



Will English, as the Lingua Franca, Survive COVID-19?

Mathew J. Anderson

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About the Author

Mathew J. Anderson is currently the President of Keiser University Latin American Campus in San Marcos, Nicaragua, where he has served in various positions. Mr. Anderson did his doctoral studies at Holland's Vrije University and has a long career in higher and international education of over 20 years. He has worked at five different universities in a variety of capacities, including Professor, Department Chair, Assistant Dean, Academic Dean, Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Provost, Rector, and now President. He has also supervised the following areas: Student Life, Athletics, Facilities and Technology, Security, Institutional Effectiveness, Human Resources, Legal, Immigration, Accreditation, Transition Issues, Orientation Programs, English as a Second Language Programs, Academic and Faculty Development, Enrollment and Retention, Marketing and Public Relations, and Fundraising and Development. He has several publications on topics such as Higher Education, Epistemology, Robotics, Metaphysics, and the impact of English in society.

Resumen

El inglés es la lengua franca actual de la tecnología, los negocios, la medicina, la diplomacia, el entretenimiento, la aviación y los asuntos militares. Aproximadamente 60 % de todas las revistas científicas están en inglés. Éste es un idioma requerido para las personas que desean tener éxito en el trabajo y oportunidades generales en la vida. La COVID-19 plantea un problema más difícil de explicar y gestionar. Es una enfermedad relacionada con el estilo de vida y seguirá siéndolo hasta que haya disponibles una vacuna o un tratamiento adecuados. La mejor forma de control es cambiar la forma de vida. Los carteles con información sobre el correcto lavado de manos y los mensajes de distanciamiento social deben ser difundidos en todo el mundo. La lengua franca se vuelve simple y se modifica con más personas que la usan. El problema con el uso de varios idiomas es que es extremadamente vulnerable a ser incomprendido y malinterpretado. Es peligroso transmitir información incorrecta durante la pandemia, ya que se volverá perjudicial para las personas.

Palabras clave: lengua franca, inglés, comunicación, COVID-19, pandemia, salud.

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English and its Lingua Franca Status

Introduction

2020 has been the year of the pandemic, and all the information that has been spread across about COVID comes from the Internet. Services like Google Translate can cater to only 100 languages, this makes hundreds of other languages vulnerable to crisis. Individuals who speak English can attain information about COVID, both online and offline. There are posters on handwashing, instructional videos on social distancing, and guidance about face covering. All this knowledge needs to reach people all over the world in order to control and eradicate this pandemic, which implies that the information about COVID has to be translated in as many languages as possible. The translations must also be culturally appropriate and accurate, and easy for people to understand. Nevertheless, before translation, all the information comes only in English (Berns, 2009, pp. 192-199).

The importance of language in Healthcare has been often overlooked, especially on the Internet, where everyone is English speaking. It is both a boon and a curse. People can use the Internet to search for information on basic symptoms, but for more than half of all people around the globe, who does not speak English, this resort is not available or feasible. They cannot even get a proper pamphlet from their doctor explaining their ailments, as they are not available in languages other than English.

Yet, then there is also a risk of misinformation as a result of inadequate language translation. This idea brings the question of the lingua franca status of English in the world. An important aspect of the lingua franca is the ability of the language to ingratiate itself with the native and local languages. Most educated people and adults talk in pidgin, that uses an interspersed collection of English words along with native words and phrases (House, 2009). It ascribes the native language with the English language and vice versa. This process of interspersing is self-multiplying. Pan-world communication is only possible through English.

English became the preferred language of communication with the rise of the British Empire and the subsequent emergence of the US as a superpower in trade and commerce. An international wave of English language was created for commercial, financial, and other trade-related purposes in the global market. Other factors such as innovative products, telecommunications, films, and music, added to the rise of the status of the English language in the world. When the Roman Empire was in power, Latin was the lingua franca of the world for the first fifteen centuries. With the fall of the Roman Empire and the expansion of the military, trade, and commerce, the cultural supremacy of the British Empire fostered the English language in the world. Only South America was alienated from the British Empire imperialism. One of the imperial legacies that Britain left was teaching English as a first or second language. This is the reason there are around 1.3 billion English speakers in the world.

English is the current lingua franca in technology, business, medicine, diplomacy, entertainment, aviation, and military. About 70 % of all scientific journals are in English. It is a “must learn” language for the people who want to succeed in their jobs and better overall opportunities in life (Andrade, 2018). In Scandinavian countries, schools start teaching English as a second language to kids at the age of seven. About 90 % of the Swedish people now have proper and functional English. English has gained the same importance as science and mathematics learning; it is a language of business and healthcare. In the 2019 edition of the “State of Broadband”



Teaching English as a 1st
or 2nd language
was one of the legacies
of the imperial Britain.
Now there are

1.3 billion

English speakers in
the world.



report given by the Broadband Commission of Digital Development, it is said that only 5% of the total 7 100 world languages are available on the Internet (reliefweb.int). Among these languages, English is the most used one.

The void left by the British created a need for a language of communication in the military, political, and commercial areas, especially after the First World War. It embedded the English language deeply in life. As a result, English language has more than five centuries of presence as a means of communication in the world. It has gained more significance in the global society that is present today. Different trade movements, industrial developments, scientific research, and changes in university education has made English a language in demand. Since 1920, English has gained immense power as a language through pop music. People memorize songs even when they do not know the meaning of the words. Apart from music, movies, comics, and other entertainments have managed to influence and charm children across the globe. Even while many of these films have been dubbed into other languages, some unforgettable phrases

enrich the memories of both youth and adults. These factors bring a major discussion on the status of English as lingua franca in the world.

Thesis Statement

In the post-COVID-19 world, English can preserve the global lingua franca status.

“A standard language will help to fight back the spread of misinformation.”

The language gap in healthcare is just surfacing due to COVID, even though it has been present for a long time. For example, Maya Health Alliance or Wuqu Kawoq is a health organization providing services to indigenous people in Guatemala in their native languages. Till 2015, their language lacked a proper word for diabetes. The

people could only repeat the name in English, as doctors said; however, a big part of diabetes management is the balance of one's blood sugar through eating. This aspect was untranslated and unaddressed in their language. Recently, Wuqu' Kawoq developed the name “kab'kik'el”, which in a literal sense means “sweet blood”. This terminology made it easier for the indigenous people to understand the disease and manage it, but this is an isolated incident. The initial knowledge of diabetes was conveyed in English.

COVID-19 poses a more difficult issue to explain and manage. It is a lifestyle illness and will remain so until there is a proper vaccine or treatment available. The best way to control it is to change the way of living. The handwashing posters and social distancing messages are to be diffused across the globe. There is also a language emergency that WHO has referred to as “infodemic”. The infodemic will escalate if a large number of languages is used. A standard language will help to fight back the spread of misinformation. According to the professionals, English, as a lingua franca, is here to stay. The British Council reports that by 2020, about 2 billion people will learn English. They will learn it since people

67 % of Europeans

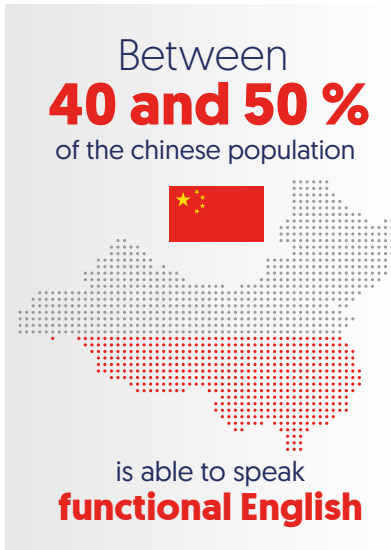


prefer to speak English instead of other European languages

now see it as a basic skill that is needed for the functioning of the entire workforce. It is a basic requirement for informed citizenship. As English will stay strong, it means that it will not be anymore an optional subject, it will become a basic work skill.

The English Language as Lingua Franca Pre-COVID

English as a Lingua Franca, or ELF, is defined, researched, and discussed in several ways. For users in healthcare, English is a practical and convenient tool for international communication. It is different from using English as a Native Language (ENL) that serves as a function of the national language. In business, and healthcare, in the pre-COVID world, the ENL functioned as a means of communication at the national level and did not represent English as a global language. The ENL is unchallenged and has been a preferred model. There are as many types of ENL as there are nations. The positions of the English language in the world remain undisputed and unrivaled (De Bot, 2015).



From the pre-COVID world on, English has been a default option for intercultural communication. It has always been at the hyper center of the global language system. Even between other languages with a large amount of speakers, such as Hindi, or Mandarin, English remains at the center, as multilingual people have it in their array. This element is unrelated to the intrinsic characteristics of the English language. In fact, the pronunciation and spelling make it unsuitable for a global language.

The lingua franca status of English is a consequence of the powerful history of the British Empire and the commercial influence of the US. Even if these hegemonic positions were to decline, English would preserve to be the hub of the language system for a long time (Bayyurt & Sumru, 2015). People across the globe have invested a lot of effort into learning it. Millions of speakers will continue to use it for a long time.

“Even before COVID-19, English has been used as a means of communication, in addition to the native languages, to convey information.”

The Lingua Franca, English, is a global phenomenon. People with non-common cultural backgrounds use it as a tool to communicate as it is “non-territorial”, in the sense that it can take place between two speakers of any origin. English remains majorly independent of constellational or spatial specifics. Through this aspect, the lingua franca status of English has affected many domains in the daily lives of people (Silver *et al.*, 2009). These areas are not stable specified units but are complex and

multi-directional networks. The complexity extends to all contexts from social to political, resulting in the process of “deterritorialization” of the English language.

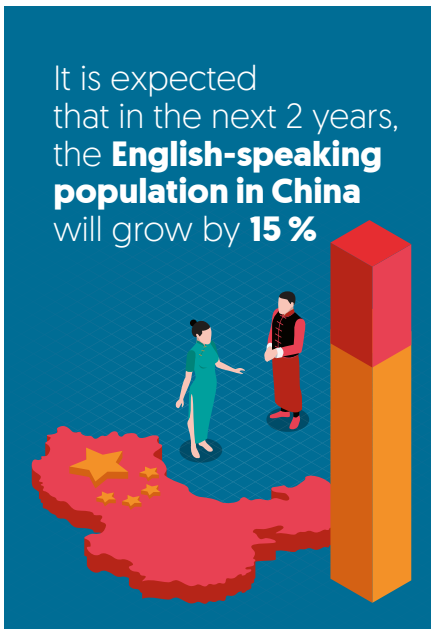
When it comes to healthcare, business, and medicine, English has is the preferred language. Any business or healthcare professional needs to be an exceptional communicator to convey difficult information to the patients. Even before COVID-19, English has been used as a means of communication, in addition to the native languages,

to convey information. It is critical, as even the smallest miscommunication can cause devastating effects. Healthcare workers must be empathetic individuals so that patients get a comprehensive understanding of medical situations. English has provided this potential, hence it has been used by practitioners and researchers across the world. Most journals and publications in medicine have been written in English. Thus, professionals must understand and keep abreast of this language.

The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics states that in the latter half of the 20th century English became the predominant lingua franca in healthcare and business. The increasingly diverse population of patients and the ability of the professionals to communicate with them ultimately relied on English. However, history tells that whenever there is a crisis, natural or man-made, there are significant changes in the normal lives of people. It affects everything related to normal life. COVID-19 has persisted for more than half of 2020. As a result of this pandemic, there has been a change in the lexicon and especially in the lingua franca English. There has been an enrichment of the normal vocabulary. A list of words has made an



entry in our everyday communication. These words are going to be a part of the language forever. Words like endemic, pandemic, epidemic, contagious, contagion, outbreak, lockdown, cluster, hotspot, transmission, community spread, isolation, incubation, social distancing, quarantine, curve, shields, symptomatic, vaccine, and many other words are now used regularly in daily communication (reliefweb.int). These words have come from English, and oftentimes it is hard to find an exact translation of the COVID related jargon in native languages.



The inception and spread of COVID have brought attention to the language barriers present even with English as the lingua franca of the world. As a result of this, people of certain communities are affected more than the others. Minority languages are important, specifically in health crises such as COVID. The nations have created separate bodies that are taking care of information and instructions amidst this pandemic. They communicate the information in the native languages of the

location. Communication in one language is not enough, especially in a health emergency such as COVID pandemic. This aspect of crisis management has brought attention as to whether English has the status of lingua franca in the world. While there are arguments that suggest that English will lose the lingua franca status, the truth is that with the ongoing pandemic, the necessity to have a proper standard form of communication in medicine and business has arisen even more. English being the prominent well-spread language, will continue to preserve the status of being the lingua franca of the world.

Influence of COVID on the English Language

In October 2014, Mark Zuckerberg gave an address entirely in Chinese; he was praised and admired by people across the globe, and at the same time it reignited the question if English is losing its status as lingua franca in the world. The answer is no. English is still the most influential language in the world. The MIT Lab published a report in December, 2015 that identified English to be at the information hub of the world. They have illustrated their data in “The Global Language Network”. It is an interactive model that shows how English is the major language in which information is conveyed to masses. It is a language that has found its way to all parts of the globe and became a way to connect and inform people. The propagation of English throughout the world by the British Empire has cemented the role of lingua franca in the world today (Seidlhofer, 2005). Of all the online content, 56% of it is in English. In order to access the content and understand it, one must have knowledge of English.

The EFL English Proficiency Index for companies makes English a top priority for the fastest-growing language in the globe. It is common knowledge that companies around the world use English to communicate and interact (Jenkins, 2017). The spread of COVID-19 has only increased the number of individuals that require their employees to know good English. The global estimates show that more than 1.6 billion people in the world are trying to learn and speak English (reliefweb.int). The population is diverse –economically, culturally, and geographically. Each of these populations is affected by COVID-19.

As all the relevant information about COVID is in English, it only creates the demand for English learning tools. The tools need to be easily accessible and inexpensive. After the COVID-19 pandemic started, the demand for English learning has only heightened.

“The knowledge of English is playing a crucial role in controlling the spread of the disease.”

Some companies translate information to local languages, but these languages are highly niche languages that do not pose a threat to the status of English as lingua franca.

The firms and institutions that work in a single language are more efficient, effective, and work better. Companies and health institutions have chosen English to be their official language for communication and operation, such as: Airbus, European aircraft manufacturer; Rakuten, Japanese e-commerce company; Renault, French automotive firm; Samsung, South Korean electronics firm, just to name a few. Small companies that aspire to reach a global audience invest in English majorly (Erling & Seargeant, 2013), as they offer language training programs to their employees. The question comes as to what all this means during the time of this COVID pandemic.

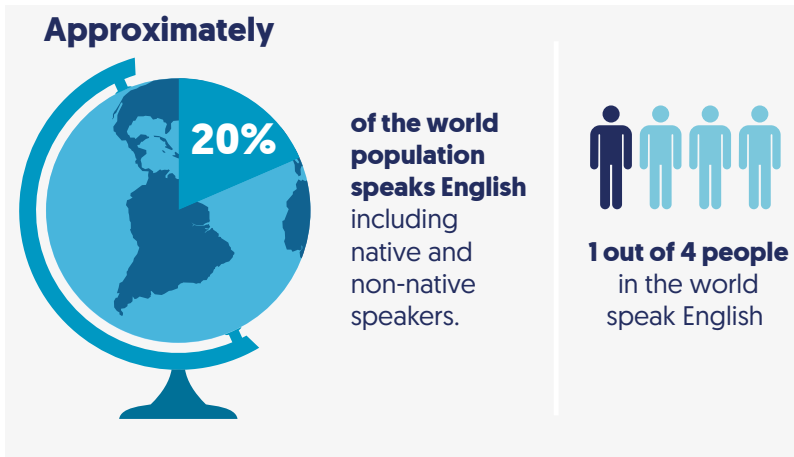
During the period of COVID-19, the knowledge of English has been playing a crucial role in controlling the spread of the disease. People must work across the borders to beat this pandemic. The most significant and important way in which it can be handled is through knowledge and information (Jenkins, 2017). It plays a major role in beating the



financial and social challenges as a result of this pandemic. The post-COVID-19 world has created a more pressing need for English than before. This language helps to enact proper safety and precaution measures.

The scenario has changed considerably and abruptly following the outbreak of Coronavirus. It is necessary that individuals and businesses have access to secure information, and proper rules

and guidance amidst the pandemic. The information needs to be available in native languages. It is not practical or possible to make the information available in hundreds of local languages across the globe (Kopaczyk & Jucker, 2013). Nonetheless, the information can reach people easily if there is a common spoken language.



For niche language groups, this information can be translated by the local authorities and they will have access to it in the news. We can analyze the case of Orange County, where there was a mass confusion when new regulations regarding social distancing and business operations were announced. The language barrier was a chaotic factor. This barrier would not have existed if there had been a proper standard language in practice for the propagation of information. While the authorities here are doing their best to translate correctly, the fear that has been established due to the initial language mishap still persists. Thus, in the post-COVID-19 world, messages must be sent across accurately to avoid chaos scenarios such as the one in Orange County.

English is the go-to language for the medical community. Any developments or research regarding Coronavirus is conveyed in English. The updates regarding social distancing, disease trends, healthcare costs,

proper treatments, precaution plans, and risk factors are shared in English (Seawright, 2014). The English language dates to the 5th century when Britain was invaded by Germanic tribes. Those English records are different from modern form, but they laid the foundation for the status of English. Out of the 8 billion inhabitants of the world, about 1.5 billion speak English, making 20% of the world population. Most of them speak English as a second language, and this percentage is growing exponentially.

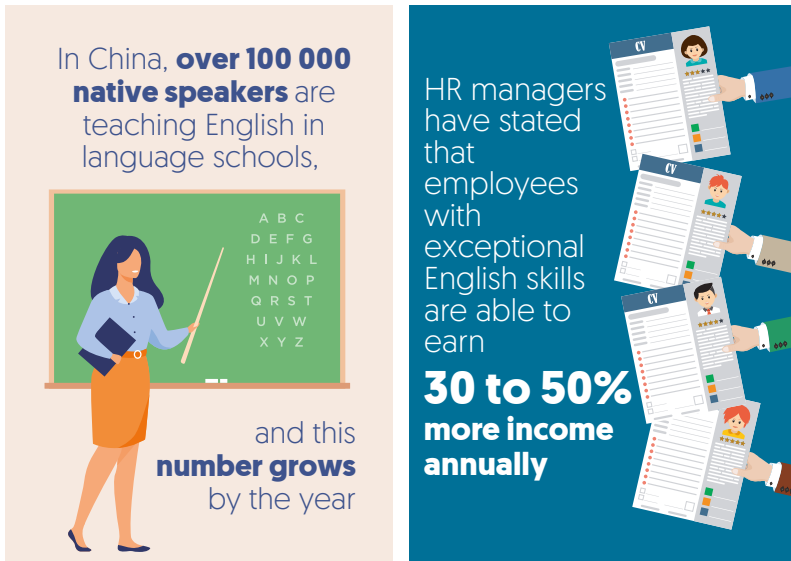
English is also the fastest-spreading language in history. Almost 2 billion people speak a useful level of English. It means one out of every four people speak English. There are about 395 million native English speakers. Nearly 1 billion people speak English in the formerly colonized nations in Africa and Asia. About 565 million people use English on the Internet on a daily basis (reliefweb.int). With such robust statistics, it is hard

“English is the language of communication. By understanding this language, it is possible to get first-hand information.”

to imagine any other language posing a threat to the lingua franca status of the English language.

After the outbreak of Coronavirus, it has become evident that presence of unrestricted multilingualism has proven to create confusion in crisis management. It is inefficient, and it can cause confusion and spread misinformation. It creates hurdles in the coordination of tasks

for multinational companies that need to function and work tightly with customers and people worldwide (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009). English, as an official language of the world, has facilitated the language of business and healthcare in a forward direction, regardless of where the company has its headquarters. The benefits in COVID times for having English as a lingua franca are immense. The companies that have an English language policy have endured in troubled times. Other companies are adopting a suitable framework for the implementation of English. The outbreak of pandemic has led us to a realization that there is much to learn when it comes to language and communication.



Other factors at stake here are the communication channels. In the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in Internet access and use. The number of Internet users has increased by 60 % since 2015 (Bedford, 2019). This growth is taking place in emerging markets that are also non-native English speakers. Any developments related to the pandemic are first shared on the web. If there are language differences, a bottleneck is created in the diffusion of the information. Geographically dispersed employees need to work together and meet their goals. If an employee from Beirut needs to contact an employee from Mexico, English is the language of communication. By understanding this language, it is possible to get first-hand information. In the case of a pandemic, access to information is also crucial for good decision making. For example, the Swiss food company Nestlé observed great efficiency in the operation of the company as a result of the enforcement of English (Köksal & Terçan, 2019).

Future of English Language Status

English is not the native language of many nations of the world. However, it remains as an unstoppable language for many years to come. After

COVID-19, English will retain its status as the most widely used language for personal and official communication. It is the “shared” language. It opens the doors to professional and social opportunities. The COVID-19 outbreak has only exposed the fact that the current practices in English learning and teaching do not meet the needs (Rostan, 2011). The efficiency of healthcare messages was less effective due to a lower knowledge of English. While there are more Spanish speakers, twice as many Chinese speakers, English is the fastest growing language in learning and will continue to be so in the future. This position is unlikely to change at any time for decades to come. The British Empire left English in 67 nations as the official language; one of these nations is the United States, which is now a dominant world power.

English has gained prominence since the 20th century, and this growth has not stopped since then. Now, with the Internet, streaming services, and other media, English is penetrating every corner of the world.

“English is also adaptable. With the inclusion of local words in the language, English has evolved considerably.”

As a result, people want to learn English to enjoy the media and become a part of the collective and global “trend”. The idea of English as a second language is not threatened, it has only just begun. This trend will not stop in the near future. Students and children learn English in a formal setting in their school curriculum. A vast majority of people also learn it through their

media consumption. Inhabitants of non-native English speaking countries know that “the Internet is in English”. An increasing number of people in the world, thus, learn English through osmosis. Osmosis occurs through social media, and by watching movies and TV shows on streaming services. The learning of English is happening in a subtle but safe way. For English to lose its lingua franca status, any other language must penetrate the world as English has, which is not possible immediately and for many decades to come.

The continued growth of English makes it more important in the future. The dominance of English in the world will only increase in the 21st century and beyond. The world is becoming more and more educated (Pitzl, Marie-Luise, 2016). Most of the children in the world go through an educational system. They are likely to learn a second language. English is the preferred second language. The technology of the world will only advance, making a common global language of communication increasingly necessary. This is where English will play a role in international communication and international relations.

Many people argue in favor of the Chinese. This language has the largest number of native speakers, but it is a complex language to learn. From any Indo-European language, the leap to learning Chinese grammar is extremely difficult. Even if a person somehow manages to learn the grammar, the spoken language is extremely complex as well. Chinese is a tonal language. This means that any mispronunciation in the language can change the meaning of the spoken word entirely. With such a level of hassles in learning and speaking, it is difficult for that



Many multinational corporations are establishing **English as the official corporate language**, even in non-English-speaking countries such as China and South Korea

language to become a threat to the English language. The difficulty is not a challenge that can be overcome, but it requires a considerable investment in time and resources. Spending a great deal of time learning a complex language in a fast-paced and global world is ineffective and will only lead to delays. In the event of tackling global problems, the future will only have more international policy requirements and problems. It will need to be solved internationally. These factors indicate that the primary mean of communication should continue to be English (Reif & Robinson, 2016).

English is also adaptable. With the inclusion of local words in the language, English has evolved considerably. The more open a language is to accept foreign words, the more receptive people will be to the language. English has shown this attribute. The penetration of English with local and native languages is so great that it also had an indirect influence on these languages. Current global trends are perplexing, and amidst these trends, the addition of another language as a lingua franca will only result in inconsistencies and mismanagement. The outbreak of COVID-19 shows the urgency of the English language to educate people on safe practices.

English does not have its lingua franca status just because it is spoken in powerful nations; it is a world language, as people in other nations give proper recognition and credibility to English. In 2010, more than 70 countries had English as a second language. It is a language that children are more likely to be taught, and also the one that adults learn by choice. Nowadays there are 100 nations, including Brazil, China, Germany, Russia, Egypt, Spain, and Indonesia, that teach English. There are strong reasons for English as a language to be taught and learned, and these reasons include trade, commerce, business, healthcare, medicine, and technological contact. There is also political convenience in the language. The status of English as a lingua franca is thus preserved as it is being learned as first language, second language, and foreign language.

English today is also called Modern English. Modern English is the result of combinations of English with native languages. It has survived different factors that have resulted in the death of languages in the past. It has survived the intergenerational language transmission. If the language was difficult or unacceptable it should have died with the empire, but it did not. It was still a key in communication. Languages die easily, as seen in the case of Serbo-Croatian. It is no longer in use. After the genocide, it was replaced by Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian, by their respective inhabitants (reliefweb.int). Within this community, English is the reasonable choice to speak. Thus, as a lingua franca, English is a language of contact between two people

of different ethnicities. About 80 % of interactions in English are conducted by non-native speakers.

A major change occurred after the COVID-19 outbreak. Since all the urgent information is being conveyed and spread over the Internet, English has become more important. The attitude of people towards the language has changed. Now it is seen less as imperialist propaganda and more as a language of world interaction. English is not a language to replace the native language. It is a language that creates a common ground between two ethnically different speakers. Here, the focus is only on effective communication and efficiency. In international relations, the companies have accepted the lingua franca as a commitment to prosperity and economic development.

Conclusion

There are numerous variations of the English language around the world. Neither of these variations are redundant. The penetration of English language has created hybrid forms of this language. The long history of linguistic contact has brought adaptability and innovation unmatched with other languages. The Coronavirus pandemic has made the requirement of English even more significant. Even if English is a part of the native language, the English language advocates do not belittle it, but empowers it through adaptability. Non-native English has brought variety to the English language. These speakers have exploited the latent potential of the English language and have provided new possibilities of use through innovative syntax, morphology, and phraseology (Dean, 2015). Non-native English speakers outnumber native speakers and, therefore, they are the main agents of the language. This English does not have to be the same as that of native speakers. Even if it follows the same grammatical rules, there is a quality of uniqueness.

English has been the lingua franca as there are several groups of people who are the main candidates for diffusion. Many hybrid forms have

diffused in the use of language. As a result, Modern English is flexible and adaptable in its grammatical rules. In conclusion, English as a lingua franca will remain indisputable. There is expressiveness in the flexibility and adaptability of language. Speakers of English as a second language have been able to imitate and accommodate new things in the use of the English language. Professionals meet people of different ethnicities in their professional and personal lives. After the COVID-19 outbreak, the diffusion of innovations has increased due to the usage of the English language and, thus, strengthened ties between the speakers. As information about Coronavirus is passed on to people, more and more speakers come up with new variants. These variants have helped the regular maintenance of the language, especially through its prolonged and extensive use on the Internet. The social significance of English is not something that can be immediately replaced by another language.

With the increase in healthcare workers and entrepreneurs across the globe, native English speakers have encountered hundreds of non-native English speakers. These people have also been welcomed into the prestigious group of English speakers. These non-native English speakers have begun to create language commandments similar to those of the native speakers. Therefore, even if there is some controversy about the lingua franca status, English will have this position for many years to come (Weedmark, 2019). The language has slowly acquired a natural elegance and power. It is too convenient for a person to use English to communicate. It is a very useful and effective form of international communication in the midst of a pandemic. English, as a language, cannot be seen only as an imperial power. A relative reduction in the political powers of English-speaking nations will not make English less useful.

A lingua franca becomes simple and changes as more people use it. The problem with using multiple languages is that it is extremely vulnerable to being misunderstood and misinterpreted. Passing on inaccurate information during a pandemic is extremely dangerous as it will have a negative impact on the lives of people. Ignorance of the

standard language will adversely affect the business world. With the number of people using it, it will probably take more than eight centuries for another language to take its place. Even then, it is estimated that it will be present as a result of some hybrid combination with another language. What the pandemic has brought for non-native speakers is that if they want to be in the world information loop, it is necessary to learn English as a required skill. It is the lingua franca of the world. English is a major asset of the future. Not just business and medicine, English is also the lingua franca for travel and science to a great extent.

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