

# 1

# The scope of English and English language teaching

## Overview

This chapter includes the following key issues:

- What characterizes the global spread of English?
  - Factors promoting the use of English around the world.
- What do we mean by English as an international language?
  - Learners' views of English.
  - Varieties of English.
  - Using English as a lingua franca.
- What are the implications for English language teaching curriculums?
  - The status of English in the school curriculum.
  - English language teaching in English-speaking countries.
  - The role of the private sector in English instruction.
  - The impact of technology.

**Part 1** English language teaching today

## 1.1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dramatic change in the scope of English language teaching worldwide and an increasing demand for competent English language teachers, as well as for language programmes that can deliver the English language skills and competencies needed by today's global citizens. The teaching of English consumes a considerable portion of available educational resources in many countries, and English is not necessarily a neutral commodity offering equal opportunities for all. English teachers, therefore, need to appreciate the special status English has in modern life, what its costs and benefits are to those who seek to learn it, the different motivations learners may have for learning English and the different circumstances in which they learn it. This chapter seeks to clarify some of these issues and to describe how English language teaching is realized in different parts of the world.

## 1.2 The global spread of English

The English language has a complex status in today's world. For some people, it is acquired as a first language. For some, it may be learned at school, and be essential for academic and professional success. For others, it may represent a subject that they are required to study in school, but for which they have no immediate need. And English means different things to people in different parts of the world. For some, it may arouse positive feelings – as the language of pop culture, the media and social networking. For others, it may have associations with colonialism, elitism or social and economic inequality.

English today has a unique status, as a consequence of the role it plays around the world and its function as an 'international' or 'world language'. It has been described as the world's *lingua franca*. Although some 380 million people are said to speak it as a first language in countries like Australia, Canada, the United States and Great Britain, a further 600 million people use it, alongside other languages, as a 'second language' – in countries like Nigeria, India and the Philippines. And another one billion people are said to be studying it, at any one time, as a 'foreign language', in countries like China, South Korea, France, Germany, Russia and Spain.

English is learned for many different reasons. It may be an essential tool for education and business for some learners; it may be the language of travel and related activities of sightseeing for others; and it may be needed for social survival and employment for new immigrants in English-speaking countries. For some, it may be a popular language for the media, entertainment, the internet and other forms of electronic communication. For many, however, it may merely be a language that they are obliged to study, but which they may never really have any obvious need for.

Despite the emphasis on learning English in many parts of the world, it is worth remembering that many people can survive perfectly well in their own countries without ever having to use English (Seargeant, 2009), and that fluency in English does not

## Chapter 1 The scope of English and English language teaching

necessarily offer learners any social or economic advantages. And as some have pointed out (e.g. Pennycook, 1994; Lin, 2001), the spread of English does not necessarily promote social equality. Lin (2001) argued that ability in English and access to adequate opportunities to learn it has a considerable impact on the lives of many learners worldwide, including both children and adult learners. She suggests that the classroom is a site in which learners experience a power asymmetry due to the social identities that all learners and teachers adopt. As a consequence, learners may develop a 'want-hate' relationship with English, one in which they struggle to acquire a language that may eventually put them at a disadvantage within the classroom context.



**To what extent do you think mastery of English affects your learners' social mobility? What other benefits do you think your learners perceive in learning English?**

## Factors promoting the use of English around the world

The status of English in the world today has nothing to do with its intrinsic characteristics as a language. It did not become the world's second language because it has some special features that gave it that status or because it is superior in some way to other languages that might have assumed this role. Rather, the spread of English is the result of a number of historical and pragmatic factors (McCrum, 2010).

### *Historical factors*

Primary among the factors that account for the spread of English is the fact that it was the language of the British Empire, and later, that of American expansion. One of the legacies of the British Empire was the use of English as the primary language needed for government, communication, commerce and education in those parts of the world under British colonial administration. And the countries in the Empire were located in many different parts of the world, from Africa to Asia and the Pacific. When colonial administrations were replaced by national ones, through independence, English remained as a major working language, facilitating communication among peoples speaking different languages (i.e. functioning as a link language or *lingua franca*) and providing a primary language for administration, education and the media. The English that became established in these vast territories took on local characteristics, giving rise to the 'new Englishes' that we recognize today, such as Indian English, Malaysian English or Nigerian English.

### *Globalization*

The spread of English is often linked to globalization, since it provides for high levels of interconnectedness among nation states and local economies and cultures. The fact that English has become the primary language for communication within international

### Part 1 English language teaching today

organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union is an example of such globalization. However, as Seargeant observes (2009: 63), globalization has contributed as much to the 'idea' of English as it has to its actual role in communication. In other words, in many parts of the world, English represents an image in popular imagination, established through the media, advertising and so on, rather than a practical necessity or reality for many people.

Scholars and educationists differ in their attitudes towards the global spread of English. Some (e.g. Graddol, 2006) think this spread is natural, inevitable, neutral and beneficial, and have been accused of 'English triumphalism'. Crystal (1997: 32) suggests that English 'fosters cultural opportunity and promotes a climate of international intelligibility'. Others see the spread of English as threatening local cultures, languages and identities. Phillipson (1992) used the phrase 'linguistic imperialism' to explain how English has come to play a leading role in maintaining the economic and political dominance of some societies over others. Because of the role of English as the dominant international language, the theory of linguistic imperialism asserts that other languages have been prevented from going through processes of development and expansion, and have been allocated a secondary status, along with the cultures they represent. Proponents of the theory of linguistic imperialism view the English language teaching industry as contributing to the propagation of the economic, cultural or religious values of dominant world powers.

### *Economic development*

Many countries see English as important to their economic development. A recent report suggested that countries with poor English-language skills also have lower levels of trade, innovation and income. The report ranked 54 countries where English is not a first language and claimed that English is key to innovation and competitiveness. The top five were Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Norway. The lowest were Colombia, Panama, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Libya. The report also suggested that Italy, Spain and Portugal were held back as a result of poor English-language skills (*New York Times*, 28 October 2012).

### *Communication*

Since English is widely taught and used around the world, it is a convenient language for communication across national boundaries and in a wide range of professions. In many cases, the speakers (or writers) involved both may be using English as a foreign or second language (see section 1.3 below). Nerrier (2006), reporting as observer of communication in situations like these, noted that non-native English speakers are often better able to communicate with business clients in Korea and Japan than native speakers of English, due to the fact that their English is not likely to contain the kind of unfamiliar idioms and colloquial expressions used by native speakers of English.

## *Business and entrepreneurship*

As the United States emerged as a global economic power after World War II, international trade and commerce became increasingly dependent on the use of English. Today, large business organizations are increasingly multinational in their operations, and English is increasingly the most frequent language used for both written and spoken communication within such organizations. Many of the world's English language learners require knowledge of English in order to enter the workforce in their countries and in order to advance professionally. Similarly, for many young IT graduates in countries like India, China, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, knowledge of English provides a chance to market their expertise outside of their countries. Their fluency in English, together with their creative and innovative thinking, is part of the driving force of thousands of successful businesses and companies worldwide.

## *Education*

In many parts of the world where English has traditionally had the status of a school subject, it is now becoming the medium of instruction, particularly at university level. For example, since 2014 the Politecnico di Milano – a premium university in Italy – has been teaching its graduate courses in English ([www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17958520](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17958520)). The motivation for teaching subjects through English is partially to improve the English language skills of graduates (as with universities in Turkey, where many courses are taught in English). This trend also reflects the growing need for European universities to offer programmes in English to attract an international body of students and raise their international profiles – an aspect of the internationalization of higher education through English. There are now more than 2,000 such programmes in European universities. It is often assumed that these courses will be taught by younger lecturers who have themselves spent part of their education abroad. However, the kind of teaching observed in these situations is reported to be similar to what is observed at international academic conferences where few people are native speakers of English: discussion tends to settle around what is described as the 'lowest common denominator'. In subjects like mathematics, this may not be a major problem, but in disciplines where language is more central to intellectual debate, there is a risk that meaningful scholarly discourse could be compromised. (Aisha Labi, 2011: Europe's Push to Teach in English Creates Barriers in the Classroom (<http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/126326/>).

Another factor likely to further consolidate the spread of English is the growing popularity of content-based teaching, or CLIL, as it is referred to in Europe – that is, the use of English to teach some school subjects (see Chapter 3). (This is referred to as bilingual education in Central and South America.) The teaching of school subjects in English may start at secondary school and continue at university. And just as English-medium education was crucial in establishing local varieties of English in countries like India, Nigeria and Singapore (see section 1.3 below), we can assume that the teaching of content subjects through English is likely to produce students who speak English fluently, but with marked local features.

**Part 1** English language teaching today

## *Travel*

Today's citizens are often mobile, either moving to a new location for tourism or to seek employment. The development of tourism within a country is often dependent upon providing resources in English for visitors, and international travellers generally find that they need some knowledge of English in order to travel abroad. This provides a reason for many people to acquire some mastery of the language.

## *Popular culture*

English today is an important language for the expression of western popular culture, as seen in movies, television and music. It is visible everywhere in sport, in advertising and in packaging and labelling of consumer items, particularly those aimed at younger buyers. In some parts of Europe (e.g. Finland), English-language movies and television programmes are broadcast in English (usually with subtitles), rather than in dubbed versions, providing young learners with increased opportunities to learn English.

## *The media*

English is the language used in newspapers intended for an international readership, such as the *Bangkok Post* or *China Daily*, and in international magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*. Similarly, it is used by international television networks, such as CNN and Al-Jazeera, and for television channels, such as RT, an English-language news channel which presents the Russian view on global news for an international audience, or CCTV, which presents the Chinese view of China and the world through English.

## *A global English language teaching industry*

The spread of English is also supported by a global industry that involves publishers, private and public language-teaching institutions, and testing organizations, such as those offering international examinations. Two examples from the private language school industry are illustrative. The Swedish language-teaching company EF (Education First) is the world's largest private educator, with over 25,000 teachers and 15 million students worldwide, with headquarters in Lucerne, Switzerland. In China, supplementary English classes for preschool and primary school age learners is a multibillion-dollar industry that is expected to grow by 30% per year. The Walt Disney Company has schools in major cities there, and China's biggest private-education organization – New Oriental Education and Technology Group – has some 500 schools and earns over US\$60 million a year from children's English classes.

## *Symbolism*

Although mastery of English is a practical goal for many learners, as noted earlier, in many parts of the world English has also accrued a value and status that transcends its role as a communicative resource. It is seen as a symbol of globalization, modernization,

## Chapter 1 The scope of English and English language teaching

technical innovation and progress. Therefore, educational planners believe that English should have a significant role in a national curriculum, because not to do so would be to opt out of contemporary views of progressivism. As one writer puts it, English is sometimes ‘ensnared by an ideology that positions English as a language which everyone must know’ (Cozy, 2010: 738), a language that everyone must study for the sake of the few. In an interesting study, Sayer (2010) examined the social meanings of English in the Mexican city of Oaxaca, as reflected in the use of English in street signs, shop names and product brands. He identified six themes or ‘ideas’ that English represents in that context:

- English is advanced and sophisticated.
- English is fashion.
- English is being cool.
- English is sex(y).
- English is for expressions of love.
- English is for expressing subversive identities.

Some describe the attraction of English as representing imagined communities of English speakers that the learner may wish to join (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). This was the focus of an interesting study by Lamb (2004), who explored the idea of what English represents in the minds of a group of Indonesian learners of English. For them, it was not linked to any particular geographical area (such as the United States, Australia or Great Britain) nor with any particular cultural community (e.g. such as Canadians, New Zealanders or Singaporeans) but rather was linked in their minds to international culture. This included international business, the spread of technology, consumerism and materialism, democracy, tourism and world travel as well as the worlds of fashion, sport and popular music.

The status of English also impacts negatively on people’s views of their own language in some countries. An observer of the impact of English in Indonesia (Lindsay, 2011: xi) comments:

A quick glance at Indonesian newspapers, advertisements or television shows the extent to which English is infiltrating and even replacing Indonesian, but more significantly, the extent to which pride in speaking and writing Indonesian is declining. There was a time when speaking Indonesian was a sign of modernity, a symbol of the adoption of a broad identity beyond one’s regional self expressed in one’s regional language. Even twenty years ago, characters in Indonesian films and advertisements speaking regional languages or heavily regional language inflected-Indonesian were inevitably portrayed as ‘traditional’ (i.e. of the past), or as lower class, country hicks. By now, this same image is shifting to Indonesian. To be trendy is to speak English, or more commonly, heavily English-inflected Indonesian. There seems to be no longer any pride in speaking or writing Indonesian well.



**Among the factors in this chapter that have promoted the spread of English, can you suggest the five which you think are most important in establishing the role of English in the country where you teach (or a country where English is a second or foreign language)?**