THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ON CONTEMPORARY WORLD: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Language has been affected by the significant trend of globalization considerably in the last two decades. Literally, we have revolutionary changes in communication and technology in 21st century and language has played a vital role to enable us to achieve and experience these developments. It is imperative that only powerful languages, like English, take the lead and stay on top in a global society and undoubtedly English has played a dominant role in international politics and diplomacy, information technology, science and technology, education and in resolving international conflicts and also the world economy. In this globalization, English has emerged as an international language despite strong competition from other languages.

This paper investigates the status of English as a global language and its impact on the contemporary world in terms of communication, technology, education, information technology, scientific researches and above all societal transformation.

INTRODUCTION

We have a few questions about global language in our minds and there are answers for them given by experts and linguists but the question is whether we are satisfied with them or not. However, we have to consider them because they are acceptable. The questions are: What is a global language? How does a language achieve global status? What is the importance of a global language in this global village? Has English achieved the global status really? Let us investigate them.

“A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country”---David Crystal says. In his famous book “English as a global language”, he talks about global language and the place of English language in modern world. To achieve global status, a language has to be taken up by every country and people of those countries must decide to give it a special place within their communities though they have mother tongue speakers. Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people
who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are. Latin became an international language throughout the Roman empire but this was not because the Romans were more numerous than the people they subjugated. They were simply more powerful. But the case is different now. Without a strong power-base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication.

Language has no independent existence but it exists only in the mouths, brains, ears and hands of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails. This point may seem obvious but it needs to be made at the outset, because over years many popular and misleading beliefs have grown up about why a language should become internationally successful. It is quite common to hear people claiming that a language is a paragon, on account of its perceived aesthetic qualities, clarity of expression, literary power or religious standing. Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic and French were among them and English is no exception.

A language does not become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties or because of the size of its vocabulary or a vehicle of a great literature in the past or it was associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors which can motivate someone to learn a language, for example, Latin. A language can become a global language only when it is spoken widely by people in every country and it is used in communication education, business, media, science and technology etc.

This is not to deny that a language may have certain properties which make it internationally appealing. For example, we comment sometimes on the familiarity of English vocabulary, deriving from the way English has over the centuries borrowed thousands of words from the languages with which it has been in contact. The welcome given to foreign vocabulary places English in contrast to some languages which have tried to keep it out and give it a cosmopolitan character and the advantage for a global language.

The world has made rapid progress in the 20th century. The establishment of the UN and other international bodies such as WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, IAEA and World Bank had to find a common language for communication and to hold peaceful discussions with different countries. This situation seemed to be slowly becoming a reality in meetings around the world as general competence in English grew. Later, they adopted English as a language of global communication because of the flexibility and universality of English language and also this language was used widely.

With about 500 million people who speak it as their primary language and one billion people speak English as a second language, it is no wonder why this language is the global language of communication. There are many countries that teach English in primary as well as secondary schools.

In today’s business world, English is no longer viewed as a foreign language and English is used in every deal being done internationally. In the past few decades, it has become widely accepted that the lingua franca of international business in English; witness the way companies increasingly choose English as their official corporate language. As far as education is
concerned, English language is being taught at various levels in most of the countries. English is also used in science & technology, information technology, tourism etc. It is also used in communication widely and more effectively than any other language in the world today.

Braj Kachru, in his book “English in the world (1985)” divides the use of English into three concentric circles. The inner circle is the traditional base of English and includes countries such as The United Kingdom, Ireland and the Anglophone populations of the former British colonies of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and various islands of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. In the outer circle, the common wealth countries such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria and others under the sphere of influence of English-speaking countries where English has official or historical importance. The expanding circle refers to those countries where English has no official role but is important for certain functions notably international business. According to the British Council, the number of non-native English speakers had come to significantly outnumber the number of native speakers by the 21st century.

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The English language’s influence has spread across the globe and is more influential in the world of communication, education, media, business and governments than any other, even in certain countries where English is used as a minority language. Moreover, it is acknowledged as the language of popular culture predominantly in the entertainment fields of cinema and music. Although English is not the most widely spoken language in the world in terms of the native speakers when compared with Chinese, it is considered as a global language because English is more flexible and adaptable than Chinese in terms of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary etc., and English is spoken and used by other countries apart from Britain, America and British colonies but Chinese is not.

Though there was competition for English from other international languages, such as French, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, in 19th century, America and Britain dominated the whole world with their economies and consequently, English emerged as an international language by the early 20th century. During that period, Britain and the United States were known for their economic imperialism and became the global economic trade capitals. The rest of the world wanted to join them and those countries had to learn the economic language, which at this point in history, was definitely English. In this context, David Crystal states that “If the metaphor ‘money talks’ has any meaning at all, those were the days when it was shouting loudly---and the language in which it was shouting was chiefly English”.

Today English is incredibly wide-spread and it is constantly expanding. The main reason is the influence of media. The first medium through which English is and was spread through newspapers and television. Everybody needs to know what is going on, in not only their country, but abroad as well. In fact, we have about five thousand news papers in the world today and more than half of the news papers are published in English. It is so important that the growth of English language is conspicuous in modern world. Television and cinema are other forms of media which greatly helped English get to this position it has reached.
today. American television has impact over the world unimaginably. For example, two hundred and fifty million people are learning English on TV.

The last few decades have witnessed a growth in the role of English language around the world as the lingua franca for economic, scientific and political exchange. The spread of English as an international language and the emergence of the Internet as a fast communication channel that has no boundaries in globalization. The Internet has revolutionized the ways of human communication as well as English language learning in a global context. Teachers and learners have to understand how the Internet is bringing about changes in English language learning. The Internet has also an ever growing impact on the lexical, phonetic, syntactic standards of language and the great importance that most teachers place on the use of correct language. The Internet seems to have important implications for linguistic or language learning. Today most of the countries are implementing English language as their second language other than English speaking countries in order to excel and compete with other countries.

According to David Crystal, 85 percentage of the world’s international organizations use English as their official language in transitional communication. About 85 percentage of the world’s important film productions and markets use English as well and 90 percentage of the published academic articles are written in English. In many cases, the increased growth in the use of English language can be attributed to educational, economical or cultural globalization.

In education system at international level, there was a drastic change in schools and universities in the last few decades i.e., all the educational institutions, private or public, have decided to adopt English as their medium of instruction keeping in view the importance of English language and they have benefited from the new trend in education. In some respects, English education has become a profitable commodity that can be sold to students who think that a prosperous future lies in their ability to speak English. In multi-lingual countries where English has been chosen as official language, such as India, Nigeria, Malaysia etc, is useful for them to excel in education and connect with the rest of the world.

International trade is often a complex and cross-border business in which goods are taken from one country, refined or given added value by a second, sold to a third, repackaged and resold and so on. Such multilateral trade brings with it greater reliance on lingua franca. Most of the countries in Asia, Africa and Australia have their trade and business with other countries by using English language today. In Europe, there is growing evidence that English has become the major business lingua franca. A recent investigation in small and medium-sized businesses in peripheral areas of Europe found that German is used extensively especially for informal communication but English is the most used language of business across Europe. Hagen (1993) suggests that knowledge of one language is not sufficient for a company to run business successfully within Europe but the companies should be able to perform in three: English, German and French. However, German and French companies use English for their businesses outside Europe. This is apparent from recommendations made by German Chambers of Commerce to members about languages with which they can have trade with other countries in the world. English is recommended as the sole language for 64 countries, German and French for 25 countries, and Spanish for 17 countries. Thus English is preferred language though there
is competition from other European languages. Japan and the US use English for international trade. The overall picture shows that English is being used extensively in international trade and business in modern world. Recently, major economies, such as China, Japan, Russia, are using English language in their businesses internationally. From this, we can understand that English is playing a key role in international trade and businesses.

English today has been reshaped by the effects of the industrial revolution. As English became the world’s language of discovery and rapid advances were made in the major fields of science, engineering, manufacturing and communications, new communicative functions were required of the language. New and more complex communicative skills were required by employees while the industrial economy gave rise to greater interaction between institutions and general public. Typographic design expanded accordingly, as did the range of written and spoken genres institutionalised in English. Thus the information age began in the 19th century, establishing many of the styles and conventions we take for granted today. Technology has indeed shown profound significance on culture and language.

English and computers have gone together for decades. Computers and the programmes which make them useful were largely the invention of English-speaking countries. The hardware and software reflected the needs of English language. The early systems for text based communication were unfriendly to accented characters and almost impossible for languages using non-Roman writing systems, while computer operators interacted with programmes using instructions in English. English will continue to be spread via software products and digitised intellectual property.

New and simplified forms of English have been constructed by many global engineering companies, such as Caterpillar and Boeing, which are claimed to make maintenance manuals more comprehensible to overseas engineers. But the use of ‘controlled English’ is also intended to make automatic translation easier—opening up the possibility of human writing in restricted forms of English so that machines can translate documents into target languages. The growing use of English as a relay language to permit translation from one language to another via English, will produce new forms of language contact which may encourage the convergence of other languages, at least in their controlled forms, with the semantic and syntactic structures of English.

One of the significant changes taking place in the organisation of the work place today is a rethinking of the way in which activities are carried out and the way they are managed. Work is now frequently arranged around teams who must work out a solution themselves co-operatively instead of passing a problem upstairs to a line manager or project head. Work of all kinds require higher levels of direct communication—both within work teams and between members of different teams. These teams need English language skills to carry out their work and communicate with others in organisations. While more workers are expected to become proficient in English, changes in communications patterns mean they also need a wider range of linguistic abilities. Mercer (1996) aptly distinguishes between two types of working English. The First kind is the communication between other professionals and workers within the same line of work. These people often have specialised language needs, including a particular vocabulary. This type of working English is not, as it is sometimes portrayed, a single, monolithic variety like a special
dialect of English. The second type of working English relates communication with people who are not members of the trade or profession themselves. This style of interaction is a consequence both of the growth in the service industries and the numbers of employees now required to project a corporate image in their dealings with the public. Many employers indeed insist on particular ways of addressing and talking to clients and customers, since English has become an integral part of the service offered. Employees today, as a result of new working practices, have to adopt a wide variety of language styles. Thus English must serve a range of corporate roles and identities and must useful for both team working and service interactions. Not surprisingly, demands on an employee’s competence in English are rising in the contemporary world. Education and training programmes in English are indispensable today to excel in organisations and even to grab opportunities with the command over English language and communication.

In twentieth century the most significant educational trend worldwide is the teaching of a growing number of courses in schools, colleges and universities the medium of English language. The need to teach some subjects in English, rather than the national language or mother tongue, is well understood particularly in sciences. Up to date text books and research articles are available much more easily in one of the world languages and most readily of all in English. The move towards English medium higher education is having a number of long term consequences. First, it accelerates and broadens the second language use of English in both developed and developing countries, creating a constituency of college of graduates many of whom come to use English more extensively for social communication and some of whom raise their own children speaking English as a first language in the present century. English medium higher education is thus one of the drivers of language shift from L2 to L1. Second, English medium education alters the pattern of social privilege which triggers wide ranging social change. Third, the growth of English medium education has permitted a rapid internationalization of education and allows developing countries to restructure themselves as exporters of educational services.

In the 21st century, the service sector of all economies is expected to grow rapidly. Demand is likely to grow particularly in adult education where the English language skills formerly taught to university students may no longer be sufficient to meet the needs of new enterprises. The widespread reform of university curricula in English language is expected in many countries. The educated labour will be greater demand everywhere but they need to update and strengthen their skills in English communication. Mc Rae (1997) suggests that the key to the very long term future lies in our education and new skills. So there is a need to update skills in communication and proficiency as well. Some developing countries which have expanded their provision for English medium higher education will emerge as competitors to developed countries in coming days because they are strictly following English language strategy in education and job environment.

English is spoken by almost everybody in the world to some degree and it has the tendency to transcend cultural aspects such as social, political, economic and religious systems, thus functioning independently from any specific culture, in terms of race and group, to the extent that it can become a positive feature to all or nobody this implies that English can be regarded as essentially a value free means of learning to communicate. The concept of the inseparable linkages between language, society and culture, which ensure economic subsistence of society, is
important in a consideration of the social and cultural impact of English as International Language (EIL), because EIL concerns the relationship between the international spread of English across national boundaries and the many groups of people within their own societies since the beginning of colonialism around five hundred years ago and to the present age of unprecedented globalization.

Phillipson (1992, 166) views the spread of EIL displaces other languages and imposes new mental structures on learners. These mental structures are possibly the ideologies that westerners used to justify their own culture and impose these ideas on others. He sees English learning and culture as inseparable, given that he sees ‘modernization’ and ‘nation building’ as being a legal process of ELT. Phillipson also considers the implications of this and ELT promotes linguistic imperialism.

However, the role of ELT and EIL has changed the face of the world in globalization. They have become somewhat more sensitive in their interaction with other cultures while English has become adopted as a part of the culture of many former non-English speaking countries. There is a growing realisation that EIL is becoming adopted by people who speak it as a second language and not as something being imposed from the outside any more. Crystal (1992) noted that non native speakers of English represent more than two-thirds of its potential speakers. Thus it could be fair to say that English no longer belongs to any particular group of people. Kachru (1994, 135) saw English is very adaptable and capable of sustaining a large assortment of functions. It seems that this phenomenon of EIL, the adoption and ownership of English by formally non-English speaking societies, is a major switch in the role of EIL from its former repressive role to one that offers possibilities for EIL being used in liberating sense.

The countries adopt English and use it alongside their own culture, and combine it with, for example communications technology, can possibly escape from the poverty –trap and catch up with developed countries rapidly. It is clearly witnessed in modern world. ELT professionals should also strive to encourage their students to express matters that are important to their lives, and how to confidently and effectively communicate their concerns, cultural viewpoints and personal interest by taking ownership of English and using it as a meaningful interchange with people of other countries, and to relate what it means to be a member of their specific societies and cultures in a positive way to others in the world community.

Due to latest developments in information and communications technology that have taken place in the past few decades, English has become more dominant in all walks of life than ever before. English has become a necessity as it is the language of modernity. In the colleges of medicine and researches, English is the medium of instruction throughout the world. All computers majors, programming languages, catalogues, medications, technical terms, conferences, research and references require English today. It is indicated that mastery of English language is required for success in life. Students who know English have a better future than those who do not. A person who can communicate in English has a better self-esteem, more self-confidence and self-reliance. Society respects those who can communicate in English and those who have graduated from an English medium college or University.
In 21st century, the number of people seeking to learn English is increasing due to the increasing dominance of English. Crystal (2003) estimates that about one billion students are learning English worldwide today. English is taught as a foreign or second language at schools and universities in almost every country. In a globalized world, English has become a global language and many people feel that English is superior to all other languages and they are keener on learning English. The developing countries like China, Russia, middle-east and some European countries have realised that English is the only language today by which they can achieve scientific and technological progress and also they can gain profits in international trade and commerce and also skilled human resources.

Thus, English is playing a pivotal role in all branches of knowledge to streamline and to unleash unlimited human resources across the globe. It is widening the boundaries of progress in all spheres. The latest and radical change in the world is globalisation and it is also massively influenced by English language and act as a bridge across the globe. The momentum of development will increase rapidly in forth coming years with the help of English in the world.

THE PROSPECTS OF ENGLISH IN FUTURE

The widespread use of English as a language of wider communication will continue to exert pressure towards global uniformity as well as give rise to anxieties about declining standards, language change and the loss of geo linguistic diversity. But as English shifts from foreign language to second language status for an increasing number of people, we can also expect to see English developing a large number of local varieties. These contradictory tensions arise because English has two main functions in the world: it provides a vehicular language for international communication and it forms the basis for constructing cultural identities. As English plays an ever more important role in the first of these functions, it simultaneously finds itself acting as a language of identity for larger number of people around the world. There is no need to fear that trends towards fragmentation will necessarily threaten the role of English as a lingua franca.

Smith (1992) carried out an experiment using speakers of nine national varieties of English-China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States- in order to discover whether the spread of English is creating greater problems of understanding across cultures. He concluded that there was no evidence of a breakdown in the functioning of English as an international lingua franca.

There is no reason to believe that any other language will appear within the next fifty years to replace English as the global lingua franca. The position of English has arisen from a particular history which no other language can, in the changed world of the 21st century. We have argued that no single language will occupy the monopolistic position in the 21st century which English has almost achieved by the end of the 21st century. As trade and communication between neighbouring countries in Asia and South America become more important than flows between such a regions and Europe and North America, so we can expect languages which serve regional communication to rise in popularity. But it is very difficult to foresee more precisely what will occur.
Leading-edge technology, particularly computers and information technology, has been largely English based in several respects. Currently, English is to be found at the leading edge of economic modernization and industrial development. The internet epitomises the information society. At present ninety percent of internet hosts are based in English speaking countries. Satellite television channels have brought English into every home, creating a global audio visual culture. Satellite television has been regarded as a major driver of global English. English may remain as the leading language in the above mentioned areas for the next five decades because no other language can replace English in the near future and the impact of English language on this modern world is well established and inseparable. The indications are that English will enjoy a special position in the multi-lingual society of the 21st century and it will be the only language to appear in the language mix in every part of the world.

In the early 20th century, English became an international language with the dominance of America and Britain throughout the world. Later, English was used in education, business, technology etc widely at international level though there was strong competition from other international languages such as French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Russian etc. By the end of 20th century, the concept of ‘globalization’ emerged and English was considered a global language because of its unquestionable influence on this world. In 21st century, English has gained more popularity and in future also English will continue to dominate the whole world in all fields because of its flexibility and adaptability.

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