News & Tips

from

English support

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Dear friends

One issue that has come up in the public debate over the last month is the suggestion that children should start school earlier in Denmark. The government already has a proposal prepared to make the so-called "kindergarten class" obligatory, thus lowering the age for compulsory school to six. A number of Liberal and Conservative politicians are now talking about starting even earlier and making the kindergarten itself part of the compulsory school system. *Could this be a good thing?*

AN EARLY START IN SCHOOL

So far the discussion seems to have focused around "competition" (when they start school in other European countries) versus "play" (our children should be allowed to "remain children" as long as possible). In other words, it is about whether or not there should be "more of the same".

The focus has not been on what children are good at learning before the age of seven. Yet that is where the very best arguments for an early start are to be found.

What are young children good at learning? Motor skills and social skills, including music, art, drama, and above all language. Why language above all? Well, it is the first and most important invention of our species – long before the wheel and probably even the use of fire. Without it, none of our other achievements would have been possible. And our brains are incredibly good at picking up languages before the age of seven or eight – especially if exposed to native speakers.

That is why I argued for an early start in school in *News & Tips* No. 23. It is bizarre to wait until children *stop* being really good at learning languages before teaching them a second language.

But the same applies to other skills of self-expression, like music, art, drama and dance, which are all easier to learn before the onset of too much self-consciousness weakens self-confidence.

In a world increasingly dominated by knowledge-based industries, communication skills of all kinds are vital. An early school start that focused on what human beings are best at learning at that age could develop and strengthen such skills out of all recognition, and at the same time allow our children to "remain children as long as possible", precisely because they would be receiving stimulation appropriate to their age.

From the workshop…

Short and brief, shortly and briefly

The adjectives *short* and *brief* are not synonyms, but they do have a certain amount of overlap in meaning. A *brief note* or a *brief holiday* might be a little briefer/shorter than a *short note* or a *short holiday*, but there is not really much difference in meaning.

Short is the opposite of *tall* when used of people, but not buildings (or stories ☺). It is also the opposite of *long*, whether used in relation to space or time. In contrast, *brief* is most commonly used in time expressions: *a brief moment*.

The adverbs *shortly* and *briefly* are almost exclusively used of time, but their meaning is quite different. As one might expect, *briefly* means **for** *a brief time*, but *shortly* means **within** *a short time*. So if I say, "*Mr Smith will speak* **briefly**", I am referring to the length of time he will speak, whereas "*Mr Smith will speak* **shortly**", refers to the (short) length of time that will go *before* he speaks.

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More than one

As noted in *News & Tips* No. 4, the words *anyone*, *everyone*, *no one* and *someone* always take a singular verb, e.g. "*Everyone* **is** *here*" or "*No one* **has** *come*". I described this as the rare triumph of 'grammar' over 'meaning', because the sense of these sentences is more plural than singular.

The expression "more than one" follows the same pattern: "*There* **is** *more than one way to catch a mouse*" and "*More than one coat of paint* **is** *not normally necessary*".

No one, not one and none

None is a strange word that has clearly developed a certain independence from its origins as a shortened form for *no one* or *not one*. While both the latter always take a singular verb, *none* can take a plural. It also turns up in some expressions of its own.

When it means *no one* or *nobody*, it takes a singular verb: "*There* **was** *none to tell the tale*". But this is rather outdated language. In modern English, we would use *no one* or *nobody* here.

Usually *none* means *not one* (of a group of things or people) or *no part* (of an uncountable thing).

When it is used in connection with an uncountable noun or a singular pronoun, the verb is always singular: "*None of the work* **has** *been done*" and "*None of that* **is** *important*".

Some very formal texts and old-fashioned speakers also still prefer a singular verb when *none of* is used with a plural noun or pronoun, but nowadays a plural verb is more usual: "*None of us* **were** *there*" and "*None of his books* **are** *worth reading*". The same applies where the focus is clearly on a plural noun: "*Did you buy the cakes?*" – "*No, there* **were** *none left*".

And in expressions like *none other*, *none the* (+ a comparative), and *none too*, the word *none* has developed some special meanings of its own. Here are some examples:

> "*Do you know who else came to the party? **None other** than Nelson Mandela!*"
> "*She was **none the worse** for her ordeal.*" "*He was **none too** pleased about the matter.*"

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From the workshop...

More on the *ING*-form

Last month (and in a number of previous issues) we looked at some specific aspects of the use of the *ING*-form. In this issue, I will try to sum up the whole topic in one place! ☺

The *ING*-form is complex because it plays so many roles. Sometimes it can play the role of an adjective, e.g. "*running water*", and it is also used (with the verb "*to be*") to make the continuous forms of verbs (see *News & Tips* No. 6). But this issue will focus on how the *ING*-form is used on its own as a *gerund* – a form of the verb which can play the role of a noun – or to replace a whole clause in what is sometimes called a *non-finite clause*. Another form of the verb that can play these roles in a sentence is the *infinitive*, but we must distinguish carefully between them.

1. The gerund and the infinitive

Both can be used as noun as in sentences like, "***Writing** is fun*", and, "***To travel** is to live*". The infinitive is more formal, and the gerund more common in such sentences. Both can also be the object of the verbs *to like* and *to love*, e.g. "*She likes **to swim**", and "*He loves **playing** tennis*".

In fact, there are a number of verbs which are followed by either the gerund or the infinitive:

> **attempt, can't bear, begin, cease, continue,*forget, *go on, hate, intend, like, love, prefer, propose,*regret, *remember, start, *stop, *try**

There is, however, a difference in meaning when the verbs marked with * above are followed by the gerund or the infinitive:

> e.g. *She went on **learning** French* (i.e., she continued to learn French)
> *She went on **to learn** French* (i.e., French was the next thing she learned)
> *He remembered **taking** his keys* (i.e., that he had taken them)
> *He remembered **to take** his keys* (i.e. that he should take them)

And some verbs are followed by the gerund when it is the object, but otherwise take the infinitive:

> e.g. *We allow **smoking** here*.
> But: *We allow people **to smoke** here*.

This pattern is found, for instance, with the following verbs:

> **advise, allow, forbid, permit**

2. Verbs followed by the gerund

Some verbs can only be followed by the gerund:

> **avoid, consider, contemplate, defer, delay, detest, dislike, dread, endure, enjoy, escape, excuse, face** (up to)**, finish, forgive, can't help, involve, keep** (on)**, loathe, mind, miss, pardon, postpone, practise, prevent, resent, risk, save** (somebody the trouble of)**, stand** (endure)

> e.g. *I enjoy **listening** to music.*
> *Do you mind me **smoking**?* (Though you can also say: *Do you mind **if I smoke**?*)

3. Verbs followed by either a gerund or a *that*-clause

With some verbs, you can use either the *ING*-form or a *that*-clause:

> **admit, anticipate, deny, imagine, mean** (when it means 'involve')**, mention, recall, recollect, remember** (when it means 'recall' or 'recollect')**, suggest**

> e.g. *He admitted **stealing** the bicycle.*
> Or: *He admitted **that he had stolen** the bicycle.*

Please turn over!

4. Phrasal verbs and prepositions

Prepositions are followed by a noun or a pronoun, and in English, if the noun is a verb, the gerund is used, not the infinitive: "*You can't make an omelette **without breaking** eggs*".

There are over 3000 phrasal verbs in English. Phrasal verbs are made up of two parts: a basic verb + one or two words (like *up*, *on*, *back*, *through*) which are called *particles*. In one of the three main kinds of phrasal verb, the final particle plays the role of a preposition.

Here are a few examples of this type of phrasal verb:

> **approve of, carry on, confess to, count on, depend on, focus on, get away with, get over, *go on, insist on, look forward to, object to, put off, put up with, rely on, resort to, start by**

When the (prepositional) object of these verbs is a verb, the gerund is used. The only exception is the verb *to go on*, which can also take an infinitive (with a change in meaning – see §1. above).

> e.g.   *She relies on **being driven** to work.*
> *I look forward to **hearing** from you*.

5. The *ING*-form used to replace a whole clause

You can use the *ING*-form in what is known as a *non-finite clause*. A non-finite clause has no finite verb, just the *ING*-form. The subject is implied from the rest of the sentence, so unless it is totally non-specific, it must be referred to in the sentence:

> e.g.   *When **buying** a house, it is best to seek legal advice* [totally non-specific subject].
> *Before **buying** the house, he sought legal advice* [implied subject of *buying* is "he"].
> ***Walking** down the street, they spotted Jack* [implied subject of *walking* is "they"].
> *They spotted Jack **walking** down the street* [implied subject of *walking* is Jack].

These kinds of constructions are very useful, but you must avoid ambiguity – and make sure that the implied subject is the right one:

> e.g.   *He watched her **considering** the matter* [ambiguous – *Who* considered the matter?]
> ***Drinking** the beer quickly, his glass was soon empty* [his *glass* drank the beer!?]

Sometimes the subject is therefore explicitly put into the non-finite clause:

> e.g.   *Her husband **having been declared** insane, Mary had to decide what to do next.*
> *He stood there quietly, his broken arm **hanging** limply by his side*.

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More next month!

Best wishes

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