

WILL ENGLISH EVER LOSE ITS GLOBAL CROWN?

history shows that no lingua franca lasts forever

This lesson traces English's rise through empire and economics, examines past challengers from Esperanto to Mandarin, and asks whether economic forces and technology could finally end its reign.

C1
BUSINESS
English
Reading



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key B2 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



ROLE-PLAY

decide together as a team



ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson explores English's rise as the world's dominant lingua franca — from British colonial expansion to post-war American influence — and asks how likely it is to stay that way. You will read an article examining historical precedents such as the fall of Latin and the failure of Esperanto, alongside the economic and technological forces challenging English today.



BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 12 new business phrases and collocations confidently
- ✓ Discuss why dominant languages rise and eventually decline
- ✓ Debate whether AI translation could make learning English less essential

WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

What are the main languages that people learn at school in your country?

What languages do you use on a regular basis for business communication?

Why do you think that English is used as a lingua franca in business communication?

Do you believe that English will always be used for this, or will another language take its place?

Will English Ever Lose Its Global Crown?

English didn't start out as a global language — it was once just the regional tongue of a small island nation. But over the 18th and 19th centuries it **rode the waves** of British colonial expansion, which gave English a **foothold** in territories across the 4 corners of the world, from India to the Caribbean, establishing educational systems and administrative frameworks around the language.

After World War II, the United States' economic, scientific, and cultural successes further **consolidated** English's reach across diplomacy, commerce, aviation and science. English has become so prevalent that it is now the most **robust** lingua franca in history, but how likely is it to stay there?

THE STATS LOOK IMPRESSIVE

In 2026, English is spoken by approximately 1.5 billion people, either as a first or additional language, and it continues to dominate international business, science, aviation, and online content. However, history shows that even once-unstoppable lingua francas eventually experience a decline.

THE FALL OF LATIN

Latin, for example, **thrived** across the Roman Empire and the Western World, but eventually gave way to Romance languages such as French, Spanish and Italian. French was the dominant language of diplomacy until the mid-20th century, when geopolitical shifts and American influence began replacing it with English. These transitions took place over several decades and reflected deep shifts in political and economic power, so it is not easy to **topple** a dominant language.

PAST ATTEMPTS TO TOPPLE ENGLISH

History's most deliberate challenge to English came from a Polish doctor named L.L. Zamenhof, who built a fully workable language completely from scratch in 1887 (of course we assume it took him longer than 1 year to invent it!) Believing that linguistic division fostered tension and conflict, he created Esperanto, which had nice easy grammar and word formation rules so that young learners could pick it up quickly without irregular verbs and nouns.

KEY TERMS IN THE ARTICLE

Lingua franca

A language adopted as a common means of communication between speakers of different native languages.

Esperanto

A constructed international language, designed in 1887 to be neutral and easy to learn as a universal second language.

Belt and Road Initiative

A global infrastructure and trade strategy led by China to expand its economic influence across partner regions.

KEY PHRASES

to ride the waves

to have a foothold

to consolidate

robust

to thrive

LANGUAGE DOMINATION: THEN AND NOW

1

Ancient Rome: Latin dominates law, science and religion

2

17th–20th century: French reigns as the language of diplomacy

3

Post-WWII: English rises via US economic and cultural power

4

2026: English is spoken by 1.5 billion people worldwide

He **envisioned** this as a global language, and while it attracted a passionate community and real native speakers, he never managed to **bring his vision to fruition**. The experiment proved **to some extent** that languages gain worldwide **traction** mainly through political, economic, and cultural influence rather than simplicity.



A TASTE OF ESPERANTO

Saluton — Hello

Dankon — Thank you

Bonan tagon — Good day

Mi ne komprenas — I don't understand

Ĝis la revido — Goodbye

Paco kaj amikeco — Peace and friendship

So what are the influences challenging English today? In the early 21st century, many predicted that Mandarin Chinese would topple English as a result of China's rapid economic rise to prominence. However, China's population has started to decline, which may inhibit Mandarin's expansion despite China's ongoing economic and AI influence.

English's strength has always been tied to economic networks, but we are now entering **uncharted waters** in a very unstable world, and economic centers are diversifying. While the United States and Anglophone economies remain major hubs, China's massive market and Belt and Road partnerships have elevated Mandarin's economic value. Meanwhile, Spanish, Hindi and Arabic are excellent candidates as their regional economies are thriving. Could economic diversification lead to a multi-lingua franca world where English remains essential but no longer the only player?

"Languages gain worldwide traction mainly through political, economic, and cultural influence rather than simplicity."

— from the article

MORE KEY PHRASES

to envision

to bring to fruition

to gain traction

to some extent

in uncharted waters

to strive

TECHNOLOGY AND AI

Technology is rewriting how we think about language. On the one hand, English dominates online content and digital interfaces, but on the other hand, advances in artificial intelligence and machine translation are rapidly breaking down linguistic barriers. Real-time translation tools — increasingly accurate and accessible — could one day allow seamless communication without learning a second language at all. Many argue that humans still **strive** to learn other languages in spite of such tools in order to demonstrate discipline, commitment, competence and professionalism.

For now, English retains its crown — but the linguistic future remains dynamic and full of possibility.

 KEY WORDS & PHRASES

to gain traction

robust

to bring to fruition

in uncharted waters

to have a foothold

to strive

to consolidate

to topple

to some extent

to thrive

to envision

to ride the waves

1 BASED ON THE CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

Can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.

1. To imagine or plan for something as a future possibility: _____
 | "How do you _____ the department looking in five years' time?"
2. To have an initial, secure position in a market or place from which to expand further: _____
 | "We already _____ in the German market — now we need to build on it."
3. To make a determined effort to achieve or obtain something: _____
 | "We always _____ to provide the best service for our customers."
4. Strong, healthy and unlikely to fail or weaken under pressure: _____
 | "Our Q3 figures show a _____ increase in recurring revenue."
5. In an unfamiliar, unpredictable situation with no past experience to draw on: _____
 | "With three new regulations coming in at once, we're honestly _____ here."
6. To start to become successful, popular or widely adopted: _____
 | "The new pricing model is really starting to _____ with our enterprise clients."
7. To take advantage of a favourable trend, moving with it rather than against it: _____
 | "We've really _____ of remote work adoption over the past two years."
8. To make a position of power or advantage stronger and more secure: _____
 | "This acquisition will help us _____ our position as market leader."
9. To succeed in making a plan or idea become a reality: _____
 | "It's taken three years, but we've finally brought the rebrand _____."
10. To cause something (often a dominant position or leader) to fall or lose power: _____
 | "A well-funded rival could easily _____ us from the top spot if we get complacent."
11. To grow, develop or succeed vigorously: _____
 | "Our APAC division has continued to _____ despite the wider slowdown."
12. Partially, or to a certain degree, but not completely: _____
 | "I agree with the proposal _____, but I still have concerns about the timeline."

2 CAN YOU ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE TEXT?

1. According to the text, how did English become a global lingua franca?

2. According to the article, why did Zamenhof believe that Esperanto would make the world a better place, and why did it fail?

3. What does the article suggest could cause a shift towards a “multi-lingua franca world”, and which languages does it mention as candidates?

4. According to the text, how might advances in AI and real-time translation affect the need to learn English in the future?

3 FILL IN THE GAPS

Below you can find a dialogue between two colleagues. Can you fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in order for them to fit into the sentence.

uncharted waters

foothold

strive

consolidate

robust

envision

ride the waves

Expanding Into a New Market**MARIA (CEO):**

Daniel, our domestic growth has really slowed down this year. I think it's time we looked seriously at Southeast Asia. If we can gain a _____ with mid-sized retailers there early, we'll be able to _____ a strong position before our competitors arrive. It's something I've long _____ for this business — though I know it also means stepping into _____.

DANIEL (HEAD OF STRATEGY):

I take your point. But let's make sure our finances are _____ enough to absorb a slow start, and that we _____ of this trend carefully rather than diving in headfirst. Whatever happens, we should always _____ to put our existing customers first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you think a single global lingua franca is a good thing for international business, or does it give native English speakers an unfair advantage? Why?

If AI translation tools became perfect and instant, would you still choose to learn a foreign language for career or personal reasons? Why / why not?

THE SCENARIO

GlobalTech, a mid-sized software company with offices in Paris, São Paulo and Shenzhen, is reviewing its internal-language policy. Each office currently works mainly in its local language, causing delays and duplicated work. Leadership must now decide together whether to mandate English company-wide, invest heavily in real-time AI translation tools instead, or keep the current multilingual set-up.

65%

of cross-office project delays are attributed to language barriers

\$380K

estimated annual cost of a company-wide English training programme

18 mo

estimated time to reach fluency targets across all offices

92%

accuracy achieved by the company's current AI translation pilot

In groups of three or four, take on one of the roles below. Using these figures — and today's key phrases — discuss the benefits and risks of each option from your character's point of view, then work together to reach a group decision.

THE CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER

- Believes mandating English is the fastest way to consolidate communication and avoid duplicated work.
- Points out that competitors who have already standardised on English seem to be gaining traction faster.

THE CFO

- Points out that a robust training budget of \$380K a year is a big commitment during an uncertain year.
- Wants proof the AI translation pilot could deliver similar results at a fraction of the cost.

THE SHENZHEN OFFICE LEAD

- Reminds the team that many senior staff in China have thrived precisely because they've never needed to work in English.
- Believes AI translation could let local teams keep working in their strongest language.

THE HEAD OF PRODUCT

- Points out that whichever option is chosen, the company is entering uncharted waters, since no clear industry standard yet exists.
- Suggests piloting both approaches with one team each before rolling anything out company-wide.

USEFUL PHRASES

GIVING YOUR OPINION

"From where I'm standing, this could really consolidate our advantage."

"As far as I'm concerned, we're already in uncharted waters, so let's be bold."

AGREEING

"I agree — this trend is clearly gaining traction, so we shouldn't ignore it."

"Yes, I think that's a robust way to approach it."

DISAGREEING

"I'm afraid I can't go along with you there."

"I don't think this will bring itself to fruition without proper investment."

PERSUADING

"If we don't act now, we risk losing our advantage entirely."

"We need to ride this wave while it's still building."

REACHING A DECISION

"On the other hand, a smaller pilot might be the safer move."

"On balance, I'd say it's time to..."

Group task: Once everyone has made their case, decide together — does GlobalTech mandate English company-wide, invest in AI translation, or keep the current multilingual set-up? Be ready to present your decision and reasoning to the rest of the class.