

Original Research

The role of English in intercultural communication: Past, modernity and future global perspectives

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The problem of interconnection between language and intercultural relations has been widely discussed by researchers worldwide. This article studies the relationships between culture and language, examining the reasons for English dominance in the world, defining the current status of its global spread, and highlighting its future perspectives as a global language in intercultural communication. The research is based on the analysis and generalisation of contemporary studies on the related topics and compares the most recent statistical data. Study results suggest that although English is not in first place, judged by the number of native speakers in the world, it is by far the most learnt foreign language in the world due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. As far as future global perspectives are concerned, English is likely to remain a global language in the near future, but it will probably acquire new forms and experience many changes in its syntactic, grammatical, and semantic structures. The study concludes that the use of English helps users achieve better intercultural understanding, making intercultural relations clear, productive, and timesaving. The study contributes to the development of the essence of the concept of an international language in its relation to culture, the formulation of factors for a particular language to acquire global status, the development of the notion of a lingua franca, and the promotion of intercultural understanding.

KEYWORDS: intercultural communication, globalisation, linguistic factor, extralinguistic factor, language and culture, lingua franca, English teaching, global language, pandemic



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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of intercultural communication has been widely discussed in recent interdisciplinary studies. The role of language – English, in particular – in intercultural communication has been researched by Crystal (2017), Ter-Minasova (2000), Yusupova and Pesina (2015), House (2018), Rao (2019), Rajprasit and Hemchua (2015) and many other scholars. Despite a

considerable number of studies dealing with English as an international language, there is a need for comprehensive research in this field to consider the most recent statistical data and findings from different parts of the world. This article aims to investigate the role of the English language in intercultural communication in terms of its past (reasons for English dominance), contemporary (its spread into different spheres of social,

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economic, and cultural life) and future perspectives (hypothesis about the future of English as a global language). To that end, the article will (1) give existing definitions of culture; (2) define culture in its relation to language; (3) study the current status of English as a foreign language; (4) examine the reasons for the dominance of English in international relations; (5) define future perspectives of English as the most widely spread foreign language in the world; and (6) explore the role of English in intercultural communication.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The article is based on the study of the most recent research in the fields of culture studies, linguistics, and history. Its primary aim is to describe intercultural communication in connection with language, define the role of English in intercultural relations, specify linguistic and extralinguistic reasons for the dominance of English in the world, and review future perspectives for English as a global language. Statistical data on the number of native speakers of English, the number of English learners and the number of countries in which English is an official language are used to describe the spread of English around the world. The article offers definitions of the key notions related to the study, analyses data on organisations using English as their official language, summarises the existing views on the correlation between English and intercultural communication, and contributes to the research in the corresponding fields. The method of prediction based on observation of the spread of English and its use by non-native speakers is employed to offer a hypothesis about future perspectives of English as a global language.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this study, intercultural communication refers to ‘communication between peoples of different nations as opposed to communication be-

tween official representatives of one nation’ (Weaver, 2000, p. 23). Culture, as a term, may hold a variety of interpretations with an array of existing definitions and approaches construing it as a mixture of material and spiritual values (Gosden & Knowles, 2020); something that makes a human different from an animal (Galli, 2018); a means of information transfer over generations (Alo, 2020); everything connected to human activity (Rahman & Singh, 2021), whereas some researchers say that only creative activity is counted as culture (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2021); or a system of signs (Lotman, 2020).

Kuznetsova (2013) lays out the following approaches to the definition of the term ‘culture’: (1) subject definition, which defines culture as a form of the reflection of the results of labour, whereas the human is regarded as a creator; (2) a processual approach that pretty much ignores the material side of culture, focusing mainly on its spiritual essence; (3) a semiotic approach, whereby culture is a system of signs and a mechanism of social inheritance, preserving human experience in words, notions, and art; (4) a functional approach interpreting culture through the lens of the functions it serves within the society.

This study posits that culture should be interpreted in view of both its spiritual and materialistic sides and regarded as a notion that sets peoples and individuals apart as different from one another. It includes a conceptual picture of a world moulded by a set of beliefs about different phenomena in its surroundings. Intercultural relations remain a widely discussed topic, since in a rapidly developing world cultural awareness is what drives amicable and productive communication. A human’s ability to accept a different point of view is what sets them apart from animals, and from this perspective, language as a means of productive communication plays a vital role in intercultural relations (Grigoryeva et al., 2020).

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

4.1. English as the most popular language among foreign language learners

According to a study published in the Washington post based on a 15-year research of the University of Dusseldorf, in 2015 English was among the most widely spread languages in the world as a native language, with bilingual speakers also included in the data search (Noack & Gamio, 2015). Table 1 presents statistics of the languages with the largest number of native speakers.

Table 1
Native speakers of the world's top ten most widespread languages

NO.	LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF NATIVE SPEAKERS
1.	Chinese	1.39 bln
2.	Hindu-Urdu	588 mln
3.	English	527 mln
4.	Arabic	467 mln
5.	Spanish	389 mln
6.	Russian	254 mln
7.	Bengali	250 mln
8.	Portuguese	193 mln
9.	German	132 mln
10.	Japanese	123 mln

English is in the top three languages spoken in the world as a native language. The number of English speakers is close to the number of Hindu-Urdu speakers and Arabic speakers. The question arises: what makes English a worldwide-recognised language of intercultural

communication? As Table 2 below shows, the English language is spoken in over a hundred countries, which outnumbers the speakers of all other languages. These English-speaking countries are dispersed all over the world.

Table 2
The number of countries in which the language is spoken officially

NO.	LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF COUNTRIES WHERE THE LANGUAGE IS SPOKEN
1.	English	101
2.	Arabic	60
3.	French	51
4.	Chinese	33
5.	Spanish	31
6.	Persian	29
7.	German	18
8.	Russian	16
9.	Malay	13
10.	Portuguese	12

As the data comparison shows, English is in fourth place in the number of native speakers and is spoken in almost twice as many countries as Chinese, being the

most widely spoken language in the world. That said, the number of people learning English as a foreign language is beyond any comparison (Table 3).

Table 3

The number of people learning a foreign language all over the world

NO.	LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
1.	English	1.5 bln
2.	French	82 mln
3.	Chinese	30 mln
4.	German	14.5 mln
5.	Spanish	14.5 mln
6.	Italian	8 mln
7.	Japanese	3 mln

The unprecedented number of English learners in comparison with other languages shows that English plays the most significant role in intercultural communication nowadays, for, as Trubina (2017) states, learning a foreign language is aimed at successful social adaptation in life. 83% of respondents in Trubina's (2017) study confirmed they had been learning a foreign language to understand the culture of another nation and broaden personal contacts. Thus, with the largest number of learners, English serves as the main language of intercultural communication contributing to 'social adaptation' and 'understanding of a foreign culture' (Baker, 2018).

4.2. Reasons for English dominance in the world

In his study of English national idioms, Khizhnyak (2013) examines external factors for the rise of English in the world by considering the social and economic factors in its spread and concludes that the key reason for English dominance lies in its overwhelming application in all spheres of human activity, including business, education, art, sport, etc. (Malyuga & McCarthy, 2020). English has also become a language of science with up to 80% of all research being published in English.

Historically, English has been on the fast track towards becoming an international language. Since the 17th century, England has become a coloniser, a lead-

ing trading nation, which contributed to the spread of English around the world. Even when colonised countries gained freedom, English retained the status of their official language. The establishment of a new English-speaking country across the Atlantic Ocean strengthened the influence of the English language on different nations and cultures. The leading positions of the USA in economics, technology and culture have also led to the popularity of English among foreign language learners.

To explore the linguistic factors in this context, Lobkovskaya (2013) turns to the issue of the use of loan words such as *hospice*, *scotch*, *digest*, *fast food*, *grant*, and many others, in Russian to name new notions, make the existing notions more detailed, distinguish between the semantics of native and foreign notions; substitute native collocations with single loan words for language saving purposes, and use an already existing foreign terminology instead of creating a native one. As posited by Lobkovskaya (2013), the reason why a language becomes a world language is a combination of linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

One of the key reasons why English gained its position as a global language lies in the language itself, for its vocabulary of over 60,000 words is undeniably among the richest in the world. Its grammatical system, in turn, is simpler compared to some other languages, with conversion and unchangeable personal pronouns

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making it somewhat easier to learn (Zhernovaya et al., 2015), especially in view of the authentic material available (e.g., films, books, blogs, press, songs), which strongly motivate learners to achieve at least the B1/B2 level and become integrated into the world community.

A combination of these factors has made English more 'competitive' to learn in comparison with other languages.

4.3. The role of English in the modern world

Recent research has shown that 75% of emails across the world are written in English (Spiryaeva, 2015), which testifies to the significant role of English in intercultural communication with different nations. In the sphere of international relations, it has a dominant role, being an official language of a variety of international organisations, international research conferences, business meetings, and sports events. No other language has experienced such spread in such a short period of time (Spiryaeva, 2015). Table 4 summarises data on the most influential international organisations using English as an official language.

Table 4
International organisations in which English is an official language

NAME OF AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION	OFFICIAL LANGUAGES
Antarctic Treaty Secretariat	English, French, Spanish, Russian
International Criminal Court	Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish
International Criminal Police Organization	Arabic, English, French, Spanish
International Energy Agency	English, French
International Federation of Journalists	English, French, Spanish
International Labour Organization	English, French, Spanish
International Monetary Fund	English
International Olympic Committee	French and English
International Telecommunication Union	English, French, Spanish
International Union for Conservation of Nature	English, French, Spanish
Organization for Economic Cooperation and development	English and French
United Nations	Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic
World Bank	English
World Health Organization	English, French, Spanish
World Trade Organization	English, French, Spanish

‘English has also become the language of business, allowing for an ongoing business contact across continents, which would also mean a large cultural shift for an organisation. Using a single language is much more convenient and timesaving than translating to many different national languages. Business English is likely to become a lingua franca for international business companies’

The list above is not complete and names only 15 most notable organisations with English as an official language. Other foreign languages used by international organisations are French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Russian.

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Rao (2019) mentions science and technology as an extensively English-dominated sphere, noting that scientists across the world can share their knowledge through communication and publications in English. In some countries, academic publications in English by non-native speakers outnumber those published by native English speakers (Rao, 2019). Academic English has become a separate well-developed language form. Today, scientists master Academic English to be recognised in the scholarly community, disseminate their research, make their results clear and accessible by a large audience.

English has also become a language of education. Since recent research is being published mostly in English, it is impossible to achieve a high standard of education without a review of literature written in English. At least B1/B2 levels of English proficiency are required to enter most international universities. A variety of online courses provided by high-profile universities is also delivered in English.

Popova and Petrova (2017) suggest that the reality of globalisation has influenced the need to teach English for specific purposes in many countries to form an

English cultural and professional communication medium. The market for teaching and learning English for specific purposes is growing all around the world in all professional spheres, since the knowledge of English in professional communication contributes immensely to getting a dream job, communicating across borders, building a career, and running one’s own business (Rajeswari et al., 2020).

Not only are social and economic spheres dominated by English. Cultural life is also largely transmitted through English-language media – such as books, films and music – to reach as many people around the world as possible. The Internet has also started a new era in the rise of English as a global language of online communication.

As many researchers claim, English has become a *lingua franca*, an Italian term that means a functional type of language used by representatives of different nations in a restricted number of social spheres (Jenkins, 2019; Suzina, 2021; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018; Wu et al., 2020; Canagarajah, 2018). English is similar to a mixed language in the Mediterranean based on French, Italian and Provençal vocabulary that was widely used in the crusades and then in trade up to the 19th century. The term *lingua franca* has now changed its meaning and frequently refers to an international language used to ease communication between speakers of different national or regional languages (Lopez, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated the importance of English as a medium of communication. With the growing demand for remote work and online learning, businesses soon realised they could hire top level professionals from around the world with the knowledge of English being one of the key employee skills. Thus, English is bound to grow into even more of a global language as the willingness to hire across borders increases.

According to a 2012 survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit, presented in Financial Express, 70% of executives said their workforce will need to master English to realise corporate expansion plans (Chaudhary, 2020). Even then, only 4% of men and 2% of women in wage employment in India were reported as speaking fluent English (Chaudhary, 2020). As internationalisation grows, accelerated by events such as Covid-19, the demand for language skills increases. Multilingualism opens up more opportunities for professionals, and businesses are entering a wider market. Companies rely on international communication to form international

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partnerships, serve customers abroad and help their employees develop, which will further strengthen the position of English as a global language.

Education First has found that the demand for people who speak English still significantly exceeds the supply. The 2021 report indicates that people working in production and office positions, as well as average technical staff, demonstrate a much lower level of English language proficiency. They cannot become part of a multinational team, and this limits their career prospects (Education First, 2021).

ACTFL, an American organisation serving teachers of all languages at all levels, found in 2019 that almost every fourth employer in the United States either lost or could not realise business opportunities because their employees did not know a foreign language (ACTFL, 2019). Multilingual and diverse staff can help businesses close the gap between current and potential customers. In its report, ACTFL mentions that American companies need multilingual employees to remain competitive. Most employers (56%) believe that the need for a foreign language has increased over the past 5 years and will continue to grow. Essential services such as healthcare, professional services and construction will rely more on multilingual professionals in the coming years (ACTFL, 2019).

As a result of the pandemic, face-to-face communication has been sacrificed for social distancing purposes. More people started learning foreign languages during Covid-19. Language learning apps like Duolingo have seen a 67% increase in new users worldwide in 2020 compared to 2019 (Blanco, 2020). Preply has observed a similar growth trend in the number of new users over the past year, as well as the number of hours they spent learning the language with tutors. When the lockdown happened in March 2020, Preply saw a huge increase in the number of new users who wanted to learn languages with an online tutor (Mascarenhas, 2021).

The pandemic became the match that lit the fire of foreign language learning. VCIOM research shows that the need to learn foreign languages in Russia is most often mentioned by residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg (75%), people with higher or undergraduate education (66%), as well as people aged 60 and older (71%) (VCIOM, 2019). Coronavirus has caused an educational boom: more free time to learn new things has led to a sharp rise in language learning vividly reflected in the statistical records.

4.4. The dominance of English: future perspectives

Considering the above, the question arises whether English is going to remain a lingua franca in the near future. History knows examples of other languages being used for communication between different nations yet later losing their dominant positions. For example, for more than a thousand years, Latin was used in Christian culture for worship, religious discussions, and in sacred texts, but lost its privileged status, being increasingly supplanted by the use of national languages. Another example is 18-19th century Russia, which witnessed a period of great popularity of French, when most of the aristocracy did not speak Russian and preferred to communicate in French. This was due to close relationships between Russian and French rulers and cultural interaction, for French was the language of popular literature and science. This dominance started to fade after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte (Valeev et al., 2019). Because of this temporary influence of French, Russian still contains lexical units of French origin. French is present in 18-19th century literature, which is considered the Golden Age of literature.

Despite the growing popularity of English during the pandemic, some believe that the torch will soon be passed to other languages spoken in developing economies such as India or China, while the population in English-speaking countries is getting older and decreasing.

Back in 2000, Graddol (2000) predicted that the next 20 years would become crucial for English and English learners. The global role of English would not be in danger, but that didn't mean that its position would not be argued over due to the transformation of political and demographic global landscapes. The author suggested that during the transition period the English language would acquire new forms. Because of its reflection of local cultures and languages, the American and British versions of English would also become more diverse, and people who spoke English as a second lan-

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guage would outnumber native speakers, while British and American television would lose their influence (Graddol, 2000).

On the one hand, the use of English worldwide requires the establishment of and keeping up with language standards. On the other hand, the acceptance by English of new forms of expression would lead to enormous diversity. There were no other precedents in the world history to make a clear prognosis of the changes that English might encounter, but Graddol (2000) advanced the hypothesis that English would be more diverse while at the same time losing a part of its global significance.

As far as changing forms in English are concerned, English is likely to experience such effects of globalisation as a loss of uniformity, disregard of linguistic forms and styles, richness and diversity. These changes have been typical for all 'big' languages during the era of globalisation (Todorova & Todorova, 2018). English as a lingua franca is even taught differently, when communicative efficiency is prioritised over correctness (Todorova & Todorova, 2018). The widespread use of one language as an international medium of communication in various spheres could not but lead to transformational processes in the language itself (Ivanova, 2020). One of the most important consequences of these linguistic transformations is simplification, which manifests itself at various levels of language functioning. Having begun artificially, with the aim of teaching English to foreigners (Smith, 1998) based on certain linguistic and methodological concepts, the process of simplifying the language in the conditions of its worldwide spread has lost its controllability. However, the functions of a language in modern international communication require not only a detailed linguistic study of these transformations, but also their specific unification, focusing on the needs of those who are not native English speakers, but actively participate in various spheres of international life such as oil production, banking, show business, industrial production, air transportation, etc. The interests

of consumers around the world in the results of this activity are considered: food and computer products, household appliances and telephones, etc., the target group to which advertising and show business products are directed. This led to the need for the creation, scientific linguistic description, and introduction of a new style of scientific and business communication in international English, which is understandable for its users all over the world. In many ways, this concept is based on previous projects of creating a reduced English language for foreigners.

Researchers have already identified such changes as a shift in the use of articles; invariant question tags; 'who' and 'which' being interchangeable; a shift in the use of prepositions; extension of the use of the infinitive over the use of gerund; extension of the colloquial field of words; increased explicitness, etc. (Todorova & Todorova, 2018).

Despite the positive effect of the spread of English (ability to become integrated into world cultural, economic, social trends), many people blame English for linguistic imperialism, causing minor languages and cultures to disappear, to homogenise people's identities (Todorova & Todorova, 2018). Aponte (2018) states that the spread of English as a global language has positive and negative effects. It is beneficial in the way that it allows people who do not share a native language to communicate. Therefore, information that is transmitted in contexts where effective communication would normally be impossible, due to an absence of a world language, is possible thanks to the use of English. Ultimately, this results in increased interconnectedness. Because of the spread of English as an international language, more countries have decided to teach English as a second language. Currently, English is spoken in some capacity by more non-native than native speakers. However, a hazardous consequence of this is that minority languages can seem irrelevant in the presence of English as a global language. In this way, English as an international language could cause languages to die. Dead languages unfortunately result in a loss of knowledge and diversity. To take against some of the negative side effects, such as the death of culture through language loss, it is necessary to know both sides of the use of English as a global language.

5. DISCUSSION

The problem of the role of English in intercultural communication has been widely discussed by researchers. The situation when one language is spoken

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by millions of people cannot be ignored in academic literature. This research contributes to the study of this topic by offering a different perspective and considering (1) the number of native speakers and English learners; (2) the number of countries in which English is an official language; (3) reasons for the dominance of English in the world; (4) the popularity of English as a foreign language in different spheres, including education, science, business, etc.; and (5) the future perspectives for English as a global language.

The paper summarises the statistical data and the existing research on the topic and presents a detailed view on why English has gained a leading position in the world. According to the statistical data presented in the article, English holds the position of a global language with the largest number of learners and its ceaseless social, cultural, and economic influence. The dominance of this international language is unrivalled, so clearly it will not lose its position as the easiest and most effective mode of intercultural communication anytime soon. In this aspect, we agree with the researchers who claim that the impact of English on world culture is likely to stay intact for decades, although the growing population and economies of some other countries might challenge its status in one way or another. Moreover, English is likely to acquire new forms because of its diversity. It will probably not stay a language which reflects only the culture of English-speaking countries. As we are now witnessing the creation of a completely new world, often referred to as 'a global village', the birth of this new world is influenced by a single language – English. Therefore, the role of English in modern intercultural relations can hardly be underestimated.

As far as the reasons for English dominance are concerned, this study's findings are in line with the historical (extralinguistic) and linguistic factors of language functioning. Despite favourable conditions for learning

English in terms of its grammar, special focus is placed on its lexical diversity. Only a combination of factors can lead to the spread of one lingua franca. An existence of a lingua franca in many ways has a positive effect on the global society, since it makes communication easier, faster, and more productive.

Other studies of the role of English have considered the negative effects of globalisation, such as the death of minor languages, and the loss of the cultural behaviour of different ethnic groups. The main difference in the approach of this research is that it concentrates on the English language itself and the changes that are likely to happen within English. The negative effects of globalisation, the existence of a global language and its negative role in the global community have not been a topic for investigation in this specific study.

The results of this study will be helpful for students and researchers in the fields of linguistics, cultural linguistics, historical linguistics, and promote future research into the influence of English within the global community. We have obtained comprehensive results highlighting the role of global English in the modern world. More experimental data is needed to make a clearer prognosis of the change in the forms of English and different variants of English worldwide. Furthermore, this research contributes to the development of the creation of productive international communication and motivation among students worldwide to achieve a high standard in the knowledge of English.

6. CONCLUSION

Language and culture are closely interrelated, and English now holds a leading role in intercultural communication around the world with the largest number of learners who choose to learn English for successful social adaptation and to develop intercultural awareness. The dominance of English is due to linguistic and extralinguistic factors, a combination of which has made English a modern lingua franca. Linguistic factors lie in its grammatical simplicity and rich vocabulary. English is a dominant language in various spheres, including politics, media, science, the economy, education, and recreation, which is why both businesses and individuals choose to learn and use English to achieve a high standard of intercultural communication. However, due to the changing situation in the world, the position of English is likely to change. Its superior status might be challenged in the near future, although it is more likely to diversify and acquire new forms due to the influence of local cultures.

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