

Book Review: *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* (2023)

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As an educator, my primary focus has always centered on research, teaching practices, and techniques in teaching English as a foreign language. However, reading *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* opened my eyes to a new world concerning the future of English, learning, and teaching. Will the pursuit of English language learning continue to hold its significance, or might it wane as other languages ascend in prominence? This is one of the eight questions posed in this book. These inquiries bear particular weight in a post-pandemic world where political tensions, conflicts, and the rise of artificial intelligence are the hot topics of the day. Commissioned by the British Council and supported by its global reach, the authors of this book have assembled experts from around the world to discuss critical issues such as the driving forces behind the demand for learning English language and the relevance of English teachers in the age of technology and artificial intelligence (AI). Their collective insights provide intriguing discussions and points of view about the future, and the authors have done a fantastic job in drawing conclusions from those discussions and providing answers to the posed questions.

Edited by Professor Barry O'Sullivan and Professor Yan Jin, *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* follows the layout of an objective and well-designed study that is meticulously structured into three distinct parts. These parts could be perceived as introduction, literature review, and discussion, as if the reader is reading a gigantic research report. In Part 1, "Introduction and background", Patel, Solly and Copeland introduce the book's purpose and outline the inception and design of the project. They highlight the pandemic-induced shift to virtual communication and underscore the renewed importance of interaction and engagement in this transformed landscape. The co-authors then present the project overview, the methodology, and its three phases. The pinnacle of the introduction part is where a homage is paid to Graddol's influential work *English Next* (2006) that inspired this global project. In his book, Graddol (ibid.) predicted the number of English learners to peak around 2 billion in the following decade leading up to 2021. He also foresaw the traditional stronghold of English-speaking countries facing challenges from non-native language learning providers in Europe and Asia, and anticipated the decreasing dominance of English on the internet as it gives way to the spread of other languages, such as Mandarin and Spanish. Moreover, Graddol saw future economic advantage in shifting away from English as other languages gain traction, leading to a paradigm

shift in English language teaching. According to Graddol's work, developments in Asia, particularly in India and China, would greatly affect the future of English as a global language.

In Part 2, "Voices from around the world", Patel, Solly and Copeland immerse readers in the insights gleaned from 14 global roundtable discussions where experts from various regions of the world offer a panoramic perspective on the evolving role of English in education. These discussions provide a wealth of valuable data and diverse perspectives that address pivotal questions surrounding the future of English language learning and its societal impacts. This part includes a series of contributions from leading experts called "Spotlights", wherein experts from Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, South America, and South and East Asia offer their personal insights on topics discussed during the roundtables. As I live in South America, it was the "Americas" round table that caught my attention the most. First of all, it is regrettable that the absence of the British Council in Ecuador resulted in the representatives of 17 million Ecuadorians not being part of this important conversation. Despite this, the discussions highlighted a growing awareness among people about the transformative potential of English, namely: access to higher education and better employment.

Similar to other regions, the role of technology in education is acknowledged by South American expert representatives, along with the need to ensure its accessibility and fairness for all. It is also reported that employment opportunities, especially in the tourism sector, are among the factors fueling the demand for English language learning. Moreover, it is pointed out that the countries in this region share similar challenges and disparities, which include insufficient numbers of English teachers and teachers with low language proficiency, as well as a lack of pedagogical skills to effectively use the available technology. Another important factor highlighted in the discussions refers to the vast size of some of the represented countries resulting in diverse situations and demands. Naturally, such diversity makes centralized education systems difficult to implement. As a result, governments often juggle multiple education systems with distinct needs in the same country. Another noteworthy point covers inequalities encompassing rural-urban divisions, economic disparities, and differences in infrastructure and education systems. Finally, there is a consensus among the experts regarding the role of technology. While the role of technology is acknowledged as a potential tool to combat disparities in different regions, the concern that technology might inadvertently exacerbate the inequality in South America is also entertained.

The concluding section of Part 2 delves into the thematic threads of the roundtable conversations and presents eight core questions that encapsulate the evolving landscape of English education, subsequently providing answers grounded in the collected data from the discussions. Among the explored questions is the enduring status of English as the world's preeminent language. The authors present compelling data concerning the number of English speakers, emerging languages, the phenomenon of "Englishes", and the role of English as a lingua franca. The consensus drawn from the presented data suggests that English, or potentially various English varieties, will continue to serve as a global language. Education and

employment are projected to remain pivotal drivers for English language learning, and technology will remain increasingly influential in this process. While debates about the ascent of languages like Mandarin persist, the prevailing sentiment is that the dominance of English is unlikely to be supplanted in the short to medium term. However, whether or not other languages are going to gain regional prominence is considered an unresolved question.

Another important question concerns the future relevance of English language teachers. The authors underscore the pivotal role English language educators play in meeting the escalating demand for language learning, emphasizing their function as both pedagogical guides and motivational catalysts. This discussion acknowledges the evolving nature of teaching in the digital age while underlining the steadfast centrality of teachers in education, despite technological advancements, e.g., artificial intelligence. The text stresses the imperative of educators' readiness to effectively integrate technology, a readiness shaped by factors such as technology self-efficacy, instructional approaches, and openness to technological innovations. The narrative contends that ongoing professional development for English language teachers is indispensable, encompassing both pre-service training and in-service learning. The authors further delve into the prospective benefits of technology and the integration of AI into language education systems. Insights gleaned from ChatGPT underscore a plethora of advantages, including personalized learning, flexible access via internet-connected devices, real-time error correction feedback, engaging gamification strategies, scalability for accommodating large cohorts of learners, and cost-effectiveness, particularly for those devoid of in-person instruction opportunities. This array of benefits highlights the transformative potential of AI in language learning and assessment. However, the report duly acknowledges that while technology has revolutionized education in certain contexts, the digital divide still hampers equitable access for learners lacking such resources. Bridging this divide necessitates concerted efforts from both the public and the private sector to ensure that technology-driven education is inclusive and effective.

Finally, the extent to which employment will drive English language learning is explored. The data extracted from the round table discussions assert that while the contemporary notion of English proficiency for professional pursuits varies across contexts and regions, there is a consensus that transformative changes are happening. People are starting to think that it's important to be good at English in ways that are useful for real life and for their area of specialty. An increasingly prevalent understanding emphasizes that applied, contextualized, and locally nuanced forms of proficiency are poised to gain momentum on a global scale in the years to come. The shift in proficiency norms indicates a gradual departure from "native" English speaker as the gold standard, to more adaptable, situationally relevant models. Concurrently, the trend towards personalized learning and assessment experiences tailored to the demands and expectations of ELT professionals and learners is anticipated to fuel transformations in the foreseeable future.

In Part 3 of the book, “Summary of project”, Patel, Solly and Copeland bring all the strands together, wrapping up the research and its findings. This part also suggests ideas for future research in five different areas. Firstly, the utilization of large-scale surveys is recommended as a method to systematically accumulate transparent and robust data concerning diverse dimensions of language education. The co-authors also call for a concerted focus on evaluating the effectiveness of educational interventions and methodologies. This emphasis involves constructing coherent frameworks for evaluating the influence of various pedagogical interventions and teaching approaches. Another area of research may cover the evaluation of language policies, encompassing educational policies, and dovetails with the objectives of the second research framework. However, it uniquely homes in on language-related policies, assessing their repercussions on educational reform and language teaching methods. Measuring and building profiles of English proficiency within specific countries and regions that transcends assessments of language competence is the fourth research area suggested by the authors. Finally, the fifth area for research refers to a cross-disciplinary initiative, namely, quantifying the societal and economic advantages stemming from enhancing English language capabilities.

In conclusion, I highly recommend *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* to policymakers, teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers interested in the evolving landscape of English language education. This book is particularly relevant for policymakers engaged in shaping educational policies as its well-structured insights facilitate a comprehensive grasp of impending challenges and opportunities in the future of English language education. Moreover, I recommend this thought-provoking read to all educators and teacher trainers because it adeptly delves into the intricate interplay among technology, education, and societal changes. Lastly, the book's thought-provoking content equips both teachers and researchers with invaluable insight to help them adapt to the evolving landscape of English language education and remain relevant in the future. Finally, one would only hope that the next exploration of the future of English will occur sooner than the 17-year gap between Graddol's pioneering work and the publication of this valuable resource.

References

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