

# English as the Main Language in Intercultural Communication

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## *Abstract*

*The paper gives an overview of the factors, changes and trends that may have an impact on the status of the English language as lingua franca nowadays and in the near future. It presents the new phenomena and concepts of 'functional native' and 'Global English' together with the change they bring about in the practice of language teaching, and gives an account of those areas where English continues to play a leading role (e.g. international business as dominated by multinational companies, the Internet, the international market of higher education). The potential rivals of English are also listed together with the brief characterisation of their competitive edge. The paper comes to the conclusion that they are not likely to jeopardize the status of English as lingua franca although it will certainly fulfil this role in a multicultural/multilingual environment.*

Nowadays, English fulfils the role that Latin had in the Middle Ages – it is a world language or *lingua franca*, and as such, it is the main medium in intercultural communication. It is not likely that this position will be jeopardized in 40-50 years by other great languages in the world such as Spanish, Chinese or Arabic, which are becoming more and more important nowadays due to various reasons. However, the status of English is changing as the world is changing and becoming multicultural around us. The paper strives to give an overview of these changes and trends.

## **1. Classification of speakers of English, the concept of 'functional native', the emergence of Global English**

In the traditional approach (e.g. Crystal 1995: 107), the role of English as a world language was illustrated with three concentric circles, where the innermost circle included native speakers of the language (those speaking English as the first language, e.g. the inhabitants of Great Britain, the USA, Australia, etc.). In the middle circle, those were put who speak English as their Second Language (the inhabitants of former English colonies). In the outmost circle, there were those speaking English as a Foreign Language (here belong e.g. China, Russia, but also Slovakia or Hungary).

As David Graddol points out in his study commissioned by the British Council (Graddol 2006: 110), in our present, globalised world, the borderlines between these three traditional categories is increasingly disappearing: irrespective of their birthplace and nationality, those around 500 million people belong to the innermost circle who speak English with native-like competence. They are regarded to be functional natives. Instead of having two distinct outer circles, other speakers of the language are put on a scale according to their level of competence.

## **2. Important developments in the field of language teaching**

It is also a new phenomenon that worldwide, English is more common now in communication acts where neither of the partners is a native speaker. This has led to a significant change in language teaching: the objective is no longer to enable the student to attain native-like competence but rather to make her/him able to communicate fluently, understand the other speaker (who is most likely not a native speaker her/himself, either) and make her/himself understood. This involves the student's acquisition of a Lingua Franca Core (Graddol 2006: 87).

It is another change in language teaching following from the aforementioned phenomenon that for a teacher, it is no longer necessarily an advantage if s/he is a native speaker by birth. In a given case, a non-native (functional native) teacher may stand just as good or an even better chance to get a job because, for example, s/he may help the students better to understand the differences between their mother tongue and English in order to eliminate the interference of the two languages as this problem is familiar to the teacher from her/his own experience as a learner.

Global English, that is, the variety of English used by two speakers non-native by birth is now the subject of research, as well: the Vienna-Oxford Corpus of International English (VOICE) has been compiled in a project based on the cooperation of the two universities, and its version 1.0 is now available online free for research purposes. It is a fascinating research topic with important consequences for language teaching to explore the differences between Global English and the most prestigious and most widely taught varieties of the language (Standard British English, General American).

Recognizing the role played by English in international communication, the educational systems of the different countries have started teaching it at an ever younger age. In China, for example, English is compulsory from the 3rd class of elementary school. In comparison, as statistics reveal, in Hungary, children start with the first foreign language at the age of 10 or 12. (It can be mentioned that there have been plans to make English compulsory in secondary schools but these have still remained plans). However, there is an increasing number of bilingual elementary schools and academic grammar schools in our country, where students study certain subjects in the given foreign language, which is most often English. This also indicates that from a foreign language, English is increasingly becoming a basic skill.

In higher education, language knowledge (practically, the knowledge of English) is more and more a prerequisite of not just earning a degree but that of gaining admission, as well. In this respect, there is still work to do in Hungary: according to the statistics that can be read on website [www.fisz.hu](http://www.fisz.hu), in 2008, at the University of Miskolc, 1,600 out of 2,100 graduates (76%) could get their degrees as they possessed the necessary language proficiency certificates. (With the exception of Budapest institutions, similar rates can be found for other universities and colleges in the provinces, as well).

It is also a relatively new phenomenon that traditional language examination systems are losing importance. The English language plays a key role in the labour market (see also the following section) and employers are less and less satisfied with some document – rather, they themselves test the applicant's language proficiency in real life situations.

### **3.Areas displaying the decisive role of the English language**

English steadily remains the dominant language in international business. This is well illustrated by examples like that of e-on, which is a joint venture company playing an important role in the Hungarian energy sector. Although it is originally a German company, the language of internal communication is English. Similarly, English is the language of the widespread *outsourcing* activities of multinational companies. This means that these companies shift certain operations to countries (e.g. book-keeping, data processing, the operation of customer service call centres) where human labour is cheap. At present, the most attractive outsourcing country in the world is India, followed by China. As a matter of fact, these two countries belong to the BRIC group (the acronym is formed from the names of Brasil, Russia, India and China), the members of which will be among the top 10 economies in the world in 2050 according to the forecast of Goldman Sachs Group.

East Central European countries are likewise important target countries in outsourcing. While in the 2005 ranking list of outsourcing target countries by A. T. Kearney Services

Location Index, Hungary was the 19th in the world (from among ECE countries, the Czech Republic was the 7th, Bulgaria the 15th, Slovakia the 16th and Poland the 17th), according to the 2007 report, due to an increase in labour costs, Hungary dropped to the 24th position, Bulgaria was the best (9th), Slovakia the 12th, Estonia the 15th, the Czech Republic the 16th, Latvia the 17th and Poland occupied the 18th place.

In international business life, migration also strengthens the dominance of English as workforce primarily moves to countries where a certain level of English knowledge is necessary for taking a job. An example is Malaysia, which made it a requirement for every foreign employee in 2003 to have a basic level knowledge of English. Mexicans working in the US are estimated to send about 18 billion USD home every year (Graddol 2006:38).

English is the basic language of the Internet and electronic communication, too. While in 2000, 51.3% of the Internet users were native speakers of English, by 2005, this number had been reduced to 32%. As regards content, in 1998, 85% of the websites were in the English language. Although this rate is steadily decreasing, it still exceeds the number of native English speaker users considerably (Graddol 2006: 44).

The role played by the English language in the media can well be illustrated by referring to global CNN, BBC Worldwide, Associated Press or Reuters. It is likewise revealing that such competitors of the English speaking media as the Arabic Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya, Russia Today or Deutsche Welle also broadcast in the English language.

The leading role of the English language is unquestionable in higher education, as well. Nowadays, there is global competition among higher education institutions. According to the 2008 international ranking list of universities compiled by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the first three places were occupied by American universities: Harvard, Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley (in this order). As a matter of fact, there were 8 American and 2 British (Oxford, Cambridge) universities among the first ten institutions in the list. The non-Anglo-Saxon institution ranking highest in the list was Tokyo University with its 19th place. The list is compiled on the basis of the following factors: 10-10 % of the score is given for alumni winning Nobel prizes or awards of international professional organisations and for the achievement per person. 20-20% is given for lecturers winning Nobel prizes or awards of international professional organisations, for citation, for publications in renowned international journals and for appearances in the Citation Index. This means that most of the student and teacher mobility characteristic of our age is directed towards universities in the English speaking countries, which owe their high ranking to their high professional standards in addition to their sophisticated marketing. Furthermore, a lot is revealed about the role of the English language in higher education by the fact that in 2003-04, there were about 1,500 master's programmes running in the English language in non-English speaking countries worldwide (Graddol 2006: 74).

Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that English is one of the working languages of the European Union. The objective of the language policy of the European Union is that every citizen should know three community languages, two of which would be the person's mother tongue and English (if the two are different).

#### **4.Potential rivals**

In the foreseeable future, the English language will have to face the challenge of several potential rivals both on the regional and global levels. Languages gaining importance due to demographic reasons are the following: Spanish (because of the fact that the most rapidly growing ethnic group in the US is the Chicano-Caribbean population, and a fact showing the growing role of the Spanish language is that in 2005, in Brazil, an act was passed that required every secondary school to offer Spanish as an alternative of English), the demographically

fastest growing Arabic and Chinese. The importance of the latter is underlined by the aforementioned forecast, according to which, in 2050, China is expected to be one of the leading (and most probably, the first) economies in the world. In addition, Chinese is the language with the largest number of native speakers. The Chinese government also strives to help the spread of the Chinese language with the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the first of which was opened in Seoul, South Korea. According to forecasts, in 2010, 100 million people worldwide will study Chinese as a foreign language (Graddol 2006: 62-63).

On a regional – European – level such traditionally significant European languages as French, German, Russian or Italian can be regarded to be the rivals of English.

## **5. Conclusion**

On the basis of the aforementioned, it can be stated that despite the challenges it faces, the role of English as a world language will not be endangered in the near future as its hegemony cannot be questioned in the fields dealt with although it will have to fulfil its role in a multilingual and multicultural environment.

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