



The Evolution of the English Language and Its Impact on ESL Students' Reading Skills in the 21st Century

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1. Introduction

The English language has experienced significant transformations over the centuries, adapting in response to political, cultural, and technological shifts. From its beginnings in Anglo-Saxon to its present role as a global common language, English has changed in terms of vocabulary, syntax, spelling, and pronunciation. In the 21st century, this transformation is hastened by globalization, digital communication, and exposure to multimedia. For students learning English as a second language (ESL), this shift presents both prospects for engagement and obstacles in understanding, particularly in reading.

Reading in a foreign language requires decoding, interpreting, and assessing texts that often embody intricate cultural and linguistic subtleties. With the growing use of informal English, online slang, multimodal texts, and abbreviated sentence structures, traditional ESL programs find it challenging to stay relevant. This paper examines the historical progression of English, the characteristics of modern English usage, and the effects of these changes on the reading abilities of ESL learners in the 21st century.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Phases of English

English has undergone several stages of linguistic development:

Old English (450–1150): A Germanic language that was influenced by Norse and Latin languages.

Middle English (1150–1500): Underwent changes due to French influence from the Norman Conquest.

Early Modern English (1500–1700): Influenced by the Renaissance and the advent of the printing press, which led to greater standardization (Crystal, 2003).

Modern English (1700–present): Characterized by grammatical simplification, rapid expansion of vocabulary, and a growing global presence.



Every stage introduced new words and altered sentence constructions, enhancing the adaptability of contemporary English.

2.2 The Rise of Digital English

The 21st century saw the advent of Digital English, which is marked by the use of abbreviations, emojis, memes, and a blend of different language styles (Tagg, 2015). This development has blurred the distinctions between formal and informal registers, particularly in online interactions and youth culture. ESL students, who are typically instructed in Standard English, often struggle to comprehend texts that combine formal grammar with digital slang or emojis.

2.3 ESL Reading and Literacy Development

In ESL, reading includes more than just learning vocabulary. It involves processing phonology, analyzing syntax, and comprehending discourse (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). ESL students must be able to engage with different types of texts, ranging from classic literature to online content. The presence of informal or mixed forms of English can hinder the enhancement of these abilities, particularly when learners lack exposure to various English dialects in their educational setting.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative meta-synthesis method. Research conducted between 2000 and 2024 regarding the evolution of the English language, the advancement of reading in ESL, and digital literacy was reviewed. Information was gathered from peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and educational reports that investigate how transformations in English influence ESL students' reading comprehension, strategies, and experiences in the classroom.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Lexical Inflation and Vocabulary Challenges

The English language has undergone significant expansion in vocabulary as a result of advancements in technology. Terms like "selfie," "Google," and "influencer" have become widely used. These words frequently rely on context for meaning and are often missing from conventional ESL textbooks, which complicates reading comprehension. ESL learners are required to understand the literal meanings, implied meanings, and cultural contexts associated with these terms.

4.2 Informal Grammar in Digital Communication

The nature of digital communication promotes the use of informal grammar, including:

Skipping punctuation (e.g., "i dont know why lol")



Abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., BRB, TTYL)

Phonetic spellings (e.g., “gonna,” “wanna”)

Although these variations are linguistically acceptable in casual contexts, they can pose challenges for ESL learners when they encounter them in non-academic texts.

4.3 Engaging with Multimodal and Hypertextual Content

Reading in the 21st century incorporates multimedia components, such as hyperlinks, images, GIFs, and videos, which necessitate a skill set referred to as multimodal literacy (Leu et al., 2013). ESL learners are now required to interpret both textual and visual elements at the same time. Many struggle with pinpointing main ideas, grasping tone, and integrating information from texts that lack a linear or conventional format.

4.4 Cultural Nuances and Idiomatic Complexity

Contemporary English is abundant in idiomatic expressions, cultural allusions, and humor, especially evident in memes or brief content. ESL students frequently lack the pragmatic and cultural understanding essential for proper interpretation. For instance, grasping a tweet or TikTok caption typically demands familiarity with current trends or online culture.

5. Implications for ESL Teaching and Learning

5.1 Revising ESL Curriculum

Teachers should update reading resources to feature a mix of formal and informal English. Incorporating online articles, social media posts, and modern literature allows students to engage with authentic English. Instruction should address how grammar and vocabulary change depending on context, tone, and audience.

5.2 Educating on Contextual Vocabulary and Idioms

Vocabulary teaching should extend beyond simple word lists to encompass contextual significance, collocations, idiomatic expressions, and informal language. This equips students to comprehend texts from diverse origins and grasp wordplay or underlying meanings.

5.3 Highlighting the Importance of Critical Digital Literacy

Instructing learners on evaluating credibility, recognizing author bias, and analyzing multimodal content improves reading comprehension and digital skills. Digital literacy has become a vital aspect of language literacy.

5.4 Tailored Reading Instruction

Teachers must evaluate students' reading abilities and offer customized reading resources that meet their specific requirements. Utilizing applications, digital books, and engaging online tools can assist learners across varying levels and promote self-directed learning.



6. Conclusion

The development of the English language, especially in the context of the digital era, has significantly changed the way language is learned by ESL students. Reading, which previously concentrated on straightforward printed materials, now requires interpreting multimodal, interactive, and culturally rich language. These changes pose challenges to conventional ESL teaching methods and highlight the need for creative, inclusive, and adaptable instructional techniques. By recognizing the evolving nature of English and modifying teaching strategies as needed, educators can better prepare ESL learners with the competencies essential for success in the 21st century.

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