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Which doors can English open? Exploring the opportunities of economically vulnerable Colombian higher education graduates

Recto running head : CURRENT ISSUES IN LANGUAGE PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Many higher education (HE) systems in the Global South have prioritised English language education (ELE), including in Colombia where English has become the dominant foreign language of HE. However, little is known about its effects on the lives of HE students from low-income backgrounds. Addressing this knowledge gap is critical to ensure that ELE in Colombian HE is relevant. The current study used the capability approach (CA) to identify the substantive freedoms which English can enlarge or constrain in the lives of economically vulnerable graduates in Colombia, and to identify factors which are instrumental in this process. The findings from this qualitative study show that English in Colombia can cultivate economic, sociocultural and epistemic capabilities. However, they also show how this capability expansion is also shaped by a range of conversion factors and individual agency.

KEYWORDS

- Capability approach
- higher education
- opportunity
- English language education
- Colombia
- development
- agency

Introduction

In recent years many education systems in the Global South have implemented English language education (ELE) programmes and policies (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017; Khan, 2019). In Latin America such programmes include *Inglés Abre Puertas*¹ in Chile; the *Programa Nacional de Inglés*² in Mexico; and *Inglés, Puertas al Mundo*³ in Perú (Mackenzie, 2022a; [Q2]). English language policies have also been introduced in higher education (HE) systems in the region. For example, university graduates in Ecuador are expected to achieve an English level equivalent to B1 (intermediate) on the Common European Framework (CEFR) (British Council, 2015a); while in Brazil English is a component on the university admissions exam (Oliveira, 2019). As the names of the Chilean and Peruvian language initiatives suggest, underpinning the rationale behind this push towards English in Latin America is the view that this language 'opens doors' (Sayer, 2018, p. 58). But what evidence is there that English expands opportunities for speakers in the region, and which doors, if any, can English help unlock? Focusing on Colombia, the current study addresses these questions by exploring the ways in which ELE improves or limits the substantive opportunities of economically disadvantaged HE graduates. In order to do so, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 Colombian HE graduates. The capability approach (CA) was employed in the interpretation of these interview data, which were thematically analysed. The analysis shows that English can expand speakers' opportunities in manifold ways, but also reveals how these opportunities – understood here as capabilities – are qualified by a range of contextual factors as well as human agency. This analysis thus challenges the triumphalist view that English unproblematically opens doors for all learners of this hegemonic language irrespective of their linguistic environment (Phillipson, 2018) and may inform the development of more contextually relevant English language learning curricula, materials, and initiatives. Such studies are especially important given the need for governments in the Global South to prioritise how the typically scarce educational resources available are allocated (Bruthiaux, 2002). Indeed, while an emerging body of research investigates the context-dependent relationship between ELE and opportunities in Africa and Asia, in Latin America this relationship remains underexplored (Mackenzie, 2022a; Mohanty, 2017).

This paper falls into five main sections. Below I briefly survey relevant research related to English and opportunity and identify key domains where English may open doors for Colombian HE graduates. I then present this paper's theoretical framework, which draws on core elements of the CA, before showing how this framework was operationalized in the current study. I then outline the methodological procedures followed and introduce this study's participants. In the findings and discussion section, I show how English can promote human flourishing in a number of ways, contingent upon human agency and a range of enabling and constraining factors. Finally, the conclusion foregrounds the main theoretical and empirical contributions this study makes and proposes several recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. Here I also suggest directions for future research.

Previous research into English and opportunity

Drawing on the literature into the relationship between English and development, this section highlights how English can promote opportunities in the domains of employment, trade, international mobility, epistemic access, and personal growth (Coleman, 2010; Mackenzie, 2022a). In the absence of research from Colombia, this section also makes use of empirical

studies from other contexts in the Global South.

A common rationale for learning English is the employment related benefits that this can bring. This claim is supported by a body of research which shows how English can boost earnings in countries such as Switzerland (Grin, 2001), India (Azam et al., 2013), South Africa (Levinsohn, 2004), and Bangladesh, Cameroon, Nigeria, Rwanda and Pakistan (Euromonitor, 2010). However, these quantitative studies also show how wage increases owing to English are shaped by factors such as gender, caste, race, educational background, proficiency level, and geographical location. This means that, for example, the economic dividends for speaking English are higher for men than for women in some contexts (Azam et al., 2013), while in others, white English speakers earn more than Black English speakers (Levinsohn, 2004). Similarly, Grin (2001) reports how in Switzerland, the more proficient a speaker is in English, the greater their potential earnings, although an English speaker can earn more in German-speaking Switzerland than in the French-speaking region. These findings suggest that English in itself does not open doors, but rather English in combination with a variety of contextually relevant factors (Erling, 2017; Warriner, 2016).

One limitation of these quantitative studies is that they use aggregate data which tell us little about the impact that higher earnings have at the micro level (Erling, 2017). For example, a university graduate may get a well-paid job because of their English skills, but this does not mean that their opportunities to do and be what matters to them have expanded since they may face exploitative working conditions. This, in turn, may constrain valued non-work-related opportunities such as spending more time with family, pursuing a course of study, or socialising. Thus, in the absence of disaggregated qualitative data, it is unclear whether higher earnings do, in fact, improve English speakers' opportunities (Mackenzie, 2022a†).

In the Colombian context, no research could be found – quantitative or otherwise – into the impact that English has on earnings in the country, but studies have shown that fewer than 10% of employers require English-proficient staff (British Council, 2015b; Herazo et al., 2012). While the need for English speakers may have increased in the years since these studies were conducted, they only report on formal work opportunities where English skills may be in greater demand (Ferguson, 2013), and tell us nothing about the informal sector, which employs nearly 50% of Colombians (Departamento Nacional Administrativo de Estadística [DANE], 2022).

A second way in which English can 'open doors' is by fostering the international trade of goods and services. This is shown by Ku and Zussman's (2010) and Lee's (2012) studies which both draw on GDP and scores on the internationally recognised Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam to highlight the economic and trading benefits to countries with significant numbers of competent English speakers. Of particular interest is Lee's (2012) finding that countries in Asia and Europe benefit more from English skills than countries in Latin America and Africa, which further indicates how contextual factors have a bearing on the benefits afforded by English. One explanation for this discrepancy is offered by Grin (2001) who posits that English speakers in countries with higher rates of foreign trade will earn more than their counterparts in countries with less external trade. Another possible explanation is that, at the local and regional level, where most trade occurs, Spanish can function as a trading language (Bruthiaux, 2002; Euromonitor, 2010). Whatever the case may be, Ku and Zussman's (2010) and Lee's (2012) findings should be treated with caution for at least two reasons. First, a more recent study by Arcand and Grin (2013), which also looked at TOEFL scores and GDP per capita, found no correlation between economic development and English. Instead, their study highlights how multilingual countries have a higher GDP than those which are less linguistically diverse. Second, at over \$200⁴ per test (ETS, 2022) the TOEFL is too expensive for many economically vulnerable individuals in the Global South, which means these data sets are clearly not representative, while GDP only provides an aggregate measure of the value of English (Mackenzie, 2022a†). As such, using TOEFL scores and GDP as proxy indicators presents an imprecise picture of the benefits that English affords to speakers at the micro-level.

A third area where English may afford opportunities to speakers in the Global South is by facilitating epistemic access. Globalisation has led to a surge in references to English and popular US culture in commercial signs and products in many contexts and over 80% of virtual content may be in this language (Steger, 2017). As a result, English skills can perform an important knowledge-unlocking function in many developing contexts. The relationship between English, globalisation and the internet is shown in studies from Bangladesh (Erling, 2017), Eritrea (Hailemariam et al., 2011), and Colombia (Martinez, 2015). In the Bangladesh study, for example, English is perceived as useful for understanding 'product descriptions, electricity bills, or information about pesticides' (Erling, 2017, p. 400) as well as for reading 'user manuals, Roman script and Arabic numerals for understanding prices on packaging and shop signs, and the sending and receiving of text messages' (p. 401). Similarly, Martinez's (2015) analysis of the prevalence of English in advertising messages in four major Colombian cities found that references to the US and its majority language accorded status to businesses and their products, even though this language may be misused or misunderstood.

Another way in which English provides opportunities to access knowledge is in academia. Academic papers in English far

outnumber **those papers** in other languages and Anglo-American institutes of higher learning dominate university rankings tables (Marginson & Xu, 2021). Indeed, such is the dominance of English in global knowledge production that publications in this language are much more likely to be read and cited (Di Bitetti & Ferreras, 2017). In Colombia specifically, the opportunities provided by English in academia have expanded in recent decades due to the inclusion of an English component on both the university admissions and exit exams (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017); the introduction of a decree to ensure Colombian degree graduates achieve a B1 (intermediate) level on the CEFR in a second language (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2015); and an internationalisation agenda (Miranda & Molina-Naar, 2022). These developments have made English the dominant foreign language in Colombian HE, with many higher education institutes (HEIs) also making English competence a mandatory graduation requirement (Martínez, 2016; Miranda & Molina-Naar, 2022).

A final way in which English may promote opportunities is by fostering personal growth. The importance of English in this domain in the Colombian context has been highlighted by the former Minister of Education, who acknowledged that learning a second language can 'empower citizens' (Mineducación anuncia, 2014). Despite this, the literature is largely silent on the relationship between English and these domains of development (Mackenzie, 2022a). At any rate, research into socio-emotional and cognitive skills, which are developed in the process of learning an additional language such as English, shows that these skills can boost employability and earnings, and increase the likelihood of participation in HE (Acosta et al., 2015; Cunningham et al., 2016; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). That said, these intrinsic benefits can potentially accrue to speakers of *any* second or additional language, rather than exclusively to English speakers.

Taken together, this brief review of the literature has shown how English has the potential to open doors in a range of domains. However, there is no guarantee that English, even when combined with a great deal of hard work, will expand the horizons of individuals living in the Global South since this is contingent on contextual factors, including but not limited to race, caste, gender, proficiency level, geographical location, educational background, and the role of English in the society. Additionally, most of the studies surveyed in this section focus on the opportunities that English provides in only one domain and yield few insights into how English broadens horizons at the individual level in multiple domains. This underlines the value of qualitative studies such as the current one. It also foregrounds the need for conceptual tools which are sufficiently flexible and multidimensional to look at the wide range of opportunities available to individuals as a result of their English skills, the factors which may stifle or support these opportunities, and how individuals use their agency to navigate disabling factors (Calitz, 2019; Mackenzie, 2022b). These considerations provide a rationale for this study's theoretical framework, which is presented below.

The capability approach (CA)

The CA is a normative framework proposed by the economist Amartya Sen as an alternative to previous measurements of human development (Nussbaum, 2011). Instead of evaluating human well-being 'in terms of resources or primary goods' (Sen, 1992, p. 81), Sen's framework shifts the space of evaluation from the means of human well-being to the ends, which are understood to be the freedoms individuals 'actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value' (p. 81). These freedoms are termed capabilities, defined by Sen (1992, p. 48) as opportunities which constitute 'a person's freedom to achieve well-being.' Capabilities are distinguishable from skills since the former reflect a rational choice. In other words, 'capability is freedom and rationality combined' (Walker, 2006, p. 165). Capabilities also differ from skills since they include more abstract freedoms such as the capability for voice, the capability to aspire, and the capability for autonomy (Hart, 2016; Walker, 2006). We can imagine contexts where these capabilities are denied to individuals, thus negatively affecting their well-being.

While capabilities refer to the range of options – or opportunities – available to the individual, and as such represent unrealised or potential achievements (Nussbaum, 2011), the parallel concept of functionings refers to the achievement or realisation of **these individual** capabilities (Sen, 2009). This means that English can be viewed as both a capability and a functioning. In the latter case, the individual has activated their English skills by using them to speak, read, write, or listen, while in the former, these skills remain dormant, or on standby. Focusing on outcomes (functionings) as well as opportunities (capabilities) is important since evidence of a capability is often deduced from its corresponding functioning (Nussbaum, 2011). Nonetheless, looking only at functionings can provide a distorted view of individual well-being and obscure sources of disadvantage as similar functionings may conceal quite different sets of capabilities (Sen, 1992; Unterhalter, 2009).

The constructs of capabilities and functionings support a multidimensional analysis of the relationship between English and opportunity expansion (Adamson, 2020). To give an example of this relevant to the current study, a rich and a poor student both graduate from university in Colombia with a B2 (upper-intermediate) level of English. However, while their

functionings may be the same (i.e. B2 English competence), looking at the capabilities sets of these two individuals might reveal that the rich student enjoyed more opportunities to make use of their English skills during their time at university as they had reliable internet access and could use English in their social environment. By contrast, for financial reasons the poor student may have lacked opportunities to use English socially and may have lived in an area with limited internet connectivity, factors which limit the potential of English to open doors for this person. From a policy perspective, interventions, where feasible, would therefore focus not on equalising their functionings, but instead on ensuring both students enjoy the same opportunities (or capabilities) to use English (Robeyns, 2018).

Agency

As Sen's definition of capabilities suggests, agency is also foundational to the CA, not least because without it, individuals cannot convert their capabilities into the corresponding functionings (Sen, 1999). Within the CA, human agency, defined by Sen (1985, p. 203) as 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important,' is a critical element of human well-being (Lozano et al., 2012). Sen's view of agency differs from those in the LPP literature which define agency vis-a-vis LPP processes or policies (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014; Vennela & Kandharaja, 2021). According to this understanding, an agent is someone who is in some way involved in LPP activities or contexts either at the macro-, meso- or micro-levels (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014; Zhao & Baldauf, 2012). At the micro-level these agents include language learners (Finardi & Guimarães, 2021), and in the current study refers to graduates who all received ELE during their HE studies.

While Sen did not theorise agency with regards to particular language situations, he does explain that 'the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us' (1999, pp. xi – xii). This acknowledgement of the importance of contextual factors in shaping individual agency is consistent with an ecological orientation to agency which has informed LPP research in recent years (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021; Vennela & Kandharaja, 2021). Also in line with more recent conceptualisations of agency in the LPP literature is Sen's (1999, p. 53) view of individuals not merely as 'passive recipients' of policy, but rather as active participants in 'their own destiny' (p. 53). Thus, consistent with Ahearn (2001, p. 112), Sen seems to accept that individual agents can 'actively construct and constrain – rather than passively receive.' This challenges a deficit view of the end-users of linguistic policies as incapable of either shaping their linguistic realities or resisting the imposition of a particular language policy (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014).

As Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2021) point out, when thinking about agency in LPP contexts at the micro-level, we should consider not only the extent to which local actors have the power to actively construct and constrain, but also the motivations behind their actions. According to Sen, a key driver of agency is the 'pursuit of whatever goals or values' that matter to the agentive individual. This view of agents as goal-oriented is also reflected in recent LPP literature (e.g. Poudel & Choi, 2021; Vennela & Kandharaja, 2021). For example, Poudel and Choi (2021, p. 3) highlight how, 'in agentive acts in relation to LPP ... individuals' goals and beliefs play a crucial role.'

Aligned with these views of agency, and in keeping with the aims of the current paper, this study's participants are thus viewed as active, goal-oriented agents operating within particular linguistic ecologies.

Conversion factors

A situated approach to agency is also important for understanding the contextual factors which may constrain or promote agentive acts (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021; Vennela & Kandharaja, 2021). In the capability literature, these factors 'determine the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning' (Robeyns, 2017, p. 45), and are thus referred to as conversion factors. Sen (1997, pp. 385–386) identifies five types of conversion factor:

Personal heterogeneities (e.g. disability, illness, age and gender); environmental diversities (e.g. variations in weather, pollution, and prevalence of diseases); variations in social climate (e.g. levels of crime in the community, amount of social capital, and public educational arrangements); differences in relational perspectives (i.e. attitudes to societal conventions and customs which can impact the amount of individual resources needed to participate as a respected member of the community); and distributions within the family (i.e. how income is distributed among members of a household).

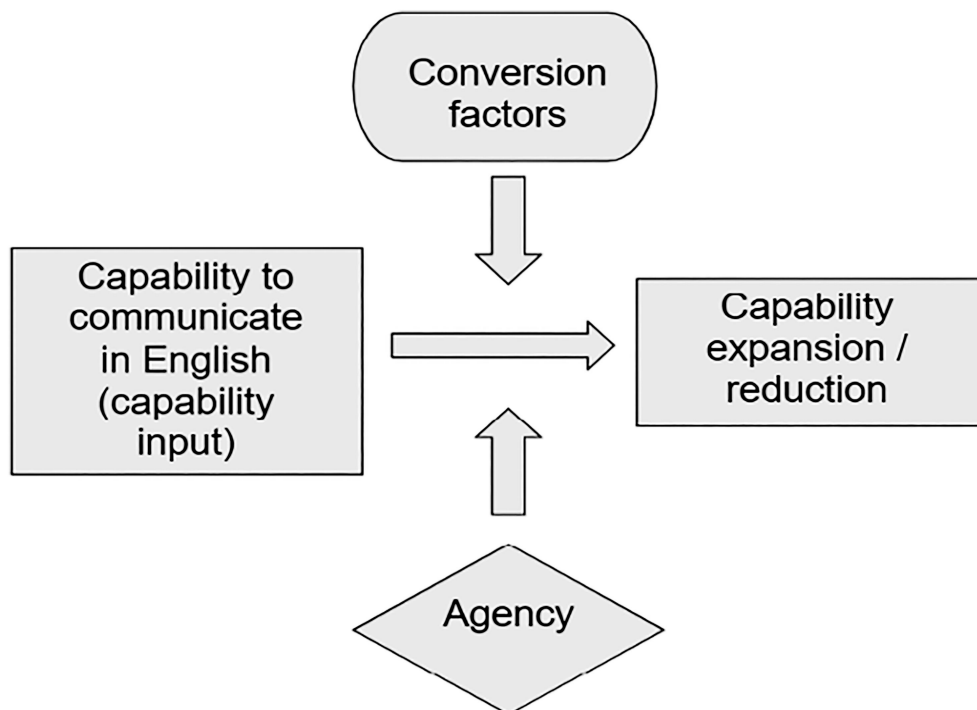
Returning to the example of the rich and poor HE graduate described above, for the former, social environment and the internet act as positive or enabling factors in the conversion of English skills into substantive opportunities whereas for the latter, these conversion factors have a negative or constraining effect. Conversion factors, then, show how the CA accounts

for internal and external influences on individuals' capabilities (Calitz, 2019; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). As with capabilities and functionings, conversion factors are unique to each individual, which further demonstrates how the CA is sufficiently sophisticated to explain the complex and multifaceted nature of human beings (Robeyns, 2018). In addition, the concept of conversion factors highlights that, while agency is central, the capability approach does not neglect the role of structure in capability formation (Lozano et al., 2012). In the current study, conversion factors can shed light on some reasons why different individuals may struggle to turn their English language skills to their advantage. This information can be particularly useful for policymakers and practitioners seeking to equalise opportunities for individuals to use English in the furtherance of other valued freedoms (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Operationalising the CA

The concepts of capabilities, conversion factors, and agency and how they were operationalised in the current study are illustrated in Figure 1. For our purposes, then, the capability to communicate in English developed through ELE in Colombian HE is understood as a capability input which may open many kinds of doors, resulting in capability expansion. However, as Figure 1 also shows, this is contingent upon a range of enabling and constraining conversion factors, but also upon individual agency. As such, it is possible that English, far from opening doors, may actually close them thus reducing an individual's capability set.

Figure 1. Operationalising English in the current study.



The study

As stated earlier, the current study used the CA to identify the substantive freedoms which English can enlarge or constrain in the lives of economically vulnerable graduates in Colombia, and to identify factors which are instrumental in this process. For generating the data, qualitative interviews were conducted, which were then analysed using thematic analysis.

Qualitative research typically uses non-probability sampling strategies, and a type of non-probability sampling known as snowball sampling was used to select participants (Cohen et al., 2005). As such, personal contacts who agreed to be part of the study put the researcher in touch with other potential participants, who then recommended additional suitable candidates. This type of sample was chosen because of difficulties encountered recruiting participants through other means. Although snowball sampling is not representative of the wider population, which means that the research is not generalisable, the value of qualitative research lies less in its potential to lead to generalisable conclusions and more in the rich and complex insights it provides into particular contextualised instances (Cohen et al., 2005; Miles et al., 2014).

As the research is concerned with English and opportunity, participants were sought who had attended English classes during their studies, and who had completed an HE qualification in the last five years. Additionally, only participants who had lived in strata one to three during their studies were selected since Colombians from these strata live in zones with

poorer quality housing as opposed to those from the upper strata (four to six) who pay more for utilities and live in more affluent neighbourhoods (Jessel, 2017).

As Tables 1 and 2 show, three participants chose to study languages (with a compulsory English component) as part of their major. These participants were included since they have better English skills than most other participants, which, as alluded to previously, may have a bearing on the opportunities afforded by such skills, and also made for a more heterogeneous sample. This heterogeneity is also reflected by the fact that graduates of different types of HEI (both public and private), qualifications, subjects, and regions (both rural and urban) participated in the study. As these tables also show, some participants had only obtained a technical or technological diploma while others had obtained a degree, and in three cases an MA. Similarly, while some participants only had one HE qualification, others were either studying for a second qualification, or had already completed two HE qualifications. 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). This means that three participants who studied technical qualifications, which are vocational in nature, are also included in the study. Obtaining such a heterogeneous sample would not have been possible without the internet. For this reason, many interviews were conducted virtually.

Table 1. Participant profiles.

	Jose	Charlie	Mariana	Leo	Alicia	Laura
Years since graduation from first HEI	5	4	1	4	3	4
Qualifications	Technical qualification (IT)	Technical qualification (Logistics & Commerce)	Degree (Public Accounting)	Degree (Modern Languages); MA (Translation)	Degree (Psychology)	Degree (International Relations); MA (Social Development)
English level	A2	A1	A1	C1	B2	B2
Stratum	2	2	2	3	2	3
Geographical region	Caribbean coast	Caribbean coast	Bogotá	Andes	Caribbean coast	Caribbean coast
Current occupation	Studying a degree in Philosophy	Studying a degree in Architecture; working part-time in a call centre	Assistant accountant	English teacher	Teaching assistant	University lecturer & coordinator
Monthly salary	None	\$240	\$570	\$675	\$405	\$730
Interview format and language	Face-to-face; Spanish	Face-to-face; Spanish	Virtual; Spanish	Virtual; English	Face-to-face; Spanish	Virtual; Spanish

Table 2. Participant profiles.

	Juan	Rebecca	Maria	Martha	Alirio	Catalina
Years since graduation from first HEI	1	½	½	1	3	4

Qualifications	Degree (Spanish & English); MA (Didactics of Spanish Literature & Language)	Degree (Spanish & English)	Technological qualification (Business Management); technical qualification (Public Health)	Degree (International Business)	Degree (Public Accounting)	Degree (Industrial Engineering)
English level	B1	B2	A1	B2	A1	A2
Stratum	2	1	2	2	3	2
Geographical region	Andes	Caribbean coast	Bogotá	Caribbean coast	Bogotá	Caribbean coast
Current occupation	Spanish teacher	English teacher	Studying a degree in Business Administration	Manager of a pharmacy	Accountant	University researcher / project manager
Monthly salary	\$410	\$410	None	\$510	\$510	None
Interview format and language	Virtual; Spanish	Virtual; English	Virtual; Spanish	Virtual; English	Virtual; Spanish	Virtual; Spanish

Since they help us make sense of participants' unique ways of viewing reality, and 'may contribute to the empowerment of the oppressed' (Kvale, 2006, p. 497), interviews were chosen to generate the data for this study. Specifically, the semi-structured format was used as it allows for a degree of systematicity and control which is absent from the unstructured format, but it is also more flexible and open-ended than a more structured approach would allow for (Denscombe, 2007; Kvale, 2006). This was helpful when it came to analysing the data as there were greater similarities among responses than would have been the case following an unstructured format (Cohen et al., 2005).

The domains where English can potentially contribute to development, as highlighted in the literature review, were instructive in the development of the interview guides. Where possible, questions were open-ended in order to elicit more detail regarding participants' life-worlds (Mann, 2011).

Thematic analysis (TA) was considered the most appropriate means of analysing the interview data. One distinct advantage of TA is that the reasonably clear-cut and adaptable procedures can yield qualitative data which are just as trustworthy, vivid, and penetrating as those produced by more sophisticated or time-consuming methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

This method involved transcribing, and in most cases, translating the data into English. This was followed by initial coding whereby categories were systematically assigned to participants' utterances (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005). Next, the codes were sorted into possible underlying themes, which also involved drawing on the literature and keeping in mind the research questions. These were then distilled by collapsing overlapping themes into superordinate themes, developing new themes, and making adjustments to existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005). This process continued until it was felt that the themes were fairly well defined, reflected the data, and were relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). A fellow researcher was also enlisted to code some samples of raw data to check the consistency of the categories that had been developed, after which any discrepancies were discussed and amendments made (Suter, 2012).

At all times during the research the ethical principles outlined by BERA(2018) were followed. As such, prior to the interviews, voluntary informed consent was obtained. In addition, pseudonyms have been used to keep participants' identities confidential, and any other identifying features have been omitted from the data.

Findings and discussion

A total of 30 categories emerged from the thematic analysis, and these were grouped into four themes, two of which were

directly related to the research questions: 1. Capabilities and English, and 2. Conversion factors and English. I first consider the capabilities which graduates felt English promoted or thwarted in their lives. It stands to reason that the salient capabilities are identified before we move on to a discussion of those corresponding conversion factors which either advanced or constrained these beings and doings.

Capabilities and English

This section discusses capabilities which English can be instrumental in promoting or diminishing for this study's participants in their wider social contexts. These have been broadly categorised as follows: (1) economic capabilities; (2) sociocultural capabilities; and (3) the epistemic access capability. These groupings provide a useful organising structure, but the capabilities identified here should not be taken as a definitive list of valued freedoms that English can advance or thwart in the lives of Colombian HE graduates from low-income backgrounds since they were not arrived at through a process of public deliberation (Sen, 2009). Nevertheless, they could inform the drawing up of such a list by future researchers (Tao, 2010).

Economic capabilities

According to Cin (2017, p. 44), economic capabilities refer to those which enable individuals to 'generate an income, own property, inherit property and to control their own earnings.' For participants aiming to turn their English skills to their advantage two economic capabilities emerged from the data analysis as significant: the capability of improving one's job prospects; and the capability to buy, sell and exchange goods. The distinction between these two capabilities is important given the high numbers of informally employed Colombians who can 'generate an income' outside of the formal employment sector. Indeed, buying, selling and exchanging goods does not depend on whether a person is officially in work or not, and purchasing goods also refers to shopping, which is typically viewed as a valued pastime rather than a means of making a living.

Improving one's job prospects

The employment capability has been identified in the literature as having a good job (Walker & Mkwanzani, 2015), or being able to choose desired jobs (Flores-Crespo, 2007), and across the interviews there was widespread acknowledgement of the instrumental role that English can play in fostering this capability. Representative of this view is the following extract. Here In this extract Laura, who graduated with an MA in Social Development from an expensive private university on the Caribbean coast and subsequently moved to a small rural city in the country's interior, is responding to a question about the opportunities available for undergraduates to turn their English skills to their advantage:

Here there are lots of call centres that are working remotely at the moment, but you can seek out one of these positions and still continue your studies, and when you graduate you can get work in your area. But if you don't speak English, you're losing a great opportunity.

In fact, as Table 3 illustrates, English helped five of this study's 12 participants improve their job opportunities.

Table 3. Jobs obtained with the help of English skills.

Participant	Jobs
Martha	Internship in advertising & marketing; marketing analyst
Alicia	Teaching assistant in a private English-medium school
Laura	University lecturer & coordinator for English in a public university
Rebecca	Teacher in a private, English-medium school; English teacher in a public school
Leo	Internship in the US (low-skilled, low-paid jobs e.g. cleaning & fast-food restaurant cashier); internship in Brazil (Spanish & English teacher); English teacher in rural public schools in Colombia

As this table also shows, Martha was the only participant whose English skills proved beneficial for finding work in a non-education related field within Colombia. Specifically, English helped her find employment as an intern with an international organisation in the final year of her degree in International Business. When her internship ended, she was offered a position

as a marketing analyst with the same company. When asked about this job, Martha responded that it required her to use English on a daily basis:

I was working there doing marketing analysis, so I had to talk in English. I had to write in English for some suppliers, and it was very easy because I had previous knowledge because of the courses that I took at university.

Notably, though, while this position was helpful for gaining experience in a foreign company where she could practise her English, Martha left this job to return to the city where she had studied to start her own business. One factor in giving up a well-paid job that her degree had specifically prepared her for was the working conditions:

Martha: I was working like eight hours, but in reality, sometimes I started at 8am, and I finished at 10pm or 11pm, so it was a lot of hours in the day.

Researcher: Did you get paid extra for those hours?

Martha: No, I didn't. Companies don't do that.

Thus, while English skills may be useful for getting a job, if the working conditions are exploitative, this may not necessarily lead to capability expansion, and may not compensate for all the hard work and financial resources needed to develop the capability to speak English. However, Martha was able to mobilise her agency to change her less than favourable employment circumstances. In her new position managing her own pharmacy, Martha has few opportunities to use her English, but has more time to do her 'own things.'

Like Martha, Alicia also studied a non-language related subject at university although she was unable to find work within her field, and after her contract as a research assistant at the private university where she had studied ended, she was unemployed for more than a year. For Alicia, a Psychology graduate, her part-time position teaching assistant position in an English-medium school therefore positively contributed to her well-being by improving her employment situation, which, in turn, expanded other substantive freedoms:

Currently I'm working in a context where I have to use English, and the work I have now is better than what I could have hoped for as a graduate in Psychology from a low social stratum... and the type of contract I have allows me to do other work. It has improved my lifestyle.

In common with Martha and Alicia, Laura's HE qualifications are in non-language related subjects. However, Laura, like Alicia, failed to find employment directly related to her studies. After over a year without work, she eventually moved from the large urban centre on the Caribbean coast where she had studied to take up a job in a smaller city inland as an English lecturer and coordinator in a public university. This demonstrates Laura's agency: she is not merely a victim of her circumstances, and by relocating to another region of Colombia she is able to navigate barriers which prevent her from using her English skills in pursuit of her goal of finding a job. This expression of agency appears to have drastically changed her life circumstances:

Researcher: Do you feel that English has improved your life?

Laura: Absolutely. Because all that time I was in [name of city where she studied]...I couldn't find work, and then after that to end up here in the university...it was a very profound change, and if I hadn't spoken English, I wouldn't have the job I have now.

In contrast to Laura, Alicia and Martha, who majored in other subjects, Rebecca and Leo majored in languages with a strong focus on English. Since the natural career choice for such graduates is language teaching, it is not surprising that English helped them find work in this field.

Buying, selling, and exchanging goods.

Aside from improving employment opportunities, English was useful for cultivating another economic capability: buying, selling and exchanging goods. For more than half of this study's participants, English was instrumental in fostering this human freedom. This is highlighted in the following excerpt from Maria, an undergraduate in Business Administration who had graduated six months earlier from a state-funded technical and technological institution with a technological qualification in Business Management, and a technical qualification in Public Health:

Researcher: Can you give me an example of when English has helped you to purchase or sell

something?

Maria: English has really helped me buy things online for those pages which are in English... there is a page from the US called Walmart... , and there I once bought a television and my sister-in-law brought it from Miami.

As this extract shows, such transactions were only possible because of US-based virtual platforms (Amazon was the most commonly cited), which in all cases enabled participants to purchase consumer goods from the US. This illustrates the value of online portals for activating the trading capability on the one hand, and Colombians' preference for products from this country on the other. According to Martinez (2015, p. 616) this preference can be explained by the fact that US goods are considered 'better than the Colombian ones, especially technology, shoes, clothing, beauty products, medicines, music, and even education,' but it also reflects the economic dominance of the US, which is Colombia's biggest trading partner (export.gov, 2013). While this might suggest that at the macro level of the economy English is having a negative impact since it facilitates the transfer of capital from Colombia to the Global North, at the micro level the effects of English are positive since participants clearly valued and derived pleasure from being able to buy these consumer goods.

Sociocultural capabilities

The second set of capabilities were labelled as sociocultural since they comprise both cultural and social freedoms. In the current study, sociocultural capabilities are defined as those which foster social participation and engagement with different cultures on the basis of mutual respect and understanding (Cin, 2017).

Appreciating artistic and cultural expression

The first sociocultural freedom that will be discussed here is the capability to appreciate artistic and cultural expression, which Mendoza and Flores-Crespo (2012) identified as a valued freedom for Mexican high school students. The importance of this capability is alluded to by Sen (2004, p. 39), who asserts that, 'the furtherance of well-being and freedoms that we seek in development cannot but include the enrichment of human lives through literature, music, fine arts, and other forms of cultural expression and practice, which we have reason to value.' An example of this capability is provided in the following extract from Juan, a Spanish teacher in state schools who had graduated three years earlier with an MA in the Didactics of Spanish Literature and Language from a public university in a mountainous region of Colombia. In this extract, Juan is responding to a question about his reasons for wanting to travel to the UK, a country he has never visited:

Because I love the traditions. I watch films in English. At the moment I'm watching a North American series called American Horror Story, and all that English culture, all that North American culture seems so exciting, so innovative, so first-world, which I've never experienced.

In fact, almost all participants stated that English had increased their appreciation of English-medium cultural products such as movies, documentaries, TV series, music, video games and literature, and most mentioned video streaming services such as Amazon Prime, YouTube, and Netflix as useful in this regard. Further evidence for this capability is provided in the quotation below from Jose, who had graduated with a technical qualification from the same state-funded technical and technological institution as Maria, and was studying in a private university for a degree in Philosophy at the time of the interview:

I like to watch series on Netflix with subtitles because I learn the meaning and pronunciation, and I know that's what they're saying.

This extract also suggests that appreciation of English-medium art and culture may perform an instrumental function by providing participants with opportunities to practise their English. According to most participants, this was also the case with regards to other capabilities fostered by English and highlights the dual role that capabilities can play both as ends in themselves (i.e. to appreciate art and culture) and as a means to other ends (i.e. to practise English). The above quotation from Jose also provides evidence of agency since he is able to navigate the absence of opportunities to practise English in his local environment by using the internet. As such, Jose actively shapes his linguistic reality by engaging in autonomous actions which enable him to realise his goal of becoming a confident and competent English-speaker.

Communicating with people from different cultures

A second sociocultural capability which the use of English promoted was communication with people from different cultures. Evidence for this capability, which is similar to the functioning of being able to communicate (Wolff & de-Shalit,

2007), is offered in the following extracts. The first of these is from Catalina, a university researcher/project manager, who had graduated with a degree in Industrial Engineering from a private university on the Caribbean coast five years prior to the interview, while the second is from Leo, an English teacher in public schools, who is discussing his experiences of using English while completing an MA in Translation in Brazil four years prior to being interviewed:

Researcher: When was the last time you used English?

Catalina: The last time I used English was yesterday because I'm trying to learn a little Korean, but it's really complicated, so the classes are in Korean with an English translation.

The university had Erasmus so there were many people from Germany and France...there were people from everywhere, so they knew neither Portuguese nor Spanish, but they knew English. So that was the way we communicated, and at the beginning when I arrived at the university my classmates talked to me in English.

These excerpts show how the capability to communicate with people from different cultures can expand other valued opportunities such as access to knowledge, in the case of Catalina, and sociality and participation (Terzi, 2007), in the case of Leo. Notably, these encounters, as with most other face-to-face opportunities to use English to foster the capability of communicating with people from different cultures, took place within the same context: the university. Bearing in mind that four out of the five jobs that enabled participants to use their English skills were also in the field of education, it seems that there may be more opportunities for individuals to convert English into valued beings and doings in this sector.

Sociality and participation

As Leo's experience above suggests, communicating with people from different cultures can foster sociality and participation. This capability is described by Terzi (2007, p. 37) as 'being able to establish positive relationships with others and to participate in social activities without shame.' Evidence of this capability is presented below. In both extracts participants are responding to the question 'do you have friends or acquaintances with whom you can speak English?':

I've got friends, but we don't speak English frequently. More than anything we chat online, or when there are people interested in learning Spanish we do like a language exchange [Catalina].

I have two Jamaican friends that I met at the school where I work. They work there too, so they became my friends. From the US I have some friends that I made through Facebook...I speak with them regularly. I'm part of some group chats where we can speak, and we talk, but occasionally, like, not all the time, and I'm in a group where I interact with people from different countries in English [Rebecca].

The fact that English enabled participants to form bonds with people from different cultural backgrounds highlights how this language has become a *lingua franca* in many situations. Additionally, it further illustrates how a functioning – in this case sociality and participation – rather than being an end in itself, is instrumental to the achievement of other ends (Robeyns, 2018). Interestingly, converting English into its corresponding functioning was a central motivating factor for Catalina and Rebecca to socialise in English. This provides additional evidence of agency since, far from being mere 'passive recipients' of the linguistic policy of ELE in Colombian HE, Catalina and Rebecca were able to pursue their goal of improving their English fluency in spite of the paucity of opportunities to do so in their respective geographical locations. As with Jose, this was made possible by using the internet.

Respect, dignity, and recognition

Also related to the capability for sociality and participation is the capability for respect, dignity and recognition which entails 'being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity, [and] not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race' (Wilson-Strydom, 2016, p. 151). Below is one example of how English helped foster this capability:

Researcher: Are there any other ways in which English has helped you that we haven't yet discussed?

Rebecca: Even though I love this language that is not mine, I love it and the cultures that speak it. I have to recognize that what is mine is what identifies me and makes me who I am, and I can use this language as a tool to help others to see where I come from, who I am, what is my history, what is my heritage, which sometimes is not very well known because there are

many people who have prejudices about Latinos or Colombians, and so that has helped to love who I am, to show people who we truly are, and embrace what I am as a person, as a Colombian, as a Latina.

This quotation from Rebecca, a Spanish and English graduate who found a job as an English teacher in the public sector upon graduation, illustrates how English has changed Rebecca's understanding of herself, has boosted her self-esteem, and is helping her to communicate this to others. Additionally, this quote highlights how Rebecca enacts her agency by co-opting English as a 'tool' in order to pursue her goal of celebrating her identity and thereby dispelling negative stereotypes of Latinos.

The experiences of Leo, the only participant in the study who had visited an Anglophone country, are also instructive:

When I went to the US I saw how people thought about Colombia...my experience at the beginning was people asking me if we live in trees, if there was electricity here... there were people asking me...that, so when I saw their point I understood what they think of Colombia...maybe they think there is a jungle here and there is nothing to do... so I didn't get offended, but I got like thoughtful about it and swapped places with them.

The opportunity to work in the US, which presented itself due to an internship organised by his university, enabled Leo to convert his English skills into the capability to improve life opportunities through mobility. However, this quote also reveals how Leo was 'othered' (Dejaeghere, 2020 [Q4], p. 8) during his time in the US by societal prejudices towards Colombians, thus denying him parity of social status. Disturbingly, despite not having travelled abroad, other participants were also aware of negative views towards 'people like them' as the excerpt above from Rebecca demonstrates. At the same time, the awareness of unfavourable perceptions of Colombians was not wholly negative as it appears to have empowered Rebecca by giving her pride in her identity. Similarly, Leo's experiences of prejudices in the US, while no doubt hurtful, also led him to 'swap places' with those holding prejudicial views of Colombians.

The epistemic access capability

A final capability which mattered for most participants is the capability to access knowledge. The importance of this capability is highlighted by Walker and Mkwanzani (2015, p. 17), who identify the functioning of accessing knowledge as 'crucial for young people to be able to realise their aspirations.' This knowledge takes diverse forms as exemplified below:

[English gave me] more access to information. I read books about theology, and there are better and more books about theology in English. There's more material, so that's really a huge help, and my favourite preachers are people who speak only in English, so I've learned a lot, and it's been a blessing for my church as well because the books my friend sent me are for my church, so I use those materials they gave me, and I translated for the church [Rebecca].

I'm principally interested in what's happening at the global level...so there's a webpage called Bloomberg and this page isn't translated into Spanish, well when I find an article that interests me using the little English that I have, I translate the whole thing into Spanish [Alirio].

For Rebecca, a committed Christian, English enables access to theological texts, which, in turn, foster her spiritual growth and also benefit her church; while for Alirio, a freelance accountant from Bogotá who trades on the stock market as a hobby, English makes it easier for him to pursue this pastime, which, in turn, can also generate an income and help him to realise his aspiration of studying trading in London. These examples concur with earlier studies which report that English fosters epistemic access (e.g. Erling, 2017), but also show how the absence or presence of one capability can impact on the availability of others (Mkwanzani, 2019).

Summing up, this section has identified a range of capabilities which low-income Colombian HE graduates have used their English skills to promote in their broader social environment. Thus, ELE in the country appears to promote human flourishing in economically vulnerable HE graduates by advancing a range of valued human freedoms. However, not all participants were able to exercise their capabilities to the same degree due to the presence of contextually relevant conversion factors. It is to a discussion of these that I now turn.

Conversion factors

As should be clear by now, conversion factors can support or stifle the activation of capabilities, and an analysis of the interview data suggest the presence of several conversion factors which shaped the transformation of participants' valued opportunity freedoms into functionings. As 'each individual has a unique profile of conversion factors' (Robeyns, 2018, para.

27), not all the factors pertaining to each respective participant can be reported here. Accordingly, this section focuses on those factors which emerged as particularly salient for participants seeking to use their English skills to better their lives. As this section makes clear, in some cases the same factor can be either enabling or constraining, depending on its presence or absence.

Level of English

It is perhaps to be expected that limited competence in English restricted participants' capabilities after graduation. Although low levels of English had a constraining effect on many of the capabilities identified in this paper, its influence on the employment capability was most evident. Indeed, all the participants who were able to benefit from their English skills in the world of work needed to have at least an upper-intermediate (B2) level of English, and across the interviews this level was cited as the minimum requirement for job opportunities requiring English in Colombia. Alirio's experience of applying for a position with a multinational company in Bogotá offers an example of this:

While I was working as an analyst, I applied for a junior accounting position ... and I was successful up until the English component. They were looking for someone with my profile, someone who knows about various sectors of the economy, who is a licensed professional, recently graduated and so on. I fit the profile, but when I got to the English part, which was the last part, that's when the whole process broke down ... they were looking for someone with a B2 level.

The importance of a certain level of English for improving labour opportunities in Colombia is further illustrated by the fact that several other participants reported missing out on such opportunities because of their poor English competence. For example, Mariana, who had worked in several accounting jobs after graduating with a degree in Public Accounting, explained that a higher level of English would have helped her chances of promotion and would have yielded other benefits. However, since her self-reported level of English was A1 – beginner level – this opportunity was denied to her. Her poor foreign language skills also excluded her from participation in workplace conversations and meetings:

There are people who can speak English, but they don't speak English in the office, only with the client. For example, my manager holds meetings with a partner in English, but if you don't speak English, why would they invite you? You won't understand.

The importance of a threshold level of English for workplace opportunities echoes research by Euromonitor(2010) which found that 31 out of 42 companies in their survey required employees to have at least an intermediate (B1) level of competence in this language. At the same time, the finding that opportunities to use English would be available to participants, but only if they are reasonably proficient in this language, challenges research which claims that few positions in Colombia require English-speaking employees(British Council,2015b; Herazo et al.,2012). Since these studies were conducted several years ago, one explanation for this discrepancy could be that English is becoming progressively more valuable in the Colombian labour market as the effects of globalisation in the country intensify (Martinez, 2015).

Geographical location

In addition to English level, geographical location emerged as a key factor for converting English into opportunities for several of this study's participants. Evidence of the importance of this factor is provided by Laura, an English lecturer in a public university, who is responding to a question about the relevance of English skills for her students:

[Name of city] has the second highest unemployment rate in Colombia. Currently with the pandemic, it may have the highest because, in contrast to many companies, the local businesses here have had to close. So the majority of people who really want to get ahead have to go to [name of a larger city] ... for example, I tell my students about an article I read which said that this city is not attractive for call centre companies because the population doesn't speak English.

In the small provincial city where Laura lives, high unemployment means that few opportunities are available to English speakers, which leads to internal migration in search of better job prospects. Not only does this finding chime with those reported by Euromonitor (2010), which found that opportunities to use English in the workplace were more readily available in urban areas, but it also helps account for a lack of commitment to learn English in this city as Laura went on to explain:

We are faced with students who have no interest whatsoever in English. I give class to first semester students and it's really difficult to foster any commitment to learning English. [Name of city] is a very provincial, rural city with lots of farms and lots of things where people maybe don't believe that they will one day leave and need English.

Thus, while English may be relevant for many Colombians in different geographical regions, given Colombia's geographical diversity and the disparities between rural and urban areas, it does not follow that all Colombians will find English beneficial. Indeed, in regions where there are few opportunities to use English, motivation to learn the language may be lower.

Despite the potential constraining effect of geographical location on participants' opportunities to convert their English skills into functionings, the interview data also highlights how in many cases participants can exert their agency to navigate this conversion factor. For example, Martha was only able to undertake an internship with a multinational company where she could use her English skills by moving to another city. Due to unsatisfactory working conditions, Martha subsequently left this job and returned to the city where she had completed her degree to run a pharmacy. Similarly, Leo, by purchasing a motorcycle, enacted his agency in order to navigate geographical obstacles to finding employment in Colombia as a state school teacher of English:

I was lucky because I arrived to [name of town] and the person who was doing the job had just quit because it was in rural areas. So you need a motorcycle or a jeep...to move, and the guy says it's too hard for him to get another car because he had an automobile... So they needed a person with a good level of English...and I sent my CV, and two hours later they called me [and] they did an interview...and the guy liked my English. He asked me about methodologies and things like that. He liked it, and he said, 'man if you want to work with us you are welcome.'

The experiences of Martha and Leo show how constraining conversion factors need not determine the opportunities available to economically vulnerable graduates to make use of their English skills, and highlight the role that agency can play in navigating obstacles to capability expansion (Calitz, 2019).

Internet access

A final factor which emerged as significant in the conversion of English into substantive opportunities was internet access. In particular, the internet was instrumental in enabling the capability of appreciating artistic and cultural expression, which was facilitated in most cases by video streaming services such as Netflix and YouTube. Additionally, by enabling participants to enjoy English-medium artistic and cultural products, the internet also shaped perceptions of life in English-speaking countries, which, in turn, may have influenced participants' aspirations to travel to such countries for work or study. This interpretation is supported by Mkwanzani (2019, p. 52), who reminds us that, 'movies, dramas and commercial advertisements may have an unintended consequence of fueling perceptions that one place may be better than another.'

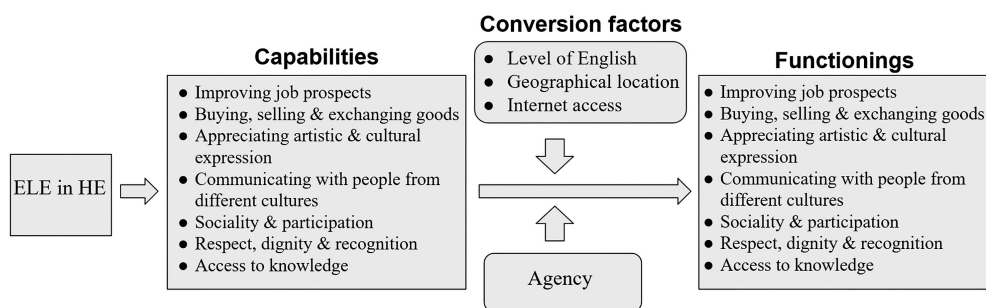
The internet was also helpful for enabling participants to exercise their agency in order to overcome a key barrier to capability expansion: English level. For example, despite his poor level of linguistic competence in English, Alirio was able to locate and meaningfully engage with information on the internet in English by using translation. As he explained, 'when I find an article that interests me using the little English that I have, I translate the whole thing into Spanish.' Thus, the internet can be instrumental in enabling agentic individuals to overcome linguistic barriers.

In sum, this section has identified conversion factors which may be particularly salient for Colombian graduates from low-income backgrounds who are seeking to make the most of their English language skills. We have seen how these factors intersect to constrain or foster the potential of English to improve participants' lives subsequent to graduation. This highlights how responsibility for using English to get ahead does not rest solely with the individual, which problematises the framing of English as the language of opportunity. However, in line with Calitz's (2019) rejection of a deficit narrative, we have also seen how individuals can use their agency to overcome barriers to capability expansion.

Conclusions

This paper has identified capabilities which ELE in Colombian HE has promoted in the lives of low-income HE graduates, and it has also identified factors which are influential in this process. These are summarised in [Figure 2](#).

Figure 2. Summary of key research findings.



In terms of the former, English can promote a range of interconnected opportunity freedoms in the lives of economically disadvantaged HE graduates (Mkwananzi, 2019). In particular, and in line with previous research (e.g. Grin, 2011 [Q5]; Azam et al., 2013), English has fostered better employment opportunities for some of this study's participants. Where the findings of the current paper differ, though, is by identifying the specific employment domains where English skills may be beneficial for Colombian graduates from poor backgrounds. Interesting in this regard is the finding that English skills appear to have been most helpful for participants working in the field of education, which is unsurprising given the dominance of English in Colombian HE (Martínez, 2016; Miranda & Molina-Naar, 2022). This study has also illustrated how English can promote the buying, selling, and exchange of goods. While this echoes findings from earlier research (e.g. Ku & Zussman, 2010; Lee, 2012) which looked at the macro-level benefits to a nation's economy of having an English-proficient population, the current study has focused on the benefits for the individual. Additionally, the findings reported in this paper corroborate prior research (e.g. Erling, 2017; Hailemariam et al., 2011; Martínez, 2015), which has shown how English can foster epistemic access. Finally, the current study has provided evidence of how English specifically – as opposed to foreign languages more generally – can facilitate personal growth by fostering a range of socio-cultural capabilities, and may be the first study of its kind to do so.

Despite presenting this evidence of how English can promote human flourishing, this study has also shown how this is contingent upon individual agency and a range of conversion factors. Prior research has reported on the role of geographical location and level of English in enabling English-speakers to turn their linguistic capital to their advantage (e.g. Grin, 2001; Lee, 2012), and the current paper substantiates these findings. However, access to the internet also emerged as a key conversion factor in this study, which is not particularly surprising in an increasingly globalised world dominated by English (Steger, 2017). What this means in broad terms is that English can 'open doors for some but not all' (Matear, 2008, p. 143). As such, this paper's findings challenge the reductive perception of English as the language of opportunity and help us to better understand the obstacles facing economically vulnerable Colombian HE graduates when seeking to turn their English language abilities to their advantage (Warriner, 2016). However, as this study is small-scale and qualitative, it makes no generalisation claims, and further research in a range of settings would be needed to firm up the conclusions presented here (Suter, 2012).

Notwithstanding, this paper makes a substantial empirical contribution to knowledge since it may well be the first in the region to use the CA to investigate the relationship between ELE and development and furthers our understanding of this relationship in several ways. First, by conceptualising development as the expansion of human freedoms – or capabilities – the CA has allowed us to consider the value of English in terms of the diversity of ways in which it contributes to well-being at the micro level rather than purely in terms of the economic benefits it brings at the macro level. This information can indicate to policymakers and practitioners domains where English skills are more or less useful, which, as I highlight below, can help in the development of contextually appropriate language policies and English language curricula. Second, the construct of conversion factors has deepened our understanding of the barriers – structural and otherwise – that financially insecure Colombian graduates can face when they endeavour to use this language to expand their freedoms. This construct therefore helps us to better account for the often complex reasons for individual variations in the conversion of English skills into valued opportunities (Mkwananzi, 2019). A third way in which employing the CA in the present study advances our understanding of the relationship between English and development is by acknowledging the critical importance of human agency. In doing so the CA helps us to view this study's participants not in deficit terms (Calitz, 2019), but rather as active agents in 'their own destiny' (Sen, 1999, p. 53). Thus, as we have seen, individuals can, given the right enabling conditions, mobilise their agency to navigate barriers to the development of the English language capability as well as to barriers to the expansion of other freedoms. However, this should not be taken to mean that the marginalised can negotiate all obstacles to human flourishing. Rather, it means that, in the words of Sen (1999 p. xi – xii), 'the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us.'

Recommendations

Participants reported that they had more opportunities to convert their English skills into valued functionings if they had **at least** a B2 (upper-intermediate) level of competence. A potential policy recommendation in this regard would therefore be to focus on improving the quality of ELE so that more Colombian graduates can attain the threshold level of English proficiency required by employers. This recommendation, however, comes with a caveat, since 'as more speakers acquire a workable command of the language, reduced scarcity may drive down the current premium afforded by possession of that skill' (Bruthiaux, 2002, p. 291). In other words, the benefits which accrue to competent speakers of this language may decrease as the number of **proficient** speakers increases. One implication of this is that individuals will have to keep upgrading their English skills to remain employable in what may be an unending process of self-improvement (Park, 2011). Given the considerable financial costs involved in accessing quality ELE in Colombia (Correa & González, 2016), this would leave financially insecure Colombians at a disadvantage compared to their more well-off counterparts. With this in mind, a more sensible policy recommendation would be to develop ELE curricula which reflect the uses – conceptualised here as capabilities – that English can be put to in Colombian society. As such, ELE instructional content should be based on an analysis of the English language skills most relevant to each particular context and **set of** circumstances. For this reason, more studies from Latin America are needed in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the contribution that English can make to development in different settings, especially in view of the recent policy initiatives promoting ELE in education systems across the region. The current study has demonstrated the potential of using the CA to explore this relationship.

Notes

- 1 English Opens Doors ✗
- 2 National English Programme ✗
- 3 English, Doors to the World ✗
- 4 All amounts in the article are in US dollars ✗

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