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ENGLISH AS IT IS BROKEN

Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.



Doing away with the problems

AFTER last week's discussion on the doer and recipient of an action, some of you may have already spotted what is problematic about the sign above.

But let's take a look at it anyway and see if you spotted all the problems.

The machine does not "use" transparencies; people do. The sign could read: "Please do not use transparencies on this machine." It would make clear the doer of the action.

In the second statement in the sign, it is unclear what is at risk of melting – the transparencies or the machine?

We would rework the sentence to this: "If the transparencies melt, you will be held responsible."

A final note about the sign: In general, when we refer to something specific, such as the machine or printer, we use words such as "the" or "this" to make clear which one we mean. But if we are not referring to any specific thing, then we usually use the plural.

That is why we should say "this machine" or "the printer", but "transparencies", as in "Please use the printer to print transparencies."

Singaporean or Singapore Idol?

MANY of us would have been following the results of the Singapore Idol. But one reader was more interested in why the show is called Singapore Idol and not Singaporean Idol. Tongue-in-cheek, he suggested that perhaps America should take the cue from us and rename its show "America Idol" instead.

Technically, since "Singapore" is acting as an adjective to "Idol", it should be Singaporean Idol. But if you look around, you'll find many other anomalies – Singapore Sports Council and Singapore Symphony Orchestra, just to name two. However, this may not be Singlish at work as our reader surmised.

After all, the world-renowned Vienna Boys Choir is not called the Viennese Boys Choir, is it? And it's the Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra, not Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra.

We don't have clear guidelines here. But one observation is that when it is a country, we tend to use the adjective – so it is the Irish Sports Council, or Canadian schools; but when referring to city-based organisations, we tend to keep to the name – for example, Boston Symphony Orchestra. Perhaps as a city-state, Singapore has followed the latter convention?

When you don't mean to 'pass up'

"PASS up your homework." Some would say that this is the most commonly heard phrase in our schools, perhaps a reflection of the amount of homework that a student is given every day!

But did you know that we've mangled the phrase, "pass up", beyond recognition? In Standard English, when you "pass up" a chance or an opportunity, you do not take advantage of it. If you pass up a job offer, for instance, it means that you have decided not to take it up.

What the students mean is that they have submitted their homework to their teacher. Instead of saying they have "passed up" their homework, they should say that they have "handed in" their work.

We would love to hear what you think. Send us your thoughts and queries.

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR QUERIES

Please use the keyword
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OUR LANGUAGE TEACHERS are (from left) Mrs Joy Lee, Mrs Regina Davamoni, Ms Connie Seng and Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray. All four are master teachers in English language – specialists who help teachers develop good teaching practices and programmes.