

You are here: [home](#) > [prime minister](#) > [speeches](#) > [2008 Speeches](#) > English - The World's language (17 Jan 08)

English - The World's language

17 January 2008

The Prime Minister has announced a boost to English language learning, teaching and training facilities for people throughout the world.

Read the transcript:

The English language, like football and other sports, began here and has spread to every corner of the globe. Today more than a billion people speak English. It is becoming the world's language: the language of the internet, of business, of international flight - the pathway of global communication and global access to knowledge. And it has become the vehicle for hundreds of millions of people of all countries to connect with each other, in countless ways. Indeed, English is much more than a language: it is a bridge across borders and cultures, a source of unity in a rapidly changing world.

English does not make us all the same - nor should it, for we honour who we distinctly are. But it makes it possible for us to speak to each other, to better understand each other. And so it is a powerful force not just for economics, business and trade, but for mutual respect and progress. I don't know how many times I've been told by people in every continent I have visited of the power of the English language to break down barriers to understanding.

For Britain, this is not a matter of narrow national pride. It is in part an accident of history - a wave of knowledge and commerce, which gathered even greater global force in the post-war era, that gave the world the English language.

And government after government around the world is recognising the role of English - ensuring it is taught at primary level as a core skill. In total, 2 billion people worldwide will be learning or teaching English by 2020. Today 350 million people speak English in India and another 300 million in China, with more children learning English in Chinese schools than in British schools. And in continents and countries where there are varied languages and dialects, often the people speak with each other in English - their shared language.

But there are millions of people in every continent who are still denied this chance to learn English - prevented from enjoying many of the benefits of the internet, commerce and culture. And I believe that no one - however poor, however distant - should be denied the opportunity that the English language provides. So I want Britain to make a new gift to the world - pledging to help and support anyone, whatever their circumstances, to have access to the tools they need to learn or to teach English. And my plan is that in the next 10 years at least 1 billion more people in the villages, towns and cities of every continent will have access to resources, materials and qualifications from the UK.

This week, during my visit to China and India, we will start to make our new commitment a reality. I want this to be a world wide endeavour of private and public sectors working together - with broadcasters, telecom companies, publishers, universities, colleges and schools playing their part in opening up English language opportunities to millions.

First, we will announce that the British Council, working with partners from both public and private sectors, will set up a new website offering learners and teachers of English around the world ready access to the materials, resources and qualifications they need to develop their skills in English. Having - with the BBC and the Open University - pioneered the use of the internet to reach many more people on-line, the British Council is perfectly placed to lead this path breaking project.

The new site will enable one to one tuition to take place through VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol), harnessing new technology to share the power of English. It will provide links to a wide range of sites with a wealth of knowledge and creativity in education, industry, culture, and science. And over the next few years, we hope to see the site being used by people in the schools, cities and even remote places on every continent.

Most critically of all, it will put English teachers and learners in touch with their counterparts in Britain and other countries. With an initial focus on China, our starting ambition is to encourage 1 million hits on the website a month. And this will play an even bigger part in the rapid transformation of English speaking in China, supporting the decision of China's government that English language lessons should be a requirement in Chinese schools from age six with 20 million more children a year starting lessons. In Beijing alone 200,000 adults also take English lessons outside the school system. And I believe that, with the right help, we will have a situation by 2025 where the number of English speakers in China exceeds the number of speakers of English as a first language in all of the rest of the world.

Second, to transform English language teaching we will need to dramatically increase the numbers and quality of those teaching and training English. So we will expand the existing framework of qualifications for English teachers to strengthen the development pathway for teachers at every stage of their career. We will encourage the development of new short distance learning courses, building on the success of current qualifications such as Certificate and Diploma in English Language Teaching. And we will work with the BBC, other broadcasters and providers of English language training to raise the number of programmes on the English curriculum accessible via the web - and encourage commercial companies to make available the books, CD's and DVD material that flow from this.

To move things forward immediately I will announce in India later this week a new British Council programme to recruit 'master trainers' who will, in turn, train 750,000 teachers of English in India over the next five years. The trainers will be able to work across the country with public authorities and corporate bodies to achieve and raise proficiency in English for millions more Indians.

And we will go even further to make English language available to the wider world - inviting offers from telephone, telecom, internet, broadcast and website companies to make available through their channels the latest and most dynamic English learning, teaching and practice materials.

So with more teachers, with more courses, more websites and now a new deal involving the publishing media and communications industries, we will open up English to new countries and new generations.

English is our heritage, but it is also becoming the common future of human commerce and communication. This is a great opportunity for Britain - and a measure of the greatness that lies not in empire or territory but through a language that has the power to bring this world of over 200 countries and billions of people closer together, with the versatility to evolve and adapt. We will take up with vigour the bold task of making our language the world's common language of choice. The language that helps the world talk, laugh and communicate together.