English Spreading Worldwide – a Positive or Negative Development?

In a modern and globalised world, being able to communicate is essential to succeed, both for individuals and nations. Before the time of globalisation, the English language had already been spread throughout the world through colonialisation. Though the British Empire has lost most of the colonies, the English language is still an official language in many of the former colonies. About 400 million people have English as their first language presently, and even more have it as their second language (NDLA, “English Spreading Worldwide”). With such a large population speaking English, spread around the world, it is not surprising that the English language has gained quite a dominant position in the international market. With increased international communication, a need for a common language has developed, and English seems to have filled this need. Also, people who do not have English as their mother tongue, but have learnt English as a foreign language, use English as a lingua franca in international communication (ibid.). What may be the consequences of this development of English into a world-language? This text will discuss some of the gains and challenges of English spreading world-wide, and argue that in spite of these, the spread of English as a means for communication is basically a positive development.

Increased international communication leads to sharing of knowledge and goods. An international market is available for young students today, and learning the English language proficiently may open many doors to studies and employment. Seen from a Norwegian perspective, there are more opportunities now than there were before, and many young people spend a year abroad studying. Either they take a year as an exchange student during their time in upper secondary school, or they may take a semester abroad as part of their higher education. This may support their development of proficient English skills, and it may also give them some positive experiences and confidence. In many countries of the industrialised world, there are good opportunities for young people, but this is not the case in all countries of the world. In poorer countries, there is no guarantee that young people go to school and learn English. If they do not learn English, they do not get access to the international market. The spread of English could be said to widen the gap between rich and poor in the world. However, the solution is not to try to stop the spread of English, but rather to support developing countries by helping them build good educational systems.

International communication makes it possible to work together to improve the conditions in different parts of the world. Though some people in the world are more privileged than others, having a global lingua franca such as English provides opportunities to improve in general.

One of the threats of English spreading worldwide is a decrease of heterogeneity in the world. The increased use of English “exert pressure toward global uniformity” (Graddol, 2001). This means that the diversity that we see in different languages and cultures may disappear as English...
takes over. Some languages may be threatened to die out, and with them, culture and traditions may die out as well. This does not have to happen. In many countries, there seems to be an increased pride in culture and languages, like in Ireland. Even though the Irish language is threatened to die out, people are interested in taking care of the Irish traditions. We could also look at the situation in Norway. Even though English has taken over to some degree in parts of higher education, we are still concerned about keeping our language and cultural heritage. Maybe we even become more conscious about our idiosyncrasies when being threatened by foreign influence. At the same time as we include new English words into the Norwegian language, like “ipad”, “poke”, “game”, Norwegians are also generally concerned about keeping their dialects and local expressions. Also in former colonies like Australia and New Zealand, where English is an official language, we see a consciousness about preserving the natives’ culture. English does not have to be a threat to the diversity in the world though it may take over some domains within education and work. What is important is that we do not forget who we are and where we come from, and keep our language and cultural heritage alive.

The adoption of English as a first or second language has also provided grounds for constructing cultural identities as pointed out by Graddol (2001). By including local forms and mixing English with other local languages, new English varieties develop and various identities are associated with these variants of English. When watching a Bollywood movie, we recognise the Indian accent immediately. When we hear “G’day mate”, we think of Australia. In some countries, like Jamaica and Nigeria, there are English varieties that are so much influenced by local languages that they are defined as pidgins or creoles (NDLA, “English around the World”). These local variants may be difficult for English-speakers to understand. Although people around the world develop their own identity related to their version of English, this identity could be seen as something not genuine, or something imposed on them from the outside. Different varieties of English may also be seen as inferior or not correct. This seems to be changing as students in school are allowed to use whatever accent they have acquired. Teaching students to speak with a British accent is no longer a goal in the Norwegian school as it used to be. So even though the identities developed in relation to English varieties are not genuine, they may be accepted as equal to other cultural identities.

To sum up, the spread of English may be considered both to cause challenges and to provide opportunities. Young people of today’s modern society have the possibility to get around the world, get an international education and there is literally speaking a world of work opportunities. One of the challenges of the development of English as a global language is to ensure that everyone is part of the globalisation taking place. Another challenge is to keep the diversity in the world alive, so we do not only become one uniform group of people. How the future will be no one knows, but what we know for sure is that the world changes continually, as does the situation of languages. Going back in
time, Latin was the dominant language of the knowledged people in Europe, now it is a dead language. Rather than worrying about what the dominance of English may lead to, we should keep our focus on preserving what makes us who we are. Combining this with having a focus on developing good English skills to be able to compete in an international market should give us the better of two worlds.

**Literature**


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