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OPINION...

DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?

One day last week I started thinking about how a lot of people can't really speak (or write) English that well. I'm sure you've seen signs of this: spelling errors, grammatical errors, the whole shabang.

I began wondering just how many people cannot use English. The problem with actually counting this is that one must define what English actually is. This is difficult; the language has changed quite a bit in the past few hundred years (look at uncut Shakespearean and see if you can read it easily). As well (just to confuse matters), there are dialects of English. Americans speak a different dialect of English than we Canadians do; I begin to think that only people with some other native language speak the "correct" English.

I finally decided that the Competence in English test, held every now and then, would be a fair measure of literacy (at least for university students). After a bit of phoning about, the Associate Registrar kindly gave me some figures that took me somewhat aback.

The test held in October 1985 was written by 550 people; 321 of those people passed. For you people without a calculator in easy reach, 58.4% of the "applicants" passed. This is not very good. I was told that these figures are average for October; I guess a lot of people are happy there is more than one chance to pass the test!

However, the real surprise was the test held in February of this year. Out of 177 people who wrote the test, a paltry 42 passed. This is a "pass rate" of 23.7%, less than half of the October percentage. I was relieved to hear that the percentage of people passing this February was somewhat below average; however, it seems that the February pass rate is always significantly lower than that of October.

Pretty depressing, isn't it? I only wish I knew the percentage of people who pass the introductory English courses; I can guess that it's not very good.

Why does this dismal situation exist? I think I would place the blame (if there is any to be placed) on the school system. You must remember the tortuous hours spent learning what a participle is, or possessive and conjugate forms of verbs (or whatever; I really can't remember it either). This is exactly the problem: the English they try to teach is too technical. They don't really try to teach how to use the language; they try to teach the rules behind the language.

Imagine, if you may, attending a driver's training school. How much would you learn about driving a car if the teacher talked about the stresses involved in going around turns, and the specific muscles used to twist the wheel a particular way? Not too much, I suspect.

What needs to be taught is more the *use* of the language, not the rules behind it. Can you remember wincing when the teacher announced, "Class, we're going to learn grammar today!" And how about those ridiculous spelling bees and such; is that really the way to learn how to spell? They might as well have assigned a dictionary to read as a book report. How dull!

The primary reason for this sad state of English fluency among "English-speaking" people is lack of funding for schools. It seems that every day we hear of funding cuts to the schools; remember the cut in federal transfer payments a few weeks ago? Teachers remain underpaid and overworked (yes, I know, everyone is that way), and have little incentive to make their classes interesting.

Something must be done; I'm sure the University doesn't really want to force students to take English courses, and employers certainly don't want semi-literate workers. I'm not asking everyone to toss away their Computer Science or Business Administration textbooks and hit the dictionaries; I just wish that more people could speak or write English.

STEVE BOYKO