

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of English Language and Literature in Global Trade

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricate relationship between the English language, English literature, and global trade throughout history. English has emerged as the dominant lingua franca in international commerce, facilitating communication across diverse cultural and linguistic boundaries. The research traces the historical development of English as a language of trade, from colonial expansion through the Industrial Revolution to contemporary globalisation. English literature has both reflected and critiqued economic structures, documenting the social consequences of trade and commercial expansion. The study explores how colonial, Victorian, and postcolonial literatures engage with themes of economic power, exploitation, and cultural exchange. While English proficiency enhances economic mobility and market participation, this linguistic dominance raises concerns about cultural homogenization and the marginalisation of indigenous languages. The findings reveal that English language and literature together form a vital framework for understanding globalisation, power dynamics, and the ethical dimensions of international trade in both historical and modern contexts.

Keywords: English language, global trade, postcolonial literature, lingua franca, economic globalisation, Victorian literature

FULL PAPER

The purpose of this study is to present the role of the English language and literature in global trade. Global trade has been one of the most powerful forces shaping human civilisation, connecting distant societies through the exchange of goods, services, ideas, technologies, and cultures. From the earliest systems of barter to the highly complex global supply chains of the modern world, trade has consistently required shared modes of communication. Language has therefore always stood at the centre of economic interaction, enabling negotiation, trust, documentation, and coordination. In the contemporary era, English has emerged as the most widely used language of global trade, finance, diplomacy, and commerce (Martins 62). Alongside this economic role, English language and literature have grown into influential vehicles for cultural expression, historical documentation, and critical reflection. The interrelationship between global trade and English language and literature is profound, historically rooted, and continuously evolving, revealing how economic power and cultural influence shape each other over time. The history of global trade predates recorded civilisation, beginning with simple exchanges among early human communities. As societies settled and agricultural surplus increased, trade networks expanded beyond local boundaries. Ancient civilisations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China developed long-distance trade routes to exchange commodities like spices, metals, textiles, and precious stones. These early trade systems depended on shared symbols, scripts, and multilingual intermediaries. Although English had no presence in these early networks, the principle that trade encourages linguistic exchange was firmly established. Merchants became carriers not only of goods but also of stories, beliefs, and cultural practices, laying the foundation for later interactions between commerce and literature.

The rise of European maritime exploration during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries marked a decisive shift in global trade patterns. Improvements in navigation, shipbuilding, and cartography enabled European nations to establish sea routes linking Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. England gradually emerged as a significant trading power, supported by naval strength and expanding commercial ambitions. Trading companies such as the East India Company played a crucial role in establishing English as a language of trade, administration, and record keeping in many regions. Contracts, shipping logs, and commercial correspondence were increasingly conducted in English, embedding the language within global economic systems. Colonial expansion significantly accelerated the spread of English across continents. As the British Empire extended its control over vast territories, English

became the language of governance, law, education, and commerce. Global trade during this period was often exploitative, extracting raw materials from colonies while supplying manufactured goods from Europe. English served as both a tool of economic coordination and a symbol of power and authority. Through colonial education systems, English literature was introduced as part of cultural training, shaping tastes, values, and intellectual frameworks. Literature thus became intertwined with trade, reflecting imperial ambitions while also exposing their contradictions.

English literature of the colonial period often mirrored the realities of global trade and empire. Travel narratives, adventure novels, and colonial memoirs depicted distant lands as sites of economic opportunity and cultural curiosity. Writers such as Daniel Defoe and Rudyard Kipling portrayed trade, exploration, and imperial duty as central themes. These works helped normalise the empire's economic structures while also shaping the public imagination of global commerce. At the same time, literary texts became spaces where anxieties about moral responsibility, cultural difference, and economic exploitation were subtly explored. The Industrial Revolution transformed global trade by dramatically increasing production capacity and altering labour systems. Britain, as the first industrialised nation, became the centre of a vast global commercial network. Factories required raw materials from colonies and markets for finished goods, intensifying global trade flows. English emerged as the dominant language of industrial commerce, finance, and technological exchange. Business documents, patents, and technical manuals were commonly written in English, reinforcing its economic significance. Literature of this era responded by examining the human cost of industrial trade, highlighting issues of inequality, urban poverty, and labour exploitation.

Victorian literature offers rich insight into the social consequences of global trade. Novelists such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy portrayed societies reshaped by industrial capitalism and commercial expansion. Their works explored how trade and economic growth affected family life, social mobility, and moral values (Almalki and Alotaibi 3). Literature served as a form of social critique, questioning whether economic progress truly benefited humanity. Through narrative and character, English literature engaged deeply with the ethical dimensions of trade, making economic issues accessible to a broad reading public. The twentieth century marked a new phase in the relationship between global trade and the English language. Following the decline of European empires and the devastation of two world wars, the United States emerged as the leading economic power. American influence in finance, technology, and manufacturing reinforced

English as the primary language of international trade. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation adopted English as their primary working language. Multinational corporations followed suit, using English to manage cross-border operations and communication. Globalisation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries further strengthened English's role in trade. Advances in transportation, digital technology, and communication reduced geographical barriers and increased economic interdependence. English became the default language of aviation, shipping, international law, and digital commerce. For individuals, proficiency in English became closely associated with employability and economic mobility. For nations, English education was viewed as essential for participation in global markets. This economic function of English significantly influenced educational policies worldwide.

The dominance of English in contemporary global trade has reshaped communication, employment, and knowledge exchange across national boundaries. In international business environments, English functions as a shared linguistic medium that enables effective interaction among people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Nickerson 324). Trade negotiations, corporate correspondence, legal agreements, marketing strategies, and financial documentation are primarily conducted in English. This common linguistic platform reduces communication barriers and enhances efficiency in cross-border economic activities. As a result, proficiency in English has become a crucial skill, often associated with professional advancement, economic mobility, and access to global employment opportunities (Liao and Zhang 296).

However, the growing importance of English in global trade has also generated concerns regarding linguistic inequality and cultural dominance. While English facilitates participation in international markets, it can marginalise indigenous and regional languages, particularly in developing nations. Local languages often struggle to compete with English in business, technology, and higher education, leading to a gradual erosion of linguistic diversity. This phenomenon reflects broader economic imbalances, where powerful trading nations shape not only global markets but also cultural and communicative norms. English literature provides an important space to examine and critique these power dynamics by giving voice to communities affected by economic and cultural marginalisation. Contemporary English literature increasingly reflects the realities of globalisation and international trade. Writers explore themes such as migration, transnational labour, corporate culture, and cultural hybridity. Literary characters

are often portrayed navigating multinational workplaces, global cities, or displaced identities shaped by economic forces. Through such narratives, literature humanises abstract economic concepts like globalisation and capitalism, revealing their emotional, social, and ethical consequences. Literature thus enables readers to understand global trade not merely as an economic system but as a lived human experience.

Postcolonial English literature plays a particularly significant role in redefining the function of English within global trade systems. Writers from formerly colonised regions employ English to critique historical exploitation and ongoing economic dependency. By adapting and reshaping the language to express local realities, these authors transform English from a symbol of colonial authority into a medium of resistance and cultural assertion. In doing so, they challenge dominant narratives of progress and development associated with global trade. In the digital age, English continues to dominate global commerce through e-commerce platforms, online marketing, and digital communication (Tabassum and Yousaf 136). While this reinforces its global status, it also raises questions about equitable participation and cultural representation. English language and literature together remain vital tools for understanding, questioning, and shaping the ethical dimensions of global trade in the modern world.

English literature evolved in response to globalisation, reflecting the movement of people, capital, and ideas across borders. Writers increasingly addressed themes of migration, diaspora, identity, and cultural hybridity. Global trade created both opportunities and inequalities, and literature captured these complexities with nuance and depth. Contemporary novels and poems often portray characters navigating globalised economies, working in multinational environments, or experiencing displacement due to economic forces. Through these narratives, literature provides a human perspective on abstract economic systems. Postcolonial English literature plays a vital role in examining the legacy of global trade. Writers from Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, and other formerly colonised regions use English to articulate experiences shaped by colonial exploitation and economic dependency. Authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy challenge dominant narratives of progress and development. Their works reveal how global trade has often deepened inequalities while also creating spaces for resistance and cultural exchange. By reshaping English to express local realities, these writers transform the language from a colonial tool into a medium of empowerment. The economic dominance of English has also shaped the global literary market. Publishing industries, literary prizes, and academic

institutions often favour English-language texts, granting them wider international circulation. Translation flows are frequently asymmetrical, with more works translated into English than out of it. This creates opportunities for global visibility but also raises concerns about linguistic inequality and cultural homogenization. Literature itself becomes a traded commodity, influenced by market demands and consumer preferences.

Education systems worldwide reflect the close link between English and global trade. English is widely taught as a second or foreign language, often with a focus on business, professional, and technical communication. English literature is included in curricula not only for language learning but also for cultural exposure and critical thinking. Through literary study, learners engage with historical and contemporary perspectives on trade, power, and human values. Literature thus complements the practical function of English by deepening cultural understanding.

The genres of English literature have been shaped by economic conditions associated with trade. Travel writing, for instance, emerged from exploration and commercial expansion, documenting encounters between cultures. The novel developed alongside the rise of capitalism, often focusing on themes of property, money, and social mobility. In the modern era, transnational fiction and global poetry reflect interconnected economies and fluid identities. These genres demonstrate how literary form adapts to changing economic realities. Critics frequently debate whether the global dominance of English represents linguistic imperialism. While English facilitates communication and economic integration, it can marginalise local languages and knowledge systems. Literature offers a space to explore these tensions, giving voice to communities affected by economic and cultural dominance. At the same time, the global use of English has produced diverse varieties and creative expressions, enriching the language itself. This adaptability allows English literature to reflect multiple perspectives within global trade systems.

Digital technology has reshaped the relationship between trade, English, and literature. Online platforms enable global marketing, e-commerce, and instant communication, primarily through English. Writers can now reach international audiences without traditional publishing barriers. Digital literature, blogs, and social media storytelling reflect the speed and scale of modern trade. These forms democratise literary production while also exposing it to commercial pressures and algorithmic influence. The future of global trade will continue to influence the English language and literature. Emerging economies, environmental challenges, and technological innovation will reshape trade patterns and cultural expression. English is likely to remain central due to its institutional entrenchment, but its forms and

functions may evolve. Literature will continue to respond to economic change, addressing issues such as sustainability, ethical consumption, and global inequality. Through storytelling and critique, English literature will remain a vital space for understanding global trade.

Global trade and the English language and literature are deeply interconnected, each shaping the other through historical, economic, and cultural processes. Trade enabled the spread of English as a global language, while English facilitated the organisation and expansion of international commerce. English literature has recorded, questioned, and reimagined the realities of trade, offering insight into its human consequences. Together, they form a robust framework for understanding globalisation, cultural exchange, and the complexities of the modern world.

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