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## Plain English: Applying Principles to Home School Written Communication Considering Diverse Families

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Plain English: Applying  
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Written Communication  
Considering Diverse Families

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**Abstract** - Schools attempting to engage with the families of all learners, including those with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds recognize the importance of effective oral and written communication. The aim of this study is to determine if school generated written communication created by an urban school district serving a culturally and linguistically diverse population in the Northeast of the US adhered to the principles of plain English. This exploratory research examined exemplar pieces of written school generated communication, using different forms of linguistic analysis to determine whether the communication contained elements recognized to facilitate or impede the comprehensibility of each piece of communication. Additionally, a text assessment tool which can help schools to analyze the written text communication they send to families was developed and refined.

### **Plain English: Applying Principles to Home School Written Communication Considering Diverse Families**

It is important for schools and families to enter into respectful dialogues with one another in order to build collaborative partnerships that will benefit learners (Lightfoot, 2003). Epstein (2010) includes effective communication as one facet of her parent involvement model aimed at linking schools with families of all learners. In order for schools to engage with families they need to communicate with families and convey the necessary specific information so that families can participate in effective partnerships. For example, schools and policy makers need to consider how they present data and information about school choice in a manner that will engage families in the selection process of new schools for prospective students (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008).

Schools must learn how to communicate with all families including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. It is especially important that home-school communication, for linguistically diverse families, be clear and free of pedagogical jargon (Howard and Lipnoga, 2010). This is because the vast majority of these communications will, out of necessity, be in English. Most schools do not possess the financial or human resources to communicate directly with families of diverse languages in their home languages and also provide professional translation services to create professional translations, in a plethora of different languages, for every piece of written communication that is sent home to families. In addition, the written documents will be easier to translate from English into learners' home languages if the aim and purpose or complete function of the message is straightforward. Schools cannot presume that just because information has been presented to families (in English) that it will be understandable to all recipients, especially those families who possess limited English language linguistic capital. There are ramifications when schools do not provide information in a language or manner that makes it understandable to families. For example, children may not be able to go on a field trip because the parents didn't realize they needed to sign a

permission slip in advance. In order to satisfy insurance regulations, a simple permission slip could be filled with so much legalese as to make it incomprehensible to families.

## 1.1 Literature Review

### 1.1 Plain English

Over the years there has been a move in both public and private sectors to create written documents in understandable English. The aim is to produce documents that feature clarity and precision and are devoid of overly complex syntax and unwieldy lexical items (Dorney, 1988). After World War II George Orwell (1946) urged writing where the meaning is both clear and accurate. At that time there was momentum to create written materials that could easily be understood by people unaccustomed to reading books (Dale and Chall, 1948).

In recent years there has been a movement amongst individuals in the legal profession to write documents in plain English instead of legalese. The Plain writing Act of 2010 signed into law by President Obama was intended to make Government initiated communication easy-to-understand and use<sup>1</sup>. The basic tenets of plain English combined with speech act theory serve as a conceptual framework for this study.

We chose to look at plain English from the perspective of legal English because much of what schools need to communicate to families must adhere to legal mandates. Plain English is a concept that exists within the legal profession and encompasses the desire to make legal English or legalese more comprehensible and is defined as:

“...writing that is as simple and direct as the circumstances allow. Not simplistic or simple-minded. Not Dick-and-Jane. Not street talk or slang. But the style you would use if your readers were sitting across the table, and you wanted to make sure they understood” (Kimble, 1992, p. 12).

### 1.2 The plain English movement

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<sup>1</sup> Plain language **act was intended, in part, to make** the US government initiated communication easier to understand and more costumer friendly. <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/>

Simply put, the plain English movement (PEM) calls for drafting legislation and a variety of other documents in ‘ordinary’ or ‘plain’ language for consumers. Typically, this means avoiding archaic and foreign expressions, using common and familiar vocabulary, simpler grammatical structures, shorter and simpler sentences, substituting active for passive voice, favoring verbs over nouns, and providing a better organized outlook —the latter entailing such features as wider spaces and margins, division into sections and subtitles, definition of technical terms, use of examples, provision of tables of contents, highlighting techniques, and the like. (Assy, 2011: 379)

### 1.3 Determining if School Initiated Communication is Written in Plain English

There are a number of techniques that can be utilized to insure that oral and written communication between schools and families is more accessible for families that are culturally and linguistically diverse (Linse, 2011). These center on an analysis of the forms employed in relation to the audience (Cutt, 2013) and the clarity of the functional intent of the message. Regarding forms, procedures based on aspects of second language acquisition theory can be used to determine if the pieces of written communication are written in Plain English with the potential of being easily understood by the target audience. The input that individuals receive is comprehensible when it has been tailored to be understandable to individuals at varying stages of English language development or proficiency (Krashen, 1982). Embedding text and content in both linguistic and extra linguistic context such as pictures, can help make it more comprehensible to learners (Cummins, 2001).

Applying speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) to the construct of Plain English is also helpful to explaining the clarity of functional intent. This is pivotal in determining whether a message is clear in that being able to interpret the illocutionary force of an utterance by being familiar with the forms does not mean that one is able to understand the message (Johnstone, 2008). For a message to be determined clear, and hence Plain English, there needs to be a direct connection between the locutionary and the illocutionary force. To clarify, every utterance has two levels or forces (locutionary and illocutionary) and the overall

effect of the utterance is determined by the interplay between these two forces. The locutionary force is derived from the semantic meaning of the forms employed. The illocutionary force comes from the intent of the utterance. The interplay between these two forces is called the perlocutionary force and this can only be determined in context. In effect, from the forms used, the reader should be readily aware of the intended function. Considering the function of the piece of written communication. This involves both interactional language designed to build and sustain relationships and transactional language which is used to convey information often necessary to complete a transaction (Brown and Yule, 1983). When schools invite families to partner with them, it is appropriate to use language that is readily interpretable as transactional in the functional intent, for example, a notice might be sent to families to invite them to meet the new principal. The exact information about meeting and greeting the principal belongs in the category of transactional language and would constitute a linguistic act. Linguistic acts focus on the use of language as a vehicle for exchanging information and/or goods and services within a variety of contexts (Halliday, 1975).

Documents, such as letters, can be conduits which serve to form relationships between writers and readers (Prior, 2003). Text can be a very powerful tool and source for interaction with readers (Hoey, 2001). Mercer (2000) makes the important point that texts, when most effective, are jointly constructed by all the parties involved. For written exchanges the message is constructed with considerations of how the audience should react. And the audience needs to consider how the author(s) expect them to react. Thus, even written exchanges have a dialogic aspect. It is pivotal therefore that school officials are fully aware of their audience when preparing and sharing information. Once more, although school communications deal with the specifics of schools, which can be quite insular, complicated and involved, a text does not need to be written in such a way that it is virtually impossible for anyone outside a specific discipline or domain to understand. Gunnarsson (1997) points out that even legal written discourse can be rewritten to make it more comprehensible.

Taking the idea of Plain English and speech act theory as guiding constructs, the research centers on two research questions:

1. Are the school generated pieces of communication written in Plain English with clear aims and functions represented in the text?
2. What elements are present in the written communication that impede or facilitate comprehensibility of the texts?

The purpose of this exploratory research is to examine a range of school, including central office, initiated pieces of exemplar written communication to determine how comprehensible such communication is from the vantage point of Plain English in accordance with ideas from second language acquisition, and speech act theory. This research, the first of its kind, scrutinized written communication documents and examined the key linguistic functions of each piece of text to determine if the written discourse adhered to the concepts of Plain English. The research identified key issues found in the communications and used them to generate a tool that can be used by schools to help them create more accessible pieces of communication (See appendix)

## **2. Methodology**

The pieces of written communication, the research data used in this study, came from the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The City of Boston was chosen in part because the school system has made a conscious effort to ensure that every piece of oral and written communication is comprehensible for culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. BPS was also chosen due to the linguistic diversity represented amongst the population of school-age learners who have chosen to attend schools in the BPS system. According to BPS, forty five percent of the learners in the Boston Public Schools have learned a language other than English as their home language and learners officially classified as English Language Learners, with limited English language proficiency, speak 73 different home languages with nine languages being designated as “top languages”.<sup>1</sup>

For this study, the Boston Public School Office of Family Engagement randomly selected and provided some samples of written communication. In addition some letters were downloaded from the BPS Internet and other pieces of correspondence were collected at public school meetings. The written communication samples needed to be representative enough of what is sent to families so that issues which pertain to the potential use of Plain English with different functional intents would emerge. Data was selected that would serve as exemplars of some of the typical types of communication that the schools send to families. All together forty different pieces of communication were initially selected for analysis.

A carefully sequenced set of data analysis protocols with specific aims and functions

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<sup>1</sup> The data on linguistic diversity was collected by the Boston Public Schools and was published in April of 2011 - [http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/bps\\_at\\_a\\_glance\\_11-0428\\_4.pdf](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/bps_at_a_glance_11-0428_4.pdf)

were utilized as can be seen in Table 1, Data Analysis Protocols. In a first step, the forty pieces of text were initially examined to identify key representative functional intents. No types were preselected but rather emerged as a result of the initial analysis as conducted separately by the two principle researchers. Based on the intended transactions, four different types were identified; welcome letters, notices, advertisements and legal notices. Four exemplars from each type were selected, in turn, for in depth analysis. In the second step, 16 texts (four of each type), were examined to determine if each piece of text was self-contained in that the intended transaction could be completed based solely on the information contained within the piece of communication. A readability analysis was conducted to determine how easily the communications might have been read by the recipients. Next, text features were also scrutinized in relation to their facilitation or confusion



of the determined functions. Finally, the texts were analyzed to determine if they possessed an appropriate amount of polite and interactional language.

Table 1:

### 2.1 Core Functions

One of the aims of the research was to examine different types of functions. Functions range from inviting, advising, refusing, etc. as means of using language to complete transactions (Blundell, Higgins, and Middlemiss, 1982). In order to make certain that a variety of writing communication functions were included. Purposive sampling was used to select four different functions which are frequently used by schools to communicate, in writing, with families. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a range of data which represents the realities of a context and can be the foundation for generating grounded theory (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Initially there were 40 pieces of written communication in the sample. Some items were immediately removed from the selection process for different reasons. Newsletters and handbooks were eliminated because they represented a number of different function types and not just one function since it was deemed necessary to isolate the core transactional function of the written communication.

The transactional functions for all 40 pieces of text were initially analyzed to determine the different purposes of written communications being distributed to families. Based on the initial analysis of transactional function, four different examples of clearly defined functions emerged from the sample: welcome letters, notice letters, legal notices and advertisements. This is shown in Table 2 below. Continuing to use convenience sampling, four examples of each function type were selected for in-depth analysis. Based on the overarching goal of this study of helping provide clear guidance to school officials regarding effective communication, these 16 samples of the original were selected based on their adherence to a specific function. Communications that did not clearly fit into any

particular function and where the transactions were numerous or unclear were also excluded from the research.

Table 2.

## 2.2 Transactional Language

The basic tenets of effective linguistic acts are based on the premise that any given communication is as efficient as possible with complete information and is informative, without extraneous information so that the transaction can take place. That is, it is relevant, clear and focused (Grice, 1975). The individual pieces of communication in the present study were examined to determine whether the intended functions (first encountered) could be completed based solely on the information contained in the piece of written communication and if there were other implied or implicit functions contained within each piece of text.

## 2.3 Readability Levels

Readability formulas were utilized to assess the reading level and complexity of each of the texts being analyzed. Readability formulas generally examine word or lexical difficulty coupled with sentence or syntactical complexity as a means to determine how challenging it will be for a learner/reader to comprehend a specific piece of text (Fry, 2002). Although there are many limitations to readability formulas they can be useful in gauging how challenging an official document can be for parents to read (Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006).

Three well recognized readability formulas were utilized to analyze the readability level of each piece of text that contained sentences, as shown in Table 3 below. Advertisements were not analyzed using readability formulas since many of the advertisements did not contain sentences and texts containing sentences are needed to accurately assess readability. Different readability formulas were utilized to analyze slightly different aspects of text complexity. Gunning Fog calculates readability based on sentence length calculated in conjunction with the number of words longer than three syllables with

the view that longer words are more difficult to read. (Klare, 1974).<sup>2</sup> The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability Formula bases their readability calculations on a more balanced combination of sentence and word length with longer words not being given as much weight as in other formulas.<sup>3</sup>

SMOG determines readability based on sentence length coupled with number of words that contain three or more syllables (McLaughlin, 1969)<sup>4</sup>. The different formulas are based on the notion that longer words and longer sentences are harder to process and understand than shorter words middle and sentences. Each piece of home school communication was word processed so that it could easily be entered into the three on-line readability calculator programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Gunning Fog based readability on sentence length calculated in conjunction with the number of words longer than three syllables <Reading grade level = .4 (average sentence length + % of words 3+ syllables in length)> (Klare, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability Formula bases their readability Readability ease  $(1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$  1.015 x the average sentence length minus 84.6 x the average number of syllables per word.

<sup>4</sup> SMOG is based on a selection of 10 sentences from the beginning, 10 sentences from the middle, and 10 sentences from the end of the passage. The number of words that have more than three syllables are counted. The square root of the number of polysyllabic words is estimated. Three is added to the square root and becomes the SMOG grade level readability score.

Table 3:

#### 2.4 Text Features

It was noted upon initial inspection that some but not all pieces of communication contained text features. Text formatting features such as boldfaced text, captions as well as pictures can facilitate linguistically diverse readers who are developing English language skills to understand informational texts (Lapp, Fisher, and Grant, 2008). Knowledge of text features can also help readers more efficiently gather meaning from a text (Guthrie, 2004). Knowledge of text features can help readers, especially second language learners, to be able to grasp the overall gist of a piece of text such as a school notice or a letter.

Each piece of text was therefore examined to determine whether the text features present in the text helped make the text more comprehensible and facilitated each transaction. For example bold faced text can draw attention to key or important information such as the time and date of a meeting. We looked to see if the most important information was highlighted in one way or other such as with bold face or italicized text. A picture such as that of a school can aid the family member in knowing what the overall message pertains to since the picture has been used to establish the context.

### 2.5 Emic versus Etic Content

An initial glance at the communications studied revealed that the concept of emic versus etic would shed important light on the understandability of the texts. Emic perspectives are of active participants within a context whereas etic perspectives are those of observers or those outsiders looking in (Harris, 1976). A lack of understanding of the overall and specific aspects of schooling can lead to learners being locked in an etic perspective, excluded rather than included in an educational setting (Gomes, Mortimer and Kelly, 2011). Immigrant parents may be outsiders unable to permeate the US school culture (Vang, 2006). Families coming from diverse national backgrounds with different educational practices may find it difficult to comprehend the procedures of US schools that others take for granted.

Immigrant families who have yet to master the English language and possibly having little familiarity with the system in general may feel unacknowledged and out of touch and find it especially challenging to engage in a home school relationship based on a foundation of mutual respect (Carreon, Drake, and Barton, 2005).

Each piece of text was examined to determine if there was any content which would make it difficult for families, who were outsiders to the US school culture, and possessed an etic perspective to comprehend the emic perspective. The analysis aimed to ensure that the text did not inadvertently exclude family members from the school community because of items that were unclear to individuals who were not yet insiders in the school community. For example there might have been acronyms which had not been spelled out which would be unfamiliar to anyone who was not an active and involved member of the school community or school culture. Etic and emic constructs were chosen to determine if there was school cultural content which could inadvertently serve to exclude families. For example, a notice asking parents to contribute to the annual PTA autumn pot luck might be

misinterpreted if families don't know that PTA stands for Parent Teachers Association and that a potluck is a type of community meal where everyone contributes a food item.

### Interactional Language

An additional important aspect of transactional texts such as business letters is the interactional element that should adhere to sociocultural standards of politeness (Arvani, 2006). Politeness is an important aspect of interactional language. There are certain expectations of politeness for those who initiate communication in specific social contexts (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The way that a letter is written should adhere to conventions of politeness and utilize interactional language if the aim is to engage parents and families and invite them to participate in different initiatives on behalf of their children. Although it is understood that there are different cultural expectations for politeness, there are some basic polite conventions that occur in written communication such as thanking someone for their application even if it is a rejection letter.

The pieces of communication were examined to determine if there was an appropriate amount of polite language contained for the specific genre within the context of an English language environment. For example, did the word *please* preface imperative commands on a notice asking individuals to be punctual? Or were sentiments of apology expressed, in a formal letter, when requests for services were denied.

### 2.7 Text Assessment Tool

In order to analyze the data, a text assessment tool was developed and refined based

on the criteria set forth above in the methodology section. The text assessment tool was comprised of a list of ten yes/no as well as wh-questions designed to glean information on different aspects of the home school communication that were analyzed. Utilizing data generated from the text assessment tool and issues under investigation, different tables were created to illustrate key findings. The text assessment tool designed for this study can be seen in the Appendix.

### **3. Findings**

One of the goals was to determine whether or not the intended transactions could be completed based solely on the content found in the text. As seen below in Table 4, Transactional Language, there were some instances where the transaction could be completed based entirely on the information contained within the individual piece of communication. Welcome Letter 1 contains the name of the school including the zip code so that a parent can use GPS to get to the school in case the parent is coming from work rather than home. The announcement also contains a phone number so that the parent can request more information or clarification as well as the time and date of the welcome event. Legal Notice 3 also provided clear step-by-step information of the suspension process for high school students.

There were also instances where the transaction did not adhere to Grice's (1975) criteria and the transaction could not be easily completed. For example, one of the intended functions for Notice Letter 3 appears to be to offer program options. However, there was not enough detail and specific information to access any alternative programs. It would have facilitated the transaction if the names, URLs, and phone numbers of available alternative programs had been included in the written communication.

Among the different genre types, advertisements seem to have been the most successful regarding the ability to complete the intended transaction while welcome letters and notice letters were less successful. Families who are not fluent English speakers may

assume that they don't understand the school communication because their English is not good enough rather than because the information contained is unclear or incomplete.

The intended purpose of the welcome letter seemed to be to engage families and initiate partnerships between a specific school and the families of the learners who attend the school. However, in two of the written communications the advertising functions did not contain complete information about the key features being advertised.

Notice Letter 1 had a transactional aim of providing families with information about alternative child care arrangements due to a delay in the school start date. However the text conveyed incomplete information. It stated:

*We know that this will cause an inconvenience for many families. To help make this easier, we will work with community groups and our friends at the Boston Center for Youth and Families to make the XXXXXXXX Community Center at XXXXX Street available for drop in service beginning at 9 o'clock on Thursday, September.....*

The information needed to secure childcare was both unclear and incomplete. The words *drop in service* do not clearly indicate child care. The cost was not included nor the times the service was available or even a phone number for more information.

Table 4:

Although there is quite a bit of variability, overall the results of the readability tests illustrate that there was an attempt to use clear straightforward language. Table 5 below shows the readability levels of the different pieces of communications studied. The SMOG

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results, which focus on polysyllabic words, show a level between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. This would seem to indicate that the writers of the communications do, in fact, pay attention to the lexical items chosen. The results of the Flesch-Kincaid analysis also show a fairly simple reading grade level. The Gunning Fog reading levels are a bit higher which show that the syntactic complexity of the home communications might need to be considered more carefully. The validity of readability assessments, however have been very much questioned. Hochhauser (1997) suggests that readability scores need to be considered with other measurements such as text features as discussed below.

There were number of instances where complex lengthy sentences contributed to unnecessarily high readability scores. For example, Welcome Letter 4 used vocabulary and sentences that were unnecessary difficult:

*The staff members at the XXXXX XXXXXX School are committed to holding high expectations for all students, fostering strong relationships with parents and community members and implementing instructional strategies to meet the needs of all.*

At the very least this text could have been two sentences. The word *fostering* could be changed to *building*.

## PLAIN ENGLISH: SCHOOL-INITIATED COMMUNICATIONS

Simplified sentences and vocabulary are appropriate for parents who are still somewhat limited in their grasp of the English language.

Table 5:

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There was use of text features in some but not all pieces of communications as seen in Table 6. The most frequently used text features were bold-facing, bullet points and visuals. If text features were used it was determined whether their use facilitated the comprehension of the text, i.e., were they used effectively, or did their use actually distract the reader from the intended transaction in the piece of communication. There was a great deal of variability

with the use of bold-facing. In some cases the bold faced text clearly indicated important information, while in others it highlighted erroneous information. On more than a quarter of all communication samples studied there was no use of bold-facing. This carried over to the use of bullet points in that less than half of the communications studies made use of bullet points. Humfress and Schmidt (1999), in a study of leaflets, suggest using bullet points as one way to increase readability. The same can be applied to efficient use of visuals, but visuals were used less than all other text features studied here.

The samples displayed a lack of a clear consistent relationship between the key transaction and the use of text features. Text features were not always used well to help readers complete transactions. For example, in Notice Letter 4 key dates were not put in bold face text. The dates were key to the transaction and should have been either bold faced or italicized so that a parent, even one with limited English language skills, would be able to glance at the notice and focus on the boldfaced italicized or otherwise highlighted portions for key information rather than having to wade through all of the written text.

Table 6:

The next area of analysis focused on whether the text would be difficult to decipher for someone not well versed in the local US Boston based school culture. The inclusion of emic versus etic considerations in the analysis of the communications, as discussed above, is intended to be helpful in determining if there are any cultural or school culture specific references that might be difficult for the culturally and linguistically diverse audience to understand. Again, attention to such references is a potentially important aspect of comprehensibility as argued in Albert and Chadwick (1992). Overall, the results are quite mixed with some communications avoiding problematic references while others do make such references as seen below in Table 7. The two researchers independently examined each piece of text and made a judgment on whether a masterpiece of communication was comprehensive or not someone familiar with the specific

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school context. Except in one instance, there was complete agreement as to what could potentially confuse “outsiders.”

Exemplars of home school communication, from the sample, included dates containing the names of the months spelled out (rather than represented by numbers) which is an example of a best practice that is inclusive of families from other cultural and linguistic traditions. In US practice, the number representing the month precedes the number for the day of the month. For example, 7/4 is July 4th according to US practice whereas in many other cultural traditions 7/4 would be April 7th.

There were also examples of content that would have been very confusing to someone outside the US school culture. In Legal Notice 1 there were very confusing references made to Adequate Yearly Progress. If you were unaware of the way school cultures use the term Adequate Yearly Progress you might assume that your child and not the school was failing to achieve. The creators of the school home communication are intimately involved with the US school culture and may have not considered the perspective of a culturally and linguistically diverse parent whose own experience with schooling may have been in a country with educational practices that differ radically from those operating in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Table 7:

Examples of interactional language were also studied. Table 8 below shows the level of politeness and the inclusion of polite language in the different communications. The results show that the communications studied do a fairly good job of extending the type of politeness needed to make the recipients feel they are being valued (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Still, the genres of welcome letters and notice letters show room for improvement regarding politeness.

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In the case of the welcome letters one would expect there to be a focus on language that serves to invite a family to become part of the school community with words such as, *invite*,

*look forward, hope, welcome, are pleased.* In the case of two welcome letters this type of language was virtually absent with only one welcoming word in one *welcome* and two welcoming words in another. In addition, there was not always the inclusion of adequate relationship building language. For example, in Notice Letter 3 the text does not contain a sufficient amount of polite interactional language for a refusal letter: “The Department XXXX received your application for your child...”. It would have been more appropriate if the following text had been included: “Thank you for your application for your child to...”. Culturally and linguistically diverse families may feel overwhelmed with such culture and language barriers and may disengage if they do not feel welcome at the school.

Table 8

#### 4. Discussion

Schools are striving to engage families of all learners, including and possibly especially those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. School generated correspondence has been acknowledged as an important way of establishing and maintaining such relations (Griffith, 1998). This research investigated one very narrow area among the variety of communications between schools and families as a means of providing an initial assessment of plain English, but the basic premises and principles can apply to other areas as well. Written communication can be used not only as a way of disseminating important information but also as a vehicle for inviting families to engage in the school community, but to do so the recipients need to feel included and this starts with comprehensibility. Based on the results presented here it seems that schools should more carefully consider the transactional aims of each piece of communication as well as the linguistic structures used. At the same time, however, attention must also be focused on the interactional elements as well, if the schools want to make the families of all students feel more connected with the school.

Schools should more carefully consider the way that they construct and use the English language with linguistically diverse parents to ensure that the recipients of such communications not only understand fully the intent (intended transaction) of the communication but also feel valued and included in the school community. Given the basic fact that home school communication is necessary and that it is a potentially positive way for schools to engage with families, it seems almost obvious that school officials would take pains to make such communications are as clear as for all parents and school families.

Whenever possible, schools should translate written communication into families' home languages. While this may be considered a difficult proposition, if the initial piece of home school communication is clear and easy to comprehend the translation process will be facilitated. Professional translators can translate a piece of text much more quickly if the text is clearly written and complete. Although machine based translations, such as Google translator, are not recommended, the translations are vastly improved when the original

translation is based on clear language structures and unambiguous vocabulary. When the transactional aim of the correspondence is obvious it is easier to create a summary of the content.

Although aspects of second language acquisition was an important part of the research, the results of the research also have implications for monolingual English speakers who may have only achieved low levels of English language literacy. By ensuring that the text is written in clear and straightforward English with all of the necessary content to complete the transaction, it is more likely that the intended message will be clear to readers with limited literacy skills. Once again the balance needs to be struck to ensure that the piece of communication is simple and clear without appearing to be simplistic and childish.

In order to apply the findings of this research in actual school settings and maximize impact, a Text Evaluation Tool was developed and is included in the appendix of this article. This tool has been used with both secretaries and teachers tasked with creating documents which are comprehensible to parents who have limited English language proficiency. Both groups found the questions that make up the tool to be extremely helpful. The secretaries and teachers initially took a piece of written communication and used the tool to assist with the editing process. By asking the questions both teachers and secretaries found that they were able to isolate places within the text that were not crystal clear and subsequently make the text more understandable.

In addition it should be mentioned that emails, tweets, texts and web pages are replacing the note in the backpack and the principles addressed in this article need to be considered for all mediums. As we move our school initiated written communication from the note in the backpack into digital means of transmission it becomes even more imperative that the text is clear and understandable for families with due consideration of some of the constraints of digital media such as those imposed for texting and twitter.

## **Limitations**

This was a small scale exploratory study. As such the intention primarily was to generate a tool for examining the comprehensibility of a written text for individuals who are linguistically diverse. The intention was not about developing a single tool that could be used with virtually every piece of written text. In order to take this tool one step further a larger number of pieces of written text will need to be analyzed both from a discourse analysis standpoint as well as from key culturally and linguistically diverse stakeholders themselves.

## **5. Conclusions**

This original exploratory research examined exemplar home school written communication generated by schools serving a population with 45% of the families speaking a language other than English as the home language. The research reflected the spirit of PEM in so far as it examined different aspects of the written communication which could facilitate or impede it being understood. The main purpose was to get an initial feel for the general linguistic and functional properties of these messages by doing a linguistic analysis so that further research can be conducted. The results found that schools wishing to engage with families who may not be fluent in English should strive to make every contact as understandable as possible. Some aspects of the written communication facilitated comprehension of the message. However, aspects which impeded the comprehensibility of the texts were also found in the analysis. To do better, schools need closer adherence to a specific transactional function and a facilitation of comprehensibility through lexical choice and text features. It is suggested that extraneous and less comprehensible references be eliminated and the presence of more appropriate interactional language be given proper attention.

Schools aiming to connect with linguistically diverse families and families with low literacy skills should consider every point of contact as an opportunity to engage or



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disengage as a result of the quality of communication. Schools should strive to make sure that the written communication sent to families facilitates and does not impede transactions. Written communication should be a conduit of positive home school communication which has the potential to lead to greater family engagement. Schools should not send out confusing, difficult to decipher texts which could potentially lead to disengagement. Schools may wish to consider developing templates of routine written communication using the text assessment tool to ensure that the communication is comprehensible and friendly.

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Appendix

Text Evaluation Tool

Please complete the form.

1. Piece of Text:
2. What were the key functions of the text? What was the purpose of the text? For example, inviting families to an event, informing them of a program for their children, etc.
4. What are key indicators of the function? Are there key words such as *meeting*, *welcome* etc.? Are there forms (to be filled out) attached as part of the communication?
5. What is the main transaction? For example, an upcoming parent teacher conference.
6. Does the text facilitate the transaction? For example, are the acronyms spelled out and explained. If not where is the problem?
7. What are the readability levels?
8. How are text features used? For example, are key details and information italicized such as the time and date for a meeting? Do they support the transaction?
9. Is there content that an outsider would not understand and prevent the completion of a transaction? For example, a locally used test called the stage 4c exam.
10. Is there an appropriate amount of polite interactional language? For example, if parents had applied for a place for their children to be in a program it would be appropriate for the letter to begin with *Thank you for your application.*

Tables included in the manuscript-  
Table A1

*Data Analysis Protocols*

Data Analysis	Aim of Analysis
Core Genres	To determine the types of information or genres being presented to families. To select pieces of text for in-depth analysis.
Transactional Language	To determine if the transaction could be completed solely based on the information in the written communication.
Readability Levels	To determine the reading grade level and

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	complexity level of each piece of text.
Text Features	To determine if there are text features such as bold face and italics which draw attention to key essential information.
Emic versus Etic Content	To determine if there is content which is only comprehensible to individuals with insider or emic perspectives. The content would be confusing to someone with an etic perspective, a perspective of someone who doesn't understand the school culture.
Interactional Language	To determine if there is a sufficient amount of polite, friendly, relationship building language.
A Data Analysis Tool was developed based on the data analysis principles listed above.	

Table A2

*Genre Types of School Initiated Communication*

Genre Type	Key Function of Text	Indicators
Welcome Letter	To help families feel engaged with the school	Letter format, the word <i>welcome</i> in a prominent place
Notices	To inform families of specific events and activities	The words <i>inform, information and/or concrete information</i> such as addresses or names
Advertisements	To promote or advertise specific schools, school endeavors and Initiatives	Positive attributes are listed such as the words <i>dedicated, valued, healthier, wonderful, top</i>
Legal Notices	To provide or request information as mandated by local and/or federal laws	Direct or indirect reference to regulations with words such as <i>required, permission, parents'</i>

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*rights*

Table A3

*Readability Formulas*

Gunning Fog	Flesch-Kincaid	SMOG
Words per sentence. Complex sentences.	Average Sentence Length = Number of words divided by the number of sentences. Average number of syllables per word are divided by the number of words.	Number of sentences and number of words with three or more words.

Table A4

*Transactional Language*

Communication Sample	Core Transaction	Transactions	Does the text facilitate the transactions?
Welcome Letter 1	Help students feel engaged with school	Invite to welcome event Establish ongoing Communication	Yes
Welcome Letter 2	Help students feel engaged with school	Advertise key features	No Incomplete information about key features
Welcome Letter 3	Help students feel engaged with school	Advertise key features	No Incomplete information about key features
Welcome Letter 4	Help students feel engaged with school	Inform expectations Advertise key features	No Unclear and unfocused information



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Notice Letter 1	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform families of delay in school start date and alternative child care arrangements	No Unclear and incomplete information
Notice Letter 2	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of specific programmatic details	Yes However there is some extraneous information
Notice Letter 3	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of student being denied entry to program Offer alternative program options	No Information on alternative programs is incomplete.
Notice Letter 4	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of registration events and test dates	No Information is unclear and incomplete
Advertisement 1	Promotes or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key school features	Yes
Advertisement 2	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key lunch program features	Yes
Advertisement 3	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key school features	Yes
Advertisement 4	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key program features Provides program enrollment information	No Information is incomplete
Legal Notices 1	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Offer school choice due to inadequate yearly progress	No Information is incomplete
Legal Notices 2	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Request permission from parents for students to participate in school programs.	Yes However there is some confusing information
Legal Notices 3	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Provide suspension process information	Yes
Legal Notices 4	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal	Provide compulsory attendance information	No Information is confusing

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laws

Table A5

*Readability Grade Levels*

Text Sample	Gunning Fog Grade Level	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	The SMOG Grade Level
Welcome Letter 1	10.4	8.6	7.8
Welcome Letter 2	10.5	7.8	7.9
Welcome Letter 3	12.1	9.6	8.8
Welcome Letter 4	12.4	9.8	9.2
Notice Letter 1	10.4	10	9.7
Notice Letter 2	9.9	9.1	8.6
Notice Letter 3	12.8	11.2	10.1
Notice Letter 4	10.1	9.8	9.2
Legal Notices 1	13.9	11.4	9.9
Legal Notices 2	15.7	12.3	11.9
Legal Notices 3	8.4	7.1	7.2
Legal Notices 4	11.8	9.7	9.2

Table A6

*Text Features*

Communication Sample	Efficient Use of Boldfaced	Inefficient Use of Boldfaced	Non Use of Boldface	Non Use of Bullet Points	Appropriate Use of Visuals	Non Use of Visuals
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	Test	Text		
Welcome Letter 1	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Welcome Letter 2			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Welcome Letter 3			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Welcome Letter 4			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 1		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 2	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 3			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 4		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Advertisement 1		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Advertisement 2	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Advertisement 3	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Advertisement 4	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 1			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 2	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 3			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 4		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

Table A7

*Confusing Content from an Etic Perspective*

Communication	Is content clear from an etic perspective?	If no, are there key references and/or acronyms which would be unclear to outsiders?
Sample	from an etic perspective?	unclear to outsiders?
Welcome Letter 1	Yes.	

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Welcome Letter 2	No.	Key reference to School Name Village.
Welcome Letter 3	No.	Key reference to the school as a Castle on the Hill.
Welcome Letter 4	Yes.	
Notice Letter 1	No.	Key reference to drop-in service without explaining what drop-in service is.
Notice Letter 2	Yes.	
Notice Letter 3	No.	Key reference to the BELLS program without an explanation of the acronym BELLS.
Notice Letter 4	No.	Unclear explanations for Advance Work Classes and Exam Schools.
Advertisement 1	No.	Key reference to a Peace Zone without an adequate explanation.
Advertisement 2	Yes.	
Advertisement 3	No.	Numerous unexplained acronyms FHO, DSNI, SES, MOS.
Advertisement 4	Yes.	
Legal Notices 1	No.	Unclear references to Adequate Yearly Progress.
Legal Notices 2	Yes.	
Legal Notices 3	Yes.	
Legal Notices 4	No.	Confusing references to Attendance Law and Massachusetts Law.

Table A8

*Interactional Polite Language*

Communication Sample	Sufficient and Appropriate Use of Interactional Polite Language	Examples of Interactional Polite Language
Welcome Letter 1	X	Welcome, invite, please
Welcome Letter 2		Welcome
Welcome Letter 3	X	Welcome, please, thank you

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Welcome Letter 4		Welcome, please
Notice Letter 1		Please
Notice Letter 2	X	Congratulations, Look forward to
Notice Letter 3		Apologize
Notice Letter 4		
Advertisement 1	X	Not needed for text type
Advertisement 2	X	Thanks, patience
Advertisement 3	X	Not needed for text type
Advertisement 4	X	Not needed for text type
Legal Notices 1		Please
Legal Notices 2	X	Not needed for text type
Legal Notices 3	X	Not needed for text type
Legal Notices 4	X	Not needed for text type

Table 1

*Data Analysis Protocols*

Data Analysis	Aim of Analysis
Core Genres	To determine the types of information or genres being presented to families. To select pieces of text for in-depth analysis.
Transactional Language	To determine if the transaction could be completed solely based on the information in the written communication.
Readability Levels	To determine the reading grade level and complexity level of each piece of text.
Text Features	To determine if there are text features such as bold face and italics which draw attention to key essential information.
Emic versus Etic Content	To determine if there is content which is only comprehensible to individuals with insider or emic perspectives. The content would be confusing to someone with an etic perspective, a perspective of someone who doesn't understand the school culture.
Interactional Language	To determine if there is a sufficient amount of polite, friendly, relationship building language.
A Data Analysis Tool was developed based on the data analysis principles listed above.	

Table 2

*Genre Types of School Initiated Communication*

Genre Type	Key Function of Text	Indicators
Welcome Letter	To help families feel engaged	Letter format, the word <i>welcome</i>

Notices	with the school To inform families of specific events and activities	in a prominent place The words <i>inform, information</i> <i>and/or concrete information</i> such as addresses or names
Advertisements	To promote or advertise specific schools, school endeavors and initiatives	Positive attributes are listed such as the words <i>dedicated, valued,</i> <i>healthier, wonderful, top</i>
Legal Notices	To provide or request information as mandated by local and/or federal laws	Direct or indirect reference to regulations with words such as <i>required, permission, parents'</i> <i>rights</i>

Table 3

*Readability Formulas*

Gunning Fog	Flesch-Kincaid	SMOG
Words per sentence. Complex sentences.	Average Sentence Length = Number of words divided by the number of sentences. Average number of syllables per word are divided by the number of words.	Number of sentences and number of words with three or more words.

Table 4

*Transactional Language*

Communication	Core Transaction	Transactions	Does the text facilitate the transactions?
Sample			
Welcome Letter 1	Help students feel engaged with	Invite to welcome event	Yes

	school	Establish ongoing Communication	
Welcome Letter 2	Help students feel engaged with school	Advertise key features	No Incomplete information about key features
Welcome Letter 3	Help students feel engaged with school	Advertise key features	No Incomplete information about key features
Welcome Letter 4	Help students feel engaged with school	Inform expectations Advertise key features	No Unclear and unfocused information
Notice Letter 1	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform families of delay in school start date and alternative child care arrangements	No Unclear and incomplete information
Notice Letter 2	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of specific programmatic details	Yes However there is some extraneous information
Notice Letter 3	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of student being denied entry to program Offer alternative program options	No Information on alternative programs is incomplete.
Notice Letter 4	Inform families of specific events and activities	Inform family of registration events and test dates	No Information is unclear and incomplete
Advertisement 1	Promotes or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key school features	Yes
Advertisement 2	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key lunch program features	Yes
Advertisement 3	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key school features	Yes
Advertisement 4	Promote or advertise specific school endeavors or initiatives	Advertises key program features Provides program enrollment information	No Information is incomplete



Legal Notices 1	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Offer school choice due to inadequate yearly progress	No Information is incomplete
Legal Notices 2	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Request permission from parents for students to participate in school programs.	Yes However there is some confusing information
Legal Notices 3	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Provide suspension process information	Yes
Legal Notices 4	Provide or request information as mandated by local and or federal laws	Provide compulsory attendance information	No Information is confusing

Table 5

*Readability Levels*

Text Sample	Gunning Fog Level	Flesch-Kincaid Level	The SMOG Level
Welcome Letter 1	10.4	8.6	7.8
Welcome Letter 2	10.5	7.8	7.9
Welcome Letter 3	12.1	9.6	8.8
Welcome Letter 4	12.4	9.8	9.2
Notice Letter 1	10.4	10	9.7
Notice Letter 2	9.9	9.1	8.6
Notice Letter 3	12.8	11.2	10.1
Notice Letter 4	10.1	9.8	9.2
Legal Notices 1	13.9	11.4	9.9

Legal Notices 2	15.7	12.3	11.9
Legal Notices 3	8.4	7.1	7.2
Legal Notices 4	11.8	9.7	9.2

Table 6

*Text Features*

<b>Communication Sample</b>	<b>Efficient Use of Boldfaced Test</b>	<b>Inefficient Use of Boldfaced Text</b>	<b>Non Use of Boldface</b>	<b>Non Use of Bullet Points</b>	<b>Appropriate Use of Visuals</b>	<b>Non Use of Visuals</b>
Welcome Letter 1	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
Welcome Letter 2			<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Welcome Letter 3			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Welcome Letter 4			<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 1		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 2	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 3			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Notice Letter 4		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Advertisement 1		<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	
Advertisement 2	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
Advertisement 3	<b>X</b>					<b>X</b>
Advertisement 4	<b>X</b>					<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 1			<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 2	<b>X</b>					<b>X</b>

Legal Notices 3		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Legal Notices 4	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

Table 7

*Confusing Content from an Etic Perspective*

Communication Sample	Is content clear from an etic perspective?	If no, are there key references and/or acronyms which would be unclear to outsiders?
Welcome Letter 1	Yes.	
Welcome Letter 2	No.	Key reference to School Name Village.
Welcome Letter 3	No.	Key reference to the school as a Castle on the Hill.
Welcome Letter 4	Yes.	
Notice Letter 1	No.	Key reference to drop-in service without explaining what drop-in service is.
Notice Letter 2	Yes.	
Notice Letter 3	No.	Key reference to the BELLS program without an explanation of the acronym BELLS.
Notice Letter 4	No.	Unclear explanations for Advance Work Classes and Exam Schools.
Advertisement 1	No.	Key reference to a Peace Zone without an adequate explanation.
Advertisement 2	Yes.	
Advertisement 3	No.	Numerous unexplained acronyms FHO, DSNI, SES, MOS.
Advertisement 4	Yes.	
Legal Notices 1	No.	Unclear references to Adequate Yearly Progress.
Legal Notices 2	Yes.	
Legal Notices 3	Yes.	
Legal Notices 4	No.	Confusing references to Attendance Law and Massachusetts Law.

Table 8

*Interactional Polite Language*

Communication Sample	Sufficient and Appropriate Use of Interactional Polite Language	Examples of Interactional Polite Language	Need for Increased Interactional Polite Language
Welcome Letter 1	X	Welcome, invite, please	
Welcome Letter 2		Welcome	X
Welcome Letter 3	X	Welcome, please, thank you	
Welcome Letter 4		Welcome, please	X
Notice Letter 1		Please	X
Notice Letter 2	X	Congratulations, Look forward to	
Notice Letter 3		Apologize	X
Notice Letter 4			X
Advertisement 1	X	Not needed for text type	
Advertisement 2	X	Thanks, patience	
Advertisement 3	X	Not needed for text type	
Advertisement 4	X	Not needed for text type	
Legal Notices 1		Please	X
Legal Notices 2	X	Not needed for text type	
Legal Notices 3	X	Not needed for text type	
Legal Notices 4	X	Not needed for text type	