

**How Not to Speak English: Using Nissim Ezekiel's
"Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." in ELT**

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nissim_Ezekiel

Abstract

“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” is a satire on ‘Indish’, that is, an English whose flaws in grammar and vocabulary are peculiar to its use among educated Indians. My paper demonstrates that the poem may be used, first, to illustrate the particular instances of error (for example, incorrect collocations, omission of articles etc.); second, to introduce the correct form; and third, to explain the underlying principles of usage and grammar. Therefore, it would be a convenient aid in teaching English to undergraduate students, whose predilection for exactly those errors highlighted in Ezekiel’s poem, adversely affects their academic performance. My paper offers two lesson plans to elucidate how “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” may be used in ELT.

Keywords: Indian English, satire, English usage, error-correction, vocabulary, progressive forms, articles.

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel's poem, "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.", is a witty satire on certain common errors in grammar and vocabulary that typify the use of English among educated Indians. My paper demonstrates that this poem may be used to identify, analyze and correct such errors. Therefore, it would serve as a handy aid in teaching English to advanced learners in India, particularly, undergraduate students across academic disciplines.

A lack of proficiency in English among such students is an impediment in maximizing their academic performance. This deficiency is more aggravated in rural than in urban areas as also among students in government schools than in private schools. But heterogeneity in its levels notwithstanding, surveys such as the 2017 ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) have established that the deficiency exists. In fact, even a score of above eighty percent at the Higher Secondary level examination is not a guarantee of English Language skills in an undergraduate. This is because the mechanical, grammar-centric language teaching methods and the memory-testing assessment techniques employed in Indian schools are not conducive to the acquisition of practical skills in a foreign language. The outcome is a category of undergraduate students whose skills deficit means that, first, they cannot cope with course contents in English and fare badly in the examinations; second, experience a debilitating lack of confidence; and finally, suffer a drastic reduction in employability.

Higher Education in English and Formal Rectification of Flaws in Grammar, etc.

The logic and legitimacy of a higher education in English in India is, of course, debatable. However, vernacularizing of academic course contents at the tertiary level is yet to be achieved. Besides, since English is slated to remain the predominant language in global use (in business and in academia) at least for the next decade, English skills would certainly continue to determine employability in a globalized job market. Under the circumstances, the issue of a skills deficit at the undergraduate level needs to be urgently addressed.

However, the formal rectification of flaws in grammar and vocabulary at this level poses several problems. For instance, time constraints preclude a comprehensive English Language Teaching programme in intensively subject-specific courses like a B.A. in Sociology or a B.Tech. By this logic, the conventional method of systematically introducing and explaining the discrete items of grammar, such as the second conditional or the non-progressive verb, and then following up with practice exercises would be inefficient. Also, this method makes for a passive learner, who is incapable of analytical thinking and making practical applications of the grammatical principles. Moreover, for many students, conventionally taught grammar is likely to be a bogey. Conversely, those with a comparatively higher level of language skills would view such lessons as a juvenile project. To be effective, ELT for undergraduates must be interesting, challenging and, also, demonstrate its immediate relevance for the target learner. My paper proposes that "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." may be used to prepare lessons in English grammar and vocabulary, catering specifically to the needs of undergraduate students.

Discussion

At the outset, it is imperative to define the needs of the students. Clearly, these undergraduates do not need out-of-context theoretical definitions of grammar components (for instance, ‘what is a non-progressive verb?’) or grammar exercises, which bear little semblance to real life usages (for instance, ‘change the following sentence from active into passive: I drank coffee yesterday.’). Rather, what they need is to be alerted to certain common errors in usage, relating to grammar and vocabulary. The former would include omission of articles, incorrect prepositions, faulty constructions in reported speech, the misuse of the progressive form etc. Instances of the latter would be incorrect collocations and the tendency to translate verbatim, vernacular expressions into English.

“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.”

“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” contains multiple illustrations of some of these flaws, namely, the omission of articles, the misuse of the progressive form and the tendency to translate vernacular expressions into English. Therefore, it can be conveniently used as a three-step ELT exercise; first, to identify and generate an awareness about these flaws; second, to introduce the correct forms; third, to explain the underlying grammatical principles. This should make for two one-hour lessons. Ideally, the first may be devoted to vocabulary and the second to grammar. Accordingly, two tentative lesson plans have been chalked out below.

Lesson 1

- Handouts with the text are to be distributed among the learners. They are to be allotted five minutes to read and understand the poem.

Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.
Nissim Ezekiel

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018
Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: *Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature*

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from very high family.
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat
with family members
of my uncle's very old friend-
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa
she is most popular lady
with men also and ladies also.

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it.' That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospects
and we are wishing her bon voyage.

Now I ask other speakers to speak
and afterwards Miss Pushpa
will do the summing up.

(Parthasarathy, 37-38)

Activities

- The context of the poem is to be elicited from the learners; namely, that it is an introductory speech at a farewell party thrown by her colleagues for Miss Pushpa T.S., who is leaving her job to go to a foreign country.
- To elicit the poem's theme, the learners may be asked to consider the second stanza ("You are all knowing ... internal sweetness.") and an explanation of the lines sought, with particular reference to the repetition of the substantive "sweetness". They are to be guided to the conclusion that "sweetness", further qualified by "external" and "internal", as a definition of Miss Pushpa's character is ambiguous. Congeniality, amiability etc.

may be proffered as more precise alternatives, while “internal sweetness” and “external sweetness” may be explained respectively as ‘general decency’ and ‘a charming demeanour’. The learners are also to be alerted to the confusion accruing from the repetition of the verb “smiling” in line 12 and the impreciseness of the verb “feeling” in line 14, the latter, in fact, causing a breakdown in communication. The purpose underlying the exercise is to help them realize that Ezekiel’s poem is illustrative of the confusion, often comical, arising from the use of inexact words in communication. It must be emphasized that the speaker does not intend to be humorous; he is not aware of the errors and inaccuracies in his usage of English. The humour is apparent only to the readers who can recognize these flaws. Insofar as Ezekiel’s objective is to promote such recognition, “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” is a satire on the common errors in the use of English in India.

- The poem’s context and theme established, the learners may be asked to work in pairs to identify inaccuracies in its vocabulary. These would then be discussed and corrected. Given below is a checklist of such errors, analyses of these and the correct expressions.

1. “Goodbye Party”: though goodbye and farewell are synonymous terms, the former is not an alternative for the latter when qualifying “party”. The correct phrase would be ‘farewell party’.

2. “dear sister”: “sister” is an inappropriate form of address for the occasion. It probably corresponds to vernacular forms such as ‘didi’ or ‘aapa’, which is deemed suitable on informal or semi-formal occasions in India. The appropriate form here would be ‘dear Pushpa’.

3. “departing”: this is a case of faulty register, that is, the formality of the term does not match with the colloquial idiom of the speech. ‘Leaving for’ or ‘going away to’ would be apposite.

4. “for foreign”: the tendency to use the adjective “foreign” as a substantive derives from its use in this sense when it is appropriated by vernaculars such as Bengali or Hindi; for instance, ‘yeh foreign sey abhi abhi aayi hai’. In English, the correct adjectival usage would be ‘for a foreign country’.

5. “very high family”: “high”, a wrong choice of adjective here, is also the result of the translation into English of vernacular phrases such as “oonche khaandaan”; the speaker means ‘a rich’ or ‘a well-established family’.

6. “cooking nicely”: “nice” is randomly used by Indians as the English equivalent of the vernacular ‘achha’, in the sense of ‘good’. But, its adverbial use in the given context fails to convey the idea that the person concerned was ‘a good cook’.

7. “ladies and men”: this is an instance of a wrong collocation. The correct phrase would be either ‘ladies and gentlemen’ or ‘men and women’.

8. “good spirit”: this is a corruption and incorrect use of the prepositional phrase ‘in good spirits’. The correct choice of word would be ‘cheerfulness’.

9. “speakers to speak”: this is a careless tautology; a better way of putting it would be, ‘ask the others to speak’.

10. “will do the summing up”: “do” is redundant, since “summing up” contains the sense of doing something. To sum up the speeches made by others at her farewell party is a strange request to make of Miss Pushpa. Probably, the speaker merely means that she should say something in acknowledgement of the speeches by others. ‘Miss Pushpa will say a few words’ is more appropriate.

- This entire exercise of identification, analysis and rectification of errors in vocabulary should take an hour.

Lesson 2

- The second exercise, planned for another hour, would check the text primarily for two types of grammatical errors, the omission of articles and the misuse of the progressive form. This would follow a similar three-step process of identification, analysis and rectification.
- The first type of error may be introduced by referring the learners to at least two cases in point. For instance, lines 15-16 (“Miss Pushpa is coming / from very high family”) and 17-18 (“Her father was renowned advocate / in Bulsar or Surat,”).
- From the learners it would be possible to elicit:
 1. The nature of the grammatical error, namely the omission of the indefinite article ‘a’;
 2. The function of the article ‘a’ in the given contexts; namely, that the speaker is talking about something or someone of which / whom the reader has no knowledge (that is, the reader does not know the “high family” or the “renowned advocate” mentioned here);
 3. The reason ‘a’ would have to be replaced by ‘the’ if the line were re-written as, ‘Her father was ‘the’ renowned advocate who won every case against the state government’. The sentence would then indicate the speaker’s assumption that the reader knows about the “advocate” in question.
- Having established the difference in use between the definite and the indefinite articles, learners may be asked to locate the other instances of their omission in the text; for

example, in line 25 (“that was long time ago”), line 27 (“she is most popular lady”), line 40 (“Now I ask other speakers to speak”) and in the title (“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”). In each case, they would have to insert the correct article. The grammatical logic for each choice of article would be discussed. For example, in line 27, the explanation for using ‘the’ to qualify the superlative “most” is that there is normally one best or biggest individual in a group. So, it is clear which one(s) we are talking about.

- To introduce the second type of grammatical error, that is, the misuse of the progressive form, the learners might be asked to examine the time scale implicit in the poem. They would be guided to the conclusion that insofar as the poem is a speech someone is making at a party, it represents a continuing action in the present time. The verb forms for such continuing actions end in –ing, ‘e.g., speaking’. This is the present progressive form. In this context, the learners would be referred to line 6 (“we are meeting today...”) to assess whether the present progressive form here is justified. The following diagrams, based on Swan (439, 452), may be used to illustrate the time scale of the two actions of ‘speaking’ and of ‘having met’.

Diagram 1

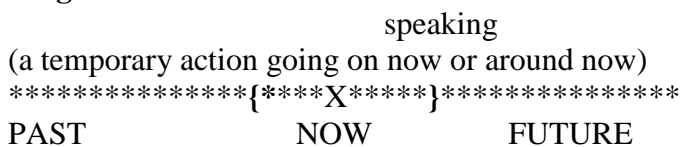
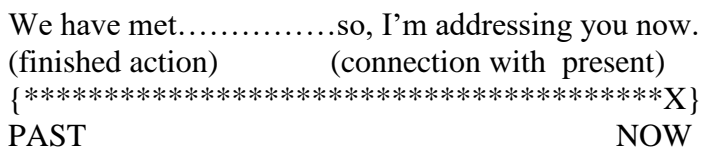


Diagram 2



- The objective is to establish that the people at the party meet sometime before the speaker begins to address them. Therefore, the present progressive form, “meeting”, is incorrect. The correct form would be the present perfect, ‘have met’. This expresses the sense of a completed action, which is linked to the present, that is, the speaker’s addressing them is contingent on their having met.
- The next step would be to point out the progressive form that follows immediately afterwards in line 8 (“You are all knowing friends”). Learners would be required to distinguish between the two actions represented by the verbs, ‘to meet’ and ‘to know’, that is, whereas the former is a physical action, the latter represents a state of mind. It would be explained that verbs denoting states of mind, such as believe, doubt, love, realize, understand etc. do not take the progressive form. Learners would be asked to locate examples of such verbs, which have been incorrectly attributed a progressive form,

for example in line 14 (“but simply because she is feeling”) and line 19 (“I am not remembering now which place”).

- Finally, other instances of the incorrect use of the progressive form would be listed by learners, in each case, explaining why the form is incorrect and stating the correct form. The list would include:
 1. Miss Pushpa is coming / From very high family.
 2. Coming back to Miss Pushpa...
 3. She was saying ...
 4. This is showing good spirit.
 5. I am always / appreciating the good spirit.
 6. Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
 7. Whatever I or anybody is asking /she is always saying yes
 8. ...and we are wishing her bon voyage.
 9. Miss Pushpa / will do the summing up.

Conclusion

ELT methods in India tend to be regimented, both, the conventional deductive techniques followed in the government schools as well as the inductive practices in private institutions which teach English Language. The former, as has already been indicated, are not particularly suitable for adult learners. The inductive techniques, while unarguably effective, tend to become mechanical through repetition of set practices. The objective of my paper is to suggest an opportunity to circumvent such regimentation. Particularly, it constitutes “an alternative” to teaching grammar within a “tightly structured system” by “allowing learners simply to experience the language through communication” (Thornbury, 17). Methodology-wise, this is a flexible approach. It combines the freedom of guided discovery with some controlled activities. It might be said to approximate Harmer’s “engage-study-activate” formula (Harmer, 51-52). Encouraging such approaches would allow teachers to use their reading and innovate in classroom teaching. It would be fatuous to stress how imperative it is to have such scope for creativity in teaching in order to relieve tedium and sustain intellectual dynamism.

The advantages of using authentic material for ELT have been enumerated too well by experts in the field to require repetition here. Suffice it to say that Ezekiel’s poem offers a broad and cogent context for the analysis and application of specific principles of grammar and vocabulary. It simulates a real-life situation, making the practice in these language skills more practically relevant and meaningful than a practice exercise with random examples. “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” is especially relevant for ELT on account of its theme and context. The fact that it illustrates errors in grammar and vocabulary, uniquely equips the poem to generate awareness about such errors. As Penny Ur points out, “Related to the notion of focus on form is the notion of consciousness-raising” (Ur, 24). By this, she means that the learner must be brought to attend to or notice items of form, which helps in acquisition of the language. In Ezekiel’s poem, particular errors are repeated, making the experience of noticing them impactful. Correspondingly, error correction is also undertaken multiple times in the lessons. This will

“trigger a train of mental processes that in time will result in accurate and appropriate production” of the target languages (Ur, 24).

Finally, the poem’s humour makes it an interesting read. Correction through humorous criticism, which is the underlying principle of satire, is invariably effective. This in itself is a justification for using Ezekiel’s poem in ELT to identify, analyze and correct errors in the usage of English.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: *Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature*

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