

LESS IS MORE: PATHWAYS TO A SIMPLER, PLAINER PEOPLE'S ENGLISH AS AN EQUITABLE LINGUA FRANCA

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Sustainable educational innovation needs to address a major problem: the great gap in the learning of English as a lingua franca (ELF) between the privileged and less privileged ('non-dominant') across the planet. Ordinary learners in Malaysia, Thailand, Laos and other corners of the world, especially the Global South, need a more 'downshifted' form of English for basic communication and broader reading and listening – instead of climbing the 'Everest' of trying to master a standard English based on native English-speaker posh proficiency models. The paper, organized in ten theses, introduces some perspectives for English as a 'downsized' and effective power tool for the greater masses of learners (and teachers). It looks briefly at three options in simpler discourse: (1) the PLAIN LANGUAGE community of research & practice (<http://plainlanguagenetwork.org>;<http://www.impact-information.com/>), focused on communicating clearly; (2) Charles Ogden & Ivor Richard's BASIC ENGLISH 850, an older model of highly simplified English, a "leveraging" tool usable for expressing almost any idea, and science in a leaner 'ESP-Lite' mode (<http://www.basic-english.org>); (3) VOA SPECIAL ENGLISH, a downshifted form of English developed by the Voice of America, and now available online as well as on shortwave radio. It can be used for communicating about many topics (<http://www.voaspecialenglish.com>), at the level of pre-intermediate readability (1,500 word families), and has a huge online archive of over 5,000 feature articles. Texamen in Holland contends it is possible to say and write virtually anything at a level of 7th grade readability, which is where most citizens in the U.S. & many countries feel comfortable reading their native language at (<http://www.texamen.com/index.php?id=1>). The overall aim is toward a more equitable planetary ELF for the Multitude and more 'empowering' constructivist pedagogies, especially for working-class learners and in rural environments.

Keywords: Sustainable educational innovation, pre-intermediate readability, constructivist pedagogies

Everything has changed except our way of thinking. –A. Einstein

This paper presents ten theses for rethinking our approaches to teaching ELF (English as a lingua franca) as a global means of communication more effectively, and for new ideas on what authentic mass literacy in English as a native language (and other languages) could mean in a more equitable democratic world, where money talks less and people count more.

Thesis 1: Downshifting Discourse for Mass Literacy in ELF

Sustainable educational innovation needs to address a major problem: the great gap in the learning of English as a lingua franca between the privileged and less privileged across the planet. My thesis is that ordinary working class learners in Malaysia, Thailand, Laos and many other corners of the world, especially the Global South, need a more 'downshifted,' 'leaner' form of English for basic communication and broader reading and listening – instead of climbing the 'Everest' of trying to master a standard English based on posh native English-speaker proficiency as a target paradigm -- for most learners an unrealistic aim. A different notion of mass literacy in a simpler global lingua franca is required, less meritocratic, more populist. A bit of De Bono's (1970) 'lateral thinking' can help us to better see how learners can leverage less into more (Mankatelow, 2006), rediscovering for themselves the power of reading (Krashen, 2004) and ownership of their own literacy. This is crucial to any constructivist pedagogy,

Thesis 2: What is Enough? ‘Satisficing’ Communication Needs

A “satisficing model” for most ordinary ELF learners is a focus that needs to be put on the research agenda, for mass competence in a usable English as L2. Most learners’ needs are rather basic.

Satisficing is behavior that tries to achieve at least some minimum of a particular variable, but does not necessarily maximize its value (Byron, 2004). Herbert Simon defines satisficing as a decision-making process “through which an individual decides when an alternative approach or solution is sufficient to meet the individuals’ desired goals rather than pursue the perfect approach” (cited in Prabha et al., 2007, p. 3). When learners satisfice, they compare the benefits of obtaining more of something (such as information, or a defined level of language proficiency) against the additional cost and effort required, and choose a solution adequate to self-projected (or even prescribed) needs. A “satisficer” is happy with that -- a “maximizer” may want ever more information, lexis, complexity, optimality, and there is rarely “enough.”

Such a model, like Basic English 850 or VOA Special English (see below), will also be remarkably frugal in terms of lexis, structure and time necessary for mastery. This is by analogy in line with “fast and frugal heuristics” (Todd & Gigerenzer, 1999) -- heuristic principles for solving problems that are “simple rules for making decisions with realistic mental resources” (ibid.; see also Gigerenzer, Todd & ABC Research Group). Rules of thumb for discovering “what works, is enough.” Most ELF learners are probably “satisficers,” and only empirical work can suggest what downsized model may appeal as a strongly mastered plateau proficiency, which can be practiced and recycled for extensive reading and listening whenever one wishes – a power tool level akin to “Threshold” level in the Council of Europe (2001, p. 23) proficiency pyramid.

Thesis 3: Leveraging

A simpler English lingua franca should be viewed as a macro-lever that helps students and teachers leverage ways of talking about complex things (like science discourse) in more common high-frequency lexis and shorter sentences. Leverage across many domains means “doing a lot with a little.” It should assist ELF learners’ meaning-making as they leverage the words they know to talk about science (Gomez, 2007). As Mankatelow (2006) of MindTools.com notes: “Just as a pole vaulter uses the pole for leverage, you can use other types of leverage to achieve much more with your skills and resources, and with the limited time available.”ⁱ What is envisioned here is a minimalist model of English that is indeed frugal and faster to master, grounded on a “leveraged semantics” (see below). A compacted model of communicative English like VOA Special English is itself, as a low-cost, easy-access resource, a “lever” in an adaptive toolkit to a more dynamic practice of extensive reading and listening. We all need to save cognitive energy. As Epstein (2005) stresses, effective communication is often doing more with less, “at the end of the day, it’s about leveraging language.”

Thesis 4: Plain Language

For *native speakers*, we need new perspectives on what most working people are comfortable reading and listening to as discourse. This is what is focused on in the Plain Language community of research and practice in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Australia/NZ, India and elsewhere.ⁱⁱ Bill DuBay (2004; 2006) provides a well-researched, readily accessible introduction to the whole field of readability research.ⁱⁱⁱ Cutts and Maher (1986) is an insider introduction to the Plain Language Campaign in Great Britain, which still continues with far greater momentum today. Cutts (1995, p. 3) defines Plain English:

The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood.

It is a good handbook for exploring many aspects of Plain English with a multitude of examples.

The focus in Plain Language is for furthering mass literacy through empirical studies on readability (via focus groups, quantitative analyses, group testing) and learning to respect your target audience and their level of native comprehension skills, what they are honestly comfortable with, their *authentic vernacular literacy*. A People's English -- or People's Bahasa -- targets its audience, at their level of reading ease -- for clarity and comprehensibility. The principle of equity here is that ordinary people have a right to communicate -- and be communicated to -- in language they can readily understand. "Plain Language should, I believe, become an accepted part of plain dealing between consumers and business, and between citizens and the State (Cutts, 1995, p. 8). Such "downsized" discourse is also a form of "leveraging" of text and design for communication more quickly comprehensible to real people.

A majority of working Americans have a proficiency level in reading about 9th grade, and are comfortable reading for fun and information about 7th/8th grade level: "Nearly all of today's blockbuster writers write at the 7th-grade level, including John Grisham, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, and Dan Brown. Experts today recommend writing legal and health information at the 7th-grade level."^{iv} Only some 13% of US citizens have 12th grade proficiency in reading English. Texamen in Holland (<http://www.texamen.com> [accessed 20 May 2008]) has research indicating that some 50% of Dutch population has a maximum comfortable reading proficiency of about 8th grade, maybe 3,000 word families, what is called B1 level (equivalent to 'Threshold') in the Common European Framework scale.^v

We swim in a world of texts at C1 level. Hardly any texts at level A2. Yet Texamen contends that it is possible to write down all of the information in our society -- about almost anything -- at A2 level, without losing valuable information. The implications are far-reaching. What is enough? Texamen suggests: Flesch Reading Ease 70-85, about 7th grade, age 13, which is the level most citizens in Holland (and the U.S.) are comfortable reading their native language at.^{vi}

Plain Language initiatives are being adopted by governments, especially across the English-speaking world.^{vii} In the U.S., Florida Governor Charlie Crist's 'Plain Language Initiative' (January 2007) mandating the use of Plain English in all government documents and communication with citizens of the state of Florida, focuses on clear language that is commonly used by the intended audience. As Gov. Crist (2007) says: "It makes no sense to talk to people in bureaucratic legalese, gobbledygook to some, and expect citizens to comply with incomprehensible rules, requirements, and instructions. We can, and must, do better."

And very significantly, the 'Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008' has introduced a new momentum in downsizing discourse at the federal level in the United States. House Bill: H. R. 3548, passed on 15 April 2008, constitutes a milestone in efforts for getting government offices to rethink their communication and rhetoric agendas and strategies: "The purpose of this Act is to improve the Federal Government's effectiveness and accountability to the public by promoting clear communication that the public can understand and use."^{viii}

A couple of examples of such simplification in the name of clarity reflect part of the pressing need to downsize legal language and government discourse, often easier said than done:

I grant to my Agent full power and authority to do everything necessary in exercising any of the powers herein granted as fully as I might or could do if personally present, with full power of substitution or revocation, hereby ratifying and confirming all that my Agent shall lawfully do or cause to be done by virtue of this Power of Attorney and the powers herein granted. **DOWNSIZED TO** → I give my agent the power to do anything that I have a right or duty to do, now or in the future.

Or here, from the Veterans Benefit Administration in the U.S:

We are providing the following information about an insurance payment you indicate you have not received or which is otherwise missing. We have given the Treasury Department the necessary information to trace the check in question. **DOWNSIZED TO** → We received the missing check form you sent us. We asked the Treasury Department to find out what happened to your check.

Gov. Crist's web site for the State of Florida gives this brief example of government discourse rewritten, among others:

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing. *DOWNSIZED TO* → Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.

Cutts (1995, p. 11) provides a classic example from an accountant's letter to his client, a single sentence of 87 words, which "force-feeds the reader with point after point after point," and "comes hissing across the page":

Our annual bill for services (which unfortunately from your viewpoint has to increase to some degree in line with the rapid expansion of your business activities) in preparing the accounts and dealing with tax (please note there will be higher-rate tax assessments for us to deal with on this level of profit, which is the most advantageous time to invest in your personal pension fund, unless of course changes are made in the Chancellor's Budget Statement) and general matters arising, is enclosed herewith for your kind attention.

The Gunning-Fog index for years of formal schooling for this text is 40.65, Flesch reading ease is a staggering minus 22.84, and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level of difficulty is 38.31 [!], which is far beyond the doctoral level in most fields. You can readily test readability of this and any other text or text excerpt with a handy, fast tool online: <http://www.editcentral.com> OR

http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp (accessed 22 May 2008). Try it and you will better understand what "quantitatively measured readability" involves. It is not foolproof but gives remarkable results, and an instant analysis of roughly how difficult a text is.

For Flesch Reading Ease, scores of 90.0–100.0 are considered easily understandable by an average 11-year old student. Students 13–15 years old could easily understand passages with a score of 60–70, high school seniors a level of 50–60, and passages scoring 0–30 are best understood by college graduates. Texts with minus values, like the one above, are considered at the extreme limit of comprehensibility, even for experts.

The *Reader's Digest* tests at about 9th grade native speaker level. *The New York Times*, *USA Today* are at 10th grade NS level. *The Boston Globe*, *LA Times*, score at 12th grade level, as do *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. *The New York Review of Books* and *Harvard Law Review* test at 16th grade level, the reading proficiency of a graduating senior native speaker from an American college. The UK's most successful tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, is at 9th grade level. The *New Straits Times* is 9/10th grade NS level, in many articles, though editorials may go to 13th and even 17th grade level (as in an editorial published 5 May 2008).^{ix} By contrast, *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, two dailies in English, often score at 13th to 14th grade level in readability. I tested some articles from *The Nation* which scored much higher, at US graduate school reading level, 17th grade. Who among the Thai population can be reading such complex discourse, other than a small privileged stratum? Internet English websites are at a variety of levels, but often around 12–13th grade level, and higher. But a standard auto insurance policy, which nearly all car owners in the U.S. probably are obliged to sign, can score at 17th to 18th grade level, i.e. native-speaker graduate student [!] (DuBay 2004, p. 26).^x

Thesis 5: Size Matters

Both for native speaker and foreign learner literacy, we need a 'leaner discourse,' a 'satisficing' model that can be easily taught, readily learned and widely used. "Tackling unnecessary complexity," downshifting communication and leveraging language is a core concern of the new Simplification Centre at the University of Reading:

Over-complex information is not just a nuisance: it's unfair, ugly, unsafe and a huge waste of everyone's time. A large proportion of the population struggles with functional literacy – and there are everyday tasks that defeat the cleverest [...] There are a lot of people in government, in industry and in the community, trying to deal with this. To help them, we're starting the Simplification Centre.^{xi}

Thesis 6: Class Matters

We are talking here about learning styles and preference often anchored in social class. The 'satisficing' model for EFL learners needs to be oriented to what average working class learners – and "non-dominant students" (Gutiérrez, 2006) -- find reasonable and learnable, and in tune with their "repertoires of practice" (ibid, p. 46). The imperative of how better to address the communication needs and levels of ordinary working people need to be put on the research agenda for inventive innovation in EFL pedagogies, and in better understanding mass literacy needs. It is part of working class studies. Some economists think about two-thirds of the American population is working class.

Class is not simply about how much money you make. If you earn an hourly wage and a supervisor manages what you do at work every day, if you are not a boss, if you have very little power on the job, if you believe in hard work and plain talk, then you are probably working class. If you have just a high school diploma, or even a BA or B.Ed. or M.Ed., you are still probably working class – most teachers everywhere are.^{xii}

Class in the classroom impacts on all aspects of EFL learning and student attitude. Asraf and Ahmad (2003) describe an experiment in extensive graded reading for working class youth in village Malaysia, suggesting further inquiry into the "complexity of learning English in the rural school situation," and gearing instruction to marginalized learners' needs. We know that the poverty level of students and their overall access to print (in the home, school and community) are remarkably strong indicators of how well they will perform in standardized reading tests in the U.S. (McQuillan, 1998), pointing up the ever widening gulf between learners from higher-income and low-income families. Such factors play a role in EFL instruction across the planet, but have been too little investigated: "New working class studies places working-class people, their voices, experiences, and perspectives, at the center of its research, teaching, and activism" (Russo & Linkon, 2005, p. 111), as focused on at the Center for Working-Class Studies (CWCS) at Youngstown State University in Ohio where Russo and Linkon teach. For foreign language education, it involves trying to understand how the real-world experience of being working class impacts on learning styles, motivation, access to books and print, attitudes toward reading, their cultures of orality, repertoires of practice and other dimensions. We have to be able to look beyond the distorting lenses of our own highly interiorized literacy as teachers, in effect "decolonizing" our own pedagogies (Smith, 1999; Tejada, Gutiérrez, & Espinoza, 2007). And as Gutiérrez (2006, pp. 43, 46) stresses, *culture matters*, and proposes a:

more dynamic, nuanced, and processual notion of culture that challenges essentialist views about students and their practices and communities and also informs a new equity framework for educational change. [...] rethinking current normative views of cultural communities and redefining culture as a resource can help educators find new ways to create robust learning environments for youth, particularly students from cultural communities for whom poverty, immigration, and inferior educational experiences complicate life in schools.

Thesis 7: Basic and VOA Special English

For the multitude of L2 learners, two major 'minimalist' modes of English as a lingua franca that need to be more experimented with are:

- Charles Ogden and Ivor Richard's BASIC ENGLISH 850, an older model of highly simplified English that is now being reconfigured and rediscovered (Templer, 2005, 2006;

Seidlhofer, 2002), usable for expressing almost any idea, and science in a leaner mode, and Richards' Everyman's English, including his textbook *English Through Pictures* (Richards & Gibson, 2005). This is akin to what Michael West years ago talked about regarding a "plateau proficiency" (West, 1953).^{xiii} The *General Basic English Dictionary* (Ogden, 1960) is one of the most extraordinary dictionary projects in English lexicography, defining some 20,000 words using the core lexis of 850 words in Basic. It is a prime example of a kind of "leveraged semantics," where more difficult meanings are generated from a solid, simple and highly "robust" lexical base, saying "go away" in lieu of "leave," "put an end to" instead of "rescind" or "revoke." The Basic 850 project also envisioned a "democratization" of knowledge by translating a core library of 500 books into Basic, and myriad other texts. The Ivor Richards (1942) edition of *The Republic of Plato* is a version of this classic in Basic, and Richards (1950) is a unique version of Homer's Iliad in a slightly expanded Basic 850. Ogden in 1943 (1968, 92; <http://ogden.basic-english.org/isl127.html#10> [accessed 20 May 2008]) envisioned international shortwave broadcasting, five minutes of international news in Basic English: "Five minutes would be enough -- five minutes every hour on the hour -- to give everyone the feeling that this little earth was pulling itself together." This was a precursor vision to the reality of VOA Special English launched 16 years later.

- VOA Special English, a downshifted form of English developed by the Voice of America starting in 1959, and now available online as well as on shortwave radio, is brought to you by the U.S. government (<http://www.voaspecialenglish.com> [accessed 21 May 2008]). Texts for reading and listening (at slower speed) about science, health, education, development, and much more, are at the level of pre-intermediate readability (1,500 word families). There is a vast archive online of over 5,000 *Special English* texts: a huge resource for extensive reading/listening, over-learning at a crucial 'plateau' proficiency level. And for 'narrow' reading of simpler scientific and technical material. Virtually no research on VOA Special English is under way anywhere in East Asia (Templer, 2007; idem, forthcoming), even in China, where SE is a bit known.

Trial-run experimentation in the schools is needed. Ministries should give these more 'minimalist' modes of English -- also far easier for average teachers to teach -- careful examination and possibilities for empirical experimentation (with control groups) in the field. Such research was done over the years with Basic English 850 and Everyman's English, with striking results, especially in Yunnan (Katagiri & Constable, 1993, pp. 359 ff. and passim). Richards noted: "As a result 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" (ibid., 61).

Thesis 8: Aim for Threshold Plateau

Push toward over-learning at a crucial 'plateau proficiency' level of about 1,500 word families -- or maybe even less. Get students in 200 hours to really master BASIC 850 or Richards' Everyman's English (Richards & Gibson, 2007) --- and then leave them to learn on their own. Foreground learner autonomy, extensive free voluntary reading, constructivist approaches (Marlowe & Page, 2005; Reyes & Vallone, 2008). This is what Krashen has been saying for years, in reflections on "the easy way" for foreign language education (1997, pp. 46-47; 2004, pp. 146 ff.) and elsewhere. We need to bring students in a classroom to about low intermediate level, such as VOA Special English, or the General Service List level of Michael West (1953) -- 'Threshold' -- and then let learners be learners on their own. Through extensive graded reading and listening (such as at Jeff McQuillan's ESLPOD (<http://www.eslpod.com> [accessed 22 May 2008])).

Graphic Novels. Graphic storytelling, "sequential art," is another key focus with leverage: like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire*, Marjane Satrapi's best-selling Iranian memoir *Persepolis*, or Marisa Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*. Visual narrative needs more inclusion in TEFL pedagogy (Arnold, 2003; Gravett, 2005). Comics are the matrix genre here:

<http://www.teachingcomics.org/curriculum.php> and <http://www.cartoonstudies.org/> (accessed 22 May 2008). The word/image/narrative genre is riveting for all readers (Krashen, 1997, 2004).

Thesis 9: 'ESP-LITE'

For scientific English, we need experimentation with Basic English (or VOA Special English), combined with necessary technical/specialist vocabulary, as an easier form. As Richards and Gibson (1945, p 74) noted regarding Basic English 850:

Naturally, students of the language who have had a bad start with English but know they have invested years of study in it at first may feel dismay at being turned back to a small vocabulary and simple sentences. But the more intelligent they are the more readily they come to see that drill with common statement patterns built up of widely useful words is what they need. An able surgeon from Peru will ask for three weeks of Basic structure patterns so that he can present a paper on obstetrics at the medical school where he is visiting. The medical terminology he has in common with the doctors he is to address. It is the frame-work of simple English statement that he needs, and he finds with relief that Basic can give it to him. It does with broken English what he can do with broken bones. [...] Take the simple grammar of Basic from the start and this won't happen.

VOA Special English can serve as a kind of ESP-Lite or CLIL-Lite (Content and Language Integrated Learning) -- i.e. a corpus of engaging texts on a broad range of academic topics in simpler, plainer style and lexis at a more comprehensible level -- a "downshifted," non-posh *leveraging tool* to ESP. Experimentation is needed. The mixed experience in Malaysia trying to teach science and math at the primary level in state schools in English, with resistance by pupils, teachers and parents to exploring other models for scientific English. One such model is Simplified Technical English, developed in part by *tedopres international* in the Netherlands. The AECMA Simplified English it promotes is a version of 'Controlled English' widely used in the international aerospace industry (Verduijn, 2004, pp. 52ff.).^{xiv}

Thesis 10: Lean Language Mini-Center

For sustainable educational innovation in teaching ELF, we need an inventive mini-center for research/experimentation with downshifted, simpler forms of English (and other languages) here in Southeast Asia, with empirical work of various kinds to test models, student response, student progress in communication, and much more. Qualitative case-study research (Stake, 1995, 2006) would be desirable. And perhaps application of phenomenography (Marton, 1994), investigating in depth the ways learners experience or feel about learning a simpler mode of English.^{xv} No such center exists anywhere. A 'center for lean language' should be regarded as a pedagogical desideratum for ELF, perhaps in one of the ASEAN nations, maybe assisted by UNESCO. It is directly germane to language planning policy, even inside U.N. agencies and their own discourse practices.

Moving Out of the Box

Lateral thinking requires educators and language policy planners to be open to new ways of seeing any problem (Bernacki, 2002): "Out-of-the box thinkers know that new ideas need nurturing and support [...] Results are what count." We need to begin implementing a leaner "leveraging" discourse for all. We need empirical data on results, multiple case studies. And we need to generate new ideas for ELF and literacy pedagogy, in constructivist modes, better attuned to the grassroots life worlds and repertoires of practice of the "social majorities" or most learners everywhere. At the end of the day, it is about sustainable, satisficing, robust, fast and frugal, downsized discourse for a more equitable commons of human solidarity. Privileged and elite ELF learners can climb to whatever levels of upscale proficiency they aspire to.

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- ⁱ This is not about "financial leverage," i.e. using borrowed capital to expand a business or hedge fund.
- ⁱⁱ The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is an active network of Plain Language editors and researchers: <http://plainlanguagenetwork.org> (accessed 15 May 2008).
- ⁱⁱⁱ See also his website: <http://www.impact-information.com/>, where he maintains an excellent newsletter.
- ^{iv} See the article on Readability <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Readability> (accessed 16 May 2008)..
- ^v On a 6-level scale: A1/A2 B1/B2 C1/C2 (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 21 ff.).
- ^{vi} See <http://www.texamen.com/index.php?id=1> (accessed 20 May 2008).
- ^{vii} See the website of the U.S. government: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov> (accessed 1 May 2008).
- ^{viii} See the full bill: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-3548> (acc. 21 May 2008).
- ^{ix} The editorial was entitled "A joint responsibility." By contrast, a related news article on the topic of pensions written by an NST reporter, "Cuepacs: civil servants must do better" (11 May 2008, NST), had reading ease of 49.76 (12th grade), and Flesch-Kincaid grade level at 11.37.
- ^x See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flesch-Kincaid_Readability_Test (accessed 22 May 2008).
- ^{xi} The Centre was officially launched in the spring of 2008: <http://simplificationcentre.org.uk> (1 May 08)