

THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH ACROSS THE GLOBE. SOCIAL POLITICAL
AND CULTURAL FACTORS

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Abstract: The spread of English as an international language has changed our conception of both the language and how it should be taught. With more nonnative than native speakers of English, the ownership of English has shifted and new world Englishes (WE) have emerged. Researchers studying this phenomenon have recommended changes to English language teaching (ELT) that require re-examining firmly entrenched assumptions still evidenced in teaching practice.

Key words: Spread, English, century, South Asia, Southeast Asia, literary reincarnations

Stating the obvious by his own admission, Widdowson (1997) declared the following: “English has spread to become an international language” (p. 135). In the same year, Graddol (1997) published a short book entitled *The Future of English?* wherein he proclaimed English the sole global lingua franca for at least the next fifty years. In fact, he maintained “that no single language will occupy the monopolistic position in the 21st century which English has – almost – achieved by the end of the 20th century” (Graddol, 1997, p. 58). Why is this? Did inherent linguistic attributes lead to its rise and spread as a global language, or were other elements at play? More importantly, with English seemingly permanently installed as the international language, what issues and concerns need be addressed by English language teaching (ELT) professionals? These and other questions will be explored in the following examination of the spread of English.

The Spread of English: The Concentric Circles of English In discussing the spread of English, scholars invariably refer to Braj B. Kachru’s Three Concentric Circles of English (Bhatt; 2001; Bolton; 2005; Davies, 1999; Graddol, 1997; Jenkins; 2006; Kachru, 1986, 1996; Pakir, 1999). Bhatt (2001) proclaimed Kachru’s model as encapsulating the many factors informing the spread of English, including historical, sociolinguistic, acquisitional, and literary elements. In light of the wide acceptance of this model, Kachru’s discussion of the diaspora of the English language features as the main informant to the treatment of this topic. Kachru (1996) parceled the spread of English into several phases. The first phase saw English spread throughout the British

Isles, including Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, during the 16th and 17th centuries. This was quickly followed by the second phase wherein English further expanded its realm to North America, Australia, and New Zealand by means of the migrations of English-speaking populations. Kachru cited the third phase, the Raj phase, as having the greatest effect on the sociolinguistic profile of English. It was during this phase that English spread to areas where no English-speaking communities had previously existed, including South Asia, Southeast Asia, South, West, and East Africa. According to Kachru, this contributed to the rise of major cross-linguistic and cross-cultural attributes, which together resulted in the changed profile of English as a pluricentric language. This pluricentricity, he asserted, “is not merely demographic, it entails cultural, linguistic, and literary reincarnations of the English language” (Kachru, 1996, pp. 136-137). Bhatt (2001) echoed this notion, citing the development of “regional-contact varieties of English” (p. 529) stemming from its contact with diverse languages in these disparate sociocultural contexts. He went further, describing this phase of diaspora as creating “a new ecology for the teaching of English...in terms of linguistic input, methodology, norms, and identity” (Bhatt, 2001, p. 529). These elements have had considerable influence on the paradigm shift within ELT resultant from the spread of English.

The hegemony of English is accompanied by numerous concerns. Master (1998) suggested both a positive and a negative side to the dominance of English, with the former linked to its ability to promote universal access for all, and the latter tied to its ability to exclude those with fewer resources, thus perpetuating the status quo and prevailing power structures. So, while the global spread of English promises improved communication worldwide, it limits the exchange to those with the power to access opportunities to learn English. This connotes a kind of linguistic imperialism first introduced by Phillipson in his 1992 book of the same name. The book sparked heated debate (Kachru et al., 1993), inspired a call for critical ELT (Bolton, 2005; Erling, 2005), and helped establish the discipline of critical applied linguistics (Bolton, 2005). Therefore, in the last fifteen years, critical discourse regarding the mounting dominance of English and the implications of its spread has at least served to monitor this phenomenon, if not alleviate its illeffects. At present, English goes by many names. It has been dubbed an international language, a lingua franca, a global language, and a world language (Erling, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; McArthur, 2004). In addition, led by scholars such as Kachru, English has developed a plural sense, with its different varieties designated world Englishes and the ensuing acronym, WE; these uses denote the essential plurality and inclusivity that informs the conception of English (Bhatt, 2001;

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