

Name of collection

Why study English language?

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Our ability to use language is one of the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. Communication is central to how we present ourselves, how we relate to each other, and how we operate as a society. When you study English language, you investigate a huge variety of different topics. These range from the history of the language through the way it relates to people's identities to the roles it has in everyday life.

You might look at its use in literature and culture, how it is spread around the globe taking different forms in different locations, how it's learnt and taught, and how it's used in social, professional, political, and creative contexts. All of this will help you in many different careers.

English is unarguably the world's preeminent lingua franca, and it looks as if that position of preeminence is not going to be challenged for a long, long time yet. It is the language of international business. It's the language of international politics. It is the language of science, the language of academia, and if you think of artistic output, consider the number of songs which are produced in English or which have English lyrics in them. Think about literature and how many books are written in English or translated into English.

Probably for the first time in human history, there is a lingua franca, which is owned not by its native speakers, but, in a sense, by the citizens of the world, because English is used, a lot of the time, between non-natives. And this means that the development in the future of the language is, indeed, in the hands of everybody.

Studying English language is particularly helpful in thinking about how communication works. And this is something that's vital nowadays for many employment opportunities. So people working, say, as a teacher within a school context, how do you engage your pupils? How do you get them interested? How do you convince them that this is a really important and significant thing that they're doing in terms of their education? If you're working in business, how well you can write and put across points in a report, how you can be succinct, but be convincing. And that might be something that you're doing either verbally through presentations or in writing.

Medical humanities is an emerging branch of medicine. It's actually taught in some medical schools, and it recognizes the contribution that humanities subjects, such as language, the study of language, can make to medicine, to treatment, to the improvement of health in general. So actually, all aspects of health and illness, the experience of that are mediated through language. You use language when you speak to your doctor to tell them what's wrong. The doctor uses language to try and understand it a bit better.

And it's not just verbal language. It's also signed language, so you will point to bits of your body to explain where it hurts or where you're feeling something strange. The doctor will then write notes, so a source of written language. They will use language when they communicate with other health care professionals, et cetera. And whenever you use language, you say a lot of things, but actually, a lot is also assumed. And language analysis helps you get at the things that are underlying, the things that are assumed, and the things that you otherwise wouldn't necessarily know. The doctor might not even notice it.

I'm particular interested in language in education, so the obvious context for that is teaching. In England alone, there are 8 million students in our schools, and at the primary level, everybody needs to know about how English language functions. Worldwide, there are an estimated 1.5 billion learners of English in schools and other language institutions at some level. These institutions employ some 250,000 native speakers. And in China and South Korea alone, currently, about 1,000 people a month are being employed to teach English.

So clearly, a knowledge of English language studies is a very good route to employment. My own research has focused mainly on English as an additional language, EAL. And so the applications of that and the implications for that are that, hopefully, teachers will be better able to support their students' learning of how language actually works in their subject areas. And for the students, that should mean that they are able to do better in their exams, and then, therefore, able to take up a proper active part in society.