

Teachers intro to E-Prime

The “IS” warning poster introduces students to the potential dangers of the verb “to be.” Not only can this little miscreant create misinformation, but also diminishes speaking and writing skills.

Actually, the verb ‘to be’ has at four basic uses in English. We can label these four as (1) auxiliary or linking verb, (2) existence, (3) identity, and (4) predication. Since predication describes adding properties and implies projection, for simplicity we will call number 4 the “is” of projection. Numbers (1) and (2) have such common use that they pose few problems. Numbers (3) and (4) can create major obstacles to sound evaluating and communication.

Dr. David Bourland, a strong proponent of writing without the use of the verb “to be,” called this style “E-Prime.” Most school districts currently introduce a form of E-Prime in middle or high school by having students write some assignments without the use of the verb ‘to be’. Primarily these exercises demonstrate to the students the positive effect of eliminating the verb “to be” and writing in the active rather than passive voice. You can find more about E-Prime on www.time-binding.org.

We have included two basic lesson plans and scheduled them for 6th and 9th grades. The 6th grade unit introduces the use and misuse of “is.” By the 6th grade, students have been subjected to all aspects of “is.” We want them to recognize the potential damage perpetrated upon them and those around them by “is.” As you read all the material in this chapter, we believe you will recognize the source of many arguments, misunderstandings, and belligerent attitudes. With this understanding, possibly the students will be less likely to utilize these constructions, and find themselves in the position of not taking the words of others too seriously.

The 9th grade unit provides the students a fuller understanding of the ‘is’ of identity and the ‘is’ of projection. The lesson plan will touch upon uses (1) and (2) but will go into more depth on uses (3) and (4).