



English as a Language of Wider Communication

*Ajibola, Morohunkade Adejoke

Department of Theatre Arts, Federal University of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examines English as a language of wider communication. The literature is replete with the global relevance of English, as anchored by its diverse use and functionality across the world. For example, in different countries, English is the foundation of the education system basically because it is a language of wider communication; it is very effective in international communication and in intra-national cross-domain communication. The notion of 'English as a language of wider communication' can be construed from different perspectives, including job-seeking. Indeed, there are several job opportunities for certificate holders in English. This implies that English is arguably language of wider communication. It is not incidental that speakers of English in non-native settings outnumber speakers of the language in native settings. This situation is informed by the fact that English is a language with which language users can engage in broad-based communication tasks. The literature acknowledges that English is no longer the exclusive property of its native speakers. The rise of non-native speakers' proficiency in English is a demonstration of the utilitarian quality of the language. Individuals and groups aspire for proficiency in a language that is potent in communication across domains and walks of life. This study hinges on Afolayan's (1995:1988) postulation on the feature and roles of a foreign (global) language in a multilingual nation. The study concludes that the English language is a language of wider communication for different reasons including: the broad coverage of the speakers of English, the communicative vitality of English in the era of globalization, the cross-facet functions of English in non-native settings and the potency of English in career pursuits.

Keywords: English, language of wider communication, sociolinguistics, globalization, Afolayan.

1. Introduction

Speakers of English cut across age-range, class, occupation, nationalities and sex. By enabling countries to be in tune with the challenges of international communication, English demonstrates its widespread lexical stock; this feature gives it edge over other languages. This has been the situation for decades. The inevitable link between language and society implies that a language of wider communication stands out in the era of globalization that is characterized by multifaceted trends and practices. A language of wider communication, such as the English language, is a credible candidate for investigation in terms of the nexus between language and society. Ifeyinwa Obiegbo (2014:87-88) asserts that 'language generally plays a very important role in national development because it helps to promote unity, understanding and a sense of belonging among the various members of the different ethnic and social groups that constitute a nation.' The constitutionally assigned *lingua franca* status of English in non-English regions is informed by what the language is used for in nation-building, governance and administration. The language fosters communication and national integration. Globalization makes nations promote languages of wider communication, because in the era of globalization, effective communication of new social, scientific and technological trends becomes imperative. Thus, governments of various countries promote the co-existence of English and indigenous languages towards nation-building. In this regard, language policy decisions are favorable to English because it is a language of wider communication. This study invariably investigates the crucial roles that language plays in human existence.

2. Language and Society

Language is linked to society in functional perspectives which essentially immersed in sociolinguistics – place, reason and manner that language is put to use by language users. Bosede Sotiloye (1992) defines sociolinguistics as ‘a field of study which relates societal problems to linguistic/language problems. It answers the question: how do our social and cultural backgrounds affect our use of language? It is a branch of linguistics which tries to answer questions like who says what to whom, when, where, how and why? One of the major aims of sociolinguistics is the study of the use of language in its social and cultural contexts. It studies the norms of the society at large and examines how the individual exploits his awareness of the society’s norms in order to achieve particular effects.’ In addition, Sofunke (1992) posits that ‘sociolinguistics ... is another major area of applied linguistics. The sociolinguistic aspect of applied linguistics is concerned with issues which indicate the interaction between language and society. Society is in general divided along class and occupational lines, these divisions being in most cases reflected in language. The elucidation of the nature and use of these socially stratified speech forms is the business of sociolinguistics.’ A study of language and society is indeed a study of the different functions of language in society which include:

- i. Interactive Function: Language is used for communication. According to Adeniran cited in Ayodabo (2013:139), ‘communication is thus a social function involving more than one living organism interacting where there are certain elements of behaviors to share. We must then perceive elements of behavior as ... being context (actions, information, concepts, emotions, etc.) as well as modes of sharing. This is the integrative function of language; that is, using language to achieve solidarity/mobilization.
- ii. Domain-based Functions: ‘Domain’ concerns entities such as participants, setting and topic. Language is used in schools, parliamentary sessions, banks, religious worships etc. In schools, language is used for passing information, documentation, publications and recruitment of people into jobs.
- iii. International Diplomacy: Language is used in international relations.
- iv. Lingua franca: A lingua franca is used for running the affairs of a nation smoothly.
- v. Symbol of Identity: Mother tongues symbolize people’s ethnic identity.

3. Communication

Communication can be defined in terms of the different perspectives in communication studies. Linguists, sociologists and psychologists view communication from disciplinary backgrounds. Ogu S.E. (2008) presents different definitions of communication, as obtained in the literature:

- i. ‘Social interaction through message’ – Gebner
- ii. ‘The process of sending and receiving messages’ – Sanborn
- iii. ‘The process whereby someone sends a message to someone else and receives a response’ – Hedebero
- iv. ‘The sharing of meaning’ – Holand
- v. ‘The process of using signs and symbols which elicit meaning in another person or persons’ – Sarbough
- vi. ‘The process of sending and receiving messages, and it occurs whenever we express ourselves in a manner that is clearly understood’ – McCutcheon, Schaffer and & Whycoff

Indeed, communication involves ‘feedback’. The response of the receiver of a message, based on the understanding of the message, is known as ‘feedback’. The receiver of a message may respond with words or actions. Arguably, ‘communication’ and ‘language’ are inseparable. As a language of wider communication, English sends messages from person to person, nation to nation. Mutual intelligibility is crucial in the definition of communication. Communication is successful or effective when the sender gets the right or expected response from the receiver.

There are discrete models of communication. Folarin (1998:50) defines a model as ‘a symbolic representation designed to help us visualize the relationships among various elements of a structure, system or process, for purposes of discussion and analysis.’ See Ogu, S.E. (ibid) for explanation of the models of communication which include: Mathematical Model, Berlo Model, ABX/Co-orientation Model and Lasswell Model. It is worthy of note that communication can be: intra-personal (taking place within a single individual), inter-personal (involving at least two individuals), group communication (within any group of persons), organizational communication (involving organizations or corporate bodies), mass communication (mass production and sending of messages) and international communication (cross-border communication).

4. Theoretical Framework

Afolayan (ibid:1988) is an appropriate theoretical framework for this study because: it acknowledges the potency of a global/foreign language in broad-based communication across all walks of life; it aligns with the view that only languages of wider communication can cope with the herculean task of transmitting knowledge via formal education; and it views mastery of discrete language skills as being fundamental to the use of a foreign language or *lingua franca* for individual and collective communication purposes.

4.1 Afolayan (1995:1988)

Afolayan's (ibid:1988) postulations on language types in heterogeneous speech capture the position and function of a foreign or international language. Viewed within the context of this study, Afolayan's postulations reveal how the English language operates its imperialistic tendency as a domineering foreign language amidst mother tongue/first language linguistic situation, in which the English language is assigned specific roles and functions in a speech community. Afolayan (ibid) encapsulates not only the roles of an imperial language in a multilingual nation, but also the skills needed for effective use of the imperial language to achieve such roles from learner-end. Odebunmi (2017:3-4) reports that Afolayan (ibid:122-124):

Identifies a number of features typifying the mother tongue, the foreign language and the second language in general. The mother tongue, by his account is: the only language spoken by a monolingual for all their communicative needs, the first sequential language of a bi/multilingual individual, the language that fully identifies with the personal or native culture of a bi/multilingual person, the language used on an everyday basis and in which a speaker is intuitively equipped, the language that instrumentalises nationalism or nationism in a country, the language that serves as the code for formal education in the speech community in which it is spoken, the language whose effectiveness compels learners to be groomed in listening, speaking reading and writing.

He highlights the following features of the foreign language:

The second language learnt sequentially by a bilingual individual,

The second, third, fourth or fifth language learnt by a multilingual speaker.

The language used by a bi/multilingual person to carry out only activities that are specialised with limited linguistic competence, ... the language which has its mother tongue standard variety, particularly that standard variety recognized within the formal educational system of the donor or mother tongue metropolis as the target model of the formal educational system operative within its speech community (i.e. for those learning it as an EFL) ...

Other features of the second language, according to Afolayan (1995:123) include:

The language learnt in addition to one in which the speaker is more linguistically competent, to carry out the speaker's daily activities, the language within the same geographical or political unit foreign to the speech community of the speaker but found within the same political setting; for example, Yoruba adopted by the Igbo-speaking community or vice versa, the language which is foreign to the speech community and the political system and which imposes bilingualism or biculturalism on the community in which it is used. Examples include English or French in former British or American colonies, the language whose mother tongue is adjusted to suit the formal education framework of the adopting country or community, the language whose effectiveness demands that speakers are acquainted with the skills of listening, speaking reading, and writing.

5. English as a Language of Wider Communication

This section of the paper discusses from discrete perspectives, the view that English is a language of wider communication.

5.1. Coverage of Speakers

The English language has a remarkable coverage of speakers in different nations and across the world, as a result of the pride of place of its native regions. For example, in discrete facets of life, including economy, science and technology, the US has a pride of place. Nobody doubts its level of success in military, economic and technological endeavors. Being a language that matters, people across the world desire proficiency in English. This implies that speakers of the language will continue to rise. As a result of the socio-economic benefits of proficiency in English, the language will continue to have broad coverage of speakers; the speakers cut across class, age, gender and other sociolinguistic variables. Proficient speakers of English have edge over others in job-seeking, social integration, social prestige and work-place productivity. According to Bipin Bihari Dash, (2022:10), 'as of 2020, there are 1.27 billion English speakers around the world. This makes it the most spoken language, ahead of Mandarin Chinese (1.12 billion speakers) and Hindi (637million speakers). More than 50 countries officially list English as an official language.' The fundamentals of the role of English as a language of wider communication are accentuated by the different statuses that are ascribed to the language in non-English regions of the world: *lingua franca*, official language and national language. Wardhaugh R. and Janet M. Fuller (2015:369) rightly notes that 'as a result of planning decisions, a language can achieve one of a variety of statuses ... A language may be recognized as the sole official language, as French is in France or English in the United Kingdom and the United States. This fact does not necessarily mean that the status must be recognized constitutionally or by statute; it may be a matter of long-standing practice, as it is with English ... Two or more languages may share official status in some countries, for example, English and French in Canada and in Cameroon; French and Flemish in Belgium; French, German, Italian, and, Romanish in Switzerland; and English, Malay, Tamil, and Chinese in Singapore. South Africa has

eleven official languages which the state guarantees equal status. A language may also have official status but only on a regional basis, for example, Igbo Yoruba, and Hausa in Nigeria; German in Belgium; and Marathi in Maharashtra, India. A language may be a 'promoted' language, lacking official status, but used by various institutions, for specific purposes; for instance, English is increasingly used in educational contexts in Germany and Sweden. A tolerated language is one that is neither promoted nor proscribed or restricted, for example, Basque in France, many immigrant languages in Western Europe, and Native American languages in North America. Finally, a discouraged or proscribed language is one against which there are official sanctions or restrictions, for example, Basque in the early years of Franco's regime in Spain, Scots Gaelic after the 1745 rising.' Holmes Janet (2008:100-101) clarifies language-status-related nomenclatures that are common in the literature of sociolinguistics:

In sociolinguistics the distinction between a national language and an official language is generally made along the affective-referential dimension, or more precisely in this context, the ideological-instrumental dimension. A national language is the language of a political, cultural and social unit. It is generally developed and used as a symbol of national unity. Its functions are to identify the nation and unite its people. An official language, by contrast, is simply a language which may be used for government business. Its function is primarily utilitarian rather than symbolic. It is possible, of course, for one language to serve both functions. Not surprisingly, governments do not always recognize the distinctions made by sociolinguists. They use the terms 'official' and 'national' to suit their political ends ... Many countries make no distinction between a national language and an official language. In countries which regard themselves as monolingual nations, the same language serves both purposes. In multilingual communities, however, all kinds of permutations have been used in order to satisfy both political and social goals on the one hand, and more practical and utilitarian needs on the other. In multilingual countries, the government often declares a particular language to be the national language for political reasons. The declaration may be a step in the process of asserting the nationhood of a newly independent or established nation, for instance, as in the case of Swahili in Tanzania, Hebrew in Israel, Malay in Malaysia, and Indonesian in Indonesia. Where this national language cannot serve all the internal and external functions of government business, however, it has been necessary to identify one or more official languages as well. So French is an official language in many countries, such as the Ivory Coast and Chad, where French was previously a colonial power and Arabic is an official language in Israel alongside Hebrew. The identification of official languages may also be necessary when the choice of national language is problematic. In multilingual India, for example, attempts to give Hindisole status as the national language have not succeeded. Fourteen regional Indian languages are recognized as official languages alongside English and Hindi for the country as a whole, and in addition different states each have their own official languages. Talegu, for instance, is the official language of the state of Andhrap Pradesh. Some multilingual countries have nominated more than one national language.

5.2 Career Purposes

According to Ches et al. (2017), 'the growing need to use the English language in international relations, international law, and diplomacy has promoted language learning as a necessary component of social and political inclusion, yet English has established itself as a dominant language in this line, English for occupational purposes has been taken into consideration. English for occupational purposes has been taken into consideration. English for occupational purposes is a branch of English for Specific Purposes and covers situations in which learners are studying English, for work-related reasons. The topics are based on an analysis of their specific communicative needs in their work...' As a language of wider communication, English is heavily relied upon in the transmission of knowledge across disciplines. For example, register of medicine, architecture, engineering, religion, etc. (which are available in the English lexicon) are means of conveying knowledge via formal education. A language of wider communication is instrumental in nation-building because the acquired knowledge of individuals is deployed in work-force for national development and sustainable growth. It is therefore not surprising that employers demand proficiency in English from job-seekers. According to Nataliya Todorova and Anna Todorova (2018:326), 'multinational companies require a certain degree of English proficiency from potential employees. It means that more and more people nowadays learn English in order to get the best possible professional training and employment opportunities with top companies.' In addition, Clement Gowon Omachonu, Joseph Abuh and Habiba Oma Alhassan (2017:167) rightly state that 'the modern goal of English language teaching should be how to equip learners with the knowledge and critical awareness of how globalization defines and positions their use of the language. Consequently, teachers of English as a second language need to adopt methodologies that will envision English language teaching within the context of globalization.'

In non-native settings where English suffers from ethnic resentments, the career benefits of proficiency in English enable the language to thrive and pull through. In such environments, English is treated with what sociolinguists refer to as 'love-hate ambivalence'; that is, the language is hated for being alien, but loved due to its economic value to the speakers. Nunberg (1990) asserts that 'people learn a language when it has economic and social advantages to them; people do not learn a language because they are forced to, nor do they cease using a language when mandated to do so.' Commenting on the facilitating role of the English language to individuals, Laxman Jnawali (2024:15-16) submits that

‘this language has worked as a bridge among various bilingual and multilingual communities where English language has been used as second or foreign language ... The language has been very popular in social media as well. People from multilingual communities are actively involved in learning English as their second and foreign language. People are learning IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, GRE and many others in order to go to the foreign countries for various purposes.’ English fosters career inclinations of youths and middle age individuals because of the roles it plays in cognition, thought and reference-making. This view corroborates Bennett’s (1998) submission on functions of language. Bennet (ibid) cited in Acheoah, J. E. and Agu M. N. (2021:20) notes that ‘language does serve as a tool for communication, but in addition, it is a ‘system of representation’ for perception and thinking.’

5.3 Globalization

Globalization trends are cross-border, multifaceted and ever-evolving. This implies that globalization encapsulates all aspects of society. Shobha P. (2025:37) asserts that ‘virtually, no aspect of life in the twenty-first century has been unaffected by the integration of global markets and the widespread dissemination of information. Rapid advances in communication technology have exponentially increased human connections and transformation, transformed values, undermined societies and revolutionized the labour economy, to name a few effects. Multiple centres of economic and military power will come to define the nature and dynamics of globalization in the 21st century. However, the outcome of the process was soon to overwhelm many countries around the world, as more and more countries were forced to bear the cost of this impact as they witnessed the denationalization of their economies through privatization, transnational corporate control, rising foreign debt, deteriorating terms of trade, uneven distribution of income and wealth, and increasing class polarization ... Thus, neoliberal globalization grew to totally dominate the global economy, beginning in Latin America and spreading to Asia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere.’ Chen (2012) lists five crucial features of globalization:

1. Globalization is a dialectically dynamic process, which is caused by the pushing and pulling off between the two forces of cultural identity and cultural diversity, or between local and global;
2. Globalization is universally persuasive as it penetrates into every aspect of human society and influences the way it lives, thinks, and behaves;
3. Globalization is holistically interconnected as it builds a huge matrix in which all components are interconnected with networks;
4. Globalization represents a culturally hybridized state, which allows cultural transmission via new media to take place at a very rapid rate by permeating and dissolving human boundaries.

A major link between humans and globalization phenomena is communication, and this is where the English language becomes indispensable. Views on globalization and its impact on society are quite worthy of scholarly attention. Cornelia Hulmbauer (2008:26) asserts that ‘in today’s globalized world, interconnectedness has not merely affected numerous aspects of our daily lives in the physical sense of transcending borders. It has above all confronted our formation-based societies with the necessity to find a common voice in order to bridge language barriers – not only for the simple exchange of information but also for the mutual creation of knowledge. Multilingualism is a reality in various kinds of community with the European Union being a prominent example, and without any doubt, it represents an asset in regard to cultural diversity and richness. However, this reality also brings new ‘emerging’ language repertoires developing as a result of the immediate processes of language contact induced by communicative need.’ According to Bipin Bihari Dash (ibid:10), globalization is ‘the process by which the world is becoming increasingly interconnected as a result of massively increased trade and cultural exchange. Globalization has increased the production of goods and services. For both native speakers and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) speakers, strong communication in English involves four modes: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Different people have naturally differing aptitudes for these skills’ Since the 18th century, increase in transportation, communication technologies, information and trade necessitated cross-regional integration and interaction as a result of globalization. Globalization is also a major factor behind increased quest for mastery of English by all possible means, especially through formal instructional medium. In this regard, Michael Clime and Farzad Sharifian (2008:28) state that ‘in recent years, there has been a rapid evolution in the demographics of English speaking communities and individuals around the world, with an unprecedented growth in the number of users and learners of English. In the majority of cases, these learners and users are those who would traditionally have been classified as ‘non-native speakers. This trend towards non-native speakers far outweighing native speakers in number is projected to pick up speed. The evolving nature of English in this context of its globalization has called for a reassessment of a number of key dimensions in applied linguistic studies of English.’

5.4 Nation-building

In non-English regions where the English language guarantees national integration, the language is used for ‘solidarity’ and ‘social mobilization’, given the fact that it is not ethnically inclined. For example, the same historical accounts (e.g. colonialism) relate the people of Nigeria with the English language. Defining the term ‘solidarity’ from a sociolinguistic perspective, Wardhaugh R. and Janet M. Fuller (ibid:9) posit that ‘solidarity refers to the motivations which cause individuals to act together and to fulfill a common bond which influences their social actions. Thus the concept of

solidarity is intertwined with both identity formation and group formation.’ Apart from being languages that necessitate the use of interpreters in global proceedings, languages of wider communication are candidates for transliteration. So long as English is used for wider communication in international sense, such as the use of the language in international relations and foreign diplomacy, there is need for the spoken corpora of English in non-native countries to be internationally intelligible. Efforts of the educational institutions to improve the phonological corpora of standard variety of English in former British colonies are therefore laudable. The expression ‘glocal’ evolves to make reference to phonological features of English in non-native settings. Such features are poles apart from Standard British English (SBE), and do not facilitate international, intercultural and multicultural perspectives or dimensions of English-based communication in the era of globalization. Considering the sociolinguistics implications of multilingual nations where English fosters nation-building in spite of ethnic resentments, the communicative potential of English is widely acknowledged. Oby et al. (2001:32) comments on Nigeria’s ethnography:

Nigeria is a linguistically rich nation. Recent mapping of number of individual languages in Nigeria shows that the country is home to about five hundred and twenty (520) languages. This makes Nigeria one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Indeed, if the record that places the number of languages in the world at 6000 is correct, it means that Nigeria contributes nearly ten per cent (10%) to the global pool of language resources. Out of this number, about five hundred and ten (510) are regarded as living languages that is, languages with current speakers and which are still transmitted to children. Two in this language pool are without native speakers as they rely in their being used as second languages for their survival while (9) are said to be extinct without any known living speaker.

Arguably, different factors account for the rise of English across the world. For example, Akere (2006:5-6) lists factors responsible for the success of English in Nigeria:

- a) English can be described as a product of linguistic imperialism bestowed by colonialism;
- b) The introduction of certification system in Nigeria’s educational programmes, with ordinary pass and Credit pass in English, as a measure of adequacy for higher education (Even to read French or Hausa or Yoruba or Igbo in any Nigerian University, at the Bachelor level, you must have a Credit pass in English);
- c) A good working knowledge of English language is considered a prerequisite for obtaining government jobs;
- d) Establishment of educational institutions and the introduction of English as a subject of study, and a medium of instruction;
- e) The establishment of the British Council in 1935, and charter in 1940 to promote a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the English language abroad.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the notion ‘language of wider communication’ as used in making reference to the English language. The bottom-line is that a language of wider communication is spoken by many people. According to Xhemaili Marvan (2022:326), ‘it is estimated that 1.1 billion people know English as a second or foreign language. English as a worldwide language has now become the language of power and status. English’s current supremacy as a world language is undeniable. English is the contemporary worldwide business, scientific, technology and aviation lingua franca. The English language retains its intact leader’s status, allowing for the successful negotiation of diplomatic agreements amongst a wide range of allies.’ Grahovac, Dijana and Rodenoic-Kozic B. (2020) also report that ‘English is the most widely spoken language across the globe which gives an edge of comprehension to its users of global content.’ The fact that a ‘language of wider communication’ guarantees cross-border communication makes an international language such as English, suitable for the appellation. McKay (2002:12) notes that ‘... as an international language, English is used both in a global sense for international communication between countries and in a local sense as a language of wider communication within multilingual societies.’ A language of wider communication, English is the medium of communication in organizations that are concerned with international affairs including UNO, EU, WHO and UNICEF. Conclusively, this study provides clear arguments to justify the claim that English is a language of wider communication: English has wide coverage of speakers, its lexicon copes with the communication constraints of globalization, its roles in non-English regions and the use of English to facilitate career pursuits.

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