

Why Do We Teach English?

Kenji Kitao
Doshisha University (Kyoto, Japan)
k.kitao@lancaster.ac.uk

Introduction

We are teaching English or studying the teaching of English, but why do we want to teach English, as opposed to other foreign languages? It is useful for us to consider this basic question occasionally.

The Importance of English

English is not the most widely spoken language in the world in terms of the number of native speakers--there are many more Chinese speakers than native English speakers--but Chinese is spoken little outside of Chinese communities, so English is the most widespread language in the world. It is difficult to estimate exactly how many English speakers there are, but according to one estimate there are more than 350,000,000 native English speakers and more than 400,000,000 speakers of English as a second language (a language used in everyday life, even though it is not the native language) or foreign language (a language studied but not used much in everyday life).

However, even these numbers do not really indicate how important English is as a world language, because less than fifteen percent of the world population uses English. The importance of English is not just in how many people speak it but in what it is used for. English is the major language of news and information in the world. It is the language of business and government even in some countries where it is a minority language. It is the language of maritime communication and international air traffic control, and it is used even for internal air traffic control in countries where it is not a native language. American popular culture--primarily movies and music--carries the English language throughout the world.

English as a First or Second Language

In some countries, English is the sole or dominant language. It has that role in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. All of these countries are former British colonies. In other countries, English is widely used, particularly among people who have no other language in common, even though it is not the dominant language of the country. For example, English is widely used in Hong Kong, Singapore, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Malaysia. In such countries, it is often used as a means of communication between people who have different native languages.

Uses of English

English for News and Information

English is commonly used as a medium for the communication of information and news. Three quarters of all telex messages and telegrams are sent in English. Eighty percent of computer data are processed and stored in English. Much satellite communication is carried in English. Five thousand newspapers, more

than half of the newspapers published in the world, are published in English. Even in many countries where English is a minority language, there is at least one newspaper in English. In India alone, there are three thousand magazines published in English. In many countries, television news is broadcast in English. Because of the power of television, demonstrators in every country use signs printed in English for the benefit of the international press.

English for Business, Diplomacy, and the Professions

English is a major language of international business, diplomacy, and science and the professions. It is the language that an Iranian businessman and a Japanese businessman are likely to use to communicate. Important commodities such as silver, tin, and hard currency are traded in English. English is also an official language, or the official language, of many international organizations, including the United Nations and many professional organizations. It is frequently the language of international conferences, and it is the language of international athletics. Throughout the world, many professional papers are published in English. Even papers that are published in other languages often have abstracts in English.

English for Entertainment

Popular culture.

Popular culture has also played an important part in spreading English. American and British popular music are heard all over the world. American movies are seen in almost every country. Books in English are available even in countries where few people actually use English. One reason that students give for learning English is to understand these songs, movies and books.

Travel.

English is also very important for international travel. Much of the information countries disseminate about themselves outside of their borders is in English. English is spoken in large hotels and tourist attractions, at airports, and in shops that tourists frequent. There are newspapers printed in English, and TV news is available in English. Tours are almost always available in English. Even in countries where few people speak English on the street, people who work with tourists generally speak English. In some countries even drivers of buses or streetcars and sellers at newsstands speak English well.

Other Uses of English

In many former British colonies, English is still used in government and as a medium of communication among people who do not have another language in common. In some cases, it is a neutral language that is used to avoid giving any one indigenous language too much prestige. English is often used in India, because it is neutral. It is the language of government. People who speak English have a certain status in society. It is used for books, music and dance. In Singapore, English is a second language, but it is necessary for daily life. Many companies there use English. In addition, sixteen countries in Africa have retained English as the language of government. Now standard English is taught in schools in those countries, because it is necessary for careers.

English is also studied as a foreign language in countries where it is not generally used as a medium of communication. In China, English language lessons are popular TV programs. Two hundred fifty million Chinese--more than the population of the US--are learning English on TV. English is usually the first or most commonly taught foreign language in many countries, and people understand it a little at least.

The Situation in Japan

More than ten million Japanese visit foreign countries each year, and more than one third visit English-speaking countries. Probably more than half of these people go abroad as part of a tour, and they do not speak English during the visit. They just see scenery, buildings, gardens, etc., eat in restaurants and stay at hotels. There is no contact with the people of the country. If they could speak English, at least they could talk with people in the countries where they visit. They could visit places on their own or take local tours. They can choose restaurants where they wanted to eat and shops where they wanted to buy things. They could get information though tourist information literature, newspapers, magazines, and TV programs.

Whenever we meet English-speaking people from various countries when we travel, they tell us that there are many Japanese tourists in their cities or countries, but that the Japanese tourists have difficulties speaking English.

Nowadays many college graduates who work for large corporations will have opportunities to visit foreign countries on business or work in foreign countries. English is likely to be essential wherever they go, even if they are working in countries where English is not the dominant language. Local workers with whom they work may speak English but not Japanese.

Japan has achieved economic power and reputation for producing high quality manufactured goods. Many people throughout the world are interested in Japanese business, technology, and culture. However, there are not many people who understand Japanese. There are not many books, magazines, or computer sources to convey information on Japan. More and more information needs to be transmitted in English, so that many people in the world will know what is going on in Japan and can learn about Japanese culture. We need more people who could convey information about Japan to the outside world.

More Japanese attend international conferences and need to present papers and participate in discussions. Most international conferences are held in English. Many researchers in universities and companies attend international conferences to present the results of their research. Most presentations are in English. Their papers are also published in international journals, which are also in English.

A great deal of information is available on the Internet. Most information on the Internet is in English, so if Japanese people want to take advantage of the many resources on the Internet, they need to be able to read English.

Conclusion

As we have seen, English is a widespread and important language in the world today. It is used for everything from international academic conferences to news reports to popular music lyrics. It is used not only for communication between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English but between nonnative speakers. Even though it does not have the greatest number of speakers in the world, it is the most widely used language in the world, and it will be used by more people in the future