

URSZULA FRYSZTACKA-SZKRÓBKA
University of Silesia, Katowice

DECODING HIDDEN MESSAGES THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING

The article presents the initial results of the research on the university students' ability to decode hidden messages in the *language of propaganda* as it has a strong influence on our understanding of the social reality we live in and on language communication. This is only a part of the broad design on the subject indicated in the title of the paper and developed in its *Introduction*. This article will present the results of the initial research concerning the students' reaction to the written text to be understood with the help of critical reading. There are two parts of the research called by the author 'step one' and 'step two'. 'Step one' was already published in full (cf. Frysztacka-Szkróbka 1999). However it was necessary to summarise the results of 'step one' research in this article so as to be able to compare them with those obtained in 'step two'. Thus the final conclusions seem to be more reliable. The final goal (after having completed the whole research) will be to find ways of increasing the skill of critical thinking necessary to decode hidden messages.

1. Introduction

1.1. The general scheme of the research

The scheme of the research is concerned with obtaining information as to the ability of university students to decode messages hidden in:

- (1) the political language of propaganda used in mass media (except commercial advertising),
- (2) everyday language,
- (3) the language of literary works,
- (4) any scientific language.

The final goal will be to find ways of increasing the skill of critical thinking necessary in decoding hidden messages. To achieve this goal, the author plans to do a long term research. Since the subject is many-fold, demanding theoretical knowledge in various fields, an extensive theoretical background to the problem will be provided after having completed the whole design of the research.

1.2. The aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to show the results obtained on the basis of three tests examining university students' ability to decode messages contained in political language

of propaganda – this is called ‘the initial research’ presented in two parts: part one will refer to the results obtained in ‘step one’; part two will refer to the results obtained in ‘step two’. The terms ‘step one’ and ‘step two’ have been introduced for the sake of convenience in cross references.

‘Step one’ of the study tests is somewhat different from ‘step two’ tests: in the former the students are completely free in expressing their views (Task I, question 2; Task II and Task III – both questions). All the details concerning ‘step one’ of the study were published in 1999 (cf. Frysztacka-Szkróbka 1999: 155-168).

In ‘step two’ the students are restricted to some extent; they have to choose in each Task / question no. 2 – Task I, Tasks II and III – both questions / either one of the 10 statements taken from the students’ answers obtained in ‘step one’ or to formulate their own statement/comment / in point 11. Point 11 is treated by the author as a hint to help the students think in a critical way about the contents of the messages enclosed in the texts. Point 11 was of crucial importance in Task III. The author hoped that offering the possibility to provide a comment on the artificial text, would encourage the students to express their critical approach to it, while in Task I and in Task II, point 11 was not of so much importance since the texts were original carrying real messages easy to decode.

1.3. A brief theoretical background to the research

Propaganda language and its influence on the mentality and on human behaviour have been noticed and analysed starting from 2500 BC to modern times (Mead 1979:21-49; Finkelstein 1997:50-110). The University of Honolulu published a three volume book tracing the history of propaganda and communication (Lasswell, Lerner, Speier, [eds.]:1979) providing grounds for the reason why we should be preoccupied with the propaganda communication nowadays. A simplified answer to the question, based on the articles enclosed in Volume III (Lasswell, Wiesner, Spengler, Killian, Rogow: 1979) seems to be connected with the necessity of teaching critical thinking in order to make the society conscious of the traps hidden in messages contained in propaganda language.

The functions of propaganda language have been also analysed by Polish linguists and psychologists. The publications which appeared in early 1970th (e.g. Wojtasik 1973, Barańczak 1975) are mainly concerned with the way of constructing persuasive texts, whereas in the 1980th and 1990th there appeared works analysing both *the informative and persuasive functions* of propaganda language (e.g. Bralczyk 1981, Bralczyk 1987, Bralczyk 1991, G³owiński 1991a, 1991b, D¹browska 1991). While the former function is desirable, the latter may be harmful for its tendentious use of words in cunning syntactic structures so as to impose particularistic called ‘the initial research’. The results of the initial research will be presented in two parts attitudes and views upon the society.

All the aspects of language manipulation need special consideration which will be dealt with later, as has been mentioned above.

1.4. Explanation of the key terms used by the author of the research

The author uses four key terms:

- *Hidden messages* will be understood as those which convey ideas with lack of language precision, particularly by using expressions difficult for analysis or interpretation, as well as by deliberate withholding of factual information (c.f. Channell 1994: 5-20).

- *Propaganda language* will mean here messages passed to us by pseudo-communication, where the means of communicating messages are intermingled with the characteristics of ‘hidden messages’ in order to influence public opinion on some matters, true or false according to the particularistic interests of a given individual or corporation as well as according to the interests of a currently governing political party.
- *Vague language* is closely connected with the characteristics of ‘hidden messages’. Deese claims that hidden messages are “vague” not only for their non-precise language but first of all because of the ideas which are vague. The reason for misunderstanding or misinterpretation of a message is the fact “that the correspondence between the ideas possessed by two individuals who are in communication on a common topic is rather poor, a condition which we do not notice because we seldom make explicit attempts to validate a communicated idea against the original” (Deese 1974:72). Hidden message passed to us in vague language may be treated as having advantage (e.g. in literary works, where room is left for the reader’s individual interpretation leading to personal aesthetic experience), and disadvantage (e.g. in propaganda, where true facts are deliberately hidden for manipulating the receiver’s interpretation).
- *Critical thinking* involved in understanding information seems to be connected first of all with the ability to react critically to the message through relating the material contained in it to our personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs. It does not mean, however, that we are to criticise a given message in the sense of providing unfavourable judgement or disapproval of its contents. By critical thinking, we will understand in this article critical/evaluative comprehension of a text in order “to compare information in a passage with the reader’s knowledge and values”(Richards, Platt J., Platt H. 1993: 307).

2. Summary of ‘step one’ results of the initial research

2.1. Presentation of the Tasks, Questions and Subjects

On the 26th of March, 1997 a research was conducted on a random sample which consisted of 45 students of English, University of Silesia, out of them 37 were students of the 3rd year and only 8 of them were students of the 4th year (= 45 students of English). All of them had to answer the questions put to them in Task I, Task II, and Task III.

Additionally, Task III was fulfilled by 39 students of the 1st year studying Fine Arts in Cieszyn, University of Silesia. The text was given to them in Polish. In total, Task III was fulfilled by 84 University students.

Task I – /45 university students of English/ is based on George Bush’s speech (Górska B., Siedlecka-Orze³ 1990- see Appendix I);

Task II – /45 university students of English/ comprises extracts from JFK’s speeches (taken from the memorial wall at Arlington – see Appendix II);

Task III – /45 university students of English and 39 university students of Fine Arts - Task III; the students of Fine Arts were give the text and the questions in Polish).

The text is totally artificial formed on the basis of a press notice (see Appendix III). If a speaker connects any part of an entrance unit from column I with any other unit contained in columns II, III and IV, the combination makes the speaker able to talk for 40 hours using grammatically correct sentences (see Appendix IV).

The students under investigation were asked to answer the following questions:

TASK I

- 1) Which of the following statements are true and which of them are false? [put 'T' or 'F' after each statement]
- 2) What is the topic of the speech?

TASK II and TASK III

- 1) Which of the 4 (7 – in Task III) sentences is of crucial importance in the speech?
- 2) What is, according to you, the topic of the speech?

2.2. The results

TASK I

- Answers to Question 1: The majority of the students (85.45%) were right in their answers.
- Answers to Question 2: There have been given 45 different answers to the question which were so divergent that it was difficult to categorise them.

TASK II

- Answers to Question 1: The subjects under investigation chose either sentence no.1 (20%) or sentence no.4 (80%). Both sentence no.1 and sentence no.4 may be treated as being most important in the speech. The distinction lies in the historical categories. Poland had to fight constantly for freedom; therefore those students who chose sentence no.1 seem to be more historically orientated – the Polish tradition of fight for freedom of our country must have been strongly rooted in them. The other students who chose sentence no.4 seem to view Poland as a free country without any necessity on the part of the citizens to fight for freedom. They probably tend to perceive themselves as citizens of the world who should have the rights as they are stated in the "United Nations Charter of Human Rights".
- Answers to Question 2: Here again there were 45 answers, each different. No categorisation was possible.

Task III

- Answers to Question 1 (university students of English): Since the whole text is artificial, not conveying any meaning, none of the answers can give proof of understanding the speech, which is empty of meaning. Nevertheless, 42 (out of 45) students pointed at one of the 7 sentences which seemed for them to convey the main goal of the speech, in spite of the fact that there is no goal in the speech. This way the students appear to show total reliance on the impact of the written text; they did not involve their critical thinking to detect its nonsense. Only 3 students who did not decide to point at any of the sentences as being the main goal of the speech may belong to the small group of those who are brave enough to reject messages which are meaningless to them; they gave a kind of explanation when it came to answer Question no.2.
- Answers to Question 2: The 'virtuosity' of a propaganda language engaged in communicating hidden messages makes the receiver yield to the interpretation of the transmitter without much criticism. The impact of this virtuosity might have been the reason why 42 students (out of 45) strived hard to answer Question no.2. The style of their answers resembled the language used in the artificial text, e.g.: "Shaping the attitudes and tasks connected with training the organisation leaders"-*E.J.*; "Factors which cause the formation and the development of certain attitudes

and ways of behaviour-*H.G.*; "Progress in educational system"-*M.G.* There is no word which would clarify what 'attitudes', 'tasks', 'organisation', 'formation' or 'educational system' are referred to. The sentences, as well as the whole artificial text, do not convey any message. That is why we can only conclude that the 42 students were not able to discover the senselessness of the speech. The remaining 3 students who did not point at any sentence in Question no.1, provided here explanations instead of formulating the answer: "Perhaps the text is not a speech on any topic"-*K.K.*; *no answer – anonymous*; "The speech is unclear"-*I.G.*

TASK III

- Answers to Question 1 (1st year university students of Fine Arts)
Nearly all the students chose one of the sentences, except 7 /out of 39/ who refrained from pointing at a particular sentence. The explanation of the fact is the same as in: Task I /Question 2/, Task II /Question no.2/ and Task III /Question no.2/ . Nothing new has been introduced for particular analysis.
- Answers to Question 2: All the answers to Question no.2 are as vague and meaningless as the artificial speech itself. However, there is some hope in the fact that 7 students, though forming a comparatively small group, were not deceived by the text. Their explanation for not choosing any statement in Question no.1, Task III, is put in their answers to Question 2 where their comments describe the text as being unclear, obscure, too general, incomprehensible.

2.3. Summing up of 'step one' results

The majority of the sample consisting of the 4th and 5th year students of English fulfilled Task I (Question 1) correctly – they were not deceived by the semantically vague statements to be pointed at as being true or false. It was presumed that all those students would not have any difficulty in the distinction between right and wrong statements, since this particular task was designed for secondary school students. However, 14.55% of the answers were wrong.

Question 2 of the same Task showed the students' tendency to form their answers in such a general way that none of the answers could be rejected; the messages in the statements are intermingled with interpretation. Therefore, the students who formulated their answers to this question appear not to be able to separate facts from their hidden interpretation.

Answers to Question no.1 and to Question no.2 in Task II are easier to interpret. The discrepancy between the answers lies either in historically orientated approach to the text – sentence no.1 in question no.1 (20% of the respondents displayed this orientation) or in up-to-date orientated approach – sentence no.4 (80% of the respondents).

Questions no.1. and no.2 in Task III were supposed not to be answered. The author of the article presupposed that the artificiality of the text would be discovered very soon, and that the students would, at least, 'riot' in order to receive some explanation concerning the text. On the contrary, they silently endeavoured to form senseless answers on the basis of the senseless text. Only 10 students (3 University students of English and 7 University students of Fine Arts) refrained from giving answers to the questions – a too small group to take into consideration in final conclusions.

Nevertheless, the attitude to Task III of both the 3 students of English and the 7 students of Fine Arts cannot be ignored – they belong to the small group of students who

possess the ability of critical reading – they may be treated as those hopeful exceptions who seem to be on the proper direction in the area of comprehending hidden messages or decoding their hidden interpretation.

3. Analysis of 'step two' results

Both 'step one' and 'step two' of the research are called 'initial' because they concern the same problem – the university students' ability to decode hidden messages passed to them in political language of mass media (propaganda language). The same texts and the same questions were put to 111 subjects consisting, this time, only of the 4th year students of English, University of Silesia (14th of March, 1998). The only difference between the tasks put to the two groups of subjects (i.e. between those who were tested in 'step one' and these who completed the tests in 'step two') was that the subjects in 'step two' had the possibility to put forward their own view on the texts under point no. 11 /"your own statement or comment"/ in each question no.2, instead of choosing one of the 10 statements suggested to them. There was no change in the procedure referring to question no. 1.

3.1. The results and their analysis

3.1.1. Task I Question no.1

Table 1

No. of sentence	[T][F]	Right	Wrong
1	[F]	83	28
2	[F]	97	14
3	[T]	93	18
4	[T]	90	21
5	[F]	107	4
6	[T]	106	5
Right answers in numbers		576	
Wrong answers in number			90
Right answers in %		86,48%	
Wrong answers in %			13,52%

The results are almost the same as those obtained in 'step one', that is:

Table 2

	Right answers in %	Wrong answers in %
'Step one' results	85.45%	14.55%
'Step two' results	86.48%	13.52%
Total in %	85.92%	14.08%

The total right answers in percentage (85.45% in 'step one' and 85.48% in 'step two') seem to be quite a good result. However, remembering that the test was designed for secondary school students, the result is not satisfactory as to the 4th and the 5th year university students of English; one might expect even 100% of right answers.

3.1.2. Task I Question no.2

Table 3

No. of sentence	Answers in numbers	Answers in %
1.	8	7.20%
2.	3	2.70%
3.	0	0%
4.	100	90.10%

Although the results obtained here are slightly different from those obtained in 'step one' (20% chose sentence no.1.; 80% chose sentence no.2 in 'step one'), still the proportion of choices in both 'step one' and 'step two' show that sentence no.1 and sentence no.4 seem to be perceived as being of greater importance than the remaining sentences. The interpretation of the choices made in 'step two' of the research seems to be the same as in 'step one': the respondents are either historically orientated keeping to the Polish tradition of constant fight for freedom, or they are up-to-date orientated treating Poland as a free country whose citizens should be treated as citizens of the world.

3.1.3. Task II – Answers to Question no.1

Table 4

No.of statement	Answers in numbers	Answers in %
1.	23	20.72%
2.	13	11.71%
3.	4	3.60%
4.	31	27.93%
5.	18	16.22%
6.	3	2.70%
7.	19	17.12%

Comparing the results shown in TABLE 4 ('step two') with those obtained in 'step one', we can state that they are quite similar. The divergence of choice, which is of no significance since none of the 7 sentences contain any meaningful message, is a proof of the respondents' poor ability to think in a critical way, the more that not a single subject (out of 111) restrained from choosing any of sentences.

3.1.4. Task I, Task II, Task III – Answers to Question no. 2

Table 5. Choice in numbers and in %

No.of statements	TASK I		TASK II		TASK III	
	numbers	%	numbers	%	numbers	%
1.	1	0.90	12	10.81	9	8.11
2.	26	23.42	3	2.70	6	5.40
3.	0	0.00	0	0.00	12	10.81
4.	4	3.60	25	22.53	35	31.54
5.	5	4.50	4	3.60	10	9.01
6.	0	0.00	7	6.31	7	6.31
7.	0	0.00	6	5.40	1	0.90
8.	7	6.31	42	37.84	1	0.90
9.	13	11.71	1	0.90	5	4.50
10.	5	4.50	7	6.31	4	3.60

TASK I

Over 45 % (50 in numbers) of the subjects were not satisfied with the proposed answers in Task I (question no. 2.). Nevertheless, their independent choice was mainly connected with the statements under no.2 or no.9. The formulation of their answers given in no.11 was either more condensed or elaborated.

Examples of condensed answers:

“Bush plans to introduce changes in his mass media involvement” (*J.L.*);

“Bush’s plans about his future press conferences” (*anonymous*);

“Bush’s view on the role of press is entirely different from that of Reagan’s” (*B.N.*);

“Bush’s plans to reform his contacts with the press” (*A.S.*);

“Bush wants to establish a different relations from Reagan’s with mass media” (*S.C.*);

“Bush plans to reform his contacts with the press” (*anonymous*).

Such condensed answers were provided, with some subtle modifications (e.g.: “quite” instead of “completely”; “some changes” instead of “changes”; “quite different” instead of “entirely different”), by 29 subjects.

The elaborate answers under no.11 presented a kind of summary of the text or/and individual interpretation (20 subjects). Here are examples of the most frequent formulations:

“Bush plans to change the way of gaining information about his political decisions by journalists -it will be different from Reagen’s way and it will be limited and more precise” (*anonymous.*);

“I think that Bush wants to introduce a completely new style of being a politician in comparison with Reagen, which will be reflected in his different contact with media” (*E.L.*);

“Bush wants to improve the relationship with the press and the quality of the flow of information which would be quite different from the Reagen’s” (*anonymous*);

“Ronald Reagan will serve as an example of how to gain support for Bush’s plans through media though many changes will be introduced, especially the photo opportunities which would defuse conflicts with the reporters” (*anonymous*);

“Bush plans to introduce changes in his relation with the press which would differ from President Reagan’s way of announcing information by limiting presence in media”(A.S.);

“George Bush wants to create a better presidential image of his own by controlling the frequency of his appearance at media”(K.R.);

“Bush plans to change the White House relation with press in such a way that backfire would be eliminated – less spontaneous conference, more regular press conferences with a small group of journalists”(anonymous).

The elaborate answers under no.11 presented a kind of summary of the text or/and individual interpretations.

The 49 respondents out of 50 (excluding the answer: “Bush is unsatisfied with the media”-[P.C].-c.f. TABLE 5, sentence no.1- which is wrong), who endeavoured to answer question no.2 of Task I independently, both in a condensed and elaborate way, were right in decoding the main topic of the text.

3.2. Summing up of the results

TASK I

In total, there were 88 subjects (which makes 78.39%) who proved to understand the message contained in the text. It is not an imposing result forasmuch as it was a text prepared for secondary school students.

TASK II

There were 4 students who decided to formulate the answer to question no.2 on their own under point 11 (see Table 5):

(1) “The speech is a kind of coquetry of the Superpower” (J.D-G.);

(2) “Each of us can do a lot for our welfare – it is very encouraging” (J.G.);

(3) “The USA as the guard of liberty” (A.S.);

(4) “America will not ensure us liberty and freedom unless we do our best to achieve this common goal” (R.G.).

Statement (2) and statement (4) quoted above may be treated as being close to the suggested statements under no.4 and under no.8 (see [Appendix III](#)), whereas comments expressed in point (1) contains an amount of unfavourable criticism towards the USA. Statement (3) stands in opposite to statement (1) – it expresses a kind of admiration for the USA. Thus the two opposite comments [(1) # (3)] do not add anything to support the conviction about the students’ ability to understand a political text; they only signal that among the young generation there exists a tendency to believe in the power of the USA or to negate its power as to the role in ensuring freedom in the world. Out of the 10 suggested answers, no.4 and no.8 seem to be most adequate, with preference to no.8. TABLE 5 shows that 25 subjects chose suggestion no.4 and 42 chose suggestion no.8. Adding 1 subject to each of the two suggestions out of those who formulated their answers on their own under no 11 [(2);(4)], there were 26 subjects who agreed with the idea put under no 4 (23.42%) and 43 (38.73%) who preferred the statement under no.8. In total there were 69 subjects (62.15%), out of 111, who answered question no.2 in a correct way.

TASK III

The construction of the questions in TASK I (question 2.) and in TASK II (both questions) were a kind of “camouflage”: the regularity of the questions (except TASK I,

question no.1) was to make it less obvious that in TASK III both questions had no grounds in the artificial text for being answered.

Question no. 2, as mentioned above, was supposed not to be answered. Instead, it was presupposed that the respondents would comment under no. 11 on the artificiality of the text, providing reasons for being unable to answer both question no. 1 and question no.2. Unfortunately, though all the subjects chose one of the proposed statements as an answer to question no.1 (see TABLE 4.), there were only 4 students whose comments (under no.11) proved that they could read a text in a critical way. Here are their comments:

(1) "The main subject or rather aim of the speech is to make someone listen but not to understand" [B.W.];

(2) "An obscure text whose aim is unclear" [S.C.];

(3) "It's hopeless" [J.L.];

(4) "The text is difficult to follow. The train of thought is not sustained"[anonymous].

Suchlike answers/comments from the respondents were expected by the author.

The answers of the remaining 17 students under no. 11 (see Table 5) were as vague and senseless as the whole text. Therefore there is no need to present any examples of their formulations.

TASK III, which was of crucial importance as to the university students' ability of critical thinking reflected in critical reading, showed that the students under investigation were totally reliable on the text which was presented to them in the written form. They seemed to believe that any information passed to them in print must have its topic, goal and reliable information.

4. Comparison of the results obtained in 'step one' and in 'step two' with the focus on the research questions

The initial research consisting of 'step one' and 'step two' investigation was to answer the following research questions:

1) "Are University students able to decode the main ideas contained in a political text?"

2) "Are they able to use their critical thinking to detect messages hidden in a vague language?"

4.1. 'Step one'

On the basis of the results obtained in 'step one' the answers to both research questions were unsatisfactory. The reasons are as follows:

TASK I

Even though the majority of the respondents (85.45%) were right in their answers to Question no.1, the fact that 14.55% of the university students were wrong in deciding whether a given statement is true or false proves that their ability to detect messages hidden in a vague language characteristic for political texts are not fully satisfactory (*research question no. 2/*), the more that the task was designed for secondary school students.

Question no.2 of the same Task showed the students' tendency to form their answers in such a general way that none of the answers could be rejected; the messages in the

statements are intermingled with interpretation. Therefore, the students who formulated their answers to this question appear to be unable to separate facts from their hidden interpretation, which points at their inability to think in a critical way (research question no. 1).

TASK II

Answers to question no. 1 and to question no. 2 are more clear for interpretation. The discrepancy between the answers lies either in historically orientated approach to the text – sentence no. 1 – 20% displayed this orientation, or up-to-date orientated approach – sentence no. 4 – 80% of the respondents. In the aspect of our Polish history and present realia, the results may be treated as being satisfactory (research question no. 1).

TASK III

The majority of the students (74 out of 84 which makes 88.09%) answered the questions without much care about the nonsense of the speech; their answers to Question no. 1 must have been accidental. The 10 students (11.91%) who did not answer this question, giving their explanations for not doing so in answers to Question no. 2. of this Task, may be treated as exceptions to the overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, the attitude to both the 3 students of English and the 7 students of Fine Arts cannot be ignored. They belong to the small group of students who possess the ability of critical reading – they may be treated as those hopeful exceptions who seem to be on the proper direction in the area of comprehending hidden messages or decoding their hidden interpretation.

On the whole, however, the results are unsatisfactory (research question no. 1 and 2).

4.2. 'Step two'

TASK I

Although the number of subjects consisting this sample was larger than in 'step one', the right answers to Question no. 1 was similar in percentage – 85.45% ('step one'); 86.48% ('step two'). Therefore the results are again treated as not fully satisfactory (research question no. 2).

TASK II

Answering Question no. 1, 90.10% of the subjects chose sentence no. 1 and 7.20% chose sentence no. 4 (the remaining 2.70% of subjects who chose sentence no. 2 will not be commented at the moment). The shift towards sentence no.1 (80% in 'step one'; 90.10% in 'step two') shows that the respondents' tendency towards up-to-date orientation has grown by 10.10% within two years (the measure in 'step one' was taken on the 26th of March, 1996; the measure in 'step two' was taken on the 14th of March, 1998).

Taking into consideration the current political scenery in Poland and our historical past, we may accept the results obtained in both 'steps' as being satisfactory (research question no. 1).

As to question no. 2, 'step one' results showed the students' lack of precision in formulating the answers and lack of consequent logical thinking. Therefore, the results were treated as unsatisfactory (research question no. 2).

In 'step two', where the respondents were guided by the suggestions indicated in 10 statements plus 1 (= no. 11): "your own statement or comment", the results were much

better. In consequence, there were 69 subjects out of 111 (62.42%) who answered the question in a correct way. Nevertheless the results are beyond objective expectation (the 4th year students of English); overall the results should be treated as unsatisfactory (research question no.2).

TASK III

In spite of the fact that the students under investigation were provided with a hint under no. 11, where they were encouraged to make comments on the artificiality of the text instead of choosing one of the 10 nonsensical statements, there were only 4 (3.60%) who did so in question no. 2. Paradoxically, all the 111 subjects chose one of the sentences as being of crucial importance in the speech in question no. 1. On the whole, the results are unsatisfactory (research question no. 1 and 2).

5. Conclusions

After having compared the results obtained in 'step one' and in 'step two', the final conclusion is that the samples consisting of university students lack the ability to think critically while reading and evaluating political texts. In consequence, they proved not to be able to decode messages hidden in the specific language of political propaganda. Therefore the answer to the research questions no. 1 and 2 is negative. It is amazing that even though the respondents were 'pushed' to express comments of their own under no. 11 ('step two'), especially when it came to answer question 2, Task III – they failed to take the advantage.

Therefore, on the basis of the results obtained both in 'step one' and in 'step two', we can conclude that the students under investigation do not possess the ability of critical thinking necessary to decode hidden messages passed to them in a vague language.

It seems to be necessary to introduce special activities during comprehension classes so as to increase the receivers' ability to think in a critical way while reading (or listening to) texts, especially political texts, in order not to be lead astray by the hidden intention of the messenger. The problem needs special attention nowadays, when the political scenery changes rapidly both in Poland and in other previous 'satellite' countries. Perhaps such special activities increasing the learners' critical thinking should be used very early, starting from primary schools with pupils over 11 (cf. the text book for learners of Polish by Jędrychowska and Kłokówna, 1997), through secondary schooling to university studies.

Appendixes

Appendix I – The text: "BUSH and the MEDIA"

"George Bush's plans to bring more civility to White House press relations could backfire, some top aides fear. To eliminate the circus atmosphere of shouted questions that plagued Ronald Reagan's photo opportunities and to defuse conflict with reporters, Bush plans more regular press conferences – though fewer in prime time. Also: more informal give-and-take "under the wing of Air Force One, in small groups, and frequently in the briefing room ... with very little notice," a top Bush official predicts. But some staffers fear losing the press as a foil. The shouting won sympathy for Ronald Reagan and laughs for his one-liners. There also might be less TV coverage of daily events if questions are cut off and less Bush on the

evening news. Bush also wants to eliminate "protective" pool coverage of his unannounced trips to movies or for Chinese food. "He' ll fight this battle but he' ll lose," an insider predicts. "The press secretary will catch too much hell to let him out by himself." One Reagan media staple that probably will disappear: the ritual Saturday-afternoon radio address. Bush prefers spontaneity. "They're not his style," says one staffer. "And the ratings are real low."

Question no. 1 – *True or False ?*

1. George Bush plans fewer press conferences in future [F]
2. Ronald Reagan shouted his answers at press conference [F]
3. Ronald Reagan's conference resembled a circus [T]
4. George Bush will be less seen on TV [T]
5. George Bush will address the nation on the radio every Saturday afternoon [F]
6. George Bush prefers to meet journalists in small groups [T]

(Górska, Siedlecka-Orzeł 1990: *Can you read Newsweek*. Warszawa: C.D.N., p. 31)

Question no.2 – *Which of the following statements is the main topic of the speech?*

(The statements are taken from the answers formulated by the student in 'step one')

Appendix II – The text

Dear Citizens!

(1) Let every nation know whether its wishes lie well or ill that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. (2) And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. (3) My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you – (4) but ask what together we can do for the freedom of man (taken from JFK speeches put on the memorial wall at Arlington).

Question no. 1 – *Which of the 4 sentences is of crucial importance in the speech?*

Question no. 2 – *Which of the following statements is the main topic of the speech?*

(The statements are taken from the answers formulated by the student in 'step one')

1. Freedom of nations as a task for all citizens.
2. All people are created equal and all of us should equally fight for freedom in our own countries.
3. Brotherhood of men.
4. Encouraging people to participate in the action or in some plans aimed at protecting liberty of men.
5. This speech underlines the importance of all the nations.
6. The USA politics for freedom of men.
7. Do not be passive and expect us to help you. Try to be active and help yourselves.
8. The success of liberty and freedom of men is our common goal that we should strive at.
9. Men' s effort to support freedom in the world.
10. Freedom and rights for men.
11. Your own statement or comment.

Appendix III – The text (*translated from the Polish original by the 4th year students of English*)

(1) Higher ideological assumptions as well as the commencement of the common action of shaping attitudes help to prepare, to formulate, and to put into action the model of development. (2) Everyday life experience proves that further development of various

forms of activity plays an important role in creating directions of new proposals.(3)On the other hand, constant growth in the amount and range of our activity compels us to analyse the existing administrative and financial conditions.(4)This way, strengthening and developing the structures cause appreciation of the importance of the system of the stuff' s education, relevant to the required needs.(5)Let us not forget, however, that the realisation of the outlined programme tasks plays an essential role in shaping the directions of up-to-date education. (6) Similarly, constant propaganda information concerning our activities helps to prepare and realise the forms of influence.(7) Various and rich experiences, consultations with numerous activists enable a large group to become involved in shaping attitudes towards the demanding put forward by the organisations”.

Question no. 1 – *Which of the 7 sentence is of crucial importance in the speech?*

Question no. 2 – *Which of the following statements is the main topic of the speech?*

1. Realisation of the goal concerning the development of attitudes and general development of people as assigned by the programme.
2. ‘Disinformation’ concerning the goal of the organisation.
3. The goal of further education of teachers and the problems connected with this goal.
4. Ideological assumptions, various forms of the organisation and the range of its activity in realising of its goals – these are the factors influencing the development of the attitudes of the members of the organisation as well as of the society.
5. How to make people follow the ways of the organisation.
6. Shaping and creating attitudes by special methods or means in order to achieve self development and proper behaviour of the workers.
7. Progress in educational system.
8. Generalisation on activity, structure and future of an unknown organisation
9. The goals set for members of a given organisation which may be responsible for shaping attitudes connected with the outlook on life.
10. The speaker focuses on the aims which are to be fulfilled to create or shape the way of behaviour of an individual.
11. Your own statement or comment.

Appendix IV

UNIWERSALNA ŚCIAĞACZKA ZEBRANIOWA

Dowolne zdanie z rubryki I należy połączyć z dowolnym zdaniem z rubryki II, III i IV, a otrzyma się przemówienie na dowolną okazję. Ilość możliwych kombinacji wystarczy na 40 godzin przemówień. Anonimowego autora tej ściągaczki prosimy o skontaktowanie się z redakcją.

I	II	III	IV
koleżanki i koledzy	realizacja nakreślonych zadań programowych	zmusza nas do przeanalizowania	istniejących warunków administracyjno – finansowych
z drugiej strony	zakres i miejsce szkolenia kadr	spełnia istotną rolę w kształtowaniu	dalszych kierunków rozwoju
podobnie	stały wzrost ilości i zakres naszej aktywności	wymaga sprecyzowania i określenia	systemu powszechnego uczestnictwa
nie zapominajmy jednak, że	aktualna struktura organizacji	pomaga w przygotowaniu i realizacji	postaw uczestników wobec zadań stawianych przez organizację
w ten sposób	nowy model działalności organizacyjnej	zabezpiecza udział szerokiej grupie w kształtowaniu	nowych propozycji
praktyka dnia codziennego dowodzi, że	dalszy rozwój różnych form działalności	spełnia ważne zadanie w wypracowaniu	kierunków postępowego wychowania
wagi i znaczenia tych problemów nie trzeba szerzej udowadniać, ponieważ	stałe zabezpieczenie informacyjno-propagandowe naszej działalności	umożliwia w większym stopniu tworzenie	systemu szkolenia kadry odpowiadającego potrzebom
różnorakie i bogate doświadczenia	wzmocnienie i rozwijanie struktur	powoduje docenianie wagi	odpowiednich warunków aktywizacji
troska organizacji, a szczególnie	konsultacja z szerokim aktywem	przedstawia interesującą próbę sprawdzenia	modelu rozwoju
wyższe założenia ideowe, a także	rozpoczęcie powszechnej akcji kształtowania postaw	pociąga za sobą proces wdrażania i unowocześniania	form oddziaływania

(taken from the Polish weekly Polityka, published in the late 1970s)

Bibliography

- Bralczyk J. (1987). *O języku polskiej propagandy politycznej lat siedemdziesiątych*. Uppsala.
- Bralczyk J. (1981). Poza prawdą i fałszem. *Teksty* 6, 122-133.
- Bralczyk J. (1991). Strategie propagandy politycznej. In: J. Bartmiński, R. Grzegorzczkova (eds.), *Język a kultura. Vol.4: Funkcje języka i wypowiedzi*. Wrocław.
- Barańczak S. (1975). Słowo – perswazja – kultura masowa. *Twórczość* 4, 44-57.
- Channell J. (1994). What is vague language? In: J. Sinclair, R. Carter (eds), *Vague Language*. Oxford University Press, 5-20.
- Dąbrowska A. (1991). Językowy obraz przeciwnika politycznego. In: J. Bartmiński, R. Grzegorzczkova (eds.), *Język a kultura. Vol.4: Funkcje języka i wypowiedzi*. Wrocław, 115-148.
- Deese J. (1974). Towards a psychological theory of the meaning of sentence. In: A. Silverstein (ed.), *Human communication: Theoretical explorations*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Association.
- Finkelstein J.J. (1979). Early Mesopotamia, 2500-1000 BC. In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 1*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Frysztacka-Szkróbka U. (1999). Critical thinking in the process of acquiring comprehension skills. In: M. Wysocka (ed.), *On language theory and practice. Vol. 2*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 155-168.
- Głowiński M. (1991a). *Marcowe gadanie*. Warszawa: PEN.
- Głowiński M. (1991b). *Nowomowa po polsku*. Warszawa: PEN.
- Jędrychowska M., Kłakówna Z.A. (1997). *To lubiê. Podręcznik do nauki jêzyka polskiego, klasa 5. Teksty i zadania. Książka ucznia*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne.
- Killian L.M. (1979). The respect revolution: Freedom and equality. In: L.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 3*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Lasswell H.D. (1979). Must science serve political power? In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier, (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 3*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Mead M. (1979). Continuities in communication from early man to modern times. In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier, (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 1*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Richards J.C., Platt J., Platt H. (eds.) (1993). *Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Harlow: Longman.
- Rogow A.A. (1979). Love and intimacy: Mass media and phallic culture. In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier, (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 3*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Spengler J.J. (1979). Rising expectations: Frustration. In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier, (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 3*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Weisner J.B. (1979). The marriage of science and government. In: H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner, H. Speier, (eds.), *Propaganda and communication. Vol. 3*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Wojtasik L. (1973). *Zarys psychologii propagandy*. Warszawa: PWN.