

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

English is an international language, spoken in many countries both as a native and as a second or foreign language. It is taught in the schools in almost every country on this earth. It is a living and vibrant language spoken by over 300 million people as their native language. Millions more speak it as an additional language.

English is spoken habitually in the United States, the British Isles, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of South Africa, Liberia, and many territories under the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It is estimated that 300 million people speak English as a second language, and an additional 100 million people use it fluently as a foreign language. As a rough estimate, 1000 million or one billion people around the world have some knowledge of English, either as a native language, as a second language, or as a foreign language.

English is the associate official language of India which has over 1000 million (over billion) people. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and many other nations which were ruled by Britain continue to use English both as an optional medium of instruction in their schools and as one of their official languages. The islands of the Philippines continue to use English as an important tool for education, administration, and for mass media purposes. English is the chief foreign language taught in the schools of Europe, South America, Asia and Africa.

Even though some nations which were ruled by the French continue to teach French as their most preferred second language, English is gaining ground even in these countries. In the former Soviet Union, Russian was the dominant language. Since the break of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian Republics have been rapidly introducing English in their school system as a second or foreign language. In Russia itself, English is gaining ground as the most popular second language. In Japan too, English is the most favored second or foreign language.

Outside Europe, English is the predominant language of international commerce. Although the United Nations and its various agencies have more than one language for transaction, more often than not, English comes to be chosen as the preferred language of communication between the participating member-nations.

All this has happened within the last one hundred years. The ascendancy of English as the most preferred language began two hundred years ago with the colonization of North America, Asia, and Africa by Britain. The Industrial Revolution in Britain, its ever-expanding maritime power, development of material wealth, progress in scientific research and consequent power, all helped the spread of English, even as Britain marched as a great empire. In the Sixteenth Century, English was spoken mostly in England, southern Scotland, and small areas of Wales and Ireland. There were only about two to three million people speaking it as their native language. At

present one in seven in this world speak English either as a native language or as a second language.

English was well established as the dominant language in North America in the 17th Century. But its rapid growth was in the 19th Century.

Latin was the main medium of education in western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. French was the language of diplomacy for four centuries, from the 17th to 20th. And yet, at present there is not a single language which can be compared to the position occupied by English as the international language. This is so, even though more people in the world speak Chinese than English as their native language. Spanish may claim a large number of native speakers, but neither Spanish, nor French, nor Russian, nor Chinese can even come close to the level and variety of uses to which English is put in the world.

English is learned everywhere because people have found out that knowledge of English is a passport for better career, better pay, advanced knowledge, and for communication with the entire world. English is also learned for the literature it possesses, and for the variety and rich experience it provides. English has replaced French as the language of diplomacy. In this computer age, English is bound to expand its domains of use everywhere. Everyone wants to appropriate English as their own.

In the Indian subcontinent, English became the dominant language of communication among the educated classes after the famous Minute of Lord Macaulay in 1833. For an insightful discussion on the progress of English as the dominant language of communication among the educated classes in India, see the monograph on the subject by Professor Ranjit Singh Rangila, et al., *Bringing Order to Linguistic Diversity: Language Planning in the British Raj in Language in India*.

ORIGINS OF ENGLISH

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. Within this family, English is a member of the Germanic branch. The Germanic branch may be divided into three groups or subdivisions: East Germanic which consisted of Gothic, now an extinct language; North Germanic under which we include the Scandinavian languages; and West Germanic which consists of High German, Low German, Frisian and English.

Three tribes settled in England. These were the Angles, the Jutes, and the Saxons. The Angles came from Denmark, the Saxons were from Holstein in the south, and the Jutes were from the north. These and the Frisian were worshippers of Ing. Linguistic and religious associations between these tribes resulted in a bundle of related dialects, which we presently call English.

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