

# Guide for Multilingual Student Writing

## World Englishes in U.S. Classrooms: Working with Indian English Speakers

Sharmin Khan  
San José State University

### Introduction

This guide categorizes ten of the most noticeable *variations* between Standard American English (SAE) and varieties of Indian English (IE). The goal is threefold: (1) to identify a number of these differences so that miscommunication between instructor-student and student-student may be minimized; (2) to help instructors unfamiliar with Indian English understand why these differences appear in their students' language use (written or spoken); and (3) to sensitize instructors and the larger American audience to the legitimacy of World English varieties.

Indian Englishes or South Asian Englishes (encompassing varieties used in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) are legitimate dialects in their own right. They are varieties of World English with rules that are as stable as any other variety of English, such as American English or British English. There is much variation within the dialects themselves, just as there are variations within any variety of English. However, they are for the most part intelligible to other speakers of English. IE displays a range of features that are innovative and qualitatively different from SAE, and misunderstandings arise because of these differences.

The aim of this guide is not *contrastive error analysis*; that is, “errors” made by IE users cannot always be predicted by comparing and contrasting IE and SAE with the expectation that an “error” will occur if a feature is missing in the pan-Indian languages or if it is expressed in a different way. Interference from the first language does not always account for differences that may be evident in the second language. The process of language variation is much more complex incorporating linguistic, sociolinguistic, and environmental factors. Therefore, an approach that envisions multilingual speakers as indiscriminately imposing their L1 on to their L2 is limited.

With the aim of making this guide a reader-friendly document, the sources consulted were not cited (except in a few cases) but are listed on the last page. Please note that examples included were drawn from former students as well as published sources.

## Table of Contents and Summary

Section	IE Example	SAE Example
1. Verbs and Verb Complements	She is knowing the answer.	She knows the answer.
2. Question Formation	Which way you are going?	Which way are you going?
3. Topicalization	Five minutes I am not getting.	I am not getting five minutes.
4. Pluralization	Let's go through the alphabets...	Let's go through the letters of the alphabet...
5. Reduplication / Repetition / Fused Phrases	I bought some small small things.	I bought some really small things.
6. Articles and Prepositions	I am master's student of Computer Science.	I am a master's student in Computer Science.
7. Focus Markers	I am here only.	I am only here and not anywhere else.
8. Lexicon	Prepone	Reschedule something to an earlier date
9. Literal Translation from the L1	Open or close the lights	Turn on/off the lights
10. Style and Usage	Long sentences with multiple modifiers and filler words; mechanics	Shorter sentences; economy of words

## 1. Verbs and Verb Complements

Type	IE	SAE
Verbs	I was not knowing this.	I did not know this.

In IE, usage of verbs and verb complements varies at times from SAE.

### 1.1. Use of progressive tense in stative and non-stative verbs:

A stative verb expresses a state or a condition and not an activity. Examples of stative verbs are *be*, *have*, *know*, *believe*. In IE, stative verbs are given progressive forms:

IE

*I **am believing** you.*  
*I **am not having** a copy of writing exercise.*  
*The code **is running** on Linux systems.*

SAE

*I believe you.*  
*I don't have a copy of....*  
*The code runs on Linux systems.*

### 1.2. Use of present perfect rather than the simple past:

IE will use the present perfect form when an action occurred in the past and where SAE uses the simple past:

IE

*I **have bought** the book yesterday.*

SAE

*I bought the book yesterday.*

### 1.3. Absence of past tense marker:

Verbs are left unmarked for tense, although other signals (adverbs of time, such as yesterday or last week) often provide linguistic clues about the timing of an event. In cases where the sentence contains multiple verbs, some may be marked for tense and others not, as in the second and third examples.

IE

*She **like** the photograph yesterday.*  
*I thought I **have** already submitted it.*  
*I got upset, and I **forget** about it.*

SAE

*She liked the photograph.*  
*I thought I had already submitted it.*  
*I got upset, and I forgot about it.*

### 1.4. Conversion of transitive verbs into intransitives:

A transitive verb is one that requires a direct object, such as *sent* and *saw* in the following sentences: *She **sent** me a letter. He **saw** the notice.* An intransitive verb does not need a direct object after it. Examples of intransitive verbs are *sit* and *jump* as shown in the following sentences: *She **sat** down. He **jumped**.*

In the examples below, the noun, which acts as the direct object, is implied, and the context clarifies the meaning of the sentence:

IE

*Ok, I'll take for transport.*

*I didn't expect.*

*We enjoyed very much.*

SAE

*Ok, I'll take money for transport.*

*I didn't expect this party.*

*We enjoyed ourselves very much.*

This occurrence could happen because Indian languages permit omission of the object.

#### 1.5. Subject-verb agreement:

In many varieties of IE, the verb does not agree with the subject as in SAE.

IE

*Your father **send** you love.*

*She **know** JavaScript.*

SAE

*Your father **sends** you love.*

*She **knows** JavaScript.*

#### 1.6. Use of conditional *would*:

*Would* describes something that was in the future at the time of the original action but is no longer in the future now: *She said that she **would** do the job.*

*Would* also functions as a conditional: *I **would** go to space if I had the money.*

However, IE uses *would* to indicate the future where SAE uses *will*.

*The next step **would** be to identify the features.*

*Malware binaries **would** be converted to images using a Python script.*

*Other potential factors **would** be considered during data collection.*

It is possible that the higher occurrence of the past forms is because they are considered politer forms in discourse.

## 2. Question Formation

Type	IE	SAE
Wh-questions	Which way you are going?	Which way are you going?
Yes-no questions	You will come?	Will you come?
Tag questions	They should do the job, isn't it?	They should do the job, shouldn't they?

### 2.1. Wh-questions:

In SAE, for question formation, two different processes occur: the question word is moved to the front, and the subject and verb are inverted: *What would you like to buy?* is the question transformation for *You would like to buy \_\_\_?* In IE, often the declarative word order is maintained in interrogative construction. The question word is fronted but without subject/auxiliary inversion: *What you would like to buy?*

IE

*When you will be there?*

*How you will come?*

SAE

*When will you be there?*

*How will you come?*

### 2.2. Yes-no questions:

SAE constructs yes-no questions by inverting the subject and the auxiliary, as in this example: *She is coming to Is she coming?* IE, in contrast, retains the structure of the statement, and speakers use a rising intonation to indicate a query: *You are waiting?*

### 2.3. Tag questions:

IE uses the invariant tag *isn't it* in all situations regardless of the anchor clause in the question. For example, *Isn't it?* is a generalized question tag that ignores both the verb and the pronoun in the question: *They are coming tomorrow, isn't it? You were in San José, isn't it?*

IE

*You had seen it before, isn't it?*

*She gave her address, isn't it?*

SAE

*You had seen it before, hadn't you?*

*She gave her address, didn't she?*

According to Meshtrie and Bhatt (2007):

IE speakers find this non-impositional and mitigating placing them high on a scale of politeness....IE users use undifferentiated tags to sound less demanding in the requests that they make. Such tags have the added advantage of avoiding pronoun forms for the addressee, which would require other deference strategies. (p.134)

IE, similar to SAE, also uses *yes* and *no* as question tags:

*He is coming, yes?*

*She was helping you, no?*

However, according to Sailaja (2009), IE uses the invariant *no* to a greater degree.

### 3. Topicalization

Type	IE	SAE
Topicalization	That you told me.	You told me that.

Topicalization establishes a word or phrase as the topic of the sentence or clause by moving it to the front rather than further to the right. IE moves objects to the front in contrast to SAE.

IE

*Five minutes I am not getting.  
This book I will return tomorrow.*

SAE

*I am not getting five minutes.  
I will return this book tomorrow.*

### 4. Pluralization

Type	IE	SAE
Pluralization	Let's go through the alphabets.	Let's go through the letters of the alphabet.

#### 4.1. Collective nouns:

Collective nouns, considered singular in SAE, are pluralized in IE. Thus, uncountable nouns become countable.

IE

*Luggages, baggages, equipments,  
homeworks, furnitures*

*Previous **researches** were aimed at  
non-signature based detection of malware.*

SAE

*Luggage, baggage, equipment,  
homework, furniture*

*Previous research was aimed at  
non-signature detection of malware.*

#### 4.2. Overgeneralization:

Along with pluralization of non-count nouns, IE also overgeneralizes terms that SAE does not, pluralizing words such as *imaginations, informations, feedbacks, trainings*.

## 5. Reduplication / Repetition / Fused Phrases

Type	IE	SAE
Reduplication	I have a bad bad cough.	I have a very bad cough.
Fused phrases	Included are three-four references.	Included are three or four references.

### 5.1. Reduplication:

IE speakers commonly use reduplication or repetition to emphasize the quality of an item (as an intensifier) and to indicate a distributive meaning or a numerical range.

IE

*I bought some **small small** things.  
I have to **study study** for the test.  
Why you don't give them **one one** piece of cake?*

SAE

*I bought some really small things.  
I have to study very hard for the test.  
Why don't you give them each a piece of cake?*

Reduplication is evident in many other languages and varieties of English, in particular Singaporean and Malaysian English (Cho, 2013). It is a phenomenon reflective of native Indian languages.

### 5.2. IE also has fused or reduced phrases omitting the conjunctions *or*, *and*:

IE

*We feel both **happiness-sorrow**.  
I was encouraged by my **mother-father**.*

SAE

*We feel both happiness and sorrow.  
I was encouraged by my mother and father.*

These are direct carry-overs from pan-Indian languages that have similar fused expressions to indicate approximations, contrast, or a form of inclusion.

## 6. Articles and Prepositions

Type	IE	SAE
Articles	I did internship at Ascent.	I did an internship at Ascent.
Prepositions	To discuss about ...	To discuss...

### 6.1. Articles:

The indefinite article *a* or *an* and the definite article *the* are frequently omitted. Also, the word *one* often replaces the indefinite article. IE often substitutes *a* for *some*.

IE	SAE
<i>I am master's student of Computer Science.</i>	<i>I am a master's student in Computer Science.</i>
<i>What is wrong with paper?</i>	<i>What is wrong with the paper?</i>
<i>She gave me one book.</i>	<i>She gave me a book.</i>
<i>I have a good news.</i>	<i>I have a piece of good news. OR</i> <i>I have some good news.</i>

### 6.2. Prepositions:

IE speakers will often use prepositions differently than SAE speakers.

IE	SAE
<i>Pay attention <b>on</b>...</i>	<i>Pay attention <b>to</b>...</i>
<i>I will get in touch with you to set up a date <b>of</b> an interview.</i>	<i>I will get in touch with you to set up a date <b>for</b> an interview.</i>

Furthermore, prepositions of place such as *above* and *below* are generally placed before the noun rather than after, as in SAE. The adverb acts as a modifier, forming a prepositional phrase that modifies the noun.

IE	SAE
<i>The <b>above</b> goals should be achieved.</i>	<i>The goals <b>above</b> should be achieved.</i>
<i>We will need the <b>below</b> software to proceed.</i>	<i>We will need the software <b>below</b> to proceed.</i>
<i>The <b>above</b> mentioned qualities are genuine.</i>	<i>The qualities mentioned <b>above</b> are genuine.</i>
<i>We will require the <b>below</b> listed resources.</i>	<i>We will require the resources listed <b>below</b>.</i>

## 7. Focus Markers

Type	IE	SAE
Focus marker: <i>itself</i>	It was God's order <i>itself</i> .	It was God's order indeed.
Focus marker: <i>only</i>	I am here <i>only</i> (not anywhere else).	I am here and nowhere else.

Focus markers: *itself*, *only*

The reflexive pronoun *itself* and the word *only* are used for emphasis in IE: *It was God's order itself*. (It was God's own order.) *They live like that only*. (That is how they live.) IE speakers prefer to place *itself* and *only* in final position following the focus (Lange, 2012).

*The report will be forthcoming today **itself*** (definitely today).

*I am leaving after the 19<sup>th</sup> **only*** (not leaving any earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup>).

*I plan to give my Course Reader next week **only*** (not giving Course Reader to Maple Press for copying any earlier).

*He kicked the ball like that **only*** (emphasis on manner of kicking the ball).

## 8. Lexicon

Type	IE	SAE
Neologisms	Batchmates	Cohort that one enters into a program with
Semantic variation	Revert back	Respond or reply back
Compounding	English-knowing (noun-verb)	A person or group of people who use or speak English

### 8.1. Neologisms (new words created):

Some examples of uniquely Indian English terms:

IE	SAE
<i>Canteen</i>	<i>Cafeteria</i>
<i>Crib</i>	<i>Complain</i>
<i>Air-dash</i>	<i>To make a quick trip by air</i>
<i>Time pass (it's a good time-pass we have)</i>	<i>Act of passing the time in an aimless way</i>
<i>Godown (from the Malay word godong)</i>	<i>Warehouse</i>
<i>Prepone</i>	<i>Reschedule something to an earlier date; opposite of postpone</i>
<i>Co-brother-in-law</i>	<i>One who is also a brother-in-law: individuals married to two sisters</i>
<i>Four twenty (420, from a number of a section of the Indian Penal Code)</i>	<i>A swindler or cheat</i>

### 8.2. Semantic variation (change in meaning):

IE	SAE
<i>Out of station (from a railway reference)</i>	<i>Out of town on business</i>
<i>Taking my lunch</i>	<i>Eating my lunch</i>
<i>Invigilate an exam</i>	<i>Proctor an exam</i>
<i>Giving or writing an exam</i>	<i>Taking an exam</i>
<i>Taking the class</i>	<i>Teaching the class</i>
<i>Joining the class</i>	<i>Enrolling in the class</i>
<i>Cent percent of my time</i>	<i>One hundred percent of my time</i>
<i>Redressal</i>	<i>Redress or remedy</i>
<i>Mugging for an exam</i>	<i>Cramming for an exam</i>
<i>Mistakes I have done</i>	<i>Mistakes I have made</i>

A few of the variations, such as *invigilate*, are remnants from British English varieties.

A number of lexical items have been given new meaning in the Indian context:

IE	SAE
<i>I have a <b>doubt</b>.</i>	<i>I have a <b>question</b>.</i>
<i>He <b>passed out</b> from college this year.</i>	<i>He <b>graduated</b> from college this year.</i>
<i>My uncle <b>expired</b>.</i>	<i>My uncle <b>passed away</b>.</i>
<i>I will <b>call</b> her to my party.</i>	<i>I will <b>invite</b> her to my party.</i>
<i>This coffee is <b>too</b> good.</i>	<i>This coffee is <b>very</b> good.</i>
<i>Shift</i>	<i>Move, especially house or office</i>
<i>Bearer</i>	<i>Waiter</i>
<i>Back-bencher</i>	<i>One who occupies the last rows in a classroom; generally a dull student</i>
<i>Botheration</i>	<i>Bother</i>
<i>Hotel</i>	<i>Restaurant</i>

### 8.3. Compounding:

Indian languages are rich in compounding, and this is carried over into IE. These compounds can be both noun-noun (NN), noun-adjective (NA) or noun-verb (NV) as in the examples below. (Although not entirely consistent, most NNs and ANs are non-hyphenated while NVs are hyphenated as they are considered compound adjectives.)

IE	SAE
<i>Plate meal (NN)</i>	<i>A meal with fixed portions of various items</i>
<i>Hill station (NN)</i>	<i>A place in the hills, generally with a cool climate</i>
<i>Pass percentage (NN)</i>	<i>The percentage of students who have passed</i>
<i>Tall claim (AN)</i>	<i>An exaggerated claim</i>
<i>Gazetted officer (AN)</i>	<i>A government official of a particular rank</i>
<i>Kitty party (AN)</i>	<i>A woman's club that meets regularly</i>
<i>Foreign-returned (NV)</i>	<i>An individual who has returned after a stay abroad</i>
<i>Convent-educated (NV)</i>	<i>An individual educated in a Christian convent school</i>

### 9. Literal Translation from the L1

Type	IE	SAE
Literal translation	Open or close the lights	Turn on/off the lights

IE incorporates distinct phrases that are direct, literal translations from Indian languages:

IE

*What's your good name?*

*My sister is eating my head.*

SAE

*What's your proper name?*

*My sister is annoying me.*

## 10. Style and Usage

Type	IE	SAE
Modifiers and filler words	Long sentences with multiple modifiers forming noun phrases	Shorter sentences getting straight to the point
Use of flattery	Flattering the recipient	Flattery frowned upon
Mechanics	British spelling, punctuation and capitalization	American spelling, punctuation, and capitalization

### 10.1. Long sentences with modifiers and filler words:

IE writing often privileges the older Victorian style used by the British colonialists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the Indian sub-continent was ruled by the English. Some characteristics of that style are wordiness, long sentences with multiple qualifiers, and generally archaic usage harkening back to an older period.

IE

*A copy of the aforesaid report will be forthcoming from the concerned person today itself, after which it would be my greatest pleasure to revert and discuss about the same for your valued feedbacks.*

*To enable other guests avail this facility, you are kindly requested to use the equipments for a maximum duration of 30 minutes time period.*

*I am really sorry for resubmitting the cover letter again. I am requesting you to review the letter as per your convenient time. I will attach the cover letter here. Besides, I will bring the hardcopy of the cover letter on coming Monday to the class. Thanks a lot for consideration.*

*I have duly completed the work.*

*May we request your kind attention?*

*Please do the needful.*

SAE

*After she delivers the report today, I would appreciate it if you could give me your feedback.*

*So that other guests have a chance to use the equipment, please use it for no more than 30 minutes.*

*I am sorry for resubmitting the attached cover letter. Please review it at your convenience. I will bring a hard copy of the letter to class this Monday. Thank you for your time.*

*I completed the work on time.*

*May we request your attention?*

*Please do what is required.*

## 10. 2. Use of flattery:

Formal IE, both in speech but particularly so in writing, demonstrates a tendency to flatter the recipient if they happen to be of higher status and if the speaker/writer wants something of value from them. A possible explanation for this is that speakers or writers want to mitigate the impact of their need or desire on the hearer or reader. In an attempt to acknowledge the recipient's right not to be imposed upon, the speaker or writer uses flattering modifiers to save face. In SAE, overt flattery in professional settings, especially at initial points of contact, is considered inappropriate.

IE

*I wish to work for your **well-regarded** company.*

*Dear **honorable respectable** professor...*

*I am applying for an internship at your **esteemed** company.*

*I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to work and learn from you and your **talented** team.*

## 10.3. Mechanics:

SAE capitalizes proper nouns and the first letter in a sentence. Indian students tend to capitalize a word if it is considered important, as seen in the following example:

*According to the results of the First Experiment, I conclude that ...*

Another deviation from SAE is that IE writing will place *and* before *etc.*: *We turned in a resume, contacted the hiring manager, requested an interview and etc.*

Often there is no comma before *etc.*: *I will graduate once I have my course work completed, project approved, exams passed etc.*

Commas and periods are placed outside quotation marks: Albert Einstein said, "*Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former*".

Spelling follows British rather than American traditions: *colour, flavour, calibre, centre, defence, offence.*

## References

- Cho, H. (2013). Reduplication in Singapore colloquial language. Retrieved from <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/handle/10066/11849>
- Lange, C. (2012). *The syntax of spoken Indian English*. John Benjamins.
- Mesthrie, M., & Bhatt, R.M. (2008). *World Englishes: The study of new linguistic varieties*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sailaja, P. (2009). *Indian English*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Writing for an Indian business audience. Retrieved from [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/english\\_as\\_a\\_second\\_language/esl\\_students/writing\\_for\\_an\\_indian\\_business\\_audience/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/english_as_a_second_language/esl_students/writing_for_an_indian_business_audience/index.html)