BEYOND WORDS: THE POWER OF ENGLISH IN THE MODERN WORLD

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Annotation:

This article looks at how English came to be the main language of international communication and what this means for ordinary people, schools and whole societies. It draws on nine sources: books, research reports and conference papers. English spread partly through historical momentum and partly because it adapts easily, and today most people learn it because it helps them find work, study and get information. The article then turns to early English teaching, the unequal access that often comes with it, the risks for other languages, and the place of English in migration and global citizenship education. The method is descriptive analysis combined with a comparison of published literature. The conclusion argues that English works best when it is added to a person's mother tongue rather than set above it.

Keywords: English as a global language, early language learning, language policy, inequality, multilingualism, migration, global citizenship.

Introduction: In 2011, during the uprising in Libya, one activist went into the streets speaking Arabic, then went online and wrote in English. Asked why, he gave a short answer: English is where you go if you want to reach the world [2.7]. That choice tells us something about our time. About 1.75 billion people now speak English at a useful level, roughly one in every four people on earth [2.2]. Crystal had estimated around 1.5 billion for the early 2000s and observed

that no language had ever grown so quickly [1.6]. Still, figures only go so far. Why do so many people want English? What happens when children begin at six, or even four? And who gets left out? This article tries to answer these questions by placing several sources next to each other and checking where they agree and where they disagree.

How English Became Everyone's Language

Crystal explains that a language becomes global when it develops a special role that is recognised in every country [1.3]. Native speakers are only part of that story. In 2002 about 329 million people were counted as first-language speakers, yet the countries where English has an official or priority role held well over a third of humanity [1.67]. Today, non-native speakers are estimated to outnumber native speakers by four to one [2.4]. To me, this shows that English no longer belongs only to the countries that gave it its name.

How did it come to this? The British Council report names two qualities, momentum and adaptability [2.5]. The momentum began with trade, empire, military power and missionaries. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 made English the dominant language of the United States, American influence pushed it further [2.5]. Arabic and Spanish also travelled widely through conquest and religion, but according to the report they adapted more slowly [2.5]. English kept borrowing from Arabic, Hindi, Malay and many other languages, and words like *shampoo*, *jungle* or *chutney* are simply English now [2.5]. None of this happened because English is an easy language. The report admits that it became global mostly for historical reasons and that its spelling is a genuine obstacle for learners [2.10]. It seems that English won its place as much by bending as pushing.

The internet has made everything faster. Changes that used to take centuries now happen in months; in 2012 the Oxford English Dictionary added about 300 new words in a single month [2.6]. The report even speaks of an "English 2.0",

a loose, flexible version used online [2.6]. Which leads to Crystal's most striking point: once a language goes global, nobody owns it any longer, or maybe everyone who has learned it owns a small share [1.2]. Honestly, I wonder if we can still talk about one English, since it changes faster than any textbook can follow.

Why People Want It: Jobs, Money and Doors

The reasons for learning English are mostly practical. A 2012 survey found that nearly 70 per cent of executives expected their workforce to need good English if their companies were to grow [2.2]. In India, men who speak fluent English earn on average 34 per cent more per hour than men who speak none [2.10]. Governments have noticed. Enever and Moon describe how China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam opened to the world economy and then started treating English as a generic skill, lowering the starting age to build a stronger workforce [3.5–6]. Parents push too, from the other side, since English has come to stand for a better life and social mobility [3.6]. Rwanda went furthest. In 2009 it announced a plan to move its entire education system into English, although most schools had been teaching in French [2.12]. Looking at these figures, I can see why many students in my country put English before almost every other subject.

Numbers can hide the human side, though. The Kurdish writer Bejan Matur says her mother tongue is banned, so she writes poetry in Turkish, a language she has a painful relationship with English, she says, feels like a break she has been offered [2.9]. For her this has nothing to do with salary. It is a place where she can breathe. I find this a useful reminder that learners also have personal reasons, and no table of statistics will capture them. Her story made me realise that for some people English is less a career tool and more a quiet place to be themselves.

Starting Early: A Promise With Conditions

Many governments believe that younger children learn languages more easily and that a longer period of study gives better results. Enever and Moon warn that these assumptions are still debated and are sometimes oversimplified in public discussion [3.6]. Johnstone comes to a similar view. Of 35 recent studies on the critical period, 14 seemed to support it and 21 did not [5.33–34], and Scovel advised ministries to be "exceedingly cautious" about turning this research into policy [5.34]. Johnstone also recalls Stern's old argument that each age has its own strengths, so there is no need to force a choice between starting early and starting late [5.34]. Younger beginners tend to pick up sounds more easily and feel less anxious, while older beginners grasp concepts better and have more learning strategies. A child who starts early can draw on both sets of strengths as time goes on [5.34]. What stays with me is that "the earlier the better" sounds so obvious, yet the research is far less certain than people assume.

An early start only pays off if the programme behind it is solid, however. Most primary programmes give less than an hour a week and depend on busy generalist teachers whose own English is limited [5.35]. A European review found that children enjoyed the lessons, but measured results were modest and most of what they said was learnt by heart [5.36]. One comparison stands out: a city programme offered 400 hours of English over four years, while a bilingual project in the same city offered 1,700 [5.36]. The same problems come up again and again across countries: too few trained teachers, classes of fifty or more in parts of Asia and Africa, and end-of-primary exams that drag teachers back to grammar drills [3.10–11]. So it is hardly surprising that Enever and Moon end their chapter by saying plainly that "earlier is better" is not always true and that education reform takes time [3.19–20]. A weekly half-hour of memorised phrases sounds closer to a hobby than to real language learning.

What should good teaching look like? Krashen's input hypothesis says we make progress when we understand language slightly above our current level, with attention on meaning rather than form [7.21]. His affective filter idea adds that anxiety can block input even when it is understood, so a good teacher offers understandable language in a low-stress setting [7.31–32]. Cummins' conditions, as Johnstone summarises them, point the same way: help learners make meaning, encourage wide reading and give them real chances to use the language [6.12]. There is encouraging research on bilingualism too. Bialystok's work suggests that managing two languages strengthens attention control and planning in children and may slow cognitive decline later in life [6.10]. The catch is that learners need to reach a certain threshold in the second language before these benefits show up [6.11]. From my own experience, I learn best when I feel relaxed enough to make mistakes without fear.

The Other Side: Fairness, Teachers and Lost Languages

If English is a key to opportunity, who holds the key? Butler shows that in East Asia English has become a high-stakes subject and a yardstick of academic success, so parents react strongly to any difference in access [4.24]. In Korea and Taiwan, making English official in primary school seems to have increased family spending on private lessons, and teachers already see gaps linked to parents' income and region [4.24]. Enever and Moon describe the same pattern in India and Bangladesh, where English-medium private schools widen the distance between the haves and the have-nots [3.8]. Johnstone's East Asian study therefore insists that success should not stay in a few elite, privileged schools [6.9]. It worries me that a skill meant to open doors can slowly become one more thing that only wealthy families can afford.

Teachers are another pressure point. Parents and administrators often prefer native speakers, but qualified ones are in short supply, and Butler predicts an "NS teacher divide" between rich and poor regions [4.27]. Taiwan tried a

creative fix by sending English-educated young men to rural areas in place of military service [4.27]. Butler also notes that communicative methods imported from English-speaking countries need real adjustment before they suit local classrooms [4.27–28]. Maybe the more important question is not who is a native speaker, but who is a good teacher.

Then there is the question of other languages. Crystal lists the fears openly: a lazy, monolingual English-speaking elite, a gap between those who have the language and those who do not, and the loss of minority languages [1.14–15]. He accepts that perhaps half of the world's 6,000 languages could vanish within a century, but he argues that a global language is only weakly connected to this process and may even encourage stronger support for local languages [1.20–21]. To its credit, the British Council report also says that English alone is not enough for young people in the UK [2.16], and it quotes research suggesting that monolingual graduates face a weaker future against multilingual competitors [2.8]. Policy makers elsewhere share the worry. Oman's new curriculum stresses Arabic and Omani culture, and Prabhu argues that English should be added to a child's languages and should not replace the first one [3.13]. Whatever the numbers say, losing a language means losing a way of seeing the world, and I would not want that to happen to my own language.

English, Migration and Belonging

English also matters to people who have moved to English-speaking countries. A European handbook quoted by Mallows treats knowledge of the host language as indispensable for integration [8.2]. The chapters in that book paint a more complicated picture, though. Migrants need the language for practical things like housing, healthcare and school, and also for emotional belonging, and a chat at the school gate may teach as much as a formal class [8.3]. The OECD survey found that in countries with high migration about one in three adults at the lowest skill level were born abroad, partly because the tests

were given in the host language [8.4]. Mallows also points out that debates about integration rarely include migrants themselves, which is why participatory classes, where students choose the topics, are so interesting [8.4]. Some European countries now use a language requirement as a condition of entry [8.5]. So language can open a door, but it can also work as a gate.

English and Global Citizenship

The last theme asks what the English classroom is for. Gimenez and Sheehan argue that English teachers now have to go beyond linguistic skills, because English helps to create a global community and a sense of planetary citizenship [9.4]. In the foreword, a former British Council director-general is quoted saying that the language classroom is a non-threatening place to discuss serious issues, which gives students a double motivation [9.2]. Gimenez herself sees the spread of English as a chance rather than a menace, a chance to show students how competing discourses shape our view of the world [9.48]. She builds on Fairclough's idea of critical awareness of discourse, the habit of asking whose interests a text serves [9.49]. That fits with Cummins' "critical literacy", the ability to read hidden meanings and power relations in texts [6.12]. Put simply, a learner should leave the class able to speak English and also to question what is said in it.

Conclusion

After reading these sources side by side, I came to see English as a tool, not a trophy. It spread through trade, empire and technology, and it stays powerful because millions of people find it useful for work, study, friendship and information. The evidence also shows that good intentions are not enough. Early English programmes need trained teachers, enough hours, reasonable class sizes and patience. Without them they mostly produce frustration, and a new gap between families who can pay for extra lessons and families who cannot.

What impressed me most is that almost every author, each from a different angle, returns to one idea: English should be added to a person's languages, not replace the first one. I believe children who keep and value their mother tongue are better placed to benefit from a second language. Schools, in my view, should also teach students to think critically about English and not just to speak it, and countries that gain the most from English should invest in other languages as well. English will matter most, I think, for people who use it to listen as well as to speak and to connect with others. If we keep that in mind, the power of English can be shared more fairly.

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