

# Basic instincts

**Frances Mehan-Schmidt** *discovers a new teaching method that reduces English to just a thousand words*

What would you think if you heard about a new method of teaching English that reduced everything to basics, not bothering with correct spelling or careful enunciation – and to hell with the grammar? Well, these are the hallmarks of Basic Global English (BGE), the most important element of which is to communicate, using a basic vocabulary of around 750 words.

An entirely new way of learning, pioneered by language professor Joachim Grzega, BGE concentrates on the vocabulary people need most for everyday conversation, such as the days of the week, numbers and food. Grzega, who teaches at the Catholic University of Eichstätt in Bavaria, began by trying out his revolutionary methods at two local primary schools after getting the go-ahead from the German government to run a pilot project.

So how does BGE work in practice? Grzega's aim is to fast-track the process of acquiring language, getting people to speak English as quickly as possible. As such, he has no time for *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep* or *Humpty Dumpty*. Instead, he puts useful words to well-known melodies, so children might sing a rousing chorus of "Today is Tuesday, today is Tuesday..." to the tune of *Frère Jacques*. The BGE methodology also stipulates that games should be included only if they help train communicative skills.

In his 2007 "Report on an Elementary School Project",<sup>1</sup> Grzega describes what happened when he asked one child when his birthday was. "My birsday is March," he replied. "And how old are you?" The boy hesitated, then slowly held up seven fingers. The fact that he did not yet know any numbers and that his grammar was not



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perfect did not bother Grzega. He had understood and made himself understood, and that is what communication is all about.

"Of course, the children should learn to speak correctly later on, if they wish," he writes. "But for beginners, the most important thing of all is to get over their fear of making mistakes – to just start talking and get on with it." He only corrects faulty pronunciation when it could lead to misunderstandings – where "laboratory" sounds like "lavatory", for instance.

Grzega's approach to learning English reduces its grammar to around 20 rules and kits out learners with a basic vocabulary of 750 words, which each student then tops up with a

further 250 words that relate to their favourite sports team or special hobbies. He arrived at the basic word list by taking the words that appeared most frequently and were "devoid of clear associations with a specific nation" from vocabulary books, dictionaries and other sources. He then added the "words that seemed necessary for active conversation" before reducing the list to 750 words in consultation with his students and members of his EuroLinguistX discussion forum.

Grzega initially prepared 12 lessons of 30-45 minutes, after which the children had acquired about 140 words and could give information about themselves, say what they had in their school bags and count up to 39. Their achievements by far surpassed the requirements of the Bavarian curriculum, which states that students should be able to use 301 English words actively after two years' study with two 45-minute lessons a week.

Astonishingly, BGE is by no means restricted to youngsters and is already catching on among adults who are keen to master English as a lingua franca (ELF) so they can conduct their business, attend meetings and communicate with each other in a common international language. When it comes to adults, the individual stock of 250 words might include words relating to their job rather than to school, and the customs of their culture rather than the contents of their bag, but the principles are the same.

Perhaps BGE's popularity should come as no surprise. After all, "Globish" is rapidly taking over from "standard" English, in numerical terms at least. Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers by three to one, as David Graddol noted in his "English Next" report, compiled



### QUICK TO LEARN

*Joachim Grzega teaches pupils during the pilot project in Bavaria. The children learnt the basics of English in just 12 hours*

for the British Council two years ago.

Jean-Paul Nerrière, author of *Don't Speak English, Parlez Globish*, claims that he could talk happily in broken English to colleagues from other parts of the world, with everyone understanding each other perfectly. In fact, there were only problems when a native speaker was present, as their nuances, metaphors, humorous asides and double entendres confused the non-native speakers.

Just like Grzega, Nerrière has drawn up a simple code of rules: Globish has only 1,500 words and users must avoid humour, metaphor, abbreviation and anything else that could cause cross-cultural confusion. Indeed, Nerrière claims that, after six months, managers who practise an hour of Globish a day will be able to hold their own in the international business world.

Nouns, verbs and phrases such as "knowledges", "to make a discussion" and "to phone to somebody" may be here to stay, but is it reasonable to expect that Basic Global English will work – that children schooled in the method will progress more quickly and become fluent Globish speakers, communicating more quickly and effectively with others around the world? Yes, asserts Grzega, who does not regard BGE as an exclusively linguistic concept, but more a way of equipping people with global dialogue and international communication skills, as well as giving them social competence.

As such, an important element of BGE is providing the learner with strategies for communication and successful conversation in a global setting. Teachers advise learners on how to paraphrase in order to fill lexical gaps, or use hedges such as "kind of" or "somehow". Tricks to enrich their word-stock

by, for example, converting nouns from the basic vocabulary to verbs, or adding suffixes such as "-er" (eg "dancer", "mixer") are also taught. Furthermore, students learn politeness strategies, including how to create a positive atmosphere by using positive words ("good"/"not so good") rather than negative ones ("good"/"bad").

BGE also teaches some general rules for intercultural communication, such as looking out for hidden misunderstandings, speaking slowly and distinctly, and using body language.

### *Based on the concept of 'learning by teaching', students take turns at leading activities*

"Learners need to be aware that different nations or social groups categorize the world in different ways," explains Grzega in his "Globish and Basic Global English (BGE)" report.<sup>2</sup>

Taking "family" as an example, he suggests that Europeans use the word to designate "parents + children (+ grandparents)", whereas Asians use it to refer to "everyone that is related to him/her, even if only remotely".

Autonomous learning is another key element of the BGE method, which stresses that learning should be specific to individuals, based on their culture, age, language, ethnicity, nationality and interests. Teachers are therefore instructed to use a

didactic model that focuses on activity, handing over as much teaching responsibility to the learner as possible. When it comes to students adding the personalised 250 words to their vocabulary, for example, the teacher should simply recommend a good bilingual dictionary. In the classroom, teachers make use of "mini-teachers". Based on the concept of "learning by teaching", this means students take turns at leading activities.

Grzega is now devising new BGE materials aimed at adult groups of all ages and all languages. In particular, he intends to target learners who do not have a computer and/or are based in developing countries. And, since the number of English learners is expected to peak at around two billion in 10-15 years time, according to the "English Next" report, why not?

Already, says Graddol, the majority of encounters in English take place between non-native speakers. No doubt the programmes of the future – Basic Global English included – will contribute towards more amicable encounters between people with different business needs, and specific aims and uses for English in a global business context.

### Notes

**1** Grzega, J & Schöner, M, "Basic Global English (BGE) as a Way for Children to Acquire Global Communicative Competence: Report on an Elementary School Project" in *Journal for EuroLinguistiX*, 2007, 4:5-18

**2** Grzega, J, "Globish and Basic Global English (BGE): Two Alternatives for a Rapid Acquisition of Communicative Competence in a Globalized World?" in *Journal for EuroLinguistiX*, 2006, 3:1-13