

Culture: English, the world's second language

Second language

Alone amongst world languages, English is more widely used as a second language than as a native language. If we define *English Language Users* as people who use the English language regularly (at least once a week or once a month), then there are more *English Language Users* who would give a different language as their native language than there are people who would say they were native speakers of English.

Since 1750, the population of the world has grown rapidly from less than one billion to six billion in 1999. Projected population growth foresees a continuing rise to eight billion in 2027 and reaching about ten billion in 2250. After 2250, it is projected that population growth will stabilise at about ten billion.¹

Although there are an estimated 7,000 different languages spoken in the world, it is estimated that 50% of the world population speaks one of the top twelve languages as a native language.

English does NOT have the largest number of native speakers. In 1950, English was clearly in second place compared with Chinese. Currently, English is spoken as a native language by about as many people as speakers of Spanish and Hindu/Urdu but these numbers are all much smaller than the number of Chinese speakers. Because of differences in population age and population growth, English will very soon be overtaken by Spanish and Hindu/Urdu. By 2050, Arabic may well have replaced English as fourth most popular native language.

Circles of English language users

But, as a world language, the relatively small number of native speakers are less important than the very large number of non-native speakers who use English as part of their everyday lives. It is very difficult to estimate the precise number of English Language Users who are not native speakers. David Crystal² writing in 1995, suggested there were between 320 and 380 million native speakers of English in countries such as Ireland, Guyana, Malta, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, U.S.A., Wales, Scotland and England. There are another 150 to 300 million people who use English as a major part of the lives in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, or Kenya because it is one of the 'official' languages of their country. There is also a much larger group of between 100 and 1,000 million who live in countries where English is the first choice of foreign language within the education system.

Different Englishes?

Of course, not all of these people speak 'BBC English'. We all know of the differences between American English and British English, but what are the differences between Indian English and Australian English? Certainly, there are differences, but does this mean an Indian English speaker will not understand an Australian English speaker.

We judge the differences between languages by level of 'comprehensibility' or 'incomprehensibility'. Argentinian speakers of Spanish can comprehend understand Mexican speakers of Spanish and vice versa. Their languages are 'mutually comprehensible'. in the same way, Jordanian speakers of Arabic can understand Moroccan speakers of Arabic. They

¹ See English Next by David Graddol © British Council 2006

² See The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language by David Crystal © C.U.P. 1995



will speak with different accents, they will have some differences in vocabulary and possibly also in structure, but they will be mutually comprehensible.

A monolingual speaker of Dutch will understand quite a lot of German and even more of Afrikaans, but less of Swedish. The monolingual Dutch speaker will not be able to understand Hungarian, Finnish, or Arabic because these languages are 'mutually incomprehensible'.

Perhaps surprisingly considering the very wide geographical spread of English, the different varieties are all largely 'mutually comprehensible'. If we compare written forms of English mutual comprehensibility is even stronger.

Origins of English

The origins of English begin with a major influence from Germanic tribes from Saxon regions. These effectively replaced the Celtic tribes (also originally from Germany) pushing them north to Scotland, west to Wales and Ireland and south-west to Devon and Cornwall.

Anglo-Saxon

The Anglo-Saxon language, sometimes called Old English, was, like German, a high inflected language. There was declension of nouns and adjectives as well as conjugation of verbs. Nearly every word had a special ending to show its grammatical function. Anglo-Saxon vocabulary absorbed very few words from Celtic languages. More words were adopted from Latin during the 200-year Roman occupation of England and Wales (55 BC – 150 A.D). The influence from Latin continued with missionaries from Rome spreading the Christian religion. Starting in 787 AD Viking raids brought influence from Norse. The area of England north of a diagonal line from London to Chester fell under the rule of Denmark which led to further influence from Scandinavian languages.

In 1066 the Norman French armies of King William 1 invaded Britain and quickly gained control of most of England. The Normans brought with them French habits and French language. For some years England was bilingual with the Norman rulers speaking French and the Anglo-Saxon peasants speaking Old English.³

This led to the development of Middle English during the 12th century. During the 11th and 12th centuries Old English gradually lost most of its grammatical inflections. A few remained as we can see in the forms of some high frequency irregular verbs [speak / spoke / spoken, write / wrote / written, break / broke / broken], the 's' in 3rd person singular verbs and the 'Saxon' genitive (Peter's).

Gradually, English became a language with largely Latin based vocabulary and a simplified German grammatical system.

Renaissance growth of Modern English

In Early Modern English, the second person singular forms [thou / thee / thy / thine] were replaced by the second person plural forms [you / you / your / yours] except when addressing God.

During the age of Shakespeare, there were enormous developments in science, exploration, literature and warfare. This brought thousands of new words into English.

³ This is believed to be the reason why whilst the farm animals (reared by the Saxons) are called by Saxon names, swine, cattle, sheep, their meat (eaten by Normans) are called by French names, pork, beef, veal, mutton.



Dr Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* published by Thomas Longman defined the meaning and standardised the spelling of English words.

English language Empire

The English explorers of the Elizabethan period and later were pirates, soldiers, sailors and thieves. They were not the settlers, farmers, traders and religious exiles who developed the British Empire.

In 1600 Queen Elizabeth I gave a charter to the East India Company to explore and begin trading in India. Through treaties and battles, the East India Company became the dominant power force in the region pushing out other settlers from France, Holland and other countries. The power of the East India Company gradually declined and was replaced by the British Government. 'British India' included areas now called India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The French, Spanish, Dutch and British had large settlements in North America. When the settlers established the United States of America, there were many who wanted French to be the official language of the USA. In Canada, although the British gained political power, both French and English are official languages.

The sugar-producing Caribbean islands were occupied by English, French, Dutch and Spanish settlers. The infamous slave trade transported African slaves to the settlements in the Caribbean and in North and South America to provide labour in plantations growing sugar, cotton, and tobacco.

In 1788, a large number of English settlers landed in Australia. Soon after, settlers landed in New Zealand initially using it as a base for whaling expeditions in the Southern oceans but later for settlement and agriculture.

During the 19th century European countries expanded their colonies in Africa. Germany, France, Britain, Holland, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain all had colonies in different parts of Africa.

The English language empire

In North America, Australia and New Zealand, the British colonists either eliminated or subdued the local indigenous populations taking their land and imposing British control.

Initially, the English settlers in India and Africa were eager to trade, steal gold, diamonds and timber and to exploit the land. As the farmers became administrators, they began to see the need to teach English in order to educate the local population and impose a legal system.

Many of the basic TEFL methodologies which are still used today were first developed in British India and Africa.

Gradually, the British Empire became an enormous English language classroom.

English around the world in 1900

Queen Victoria (who ruled from 1837-1901) was the ruler of the largest Empire the world had ever seen. In 1900 Britain had completed its takeover of Southern Africa. Products from British factories were being sold all over the world. An English speaking merchant and administrative class were gradually being developed in the colonies.

New Zealand had fought for independence throughout Queen Victoria's reign. Australia became independent in 1901 but retained Queen Victoria as Head of State.



Canada was also independent but retained the British monarch as Head of State.

The defeat of Germany in the First World War further expanded the British Empire with some German colonies coming under British control.

In Britain, the establishment of BBC radio in 1922 helped Southern British English to become understandable in all the different regions of the country.

In the 1930s, the British Council started teaching and promoting British English around the world. In the same period, the *BBC Empire Service* (later the *BBC Overseas Service* and now the *BBC World Service*) started broadcasting radio news, music and other programmes in English and other languages.

When the first 'talking pictures' arrived in Britain from America, people heard American accents for the first time. They had great difficulty in understanding the dialogue.

During the Second World War, many American soldiers were stationed in Britain and people learned to understand the "Yankee" accent. The Americans were largely welcomed by the British although they complained that the American soldiers were "over-paid, over-sexed and over here." Nevertheless many British girls went to America as 'war brides'.

After the end of the war, the British Empire began to become independent. British India was partitioned in 1947 forming India and the two parts of Pakistan. These countries became self-governing but retained important strategic and trading links with Britain as well as close links to the English language.

English around the world in 1950

Through the 1950s and 1960s more and more ex-colonies were becoming independent, often after savage and brutal conflicts. However, the newly independent countries retained strategic, cultural and trading links with Britain. The English language was an important part of the trading, cultural, academic and professional links.

Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953 and her coronation was watched on new 'television sets'. The original BBC television service had started in London in 1936 but was closed through the war years. It reopened in 1948 but the coronation was the stimulus for many people to buy their first 'television set.'

In the 1950s Hollywood and Elvis Presley were teaching the world to understand American English. In the 1960s, the Beatles introduced the world to Liverpoolian English.

The collapse of communism at the end of the 1980s introduced viewers in many new countries to satellite television. Initially, this was just CNN. Although many Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and others could read English quite well, listening to English spoken in authentic American accents was new. Many teachers said that comprehension was difficult, "but luckily, CNN repeats the news every 15 minutes, so you can listen again."

Satellite broadcasting of radio and television programmes assisted the spread of English through Eastern Europe and around the world.

English around the world in 2000

The Internet which was developed in the 1990s was initially, a powerful force for the English language. In the early days, nearly 80% of internet pages were in English. In 2005, only 32% of pages were in English.

Continuous expansion? yes? no?

Is English going to continue to expand as a world language? English is gradually becoming the lingua franca of Europe but, is English going to become 'the lingua franca' of the world?

David Graddol says this will not happen. He argues that other languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Hindi/Urdu and Chinese are growing faster than English. The populations who use these languages are younger and have greater potential for economic expansion.

Whether or not David Graddol's predictions are correct (and he presents a great deal of evidence to support his opinion), we can be sure that in our lifetimes, and the lifetimes of the students we are teaching today, a communicative ability in English is going to be a very important asset.

