

## **Bill Templer**

### **Developing a Research Unit for Simplified English\***

What influence can critical librarians, information workers, cultural workers, teachers, pedagogues, have in working towards a democratic, egalitarian society/economy/polity? (Hill, 2006, 18).

My prime thesis here, in the spirit of Dave Hill's question above, is that the TEFL profession is faced with an evident need it is not adequately addressing. We have to experiment with and research in empirical depth new paths toward a more sustainable -- and more easily learned and retained -- 'clearer, plainer' English among the world's social majorities, and non-privileged learners from working-class, rural and poverty backgrounds everywhere. Too much orientation in our field -- and in global education more generally, shaped by the ethos of 'cultural elites' and their 'meritocracy' -- is toward teaching middle-class learners, too little toward "educating working-class children in their own interest"(Finn, 2009; see also Willis, 1982; Christopher, 2009).

The upshot of this is growing inequality in the effective teaching of EFL as a tool of international communication, and the increasing conversion of English language proficiency into a badge of class privilege, inequity and 'cultural capital.' There is a widening chasm between small islands of privileged 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,' generating vast topographies of inequity in global discourse (Templer, 2008c). This is a phenomenon here in Bulgaria, clearly shaped by social class. In the interest of 'discourse democracy' and a *TESOL of equity and solidarity* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need strategies to resist and counter that.

#### **1. Proposed Research Unit**

I wish to propose the establishment of a >Research Unit for Simplified English<, needed especially in the Global South, for investigating in empirical terms alternatives to the present English language syllabus in the schools, and a simpler version of English for Academic Purposes ('EAP Lite'). One concrete aim is to test specific models of simpler and leaner, more sustainable and significantly 'less complex' English as a lingua franca (ELF) for instruction to the social majorities in many developing countries, and the working-class majorities in the so-called developed economies. To our knowledge, there is no such research unit/center anywhere at present, Global North or South (Templer, 2009).

## **2. Furthering working-class pedagogies of English as a lingua franca**

My guiding thesis suggests that ideally, all individuals on this planet should have the right to learn an efficient, compact lingua franca for inter-cultural communication, in effect *reclaiming the commons of discourse* through pedagogies for plainer talk, as applied in the teaching of English as an additional language (Templer, 2008a; Solomon, 2010). Such a proposed research unit/center is in the interest of average people learning a simpler English to communicate across borders and social boundaries, a globalization “from the bottom-up” (J. Arputham [2009]: [tinyurl.com/69bnbpr](http://tinyurl.com/69bnbpr)) for the Multitude, not the small stratum of a transnational elite, generally drawn from the social and economic middle classes.

>English as a lingua franca for the Social Majorities< is often neglected in linguistic and pedagogical research and practice, and in national syllabi for teaching English across the planet. In many countries, especially in the Global South, only a relatively small minority of learners of English achieve a mid-intermediate level proficiency in English. At present, little more than 1% of the world’s population goes on to tertiary education, and far less to a completed degree. The teaching of English as a lingua franca (ELF) across much rural and working-class education in the Global South -- and many lower-income social ecologies of language learning elsewhere -- faces formidable challenges: a lack of qualified teachers & materials resources, low levels of pupil motivation and achievement among non-privileged learners. And as Ivor Richards pointed out in promoting BASIC ENGLISH decades ago: millions of “largely wasted boy/girl hours” in the ELF classroom.

In SE Asia, experience in Thailand is a striking example of this low level of achievement (Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010, esp. 303-304). As Graham (2008) notes: “The problem occurred when moving to secondary school. A cloud of depression seems to set in as students are confronted with a foe so great as to make them hate English for the rest of their lives.” Mackenzie (2008), commenting on basic problems in TEFL in the Thai state school system, notes: “very low English and teaching skills proficiency levels of teachers; 60-80% of English teachers being non-English majors; poorly resourced schools; shortfall of 50,000 English teachers nationwide.” Brown (2011) echoes this concern: “In my experience, too many Thai English-language teachers can barely speak English themselves, let alone being let loose to teach it to their acquiescent students. There should be an intensive programme to improve the skills of Thai English teachers with the aim of reducing the reliance on so-called native English-speaking teachers.” We need to think more “laterally” about what

teachers and most learners need as a solid basic skill. If we strive toward “putting the brakes on complexity” (Templer, 2008c), we can work to forge a more sustainable TEFL pedagogy in the interest of average working-class learners pretty much everywhere.

But extensive fresh research is needed on what kinds of more ‘downshifted,’ simpler English for the Multitude can actually work. Can it mesh better with individual learner styles, strategies, motivation and self-confidence -- key components in a focus on the learner and the “personal baggage” and social background they bring to the learning process (Cohen, 2010) -- among non-elite ELF acquirers from the working social majorities?

### **3. Focus areas of the RU**

The proposed Research Unit can concentrate on several focus areas:

- **BASIC ENGLISH.** There is need to initiate an array of pilot projects to test the efficacy of teaching a revitalized mode of Ogden & Richards’ BASIC ENGLISH, grounded on 1,000 key words/word families within school systems in a spectrum of language-learning ecologies, both as a ‘first stage’ and as a ‘target plateau’ (i.e. ‘just really master this!’). It is also far easier to train teachers who concentrate on educating learners intensively in BASIC ENGLISH, as was done in Yunnan in China 1939-1945 (Templer, 2007; 2005, 2006, 2008c). Such a ‘downshifted’ mode could be particularly useful for working with Roma children and adults, for example, who are largely marginalized in the Bulgarian school system and broader society. Likewise in Romania, Serbia, Macedonia. Many opt to work abroad, and BASIC ENGLISH could be a great boon for them as temporary economic migrants. As Coleman (2011, 104) notes in regard to Indonesia:

there is a very large group of Indonesians who go abroad and face ‘global competitiveness’ in a direct and often painful way: the migrant workers. Migrant workers are mostly female, are generally poorly educated, do not speak any foreign language and are not being prepared at all for the ‘globally competitive’ world which is waiting for them. A third anomaly is that this second group – despite being so poorly prepared before leaving the country – generates a very large inflow of funds to Indonesia.

In Bulgaria and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, similar questions arise about what basic language needs should and can be met for the many current and potential migrant workers, across all social and ethnic strata. Empirical research is needed.

- **BASIC GLOBAL ENGLISH.** There is interest and need to develop pilot projects to test outside Germany a model of easier English developed by German linguist Joachim Grzega, Catholic Univ., Eichstätt/Germany ( [www.basicglobalenglish.com](http://www.basicglobalenglish.com) ). Joachim's experimental model is grounded on 750 high frequency words/word families, with a further 250 chosen by the individual student. Spoken communication is emphasized from the start. BGE has had success in trial projects in adult education and in early primary education in Germany. Broader empirical research and experimentation is needed.
- **VOA SPECIAL ENGLISH.** I am convinced we need to significantly spur classroom and academic research on VOA Special English ([www.voaspecialenglish.com](http://www.voaspecialenglish.com) ) as a second tier of simplified clear English, at the level of 1,500 higher frequency headwords. This can be promoted as a *target plateau level*, with a large corpus of materials for reading (Templer, 2009). This can involve workshops for primary and secondary school teachers in the use of VOA Special English as a resource for a simpler 'Scientific and Academic English Lite.' especially for supplementary comprehensible reading and extensive listening (Templer, 2008a, 2008b). Syahro's (2009) investigation indicated statistically significant better scores on the IELTS reading exam among an experimental group using VOA Special English texts for exam preparation. Much more such research is needed. Special English is being 'discovered' at some Thai universities, as reflected here at Thaksin U, a useful brief read: <http://www.tsuwestern.com/?p=746>
- **PLAIN ENGLISH.** The 'Plain Language' movement is burgeoning, promoted by the US government (<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/> ), the New Zealand government and many professionals (especially in law, medicine and government administration) in a number of countries around the world. The goal is discourse simplification (European Commission, 2010; Cutts, 2009), as exemplified in The Netherlands in the work of [www.texamen.com](http://www.texamen.com). What implications does a concern with "clear, plain language" have for teaching English as a global lingua franca for the social majorities? The U.S. Federal Plain Language Guidelines (March 2011)

are highly instructive: [tinyurl.com/24rjfxk](http://tinyurl.com/24rjfxk) In Australia, a useful government handbook is online: [tinyurl.com/yaseb7j](http://tinyurl.com/yaseb7j).

#### 4. Possible Links

As it develops, the proposed Research Unit will seek to forge links to individuals and research institutions with analogous interests elsewhere, in particular:

- Basic English Institute ([www.basic-english.org](http://www.basic-english.org)). The principal online resource center for BASIC ENGLISH of Ogden/Richards, revitalized for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Simplification Centre, University of Reading, UK ([www.reading.ac.uk/simplification/](http://www.reading.ac.uk/simplification/)). A unique initiative in the UK, “the Centre's work focuses on how to make overly complex information clearer, through a programme of research, training and consultancy.”
- The work of bureautaal (<http://www.bureautaal.nl/>) and Texamen (<http://www.texamen.com>) in The Netherlands, which is doing exemplary work on both “eenvoudig Nederlands” and English at a clearer, more simplified level.
- Lexitronics (<http://lexitronics.edublogs.org/>). The proposed RU intends to develop a corpus project with Lexitronics on VOA Special English (Shelly Gollust, head of Special English at VOA, has given basic approval for such a corpus project [personal communication]).
- The work of Bill DuBay, as exemplified in his IMPACT-INFORMATION site and Newsletter. See [www.impact-information.com/impactinfo/yourstake.pdf](http://www.impact-information.com/impactinfo/yourstake.pdf)
- Basic Global English project under Joachim Grzega, Catholic University, Eichstätt.
- Center for Plain Language, based in Maryland. Its motto: “Plain language is a civil right” ([centerforplainlanguage.org](http://centerforplainlanguage.org)). Its work is highly relevant to the research agenda of the RU.

#### 5. Moving forward

Such a Research Unit can spur comparative research in the field with simpler models for ELF pedagogy, conduct workshops for teachers, and begin to reshape more sustainable, ‘lower-energy’ curricula. Now is the time. The cost of establishing the RU can be very modest, its potential impact exponential. Important is a formal attachment to a university somewhere in Europe or the Global South. The core aim is to further teaching of English as a ‘people’s lingua franca’ (Templer, 2005) and a ‘TESOL for social justice’ – forging ‘counter-hegemonic’ strategies for teaching ELF in the context of economic globalization ‘from the bottom-up,’ and a more “human, egalitarian, socially just, economically just,

democratic, socialist society” (Hill, 2006). And to ground this on solid empirical investigation in the world’s ordinary classrooms.

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