

# Why Can't They Just Get This Right?



...AND 159 OTHER COMMON  
POLISH-ENGLISH ERRORS



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Have you ever met one of those errors that simply will not go away? In Kazakhstan, Many students would say to me, "I am agree with this," instead of, "I agree." It didn't matter the level of the student. I would hear students making this mistake over and over. And the standard error correction practices didn't seem to make much of an impact.

Why is it that our students seem to have these persistent errors? And why is it that students from a particular country or culture seem to

share so many of these errors?

## Interlanguage?

The answer is interlanguage. Interlanguage is a sort of language (or pidgin) that students construct when they are learning a second language. Interlanguage shares features of both students' first language and the new language, and it changes as students master the new language.

Basically what happens is that students process a new language through the filter of their first language-trying to apply the grammar and language features to the new language. If you've ever tried to communicate in a new language by translating an idiom from English literally into the new language, that's interlanguage. Another feature of interlanguage is the overapplication of rules of the second language. When a beginner student learns that adding -ed to verbs makes them past tense in English, they often start using that rule every where. They say things like "sitted" and "eated".

So why were my Kazakhstan students saying, "I am agree," instead of "I agree"? Well, in their first language, Russian, it's common to say "я согласен" which literally translates to "I am agreeable," i.e. the adjective form of "agree". However in Russian, you usually drop the verb "to be" in the present tense.

So to produce, "I am agree," my students had to apply a few rules of Russian and a few of English:

1. They added in the verb "to be" because they know that in English we do use it.
2. They used the correct form of "agree" (instead of "agreeable") because they heard that form being used.
3. However, they missed that "agree" here is a verb and therefore we

don't actually need the verb "to be"

## Why Should We Care About Interlanguage?

Well, first of all, interlanguage brings out the positive in student errors. Rather than focusing exclusively on the mistake (using "to be" incorrectly"), the analysis above shows that students learned two things about English. In fact, their error is really an over application of a rule in English. We really should be complimenting them on what they've learned so far!

Second, the analysis above has given us an insight into the nature of the error, so we can now go about correcting it. Rather than shouting, "It's 'I agree!' Stop saying 'I AM agree!'", we can explain the rule to them. In English, agree is a verb so we don't use "to be" for that. We could then find some other similar expressions and analyze how they work in Russian and English, such as "I am tired", "I am hungry".

## A Guide to Interlanguage for Your Students

Wouldn't it be nice if you had a guide to the most common errors your students might make, based on their native language? Then you could understand exactly why your students are making the mistakes they are making. And you'd have insight into how to fix them. Well if your students speak Polish, good news!

[Matt Purland](#) has written the definitive guide to interlanguage and Polish students of English: [I Have Twenty Fingers](#), for sale on Amazon as a paperback.

This book lists no less than 160 common errors that Polish-speaking students of English make. Each error is explained clearly and simply with reference to the differences between Polish and English. The

explanations are also supported with an example sentence in Polish, the correct version in English, the literal translation into English and the specific error. The book is remarkably thorough in the explanations, so it's quite clear the source of the error and how best to correct it.

As you may have guessed from the title, one source of an error is that in Polish, toes are also referred to as fingers (as they are in Russian as well) so a Polish speaker might well say they have 20 fingers because they are including the toes. (Interestingly, Matt as a British English speaker has a different concept of fingers from me. He advocates for saying one has eight fingers and two thumbs, whereas I would tend to say that I have ten fingers with thumbs being a kind of finger)

know it is a year, without having to say 'year'. The student has used the Polish convention for saying the year in English, without taking the time to learn the English method.

#117 *In English but not in Polish*

Correction:	Get out!
Polish:	<i>Idź stąd!</i>
Word for Word Translation:	Go from here!
Error:	Go from here!

There aren't any phrasal verbs in Polish, so the phrase 'Get out!' does not exist. Instead, Polish people say 'Idź stąd!', which translates into English as 'Go from here!' or (another meaning) 'Go hence!' Instead of learning phrasal verbs, the student has translated directly from Polish into English, finding the unnatural phrase 'Go from here.' 'Go hence!' is archaic and could be used in a story about medieval knights, for example. It would be far more natural to say: 'Get out!', 'Go away!', or simply 'Leave!' or 'Go!'

#118 *One word in Polish, two words in English*

Correction:	I feel good in this city.
Polish:	<i>Czuję się dobrze w tym mieście.</i>
Word for Word Translation:	I feel myself well in this city.
Error:	I feel well in this city.

There is no difference in Polish between the phrases: 'I feel good' ('czuję się dobrze') and 'I feel well' ('czuję się dobrze'), but in English there is a difference between the adjectives 'good' and 'well'. We usually think of 'well' as the adverb form of the adjective 'good', for example: 'The play was good' (adjective) / 'The actors did well' (adverb). However, 'well' can also be an adjective, meaning 'not ill': 'I do not feel well' means 'I feel ill'. Perhaps thinking that there is no difference between the two options – as in the Polish 'czuję się dobrze' – the student has chosen incorrectly and used 'well' as an adjective in this sentence, instead of 'good', which would have been correct.

#119 *In English but not in Polish*

Correction:	If I had some money, I would buy a car.
Polish:	<i>Gdybym miał pieniądze, kupiłbym samochód.</i>
Word for Word Translation:	If I had money, I would buy car.
Error:	If I would have some money, I would buy a car.

In this error the student has used the wrong structure for second conditional. We cannot use 'would' in both clauses, but only in the second clause. Second conditional = past simple (first clause) / 'would + infinitive'

Beyond the detailed explanations, the scope of the book itself is also very thorough. In the first section, Matt breaks the errors down into categories such as "false friends", "errors with tenses", "direct translation errors", and "one word in Polish but two words in English". The first section also contains a brief list of each error to refer to quickly. There are very clear but brief explanations and translations.

Finally what makes this book really useful is the tests. Beyond the

explanations, Matt provides 4 tests that teachers or students can use to diagnose their errors. Students find the error in the English sentence and then the answer key leads them to the explanation in the book if they answer incorrectly. In fact, Matt is promoting the book as a series of tests, whereas I see it as really a series of explanations of interlanguage

if you are teaching English to Polish speakers you need this book. Or you are a Polish speaker studying English on your own, It will help you truly grasp the conceptual differences between English and your language to overcome persistent errors. You might want to pick it up even if you are studying or working in another Slavic country as many of the errors do overlap.

And if you are working in another area of the world, consider making your own list of these errors due to interlanguage. Once you understand how to analyze these kinds of mistakes, you'll see that many supposed errors are in fact the growing pains of learning a new language.