

The classroom of Babel

University of Missouri plan to require English proficiency for professors full of benefits

"How did you do in physics?"
"Well, I got a C, but considering the fact that I couldn't understand a word the prof said, that is pretty good!"



MELISSA BEDSOLE

This conversation may seem outrageous, but it is not as uncommon as one would like to believe. Frequently, on campuses all over America, there are professors and teaching assistants whose English is so poor the students struggle to decipher the words, let alone comprehend the material in the course.

Recently, the University of Missouri has taken action to prevent their classes from being plagued by this ridiculous situation by proposing a new rule making it mandatory for teachers to be tested for English proficiency. It is time that all schools in this country take a stand on this issue and prevent poor communication skills from tainting their classes any longer.

A new Missouri state senate bill states that the institution should evaluate "each member of its instructional faculty who did not receive the majority of both of his primary and secondary education in a program in which English was the primary language."

The testing would analyze the oral and written fluency and determine each individual's skill in the English language. The idea is that all schools would be required to evaluate their teachers through a testing process and determine whether their skills are sufficient for the classroom.

In a review of oral English proficiency policies in U.S. higher education, there were many questions raised about the validity of these standardized tests as well as the narrow focus on language rather than the classroom teaching processes. The "classroom teaching processes" are exactly what are at stake here. The teaching is going on, but it is of no benefit to the students if they cannot understand the words being spoken or used.

Students often find themselves paying so much attention to the actual words, in trying to interpret the poorly used English that the concepts in the lecture are completely lost. On the issue of the validity of the testing procedures, it seems that with any test of this nature it should be obvious if the teacher is qualified. And if there were any question or the teacher was borderline, it would seem that this would not be the level of instructor desired for an educating position.

One argument brought up against these types of new laws is the idea that "there are civil rights questions about policies that require certification of only one group of faculty" (for

example foreign faculty members). However, these rules do not violate anyone's civil rights. It is wonderful that America opens its doors to so many foreigners and attempts to equalize all cultures and backgrounds.

But while foreigners deserve to be equal, language barriers will always separate foreigners from those whose primary language is English. These actions are not intended to discriminate — they are intended to provide the best education for students in American schools.

Diversity is an important American goal and a hot topic on the Texas A&M campus, but sometimes the efforts to diversify a particular situation tend to result in negative effects. By hiring teachers from different countries, it appears that students could be taught the material of the course as well as be exposed to a diverse environment that will teach them to be more culturally aware.

Although this idea seems like a nice one and completely supports the Vision 2020 plan, when professors and teaching assistants cannot speak English proficiently, not only does this plan fail — it fails the students. After performing poorly on their exams, students become even more hostile or less accepting of these people's cultures than before.

Although Missouri is definitely on the right track, their fiscal plans for implementing this rule are inadequate.

The provisions of the new rule explain that the testing for English proficiency shall be done at no cost to the instructors. The testing will cost \$225 per person and will total over \$960,000 for the University of Missouri in its first year of faculty evaluation. Many occupations require workers to take license tests at the cost of the individual, and there is no reason why this situation should be different.

Still, the state of Missouri has advanced further than many in the faculty English proficiency issue, and soon their schools will begin to benefit from it.

This problem should not even be considered an "issue." It



JEFF SMITH/THE BATTALION

is inexcusable that these instructors were allowed into American schools in the first place.

This does not mean that there should not be efforts made to provide an environment that is culturally diverse, but in America, English is the predominant language for

communication, and for teaching to be effective it must begin with clear communication.

Melissa Bedsole is a sophomore general studies major.

Iranian government offers chance for better relations

For the past half century, the Middle East has been the most volatile place on the planet. This region, which has exhibited the stability of Hell-O, has sucked the United States into its continuing melodrama on several occasions.



MARK PASSWATERS

When the category of American allies in the region comes up, nations such as Saudi Arabia and Israel are usually mentioned, while the foes include Iraq and Iran. Once upon a time, though, Iran was not an American foe, but a staunch ally.

Those days may be approaching again, if the United States plays its cards right. For the sake of American foreign policy and peace in the Middle East, it had better.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is usually thought of by the average American citizen as a nation inhabited by a bunch of Islamic radicals. While leaders such as the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and current spiritual leader Ali Khatami do not help to dispel this notion, there are others who do. Nearly half of Iran's population, according to the United Nations, were born when Iranian "students" held members of the United States embassy hostage 20 years ago. They are growing tired of the totalitarian religious system in their nation, and their votes at the polls show their desire for change.

The current President of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, is considered a moderate in Western circles. He supports the loosening of Islamic law in his nation as well as increasing the rights of women. He has also sent out signals that he is ready to make friends with the United States.

There could be no better time for the U.S. and Iran to resume diplomatic ties than now. It would prove to be of great benefit to both nations. Iran is a nation that has a large oil reserve, yet sanctions prevent the importing of Iranian crude to the United States. With skyrocketing gas prices threatening to disrupt the booming economy, the U.S. could use the threat of Iranian oil to make the rest of OPEC increase their production, causing the cost of oil to drop.

It would also be in the interests of American foreign policy to achieve a rapprochement with Iran. Many anti-American terrorist organizations have

received support from Iran in the past, and a thaw in relations might place a stranglehold on their activities. Many of the supplies that are used by the Saudi born terrorist Osama Bin Laden (based now in Afghanistan) are smuggled in through Iran. Increased policing of the Bin Laden network by Iran could also make it more difficult for him to operate.

The Clinton administration wants to see a binding Arab-Israeli peace settlement before its time in Washington is up. Clinton is obsessed with improving his legacy as President. Being remembered as the President who brought peace to the Middle East would, in his view, be far better than being remembered for the statement "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." One of the first steps towards achieving such a peace calls for Israel's withdrawal of its forces in Lebanon.

The Israelis have started to pull out, but fear increased attacks from Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed terrorist group based in South Lebanon. Israel has threatened strong retaliation against any attacks, which would almost certainly destroy any chances at peace in the near future. A "suggestion" from Iran might cause Hezbollah to think twice before killing innocent civilians.

Khatami and the Iranian government can also benefit from making nice with the United States. Quite simply, it could be the difference between surviving and a firing squad. While Khatami is very popular among the general public, Shiite Muslim clerics are strongly opposed to his reforms. The clerics — Ayatollah Khomeini in particular — also are in control of the military and the Iranian secret police.

If Khatami moves too quickly with his reforms and has no international backing, his odds of survival are minimal. If Khatami receives the endorsement of the United States, as well as the tacit support of other Persian Gulf nations, his chances of survival are greatly increased.

From the end of World War II to the fall of the Shah in 1979, the United States and Iran enjoyed a very close relationship. While the relationship has grown far chillier in the past 20 years, a mending of fences would be of great benefit to both nations.

Both leaders would get something they want — President Clinton would get a chance to go to Chappaqua, N.Y. happy, while President Khatami would get a chance to simply keep going.

Mark Passwaters is a senior electrical engineering major.

Trying to make sense of the census

In case you haven't received notice yet, Census 2000 kicked into high gear last week. Answer this question to see if you're ready for it:

What is the method for taking the census? Option one: You fill out a survey the government sends you and send it back. Option two: At some point this week all the fire alarms in the country will go off simultaneously. Every citizen will then proceed outside and line up single file while a census worker goes down the line, tapping each person on the head in rapid succession as he or she counts, to make sure everyone's there. People talking receive detention.

No, you don't have any lifelines left. The answer is option one. But like you, I see the appeal of option two.

However, it's too late for that. Most of the population receives its form between March 13 and March 22. Knowing how much the public likes telling the government how much money it makes, the census braintrust launched an aggressive advertising campaign using Sopranos-like subtlety. You may have seen some of these commercials.

In one ad, a distraught couple looks on as the local fire department struggles with what I believe is a manual water pump mounted on a horse-drawn carriage. Failing to draw enough water, the firefighters give up as the house burns to the ground. A smug voiceover says, "Oops, forgot to fill out the census. Don't leave it blank."

The obvious moral of the story is that your census form is made of paper, which

constitutes a fire hazard if left lying around. Also, the advertisement threatens that not filling out the census may cause your community to lose federal funding and revert to an 1850s infrastructure.

In another, we observe the clotted halls of Any Public School until we arrive at a broom closet. The closet's door opens, revealing a class of 15 students and a teacher. The message is simple: If you're a janitor and you don't fill out the census, you might be out of a job. I think it's tailored to a little too specific a population, but I'm not paid to make these kinds of decisions.

Clearly, the Census Bureau desperately wants everyone to take them seriously and wait at the mailbox for the form to arrive. One suggestion to increase participation that it explored and rejected was to make the census into a sweepstakes. I'm a little worried over what that says about us as a country.

In all seriousness, I think the census is important and everyone should fill it out. But if you didn't trust the government before, I'm a bit alarmed if you'll sell out the family to the government for a chance at a Cuisinart.

At any rate, the Census Bureau, syndicate, whatever, might as well stick with the bullying ads. I suggest taking them a step further with the slogan, "Census 2000: Fill it out early and fill it out often."

Which brings us to actually filling out the census.

The questions always serve as a source of controversy. For example, Libertarians maintain that you only need to answer the

question regarding the number of people in the household, per the constitution. So Bill Maher, Dennis Miller and your crazy eighth-grade shop teacher likely will hand in mostly blank surveys.

For the record, the Census Bureau asserts that every question is required by law and if they have to, I think they'll crack skulls.

The census is a pretty short task, at least for most of us. The standard census form has only seven basic questions. A lucky one in six of us (there's your sweepstakes) gets a long form, asking more personal questions. Of course, some of these questions make people pretty nervous.

I'm only quoting rumor here, but I believe the following are some of the questions:

- People in the house?
- Party people in the house?
- How much money do you make?
- What is your PIN number?
- Are you a citizen of the United States?
- Would you tell us if you weren't?
- What sex are you?
- Are you sure?
- Do you watch Public Television? (The question lacks a "yes" answer.)
- Are you still using drugs?
- Personally, I don't see the need for most of these questions, and I'm scared to know how they all relate.
- But they are government mandated, so if you're not a Libertarian, be a good citizen and fill them out.

David Wallace is a columnist for The Michigan Daily at the U. of Michigan.

MAIL CALL

Six-year-old shooter a victim, not a killer

In response to Jill Riley's Mar. 8 column.

Everyone should be tolerant when listening to another's opinions, but tolerance does not imply agreement or acceptance of ideas. Constructive criticism is the ideal response to differing opinions, but often emotion leads to less civilized and inappropriate retorts.

McCain and Keyes showed hypocrisy when dealing with the Bob Jones University situation, but in the end the university "got what they needed." They had a long-standing policy against interracial dating on campus and after the press reamed them for

their racist policy it was reversed. I'm still trying to understand the statement, "The warning against interracial marriages is not about the couple, but about the one world system." Yes, this is one world we live in and there is nothing wrong with interracial relationships.

When comparing the criticism Bob Jones University received to Texas A&M's Bonfire experience, it is true our school did get criticized and mocked at a time we needed to be consoled.

However, in the end we have been forced to see some of the very serious dangers that were involved in the event. Had it not been for the negative criticism from around the nation, we might not have revealed all the details, which can, and in the past, have been omitted. I don't agree with the mocking

of the pain we felt, but "sometimes the end justifies the means."

Patrick Plate
Class of '01

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