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AUTHOR Shuy, Roger W.
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ABSTRACT

There is a prevalent public outcry against the putative decline in the quality of world, and especially American, linguistic expression. This paper examines the accuracy of this claim, and weighs the significant supporting and opposing evidence, which includes informed opinion, expert witness, and results of standardized reading and writing examinations. The present state of affairs can be attributed to negative public attitudes (e.g., a willingness to generalize the worst, a desire to return to the "good old days," an unjustified reverence for standardized tests), as well as to a general lack of knowledge of how language works. Areas of research are suggested, and recommendations for diagnosis, remedy, and prevention of deficiencies in linguistic competence and performance are outlined. (DB)

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Confronting the Literacy Crisis

Roger W. Shuy

Georgetown University and
Center for Applied Linguistics

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1.0 Is There A Literacy Crisis

It should not seem surprising that the public reactions about reading and writing operates in cycles which reflect and parallel the social pressures of a given time. During the sixties, when academic concerns were riding high, it seemed possible that the world of education might even go so far as to share in the dream of Plato's philosopher-statesman. During this period the hard sciences became heavily funded and provided almost instant returns with leaps in scientific discovery. The social sciences grew in stature, possibly far beyond their capabilities to do so, and even the humanities became slightly favored, a step almost unheard of in our technologically biased society. Such high flying was bound to peak some time and, of course, we are currently witnessing at least one phase of the great public disillusionment. Partly as a result of this national discouragement with society, with the failures in Vietnam, with Watergate, with leadership in general, with economy, with what was thought to be progress and partly as a result of education's own self-debunking the door has opened to an attack on the very foundations of teaching and learning.

Once it has become popular to attack the basic institutions which hold this country together (government, the family, education, religion), it is not difficult to find public expressions of self-righteousness and scorn for the way we have been doing things. A humorous example of the effects of the linguistic decline of American society was portrayed by John Boyd, in a recent science fiction novel. In the following shortened excerpt, a linguist, Stewart and a

naval officer, Hansen, are observing Stewart's semi-literate student, Angus, and his girl friend. Angus has invited Cora Lee to come to Washington with him:

Cora Lee: That wouldn't be right proper, Angus. I've not been spoke for.

Angus: Well, I'm speaking for you now, Cora Lee. (She says she can't accept.) Are you already spoke for? (She says "not exactly".)

Stewart: That's natural, colloquial English, for these parts.

Cora Lee: I never been spoke for, but I've done been spoke for to.

Angus: Who you done been spoke for to with? (She refuses to tell.)

Cora Lee, I can beat the time of any man, lest you're promised to some boy right here in these hills. Where's this boy you done been spoke for to with at?

A thud from Stewart's direction caused Hansen to glance over and down to see that the grammarian... had toppled from his stool. Hansen could see the eyes staring into infinity, and he knew that faulty grammar had killed the grammarian. A heart which had beat through three prepositions at the end of a sentence had been stopped by four.¹

1.1) The Public Expression of the Literacy Crisis

Not all critics of the supposed decline in public expressions of language will keel over dead upon witnessing their favorite atrocities, but many of them are venting public criticism quite openly. During the past year or so we have witnessed one best selling book on a layman's view of language, dozens of articles about language in our newspapers (with dozens more letters to editors about them), almost monthly articles about language in The Saturday Review and

¹ John Boyd, Sixty and The High Command

quarterly articles in Harpers and Atlantic. During recent months I have collected as many of such newspaper articles as I could find in the Washington Post, The Washington Star, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Fresno Bee, The Charleston Daily Mail and the Akron Beacon Journal. In addition, I collected magazine articles from Time, Newsweek, Saturday Review, Atlantic and Harpers. One might argue that authors or writers reflect a somewhat distorted view of American thought, but in many cases, my data also include letters to the editor, which reflect opinions little different from those of the authors.

Edwin Newman's book Strickly Speaking, elegantly portrays this current position: "Language is in decline. Not only has eloquence departed but simple, direct speech as well, though pomposity and banality have not." (p. 4)

Newman observes that obfuscation has always been with us but that today it is worse than ever: ". . . stiffness and bloat are almost everywhere." (p. 9).

According to Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., a syndicated columnist in the Washington Star, the discipline of language study has collapsed. (Star, September 18, 1975, p. 21) We can no longer decree shalts and shalt-nots with a straight face since the field has atropied to the point of kittenish meaninglessness.

The recent flurry over the declining scores on the Scholastic Aptitude test has brought out dozens more of opinions about the decline of language in this country. A Washington Star editorial (September 11, 1975) concludes, "... the written word has been in decline for some time." The S.A.T. scores have declined for twelve straight years largely a result of shifting societal values and the invention of television, which has turned "our minds into cucumbers."

A recent Time essay (August 25, 1975) takes a slightly more careful position, noting that much of the current concern about language decline is little more than the pedants' delight in one-upping each other's collection of absurdities and bloopers. Watergate has been the fairest game of all, culminating, perhaps, with a book called The D.C. Dialect, with specific illustrated chapters on how to be impersonal, obscure, pompous, evasive, repetitious, awkward, incorrect, faddish, serious and unintelligible. (Paul Morgan and Sue Scott, The D.C. Dialect, N.Y.U. Press, 1975). The long and noble tradition preserved by English teachers, that of keeping a list of humorous student mistakes to be trotted out and chortled over, is renewed almost invariably in the letters to the editor columns following public essays such as the one in Time. One writer submitted his contribution, attributed to a police representative: "A number of shots was fired at the deceased person, mortally wounding him." Another submitted a letter written entirely in Latin. Despite Times' cautious warnings, however, the temptation to take an extreme position was too great to ignore. The article soon moves on to note that there are signs of "... a new brainlessness in public language that coincides with a frightening ineptitude for reading and writing among the young." (p.34).

Thomas H. Middleton's columns in Saturday Review also frequently support the all-is-lost position regarding language. On April 4, 1975, for example, his entire column was devoted to ya-know. Middleton, at least, writes wittily about it and with some insight into the fact that hesitation and continuation markers will probably always be with us, concluding: "And so it goes; forsooth, i'faith, bejabbers, alors, and there's nothing we can do about it." (p.6).

1.2 Former Expressions of the Literacy Crisis

That the public seems determined to claim that there is a literacy crisis then, seems clearly evident from such expressions of the public press. But we have also suggested that such expressions are cyclical, if not continuous.

Every teacher of English knows that there have always been department meetings dedicated to the decreasing writing ability of students. Either our students have always been worse than their predecessors or our job of teaching them to write better becomes increasingly more difficult for us. Complaints about the current decline in literacy are not difficult to find throughout recorded history. At about the very time which our country was founded, one James Buchanan made a similar lament. In reference to the grammatical improprieties of even the best writers of the time, Buchanan observed:

"Considering the many grammatical Improprieties to be found in our best Writers, such as Swift, Addison, Pope, etc. a Systematical English Syntax is not beneath the Notice of the Learned themselves.

Should it be urged, that in the Time of these Writers, English was a very little subjected to Grammar, that they had scarcely a single Rule to direct than, a question readily occurs: Had they not the Rules of Latin Syntax to direct them?"²

Other laments for the slovenly approach to written language in the eighteenth century put the blame on the English language as much as on its writers. Jonathon Swift's letter to the lord treasurer, Harley, (Earl of Oxford), argues both that our language has serious flaws and that some sort of literary crisis was apparently felt even then:

² James Buchanan, English Grammar, London, 1767, Preface.

"My Lord, I do here, in the name of all the learned and polite persons of the nation complain to your lordship, that our language is extremely imperfect: that its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions: that the pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and that in many instances it offends against every part of grammar... and these corruptions very few of the best authors in our age have wholly escaped."³

Similar complaints about the atrocities of current writing can be found throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well. Issues of the English teaching journals for the past fifty years have also been known to express such a position.

1.3 Foreign Expressions of the Literacy Crisis

Whenever the public opinion cycle reaches its height about matters of this sort, it is wise to try to ascertain whether or not the phenomenon is peculiarly American. Exactly how widespread the fear of language decline really is cannot be determined with accuracy, but evidences of such opinion have been made public in Hong Kong, Portugal and England in recent months.

In Hong Kong, elderly scholars lament the decline of the Chinese language while foreign employers complain about the lack of proficiency in English among their staff. (San Juan Star, March 6, 1976, p. 9). Local educators are concerned that the local school system has made a mess of both languages by teaching neither effectively. The Vice Chancellor of Hong Kong University is quoted as saying: "It is a worrying thought that the proficiency

³ Jonathon Swift, Letter to Harley, Earl of Oxford, 1712.

in languages of the public emerging from our school system appears to be, for some years, deteriorating." (Idem). The Vice Chancellor went on to warn that if the present trend continues, the people of Hong Kong may one day speak no language at all.

Portugal has faced recent revamping of elementary and secondary education in that country, one complaint being that the basic skills including literacy are in chaos. The proposed actions are familiar ones, with cuts foreseen for college teaching (too much autonomy exists there) along with the "return to basics" approach. Interestingly enough, Portugal's minister of Education and Culture is looking to Yugoslavia as a model for reshaping basic subjects in the Portugal's schools (New York Times, March 13, 1976, p. A 16).

In June 1972, in England, the National Foundation for Education Research issued a report on reading standards in British schools called "The Trends of Reading Standards." As a result of this report Sir Alan Bullock, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, was appointed chairman of a committee to examine thoroughly public concerns which might be roughly translated as "The British Literacy Crisis". For approximately two and one-half years, these recognized educational leaders thoroughly investigated "all aspects of teaching the use of English" and submitted their report on February 18, 1975. In direct response to once charge, of the committee, the report argues that there is no firm evidence upon which to base comparison standards today with those of 35 years ago. If standards of reading, writing and speaking are in decline, there is no way to prove it--The Committee had recourse to two sources of information: the testimony of expert witnesses and the empirical evidence of surveys. The witnesses were not unanimous and were admittedly subjective. The surveys were

admittedly flawed and inconclusive. Not surprisingly, the major contribution of the report lies in its wise plotting of future action for the British schools. For our purposes, suffice it to say that whatever decline in standards we are facing in the U.S., Britain has already been there and is at least a leg up toward doing something about it.

The question of whether or not there actually is a literacy crisis in this country is, of course, not easy to answer. Most certainly there is a public outcry against what is thought to be a decline in ability. At the same time it must be noted that the public outcry is not a new phenomenon and that it is not specific only to America. One might wonder, in addition, if the outcry would be as strong if it were couched in a different socio-economic period. One might hypothesize that if things were going well, politically, economically, morally and socially, such an outcry might not appear. In times of such difficulty, people need symbols against which to inveigh, causes about which to be indignant, and scape-goats over whom to be superior. Perhaps there is a touch of this phenomenon in the current situation as well.

2.0 Why Is There A Literacy Crisis?

Just as the Bullock report noted two major sources of information regarding the extent to which a literacy crisis may be said to exist in England, so there are the same two major evidences for the source of the crisis in America: expert witness and the empirical evidence of surveys or tests.

2.1 Expert Witness

Some of the recent public outcry about literacy has already been noted. Edwin Newman claims that the reasons for this decline are many. He blames societal rapid change (always dangerous), the rise of minorities (specifically

Blacks, Indians, Chicanos, women, homosexuals, lesbians, prison inmates, welfare recipients); the generation gap and, of course, television. Newman concludes his analysis with an observation that we have witnessed "... a wholesale breakdown in the enforcement of rules, and in the rules of language more than most." (p. 11). It is not unusual for the public press to, in effect, claim both that language is leading mankind down the path to destruction while also claiming that language is being done-in by various heinous bad influences of various sorts. Television is the most common culprit suggested and, although the tube has become fair game for almost all writers, criticism is nowhere more incisive than when it is written by TV critics themselves. Jean Stafford of the New York Times observes:

"The high linguistic crimes committed by television's newscasters have impoverished the richest language in the world. The crown jewels have been smashed to smithereens and the gold settings have been hocked." (September 15, 1974, p. D23).

Other bad influences have also led language astray, according to the press. Times claims that Samuel Johnson's society pinned its faith on language while Americans attach theirs to technology: "It is not words that put men on the moon, that command Technology's powerful surprises. Man does not ascend to heaven by prayer, the aspiration of language, but by the complex rockets and computer codes of NASA." (Time, August 25, 1975, p. 34).

The Vietnam/Watergate morality muddle has also been suggested as a leading contender for the modern collapse of language clarity. Time continues, "An accumulation of lies inevitably corrupts the language in which lies are told." "Bombing" became known as "air support" during that period, illustrating Time's contention that abuse of power is followed by abuse of language.

Other suggested bad influences include the feminist movement which, Time observes, "... may eventually succeed in neutralizing gender in language" (Ibid, p. 35), overworked teachers and open admission policies such as the one at a large midwestern university which conscientiously admitted 800 inner city Black students only to fail most of them after one or two terms of freshman English.

It is difficult to assess the output of the critics of language who feel that television, technology, slipping morality, feminism, overworked classroom teachers, the rise of minorities, or open admissions have caused a decline in language skills. One can only speculate that if this sudden flurry of interest in language had occurred in another age it might have been blamed on fluoridation, jazz, the labor movement, industrialization, slavery or the invention of the printing press.

2.2 Empirical Evidence of Surveys or Tests

Just as the Bullock report revealed that there was no empirical evidence to support the claim that English language use was in decline in England, so there is no such evidence in this country. This point will be heavily disputed on all quarters, evidence to the contrary, largely because we are a country which believes in the assessment measures which we manufacture. We place incredibly high stock in the ability of the Stanford-Binet to measure intelligence, the ability of the Differential Aptitude Test to predict employability, the ability of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to measure achievement in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the least reliable instruments of all, however, are those which have been developed to assess language-use abilities. This unreliability was recognized recently by the Office of Civil Rights as it developed the guidelines for implementing the Lau vs. Nichols Supreme Court decision regarding bilingual education. The OCR guidelines essentially denied the validity of discrete-point language testing. That is, OCR said that the very isolation of a discrete component of the gestalt of language use is a violation of the goals of language measurement. They asked, in essence, how a Spanish speaking child's competence in speaking English could in any way be reflected or indicated by his ability to select the appropriate verb form on a multiple-choice test item. Instead, OCR argues, the child's language ability will have to be measured by someone's observing the child use it in a natural context and in a non-segmented fashion. To be in compliance with the law, then, a school must devise a totally new type of instrument from the discrete point tests now in use.

2.2.1 Reading Tests

The same principle obtains for reading. The measurement of reading ability has been hampered for years by three major areas of confusion:⁴

1. A confusion of component skills with the gestalt of reading.
2. An imprecise and unworkable definition of what meaning is.
3. A confusion of speaking standard English with the ability to read.

In any theory of reading which accounts for the multiple accesses of language in the reading process it will be apparent that early strategies, such as letter-sound correspondences, are learned only to be shelved, as soon as possible, for more cognitive strategies such as meaning processing. There is

⁴Taken from Roger W. Shuy "Reading and Reading Tests," A Report to the Hawaii Curriculum Center, September 19, 1975.

little reason to believe that a proficient reader will be able to retain the level of awareness of letter-sound correspondence required of beginning readers after he has achieved more advanced status. Such behavior would be analogous to maintaining conscious awareness of what one does with one's feet in the act of walking long after one has learned to walk. Yet most measures of reading ability continue to test component skills, even early learning skills, at later stages on the amazing assumption that component skills are of equal importance at all stages in the learning process.

One might ask, in fact, what value such skills have at all as measurements of a gestalt such as reading or writing. It is a preposterous claim, for example, that by knowing the rule one can perform the act which the rule explains. Being able to isolate the letter-sound correspondences of a word may be a useful skill but its value to the good reader is at best, questionable. Being able to define a noun may be a nice thing to do but it in no way enables me to write better any more than being able to spot a metaphor will turn one into a publishable poet. The gist of this argument is simple enough. The gestalt of reading and writing will probably not be measured by questions which address isolated component skills learned at various stages in the acquisition of these gestalts. Writing tests which test for spelling measure spelling, not composition. One should not confuse component skills with the gestalt.

The study of meaning has not been easy for reading specialists. Reading comprehension questions frequently follow the format of asking the child to read a paragraph, then to provide him with four answers, one of which is said to be correct. Unfortunately, the correct answer is often selected from a minor point in the text, a technique which is thought to measure "careful reading ability."

Several things are wrong with this assumption. For one thing, there is no reason to suspect that "careful reading" is equivalent to good reading, especially as a reader progresses farther and farther in his skills. As he becomes a better reader, the child learns to process fewer and fewer of the many clues provided by the printed page, selecting only those which offer the quickest pay off. In a very real sense, the good reader, who has learned to attend to the important facts and to ignore or non-prioritize the marginal facts, can be penalized by such a test.

Comprehension questions are the only kinds of questions which are useful in measuring a child's ability to read. Questions related to decoding skills can measure whether or not the child has mastered the appropriate level of those skills, at least at the early stages of reading. Since comprehension questions are the only areas which measure reading ability, it is important that they not penalize the good reader or the bad reader and that it is clear what they actually measure.

Most reading tests contain comprehension questions which measure:

1. Memory for details (~~a common one~~, frequently used because it is easy to measure.)
2. Marginal facts (also easy to measure)
3. Main idea or theme (the least measured, but often by asking the child to provide the best title).
4. Study strategies (questions which require read-search-reread experimentation more than anything else).
5. Inferencing (what happens next? What is implied? etc.)

The strange part about these questions is that they are usually mixed together and assumed to be equally indicative of comprehension. Yet good sense tells us that main idea and inferencing seem to be far more important than memory or marginal facts. Study strategy type questions probably do not measure comprehension nearly as much as they measure study strategies. It would be infinitely more useful to know of a student which of these types in which he is strong and in which he is weak.

Can it be that some children have difficulty in learning to read because the language they bring to the book is sufficiently different from the language of the book to cause problems? Initially, the answer seemed to be that the differences were significant and that so-called dialect readers should be used, at least in the initial stages of teaching reading. Others came along, however, such as Labov, Shuy, and especially Kenneth Goodman, who pointed out that many of the differences found between Standard English and Vernacular Black English were surface features, that the underlying structures were essentially the same. One solution that was offered was to recognize a child as a reader if, when given a sentence written in standard English, the child uttered the equivalent sentence in his own dialect. The problem was then for teachers to become sufficiently aware of the language of the children in their classrooms that they could recognize an equivalent sentence.

And so reading has moved away from meaning essentially sound/letter correspondences in Standard English. We no longer are concerned that the child sees "My brother goes to school." and reads it as "My brother he go to school." We know the child has comprehended the underlying meaning of that sentence and, therefore, he is reading. If we want him to speak Standard English, that is another problem, but it is definitely not a reading problem.

But can we be so sure that the underlying structures are the same between Standard English and other varieties of English? New developments in linguistics may help us to uncover some differences. Current linguistic research is focusing much less on the phonological and syntactic systems and much more on the semantic systems. Linguists are wondering, for instance, how a sentence like

It's cold in here

can possibly mean the same thing as

Please shut the door.

or why a sentence like

She's a professional

conjures up different occupational connotations than the sentence

He's a professional

What they have found that is significant for us here is that meaning can no longer be discussed in a vacuum; we must talk about meaning in its social context. Anthropologists such as Dell Hymes have been saying as much for years, but only recently has this become evident in linguistic studies.

2.2.2 Writing Tests

A few years ago this nation witnessed the National Assessment of Writing, as part of a series of national profiles of educational success. Five age groups, from late primary through adult were given the task of writing a composition based on a stimulus picture of a forest fire. On the surface, this appeared to be a reasonable way to avoid discrete-point test problems but several other developments took place to make the event memorable in our search for empirical evidence concerning the declining ability of our students. Having accumulated these thousands of written compositions, the assessment staff suddenly realized

that it would also be necessary to score them. The problem of course, was how. In the most uncreative decision making of entire project it was decided that a minimal cut-off point would be established and that the criteria for minimal cut-off would be mechanics. Thus, writing was defined, for the first time, as spelling, punctuation, usage and capitalization. Since the mandate for measurement did not specify creativity, logic, tone or well turned phrasing, no argument could be made against such a decision. Contextual concerns were also minimal in the national assessment since the writers were never told who the audience for their composition might be. Nor were they given a chance to proof read their efforts.

A short term comparative study of written compositions of 9, 13 and 17 year olds was carried out in 1970 and again in 1974, each time on national samples of 1500 students. In that period of time no decline in the skills of grammar, punctuation or spelling were evident (Washington Star, Nov. 19, 1975, pp. A1, A2). The report, issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress concluded: "There is no evidence here that the schools must 'go back to basics'; indeed, the basics seem to be well in hand." (Idem). On the other hand, the report indicated that the writing of the 1974 17 year olds is less coherent, more simplistic and awkward than their 1970 counterparts while the same writing quality of the nine year olds had slightly improved. Professional English teachers who served as test analysts were generally skeptical of the significance of the exam. Martin Lloyd-Jones observed that the test "is a very gross, not a very sensitive instrument, but happens to be the best we have right now" (Idem).

2.2.3 The CEMREL Study

Evidence for the reality of the decline in achievement of students is presented in the CEMREL sponsored study by Anneliese Harnischfeger and David Wiley, called "Achievement Test Score Decline: Do We Need to Worry?" This study seems to pin-point the reason why students are entering college with a weaker background than did freshman of ten years ago. It concludes that lowered test scores are due, in part, to the fact that fewer high school students are taking the traditional college preparatory basic courses. Simple drops in enrollment seem, to the authors of this study, to correlate with test score decline. High school foreign language enrollment is down 7%. General mathematics is down 15%. Physics is down 30%. High school English enrollment is down more than 10% while English test scores have dropped by 11%. Interestingly enough, the study has not found any particular specialty replacing the dropped enrollments.

The CEMREL study also cites other less vital factors which are involved in the decline of achievement. These include a lower dropout rate (many students who would have dropped out in the days past are now taking the entrance examinations for college) and increased absenteeism.

2.3 Weighing the Evidence

Is the evidence presented by the expert witnesses, the reading tests, the writing tests and the educational analyses adequate to determine whether or not there is a literacy crisis? It would appear that the position taken by the Bullock Report might be as appropriate for America as it was for England. The simple truth of the matter is that our reading tests are so ill-conceived that they do not effectively measure reading ability at any point in time, much less across points in time. We have no longitudinal data on writing assessment.

and what we do have is of doubtful value. In the cases of both reading and writing it is safe to say that there is no firm evidence upon which to base comparison of today's standards with those of 35 years ago.

There may be something to the CEMREL study. It seems to be true that students are not taking the same traditional college preparatory courses as they did ten years ago. Courses which survey English and American literature, for example, are being replaced by cutsey titles such as "The Problem of Darkness" (a comparison of Melville's Moby Dick with Cleaver's Soul on Ice, offered at my son's high school in the suburban Washington area). To be sure, today's high school teachers know relatively little about teaching composition, but this is not a new phenomenon and it is certainly not limited to the pre-college teaching community. One cannot deny the statistics on absenteeism but it is hard to imagine how children can know less today than their counterparts knew a decade ago. In short, the curriculum may be partly at fault but it would appear that we also are woefully lacking in the instrumentation which will give us an accurate assessment of what we want to know.

3.0 What Can Be Done About It

To this point we have noted that if there is a literacy crisis in this country, it is not a new phenomenon, the phenomenon is not peculiarly American and that it is based primarily on subjective judgements of presumed expert witnesses rather than on objective data. Certain advantages can accrue when a problem such as this one receives widespread attention. It would seem obvious that if such a crisis is thought to exist, certain steps will be taken to remedy it. After the Russians put Sputnik into space, America quickly retooled its space engineering program. Such precedents certainly exist. If little or nothing is done about a national crisis one can assume either that there really

is no crisis or that it is not to be taken seriously.

The field of education, unlike the hard sciences, has never been technologically valued in America. We can gear up for medical or engineering crises much more efficiently, largely because the latter are so far from the natural knowledge base of most citizens that innovation is thought to be the only way out. In times of crisis of the generally unknown, one turns to innovation much as one might turn to prayer when all else has failed. Education, however, seems to be closer to the common knowledge of most Americans. They feel that they know something about education. This feeling has been legitimized by increased community involvement in education decision making, often confusing policy and needs assessment issues with implementation strategies. In this process, school personnel have tended to default in their effort to be authoritative and, however positive this may have seemed to be, such defaulting has been accompanied by a loss of public confidence.

When the public feels that it knows as much as the school people, one can expect relatively little in terms of support mechanisms. It is therefore not too surprising that President Ford did not even mention education in his January, 1976 State of the Union Message. Nor is it surprising that many public expressions regarding the literacy crisis present wild and half-baked explanations for it. After all, their explanations are no less supported by evidence than those of the professional educators.

In discussion of what to do about the literacy crisis, however, these public expressions have several commonalities:

1. They are willing to generalize the worst.
2. They express a desire to go back to the former ways of doing things.

3. They evidence little or no understanding of how language works or even that language is important in understanding the literacy crisis.
4. They express great reverence for standardized test instruments.
5. They evidence no recognition of the needed programs or research upon which the current vagueness can be clarified.

The strategy for educators and linguists in this regard is, therefore, clearly laid out for us. We have stood-by mutely and somewhat bewilderedly while pressured expert witnesses have made claims about the reading and writing ability of the students we are teaching. On the surface, this procedure seems unbelievable. Why is it that newscasters like Edwin Newman, columnists like Edwin Yoder, literary critics like Thomas Middleton, television writers like Jean Stafford can tell professional educators what is wrong with our students? Do educators tell them how to announce, to review or to criticize?

Why is it that the personal opinions about language by such people as Ronald Regan and Jacob Javitz should be valued as highly as the scientific descriptions of usage which have been carried out by linguists and lexicographers? If we really believe that we have done a rotten job of teaching reading and writing we should be able to say exactly what is wrong or get out of the business and leave it to people like Newman, Reasoner and Cronkite. What is so surprising to me is that little or no indignance has been expressed by the very educators who have been under attack. Imagine the reaction from the medical profession if suddenly the newscasters in this country began to offer free advice on techniques of brain-surgery.

3.1 What to Do About the Public's Willingness to Generalize The Worst

There is probably no way to change the attitudes of the apparent millions of Americans who take solace from the notion that the world is going to hell in a basket. Such a feeling must be satisfying to many people, for whatever reasons. On the other hand, there is little to be gained by our permitting literacy to be thought of as an integral part of this disintegration. Rather than to become defensive about it, however, I would suggest that we take this recent attention and turn it to our advantage. At least literacy is being discussed in the public press, whether intelligently or not. We need to develop strategies for capitalizing on this attention in such a way that appropriate public measures can be taken. In brief, we need to discourage the public reaction which would argue that since literacy is a problem, we should stop funding research in it, avoid innovation and return to the study of Latin as a model. We need to convince the public that rather than to penalize literacy for being bad, we should assist it to be effective.

3.2 What to Do About the Public's Desire to Return to the Good Old Days

This is a rather predictable but difficult-to-deal-with phenomenon. We like to live with the illusion that the former generation (especially our own) had a firmer grip on how to do things. Generally the truth of such an assumption is romanticized as we rewrite history to suit our own wishful thinking. Nevertheless, if it must be dealt with, we are left with only a few alternative directions.

We can, for example, claim that the old way was not very effective either, that the teaching of literacy was never well conceived, even in the past. Intellectually, there is some merit to such a position, but there is

little to support it politically. That is, it is doubtful that the public will be satisfied with an answer which says only that today's mess was also yesterday's mess.

Alternatively, we can find writing samples of a decade ago and compare them to a similar group of today's students.* This is essentially what the CEMREL studied reported, albeit only over a four-year time span. Such a procedure could prove convincing, provided the comparison groups were balanced and fair.

More effective than either of these strategies would be to encourage the development of teaching techniques and assessment procedures that would improve upon the problems noted in procedures and instruments used in the past. The Bullock report argued that teachers need to become convinced that competence in language comes, above all, through its purposeful use, not through the working of exercises divorced from context. It stresses the need for the schools to help parents to understand the process of language development in their children and to take part in it. The report laments the long hours which children spend in watching television but it also recognizes the positive aspects and points out that television exposes children to a range of accents, idioms and registers which they might not hear otherwise. The exact influence of television on shaping language and word-lay, in fact, is suggested as one important area of needed research.

In short, the teaching strategies proposed in The Bullock Report smack very much of the here-and-now, the modern and up-to-date. On to the basics" is that such a statement is taken to mean that we need to stress mechanics and

early developmental skills. Often what is wrong is either that the children, once taught, are not given ample opportunity to evidence these skills in the realistic context for which they are intended or that the skills continue to be taught, as skills, out of context, far too long. That is, children write only words, phrases or sentences rather than paragraphs or whole compositions, the assumption being that one learns sequentially and neatly from small to large, from part to whole. Evidence for such learning seems rather clear from the field of reading, where it is obvious that the more clues available, the easier it is to read. That is, sentences are easier to read than words, simply because the level of syntactic and semantic context (predictability) is added to the phonological and morphological context of the word. Writing, by the same token, is easier to accomplish contextually rather than in isolated bits and pieces. Every teacher knows that it is easier to judge a longer composition than a short one, at least for coherence, ideas, tone and all other characteristics except the purely mechanical.

In order to combat the "back-to-basics" oversimplifications, then, educators will need to develop methods of communicating that basics, if this term is meant to mean mechanics, are useful as beginning teaching strategies but, like the old expression about salt, if a little is good, a lot is not necessarily better. It should also be made clear to those who stress mechanics that we are not against mechanics, but that content, style, tone, organization and other matters are, in the long run also critical. We will need to come to grips ourselves with the evaluation of a good idea expressed in poor mechanics

versus a bad idea expressed flawlessly. Without appearing to down-play mechanics we need to communicate that they are only the surface of the subject, the visible part of the ice-berg, and that the critical mass lies much deeper.

3.3 What to do About Developing Understanding About How Language Works

This problem has plagued linguists for years. Everyone seems to think he is an authority about language. Therefore, very little effort is made to learn about it. Elsewhere I have argued that language should be at the very core of teacher-training programs. Reading is a language processing operation. To understand how children read, one must know how language works. To know how to diagnose writing problems, one must know the principles of variability, acquisition and semantics. Virtually none of this goes into the training of teachers to teach the most important thing the child may ever learn -- how to read and write. Suffice it to say that little will be done about public knowledge on how language works until teacher knowledge is first accomplished.

3.4 What to Do About The Reverence for Standardized Tests

There can be no question but that the general public believes in the validity of currently used standardized tests. These tests display quantified, objective information which can be used to compare groups or individuals with each other. The American public has clearly become enamored of such information, often to the extent of being willing to believe almost anything the test reports, regardless of its validity.

It will be difficult to disabuse the public of the overarching authority of standardized tests, especially in that such measures are used by parents to assess not only how well their children are doing but also how effective their children's schools are when compared to other schools or school systems.

The surest question to ask of any standardized test is whether or not it actually measures what it says it is measuring. Often a test in reading really measures the child's ability to recognize standard from non-standard English. These are most certainly not the same thing and any test which contains such confusion is certainly subject to doubt. Likewise composition tests frequently test the student's ability to identify principles of mechanics, an important phase of writing, to be sure, but certainly not only the delivery rather than the content.

In addition to the intention of the test, standardized tests can also be questioned regarding their biases. The psychometricians who design such tests often express no interest in potential bias, arguing that if a question discriminates, it has done exactly what it is supposed to do. Sociolinguists have asked for a deeper analysis of the discrimination, arguing that it is better to know why certain items discriminate and for what specific groups than to lump all non-acceptable responses together as evidence of good-bad discrimination.

In general, the American public deserves to know a great deal more than it knows at present about what standardized test scores really mean.

3.5 What to Do About the Needed Programs and Research

There is probably no better place to go for an agenda for research than the suggestions already made by the writers of The Bullock Report. Of the total of 333 conclusions and recommendations in that report, 15 may be selected as critical. No easy answers were found. No neat administrative strokes were envisioned as solving the problem. No single set of materials or methods could be recommended. The fifteen principal recommendations are as follows:

1. A system of monitoring should be introduced which will employ new instruments to assess a wider range of attainments than has been attempted in the past and allow new criteria to be established for the definition of literacy.
2. There should be positive steps to develop the language ability of children.
3. Every school should devise a systematic policy for the development of reading competence in pupils of all ages and ability levels.
4. Each school should have an organized policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher's involvement in language and reading development throughout the years of schooling.
5. Every school should have a suitably qualified teacher with responsibility for advising and supporting his colleagues in language and the teaching of reading.
6. There should be close consultation between schools, and the transmission of effective records, to ensure continuity in the teaching of reading and in the language development of every pupil.
7. English in the secondary school should have improved resources in terms of staffing, accommodation, and ancillary help.
8. Every LEA should appoint a specialist English adviser and should establish an advisory team with the specific responsibility of supporting schools in all aspects of language in education.
9. LEAs and schools should introduce early screening procedures to prevent cumulative language and reading failure and to guarantee individual diagnosis and treatment.

10. Additional assistance should be given to children retarded in reading, and where it is the school's policy to withdraw pupils from their classes for special help they should continue to receive support at the appropriate level on their return.
11. There should be a reading and writing clinic or remedial centre in every LEA, giving access to a comprehensive diagnostic service and expert medical, psychological, and teaching help. In addition to its provision for children with severe reading difficulties the centre should offer an advisory service to schools in association with the LEA's specialist adviser.
12. Provision for the tuition of adult illiterates and semi-literates should be greatly increased, and there should be a national reference point for the coordination of information and support.
13. Children of families of overseas origin should have more substantial and sustained tutoring in English. Advisers and specialist teachers are required in greater strength in areas of need.
14. A substantial course on language in education (including reading) should be part of every primary and secondary school teacher's initial training, whatever the teacher's subject or the age of the children with whom he or she will be working.
15. There should be an expansion in in-service education opportunities in reading and the various other aspects of the teaching of English, and these should include courses at diploma and higher degree level. Teachers in every LEA should have access to a language/writing/reading centre.

4.0 Conclusions

There is hardly any way to end a paper with the title, "Confronting The Literacy Crisis." The task is on-going and un-ending. It would be nice to believe that somehow we could swing the public opinion around to believing in us again. It would be nice to cause the world to realize that the good old days really were not that good and that even if they were, we can't go home again. It would be nice if teachers really were to understand how language works so that diagnosis and teaching could be improved. It would be nice to take the inordinate faith in standardized tests down a few notches and to cause teachers and parents to understand exactly what the limits of such data really are.. And from my own perspective, it would be nice if the problems which are born in the classroom could be researched effectively so that educational technology could, for once, catch up with legislation and policy. But maybe this is all too much to ask. Suffering from getting all our druthers may prove to be as fatal as living through five consecutive prepositions at the end of a sentence.