

English language changing the world or vice versa?

English is spoken and used by 1.3 billion across the world. The dominance of the language has brought native speakers many advantages. Nearly two-thirds of the world's top companies are from Anglophone countries and English is worth an extra £14.5 billion to the UK economy. It is the language of science, of international relations and of influence. Tourists and business people can travel from native English-speaking countries and be confident that, wherever they go, someone will speak English.

But what is often ignored is that the use of English as a global lingua franca is signalling change. Non-native English speakers outnumber native speakers by three to one. Multilingualism has become a vital skill and the benefits of speaking English are increasingly scant consolation for a largely monolingual UK. Behind these changes lies a story of the shifts of global power. English was the language of the British Empire, and more recently of the capitalist power of the US. Today, it dominates the internet.

English has come to reflect the changing powers of globalisation; it is used in different ways, by different people, for different purposes. Where the UK once directed the spread of English, we are now just one of many shareholders in the asset that it represents. Opportunity and influence remain tied to English, but native speakers are at risk of being left behind.

Words, phrases and idioms reflect the world around us. When bundled together into languages, all those words start to reflect how power is distributed in the world.

Take the English Language. There used to be a very direct relationship between the English language and the imprint of Britain's influence around the world -- the global era however, has made this relationship less clear. English is no longer a natural source of natural competitive advantage for the UK. As a Brit you can forget your phrase book when you go on holiday and it's probably no big deal -- but if you think that's going to help you in the workplace, forget it.

More English speakers, means more competition for your job and it means your desk can be shifted to another country when market forces demand it.

The English Language now has many shareholders, and The English are just one of them. In Britain, from a policy perspective, it's time to rethink how we teach English, our whole attitude to languages, to reflect our changing relationship to the rest of the world.

The UK has not done enough to respond to these changes. Policy is needed across a wide range of government departments that understands and responds to this changing context. As You Like It sets forth the considerations that must shape this.

Based on:

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/asyoulikeitpamphlet>