lexicographer or grammarian knows, newspapers, by the very nature of the circumstances, inevitably contain a high proportion of deviations from standard language. That is why students are ill-advised to learn Standard English from newspapers, especially the Chinese one which teaches English with Chinese thoughts and Chinese expressions through Chinese medium: these inflict irreparable damage to English learners.



Essay Competition Results (Open Group)

Title : **How do you raise the standard of formal English (down to the floor of illiteracy) in Hong Kong?**

教育署註冊編號:E.D.1/21528/76

Criteria of adjudication :

1. Entries with 4 or more mistakes on grammar or diction were disqualified.
2. Essays were judged at the level of professional writers on readability, clarity, concision (brevity), cohesion (flowing), coherence (focus), elegance, figures of speech, punctuation, rhythm and contents.
3. All winners will be individually notified within a week to collect their prizes.
The following are **EXTRACTS** of the Champion.

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Champion - by Mok, Sui - Hing Original 2051 words

Many students in Hong Kong labour under the illusion that formal English is no longer practised. They think as long as you can put your message across, it matters little in what manner you say it. Nothing could be more wrong. Whoever thinks the mastery of English is a meaningful goal in life, it is important not only to learn to express oneself well, but also to come to grips with the grammatical structure of the language, especially if you aspire to have a wider choice of professions and win respect from your interlocutors.

This, however, is not happening in today's Hong Kong. Students can string words and phrases together, but most of the sentences thus formed are totally wrong or at best sub-standard. What is even more horrifying is that they have lost all notion of correctness and may even argue back that it's OK as long as they are understood. The problem is, if you are consistently ungrammatical the comprehensibility of your speech is bound to be impaired. **Grammar, or formality is not an invention of wise men in the past, or fetters put upon students to make life harder for them. It serves the very important function of regulating the language so that there is common understanding between users - when you say certain things in a certain way, your meaning will be clear to the receiver of the message.** So whoever speaks ungrammatically tends to express himself poorly.

Hong Kong students' disrespect for grammar originates from two aspects of our education - English medium teaching and the **scrapping of grammar from the English syllabus since the late seventies. Another important reason for the sloppiness in formal English has nothing to do with our education system.** Hong Kong people use language sloppily anyway, especially in Chinese. **Journalists, newsmen, politicians, disc-jockeys and so on make mistakes in Chinese in the media every day.** Because of our colonial past, English has always been treated with more respect. But if you cannot structure your own language correctly, what hope do you have of being spot on in a language which is not your own? It is perfectly possible to speak and write good and correct English without learning grammar, just as it is possible to become a manager without an MBA, or a teacher without a Dip. Ed. But alternative measures will have to be taken.

The cessation of grammar teaching was a choice made by colonial educators. It was a decision made for no better reason than grammar was no longer taught in the UK. The fact that UK pupils listen to, read, speak and do things with English every day, and most of the time in formal English, was glossed over and conveniently forgotten. **If you do not teach grammar, the pre-requisite would be to create the same type of language environment and utility for Hong Kong students. This has not happened and will never happen in Hong Kong's context. Moreover, phasing out English grammar in the UK was only a measure taken by one nation at a certain time in history and should not be held as God's truth.** Mother tongue grammar is happily taught in France and other European countries, and the results are rather benign. Even when UK pupils are learning foreign languages, a lot of attention would be paid to structure, or grammar of some form or other.

Asking whether grammar is useful is just like assessing the usefulness of education or management theories for educators and managers. The answer is bound to be a definite yes.

We can however negotiate the type of grammar taught, or even use mixed methods to explain the numerous exceptions that exist in the English language. The many types of modern linguistic theories may not be able to supplant traditional clause analyses, but could possibly supplement them. **But reinstating structural English studies should not only be done, but also done with extreme urgency.**

However, grammar, or structure is not an end in itself. Grammar books will enable students to use English more accurately, but cannot make them express themselves better. If someone is able to say only two sentences in English, namely 'I am a boy' and 'you are a girl', his English will be 100% grammatical, but he won't be able to claim that he has mastered formal English. So the question how to raise the standard of formal English begs another one: **how to improve the standard of English itself.** It has also tormented generations of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and even employers, and we are no nearer to an effective solution than twenty years ago.

In my opinion, the answer lies in not linguistic theories and expert reports commissioned by the government. **One can perhaps draw an analogy with managers of a department store trying to second-guess what consumers like and dislike, without realising that the answer is best provided by the consumers themselves.**

We have for too long imposed English on students without understanding their needs, fears and hopes. **All remedial measures are only based on armchair theories and bureaucratic responses to changes in reality.** If you ask an average Hong Kong student whether he realises the importance of English, he will probably give you a sincere and unequivocal yes. But when he is asked whether he really likes it, the chances are that he will give a shake of the head. How, one will ask, can you ever learn something well if you don't enjoy it, even with the most advanced teaching aids and the best teachers in the world? Modern education theories tell us that motivation is the start to all learning processes. If students are not motivated, there is no need to talk about anything else.

When I was still at school in the sixties and seventies, I shared the same obsession with proficiency in English as school children today, but we were learning it in a completely different atmosphere. Looking back, I now realise how strumming guitar and singing folk songs were instrumental in not only forming the grammatical base in English, but also in cultivating an affinity for things English or American - language, literature, sports, music and all. The same interest in the English language and Anglo-American culture has led many to go on and teach themselves (**I stress the fact that many were actually advancing without anybody's help**) to read Dickens, the Bronte sisters and even Shakespeare all on their own.

It is only through wide reading that one can acquire a firm grasp of the subtleties of English, including aspects of formal English.

If Hong Kong's educators and textbook writers take a little time to study language teaching courses of other European languages, they will find that there is a much richer cultural (both popular and traditional) content and that textbooks are better laid out and more colourful. The idea is to make the entire process more entertaining. I am not recommending a wholesale adoption of the approach used by these courses, but a lot can be learnt from them. Unlike history, geography or economics, **the English language does not have a hard and fast syllabus which teachers or textbook writers have to closely follow, and they can give free rein to their imagination.** So it amazes me how some of our teaching materials are so singularly uninspiring.

After all, **an average student in Hong Kong would spend less than 300 hours per year in English classes.** Their own effort outside the classroom is absolutely crucial to their success in English. So their interest in the language is actually more important than what they learn in the classroom.

The foregoing is my personal view on a subject which evidently cannot be exhausted by a brief essay like the present one. From a broader viewpoint, the real reason behind Hong Kong's weakness in English is because it is not a language conscious society.

We enjoy this prose not as a transparent medium, but as an aesthetic experience particularly when coming to the well-turned sentences. Knowing devices for writing and knowing the usage of them is the difference between reading cookbooks and cooking. It is a matter of practice and taste, and maybe it is a gift.