

The Untapped Potential of English Teaching

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Public Diplomacy (PD) at the State Department shows signs of going through a serious rethink. The push to be more strategic in our programming has taken off. Public Diplomacy officers can rattle off the Integrated Country Strategy goals with the best of them. More rigorous program planning and evaluation may be coming to a cloud platform near you soon (see the excellent article by my colleague Carissa Gonzalez in the previous issue of *The Ambassadors REVIEW*).¹ Social media regulations are in the Foreign Affairs Manual. EducationUSA and American Spaces have slick branding, unified looks, and centralized websites. These new strategies and tools are great, and in many cases, long overdue. However, as we redesign Public Diplomacy for the 21st century (albeit we are already well into that century), we should go back to the basics for a moment, and remember why we're here.

Our PD currency, our “soft power,” lies in the United States’ attractiveness to outsiders. To make our Public Diplomacy more effective and explain its value, we need to start with what attracts people to the United States. That attraction, according to Dr. Joseph Nye, can come from three sources: culture, political values, or foreign policy.² A big part of our job in Public Diplomacy is explaining the latter two, especially when they aren’t popular. But, in the last few decades, as global opinion has shifted in response to world events, foreign policy and political values have not been the most constant sources of our attractive power. Our culture has. Our movies, music, education, and innovation have remained immensely attractive. And the ticket to getting the most out of those things is another piece of our culture: the English language.

If we are looking for an approach that will advance every one of our foreign policy goals, streamline our Public Diplomacy programs, and get the most bang for our buck, we need to take a fresh look at English teaching. Devoting more of our limited resources to English teaching would enable us to address major policy goals and engage key audiences, all while giving people overseas something they already want.

First, let’s look at the global demand for English. While it’s difficult to track the number of English language learners, the British Council estimates there are 1.5 billion people studying English as a second language.³ Native English speaker teachers are in high

¹ Carissa Gonzalez, “The Evaluation Revolution in Public Diplomacy,” *The Ambassadors REVIEW*, Fall 2015, 36-43.

² Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Think Again: Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006, foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power.

³ John Bentley, “1.5 Billion English Learners Worldwide,” International Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Academy, April 5, 2014, www.internationalteflacademy.com/blog/bid/205659/Report-from-TESOL-2014-1-5-Billion-English-Learners-Worldwide.

demand—there are as many as 20,000 openings a month for teachers overseas, according to one Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) website.⁴ The predominance of English in global business is unquestioned, and millions of people see learning English as a way to get ahead. English is the key for accessing an enormous amount of information. English is the language of the Internet. More than 80 percent of published scientific research is in English.⁵ Not knowing English prevents any scientist or techie from tapping into the latest developments and keeping pace with colleagues and competitors alike. In Singapore, English has even surpassed Mandarin as the most popular language spoken at home.⁶ English is hot.

Governments of some of the world's fastest growing economies are pouring resources into English language learning, convinced of the connection between a strong cadre of English speakers and their countries' economic prosperity. South Korea is one of the most well-known examples. In Kazakhstan, where I currently work, the government has an ambitious plan to create a trilingual society—Russian, Kazakh, and English—by 2050. Average Kazakhstanis don't ask me for more musical performances or better content on our Facebook page. They want to practice their English to improve their chances of securing a better job in the future. Promoting English learning is a welcome policy in many countries, and one that is not tainted by misperceptions of US military operations, conspiracy theories, or myriad sources of misinformation about US actions and motivations.

Second, let's consider how English teaching can help us meet our goals and target key audiences. The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) focuses on four key priorities for the State Department.⁷ English teaching can be adapted and targeted to address each one. Of course, English teaching is not the only way to address these priorities, but it is a powerful tool and can make everything else we do in these areas more effective and efficient.

- ◆ **Inclusive Economic Growth:** I've already mentioned the connection countries such as South Korea have made between English and economic growth. English provides access to business markets and increases tourism opportunities. Global English teaching itself is big business, with the United States taking in the most of any country—\$3.7 billion a year.⁸ That number isn't expected to go down anytime soon.

⁴ "The Global Need for English Language Teachers," *Everything TESOL*, February 3, 2015, www.tesoltrainers.blogspot.ae/2013/04/the-global-need-for-english-language.html.

⁵ Adam Huttner-Koros, "The Hidden Bias of Science's Universal Language," *The Atlantic*, August 21, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/08/english-universal-language-science-research/400919/.

⁶ Pearl Lee, "English Most Common Home Language in Singapore, Bilingualism Also Up: Government Survey," *The Straits Times*, March 10, 2016, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/english-most-common-home-language-in-singapore-bilingualism-also-up-government-survey.

⁷ "Enduring Leadership in a Dynamic World," Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, U.S. Department of State, 2015, www.state.gov/documents/organization/241429.pdf.

⁸ "Industry Surveys Highlight Continued Growth in Language Study Travel," *ICEF Monitor*, January 14, 2015, www.monitor.icef.com/2015/01/industry-surveys-highlight-continued-growth-language-study-travel/.

- ◆ **Promoting Open, Resilient, and Democratic Societies:** Language is a powerful vehicle for teaching values and different ways of perceiving the world. The extent to which language influences our understanding of the world is a subject of much debate in linguistic circles.⁹ However, anyone who has ever tried to translate a joke from one language to another knows there are a number of cultural assumptions inherent in our speech. More importantly for foreign policy, teaching English usually involves teaching critical thinking. By no means does English have a monopoly on the concept, but many of the ways we teach English involve critical thinking—everything from story problems to standardized tests. Critical thinking directly aids problem solving, which feeds innovation. It is also arguably an incredibly strong antidote to propaganda. If you are taught to think critically, you learn to consider sources of information, who controls those sources, and what they hope to achieve by sharing certain information.

- ◆ **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE):** This is one of the most complex challenges we face today, and the debate continues about the best approaches to countering violent extremism. However, there is room for greater exploration of the role that education, and specifically English teaching, can play. Hedayah, a UAE-based think tank born out of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, recommends the promotion of critical thinking as a way to challenge extremist propaganda in a report on CVE and education.¹⁰ Additionally, learning English provides economic opportunities, the lack of which have been identified as one of many complex factors leading some young people to radicalism.

- ◆ **Mitigating and Adapting to Climate Change:** Vast amounts of research on evidence of climate change and its disastrous consequences, as well as research on new technology to combat the effects, are in English. However, if scientists and policymakers in developing countries can't read it, how can they act on it?

English teaching also brings us to our target audiences. Youth are definitely interested in English, as are movers and shakers in all fields. English teaching allows us to offer something to widely diverse audiences. English teaching is also scalable—you can target different levels of learners at different points in their language learning process. You can target small groups of learners in classroom settings or huge audiences through online courses and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It's an incredibly flexible tool.

Third, let's look at resources that we already have. The vast majority of our citizens speak English as their native tongue. In fact, we have more native English speakers than any other country in the world. We produce masses of material—cultural, scientific,

⁹ Lera Boroditsky, "Lost in Translation," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2010, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703467304575383131592767868.

¹⁰ Wedad Alhassen, Rafia Barakat, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Ivo VeenKamp, Sara Zeiger, "The Role of Education in Countering Violent Extremism," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation and Hedayah, 2013, www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Dec13_Education_Expert_Meeting_Note.pdf.

educational, business, you name it—all in English. When it comes to teaching English, we also have substantial resources and expertise in how to teach non-native speakers.

The State Department already has existing resources for teaching English. The English Access Microscholarship Program is one such model that has taken us to hard-to-reach small towns and villages. E-teacher and other distance learning programs coordinated by Regional English Language Officers bring us directly to teachers and have multiplier effects. English Language Fellows and Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) offer longer-term support to schools and universities. Devoting more resources to these programs would expand our reach in an area where people want it.

We already have venues for teaching English, beginning with our network of 700 American Spaces across the globe. Granted, not all have space suitable for classroom English teaching, but many do or are housed in institutions where such space is available. Our EducationUSA centers, where they are located separately from American Corners, also have space. I'd like to highlight in particular the model of Binational Centers, where they exist, because many offer fee-based English classes. Other venues could also become at least partially self-sustaining, fee-charging spaces where English lessons are among the most popular offerings. The bureaucratic framework exists for creating a global network of English teaching centers. We just have to capitalize on it.

What More Do We Need?

At this point, no State Department English teaching program compares to the brand recognition of the British Council. We need a bold program to unify State Department English teaching programs under one umbrella and give the British Council some worthy competition. As we have done with EducationUSA and American Corners, we need to create a cohesive concept and brand, rather than have dozens of different programs and names for the same thing. Programs from the Regional English Language Offices and other related Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) programs could be folded into this brand. Posts could choose from a menu of virtual, in-person, and exchange programs that promote English language learning.

Ideally, we should expand our offerings as well. Some of our English language programs focus directly on providing learning opportunities to individuals, like the English Access Microscholarship Program. Many others, however, focus on improving the work of local teachers of English. Both are necessary, and have different degrees of relevance depending on the host country. However, we could do much, much more where it comes to providing learning opportunities for individual learners. We could create a continuum of English teaching programs that would take a student from zero to fluent. We could partner with local media organizations and provide radio and television programs to teach English. The building blocks for creative programming are already out there.

Anytime we discuss adding more resources to one area of programming, we are looking at cutting resources in another. In its last report, the United States Advisory Council for Public Diplomacy (ACPD) noted the constantly expanding menu of PD

programs.¹¹ ECA alone has 84 programs. Who can keep track of that many programs and make sure each is strategically focused and efficiently producing results? It is difficult to say which programs should be cut to allow for greater investment in English teaching, and I will not endeavor to do so here. However, I do believe we need to take a serious look at the programs we administer.

The ACPD report also lists the costs per program participant in its analysis, but it doesn't consider the program cost in terms of audience reached. A Fulbright ETA costs about \$35,000 a year. When looked at per participant, it's a relatively expensive program. But if that ETA is reaching hundreds of students, and building strong relationships with several dozen, how do we factor that benefit into the cost? A three-city tour of Kazakhstan by a ballet troupe may cost a similar amount, and the number of people who view a performance may be greater than the number the same ETA reaches. But is the impact on their lives as great? These are questions we must attempt to answer.

As we work to make our Public Diplomacy programs ever more relevant, targeted, and effective, we need to consider English teaching as an area with enormous potential for all of the above. Teaching English is not only a means to achieve our goals, but should be a priority in and of itself. We have all the pieces to create a powerful, well-respected brand for teaching English. We just need to put them together.

¹¹ "Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting," United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2015, www.state.gov/documents/organization/247329.pdf.