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A Language to Air News of America to the World

By HOLLI CHMELA

WASHINGTON, July 29 — [Voice of America](#), the government-sponsored news organization that has been on the air since 1942, broadcasts in 44 different languages — 45 if you count Special English.

Special English was developed nearly 50 years ago as a radio experiment to spread American news and cultural information to people outside the United States who have no knowledge of English or whose knowledge is limited.

Using a 1,500-word vocabulary and short, simple phrases without the idioms and clichés of colloquial English, broadcasters speak at about two-thirds the speed of conversational English. But far from sounding like a record played at the wrong speed, Special English is a complicated skill that takes months of training with a professional voice coach who teaches how to breathe properly and enunciate clearly.

Mario Ritter, a Special English writer and producer, arrived at Voice of America five years ago with many years of experience. Mr. Ritter has been training for six months to be a Special English broadcaster. In August, he said, he will be ready to go on the air live.

“It’s kind of ironic that I normally speak slowly, but it doesn’t give me a leg up in being a Special English broadcaster,” Mr. Ritter said.

Shelley Gollust is chief of Special English at Voice of America. “People in this country have likely never heard of Special English,” Ms. Gollust said, “and, if they have, they often don’t understand the significance of it to people in other countries. They hear it and make fun of how slow it is.”

A 1948 law prohibits Voice of America from broadcasting in the United States, but audio and text files of Special English are on the Voice of America Web site, www.voanews.com/specialenglish.

Students and teachers in other countries say Special English is a good learning tool. “I like that the program is based on 1,500 words,” Sarah Paulsworth said in an e-mail message from Azerbaijan, where she works as a journalist and a volunteer English teacher. “It is a very tangible goal for students. I can literally see some of my students counting the words they know.”

A vocabulary of 1,500 words is adequate for news reporting, but for features and biographies, more words are allowed if they are explained in the context of the sentence.

Words can be added or dropped from the vocabulary. “Sabotage,” a word used often in the World War II era, may be dropped because it is rarely used in news stories today.

Jim Huang Jiwen, a 69-year-old mechanical engineer from Hangzhou, China, said he had listened to Special English on the radio for more than 20 years and, more recently, on the Internet. He said it had helped him improve his ability to write and understand English.

“The pronunciation is beautiful, the sentence is sweet and short, and the content is interesting and friendly to our daily life,” he said in an e-mail message, adding that he particularly liked technical programs.

François Renaud, 56, a teacher at a vocational school in Paris, has found Special English useful in his business and economics classes. “It closes the gap between textbook English and traditional broadcasts such as BBC or CNN, which are too difficult for the average student,” Mr. Renaud said.

A Special English editor at Voice of America, Avi Arditti, said: “There is a fine line between simplifying and simplification. It’s not so much simplifying, but clarification. Simplifying can seem somewhat demeaning. You’re not dumbing it down, but you’re making it understandable to your audience whether they have Ph.D.’s or are in middle school.”

But some listeners, like Ali Asqar Khandan, 36, an assistant professor from Tehran, said Special English seemed like “a special program for advertising American life and culture, not a simple radio station for broadcasting news or teaching English.”

“We hear this message everywhere: not even in education reports and culture reports, but in science reports and agriculture reports,” Mr. Khandan wrote in an e-mail message.

The link between learning English and learning about America has been a constant thread in the debate in Congress this year about revising [immigration](#) policy.

But at home, the Special English branch at Voice of America would support the use of its programming for recent immigrants in a bilingual model if the law did not prohibit it.

“If new immigrants could turn on their radios at 8 o’clock and listen to a half-hour of Special English to listen to the news, it would be very beneficial,” Ms. Gollust said.

Mr. Ritter added, “That would be a great use of a resource that already exists.”

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