Theorising English as a Linguistic Capability: A Look at the Experiences of Economically Disadvantaged Higher Education Students in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The current study used the capability approach (CA) to explore the English learning experiences of 10 economically vulnerable higher education (HE) students in Colombia in order to better conceptualise English from a capability perspective. In doing so,

this paper builds on the empirical and theoretical work of capability scholars which has looked at the role of English in educational settings. It highlights the importance of viewing linguistic capabilities as inchoative since viewing them as fully formed can obscure injustices. These injustices can include poor quality English language education (ELE), an unfavourable financial situation, and a lack of opportunities for exposure to and practice of English. This last-mentioned injustice foregrounds another important dimension of linguistic capabilities: their inter-subjective, relational nature. To aid in this conceptualisation, the paper also draws on Phillipson's **[Q1]**[1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press] theory of linguistic imperialism to better illustrate how English is implicated in asymmetrical power relations which give rise to oppression and domination. However, this paper also shows how some injustices can be navigated by educationally resilient individuals. The findings of this thesis are therefore of interest not only to language policy experts and other language education stakeholders in developing contexts, but also to capability scholars. **[Q2]**

KEYWORDS

~~Education~~
- Capability Approach
- English
- Colombia

~~Linguistic~~
- higher education
- language
- linguistic imperialism**[Q3]**

Introduction

Mastery of the English language forms an important component of knowledge capital in a globalised world and is perceived by many governments in the global South as key to their development (Rassool 2013). In Latin America, for example, many governments have prioritised initiatives which promote ELE in their respective countries. These initiatives include the *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo*[1] in Colombia; *Inglés Abre Puertas*[2] in Chile; and *Inglés, Puertas al Mundo*[3] in Perú. These initiatives also extend to HE systems in the region. For example, HE graduates in Colombia are expected to achieve an intermediate level of competence in a second language (typically English) (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia*[4] [MEN] 2015); while in Peru second language education, which again usually means English, is compulsory for undergraduates (*Ministerio de Educación*[5], Perú 2015).

Despite its pervasiveness in educational systems in the global South, English and the role it can play in human flourishing remains undertheorised from a CA perspective. Building on the available capability literature on English, the current paper shows how this language can be operationalised in capability studies which examine the effects of English in developing contexts. Additionally, this paper highlights the value from a social justice perspective of conceptualising language capabilities as inchoative, relational, and unique to every individual. In order to do so, it draws on empirical research into the obstacles faced by economically vulnerable Colombians when developing their English skills during their HE careers. The empirically informed argument I make here aims to advance current thinking about linguistic capabilities in general and the role of English in human flourishing in the global South in particular.

The Capability Approach, English, and Development

How can employing the CA advance current thinking about the relationship between English and development? This section outlines foundational concepts from the CA and highlights how they can be used to improve our understanding of the interface between English and human flourishing. The first two core concepts are capabilities and functionings. According to Sen (1987, 36),

> A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they *are* different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead.

While the constructs of capabilities and functionings are often conflated in the literature, as the following example illustrates, whether we focus on the former or the latter may lead to different conclusions. Let us imagine a rich student (Rodrigo) and a poor student (Deisy) who attend English classes during their HE studies. An exam taken prior to graduation indicates that they have both attained the same level of functioning in English. This information is important as it can be used to make inferences not only about the quality of ELE that each student received (Walker 2020), but also about the level of maturity of their respective capabilities to communicate in English, which, like other capabilities, cannot be observed directly (Sen 1992). However, looking only at achievements can provide a distorted view of individual well-being and obscure sources of disadvantage as similar

functionings may conceal quite different sets of capabilities (Walker 2020). For instance, information about capabilities might reveal that Rodrigo enjoyed real opportunities to develop his English language skills such as a supportive family environment, reliable internet access, and money to spend on learning materials, while Deisy managed to achieve the same level of functioning as her richer classmate despite being denied these opportunities. From a policy perspective, interventions would therefore focus on ensuring both students enjoy the same opportunities (or capabilities) to develop their competence in English irrespective of their achieved functionings (Robeyns 2018).

As Sen's above characterisation of capabilities as positive freedoms implies, human agency is also central to the CA. While Sen's earlier writings maintain that our agency can be advanced by someone acting on our behalf (Crocker and Robeyns 2009 **[Q4]**), this is at odds with his (1999, 52–53) later claim that "people have to be seen … as being actively involved … in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs". In line with this more recent understanding of an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change" (Sen 1999, 19), and consistent with Sen's conceptualisation of capabilities as "notions of freedom, in the positive sense", this paper holds that for our agency to be advanced, it is not enough to have our goals realised: we must also play an active part in their realisation (Crocker and Robeyns 2009). To illustrate the importance of being clear on our account of agency, let us return to the case of Rodrigo and Deisy. An analysis of their conditions of choice might reveal that learning English expanded Rodrigo's agency since he chose to study this subject as an elective, but can we say the same of Deisy, whose English classes were mandatory? In keeping with Sen's initial account of agency, one could argue that even though Deisy had no say in whether she learned a foreign language or not, her agency was advanced as this is something she would have chosen had she been given the option (Crocker and Robeyns 2009). Yet if we take the view, as this paper does, that "human agency (rather than organisations such as markets or governments)" should be "at the centre of the stage" (Sen 2002, 6), then Deisy's agency was not advanced as she had no say – either directly or indirectly – in whether to study English or not. Thus, according to Sen's later, normative understanding of agency, while Rodrigo's agency was enhanced by studying English, Deisy's agency was constrained (Crocker and Robeyns 2009). In other words, we would not need to know whether or not learning English was a valued agency goal for Deisy; knowing that it was not freely chosen would be sufficient to conclude that it does not advance her agency.

Despite the centrality of agency to the CA, as Sen (1999, xi–xii) explains, ~~this~~ agency "is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us". These social arrangements or influences are referred to as "conversion factors", which "determine the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning" (Robeyns 2017, 45). These factors, which can be both enabling and constraining, show how the CA accounts for the influence of internal features and external conditions on individuals' well-being (Wilson-Strydom 2017; Calitz 2019). While a distinction can be drawn between different types of conversion factors, "we have good reasons to expect interdependencies between the types" (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018, 870). To illustrate this, Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) give the example of reading skills – a personal conversion factor – which depends for its development on schooling opportunities, but a more relevant example would be foreign language competence. As with reading skills, this conversion factor, which can also be described as personal or internal, requires interaction with other speakers of this language for its development. As such, in some cases the distinction between personal/internal and social/external conversion factors may not be particularly helpful, and it may be more accurate to speak of interdependent or interactive conversion factors. Leaving this issue aside, the construct of conversion factors more generally is useful in the context of the current study for drawing attention to the challenges that individuals face when learning English. An understanding of these challenges can provide particularly useful information to policymakers and practitioners seeking to equalise opportunities for individuals to acquire the English linguistic capability (Wilson-Strydom 2015a).

While conversion factors may "qualify and constrain", they do not determine people's capabilities since they can be navigated by agentic individuals, especially in the presence of enabling factors which allow them to draw on their capability for educational resilience (Calitz 2019; Wilson-Strydom 2017). This capability, which entails being able "to negotiate risks, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints" (Wilson-Strydom 2015b, 118), has been identified as instrumental in negotiating obstacles to capability expansion (Wilson-Strydom 2017). Indeed, in the absence of resilience, individuals may come to accept their lot and cease striving for a better life (Nussbaum 2011). Importantly, for Wilson-Strydom (2017) resilient responses arise from the interplay between agency and the social environment. This understanding helps us to move beyond a neoliberal framing of failure as the sole responsibility of the individual since it also acknowledges the role of contextual factors in shaping resilience (Wilson-Strydom 2017).

The final capabilities construct which can be employed to yield fresh insights into the relationship between English and human flourishing is ~~known as~~ "adaptive preference[s]" (Sen 2002, 80). These arise from adverse conditions which lead individuals to limit their horizons to their available options. A focus on adaptive preferences is important since they may help explain~~account for~~ why people fail to navigate obstacles to the development of the English linguistic capability. For example, unable to access quality ELE, individuals may simply adapt to this reality and give up on their goal of becoming proficient in English. Evidence of adaptive preferences would also point to capability deprivation, which, as Calitz (2019, 55) highlights, "can contribute towards an argument for structural transformation".

Having looked at core components of the CA and how these can be brought to bear to analyse the contribution of English to human flourishing, I now turn to the extant capability literature on English in order to better conceptualise the role that this language can play in human development from a capability perspective.

Theorising English as a Linguistic Capability

So what are capability theorists' views on the contribution of hegemonic languages such as English to human flourishing? For Nussbaum (2016), teaching the dominant world languages is necessary because of the importance of a global perspective, but she also suggests that learning a language is useful in multilingual societies for promoting a "multicultural education" (2006, 390) where the language in question forms part of the cultural heritage of that country. Similarly, Sen (2010), referring to language policy in India, is supportive of the official status of English in his home country since it helps "economic integration as well as international relations" (Timestamp, 1:00), which indicates that it may contribute to development in other contexts. As for the role of languages such as English in early schooling more specifically, Sen (2010) acknowledges the benefits of learning in one's mother tongue~~first language~~ (L1), but also mentions that "there's also things to be learned from doing early schooling in a way that gives access to the world markets" (Timestamp: 1:44). Although these comments might suggest that the value of language for Sen is largely instrumental, he also highlights that language is central to human existence and our identity and advocates a pragmatic approach to linguistic policy (Sen 2010).

In contrast to his optimistic view of the role of English in India, in his work with Drèze and Sen (2013, 132), Sen takes a more critical stance:

> There are also other important social divisions in India, often reinforcing those already discussed. For instance, there is the division between those who know English and those who don't… Indeed, knowing English opens all sorts of doors in India, even to someone who may not be particularly qualified otherwise. English is the language of the courts … of higher education, of modern business, of high-level official documents, and to a large extent still, of the Internet. This division is increasingly reflected in the schooling system, split as it is between privileged "English-medium" schools and the rest. It is a major barrier against the integration of all children in a common schooling system. Here again, one form of inequality stands in the way of tackling another.

Sen, therefore, is cognisant of the fact that English limits opportunities for some and expands opportunities for others, but his use of the phrase "English opens doors" suggests that English can also play a positive role in development, at least in India.

More substantial theoretical contributions which have explored issues related to English and development from a capability point of view have tended to focus on the role of English as a medium of instruction. Tikly (2016) for example highlights how a lack of competence in the language of instruction can stifle development of Nussbaum's list of central capabilities (which, incidentally, makes no explicit reference to language). Not only does this underscore the importance of L1 instruction in early years education, but it also shows how language can be fundamental to ~~an individual's~~ well-being (Tikly 2016). Another important contribution that Tikly's (2016, 409) research makes is to illustrate the value of postcolonial theory for interrogating "the continuing hegemony of colonial languages in the context of contemporary globalisation and the marginalisation and under-development of indigenous languages". This critical perspective, argues Tikly (2016, 409), can also direct our attention to historically constituted injustices which limit access to hegemonic languages such as English to "postcolonial elites". As for Mohanty, his conceptual work has drawn on Nussbaum's and Sen's ideas to look at the role of English in multilingual education in India. One key contribution he makes in this regard is to view language, and by extension, English, as "an enabling factor for access to quality education" (2008, 103), which suggests that its absence can lead to "unfreedom" (118). In other words, just as illiteracy can stifle freedom so too can a lack of English skills (Mohanty 2017). Mohanty (2017) also draws on the CA to show how the relationship between English and development has been exaggerated, and how the global spread of English, which is promoted by interests in the global North, is implicated in the marginalisation of local languages and the reproduction of inequality.

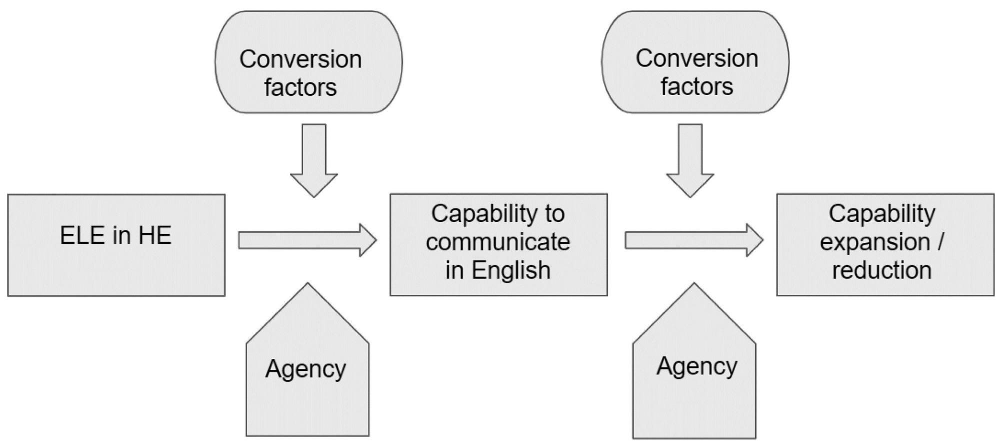
This theoretical work has been supported by empirical studies which draw on the CA to explore the effects of English in postcolonial contexts. Tamim's (2010, 2014) research, for example, investigates how language instruction in Pakistani state schools impacts the educational achievements of pupils from economically vulnerable backgrounds compared with non-poor students in private schools. Her studies show a clear relationship between social class and linguistic skills in the dominant languages in Pakistan, including English, which is in line with Drèze and Sen's (2013) observation that English is associated with privilege. Tamim's work also illustrates how a deficit of English language capital negatively affected poor participants' ability to take advantage of the affordances that English offered in Pakistani society, such as access to knowledge and employment opportunities, leaving them more vulnerable to economic exploitation. As such, limited ability in English in certain settings can not only disadvantage those of low socio-economic status in school, but can also perpetuate this disadvantage after leaving school.

Finally, although not directly dealing with issues related to English and human flourishing, several capability scholars working in South Africa, where English is used extensively, including within HE, touch upon the role of English in this context. For example, Conradie and Robeyns (2013, 570), who investigated the aspirations of women living in a township in the English-speaking city of Cape Town, point out that poor English proficiency can represent a "capability obstacle" to aspirations achievement. Similarly, Calitz, Walker, and Wilson-Strydom (2016, 64) identify one university's English policy as a "structural barrier" to be navigated since it~~this policy~~ meant that many students could not be educated in their mother tongue. Although the authors state that this "complicated access to learning and demanded additional academic resources that were not equally available to all students" (2016, 64), they do not delve into the wider implications of this policy. The importance of English for access to university in South Africa is also acknowledged by Wilson-Strydom (2015b, 2016) who developed an empirical list of key capabilities for the equitable progression of students from high school to university. This list includes the capability of language competence and confidence, which Wilson-Strydom (2016, 152) defines as "being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction". The fact that insufficient "levels of competence" (Wilson-Strydom 2015b, 95) in the language of instruction adversely affected university access and participation for the participants in her study highlights how significant this capability can be. Finally, Calitz (2018, 64) describes how the Black undergraduate women in her study were marginalised at university because of their "ethnic" English accents, which she characterises as a problem with the institutional culture.

Taken together, at least five observations can be made about the literature reviewed in this section. First, as with education more generally, in some contexts English can act as a capability multiplier (Wilson-Strydom 2016) or "fertile capability" (Nussbaum 2011, 99) while in others it may have harmful effects (Walker 2006). Hence, the role of English in many settings embodies a paradox or contradiction (Phillipson 2001), which is perhaps best summed up by Mohanty's (2017, 266) assertion that English "empowers some and disempowers many". With this in mind, as Tikly's (2016) work indicates, critical lenses can yield greater insights into the ways that English as a dominant colonial language is implicated in social injustices. One such lens is Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism. For Phillipson (2010, 57), linguistic imperialism, which is a subcategory of cultural imperialism and is bound up with other mutually supportive forms of imperialism, entails "unequal exchange and unequal communicative rights between people or groups defined in terms of their competence in specific languages, with unequal benefits as a result, in a system that legitimates and naturalises such exploitation". Phillipson's framework can more clearly illustrate how the use of English in postcolonial settings such as Pakistan and India, which is separating these societies into "English-speaking haves" and "non-English-speaking have-nots" (Phillipson 2001, 189), is simply a continuation of imperialist educational policies. Far from promoting development, such policies can foster linguistic segregation in postcolonial contexts, which restricts access to domains such as employment, education, and even health care, while disproportionately benefitting both the English-proficient ruling classes in these contexts and wealthy Anglophone countries in the global North (Phillipson 1992; Tamim 2010; Pennycook 2017). In addition to shedding light on the role of English in the global South, the use of theoretical tools such as linguistic imperialism is also helpful for addressing criticisms that the CA has failed to adequately account for asymmetrical power relations which give rise to oppression and domination (Crocker 2009).

Second, the literature reviewed in this section highlights how for some researchers, English can be considered a capability, while for others, poor English language competence can function as a capability obstacle and therefore a negative conversion factor. A natural corollary to this is that, as Mohanty (2008) has remarked, strong English language competence can be a positive or enabling conversion factor. At the same time, as it can form part of a literary education (Nussbaum 2016), English can also be considered a capability input. Thus, just as education can be understood as a conversion factor, capability input (Conradie and Robeyns 2013), or a capability "in its own right" (Tikly and Barrett 2011, 7) so too can English. These contrasting understandings are useful for operationalising English from a capability perspective as Figure 1 illustrates. The distinction between conversion factors related to HE and those related to society at large is relevant since interventions and strategies can be formulated to address the former~~constraining conversion factors~~, but removing barriers to capability expansion in the wider society is not practicable.

Figure 1. Operationalising English from a capability perspective.



As should be clear by now, the current study reports on the challenges that economically disadvantaged Colombians have faced in developing the capability to communicate in English during their HE careers. Thus, for our purposes, in accordance with Figure 1, English (ELE) is understood as a capability input which can foster the capability to communicate (i.e. read, write, speak, and listen) in English, contingent upon an array of conversion factors. These factors may include poor competence in English (a constraining factor) or strong competence in this language (an enabling factor). Although not the focus of this study, Figure 1 also shows how the capability to communicate in English developed through ELE can, in turn, open "all sorts of doors", resulting in capability expansion, but this also depends on a range of enabling and constraining factors, which, again, may include level of competence in English. In addition to these conversion factors, developing the capability to communicate in English and taking advantage of opportunities to use this capability to expand other capabilities also involves agency, as Figure 1 also shows.

A third observation we can make regarding the literature surveyed above is that linguistic capabilities, as with educational capabilities more generally, are relational (Smith and Seward 2009; Walker 2020). The relational aspect of some capabilities, which is suggested by Calitz's (2018) finding that an English speaker's accent can influence listeners' perceptions, and can even result in marginalisation, is acknowledged by Nussbaum in her explanation of combined capabilities. According to Nussbaum (2008), combined capabilities are a combination of an internal capability, which is the in-built capacity of individuals nurtured by education, and appropriate conditions to activate them. While Nussbaum (2008, 249) gives the example of "an educated person capable of free speech and association but is living in a repressive regime that denies those freedoms", a more relevant example would be a person who is capable of communicating in English but is living in a society where no other speakers of this language are present. In such a context, in the absence of enabling factors such as the internet or telephone, this person cannot convert their internal competence into a combined capability (Tikly 2016). In other words, becoming fluent in a foreign language requires a combination of exposure and practice and therefore cannot be done in isolation (Council of Europe 2001). Thus, the capability to communicate in English, as with language capabilities more generally, is "inter-subjective" (Ballet, Biggeri, and Comim 2011, 34).

Useful as Nussbaum's terminology is for highlighting the relational nature of certain capabilities, describing innate endowments as "basic capabilities" and mature internal abilities as "internal capabilities" is misleading since these terms~~y~~ do not, strictly speaking, refer to genuine opportunities (Robeyns 2017). In this regard, Brando's (2020, 253) use of the terms capacity, competence, and capability to refer to capabilities, innate capabilities and combined capabilities, respectively, provides greater terminological clarity. For Brando (2020, 253–254), a capacity "includes all the basic endowments, innate material and latent potentials that allow us to exercise a function", while a competence suggests the presence of developed abilities "be they physical, mental or emotional, required to exercise a function". By contrast, a capability comprises "both the acquired competences and the external conditions required to be substantially free to exercise one's competences" (Brando 2020, 254). I~~;~~ ~~and i~~t is in this combined sense that capabilities are understood in the current paper. Brando (2020) highlights how these three terms represent different developmental stages which, contingent upon the presence of supportive conditions, including opportunities for practice, an individual progresses through. Importantly, though, this distinction only holds for those freedoms which "are conditioned by an individual's ability to exercise them" (Brando 2020, 250). This therefore does not refer to the capabilities of individuals with certain types of cognitive impairment since "they do not develop and their capacities, by and large, do not evolve" (Peleg 2013, 536). Nor does it include those freedoms which refer to rights such as the capability to bear arms or the capability to vote since such genuine opportunities do not change even if we never~~whether we~~ exercise them~~ or not~~. In other words, if I never vote, I still expect this capability to be available to me in the future. However, if I never speak a foreign language I have learned, my future capability to speak this language will be diminished. This raises the important question of whether it is ever justified to promote the foreign language functioning rather than the corresponding capability. The short answer to this would be that, in line with the participatory view of agency that this paper subscribes to, when faced with a conflict between the capability to agency on the one hand and the capability to develop competence in an additional language on the other, the former should take precedence. However, as Nussbaum (2011, 157) reminds us, "good education requires sensitivity to

context, history, and cultural and economic circumstances", so contextual considerations and interests will frame the correct approach.

This brings us to the final and arguably most important observation we can make about the capability literature surveyed above: linguistic capabilities, as with many other capabilities, are not "positive freedoms instantaneously transferred to individuals" (Comim 2012, 28) but rather are nurtured over time and thus vary in degrees of "robustness" (Robeyns 2017, 97). This understanding of linguistic capabilities as adaptive and evolving (Ballet, Biggeri, and Comim 2011) is also in line with the literature on foreign language learning. For example, the official Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) document, which provides guidance to education systems across the globe in the development of language teaching materials, testing and curricula, states that: "the process of language learning is continuous and individual. No two users of a language, whether native speakers or foreign learners, have exactly the same competences or develop them in the same way" (Council of Europe 2001, 17).

While it is true that many scholars do refer to the process dimension of some capabilities and functionings, it is also true that the implications of conceptualising capabilities as in varying stages of development, and therefore unique to each individual, have not been sufficiently explored in the literature. Such a conceptualisation is necessary since, as we have seen, proficiency in English correlates positively with financial resources. Hence, viewing English as a process capability may call attention to other injustices, which, in turn, can inform policy and curricular decisions such as the different amounts of resources that individuals or groups of individuals may need to attain capability parity. By contrast, viewing linguistic capabilities in binary terms masks the disadvantage that those with low levels of this capability face and precludes the possibility of exploring potential reasons why some possess more of this capability than others.

The importance of theorising linguistic capabilities as person-specific and either partially developed (in the case of beginner or elementary users) or more fully developed (in the case of advanced or proficient users) (Council of Europe 2001) is illustrated below. In this section I employ concepts from the CA to analyse the results of a study into obstacles faced by economically vulnerable Colombians when developing their English skills during their HE careers.

Background to the Study

As should be clear by now, the current paper draws on empirical findings into the obstacles faced by economically vulnerable Colombians when developing their English skills during their HE careers. These findings are taken from a larger study which investigated the role of English in development by looking at the experiences of economically underprivileged Colombians both during and after HE. Such research is useful for our analysis given that English is now compulsory in most Colombian higher institutes of learning (Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez 2016), together with the fact that in Colombia socioeconomic background strongly correlates with high levels of English proficiency (Sánchez 2013; World Bank 2013). Indeed, cash-strapped Colombians do not normally attend the expensive, better-resourced private schools which are more likely to have higher standards of English language instruction and cannot afford to pay for costly private English language classes (Correa and González 2016). As a result, such students may require longer to complete their studies, or, in some cases, may fail to graduate in their chosen field because they were unable to achieve the mandated intermediate (B1) exit level (Martínez 2016). Thus, the imposition of English in Colombian HE may be contributing to several social injustices (Mackenzie 2020).

In total, 24 participants participated in this larger study, but the current paper is based on qualitative interviews with 10 HE graduates who took English classes during their studies. In the interests of analytical variety, graduates of different types of higher education institute (HEI), qualifications, subjects, and regions (both rural and urban) participated in the research. Such heterogeneity also reflects the complex and highly stratified HE landscape in Colombia which, by law, refers to all post-secondary education regardless of length or type of programme (MEN 1992). As such, three graduates of technical and technological programmes, which are vocational in nature, are also included in the study. Although participants attended different types of HEIs and obtained different qualifications in different areas, they can all be considered economically disadvantaged because they lived in the lower social strata[6] during their HE careers. In addition, with the exception of Theo and Jeremy, who chose to study English as part of their major, all participants were obliged to study English and could not graduate without passing this mandatory subject.

Interviews with the main participants were conducted in either Spanish (in eight cases) or English (in two cases). The audio recorded interviews, which lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, were analysed thematically using Atlas.ti, and, where necessary, translated (Braun and Clarke 2006). A total of 25 categories emerged from this analysis, and these were grouped into four themes which were directly related to the research questions: 1. English and Disadvantage; 2. Capabilities associated with English; 3. Attitudes to ELE; and 4. Conversion factors shaping the development of the English linguistic capability.

I adhered to the ethical principles outlined by BERA (2018). As such, prior to the interviews, voluntary informed consent was obtained. In addition, pseudonyms have been used and identifying features such as ~~specific~~ geographical locations and the names of HEIs have been omitted. Relevant characteristics of study participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants.

Name	Qualifications	Type of HEI	English level upon graduation
Kylie	Technical/Technological qualification (Logistics & Commerce)	Technological institution (private)	A1
Samuel	Technical/Technological qualification (IT); Degree (Social Sciences)	Technical professional institute (public); university (public)	A2
Ariadne	Degree (Public Accounting)	University (private)	A1
Theo	Degree (Modern Languages)	University (public)	B2
Yorgelis	Degree (Economy)	University (public)	A2
Katrina	Degree (Industrial Engineering)	University (private)	A2
Mariluz	Technological qualification (Business Management)	Technical professional institute (public)	A1
Jeremy	Degree (Spanish & English)	University (public)	B1
Diana	Degree (International Business)	University (private)	B2
Luna	Degree (International Relations) MA (Social Development)	Universities (private)	B2

Developing the Capability to Communicate in English: Challenges for Economically Vulnerable HE Students

When entering their respective HEIs almost all participants could only draw on the capability to communicate in English to a very limited extent, in contrast to their wealthier counterparts whose English language capability was typically much more developed. This linguistic inequality gave rise to several injustices experienced by participants during their HE studies as exemplified in the following extracts from Jeremy and Theo, who both opted to study English as part of their degrees in languages, and were placed in English classes alongside more proficient students:

> The majority of my classmates who spoke English had done courses, had a more advanced level of English because they had studied in other schools, in private schools … by contrast, those of us from public schools had not had the possibility to learn certain vocabulary, and it was very difficult for us to learn and acquire new words, and the structure was also very complex (Jeremy).

> The first two semesters [at university] were really hell because as I told you I didn't know anything, so it was like everything was new. I needed to learn from zero, and it was scary at the beginning because at the university they started speaking English all the time, and … I think I didn't understand anything, and there were people that had studied at the Colombo[7] or the British Council, they were able to interact with the teacher, but my first month … I thought I wouldn't make it. (Theo)

These extracts show how linguistic disadvantage – in this case participants' poor English proficiency – can exacerbate the disadvantage experienced by students from lower socioeconomic strata when commencing post-compulsory education in Colombia. In particular, the incipient nature of Jeremy's and Theo's capability to communicate in English made it more difficult for them to participate in ELE on an equal footing with their wealthier classmates, increased their workload and stress, and constrained their capability for voice (Walker 2006). These extracts also suggest that poor competence in English when entering HE can have negative consequences in terms of academic achievement. Additional examples of this are offered below:

Diana: In the first semester I had to work harder and because of that [poor English skills] I took a course in the Colombo, but it wasn't enough to be at the level of the other people in the classroom.

Researcher: So were your grades not as good as theirs?

Diana: No they weren't very good.

The only [one] surviving the first semester [from those who did not speak any English] was me and then in the second semester we started a writing class. That was hell. That was even more difficult than the first semester, but what I tried to do was to be closer to the best ones to learn from them (Theo).

I didn't have the time for it [learning English]. That's what made it difficult for me. I couldn't dedicate myself 100% to English, so I withdrew from my English classes (Samuel).

For these participants English has diminished their substantive freedoms in HE: Diana had lower grades than her classmates, despite investing financial resources in private English language tuition; Theo experienced high levels of stress; and Samuel had no time for English, which led him to withdraw from the subject. These findings substantiate Conradie and Robeyns's (2013) assertion that a lack of linguistic competence in English can act as a "capability obstacle" and show how poor English skills can function as a constraining conversion factor in Colombian HE.

However, poor English proficiency need not be a negative~~constraining~~ conversion factor if HEIs have structures and arrangements in place to address this linguistic injustice. One such arrangement would be to provide support mechanisms for fresher students with limited or no competence in English. That these were not provided suggests that the quality of ELE that students receive in their respective higher educational settings can also have a constraining effect~~operate as a constraining conversion factor~~. Indeed, the majority of participants were unsatisfied with the standard of English language instruction they received during their HE careers as following quotes illustrate:

> It's difficult for a teacher when there are 30 students and some understand and others don't. So those who understood were held up…everyone studied for the grade, but not because it was important. We saw it as just another subject not as something necessary. (Ariadne)

> Students don't see it as important. They don't go to class. The course starts with 20 people, and it ends with five because the students simply don't go to class. (Luna)

In addition to these experiences, as Table 1 shows, more than half of this study's participants failed to achieve the B1 exit level expected of graduates (MEN 2015). This suggests that low quality ELE is an issue in Colombian HE which deserves closer attention.

In light of the quality concerns surrounding the provision of ELE, making this subject compulsory for all Colombian HE students may be compounding the injustices this study's participants experienced. Indeed, some of the injustices suffered by participants as a result of the low levels of the English linguistic capability that they could claim when taking up their HE studies could have been avoided had they not been obliged to take English in their respective HEIs. Moreover, for participants who had no choice but to attend English classes – in other words all those not majoring in languages – mandatory ELE restricted~~constrained~~ their agency since they played no active role in opting to study this subject, irrespective of whether it was something they would have chosen to study if asked. To quote Sen (2004, 331), "there is clearly a violation of freedom" when an individual is "forced to do exactly what she would have chosen to do anyway". This lack of agency also undermined the capability of autonomy, which can stifle "confident participation in learning and in dispositions to learn" (Walker 2006, 174), and limit the acquisition of knowledge, as exemplified in the following extract:

> You see it [English] as a subject not as something indispensable for our studies, our future, so you learn what you have to learn, but not for the long term, only for the moment. So this is how they pressure you, and what you learn is nothing. (Ariadne)

Deprived of the capability for voice, and denied the agency to choose whether or not to study English, this quotation highlights how Ariadne was a reluctant participant in her English class while at university. While this clearly points to agency deprivation, unlike Samuel, Ariadne continued to attend her English lessons. This, it could be argued, might suggest a "tacit commitment" (Cudd 2014, 35) to English, which would at least reflect a brittle form of agency. However, evidence for even a minimal level of agency is complicated by the fact that, when asked, Ariadne, along with most other participants, did not see learning English as a valued opportunity. Ariadne's experience also reflects participants' largely instrumental view of ELE, which may be contributing to its commodification in the country (García León and García León 2012). This is also shown by the fact that, in addition to having to take English, regardless of whether they wanted to or not, in several cases participants also had to pay additional fees ranging from between $200[8] to over $1000 to take these classes. Paying these large sums of money for obligatory English instruction created another layer of disadvantage, exacerbating the injustice participants suffered. In addition to these fees, several participants also had to purchase learning materials such as books:

> The price was more or less $16-$19. Some students bought one book per group. Others preferred to buy on their own. Others didn't have the means, and we also disagreed with buying a book that we would only use for one semester. (Yorgelis)

This quotation highlights how some students~~English language learners~~ could not afford the expensive coursebook produced by a British publishing house, which impacted on the capabilities of accessing knowledge and equitable classroom participation. In addition, as alluded to above, in order to pass their English classes, several other participants turned to educational institutes with links to the US or the UK such as the British Council and the Centro Colombo Americano. These examples thus highlight how mandatory English instruction in HE is facilitating the economic, cultural and linguistic incursion into Colombia of interests located in wealthy Anglophone countries and as such is contributing to English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992).

While the evidence presented above raises concerns about the quality, equity and relevance of ELE in Colombian HE in general, the low levels of the capability to communicate in English that participants could claim when compared with their wealthier peers at the start of their HE studies can be taken as an indication of inequalities in the provision of English language education prior to HE. Consider the following extract:

> If we compare the public sector with the private, a wealthy individual can enrol her child in a bilingual school, and from pre-school onwards they receive English instruction, but in a public institution the educational content is the same every year. For example, I never got beyond the verbs "to be" and "to have". That was the basis of every year of English I had. In contrast, in the private bilingual schools where the fees are high, from a very young age … there's much more teaching, much more material to explore. (Yorgelis)

As Yorgelis explains, private bilingual schools, which are typically attended by individuals from well-off backgrounds (British Council 2015), are expensive, and were beyond the budget of this study's participants with the exception of Luna. However, Luna also had to transfer to a public school for economic reasons. As the only participant who attended both public and private schools, her experience of the~~is~~ contrast in standards is illuminating:

Researcher: How many hours of English did you have per week?

Luna: Two.

Researcher: And what was the quality of instruction like?

Luna: Awful. Before studying in a public school I had attended a private one. That's where I acquired a foundation in English. When I had to switch to a public school for economic reasons, all the pupils who were in my situation, in other words, all those who had learned English in the private sector, were the ones who taught the students in the public school because the teacher didn't even come to class.

As this example demonstrates, one reason for the poor quality of ELE in public schools is teacher absenteeism, and this was corroborated by several other participants. Another reason is the amount of classroom time allocated to English. According to the MEN (2015) public school pupils should receive three hours a week of English, which is more than Luna was supposed to receive even if her teachers had been present. This highlights one key aspect of linguistic capabilities: the importance of practice and exposure. As with the capability of play, promoting the functioning of communicating in English is necessary if the capability is to be developed (Nussbaum 2000), but in public schools, opportunities for exposure and practice appear to be more limited.

The poor standard of English instruction in public schools in Colombia has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Cárdenas and Miranda 2014) and supports findings from other studies which show a negative relationship between poverty and English proficiency in the country (e.g. Sánchez 2013) and in the global South more generally (e.g. Tamim 2014; Adamson 2020). Not only does this highlight how the diffusion of English in Colombia is implicated in injustices, but it also foregrounds the importance of financial circumstances for developing the capability to communicate *well* in English, as Mariluz indicates:

> Public education is not as good as private education. Perhaps when you pay you have the right to demand more unlike in the public sector where you have to settle for what's on offer. (Mariluz)

This quote is disconcerting since Mariluz appears to have internalised the logic that an education which is paid for directly is superior to an education which is funded indirectly through taxes, and shows the extent to which quality education is seen as a privilege of the wealthy in Colombia. Given that participants' access to better resourced~~quality~~ private schools was limited for economic reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that this can lead individuals to adapt their preferences to unjust conditions (Sen 2002) as in the case of Mariluz who has to "settle for what's on offer". Thus, by restricting participants' educational choices to public schools of generally low quality, economic situation intersects with low quality ELE in both compulsory and higher education to constrain the development of the English language capability. In other words, just as a combination of factors can enable individuals to navigate capabilities constraints, so too can a combination of factors converge to frustrate their capabilities (Calitz 2019; Mkwananzi 2019).

Overcoming Linguistic Injustice

Despite the injustice of having to study English alongside wealthier and more proficient students, all participants eventually managed to pass their English language classes and graduate in their chosen fields. A close analysis of the data revealed that for

some participants this was possible on account of their educational resilience, which, as shown by Wilson-Strydom (2017, 287), can be seen as "a socially located response to adverse conditions". Evidence for the socially embedded nature of resilience in the current study includes the experience of Diana, who, as we have seen, had to "work harder" than her classmates, and even took a course at a private language institute to avoid falling behind. As such, it was not resilience on its own which enabled Diana to succeed in English, but rather resilience in interaction with factors such as access to private tuition (which, in turn, is contingent upon financial situation). Additional examples of educational resilience are offered below:

> The little that I know of English is not because of [name of HEI], but because I've done several free online courses. (Mariluz)

Theo: I felt really behind them. I really had to work hard to catch up with them

Researcher : But you caught up?

Theo: Yeah. Actually, in my fourth semester [at university] I was really doing really well

Researcher: Why do you think they didn't stay ahead of you [academically]?

Theo: Because they could talk to the teachers, and I couldn't. They were understanding things … they didn't try so hard.

These instances further demonstrate how resilience operates within particular contexts. For Mariluz, resilience and the internet enabled her to develop the capability to communicate in English rather than resilience alone. Clearly, though, internet access is contingent upon other contextual factors such as geographical location, and financial situation, which underscores the importance of locating resilient responses within the broader social environment. Similarly, had Theo's peers been as hardworking as he was, resilience on its own may not have enabled him to close the gap between his English level and theirs. Further evidence for the lack of effort made by privileged students is provided by Diana:

> At university you can find certain students that are interested in learning English and certain students that are not interested. And I don't know why, but the students that are not interested in learning English are the ones that came from a private school that already learned English and have no interest in learning in the university. (Diana)

Strikingly, far from having an advantage over their less proficient classmates, privileged students' prior learning experiences with English may foster disinterest, which, in turn, can impact academic performance. By contrast, low-income students' experiences of disadvantage can motivate them to use their agency to succeed in English. This finding substantiates Wilson-Strydom's (2017) assertion that adverse circumstances can provide opportunities for individuals to draw on their capability for resilience.

A final example of educational resilience is provided by Theo, who not only had to catch up with his classmates in order to avoid dropping out, but also lived further away from university than these students:

> The second semester we started a writing class. That was hell. That was even more difficult than the first semester, but what I tried to do is to be closer to the best ones to learn from them, but what was difficult … was outside the classroom because the people that were in front of the class that were better had a different lifestyle. They went to different places. They lived closer to the university. For example, my neighborhood was far from the university. Some of them arrived in cars. I was riding my bicycle because the first semesters I used my bicycle to go from my neighborhood to the university.

This quote shows how Theo had to negotiate barriers both inside and outside the classroom in order to claim the same amount of the capability to communicate in English as his wealthier peers. However, since Theo's dream was to become proficient in English, he was able to use his resilience to associate with the high-performing students, and a bicycle helped him to navigate the geographical obstacles he faced. Thus, as this example indicates, conversion factors can interact to shape the English language capability in complex and person-specific ways (Calitz 2019; Mkwananzi 2019).

The findings in this section show how resilient individuals do not operate in a vacuum, but rather in social contexts where a range of enabling and constraining conversion factors are at play. An understanding of these conversion factors, which, as we have seen, include financial situation, access to private English tuition, geographical location, internet access, learning context, and level of English, can be useful for shaping institutional responses to the injustices participants faced as a result of their poor English skills (Wilson-Strydom 2017). The findings above are also in line with Calitz (2019) who has demonstrated how marginalised undergraduates in South Africa were able to use their agency to navigate barriers to equitable participation in HE. Nevertheless, success stories in overcoming injustices should not imply that nothing should be done about them. Indeed, as Radinger et al. (2018, 64) show, in Colombia "only 11.4% of disadvantaged students were considered 'resilient' in 2015, that is they scored among the top quarter of students in all participating countries". This is in contrast to the OECD average of 29.1% of disadvantaged students who "beat the odds against them" (Radinger et al. 2018, 65). Thus, while resilient Colombians of low socio-economic status can transform their circumstances, the chances of doing so are slim compared to other OECD countries.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Summing up, this paper has highlighted the value of viewing English as a process capability which is unique to each individual since the low levels of the English linguistic capability that participants could activate when entering HE points to the injustice of substandard ELE in public schools in Colombia. This does not necessarily mean, however, that private sector ELE in Colombia is always better since examples can be found of both high quality ELE in public schools and low quality ELE in private schools. Indeed, at tertiary level, the data suggest that the quality of ELE was below par in both public and private HEIs. This is highlighted by their failure to address the linguistic disadvantage experienced by this study's participants, together with the low levels of English that most participants reported upon graduation. Additionally, a lack of proficiency in English undermined participants' capabilities in HE in various ways by adversely influencing their academic performance and participation, depriving them of the capability for voice, and increasing their workload and stress. Another layer of disadvantage was added due to the compulsory nature of ELE in Colombian HE. This not only constrained the agency of all those who had no say in whether they studied English or not, but also adversely affected their economic situation. This, in turn, may be contributing to greater instrumentalisation and commodification of the subject, which promotes English language imperialism. Yet in spite of the range of obstacles that poor Colombians faced to attaining a high degree of competence in English, some participants were able to use their agency and resilience to beat the odds, catch up with their wealthier, more proficient classmates, and pass their English classes. Importantly, though, since resilience interacts with contextual factors, it is more accurate to say that, given certain enabling conditions, some resilient individuals may be able to overcome the linguistic inequality they face (Wilson-Strydom 2017).

Clearly, then, conceptualising linguistic capabilities as capabilities-in-development rather than as "freedoms instantaneously transferred to individuals" (Comim 2012, 28) is useful for flagging injustices that have led individuals to claim different levels of the capability to communicate in English. This conceptualisation is also applicable to other contexts where language plays a role – positive or otherwise – in human flourishing and can inform the design of interventions to address this injustice in a range of settings. Similarly, an understanding of the importance of exposure and practice for the development of linguistic capabilities can be particularly useful for ensuring that language policies are socially just. For example, while public school students in Colombia only have three hours of ELE, private school students typically have considerably more opportunities to use their foreign language skills, which, as we have seen, can result in unjust educational outcomes.

Based on this study's findings, several policy recommendations can be proposed. However, given the perceived importance of English in the era of neoliberal globalisation, removing English from educational curricula in Colombia is not one of them. Instead, the issue is rather to help ensure that English in Colombian HE neither gives rise to injustices nor perpetuates existing injustices. As such, the first recommendation would be to offer more support to students with poor English proficiency when entering HE by providing them with additional resources such as extra tuition and learning materials. Alternatively, Colombian HEIs could make the study of English optional rather than mandatory. Where possible, this language could be offered as an elective alongside additional languages – both local and imported – which are considered to be of value and relevance to students in their respective contexts both now and in the future. Giving students some say in the additional languages they learn during their HE careers would not only thicken their participatory agency, leading to "future positive consequences" (Ballet, Biggeri, and Comim 2011, 37) such as greater motivation, autonomy, and voice, but it would also help interrupt English language imperialism.

Second, this study has shown how participants' poor English skills compared to their wealthier counterparts can be partly attributed to the gap in quality between foreign language education in the public and private sectors, which foregrounds the critical importance of financial situation for developing the English linguistic capability in Colombia. Given that the development of linguistic capabilities requires practice and exposure, increasing the number of hours of English instruction in public schools would go some way to addressing this divide, but only if this were accompanied by an improvement in teacher capacity. This could be done by offering substantial financial incentives for public sector English teachers who improve their English level and/or participate in professional development programmes. Another way to improve teacher capacity would be to attract more qualified and proficient English teachers to the public sector with higher salaries and better resources.

The current study has demonstrated the potential of drawing on elements of the CA to look at injustices related to the provision of ELE in the global South. Because of the ways in which English is implicated in disadvantage, more such research is called for. Additionally, this study has also illustrated the value of conceptualising linguistic capabilities as inchoative process capabilities. As such, further capability studies could explore this dimension of language capabilities and its social justice implications for migration, employment, education, and a range of other domains.

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Notes on contributor

Lee Mackenzie works as a researcher and lecturer in English and English language teaching at the Universidad del Norte in Colombia. His research interests are language policy and planning, English and development, and English language teaching.

Notes

1. The National Bilingual Programme
2. English Opens Doors
3. English, Doors to the World
4. National Ministry of Education, Colombia
5. Ministry of Education
6. In Colombia, communities are demarcated based on the quality of housing in different zones; with utilities and public university fees cheaper for those from the lower social strata (one to three) than those from the upper strata (four to six).
7. A private US-Colombian language school endorsed by the US embassy in Colombia.
8. All amounts are in US dollars.

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