

Listen to the controversial Linguistics expert Professor McKenzie talking about the future of the English language.

Optional exercise

Decide whether these statements are TRUE or FALSE according to Professor McKenzie.

1. If you do not know English you can be at a disadvantage.
2. English will soon be spoken by everybody in the World.
3. By 2010 half the World's population will speak English.
4. Competitors at the Eurovision Song Contest will never be unanimous in choosing to sing in English.
5. Native English and Majority English will become the two predominant types of English.

(Answers below)

For many years now we have been referring to English as a global language, as the language of communication and technology. Everybody seems to be learning English and it isn't uncommon to see English being used as a means of communication between, let's see, a German scientist and an Italian politician. These days, if you don't know English, you are in danger of being excluded from what's going on - in education, at work and especially in the world of technological advances.

Very soon English will be the second language of all the people in the world. This is happening while I am speaking to you. We can't be certain of how long the process will take but there is no doubt that it will happen and my bet is that it will happen sooner rather than later.

First of all English will be an obligatory subject on every school curriculum throughout the world. By the year 2010 around two billion people that's about a third of the World's population will speak English as their second language. This isn't my prediction by the way. This is what the experts say.

We can see evidence of these changes all the time. Let's take the Eurovision Song Contest as an example. Whatever we might think of the contest itself, one thing that has changed recently is that now countries can opt to sing in English. In the last festival fourteen of the twenty-five competing countries asked for the rules to be changed to allow them to sing in English. They argued that singing in their own language would put them at a disadvantage. I suspect that in a few years time all twenty-five countries will be singing in English.

And what exactly does all of this mean for native speakers of English? Well, we are already in a minority. If the calculations are correct, then in ten years time, majority speakers - that is non-native English speakers - will outnumber native English speakers by four to one. The two most important Englishes won't be British English and American English. They'll be Native English and Majority English. So native English speakers will be handicapped. We will be the only people in the world who speak just one language. Because, let's face it, there won't be much of a reason for native English speakers to learn a second language. We, and not the majority English speakers, will be the disadvantaged.

As more and more people speak English, it makes sense that they will become more competent. They will start to control more of the English resources being produced and to have a say in what should or shouldn't be included in dictionaries and language books. This might seem far fetched but it is already starting to happen. Let's use Sweden as an example. Their music exports - predominantly English - account for more than thirty per cent of their export income. This exported English is bound to have an effect on English in general. And this is just one small example.

So all of you native English speakers out there, get ready to throw away your phrase books. Whether you're planning to visit Eastern Europe or the Himalayas, one thing you won't have to worry about is the language!

Answers:

1. True, 2. True, 3. False, 4. False, 5. True