

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. Within this family, English is a member of the Germanic branch. The Germanic branch may be divided into three groups or subdivisions: East Germanic which consisted of Gothic, now an extinct language; North Germanic under which we include the Scandinavian languages; and West Germanic which consists of High German, Low German, Frisian and English [1].

At present English is the second or third most popular mother tongue in the world, with an estimated 350–400 million native speakers. But, crucially, it is also the common tongue for many non-English speakers the world over, and almost a quarter of the globe's population – maybe 1.5–2 billion people – can understand it and have at least some basic competence in its use, whether written or spoken.

It should be noted here that statistics on the numbers of people around the world who speak English are unreliable at best. It is notoriously difficult to define quite what is meant by «English speaker», let alone the definitions of first language, second language, mother tongue, native speaker, etc. What level of competency counts? Does a thick creole (English-based, but completely incomprehensible to a native English speaker) count? Just to add to the confusion, there are at least 40 million people in the nominally English-speaking United States who do NOT speak English. In addition, the figures, of necessity, combine statistics from different sources, different dates, etc.

Although falling short of official status, English is also an important language in at least twenty other countries, including several former British colonies and protectorates, such as Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cyprus, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates. It is the most commonly used unofficial language in Israel and an increasing number of other countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway and Germany. Within Europe, an estimated 85 % of Swedes can comfortably converse in English, 83 % of Danes, 79 % of Dutch, 66 % in Luxembourg and over 50 % in countries such as Finland, Slovenia, Austria, Belgium, and Germany [3, p. 44].

After centuries of acquisition, borrowing and adaptation, English has ended up with a vocabulary second to none in its richness and breadth, allowing for the most diverse and subtle shades of meaning. No other language has so many words to say the same thing (consider the multiplicity of synonyms for big which are in daily use, for example). It is often considered to have the largest vocabulary of any language, although such comparisons are notoriously difficult (as an example, it is impossible to compare with Chinese, because of fundamental differences in language structure). English has become a sort of common denominator in international affairs, as it has a fairly open ended

linguistic structure and is able to be understood in a wide variety of circumstances.

The birth of the Internet in an English speaking country has also had a huge impact on this global evolution of the language, with almost 80 % of the worlds' digital information now stored in English. The Internet is basically English oriented, as most of the large search engines are based in the USA and the major computer languages themselves are a kind of sub set of the English language. This alone has been a huge effect on globalization and has meant that English speaking countries are at a definite advantage when it comes to communicating with the world as a whole [4, p. 65].

English is the predominant language of international commerce. Although the United Nations and its various agencies have more than one language for transaction, more often than not, English comes to be chosen as the preferred language of communication between the participating member-nations.

There are many reasons for the spread of English: historical, internal political, practical, and intellectual. But there are also some wrong reasons: it is sometimes thought that English has achieved its world status because of its intrinsic linguistic features. People have claimed that it is inherently a more logical or more beautiful language than others, easier to pronounce, simpler in grammatical structure, or larger in vocabulary. This kind of reasoning is the consequence of unthinking chauvinism or native linguistic thinking. Languages rise and fall in world esteem for many kinds of reasons, but linguistic reasons do not rank highly among them [2, p. 106].

In the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in the development of English as an international language (EIL). EIL implies a new way of communication across different nationalities and cultures through the medium of a common language. The emergence of EIL and World Englishes is undoubtedly linked to the phenomenon of globalization and it is often stigmatized in the traditional ELT context, which is still dominated by native-speaker standards.

At the moment, a global revolution is taking place in which more people than ever are learning English. This is because it has become the planet's language for commerce, technology and also empowerment. At the moment, there are more non-native speakers of English than there are native speakers; the ratio is 3:1. For the first time, there is a language that is being spoken by more people as a second language than as a first. In Asia, there are 350 million English-users, and this number equals the added-up populations of the USA, Great Britain and Canada. There are more Chinese children studying English than there are Britons. All these new English-speakers are not only using the language, they are also shaping it. The terms Japlish (mixture of Japanese and English) and Hinglish (mixture of Hindi and English) refer to new varieties of English that came into being all over the world. In South-Africa, many blacks have adopted their own version of English including many indigenous words.

Thus, English is learned everywhere because people have found out that knowledge of English is a passport for better career, better pay, advanced knowledge, and for communication with the entire world. English is also learned for the literature it possesses, and for the variety and rich experience it provides. English has replaced French as the language of diplomacy. In this computer age, English is bound to expand its domains of use everywhere. Everyone wants to appropriate English as their own.

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