

# Study of English as a Global Language and the Educational Impact in China

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## Abstract

**With the continuous globalization of technology, culture and economy, English plays a more and more important role in the world. English now is recognized as a global language for communication among non-native speakers and native speakers, as well as a daily communication tool for native speakers. This paper explores the reasons why English becomes a global language and how it affects the world and China, and further discusses whether English will develop into linguistic imperialism in the future.**

## Keywords

**English; Global language; Linguistic imperialism.**

## 1. Introduction

No language has ever been in a situation spoken more widely in the world than English. There are 329 million people who use English as their first language in the world, 430 million people who use English as their second language, and 750 million people who use English as a foreign language (Crystal, 2003). The UN has confirmed that English has become the official language of more than 60 countries in 185 UN member states of the world. Some countries, apart from official language, use English as a national language or a semi-official language. According to Crystal (1997), English became a leading language of colonial nation, economic power, new technologies, political power, academic and international communications during the 20th century. In foreign language teaching, Crystal (2003:5) writes, "English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil – and in most of the countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process." English is also widely used in science and technology. Phillipson (1992) describes in his book that computers and information technology are largely English-based. Professor Eugene Garfield conducted a survey of thousands of major scientific and technical journals in the world in 1997. In 1997, a total of 925,000 scientific and technological papers were published globally, 95% of which were written in English and only half of the papers are written by authors from English-speaking countries (Xu, 2010). From above the information, we can see that English has been widely disseminated throughout the world.

Why English is the global language and what are the impacts on the world and China? Based on such two questions, this paper attempts to explore the reasons and impacts behind them.

## 2. English as a global language

The US linguist Braj Kachru has put forward the "three concentric circles" term: The Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle, to summarize the distribution and use of English in different countries and regions. The inner circle means the traditional foundation of English in the countries such as the United States, Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand where English is used as L1 (the first language or native language). The outer circle represents

the regions where English is used as L2(second language), including Singapore, India, Philippines and over fifty other countries. The expanding circle involves the areas where English is taught as a foreign language, including China, Russia, Japan and other states. The three circles indicate the wide prevalence of English and its veritable status as a global language.

## 2.1. Definition

Many scholars have given similar definitions to global language. Brutt-Griffler (2002) defines world English as “the means and results of the spread of English from its historical boundaries to its current position as the preeminent global means of communication.” Crystal (2003:3) holds a view, “A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country.” Kirkpatrick (2007:7) gives a definition to lingua franca, “the common language used by people of different language backgrounds to communicate with each other.” Rajagopalan (2004) argues that world English is “a language spoken across the world”.

## 2.2. Why English?

Crystal (2003) suggests two answers to the question, “geographical-historical” and “socio-cultural”. To summarize, the major factors contribute to the answers are the areas’ expansion and the influences on human’s daily life. In what way does English influence human’s life? “The language has penetrated deeply into the international domains of political life, business, safety, communication, entertainment, the media and education. The convenience of having a lingua franca available to serve global human relations and needs has come to be appreciated by millions” (Crystal, 2003:30). Pitman’s (1873:290) observation of English implies, “The British Empire covers nearly a third of the earth’s surface, and British subjects are nearly a fourth of the population of the world.” “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries English was the language of the leading colonial nation-Britain. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the language of the leader of the industrial revolution-also Britain” (Crystal, 2003:120). The civilizing influence of Britain is greatly achieved through English language.

By giving English a special place within communities, countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Zambia and other countries use English as a medium of instruction for official purposes, which also helps consolidate the status of English as a global language. “In 1995-6, there were about 12,500 international organizations in the world. About a third list the languages they use in an official or working capacity. A sample of 500 of these showed that 85 percent made official use of English-far more than any other language” (Crystal, 2003:87).

English is also given priority in schools’ foreign language teaching. When we explore why so many nations use English as official language and chief foreign language in schools, Crystal (2003:110) describes, “one of the most important reasons is always educational sense”. Mashabela (1983) also puts, “learning and using English will not only give us the much-needed unifying chord but will also land us into the exciting world of ideas”. Crystal (2003:110) writes, “English is the medium of a great deal of the world’s knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology”. According to Large (1983) in a study of the use of English in scientific periodicals in 1980, 85 percent papers in biology and physics were written in English, 73 percent in medical papers and 69 percent and 67 percent in mathematics and chemistry papers respectively.

English likewise has a dominant position on the Internet. According to Crystal (2003), “80 percent of the world’s electronically stored information is currently in English. A NUA Internet Survey in 2002 estimates 544.2 million world users online, with a third (181 million) in the USA and Canada; 46 percent are in English-speaking countries.” Specter (1996) concludes, “if you want to take full advantage of the Internet there is only one way to do it: learn English, which has more than ever become America’s greatest and most effective export.” “In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth it was the language of the leading economic power-

the USA. As a result, when new technologies brought new linguistic opportunities, English emerged as a first-rank language in industries which affected all aspects of society-the press, advertising, broadcasting, motion pictures, sound recording, transport and communications" (Crystal, 2003:120).

### 2.3. Impacts

One of the negative effects of English globalization is that it has caused the expansion of western culture and blurred the identity and characteristics of certain ethnic cultures. For example, Indian English. Many words from India are gradually incorporated into the English vocabulary, such as "rajah", "coolie" and "verandah" (Mo, 2006). According to Graddol, there will be three types of changes in English. One of the changes is different meaning and pattern of usage among non-native speakers, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and China. The widespread use of English in different regions and fields gives an opportunity to long-term contact with other languages and cultures and inevitably leads to nativization. Nativization, however, is bound to derive a large number of different varieties of English, such as Singapore English, Thailand English and Indian English, which have their unique characteristics of voice, vocabulary and discourse. In the process of expanding, English was influenced by Chinese culture and formed a variant of "China English" (Mo, 2006). In terms of vocabulary, many Chinese-specific things have been incorporated into the English vocabulary, such as "Chinese herbal medicine" (中草药), "one China policy" (一个中国政策) and "special economic zone" (经济特区) (Mo, 2006). "China English" is based on normative English, with Chinese characteristics into the voice, vocabulary and discourse (Mo, 2006). When talk about "China English", we must distinguish it from "Chinglish". "Chinglish" is the "interlanguage" between Chinese non-standard and normative languages (Mo, 2006). We can see from above that English language can be influenced by non-native speakers' linguistic style. Apart from linguistic influence, countries in expanding circle including China, Japan, Thailand and Korean start to celebrate western holidays, such as Halloween, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

With the rapid economic development of China in commercial, technological and cultural exchanges and the more powerful status and role in international organizations such as WTO and UN, an urgent demand for English proficiency is required. English also made a significant difference to English language education in China. A large number of English professionals and translators are needed in China to serve in diplomatic, foreign trade and education departments. All junior high schools, high schools and universities make English a compulsory course, and many adults also learn English for different purposes (Guo, 2012). "These include a wide range of undergraduate degrees in Medicine and Dentistry, Economics and Management, Law, Engineering, Biology and Journalism. A range of Masters and Doctoral programs available in English are also listed" (Kirkpatrick, 2016). A large number of English tutorial schools and training institutions came into being, even kindergartens began to have English courses (Guo, 2012). The estimated number of English learners in mainland China is 350 million (Zhang, 2011).

English globalization also has a tremendous impact on the development of English curriculum standards. Chinese curriculum standards always emphasize teaching in communicative approach and student-centered method from a functional perspective. Taking college English standard as an example, the revision published in 1999 was criticized by education experts and leaders because it over-emphasized on reading and writing and ignored listening and speaking. Due to emphasis on these four parts, the refined vision was passed by committee experts in 2004 (Guo, 2012), which indicates English language teaching is favored by communicative teaching method.

Last but not least, English globalization has a certain impact on bilingual education in China. In 2001, the Ministry of Education put forward some measures to strengthen undergraduate

teaching, requiring universities to set up 5 percent to 10 percent bilingual courses, introducing original teaching materials and improving the teachers' teaching levels. Bilingual education in economically developed areas of China has developed rapidly. Some primary and secondary schools are also trying bilingual teaching (Guo, 2012). "Bilingual kindergartens have unsurprisingly become the first choice for many young and rich Chinese parents" (Pan, 2015).

## 2.4. Future Implications

In various fields of the world, English is gaining widespread use and it seems that its status as a universal language has become deeply rooted. Does it mean the future of English global status hard to be replaced? In some countries, however, people reject "give English a privileged status, either as an official language or as a foreign language" (Crystal, 2003:124). Kenya president delivered a speech in 1974, "The basis of any independent government is a national language, and we can no longer continue aping our former colonizers." Gandhi (1985) puts emotively, "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them." In China, Pan (2015) describes, "In October 2013, education authorities in Beijing, and some of the other major Chinese cities and provinces such as Shanghai, Shandong and Jiangsu, announced that they plan to shift the emphasis from English to Chinese in standardized tests such as the Gaokao", which is a way to de-emphasize English. According to Crystal (2003), a country may sacrifice its cultural identity if everything is written in English, besides, extra resources are needed to foster a local lingua franca as "a country's economic future operating more on a regional level." People also hold a view that "bilingual policy are expensive to resource, in both time and money".

Nowadays, Chinese fever popularizes among westerners. It is estimated that 300 million people are learning Chinese globally (Graddol, 2006). 200,000 people from 180 countries learn Chinese in China. In some East Asian countries, Chinese has become a regional language. According to People's Daily online edition, in North American Canada, Chinese has become the third largest language with a steady increase in the number of Chinese speakers, and nearly 2500 primary and secondary schools in the United States have set up Chinese courses (Zhang, 2011).

As above information mentioned, I totally disagree that English will eternally keep its status as a global language. Bisong (1995) points out that the status of mother tongue will not be easily shaken by the spread of English. This is especially true in the expanding countries. Because in these countries, people spend only a few hours a day learning English at school, but in a variety of different situations continuously use their mother tongue. We cannot deny its benefits neither that English offers more opportunities in many areas of life. Mo (2006) argues that those who have mastered English tend to have better jobs and higher economic and social status.

## 3. Conclusion

Language not only serves as a tool of thinking, communication and information transmission, but also acts as a carrier of cultural knowledge. English has a certain influence on the breadth and depth of different languages and cultures. Over the past few decades, English has been expanded widely in the world as a global language. This trend of development is unstoppable over a period of time and will continue to develop. English globalization not only has its far-reaching geographical-historical and socio-cultural origins, but also fulfills the natural needs of people in the real social life. It is these historical and practical reasons that make the spread of English into the world unstoppable. English dominance however cannot remain eternal. The pattern of the world's languages is dynamically changing with the new pattern of changes in the political, economic, cultural and military changes in various countries in the world. Other languages in the world, as long as the time comes, may develop into the common language of the world.

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