

For-Profit Colleges and American Salesmanship — A Unique Opportunity

By Robert Oliphant

Granted that America's for-profit colleges are in trouble, why shouldn't they start fighting back by attacking a serious educational problem that the nonprofits can't handle? To me the best strategy would target helping our youngsters compete against fluent offshore sales professionals who sound more like they're talking from a cubicle in Chicago than from where they actually are, e.g., Argentina, India, or the Philippines, to name a few in my own recent experience.

Given the superiority of this offshore Chicago sound, I urge our for-profit colleges to regain public confidence by announcing plans to increase the employability of their graduates, measurably so, by guaranteeing their fluency in Standard Worldwide American Dictionary English (SWADE, pronounced *suede*). As we'll see, nonprofit educators can't and won't make such a guarantee, practical and cheap though it is.

The practicality of SWAPE fluency as an educational goal can be summed up in one phrase: dictionary access and authority. Following the emphasis upon "platform speech" in the 1934 Merriam Webster's unabridged, America's unabridged and college-size dictionaries still recognize the needs of public speakers and sales professionals by positioning crystal clear pronunciation transcriptions first in their word entries, cf. *dictionary.com*, which opens with the Random House (RH) electronic unabridged dictionary.

By way of a preliminary check, any reader with a computer can access the Pledge of Allegiance word by word via www.dictionary.com (featured in search engines like ask.com) and then RH electronic-unabridged. There the Chicago-to-L.A. (Route 66) sound is presented via both keyboard characters (no squiggles and boldface) and audio, along with authoritative definitions calibrated in frequency-of-use sequence. These often with illustrative sentences and phrases, e.g., STATE /stayt/, def. 6 (out of 24): an abnormally tense, nervous, or perturbed condition: *He's been in a state since hearing about his brother's death.*

In current measurement science (metrology) effective calibration is essential. So it's worth noting that the relative frequency of STATE can be expressed as the total of its definitions (24) divided by its number of letters (5). Similarly, the relative difficulty of our illustrative entry can be expressed as the sum of its number of letters (5) and the numerical position of the particular definition used (e.g., def. 6). Dictionary based learning via low cost SWAPE access and calibrated testing — this is the high tech innovation behind the Chicago sound of “Chinese English” in Expo 2010.

Tactically considered, the main reason why for-profit educators should target SWAPE fluency can be summed up in the phrase, multi-dialectal chaos. Right now, even though SWAPE is our de facto radio-and-television authority, non-profit educators are still imprisoned legally and ideologically by multi-dialectal English, recently celebrated by Robert McCrum as “Globish.”

The result of our multi-dialectal educational chaos, measurably so, is that many offshore students now learn and speak better workplace SWAPE than most American students, even on the college level. So today's for-profit educators have good reason to recognize and attack this marvelous target of opportunity.

More specifically, I urge for-profit educators — all of them — to guarantee the SWAPE fluency of their graduates, testably so, with particular attention to listening, speaking, reading, and writing (composition) skills — each of which is explicitly emphasized by both the Common Core State Standards and the internationally respected Test of English as a Foreign Language.

Speaking personally, I feel ashamed when a young man in Manila tells me on the telephone that “I sound like I come from Chicago to many Americans.” It's a shame tinged with fury when I match his articulation skill against the mumbblings of many American college graduates.

How ironic that Americans today risk being conquered by their own language!

Robert Oliphant's best known book is *A Piano for Mrs. Cimino*, [the film version](#) of which won a Golden Nymph Award at Monte Carlo for Bette Davis. He is a WWII air corps veteran, and his [eBooks](#) are available from the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#).