'LESS IS MORE' --- RECONFIGURING 'SIMPLIFIED' MODELS FOR ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

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"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."
--A. Einstein

Abstract

The core postulate from which this paper proceeds is that there is a widening chasm between small privileged islands of middle-class learners of EFL across the developing world, the "EFL haves" -- and the masses of working-class learners and ordinary poor folks, the "EFL have-nots". Money talks English, and generates vast inequity. Equity and fairness demand we strike out on new paths. Basic human rights in the 21st century suggest that ideally, all individuals on this planet should have a right to learn an efficient, compact lingua franca for trans-cultural communication. In most rural and low-income learning environments, few students have the time or means to climb the ladder to intermediate proficiency in 'full' English. Other options need to be experimented with.

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The TESOL profession, at least in part, needs to re-explore in depth and experiment with reduced, simplified, 'minimalist' forms of English as an auxiliary language for the multitudes within the broader matrix of the pedagogy of ELF (Seidlehofer, 2004). The goal is the effective teaching and rapid learning of a simplified lingua franca for the global working classes.

Minimalist Models Re-emergent

The past six years have witnessed an upsurge in interest of simplified ELF for a variety of purposes within global communication. Six models for an alternative lingua franca learning agenda are central here:

1) BASIC 850 as pioneered by Ogden and Richards beginning in 1930. The establishment of the online Basic English Institute (http://www.basic-english.org) in 2003 has made numerous books and articles on BASIC 850 accessible to all, and galvanized renewed interest. BASIC 850 is the grandfather of all present 'reduced' versions of English as an international language.

2) Everyman's English (developed by I. Richards at Harvard University 1940-1979), a spin-off of BASIC 850 that has an amplified lexical core of about 950 words. A form of Everyman's has been taught now for several decades in Japan, known as GDM or Graded Direct Method (Katagiri & Constable 1993). The superb BASIC textbook *English Through Pictures* by Richards and Gibson, the foundation stone of GDM, has just been reissued in Toronto (2005) in a revised and updated edition. That initiative is due to the work of educators connected with Frontier College in Canada and is a unique experiment in working class literacy education now over 100 years old (Robinson 2006; see http://www.frontiercollege.ca). It is sparking fresh interest in experimenting today with Richards' materials and ideas.

3) Recent work on Basic Global English is another direction. Joachim Grzega's experimental model centering on 750 words, plus 250 words of the student's choosing, is currently being developed and brought to the stage of experimental teaching at the Catholic University in Eichstätt, Germany. This model, based largely on frequency, has been launched and will perhaps soon be taught experimentally to adult learners (Grzega 2006a; 2006b).
4) Globish in France, is a 1,500-word mini-English or 'English Lite' being vigorously propagated from France by the former IBM vice-president Jean-Paul Nerrière (2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). Globish has had considerable publicity in the press (Cohen 2006; Macintyre 2006; Ring 2007), and has attracted interest in places like Korea, Spain, Japan and Brazil. Globish was featured in a BBC interview with Nerrière and the linguist H.G.Widdowson ("The World Today," 2 January 2007).

5) Simplified Technical English (STE), was originally used especially in the aerospace and defense industries, but now expanding into other areas of business and technology (Wijma & Dekker 2004).

6) There is heightened interest in a well-established paradigm of reduced English, Special English (SE) as developed by the Voice of America --- launched in 1959 and still going strong. SE is based on a 1,500-word core vocabulary, and a simplified syntax and slow rhythm of delivery as a spoken language It is used for news and feature programming on the Voice of America, and the internet. Globish is modeled in some ways on the Special English of Voice of America, but is for active use, not just listening and reading. Special English is well worth the special attention of the TESOL profession in developing fresh approaches to teaching simpler English for production skills, and is available both online and on short wave (http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish). Surprisingly, there has been virtually no published research on Special English since its launching in 1959 (Gollust, 2006). SE has a number of lexical items specific to news reporting, which Globish does not foreground. Significantly, spoken discourse analysts are also beginning to stress that a core of 1,500 highest-frequency lexical items is sufficient for proficiency in most kinds of conversation, with formulaic "chunking," fillers, and other elements of spoken lexis and syntax (Foley 2007). Is such a 1,500 lexical core a reasonable 'plateau level' target for the multitude of learners, or what West (1956) called a 'plateau vocabulary for speech'?

In a similar vein, another ongoing initiative in cyberspace is the emergence of the Simple English Wikipedia (http://simple.wikipedia.org), a linguistically simplified form of the Wikipedia people's encyclopedia on the Web that reflects an interest in democratizing knowledge by simplification and greater clarity of
presentation, making the Internet more 'understandable' to both native and non-native users of English. There are now over 14,000 pages.

Basic 850

Basic 850 is a simplified auxiliary language, with (surprisingly enough) only 16 verbs ('operators') - come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take, be, do, have, say, see, send, along with may and will, plus 20 "directives" (prepositions and particles) - conceiving of verbs as "directional actions": "there are 4000 common verbs in the English language which may be similarly displaced by the sixteen operators" (Ogden 1937). Of the 850 core words, 513 are monosyllabic, a further 254 have penultimate stress, reducing problems with stress which have proved particularly difficult for speakers of some Southeast and East Asian tone languages.

A micro lingua franca. Basic 850 is engineered to be capable of expressing even quite complex thought. Of course, its reliance on a battery of largely 'delexicalized' verbs with particles has provoked criticism as a highly artificial stripping of most higher-frequency verbs from the core vocabulary.

BASIC ENGLISH was developed in the 1930s and 40s by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards. One of the major literary theorists of the 20th century, Richards was a pioneer with C. K. Ogden in linguistic semantics. Their book on meaning (Ogden and Richards 1923) provided the original basis for work on BASIC, when they discovered that they could define anything in English (and thus 'say' anything important, any common 'proposition') using less than 1,000 words, a 'leveraged' semantic core. That core is the very heart of Basic 850, not a lexical list of the most 'frequent' words but something significantly different.

The famous BASIC word list - the 100 Operation Words, the 600 Things (400 General and 200 Pictured), the 100 Qualities and the 50 Opposites -- put in columns on a single sheet of paper is an emblem of that economy in learning effort, compactness of presentation, and the separation of the "functional" from the "content" words (http://ogden.basic-english.org/words.html).

BASIC is not 'simplified' English for elementary learners, it is a remarkable
tool far more flexible and sophisticated in its power of expression and clarity. An all-purpose auxiliary language suited for business, administrative, scientific, instructional and commercial uses, it is "not merely a list of words, governed by a minimum apparatus of essential English grammar, but a highly organized system designed throughout to be as easy as possible for a learner" (Richards 1943: 21). *The General Basic English Dictionary* (Orthological Institute, 1940) gives 40,000 meanings of 20,000 words in Standard English, all defined in minimal BASIC. Ogden was guided, as Richards stressed, by "the balancing and ordering of many rival claims - simplicity, ease of learning, scope, clarity, naturalness - all to be as far as possible satisfied and reconciled" (Katagiri and Constable 1993: 50).

Even as interest in BASIC waned after the mid-1950s, I. Richards vigorously continued to promote an expanded form of BASIC which he called Everyman's English (Russo 1989: 397-410). His last working day was spent lecturing on his form of BASIC in China in 1979 shortly before his death (Koenke 2004: 210ff.).

BASIC is not conceived as a stepping stone to 'full English' but as a self-contained mini-ELF, where you learn to say 'bring together' instead of 'integrate,' 'come across' instead of 'find,' 'go beyond' instead of 'exceed,' 'keep in memory' instead of 'remember.' Instructors aim primarily at teaching learners a very high level of control, massively recycled in a tight learning spiral and where much reading material is made available in BASIC 850, so that students can continue to read and learn in it. Extensive reading is a primary post-instruction goal for autonomous users of BASIC.

As Sir Edward Tandy stated in 1939:

[BASIC's] aim is to give every pupil a complete mastery of every word and idiom within its limited vocabulary; so that when he has finished the course, and followed it by reading various Basic books on general subjects, he will be able to speak and write in Basic as correctly and fluently as in his own language. Once he has reached this stage, he can say anything he wishes to say in clear grammatical English; and if he wishes to go on to complete English, all his further studies can be easily fitted into this living framework with which he is thoroughly familiar (Katagiri & Constable 1993: 46).
Barbara Seidlhofer, a major scholar in the emerging field of ELF, has argued that "Basic ... is highly significant as a stimulus for thought. What now needs to be done is to see how far Ogden's conceptual scheme relates to (the still very scarce) empirical findings of how people actually use English as a lingua franca" (2002: 295). In 1939, based on several years' experience across China, most especially in Yunnan province, Richards stated: "we are now satisfied that we can in two years give a sounder and more promising introduction to general English than has formerly been given in six" (Katagiri & Constable 1993: 61). This claim needs to be re-explored empirically for our time. It will also be useful to examine the potential of recent work in "simpler syntax" (Culicover 2005), a response to "minimalist syntax" (Chomsky 1995) and its complexities, for better modeling syntax and semantics in BASIC.

Democratizing Knowledge. Reading for the Multitude

There is need for a wealth of serious reading materials of all kinds in that more simplified form of English as an instrument for democratizing knowledge, for 'talking science and humanities' which is a more 'analytic' medium. Not 'graded readers,' but another species of discourse for the global multitude. Among desiderata, we need a newspaper in BASIC online, and much more literature written in BASIC broadly disseminated in cheap editions. Ogden had a dream of a "Basic Library of General Knowledge covering the sciences in 1,000 divisions -- all so cheap that no workingman would be without them," along with "a Basic Parallel Library of 1,000 books giving the Basic form of the works of great writers of the present and past and on the opposite page the words of the writer himself, so that everyone would at last have a chance of learning any language in which he might be interested" (Ogden 1930).

Ivor Richards published a remarkable shortened version of Homer's Iliad (Richards 1950) is a prime example of how world literature can be 'translated' into powerful more simple texts, as is his version of Plato's Republic (Richards 1942a), which was issued as a paperback for troops in the U.S. armed forces. This also grew out of Richards' teaching of Basic in China.
Class Matters

At some level, what is central here is how we in EFL approach the reality of class in the classroom, the needs of the mass of non-privileged learners from working families everywhere. TESOL in East Asia needs to link up with new approaches to working-class pedagogies (Linkon 1999; Russo & Linkon 2005) now developing in North America and elsewhere as it re-conceptualizes its own priorities and imperatives. Research directions at the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University are paradigmatic (see http://www.as.ysu.edu/~cwcs).

Some Core Advantages of BASIC 850

In sum, the advantages of such an auxiliary "language within a language" are evident:

1. It is far easier to learn than climbing the endless Everest of 'full' or 'complete' English.

2. It is much faster to learn, on average in 200 hours of classroom instruction, instead of the thousands of hours and large sums of money now wasted.

3. It equips learners to say even complex ideas. As Ogden wrote: it would make it "possible to say all that we normally desire to say," with no more words than can be put in compact form on a one-page word list (Ogden 1930: 9): "In Basic English, the end of the work is in view all the time" (Ogden 1932: viii).

4. It is based on a form of 'leveraged' semantics: "Basic English is a system in which 850 English words will do the work of 20,000, and so give to everyone a second or international language which will take as little of the learner's time as possible" (Ogden 1932: viii).

5. It remains far easier to train teachers of this mini-form for the public schools.

6. It can be taught to L1 speakers for communicating with L2 speakers, to create a more even playing field in World English. This was a central idea in Ogden's work.

7. It can be taught even in low-resourced learning environments, and to large classes.
8. It helps to turn off what Krashen (1985) calls "affective filters," emotions like the fear of "losing face" that keep many of our students from opening their mouths. BASIC creates "low-anxiety" learning spaces, because it is compact and can be mastered, thus generating higher levels of user confidence. Moreover, students know their interlocutors are using a limited lexis, on an even, reduced "playing field" of communication.

9. BASIC 850 ensures exceptionally high levels of what Krashen calls "comprehensible input," because of extensive prolonged reading in BASIC texts, a separate vast readily comprehensible textual universe as envisioned by Ogden and other architects of BASIC: "the Comprehension Hypothesis ... claims that we can enjoy real language use right away: we can listen to stories, read books, and engage in interesting conversations as soon as they are comprehensible" (Krashen 2004). That aspect of 'fluency' focus is also stressed by Nation (2004) in his stress on graded readers.

10. BASIC can be taught as a compact basis for English for Science and other forms of ESP, including English for Business. Scientists often know their technical lexis, but need the scaffolding of control of core grammar and general vocabulary, and to say it as simply as possible.

11. BASIC 850 was conceived as a tool for heightening 'language awareness' among L2 learners and among L1 speakers. Many experiments were done in 'vertical translation,' translating 'full English' into BASIC (Richards & Gibson 1974). Richards (1942b) centers on 100 key BASIC words and how to "read efficiently," using techniques of 'vertical translation.'

12. Empirical research in China in the 1930s and 1940s under Richards, and in Israel in the 1960s, suggested BASIC was highly effective and easy to learn quickly. We need new concrete pilot studies in the field now.

13. As a non-native English lingua franca, owned by the world, it decolonizes English for world communication. No one is an L1 user of BASIC.

14. It poses less threat to 'full English' or other languages of the learner, because it is itself not a 'full language' with a culture, a literature, a whole identity bound up with its use. Nerrière (2004; 2005a) argues precisely along these lines for Globish in France, where
many think English becomes a kind of linguistic invader, exerting pressure on the very core of French identity through language.

15. BASIC ENGLISH 850 can of course serve as a remarkably solid foundation for the far smaller number of learners who may want to try to master 'complete English.' That is not a point of central dispute.

16. The crisis in low-cost effective ESOL for adult immigrant learners in the United States (Santos 2007) cries out for new ideas, as the demand for learning English in cost-free or low-cost study environments far exceeds any 'market' supply. Experiments with 'less is more' models like BASIC 850 need to be expanded, precisely for this very high-priority segment of learners who are today being badly shortchanged by the contradictions of ESOL's stateside political economy of scarcity of classes and teachers to meet a need for more simplified models of immigrant ESOL for job-related and neighborhood-rooted everyday needs.

Simplified Technical English (STE)

Space here precludes discussion of some of BASIC 850's current close cousins, but future experimentation can look to some fusion between these models in a search for a more optimal Simplified English. Of great interest is the rapidly developing sub-area of Simplified Technical English, a "plained-down" form of English for Specific Purposes. The prime model for this Simplified English for Special Purposes is a controlled language with a core vocabulary of 800 words, plus so-called company-specific technical lexis. STE utilizes 57 grammatical rules, avoids the passive construction, generally suggests one topic per sentence, and sticks to a range of 20-25 words per sentence maximum. It was originally intended for the aerospace and defense industries (ASD-STE100), but now has spread to ever more industrial branches. STE originally developed from Ogden's BASIC 850 as Caterpillar Fundamental English in the 1970s, flowing into work on standardized Aviation English in the 1980s. It is being promoted by several commercial firms, among which Tedopres in the Netherlands is particularly active (Wijma & Dekker 2004: 57). TESOLers working in any sphere of English for Science and Technology, or English for Business, can profit from the broad experience now available in using STE. A handy STE "check tool" to assess whether a text conforms to prescribed guidelines, the HyperSTE, can be obtained from Tedopres (http:/
Relevant here is also the inventive work of the International Civil Aviation English Association: "The field of aviation English has never been so busy or the challenges facing us so great" (http://www.icaea.pata.pl/).

The Challenge of Plain Language: Simplify, Simplify

Related to all this is a related development inside applied rhetoric for English as a native language: PLAIN ENGLISH. Convinced that we need a simpler, plainer 'downsized' English discourse for L1 speakers --- in government, in the media, in many spheres of English for business, in law and medicine, on the Internet, in school textbooks -- the PLAIN ENGLISH movement is now burgeoning in a number of countries, the BANA (Britain, America, New Zealand and Australia) countries, and some others. Florida governor Charlie Crist (2007) issued a directive soon after taking office mandating the use of Plain English in all government documents and communication with citizens in the state of Florida, called the "Plain Language Initiative." The PLI mandates communicating with workers in language they recognize and really use. It specifies "clear language that is commonly used by the intended audience," and "only the information needed by the recipient, should be presented in a logical sequence and in short sentences" (Crist 2007).

I can envision a convergence of work around (a) BASIC 850 and its cousins in English as a lingua franca for the world, (b) research and practice in aviation English and STE and (c) the Plain English movement, efforts to make native L1 English more comprehensible to the great masses (see http://plainlanguagenetwork.org).

Bureau Taal in the Netherlands has some intriguing relevant insights about why a plainer, simpler language is needed in order to communicate with the great mass of working families:

We have found that texts are often too difficult for numerous readers. The language use is too complicated for the target group. Language may be divided into six levels, with A1 being the lowest level and C2 the highest level, on a scale ranging from A1 and A2, to B1 and B2, to C1 and C2. Research shows us that 55% of the US and 45% of the UK population have a maximum proficiency level of B1. Most texts,
however, are written at level C1. This is an important cause of mis-
communication. … Many newspapers that try to write in plain lan-
guage write at levels B2 or B1. However, there are hardly any texts at
levels A2 or A1. Yet it is possible to write down all of the information
in our advanced society at language level A2. Whether it is a text
about infant nutrition or a text about complex stock options, the infor-
mation can always be written at level A2, without losing valuable in-
formation (Texamen 2006).

The implications of this contention - level A2 is sufficient for most kinds
of communication -- are enormous. Democratic, equity-based societies
need egalitarian, understandable discourse geared to what mass audi-
ences can readily comprehend. Why is our discourse so unnecessarily
complex?

As plain-language analyst DuBay stresses (2007a):

Plain English can be taught even earlier in grammar school. The prob-
lem is that tradition favors teaching children that good writing is more
complex and difficult. They get rewarded for learning how to write
difficult language, with dependent clauses, and lots of prepositions,
adjectives, and such. At least by fifth grade, we should back up a bit
and show them how to communicate in simple language. Simplicity
will help them find a style that is both transparent and vigorous.

A big problem in schools is that we don’t teach students the practical-
ity of reading and writing in their real world. […] even for many adults,
it is a big revelation to realize that difficulty in reading is often a fault of
the text, something not matching the intended audience.

Writing in his Newsletter on readability, DuBay stresses that while the
flashy design of the new Orange County Post in California seems geared
to a younger audience, it is:

written at an average 12th-grade level, two grades above The New
York Times and USA Today. That makes it one of the most diffi-
cult papers in the country, right up there with the struggling L.A.
Times, the Boston Globe, and its own parent, the Orange County
Register. The world's most successful English tabloid, the UK's Daily
Mirror, is written at the 9th-grade level. [...] Publishers who target families with at least $70,000 annual income miss 3/4ths of their potential readers. According to the latest surveys, only 13% of U.S. adults read at the 12th-grade level, a good four grades above the average reading level of U.S. adults (DuBay 2007b).

For inventive ideas on how to create reading material actually geared to the levels of working-class adult readers, see Dubay's web site (http://www.impact-information.com) and his new book Smart Language (2007c) on modes of readability geared to what ordinary people might feel comfortable to read.

Conclusion

Whatever the aims, we have to start (re)experimenting with BASIC 850 and related minimalist models of English as a lingua franca at the grassroots, especially in Asia, Africa and other parts of the Global South (Anderson 1977; Templer 2006). Now is the time. And as Einstein cautioned: "as simple as possible, but not simpler."

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