

English - A Global Language

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Abstract: This article writes on the factors which make a language become 'global language' and discusses about how English achieves that status. The impacts of English as a global language on Vietnamese learners, science, business, technology, education are analysed. With the development of technology, media, science, education etc. English will help students broaden knowledge, change the way of thinking and brighten career prospect.

1. INTRODUCTION*

Today, English is becoming more and more popular all over the world. It is not only considered as the mother tongue of about 60 million speakers in many countries but also used widely in the world as an international language. English is the language of the United Nations, international summit meetings, science, technology, business, tourism, medicine etc. As the mean of communication, English brings people on Earth together and helps them understand each other and exchange material, cultural and spiritual values of their own countries. Needless to say, English is now an indispensable part of our lives; the term "global language" is now used for English with wide acceptance. In my writing, firstly, I will discuss about the term "global language" and how a language becomes a global language. Some theories, ideas and comments will be mentioned; the main features will be discussed. Secondly, why English dominates as a "global language" will be analyzed. Thirdly, the implications for students are presented. In this part, the advantages and difficulties are provided. The final part presents the summary of the study.

2. THE TERM "GLOBAL LANGUAGE" AND HOW A LANGUAGE BECOMES A "GLOBAL LANGUAGE"?

- The term "global language":

From Crystal's [1] point of view, a language can achieve its role as a "global language" when it reaches a special role which is accepted in every country. Crystal [1] also claims that there are two main ways to make it possible to make a language "global language". The first way is official way, that is, a language can be chosen to be used as "first language" or "second language" in a country. Therefore, the chosen language will be used in all kinds of communication, in academic fields as technology, science, media and in government. A language can also have "official" role, "semi-official" status or stands as foreign language. As Crystal [1] puts it "... being used only in certain domains, or taking second place to other languages while still performing certain official roles". As a result, to

survive in these societies the need to master the language is very important if not essential. The second way to achieve the status is by receiving education priority. Although a language is not an "official language", it is taught in school as a compulsory subject for children or even for adults who need it. Take Russian for example, that language received education priority not only in the countries of former Soviet Union but also the countries under its sponsors as Vietnam, Mongolia. However, education privilege for a language is not always fixed, one language can replace the other in the process. Vietnam is a clear illustration of the replacement process, since Vietnam War, Russian was used as the main language and it was taught as compulsory subject in schools and universities. Since 90s, English has replaced Russian as the main language almost every where: schools, universities, magazines, books etc. In short, a language is called a "global language" when it achieves the official status and education priority in almost every nation, as a result, that language "will eventually come to be used by more people than any other language" How a language becomes a "global language" There exit several explanations about how a language achieves a "global status". Some believe that easy grammar structures, familiarity in vocabulary, and the rich in culture. etc. make a "global language" and language can exit independently. However, the said reasons above only cannot make a language "global", many languages are easy to study in terms of grammar and vocabulary but they are not "global". Here, I agree with Crystal in respect of his point that a language cannot exist independently without a strong power-base (economic, military, politic). As he puts it "language exits only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails". The essential reason to make a language "global" or "international" is the power of its people. Crystal assumes the power here includes the power of military, politic and economic. Look back at the history of Greek and Latin language which were used as international language in Middle East and Europe, we can find out that they became so popular not because of their scholars or scientists but because of their military power [1].

To achieve the "global" role, military power is needed, however, to keep and develop the status, political and economical power are essential. In other words, to maintain the status, a language needs a strong base and force to popularize itself. Hardly anyone wants to learn a language of weak and poor nation with no international

political status. Needless to say, military power, political power and economic power are the three indispensable factors to make a language “global” and to keep its status.

3. WHY ENGLISH DOMINATES AS A “GLOBAL LANGUAGE”?

English is used as an official or semiofficial language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world’s scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world’s mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world’s electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. English radio programmes are received by over 150 million in 120 countries. Over 50 million children study English as an additional language at primary level; over 80 million study it at secondary level (these figures exclude China). In any one year, the British Council helps a quarter of a million foreigner students to learn English, in various parts of the world. In the USA alone, 337,000 foreign students were registered in 1983 Crystal [1]. “English is used as the main discourse in fields such as science, economics, politics and technology and this has cemented its place as the language of global communication”. From the information above, it is hard to deny that English has achieved both official status and education priority in many countries. 400 years ago, the number of English users was around seven million people but the number now increases dramatically Philipson [3]. According to Crystal [1], in the late 1990s, around 1,2 and 1,5 billion people use English. Why English can achieve its “global status” can be explained in terms of its military might, economic and politic power. British military might in 19th century together with its world’s leading industrial and trading role and its political imperialism had “sent English around the globe” and “a language on which the sun never sets”. Moreover, with the development of technology, science, media, share market, medicine... the need to have a common language is required. The reason why English is chosen may lie in the fact that the internet language or business language, airport language and also the language behind the US dollar is English. Furthermore, education systems in English speaking countries are developed, each year hundreds of thousands students apply for education training there. One of the main languages used in United Nations conferences is English, also, the language in world summits or conferences or seminars is English.

Culpepper (1997), cited in Russell claims that today English is used as the chief language in every single way of life such as commerce, diplomacy, pop music, publishing and so on. English is not only the “international language” in business, airport, tourism but also the main language used in education or academic communication as science,

medicine etc, therefore, to master English, in a way, will affect the future of a person. Philipson [3] also shows that as books used in university’s programs are written in English, in order to achieve higher education qualifications, students must successfully overcome the pre-requirement: English. After all, with the power in military, politic to achieve the “global status” and super power in economic to maintain and expand, English now strongly confirms its undeniable dominance as a “global language” in both academic communication and every day fields.

4. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS WHO USE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

In this writing, firstly, I will look back at the languages, which once were the official language in Vietnam. Secondly, I will discuss the implications of English to students in Vietnam who use English as a foreign language. In this part, advantages and disadvantages will be presented. Since the early 90s, the open door policy has brought good opportunities for foreigners to invest into Vietnam, for tourists to visit the country. As a result, English is not only an interest but also a practical and a great demand for many people. Especially in some recent years, English has become a compulsory subject in curriculum at many secondary schools as well as universities in Vietnam, and its study has been considered as an academic pursuit. Books, magazines and internet language are written in English. Furthermore, most of university programs are strongly connected to English language. Therefore, the need to learn and master that language is essential to students who want to gain success in future. However, the need to get the competence level of English is not special if we look back at the history of languages, which once dominated as the official language in Vietnam. A language can achieve the official status in one country if its people have great influence (economic, military, politic) on that country. For a long time, Vietnam was under the conquer of China, Chinese was the official language in Vietnam, the way of thinking and the academic style in every fields as writing, laws, media are dominated by Chinese way. Thinking styles, lifestyles of Vietnamese people were nearly educated in Chinese way. To learn a language is to access and absorb its culture, as a result, Vietnam in a way became a “small part” in great Chinese family. From 1854, being one of French’s colonies, Vietnam accepted French as official language, writing systems, medicine, and science. etc. changed according to French way. However, Vietnamese ways of thinking were deeply influenced by Confucian way, the power of French language as well as power of France was not strong enough to make a dramatic change in people’s mind at that time. After that period, Russian was once considered as official language during Vietnam War and several following decades. Books, magazines, literature works, information, science were brought in by Russian experts. At that time (1980s) the main business partners of Vietnam came from Russia or countries of former Soviet Union, as a result, students as well as adults studied Russian because it was the only way to access to technology and science and to

master that language was the insurance for their future education or career. Russian was taught in schools, universities, hardly could we find a person who could not produce some Russian words. Since “doi moi” with “open door” policy, Vietnamese people have more chances to access to new world with various information, books, high technology and science (which are in English). Furthermore, Vietnam has more chance to do business with other countries, tourism develops, more foreigners visit Vietnam and the language often used is English; as a consequence, the need to understand and use the “global language” is essential. What’s more, with the wide spread of internet and super power of English speaking countries in economic, politic (the USA, the UK, Canada...); it is natural for English to replace Russian and becomes official language in Vietnam. The implications of English can be seen clearly in every fields in Vietnam as science, business, media, and technology, education. These days, people use English as an important tool to access information and to gain knowledge for their needs. For students, English also has important implications to their study as well as their future career. The first and the most significant implication of English to students is to broaden their knowledge. Through internet, books, magazines, media, students have good chance to access to various information, lifestyles and knowledge around the world.

Today, about 80% of new and update information can be loaded down from internet, thus, students can throw themselves in the world of information, analyze, use the knowledge they acquire for their own purposes. With that knowledge, students can have their own, independent way to approach then deal the issues they have. Critical, independent and open thinking, therefore, are built up and developed. Thanks to their broaden knowledge, students will then evaluate their ways of thinking and change or develop it in a suitable and better way. The change in students’ thinking can be seen in their study. Students become more open and straightforward; they can express their opinions, make their voices heard by showing their attitude to issues or even argue with teacher, which would be considered rude and illiterate according to traditional way of thinking. Vietnamese people for a long time follow the Confucian way of thinking which always ask for obedience and ‘teacher- center’ of students. Students had no chance to express their ideas, they had to use the indirect way to talk about a matter or issue, furthermore, what teacher said was considered “perfectly right” and the “power distance” was so strong in Vietnamese culture Pham Ha [5]. For the deep influence of Confucian, students “might be seen as passivity, insincerity and stupidity” by western people Ellis [6]. Therefore, when talking about the positive change in Vietnamese students’ thinking and behavior in recent years we can’t not mention the important role of English in that “wind of change”. The second and no less important implication can be realized in students’ ambition, that is a good position in future career. As English plays a vital role in every field (business, tourism, politic, economic etc.), success or failure in English may be decisive in their future career prospect. If a student masters

or has the competence level in English, s/he will surely have more chance to have a better job or a chance to receive good training in other countries or even power over some matters than other who does not. If a student wants to receive scholarship or apply to school, university in other country, besides the study grade, one of the most important requirements is competence level in English. Moreover, English helps students built up their confidence and activeness. Armed with knowledge and the global language they can make themselves understood almost everywhere, students surely have confidence to deal with the issue or people they meet and ready to absorb new things. Surrounded by western lifestyle, Vietnamese students absorb the practical and active way of dealing and approaching new things. With English students can get more information, knowledge in the field they are interested in. Together with confidence, activeness, thus, the door of new world, good job will open wider for them. In short, with the widely spread in Vietnam, English has helped students broaden knowledge, change the ways of thinking and build up confidence and activeness, brighten career prospect for each student. Although English has made positive contributions to Vietnamese students’ learning and thinking, it also goes with disadvantages. English is one of the main factors, which cause the turbulence in Vietnamese traditional culture. As mentioned above, Vietnamese ideology was strongly influenced by Chinese’s philosophical traditions. The ideas of obedience, politeness and knowledge were built up under Confucian systems. Students should always place themselves in a lower position to the teacher, they should not argue or contradict their teacher publicly they should follow their teacher findings or follow wisely the already-known “proper moral norm”. Therefore, the change in students’ thinking today has made a terrible shock to people, who for a long time are Confucian’s followers, when students can argue with teacher and fight for their opinions. New and sometimes too direct ways of approaching and dealing an issue of students can cause the insulting feeling to the “old generation”. Armed with update knowledge, new thinking way, over-open lifestyle, and practical mind, young people are obsessed by an idea of destroying the old to build the new one. Morality, family relations, and human relations can be ignored to fit with the lifestyle they learnt from western films, books etc. Many young people become more aggressive, they are too far practical to deal things with heart, sorrow and humanity, which was incredible in the past. The relationship between people is no longer in close contact as they are busy preparing plans for their future. They ignore the true fact that the so-call “old culture” or ‘backward’ traditions must have positive and strong base to survive through out nearly a thousand year. The change in young people’ thinking and behavior has led to the sad fact that they are day by day losing their identity. The concept of morality, traditional behavior, culture is seriously damaged. Besides, English also causes unfair competitions. When English is badly in need in Vietnam, people are not examined with their real ability but degrees and English. People who do not have chance to learn English can not get the suitable job or position while other without ability but

fluent in English get all the chances. More and more people enroll in English class to get the certificate in order to have promotion in job or to keep their seats in company. Consequently, the trend to have English certificate becomes popular, and people seem to care about quantity not quality. A large number of people have degree of competence level or advanced level; however, they can hardly produce correct and meaningful English sentences or utterances. To sum up, together with advantages English also causes unsolved problems as tradition turbulence such as moral degradation, wreck in human relationships and inequality in certain form of economic and education. With the wide spread and its usefulness in many fields of life, English has helped people closer in “global village” with interconnected interests in business, politic, benefit, science, technology, military... and its role as “global language” is undeniable. Thanks to the dominance and wide use of the language in media, books etc, people have more chance to get to know about other countries, cultures, literature works etc, thus, broaden their knowledge with the help of common and popular language. Furthermore, English with the development of technology, science, media, will help opening the door to a new, better and dynamic world.

5. CONCLUSION

In this writing, I have discussed about the term “global language” and two ways to make a language “global”, they are official status and education priority. I also have given examples and cite ideas of [1] explanation to the way a language achieve the status. To explain how a language becomes “global”, I follow Crystal’s assumption about three factors that play vital role, they are military, politic and economic power. In this part, I have presented some examples to make the assumption clear. To pursue the issue why English dominates as a “global language” I use the factors that are proved in the first part to compare to English role. By comparing and analyzing the role of English, it is shown that English has met all the requirements of “global language” with the military, politic power to achieve the status and economic super power to maintain and expand it. To illustrate the roles of English, I present the implications of English to Vietnamese students. I have analyzed and confirmed the advantages in terms of knowledge, thinking way and career prospect to student, on the other side, disadvantages of that implication such as tradition chaos and inequality in competition are also looked into.

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