

HMMM... 'WHAT I DONE LAST SUMMER?'

Or:

'How I spent my student illiteracy.'



by Kevin Gillese

One thing you do not expect when you begin university is to be labelled illiterate, to discover that you do not know what your language means or how to use it properly. Yet for the past two years university professors, particularly in North America, have been attacking what they term "the growing literacy problem" among university undergraduate students.

For example, all first-year students arriving at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto next year will be required to write a literacy test - an examination of their English reading and writing skills - even if their mother tongue is English.

Witness the situation in Vancouver, B.C. At the University of British Columbia in 1974, 40% of all first-year English students failed a simple grade nine level English proficiency test. Last Christmas at UBC, 37% of all first-year students failed their English examinations. The situation is viewed as so critical that the head of UBC's English 100, Jonathan Wisenthan, has said that many university students cannot even construct a simple sentence properly.

As a result, UBC has introduced a non-credit remedial reading course which currently has 600 students enrolled in it.

On our own campus, English department chairman E. J. Rose has described the writing of university students in general as "deplorable and very, very sad." Rose blames the lack of elementary and high school training in the English language for producing this situation.

"The difficulty which faces the high school graduate is that he has not learned writing skills over a period of twelve years," says Rose. "And if you don't learn it early and learn it well, you're lost. It's just like learning to ride a bicycle or learning anything - first you have to learn the basics and then you have to practise them over a length of time. Most students today have not learned those language basics and, of course, have not practised them."

Rose says he sympathizes with the dilemma students find themselves in: "nothing in our culture encourages literacy; students live in some kind of hostile environment in that respect."

Because of that hostile environment and the lack of early childhood training, Rose believes it takes a very highly motivated individual to begin learning and practising writing skills at the age of 19 or 20 years "because really it can be very frustrating and seem like an enormous waste of time."

Yet there are people on the U of A campus willing to undergo that frustration.

As one of the *ad hoc* committees struck by General Faculties Council to look into this problem pointed out in December of last year, "surely there can be no more damning indictment of defects inherent in the school-teaching of English than that provided by the pathetic spectacle of the Students' Union sponsoring and subsidizing this term a series of lectures on the rudiments of essay-writing, and gaining an attendance,

This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.  
*George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" 1950*

not of thirty or forty, as expected, but of over three hundred. Truly, the hungry sheep look up and long to be fed."

The Students' Union sponsored yet another series during the second term, again with Dr. L.N. McKill of the English department, and once more the eight non-credit lectures were filled to a capacity of three hundred.

Even though the "highly-motivated individuals" are on campus with visible force and even though their need is obvious, it seems unlikely that a number of remedial writing courses at the Freshman level will be introduced. The GFC committee's recommendation was that the institution of a massive programme of remedial writing on a permanent basis at the Freshman level "would be quite wrong, an abrogation of our duty to perform university work."

The committee based this recommendation on the belief that since it is in the early years that basic writing skills are, or should be taught, the focus of attention should be on the school system and not the university system. Attempting remedial writing courses *en masse* for the first-year undergrad would be, they concluded, "a misallocation of university funds, which could lead to the deterioration of English study throughout the school-course, or at best, provide no incentive for schools to improve their own results."

Furthermore, such an action "could well deny many who can indeed write acceptably the chance for contact, however brief, with some of the great literary productions of the human mind."

Jane Bothwell, outgoing Students' Union vp (academic) says she believes this was a move on the part of the university to pass the buck once again. "I know we proved to the university with our attendance at our writing skills course that there is a tremendous need for a remedial course in writing skills on this campus. It's not that students are too stupid to write - they just have never been taught how to write."

"But the university just sits around and blames the elementary and high school systems for failing to teach the students and doesn't want to do anything more than

that. This university should have a credit course which can be offered alongside English 200/210, for people in faculties where they are required to take a junior-level English but for whom Shakespeare is not particularly relevant.

"The recommendations from the two GFC committees stress a 'band-aid' approach to the situation by having one extra course offered - but that's just not adequate."

Bothwell says the GFC recommendations might have an affect on high school graduates coming to university after 1980, if the city's school boards pay attention to them, "but what are we going to do before that time?" She says the university is, in effect, ignoring the needs of its students: "It's time the university lived up to its responsibilities to the students."

No matter where one chooses to lay the blame or look for solutions to the problem, the implications of widespread "illiteracy" amongst the more highly-educated echelons of society are staggering.

As Rose points out, the political implications are enormous: "What happens to a society where one set of people - the media people, the politicians, the academics - understand the use of language, and no one else does?"

Rose says it is difficult to look for solutions in the school systems "because the schools merely reflect the larger trends of society, and I'm not sure they could rectify the situation, even if they wanted to. Culture has drifted into a sort of passive-medium, reading and writing have been de-emphasized. Until that cultural drift is reversed, I don't believe we can have a reversal of the tendencies for lower language proficiency among high school graduates."

Perhaps the problem is not that new at all. In 1949 George Orwell (Eric Blair) showed how a literacy gap between commoners and rulers could sustain the harsh world of double-speak and Oceania in his novel 1984. Orwell portrayed his hero, Winston Smith, as one of a number of people who alters history - the records of history - and learns how to use everyday language to lie. When it lies, the language becomes meaningless and dies. As the language dies, so does human thought, argued Orwell.

What would he have said in the 1970's?

There have been numerous allegations in the media during recent months that students nowadays are 'closer to illiteracy than were most of the peasants of the Middle Ages.

Although *Gateway* has never been cited as an example of such illiteracy we have been concerned with the controversy as it has raged in General Faculties Council, English department meetings, and Separate and Public School Board meetings. But we imagined the problem, if indeed as widespread as had been suggested, could easily be approached on a personal level, and thus we asked two English teachers - one a university professor, the other a senior high school instructor - if they had any examples to illustrate the so-called "literacy problem."

Both responded with incredulous disbelief and promptly submitted samplings of mistakes, found upon cursory examination of various final essays which had been submitted to them. Below are some of the sentences selected from papers handed in for English 20 and 30 at Saint Joseph's High School (unchanged):

- The emotion in this story was fantastic

as the writer used a personnel reference - Charlie.

- ... who is midely retarded and undergoes a brain operation that would triplicate his I.Q.

- This reinforces the reader to feel hope as well as a fighting spirit for Charlie.

- Keyes writes the story in a way that puts it in the first person, which ...

- The emotion range from happiness for Charlie in his success for gaining intelligents to pity and downcast for the mentally ill.

- The Story is written in progress reports by charlie, he describs how he thinks and feel about action by Society around him at the beginning he has an IQ of 68 his progress reports a full of ...

Sic? What about the university examples, which follow, taken from English 200 papers?

- When an Angel Cooks on Faustus with a vile of grace to pour on his head he still has time but is beginning to fear pain.

- This passage is a call for the unavoidable catastrophe to strike in reality and to leave the wrongs committed against him denuded.

The King of France represent's

Englands's natural enemy and so he his minds seeks no avenue of help in seeking assistance from France.

- "For God's sake hold your tongue..." This kind of rough and strong expression is personal feelings succeeds to 'knock the reader on the eye' effectively. It is a very powerful effect in this kind of shock tactics.

- The thought therefore is what has gone before to summon up such a plea. Injustice is viewed as a dreadful pudder. ... The character is dealing with what is happening all about him, therefore his function is to equate us with this thought. While he is wishing to have exposed what seems so dreadful, he also lets the reader know that this thing is so dreadful that it should be hidden.

Sic.

It says a lot for students' writing skills. And you should remember that these are not merely examples taken from the "stupid" students of the classes, nor are they isolated mistakes carefully culled from thousands of undergrad and high school essays. They are merely representative samplings of a common, wide-spread "illiteracy" amongst today's students.