

The future of English in global higher education: Shifting trends from teaching English to teaching through English

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Over the past 100 years we have seen a boom in the number of people who can speak English. We have also seen English creep into a number of political, economic, commercial, and educational domains. The British Council (2014) lists at least 88 countries where English has an official status. It is also often the working language for international diplomacy and international organizations (Crystal, 2003). The English language is ubiquitous with academic scholarship and is the dominant language of science, medicine, and technology, and for academic scholarship (Galloway & Rose, 2015). Due to this changing role of English, the 21st century has already witnessed a huge shift in the way that English is used in education—a trend that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. English is the “most widely taught foreign language, with over 1 billion English learners worldwide” (McKay, 2012, p. 28), cementing it as the world’s foremost lingua franca. Despite this upward trend in English language learning, English departments—with a traditional focus on foreign language learning through literature studies—have been experiencing a decline in student enrolment. In order to reconcile these two realities, this paper will explore the historical changes in English language education around the world, then discuss the current trends in terms of the way English is positioned in higher education. From this historic standpoint, it will predict future directions in English language teaching in global contexts, and discuss current and future opportunities for English language learning in higher education, particularly in non-Anglophone university contexts.

Historical spread of English

The rise of English as a global language has been well documented by historical linguists. Over a period of five centuries, English has grown from being a national language of fewer than three million people to a global language spoken in some capacity by an estimated two billion people. In the past 100 years we have also shifted from a situation in which first language speakers (L1) made up the majority of English users, to a new reality in which the majority of English speakers are second, foreign, and additional language (L2) speakers of English. While many people attribute the spread of English as a result of British colonialism, this only sowed the seeds for later growth. This history does not capture the complexity associated with the rise of English as the world’s foremost lingua franca, which is intertwined with globalization in the latter half of 20th century.

As a result of the forces associated with 20th century globalization, English materialized as a powerful global language which was tied to the economic and political power of the USA—the world’s largest national economy throughout this period. As a result, many educational policymakers saw English as a way to facilitate national upward economic mobility, as it was seen to provide access to powerful English-speaking economies. This connection was also adopted at an individual level, as people saw English as a pathway to better life opportunities. Examples of this can be found today, with nations such as Rwanda making a shift from French to English as the language of education due to beliefs that English will allow access to

the East African Economic Community, for which English plays a functioning role despite the presence of other lingua franca in the region such as Swahili. Thus, globalization, and not colonialism, remains the main driving force behind the emergence of educational language policies that promote the teaching of English as a foreign language in countries which have no historical ties to English-speaking nations.

For the remainder of the 21st century, little may dislodge English from its dominant position in education. This is because globalization is not happening; it has already happened. And for better or for worse, English was in the 'right' place at the 'right' time (Crystal, 2003). This may mean that even if world economic power shifts away from nations like the USA and UK, and towards non-English-speaking nations like China, Brazil and India, English may continue to maintain its place as a global lingua franca, due to the substantial investment that these nations have placed in English language education.

Although it is difficult to measure the number of English speakers globally, The British Council (2014) draws on David Crystal's (2003) estimates from more than 15 years ago to state that there are approximately 320-380 million speakers of L1 English, compared to between 1.3 and 1.5 billion speakers of L2 English. There is no single source that can be used to estimate exact language numbers, and Crystal (2003) used a variety of sources including the *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook*, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Yearbook*, the *Ethnologue Languages of the World* and census data to calculate these estimates. Rose and Galloway (2019) more recently estimated the figure of L2 users of English to be about 2 billion speakers. However, these figures are somewhat controversial as the number of L2 speaker estimates is particularly difficult to accurately measure due to the inherent issues surrounding how to determine the proficiency of these speakers. Many speakers might have formally learned English through school, but may not in reality be a user of the language. Nevertheless, the important takeaway from these numbers is the fact that there are now more non-native speakers of English than native speakers of English.

The future of English

A number of scholars have sought to investigate and predict the future of English, which is necessary to explore the impact that English's continued dominance (or fall from power) might have for language education policy planning. Over 20 years ago, Graddol (1997) predicted a change in what he termed the *World Language Hierarchy* by 2050, as shown in Figure 1. In this hierarchy, English and French were at the apex in 2000, "with the position of French declining and English becoming more clearly the lingua franca" (p. 13) of the future. Evidence of this shift has been fairly conclusive in the past two decades. Graddol (1997) also highlighted the fact that other lingua franca would join English in this top tier in the future. Thus, rather than *dethroning* English other languages would increase in importance to become equal in status to English.

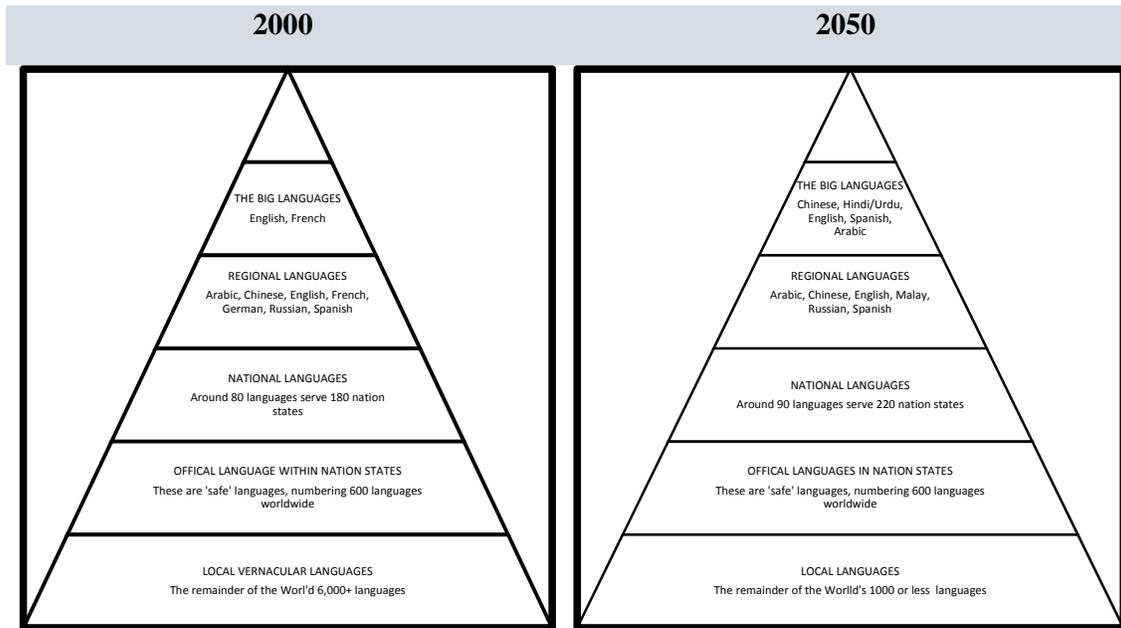


Figure 1. World Language Hierarchy (adapted from Graddol, 1997)

De Swaan's (2001) *Global Language System*, depicted in Figure 2, tells a similar story with one subtle difference. He predicts that English will maintain its dominance as the more prominent global lingua franca (or hypcentral language), and other powerful languages would more likely play the role of a lingua franca across certain (inter)national regions. That is, while Hindi-Urdu might be a powerful lingua franca in the subcontinent, and Arabic a lingua franca for many middle Eastern countries, speakers from each of these regions would still likely use English for communication across wider global regions.

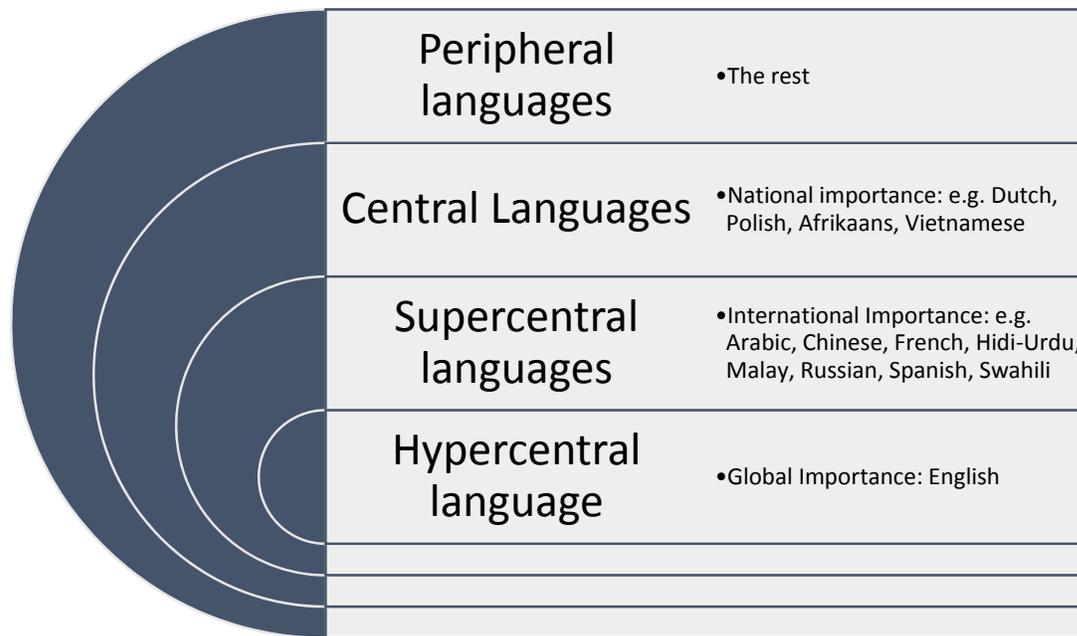


Figure 2. *Global Language System* (adapted from De Swaan, 2001)

English as a killer language

Because of the dominance of English within these world hierarchies, it has often been referred to as a killer language especially in terms of it being prioritized as the main global or hypocentral language, sometimes at the detriment to other languages (Galloway & Rose, 2015). The English language has often been compared to monsters and other beasts of death and destruction (Wilton, 2012), such as English as a lingua franca referred to as a *lingua frankensteinia* (Phillipson, 2008); English as a *hydra* (Rapatahana and Bunce, 2012); and English as a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* (Tardy, 2004).

Evidence of this destruction can certainly be found in the case of European Union—despite efforts to promote and celebrate multilingualism. Even though the European Union has actively promoted the learning of at least two foreign languages in schools, a strings of Eurobarometer reports show that fewer European pupils are being taught two foreign languages. Across 28 European Union nations, Eurostat reports 59% of pupils learn two or more languages. Numbers are highest in Luxembourg, France, Czechia, Romania, Finland, Slovakia, Estonia and Slovenia (all above 98%), and lowest in Greece, The United Kingdom, and Portugal (all below 6%). Of the foreign languages taught across school curricula in the European Union, English reaches 96 percent of the students in general upper secondary education. In every one of these nations, except Luxembourg, English is the first and more dominant language when two languages are offered in the curriculum (only because in Luxembourg the official languages of French and German are counted as foreign languages). As Seidlhofer notes, “English impinges on everybody’s life in Europe, in many different ways” (Seidlhofer et al, 2006, p. 3). Thus, the result is indeed the prioritization of English over other foreign languages in secondary education, which then extends into higher education. The emphasis on English language education has brought about a boom in the learning of English.

Why is this not good news for English language departments?

Although the picture for languages other than English is rather bleak, English language education is booming. Yet, research is emerging that student numbers enrolled in English language and English literature degrees is on the decline in many universities. In universities based in Anglophone countries, despite healthy domestic and international student numbers, it has been observed that English departments have lost their position of prestige. Schalin (2015), for example, has stated that enrollments have fallen or remained stagnant during an era of incredible growth for universities worldwide. He states that modern English departments, which focus on the teaching traditional literary works, have lost their market share to 'superficial' and 'trendy' topics.

However, there is a danger of conflating Schalin's (2015) assessment of a decrease in enrolment in English departments with a decreasing value on English-language related studies. While it may be true that English departments, especially those which have historical ties to literature studies, are being devalued, the cause is separate from the trends surrounding the English language as discussed above. The reason for the current decline in student numbers in language departments is less related to a lack of interest in English language-related disciplines, and more related to the globalization and marketization of higher education in general. Indeed, a decline in student numbers is true for most disciplines in the arts and humanities, and English language departments are not immune to such trends. The neo-liberalist transformation of global higher education has resulted in students seeking degrees that have more explicit connections to career paths, drawing them to the hard sciences as well as profession-oriented degrees in the social sciences.

However, the changing sociolinguistic landscape of the world creates opportunity for English language departments in non-Anglophone contexts, provided they do not aim to emulate the type of curriculum they have been wedded to in the past, and are willing to adapt to student needs. In order to examine these opportunities, we first must turn to another growing trend in higher education, which has placed great emphasis on the English language in university settings—that is, the teaching of specialist content (including the hard sciences and profession-oriented social science degrees) *through* English.

Teaching through English

The teaching of content through English is a rapidly growing global trend, which has seen the emergence of the educational phenomenon of English Medium Instruction (EMI). EMI is defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). This widely cited definition of EMI makes no affordances for the learning of English, and is perhaps most relevant to contexts where little language support is needed due to high levels of language proficiency. Such contexts include Northern Europe, where there have been substantial trends to teach certain academic courses entirely in English. An alternative definition aligns EMI more with and *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL), where language learning and content learning are given equal footing. Such definitions include the following: “English-medium education refers to curricula using English as a medium of instruction for basic and advanced courses to improve students' academic English proficiency” (Taguchi, 2014, p. 89). This definition more accurately captures the practice of implementing EMI in

countries where language support is needed for students to successfully learn through English. It is in these majority contexts where opportunities abound for English language departments.

In its multiple forms, EMI “has become commonplace in many institutes of higher education where English is not the native language” (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 3). The establishment of EMI programs often go hand-in-hand with what is sometimes referred to as part of the ‘internationalization at home’ trend. In fact, internationalization and English Medium Instruction are intertwined (Kirkpatrick, 2011), as universities seek to internationalize due of economic, social, political and educational drivers. Due to these driving forces, EMI in higher education is expanding at a rapid pace across the globe (Macaro, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). English is becoming universal in many academic disciplines, and internationalization is being realized via ‘Englishization’ of the curriculum within many higher education institutions. Englishization of the curriculum is seen as one way to attract international students, as it has been observed that half of the world’s international students are learning through English (Ball & Lindsay, 2013).

Commercialization of higher education

This switch in medium of instruction means that English has shifted from being taught as a foreign language alongside other disciplinary-focussed courses, to becoming an important educational language used for learning and teaching non-language related academic subjects (e.g. studying Engineering content through English; studying Business degrees through English). While globalization of higher education has also brought more prestige to the English language, the same forces have shifted a focus away from traditional academic disciplines to professional and career-oriented degrees. This is not a result of the emergence of ‘trendy’ (Schalin, 2015) topics, but a need for modern age graduates to complete in a global labour market. Traditional avenues of English language studies are often tied to degrees in the humanities, such as literature or area studies. Thus, the same forces that draw students towards English language, have detracted students from degrees in English language-related studies.

Globalization and Englishization of higher education have also meant universities now compete on a global platform, which advantages English-speaking countries. Many Anglophone higher education institutions see internationalization as a business, and are in fierce competition. Higher education is Australia’s 3rd biggest export “industry”, and in the UK international students make up one third of tuition, and add 10 billion British pounds to the economy (Rose & McKinley, 2018). However, the recent ‘internationalization at home’ trends, discussed above, create new opportunities for non-Anglophone universities to compete on a commercial basis. Many Anglophone countries have lost their reputation for student satisfaction in recent years due to a tendency to view international students as “‘empty vessels’ to be filled with Euro-American knowledge” (Singh 2005, p. 10), or just as a financial source (Rose & McKinley, 2018). Forbes-Mewett & Nyland (2012) state that Australia’s reputation has been damaged due to its ‘no frills’ approach to treated international students (p. 191). Due to this, more and more L2 English-using students are seeking opportunities for international study in non-Anglophone settings.

Growth and opportunities for non-Anglophone universities

Internationalization at home trends, and a decreasing attraction for students to study in Anglophone countries has brought about a global boom in EMI. The boom in Europe occurred early: in 2007, there were 2400 programs taught in English at 400 mainland European universities and colleges, compared to only 700 such programs in 2002 (Brenn-White & Faethe, 2013). Numbers have grown further since this time. In East Asia, the boom has just begun, as many domestic universities in Japan, China and Korea are beginning to integrate English language into their domestic content-oriented programs to peruse this 'internationalization at home' experience. Many of the leading universities in ASEAN nations have also seen increases in English-taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in recent years. There is some evidence that this has a knock-on effect for neighboring nations (Rose & McKinley, 2018). In Taiwan, for example, "the fact that rising investment in top universities in other countries (particularly Taiwan's neighbors) has alarmed the government as a potential threat to the country's competitiveness in the long run" (Song & Tai, 2007, pp. 326–27). Further afield in Latin America, where there has been less historical attention or need for the Englishization of higher education, there is strong evidence to suggest this is beginning to change (Berry and Taylor, 2013).

As a result of this boom in the English-medium study of content subjects in non-anglophone countries, there is a dual booming need for the requisite English language skills for the purposes of EMI. In short, there is an opportunity for English language specialist departments to offer their expertise to help ensure such emergent programs are successful. One area of needed expertise is the provision of help in ensuring students have the requisite language abilities to undertake study in EMI programs. Numerous studies have found that insufficient English proficiency of EMI students is one of the largest obstacles affecting EMI implementation (e.g. Costa & Coleman 2012; Hamid et al. 2013; Hu et al. 2014; Chapple 2015). Students' linguistic challenges have been widely observed, including difficulty in taking notes from academic readings (Andrade 2006); comprehending English medium lectures (Hellekjær 2010); understanding the diverse accents of EMI teachers' (Tange 2010); and comprehending the specialist vocabulary in academic readings (Kirkgöz 2005). In one large-scale study in Hong Kong, the researchers found that only 1.4% of students from non-English high school backgrounds had enough academic vocabulary to understand lectures (Lin and Morrison, 2010). A further study in the same context found that of lack in language ability impeded students' comprehension of teachers and textbooks, and their performance in discussions (Evans & Morrison 2011). A recent study of EMI business students in Japan found that while general English language proficiency was important for their success, the provision of targeted and specialized language support programs was more strongly related to success measures (Rose *et al.*, 2019).

The development of students' English language skills is a key area where English departments can play a critical role, in addition to the development of their general knowledge of English-related disciplines. There is opportunity for universities to place greater value placed on double-degrees, which offer students the professional or career-oriented degrees they are now drawn to, paired with a major in the English language. Students will need such language-related knowledge in order to be successful in their future careers, and (more immediately) to be successful in their English-medium studies. This may require a shift in focus of some of the subjects taught within literature-oriented departments in order to better cater to the language needs of multidisciplinary studies. However, some literature-based content could be retained through creative synergies. For example, while Business

students may need courses in English language and English for academic purposes to deal with lectures and readings in English, specialists in literature might be able to offer literature-based courses to teach subjects on critical thinking or human ethics, which are vital characteristics for business graduates.

A further growth area: English for research and publication purposes

Another growth area, where English language experts can adapt to fill a need, is in research-oriented programmes (e.g. doctoral-level programs), where there is a growing need for researchers to be able to communicate their research findings in English. Nowadays, English has become the predominant language of academic publishing, which has put L2 English scholars at a disadvantage. English now holds a monopoly over the academic publishing industry, and this situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future (Galloway & Rose, 2015). This situation has meant that for many non-Anglophone universities, notions of being a “good researcher” are increasingly intertwined with proficiency in English (Olsson & Sheridan, 2012). As McKinley and Rose (2018) note, the increase of English L2 writers in academic publishing has meant that many L2 English speakers struggle to work within the rigid standards of academic English. Many recent studies of the experiences of L2 English academics have highlighted a disadvantage for L2 writers when trying to get their research published (e.g. Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008; Ferguson, Perez-Llantada, & Plo, 2011; Hanauer & Englander, 2011; Hwang, 2005; Lillis & Curry, 2010).

As a result of these struggles, there is an opportunity for English language experts to offer specialized courses and programs to prepare research students for writing for publication purposes. Experts in English literature are in an ideal position to offer their expertise, as the study of literature is associated with a nuanced understanding of the critical use of language, which can extend to a variety of genres including writing for publication purposes. Many doctoral training programs these days include language-focussed courses, and it is in such courses that English language departments in non-Anglophone countries can expand their influence. Work in this direction might require some retraining or a pivot in away from literature, and towards English for academic purposes (EAP) or English for specific purposes (ESP). English for EMI purposes or English for publication purposes are growing branches of ESP, in that learners have very ‘special’ (i.e. specific) needs, which include: specific skills for immediate purposes; specific technical vocabulary, linguistic functions [and genres] for immediate purposes; specific disciplinary topics, text-types for immediate purposes; and specific communicative needs for immediate and future purposes. ESP or EAP lecturers working in this domain would also need to ensure their courses are specific to the immediate and future needs of researchers writing English for publication purposes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that English has emerged in the 21st century as the reigning global lingua franca, and is now needed by students in a diverse range of careers to be globally competitive. As a result, English has become more than a ‘foreign’ language in many contexts, as the focus and needs of English language students have changed. This new sociolinguistic reality may require a change in focus of English studies within English departments in non-Anglophone settings. Further to this, the internationalization of higher education has led the Englishization of higher education. This has brought English into diverse domains of the university, including

the integration of English within disciplines that were not traditionally connected to the language studies, such as engineering, the health sciences, and business. Current policy trends suggest that higher education institutions are entering a boom of English language education, driven mainly by the needs of students in EMI programs and the needs for researchers writing for publication purposes.

Although EMI in many contexts has a dual goal of teaching content specialist subjects, as well as improving English language proficiency, research has indicated that EMI courses alone are ineffective for language learning. Thus, English language specialists are needed to ensure students have the requisite skills to learn through English, and to use English successfully in their future careers. While English language experts housed within English departments are in an ideal position to offer expertise in these domains, they will only realize the full extent of their value if they can adapt to new needs of these students. As most EMI programs exist outside the humanities, it will also be paramount that English departments are able to communicate their value to departments in non-language related disciplines.

Further to this, the Englishization of higher education has meant that courses oriented to EAP, ESP, and content-specific education are vital. Such courses should not be positioned as 'just' language courses, but an integral part of a learner's critical education—and one that has empirically been linked to successful disciplinary content learning in a second language (Rose et al., 2019). Moving beyond literature approaches to language education might not be preferable for those trained in literature studies, but this may be a vital move to ensure the future survival of English departments in our current neo-liberalist and globalized era of higher education.

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