The Future of English: Global Perspectives

Research summary

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Foreword

English is the global language of trade. It is the worldwide lingua franca favoured everywhere from academia to social media, medicine to aviation, popular culture to technology. But will this always be the case?

What about current trends in favour of supporting and promoting indigenous languages? What about the impact of digital innovation? Will instant-translation apps render language learning redundant? Or will the digital divide between those with access to technology and those without entrench generational poverty?

The Future of English is a major research programme co-ordinated by the British Council. It provides a voice for stakeholders throughout the world and is shaping the agenda for further discussion, research and planning into the use of English, as well as approaches to English language teaching and learning, throughout the world.

Introduction

The Future of English: Global Perspectives is the output from the end of Phase 2 of a three-phase research project. The book is the most recent publication in ongoing work by the British Council that assesses and analyses the role of English throughout the world.

In 1997 the British Council published *The Future of English* followed in 2006 by English Next, both written by David Graddol. In *English Next* Graddol identified 14 trends which he felt represented the direction of travel for English over the following 15 years. The latter, in particular, was a seminal text and acted as a primary source of reference for education stakeholders (including teachers, researchers and policymakers) interested in understanding how the position of the English language may change in the coming years.

In 2020, Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council's Research Insight Unit, presented Graddol's hypotheses at a conference and explored initial evidence of the trends. Solly's work sparked interest and it quickly became clear that it was worthy of much deeper and wider investigation.

As a result, the Future of English project was commissioned. The starting point for the project was to continue Solly's work to evaluate Graddol's predictions. Phase 1 involved analysis of Graddol's predictions. Phase Two stress-tested this work and sought the insights of stakeholders through the lens of their own contexts at roundtables throughout the world.

Based on data from global roundtable discussions with policy makers and influencers, the book *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* is an exploration of global insights into the uses of English for social, educational and professional purposes. Like Graddol's 2006 work, *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* will be an important resource for everyone involved in English language education. In addition to presenting valuable data it sees the importance of ongoing research in this dynamic and evolving field. To that end it is additionally a springboard into the next stage of the programme which features ongoing research into how English is used and studied today and what these trends can tell us about the role of English as a global language in the future.

English belongs to whoever uses it, in whatever form, to interact successfully in any given context. This has implications for any language policies that may attempt to control it. For example, English language learning policies that place great emphasis on spelling and grammar at the expense of speaking and listening skills may be failing to equip today's learners with the needs of the modern world. Likewise policies that seek to de-emphasise English altogether. After all, if there is a high demand for English in the workplace, then English will be the language that people will want to learn. This research is designed to empower policymakers and stakeholders to help them understand the landscape of English use today and to help them plan and prepare for the needs of learners tomorrow.

# Recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders

- A strong English policy is important to enable people to communicate via the global lingua franca and potentially gain access to economic security and social mobility.

- Supporting multilingualism is important for the preservation and promotion of cultural richness. Implementing language in education policies is complex. It requires social consensus and careful consideration and planning in order to benefit learners and communities.

- English as a medium of education can provide powerful learning opportunities, particularly in higher education where a significant amount of research material may only be published in English. However, studies have shown that teaching basic education and primary years in a language other than the students' mother tongue can impair or delay learning. Careful considerations must be taken about where and when English as a medium of education is adopted, as well as ensuring subject teachers have support in improving their own English skills.

- English is used in different ways in different contexts throughout the world, including different Englishes. Policymakers that understand how English is used in their locality are in a position to enable communication to flourish in the way that is most appropriate for their contexts.

- It is unlikely that technology will replace the need for teachers in the foreseeable future. For those with access to technology, artificial intelligence has the potential to enhance teaching, learning and assessment. However, alternative solutions need to be found for the many learners who do not have access to technology. Teacher preparation and continuous professional development need to include training in the effective use of technology for the classroom.

- Greater collaboration between public and private sector English language teaching and learning provision has the potential to help both sectors improve and should be encouraged and enabled.

- Language Education systems should continuously review the approach to assessing English proficiency to make sure assessment practices stay relevant for today's study, work and social interactions.

- Although the Covid-19 pandemic caused a surge in digitalisation in education and provided access to language education for many more people, closing the digital divide will require massive investment in infrastructure and training to improve social mobility and ensure that connectivity issues do not unfairly disadvantage certain groups.

- Policymakers need to continually engage with stakeholders nationally, regionally and globally, to understand the role of English today and the trends of English tomorrow to ensure policies and approaches meet the needs of people everywhere. This includes engaging with employers, to ensure young people are equipped with the language skills employers require to enter the world of work. To achieve this aim all parties should work together to ensure assessment practices for employment are appropriate and relevant.

Research Methodology

The overarching aims of the Future of English research programme are to:

- Provide insights on trends that will define the role of English as a global language over the coming decades
- Inform language policy and education reform interventions
- Lay out a research agenda capable of generating evidence and data to inform those policy decisions and evaluate their impact.

To meet these objectives, the programme has been planned in three phases, with findings from each phase informing the next. The overall design integrated multiple methods of data collection and analysis.
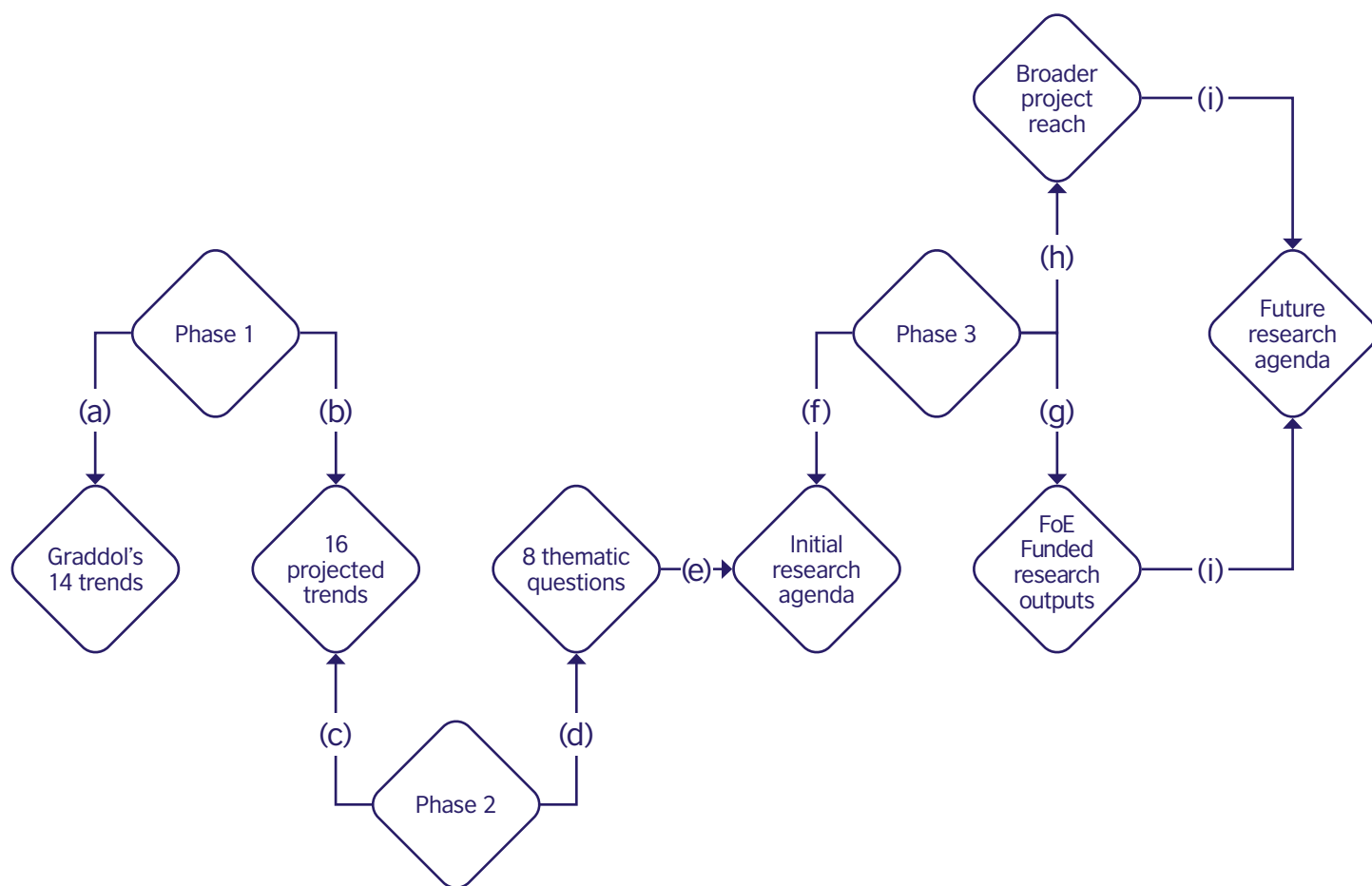
Phase 1: Evaluating Graddol's 2006 trends

Aim
To present an initial evidence-based account of the accuracy of the 14 trends identified by David Graddol in his 2006 book, English Next, and drawing upon this, to identify some proposed future directions for global English over the next 10 years.

Project team
A small research team was created, headed by Dr Sarah Rich. Dr Rich was recruited from outside the British Council in order to limit any possible organisational bias (positive or negative) in interpreting the emerging evidence. She was supported by an academic lead, Mike Solly, and a project manager, Mina Patel, (both British Council employees).

Approach
A mixed-methods approach was taken for Phase 1. Initial information and data were gathered through desk research based on Graddol's 14 trends. This was supplemented by a survey of English language educators. To generate an evidence base for each trend, data was sourced in a number of ways.

Output
Based on the findings of the Phase 1 research, Graddol's 14 trends were updated to 16 projected trends by the British Council research team. These were designed to form the basis of the roundtable discussions in Phase 2 of the research project.

Phase 2: Stress-testing 16 projected trends through roundtable discussions

Aim
To appraise the projections identified by Rich's research during Phase 1 of the project and elicit the opinions of a specific group of stakeholders on the future of English in their own contexts.

Project participants
The participants included 92 policy makers and influencers from all over the world, along with British Council silent observers for each roundtable who added their observations to the dataset through a debriefing process.

Approach
The 14 roundtables took place online using Microsoft Teams as a digital forum and aimed to elicit regional and national oversight of English language trends and policy.

In this phase of the project we partnered with Trajectory, a company that specialises in futures methodology and data analytics, to design the discussion guides used to steer the roundtables, the note-taker guides used to document the sessions, and the initial analysis of the discussions.

Findings
The roundtable discussions produced two rich and interesting datasets: the notes taken at each roundtable discussion and the notes from the debrief meetings. Analysis of these resulted in the identification of eight thematic questions. The publication, The Future of English: Global Perspectives, written by Mina Patel, Mike Solly and Steve Copeland, and edited by Professor Barry O'Sullivan and Professor Yan Jin is the first publication for the programme. The book begins the conversation about the future of English, explores these eight thematic questions and is an invitation for further investigation into the dynamic world of English language education.

Phase 3:
Building an evidenced-based research and engagement framework

Aim

Phase 3 has two key aims:
- To disseminate the research findings and engage with stakeholders globally to further explore the area.
- To establish and implement an evidence-based research and data collection agenda.

Approach and planned output

Phase 3 takes the outputs from the previous phases and uses them as a foundation for implementing a long-term programme of activity, including supporting an evolving research agenda to drive data collection in collaboration with and from an expanding range of stakeholders.

The Future of English Publication

The publication of the book is a springboard into a longer-term, dynamically evolving field of study around the future of English.

Participation in conferences and public forums

The aim is to engage with stakeholders and to help shape a global field of study with experts around the future of English.

Future of English Research Forum

This will be an annual event to share the findings of research funded in the 2022-2025 round of the Future of English Research Grants.

The Future of English Research Grant Scheme 2022-2025

This funds projects contributing to the development of the Future of English research agenda. Of the thirteen proposals received from UK universities, four were chosen for funding. These comprise four principal investigators working with 26 co-investigators in more than 40 countries, as well as two full-time PhD studentships.

Position papers produced by the British Council

These will target relevant themes to identify areas of transformation and the steps needed to achieve change to deliver results for stakeholders, with a particular focus on education policy and practice.

Research releases and updates

There will be a regular programme of published findings generated by the long-term research, dissemination and engagement activities.

Key findings from the global roundtable discussions

The book presents perspectives on the future of English from around the world. Summaries from each of the regional roundtables provide a high-level overview of the regional roundtable discussions and are loosely structured to reflect the following four main areas:

- The role or status of English

- English as a cultural object

- English in the learning system

- Specific learning system issues.

One roundtable was organised in every region, apart from East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and South Asia. These three regions hosted three roundtables each, to accommodate the diversity represented in these regions and because of their size; for example, we felt that India and China warranted roundtables of their own.

The summaries aggregate this information from the roundtables to present an overview of potential trends and drivers for the countries and territories represented. It is important to note that at this stage the findings presented in the individual summaries were broad and interim. The project was still underway and the overall data from all the roundtables was yet to be aggregated and analysed together.

Americas
Delegates from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the USA

- English is seen as the key to higher education, better employment and higher salaries.
- Technology is important for learners, although there is a digital divide between rich and poor, rural and urban.
- The region is vast with differing needs across geographies and borders.
- The diverse region ranges from bilingual education policies (Colombia) to a shortage of English teachers (Mexico and parts of Brazil).

Europe
Delegates from Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain.

- Demand for English will remain strong; it will continue to be the global lingua franca for now.
- The way people use English is changing, with social media in particular altering the balance between formal and informal language and learning.
- Europe is a multilingual continent where English is used as a tool to support communication.
- Global corporations could disrupt language learning with artificial intelligence.

Wider Europe
Delegates from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkey.

- English language learning is likely to experience growth, particularly for prospects in the global job market.
- Multilingualism is seen as important for individual, societal and national economic success, although care needs to be taken around issues of national culture and identities.
- Technology is necessary for business and employment success and important for teaching, learning and assessment, although issues relating to the digital divide will need to be addressed.
- A customised approach to learning is increasingly in demand.

The Maghreb
Delegates from Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

- There is a strong demand to learn English across the region, driven by the opportunities it provides to access employment and higher education.
- English is taught in primary schools in both public and private systems.
- Young people in Morocco, in particular, would like to see English replace French, although the roundtable agreed English should not prevail at the expense of other languages.
- Technology is increasingly important in language learning; both teachers and technology are here to stay.

The Gulf
Delegates from Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar.

- English is regarded as a second language or lingua franca rather than a foreign language in many areas, driven by education and employment opportunities.
- Arabic use and education are important for the promotion of cultural identity.
- More flexible and informal ways of learning flourished during the pandemic. Public schools should review provision to better respond to education and employment landscapes.
- There is an increasing need for teachers to become more proficient in the use of technology.

Egypt and the Levant
Delegates from Yemen, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

- English is growing the region, but its status varies in the countries represented.
- The diversity of English teaching provision needs to be supported to ensure quality in both the public and private sectors.
- Technology is both an enabler and a disrupter. Attention needs to be paid to this in the near future to ensure equity of access and opportunities.

Key findings from the global roundtable discussions

Sub-Saharan Africa
Delegates from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa and Sudan.

- English is the go-to language across the region for success in education, employment and communication.
- The region is linguistically and culturally rich and complex.
- There are moves away from colonial languages in some areas, with increasing recognition of the importance of local languages, although English largely retains a place at the table.
- English as a medium of education is growing across the region.

Pakistan
English is thriving within a linguistically diverse nation; with economic potential driving its growth.

- Education systems need to evolve and adapt. Current language provision in state schools needs increased policy coherence.
- Technology is empowering and enabling teaching and learning, and has the potential to reach many more people than tradition in-person teacher models.

India
English is regarded as vital for employment and economic success.

- English as a medium of education is increasing in both public and private schools.
- Technology has a central role in English language learning.
- Private sector provision is growing rapidly, largely because the public sector is not seen to be as good.

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka
The potential to access good jobs and good universities is a key driver behind the popularity of English learning in the region.

- Technology is key for education, although there are concerns over equality of access.
- Demand for English is strong, but the importance of local languages is also recognised.

ASEAN
Delegates from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

- Emphasis in teaching will move away from grammar and spelling and towards using English for communication in different contexts.
- English will remain the global lingua franca. Mandarin will grow but will not compete with English in the near future.
- English as a medium of education will grow and will require an expansion of teacher training.
- Technology will enable learning beyond the classroom, and the use of AI could see a step-change in language use, learning and assessment.

China
Education, technology and, in particular, employment are driving continued interest in English.

- English is seen as a channel for sharing information about China, its people and its culture.
- Technology has an important role to play in English language learning, but issues of access and equity need to be addressed.
- Stakeholder opinions about the relevance of English will play an increasingly important role in the future of English in China.

North-East Asia
Delegates from South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

- There is a wide spectrum of approaches to English across each country and territory.
- Despite these differing approaches, English as a medium of education will continue to be significant across the region.
- Unequal access to digital learning and the potential offered by AI are important issues for local educators and policy makers.
- Approaches to assessment and testing vary across the region, although the roundtable was unanimous in sharing concerns about current online testing practices.

English Language Advisory Group (ELAG)
The ELAG advises the British Council's English and Exams and the English Programmes leadership teams. It is a forum for advice, vision and strategy and has no decision-making or executive powers.

- English is important for access to opportunities and information, but its role may be changing.
- Multilingualism is important for individual, societal and national economic success, although care needs to be taken around issues of national culture and identities.
- Technology is central for business and employment, and is important for teaching, language and assessment. Issues relating to the digital divide will need to be addressed.
- Learners are increasingly looking for more individualised learning programmes.
- English will be included among other languages as part of wider foreign language policies.

Discussion of the eight thematic questions

Analysis of the findings that came out of the 14 roundtables were distilled into eight thematic questions. While these thematic questions do not provide a definitive view of the future direction of English, they do help us create a framework for our ongoing research and provide insight into global stakeholder opinion and experience.

Theme 1:
Will English remain the world's most sought-after language?

English is the most widely spoken language in the world. It is the global language of communication and is likely to retain this position for the next decade and beyond.

The desire to learn English is driven primarily by the potential it offers to secure better jobs and economic security. Its position as a sought-after language is further strengthened by the important role it plays in technology (including computer programming), higher education (with much research only published in English) and social media communications.

Theme 2:
What role will English play in our multilingual reality?

We live in a richly diverse multilingual world. English will continue to play an important role, increasingly doing so alongside other languages to provide rich linguistic opportunities for learners all over the world. In multilingual contexts people rarely need to use two languages at the same level in the same way and may use English as a common form of communication, without the need for mother tongue fluency.

There is change in the air as users of non-dominant languages grow more confident and demand recognition. In order to better support multilingualism, teachers will need training to deliver a curriculum that supports the simultaneous use of multiple languages in the classroom to aid learning.

Theme 3:
What is the future of English as a medium of education?

The perception among policy makers and parents in many parts of the world is that English as a medium of education can enhance learners' grasp of English and their ability to employ it across a variety of subjects and contexts. In many regions, university courses are taught in English. This can be in order to attract more overseas students and also because much research literature is only published in English. In these regions, English as a medium of education is growing, especially in the private sector and particularly where there is a perception that good English equals good jobs.

However, providing educational content in English when it is an additional language can present a range of challenges and disadvantages to learners and teachers. Using English in the place of the mother tongue in primary education can impair learning, limit educational attainment and prove a barrier to inclusive and equitable quality education. What's more, subject teachers who may not have a strong grasp of English may struggle to communicate and teach more complex concepts. For these reasons English as a medium of education has been rejected as a policy in several regions, especially for basic education.

Theme 4:
How will teachers remain relevant in future English language learning systems?

Artificial intelligence, machine learning and auto-translate innovations have the potential to turn our language learning systems and processes upside down. However, although such tools have the potential to enhance communication, most of the roundtable experts felt that there was still a need for language learning to enable direct human contact without the interruption or divide that the digital intervention can impose.

The roundtable view was that it is unlikely that technology will replace the need for teachers in the foreseeable future. Although artificial intelligence has the potential to disrupt and change the way English is taught, teachers will remain vital for teaching and learning. However, teacher training and continuous professional development does need to include training in technology.

Theme 5:
Public and private English language provision: who has the answers?

Public-sector provision of English language teaching is inadequate in many countries, in many instances featuring inappropriate or outdated curricula. Around 260 million children around the world do not have access to basic education. Greater collaboration between public and private providers could help improve this.

It's possible that the private sector could fill the gaps in public sector language education provision and increase opportunities for young people. However, private provision is not accessible to all and can be of variable quality. Some private provision is also driven by parental perceptions, such as the growth of English as a medium of education in basic education systems, despite studies showing that primary education in mother tongue languages is more appropriate.

Theme 6:
Can English language assessment meet stakeholders' changing needs?

Language Education systems should continuously review the approach to assessing English proficiency to make sure assessment practices stay relevant for today's study, work and social interactions.

Much of the desire from young people to learn English is driven by potential it offers for better job prospects. However, employers require language skills such as speaking and listening that many tests do not assess. In addition, different contexts require different language skills. Some of these issues may be addressed by the introduction of AI into the language assessment arena, although this also gives rise to concerns over security and usability.

Discussion of the eight thematic questions

Theme 7:
Can technology narrow the equity gap in English language education?

Technology has the potential to help greater numbers of students access language learning. The Covid-19 pandemic saw a massive increase in the numbers of students accessing learning online. This can be enormously empowering and has made English more affordable and accessible compared to the expense of in-person learning for many students.

However, technology also risks widening the divide between people who have access to technology and those who do not. In some cases, this is a clear divide between rich and poor and risks entrenching poverty where learners are not able to afford the technology needed to improve their education and employment opportunities. In other cases, the divide is drawn along connectivity lines. This is often a rural-urban division where internet (and even radio or TV) access is not available in more rural areas and is not always confined to learners themselves. Technology can revolutionise teaching. But many teachers around the world don't have access to digital technology. This can limit their teaching opportunities and may impact the life chances of their students.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic caused a surge in digitalisation in education, closing the digital divide will require massive investment in infrastructure and training.

Theme 8:
To what extent is employment driving the future of English?

English is the lingua franca of global trade. Many international businesses use English as their official language of communication. Language proficiency can have a positive impact on employability, as well as on social and international mobility and is without question a key driver behind the desire to learn English for many people. Globalisation and tourism also mean that English is not just needed by professionals in higher positions, but also in low-skilled jobs such as retail, travel and tourism.

Requirements set by employers are partly shaping English language syllabuses. English is increasingly seen as a communication tool where speaking and listening skills are as important as more formal grammar and vocabulary. In this context, the agenda can be strongly driven by employers. As noted in the China roundtable, if there is a high demand for English in the workplace, then English will be the language that people will want to learn.

About the authors

The Future of English: Global Perspectives was written by Mina Patel, Mike Solly and Steve Copeland and edited by Professor Barry O'Sullivan and Professor Yan Jin.

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