

Global opportunities in online English language learning

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This paper argues that distance English language learning, which enables economic opportunities for non-English speakers, has not been equally available globally. In this article, I will explain that there is a need to learn English remotely for people whose lifestyles and family obligations do not allow them to attend in-person language learning classes. Yet, they need to know the English language to have better opportunities financially and academically. The theoretical framework that I have chosen for this paper is world culture theory seeing the world and people becoming more similar and connected more than ever with technology.

Significance of the subject matter

Inequality is increasing between countries and within countries, and the primary reason behind it is income and economic disadvantages (Hill & Lawton, 2018). Meanwhile, education and higher education specifically are closely tied to these inequalities in that higher education is costly for the governments (Hill & Lawton, 2018). I consider ELL (English Language Learners) part of adults' higher education. Therefore, the inequality that Hill and Lawton explained exists in higher education is present in the ELL realm and needs to be addressed.

Theoretical framework

This paper uses world culture as the theoretical framework. World culture theory argues that different locations in the world have become connected as a result of globalization, and schools are becoming similar (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). In this view of world culture theory, the world is evolving to be more united, equal, and connected. However, it is essential to see both sides of the debate on world culture theory. From an anthropologist's perspective, the world is becoming more divergent as local people create new cultures daily. From a sociologist's view, the world is convergent as the global norms are somehow being dictated either through colonization or culture adaptation of local people. Therefore, people are becoming more similar, and the world is evolving (Edwards, 2021).



In this paper, I take the stance of sociologists toward world culture and argue that the world and its citizens are becoming more similar than different. From this perspective, I say that technology has helped people from other locations become connected and virtually be connected. I also see the English language as a means to connect people, and the spread of the English language has made people speak English as a lingua franca. Consequently, by using one language for business or communication, the world has become more similar than before.

Overview of the spread of English as lingua franca around the world

English has become the “global default lingua franca” and it is spoken among people whose first language is not English, even more than native English speakers (Baker et al., 2018). Before I present some figures of the population of English-speaking nations and individuals, I offer a brief overview of how English gained power as the lingua franca.

More than 1.35 billion people speak English as their first or second language. This number is slightly higher than Mandarin, with 1.2 billion speakers (Statista, 2021). Although Mandarin has a competitive number of users who claim the lingua franca as well, the number of countries which have the English language as an official language (67) exceeds the number of countries having Mandarin (5) as their official language (Lingoda, 2021).

It is noteworthy to review why and how English became the global language. Before English, other languages like French, German, and Arabic gained international attention. Abdullah and Chaudhary (2013) consider adaptability and simplicity the main reasons for English becoming and surviving as the lingua franca. Another factor contributing to English as the lingua franca is the notion of power aligned with the British empire’s control over a vast area of the world for so long. The British colonization has also contributed to the spread of English globally. Having many countries under their power and control, the British Empire wanted people to learn their language. One important aspect of spreading English is that the British Empire invested in educating people with the language in the countries they colonized. Therefore, the subject of English as a second or foreign language emerged. Besides Britain, the USA also has contributed to spreading the English language by providing education opportunities for people to learn the language. As a case in point, in the Philippines, American textbooks were used and taught at school even after their independence; further, after World War II, the USA was the most powerful country with English as the official language, and when helped with the formation of the United Nations (UN), English became one of the four languages spoken at the UN (Abdullah & Chaudhury, 2013).



With that in mind, English is the second or foreign language being taught at schools. English has also become a mandatory subject at schools. One hundred forty-two countries have English as a compulsory subject at school, and 41 countries have it as an elective course (The University of Winnipeg, 2021). In Europe, learning English has become a priority for almost all students at school. Eurostat reveals that in 2019 most elementary learners (99-100%) and secondary school students (96%) have studied English as their first foreign language (Eurostat, 2021). To conclude this section, I should once more emphasize that English has spread worldwide more than any other language, and the need and demand for learning English worldwide are increasing.

English language speakers and economic opportunities

Besides everyday communication facilitators, English has also become the dominant language for business (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005). As a case, Nordic countries have recently moved to use English as the lingua franca. Traditionally, they had used Scandinavian languages. Communicating in Scandinavian languages caused confusion and misunderstanding with neighbouring countries with different dialects and word choices. Secondly, corporations in these regions are interested in cross-border mergers and acquisitions. As a result, they can fully understand the unions and communicate with them (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005).

Another area in which language and economic growth are tied together is the labour market, specifically for immigrants to an English-speaking country. Research shows that when immigrants want to join the workforce in the destination country, their English language proficiency determines the type of job and income they could be earning. The better their English proficiency, the better job opportunities with higher salaries become available to them. This has also been reflected in the job ads, and employers seek to hire people with better English communication skills, both written and spoken. Therefore, the type of jobs that people not proficient in the English language will get are more “silent jobs” where communication is not much required (Alarcón et al., 2018). Therefore, with better English language proficiency, higher-income becomes available to the immigrants to a new country, mostly an English-speaking country.

Another tie between learning English and better economic opportunities happens when individuals gain access to more resources and networks due to their higher communication skills in the English language. Therefore, they make better connections, bringing them higher income and higher employment rates in English-speaking countries for immigrants. For example, one study shows for Muslim immigrants to Australia, if their English language proficiency improves from good to very good, there is a 6% higher chance of not being unemployed (Güven et al., 2019).



Benefits of online language learning

Online language learning (OLL) enables individuals who have joined the workforce and cannot take time off to attend a school. OLL is beneficial as it fits a variety of schedules, and it is suitable for employed learners. With work and life obligations, adult learners benefit from flexible hours, and there is no need to travel to attend school (Appana, 2008).

The second benefit of online learning for adults is learning autonomy. Autonomy or self-direction happens when learners take control of their learning plan. They can decide when to study, where to study, and how to study. Further, they become responsible for making better decisions based on their learning needs. Adult learners can plan their learning goals and are familiar with their learning styles. Therefore, having online classes will provide a better chance for self-directed learning journeys (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2011).

The third benefit is the opportunity to be registered in classes with more diverse learners as they might join from various locations worldwide. Appana (2009) also adds that access to experts in the field might become more available with online education. The third benefit related to learners is the speed at which course material is being shared with them and updated as needed, saving time and providing a better opportunity to access up-to-date course content.

The fourth benefit of online classes is learning digital skills besides course content. Students will improve their computer skills while taking an online course. In a study, Wiener (2003) found out that the students taking an online class in America's Cyber Schools, have improved their computer skills.

The fifth benefit is related to anonymity. Appana (2008) points out that shy learners get an equal chance of participation. Moreover, the instructors treat the students more equally due to proper visual cues. In a case study, Freeman and Bamford (2004) focused on learners' identity in an asynchronous situation. Their research result showed that anonymity helps with participation in discussion forums and also clarifying the course expectations.

The last benefit of OLL for adult learners is the new market. This advantage mainly means having access to new learning opportunities and institutes from different locations worldwide. For example, a student in Asia can easily take a course in North America without relocating.

The spread of online/remote EFL learning opportunities

Many learners have turned to OLL to acquire English skills, given the benefits of learning English as a foreign language. The factors that attract learners are different based on their needs. This section will address the OLL opportunities for people who want to further their studies in an English-speaking country.



These individuals use communication technology daily, and people affected by crises find OLL a substitute for in-school person classes.

The high ranking of the universities with English as the means of instruction attracts some learners to join these universities. There are many reasons why OLL of the English language has become popular globally among those learners who want to pursue academic studies in an English-speaking country. Firstly, some English language learners who would like to attend a university in an English-speaking country prefer to improve their English language proficiency online from their home country before starting their course(s). In the case of learners who aim to attend universities in English-speaking countries, those who academically qualify but lack language proficiency seem to be more interested in taking online language courses instead of sitting for TOEFL tests. Moreover, there are some mental health and financial challenges when an international student moves to a destination university to study. These challenges are, for instance, culture shock, communication issues, rent, and other living costs. However, learners can focus on the classes only without engaging in other daily life challenges when taking online English courses. Finally, learning English online before entering the university even provides the advantage of pre-studying helpful content of their university course. Many English language programs adapt their content based on the learners' future field of study. Finally, autonomy is another skill that learners gain when taking their English language course online while getting support from the instructors (Andrade, 2016).

The second reason why OLL has spread worldwide is that knowing English works as a gate opener to a whole new world of information on the internet. Many young adults who seek access to more news, online gaming, social interaction with peers, and many more activities in the digital world find mastery over English necessary to access all the mentioned resources (Lamb & Arisandy, 2020).

The third reason behind the spread of OLL is learning English even during a crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools and language institutes transferred their classes to online mode to avoid gaps in knowledge. This trend continued spreading worldwide, and some learners are happy that their education has not been stopped even when facing a global challenge. Hazaymeh (2021) claims students were satisfied with their engagement and continuity of learning English online even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, as OLL provides a chance for learners to continue their education, more people have become interested in learning English online, especially in times of crisis.

To sum up, there are many reasons why OLL has spread worldwide, mainly due to distance learning opportunities. However, besides all the motivation factors mentioned above, accessibility to online classes is another crucial factor that enables online courses. Digital access is primarily available with reasonable costs or even publicly available through public libraries or government-supported institutes. However, this



is not the case in global south (previously termed third world) countries where the basics like connecting to the internet through WIFI or owning a device for online classes may not be available (Torun, 2020).

The digital divide and inequality in the Global South

The expansion of OLL is a globalization process resulting from technological advances (Andrade, 2016). However, OLL has not been equally available to people from different locations globally, particularly those in Global South (GS). Two main reasons that cause the digital divide in the GS and GN are inadequate internet access and income equality. Digital equity is defined as not having equal chances of access to internet connection and devices, digital skills, and support (Resta & Laferrière, 2015). Although previous generations of telecom services such as telephone-use became accessible to most people worldwide, the new telecom, specifically high-speed internet use, has not been equally available to rich and poor people (Valenzuela-Levi, 2021). The unavailability of internet connection is evident in GS. For example, in 2016, only 46% of people in rural parts of the GS had access to the internet from home; that figure was 35% in India and even lower in Africa, and unfortunately, “for hundreds of millions of people in rural parts of the developing world, the digital age has not even started” (Hill & Lawton, 2018, p. 603).

Secondly, the income inequality is evident in World Bank data as it confirms that the divide in income has been increased in the GS countries and decreased in GN countries. The disparity in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is primarily the result of income inequality, which also contributes to “lower economic growth” and “lower educational achievement” (Bauer, 2018, p. 334). For example, in Africa, people lose many growth opportunities because of limited or no access to the internet; however, people from the GN have a better chance of connecting to the internet. With that comes economic opportunities and growth (Counted & Arawole, 2015). This division is not purely from state irresponsibility, and it partially originates from the platforms and online service providers who restrict GS access to their services. In contrast, the access is open to most GN users, which shows more inequality in digital access for the GS. Gross national income (GNI) is another economic factor that plays a vital role in connecting. GNI is directly related to the costs for broadband, and therefore, in countries where this cost is more than GNI per capita, access to internet connection is affected dramatically (Resta & Laferrière, 2015).

Discussion

This paper argues that while there are many benefits to learning English as a foreign language in an online setting, many people in the Global South are excluded from these opportunities. Thus, they face inequalities since their chances of learning English as the lingua franca is overlooked by the governments, institutions, and officials. The theoretical framework used in this paper was the world culture theory taking



the side that the world is becoming more similar, and schooling is becoming homogeneous. This has led to more and easier ways of connectivity and growth in communication among people worldwide, having the opportunity to sit in classes together from different locations in the world. English is the world's lingua franca, and more than 1.35 billion people speak English as a first, second, or foreign language. It is beneficial for people to learn English because it helps connect with more people around the globe because of the economic opportunities it brings to people who know the world's lingua franca. Many adult learners want to learn English to further their education, have immigration opportunities, or find a better job. However, they cannot always take in-person classes because of their busy lifestyles and workloads. Online language learning provides the chance to learn English from home without relocating. Unfortunately, as this idea seems appealing, OLL has not equally been available to people in the Global South. The inaccessibility to online learning opportunities mostly comes from poor digital infrastructure in the Global South. The future directions to solve this inequality in online learning opportunities could be made towards providing a global connection that is free of charge and not provided to a specific location in the world.

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