

## **A Consideration of the Import of English Language in Contemporary World**

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### **Abstract**

Humans communicate by means of language, even though language is not the only means of communication. Whenever communication is thought of, we always associate it with language. The English language has grown in popularity and usage, with over a billion people in the world speaking some forms of it (depending on how 'English speaker is defined'). However, globalisation and the subsequent impacts on language are seen as inescapable developments. China is the most populous nation on earth and the Chinese language is the most spoken but the British/United States of America's (USA's) English language has arguably remained ahead of China's because (i) Chinese is limited to a geographical area, while English has progressively become the world lingua franca; and (ii) the world's technical innovation and economic developments are communicated through English. It is in this context that this article X-rays the role and importance of English language in the world today which ranges from being an emerging world lingua franca to a criterion for job (employment) to business and commerce and have even been christened as the 'Hollywood language' for the entertainment industry, the internet language, among others.

**Keywords:** English language, Communication, Lingua franca, Globalisation,

### **Introduction**

Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another (Skillsyouneed, 2015). Communication is about passing messages between people or organisations. Messages between a sender and receiver take place using a medium such as email or phone (BBC, 2014a). According to Grimsley (2015), communication is sending and receiving information between two or more people. The person sending the message is referred to as

the sender, while the person receiving the information is called the receiver. The information conveyed can include facts, ideas, concepts, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, instructions and even emotions. He further classified communication into: (i) verbal communication which is simply sending a message through a spoken language that is understood by both the sender and receiver of the message; and (ii) written communication which is sending a message by the use of written symbols that are understood by both the sender and receiver of the message.

The discipline of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication (NATCOM, 2015). Communication is the essence of human interaction and learning. The nature of communication is dependent on interaction between two or more individuals and understanding is constructed through that interaction ((Crystal, 2012). The human capacity to communicate has been hypothesised to be causally dependent upon language. Communication can be viewed as a matter of coding and de-coding linguistic information. The speaker codes information and puts his/her thoughts into words, while the listener de-codes the linguistic information, taking the input from the speaker and translating it back into a thought. Language is “the principal system of communication used by a particular group of human beings within a particular society of which they are members” (Lyons, 1981, p. 98). The primary concern of language - written, spoken or signed - is the expression of meaning. Language enables humankind to communicate a bewildering range of information: exchange of emotions, expressing ideas, and an infinite variety of ideational information about the world.

### **Language and Communication**

Humans communicate by means of language, even though language is not the only means of communication. Whenever communication is thought of, we always associate it with language (Omoera, 1999). Language is a vehicle that we use in presenting our ideas, thoughts, feelings, opinions to the world. It is what we exhibit our cultural norms and orientations in and the whole essence of our being is captured in our language (Ewata, 2010). Language

is the ability to acquire and use complex systems of communication, particularly the human ability to do so (Okome & Omoera, 2006), and a language is any specific example of such a system. The scientific study of language is called linguistics. Languages evolve and diversify over time, and the history of their evolution can be reconstructed by comparing modern languages to determine which traits their ancestral languages must have had in order for the later developmental stages to occur (Willems & Varley, 2010; Omoera, 2008).

Increasing globalisation has created a global need for people in the workforce to communicate in multiple languages. The uses of common languages such as English are in areas such as trade, tourism, international relations, technology, media and science (Omoera, 2008; 2009). Many countries have adopted as a firm education policy to teach at least one foreign language at the primary and secondary school levels. However, some countries have adopted it as a second official language in their governments. According to Goa (2010), China has recently been putting enormous importance on foreign language learning, especially the English language. Languages are not uniformly distributed around the world. Just as some places are more diverse than others in terms of plant and animal species, the same goes for the distribution of languages. Out of 6,909 ethnologies, for instance, only 230 are spoken in Europe, while 2,197 are spoken in Asia. One area of particularly high linguistic diversity is Papua-New Guinea, where there are an estimated 832 languages spoken by a population of around 3.9 million. That makes the average number of speakers around 4,500, possibly the lowest of any area of the world (LSA, 2012).

The number of languages currently estimated and catalogued in Nigeria is 521. This number includes 510 living languages, 2 second languages without native speakers and 9 extinct languages. The official language of Nigeria, English, was chosen to facilitate the cultural and linguistic unity of the country post-colonisation by the British (Gordon, 2005; Kwintessential, 2014). According to Info-please (2015), there are roughly 6,500 spoken languages in the world today. However, about 2,000 of those languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers. The most popular language in the world is Mandarin Chinese.

Table 1: Most Widely Spoken Languages in the World (Info-please, 2015)

Language <sup>1</sup>	Approx. number of speakers
1. Chinese <sup>2</sup>	1,197,000,000
2. Spanish	414,000,000
3. English	335,000,000
4. Hindi	260,000,000
5. Arabic <sup>3</sup>	237,000,000
6. Portuguese	203,000,000
7. Bengali	193,000,000
8. Russian	167,000,000
9. Japanese	122,000,000
10. Javanese	84,300,000

### **English Language**

The evolution of languages is inevitable due to the globalisation and the integration of different cultures and their languages. The need to find a common lingua franca is essential for people and countries in order for them to communicate (Allen, 2015). The same is true for the English language. Globalisation is essentially technology and language-driven acceleration of human contacts. English is the primary language of globalisation. Its increasing entrenchment owes a lot to its colonial underpinnings. For instance, English is the official language in most former colonial territories of England, including Nigeria (Okome & Omoera, 2006; Omoera, 2008). The history of the English language started with the arrival of three Germanic ethnic groups that invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. These ethnicities, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and northern Germany. The Angles came from “Englaland” [sic] and their language was called “Englisc” - from which the words “England” and “English” are derived (English Club, 2014). According to HubPages (2015), English was originally the language of England, but through the historical efforts of the British Empire

it has become the primary or secondary language of many former British colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia and India.

The English language has grown in popularity and usage. It has become a global language spoken all over the world but globalisation and the subsequent impact on other languages is seen as something that is unavoidable. According to Raine (2012), the fact that English now belongs to 'everyone or to no one' would seem to imply that English will maintain its position as the global dominant language throughout the 21st century and beyond. About one hundred and one (101) countries speak English language and a population of 335,491,748 speakers, L2 users: 1,500,000 in United Kingdom (Wardhaugh, 1987). L2 users worldwide: 505,000,000 (Lewis, Gary & Charles, 2015). According to Statista (2015), the statistics shows the most spoken languages worldwide. 1,500 million people worldwide speak English, of whom only 375 million are native speakers. The world's most widely spoken languages by number of native speakers and as a second language, according to figures from UNESCO (United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) are: Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German and French (BBC, 2014b).

### **The Role of English Language**

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desire by means of voluntarily produced symbols (Okome & Omoera, 2006). The role of English language can be viewed in the light of the role of any language. Language drives: (i) our value systems; (ii) our cultural orientation; (iii) language is the primary vehicle of communication; (iv) language reflects both the personality of the individual and the culture of their history. In turn, it helps shape both personality and culture; (v) language makes possible the growth and transmission of culture, the continuity of societies, and the effective functioning and control of social group; and (vi) documentation for both now and the future.

The influence of the English is pervasive. According to *The Economist* (2014), it is spoken by about four hundred million people as first language. The number of those using it as second language

runs in hundreds of millions. At least a billion and half are learning it in EFL<sup>1</sup> contexts (Bentley, 2014). It is estimated that a third of the world's population is in some sense exposed to it. By 2050, it is predicted that half the world's population will be more or less proficient in English (Hopkyns, 2014; Crystal, 2012). The forces that propel the English language are legion. It is the language of globalisation, of international business, politics and diplomacy and of entertainment. It is the language of computers and the Internet. In fact, Norris (2003) says that 85% percent of web pages are in English. He claims that other web pages (15%) based on languages other than English usually offer options for transition to English. English based websites seldom provide options for other languages and tellingly possesses twice the number of internet users compared to other languages with a foothold on the internet

### **The Import of English Language Today**

The fact that language is primarily for communication cannot be over emphasized and over the years people have believed that it is what separates us from all other animals (Okome & Omoera, 2006). There are many reasons to learn English, but because it is one of the most difficult languages to learn it is important to focus on exactly why people want to learn English (Crystal, (2012). Here are the reasons why English is so important. HubPages (2015) highlights the following as some of the reasons to study English language:

a. English is the international common tongue: English language is essential to communication in contemporary world. First, it is the most common foreign language. This means that two people who come from different countries (for example, a Mexican and a Swede) usually use English as a common language to communicate. English may not be the most spoken language in the world, but it is the official language in a large number of countries. It is estimated that the number of people in the world that use English to communicate on a regular basis is 2 billion! (ESOE, 2013).

b. Education: English is also essential to the field of education. Due to its wide usage, many countries have adopted it as a second language and encourage learning in it. Many university programmes are done in English even in non-English speaking countries for international students. We find many syllabi in science

and engineering are written in English. Because it is the dominant language in the sciences, most of the research and studies you find in any given scientific field are written in it as well.

c. WWW and the media: On the Internet, the majority of websites are written and created in English. Even sites in other languages often give you the option to translate the site. It's the primary language of the press: more newspapers and books are written in English than in any other language, and no matter where in the world you are, you will find some of these books and newspapers accessible. In fact, because it is so dominant in international communication, you will find more information regarding nearly every subject if you can speak this language. Most of the content produced on the internet (50%) is in English. So, knowing English will allow you access to an incredible amount of information which may not be otherwise available! (ESOE, 2013).

d. Travelling and touring: With good understanding and communication in English, you can travel around the globe. Because it is the international language for foreigners, it's easy to get assistance and help in every part of the world. You can test it by online travel. Any travel booking site you can find will have English as a booking option.

e. Economy and commerce: English skills will also help you in any business venture you choose to follow. If you visit some offices, companies, governmental organisations, or even math or engineering companies, you will see the importance of English. Any big company will hire their professional staff after getting to know whether the people they are hiring are good at English or not. English is the dominant business language and it has become almost a necessity for people to speak English if they are to enter a global workforce, research from all over the world shows that cross-border business communication is most often conducted in English. Its importance in the global market place, therefore, cannot be understated. Learning English really can change your life (ESOE, 2013).

f. Entertainment language: It is referred to as the language of Hollywood. Everyone knows that Hollywood is in the United States, and that the biggest television and music industries in the world

are based there. As I mentioned above, TV and movies are a great way to practice your English once you start learning. What's more, knowing English opens up thousands of movies, television shows, and games for your enjoyment. If you want to work in the entertainment industry, English is essential. Many of the world's top films, books and music are published and produced in English. Therefore, by learning English you will have access to a great wealth of entertainment and will be able to have a greater cultural understanding (ESOE, 2013).

g. Racism: speaking English immediately opens up opportunities regardless of your ethnicity, colour, or background (5minuteenglish, 2013).

That English is now a world language - a massive linguistic superpower to be reckoned with - is indisputable. The global diffusion of the English language is one of the most far-reaching linguistic phenomena of our time. Evidence of this wide spread and variation is marked by designations such as 'World Englishes', 'New Englishes', South African English, Australian English, Indian English, Chinese English, Nigerian English, and so on. It is estimated that one out of three persons of the world's population is capable of communicating - to a useful extent - in English. Significantly, it is the only language spoken in all five continents. It is also the official language of fifty-two countries (Crystal, 2012; Hopkyns, 2014). English does not have the distinction of being the language with the highest number of speakers. With over a billion native speakers, Mandarin Chinese is spoken by the greatest number of people. English comes third, after Spanish. But unlike Mandarin Chinese and Spanish, both spoken in about thirty countries, English plays a variety of roles in different contexts in, at least, a hundred countries. In addition to the 400 million people for who it is their first language, 550 million cite it as their second (Hodson, 2016). Consequently, English has assumed the toga of the Latin of the contemporary world, though on a grander scale.

### **Conclusion**

Today's world and economy is increasingly globalised, and this means that many of us are interacting across cultures in a way we never did before. Despite China being the most populous nation



and Chinese the most spoken language on earth, the British/United States of America (USA) is arguably still a leader in technical innovation and economic development. This can be traced to the fact that Britain/English is used in the United States and in each of these fields (5minuteenglish, 2013). The USA has been ahead of China basically due to the advantage that English provides. The role that English plays in the global economy, commerce, entertainment, internet, job opportunities, education, international travel, tourism and ICT are valid reasons to for the foregoing position. At the local level, English is also indispensable. Nigeria was initially motivated by purely mercantile considerations. Subsequent political and technological developments, especially colonisation, resulted in the deepening of the utility value of the English language. Dynamic changes in the status of the English language is evidenced in its metamorphosis, from its initial elitist and utilitarianism mien, to that of deep psychological and emotive entrenchment in modern times (Jowitt, 1991; Adeyanju, 2004). Consequently, the motivation to learn English is set to continue due to its increasing role expansion or globalisation.

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