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Introduction
The global trend towards massification of higher education (HE) in recent decades is particularly evident in Colombia, which has seen an "impressive" expansion of access (OECD 2016, p. 12). However, this increase in participation, although encouraging, has led to concerns about the quality of provision (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2017). The issue of poor student performance and high dropout rates is of special relevance in the subject of EFL in Colombia since English language education is compulsory in higher educational institutes (HEIs), including in the university where the current study took place.

To address the issue of poor student performance and high dropout rates, the Universidad del Norte in Colombia established a learning centre known as CREE (Centro de Recursos para el Éxito Estudiantil[1]). But how successful has this centre been in improving English language learners' (ELLs) performance? Preliminary discussions with English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers from the Institute prior to the commencement of the current study suggested a lack of clarity about how CREE works, which would indicate that the centre is not as efficacious as it could be. As a result, one objective of the current evaluation is to find out how far the "espoused theory" about how the programme operates is aligned with the actual "theory-in-use" (Patton 2002, p. 163). This will lead to the development of a more robust theory of change of how CREE works which could contribute to programme improvement in three ways: 1) through raising awareness in stakeholders who participate in the evaluation of issues with programme implementation; 2) by providing feedback to stakeholders on which of CREE's strategies work, for whom, and in which circumstances (Pawson & Tilley 2004); and 3) by making the implicit assumptions undergirding the programme explicit in order to guide the future efforts of stakeholders (Rogers 2000). Insights into programme workings may not only enhance the use of the evaluation findings (Feinstein 2002) and inform the development and evaluation of similar interventions in similar contexts, but also contribute to the paucity of existing literature on programmes to improve EFL students' performance in HE in low and middle-income countries.

Thus, the current study aims to answer the following research questions.

- How does CREE work?
- What do the theories underlying the programme say about "what works for whom and in what circumstances and respects"? (Pawson & Tilley 2004, p. 2)

Literature Review
HE and English language learning in Colombia
HE gross enrolment rates in the last decade have doubled to nearly 50% in Colombia (OECD 2016). This massification, however, has brought with it a series of tensions, including concerns over educational quality (OECD 2016). A dropout rate of 46.1% from Colombian universities in 2016 (MEN 2016), highlights the extent of the problem. Perhaps in response to these quality concerns, the Colombian government has in recent years issued a series of decrees aimed at improving the quality of HE and regulating the industry (Alcaldia n.d.). One of these decrees, issued in 2015, included a stipulation that all university students achieve a level of B1 (intermediate level) on the Common European Framework in a second language (Alcaldia 2015). As a result, since English not only facilitates the flow of capital, goods and labour across national borders (Canagarajah, 2017) but also dominates the "the research and knowledge system" (Marginson 2007, p. 326), in many higher education institutes (HEIs) in Colombia, English language education is now obligatory. At the Universidad del Norte no university student can obtain their degree until they have passed the required levels of the English programme. This policy has two main implications. Firstly, it means that those who are weak in languages or have poor English will find it more difficult to complete their degree than those who are more proficient or have a greater aptitude for languages. The impact of the English language requirement on dropout rates is evidenced by Isaza-Restrepo et al.'s descriptive study (2016) into the dropout and graduation delay of students at the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia. This study shows how language was a reason for students not completing their studies on time in 2% of cases for cohort 1, and in 7% of cases for cohort 2. They also report an increase of around 3% in the number of students lagging behind in their studies or dropping out, between the periods 2003-2006 and 2007-2008, which they attribute to a more rigorous enforcement of the requirement for students to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in English or another second language. Secondly, the policy disproportionately impacts economically disadvantaged students (British Council 2015). Pérez-Pulido et al.'s study (2016) bears this out. The authors analysed the performance of students entering the University of Santander on a school leaving exam required for admission to HE in Colombia. Their study revealed that those from private schools performed better in the English component of the exam than those from public schools.

In light of the above, it should hardly be surprising that instead of fostering greater equity, the Colombian education system has been found to do the opposite (Garcia et al. 2013; Sánchez & Otero 2012). In such a context, evaluation can play a key role in improving educational quality for all (World Bank 2008). Indeed, in a country with a highly privatised tertiary education system (OECD 2019) where private HEIs such as the university in this study enjoy a great deal of autonomy (Bradford et al. 2018), evaluation is an important means of increasing accountability.

Against this backdrop, many universities in Colombia have implemented various student support programmes to improve educational quality and reduce dropout rates (Alvis 2009). CREE represents such a strategy.

CREE
CREE can be categorised as an intervention to improve the supply of education (Ganimian & Murnane 2014). Inputs include study groups, fairs and other events, tutorials, library monitors, exam revision workshops, peer tutors, mentors, conversation clubs, academic orientation and advice (CREE n.d.). Such academic programmes are typically designed to support and consolidate students' learning, and are commonly used to reduce dropout rates in HE in Colombia (Suárez-Montes & Díaz-Subieta 2015).

This small-scale study will only focus on one service offered by CREE which is of particular relevance to EFL students: the peer tutoring programme. Peer tutoring, which utilises "older, or more capable and more academically successful peers to provide one-to-one instruction for struggling learners" (Cole 2014, pp. 360-361), is underpinned by the Vygotskian notion that weaker learners improve through scaffolded interaction with more capable learners (Mynard & Almarzouqi 2006).

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[1] "Resource Centre for Student Success" in English.

The English Language Programme at the Institute of Languages

As mentioned previously, the English Language Programme at the Institute of Languages is compulsory. Students who are absent for more than 20% of class time cannot take the final exam, which in most cases means they will fail the level. This is in contrast to other subjects at the university where students are allowed to miss a quarter of all classes. Also in contrast to other subjects, General English is not credit-bearing. This means that once students know they are going to pass, there is no extrinsic incentive for them to keep studying or attending classes. Another distinctive feature of the English programme is that students are not streamed by age or degree. Classes can therefore be very heterogeneous.

Peer tutoring and English language learning

The success of peer tutoring in enhancing ELLs' performance is well documented (e.g. Bowman-Perrott et al. 2016; Cole 2013 & 2014). Cole's and Bowman-Perrott et al.'s studies, however, as with most research into peer tutoring for ELLs, focuses on interventions from primary to high school level. Moreover, most research into peer tutoring for ELLs, including the aforementioned studies, focuses almost exclusively on English as a second language (ESL) students (those learning English in a country where it is the dominant language) as opposed to English as a foreign language (EFL) students (those learning English in a context where it is not the dominant language). However, instruction methods, access to the language, and motivations for learning English are different in these different contexts (Lightbown 2000). Research into EFL programmes in tertiary education settings is harder to come by. One exception is Mynard and Almarzouqi's (2006) evaluation of an English language peer tutoring programme at a women's university in the United Arab Emirates. The authors conclude that tutors gained valuable experience in teaching and helping others, which made them more responsible, while tutees reported improvements in learning and greater confidence. However, tutors were sometimes unable to provide the support required, and tutees demonstrated poor metacognitive awareness, lacked a clear understanding programme objectives and struggled to manage their own workloads. To address these issues, Mynard & Almarzouqi recommend greater faculty involvement and understanding of programme goals (2006).

The only study that could be found of a university peer tutoring scheme for EFL students in Colombia was carried out by Ariza and Viáfara (2009). The authors conducted qualitative action research into a peer tutoring programme that was set up to help undergraduates of a Modern Languages degree at a public university in Colombia. Tutors were undergraduates from the same programme in the higher semesters. Ariza and Viáfara report that the programme helped prepare tutors and tutees for their future careers as teachers and gain a better understanding of the English language system and how to use it. Issues with the programme included a lack of understanding of tutor's exact role and an excessive dependence on tutors. Tutees in some instances also doubted tutors' credentials.

This paper differs from Ariza and Viáfara's in two regards. Firstly, neither tutors nor tutees in the current study are studying to be teachers. Secondly, Ariza and Viáfara's research took place in a public university whereas the context of the current study is a private university. It is possible that these contextual differences have a bearing on the outcomes of the intervention.

Methodology

Formative evaluations which aim at programme improvement such as the current one "often rely heavily, even primarily, on qualitative methods" (Patton 2002, p. 220). Indeed, the research questions are compatible with qualitative methods which are used if we wish to explore and understand an issue, and when we hope to obtain detailed information about the participants with a view to generating theories based on their perspectives (Cresswell 2014).

This study's evaluation design draws on realist principles. Realistic evaluation is compatible with both qualitative and quantitative methods (Pawson & Tilley 2004). Realist evaluation gets inside "the black box" by depicting the causal pathways of an intervention (OECD n.d.). Therefore, realistic evaluation is more sensitive to how the context and the mechanism lead to the outcomes of the programme, which may enhance the use of the evaluation findings (Marchal et al. 2012).

Following Marchal et al. (2012), the evaluation was conducted in the following stages:

1. Analyse appropriate grey literature
2. Obtain and analyse data from programme stakeholders.
3. Compare the data to develop a "theory-in-use".

The source of the grey literature on the programme is CREE's website and promotional video. In-depth qualitative interviews with stakeholders, which are appropriate for exploring divergent and convergent views of an intervention (Gilmore et al. 2016), were then used to collect data from stakeholders. Participants' perceptions of the theories of change underlying CREE were synthesised into a theory-in-use which is depicted by means of a logic model. Logic models are a useful, succinct, and comprehensible means of depicting knowledge of how a programme works from the perspectives of stakeholders (Savaya & Waysmann 2005).

In the absence of quantitative measures, as in the current study, triangulating data sources reduces validity threats and strengthens causal arguments (Maxwell 2004). Due to access issues, data were collected from six EFL teachers and two CREE staff rather than the direct recipients of the programme or the peer tutors. Obtaining as heterogeneous a sample of EFL teachers as possible helped ensure a variety of events and processes that could potentially influence outcomes were uncovered (Manzano 2016). Heterogeneity in small samples also means that any commonalities that emerge reveal particularly salient aspects of a phenomenon (Patton 2002).

Manzano's topic guide (2016) informed the interview design. Questions put to participants fell into the following categories: a) questions about how the programme works; b) questions about what aspects of the programme work, why and in which circumstances and; c) questions about context, mechanism and outcome. Each interview with participants led to a refinement of the theory of change (ibid.). Thus with each subsequent iteration, questions were more customised as my knowledge of the programme evolved (ibid.). As Manzano highlights, "programme theories are the subject matter of the interview and these are hypotheses that need to be elicited, developed, refined and tested" (ibid. p. 352).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. According to Braun and Clarke, "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (2006, p.

79). Such analysis is appropriate for research into participants' knowledge and understanding of reality (ibid.). My approach was similar to the grounded theory approach used in Mynard and Almarzouqi's study since the inductively derived themes led to hypothesis generation and thus deductive interpretation of the data (Patton 2002).

Findings and discussion

Analysis of the data revealed several main themes related to the underlying programme theory. This section of the paper is organised according to the research questions. The themes are referred to and discussed where relevant.

How does CREE work?

According to CREE's website, there are 20 language tutors available to assist students in a variety of areas such as in the editing and presentation of their work; reading comprehension; presentations; searching for information in databases; improving their knowledge of Spanish, English and other languages (CREE, n.d.). These "academic peers" are "carefully selected for their leadership, their commitment to the institution, their interest in the teaching profession, and their interest in helping others" (ibid.). They provide "specialised orientation" to low performing students, or students who are repeating (ibid.) from 8am to 6pm in various learning spaces throughout the university. The specific schedules of each tutor can be consulted using the university app or by consulting the website.

CREE is an open access service, which means that any university student can seek assistance, but participation is voluntary. According to the website, the only requirement for participants is "to be interested in persisting and achieving academic success" (ibid.).

The centre also states that its programmes and services have had success in the following areas:

- Reducing the number of repeat students
- Increasing students' GPA
- Increasing pass rates
- Increasing student satisfaction with academic life
- Reducing dropout rates

(ibid.)

Comparing this information with data obtained from interviews with programme stakeholders reveals discrepancies regarding how the programme works. For example, Carlos, the coordinator of the peer tutoring programme for foreign languages, told me that there were only 13 tutors to help students with foreign languages, not 20. In addition, although the website states that low-performers or repeat students receive "specialised orientation", I was told that, "tutors...receive students from all levels" [Carlos]. This means that, "in contrast to other subjects, we are therefore more focused on developing skills rather than working on content because we don't follow the class content. It's not possible for us at the moment to follow what each teacher is doing in each class" [Carlos].

Carlos also informed me that, despite being an open access service, teachers can formally refer students to CREE by completing a referral slip. However, this information could not be found on the website, and only two of the six teachers interviewed were aware that there was an official referral process. Moreover, one teacher commented that he thought that students could only attend CREE if referred by a teacher, but, as Carlos explained, "CREE doesn't target students...It's voluntary for all members of the student population".

A final key aspect not mentioned on the website is that CREE staff visit some EFL classes at the beginning of the semester. Carlos, the person responsible for visits to classes within the Institute, told me that he had only gone to about 10 or 15 classes for the current semester because he didn't have time to attend any more.

What do stakeholders' perceptions about the programme's "theory-in-use" say about "what works for whom and in what circumstances and respects"?

Both CREE staff highlighted attendance as a major drawback of the programme. Donald told me that "for every 100 people we invite, only 5 take up the offer". Speaking specifically about the number of EFL students who attend CREE, Carlos told me that there had been "around 70 visits" for the current semester. This does not necessarily mean 70 students as CREE counts the number of consultations, not the number of students. Thus, as Carlos explained, "this could mean 40 students", which is a very low figure considering that the amount of students failing English at the time was almost 700 according to Carlos.

Conversations with teachers also revealed that few, if any, of their students had attended CREE, even though they were failing. Cathy, for instance, told me that almost half of her students in one class had failed the first exam, but she had not advised any of them to go to CREE.

So why aren't more students who are failing or performing poorly in English using the services offered by CREE? Possible reasons can be categorised into factors related to students and factors related to teachers. These are discussed below.

One key reason why EFL students don't make more use of CREE relates to the status of EFL as an academic subject. Because English is obligatory but in most cases non-credit bearing, it is considered a "filler" [Donald]. By contrast, "the other subjects, objectively they're more important because they form part of their core studies" [David]. The status of English as an academic subject also helps account for the low levels of motivation reported by participants. Carlos told me that, "They don't see English as something useful. They do what is necessary to pass but diminish its importance and when things get difficult, they withdraw from the course".

Students on the EFL peer tutoring programme in Mynard and Almarzouqi's study (2006) also attended on a voluntary basis. They suggest that such students may have done so because they were more motivated. Indeed, student motivation seems to be an underlying assumption of the CREE programme since CREE's publicity mentions that those who attend CREE are expected "to be interested in persisting and achieving academic success". Thus, since CREE does not seem to focus on tackling the issue of low motivation, it is reasonable to expect attendance to be lower from subjects such as English which are not considered a priority.

Timetable demands and scheduling issues also seem to contribute to the low number of visits to CREE. For example, Keith also mentions in the quote above that students already have a busy week. He commented that, "they see CREE as another responsibility or something added on top of their additional workload. Their timetables have very very little free time". In addition, each tutor's schedule varies and this may not fit with students' availability. This is why, according to Lily, two of the students she advised to attend CREE did not.

Cultural factors also help account for why students are reluctant to seek assistance from CREE, as the following quotes illustrate:

1. It's seen as a weakness according to the culture...to show that you need help in anyway...to be less than perfect in this culture is to invite ridicule [Cathy].
2. Asking for help in general is a taboo [Agatha].
3. Culturally you cannot really openly say you are anxious or that you are a failure...because they are too proud to admit it [Lily].

Since CREE is open access and there is no obligation to go, in a culture where students are reluctant to seek help, it is understandable that attendance levels are very low. For EFL students in particular, "English requires the participation of the student" [Donald]. As a result, it is harder for students to hide their lack of knowledge than in other subjects, especially because English classes are more heterogeneous than in other subjects with students of different ages, degree programmes and proficiency levels in the same English class.

Another reason why CREE's peer tutoring service is underused was revealed to me by Carlos, who observed that, "some don't come because they don't have confidence in the credibility of the tutors". This chimes with Ariza and Viáfara's findings (2009) which found similar concerns among tutees regarding tutors' credentials.

Other reasons why EFL students don't go to CREE when they need to are teacher related. Given that CREE is open access, a recommendation from the teacher can be instrumental in persuading a student to attend. As we have seen, though, only two teachers knew the formal referral process for students, but this would not prevent teachers from talking to students informally about the importance of seeking help. For several reasons, however, teachers have few such chats with students, as the following quotes reveal:

1. We don't have time to do specific things to send students to CREE [David].
2. The other two I just haven't gotten around to sending them yet. This semester has been jam-packed [Cathy].
3. This semester there are a couple of students who may be failing, but I haven't really found out what the process is or what needs to be done to get a student to attend one of those sessions [Jeremy].
4. If I know what I'm recommending my students do, then I would feel more comfortable about sending my students there. But as of right now...I don't know that they'll get the help they need. I'd rather just tell them to come to me because I know what they need [Cathy].
5. I've referred students to CREE. But do I know that they do it? I'm pretty doubtful considering that they don't really improve [Keith].
6. When English went to CREE, I never used it again...I didn't find it worthwhile. Basically it was my students teaching other students. There was a lot of complaint about no shows on both sides and the pay wasn't very much or being done well [Agatha].

Quotes 1 and 2 show how the teacher's workload can impact whether they refer a student to CREE, either formally or informally. By contrast, quotes 3 and 4 show how lack of knowledge about how CREE works can play a role. Asked why they lacked knowledge about CREE, teachers told me they had had no interaction with CREE. None of the teachers, for example, mentioned ever having seen a CREE staff member address their students despite Carlos making class visits at the beginning of each semester. Finally, quotes 5 and 6 reflect teachers' doubts about the efficacy of the programme. Specifically, Agatha has stopped referring students to CREE since the programme starting using peer tutors instead of language assistants as had been the case previously. Agatha's doubts about peer tutors' credentials are corroborated by Mynard & Almarzouqi's study (2006), which revealed that tutors sometimes did not know enough to help a tutee and instead guessed what might be the right answer. Given that peer tutors are not familiar with the subject matter that tutees are covering, these concerns about the quality of provision may be warranted. From CREE's perspective, however, there is no need to deploy more resources to ensure that all peer tutors are familiar with the course content when perhaps only 40 EFL students have attended CREE from a student population of 4,500. Indeed, a vicious circle seems to exist whereby due to the low number of attendees, an increase in resources is not justified, and a lack of resources justifies concerns about poor quality.

Conclusions and suggestions

This study evaluated CREE's provision for EFL students by interviewing their teachers and CREE staff. The main finding is that many students who would benefit from the peer tutoring service do not attend. In light of this, it seems reasonable to conclude that the programme is not working as effectively as it could be. A key assumption undergirding the programme is that students will voluntarily go to CREE since they should "be interested in persisting and achieving academic success". However, as we have seen, the majority of EFL students who are failing do not seek assistance due to the interaction of certain contextual features and mechanisms. The relevant contextual features and mechanisms that are instrumental in generating the programme outcomes are summarised in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: CREE's theory-in-use

Although formative evaluations such as the current study can provide rich contextual information, they cannot be generalised to other settings (Patton 2002). Consequently, this evaluation is best viewed as a preliminary study aimed at generating a limited number of plausible hypotheses "about what works for whom and in what circumstances and respects, and how?" (Pawson & Tilley 2004, p. 2). Indeed, this study does not explore the perspective of peer tutors and tutees, which means key variables may have been overlooked. Further research into the perspectives of tutors and tutees would therefore be needed to firm up these conclusions. At the same time,

due to the scarcity of literature into EFL peer tutoring interventions in HE, it is hoped that these findings will have relevance for similar contexts.

Despite the limitations of the current study, the data point to several improvements that can be made to the existing programme. Both CREE staff acknowledged the important role that teachers can play in ensuring that students who are in need of assistance go to CREE. These comments are consistent with recommendations from previous studies into similar interventions in HE contexts which highlight the importance of involving course tutors and faculty (e.g. Álvarez & González 2005; Mynard & Almarzouqi 2006). Improving the line of communication and visibility, and clearly outlining in a detailed way how CREE works would help increase EFL students' involvement in CREE peer tutoring programme. If teachers are unaware of the formal referral process, or lack information about how the programme works, they will be less likely to send their students to CREE. This increased involvement would go some way to breaking the vicious circle whereby CREE only hires a limited number of tutors due to the low number of visits, and due to this limited number, peer tutors are not specialists which leads to teacher reservations about sending their students to CREE.

A second suggestion relates to having peer tutors shadowing students in class instead of tutees having to seek out help in their free time. In the interviews, both CREE staff and EFL teachers seemed receptive to this idea. A peer tutor shadowing classes would have several benefits even if this shadowing was only occasional. Firstly, class visits would place no extra demands on learners, who may already be struggling with the workload, or may not seek help due to low motivation. Secondly, tutees who are reluctant to ask for help from a teacher may be more inclined to do so from a peer, and tutors, by observing the teaching/learning process, may also be able to provide support without being asked to do so. Finally, it would improve interaction between CREE staff and EFL teachers. Peer tutors would have a clearer idea of how to help learners by experiencing their problems in the classroom and having the opportunity to speak directly with the tutee's teacher while teachers would also gain a greater awareness of how the peer tutoring system works, and may in the future refer more students.

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MECHANISMS

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INPUTS / ACTIVITIES
- One-to-one tutorials with 13 "academic peers" in physical learning spaces
- Class visits to raise awareness of the services CREE provides
- Teacher referrals of students
- Appropriate training for peer tutors
- Differing peer tutor availability between 8am and 6pm

- Interaction between EFL teachers & CREE
- Student motivation
- Awareness of programme
- Student priorities
- Tutor credibility
- Buy-in from students & EFL teachers
- Reluctance to ask for help

- CREE service is open-access: lack of incentives for students to attend
- Status of EFL as an academic subject
- Availability of tutors
- Timetabling demands & scheduling issues
- Teacher workload

RESULTS
Explicit
- Reduced number of repeating students
- Increase in students' GPA
- Increased pass rates
- Increased student satisfaction with academic life
- Reduced dropout rates

Implicit
- Strengthening the university's brand

CONTEXTUAL FEATURES