English Prime: A pedagogical tool in teaching writing to law matriculation students in Kedah, Malaysia

Ho Chui Chui
Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah

ABSTRACT

English-Prime or E-Prime does not permit the use of the verb "to be": *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *been* and *being*. Although this variant of English has not commanded universal acceptance, people from all walks of life have found that using E-Prime improves their writing. The author tried out E-Prime in her writing classes and found it a useful pedagogic tool. In concluding, she suggests that writing instructors adopt E-Prime to improve students' writing skill.

Introduction

A subset of English, English Prime or E-Prime prohibits the use of the verb "to be": *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *been* and *being*. The late Dr. D. David Bourland Jr., a professor of linguistics, coined the term in 1965. In his paper, *To Be or Not To Be: E-Prime as a Tool for Critical Thinking*, Bourland (2004) explains that he derived the name from the semantic equation, $E^1 = E - e$ where E represents all the words or lexical items in the English language and e represents the inflected forms of "to be". E-Prime, therefore, simply means English minus the words *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *been* and *being*. This variant of English also does not allow contractions such as *'m*, *'s*, and *'re*.

Use of the verb "to be"

We generally use the verb "to be" as the **lexical** verb in sentences like the following:
- 1a. I *am* a procrastinator. (identification)
- 2a. She *is* stupid. (predication)
- 3a. There *is* a beggar outside our gate. (existence)
- 4a. The kitten *was* in the drain. (location)

We also use "to be" as an **auxiliary** verb in the progressive:
- 5a. Father *is* sleeping soundly.
- 6a. He *is* coming soon.

The **passive** construction requires the use of the verb "to be" as in:
- 7a. A mistake *has* been made.
- 8a. The windowpane *was* broken by Ali.

Benefits of E-Prime

When rewritten in E-Prime, all the above sentences read as follows:

1b. I *submitted* my assignment two days after the deadline/I *handed in* my work after the due date.

2b. She *failed* Business Maths twice/She *re-sat* Business Maths twice.

3b. We *see* a beggar outside our gate/A beggar *has stood* outside our gate for some time/We *notice* a beggar standing outside our gate.

4b. The kitten *hid* in the drain/The kitten *shivered* in the drain.

5b. Father *continues* to sleep soundly/I *hear* father snoring.

6b. He *will come* soon/He *has left* his house and *will arrive* in a short while.

7b. The clerk *has made* a mistake/The clerk *typed* the wrong figure.

8b. Ali *broke* the windowpane.

These sentences, recast in E-Prime, contain more specific, active verbs. According to Bourland (1996), our writing becomes more crisp when we utilize E-Prime. Another exponent of E-Prime, research scientist Dr. E. W. Kellogg III (1993), strongly feels that E-Prime improves our writing as we use more active verbs and we have to substitute the passive voice with the more informative active voice. Passive sentences evade the question of responsibility (Low, 2005). For example, in sentence 7a, we do not know who made the mistake but in sentence 7b, we know that the clerk made the mistake. Besides, the passive construction also usually contains more words (Ralph, 1980). If we compare sentences 8a and 8b, we cannot help but notice the two extra words, was and by. Wren (2003, p. 267), an assistant attorney general, finds that writing in E-Prime has helped made his legal writing "more inviting to read" with less usage of the passive form.

Furthermore, Kellogg (1993, p. 312) believes that when we use E-Prime, we take responsibility for our opinions. He gives the following examples:

The Northlight *is* a good restaurant. (Ordinary English)
I enjoy eating at the Northlight restaurant. (E-Prime)

He also feels that E-Prime improves our perceptivity and creativity as in:

There *is* no solution to this problem. (Ordinary English)
No one has solved this problem yet. (E-Prime)

Psychotherapists too have found E-Prime useful in reducing labelling abuse in the rehabilitation process. Brolin and Lesnik (1977, p. 28) feel that when we use the verb "to be", we create confusion and make wrong evaluations. They lament that a sentence such as "Bill *was* an alcoholic" gives a stigma label whereas "Bill's dependency on alcohol necessitated treatment" does not. Another example they gave was "Fred *is* retarded". We can easily remove the stigma by rewording the sentence in E-Prime: "Fred scored a 65 on the XYZ I.Q. Test". With E-Prime, we express ourselves in a clear, concise manner without overgeneralising.

Brolin and Lesnik (1977, p.29) add that in the sentence "She *is* slow", we do not really know anything about the subject. They contend that the use of "to be" only makes us give meaningless labels. They suggest we say "It takes twenty extra

minutes for her to finish". E-Prime helps to make our language more concrete and objective. We become more specific, describing actual performance and behaviour. According to Einhorn (2006), E-Prime makes us describe a process or condition rather than state a "fact".

Can we really do without the verb "to be" in its eight different forms? Practitioners of E-Prime such as Kellogg and Bourland (1990, p.380) insist on purity. They mentioned examples of distinguished critical thinkers such as George Santayana and Alfred Korzybski who continued to misuse the verb "to be" even though they themselves had warned against the misuse of the verb. We, therefore, have to go cold turkey in order to make the necessary changes while speaking and writing. Making such a change will not come easily but as the saying goes, practice makes perfect.

We cannot deny that the overuse of the static verb "to be" deadens one's writing. Language practitioners who advocate E-Prime testify that written communication becomes more concise and lively. For example, Zimmerman (2001, p. 346) feels that E-Prime "invites students to extend, refine, and build upon their initial formulations". He has found E-Prime so beneficial that he insists his students use E-Prime as a revision strategy in their written work. Another English professor, Maas (2002) incorporates E-Prime into his composition classes as he has found that E-Prime can help to make his students' paraphrasing free from the perennial problem of plagiarism.

Numerous other language practitioners have used E-Prime as a practical, effective and interesting tool to help students become aware of how they tend to abuse the verb "to be" (see, for example, Johnson 1988; Miller 1999; Ralph 1980). Using E-Prime not only forces students to dig into their vocabulary store to look for alternatives, but also to experiment with different sentence structures.

My Malaysian experience

The literature on E-Prime comes mainly from the West. This made me wonder if Malaysian language practitioners would find E-Prime just as beneficial. Therefore, I decided that I would try E-Prime with my own law matriculation students who were in the final semester of their three-semester course at Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, Malaysia, a small but rapidly expanding institution of higher education.

When my students submitted their work, I circled all the *to be* verbs. When I returned their work, I gave them a list of the various forms of *to be* and instructed my students to eliminate those forms in their next draft. I wrote on the board some of their original sentences that used *to be* verbs. I then showed the students how to transform those sentences into E-Prime.

Examples:

1a. There *are* several reasons why students procrastinate.
1b. Students *procrastinate* because of several reasons.
2a. First, they *are* bad at time management.
2b. First, they *manage* their time badly/they *have* bad time management.

I explained that the reworded sentences contained more specific, active verbs. Thus, the sentences became more interesting to read and less wordy too. I proceeded to give them a list of sentences to rewrite in E-Prime, such as:

1a. My brother *is* handicapped.
2a. Many Year 1 pupils in the rural areas *are* disadvantaged.
3a. There *are* many unmotivated students.
4a. Dinner *is* ready.
5a. Mrs Wong *is* an English lecturer.
6a. Encik Abdul *is* a brave man.

After some discussion, students recast the above sentences into:

1b. My brother *lost* his left leg in an accident two years ago.
2b. Many Year 1 rural students *have not learned* the 3 R's.
3b. Many students *come* late to class all the time.
4b. Mother *has prepared* dinner.
5b. Mrs Wong *has taught* English at UiTM for many years.
6b. Encik Abdul *saved* his neighbour's children from their burning house.

Students became excited and enthusiastic when they saw they could produce more specific and descriptive sentences. They felt the E-Prime sentences gave more information and some students remarked that it did not take them long to learn to write in E-Prime.

When my students re-submitted their work a week later, they had managed to revise their non-E-Prime sentences but there were numerous grammatical errors. This gave me the opportunity to carry out some remedial work in class. Examples:

Sentence Level

1a. Taking the right food also important. (Ungrammatical)
1b. Taking the right food *is* also important. (Ordinary English)
1c. We *should remember* the importance of taking the right food. (E-Prime)

2a. If anger affecting your life, see a counsellor.
2b. If anger *is* affecting your life, see a counsellor.
2c. If anger *affects* your life, see a counsellor.

3a. These steps must follow to overcome examination stress.
3b. These steps must *be* followed to overcome examination stress.
3c. We *must follow* these steps to overcome examination stress.

Paragraph Level
Original Version
The death penalty should not be sent to the gallows. First, there *is* no evidence that the death penalty in this country has ever executed even one innocent person. This *is* because we have a good legal system. To prove someone guilty *is* extremely difficult for witnesses would *be* cross-examined by clever lawyers. The average wait on death row *is* now more than ten years even in cases in which the guilt has *been* firmly established.

E-Prime Version
The death penalty should not be sent to the gallows. Evidence shows that we

have not executed even one innocent person in this country. We can proudly make this claim because we have a good legal system. As clever lawyers will cross-examine witnesses, we will not find it easy to prove someone guilty. Waiting on death row takes an average of more than ten years now even in cases where we have firmly established the person's guilt.

Conclusion

E-Prime, English without the verb "to be", has benefited people from all walks of life including teachers, students, lawyers, scientists, psychotherapists, etc. Using E-Prime makes our writing more concise and vivid. We are forced to use active verbs that produce more informative and interesting sentences. Therefore, I would like to propose that we, language practitioners, incorporate E-Prime into our writing classes. We have a practical tool that will help our students write better. It does not take long to teach and learn to write in E-Prime.

Writing in E-Prime will not pose a huge problem to most of us. In his research, Bourland (1996) discovered that most written materials had slightly more than 50 per cent E-Prime sentences. In other words, this means that we already write in E-Prime half of the time. Many have confirmed its usefulness; many have embraced E-Prime for its practical value. Why do we not give it a try as well?

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