

English Seventeen Years after Graddol: What Now and in the Near Future?

A review of *The Future of English: Global Perspectives*

by Mina Patel, Mike Solly and Steven Copeland

The Future of English: Global Perspectives

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The Future of English is a British Council project aimed at analysing the role of the English language globally. Inaugurated with a publication by David Graddol in 1997, it has become a long-term programme of activity, which includes research and dissemination regarding English language policy, development and implementation around the world with a view to the future. This review focuses on the first publication of the latest team working on the project, who in 2020 started discussing Graddol's predictions from 1997 and 2006, as part of the English Language Research Group at the British Council.

The Future of English: Global Perspectives (2023) was published by the British Council with the objective of updating the data and (re)drawing conclusions on the state of the English language. Seventeen years ago, *English Next* (2006) by David Graddol had pursued a similar objective: taking a "snapshot" of the language and predicting its role in the future. Due to the difficulties that arose during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the publication of the book reviewed here was delayed for two years, as it was originally intended to come out fifteen years after Graddol's concise volume.

The present volume is divided into three parts. **Part 1** introduces a background of 'The Future of English', and presents a comprehensive description of and figures related to the participants, the phases, the funding and findings of this long-term research project. The starting point is the snapshot taken by Graddol in 2006 and reviews his findings "in light of available published data and reports using a unique combination of traditional desk research together with a futures research approach" (p. 24). It provides the rationale behind the "roundtables" methodology adopted, which allows us to get an idea of the complexity of the whole process, and serves as valuable input for those who would like to implement a similar methodology for their own projects. What is interesting about Part 1 is that it covers the project's inception, and it includes the prospective steps and objectives in the years to come, such as upcoming events and publications —this book included— for the wider public.

Part 2 is devoted to the data collected: 14 regional roundtables and the "spotlights", the latter being detailed insights from notable participants on specific issues, and the role and prospect of English in their contexts. This arrangement allows for different readings depending on who is using the book and for what purpose.

As Argentinian teachers, we will focus on the Americas roundtable, comprising Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the USA, a large and heterogeneous territory, which includes native and non-native speakers of English, and with great disparities within each country.



According to the findings of the research, there are two elements that seem to drive the need for English and make a difference in people's lives: access to higher education and economic benefits. The participants of the roundtable discussions stressed that technology needs to be made accessible and equitable in the region, and employment, especially in the tourism industry, is to be perceived as a major driver as well. Some common challenges have also been identified across the region, such as a lack of English teachers, lack of pedagogy on the part of the teachers, and huge distances in a vast territory that make it hard to have a centralized education system. Disparities in each country between rural versus urban, rich versus poor, public versus private education systems can bring about difficulties which, together with the differing use of technology, can result in either increased equity or an exacerbation of these divisions. In Argentina, for instance, teenagers are reported to have been improving their English skills through media and virtual channels, demonstrating the need for introducing those channels into formal school teaching and learning. Countries like Mexico, Brazil and Colombia have experienced a shortage of English language teachers at various levels of education. Argentina is no exception to this. A recent study by Gonzalez et al. (2023) reports on local teachers' working conditions around the country and in the province of Buenos Aires in particular. The survey showed that a great number of English language teachers work in at least two institutions in order to get a decent salary, without the possibility of saving any money. What these situations highlight is that for different reasons and despite technological advances and economic disadvantages, "teachers remain central to the teaching and learning process" (p. 89).

Seven contributions in the Spotlights section summarize the views of eminent roundtable participants from around the world. Spotlight writers agree that English continues to be perceived as a language that offers an "equitable pathway to a prosperous future to all citizens" (p. 134). From Brazil, Ivan Cláudio Pereira Siqueira discusses the future of English in his country, where the teaching of English is compulsory in basic education since 2017, and also in secondary schools nationwide. The National Curriculum Guidelines for Multilingual Education came into force after the exponential growth of bilingual schools and the absence of national regulation. Most of the learners of English in Brazil attend public schools, so it will be essential to have public policies of inclusion. The focus in Brazil is aimed at the search for equality, diversity and inclusion in learning opportunities. One possible way to achieve this, according to Pereira Siqueira, is responding to a need for a national plan that stipulates public policies, reduces inequalities and establishes a student-centered model of teaching and learning. As educators from Argentina, we share his views and advocate for the strengthening of public policies regarding the teaching and learning of foreign languages, especially in our formal system of education. After the discussions in the fourteen roundtables, eight themes emerged in the form of questions instead of statements, and were based on the idea that *The Future of English project* is scheduled to continue for several years to come. These questions are: Will English remain the world's most sought-after language? What role will English play in our multilingual reality? What is the future of EME (English as a Medium of Education)? How will teachers remain relevant in future English language learning systems? Public and private English language provision: who has the answers? Can English language assessment meet stakeholders' changing needs? Can technology narrow the equity gap in English language education? To what extent is employment driving the future of English?

Out of these, there are a few that resonate with us for their relevance in our local context and in terms of the projections pertaining to the Latin American scene. Question Two is related to the role of English in our multilingual and multicultural reality and complexity. Concepts like *multilingual communication* and *multilingual competence*, *flexible language policies at local level*, *translanguaging* and *decolonisation* are highlighted in order to position English as a lingua franca for social, economic and educational purposes. In education, in particular, it is expected that English will play an important role "alongside other languages to provide rich opportunities for learners all over the world" (p. 184).

Question Four poses the issue of the relevance of teachers in future English language education systems and deals with topics such as the influence of technology and the potential risk of teachers being sidelined or even replaced by technology. Based on research studies, the section, unsurprisingly, concludes that teachers will continue to be of vital importance.

Regarding the gap between public and private provision for English language teaching, the book presents an overview which can be useful as a starting point. As an example, we could refer to the class disparity mentioned in the study, which reveals that “teachers who are better qualified and speak better English tend to work in private schools rather than in public ones” (p. 227). But it leaves out deeper discussions about the complexity of educational systems and fails to introduce analyses coming from Latin American scholars (Pérez Berbain, Polastri & Leirós, 2023; Díaz Maggioli, 2022); teachers and teacher associations, among others, which have been producing knowledge regarding working conditions, infrastructure and socio-economic factors which affect the overall performance of students in any subject.

As we have mentioned before, this project was organised along a timeline from 2021 to early 2023, and is still ongoing. Back in 2021 the purpose was to reflect on David Graddol’s publications from 1997 and 2006, which outlined some hypotheses that reflected probable changes in the English language in the upcoming fifteen years. Phase 1 began in January 2021 and finished in April 2021, and included the findings of the review regarding Graddol’s 14 trends. As a result of the work of Phase 1, Phase 2 (June to December 2021) identified 16 projected trends and stress-tested them in a series of 14 roundtable discussions held in global regions that were complemented by the opinions of specific stakeholders, based on their own contexts, experiences and expertise. Phase 3 (November 2021 to the present) sets out a long-term programme of activity, including a Future of English evidence-based research agenda to explore the 8 areas of interest provided by the roundtables of Phase 2.

In **Part 3** of the book, after rounding off the presentation of findings and the data collected, the Future of English Project has selected five research categories to inform policy and practice globally and locally, using an evidence-based research approach with a quantitative, qualitative and mixed data-collection framework for the next 3-5 years. This set of research categories are: providing quantitative survey data, designing and implementing frameworks for evaluating methodologies, language and education policies, building profiles of English capability and measuring its social and economic benefits. Each of them is later developed further, including some lines of research. This is complemented by the description of some of the actions and projects for the improvement of English language teaching and learning by the British Council, together with an invitation for researchers and individual institutions to integrate the results of their studies towards the building of an updated status of English in the future.

In our role as English language teachers in the public sector, we think that categories 1 and 4 contain some of the questions that need to be answered in order to improve our practices and provide a more accurate state of the art of the ELT situation when we think about moving forward into the future.

On the one hand, there is a need for concrete figures and data regarding the number of teachers, students and other quantitative evidence of the status of English in our region, which could help governments design policies to redistribute resources more equally and find solutions to establish a common ground of what we need in our English classes, from CPD to material conditions that help the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, the need for rethinking proficiency levels and the frames and tools used to measure how and what people can use English for in different regions, should be revisited. As more diverse teacher training programmes are developed in different parts of the world, and school curricula adapt to meet regional needs and merge with other areas of knowledge, the idea of one standard measurement of language proficiency becomes obsolete. In this sense, we believe that the

concept of capabilities can become useful to spark a discussion on the process of language learning and its impact in the future.

The last pages of this publication contain the appendices, a comprehensive series of figures, tables, references and surveys that provide more detailed information about the project conducted. A full reference list of the sources, and an index of key terms, topics, authors and countries closes the volume.

This book invites us to think of our future practices in times of uncertainty and change. It provides the information needed to understand how far the teaching and learning of English has come in recent times, and concludes by offering concrete actions and projects for the future that will continue to enhance our understanding of the profession and its impact on our students. By reading it we are reminded of the broader sense of education, one that transcends our classrooms and allows our students to think of themselves as prospective businesspeople, educators, scientists or philosophers. Additionally, we can foresee this book's contribution to guaranteeing our learners' right to be educated and taught additional languages. Finally, as time goes by, we will find in this book a reference point for educational policies not only at the historical moment when it was written, but also when looking for predictions for the future. One constraint worth mentioning at this point is that the role and influence of the British Council in different countries around the world is not the same, and may even vary with time, making it essential to open the doors to projects like this one to other stakeholders and professionals in the ELT industry if the intention is to provide a comprehensive and faithful analysis of the role English. We consider this can contribute to the decentring of ELT, for example, by acknowledging the work of local teacher associations and higher education institutions and inviting them to take part (Padwad. & Smith, 2023).

The Future of English: Global Perspectives is a book that contains evidence-based information, and could become an important source of reference for everyone involved in the English language teaching and learning world: students, teachers, educators at all levels, school authorities and supervisors, teacher educators, materials designers, book publishers, ministers of education, researchers, policymakers, journalists, and educational influencers. In line with the publication's aim to continue research and pursue dissemination, it is expected to impact on English language policy from a variety of angles.

No matter what role you may play in English teaching and learning —from policymaker to school teacher throughout the English Language pathway—, this book can become a source of information and specific data; it constitutes a historical record and a starting point towards bringing the future closer to us.

María Marta Mora
Colegio N°9 D.E. 12 "Justo José de Urquiza", CABA, Argentina
rodrimora1@yahoo.com.ar

Anabella Sauer
Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina
asauer@fahce.unlp.edu.ar

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