

## **Challenges and Opportunities for English Literature Majors in the New Century**

Dr. Laurence Ajaka & Dr. Rabih Nabhan

Holy Spirit University of Kaslik

[rabihsabhan@usek.edu.lb](mailto:rabihsabhan@usek.edu.lb)

[laurenceajaka@usek.edu.lb](mailto:laurenceajaka@usek.edu.lb)

### **Abstract**

Today's working market has been shifting dramatically every few years, and thus many majors such as the English language find themselves struggling to find thriving working opportunities. English proficiency has long been linked to success or failure in other subjects such as mathematics and science. Thus, lack of proficiency has a detrimental effect on the academic performance of students. With the globalization of commerce and businesses, and English being the undisputed international language, it has come to become a cornerstone in reaching out and understanding the needs and cultures of others. It is also a necessity for entrepreneurs that are opening their small businesses in order to cohesively deliver their innovations. Furthermore, human immigration in the northern American continent set record heights during this century creating one of the biggest waves of integration in history. With English being the recognized official language for two of the biggest countries in the world, there is a real need for these immigrants to become part of their new communities. So even though the English language graduates have witnessed a diminishing role in purely academic pursuits, other opportunities have emerged that require high efficiency in the English language.

**Key words:** English, international language, HR institutes, entrepreneurship, immigration,

### **Introduction**

Literary and artistic degrees constitute an important part of our existence because they speak to the ethereal aspect of our existence that cannot be addressed by the calculated aspects of other academic pursuits such as business and science (Eagleton, 1996). Recently, there has been a

noted decrease in those who choose to pursue these majors. This can be attributed to the changing economy that is now has shown a decline in jobs available for those who major in English literature and other humanitarian sciences.

On the other hand, globalization has cemented the English as the dominant language worldwide. There is no denying that the international language is English whether it is in science, business and culture (Yano, 2015). With the development, English literature can now be employed in various new vocations. Science papers and new discoveries are almost exclusively written in English which means that any hopeful researcher must be fluent enough to understand complex scientific writing (Genc & Bada, 2010). It also aids in business, particularly for entrepreneurs that want to launch their business and need the aid of English to be able to create companies, launch marketing campaigns and being able to understand how the global market is shifting. Furthermore, the world is witnessing unprecedented waves of integration especially in the United States of America making it necessary for immigrants to become proficient in English to be able to succeed in their new home (Isphording, 2015).

The landscape has changed for English literature and the rest of the humanitarian majors, but that does not mean that those who have a passion for these pursuits should give up their passions. They simply need to adapt to a challenging and novel market and employ their skills within the right channels.

### **Trends in Humanitarian Enrollment**

The number of students enrolling and graduating in English Literature and literary and artistic degrees is declining. In the United States of America, the number of English students has declined considerably during the last few years from close to 54,000 in 2010-2011 to a little less under 43,000 in 2015-2016 with the trend predicting further decrease (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2017). The number of bachelors in English and literature has never witnessed such a steep incline since the mid-1970s till mid-1980s, and there is much speculation about the probable causes.

One of the most optimistic possibilities is that women are now moving away from their typical humanitarian degrees that they were encouraged to pursue. The percentage of women who are enrolling and graduating from humanitarian majors has been witnessing a steady decline for the last few decades, but it dropped dramatically by 8.7% between the years 2012-2014 (Jaschik, 2016). Some scholars say that this is because women are now shifting to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) majors which were traditionally restricted to men. In the year 2017, women made up 30% of all STEM graduates and yet they are less likely to continue in STEM occupations and prefer to work in academia and health (Noonan, 2017). Figure 1 shows the variations in the trends of bachelors earned, and natural sciences seem to be the most popular choice as the percentage has increased from nearly 12% in 2005 to nearly 18% towards the end of 2014. Engineering is also showing a slight increase from its previous slump around 2005 especially with new majors and programs being available for engineering students. These data support the shift to STEM that some scholars postulated.

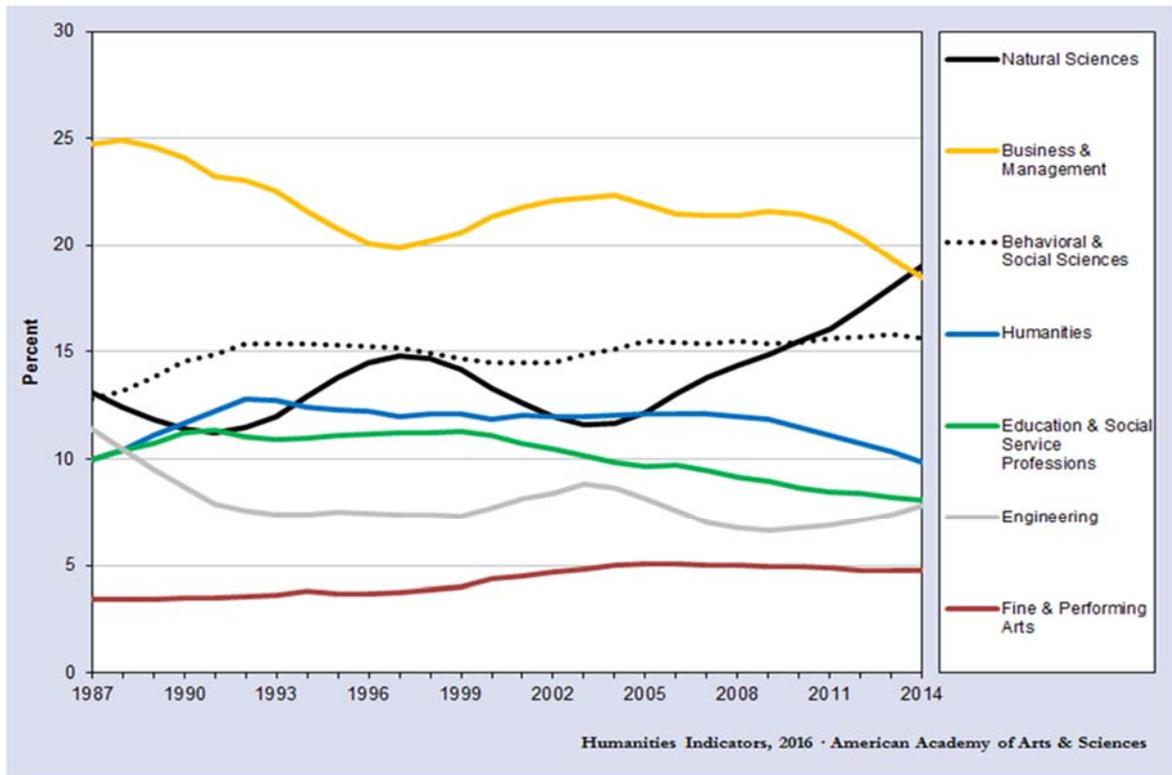


Fig. 1 Variation of percentage of bachelor degrees earned per major between 1987 and 2014 as cited from Jaschik (2016)

There are some who say the shrink in the number of humanitarian graduates is not because there is lack of interest, but because universities prefer to focus more on STEM and business majors (Jaschik, 2016). There are considerably more donations and contributions to universities that are currently involved with STEM studies because they have the potential to produce considerable profits. For example, a university would opt for opening a new technology program that would possibly make a breakthrough than a new history major that wouldn't have the chance for economic revenue. The university is more likely to get a hefty donation for the first than the second. At first glance, this does not come off as a bad trend, but the recent decades have clearly shown that the desire for more funding has created an immense pressure on academic to publish, and this is especially true in the case of STEM majors (Grimes et al., 2018).

There is even a coined expression to illustrate the situation: “Publish or perish”. It has led to a significant increase in scientific misconduct because the emphasis of quantity over quality is currently the dominating trend (Pinto et al., 2008). Although the majority of the mishaps are minor, there are three major offenses that compromise the integrity of research: fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism (Sox & Rennie, 2006). As low as 0.02% of all papers across all fields is retracted every year, and this is a keen indication the pressure for publication is compromising the quality and integrity of all papers, especially those involved with STEM (Van Noorden, 2011).

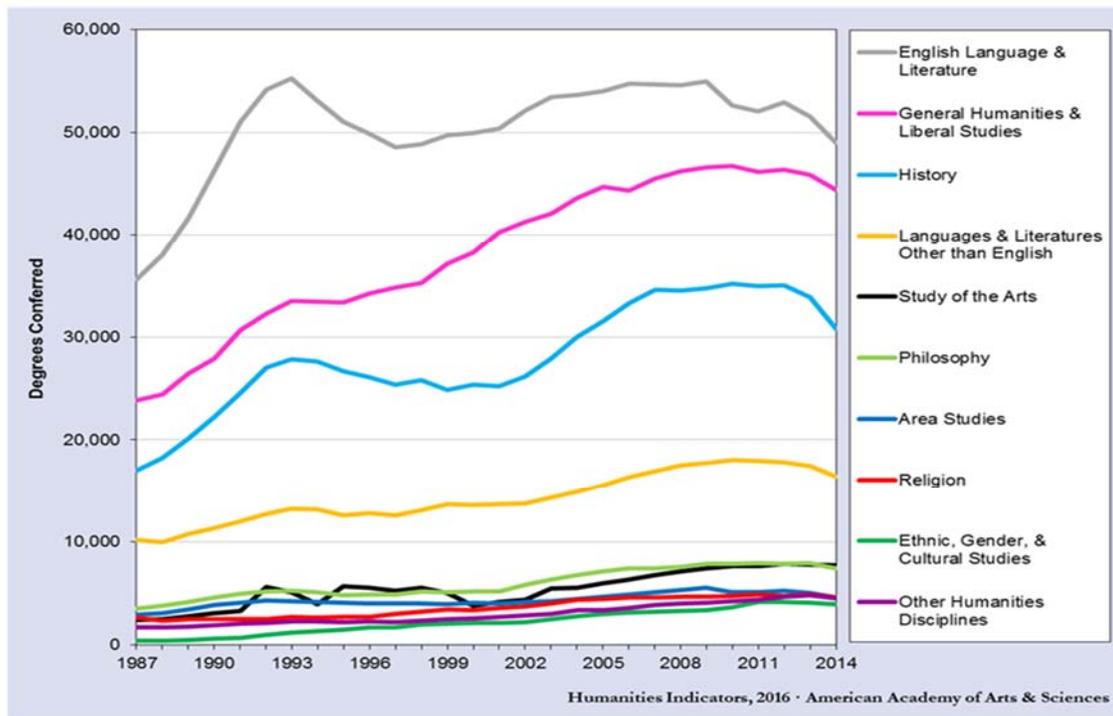


Figure 2 The variation of percentage of humanitarian degrees per major as cited by Jaschik (2016)

Figure 2 clearly shows that the demand for the English language is high within the offered positions. Other humanitarian majors also show steady numbers, but it is very difficult to maintain the previous numbers if there are no programs available for prospective students to enroll in.

English literature is still a viable major if invested properly. Today's market offers diverse options for graduates and incentives for those who are considering it. The next few chapters will discuss these advantages and opportunities.

### **Recognition of English as the International Language**

English has become the most popular and widespread language in the world and is regarded as the global language that almost all university majors are taught in partially and fully (OECD, 2016). The world is getting even closer in terms of education with the number of tertiary students (those who are enrolled in countries they are not citizens of) has increased dramatically from 0.8 million in the 1970s to 4.6 million recently (OECD, 2017). These numbers are expected to increase, and English will become a major component for this phenomenon since 4 out of the 6 major destinations of these students would be to Anglo-speaking countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia. This is also persistent in countries that do not have English as their primary language such as Germany, Turkey, Republic of Korea, Japan, etc (Al Khalil, 2016). These countries even include English as a major component of their curricula even before students reach their tertiary education phase as students are taught English in parallel with their own native languages. Policies such as these come as a recognition of these nations of English as the dominant international language, so they want to prepare their youth and give them an added advantage for their future studies. There are many nations that have come to recognize English as a vital component of their success on the global scale, and China is one of them.

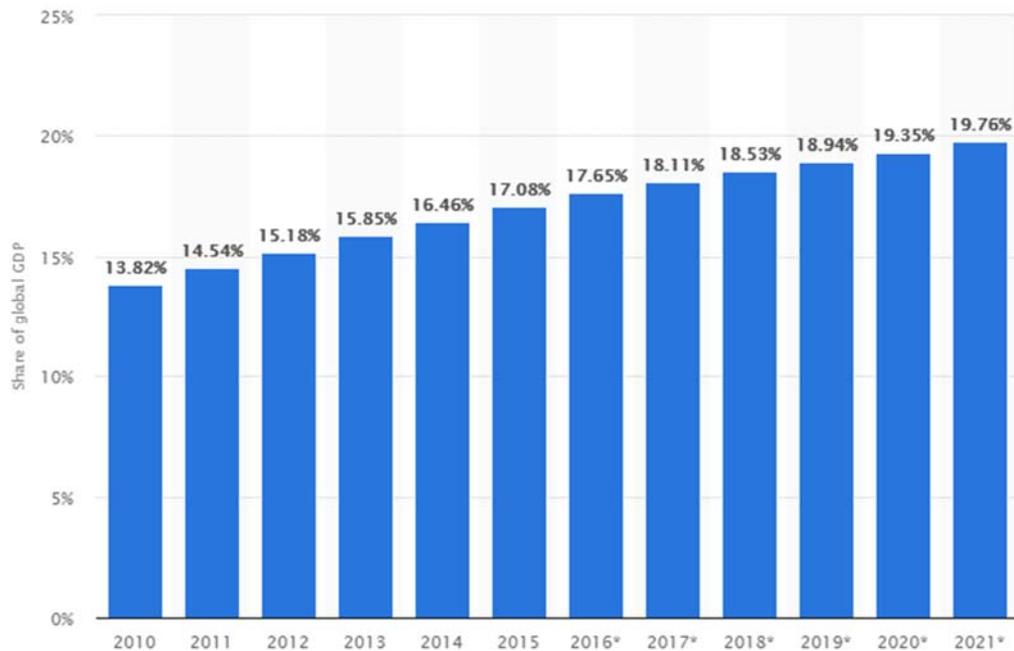


Figure 3 The Chinese share of global GDP as cited by Statistica (2018)

According to Figure 3, China is expected to be responsible for close to 20% of the global GDP by 2021 making it a leading contender and a deciding force. Pan and Block (2011) performed a study that found that the Chinese believe in the importance of English and accept it as the form of communication with other countries, and therefore, focus on teaching it as a means for interacting with the world to further their dominance. Wang et al. (2017) also proved that there is a high demand for English proficiency in China and that it is a skill that will likely substantially increase the earning potential. This shift has been spurred by China's involvement in the world trade since 2001, and it has been steadily increasing with the globalization of Chinese trade.

In South Africa, research has shown that men who are proficient in English, especially in post-secondary capacity, could have the potential to earn as high as 90% more than those who are not (Casale & Posel, 2011). There are even shreds of evidence that employers rely on English

proficiency in screening because it is considered an indicator for social standards and high quality educational background.

These two countries are only a small sample of a global trend. The English language is crucial in an economic powerhouse such as China as well as budding economies such as South Africa. Having a degree in English literature in such countries is a huge vocational bonus because the demand for English proficiency is high for important organizations that want to compete in the demanding market. Specialization in English Business would be a bonus in such cases because it's the most needed discipline.

### **English and Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship is a leading economic driving force in the new flexible marketplace; in fact, it can be a driving force for the economy because of their innovation. They are capable of responding to the ever-changing demands of their immediate market (Shehu & Shittu, 2015). This is particularly true in case of emerging economies especially in the African, Asian and South American countries. Most of those countries have high demand but low income, so they end up creating new sectors and industries that combat poverty by creating new job opportunities on one hand and contributing to the GDP of the country.

Entrepreneurship and education are closely correlated together, and there is evidence that education will contribute to a culture of entrepreneurship positively or negatively. The concept of entrepreneurship is not a new concept as some might assume; the first entrepreneurship course was recorded to be offered by Harvard University in 1948 (Katz, 2003), but the recent advancements in technology, access to investment opportunities and open economy have

created a hospitable environment for entrepreneurs (van Praag, 2019). Furthermore, the taste and demands of individuals are constantly changing and consumerism is the essence of reality. There are many skills that an entrepreneur needs, but communication is on top of those indispensable set of talents. For communication to be effective, both sides should be able to understand each other, and for that they need a common language (Shehu & Shittu, 2015). Seeing that English is now accepted as the international language, it is a requirement for the entrepreneur. This is especially needed in crisis management, within the organization and with clients, when emotions are running high and tension can cloud judgment.

### **English and Immigration**

Immigration is a commonplace occurrence in today's globalization, but it can create a language barrier for immigrants that are not proficient in English and subsequently damage their chances of economic and social integration. In 2016, it was estimated that there are 250 million first and second generations worldwide (United 2016) with predictions of increasing numbers on a yearly basis.

In Australia, having low proficiency in English is detrimental for new immigrants because it highly influences their access to labor market participation and social integration; thus it is a crucial factor in a country with an estimate of 27% of the Australian population being made up of newly arriving immigrants (Tam & Page, 2016).

The United States of America is perhaps the largest melting pot for immigrants from all around the world with the Latin American nationalities holding the greatest percentage. There are numbers that claim immigrant children perform worse than the native citizens, and some have attributed this trend to language proficiency (Akresh & Akresh, 2011). When it comes to

Mathematics, it was difficult to measure the effect of the lack of English proficiency in the US among Latin students, but it didn't show many implications on their skills (Fenoll, 2018). Some researchers have come to the conclusion that proficiency of English is an important component, but it is not separate from the ecological and social context of the country they live in (Xi et al., 2010). All the factors combine together to form a recipe for success with a social and economic niche that determines the feasibility of attaining integration; however, English proficiency remains a key factor.

Multinational companies have branches and factories all around the world, and they demand a high standard in all their employees. They are more likely to hire those who are capable of communicating easily with others.

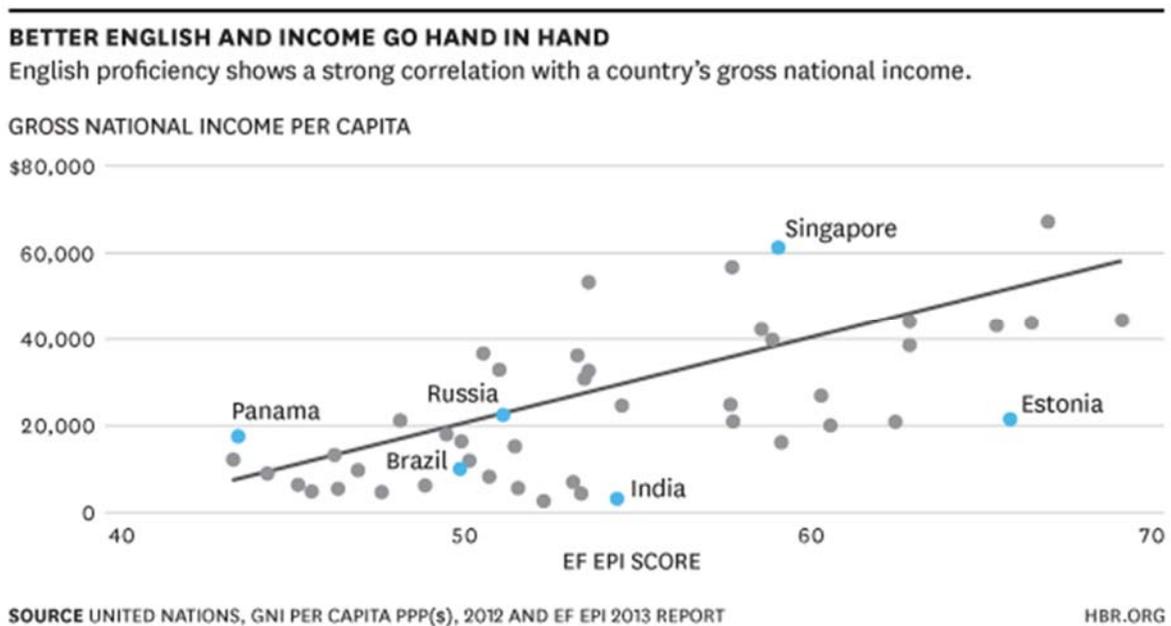


Figure 4 The correlation between English proficiency and a country's gross national income as cited from McCormick (2013)

Countries that have a high level of English skills show enhanced economic performance where indicators such as GNI and GBD increase proportionally (McCormick, 2013). The scores of

postsecondary courses taken in English have been found to be a driving force for this trend, and it establishes a new avenue for English major degrees in the new market.

## **Conclusion**

The time of English major graduates despairing of finding proper employment is a thing of the past. There are new and exciting avenues open for those who have the insight and motivation to explore their career options. They are now more important than ever in a world when the English language is the dominating dialect in the world. Having a degree in English literature will open many doors for prospective graduates. Universities should be aware of the choices available for these students and offer more positions for them instead of continuing to scale back programs and classes for the sake of more profitable degrees, especially in STEM disciplines. Students exploring their careers should take into consideration having a second degree in English or at least take English proficiency courses to further their career options. This is especially true in developing countries where educated laborers are forced to seek employment overseas because they are unlikely to find adequate opportunities in their local market. It is an asset whether one chooses to enroll in a corporate profession or explore the risky yet rewarding world of entrepreneurs. It is the responsibility of academics and guidance counselors to advise and guide students to choose career paths that best serve their capabilities instead of merely focusing on antiquated notions of what is considered a reputable career while sacrificing their own passions for literary and art majors.

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