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International Communications

English as a Global Language

In the age of globalization, international communication grows, causing a problem of inefficient communication. Communication affects every aspect of life, whether it is work or leisure so a solution to this problem is needed. A current short-term solution is International English. A dialect of English created to allow all English speakers, regardless of their background to understand. Another more longer term and permanent solution is instating a lingua franca. A common language used internationally could solve inefficacies and faults in international communication, but it could also cause problematic side effects. In a world where international communication becomes increasingly more important as time moves forward, the way the world communicates must change with it. After understanding the state of world communication and the use of New Englishes, the solutions of using International English and a lingua franca will be discussed to perceive what might occur in the future.

The importance of international communication is evident when accessing the state of the world today. Due to globalization, staying competitive requires international communication skills. EF Education First with help from the Economic Intelligence Unit found that almost 600 executives from all over the world claimed communication misunderstandings caused the failure of large international business deals. Two thirds of the executives say it was due to differences in language and culture, causing “messages lost in translation” (Giang). Statistics also show that 40% of executives in Spain find language barriers blocking their ability to gain international relations (Bailey). The president of EF Corporate Language Learning Solutions, Christoph Wilfert, says “businesses do not devote the appropriate time and resources into improving the international language skills of their key staff. It has never been so critical as it is today" (Giang). A large proportion of companies also use English for internal affairs (Reithofer).

Globalization also caused all fields to adapt to the international setting. It is anticipated that the health care field will follow the economic trend of moving international goods by trading health professionals across the globe (Int). Also, the fields of science and engineering are showing signs of globalization. “The growth of [science and engineering’s] capacity around the world is facilitated by multinational corporate investments” (Globalization). The globalization of these fields and others show the need for better international communication.

Better communication skills can also save lives. In 1995 a flight that left from Miami crashed into a mountain in Colombia because the pilots did not understand the English directions of the Colombian controller. The crash killed 159 people. With better communication skills those deaths could have been avoided. This tragic story is evidence of a need to improve international communications.

When discussing international communications many people look towards English. It is clear through many statistics that English has a large role in world interactions. According to Crystal, the author of *English as a Global Language,* one quarter of the world speaks English (69), and by the 1990s the 80% of electrically stored information was in English (115). In the business world, English will change from being a trait of the elite to a basic requirement (Clark). The language also holds power in numbers through four hundred million people in 53 countries who learn English as a first language (English). These statistics show that "English is dominant in a way that no language has ever been before” (Mydans).

While native English speakers do hold power through their use of English, this is slowly changing. Swarthmore College linguist K. David Harrison said “the global share of English is much larger if you count second-language speakers, and will continue to rise, even as the proportion of native speakers declines” (English Won’t). It is also estimated that up to 70% of all communication through English are among non-native speakers (New). Statistics also show that 1.4 billion more learn English as a second language, and this trend does not seem to be loosing its steam (English). The British Council agrees with this growth of non-native English speakers and reports that two billion people will be studying English by 2020 (Clark). Other estimations show that within fifty years there could be 50% more people who speak English as a second language than as their first (Crystal).

If these estimates are correct, native English speakers will be in the minority and the use of New Englishes the majority. New Englishes is defined as varieties of English used in areas where English is not the native language. The fluidity of language allows for change, and as the use of English spreads throughout the world, regional cultures influence the language. The fluidity of language provides cultures with the ability to make it their own, but in doing so a barrier between English speakers occurs.

Platt, Weber and Ho identified New Englishes with four traits. First, speakers of New Englishes learn English in an education system rather than in the home. Second, it is spoken where the majority of people do not speak the native dialect of English. Third, the many aspects of life, whether formal or informal, require English. Lastly, the “nativised,” or new, version of English is used through the incorporation of rules differing from old English (New).

The above characteristics allow for various changes in the language. According to Crystal, most changes happen through vocabulary. Regional differences in geographic uniqueness, differing food, drink, medicine, personality, government, and relationships require special diction not found in old English. Other differences occur through collocations and idiomatic phrases. Collocations, the constant use of words together in a particular order with out grammatical reason, also reshape the language. Some examples are “black and white,” “make a mistake,” and “do a test.” Grammatically these phrases do not make sense, but when a society uses them over generations, they become an accepted part of the language. Idiomatic phrases occur similarly. “Give a hand” and “raining cats and dogs” do not literally make sense, but have meaning to those within a certain culture or New English.

While New Englishes allow each area to have its own identity, communication becomes more difficult. A solution to this problem is currently the use of International English. International English was created to account for the fluidity of the language and to provide a vehicle for all English speakers to exchange ideas with ease. This dialect of English enables written and spoken language to yield easy communication with all English speakers regardless of their origin or native language. The occurrence of New Englishes causes comprehension problems, especially in written language because of the lack of body language and the inability to gain further explanation.

Using International English provides a solution to some of these problems. It provides clear communication between people from different cultures and differing New Englishes. Using this dialect will not only allow English speakers from all over the world to understand the main message, but if done right it will resonate with them. This is powerful. International English is used for a global audience, but with a audience from one country or area research on that culture is mandatory to understand the customs.

In practice, learning International English requires the understanding of simple rules. When composing any type of international text, the main message must be clear and stated at the beginning. By stating the main idea and building on it, the reader has a better chance of obtaining the main focus instead of getting lost in the details. Also, the tone should be formal and polite. It is always better to caution on the side of formality due to the range of cultural differences. The tone should also not intimidate or condescend.

While composing the message sentences should be short and simple to allow the audience to easily follow the building of the thought. Any extra word not used to create the idea should be omitted, and a sentences with more than one idea should be marked with a comma and a conjunction word like “and” or “but.” The use of commas and periods should occur more than in usual texts to help guide the reader through each sentence.

Word choice can also make or break the message. The British phrase “to knock up” means to knock on a door, but in America it means to impregnate a woman. Needless to say this type of diction could cause confusion and humiliation. To avoid this, diction should be literal, simple and have only one meaning to ensure the reader does not confuse one meaning for the other. This means no use of idioms colloquialisms. Present tense should be used throughout the whole text but without the use of –ing verbs. The verbs should be active instead of passive, meaning the use of “is” and “are” should be minimal. Also using consistent word choice ensures the reader follows the message.

By following these guidelines, the use of International English improves the accuracy and efficiency of international communication, but it does not help communication between non-English speakers. To solve this problem a debate has occurred over the installation of a lingua franca. A language is a lingua franca when it is the common language between people from different areas to communicate in an equal way (New). A language is a lingua franca when considered to be the medium of choice across cultures.

There are both strengths and weaknesses in this solution. Crystal believes that a common language provides the world with an important resource to provide effective communication. This, he believes, will give the world more international communication. He states that “the presence of a lingua franca is needed to ease communication between groups, for the more a community is linguistically mixed, the less it can rely on individuals to ensure communication between groups” (Crystal 11). Crystal claims two things: the world would continue to be linguistically affluent and the limitations of people would be lifted.

Both of these claims can be disputed. Many people think using a lingua franca would lessen the need for smaller languages and eventually lead to their extinction. The national journal states that only 10% of native-born Americans speak a second language (Clark). This is an indictor that those who know English will not feel the need to learn other languages. Even the EU, an entity that supports multilingualism, uses the efficiency of English (Adriana). Kaplan, a linguist, claims this likely extinction means an end to understanding the world and how to interact with it (New). The power of a global language threatens the preservation of cultures. For many countries, the risks outweigh the benefits in using a global language because of their need to protect their cultural identity and history.

Mohammed Alikbari from Ilam University in Iran disagrees that the use of a lingua franca causes the extinction of languages. He argues that non-native speakers learning the English language do not fall prey to linguistic imperialism because they are not required to shed their own cultural homogeneity for those of a native English speaker. He says there is a difference between “bilingualism” and “biculturalism.” “Language and culture may be inextricably tied together but no one language is inextricably tied to any one” (Alikbari). He believes that many languages can be used in one culture, allowing the society to keep its ethnic background. In his believe, one language would not dominate, but many people would use various languages within their cultures.

Crystal also says a lingua franca lifts communication limitations, but he also understands many societies’ apprehension to allowing one language to hold such power. Ghandi said “To give millions the knowledge of English is to enslave them” (Crystal 124). English gained its power through colonization leaving many people apprehensive about giving it control. This apprehension in the present limits the use of English on a global scale.

While English has a negative connotation, many see it as the best choice. The British Council states that while English is only the third largest language in the world, it has become the international language of business communication (Adriana). English has become the accepted official language in various fields. In 1980 the International Maritime Organization launched the idea of seaspeak, commands spoken in English, to make sea communication more efficient and clear. Similarly, the International Civil Aviation Organization determined English to be the chosen language when pilots and controllers do not speak the same language (Crystal 108). In the international relations arena 85% of organizations, like the UN, OPEC and NATO, that list their official language, call English one of the official languages (Crystal 4). English also holds the majority in other fields that do not hold an official language. Crystal says by the 1990s the United States held 85% of the world film market (100) and 80% of electrically stored information is in English (115).

Regardless of the choice of language, there is a possibility of a division between those who know the language and those who do not. Instating a lingua franca could cause the separation of people instead of facilitating communication. Those who learn the lingua franca as their first language would have the advantage and hold powerful positions in the world, but those who never have the opportunity to learn it would have a lessened ability to gain power. Currently the wealthiest twenty countries per capita income are either English or German speaking countries (Thoma). Also, while only eight percent of people use English or other Germanic languages as their primary language, they account for more than forty percent of the world’s GDP (Thoma). This clear divide could deepen if a lingua franca is instated.

While the separation of English speakers and non-English speakers is a large concern, having a lingua franca is shown to cause efficient communication in international settings. Studies show that business interactions with the use of a lingua franca facilitated success in negotiations (Reithofer). Even in 1992, 84% of German researchers chose to write their publications in English, because they believed it would lead to better communication across international lines (Reithofer). They claimed “important results might not be noticed, if they are not published in an international language” (Reithofer).

This recent debate continues today with no actions in either direction. Both sides have valid arguments and appropriate statistical data, but there cannot be one final decision until the future. No one can know the state of the future. There is a possibility of a lingua franca facilitating international communication, but it could also deepen the separation between the powerful and the powerless.

The future of the English language is also unpredictable. Predicting the future complicates when trying to forecast something as fluid and vastly influenced as language. **Graddol** explains the unpredictability of the future of English as a global language is due to the inability to collect accurate and comparative data. The continuous change in language blocks researchers’ ability to find an accurate number of English as a second language speakers, and also complicates the ability to track proficiency in the language. Without a correct estimate of these numbers today, what tomorrow holds proves unknown. Even if we could find accurate estimates, using those numbers may not give us an accurate account for the future. “The world has changed so drastically that history is no longer a guide” (Mydans). Never in history has a language been so globally used, leaving us unable to have a basis for a prediction.

This unpredictability in the effects of a lingua franca and the future of English leaves the use of a lingua franca at a stalemate. Until a conclusion can be made, the use of International English will have to suffice in facilitating international communications. In my opinion, a lingua franca should not be instated at this time. While international communication needs more efficiency, the state of the world would not allow for a lingua franca to equally facilitate this communication. The inequality already present in the world would deepen. As those who have educational advantages learn the lingua franca and become more powerful, those who do not have the same access to education become even less powerful. If a lingua franca would be instated, educational advancements on an international level would have to be in order, and other international arrangements would need to occur to make the transition fair.

To ease international communication, I propose that everyone become an international citizen. This means each person should learn international English as well as understanding multiple cultures and their languages. Learning International English helps to ease communication, but we cannot solely rely in it. By learning other languages and their respective cultures, we not only gain a tool of communication, we also learn about the world and ourselves. Understanding these different perspectives of life makes us better communicators and people.

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