

Original Paper

Critical Perspectives on the Global Status of English

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Abstract

This study examines front-burner perspectives on the global status of English. A modern trend of the world, globalization represents multifaceted developments across facets of life: architecture, communication, education, movie industry, science/technology, dressing, international diplomacy, etc. The implication is that language plays crucial role in the scope and values that erupt from globalization. Consequently, nations look outward for new norms in the scheme of things, and evolve means of coping with the attendant challenges of globalization. The theoretical framework of the study is Orisawayi's (2005) "parameters for ascertaining development". The study concludes that the global status of English is predicated upon by: its roles in other regions of the world; its being a language of wider communication (LWC); its development-promoting potential across the world; and its facilitating function in the cross-disciplinary transmission of knowledge in the era of globalization.

Keywords

English, globalization, language, development, Orisawayi's development parameters, perspectives

1. Introduction

The societal trends that are associated with globalization are so crucial that they cannot easily be ignored by any nation, particularly Third World nations that are in dire need for sustainable growth and development. Consequently, cross-border cooperation and interdependency of nations characterize the era of globalization. English as a global language can therefore be construed in terms of the communication link between language and the referent(s) it picks from the universe of discourse (our real world). The debate as to whether English should be labeled as an "international language" or a "global language" is informed by the global status of English. Phillipson cited in Poggensee Anna (2016) posits that "'global English' is an appropriate term because English is widely accepted in the global linguistic market and ... English is becoming the defiant language of international communication in an

increasing number of countries worldwide”. The literature indicates that the terms ‘international language’ or ‘world language’ are used to describe the English language because of its function as a language of international communication. In this regard, the extent to which a language counts as an international one, the more acceptable it is to refer to the language as a global language. The thrust of this study is to locate the critical factors that account for the global status of English in the context of the development-inducing features of the language in this contemporary era in which the world is viewed as a global village.

2. Language

Human beings communicate through language (a natural human heritage). Natural languages sound systems (segmental phonemes and prosodic features). Obiegbu Ifeyinwa (2014:81-96) defines language as “a creation of man’s social needs. Like all other living creatures, we depend on the air, water and earth around us, and in the same way, society depends upon language for its very existence. For effective national development, language plays a central role, particularly in terms of such agents of development as literacy and communication. This is clearly understandable because it is through language that man has to plan ... Apart from the planning, man uses language to instruct and evaluate his programmes.” Language reveals human beings as social animals; human beings socialize by using language to interact. For more insights on the term “language”, see Dada (2010, pp. 417-440).

3. Globalization

Steger (2013) defines globalization as “the interconnections of global economic, political, cultural and environmental processes that continually transform present conditions.” Globalization is therefore immersed in the advancement of society, its value systems and standard of living. According to Hafsat Ahmad Abubakar (2014, pp. 23-27), “globalization is a worldwide linkage entrepreneurship which centered on entrance to immediate global communication network where individuals can have access to information and movement globally.” Globalization is an inter-regional phenomenon, rather than an intra-regional notion. Nataliya Todorova and Anna Todorova (2018, p. 61) assert that “... the term globalization has no precise definition, but numerous meanings and interpretations in different areas such as cultural studies, economics, environment or politics. While some students consider globalization as a social process that makes the currently existing borders irrelevant, others stress the world-unifying, homogenizing power of this process. This term generalized, globalization, globalization (which obviously comes from the word ‘globe’) is the ‘big idea’ of 20th century, which contains the process of international integration arising from the exchange of worldwide views, products, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture and life.” Chen (2012) highlights five crucial features of globalization:

- 1) globalization is a dialectically dynamic process, which is caused by the pushing and pulling off between the two forces of cultural identity and cultural diversity, or between local and global;

- 2) globalization is universally persuasive as it penetrates into every aspect of human society and influences the way it lives, thinks, and behaves;
- 3) globalization is holistically interconnected as it builds a huge matrix in which all components are interconnected with networks;
- 4) globalization represents a culturally hybridized state, which allows cultural transmission via new media to take place at a very rapid rate by permeating and dissolving human boundaries;

More perspective on the term “globalization” is given by Kayode Omole cited in Ayodabo et al. (2016) who assert that “globalization refers to the universal adoption of social institutions”. It is a process by which social institutions or policies become adopted on a world-wide scale. Globalization is an era or period when regions of the world inevitably alter socio-cultural practices, value systems, policies and institutions. In such a situation, new status quo is either imposed on less developed nations or necessitated by the new world order in education, science, technology, politics, etc.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study hinges on Orisawayi’s (ibid) “parameters for ascertaining development”. The parameters are quite elaborate and instructive. According to Orisawayi (ibid), development can be assessed by using the following criteria:

- 1) Intellectual and mental expansion for the individual person in society;
- 2) a stable polity with a strong sense of commitment to nationalism/nationhood among the people;
- 3) economic development, progress and equitable distribution of national wealth;
- 4) socio-political integration of the constituent units that make up the nation;
- 5) scientific and technological progress and its application to the improvement of the quality of life of the people;
- 6) efficient and functional educational output at all levels;
- 7) widely recognized, accepted and practiced democratic structures and systems;
- 8) highly enlightened citizenry with 80%-90% achieved level of functional literacy among the people and highly sharpened awareness of individual and collective fundamental rights, with freedom of speech and association;
- 9) stable employment for all citizens in private and public sectors of the economy;
- 10) a highly recognized and respectable network of understanding and positive relations among the constituent units and with other nations of the world;
- 11) a highly developed network of communication and transport system; and
- 12) a high sense of motivation among the citizenry towards the achievement of all the parameters of development indices ...

The suitability of Orisawayi’s (ibid) postulations for this study is clear. With “development” as the bottom-line, English performs certain roles in nations across the world: English facilitates the

comprehension of knowledge transmitted through formal education, thereby facilitating cognition; nations develop when English-driven acquired knowledge or skills are deployed in the labour force; English facilitates social integration; scientific and technological advancements anchor national development; English fosters research and innovations in science and technology through its broad lexicon; and English is the language of politics and administration which are the pillars of nationhood.

5. English as a Global Language: Front-burner Perspectives

This section of the paper examines the global status of English from different perspectives.

5.1 Cross-regional Roles of English

Every nation desires improvement in the well-being of its populace. Through development-sensitive language policies, there can be sustainable growth and development in a nation, particularly when such a nation assigns crucial role to a global language in nationhood. The more nations of the world assign critical roles to English, the more English remains a global language. From this perspective, English is a global language because of the number of countries where it operates with certain labels: “national language”, “lingua franca” or “official language”. Many other languages of the world do not have such recognition or functions outside their native territories; English and French are therefore viewed as global languages. The two languages have former colonial territories where the languages are now colonial heritage to the non-native speakers; that is, English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. Across regions of the world, language fosters national cohesion for smooth and productive governance. This is particularly a reason why the English language gains recognition in countries where it is: a symbol of identity; an instrument of national cohesion; and a facilitator of nationalism. Thus, English is a global language by demonstrating its cross-border vitality. A language of vitality such as the English language, establishes the link between “communication” and “society”. Wardhaugh R. and Fuller Janet M. (2015) define the term “society” as “a group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes; this is a rather vague and broad term ... we use the term language to mean a system of linguistic communication particular to a group; this includes spoken, written, and sign modes of communication ... These terms are ... inextricably intertwined. A society must have a language or languages in which to carry out its purposes, and we label ways of speaking with reference to their speakers. This connection is inevitable and complex.” Umar Fauzan (2022) notes that “as a global language, English language has some statuses. Firstly, it is the first language for the native speakers and used as a national language. Secondly, it is the second language for the non-native speakers and used as an official language ... Thirdly, it is a foreign language for the speakers other than the two groups above. For the sake of international communication, it is used as a lingua franca. As an international language, English language functions as the official language by the United Nations (UN) and is used for international communication. In the academic field, English language can be used as a medium of instruction and a means of developing science and technology ... English has become a very important language especially when communicating with people from different countries.” English is a global language, considering its

imperial track-record in different parts of the world. In this regard, Phillipson's Theory of Linguistic Imperialism is illustrious. David Crystal's (2003) use of the expression "beginning to" in an instructive submission is suggestive of the speed and scope of the new turn of events that characterize the era of globalization:

... economic developments beginning to operate on a global scale supported by the new communication technologies – telegraph, telephone, radio – and fostering the emergence of massive multinational organizations. The growth of competitive industry and business brought an explosion of international marketing and advertising. The power of the press reached unprecedented levels soon to be surpassed by the broadcasting media, with the ability to cross national boundaries with electromagnetic ease. Technology chiefly in the form of movies and records fuelled new mass entertainment industries which had a worldwide impact. The drive to make progress in science and technology fostered an international intellectual research environment which gave scholarship and further education a high profile.

5.2 Spread of Speaker

The global status of English can be viewed in terms of the spread range of speakers of the language all over the world, as informed and sustained by the military, economic, political and technological dominance of its native speakers in world affairs. David Crystal (ibid) submits that states that "given that the USA has come to be dominant element in so many of the domains ..., the future status of English must be bound up to some extent with the future of that country. So much of the power which has fuelled the growth of the English language during the twentieth century has stemmed from America ... the country contains nearly four times as many mother-tongue speakers of English as any other nation. It has been more involved in international developments in twentieth-century technology than any other nation. It is in control of the new industry (that is, electronic) revolution. And it exercises a greater influence on the way English is developing worldwide than any other regional variety – often, of course, to the discomfiture of people in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa who regularly express worries in their national presses about the onslaught of 'Americanisms'." In addition, David Crystal (ibid) reports that "a language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power. The explanation is the same throughout history. Why did Greek become a language of international communication in the Middle East over 2, 000 years ago? Not because of the intellects of Plato and Aristotle: the answer lies in the swords and spears of Alexander the Great. Why did Latin become known throughout Europe? Ask the legions of the Roman Empire. Why did Arabic come to be spoken so widely across northern Africa and the Middle East? Follow the spread of Islam, carried along by the force of the Moorish armies from the eighth century ..." English is indeed an imperial language used for constitutionally stated roles in former British colonies such as countries in Africa. Odeunmi (2017, pp. 1-45) reports that "in his theory of linguistic imperialism, Phillipson (1992) (re-) groups global English speakers into core English speaking countries, comprising Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; and 'periphery

English-speaking countries', where English serves as a second language (for example, Nigeria, Ghana, India and Singapore) or an international language (for example, China, Indonesia and Japan). The groups relate unequally with respect to structural and systemic power in that the Western Anglophone group wields political and socio-economic power against the former colonial communities found in the peripheries. This hegemony is further sustained by 'English linguistic imperialism, defined as 'the dominance of English' ... asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.'" Claims on the global status of the English language are supported with facts and figures that are too significant to ignore, especially in this era of globalization when new trends direct countries' approach to nationhood. Nataliya Todorova and Anna Todorova's (2018, p. 61) report (cf. British Council) justifies the claim that English is a global language. The report statistically captures not only the cross-domain use of the language, but also its cross-regional recognition:

- English has official or special status in at least 75 countries, with a total population of more than two billion;
- one out of four of the world's population speak English to some level of competence; demand from the other three quarters is increasing;
- more than two thirds of the world's scientists read in English;
- three quarters of the world's mail is written in English;
- 80 per cent of the world's electronically stored information is in English.

David Crystal (ibid) submits that "the language plays an official or working role in the proceedings of most other major international political gatherings, in all parts of the world. Examples include the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the Commonwealth, the Council of Europe, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." Scholars align with the view that intrinsic (internal system of the language) and extrinsic factors (e.g. historical factors) account for the rise of the English language to the position of global prominence. For example, Bello, O. Rachael and Oni-Buraimoh, O. Olawunmi (2017, p. 98) present different reasons why the English language readily comes to mind as a global language:

- It is the language of a number of past colonies;
- Apart from its being one of the languages used in international organizations such as UNO and AU, English is also versatile and it enjoys a wide spread;
- It is the most studied language (Research had it that yearly, 1, 500 million people would opt to learn English; 84 million, French; 30 million, Chinese);
- It is one of the easiest languages to learn when compared with Chinese, German, French, Spanish, Arabic, Korean, and Japanese. The most difficult languages of the world to learn are Arabic, Chinese, Korean and Japanese (Arranged in order of their degree of difficulty);
- A reasonable percentage of information found in the internet is in English;
- It has a rich and in-depth history.

5.3 *Language of Wider Communication*

Ushuple Lucy M. and Iskandar I. (2019, pp. 58-65) posit that “as a language of wider communication (LWC), English is used for phatic communion, ceremonial purpose, an instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-expression and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups in Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that constitutes a requisite for the existence of any nation is provided by English. So with English as the common tongue to all the ethnic groups, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the individual or ethnic differences is forged. Related to the discussion is the fact that Nigerian Nationalism or collective identity is stamped on national institutions through the medium of English.” The lexicon of English is so broad that it has some form of representations in cross-regional practices: agriculture, marriage, music, art, dressing, feeding habits, religion, etc. David Crystal’s (ibid) report corroborates this claim:

Most adaptation in a new English relates to vocabulary, in the form of new words (borrowings – from several hundred language sources, in such areas as Nigeria), word-formations, word-meanings, collocations and idiomatic phrases. There are many cultural domains likely to motivate new words, as speakers find themselves adapting the language to meet fresh communicative needs. A country’s biogeographical uniqueness will generate potentially large numbers of words for animals, fish, birds, insects, plants, trees, rocks, rivers and so on – as well as the issues to do with land management and interpretation which is an especially important feature of the lifestyle of many indigenous peoples. There will be words for foodstuffs, drinks, medicines, drugs, and the practices associated with eating ... The country’s mythology and religion, and practices in astronomy and astrology, will bring forth new names for personalities, beliefs and rituals. The country’s oral and perhaps written literature will give rise to distinctive names in sagas, poems, oratory and folktales. There will be a body of local laws and customs, with their own terminology. The culture will have its own technology with its own terms – such as for vehicles, house – buildings, weapons, clothing, ornaments and musical instruments. The whole world of leisure and the arts will have a linguistic dimension – names of dances, musical styles, games, sports – as will distinctiveness in body appearance (such as hair styles, tattoos, decoration). Virtually any aspect of social structure can generate complex naming systems – local government, family relationships, clubs and societies, and so on ... So, when a community adopts a new language, and starts to use it in relation to all areas of life, there is inevitably going to be a great deal of lexical creation.

5.4 *Education, Science and Technology*

The usefulness of English in cross-border communication and transmission of knowledge is a contributory factor in the global status of the language. By being functional in people’s career pursuits, English is instrumental in the development of nations; when English is deployed as a medium of transmitting knowledge in schools, individuals develop their productive capacity for nation-building. This is the case in developed and developing nations. Rohmah Zuliati (2005) posits that “about fifty years ago the notion of English as a true global language was merely a theoretical prediction which is

still diffuse and vague. However, realities have created it as a real world language at the present time. People in every part of the world feel its urgent role in their life: for academic purposes, for business goals, and for other purposes. English is spoken by people throughout the world as their first language, second language and foreign language. Indeed, English is now a world language. English as a world language is not merely an international language. The notion of international language can be understood as a language which is used in any international communication which involves people from two or more countries. Japanese is an international language, but it is not a global language ...” As a global language that contributes to the growth and development of nations, English enjoys growing positive attitudes not only from governments across the world, but also from individuals. There have been tolerant language policies in favour of the English language. Lee Thomas (1996, pp. 129-140) notes that “tolerant language policies unite and promote nationality-building through inclusiveness in nationalism, and restrictive language policies divide.” English is both a National and Official Language in Nigeria. Tolerance towards English in non-native territories is understandable; for example, Nigerians are not ignorant of the instrumentality of the English language in their different careers. It is generally believed that individuals in a country learn a language when it is economically and socially beneficial to them. The fact that the English language guarantees economic opportunities implies that it can be significantly engaged in nation-building. Nataliya Todorova and Anna Todorova (ibid) report that “according to the 2004 Euro barometer survey, 75 per cent of Europeans supported the idea that English is the most useful language to learn, while 69 per cent were confident that every EU citizen should speak English. English leads the world both in terms of total speakers as well as being the most commonly studied foreign language.

The leading role of English as a common medium for international communication is also supported by the following commonly recognized facts. It is partly the broadness of the English lexicon that makes the language popular in career pursuits of individuals. Commenting on the global status and career roles of the English language, Laxman Jnawali (2024, pp. 12-17) submits that “this language has worked as a bridge among various bilingual and multilingual communities where English language has been used as second or foreign language ... The language has been very popular in social media as well. People from multilingual communities are actively involved in learning English as their second and foreign language. People are learning IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, GRE and many others in order to go to the foreign countries for various purposes. According to David Crystal (ibid) “since the 1960s, English has become the normal medium of instruction in higher education for many countries – and is increasingly used in several where the language has no official status ... The English language teaching (ELT) business has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the past half-century. However, its relevance to the growth of English as a world language goes back much further. Indeed, people who engage in international business and commerce have also been taking interest in English language.” Nataliya Todorova and Anna Todorova (ibid) also report that “multinational companies require a certain degree of English proficiency from potential employees. It means that more and more people nowadays learn

English in order to get the best possible professional training and employment opportunities with top companies.” Furthermore, Holmes Janet (2008) submits:

Over the last hundred years nationhood and independence have been very important political issues throughout the world. In the struggle to establish a distinct national identity, and to secure independence from colonial rule, the development of a national language has often played an important part. The symbolic value of a national language as a unifying rallying point in the fight for independence was quickly appreciated in countries such as Tanzania, where more than 120 languages are spoken. In other multilingual countries such as China, the Philippines and Indonesia, where there are large populations speaking hundreds of different vernaculars, a national language is not only a useful lingua franca and official language, it also serves a symbolic unifying function for these nations.

Where there is a single dominant group, the issue of which language to choose as the official language to represent the nation generally doesn't arise. Somali is the first language of 90 per cent of the people of Somalia and the national official language of the country. Danish is the national language of Denmark, and the first language of 98 per cent of the people. Numerical dominance is not always what counts, however. Political power is the crucial factor. In multilingual countries the significance of political power in the choice of national language is particularly clear.

A global perspective of the English language can be explained in terms of the tenacity and approaches deployed in ESL contexts in the teaching and learning of the language. Many other languages in the world do not enjoy such privileges. Governments of different countries allocate resources for the promotion of English studies due to the position of the language on the global stage. Clement Gowon Omachonu, Joseph Abuh and Habiba Oma Alhassan (2017, pp. 167-177) submit that “the modern goal of English language teaching should be how to equip learners with the knowledge and critical awareness of how globalization defines and positions their use of the language. Consequently, teachers of English as a second language need to adopt methodologies that will envision English language teaching within the context of globalization.” Efforts of the education system in different countries are aimed at achieving certain productive competence (proficiency) level that can foster national development. Adeniran cited in Ayodabo (2013) presents three different degrees of competence in language:

- Minimal Competence

Speakers are characterized by a single speech habit in a single social sphere without any shifting of repertoire or code (restricted).

- Average Competence

Speakers have a command of a set of speech habits which is neither large nor small; they use this in a limited range of different social spheres, and shift their verbal repertoire accordingly (flexible).

- Maximum Competence

Speakers have versatile speech habits in many social spheres, and shift their verbal repertoire with ease (versatile).

6. Conclusion

This study examines the global status of English within the context of the roles it plays in the growth and development of nations. The paper holds the view that even developed nations desire more growth and development across domains of “national life”. Topado and Smith (2011) view development in terms of three dimensions: economic dimension (satisfaction of basic needs); psychological dimension (positive view of “self” as obtainable in any person); and social dimension (freedom that individuals have or enjoy as their right). As a global language, English is directly or indirectly useful to all nations of the world. For example, international organizations anchor crucial aspects of life: financial issues, health, education, security, natural disaster, world peace, etc. Given the fact that English is the medium of instruction in many of such organizations, its contribution to the well-being of humanity is factual. Commenting on the use of language for the development of a nation, Ushuple Lucy Mishina and Iskandar Iskandar (ibid) submit that “language has started to be treated as a powerful political instrument ... language can be used in many ways; one of them is in specific purpose areas such as social or cultural communication, government decisions, political debate, media which could foster National Development ...” At the international level, domains of society such as politics, economy and education, have standards or structures within the context of globalization. This explains the unifying potential and role of globalization. Nations of the world, particularly Third World nations, struggle to align with globalization-related standards and conventions, as part of seeking progress and good governance. Cross-facet transformation and revolution are part of the dividends of globalization. Indeed, the revolution that globalization brings manifest unequally in domains of society. For example, ICT witnessed rapid changes and innovations as a result of the impulses of privatization and corporate bodies in the 21st century. The interconnectedness of the world is quite obvious in the era of globalization, as a result of massive trade, unprecedented explosion in career pursuits, cross-national exchange of ideas and international diplomacy. In all these globalization-driven phenomena, good mastery of English is advantageous, as English is a major language of communication at a global level. For more insights on globalization in relation to English and 21st century societal phenomena, see Maria Georgieva and Allan James (2010), Bipin Bihari Dash (2022), Shobha P. (2025) and Laxmi Rawat Chauhan (2008). This study concludes that proofs of the global status of English include: its functions in other nations; its potential in fostering the development of nations in different ways, its communicative coverage and its feat in education, science and technology.

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