

The Unstoppable Spread of English in the Global University

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A global knowledge economy, combined with the pressure of international rankings, has set universities around the world on a mission to internationalize. That mission has influenced course offerings, student recruitment, faculty hiring, and scholarship, all tied directly to English as the dominant world *lingua franca*. Policymakers, educators, and the intellectual elite continue to debate the consequent benefits and burdens for faculty members and students, and challenges for institutions, particularly in Europe, with intermittent judicial input. Key points of contestation are the quality of the education programs; the levels of English proficiency among students and professors; and the impact on national languages, identity, and knowledge production and dissemination. Even the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which were in the forefront of the movement, are now questioning whether they may have gone too far in internationalizing through English.

The debate has helped energize a related discussion among linguists, political scientists, political philosophers, and economists interrogating the question of a common world language, specifically English, and its comparative costs and benefits to individuals and nations. Though the competing arguments are highly informative in theory, they have had little influence in shaping national or institutional policies and practices, save perhaps for the Nordic countries. Understanding the extent of that disconnect in Europe and beyond, and its economic and social implications, demands a broader look at the rise of English, including its historical roots, its promises and limitations, and its present-day global impact.

Past to Present

Though English appears to have been loosened from its national moorings, it still bears the mark of its colonial past and its enduring power associated with the United Kingdom and the United States. Its global spread began with the British Empire, which, at its height, left a lasting linguistic and cultural imprint on a quarter of the globe. Just as that empire was unraveling in the mid-twentieth century, the United States emerged as a world military and economic leader, giving English an even more vigorous life and cultural appeal with the help of advancing technology.

Through the intervening years, English has become a marketable commodity, a form of cultural capital, and a vehicle for transcending language borders. It both drives the knowledge economy and gains from it. English represents modernity, cosmopolitanism, and technological progress across generational, geographic, and class divides. It has replaced French as the primary language of international diplomacy, and German as the language of scientific investigation. It is the most studied second language in schools worldwide. English speakers can travel internationally with greater comfort; world leaders can communicate with their foreign counterparts without interpreters; researchers can share their findings in international venues; and students can enroll in university programs in English, sometimes at a fraction of the cost of tuition in their home countries. Having English in one's skillset may significantly advance employment opportunities.

Limits and Inequities

Undoubtedly, the United States is the prime beneficiary. Yet other Anglophone countries and their speakers have also benefited from the "English effect." These advantages have reaffirmed a self-satisfied monolingual mindset and historical resistance among native English speakers to learn other world languages.

Abstract

As English has spread across higher education worldwide, it has generated ongoing debate and a wealth of scholarship raising academic and national concerns, but with little, if any, pause or retreat on policies and practices. This article examines that puzzling disconnect within the broader framework of the rise of English as the dominant *lingua franca*, its historical grounding, its social and economic implications, and its diverse course within Europe and postcolonial countries.

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Relying solely on English, however, carries distinct disadvantages. Only about one-quarter of the world's population is minimally competent in English. That means that monolingual Anglophones cannot communicate with three-quarters of the world. Nor can they access knowledge generated in other languages or job opportunities dependent on other language skills. English, in fact, ranks behind Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, and Hindi, all languages of economic and political importance, in the number of first language speakers.

Most of the world, moreover, is multilingual or at least bilingual. In Europe, migration has brought multiple languages into the mix of national and regional languages, while intersecting colonial and indigenous languages are commonplace in postcolonial countries in Asia and Africa. English is increasingly part of these multilingual repertoires, though with varying levels of proficiency largely related to socioeconomic class and geography.

The spread of English has created social and economic inequalities on both sides of the English divide. In Europe and especially in the postcolonial world, the quality of English learned is directly related to the quality of schooling, with the less privileged denied language skills that bear important personal and economic benefits. A similar socioeconomic gap has arisen in the United States and the United Kingdom, where world languages are more commonly offered, formally or informally, in communities with the cultural capital to appreciate the value of multiple language skills and the resources to provide them to their children.

European Resolve

The march toward English seems to defy legislative or judicial efforts toward reconsideration for all the economic reasons discussed. In France, the adoption, in 2013, of the Fioraso Law, which loosened restrictions on teaching in a language other than French, unleashed a torrent of opposition from intellectuals who feared that English was robbing French of its historical status. Yet despite all the invocations to French republican values and the interventions of the country's literary giants, the number of English-taught programs has continued to increase, especially in the elite *grandes écoles* and business schools, where entire programs are offered only in English. In Italy, the proposed plan, in 2012, to shift all graduate programs to English at the prestigious Politecnico di Milano (Polytechnic University of Milan) moved a core of professors to challenge the proposal in court. Yet, notwithstanding the Italian Constitutional Court's ruling affirming the rights of Italian students to learn, and Italian professors to teach, in the national language, the overwhelming majority of the Politecnico's courses are still taught only in English. In the Netherlands, despite a law dating from 1992 intended to preserve the Dutch language, followed by years of intense debate over the growing number of English-taught programs and courses, the legislature has still not taken definitive action on proposed reforms to stem the tide.

Postcolonial Tensions

In the postcolonial world, where the economic value of English intersects with history and politics in distinct ways, decisions regarding English instruction in universities are fraught with even deeper tensions. In Algeria and Morocco, English competes with Arabic and French. Notwithstanding widespread ambivalence toward France and pushback from a postindependence Arabization movement, Morocco has settled on French instruction, though with an eye toward English in the future. Algeria, still reeling from its bitter war for independence from France more than a half century ago, has decidedly shifted to English. Rwanda, mindful of France's complicity in the 1990s genocide, has likewise replaced French with English, not just in education but also in government, commerce, and legislation. In South Africa, where the scars of white Afrikaner supremacy have not healed, universities have transitioned to English with approval from the Constitutional Court, in response to demands of Black students who view Afrikaans as the language of oppression and English as the language of resistance and liberation. In India, English competes with Hindi for political prominence in the face of rising nationalism, with recent reforms officially sidelining English in primary and secondary schooling. Yet parents, from the rich to the poor, still clamor for their children to learn English,

while English remains dominant in university teaching to preserve the country's place in a knowledge-based economy.

Looking Ahead

In the end, the rise of English in universities is more complex than conventional debates reveal. Not only is it a by-product of history and Anglo-American power, but it has evolved against longstanding global rivalries, national politics, and the enduring legacy of colonialism. It has also defied attempts to reel it back or even put it on pause. To what extent English-taught programs will continue to spread for the long term remains uncertain, dependent in part on the status of English vis-à-vis other world languages, and, for the short term, on the success of rising nationalist movements turning inward on globalization, of which English is a key component. It also depends on whether higher education institutions will use the strategic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic to reconsider their goals in promoting internationalization through English and student and faculty mobility. ▲

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