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THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION



Frequently Asked Questions



How many people in the world speak English?

Which organisations deal with aspects of the English language?

HOW MANY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD SPEAK ENGLISH?

This is the question we are asked frequently - and it is impossible to give a simple answer. Large figures are often quoted, but the truth is that nobody really knows. Estimating the number of speakers of any language is complicated. Figures for 'mother tongue' speakers can be estimated from census returns, but of course many more people worldwide use English as a second or foreign language. The reliability of census data varies throughout the world, and questions about second languages are in any case rarely asked.

English as First Language (L1 speakers)

English is profoundly dominant (and is often the only language) in over 30 territories including: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Ascension, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Dominica, England, The Falklands, Grenada, Guyana, the Isle of Man, Jamaica, Montserrat, Northern Ireland, St Kitts & Nevis, St Helena, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago, the USA, and the Virgin Islands. In the following countries it is dominant but at least one other language is significant: Canada, the Channel Islands, Eire, Gibraltar, Liberia, New Zealand, St Lucia, Scotland, South Africa, and Wales. Some believe that Spanish will soon be as significant in the USA as English.

Most recent estimates suggest that 377 million people speak English as a first language (Crystal 1997). The two largest concentrations are the USA (226 million) and the UK (56 million). As a percentage of the world's population, this means that 6.2% use English as their mother tongue, second only to Chinese.

English as a Second Language (L2 speakers)

There are no official figures available on the number of people who use English as a second language, that is, people whose mother tongue is

not English but who live in countries in which English has official or joint official status and who therefore use English for official business. The estimate often quoted is 300 million, around one-third of the world's population. English is the official or joint official language of over 70 countries, but in some of these countries the language is little used by the majority of the population.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL speakers)

There are no official figures available on the number of people who speak English as a foreign language (that is, in countries in which English has no official status). Estimates range from 300 million to 750 million. Clearly such figures can only be treated as approximate. There is no way of quantifying the number of people worldwide who may have learnt some English at school.

The English-Speaking Union strongly recommends that anyone who needs detailed information should consult the following book or contact the English 2000 Project at the address below:

David Graddol *The Future of English*. British Council, 1997
£15.99 from The English Company, Western Rd, Wolverton, Milton Keynes MK12 5AF, UK, Tel: 01908 220183, Fax: 01908 220447
Website: www.english.co.uk

Further information on the British Council's English 2000 project from 10 Spring Gardens, London, SW1A 2BN, UK, Tel: 0171 930 8466
Website: www.britcoun.org

Further sources (all available in the Page Memorial Library)

Bryson, Bill. *Mother tongue: the English language*. Hamish Hamilton, 1990

Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*. CUP, 1995

Economist Intelligence Unit. *English: a world commodity*. The Unit, [1991?] - the library has a copy of chapter 2, "The current situation", for reference only.

McArthur, Tom (ed). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. OUP, 1992

McCallen, Brian. *An international asset - the role of the English worldwide*. In Concord (Issue 2 1994)

McCrum, Robert (et al). *The Story of English* by Robert McCrum,

William Cran and Robert McNeil. Faber & Faber, 1986

Putseys, Yvon. *The world's languages - how many speakers?* In *English today* (October 1993)

The following give further details but are NOT available in the Page Memorial Library

Bailey, R W. *English as a world language* edited by R W Bailey and M Gorlach. CUP, 1988

***Britannica World Data Book [annual]* - for statistics. The Economist Intelligence Unit report (see above) uses this as its main source for figures.**

Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. CUP, 1987

Crystal, David. *How many millions? the statistics of world English* In *English Today* (January 1985)

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WHICH ORGANISATIONS DEAL WITH ASPECTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

Societies and Associations with an Interest in the English Language

We receive many enquiries from people looking for more specific information than we are able to give, and this list is designed to refer those enquirers to the appropriate bodies.

ARELS (Association of Recognised English Language Services)

**56 Buckingham Gate, London SE1E 6AG
Tel: +4420 7802 9200 Fax: +4420 7802 9201
Email: enquiries@arels.org.uk Website: www.arels.org.uk**

Purpose: To promote and improve the teaching of English to foreign students and to ensure their proper welfare whilst in Britain.

**Annual publication: *Learn English in Britain* (free), giving details of courses
Chief Executive: Richard Walker-Arnott**

The English Association