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Thursday, June 5, 2008

Let students master plain, simple English

Bill Templer, University of Malaya

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia -- In response to Phil Charlier's "Students need English input in class," (The China Post, May 31), I agree that the game's name is 'comprehensible input,' mainly through extensive voluntary lighter reading and 'recreational' extensive listening, largely outside the classroom.

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A very under-used resource -- both for weaker learners and more proficient students who want to really strengthen foundations -- is Voice of America Special English, launched in 1959 on shortwave and now a mouse click away

(www.voaspecialenglish.com), cost-free. It's based on a 1,500 headword core vocabulary. Sentences are short, averaging 14 words. Repetition is frequent. There are few adjectives and almost no idioms. One 'proposition' per sentence. The speed of delivery is 90 words per minute, about 25 percent slower than 'normal' speaking tempo. For all feature reports, you can both read the text and listen to the audio.

Every day, there is 10 minutes of world news, followed by two feature reports in 14 categories, from development and economics to health, exploration, agriculture, science, music, education and a kind of American 'mosaic' of culture. The online archives going back to 2001 has more than 5,000 separate feature texts, many with MP3 audio. Students can learn to browse, self-select what interests them, all at a comfortable reading level. Using a technique that Krashen calls 'free voluntary Web-surfing.' Many feature articles are of kind of 'English for Science Lite,' adding some technical vocab where needed. There is a Word Book of the 1,500-headword core online.

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You can also still get Special English very easily on shortwave. Though run by the U.S. government, this is not a propaganda channel. It's coverage is very balanced. Biographies have included Margaret Sanger, Billie Holiday, Kurt Vonnegut.

My own view is that Special English, made active for speaking and writing, is a "leaner downshifted" mode of plainer language that can serve as a "plateau target" for many average ordinary learners, the great multitude. With 1,500 headwords, you can say almost anything.

My advice: have most students master and overlearn a simpler English, largely autonomously. Build in-depth control of a compact power tool, frugal and fun. Especially for improving pronunciation, writing, grammar control -- and even speaking skills -- by extensive exposure to comprehensible interesting input, it's an excellent spot. For extensive listening at lower intermediate level, another superb site is www.eslpod.com, run by one of Krashen's closest associates, Jeff McQuillan.

Those who'd like to continue climbing up the 'Everest' of complex English -- and who enjoy the socioeconomic privilege to do this -- can always trek on. As Shelley Gollust, head of Special English, recently commented: "It's almost like Hemingway. You can write something easy and direct, and it's more powerful that way."

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