

THREE KEYS TO ENGLISH *

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In a TESOL version of the old story about Three Wishes, suppose we have been given the power to help students learn three things. Which three insights will we wish them to develop? Which three would control or unlock major areas of the language? Let's consider a few potential choices.

Perhaps we should wish students to understand -- really understand -- the importance of Word Order in English. That was the insight considered most essential by C. C. Fries and other structural linguists of the 1940s and '50s. But, for that very reason, we may not need to include it among our Keys today. Nowadays, as the result of Fries's work, teachers and textbooks generally succeed in showing the importance of Word Order, as in these sentences:

JIM LOVES POLLY vs POLLY LOVES JIM
THEY FOUND THE MAN DEAD vs THEY FOUND THE DEAD MAN
I LIKE CHOCOLATE MILK vs I LIKE MILK CHOCOLATE

Since Word Order is generally treated quite effectively in English programs today, let's not spend any of our three wishes on that Key to English.

Without any doubt, students need a reliable key to the use of the articles. In recent years, a little helpful work has been done on that subject; but there is a great deal still to be learned. The same is true of prepositions, especially as used with verbs like got, put and take (got up/off/over; put on/off/up with; take off/up/in, etc., etc.) As for verbs, the system of tenses would be a good choice for one of our three special wishes. But in most English programs there is vigorous work on verbs.

It seems to me there are other needed insights into the mysteries of English -- facts that students often must discover for themselves.

First, there is a fact that teachers and textbooks do not often mention:

The most common words have two correct pronunciations.

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I do not mean that different speakers from different regions or different social groups pronounce those words in different ways. No, what I mean is that certain words are spoken differently, by the same speaker on different occasions, or even in different parts of the same sentence. Moreover, this shift in pronunciation is predictable; there is a regularity about it.

Even advanced classes need help in discovering this fact, that many words have more than one pronunciation -- and that those words are the most common of all. As an item in a dictionary, the word the rhymes with see; a rhymes with day; and rhymes with hand. But that is not how the, a and and are generally pronounced in natural speech. As a dictionary item, or citation form, or word in a list, each one sounds different from the way it sounds in a sentence like

THE MAN WANTS A HOUSE AND A CAR.

In such a sentence, spoken without special emphasis, the "dictionary" pronunciation of those most common words is rarely used. Among native speakers of English, such a pronunciation usually indicates hesitation, or self-consciousness, or a contrast between two ideas, as in the following, spoken hesitantly and self-consciously:

"The ... man ... wants a house, not the house."

Other very common words with two pronunciations include am, an, are, as, at, can, does, for, have, has, or, than, them, and to. For each, there is a dictionary pronunciation and there is the pronunciation generally used in ordinary, unemphatic speech.

Why could this fact be considered a Key? It is a key to the comprehension of English -- to understanding what native speakers say. Students who grasp this key are prepared for hearing many words, for recognizing words they know. And students who learn to shift from dictionary pronunciations in their own production of sentences will be more intelligible to native speakers. This first Key, then, reduces the barriers that exist when what is heard seems different from what the listener expects to hear.

The second Key is close to the first. The vowel sound which is generally used in each of those most common words (am, an, and the rest) in ordinary unemphatic sentences is the most common sound in English. I refer to the sound which is often written as "uh" in American English. It is the vowel sound heard in but, or sun, or one. Since it is the most frequently used, we could call it the "number one" sound of English (as Robert L. Allen calls it in his system of numbers for English vowels). This Key to English can be expressed as follows:

The "uh" sound is the #1 sound of English.

It has already been noted that the most common words are usually pronounced with the #1 sound in natural speech. We can remind students of this by writing #1 below each letter that native speakers pronounce with that vowel sound:

THE MAN WANTS A HOUSE AND A CAR.

1 1 1

Furthermore, students need to know that the number one sound also occurs in the "weak" syllables of polysyllabic words. They need to notice that pen does not sound like pen when it is the weak syllable of the word open. And ate does not sound like ate when it is part of the word climate. Students should notice, too, that able rhymes with table when able is used as a word; but as a suffix, it is pronounced with the #1 sound (as in portable) and sounds more like trouble or bubble than table. In the same way, gain sounds more like "gun" than like gain in the word bargain, because it is in a "weak" syllable. We can help students by writing #1 below the appropriate letters in words like mountain and Europe and important.

For listening comprehension, and for the production of spoken English, nothing is more vital than a grasp of the Key we have just considered -- the ubiquity of the #1 sound in the language.

Now, for the last of our three keys, let's consider the written as well as the spoken language. There is a fact about sentence construction which is rarely grasped in its totality. That is because textbooks present only small pieces of it at widely separated intervals during the instructional program. I call this phenomenon, this Key:

The Magic of Green Words.

Green Words are twenty words which have been given different names by others. A. S. Hornby called them *Anomallus Finites*; Robert L. Allen has called them X-words. I call them Green Words for two reasons:

The words are printed in green on a chart which hangs at the front of the classroom every day.

They are printed in green because they are the GO words of English -- the words that make many types of sentences GO.

As each Green Word is introduced, it is added to the chart, until all twenty appear:

can, could; will, would; shall, should (These words rhyme.)

may, might, must; have, has, had (3 with m, 3 with h)

am, is, are, was, were (the "time-telling" forms of BE)

do, does, did (Notice the "box" around these three)

To reinforce the notion of GO words, students may be asked: When we change each of the following statements into a Yes/No question, which word will GO from its statement position to the front of the sentence?

I can help. I could see. I would lose. I shall try. I should know.

We may leave. It might rain. They must pay.

You have seen it. He has left. She had eaten.

I am wrong. That is right. They are here. That was it. You were late.

In converting any of those statements to a question, the first step is to find the Green Word. That word is then moved to initial position, before the Subject of the sentence.

Now the significance of the "box" around do, does and did can be made clear. If the statement does not already contain a Green Word, there is no word that can GO to the front of the sentence. Therefore we must "take a word out of the box" -- take the word do, or does or did. For each of the following, therefore, do or does or did must be "taken out of the box" and put at the front of the sentence:

He finished it. Did he finish it?

She lives there. Does she live there?

You speak English. Do you speak English?

The way to choose among those three words is then explained. Students learn that does is needed for the question if the main verb of the statement ends in -s; that did is needed if the main verb ends in -d (or has some other indication of past tense); in other cases, do is the word that is "taken from the box!"

In addition, they learn this very essential point: If we take a Green Word from the box, we change the main verb to its basic or simple form.

Thus there are three important rules for Green Words.

1. If the sentence already contains a Green Word, use it.
2. If there is no Green Word, take the right one from the box.
3. If you take do, does or did, change the main verb to its basic or simple form.

Part of the "magic" of Green Words is that these three steps apply to such a wide variety of major sentence types in English. They include the following:

- Emphatic sentences (She DOES look pretty. We MUST get together.)
- Negative statements (I do not like him. They might not see it.)
- Short additions to statements (... but I do/but she can; and I do, too; and so do I; and neither does he/neither will you)
- Tag questions (She dances, doesn't she? It should help, shouldn't it?)
- Short answers (Yes, he does. No, they cannot. Columbus did.)
- Certain types of Wh-- questions (Where did he buy it? When did he leave? How did you know? What did you say? How much does it cost? How long do they stay?)

When students become aware of the magic of Green Words, they develop a special feeling about the power and utility of these often unappreciated words. In a sense, as can be seen, the Green Words are the "heroes" of the sentences. They are the words that must be there to perform essential tasks. In fact, do, does and did are "superheroes." Just as Superman arrives on the scene to perform a rescue, so the word do, does or did will come "out of the box" to perform when there is no more "hero" around to depend on.

People sometimes complain that "English has no grammar" and "There are no rules to help us form English sentences." Students who have grasped the third Key know that such complaints are not based on fact. They are able to construct the major types of sentences by following one set of basic rules, step by step. This is a Key that opens doors to confident use of the language.

These, then, are fundamental understandings for students to develop. First: The most common words have two pronunciations, and both are correct. One is used for saying the word when the word is an item in a dictionary or a list. The other is heard in unemphatic sentences in natural speech.

Second: The "uh" sound is used for countless words that do not look like "uh" words. They are not spelled with the letter "u"; but the vowel really sounds like the vowel in sun or one. This "number one" vowel of English occurs in many of the commonest short words, and in weak syllables of many longer words.

Then, in addition to those, there is a third Key for students to grasp: the magic of Green Words in grammar. With these three, many doors to mastery of English can be unlocked.