

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND DIPLOMACY

Boymurodova Feruza Ziyot qizi

MA international Education, Senior English teacher, Exeter University

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

boymurodovaferuza555@gmail.com

Abstract

English has emerged as the dominant global language, playing a crucial role in both international business and diplomacy. As the preferred medium of communication across multinational corporations, global markets, and international organizations, English facilitates negotiation, trade, and policy-making by providing a common linguistic ground. This article explores how English functions as a bridge between diverse cultures, enabling effective collaboration in cross-border economic and political arenas. It also examines the advantages of using English, including its widespread adoption, standardization, and clarity, while addressing the challenges it poses, such as linguistic inequality and cultural bias. Finally, the article considers the future of English in a rapidly evolving global landscape, marked by technological advancements and shifting geopolitical power. Through this analysis, the article highlights the indispensable yet complex role of English in shaping global communication today.

Key Words

English language, international business, global communication, diplomacy, lingua franca, multinational corporations, cross-cultural communication, globalization, language policy, language inequality, international relations, English as a global language, multilingualism, corporate communication, language and power.

INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that language is not only an instrument of communication, but the very essence of diplomacy. Diplomats engage in negotiations, persuasion, presentation, and communication, all of which necessitate language skills for the effective conduct of diplomatic work. As Stephen Pinker points out, language is what allows us to build on the work of others, benefiting from their knowledge and collaborating to achieve more than one person can alone. The processes of diplomacy – communicating, negotiating, reaching and formulating agreements, collecting, creating, transmitting and recording knowledge – all depend on language. The League of Nations was the first of many modern international alliances to allocate a special place to English in its proceedings: English was one of the two official languages (the other was French), and all documents were printed in both. The League was created as part of the Treaty of Versailles in 1920, and at the time of its First Assembly, it had forty-two members, several from outside Europe. The importance of a lingua franca, with such an extended membership, was obvious. The League was replaced in 1945 by the United Nations, where the role of the lingua franca became even more critical. The UN now consists of over fifty distinct organs, programmes, and specialized agencies, as well as many regional and functional commissions, standing committees, expert bodies, and other organizations. English is one of the official languages within all of these structures. The language plays an official or working role in the proceedings of most other major international political gatherings, in all parts of the world. Examples include the Association of South East Asian Nations, the Commonwealth, the Council

of Europe, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. English is the only official language of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, for example, and the only working language of the European Free Trade Association. Unless a body has a highly restricted membership (such as one consisting only of Arabic-speaking states or only of Spanish-speaking states), the choice of a lingua franca has to be made, and English is the first choice of most.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The English language holds many benefits as a diplomatic language. For example, it enhances communication efficiency among countries. As English has already been used by many nations, it facilitates negotiations and reduces misunderstandings and improving diplomatic efficiency. The findings of studies show that over 85% of international agreements are drafted in English (Graddol,2006). Diplomats engage in negotiations, persuasion, presentation, and communication, all of which necessitate language skills for the effective conduct of diplomatic work. As Stephen Pinker points out, language is what allows us to build on the work of others, benefiting from their knowledge and collaborating to achieve more than one person can alone.

English plays a crucial role in multilateral diplomacy. In organizations like the UN, NATO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), English serves as a common language, enabling delegates from diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively (Crystal ,2003)This shared medium is essential for negotiating treaties, resolving conflicts, and addressing global issues.

Today economical-powered countries such as China and languages like Spanish and Arabic are influencing the rise of English as a diplomatic language. However, technological advancements, especially AI-powered translation systems, may stop the dominance of English by making multilingualism more efficient (Van Parijs, 2011).

1. Historical Context and Rise to Dominance

The rise of English in diplomacy can be traced to the 20th century, particularly after World War II. The geopolitical dominance of the United Kingdom and, more significantly, the United States after 1945 contributed to the increasing use of English in international organizations and multilateral forums(Crystal,2017). English gradually replaced French as the principal diplomatic language—a shift cemented by the establishment of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, where English became a key working language.

The colonial policies of the Great Britain and the development of theUnited States led to the widespread of the English language between 19th and20th centuries (Kachru, 2005). Since the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which was considered one of the primary treaties, was written in English and French, itespecially contributed the wide use of English (Wright, 2016).

While French remains an official language in many diplomatic contexts, English has gained dominance due to the political, economic, and cultural influence of English-speaking countries in the post-war era. This influence has only grown with the rise of globalization and digital communication.

2. English as the Working Language in International Institutions

English is one of the six official languages of the United Nations, alongside Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish. However, it is the primary working language in most UN bodies, particularly for day-to-day correspondence, documentation, and informal discussions.

Other major international organizations—such as NATO, the European Union, the Commonwealth of Nations, ASEAN, and various global NGOs—rely heavily on English as either an official or the de facto working language. It serves as a common denominator, enabling representatives from linguistically diverse backgrounds to participate effectively in dialogue and decision-making processes.

3. A Tool for Neutral, Cross-Cultural Communication

English's role in diplomacy is often described as linguistically neutral—it is rarely the native language of all participants in a negotiation. This perceived neutrality allows for a more level playing field in bilateral or multilateral talks. For example, during peace negotiations or climate summits, English is commonly used not because it is anyone's preferred language, but because it is the most widely understood and least politically loaded option.

This neutral ground is especially useful in sensitive diplomatic engagements, where mistranslations or linguistic asymmetry could create misunderstandings or be interpreted as bias.

4. Practical Benefits in Diplomatic Practice

The widespread use of English in diplomacy offers several practical advantages:

- Standardization of diplomatic vocabulary and protocols.
- Clarity and efficiency in drafting agreements, resolutions, and communiqués.
- Reduced dependence on interpreters in informal or preparatory discussions.
- Accessibility for professionals trained in international law, economics, and political science, where much of the academic and policy literature is published in English.

Furthermore, most diplomatic training academies around the world emphasize English proficiency, and many international law courses are taught in English to prepare diplomats for multilingual environments.

5. Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its utility, the dominance of English in diplomacy is not without drawbacks. Language inequality is a major concern, particularly for diplomats from non-English-speaking countries. These individuals may face linguistic disadvantages during negotiations, or may require additional resources for interpretation and translation, potentially slowing down their participation or limiting their effectiveness.

There is also the issue of cultural bias. English, as a language, carries embedded cultural values and rhetorical styles that may not align with the diplomatic traditions of other cultures. This can lead to subtle miscommunications, even when the literal meaning of words is clear.

Moreover, an over-reliance on English may marginalize other global languages, including those spoken by large populations (such as Hindi, Portuguese, or Swahili), reducing the diversity of voices in international diplomacy.

6. The Digital Era and the Future of English in Diplomacy

The digital age has further reinforced the importance of English. Most international diplomatic websites, communiqués, online briefings, and even crisis alerts are issued in English first. Social media diplomacy (“Twiplomacy”) also takes place largely in English, as seen in the use of platforms like X (formerly Twitter), where world leaders, embassies, and global institutions communicate in real time.

However, the future may hold shifts. The rise of China, the increasing geopolitical relevance of Latin America and Africa, and the evolution of AI translation tools may challenge English’s unshakable position. Technologies such as real-time interpretation and machine translation could make multilingual diplomacy more feasible, reducing the need for a dominant global language.

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, language plays a pivotal role in enabling cross-border trade, investment, and corporate growth. Among the thousands of languages spoken around the world, English has emerged as the dominant language of international business, functioning as a shared medium for communication, negotiation, education, and strategy. Whether it’s a Chinese tech startup pitching to Silicon Valley investors or a Swedish logistics company coordinating with an Indian supplier, English often becomes the linguistic bridge that makes such transactions possible.

In the corporate world, English is the predominant language of international business. Multinational corporations, trade agreements, and cross-border collaborations rely heavily on English. Proficiency in English is often a prerequisite for high-level positions and international assignments.

1. Historical Background and the Rise of English in Global Trade

The dominance of English in business is not accidental—it is deeply rooted in colonial history, economic power, and geopolitical influence. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the British Empire spread English across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. However, it was the post–World War II economic leadership of the United States that truly cemented English as the global business language.

The Bretton Woods system, the rise of American multinational corporations, and the influence of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street all contributed to making English the de facto language of commerce. Today, English is a working language of major international economic institutions such as:

- The World Trade Organization (WTO)
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- The World Bank
- The OECD
- Regional blocs such as ASEAN and NAFTA (now USMCA)

2. English as a Common Platform in the Global Marketplace

In international business settings, English serves as a lingua franca—a neutral and widely accepted language used by non-native speakers for practical communication. It is the default choice for:

- Corporate governance and board meetings
- Cross-border contracts and legal documents

- Customer service and client relations
- Email, documentation, and company-wide announcements
- International marketing campaigns and advertising

For instance, a German automobile manufacturer doing business in Mexico may use English to communicate internally with its regional offices, even if neither party speaks it natively. Similarly, companies headquartered in non-English-speaking countries such as Samsung (South Korea) and Airbus (France/Germany) conduct a significant portion of their international operations in English.

3. English in Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

Many multinational corporations (MNCs) officially adopt English as their internal “corporate language”, even if they are based in non-Anglophone countries. This decision is not just linguistic—it’s strategic. It allows companies to:

- Standardize communication across global branches
- Attract international talent
- Streamline training and onboarding
- Communicate clearly with shareholders and global partners

A notable example is Rakuten, a major Japanese e-commerce firm, which mandated English as its official language in 2010. Despite initial employee resistance, the move was ultimately credited with boosting international collaboration and competitiveness.

4. English and Business Education

English’s dominance is also reinforced through business education. Top global business schools—including Harvard, INSEAD, Wharton, London Business School, and IE Business School—offer programs in English, regardless of their geographic location. Degrees such as MBA, CFA, CPA, PMP, and other global certifications are typically taught, examined, and credentialed in English.

This widespread use of English in academic and professional training ensures that future business leaders and entrepreneurs are equipped to operate in international environments. Even in non-English-speaking countries, English-medium business degrees are increasingly common.

5. English in Digital Commerce and Global Marketing

With the rise of the internet, e-commerce, and social media, English has become the dominant digital language:

- Over 50% of websites are in English.
- Online marketplaces like Amazon, eBay, and Alibaba use English interfaces to cater to global audiences.
- Marketing and branding strategies increasingly rely on English slogans, hashtags, and SEO-friendly content.

Many startups in Asia, Latin America, and Africa use English to gain international exposure, attract foreign investors, and enter new markets. This is particularly visible in the tech and

fintech sectors, where English is the standard language for code documentation, UX design, app stores, and investor decks.

6. Soft Skills, Cultural Intelligence, and English Fluency

English does more than just facilitate business deals—it also shapes leadership communication, networking, and soft skills. Business professionals who are fluent in English often find it easier to:

- Deliver international presentations
- Lead diverse teams
- Attend international conferences and summits
- Build relationships with global stakeholders

However, English fluency alone is not enough. The best global professionals pair their English skills with cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to understand nuances in tone, politeness, and negotiation styles.

7. Challenges and Drawbacks of English Dominance

While English brings many benefits, its dominance in international business also raises ethical, cultural, and practical concerns:

a) Linguistic Inequality

Non-native speakers may struggle to compete on equal footing with native English speakers in high-stakes meetings, interviews, or negotiations. This can lead to bias in hiring, missed opportunities, and underrepresentation of diverse voices.

b) Communication Misunderstandings

English spoken in global business settings is often simplified, resulting in “Globish”—a stripped-down version that may lack nuance. While functional, it can lead to ambiguity, especially when dealing with technical subjects, legal language, or emotionally charged discussions.

c) Cultural Erosion

The prioritization of English can marginalize local languages and cultures. For example, global marketing campaigns that ignore local idioms or cultural references may appear inauthentic or even offensive.

8. The Future of English in Business: A Multilingual Outlook?

While English continues to dominate, several trends are reshaping the linguistic landscape of international business:

The Rise of Regional Powers: As countries like China, Brazil, India, and Nigeria grow in economic importance, other languages—like Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi, and Arabic—are gaining ground.

AI and Real-Time Translation: Technologies such as Google Translate, real-time interpretation tools, and language AI assistants are narrowing the gap between English and other languages.



Multilingual Workforce Strategies: Companies are increasingly recognizing the value of bilingual or multilingual employees, and investing in language training, translation services, and localized strategies.

Thus, while English is likely to remain central to international business for the foreseeable future, it will be part of a more complex, multilingual global ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of existing sources about the role of English in diplomacy. The study employs a literature review approach to examine historical, political, and linguistic factors on the dominance of English in international relations and business. Key sources include academic books, journal articles, case studies and policy documents from organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Additionally, this research uses case studies of major diplomatic treaties and international agreements, such as the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the United Nations' official language policies, to analyze how English has influenced global governance. A comparative analysis is also conducted to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of English as a diplomatic language business language, considering viewpoints from scholars such as Crystal (2003) and Wright(2016).

Case Study: The European Union

The European Union (EU) exemplifies the practical benefits of English in diplomacy. Despite Brexit, English remains one of the EU's working languages. It acts as a bridge among member states with different native languages, facilitating smooth communication in meetings, legal documents, and official publications.

Case Study: ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) uses English as its working language. This choice promotes economic integration and cooperation among its ten member states, which have a variety of native languages. English enables ASEAN to engage effectively with global markets and international partners.

CONCLUSION

English plays a central role in international business, offering a practical and widely understood medium for cross-border collaboration, communication, and competition. From corporate headquarters and university classrooms to digital marketplaces and international boardrooms, English enables global economic activity at every level. However, its dominance also brings challenges—particularly for non-native speakers and for efforts to maintain linguistic and cultural diversity. English has become an indispensable tool in global diplomacy, offering a practical, neutral, and widely accessible medium for international communication as well. Its role facilitates mutual understanding, speeds up global decision-making, and allows for more inclusive dialogue across continents and cultures. However, this dominance also raises questions about fairness, linguistic justice, and cultural representation in international affairs. Moving forward, the global diplomatic community must find a balance between the convenience of a shared language and the value of linguistic diversity.



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