

1 Language in cultural context

Chapter 1 The English language

Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will be able to

- understand why the English language became a global language
- understand why there are so many varieties of English
- plan and write a part 1 written task 1
- plan and conduct a part 1 further oral activity.

In this book you will approach the English language as anthropologists. You may think of anthropologists as people who study little-known cultures, deep in the jungle, writing observations in a journal or making recordings of an obscure language; but anthropology is the study of all human cultures, including English-speaking cultures. As students of the English language, you should consider yourselves students of the **Anglophone world**, a vast network of diverse cultures of English speakers which is alive and buzzing around us today, from the street corners of Singapore to the cornfields of Iowa.

You will not have to look hard to find evidence to learn about these cultures. All you have to do is look at film posters, text messages, advertisements or websites. These are all carriers of cultural information, and for the sake of our study we will call these pieces of evidence ‘**texts**’. You may think of texts as books, but you will be using a much broader definition of the term. Texts are the covers of magazines, the graffiti found on billboards, the poetry read in cafés, or the speeches of politicians. They are manuals, private letters and even Tweets. Texts are little mirrors that reflect cultural values. You should approach them with the same care and scrutiny that an anthropologist would use.

Your study of Anglophone cultures is going to take you around the world. While you may often think of English-speaking countries as places such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) or Australia, you will also explore countries like Nigeria, South Africa and the Caribbean. You will have to learn more about these places in order to understand the meaning of the texts in this coursebook. Your goal will not be to make generalisations about Anglophone cultures (such as how the British are good at hiding their emotions – the famous British ‘stiff upper lip’) but to learn to appreciate how **culture** and **context** help shape the meaning of texts.

In this chapter you will find out how culture and context help shape the meaning of texts and tell us more about the Anglophone world. In Unit 1.1 you will explore the reasons why English has become the language of global communication. You will also see, in Unit 1.2, how different varieties of English reflect people’s social, regional and historical background. At the end of the chapter you will find two assessment sections, with a sample part 1 written task and a sample part 1 further oral activity.

Key terms



Anglophone world refers to the places in the world where English is spoken.

Text is any written work or transcribed piece of speech. For the sake of our studies, we will think of texts as clues that lead to a better understanding of one of the many Anglophone cultures, and these clues can range from e-mails to poems and from advertisements and posters to books.

Culture can have two different meanings:

- 1 It describes the values, goals, convictions and attitudes that people share in a society. Parts 1 and 2 of the IB English language and literature course are particularly interested in this aspect of culture.
- 2 It refers to the fine arts and a society’s appreciation of the arts. Parts 3 and 4 of the course are particularly concerned with this, through a study of literature.

Context refers to the circumstances that surround the writing and the reading of a text. Trying to understand why a text was written (the purpose) and whom it was written for (the audience) are good starting points for understanding context.

Part 1 – Language in cultural context

HL

Higher
level

It does not always have to be your teacher who finds appropriate texts to study for part 1. Hunting for interesting texts is a challenging and worthwhile activity for you as well. You can create a classroom 'library' of texts that explores a wide range of cultures. Try to include as many different types of text as possible, from letters to brochures, and articles to advertisements.

Quick Quiz

- How many people speak English as a native language?
 a 200 million c 600 million
 b 400 million d 1 billion
- How many people speak English as an additional language?
 a 300 million c 600 million
 b 400 million d 1 billion
- How many people are learning English today as a foreign language?
 a 300 million c 600 million
 b 400 million d 2 billion

'There is no retreat from English as the world language; no retreat from an English-speaking world.'

Sir Shridath Ramphal (1928–)

Answers

1 c. According to the Wolfram Alpha database 600 million people speak English as a native language.
 2 c and d. Between 600 million and 1 billion people speak English as an additional language, depending on the source of the information and the definition of 'additional language'. Levels of proficiency vary.
 3 d. Over 2 billion people are learning English, according to Jay Walker (see the further resources suggestion on page 6).

Unit 1.1 English as a global language

The number of English language users in the world is expanding as rapidly today as it has for the past 400 years. Between 1602, when Elizabeth was queen, and 1952, when Elizabeth II became queen, the number of native speakers of English increased 50-fold, from 7 to 250 million speakers. At the height of its power it was claimed that the sun never set on the British Empire. In fact, the sun still does not set on the English-speaking world. Today there are more people who speak English as an additional language than there are native speakers of English, and English is the only language for which that is true. It is the world's number one **lingua franca**, which is to say that it is spoken by many people who do not share a native language.

Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian philosopher and writer, once said that the world is becoming a '**global village**'. He was referring to the way in which people with similar interests are reaching out and making contact with each other, forming networks through various media and a common language. English has become the common language that facilitates this process of **convergence**. In linguistics, the term *convergence* refers to the phenomenon of people coming together, making connections and accommodating for each other through their use of language.

Of all the languages in the world, why has the English language become the world's number one lingua franca? Why is English the language of the global village? We will explore three answers to these questions, focusing on the British Empire, economics and fashion.

The British Empire

Let us begin our study of the global nature of English by reading an extract (Text 1.1) from a communication phrase book from the International Maritime Organization (IMO). It demonstrates the interconnected nature of McLuhan's global village and the need for English as a lingua franca.

Text 1.1 *IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, International Maritime Organization, 2001*

In order to prevent miscommunication and accidents in harbours and seas around the world, the IMO has been developing standard methods for communication since 1973. According to the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping, officers of ships over a certain size are required to speak and understand Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) in English. The SMCP was designed for native and non-native speakers of English in such a way that it reduces the risk of any miscommunication. Text 1.1 is from a book used by Dutch seafarers containing many Dutch-to-English translations of maritime vocabulary and expressions, all of which have been approved by the IMO.

MAYDAY

- THIS IS TWO-ONE-ONE-TWO-THREE-NINE-SIX-EIGHT-ZERO MOTOR VESSEL "BIRTE" CALL SIGN DELTA ALPHA MIKE KILO
- POSITION SIX TWO DEGREES ONE ONE DECIMAL EIGHT MINUTES NORTH
- ZERO ZERO SEVEN DEGREES FOUR FOUR MINUTES EAST
- I AM ON FIRE AFTER EXPLOSION
- I REQUIRE FIRE FIGHTING ASSISTANCE
- SMOKE NOT TOXIC OVER