

WHO'S WATCHING THE CHICKENS?

By Dorothy A. Rutishauser

In the corner of my classroom I have an extra bulletin board which I might call the "Ooops!" center, but instead it bears the label, "Why English Teachers Grow Gray." On it is a collection of newspaper clippings, school memos and bulletins, business letters, professional writing, and cartoons which have caught my eye over the past year or two. Each is highlighted with yellow marker to emphasize language errors in print--errors which cause seasoned editors to squirm in embarrassment and English teachers to age prematurely.

There would be little reason to call this to your attention, since the theme has been belabored by Edwin Newman, Richard Mitchell and others, except that I am beginning to notice errors creeping into professional writing of educators and English teachers in articles such as those in the Minnesota English Journal. It is this dismaying discovery that leads me to ask, who's watching the hen house of the English language?

I would not go so far as Richard Mitchell, editor of the Underground Grammarian, who feels that "poor English is not only hard on the ears, it is also downright immoral,"¹ but I think English educators have a responsibility, thrust upon us every time somebody says, "Oh, you're an English teacher! I'd better watch my grammar!", to be especially careful and caring about our use of this versatile and volatile tool we wield.

As teachers of English and professionals in our native tongue, we can't afford to violate the principles of the English language any more than an engineer can be careless in his mathematics. If the engineer goofs, the highway may buckle or the building may fall down. The results of our blunders might not be as dramatic, but are still a matter of concern. Our solecisms have led to confusion in students who maintain that some linguistic barbarism is permissible because they read it somewhere, or So-and-So (team teachers, no doubt) taught them that way.

I generally find the errors in print are not much different from those I confront in hundreds of student papers: agreement, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, and a few assorted types of errors I'll just call "sloppy semantics." Some of the errors I have recently spotted in professional education materials² include the following:

"the teacher in charge . . . is to go down with their students"
"The individual spread himself too thin"
"he must develop other measures different than those used"
"how each principal was to conduct a "delphi" session with their teachers".

Some sentences broke down in the baffling syntax of dangling modifiers:

"When considering administrator evaluation, the subject of staff and teacher evaluation must be brought forward."
"Of the administrators who are evaluated on a periodic basis, a large majority of the evaluations are accomplished by the use of checklists."

Spelling and punctuation errors blossom as freely as dandelions:

"a persons performance"
"not in addition to an educators job"
"When challenged by a teacher, just say, "In my time I was alright!"
"the teacher's behavior and it's effect on the students' behavior"

"the judgement of the _____ University team."³

Perhaps the unkindest cut was a brochure from the college English department for a summer program offering, among other things, "grammer."

Perhaps it is only coincidental that some of the errors which prompted this essay were in the Minnesota English Journal in recent technical articles which developed impressive theories of rhetoric and heuristics. They were loaded with statistics, criteria, analysis of variation, footnotes and bibliographies. One of the errors was probably a lapse in proofreading. I can't believe that a professor of English would deliberately write the sentence, "How is the materials directed into parts?"

The other errors probably should not bother me, but they do. In this age of smashed atoms and shattered governments, a few split infinitives are not a big issue. The logic of the formation of infinitives, however, is that "to" is an integral part of the verbal; it may not be sundered by modifiers, especially since the modifiers may be placed elsewhere in the sentence pattern with equal clarity and vigor. Thus it seems indefensible for English educators to write such phrases as:

"designed to effectively provide"

"to very briefly describe."

The first example is double irritating because it is a tautology. Would we fear that something might be designed to be provided in an ineffective manner if we did not specify otherwise? Unfortunately, the split infinitive is a pervasive error and may, within our lifetime, become accepted as standard English. It is not accepted as yet, however, and we should protest such usage in professional writing as:

"to efficiently get along with his peers"

"to socially interact"

"to properly delegate"

"to actually accomplish"

"to really work hard."

In professional writing, English errors call attention to themselves as surely as a stutter in a public speaker. Let me return to my original metaphor: are we so involved with the theory of education that we've forgotten about tending the ordinary chickens of clear, correct communication? Some of those "chickens" are wandering from the coop and getting lost in the swamps of careless writing.

Notes

¹The Minneapolis Tribune, April 12, 1980, p. 10c.

²To protect some colleagues from further embarrassment, I will not document the sources of errors quoted, but I can do so upon request.

³Although judgement has been included in some dictionaries as an alternate spelling, judgment is still the preferred spelling by most authorities.

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