

# A Study on the Promotion of English

Ying Wu

Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, 212003, China  
Email: wycherry@sina.com

Xiaoqing Qian

Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, 212003, China

**Abstract**—Nowadays, the global spread of English has been widely discussed by researches in various fields. In this article, the author advocates that the promotion of English can facilitate broader communication on a more economical basis, and attempts to prove how as a global language English enables people to access better understanding and more information at the cost of fewer resources.

**Index Terms**—promotion, English, communication, information

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, the global spread of English keeps drawing more and more attention from people in various fields. Some supporters of “English triumphalism” (Graddol, 2006, p.10-13) think the spread of English as a means of international communication is natural, neutral and beneficial. David Crystal, for one, suggests that as a lingua franca of the whole world, English “fosters cultural opportunity and promotes a climate of international intelligibility.” (Crystal, 1997, p.32) Counter to this are other critics who believe accompanying the spread of English, the culture and values would jeopardize the local culture and identity. Some scholars including Alastair Pennycook and Robert Phillipson criticize English for playing a fundamental role in global inequalities. “The predominant paradigm of investigation into English as an international language” lacks “a broad range of social, historical, cultural and political relationships.” (Pennycook, 2001, p.80) He further puts forward that “English threatens other languages, acts as a gatekeeper to positions of wealth and prestige...through which much of the unequal distribution of wealth, resources and knowledge operates.” (ibid. 86) Robert Phillipson coined the word “linguicism” to refer to “the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources(both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of their language (i.e., of their mother tongue)” (Phillipson, 1988, p.339). Among the turmoil the question rises to everyone – which side should you take on the spread of English? Is it really bad enough to deserve the title “linguistic imperialism”?

Maybe not. The opposing critics seem to have gone too far in contradicting the interests of native English-speaking countries and those ESL/EFL countries, which in fact are not necessarily contradictory – the language and culture of English might not inevitably cause the local language and culture to debase to a secondary status. In fact, many people take their own culture and identity for granted until a different culture comes in as a contrast. The trend of studying ancient Chinese literature and philosophy also rose only after China opened up to foreign thoughts. (Nie, 2007) Among this and all the other reasons we can provide to support the spread of English, the most important one to my understanding is that the promotion of English can facilitate broader communication on a more economical basis. In the following, I will try to prove how as a global language English enables people to access better understanding and more information at the cost of fewer resources.

## II. RATIONALITY OF THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH

Due to some historical and cultural reasons, English has become the most widely used language in the world.

### A. *Better Communication and Less Money*

International institutions can use English as a tool of communication at the cost of less misunderstanding and less money. Ever since the twenties century, there are more and more international bodies in political, business and academic circles where people from various places with different languages join together to exchange their knowledge and opinions. Without a common language in this case, it becomes both an understanding and a feasibility problem to ensure every speaker/writer's words are fully and correctly understood. Misunderstanding caused by mistranslation must be no news. In such institutions, the pressure for simultaneous translation is rather intense. Meanwhile the consequences of any misunderstanding are neither easily noticeable and changeable nor affordable. As a contrast, a common language would ensure much less chance of misunderstanding. People speaking the same language are much likely to understand better than people speak different language and communicate through a third translator. As for the feasibility concern, there is neither enough room for so many translators provided the translators are available, nor

enough money for such human resources. Just think of the situation in the United Nation (over 180 countries involved in some bodies). With the five official languages, the spending on translation and clerical work can easily bite up half of the total budget. (Crystal, 1997)

At this point, one might ask, even so, why it should be English instead of some other languages to take this responsibility. The answer can still go back to the economical concerns. In 2001, rough agreement was reached on the total number of English speakers, “between 700 million and 1 billion” (Pennycook, 2001, p.78), and it is reasonable to predict the number is even larger today. This number of speakers puts English in a favorable position than any other candidate language for being a common language. Esperanto might be an ideal image without any equality or justice issues involved in some linguists’ minds, but suppose how much money will be spent to turn all people from outsiders to regular users. Other language might cost less than using Esperanto, but none enjoys the advantageous position as English concerning both the number and the range of distribution of its speakers.

With the pace of globalization, any place in the world is likely to become an “inter-national” body at some time to a much or lesser degree. For example, global trade is no longer a matter of bilateral arrangements between nation states, or between organizations economically rooted in nation states. Such is the complex structure of business ownership, through joint ventures and holding companies, that establishing any simple national pattern of ownership of the major enterprises is difficult. And many of the world’s largest corporations can hardly even be called multinational; rather they have become transnational. It has been calculated that transnational corporations (TNGs) account for as much as two-thirds of international trade in goods, while 50 of the 100 largest economies are said to be not nation states but TNGs. The largest of the world’s TNGs are involved in the energy and chemical industries (oil, pharmaceuticals) and the communications industry (airlines, telecommunications, media). The majority are headquartered in the Big Three trading blocs. At the present stage of global economic development, the international activities of TNGs are tending to promote English. At these not-so-formal occasions, the availability and quality of translators become even more of a problem, whereas the consequence of misunderstanding could be said to be not as costly but also definitely harms further communication. In similar ways, the spread of English could solve such problems by providing a common language at less cost.

#### *B. More Information at Lower Cost*

Through the global spread of English, people are enabled to achieve not only better understanding, but also more information. Today, who is the important assistant for people to get free and instant information they need? Internet for sure. However, if the information posted on different websites uses language unintelligible to us, it is not really accessible unless we were all multi-lingual genius, the uneconomical costs of which can be illustrated through the invention of bulb. Although Edison had invented the bulb, if people from other places do not have this information, they might invest their time and efforts to invent it and then think themselves as the inventor of bulb until the information somehow reaches that someone else has already done that before them and make their investment futile. This could be a bit exaggerated, but the point is, the resources all human beings possess are limited, so it is important to invest such resources as time, efforts or materials wisely and to avoid possible waste in redundant work, and in turn it is more important to get as much information as possible as to what has been done, what is about to be done, and what has not been thought of yet. Information posted in a global language is far more accessible than one that uses local language. Here again, English already takes up a favorable position. Such being the case, the promotion of English can provide people with more non-confidential information, like how to keep fit, how to take care of a pet, or how to decorate home from various brilliant brains all over the world rather than sticking to their local limited wisdom. As for the confidential information like Coca Cola recipe or techniques in sending off a satellite, people from other countries can choose to invest time and efforts on other things like effective ways of planting rice or procedures of building an aircraft, and through negotiation and trade, both sides can enjoy the benefits of what they need without redundant cost of resources and still keep their secrets to themselves. If anyone is concerned with underdeveloped countries not having any such confidential information to offer, it might be helpful to bear in mind what David Ricardo called relative advantage model, which can be interpreted here as even if the native English speaking countries are potentially good at everything and capable of working out all the confidential information by themselves, they will still invest their resources only in things they are most efficient at and benefit more from trading.

As for the accusation by Pennycook that English restricts access to technology for “the literature and conferences in which research findings are reported and through which researchers keep up to date with developments elsewhere are English based”(Graddol, 2001, p.33), it is true, but there seems to be few other choices left except the promotion of English. Without it, countries that are excluded will only remain outside, and the core native English speaking countries will remain leaders. The non-native English speaking countries can afford neither to be left outside forever nor to work out everything on their own. The revenue is much higher to invest on a communication channel and benefit from information exchange than to invest on all work necessary to generate information they need. Meanwhile, with a common language of English, it is less likely for the core countries to keep information to themselves for long. It is like Chinese people whose local dialects are similar to Putonghua are less likely to keep their conversation to themselves because anyone overhear it can understand without much difficulty. Having provided the above argument for English being an economical tool of effective communication, though, one last point can not be missed English serves people as a communicative tool. The instrumental nature requires people to preserve their own language and culture to define who

they are, and that they need to apply English to their local use as “Englishes” (Crystal, 2001, p.53) instead of chasing Standard English perfection.

### III. THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH

The indications are that English will enjoy a special position in the multilingual society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: it will be the only language to appear in the language mix in every part of the world. This, however, does not call for an unproblematic celebration by native speakers of English. Yesterday it was the world's poor who were multilingual; tomorrow it will also be the global elite. So we must not be hypnotized by the fact that this elite will speak English: the more significant fact may be that, unlike the majority of present-day native English speakers, they will also speak at least one other language – probably more fluently and with greater cultural loyalty.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a Global Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Crystal, D. (2001). The Future of Englishes. In A. Burns and C. Coffin (Eds.), *Analyzing English in a Global Context*. London: Routledge, 53-64.
- [3] Graddol, D. (2001). English in the Future. In A. Burns and C. Coffin (Eds.), *Analyzing English in a Global Context*. London: Routledge, 26-37.
- [4] Graddol, D. (2006). *English Next*. London: British Council.
- [5] Nie, Jinfang. The Pattern of Standing like the Legs of a Tripod in the Study of Philosophy in Contemporary China. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2007, from <http://myy.cass.cn/file/200512011605.html>
- [6] Pennycook, A. (2001). English in the World/ The World in English. In A. Burns and C. Coffin (Eds.), *Analyzing English in a Global Context*. London: Routledge, 78-88.
- [7] Phillipson, R. (1988). Linguicism: structures and ideologies in the linguistic imperialism. In J. Cummins and T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Eds.), *Minority Education: From Shame to Struggle*. Avon: Multilingual Matters.

**Ying Wu** was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1979. She received his M.A. degree in Translation Study from Nanjing University, China in 2009.

She is currently a lecturer in the English Department of Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching.

**Xiaoqing Qian** was born in Yiwu, China in 1982. She received his B.A. degree in 2004.

She is currently a lecturer in English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College of PLA, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching.