

English Language Proficiency and Development

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Proficiency in English is a critical component of a successful modern society. English is the third most spoken and most widely taught language on the planet. Commonly used in [over 100 countries](#) by more than 300 million people as a first language and by over 600 million as a second language, English is a “[global language](#),” the “[lingua franca of the modern era](#).” English skills are necessary for any country to fully benefit from global commerce; access the latest science, technology, and innovation; and exert influence in the world. Over [20 percent of published literature is in English](#), followed by approximately 10 percent in Mandarin and German respectively. The United States, in partnership with other Anglophone countries, should do more to further the use of English abroad, especially in parts of the world where English proficiency is not currently strong and in strategic geographies such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia.

Other languages once considered the *lingua franca* included Greek and Latin, but some experts believe that English is “[too widespread and too deeply entrenched to die out](#)” the way those languages eventually did. French was the *lingua franca* of [literature and diplomacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries](#) and is still a prevalent language in parts of Europe and Africa. The negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles in France after World War I was conducted in French. By the end of World War II, however, [English replaced French](#) as the international language of science, technology, diplomacy, and business. For example, the Bretton Woods negotiations establishing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank [were conducted](#) in English. Fast-forwarding to the [prevalence of English on the Internet](#), the English language’s role as a *lingua franca* can be seen as further solidified in the twenty-first century. Today, even in some former French colonies, [English classes have overtaken French classes](#) in schools.

The Benefits of English Language Education

There are several strategic benefits to English proficiency. First, English is the language of business, growth, and economic prosperity. The operating language of [Deutsche Bank](#), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and even the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is [English](#). Multinational corporations in China report [exponentially higher salaries](#) for employees fluent in English, and the elite [French National School of Administration](#) expects graduates to be able to conduct business in English as well as French. With [one out of four people on the planet at least proficient](#) in English, the commercial benefits are also significant. The ability to communicate with the broadest customer base possible requires proficiency in English, and cross-language negotiations in a shared third language can be more successful than relying on either company’s native tongue.

Second, English is the language of education and research. Nearly half of all [scholarly journals](#) are published in English. In 2015–2016, a record number of international students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education—[over 1 million](#)—compared to about 300,000 U.S. students studying abroad. English language skills are required to study in U.S. institutions, as well as in many highly regarded schools in Europe, Australia, and around the world.

Third, there are geostrategic benefits to English proficiency. Countries that want to orient their broader relationships toward the West require a broad base of English proficiency. For example, Ukraine would like to orient itself to the West—away from Russia. At present, [nearly 30 percent of Ukrainians](#) speak Russian, while English fluency is less common. A much bigger base of English speakers would help Ukraine to reorient its international position.

Middle-income countries, in particular, would benefit from using English as a stepping-stone toward economic progress. The United States currently has [47 Bilateral Investment Treaties](#) (BITs) and dozens of [Trade and Investment Framework Agreements](#) (TIFAs); English proficiency could help a middle-income country negotiate and comply with a trade agreement that [catalyzes economic growth and job creation](#). The British Council has published a report that cites [language barriers as an obstacle to growth](#) for one out of five businesses surveyed. With less than 1 percent of the study's respondents confident enough in Russian or Chinese to conduct business, a strategic approach to educating business owners in a common language—English—would enable international competition and cooperation.

Brazil, for example, seeks to escape the [middle-income trap](#). In order to do this, Brazil will need to shift away from its commodity-focused economy toward a knowledge economy with greater capacity in the sciences, research, and technological innovation. In order to accomplish this, Brazil will need to increase English education and proficiency.

Similarly, both social and economic progress in El Salvador would benefit from higher levels of growth in its formal economy. For the nascent tourism industry to grow, El Salvador needs a greater number of fluent English speakers. El Salvador is a [growing a call center hub](#) for North America. However, without significantly higher English proficiency, that nation cannot make full use of this strategic opportunity.

For countries with severely lagging English proficiency—the Middle East and North African countries are generally at the [bottom of the English Proficiency](#) Index list—a clear strategy tailored to each country's needs is critical. English training should be considered a mandatory component of technical training for government officials and a key part of education reform funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), multilateral development banks, and other donor organizations.

Teaching English and an Anglophone Partnership

There are several U.S. government programs supporting English language education. With a budget of [\\$410 million for fiscal year 2016](#), the Peace Corps is one vehicle through which the United States promotes Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) abroad. TEFL programs make up the majority of the Peace Corps' education programs, which account for [37 percent](#) of all Peace Corps volunteers' work. TEFL education includes, in many cases, adult education as well as primary and secondary school lessons.

The U.S. Department of State also has programs for teaching English abroad. The [Office of English Language Programs \(OELP\)](#) is part of the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). OELP programs have a budget of approximately [\\$43 million each year](#), which goes to various grants, scholarship programs, and teacher training programs that foster the spread of English proficiency. These programs are a form of U.S. soft power; sending educated, talented teachers abroad demonstrates the United States' commitment to education while opening new avenues for communication and cooperation, thus aiding in the socioeconomic success of the developing world.

English education [occurs mostly during primary and secondary school](#), alongside the study of the national language or languages. Currently, the United States indirectly supports improving basic education through development assistance provided by USAID, which endeavors to improve the quality and quantity of English language classes, as well as through the various teacher training programs previously mentioned. New technologies can supplement—but not yet entirely replace—traditional classroom learning. Apps such as [Duolingo](#) or [Busuu](#) are increasingly popular, but they do require access to the Internet and smartphones. Distance learning through videoconferencing is also an option, but it still requires access to the Internet, technological tools, and trained, competent teachers.

The for-profit private sector has an important role to play. Successful for-profit programs, including technologies like apps or videoconference classes, could be scaled up with the help of government support. [English First](#), which sends English teachers to over 300 locations in Indonesia, Russia, and China, is one such private company that already has significant reach. Public-private partnerships with corporations that need skilled, English-speaking

workforces are a good place for this kind of scaling up to start.

In theory, the United States could identify areas of collaboration with the Anglosphere, especially the United Kingdom. However, in practice there are limitations on the scope of this cooperation due to fundamentally different guiding principles. The [British Council](#), for example, provides English classes but charges a fee. Furthermore, Australian and Canadian English-teaching programs are less developed than State Department and Peace Corps programs, which makes cooperation challenging. But that could change with some high-level attention from Anglosphere governments.

The [French Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and the [Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture](#) both work with networks of schools, adult education centers, cultural organizations, and online tools in order to promote the study of French and Spanish. Understanding how France and Spain encourage the study of French and Spanish, respectively, could be a worthwhile strategy for the U.S. government to replicate when cooperating with other Anglophone countries on English education efforts abroad.

Americans Must Still Learn Strategic Languages

The spread of English as the modern *lingua franca* does not undercut the importance of English speakers learning other strategic languages. Americans in particular should consider the importance of learning a second language; only [58 percent of middle schools](#) offered foreign language instruction as of 2008. Just as the ability to communicate in English has value for those in developing countries, fluency in a second language such as Spanish, French, Chinese, or Arabic enables English speakers to better understand international issues and opportunities.

In the United States, learning Mandarin as a second language is increasingly popular; at the undergraduate level, Chinese language class enrollment has increased [51 percent since 2002](#). While Spanish and French remain the most-studied languages at the undergraduate level in the United States, they have both experienced falling enrollment ([down by approximately 8 percent](#) from 2009 to 2013), while Chinese has seen a 2 percent increase in enrollment. The Chinese government is encouraging the expansion of language training through [Hanban](#), an affiliate of the Chinese Ministry of Education that has partnered with K-12 schools, as well as colleges and universities, in the United States to support Mandarin Chinese language classes. Schools that have partnered with Hanban receive [\\$10,000 per year](#) for the three-year partnership to train teachers and provide materials. China's Ministry of Education is clearly investing in teaching Mandarin; the U.S. government should consider similar partnerships for English classes abroad. In 2010, over 750,000 people took the Chinese government's [official language proficiency test](#), and the government reports 40,000 students enrolled in over 330 official language-learning centers worldwide.

English instruction abroad can no longer be considered a “neocolonial” undertaking that devalues the non-English-speaking culture. Given the current state of global and economic affairs, the United States should not have any hesitancy in encouraging the spread of English, as English proficiency must be considered a mutually beneficial skill that promotes integration of more countries into the global economy, fosters international understanding, and contributes to U.S. interests in peace, security, and economic development.

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