

"To run is good exercise"?!

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It seems that non-native speakers of English in Taiwan do not realize that "To run is good exercise" is not a good English sentence. A colleague today even said it was grammatically correct. I don't think it is: I would never start a sentence with an infinitive. The one counterexample I can think of would be the song lyric "To know him is to love him" except here the sentence is in the form verb phrase = verb phrase and not the awkward verb phrase = noun phrase as in the previous example.

The basic problem is that students don't seem to be taught the difference between a gerund and an infinitive. At best they assume that "I enjoy swimming" is idiomatic and "I enjoy to swim" is still grammatically correct. I have counter argued that you can meaningfully say "I watch the Summer Olympics because I love swimming" but not "I watch the Summer Olympics because I love to swim".

Grammar books make it clear that a gerund is a noun and not a verb, that "running", "writing", "swimming" and "collecting stamps" are activities, abilities, passtimes and hobbies but some non-natives think the same can be said of an infinitive: they'll argue that when a person says "I love to swim" that "to swim" is the object of the verb "love"! Does anybody know of any grammar books that clarify this issue for the sake of students and teachers here who, for some reason, won't take the word of a native speaker? It could be hard to find such a reference because a native speaker would never say "To run is good exercise": nobody would think to write a rule to correct an error that nobody would be expected to make.

Incidentally, I find that English grammar books in Hong Kong distinguish the "infinitive with 'to'" and the "infinitive without 'to'" as in the examples "I can run" and "I must find a job". I think this is a good way to describe the infinitive even though native speakers wouldn't think of "run" and "find" as infinitives in these examples: the phrase I learned when I was in junior high school was "base verb".

Martin

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