

## **“Me Talk Good”**

Sarah H. Lee  
Glenbrook South High School, Illinois

As a first generation immigrant, my childhood memories were quite interesting.

My first thought when I stepped off the plane was, “Wow, there’s a lot of white people here.” I mean I’d heard about them, and I’d even read about them, but I’d never quite seen so many in one place.

Oh, and then there was a culture shock phase when a sixteen-year-old baby sitter tried to teach me English – through rap songs.

[Sings a bit of rap]

This is what I call apping a jiggy with it.

I wasn’t “fly enough” to pull off all those “hippin’s” and “hoppin’s” and especially those “bangin’s” – we don’t have banging in Korea.

But, believe it or not, within six months I was in regular classes. Imagine the teacher’s surprise when the new kid announced to the whole class that she had to, “Do the bathroom,” – right here. Of course, the teacher didn’t make things better when he tried to correct me. See, I couldn’t quite understand what he was saying, and I thought he was offering to help me in the bathroom.

“Oh, no t’ank you.”

But even as I laugh at my fumbles with the English language, I can’t help but think that something is amiss with my story. Those teachers who deemed me ready for regular classes encouraged me to speak even when my English hadn’t been perfected. But they also sent the message that incorrect and imprecise language was acceptable.

Unfortunately, this is a message all of us have come to accept. Just take a look at the average American teenager. Half the time we sound like a broken record.

“Uh, ya know that thing, ya know that thing, that thing, that thing, ya know?”

Though I am by no means, “Miss Perfect Grammar,” it scares me to think just how easily we’ve slipped into this practice of careless language. You see, whether it’s English, Spanish or Korean, language is the one element that identifies us both as individuals and as a society. And until we realize the incredible role language plays

in our lives, we will continue to present ourselves as ignorant individuals who won't take the time to articulate their unique goals and ideals.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I go under the knife, I'd like to think my doctor knows exactly what he's talking about. Apparently, some doctors don't. TheDoctorsLounge.com displayed a list of grammar mistakes made on patient charts like these:

"When the patient was admitted, his heart stopped and he was feeling much better."

"She can't get pregnant by her husband, so I will work her up."

"The patient absolutely refused an autopsy."

And these are the people we trust with our lives?

*Reading Today* came to an alarming conclusion when the College Board announced its year 2000 ACT test results. Since 1990, the percentage of ACT test takers with four years of high school English, math and science rose to sixty-three percent since 1990's forty percent. Due to this increase in the level of education, math and science averages skyrocketed a total of thirteen points in the last decade. However, unlike math and science scores, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* announced that English averages have stagnated for the last twelve years at 21 points out of a possible of 36.

Now, despite what paranoid, ACT-crazy, I-live-through-my-kid parents may say – yeah, my dad – a test score cannot be the golden ruler through which we measure our self-worth. But this lack of progress should raise deep concerns in all of us, because it indicates a generation that is lacking in language skills. But, okay, some of you may be thinking, "Fine, we live in a society where correct grammar or appropriate word choice aren't top priorities." And who cares if we replace interesting and descriptive words with "stuff" and "like" and "ya know?"

No, I don't know.

See, this is part of the problem – that we allow the use of careless language because we have forgotten just how important language is to human beings. As Canada's Secretary of State David Kilgore put it, "Language is a vital tool. Not only is it a means of communicating thoughts and ideas, but it also forges friendships and creates cultural ties." It is this unique ability that makes language so powerful. We have the power to create something beautiful with our words, and when we use them correctly and precisely, we can positively impact the lives of the people around us.

In 1999, *Technology and Learning* published the life-changing story of Deon, an eighth grader with a reading disability. His English teacher couldn't break him out of his shell as he retreated from the class. Then one day, everyone was told to write a story. When the teacher bound all of the stories into a booklet and passed it around the room, a boy yelled out, "Hey guys! Check this out. It's an awesome story." He was pointing at Deon's paper. After that, the entire class rushed to praise Deon, and watching him shyly interact with the kids for the first time his teacher wrote, "It wasn't great literature, but with a few positive words we were able to change a heart, and that may have been a finer accomplishment."

Then again, language can also be the cause of excruciating embarrassment. Like the time I accidentally called my aerobics teacher, "Mr. Robinet." Yeah, she wasn't very happy about that mistake.

And we can't forget the Bush-isms.

In replying to accusations of subliminal messages, President Bush used the word "subliminable" – twice. And while addressing the nation he stated, "I know how hard it is to put food on your family." Must be even harder when they don't hold still.

While we may laugh about these slip-ups, our carelessness ultimately reflects on each and every one of us. It was linguist Noam Chomsky who stated, "It is the preciseness and the creative use of language that distinguished human communication. But when we choose to ignore this clear distinction, we lose our uniqueness as individuals and as a human race." To put it bluntly, when we don't take the time to correctly form a sentence, be more precise or look up the pronunciation of unfamiliar words, we might as well be wearing a sign that reads, "Forgive me. I just don't care." The moment we present ourselves through senseless phrases, we lose our credibility, dignity and respect.

Now, I'm tempted to say that this is a problem we can't fix, or simply suggest that we eradicate all careless communicators.

That's right buddy, you're going down tonight.

However, English professor William Lutz provides us with a more appropriate solution. In his book, *The New Doublespeak*, he stated, "You must first realize that the misuse of language has consequences for you personally, and then for all of us as a society." And, perhaps, his call for individual awareness first maybe the best solution, but – beyond our obvious need for awareness – this could mean adding another grammar course to the English rubric. Or simply teaching each other to become more aware of how we speak: remind your classmate to drop that double

negative – and stop using the word “stuff” all the time. Oh, and the next time you hear your friend say, “Dude, that is so bomb.” You can tell him, “Dude, that doesn’t make sense.”

So now I stand before you, and after ten years of trying to learn a new language, I can finally communicate in English. And trust me, it was a rough ride. But despite the ups and downs, I learned a lesson I will never forget: Every word we share with each other has the infinite potential to become something amazing, something moving. And let me tell you, coming from a person who was sensitive to correct and incorrect language, the beauty in truly and completely communicating your thoughts is priceless.

In fact, I actually remember the first time I said something coherent. I had been eyeing this boy for quite some time and I practiced my approach for over a week. So, when I was ready, I walked up to him and said, “Hi, I am Sarah.”

He smiled, and so I tried sentence number two.

“Can I sit on you?”

Darn prepositions!