

Not the Queen's English

Non-native English-speakers now outnumber native ones 3 to 1. And it's changing the way we communicate.

By Carla Power

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March 7 issue - The name—Cambridge School of Languages—conjures images of spires and Anglo-Saxon aristocrats conversing in the Queen's English. But this Cambridge is composed of a few dank rooms with rickety chairs at the edge of a congested Delhi suburb. Its rival is not stately Oxford but the nearby Euro Languages School, where a three-month English course costs \$16. "We tell students you need two things to succeed: English and computers," says Chetan Kumar, a Euro Languages manager. "We teach one. For the other"—he points to a nearby Internet stall—"you can go next door."

The professors back in Cambridge, England, would no doubt question the schools' pedagogy. There are few books or tapes. Their teachers pronounce "we" as "ve" and "primary" as "*primmry*." And yet such storefront shops aren't merely the ragged edge of the massive English-learning industry, which in India alone is a \$100 million-per-year business. They are the front lines of a global revolution in which hundreds of millions of people are learning English, the planet's language for commerce, technology—and, increasingly, empowerment. Within a decade, 2 billion people will be studying English and about half the world—some 3 billion people—will speak it, according to a recent report from the British Council.

From Caracas to Karachi, parents keen for their children to achieve are forking over tuition for English-language schools. China's English fever—elevated to epidemic proportions by the country's recent accession to the World Trade Organization and the coming 2008 Olympics—even has its own Mandarin term, *Yingwen re*. And governments from Tunisia to Turkey are pushing English, recognizing that along with computers and mass migration, the language is the turbine engine of globalization. As one 12-year-old self-taught English-speaker from China's southwestern Sichuan province says, "If you can't speak English, it's like you're deaf and dumb."

Linguistically speaking, it's a whole new world. Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers 3 to 1, according to English-language expert David Crystal, whose numerous books include "English as a Global Language." "There's never before been a language that's been spoken by more people as a second than a first," he says. In Asia alone, the number of English-users has topped 350 million—roughly the combined populations of the United States, Britain and Canada. There are more Chinese children studying English—about 100 million—than there are Britons.

The new English-speakers aren't just passively absorbing the language—they're shaping it. New Englishes are mushrooming the globe over, ranging from "Englog," the Tagalog-infused English spoken in the Philippines, to "Japlish," the cryptic English poetry beloved of Japanese copywriters ("Your health and loveliness is our best wish," reads a candy wrapper. "Give us a chance to realize it"), to "Hinglish," the mix of Hindi and English that now crops up everywhere from fast-food ads to South Asian college campuses. "Hungry kya?" ("Are you hungry?"), queried a recent Indian ad for Domino's pizza. In post-apartheid South Africa, many blacks have adopted their own version of English, laced with indigenous words, as a sign of freedom—in contrast to Afrikaans, the language of oppression. "We speak English with a Xhosa accent and a Xhosa attitude," veteran actor John Kani recently told the BBC.

All languages are works in progress. But English's globalization, unprecedented in the history of languages, will revolutionize it in ways we can only begin to imagine. In the future, suggests Crystal, there could be a tri-English world, one in which you could speak a local English-based dialect at home, a national variety at work or school, and international Standard English to talk to foreigners. With native speakers a shrinking minority of the world's Anglophones, there's a growing sense that students should stop trying to emulate Brighton or Boston English, and embrace their own local versions. Researchers are starting to study non-native speakers' "mistakes"—"She look very sad," for example—as structured grammars. In a generation's time, teachers might no longer be correcting students for saying "a book who" or "a person which." Linguist Jennifer Jenkins, an expert in world Englishes at King's College London, asks why some Asians, who have trouble pronouncing the "th" sound, should spend hours trying to say "thing" instead of "sing" or "ting." International pilots, she points out, already pronounce the word "three" as "tree" in radio dispatches, since "tree" is more widely comprehensible.

Not everyone is as open-minded about English, or its advance. The Web site of the Association for the Defence of the French Language displays a "museum of horrors"—a series of digital pictures of English-language signs on Parisian streets. But others say such defensiveness misses the point. "This is not about English swamping and eroding local identities," says David Graddol, author of the British Council report. "It's about creating new identities—and about making everyone bilingual."

Indeed, English has become the common linguistic denominator. Whether you're a Korean executive on business in Shanghai, a German Eurocrat hammering out laws in Brussels or a Brazilian biochemist at a

conference in Sweden, you're probably speaking English. And as the world adopts an international brand of English, it's native speakers who have the most to lose. Cambridge dons who insist on speaking the Queen's English could be met with giggles—or blank stares. British or American business execs who jabber on in their own idiomatic patois, without understanding how English is used by non-natives, might lose out on deals.

To achieve fluency, non-native speakers are learning English at an ever-younger age. Last year primary schools in major Chinese cities began offering English in the third grade, rather than middle school. A growing number of parents are enrolling their preschoolers in the new crop of local English courses. For some mothers-to-be, even that's not early enough; Zhou Min, who hosts several English programs at the Beijing Broadcasting Station, says some pregnant women speak English to their fetuses. At Prague's Lamea children's English-language school, 3-year-olds sing songs about snowmen and chant colors in English. Now 2-year-olds have a class of their own, too.

For the traditional custodians of English—the British and, more recently, the Americans—this means money. The demand for native English-speakers is so huge that there aren't enough to go around; China and the Middle East are starting to import English teachers from India. The average price of a four-day business-English course in London for a French executive runs 2,240 euro. Despite—or perhaps because of—all the new Englishes cropping up, it's the American and British versions that still carry prestige, particularly with tuition-paying parents. Australia and Britain, in particular, have invested heavily in branding themselves as destinations for learning English. More than 400 foreign English-teaching companies are trying to break into China. On a visit to Beijing last week, British Chancellor Gordon Brown said the Chinese thirst to acquire the language was "a huge opportunity for Britain," which already boasts a 1.3 billion pound English-teaching industry. Says Jenkins, "Owning English is very big business."

To see big business in action, one need only walk down London's busy Oxford Street, where ads hawk instant access to the language of success: DOES YOUR ENGLISH EMBARRASS YOU? BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR BEGINNERS; LEARN ENGLISH IN JUST 10 WEEKS! Above clothing stores, bustling English-language schools are packed with eager twentysomethings from around the world. Ben Beaumont, a buoyant 28-year-old Briton, presides over a class that includes a South Korean business manager, a nurse from rural Japan and an Italian law student. "Do you want a lot of homework or a little?" he asks. The class is unequivocal: "A lot!"

Why such enthusiasm? In a word, jobs. A generation ago, only elites like diplomats and CEOs needed English for work. "The ante on what's needed is going up year by year," says Graddol. "Throughout organizations, more people need more English." In China, the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2008 Olympics is pushing English among staff, guides, taxi drivers and ordinary citizens. For lower-middle classes in India, English can mean a ticket to a prized call-center job. "With call centers, no longer is speaking English one of the important skills to get a good job," says Raghu Prakash, who runs an English-language school in Jaipur. "It is *the* skill." At the new Toyota and Peugeot plant in the Czech Republic, English is the working language of the Japanese, French and Czech staff. Says Jitka Prikrylova, director of a Prague English-language school: "The world has opened up for us, and English is its language."

Governments, even linguistically protectionist ones, are starting to agree. Last year Malaysia decided to start teaching school-level math and science in English. In France, home of the Academie Francaise, whose members are given swords and charged with defending the sanctity of the French language, a commission recommended last fall that basic English be treated like basic math: as part of the mandatory core curriculum beginning in primary school. As it turns out, the minister of Education didn't agree. No matter; French schoolchildren are ahead of their government: 96 percent of them are already studying the language as an elective in school.

Technology also plays a huge role in English's global triumph. Eighty percent of the electronically stored information in the world is in English; 66 percent of the world's scientists read in it, according to the British Council. "It's very important to learn English because [computer] books are only in English," says Umberto Duirte, an Uruguayan IT student learning English in London. New technologies are helping people pick up the language, too: Chinese and Japanese students can get English-usage —tips on their mobile phones. English-language teachers point to the rise of Microsoft English, where computer users are drafting letters advised by the Windows spell check and pop-up style guides. In the temple town of Varanasi, India, Sanjukta Chaterjee says she's astonished by the way her 7-year-old son learns the language, through CDs and video. "Our teachers were strict that we should practice, and speak the language till we were near-perfect," she says. "Now there's an additional technological finesse to learning English."

Schools are becoming more and more creative. Last August, South Korea set up its first English immersion camp. The Gyeonggi English Village, built on a small island in the Yellow Sea and subsidized by the provincial government, comes complete with a Hollywood-style fake bank and airport, where students must conduct all transactions in English. "Through the camp, we want to train capable global citizens, who can help Korea win international competition in this age of globalization," says Sohn Hak Kyu, governor of Gyeonggi province, who started the program. In one class, eighth grader Chun Ho Sung, wearing a long black wig and posing as British heartthrob Orlando Bloom, sweats under the lights of a mock television studio as he prepares to be interviewed. "Do you think you are handsome?" asks the anchorwoman. Shyly, in broken English, Chun responds: "Yes, I do. I am very handsome." The audience of other students collapses in giggles.

While courses like Gyeonggi's sound simple, English and its teaching are inexorably becoming more complex. Ilan Stavans, an Amherst College professor, recently finished a translation of Cervantes's "Don Quixote" into

Spanglish, the English-Spanish hybrid spoken in the United States and Mexico. Writing in the journal *English Today* last spring, Hu Xiaoqiong argued for reorientating China's English curriculum toward China English, incorporating Chinese phrases like "pay New Year calls," a Spring Festival tradition, and "no face," to be ashamed—as Standard English. In countries like Germany, where most kids begin English as early as the second or third grade, the market for English studies is already shrinking. German language schools no longer target English beginners but those pursuing more-expert niches: business English, phone manners or English for presentations. Beginning-English classes are filled with immigrants from places like Turkey and Russia, eager to catch up with the natives. As with migrants the world over, they're finding that their newfound land is an English-speaking one.

With Sudip Mazumdar and Hindol Sengupta in Delhi, Paul Mooney in Beijing, Katka Krosnar in Prague, Emily Flynn and Marie Valla in London, B. J. Lee in Gyeonggi, Tracy Mcnicoll in Paris, Stefan Theil in Berlin, Henk Rossouw in Johannesburg, Maria Amparo Lasso in Mexico City and Jaime Cunningham in New York

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