

English as Lingua Franca: A Significant Global Window on 21st Century Community and Connectivity



Archana Bhatnagar
Associate Professor (English)
Dept. of Basic Science,
College of Agriculture,
Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University
of Agriculture and Technology,
Meerut (U.P.), India

Abstract

English in fact is the global language of the present day world and is now the richest among the modern languages. It is the lingua franca which defines and encompasses all progress. Today there are more than 780 million people adopting and practicing English as a second language in about 112 countries across the globe. It is the official language of 53 countries. It is a language with vast possibilities of usage and flexibility which makes it enjoy the unique status of being the first language, official language or the foreign language in different parts and countries across the globe. It is the language of science and technology which in turn has a global impetus as it gives access to important domains such as government functioning, media, academic patterns, laws, trade and commerce. It is one of the six officially recognized languages of the U.N.O. It has the distinction of being spoken to a great extent in all the five continents of the world due to the British policy of colonization. The 1989 revised Oxford English Dictionary in 20 volumes listing 615,000 words render it the status of becoming the world's largest dictionary. Due to its flexible nature it offers a wide range of new vocabulary with word-formation, antonyms, synonyms, different parts of speech and use of idiomatic and phrasal expressions. Hence, English today is not the exclusive language of its land of origin i.e. the United Kingdom but has become the lingua franca of the entire world community and its connectivity.

Keywords: Lingua Franca, Global Window, Flexibility, Language of Science and Technology, World Community, Connectivity.

Introduction

The world today is at the never before zenith of progress and development in all spheres - international trade, commerce, science, technology, culture, arts, aesthetics, economics and innovations along with improvement in bilateral relations among the different nations. '*Language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings.*' (O. Jespersen)

Language therefore, is the means with which any group interacts and functions. English in fact is the global language of the present day world. It is the lingua franca which defines and encompasses all progress. 'Statistically there are more than 350 million people around the globe speaking English as a first language'¹ and more than 430 million people adopting and practicing it as a second language amounting to a total of 780 million people who speak English as a language of communication and expression in about 112 countries across the globe. It is the official language of 53 countries.

Objective of the Study

The language of English has its origin in the United Kingdom with later expansion to the parts colonized by it in different continents throughout the length and breadth of the globe i.e. parts under the regime of the British Empire. But, today with its status of being the official language of about 53 countries and its usage as a second language in about 112 countries English language has become the medium for developing the personal, professional or intellectual capabilities of people striving to learn it. One out of every five world citizens is able to speak or understand the communication in English. The objective of the present paper lies in establishing the inevitable significance and requirement of achieving proficiency in a subject which is prevalent as the language of media, academia, tourism, employment, world trade, administrative

policies and scientific literature throughout the world. The object of the study therefore is to give wide popularity and relevance to the English language and to establish its reputation more as a skill subject than a literary subject. Today, it is less a subject and more a tool of communication. This study also is an effort at highlighting the flexible nature of English language and the ease in its acquisition compared to the languages posing rigidity and formidable nature like the Chinese, German or the French.

Reasons behind The Popularity of English

One major factor behind the popularity of English as a *lingua franca* is that it is spoken world wide and is not confined to specific regions as that of the Chinese or Mandarin. From its homeland - the United Kingdom, today English is the *lingua franca* among all the continents of the world and has assumed the status of official language in many countries like India, Ghana or the Bahamas. It opens the possibility of communicating more easily with each other across the globe and knitting it into a 'World Community' instead of compartmentalizing it into different boxes of nationalities each restricted to its own narrow confines of language. Its role and significance today is acknowledged almost everywhere thus leaping the confines of being identified as the first language, official language or the foreign language.

The present day world trade, films, economy, advertisements, technology exchange and awareness owe a lot to the English language. Almost one-third of scientific literature is available in English language. It claims to have a global impetus because it gives access to important domains such as government functioning, media, academic patterns, laws, trade and commerce.

The world is ever-expanding in the domain of knowledge and awareness, bringing new countries into contact, opening wider horizons of learning and sharing, developing better networking and building significant contacts at bilateral and business meets, conferences, seminars, trainings, workshops etc. irrespective of the nationality of the scientists, technocrats or inventors, most of the technical terminology is based on English vocabulary though 'English is a complicated language. Its vocabulary of some half a million words can be put into sentences of almost endless complexity.'²

English is not just the international language of science. Increasingly English is becoming the international language of business and of the computer. All scientists, wherever they are in the world and whatever their native language, must acquire reasonable fluency and proficiency in English. Except in a few small scientifically undeveloped regions, it simply is no longer possible to do science except in English.

Relevance in The Field of Academia

English language plays a strong role in opening new vistas of the academic world. English - a link language connects and provides opportunity for interacting academically with the top-notch global scholars, doctors, scientists, technocrats, statesmen etc.

The present day world community is confronting an immense wave of 'Brain Drain'. The younger generation is immigrating to more advanced and developed nations such as the U.S.A., U.K., Canada or the continent of Australia in search of better job opportunities and settlements as the world has and become very competitive today.

Any student entering into a foreign university has to clear the basic proficiency Exam in English-different for different countries as per their norms. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for entering the American universities, the U.K., Australia or Canada recognized by more than 9,000 colleges, universities and agencies in more than 130 countries or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) for Australia which are identifying strategies and proof of a specific level of competence in written or oral English for academics and recruitment for jobs, for migration, seeking admission as students to any undergraduate or postgraduate or Ph.D. degrees. It is also recognized by 9,000 institutions across the world. IELTS include over 2,000 universities in the US, and many other universities in the U.K. and Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa along with other organizations around the world. IELTS is administered by British Council and IELTS Australia, Canada, the U.K. or New Zealand. These tests are available in more than 100 countries across the globe. It is also required for the purpose of immigration. Knowledge of English is not only an ability to interact with the local and native speakers but its importance rests mainly due to the fact that today it is the most common second language in the world. 'The British Council projects that by 2020 two billion people in the world will be studying English.'³

Learning English helps to make appropriate use of technology to enrich both 'teaching' and 'learning' because English is also the language of the internet which reduces dependence on translations and subtitles. Watching movies and programmes in English language is a great mode of fun and light mannered method to learn and enjoy it. English is the language and medium of instruction in many of the world's renowned universities such as Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, MIT, Yale, Melbourne and many other such names of renown. Over 4500 university courses are taught in English as the medium of instruction in Continental Europe alone.

Suitability, Need and Claim of English As A Global Language

Global language is any language which provides a common platform for interaction, communication and growth in the direction of a world of unity, harmony and economy for the world community.

'English is the nearest thing there has been to a global language. It's worldwide reach is much greater than anything achieved historically by Latin or French, and there has never been a language as widely spoken as English. Many would reasonably claim that, in the fields of business, academics, science,

computing, education, transportation, politics and entertainment, English is already established as the *de facto lingua franca*.⁴

Since the inception of the world's largest intergovernmental organization like the U.N.O. on October 24, 1945 after World War II with the aim of restoring world peace and prevention of future wars, English language has gained all the more prominence. The 06 officially recognized languages of the U.N.O. are - Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and the Spanish. At the same time the fact remains that Chinese is the language spoken by maximum number of native speakers in the world. Another stark fact which gives Chinese the maximum number of speakers in the world is the fact that China is the most populated country in the world with a total of 1,419,874,836 as based on the latest United Nations estimates. The population of China is 18.41% of the total world population. But in spite of this English stands tall above the Chinese and the Spanish language in context of geographical distribution as a direct consequence of the policy of British Colonization all over the world.

Though Chinese and Spanish exceed English speakers, English still has the distinction of being spoken in all the five continents of the world. *Chinese*, in fact, is a combination of about seven provincial dialects of China out of which mandarin alone shares about 70 percent of the different dialects and hence is regionally confined. Besides being one of the official languages recognized by the UNO, English is also the official language of organizations such as the European Union, African Union, FIFA, ASEAN and the World Bank.

Investigating Some Substantial Grounds for English Being The Global Language

'The richness and depth of English vocabulary sets it apart from other languages. The 1989 revised "Oxford English Dictionary" lists 615,000 words in 20 volumes, officially the world's largest dictionary. If technical and scientific words were to be included, the total would rise to well over a million. By some estimates, the English lexicon is currently increasing by over 8,500 words a year, although other estimates put this as high as 15,000 to 20,000. It is estimated that about 200,000 English words are in common use, as compared to 184,000 in German, and mere 100,000 in French. The availability of a large number of synonyms allow shades of distinction that are just not available to non-English speakers and although other languages have books of synonyms, none has anything on quite the scale of Roger's Thesaurus.'⁵

The language of English offers and affords a large world of learning experience and flexible nature. A keen learner can feel himself engrossed in framing and enriching his power of vocabulary

through simple exercise of framing words with prefixes and suffixes, trying to build antonyms using negative prefixes like un-, dis- or mis- for words like happy, discount or mistake. The use of a long list of idiomatic terms and phrases also widens the scope and usage of English as a language because small idioms at times are more emphatic and expressive in conveying any message or communication, for example the idiomatic use of *A stitch in time saves nine, Precaution is better than of cure, A bolt from the blue, A wet blanket, Burning the midnight oil etc.* The global relevance becomes all the more wider because human expressions share similar emotions across the globe. Moreover this language can be used both in 'Active and Passive Voice' and as 'Direct and Indirect Narration'.

Despite all advantages the language of English is to some extent quite intriguing as well when considered phonetically, for example, to consider the pronunciation of words like 'cut' or 'put', a learner would get mixed up with the sound of /ʌ/ as in cut and /U/ in put though both the words share the same spelling. Diphthongal glides or semi-vowel sounds also pose some problem because all speakers don't realize the swift shift of one sound followed by the other as in the pronunciation of words like *rate* or *hate* which are phonetically pronounced as /reIt/ or /heIt/ where the sound /e/ is very smoothly and quickly mixed with the sound of /I/ as in the R.P. phonetic system. This is because there are many variants of English Speech or Phonetics. The most popular forms are the original British English (R.P.) and the American English. Received pronunciation is the pronunciation spoken by the non-native speakers of English across the globe which were colonized by the British Empire during its regime. R.P. today is no longer the exclusive property of a particular class in England. It is generally equated with the correct pronunciation of English.⁶ The other important forms are the African English, the Asia-Pacific English, the Australian English and the New Zealand English which means almost the entire globe is encompassed and herein lies the significance of English as the lingua franca for the entire world community.

The Future of English as the Global Lingua Franca

The flexibility of English as a language is its greatest attribute which invites the claim for English to become the lingua franca of the world. Despite posing some complexities of pronunciation it is relatively simpler in its spelling and related pronunciation when compared with other languages such as the French language which is rigid in welcoming vocabulary from other languages. English, on the contrary keeps on adding new words by adopting them and giving a place to them in its dictionary. Still one should be apprehensive of the fact that change is the law of growth and development and hence what stands in the present cannot be an assured fact in the future.

Conclusion

In the present scenario of corporate companies, multi-national organizations and academic institutions meant for preparing the

present student population for prospective job opportunities, English as a language and its sustenance stands a promising status. The workplaces as per the international standards invest a lot on their infrastructural developments in order to prosper, grow and retain its human resource. They try to develop their employees in all the four basic areas of communication skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here arises the importance and need for Technical Writing which is very different from General Writing in its terms and specific vocabulary which is marked by brevity, conciseness, avoidance of cliches, jargons and dogmatism. So far America stands economically dominant, English as a language of mutual and technical communication will retain its strength. Technical communication also known as professional communication is an integral part of both the British English and the American English though British English is considered to be nearer the correct

version of English grammatically and phonetically but American English is gaining more prominence due to the expanding dominance of American establishments across the globe. Hence, the dominance of English as lingua franca for the world community and connectivity is undeniable.

Endnotes

1. <http://englishlive.ef.com/blog/English-in-the-real>.
2. Robert A. Day: *Scientific English*, Hyderabad: University Press (India). 2000, pp. ix, 10.
3. <http://www.elc-school.com>
4. http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/issues_global.html
5. http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/issues_global.html
6. M.A. Pink and S.E. Thomas: *English Grammar, Composition and Correspondence*, New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1998, pp.1-2.