

# Issues in TECHNOLOGY Innovation

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## The Internet Goes EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communication is central to the exercise of international influence and talking to foreigners is better than fighting them. Communication across national boundaries first of all requires a technology that can span great distances. The Internet and related forms of telecommunication make global conversations far easier, quicker and cheaper than ever before. Secondly, the spread of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) meets the need for a common language and makes it possible for Americans to use their home language when travelling abroad, because others will work in a foreign language in their home country. The third requirement—mutual understanding—is more difficult to achieve. In learning English, people also learn about America, but Americans have fewer incentives and opportunities to understand where foreigners are coming from. Foreigners have not learned EFL to advance America's interests, but to advance their own personal or national interests. If different national interests coincide, then all sides can benefit. But when differences arise, those with a better understanding of others they deal with are better placed to get what they want. The result of this asymmetry is that the international spread of English is increasing the soft power of foreigners who know what they want from Washington—and weakens America's influence with friends as well as potential enemies.



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#### Issues in Technology Innovation

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Political influence can be communicated through hard and soft power. Guns and money give expression to hard power, that is, the ability of one country to force another country to do what the former wants. Words give expression to soft power, that is, communication that makes others act in ways that the former wants without the threat of coercion or the payment of cash. The conduct of foreign policy is normally about the exchange of words; as Sir Winston Churchill once said, 'Jaw, jaw is better than war, war'. When the global economy is in trouble, policymakers try to talk up the dollar and talk down fears of recession, reflecting the fact that the word credit comes from the Latin word *credo*, I believe.

The communication of soft power requires technology, a common language, and understanding. The Internet makes global communication fast and free. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) makes it possible for political discussions to take place in a common language that is not the home language of one or both speakers. Understanding the point of view of others does not spread as rapidly as technology. When foreign diplomats show a sophisticated understanding of American politics it is not because they want to emulate America's debt or global military commitments but because they want to advance their own country's national interest.

Political communication is an interdependent relationship. If each party to a dialogue understands the interests, resources and goals of the other, the language used will not confer an advantage on either. However, communication is asymmetrical if one party understands where the other is coming from, while the other does not. Asymmetries of understanding can create a situation in which a country that has lots of hard power finds it partly or even wholly offset by the soft power of another country's superior understanding.

For half a century the United States was unique in enjoying both hard and soft power. NATO attracted members wanting the benefits of an alliance that offered the assurance that America's military would be used to protect their own boundaries against a Soviet attack. The dollar was the common medium of foreign exchange. The spread of EFL made it easy for citizens to communicate globally by learning a single foreign language and for Americans to communicate their views anywhere in the world without bothering to learn the language of their audience.

Global interdependence is increasing the importance of understanding and, as the problems of fighting terrorism and fighting deficits shows, challenging America's hard power. Insofar as foreign countries understand America better than Washington understands them, then the more America interacts with other countries, the more advantage the others can gain.

## The Internet Sinks the Cost of Distance to Zero

In previous centuries, poverty and illiteracy confined billions of people to face-to-face contacts in a village. Today, the percentage of people living in isolated villages in which no one has a mobile phone or relatives in a big city is now less than the third of the world's population that has a computer in their home. For everyone who lives in a

town with a school, a library or a cafe with a computer, the Internet offers a window on the world. Instead of Internet access conferring status, not having an email address now threatens social exclusion.

Whereas previous forms of global communication imposed charges according to distance, there is no charge for sending an email or consulting a website anywhere on earth. Because the United States was an early leader in Internet adoption, it has simultaneously seen domestic Internet use expand while its international dominance has fallen to about one-eighth of the world's users. For five-sixths of the world's population living in developing countries, the falling cost of Internet access is producing a faster rate of take up than in the United States, where Internet dynamics now is about new uses of electronic communication rather than new users.

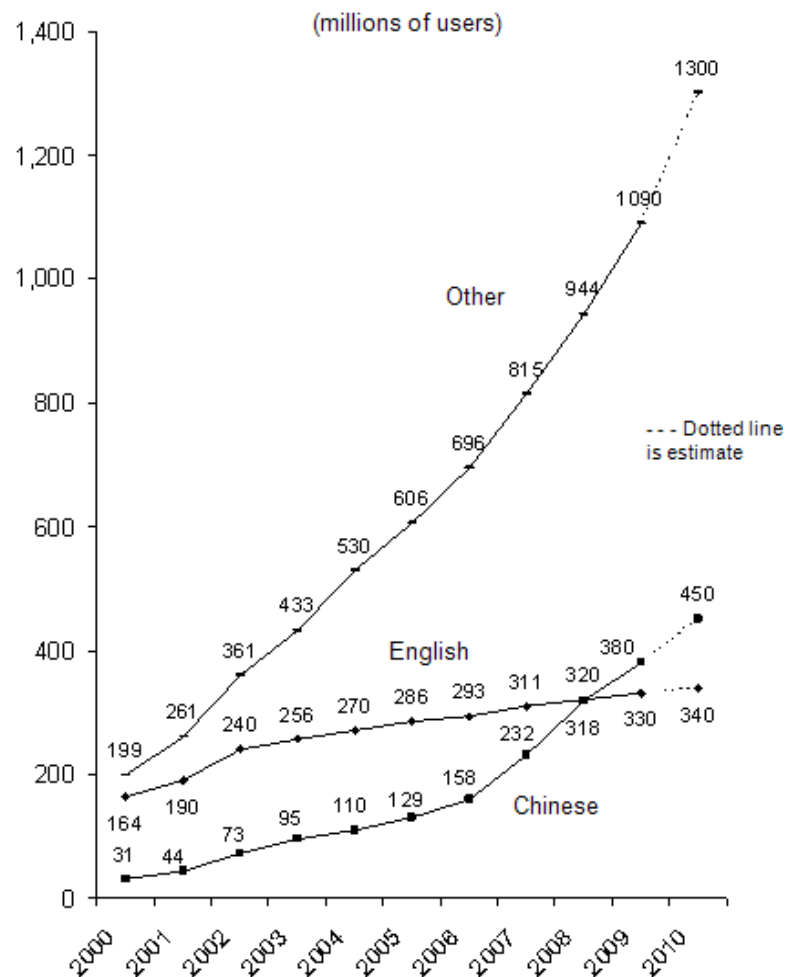
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Internet users have increased by more than 1.4 billion people in the past decade. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates that more than 1 billion people in developing countries are online, compared to 800 million people in developed countries—and this figure is an underestimate, because between the time when numbers are reported to the ITU and they are in print one hundred million more people are on line. The People's Republic of China now has the world's largest number of Internet users, an estimated 375 million—and the number continues to grow. Because of population disparities, poor countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan each have more Internet users than Sweden, Finland and Denmark combined.

Figure 1 GROWTH OF MAJOR GLOBAL INTERNET USERS



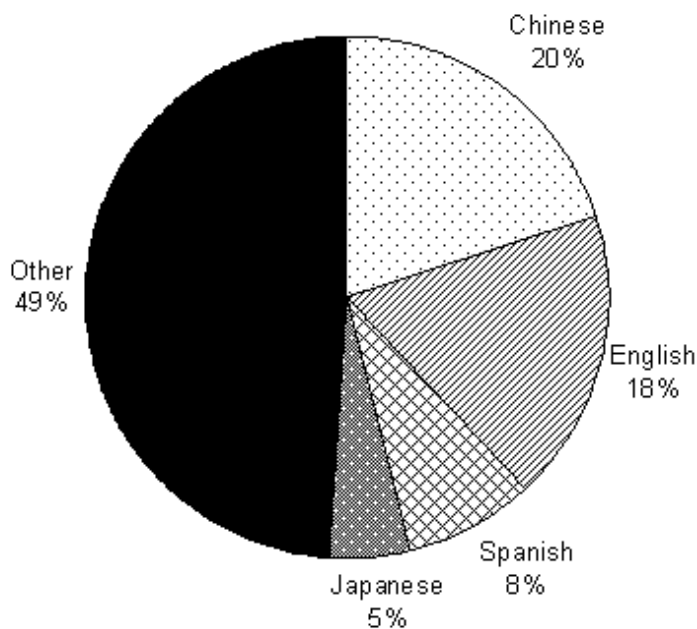
Source: Calculated from national statistics reported to the International Telecommunications Union, [www.itu.int/ITU-D/statistics](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/statistics) with author's updating to take into account substantial differences between national governments in methods and dates for estimating national usage.

## The Spread of EFL

The world's population is divided by languages. Almost 400 languages are used by more than one million people and more than 6,900 different languages have been identified by linguistic experts. Of the ten most widely spoken languages in the world today, only three share with English the use of the Roman alphabet. Chinese in one or another form is the home language of more than one-sixth of the world's population. In India, the world's second most populous country, dozens of languages are in use and none is common to as much as one-third of its population. Hence, even though English is the home language of less than seven percent of the world's population, this places it second to Chinese.

No home language dominates the Internet. One-fifth of Internet users have Chinese as their first language, 18 percent use English, 8 percent are native Spanish-speakers and 5 percent Japanese. Half of the world's Internet users today are divided into users of more than one hundred different home languages.

Figure 2 HOME LANGUAGE OF INTERNET USERS



Source: As in Figure 1.

When a language is spoken by only a few million people, and this is the case for most of the world's languages, learning a foreign language is a necessity if people do not want to live a life shut out from exchanging goods, service, ideas and entertainment with the rest of the world. Linguistic fragmentation creates a demand

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Since the Second World War, English as a Foreign Language has become the standard language of communication between people who do not share a home language.

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for a *lingua franca*, a common language that people can use to communicate with others who do not share their home language. In Europe that language was originally Latin, and subsequently French. Even though it was designed to be easily learned and understood, Esperanto failed to become a *lingua franca* because it was not backed up by money, guns and a major culture.

Since the Second World War, English as a Foreign Language has become the standard language of communication between people who do not share a home language. For example, to qualify for a job at the Asian Development Bank an Asian not only needs an advanced degree in economics but also proficiency in written and spoken English. English is not the home language of seven-eighths of the population of the European Union, but it is the language in which business is done in Brussels by representatives of member states with 23 diverse official languages. While every national government uses its national language to address its citizens, virtually every EU member state that is not English-speaking also makes some use of English on their websites in order to communicate to people who are not familiar with Slovak, Slovene or German or Greek.

Learning English today is the most efficient way to go beyond the restrictions imposed by using a language known to relatively few people, because it offers people a passport for communicating globally. Its use is not confined to dialogue with Americans or Britons. It can be used to find one's way around an airport in Tokyo or to order a meal in Rio. The requirement of English in order to study many subjects at university makes EFL a working language for an increasing proportion of the world's opinion formers.

Statistics about the knowledge of English are very dependent on definition. This can range from having a formal educational qualification in English to the ability to read an English-language newspaper or to understand documents in one's field of interest, whether computer technology or pop music. A French-born vice president of IBM, Jean-Paul Nerrière, has created Globish, a shorthand term for Global English, by identifying 1500 words needed to communicate adequately in international business and travel ([www.globish.com](http://www.globish.com)). While many people knowing EFL cannot use it to discuss last night's baseball game, they can use it for what they want most, getting on in the world, catering to customers in a restaurant or driving a taxi where foreigners are a source of income.

International experts estimate that approximately 400 million people use English as their first language, an additional 400 million use it as a second language, and an additional 600 to 700 million people know enough to make some use of English. The English-speaking world is now divided between a growing majority who speak English as a foreign language and a minority who speak it as their native tongue.

The Internet has not created a cyberspace Tower of Babel. Instead, EFL is taking over cyberspace. The Internet offers a far greater choice of materials in English than in any other single language. In most countries of the world to be confined to a language used by only a few million people is to forfeit the chance of following what is happening in the world.

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Because use of the Internet and knowing English are both biased toward the young, a great majority of Internet users can make some use of English-language websites as well as using websites in their home language. For example, within the European Union the number of people using EFL to access websites is now three times greater than the number of Britons. Thanks to its larger population, Germany has more online Anglophones accessing the Internet than does England.

The spread of EFL means, in the words of David Chrystal, that "English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as 'owned' by a single nation". Moreover, opinion formers with a knowledge of EFL do not have to look to American media for an understanding of international affairs. They can go on line to read *The Economist* instead of *TIME*, the *Financial Times* instead of the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Times* of London instead of the *New York Times*, or listen to the BBC World Service rather than get their news from CNN.

### Whose soft power?

Paradoxically, the more people who use a language, the greater the possibility of "ghettoization", that is, being confined to what can be learned in one's home language. This has happened in Russia, where 40 million Internet users an audience big enough to satisfy almost every need. Geography and history result in less than one in four Russian Internet users knowing enough English to access a website that provides a different view from that of the world in Cyrillic.

People born in an English-speaking family do not have the same pressure to learn a foreign language, because they have the rich resources of the Anglo-American world readily at hand on the World Wide Web. Moreover, it is possible to "free ride" on English when travelling abroad. In Anglo-American schools and universities, the learning of foreign languages is now being crowded out by learning how to crunch numbers or read a profit and loss statement.

Use of a common language is not proof of common interests. The use of English is an instrumental means of getting what they can to protect and advance their national interest. In the great majority of international organisations English is the language in which member states express their differences of opinion as a prelude to bargaining. Anti-American demonstrators hold up protest signs in English in order to communicate their opposition to Washington's foreign policy. Terrorists use their understanding of the United States to spread fear and frustration through symbolic acts that blast claims to American omnipotence.

The great majority of countries lack hard power; a high per capita income does not confer military might or a dominant position in the world economy. But that does not mean that they must be passive followers of what is done by big countries. Instead, they cultivate soft power in order to understand how to find levers to advance their interests and secure niches offering protection from the adverse consequences of actions taken by greater powers. Foreign governments send their best and their brightest to their Washington embassies because understanding

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American policy is important to them.

Political movements can use the Internet to organise trans-nationally to lobby for national governments and international institutions. Greenpeace, for example, not only maintains a website but also disseminates its messages through Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube. Anti-globalization trans-national movements have used the Internet to mobilize a cosmopolitan assemblage of street protesters at meetings of international bodies such as the World Trade Organization and G-8.

For the great majority of the countries in the world today, the choice is between cultivating soft power or having no power. The comparative advantage of EFL-speakers is that they are likely to have a better understanding of American society than their American counterparts are to understand where they are coming from. Greater understanding is a reflection of their need to 'try harder' to understand American politics. The United States government is often casual about how much the ambassadors it sends abroad understand the country to which they are accredited.

China is distinctive in that it not only has formidable resources of hard power, but also the world's largest population. However, it has not yet developed the soft power to complement its strength in money and guns. Chinese is a regional rather than a world language. Its use is limited to the spread of the Chinese diaspora around Asia. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, where Chinese are freest to interact with the rest of the world, EFL is the language of international communication. The efforts of the People's Republic of China to block access to Internet sites using English pay tribute to the soft power of the Internet vis a vis the hard power of a one-party state.

## **America Needs Understanding to Exercise Soft Power**

When Joseph Nye launched the concept of soft power he defined it as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction'. He cited the attraction of American movies, television, pop culture and pop ways as examples. But every retailer knows that to sell what you make requires paying attention to your customers. Whereas in Russia McDonalds makes money by selling hamburgers, it understands that in India, where cows are sacred, it must offer different fare. Moreover, in low income countries McDonalds has found it makes more money selling itself as an up market family restaurant.

Failure to understand the people you are communicating with subtracts from the effectiveness of hard power. The United States is going through a twenty-first century transition in which hard power is no longer sufficient to achieve its goals. The successful toppling of the military power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was followed by a massive misunderstanding in Washington of what was required to establish order, let alone democracy, there. In Afghanistan the United States is confronted by opponents who are not only using their guns to wage a guerrilla war against NATO forces but also using soft power in efforts to convince the population that their interests are best served by siding with them rather than with foreign armies that do not understand their way of life.

To exercise soft power in an age of instant global communication it is not enough to rely on public diplomacy activities that project American values. To build a coalition of the willing means being willing to listen as well as talk and to recognise that American foreign policy must pay more attention to foreigners. For example, Turkey's policy in the Middle East is neither pro nor anti-American, but pro-Turk. Whereas Washington-sponsored public opinion surveys ask about Turkish attitudes toward the United States, Turkish-sponsored surveys ask how their fellow citizens see Turkey's place in the world. Answers show that first priority is given to the European Union and, if membership is not obtained, to links with the Middle East and Central Asia rather than to the United States.

The Internet's creation of a global village gives new meaning to Tip O'Neill's claim that 'all politics is local'. Today, policymakers must consider not only how their measures will play in Peoria but also in Pakistan. To do so means recalling the maxim of another Congressional great, Sam Rayburn: 'If you want to get along, go along'. To do so requires understanding not only where you want to go but also where others are going.

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