

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

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English is now called a “world language”, an “international language”, or a “global language”. Where is it spoken? In England, of course – England is a part of the British Isles or the United Kingdom, the U.K; and in the U.S.A. or the United States of America. We often think of these countries as “powerful”. It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire – because it stretch so far from the east to the west, you see, that there was always some part of the Empire where it was daylight! Beginning with the end of the Second World War, the U.K. began to give up its colonies, and the British Empire ceased to exist. But as the British Empire came to an end, the U.S.A. rose to the position of a world power. In this way, the political importance of the English language continued even after England, the country, ceased to be politically powerful. Kevin Finneran in *SPAN*, January 1990:

.... In the 19th century the British Empire ... consolidated the world position of English, creating a ‘language on which the sun never sets, - David Graddol, *the Future of English* (1997) Language is closely linked to political power¹.

The population of the U.S.A. has actually always had speakers of many different languages, who went to the “New World” from various parts of Africa, Europe, South America and Asia, But the “melting pot” culture of the U.S.A. has ensured that English has remained its predominant language. Bilingual education (especially in German) was common in 19th century America; but in the 20th century, a movement to emphasize English as the national language gained power, and bilingual education was discouraged. In 1906, the U.S Congress passed a law, still in effect, making competence in English a requirement for citizenship

....data from the 1990 U.S. Census shows that nearly 32 million people speak a language other than English at home – mainly Spanish².

Sydney Greenbaum, director of the server of English Usage project University College, London, in his Afterword to *South Asian English: Structure, Use and Users (1996)* A Brazilian teacher of English says on the Internet: British colonialism in the 19th Century and American capitalism and technological progress in the 20th century were undoubtedly the main causes for the spread of English throughout the world. Other countries that speak mainly English (in addition to the U.K. and the U.S.A.) are Australia, Canada, and New Zealand and Ireland. But today the importance of English lies in the fact that it is spoken, used and taught in very many countries around the world, as a language used in addition to their own, other languages. Many or most of the former colonies of Britain chose to keep the English language after the British left. Take our own example. We first decided to let English continue in India for at least fifteen years after independence:

- As a language of modern knowledge, especially for science and technology; thus a medium of instruction in higher education, and. A “library language”:
- As a language of administration – a common language for the various parts of this country, which have their own languages; and
- As a language of law.

Then at end of fifteen years many parts of our country felt the need to let English continue in these roles indefinitely. English is now an “associate official language” of the country.

- Its role in communication with other nations – internationally

According to research by the British Council, English has official or special status (for example, within an educational system) in at least seventy – five countries in the world, with a total population of over two billion. What countries are these (apart from India)? It’s difficult to remember a list of 75 names, so let’s see if we can find a better way to think of these countries. Let’s think of

- Our neighbors in South Asia: Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal (although it was never part of the British Empire) :
- Countries that were part of the British Empire, and now belong to the Commonwealth of Nations (That we too belong to), such as South Africa (English is one of the 11 official languages that are given equal status in South Africa), and other former British territories in East and West Africa.
- Former British Colonies or countries closely associated with the U.S.A. such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius and the Philippines.

We have got 12 names so far. Would you like to have some more of the names of the seventy five countries where English has a special status? Let’s see if we can find a country for each letter of the English alphabet- well, almost! We’ll try not to repeat a country we have already named, unless it is unavoidable. Here is a list, from Australia to Zimbabwe:

Why do we need an international language? An international language is applying because it would improve communication, increase trade, ease travel and perlamps promote global cooperation, “said Kevin Finnegan in 1990. More recently, Graddol says in his report,

“As more countries have been rendered open to global flows of finance, goods, knowledge and culture, so the influence of English has spread.³”

About a hundred years ago, some people tried to create an artificial language, Esperanto, that they thought could serve as an international language. But today it is English that is the language most often studied as a foreign language in the European Union (by 89% of School Children). It is a medium of education in countries like Hong Kong and Malaysia, and it is the most studied foreign language in the European Union (By 89% of school children). It is a medium of education in countries like Hong Kong and Malaysia, and it is the most studied foreign language in the People’s Republic of china, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. 150 million Indian children in primary school, and 120 million of their Chinese counterparts, are learning English. English is likely to maintain its position for at least the next twenty, if not forty, years.

Today English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world’s scientists read in English. Three quarters of the world’s mail is written in English. Eighty per cent of the world’s electronically stored information is in English. Of the Millions of users of the Internet, the majority communicate in English.

Major international domains of English [from David Graddol]

1. Working language of international organizations and conferences.
2. Scientific publication.
3. International banking, economic affairs and trade.
4. Advertising for global brands.
5. Audio-visual cultural products (e.g. film, T.V. popular music)
6. International tourism.
7. Tertiary education.
8. International safety (e.g. airspeak, sea speak)
9. International law.
10. As a relay language in interpretation and translation.
11. Technology transfer.
12. Internet communication.

85% of international organizations now use English as one of their working language; it is the preferred language of the United Nations.

English is now “the international currency of science and technology”. It was a language of science in the 17th century, which was a period of renaissance in British science. But after that, German became the cominant international language of science, until World War I. Subsequent to World War I, because of the growing role of the United States in science, English regained its place as the language of science. Science journals in many countries shifted from publishing in their language to publishing in English. In 1989, the Pasteur Institute of France announced that it would publish its famed international medical review only in English from then onwards, because too few people were reading it in French. Some disciplines have been more affected than others by the English language: Physics is the most globalised and Anglophone”, followed by the pure sciences.

English language book production occupies 28% of the world’s share; over 60 countries produce books in English. We in India produce more books in English than we do in our other major language. In 1997, for example, one-fifth of a total of 60,000 books published in 18 languages in India were in English. One third of our publishers publish books in English; the remaining two-thirds publish in 21 other languages. Print runs are larger for English books in India, and so are sales to libraries. We export our books in English, too, to countries in Europe⁴.

When companies from four European countries- France Italy, Germany and Switzerland- formed a joint truck-making venture in 1977, they chose English as their working language because “ It puts us all at an equal disadvantage.”(Compare attitudes to English as a link language in the non-Hindi regions of our own country?) When the Swiss company Brown Boveri and the Swedish company ASEA merged in 1988, they made English the official company language. When Volkswagen set who knew each other’s languages; but the German engineers and the Chinese managers were able to communicate in English. “For non-English speakers everywhere, English has become the common tongue”, says Robert Mc Neil in the Story of English (a series of television programmes, now available in book form).

“From scientific journals to snack food labels, English constantly impinges on the world consciousness⁵”

Says Kevin Finneran, a former college English teacher and a science and technology policy consultant. English is the language of air traffic control and of ships navigating their way around the world. A single language for communication, with a fixed terminology, allows airplanes and ships to travel safely around the globe, spanning a variety of countries speaking very many different languages. But ironically, a study on air safety by MIT, published in 1990, blamed language and communication difficulties for a crash involving avianca, the National

Colombian Airline. The Avianca liner was kept waiting for an hour and a half in the air corridor as one group of New York’s Kennedy terminal did not pass on to the second group the pilot’s report that he was low on fuel. According to a report by PTI on February 9, 1990, the air controllers later said they did nothing about it because the pilot had asked for “priority” landing facilities. He should have asked for “emergency” landing if he was really low on fuel, they said, making it out that it was a case of breakdown in communication between a pilot whose mother tongue is Spanish and air controllers whose language is English. Fortunately, this is the only such case reported.

T.V. programmes are another force behind the spread of English. People around the world can view entertainment programmes in English, produced with the latest technology. Pop songs and films in English contribute to an awareness of the language in many countries. Computers and their programs were largely the invention of English –speaking countries. Most computers have English-based operating systems. Early computer systems were almost impossible to use for languages using non-roman writing systems. But new interface designs now make it possible to have software more easily and rapidly customized for lesser used language. For example, there are Chinese versions of all major American computer operating programs such as Windows and Microsoft Word⁶.

TOP TEN LANGUAGES IN THE INTERNET	% OF ALL INTERNET USERS
English	29.4%
Chinese	14.0%
Spanish	8.0%
Japanese	7.9%
German	5.4%
French	5.0%
Portuguese	3.1%
Korean	3.1%
Italian	2.8%
Arabic	2.6%
TOP TEN LANGUAGES	81.8%
Rest of World Language	18.2%
WORLD TOTAL	100.0%

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