

“The temperature has risen. Would you ventilate the space we are occupying?” “The heat is getting to me. Please replace the air in the room.” “It’s hot. Open the window, please.”

These sentences all mean the same thing, but at what point did you understand? There are many ways to convey the same idea in English. In school, we learn more and more complex grammar and vocabulary and I used to think that mastering these was the sole path to being "good at English" ...until I met Katya.

Katya is a French girl whom I met during a homestay program in the UK. On the first night, I went to her room to greet her. I said, "I would like to get along with you." It was supposed to be perfect textbook English, but she didn't get it. It felt like the fancy idioms and grammar were making things overly complicated. So instead, I just said "Friends, friends!" gesturing towards each other. Soon she responded with a smile. "Yeah! OK!" Since then, I tried my best to communicate using simple words and sentences. But, speaking simply was not always as simple as it sounds.

Later, back in Japan, I was greatly helped by this experience. In April, as the student council president, I had to explain a change in election rules during the general assembly. In my school, where students from grade one to grade nine attend, fifth graders and above have the right to vote in student elections. The new rules were written in complicated Japanese. When I first explained the change, no one responded. But looking at the 5th graders, I was pretty sure they didn't get it. So, I asked, "Does everyone understand? Is it really okay to proceed with the vote?" Finally, one of the elementary students confessed that he didn't understand, and others soon joined. I started re-explaining using simpler language. The experience with Katya taught me the importance of flexibility and sincerity in mutual understanding. So I encouraged them to ask me any questions. It took forever, but that helped me to realize what they didn't understand. The elementary students and I never gave up trying to understand each other and that is what true communication is. We can't communicate if we don't stop to consider the person we are speaking with. That goes for any language, my native Japanese and of course, English as well.

These experiences taught me that even if you have a lot of knowledge and vocabulary, you must always consider what the other person actually understands. No matter whom I'm talking to – even if they know fewer words or are younger – I want to speak sincerely. After all, in the real world, what's more important, complicated grammatical perfection or purposeful communication?

My parents are linguists, and we have traveled to various countries in Europe. They often used English to communicate. What's interesting is that they weren't always speaking English with native English speakers. Europe has over 200 languages. There, I could enjoy many types of “Englishes” influenced by various languages and cultural backgrounds just like our Japanese-English is. I thought they all sounded unique thus beautiful. What's more beautiful is how everyone was working just as hard to listen as they were to speak even with simple words and heavy accents. If seeking perfection stops us from having purposeful and considerate interactions, maybe it's time we consider not being perfect.

I am greatly appreciative of the time you have taken to consider the words I have expressed at this venue today. I mean “Thank you for listening.”

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I Am Greatly Appreciative of the Time ... Today