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# Language and international communicative competence: Implications for institutional and national education policy

Richmond Stroupe

Professor  
World Language Center, Soka University

## Abstract

In recent years, globalization has continued to affect economies, identities and society, and national policy, including policies concerning language instruction. English has been trumpeted as the international language of the new century, yet its predominance may be challenged by other languages, including Chinese (Mandarin), Spanish, various regional and national languages, and another unlikely competitor, Global English. As national policies change, and as the demographics and needs of language learners evolve, the nature of language education must also adapt or risk becoming irrelevant. National and individual education institutions should address these changes, focusing on the comprehensibility of international

communication as one of a number of skills that learners require, and moving beyond a strict EFL model to a more integrated skills and content-based approach. Much international communication may continue through English-media, yet the face of English language instruction may change significantly in the years to come.

## **Introduction**

In a time of ever-increasing globalization, social systems are challenged. Economic changes occur at a rapid pace, societal changes increase in frequency and intensity, and institutions must cope with these changes or risk becoming irrelevant. One challenge comes in the form of foreign language instruction: On what language(s) to focus, what methodology to use, is foreign language proficiency sufficient? Many have suggested that English will become the predominate language of the new century. However, the impact of other languages cannot be overlooked. Chinese (Mandarin), along with China itself, is having a more and more significant impact globally (Graddol, 2006). The number of speakers of other languages, including Spanish, globally and within national borders, for example in the United States, is resulting in far-reaching effects. Other regional languages are playing important roles as well. In addition, the rise in number of variant forms of Global English is increasing and out-pacing 'standardized' versions of the language (Kirkpatrick, 2010). In order to address these linguistic changes, local, national and international language policies are also changing, resulting in changes in educational standards, goals, and curricular emphasis. However, a focus solely on language proficiency may be insufficient: International communication is being seen as a skill which is the basis for moving

beyond linguistic proficiency to a level of cultural understanding necessary for meaningful exchange (Gross, 2004). While English may remain a focus of national curricula across many countries, the way in which English language instruction is carried out will continue to evolve and be affected by the globalization process. This paper will discuss some factors that may influence language education in the future as it moves beyond a strict EFL model, including the growing importance of content-based instruction, integrated skills, and the importance of international and intercultural communication as one of a number of skills that learners require.

## **Background**

It is not surprising to hear that globalization is an ever-increasing force in the world today, and one that affects many aspects of society. Economic globalization has brought both increased standards of living as well as economic hardships to those in developed and developing regions. The growth of international telecommunications has made international business more efficient and possible where barriers significantly hampered growth and expansion in the past. Family members living great distances apart can also communicate more effectively, economically and clearly than at any time in the past. Education has not escaped the effects of globalization, with increasing competition between individual institutions internationally as well as within national educational sectors. This tremendous growth in globalization has resulted in an ever increasing demand for the ability to communicate across cultures, not only linguistically by speaking other languages, but also through understanding others' cultures thereby developing an intercultural communicative competence

(Graddol, 1997; Grosse, 2004; Stroupe and Panda, 2007; Suarez, 2005; Warschauer, 2000).

The increase in the prevalence of foreign language study is one indicator of how globalization is affecting education in general and the study of languages in particular. Increasingly, the concept of 'monolingualism' (Graddol, 2006) is losing ground to the idea, and the necessity, of multilingualism. For example, within the European Union, there has been a renewed emphasis on the value of foreign languages. This is apparent in the common framework for curriculum as it relates to foreign language education (Council of Europe, 2001). Even in the United States, the controversy related to the prevalence and use of English as the dominant language in American society (Ovando, 2003) is being affected by a newer generation of immigrants who are choosing to retain much of their traditional customs and cultural activities, including their native languages. The emphasis in sectors including business, education, health care and government is recognizing the importance of Hispanic linguistic needs (Graddol, 2006).

Along with the globalization and increase in international business, international travel has increased to levels never before seen, placing more and more travelers and business people in situations where not only is their ability to communicate challenged linguistically, but their understanding of cultures other than their own is also required. Yet this is not a simple trend of more travelers visiting similar areas. In general, international tourism is increasing. However, only 4% of English speakers are traveling to other English speaking countries. Another 12% of English speaking tourists are traveling to countries where English is not the predominate language, while only 10% of non-English speakers are traveling to English speaking

countries. By far, the largest increase can be seen in the numbers of non-English speaking travelers visiting other non-English speaking countries (74%) (Graddol, 2006). In this latter case, where neither the language of the speaker nor the language of the country to which she is traveling is similar, English is increasingly the common language used for communication. On any street in major urban centers, such as Hong Kong, New York, London and Tokyo, it is not uncommon to hear Southeast, South and East Asians, Chinese, North and South Americans and Europeans communicating by using English, a language many of these travelers may not recognize as their native language.

Although affected by the recent global recession, the trend of globalization shows no signs of slowing or retreating. In fact, as the global recession has shown, we are all more interconnected than at any other time in history. The establishment and expansion of international organizations, trade bodies and institutions have perpetuated this process over the last decades. The United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union, as well as international military relationships (North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces) are evidence of this increase. Entertainment and media, which many have criticized for being dominated by English-medium programming (Hollywood, CNN and the BBC), continues to expand. However, traditional English-medium media may be challenged as 'Bollywood' and other domestic forms of entertainment production are strengthened and become more popular globally (Phillipson, 2001).

Multinational corporations have established a record of utilizing opportunities globally to become more competitive and efficient.

Establishing manufacturing facilities in Southeast Asia and implementing outsourcing where profitable have all contributed to this trend. Significant business sectors, which can be seen in India and the Philippines, have benefited from their relatively high English language proficiency levels, resulting in increases in outsourcing services being based in these countries (Friginal, 2007; Graddol, 2006; Warschauer, 2000). Such increases of foreign investment, which can be seen as a prudent and cost efficient business strategy, have become one main source of economic advancement in 'developing countries' (Graddol, 2006). Likewise, in more developed countries, globalization of companies, such as Japanese multinational companies, has led to an increased flow of information through Information Technology in English (Stroupe, 2007).

### **Resulting language: The role of English**

From the British colonial period through the economic development of the United States, the importance of English has continued to increase accompanied by a broader influence on the linguistic map. However, the predominance of English is not unchallenged. The numbers of native speakers of other languages, namely Chinese, English (by non-traditional native speakers), Spanish, Hindi / Urdu, and Arabic, are all increasing (Graddol, 2006) while the number of traditional English native speakers is receding based on population figures. In addition, the number of non-native speaking English learners are increasing in number (Liu, 1999) and decreasing in age (Graddol, 2006), with dramatic effects on associated educational systems and local languages (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Economically, English accounts for just less than 30% of world GDP whereas Chinese stands

at just less than 23%. Yet significant increases in the importance of Mandarin and Spanish along with English will most likely continue into the foreseeable future (Graddol, 2006).

The concept of World Englishes (Crystal, 1997; Higgins, 2003; Kachru, 1985; Kachru and Nelson, 1996) is well known and has been used to illustrate the social and economic impact of the spread of English as an international lingua franca. Kachru (1985) suggested that there are primarily three concentric circles representing the use and types of Englishes worldwide. The first, or inner, circle includes those native-speakers of the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, numbering approximately 320-380 million speakers. The next outer circle represents English as a Second Language speakers (those who use English as part of their daily life but do not claim to be native speaking) from countries such as Singapore, India, Malawi and over 50 other territories (150-300 million speakers). The largest population of English speakers is encompassed by the expanding circle based on their use of English as a Foreign Language (100-1000 million speakers). China, Japan, Greece, Poland, and Russia fall into this last category. The corresponding implication is that the speakers within the inner circle enjoy advantages based on their native speaking abilities, and those in the outer and expanding circles look to those at the center for standards of language use and certification.

Others have suggested that globalization is changing this linguistic power structure, and this has led to new categories: From a high proficiency inner circle (encompassing approximately 500 million speakers) ranging to a low proficiency outer circle (including all others) (Graddol, 2006). This new categorization is no longer based on 'nativeness' or nationality. Therefore the categories, as well as the English language itself, can no longer be easily characterized as

imperialistic (Phillipson, 1992). Likewise, this is accompanied by a decline of western influence and status (Graddol, 2006) as English is no longer only associated with western countries. Indeed, these new categories emphasize two-way, multidirectional cultural flows and are based on complex economic 'interests.' Nevertheless, significant concerns over the spread of English remain, particularly as to how the language socially and economically advantages one group over another (Phillipson, 2001). With the significant increase in the number of English speakers, learners will most likely not use their language abilities to communicate with western, native speakers of English, but rather they will likely engage in communication through English between two or more non-native English speakers (Kachru, 1996; Warschauer, 2000). In many countries, language proficiency (English and others) is no longer considered a 'foreign language', but rather a basic skill (Graddol, 2006; Suarez, 2005) that is not only necessary but also expected as a member of the educated social elite or middle class.

To meet these changes in the view of English and how the language is used, language education has also changed in many ways. Where English language proficiency is seen as a skill, there has been an increased focus on learner differences, autonomy, and personalized learning, and a decreased emphasis on rote education (Graddol, 2006) or narrow functional or syntactic curricula (Warschauer, 2000). Traditionally English has been taught at tertiary (university), and upper and lower secondary levels (Graddol, 2006). However, English is more and more commonly taught in primary and pre-primary levels (Graddol, 2006; Suarez, 2005). English ability (or more accurately form-based test scores) is often used as a graduation requirement. However, communicative competency is increasingly being used as an entrance requirement (Graddol, 2006).



Because academic proficiency is typically achieved after intensive study on average for eight years, in order to prepare students for tertiary level entrance exams, English language study is beginning at younger and younger ages. Whereas in the past, most English language learners achieved this academic language proficiency at the tertiary level, as more countries have introduced English language instruction at lower levels (grades) in their educational systems, the result has been a decreasing in age-proficiency levels from 22 to 14 years old (the age at which a learner achieves an acceptable and functional academic English language proficiency) (Graddol, 2006). Some critics state that this has been at the expense of other content areas at these lower (primary) levels of the educational systems, as well as local language instruction, and as a result, some countries are beginning to re-think these strategies (Kirkpatrick, 2010). On the other hand, this development has furthered the acceptability of forms of World English, which in some countries have become mainstream (Graddol, 2006).

Nevertheless, these developments will have significant and long lasting effects on language instruction at the tertiary level. The peak of English learners of all ages will most likely occur in 2010 (Graddol, 2006). From that point on, the overall number of English language learners will decrease as cohorts of English learners who started at primary level reach tertiary level (2010-2050). In 2050, it is predicted that the number of English learners will be at 15% of 2010 levels, and will be made up of only very young learners (primary) or those requiring specialist support (Graddol, 2006). Likewise, English language proficiency is becoming less of a competitive advantage as the general expectation of proficiency grows; conversely the penalty for failure to acquire basic proficiency is increasing (Graddol, 2006).

The model for English language education is shifting from the United States and United Kingdom to Singapore, Finland, the Netherlands (Graddol, 2006) and other countries with a history of linguistic diversity in their educational systems. There is increasingly less focus on a native-speaking Standard English (Graddol, 2006; Higgins, 2003; Liu, 1999; Warschauer, 2000). Similarly, there may tend to be less of a need for 'native-speakers' of English as EFL / ESL instructors, but rather the value of non-native speaker / instructors of English will increase (Graddol, 2006; Liu, 1999; Milambiling, 2000). This demand for non-native English instructors may result in cross discipline specializations and an increased need for teacher training.

### **Influence of Non-native speakers**

Whereas in the past English language learners looked to Kachru's (1985) inner circle for benchmarks and standards for language use, the future of English may be determined by China and India based on the rapidly expanding numbers of English speakers in these countries (137 million primary level English learners in China, and a similar, possibly larger number in India) (Graddol, 1997, 2006). Likewise, an increased emphasis on English as a second (official) language can be seen in a number of other countries, including Chile (bilingual), South Korea (special economic zone), and Taiwan (80% view English positively based on popular opinion) (Graddol, 2006). However, language instruction in these countries is changing. English instruction is no longer solely classroom focused. Both the private sector and societies in these countries have come to view English language proficiency, and the ability to function in the language outside of the classroom, as a valuable and necessary skill (Graddol, 2006).

## Tertiary education: Policy and curricula

The globalization of business, economies and communication has been mirrored in the higher education sector. Students are becoming increasingly mobile, with the ability to choose not only domestic institutions but also institutions internationally to meet their education goals, learning preferences, and economic requirements. In today's competitive international market, a university of international excellence requires international students, faculty and research: English remains the predominate global academic language (Graddol, 1997, 2006). As a result, more students, administrative staff and faculty may require assistance and support, including language support, in order to perform internationally on the same level as they are accustomed to doing so domestically. Competition is high among institutions that wish to cater to the international student market. The rewards can be substantial, and in some cases may provide the necessary revenue for a department or institution so that it can remain financially viable. Two to three million students study abroad each year: Over 50% in English (United States [43%], United Kingdom [25%], Australia, Canada, New Zealand [19%], and others [13%]) (Graddol, 2006). Institutions in other countries may focus more on domestic languages (for example Germany) (Graddol, 2006). Yet the competition is not only internationally based: Many countries as a result of significant development initiatives have now established much better domestic institutions. Institutions in China are growing at a rapid pace. Additionally, more institutions regionally in Europe and Asia are offering English medium programs (Graddol, 2006). Competitiveness of the international education and labor markets is increasing and is complex (Yonezawa, Akiba, and Hirouchi, 2009).

The type and use of curricula is one way in which institutions can differentiate themselves. Significant numbers of institutions are implementing a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (content is provided via foreign language with two goals: Learning of content through a foreign language and increasing proficiency in the foreign language) (Darn, 2006; Graddol, 2006). There has been an increase in the use of CLIL in the EU. Such an approach necessitates effective collaboration between language and content specialists (Graddol, 2006; Stroupe, 2005). In addition, more of a focus on a project-based approach to education (Warschauer, 2000) engages learners in a broader understanding of not only the linguistic aspects of the language but also provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context in which the language exists. As the increase in international communication through Internet technology and business requires bilingualism (Graddol, 1997), only proficiency in English without broad cultural understanding is limiting (Graddol, 2006; Harris, 2001). Critical thinking skills and the ability to engage in critical inquiry is becoming increasingly important (Stroupe, 2007; Warschauer, 2000). Businesses are more often looking for candidates who possess information-processing and analytical skills (Warschauer, 2000).

### **Future prospects**

The trend in the internationalization of higher education (among stakeholders: government, students and faculty) will most likely continue for the foreseeable future (Yonezawa, Akiba, and Hirouchi, 2009). The market within higher education will continue to be competitive, and international students will become more

sophisticated in their ability to make choices among different institutions on an international scale. The requirements for English language proficiency, and the ability to use not only language effectively but to use a combination of critical inquiry skills will continue to gain importance (Trudgill, 2000). In order to meet students' needs and expectations in these areas, programs and institutions should allow for student choices during their learning experience, so that each student can tailor portions of their programs to suit their individual learning goals. In addition, examination regimes will need to be altered, so that they can adapt to a more practical curriculum at the tertiary level. Communicative competency at the entry level at tertiary institutions will 'washback' into the curricula at the secondary levels. Proficiency requirements for graduation would emphasize the practical nature of students' learning during their tertiary experience (Yonezawa, Akiba, and Hirouchi, 2009). Additionally, post graduation, students will continue to be expected to make use of their linguistic and cognitive skills, beyond what can be expressed in a test score or certification document.

Institutionally and nationally, to meet the growing needs in the educational sector, the utilization of increasing numbers of non-native speaking instructors should be emphasized (Liu, 1999; Matsuda, 2003). In addition, it will be important for institutions to support (funding for conducting research, establishing overseas offices or recruiting schemes, providing staff English language learning opportunities) (Yonezawa, Akiba, and Hirouchi, 2009) the professional development of both staff and faculty as well as carefully planning long-term strategies. Faculty could benefit from engaging in academic development and research opportunities abroad (sending academic staff abroad, academic exchange, visiting scholars) and the English proficiency of

academic staff should be enhanced and supported.

Students will continue to seek out and benefit from international experiences during their tertiary educational experience, and by doing so, will gain increased exposure to outer-circle and expanding circle speakers (Matsuda, 2003). In addition, institutions will increasingly attempt to attract international students, not only as a revenue stream, but also to diversify and internationalize their university campuses. A variety of programs (overseas campus / programs, distance education, overseas partners) will continue to grow and become more important in the overall strategic and developmental plans of successful institutions. Content, through CLIL or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) will continue to increase in popularity. And lastly, improving critical thinking and critical inquiry skills will continue to be emphasized through adapted evaluation methods, use of experimentation in class, and a focus on a project-based approach to education (Stroupe, 2007; Warschauer, 2000). Language education will move beyond a strictly EFL model (as defined by Nayar, 1997) (Matsuda, 2003), and will become more holistic and comprehensive in nature, ultimately resulting in a better product for students, better candidates for the companies for which they will work, and more capable citizens for the societies in which they will take part.

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Richmond Stroupe has worked with university and professional language-learners from Japan, the United States, Thailand, Lao PDR and Cambodia since 1989. He is currently a Professor and Program Chair for the Master's Program in International Language Education: TESOL at Soka University, Tokyo, Japan. His academic interests include teacher training practices, ongoing professional and curriculum development, and international comparative education.

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