

Abstract

English is and will remain the key global scientific language and an important language of instruction for the foreseeable future. Yet, at the same time, a worldwide debate is emerging about the role of English and about the role of languages in general in higher education. There are no easy solutions to what some call “English imperialism.” Understanding all the implications and the costs and benefits of the use of another language is crucial, and decision makers bear a heavy responsibility in doing so.

The Dilemma of English

Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit

By the mid-twentieth century, English had become the global language of science and scholarship. With the rise of the Internet and globalization in the latter years of the century and in the new millennium, this domination has only increased—with all of the top-50 scientific journals published in English and the large majority of internationally circulated scholarly articles in English.

The advent of mass student mobility increased the attraction of English (more than 5 million students now study outside of their home countries, with the majority choosing English-speaking countries). An increasingly mobile professoriate, including thousands of postdoctoral students, gravitate to English-speaking universities. In non-English-speaking countries such as Ethiopia, academic programs, and even entire universities, use English as a language of instruction—or even as the only language of instruction. In Africa, Rwanda moved from French to English as a country and in higher education, and recently, the minister of education of Algeria announced a shift from French to English in higher education. Indeed, most countries now have English-medium universities, branch campuses that use English, or complete graduate programs in English. For example, one can obtain an English-medium MBA degree from more than 30 universities in China. Universities in Russia are offering academic programs in English targeting mainly Russian students, who seek such degrees to boost their prospects in the local and international job markets. Chinese universities urge their faculty members to publish in high-prestige English language journals and offer them handsome financial rewards for doing so—while publication in Chinese journals yields few benefits. Indeed, the number of journals in English in China is growing exponentially. The same is true in other countries, such as South Africa. Without question, English will remain the key global scientific language and an important language of instruction for the foreseeable future—and even in these days of nationalism and populism, its role is likely to increase. Countries, institutions, and individuals seek to adjust and adapt to the impact of global English in academic life worldwide. Yet, at the same time, a debate is emerging about the role of English and about the role of languages in general in higher education.

Questions Worth Asking

It is worth raising questions concerning the impact of the tide of English. In the broader sense, there is no use in rejecting it; just as globalization is an inevitable force, so is the role of English in higher education.

Language is more than just communication, it is also culture. The implications of using English as a key language for higher education in non-English-speaking countries may affect culture and ways of thinking. The French and the Italians, always protective of their culture, have long resisted the use of English in higher education, but even they have recently yielded and there are a growing number of English-medium courses in France and Italy, ignoring intensive protests not only by nationalists, advocates of safeguarding national cultural heritage, but also by academics.

Using English also has implications for research methodology, publication, and academic orientation. This is true for several reasons. The high prestige English-medium journals are almost exclusively edited by academics in English-speaking countries, and these editors rely in large part on reviewers also located in these countries. Even the most internationally minded editors will bring a bias toward methodologies and academic orientations favored in English-speaking academe, as will most reviewers. Studies show that the most highly cited journals and articles are in English. Academics from non-English environments are disadvantaged in several ways. Their facility in English, which is not their native language, will often be imperfect. More important, in general they will be influenced to conform to the methodological strictures of mainstream

English-dominated trends in their disciplines. This may be less important in the natural sciences, where methodologies may be more universal, but has considerable salience in the social sciences, where cultural and national realities shape scholarship. And in all fields, researchers and scholars may be tempted to orient their research topics toward what will appeal to journal editors and publishers in the dominant English-medium markets.

Another implication, especially for the humanities and social sciences, is that the pressure to publish in English-medium international journals limits the possibilities to contribute to the debate in local language media, and, by that, the possibility to contradict fake news, an argument expressed for instance by academics in the Netherlands against the international publication pressure. In *International Higher Education* #88, Winter 2017, Akiyoshi Yonezawa noted that “limited publication in English in these fields is becoming a serious obstacle to the further development of the humanities and social sciences in Japan,” and that “it is unlikely and undesirable that English as an academic language should continue to monopolize fields such as the humanities and social sciences, which are deeply rooted in multilingualistic and multicultural activities and values.”

A reality due to offering English-medium courses and programs in many non-English environments is the poor quality of the instruction offered by many faculty whose command of English may be rudimentary, or whose ability to teach in the language is limited. This, often combined with limited English comprehension by many local and non-Anglophone international students, creates an environment where little learning takes place. Additionally, knowledge of, and access to, current course materials and texts in English may be limited. In short, offering high-quality programs in English is complex and requires a high level of fluency by both faculty and students.

A little noticed consequence of the rise of global English in universities is the deteriorating status of learning other languages by students in English-speaking countries. Enrollments in foreign language courses and programs throughout the English-speaking world have declined, with many students (and faculty) feeling that they can communicate anywhere in English. This has meant that courses on world cultures and civilizations have also declined, thus reducing in-depth knowledge of cultures among native English-speaking students. An additional factor is the increasing sophistication of machine translation of academic materials of all kinds, further reducing the perceived need to learn foreign languages.

There is also a concern about the role of colonial languages in the developing world, and particularly in Africa. Local languages are used in public primary and secondary education, but, with some exceptions, not in higher education. The risks of such policies are high: elitism in access of higher education; deterioration of quality of education and research; lack of alignment with local needs; and dominance of western paradigms.

The Debate in the Netherlands

The pushback against the use of English as a language of instruction in the developed world is increasing. In Italy and the Netherlands, academics have gone to court to stop universities from adding more English-taught programs. Arguments vary, from concerns for maintaining the national culture and the quality of education, to claiming that internationalization is only a source of revenue that is being promoted at the cost of good education for local students. These last two arguments are dominating the current debate in the Netherlands, where there is a general feeling that the spread of English as a language of instruction, with its lack of a strategic approach, has gone too far and has become a liability. Among the questions that are raised are the following: why should subject areas such as Dutch literature, history, or law be taught in English? Are disciplines like psychology taught in English in order to attract international students and compensate for a decline in interest among local students? Should the substantial contribution that international students make to the budget of institutions and to local and national economy count more than investing in quality education for local students? Why should local students have to compete with international students for limited student housing? And how does one counteract the declining interest of local students for Dutch language and literature? The Dutch minister of education, culture, and science and institutional leaders are caught between the pressure to compete internationally

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and the imperative of responding to these arguments—as well as those of nationalists in parliament. Finding a compromise is not easy. Other countries, like Denmark and Germany, are facing similar debates.

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Conclusion

There are no easy solutions to what some call “English imperialism.” It is a fundamental reality today that English is the dominant language of science and scholarship, and increasingly of communication, both formal and informal, among students and academics globally. Understanding all the implications of selecting the language of instruction of a program or an entire institution, and the costs and benefits of that decision, is crucial, and decision makers bear a heavy responsibility. ▲