

## **English Language: The Gradual Shift from Being a Second Language to the Main Language**

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English language is widely used, spoken, learnt, and taught by people around the world. It is not only used as a lingua franca by the people belonging to different regions and countries of the world for interacting with one another, but is considered by most of us to be the most universal, global, and international among all the languages across the globe today. It is widely spread and currently the primary language of a number of countries. It is extensively used and taught as a first, second or foreign language around the world. In the countries like Britain, America, Australia and Canada, English is used as first language or mother-tongue. The users of English as a first language are around 400 million people. In the countries like India, Pakistan, and South Africa, it is used as second language. The users of English as a second language/ official language are also about 400 million and there are 700 million people around the world who use it as a foreign language. The countries which use it as a foreign language are such as China, Japan, Russia, Iran and Iraq. Thus, there are around 1500 million people i.e. one fourth of the total population of the world who make regular use of English. This is the estimate made by David Crystal (2002) , a famous linguist.

The primacy of some English speaking countries is a key factor for wide spread of English language throughout the globe, which had now become the most prominent international language in communications, science, technology, business, aviation, and other areas including internet. This is why it has often been referred as a global language. As a global means of communication, English language has inevitably changed in order to suit specific contexts or needs (Crystal, 5)

Being a global language, English is being taught as a foreign language in a most extensive scale and more than 100 countries such as China, Russia, Spain, Germany, Egypt and Brazil and in most of these countries it has emerged as one of the chief foreign languages and is being used in schools, colleges and universities, often displacing another language in the process. In 1996, for example, English occupied the place of French, as the chief foreign language in schools in Algeria, a former French colony (David Crystal, 3-4). Many countries formally point out a language's status in their constitution (such as our own country); some make no special mention of it (like Britain). In certain other countries, the question whether the special status should be legally acknowledged is a matter of considerable debate, particularly in the USA. Because of the three pronged development of English as a first, second and foreign language— it is inevitably that English as global language is likely to be used by more people than any other language. In fact, it has already reached this stage. The statistics suggest that nearly a quarter of the world's population is already fluent or competent in English.

The global status of English is further supported by Ulrich who maintains that English is by far the most useful language for international communications today and multilateral contacts,

especially in the divergent regions, the language which functions best in all the cases, or entire functioning is accomplished in the English language.

The present day world status of English is primarily the outcome of the two chief reasons: the expansion of British colonial power, which reached its peak towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the emergence of the United States as leading economic power of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the latter factor which has contributed significantly for the world position of the English language today. The USA covers nearly 70% of the all English mother tongue speakers in the world (excluding Creole varieties). *Such dominance, with its political/economic underpinnings, currently gives America a controlling interest in the way the language is likely to develop (David Crystal, 53).*

In fact, the English language has not been received by every country and their people in a positive manner, but the dominant view about this language is that a person is more likely to be in touch with the latest thinking and research in their subject of interest by learning English than by learning any other language.

During the last 50 years, English has been adopted as a general medium of instruction in higher education in many countries. As Graddol notes, *“one of the most significant educational trends world-wide is the teaching of a growing number of courses in universities through the medium of English. The need to teach some subject in English rather than the national language, is well understood: in the sciences (where), for example, up to-date text books and research articles are obtainable much more easily in one of the world languages and most readily of all in English ”*. There are several countries where the language has no official status. Advances courses in the Netherlands, for example, are widely taught in English. If most students are going

to encounter English routinely in their monographs and periodicals, it makes sense to teach advanced courses in that language, to better prepare them for that encounter. But these days there is also a strong lingua franca argument: the pressure to use English has grown as universities and colleges have increasingly welcomed foreign students, and teachers have found themselves faced with mixed-language audiences.

The rise of English as a global language was predicted by Sapir as early as 1931 (Sapir, 66). Almost sixty years later, Crystal acknowledged that its use as a lingua franca was closely connected with its rise as a world language (Crystal, 8-10). According to him, “A *language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country*” (McArthur, 10). With this in mind, Toolan affirms that “English is shockingly emerging as the only truly global language” (Toolan, 35). Similarly, Crystal names three major trends which had an impact on the world’s linguistic ecology, one of which is “the arrival of the world’s first genuinely global language- English” (Crystal 1). On a similar note, Redmann (2002:45) argues that “English spans the divide between people and cultures. It is owned by Britain and America: now it belongs to everyone”( Redmann, 45). Chairman Lord Alan Watson of the English Speaking Union (ESU) states, “*English has become the working language of the global village*” (Redmann, 45). In addition, “the widespread acceptance of English as a first, second or the foreign language is the main indication of its worldwide status” (wikipedia). Moreover despite its recent decline, English continues to be most widely published language.

Despite the widespread use of English across the globe and its overlap with other languages, there has been a hot controversy over the years as to how many people speak English either as a ‘first’ or a ‘second’ language. Estimates of the numbers of the English language

speakers vary from person to person. For example, Braj Kachru said that between 320 to 380 million people speak English as first language, and anywhere between 250 to 350 million as a second language. On the other hand, David Crystal cites over 75 territories where English “holds a special place” (territories which include not only Britain, the USA, Australia, Canada etc. but also countries like Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, and Nigeria) and calculates around 377 million as the first language speakers of English and only 298 million as second language speakers. However, he points out that it would be easy to get nearer a total of 350 million for second language speakers if we were able to calculate how many speakers of English as a second language there were in Canada and Australia, or in countries like Pakistan or Nigeria. Not only is the calculation of such figures problematic, but a lot, as he suggests, also depends on how well we expect people to be able to speak English before we can start including them as second language English speakers. He points out, “*the more limited command of English we allow to be acceptable, the more this figure can be inflated*” (Crystal, 108). If we count the second language English speakers of the world on Crystal’s criterion, anywhere between 600 and 700 million people in the world speak English, and of that huge number, a significant minority speaks it as a second language.

The declining use of English on the internet is shown in the statistics (Graddol, 45), which is based on data obtained from the Latin American NGO Funredes. The data gives the decreasing percentages of internet users working in English from 80% in 1996 to 20% in 2005 and similarly the decreasing percentages of web pages in English from 90% in 1996 to 46% in 2005.

The new figures provided by the different sets of statistical data should not come as a surprise to most specialists, considering that the power endowed to a language is a function of extra-linguistic factors such as the economic power and political influence, among other things. It is quite obvious that the world has been witnessing a state of economic restructuring and evolution which will extend over the next few decades. This, according to Graddol (2000), “*will alter the relationship between the West and the rest of the world—especially Asia—and will change the economic attractiveness of the major languages...however, proficiency in English may yet to be one of the mechanisms for dividing those who have access to wealth and information from those who do not*” (p.25)

If we accept that English is a lingua franca for many people in the world, does this necessarily mean that its pre-eminence is assured? What happens as more and more people appropriate it for their own use? Will it split into varieties that become less mutually intelligible? Or will it continue to march over the globe, crushing all in its path? Is it conceivable, as David Crystal half-jokingly worries, that in 500 years it will be the only language left? Such an outcome would be, in his words, “*....the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known*” (Crystal, 140)

David Graddol does not prophesy a globally destructive English of this kind. He considers a number of future possibilities, all of which question the certainty of English as number one world language. He points out, for example, that the fastest-growing language community in the USA is Hispanic. Taken together with the trade agreements which are springing up in both the North and South American continents, it is highly possible that in the foreseeable future the entire American continent will be an English-Spanish bilingual zone.

Looking at the internet and the World Wide Web he reminds us that whereas English is said to have accounted for 80% of computer-based communication in the 1990s, the proportion is expected to drop to around 40% by 2010.

In short, it may be concluded that there is no certainty about the upholding of the current primacy of the English language in future. Brighter chances are for its downfall.

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