Confronting English at a women's college in the Indian periphery: A capability approach to empowerment and decoloniality

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Abstract

English in India is steeped in paradox. It retains its colonial legacy and its prestige as the language of the metropolitan elite. Its expanding use as a medium of instruction is widely believed to "advantage some, but disadvantage most" (Mohanty, 2017, p. 261). Yet English is also positioned as a decolonial language with potential to disrupt entrenched class, caste and gender hierarchies, and provide a viable pathway to socioeconomic mobility for the most marginalised communities in India (Vaish, 2005).

In this thesis I explore how English is at once a source of empowerment and disempowerment for young women from outside the metropolitan elite, as they confront gender and social class barriers while navigating their higher studies and their lives beyond. The study is based at an English-medium women's college in a middle-sized city in South India, where many students are the first in their families to have access to English and higher education. As a privileged White male researcher in this postcolonial context, I was compelled to be reflexively mindful of my positionality, my ethical approach and my research design, as I strove to follow a participant-centred decolonial ethos.

By way of student narratives and interactive interviews, and the theoretical lens of the capability approach, I explore how English bolsters key capabilities like aspiration, autonomy and voice. However, I also assess how status, fear and patriarchy interact with English to form structural constraints which undermine these capabilities. Additionally, I propose emancipatory pedagogical changes which foster a translingual, participatory and decolonial language learning space, thereby supporting students to use English on their own terms.

This study offers a rare excursion into the lives of seventeen young women who sit on the fracture line of India's English divide as they negotiate the persistent tension between the promise and the despair that enshroud English in an unsettled postcolonial world.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Publications derived from work on the doctoral programme

The following publications were derived from work in Part 1 of the PhD Education and Social Justice programme:

Kral, T. (2023). “Eventually we’ll all become Anglophones”: A narrative inquiry into language-in-education policy in Rwanda. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *21*(3), 377–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2033613

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Chapter 1: Introduction – The language of empowerment?

1.1 The paradox of English

Layla was one of the most confident students I met during the year I that I carried out my PhD research at a women's college in South India. As we were concluding our interview she paused to reflect on our discussion about the role of English in her life. "Actually, I enjoyed this interview personally because… I have faced a lot of problems and a lot of advantages and disadvantages using this language."

Layla's reflection and keen interest in the topic underscores the irresolute position that English has occupied in India since colonial times. It was the language of British imperial tyranny but was also central to its demise (Evans, 2002). It remains the language of the wealthy and elite but holds the aspirations of millions in marginalised communities (Graddol, 2010). It retains its metropolitan prestige but is the preferred language of instruction in countless rural schools (Mohanty, 2017). The constitution grants it official status, legitimising its use in government offices, courts and universities, yet relatively few are sufficiently proficient to engage (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2023). Government ministers publicly denounce its spread, but furtively educate their children in English (Press Trust of India, 2022). Hindu nationalists push to impose Hindi country-wide, yet many states are switching to education in English-medium (Apparasu, 2021). English is labelled a hegemonic threat to India's linguistic diversity but is promoted to counter the hegemonic threat of Hindi (Nakassis, 2016). For the patriarchy English is crucial to their sons' job prospects, while a potential notch up to their daughters' marriage prospects (Highet, 2022). Scholars write about the privileged English haves, and the impoverished have nots who fall below the English line (Jayadeva, 2018). They lament that English promises much but delivers little (Rao, 2017), that it advantages some, but disadvantages most (Mohanty, 2017). Many write about the persistent coloniality of English but others about its potential for decolonisation and its capacity to give voice and agency to India's subaltern communities (Vaish, 2005, 2008). For millions of young Indian students who,

like Layla, come from outside of India's metropolitan elite, English offers a viable yet potentially tenuous path to navigating an unsettled epoch in which social mobility contends with economic precarity, global citizenship with chauvinistic ultra-nationalism and social progress with obstinate societal barriers based on gender, religion, class and caste. In this thesis I explore how aspirational young women navigate these tensions, how English can at once empower and disempower their journeys and how educators can nurture a more empowering and socially just language pedagogy.

1.2 An unfamiliar context with familiar fault lines

All of the tensions around English and its role in a changing society formed an ever-present backdrop during the year I spent conducting my PhD research at an English-medium women's college in a provincial city in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The college is small, unassuming and decidedly non-elite. It no longer attracts as many students as it once did from the city's professional and middle-class families. Instead, the students increasingly come from lower income and disadvantaged backgrounds, often from rural and semiurban communities where opportunities to attain English proficiency are scarce. Although the college is run by a Christian denomination, its student cohorts come from a plurality of India's religious communities. There is a guarded but palpable ethos of gender solidarity as the college celebrates its mission to empower its young and often socially disadvantaged female students. However, discussion of caste is muted, predicated to exist outside of the college's Christian identity and religious diversity, despite casteism's well-known reach beyond the Hindu faith (Mosse, 2020). Thus, barriers related to gender and social class, rather than caste, emerged as salient factors in discussions about the students' social disempowerment.

To support students in overcoming these barriers, the college foregrounds English proficiency, which, along with a degree, can open a viable but precarious path to social mobility and the hope of a better life for their families. However, for many students, navigating an English-medium higher education is a struggle and the college's axiom of 'English for empowerment' remains a

nebulous ideal. Consequently, the college is a site where English is both empowering and disempowering, where students traverse the English line between the haves and the have nots and where they may gain hitherto unknown agency, voice and autonomy, yet contend with persistent patriarchal and social class structures.

Although the college and the city were new to me, the fault lines of English were not. For the last fifteen years I have been working on education development projects in Asia and Africa, supporting learners and teachers from peripheral and non-elite communities to navigate English language and English-medium education, largely imposed by governments seeking to build human capital for their countries' globalising economies. My work has led me to become increasingly mindful, academically inquisitive and consequently critical of the hegemonic implications of the spread of English in the Global South[1] (Phillipson, 1992). I have become especially attentive to the neocolonial power imbalance and the consequent linguistic and epistemic hierarchy which privileges the English varieties and the knowledge systems which flow from the Global North to the South (Pennycook, 2017). Indeed, as a European-Canadian educator and researcher, I recognise my own privileged position within this hierarchy and my complicity in its persistence. Fortuitously landing at a women's college in South India far from the country's metropolitan elite enabled me to immerse myself in a context where the coloniality, the status, the promise, the despair, the unity, the divisiveness, the fear, the patriarchy and the appropriation of English intermingle. Ever mindful of mitigating the power inequities and my own inevitable footprint in the research space, I sought to explore the students' perspective on the notion of English as a source of their empowerment, as well as disempowerment. In so doing I also aimed to amplify the rarely heard stories and voices of these female college students, situated in

[1] In this thesis I warily refer to the 'Global South' mindful of the term's frequent but problematic use, uncritically and ambiguously grouping immensely diverse populations and states in an implicit contrast with those in the 'Global North.' (Haug, 2021)

the peripheries of India's metropolitan centres of power, where so many decisions on their behalf are taken.

1.3 Critical applied linguistics, decoloniality and the capability approach

As a study which links language education with the coloniality of English and questions of social justice, this thesis is grounded in the field of critical applied linguistics. However, as a participant driven research project which foregrounds student empowerment and aims for emancipatory pedagogical change, I have deployed the capability approach (CA) as its guiding theoretical framework. Both of these areas of scholarship align with this study's commitment to decoloniality, which I understand as the struggle against the power imbalances and the dehumanising hierarchies associated with Western hegemony, and the advocacy for a plurality of forms of being and knowing (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 10; Talbot, 2023, p. 219).

The CA explores social justice and human development through the lens of individual freedom, well-being and agency, aiming to enable individuals to lead lives which they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). For CA theorists, the primary focus is not on the distribution of resources, but rather on the development of capabilities, or one's potential, including the freedom to live a life of one's choosing. Central to the approach and to this study is the notion of empowerment, which for CA scholars means supporting marginalised groups and individuals to overcome internalised oppression, strengthen their agency and nurture their capacity for personal and societal development (Crocker, 2008; Esch, 2009; Nagar & Raju, 2017).

While the CA rarely features in studies related to language education, it has frequently been adopted in various strands of educational research. Capability scholars conceptualise education beyond its economic instrumental value as a source of human capital and instead prioritise human well-being through pedagogies which aim to build a culture of empathy and expand democratic freedoms (Esch, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006; Robeyns, 2006a). Aspiration, autonomy and voice are among the capabilities that have been identified as

crucial for social justice and gender equality in education (Walker, 2007) and are central to this study's exploration of empowerment and disempowerment through English. The CA is also well equipped to assess structural constraints, which in this study are the societal norms and social barriers which undermine students' development of key agency-building capabilities with English (Robeyns, 2017). Furthermore, understanding the CA as a practical tool as well as a theoretical framework, I explore potential changes to pedagogy and practice based on deliberation with students, enabling a novel bottom-up contribution to the academic discussion on indigenising English and decolonising English language education in India and beyond. This involves legitimising localised and hybridised Englishes while critically assessing the hegemony of native speaker language models and Anglocentric pedagogies (Kubota, 2015). Such discussions complement and contribute to the work of the CA education scholars committed to decoloniality, epistemic justice and gender equality (Walker, 2018b).

Beyond the bounds of the CA, there is an abundance of scholarship on the social justice implications of English and English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in postcolonial contexts generally and in India specifically. Much of this work focuses on growing demand for English in primary and secondary education, low-cost private English-medium schools (Mohanty, 2017) and professional skills training centres (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b). However, there is far less research on English in the higher education context, especially empirical studies outside of metropolitan centres, where student participation is on the rise (LaDousa et al., 2022). There is also a scarcity of qualitative research which gives voice to students (Tupas, 2021), especially young women confronting untold barriers in their journeys as aspirational English learners and users. To this end I have formulated the following research questions.

1.4 The research questions

1. How does English empower and disempower students at a non-elite English-medium women's college in India?

2. What are the most significant structural constraints which undermine the students' empowerment through English?
3. What changes to language pedagogy and practice could support the students' empowerment?

These lines of inquiry offer a novel contribution to critical applied linguistics and CA scholarship with a bottom-up student perspective on a wide range of academic, pedagogical and policy discussions on the nexus of language, education, coloniality and the intersecting barriers of class and gender. And even though the stories and specific contexts are unique to this study's participants, there is likely to be much they share with many other students in India, South Asia and beyond. Language hierarchies intersect with colonial legacies, neoliberal trajectories and social inequalities in varying ways in the postcolonial world (Hamel, 2006). It may be English in East Africa, French in West Africa, Russian in Central Asia or other languages of power which aspirational students are forced to confront in the peripheries of formerly colonised lands, living in times of social and economic disruption.

1.5 A reflexive research design

To ethically carry out this research with the sincere intention of following a participant-centred decolonial ethos, I was obliged to be especially mindful of my research design and my positionality in the research context. The Covid 19 pandemic forced me to abandon my original PhD research project in Sri Lanka, where I had lived for many years. Arriving as an accompanying spouse in a part of India which neither of us had previously visited, I began my research journey as an outsider to the community I was hoping to engage with. As a privileged White male researcher, I was compelled to confront the vast power discrepancies between myself and any potential female student participants. Questions of whether I could properly represent this community and whether I was exploiting or disempowering its members loomed large, forcing me to reflect on whether I should even be conducting this research at all (Bridges, 2001, 2009). Engaging with the community as a volunteer teacher, workshop facilitator and photographer enabled me to develop relationships with the staff

and students, mollifying the line between outsider and insider. I sought to take a reflexive stance, to be vigilantly mindful of the social setting and the power disparities, to empower the participants and the community yet disavow the White saviour complex, and to embed ethics into all aspects of my intervention (Bryman, 2015; Smith, 2021). I also understood that my study would not uncover an objective truth and generate generalisable data. Instead my qualitative research aligns with an interpretivist epistemology, with the understanding that the data I collect would be mutually constructed by myself and the participants and that this would be informed by the impact we have on each other's social worlds as a result of our collaboration (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

The data collection was carried out through interactive dialogic interviews with seventeen final year undergraduate students with whom I had established a good rapport. Aiming to counteract the power imbalance and the extractive nature of many research interviews (Ellis & Berger, 2012), I invited participant interaction through written student narratives, photo prompts and vignettes. These practical tools contributed to the creation of a safe space in which the participants could more candidly discuss sensitive issues, power asymmetries and the gendered cultural boundaries they must negotiate as young women. To analyse the data I adopted a reflexive process of iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), which resulted in an interplay between initial coding, developing and refining CA-driven themes and assessing the dialectical relationship between what the data was telling me and what I wanted to know (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

The reflexive research design, reinforced by the study's decolonial ethos, enabled a rare journey into the lives of seventeen young female students on the fault line of India's English divide, as they navigate the many tensions between the promise and the despair of English and English-medium instruction (EMI).

1.6 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters including this introduction and a conclusion. In the following chapter (Chapter 2) I first explore the key debates on the coloniality and the global spread of English. Secondly, I examine the path of English as a hegemonic language in colonial, postcolonial and contemporary India. Finally, I review some of the key empirical studies on English and English-medium education in India and beyond, especially those pertaining to students who face barriers of gender or social class.

In Chapter 3, I outline the principles, the key concepts and the limitations of the capability approach as a theoretical lens through which to investigate student empowerment through English. I also examine how the CA has been applied to education generally and language education specifically, both globally and in India.

Chapter 4 serves both as a reflexive account of my positionality and the methodological choices I followed while undertaking the study. In the first part, I discuss how I negotiated my status as a cultural outsider and the various power imbalances in the research space. In the second part, I outline the collection and analysis of the data, including participant recruitment, sampling, language choice and methods which supported participant interaction and empowerment. Finally, I reflect on embedding an ethical mindfulness into all aspects of the research project.

In the three chapters that follow (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) I report on and discuss the findings as they relate to each of the three research questions. In Chapter 5, I explore the participants' stories beyond proclamations of English as essential for survival in a competitive world. Thus, global citizenship, critical thinking, narrative imagination, aspiration, autonomy and voice are identified as capabilities for which English can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment.

In Chapter 6, I delve into the structural constraints which undermine the potential to develop students' agency and capabilities through English. Drawing on the participants' stories, I assess how the privileged status of

English, the fear that English often evokes and the persistence of patriarchal structures act to disempower students.

In Chapter 7 I harness the participants' stories to explore a decolonial paradigm shift toward a language supportive, translingual, participatory pedagogy. I further discuss raising students' critical language awareness about the coloniality of English and contemporary linguistic hierarchies. These proposed shifts aim to widen student empowerment through English while disrupting the structural constraints identified in the previous chapter.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I briefly revisit the research questions and provide a consolidated overview of the key findings and discussion points. I also summarise the contributions the study makes to discussions in critical applied linguistics, decolonising English and the capability approach. Finally, I reflect on my PhD journey and on the students who generously shared their time and their stories, hopeful that our collaborative work contributes to a more socially just language learning paradigm for those who follow in their footsteps.

Chapter 2: Literature review – Coloniality, hegemony and (dis)empowerment

2.1 Introduction

English has both empowered and disempowered colonised people since the early days of Britain's imperial project and continues to do so in India and other postcolonial contexts. Central to contemporary debates among scholars is the tension between the widely accepted notion that "English in India advantages some but disadvantages most" (Mohanty, 2017, p. 261) and the contrarian view that "the spread of English in contemporary India has indigenous agency and voice" (Vaish, 2005, p. 200). This study probes these arguments by exploring the conflicting roles English plays in the lives of young female students from outside the English-speaking elite, as they confront gender, class and other social barriers while navigating their higher studies and contemplating their future pathways.

To help understand how English is situated in the social, cultural, economic and academic lives of this study's participants, I explore three key areas of scholarship. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the academic debates on the coloniality of the global spread of English in the field of critical applied linguistics. In the second part I investigate the hegemony of English in colonial, postcolonial and modern-day India. Finally, I examine contemporary empirical research on English and English-medium education as sources of empowerment and disempowerment for students and communities on the margins of India's current neoliberal trajectory.

2.2 Coloniality: The debates over global English

The rise of English as a global lingua franca is intertwined with coloniality. In this study coloniality refers to the power hierarchies that emerged during Western colonialism but which continue to shape cultures, relationships, knowledge production, language use and much else in the modern human experience (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243; Tupas, 2022). The academic deliberations over the coloniality of global English have become increasingly

complex and contested as narratives entangling English with linguistic imperialism, global capitalism and inequality have become amplified (Tupas, 2021). In this section I break these down into three distinct yet interconnected lenses of argumentation in the field of critical applied linguistics. The first confronts linguistic imperialism and the postcolonial legacy of English; the second lens probes how English is appropriated as a local and global lingua franca and a potential tool for decolonisation; the third explores the nexus between English and the rise of the global neoliberal paradigm. These three lenses of argumentation consolidate groupings proposed by Pennycook (2017), who examines the cultural politics of English, and O'Regan (2021), who focusses on the spread of English in relation to the ascent of global capitalism. Although there is significant overlap between the three categories, they provide a helpful scaffold to highlight the most important contributions to the literature on global English and critical applied linguistics. In the following section I highlight the most germane arguments of these three groupings and provide a contextual academic framing to the world of English with which the participants engage.

2.2.1 English as (post)colonial

The link between British imperialism, the neocolonial power of the United States and the global spread of English and English language education has been most forcefully articulated by the seminal work of Phillipson (1992, 2001, 2017) on linguistic imperialism. According to Phillipson (1992, p. 47) "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages." Critical scholars assert that English has been deployed as an instrument to consolidate the political, cultural and economic power of the Anglophone West, sustained through transnational institutions (Canagarajah & Said, 2013). While I tend to view cautiously some of the more fractious scholarship which hints at English being shrewdly and wilfully disseminated around the world, the fact that the US and UK governments have long been exploiting the growth of global English as a tool for soft power is in plain sight (MacDonald, 2018).

Critical scholars lament that the soft power of English has imposed a hierarchy of languages which leads to linguicism, akin to racism and sexism, in which language is "used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources" (Phillipson, 2017, p. 317). With English at the top of the hierarchy, other languages are marginalised in numerous contexts, including academia and language education, where Anglophone monocultures become increasingly dominant (Phillipson, 1992, 2017). The language hierarchies which bolster English also contribute to the endangerment and extinction of indigenous languages (Rao, 2018; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010) and to the lack academic viability of regional languages in India and other contexts in the Global South (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017).

The dominant position of English also enforces an ontological narrative which claims that the language has the fundamental qualities of superior knowledge production and critical thinking capacity, thereby empowering its users (Canagarajah, 2023, p. 97; Mignolo, 2011). Moreover, despite non-native English speakers vastly outnumbering native ones, English standards and dominant language teaching pedagogies nearly always originate in Anglophone countries and spread outward, especially to the Global South, emblematic of the "unilateral flow of power from the center to the periphery" (Canagarajah & Said, 2013, p. 394). Thus, English is implicated in the Anglocentric colonisation of language education, academic publishing and ways of thinking and knowing in education and beyond (Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2005; Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992).

Extending the work on linguistic imperialism, postcolonial scholars connect the hegemony of global English to Said's (1978) notion of Orientalism, an essentialised pejorative depiction of the Global South rooted in colonialism. In the field of English language education this constitutes a dominant professional discourse which privileges the language and pedagogy of the native-speaking centre over the peripheral non-native speaking 'Other'. As part of a racialised discourse, teachers and learners in the Global South are labelled with culturally essentialised characteristics such as 'dependent', 'hierarchical', 'collectivist', 'passive', 'lacking in self-esteem', 'reluctant to challenge authority',

'undemocratic', 'traditional' and, 'uncritical' (Holliday, 2005, p. 19). Thus, the teaching of English and the training of teachers is often underpinned by "a native-speakerist 'moral mission' to bring a 'superior' culture of teaching and learning to students and colleagues who are perceived not to be able to succeed on their own terms" (Holliday, 2006, p. 386). Drawing on the work of Gramsci (1992) on hegemony, Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues that such discourse is normalised "through the process of marginalization on the part of the dominating forces, and the practice of self-marginalization on the part of the dominated groups" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 76). In this way native speakerism is operationalised through local teachers and academic managers taking up the dominant Anglocentric epistemic models.

The scholarship on linguistic imperialism and postcolonialism provides a key critical lens through which to examine the context of this study, as its participants are positioned on the peripheries of the Eurocentric power dynamics which have privileged the elites in India's Anglicised metropolitan centres.

2.2.2 The decolonial global lingua franca

Diverging from the linguistic imperialism lens, some scholars conceptualise English as a malleable lingua franca, decentred from its colonial roots, with the potential to emancipate and extend social mobility to marginalised populations. Their perspective "offers an alternative to the notion that hundreds of millions of people around the world have set out to learn English because they are the passive victims of Western ideological hegemony, emphasizing instead their agency in (re)making world culture" (Brutt-Griffler, 2002, p. ix).

The scholarship on English as a lingua franca (ELF) examines English as a neutral medium of global communication no longer owned by any culture or nationality (Jenkins, 2007). This builds on research related to World Englishes (WE) (Kachru et al., 2006), which explores the global plurality of English and its regional and national varieties, especially in multilingual contexts such as India, where it serves as a postcolonial second language. Scholars of both ELF and

WE frequently focus on the need for a paradigm shift away from native speaker standards and pedagogical models, toward legitimising localised alternatives (Vettorel, 2021). For scholars confronting the coloniality of English, the growing legitimacy of ELF and WE bolsters the resistance to Anglocentric language norms and the appropriation of culturally alien learning resources by teachers and students to suit their own sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Canagarajah, 1999; Imperiale, 2017). All this, it is suggested, allows "local communities to bring in their own values, discourses, and interests into the English language" (Canagarajah & Said, 2013, pp. 393-394).

Extending this notion of linguistic appropriation, Vaish (2005, 2012a) proposes the 'peripherist' view, which positions English as a decolonising language, chosen to be studied for its potential to disrupt entrenched linguistic and social hierarchies by providing a viable pathway to socioeconomic mobility for the most marginalised members of society. In this way the oppressor's language is appropriated by the oppressed to become the language of resistance (Canagarajah, 2022; hooks, 1994). The 'peripherist' view interrogates the linguistic imperialism thesis (Phillipson, 1992), accusing it of colonialist orientalism, as it "assumes a 'childlike' character for developing countries" (Vaish, 2005, p. 200), where compliant locals lack the agency to resist Anglophone hegemony. The tensions and intersections between the imperialist and peripherist views are central in this study of how English can simultaneously function as a language of coloniality, resistance and emancipation.

Another prominent strand of work on decolonising English and language education is devoted to translanguaging, a post-structuralist view which challenges the politicised hierarchical separation of named languages and promotes a speaker-driven, situationally relevant, multilingual pedagogy in which English is part of a hybridised language mix (Brock-Utne, 2018; Canagarajah, 2011; García & Otheguy, 2020; Wei, 2018). Translanguaging is especially relevant for the many multilingual communities in India and other postcolonial contexts, where mixing spoken languages is often routine (Kothari, 2013; Vaish, 2008). English in this way is no longer a top-down Anglocentric

imposition, but a localised addition to a translingual mix that empowers local cultures, economies and pedagogies (Canagarajah, 2007; Graddol, 2007).

However, the decolonising potential of ELF and WE is duly contested by critical scholars who see little evidence of genuine structural shifts away from the Anglocentric hegemony of English and English language education (O'Regan, 2021; Pennycook, 2020; Rubdy, 2015). As such, the long-established scholarship on ELF and WE has spawned the more recent critical work on Unequal Englishes, which investigates how the globalisation and localisation of English reinforces social inequalities (Tupas, 2019). Furthermore, the viability of translingual pedagogies and the decolonial potential of translanguaging are contested and empirically under researched, particularly in the Global South (Barrat, 2021; Canagarajah, 2022; Moody et al., 2019). In this study I probe students' lived experience with the contested notions on the (de)coloniality of ELF, WE and translanguaging, and the extent to which these uphold and disrupt hegemonic structures. The comparative scarcity of research on this topic with students (Coleman, 2017; Galloway & McKinley, 2021), especially ones from subaltern communities, enables this study to offer a novel and constructive contribution to the body of knowledge.

2.2.3 English as neoliberal

The most cogent critiques of the arguments in the previous section come from scholars who suggest that insufficient attention is paid to the economic dimension in the coloniality of global English (O'Regan, 2021). More specifically, these scholars explore the nexus between English and the acceleration of neoliberalism around the world, with neoliberalism here defined as a project of reorganising society by proliferating free market logic into ever more aspects of daily life and promoting individualistic cultures of personal responsibility, entrepreneurship and heightened competition (Block et al., 2012; Carroll, 2022). They assert that the scholarship on hybridised and appropriated Englishes lacks authentic decolonial intransigence and gravitates toward the prevailing neoliberal order which venerates socioeconomic mobility and privileges a cosmopolitan elite (Kubota, 2016). Indeed, despite the

consequential decolonial work of scholars who scrutinise unequal Englishes (Tupas, 2021), and the gradual shift toward a hybridised postmodern paradigm, there is an enduring resonance to Graddol's (2007, p. 20) argument that English "still forms a key mechanism for reproducing the old order of social elites."

Following the neoliberal logic of harnessing human capital, the teaching of English has long been supported by governments and international donors in the Global South as part of economic development projects and capacity building initiatives (Q. H. Chowdhury, 2022). While English is considered crucial for participation in a globalising economy, many scholars cast doubt on its potential to advance large scale socioeconomic mobility. Notions such as English giving agency to the oppressed are contested by critics who contend that the spread of English is aligned with a global neoliberal project which serves the interests of the cosmopolitan elite, exacerbates inequalities and ravages the earth's ecosystem (Fraser, 2007; Ives, 2010; Phillipson, 2001). Sceptical scholars further argue that for most of the world's poor, the spread of English is a "sideshow compared with the issue of basic economic development and poverty reduction" and call "English language education an outlandish irrelevance" (Bruthiaux, 2002, pp. 290, 292). Yet for a significant segment of this population and especially so in the Indian context, English is perceived to be of enormous relevance (Vaish, 2008), a tension which warrants greater scrutiny and is a central pillar of this study.

The academic work on neoliberalism and English converges with the expanding body of work on the marketisation of education more broadly. This scholarship persuasively contends that capitalist logic has permeated into educational policies and discourses throughout the world, gradually turning education into a commodity and students into consumers (Apple, 2017; Giroux, 2002; Nussbaum, 2009). The neoliberal paradigm forms a significant part of a complex power dynamic in which English is situated in Indian higher education (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). One area of focus in this study is how neoliberal logic shapes students' perceptions and decisions about English, English-medium education and their subsequent lives. Such research is comparatively

scarce and fills an important gap in the scholarship on English, inequality and educational structures in postcolonial contexts (Tupas, 2021).

Having outlined the academic debates about the coloniality of global English, I move on to the positioning of English in India, historically and in present day.

2.3 Hegemony: The positioning of English in India

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how English is situated in the contemporary Indian context which this study's participants must navigate, I examine the historic positioning and repositioning of English during the colonial and postcolonial eras, and in the modern-day neoliberal era.

2.3.1 The colonial era

The spread of English in the Indian subcontinent started with East India company traders and Christian missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries, well before British colonial rule (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). It was not until 1835 that Lord Thomas Babington Macauley, a counsel to the Governor General of India, formalised English-medium education for India's elite, who were to "be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (as quoted in Sharp, 1920). In the decades following Macaulay's detestable edict, the growing demand for English proficient civil servants paved the way for the establishment of English-medium universities and the establishment of an English-speaking governing elite (Graddol, 2010, p. 63).

Yet Macaulay's infamous pronouncement obscures a more complex story of colonial education policy and India's relationship with English (Evans, 2002). 'Anglicists' believed it was essential to disseminate Western knowledge in English, while 'Orientalists' favoured doing so in Persian, Sanskrit and vernacular languages (Pennycook, 1998, p. 94). Policies and discourses favouring either position ebbed and flowed over time, driven by economic realities and political impulses. There was, however, a consensus among colonial rulers that education was to be a 'civilising mission,' passed down by

the elite, prioritising Western knowledge over indigenous ways of learning and knowing (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992). As Britain's imperial project began to wane in the 20th century there was fear among the ruling classes "that too much English would lead to a class of 'discontented and disloyal members of the community'" who would be "vulnerable to be taken in by the growing tendency towards Indian nationalism" (Pennycook, 1998, pp. 91–92). Thus, the threat that English would be used to unite the population against the empire was a significant factor in restricting English-medium education to the ruling elite and urban professional middle-classes, while education in vernaculars for everyone else ensured a linguistically divided population (Fernandes, 2006).

In the next section I assess how Anglicism and English in the postcolonial new world order played out in India.

2.3.2 The postcolonial era

The decades-long path toward independence in 1947 elicited important questions about national language policy and the role of English in a new Indian state. Mahatma Gandhi was circumspect about the further spread of English, and promoted a hybrid Hindustani language of national unity (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017, p. ix). However, Gandhi's vision of linguistic unity was never realised; instead growing cohorts of primary and secondary students were being educated in regional languages (Annamalai, 2003). Additionally, India's elite was more in sync with the Anglicist vision and the 'rooted cosmopolitanism' of Bengali writer-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (M. Mukherjee, 2020). Though mindful of its many injustices, Tagore ultimately believed that the "English language and Western civilization had done India substantial good" (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017, p. 17). In addition, English-medium education remained the established pathway for students pursuing higher education (HE) and careers in business or government (Annamalai, 2003).

In the decades that followed independence, the Three Language Formula (TLF) emerged as a national guiding principle for language policy in government schools, implemented by linguistically diverse states according to local needs

(Hornberger & Vaish, 2009). The intention of the TLF was to promote a local or regional language as a medium of education, with English and another Indian language as subjects, ultimately aiming "to subvert the moral, ideological and cultural hegemony that English had enjoyed in colonial India" (Kalyanpur et al., 2023, p. 67). However, the TLF was unable to counter the continued privileging of English for the privately-educated elite and was criticised for prioritising Hindi in the North and large regional languages in the South, thereby undermining the educational viability of India's many indigenous and minority languages (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022; Kalyanpur et al., 2023). Additionally, the TLF failed to disrupt the dominant position of English and Western epistemology in India's HE system (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017, p. 16). As a result, India's vast state bureaucracy and its powerful military-industrial apparatus remained in the hands of the university-educated English-speaking elite, while the knowledge and skills needed to maintain the state's authority was filtered downward through the vernaculars in schools and workplaces (Annamalai, 2003, p. 83). Indeed, rather than subverting it, the TLF appeared to have accelerated Macaulay's vision of a Westernised Anglophone 'class of interpreters' disseminating Western knowledge to vernacular educated masses.

The TLF was part of a broader legal framework which attempted to synthesise India's immense linguistic diversity, but which ultimately enabled the primacy of English to persist. Twenty-two out of India's thousands of languages were privileged with official status as 'scheduled languages' thereby marginalising many millions of minority language speakers (Pandey & Jha, 2021). The imposed language hierarchy drove many toward English, which came to be seen as an "escape from intra-linguistic dominance" (Kalyanpur et al., 2023, p. 70). In addition, the suggestions of awarding 'national language' or 'sole official language' status to Hindi was violently rejected by 'anti-Hindi agitation' in several southern states, most notably Tamil Nadu (Pandey & Jha, 2021). Much of this delicate post-independence balancing act has persisted to the present day, with Hindi serving as a lingua franca and an elevated official language in states mostly in the north, while English retains its position in such

places as courts and as the link language of prestige among Indians from all parts of the country.

The ideological positioning of English has again shifted in the past two decades in response to India's turn toward a globalised market economy. In the next section I examine the position of English in this neoliberal paradigm.

2.3.3 The neoliberal era

A disruption to India's postcolonial language-in-education paradigm came during the country's economic shift toward market liberalisation in the 1990s and beyond, accompanied by the accelerating forces of neoliberalism and globalisation (Proctor, 2014). These forces hold "reverence for and application of market and market-like discipline in the reorganization of state and society" (Carroll, 2022, p. 136) in a context of intensifying "social, political and economic activities across political frontiers and geographic borders" (Held, 2010, p. 20). This ideological shift has brought with it a growing national "discourse about consumption, entrepreneurship and transnational aspirations" (Dhuru & Thapliyal, 2021, p. 407) as well as individual responsibility, resilience and competition, all the while downplaying structural inequalities and failures of the state (Highet, 2022). In this narrative English is positioned as "an easily acquirable skill, one that is crucial in the project of self-empowerment and individual achievement" (Proctor, 2014, p. 309). A further impetus for English is its potential, however fanciful, to bypass historic and persistent inequities based on class, caste, religion, gender and regional/local languages, thus acting as a neutral lingua franca for the diverse Indian population (Kothari, 2013).

However, the positioning of English as an empowering lingua franca and its entanglement with India's neoliberal trajectory has created a tension within the powerful Hindu nationalist party which governs India. The government's antagonistic rhetoric toward English and its championing of Hindi as the national language is out of sync with its steadfast alignment with India's neoliberal project and its global ambitions (Chacko, 2020; Dhuru & Thapliyal, 2021). Indeed the duplicitous posturing of Hindu nationalist leaders who

educate their own children in English-medium while decrying the popularity of the language is periodically exposed by the government's critics (Press Trust of India, 2022; Shepherd, 2020). Despite threatening to enact policy guidelines unfavourable toward English, the final version of the central government's key National Education Policy 2020 document[2] was left sufficiently vague and poses no threat to the primacy of English in any educational context (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022; LaDousa et al., 2022). As a result, language-in-education policy largely remains at the discretion of the states, whose agendas are not necessarily aligned with the central government's. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the site of this study, the state government has in recent years enacted policies which bolster English-medium instruction (EMI) in state schools (Dey, 2019) and consolidate its primacy in higher education (HE) (Apparasu, 2021).

The bolstering of EMI in colleges and universities is taking place alongside an expansion in HE enrolment by students from communities outside of the metropolitan elite (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). This expansion has been driven by free market economic reforms which have enabled the rise of private colleges and universities, but also by affirmative action schemes which allocate places in HE and the civil service for members of communities disadvantaged by class and caste (Jayal, 2015; Tilak, 2015). However, this expansion has missed opportunities to decolonise, democratise and localise HE. Many HE institutions have reverted to the parochial dissemination of Western knowledge to new cohorts of non-metropolitan students, while paying scant attentions to the social and linguistic contexts within their communities (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017, p. 89; Jayadeva, 2018). The positioning of English in this changing HE scenario is an important but under-researched topic which this study addresses from students' perspectives.

[2] This replaces the National Education Policy 1986 document.

2.4 (Dis)empowerment through English

In the following sections I assess the most relevant literature and empirical studies, based in India and the subcontinent, which examine the potential of English and EMI to empower and disempower. The first section evaluates the notion of English as a vehicle for social mobility.

2.4.1 Social mobility or prestige?

Although it has long been a language of economic opportunity, English in the neoliberal era "is not merely a route to success; for many, it is the very definition of success" (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022, p. 53). As the language becomes available to a wider segment of India's population, many wish to disentangle English from the clutches of the elite and leverage its power (A. K. Mukherjee, 2003). To this end, some members of India's Dalit community, the most disadvantaged group in India's caste system, have erected a temple dedicated to the Goddess of English (Figure 2.1), "who will encourage her worshippers to seek the empowerment of their children through learning English, the language of social mobility without which jobs in the liberalized economy will be hard to come by" (Jayal, 2015, p. 118). Such hopeful convictions about English extend to India's other disadvantaged communities and those aspiring to middle classness (Kalyanpur et al., 2023).

Figure 2.1 The Dalit Goddess of English (Devraj, 2010)

A number of empirical studies conducted in educational contexts examine how English is perceived to be a vehicle to social mobility. Especially noteworthy is Vaish's (2008) ground-breaking ethnographic work in Hindi-English bilingual government schools in disadvantaged Delhi neighbourhoods and her research at a call centre which provides work placements for graduates of such schools. Despite a critical assessment of the schools' teacher-centred pedagogies and much else, Vaish (2008, pp. 27, 105) contends that "English has the power to change social class in one generation" and concludes that "the urban disadvantaged in India have demanded access to the linguistic capital of English and are receiving it."

A more recent ethnography by Highet and Del Percio (2021b, 2021a), conducted in an NGO English training centre also in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Delhi, takes a far more critical position. The researchers note how the commodified value of English can be a source of pride, but also a marker of shame and social stigma among students with low English proficiency, not dissimilar to the stigma which results from caste, class or religion (Highet & Del Percio, 2021a, p. 114). Another angle within the same study explores the intersection of race, class and the legitimisation of Indian accented Englishes as identity markers, their subservient position to "good" Indian English as spoken by elites, which itself is subordinate to "authentic" English, as articulated by White native speakers (Highet, 2023, p. 9). Another study on language and social class, carried out by Jayadeva (2018) at a training institute in Bangalore, found that hierarchies are formed based on English proficiency levels. While high proficiency signalled "being socially skilled, well educated, intelligent, and 'professional'… not being able to demonstrate competence in English was imagined to reveal one as uneducated, unintelligent, rural, and from a low socio-economic background" (Jayadeva, 2018, p. 592).

This recent critical research confronts the optimism of Vaish's work a decade earlier when she proclaimed to "see exciting changes and hear uplifting stories" (Vaish, 2008, p. 7). One wonders if the rising tide of neoliberalism since Vaish's study has tarnished such optimism about the potential for English to promote social mobility and inclusion. As such, Rao (2017, p. 286) astutely observes that

> for the vast majority of Indian students, English promises much but delivers little. In a country with increasing inequalities, English has become a source of social division and exclusion, thereby undermining the social justice agenda of education in a democracy.

The majority of Indian students to which Rao refers largely live away from globalised urban centres like Delhi and Bangalore, in places where livelihood opportunities with English in outsourced call centres or similar contexts are

rare. Yet, even away from India's metropolitan centres, English continues to hold promise for many Indians. Studies with lower income and non-metropolitan communities conducted in Bihar (Hayes, 2016) and Gujarat (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2023) suggest that English is valued as much for its prestige as for its potential to secure professional jobs, which are often scarce. However, its outsized importance was often lamented, as respondents perceived English to be difficult for students who are distant from its "lifestyle, values and mindset" (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2023, p. 9).

Such perceptions have received considerable scrutiny in some of the recent studies cited above (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2023; Highet & Del Percio, 2021b; Jayadeva, 2018), all drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital. This line of enquiry connects English to neoliberally driven attitudes, behaviours, demeanours, ways of dressing and even hygiene practices which have been

> imposed upon a population that, through histories of colonial encounters and patronizing modernization, has learned to identify in the West, and especially in what is imagined to be English culture, an ethically, morally, and racially superior model of being and seeing the world (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b, p. 129).

However, such arguments tell only part of the story. Scholars have long documented ways in which Indian English speakers have eschewed Western cultural capital, with English indigenised, vernacularised, (Kothari, 2013) 'tandoorified' (Vaish, 2008) and hybridised into local practice (Pennycook, 2010). Research recently conducted by LaDousa et al (2022) at the elite Indian Institute of Technology in Gujarat uncovers a student cohort which considers English necessary for pan-Indian and global engagement but disconnected from Indian identity. English on campus is appropriated into a translingual hybrid mix with Indian languages representing the diversity of the student population. The study's authors have called for similar research to be undertaken "among students studying in less prestigious venues." (LaDousa et al., 2022, p. 623). My project answers their call by exploring English as local

practice among less privileged students and how that intersects with their conceptions of social mobility and identity in the neoliberal age.

English as a hybrid mix and local practice confounds India's English-medium schools and colleges. In the following section I examine the scholarship and empirical research on EMI.

2.4.2 English-medium instruction

The concurrent rise of the neoliberal paradigm and economic globalisation has driven the surge in English-medium instruction in all levels of education in many postcolonial contexts, though this trajectory has been especially salient in India. The perception of EMI as a vehicle to social mobility for low income families has resulted in the proliferation of low-cost private English-medium schools and has forced many government schools to switch to English-medium or bilingual education in order to retain students (Mohanty, 2017; Rao, 2018).

However, most scholars take a critical view of this trajectory. Mohanty (2017, p. 269) calls it "the new caste system" due to the enormous gap in the quality of English-medium schools, suggesting only those who can afford expensive, high quality private institutions benefit from EMI. In contrast, government and low-cost private schools are ill-equipped to provide quality EMI, as both teachers and students often lack sufficient language proficiency, resulting in student underperformance compared with those in vernacular-medium schools (Rao, 2018). This has had a knock on effect for the expanding HE sector, which is steadfastly English-medium, and into which an increasing number of low-income students are entering with inadequate English and academic skills (Rao, 2018). Thus, upholding EMI in HE "has served to (re)produce educational inequalities and injustices for the poor students" (Sah, 2020, p. 751).

Nevertheless, English-medium education continues to be perceived as a pathway to economic security and overcoming social obstacles (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022). Although some scholars suggest that people opting for low-cost EMI schools are credulously internalising hegemonic ideas about English

(Mohanty, 2017; Rassool et al., 2007), the reality on the ground is more complex. For many Indian parents, a low-cost English-medium school may be the only hope for their children to qualify for higher education and secure professional work. Otherwise they fear their children will end up, as they did, on the 'wrong' side of the English-vernacular divide (Jayadeva, 2018; Ramanathan, 2005). Indeed when the same parents see India's English-proficient Hindu nationalist rulers hypocritically rebuke English and deify Hindi and Sanskrit (Press Trust of India, 2022; Shepherd, 2020), it should surprise no one that growing cohorts of families from all social classes are increasingly pinning their hopes on English-medium education.

As an alternative to EMI, most scholars support multilingual education with English as an additional language rather than the exclusive medium of instruction (Mohanty, 2017; Rao, 2017). Importantly, they advocate for developing the academic capacity of Indian languages and their increased use in all levels of education, thereby bridging the linguistic gap between educational institutions and the communities they inhabit (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). However, such a commitment to inclusive multilingualism is unlikely to come from policymakers, given that India's current central government prefers nationalistic rhetoric over clear policy guidance (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022) and states like Andhra Pradesh double down on EMI despite its many limitations (Apparasu, 2021).

An important discussion around EMI concerns its pedagogical implications, which I turn to in the next section.

2.4.3 EMI and pedagogy

One of the major criticisms of EMI is that enforcing classroom English for students and teachers who lack sufficient proficiency imposes a major barrier to learner-centred and interactive pedagogy, as well as the development of critical thinking skills. Rao puts forward the simple yet convincing argument that "teaching everything in a foreign language is precisely what promotes rote learning without understanding and kills creativity" (Rao, 2018, p. 203). Such a

view is underpinned by the frequent labelling of English as India's 'library language', in which students read textbooks and take exams, but seldom use for discussion (Graddol, 2010).

Empirical research at all levels of education points to an intractable culture of rote learning in many institutions, though to what extent this is exacerbated by English is less clear. A comprehensive study of India's HE sector by the British Council exposes an exam-driven system which fosters student dependence on rote learning and regurgitation of technical and theoretical information, offering "virtually no opportunities for collaborative working, creativity or real-life problem-solving" (Heslop, 2014, p. 35). However, the study fails to link EMI to the predominance of these pedagogical shortcomings despite acknowledging the rising numbers of low-proficient rural students into India's HE institutions. In contrast, Tamim's (2014, 2021) research spotlights university students in Pakistan who struggle with EMI, fall back on rote learning rather than understanding, and find their capacity to participate in the learning community vastly reduced (Tamim, 2014, p. 290).

Regardless of medium of instruction, rote learning is a familiar archetype for most Indian students long before they reach HE. Government and low-cost private schools have been found by multiple studies to uphold a teacher-centred pedagogy of exam-centred rote learning, choral repetition, student discipline and a strict hierarchy between teachers and students (Erling, 2014; A. Kumar, 2019; Mohanty, 2017; Pandey & Jha, 2021). In contrast, interactive teaching and cultures of inclusivity often prevail at high-end private schools and institutions run by NGOs (A. Kumar, 2019; Mohanty, 2017; Nussbaum, 2006). In sum, these studies suggest that vast disparities in teacher education and in the social structures of schools outweigh medium-of-instruction in determining cultures of learning, thereby exposing a more nuanced interrelationship between pedagogy, EMI and socioeconomic factors than is often presented in much of the literature.

A further pedagogical constraint which has been widely reported by scholars is the fear and anxiety that English evokes in educational settings. Several

studies in India and other postcolonial contexts uncover a paradox in which students fear being laughed at for making mistakes but also feel anxious about being perceived as pretentious or aloof from their community by speaking the language (Adamson, 2022b; Attanayake, 2020; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019; Nakassis, 2016). Unsurprisingly, student anxiety and lack of confidence when speaking English has most often been attributed to HE students who come from vernacular rather than English-medium schools (Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016), and to students who face discrimination based on social class, caste and gender (Patil & Jagadale, 2018; Verma, 2014). This complex interaction between the high status of English, social class, caste, gender and the anxiety to speak it breeds an uneasy learning culture in which students prefer to avoid speaking English, thereby undermining the potential for interactive learning.

A final significant pedagogical issue addressed by researchers is the extent to which English-medium learning spaces actually adhere to their mandated monolingualism. Most studies suggest that EMI, even in HE, is often illicitly supplanted by local languages to facilitate student understanding (Chimirala, 2017; Erling et al., 2017; Rao, 2017). Other studies have found that disregarding English-only edicts and using local languages is for some students a subtle act of defiance (Nakassis, 2016), while for others a way “to negotiate their desired values, identities, and interests” (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 419).

Building on the research cited in this section, this study offers insight into how rote learning cultures, the fear to speak English and English-only mandates are navigated by students who face the intersecting barriers of gender and social class. Such student-centred research on EMI is comparatively scarce (Macaro, 2018).

In the next part, I address the barriers faced by girls and women who seek empowerment through English and education, a crucial issue for this study’s participants.

2.4.4 Gender injustice

India's fraught relationship with gender inequality and English is provocatively captured in a satirical poster (Figure 2.2) which went viral some years ago.

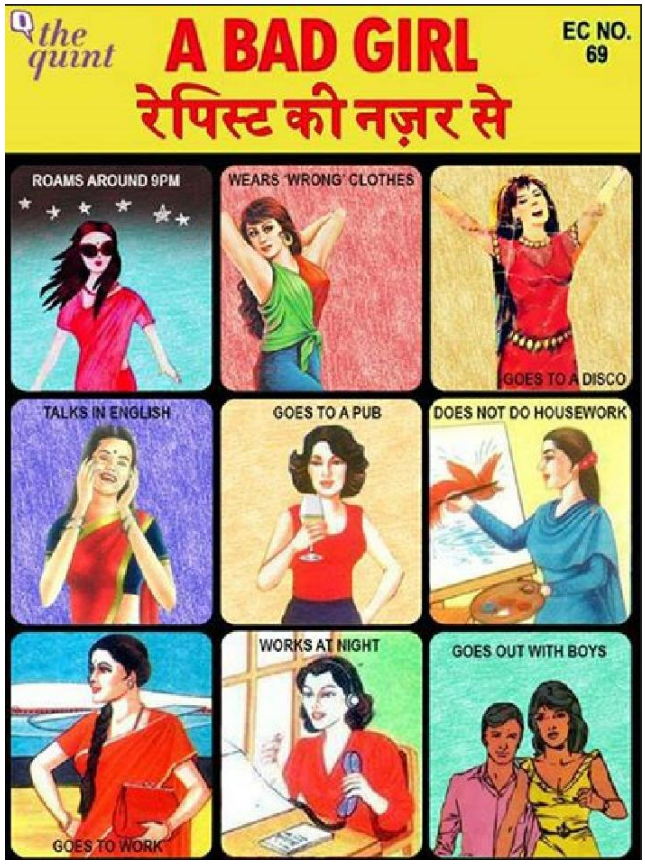


Figure 2.2 "A Bad Girl" satirical poster (Deccan Chronicle, 2019)

The parody's depiction of 'talking in English' as one of several disreputable behaviours undertaken only by 'bad girls' provides an intriguing insight into how India's patriarchal structures are understood and confronted, and how English is positioned as a language of resistance to staggering gender inequalities.

Indeed, the persistence of gender injustice in India is well documented in empirical research. The practice of sex-selective abortions remains common and underscores an obstinate preference for boys, a decision often driven by economic factors such as dowry obligation (Rosenblum, 2017). Indian women continue to lack agency in making life choices and are persistently positioned lower than men (Dhar et al., 2019; Sandhu, 2018, p. 65). Contrary to global trends, women's participation in the workforce has decreased in recent decades

(Afridi et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, India maintains low rankings (e.g. 129th of 146 countries) in global gender gap comparisons (World Economic Forum, 2024), while patriarchal gender values seem likely to prevail amid the rising tide Hindu nationalism (Chacko, 2020).

Nevertheless, there has been some progress in the struggle for gender equality. Female participation in all levels of education has increased markedly, and in HE is approaching parity with men (Ghosh & Kundu, 2021). Education empowers women in many ways, most crucially by curtailing early marriage and pregnancy (UNICEF, 2022), both of which have seen significant declines in the last three decades (Pradhan et al., 2024). Earning a degree and learning English allows women to seek out opportunities in lucrative and expanding fields like the digital economy (Vaish, 2012b). However, female students continue to be streamed into persistently gendered occupational courses such as teaching and nursing (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017), with key decisions on study, work and life trajectories often made by their fathers (Gautam, 2015). Thus, as Highet (2022, p. 3) remarks, countless young English-speaking women "find themselves enmeshed in complex (and often contradictory) discourses that emerge from the colonial and neoliberal framings of 'English', and disputed notions of femininity, modernity and tradition."

Highet's (2022) work is among the few empirical studies conducted in the last decade which uncovers important insights into how English and English education shape the lives of Indian girls and women. Verma's (2014) mixed-methods study explores how gender intersects with social class in limiting opportunities for young women in low-income communities who wish to pursue HE, as limited family funds are allocated to educating boys and paying for dowries. The women who do attend college reported being motivated first by the improved marriage prospects a degree and English proficiency can bring and second, by improved career opportunities. Other studies likewise found that English can lead to upward mobility for women through the marriage market, but can also risk social ostracism and contempt from future husbands and in-laws if their English is found to be inadequate (Highet, 2022; Sandhu, 2018). Highet's (2022, p. 9) research exposes a notable paradox in which

some families rejected educated, English speaking brides either due to the shame of their son being less accomplished or the threat that an ambitious woman “may refuse to follow patriarchal norms, and thus [act] as a potentially controlling, un-submissive wife.”

A further paradox is that marriage and work can be inhibitors as well as motivators for women who wish to pursue higher education or study English. Research by Singh and Mukherjee (2018) with low-income families in Andhra Pradesh found that the pressure to marry and provide money for the family prevented many girls from extending their secondary education and pursuing higher studies. In Highet and Del Percio’s (2021a, p. 109) study, several female participants confessed they had to lie to their husbands and in-laws to attend English classes while others dropped out soon after getting married.

A final paradox is the alignment of English with liberation and modernity, yet the inevitability that many women, regardless of their English proficiency and education, will be forced to take on domestic duties as per custom (Singh & Mukherjee, 2018). Highet (2022, p. 6) sees this as an incompatibility between the expectations of ‘traditional’ womanhood connected to class and caste and the aspirational position of English as an emancipatory language. Indeed, this is a persistent tension in the lives of many women in India and beyond, including the participants in this study.

2.5 This study’s contribution

This chapter has explored a vast range of academic debates, historical accounts and empirical research related to English and Indian education to which this research project contributes. However, these topics resonate far beyond India and English, in countless postcolonial contexts where language and education intersect with coloniality, hegemony and student (dis)empowerment. This study, along with my previous work in Rwanda (Kral, 2023) and Malaysia (Kral & Smith, 2017) contributes to wider debates about the positioning of English, and indeed other hegemonic languages, in stratified, trans/multilingual postcolonial contexts and peripheral communities (Dovchin et

al., 2016; Hamel, 2006; Phyak, 2021; Tupas, 2019). In the following sections I highlight the perspectives within the field which are under-researched and seldom explored, and which this study aims to address.

2.5.1 Under-researched perspectives

From a global perspective the data set touches on understudied topics such as the way English is used as a lingua franca in multilingual societies (Coleman, 2017) and as a link language by people from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Mohanty, 2017). As Kubota (2015, p. 35) points out there is a lack of "critical attention to the inequalities that exist amongst Englishes, English users, and languages including English." This study also provides much needed student perspectives on how they navigate the challenges of EMI, why it is enduringly popular and which pedagogies can better support EMI in low proficiency contexts, all areas identified as under-researched globally (Graham & Eslami, 2021). Also lacking is recent empirical research on how English and EMI relate to student employability (Coleman, 2017; Mackenzie, 2022), a topic frequently raised by the study's participants.

Many scholars engaged with postcolonial contexts, including India, note the scarcity of empirical research with students on their experience of education, language of instruction and the role of English in their lives (Attanayake, 2020; Coleman, 2017; Galloway & McKinley, 2021; Milligan, 2016; Morrow, 2013; Tupas, 2021). Anderson et al. (2021, p. 112) specifically call for the "elicitation of more first-person narratives" and the mobilisation of "the opinions, beliefs and insights of students learning languages" in underprivileged contexts. In Indian HE research, it is especially rare to hear from the less privileged but growing population of students in non-elite institutions, particularly those outside of the metropolitan centres (LaDousa et al., 2022). It is these students who scholars fear are too often on the wrong side of ever widening academic and cultural power disparity between the Anglophone metropolitan centres and the vernacular provinces (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). More broadly, educational researchers report that "India, a country known for its linguistic and cultural diversity, faces a paucity of literature on understanding the culture of

learning…" (Pandey & Jha, 2021, p. 1). This study is therefore a response to the many calls for more grassroots research with (underprivileged, female) students, who are ultimately the most important stakeholders in educational policy making and pedagogical development.

In addition, the study's focus on the experience of female students brings the intersection of gender and social class barriers to the forefront. Indeed, as Gautam asserts, "the increased participation of women in higher education in India since 1947 has not received the scholarly attention it deserves" (Gautam, 2015, p. 31). The bottom-up interactive research ethos which underpins this study amplifies the female student voice, which is so rarely sought and even less frequently heard in discussions on language-in-education policy and pedagogy.

2.5.2 Complementary empirical studies

Despite the overall scarcity of student-centred research on English and HE in India and other postcolonial contexts, some of the empirical studies cited in this chapter intersect closely with my own research but diverge in important ways. I have compiled the most relevant of these in a table (Appendix One) and summarise below how my work builds on this scholarship.

Qualitative studies with students have nearly all been situated in large metropolitan centres like Delhi (Highet, 2022, 2023; Highet & Del Percio, 2021a, 2021b; Vaish, 2008), Bangalore (Jayadeva, 2018), Chennai (Nakassis, 2016) and in large cities in Pakistan (Tamim, 2014, 2021). Some qualitative research has been undertaken in smaller urban centres, but is limited to elite institutions (LaDousa et al., 2022; Nakassis, 2016). In contrast, this study offers a novel grassroots exploration of the student experience of English in a non-elite college, far removed from the metropolitan centres of India, a nexus which represents a fast growing segment of the India's HE enrolment (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017).

Much of the other empirical research on student perceptions of English and education in India has relied primarily on quantitative data (Attanayake, 2020;

Patil & Jagadale, 2018; Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016), thus lacking the intimacy and candour of a grassroots qualitative study which enables students to tell their stories. Both studies cited in this chapter which focus specifically on the experience of English among female Indian students (Highet, 2022; Verma, 2014) are assessed through the lens of Bourdieu's (1986) theories of capital. Building on this work, my own study explores the topic through the lens of the capability approach, which is largely absent in the Indian language-in-education context. In the next chapter I provide a comprehensive review of the capability approach.

2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have outlined three interrelated lenses through which to assess the scholarship in critical applied linguistics. The first lens examines English as an integral part of the Anglo-American neocolonial project; the second explores the potential for English to be an inclusive and emancipatory global lingua franca; the third critically examines English as part of the global neoliberal trajectory in education and beyond.

I have also explored the persistently unsettled positioning of English in India. While English has privileged the urban elite, exacerbated social inequalities and imposed Western knowledge systems, it has also been co-opted to resist British imperial subjugation, to challenge Hindi linguistic nationalism and to inspire marginalised communities to seek social mobility in India's increasingly digitised and globalised economy. Empirical studies show that English continues to hold much promise, but many barriers persist, including hierarchies of 'accepted' English standards, inaccessible social and cultural capital related to English, poor pedagogical outcomes in low-cost EMI schools and persistent patriarchal structures which limit women's empowerment through English.

Finally, I have highlighted some gaps in the literature, most notably, a scarcity of qualitative grassroots research conducted in less prestigious institutions outside India's metropolitan centres, especially with female student participants.

Chapter 3: The capability approach – A framework for empowerment

3.1 Introduction

The capability approach (CA) is a participatory, pluralistic analytical tool which offers a multi-dimensional lens through which to explore people's well-being, their achievements and aspirations. Foregrounding social justice rather than material resources, the CA assesses what people are able to be and do, their social arrangements and their freedom to live a life they value (Robeyns, 2017). Despite its flexibility and interdisciplinary application the CA has largely been overlooked by applied linguistics and language education scholars, and thus offers a novel analytical and critical perspective on research in these fields (Adamson, 2021; Crosbie, 2014; Imperiale, 2017; Mackenzie, 2022). As a participant-driven tool, the CA is especially compatible with the bottom-up decolonising ethos which underpins this research project (Walker, 2018b). It is therefore a compelling and intuitively appealing theoretical framework for a multidisciplinary study on the lives of students in India, undertaken by a researcher from the Global North who is committed to a reflexive decolonial positionality.

In this chapter I explore the CA as a theoretical framework for gender justice, student well-being and student empowerment while promoting transformative and socially just pedagogy and language-in-education policy. I begin with a background to the CA, its philosophical foundations and its most important characteristics. I follow this by outlining the key critiques and limitations of the CA. I then examine how the CA engages with gender justice and finally how it has been applied to research on education and language, both globally and in the Indian context. The integration of the CA into the study's data analysis is detailed in Chapter 4.

3.1.1 The foundations of the CA

The CA was first conceptualised from the early lectures and writings of Indian-Bengali economist Amartya Sen (1979, 1985) as an alternative to utilitarian,

income and resource-based approaches when evaluating social justice, human development and well-being. Sen, along with American philosopher Martha Nussbaum and scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have since developed the CA into a flexible, transdisciplinary conceptual framework for social justice. Rather than assessing well-being by measuring access to resources, the CA explores human development through the lens of individual freedom and agency, aiming to enable individuals to choose a life they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Key to this is having the freedom to develop the capabilities of one's choosing, the options of what an individual wishes to be and to do. Sen's work with capabilities has been highly influential in shifting development economics away from a singular paradigm of economic growth and engendering a broader assessment tool for well-being with the UN's Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023). As a result of his contribution to welfare economics Sen was awarded a Nobel prize in 1998 (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2023).

The scholarship of Sen and Nussbaum and, by extension, the CA itself, is influenced by an eclectic mix of Indian and Western philosophical traditions, with traces of Indian Buddhism, rationalist Hinduism and Greek philosophy, as well as writers and philosophers including Tagore, Gandhi, Marx, J.S. Mill and Adam Smith (Nussbaum, 2021). Exploring the topic of social justice, Sen (2012) distinguishes between two terms in Sanskrit, *niti* and *nyaya*. The CA's guiding principle is *nyaya*, which refers to the quest to remove actual unjust practice, rather than *niti*, which seeks perfectly just institutions. In contrast to the predominance of *niti* ideals in the scholarship on social justice, the *nyaya* vision of the CA has cultivated "a theoretical framework with clear commitments to practice and policy making in the world as it is, not just in some hypothetical world or in a stylized model" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 174). So while the CA has a discernible intellectual foundation, the approach is ultimately "rooted in people and their lives…[and] does not need the support of exalted intellectuals for its justification" (Nussbaum, 2021, p. 13).

3.1.2 Capabilities and functionings

The CA is based on the view that providing income or resources to people does not necessarily lead to equitable or socially just outcomes nor to human well-being (Nussbaum, 2000a). As an example from my own work on education development projects, I have observed donors celebrating book donations to disadvantaged schools, only for the books to be displayed in locked-up bookcases and never used by teachers or students. The CA instead foregrounds human capabilities, assessing "what people are actually able to do and to be" (Nussbaum, 2000b, p. 5). As a result, the focus changes from resources (books) to capabilities, such as students being able to read or to be literate. In this way the CA is ultimately focused on people's ends, articulated through their capabilities and functionings. Once the desired ends have been established, capability scholars then assess the means to nurturing them, which may be financial resources or changes to social structures, cultural practices, public services and political processes (Robeyns, 2017)

Despite the CA's pluralistic and underspecified nature, and the divergent interpretations of capabilities and functionings, there is broad agreement that capabilities are the genuine freedoms and opportunities that individuals have to be and to do what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2017). In contrast, functionings are the actual outcomes or achievements which an individual chooses to pursue from her capability set (Nussbaum, 2011). In this scenario, not all capabilities turn into functionings. Using an example in the context of this study, a graduating student may have the opportunity to pursue a master's degree in a major city, but she has children at home who she would like to care for and nurture. She thus has to make the difficult choice between two potential functionings, both of which she has reason to value (Robeyns, 2017, p. 52).

A further point of consensus among capability scholars is the interdependence of capabilities both individually and collectively (Robeyns, 2017). Walker (2007) suggests that voice and aspiration are examples of capabilities on which many others can be built. In a classroom context, for example, the capability of voice is foundational to the capability of speaking a language, both of which are, in turn, promoted by other students developing these capabilities. Nussbaum (2011) refers to capabilities which nurture others as 'fertile capabilities' and

asserts these should be the focus of policy intervention. As such, this study examines fertile capabilities including voice, aspiration and autonomy which are key to the research on English and empowerment.

Two divergent positions on how to identify capabilities have emerged, reflecting two different starting points when conceptualising the CA. Sen repeatedly stresses human diversity and the importance of what people have reason to value (Robeyns, 2003). He thereby declines to name specific capabilities in his work, instead insisting on a reflective and deliberative process of public reasoning for identifying situationally relevant capabilities (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999). While sharing Sen's view that local beliefs and circumstances must inform capabilities, Nussbaum (2011, pp. 33–34) endorses universal notions of human dignity and flourishing, based on which she has generated a provisional, cross-cultural list of ten central human capabilities focusing on physical, intellectual and emotional well-being. While some scholars eschew publishing capabilities in this way, others have steered their empirical work toward producing theories of justice, either expanding on Nussbaum's list or generating bespoke capability lists in various disciplines (Robeyns, 2017). On this I share Claassen's (2011) view that empirically generated capability lists have the potential to encompass both the democratic and philosophical ethos of the CA. Therefore, for this study, I have drawn on established lists of educational capabilities (Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2007), from which I selected specific capabilities to assess based on deliberative interviews with students.

3.1.3 Conversion factors, structural constraints and adaptive preferences

The central premise of the CA is that equal access to resources and commodities is by itself insufficient to achieve socially just outcomes, due primarily to the diversity among people, their various contexts and specific circumstances (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1999). To assess this diversity, the CA focuses on conversion factors, which enable or constrain different people in different circumstances to convert resources into functionings, or their desired outcomes (Sen, 1992). In educational contexts, this means assessing "the lives that students are living and the conditions that enable and constrain their

well-being" (Wilson-Strydom, 2017, p. 388). CA scholars draw a distinction between three types of conversion factors: personal, social and environmental. Personal conversion factors may include a person's gender (sex) and physical ability; social factors relate to policies and societal power structures; environmental factors include climate and geographic location (Robeyns, 2017). For example, using 'being literate' as a desired outcome, the state may provide free education to all students, but not all students are able to achieve the functioning of being literate. A girl (personal factor) who wants to learn to read but lives 5 km from the school (environmental factor) and whose family prioritises her marriage over her education (social factor) faces several potential negative conversion factors which could prevent her from achieving her desired outcome.

To assess conversion factors, it is often necessary to consider structural constraints. While the two terms overlap and are sometimes conflated (Mkwananzi, 2018; Walker, 2019), I adhere to the notion of conversion factors focussing on an individual's specific circumstances and structural constraints as the institutions, policies, laws and social norms which hinder the development of people's capability sets (Robeyns, 2017). In addition, conversion factors can enable or thwart capability development, while structural constraints encompass the oppressive systems which impact groups that are stigmatised due to factors such as gender, race, caste, class and religion. Further nuance is provided by Drydyk (2021) whose scholarship on structural constraints, oppression and conflicting agencies invites researchers to undertake a synchronic examination of why some forms of oppression are so pervasive, and a diachronic assessment of how these subjections are reproduced over time. In this vein, I examine the structural constraints which confront this study's participants, who face significant intersectional barriers based largely on social class and gender. Thus, in Chapter 6, I explore the social prestige of English, the fear of speaking English and the persistence of patriarchal norms as the three most salient structural constraints that the students have had to navigate.

Structural constraints may also operate in tandem with adaptive preferences, a situation in which people who face oppression or deprivation accept a lower

level of freedom, well-being and aspiration than their capability set enables (Sen, 2002). Although adaptive preference are an important analytical tool, scholars urge researchers and practitioners to proceed with caution, so as to neither overstate nor understate the impact of adaptation on people's agency and autonomy, as well as on their perceptions of well-being, achievable aspirations and capabilities (Khader, 2009; Robeyns, 2017). While not a primary focus in this study, questions about adaptive preferences were germane for several participants.

The challenges of assessing conversion factors, structural constraints and adaptive preferences behoves CA researchers to gain a deep understanding about the perspectives of the participants, their contexts and their circumstances (Robeyns, 2017). The in-depth interactive research approach and the bottom-up ethos at the core of this study are thus well-situated in exploring how students' agency, aspirations and capability sets are enabled, constrained and adapted by their circumstances. Figure 3.1 in the next section provides a visual representation of how these factors interconnect with capabilities, functionings and well-being.

3.1.4 Agency and empowerment

Agency is an important principle in the CA and a key component of this study's focus on student empowerment. For CA practitioners, nurturing people's agency is critical in fulfilling the CA's ethos of recognising individuals as active agents rather than suffering patients (Alkire, 2010; Sen, 1999). However, CA scholars conceptualise agency in a wide range of contexts, influenced by a variety of social structures (Robeyns, 2017), thereby exposing the complexity of agency and empowerment as lenses of inquiry. A helpful starting point is Sen's (1999, p. 19) definition of an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives." Crocker (2008, p. 19) elucidates Sen's conceptualisation of agency as "a normative ideal that affirms the importance of the individual and group freedom to deliberate, be architects of their own lives, and act to make a difference in the world."

However, these accounts of agency have been critically scrutinised by various CA scholars. Critics argue that the common focus on being the architect or author of one's own life (Crocker, 2008; Lozano et al., 2012) spotlights an individualistic perspective on agency. Thus, Claassen (2016) focuses his account of agency on the ability to participate in social practices and navigate between sometimes conflicting social practices on one's own terms. Conradie and Robeyns (2013) highlight the role aspiration plays in unlocking agency. While one's aspirations can be both individual and collective, they are significantly influenced by social structures, cultural contexts, and by how these change over time (Appadurai, 2004; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). In a similar vein, Koggel (2019) argues that accounts of agency excessively focussed on the individual fail to adequately capture the institutional structures and oppressive social norms which undermine marginalised people's capacity for economic, political and social participation, public deliberation and autonomous decision making. In such contexts of oppression and limited possibilities, agency can instead emerge from relational networks and emotional abilities. Koggel (2019, p. 176) therefore suggests "an expanded notion of agency that incorporates the rational, emotional, and relational capacities of all agents… [to] help identify whose voices are excluded from the public discussion that can shape and change public policy." Such a notion would, for example, capture the relationship between public shame and agency that De Herdt (2008) considers crucial. This enhanced account of agency is especially instructive in this study's context, in which young female students frequently report feelings of public shame and whose voices are rarely heard by those who shape their world. Another important perspective to this study is Drydyk's (2021) scholarship on how the agency exercised by the privileged can often inadvertently undermine the agency of oppressed groups, thereby reproducing unequal social structures. I deploy this lens in my discussion of the findings in Chapter 6 to assess how competing agencies interact with structural constraints.

Agency is closely interwoven with the concept of empowerment, often understood as "those conditions and processes that enable individuals and

groups to strengthen and exercise their agency“ (Crocker, 2008, p. 19). For some CA scholars such as Drydyk (2013), strengthening agency, frequently interpreted as gaining greater choice, represents an insufficient account of empowerment if power relationships do not change. If, for example, a student asks her father whether she can pursue a medical degree and he instead adds French literature to English literature as his approved choice of courses, her agency may have slightly expanded but the family power hierarchy and her well-being remain largely unchanged. She is also in no significant way the architect of her own life. Thus Drydyk (2013, p. 261) suggests that to understand empowerment “it is necessary to understand changes in group subjection, intra-group dominance, and vulnerability”, while attending to an individual’s well-being freedom, or opportunity for well-being. Consolidating these ideas for a study focused on how English empowers and disempowers, I conceptualise empowerment as “a process of undoing internalized oppression” (Nagar & Raju, 2017, p. 4) while building “capacity for personal development and potential… to access new forms of knowledge which open the mind and benefit society” (Esch, 2009, p. 4).

Given the neoliberal logic which underpins the role of English and language education (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b; Kubota, 2016; Proctor, 2014), it is important to situate agency, aspiration and empowerment in this study’s context. Indeed, much of the promise of empowerment through English at the college in this study, and others like it in India, is embedded in neoliberal ideologies (Proctor, 2014) and patriarchal social values (Chacko, 2020). Such factors play a significant role in socially mediating student aspiration (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013) thereby undermining the potential for transformative empowerment which seeks to disrupt power hierarchies (Drydyk, 2013). Thus, in my discussion of the study’s findings in Chapter 5 I draw on scholarship which assesses how claims of empowerment in practice reflect neoliberal, socially liberal and transformative paradigms (Kraft & Flubacher, 2020).

Contextually exploring agency and empowerment is central to this study, whose participants face the intersecting barriers of gender and class which are at once hegemonic and persistent, yet potentially pliable and fragile. It is thus important

to understand how agency and empowerment interact with structural constraints, conversion factors, adaptive preferences, capabilities, functionings and well-being. Figure 3.1 provides a visualisation of this interaction in the context of this study.

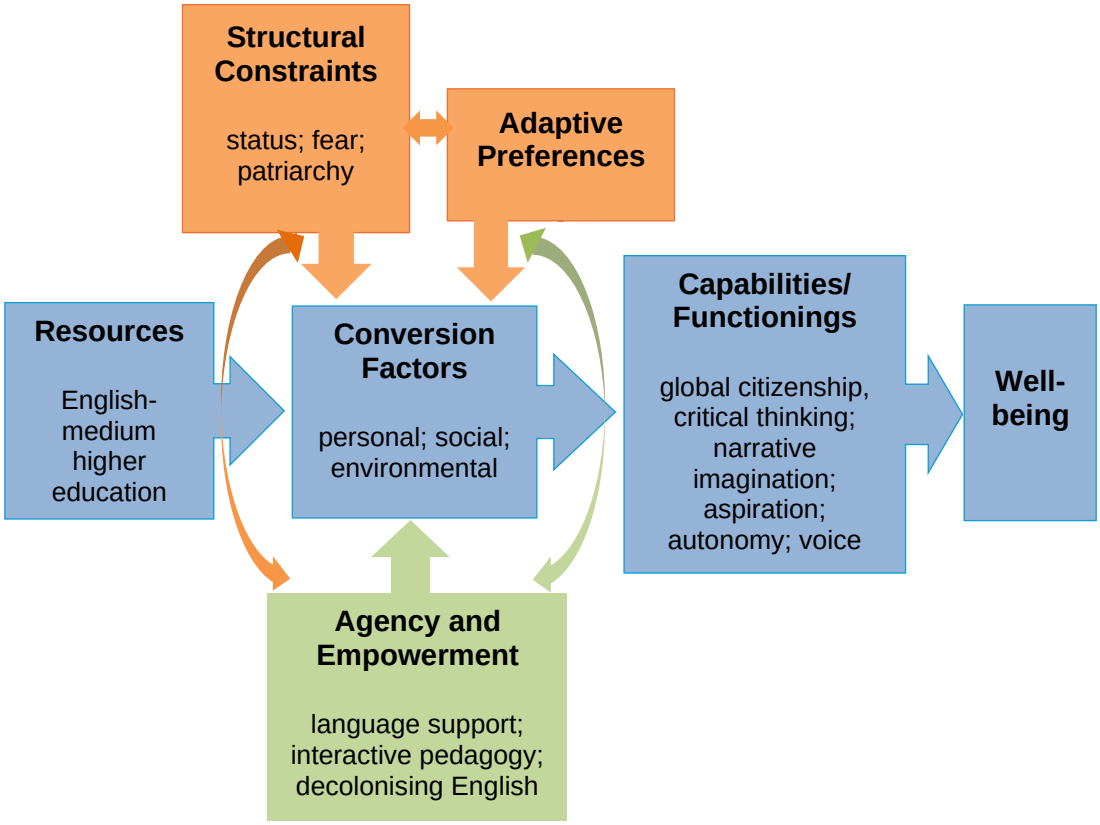


Figure 3.1 Visualisation of the key concepts of the capability approach for this study. Based on Robeyns (2017, p. 83)

Before examining the CA in the context of gender, education and language, I will highlight some of the main critiques and limitations of the CA.

3.2 Criticisms and limitation of the CA

In this section I assess two broad concerns that have been raised about the CA as a social justice framework and how CA scholars have responded to these critiques. The first is the claim that it focuses excessively on the individual at the expense of the collective. The second is the charge that the CA fails to sufficiently address power dynamics.

3.2.1 Excess focus on the individual

The principal criticisms of the CA stem from its focus on the individual rather than the collective. The most recurrent argument is that CA scholars unduly rely on the individual as an autonomous decisionmaker, removed from the influences of her social context (Robeyns, 2017, p. 184; Stewart, 2005). Additionally, critical scholars argue that the CA's excessive focus on the diversity of individual needs undermines the wider collective demand for the removal of barriers and equal treatment, especially in the context of gender justice (Pogge, 2010).

Although CA literature makes clear that the individual is the focal point of concern, there is abundant scholarship which centres around the relationship between the individual, society, collective processes and social structures (Nussbaum, 2000a; Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 2002). Certainly, the prominence CA scholars assign to conversion factors, structural constraints and adaptive preferences demonstrates a commitment to seek a perspective beyond the individual. Robeyns (2017, p. 58) further clarifies that the CA rejects ontological individualism, the notion "that human beings are individuals who can live and flourish independently of others." Indeed, CA scholars frequently work with collective capabilities, often political rights which require group mobilisation (Robeyns, 2017, p. 116). Applying the CA to this study has given me ample space to determine how social norms and pressures influence the decision-making and well-being of the participants and has provided valuable insight into the collective well-being of the wider community of female students.

3.2.2 Power dynamics

The critique that the CA is excessively individualistic spotlights the related misgiving that it pays insufficient attention to power inequalities at the social and institutional level (Crocker, 2008; Hill, 2003; Koggel, 2019), and at the broader geopolitical level (O'Hearn, 2009). For example, some gender scholars argue that the CA does not adequately account for the role deeply-rooted gender norms play in limiting women's social, economic and political

participation and thus question the transformative potential of deliberation and agency (Koggel, 2019, pp. 155–156). Additionally, the CA has been criticised for taking an "a-historical, context-free stance" (Morrow, 2013, p. 259), ignoring the legacy of colonialism, championing capitalism and upholding a Western worldview, all of which underpin the profound global inequalities and injustices seen today (O'Hearn, 2009).

While some of these blind spots have been abated by changing capability scholarship over time (Robeyns, 2017) others are persuasively countered by CA scholars. To the first point on social and institutional power relationships, Nussbaum (2000a, p. 234) contends that the CA insists on asking pressing questions "about hierarchies of power and opportunity" as evidenced by the fact that her list of central human capabilities was driven by her work with subaltern Indian women. Scrutinising power imbalances is also critical for the many CA scholars who place a premium on assessing how conversion factors and structural constraints interact with agency.

Additionally, capability scholars have highlighted the framework's compatibility with projects committed to righting historical wrongs by supporting decoloniality and epistemic justice (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021; Talbot, 2023; Walker, 2018b, 2020). To this end Robeyns (2017) stresses the latitude scholars are permitted to integrate additional ontological or explanatory theories into a CA framework. As for upholding Western worldviews, CA scholarship is indeed often philosophically grounded in Western liberalism (McArthur, 2023), however Nussbaum (2000a, p. 225) asserts that "what may possibly be 'Western' is the arrogant supposition that choice and economic agency are solely Western values!" I subscribe to the notion of the CA as politically agnostic, "neither necessarily left or right, nor does it *a priori* advocate any social or economic policies" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 195 italics in original). As such, the CA works toward the removal of injustice (*nyaya*) rather than an ideal (*niti*) (Sen, 2012).

Addressing power inequities and coloniality are central to this research project and I consider the CA a powerful tool to fulfil this project's decolonial ethos. In

the following section I delve deeper into the CA as a relevant conceptual framework for a study guided by gender justice.

3.3 The CA and gender justice

The interplay between capabilities, agency, conversion factors and structural constraints offers the researcher a compelling series of lenses through which to investigate the lives of people whose well-being has been undermined by gender inequality. Indeed, the work of Sen, Nussbaum and other CA scholars is highly valued for confronting the injustices faced by women and girls (Pogge, 2010). Due to its fundamental ethos of focussing on capabilities and well-being, rather than just income and resources, the CA has potential to expose underlying gender injustice which may be concealed by positive statistical indicators. For example, even though a woman who involuntarily takes on work outside the home increases her family's income, the CA is concerned that her agency and well-being may be diminished, having been forced into outside work and provided no relief from her exhausting domestic duties (Nussbaum, 2000a, p. 227). Thus, CA scholarship engages with the complexity of gender inequality by interrogating the gendered hierarchies in social arrangements, institutional structures and decision-making processes, and confronting the diminished agency of girls and women rooted in "many centuries of discrimination and subordination" (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 103). For Sen (1999), removing barriers to social, political and economic participation is essential to enhancing women's agency and enabling them to live lives they have reason to value. In turn, understanding these barriers to participation requires the scrutiny of the social structures and the cultural factors which shape people's preferences, aspirations and perceptions about masculinity and femininity (Unterhalter, 2007). These structural and cultural considerations then mediate the link between opportunity and outcomes to establish a more robust assessment of gender (in)equality. CA scholars additionally engage with the ways in which gender intersects with class, language, ethnicity and other disparities "to create particular constellations of disadvantage or prejudice" (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013, p. 29).

The CA's compatibility with a cross-cultural examination of gender justice hinges on scholars' capacity to navigate the tension between Eurocentric and culturally relativist worldviews. Critical voices within the CA scholarship on women's agency argue that excessive attention is given to liberal ideals like economic participation and political deliberation, while relational and emotional capacities, required for care work to which women are typically assigned, are undervalued for their agency building potential (Koggel, 2019). Pushing this critique further, Khader (2020) admonishes the cross-cultural feminist academics who perceive the West as an agent of moral progress and advance a Eurocentric worldview which links women's empowerment with neoliberal constructs like economic self-sufficiency, individualism, secularism and an unmediated rejection of tradition. However, CA scholars are generally circumspect of cultural relativism (Sen, 1999) and instead see cultures as "scenes of debate and contestation" (Nussbaum, 2000a, p. 225). Their work accounts for changes in perceptions about gender identities over time and the interaction between local and global understandings of these changes (Unterhalter, 2007). Furthermore CA scholars are concerned about whose voices are included and whose are excluded when "local perspectives" and "tradition sanctioning practices" are promoted (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013, p. 33). In this vein the CA upholds a "woman's choice to lead a traditional life, so long as she does so with certain economic and political opportunities firmly in place" (Nussbaum, 2000a, p. 225). This means removing unjust practices (Sen, 2012) and ensuring she has the right to critically scrutinise her living situation (Robeyns, 2017). As a cross-cultural researcher, my own position aligns with CA scholarship which promotes the agency of women to scrutinise gender hierarchies, negotiate the extent to which they take up traditional practice and to do so in a way that serves their own interests.

In assessing gender justice in education, CA scholarship is critical of approaches which focus on distribution and parity (Unterhalter, 2007). It is instead is concerned whether education provides women a greater political voice, enhances their agency and raises their awareness about their rights and legal options (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Indeed in India, as in much of the world,

female and male literacy and enrolment rates are at or near parity (Ministry of Education, 2023a). While these are undoubtedly promising developments, they fail to capture other less benign factors. CA scholars argue that essentialised gender biases persist in educational material, teacher training, teachers' expectations and patriarchal family settings (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013; Cin & Walker, 2016). This means that girls and women are often streamed into lower status courses and less promising career paths, while being expected to fulfil domestic labour and caring duties (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013; Unterhalter, 2007). Furthermore, when women and girls believe that they do not need to become educated or claim that education is not appropriate for them, the CA demands the scrutiny of the gendered hierarchies and discourses which underpin such perceptions (Unterhalter, 2007).

In this study I operationalise the CA to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of gender by examining the stories beyond the numbers which obscure gender injustice. I thereby open up to scrutiny the gendered hierarchies which impact what the students are actually able to be and to do with their higher education and their English skills. I deploy the tool of structural constraints to assess how the intersecting barriers of gender and social class impact the students' lives in the context of English education. I further invite the participants to reflect and deliberate on the complex tensions between tradition, emancipation and what gender justice means for them.

In the next section I examine more closely how education is positioned within CA scholarship.

3.4 The CA in Education

For CA scholars, education is an important enabler of capabilities, human development and well-being (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009; Tikly, 2016). In turn, the CA has been operationalised by educational scholars and practitioners to advocate for reforms of policy and pedagogy (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). However, the approach has thus far had limited currency in the field of language education (Imperiale, 2017; Mackenzie, 2022). In this

section I explore how the CA's human development perspective on education contrasts with the human capital paradigm, which has become predominant in policy making around the world (Nussbaum, 2010). I then move on to the capability lists proposed by educational scholars which I worked with in this study. After that I turn to language education and the CA and finish with a look at how the CA has been applied to India's education context.

3.4.1 Human development vs human capital

Aligning with the human development perspective, the CA affirms the intrinsic value of education and recognises its potential to advance people's well-being, build a culture of empathy and expand democratic freedoms (Robeyns, 2006b; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). As a precondition to fostering capabilities, CA scholars contend that "the goal of education is to expand people's agency (empowerment) to enable them to be the authors of their own lives" (Lozano et al., 2012, p. 134). The focus on empowerment aligns CA scholars with Freirean pedagogy which

> involves learners as agents in a dialogical and critical approach. Students learn to ask questions, not just to answer them. Education is something students do, rather than something that is done to them. Dialogue is absolutely key – a culture of silence excludes and oppresses (Walker, 2012, p. 390).

This vision of education as emancipatory and democratic stands in stark contrast to human capital theory, which focuses exclusively on economic needs and the skills that an individual must acquire to become employable, so as to contribute to the national economy (Robeyns, 2006b; Sen, 1999). CA scholars do not dispute the significant economic value of education to human well-being, but they urge going "beyond the notion of human capital, after acknowledging its relevance and reach" (Sen, 1997, p. 1960).

What critics contest is the alignment of the human capital paradigm with a neoliberal ethos and its growing prevalence in educational policymaking. Within this ideology, student success is individualised while the social, cultural,

emotional and economic factors students face are overlooked (Robeyns, 2006b; Walker, 2012). Such an approach places priority on producing compliant workers but fails to nurture social justice, critical thinking and democratic values (Laruffa, 2020; McClure, 2014; Nussbaum, 2010). Critics in India argue that human capital logic and the needs of the labour market are increasingly defining what quality education means (Venkataraman, 2017). This perspective has captured the teaching and learning of English as the indispensable language of success in the global economy, but has galvanised critical scholars like myself to "explore how they can challenge this neoliberal ideology and reconceptualize the purpose of learning English" (Kubota, 2015, p. 36).

To make the human development paradigm a practicable alternative to the human capital model for education policymakers, CA scholars have identified specific roles and capabilities for education, which I turn to in the next section.

3.4.2 Compiling a capability list

CA scholarship on education includes a range of capability lists which have been developed and adapted by scholars based on the context in question. My starting point for this study was to consolidate Sen's emphasis on democratic deliberation with Nussbaum's philosophical approach of identifying key capabilities (Claassen, 2011). To this end, interactive student interviews would inform the selection of capabilities from the most contextually relevant published capability lists. Thus, I drew on capabilities for education and democratic citizenship identified by Nussbaum (2002, 2006), informed by her fieldwork in rural India. I further consulted capability lists compiled by Walker (2005a, 2007) and Wilson-Strydom (2016) based on their work on higher education and gender equality in South Africa. I was especially interested in these lists as they contained many 'fertile' capabilities, ones which nurture the development of other capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). I also engaged with Lamo's (2019) list of higher education capabilities in India. All of these lists with definitions can be found in Appendix Two.

The capability lists formed a conceptual grounding for my data analysis and enabled me to capture the often neglected human development aspects of English and education (Esch, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010). Deploying a reflexive and iterative thematic data analysis process (see Chapter 4), the capabilities served as potential themes around which to organise and synthesise codes. As the iterative coding process proceeded, I connected the codes to the capability themes from the various lists, discarding the ones which did not apply. The capabilities which were derived from the coding process are listed below in Table 3.1.

Nussbaum's capabilities for education for democratic citizenship

- **Global citizenship:** the recognition of a common humanity and a perspective beyond individuals' own communities and nation states.
- **Critical thinking:** the capacity to scrutinise traditions and received wisdoms.
- **Narrative imagination:** the ability to empathise with people different than oneself through the study of literature and the arts (Nussbaum, 2002, 2006).

Walker's capabilities for higher education and gender equality

- **Aspiration:** the hope to change one's life for the better and the motivation to learn and succeed
- **Autonomy:** the ability to choose and plan one's life independently
- **Voice:** the capacity to inquire, debate and critique; to participate actively in learning; to overcome being silenced through power inequities, top-down pedagogy or harassment
- **Emotional integrity:** "not being subject to fear which diminishes learning, either from physical punishment or verbal attacks"
- **Respect and recognition:** "self-confidence and self-esteem, respect for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race" (Walker, 2007, pp. 189–190).

Wilson-Strydom's language capability

- **Language competence and confidence:** "being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction" (Wilson-Strydom, 2016, pp. 151–152)

Table 3.1 Definitions of key capabilities deployed in this study

Addressing the first overriding research question on student empowerment and disempowerment through English, six of the capabilities from the various lists served as themes. Nussbaum's (2006) three capabilities: global citizenship, narrative imagination and critical thinking, along with three from Walker's (2007)

gender equality list: aspiration, autonomy and voice, effectively synthesised the codes which I identified from participant interviews and written narratives. Three further capabilities were developed from the coding process and helped address the other two research questions. The capabilities of respect and emotional integrity (Walker, 2005a) formed the basis of two of the three structural constraints discussed in Chapter 6: the elevated status of English and the fear to engage with English. The capability of language competence and confidence (Wilson-Strydom, 2016) underscores the entire study on how students confront EMI. Figure 3.2 below shows a mind map of capabilities as themes, derived in the coding process for the first research question. The mind maps detailing the relationship between codes and themes for all three research questions can be found in Appendix Seven.

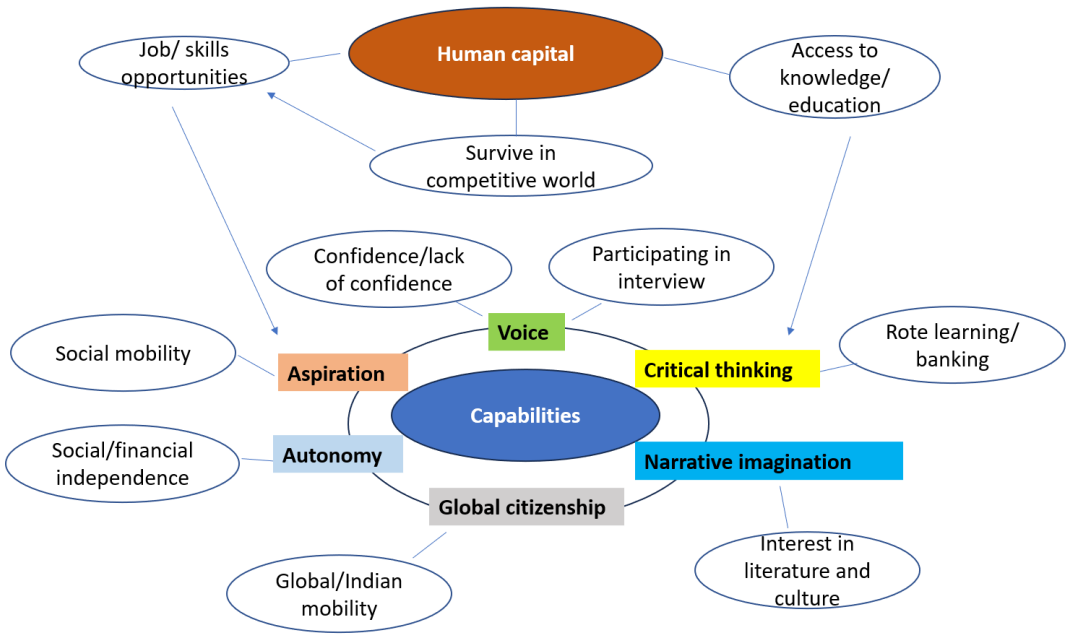


Figure 3.2 Mind map of codes and capability themes for Research Question 1

It is also important to note that I extended the original CA theorists' capabilities definitions (Table 3.1), aiming to capture the participants' specific contexts and lived experiences. For example, I drew on conceptualisations of how global citizenship is positioned in India, often grounded in a Hindu, masculine, neoliberal narrative (Ashutosh, 2019). This augmented the analytical scope of Nussbaum's (2002) definition, which focuses on interconnected humanity and cross-cultural perspectives. I explore how the local and 'global'

conceptualisations of capabilities interact with the participants' stories in Chapter 5, 6 and 7.

In the next section, I discuss how the CA has been applied to language education.

3.4.3 The CA, English and language education

Although linguistic social justice and language education are rarely spotlighted in CA literature, both Sen and Nussbaum have emphasised the centrality of language in their conceptions of the CA. Sen (2010) understands language as a crucial marker of identity and status, while broadly supporting mother-tongue medium education and access to global languages in early years schooling. Nussbaum (2006, 2010) likewise supports early mother-tongue instruction and promotes foreign language proficiency for all students as an integral part of a multicultural education and "an essential lesson in cultural humility" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 90).

Some scholars have applied the CA to their theoretical scholarship on language-in-education. Most relevant to this study are works by Esch (2009) on English and empowerment and Tikly (2016) on language-in-education policy in low-income postcolonial contexts. Esch challenges the prevalent human capital paradigm and supports a capability approach to pedagogy and policymaking for its capacity to assess social reproduction, position language education as socially transformative and promote student (and teacher) empowerment through the development of autonomy. Along similar lines Tikly (2016) draws on the CA to prioritise the removal of structural barriers to language acquisition and calls for community engagement and deliberation in the selection of valued linguistic capabilities for students. Resonating with my own study, Tikly (2016) advocates for a language supportive pedagogy which shuns the prevailing monolingual EMI model and invites educators to integrate multilingual resources, scaffolding strategies and a whole school ethos to support student linguistic development.

In addition to the theoretical work discussed above, several empirical studies in the field of language education have been undertaken using the CA. An early study by Crosbie (2013, 2014) on fostering intercultural dialogue among students in a multinational English language class spotlights agency, voice and global citizenship as key factors which are seldom considered in language education scholarship. Crosbie (2014) calls on other scholars interested in social justice in language teaching to consider the CA as a theoretical framework for their work. Taking up this invitation, Imperiale's (2017) study with English teachers at a university in Gaza intertwines the CA with a decolonial ethos and the use of art, poetry and literature to nurture student agency, voice and aspiration through an English language pedagogy of resistance. My own research draws on these two early studies to assess student agency, global citizenship and aspiration in a context of significant gender and social class barriers.

The tension between student agency and structural barriers is explored in several language education studies. Research carried out at a South African university by Wilson-Strydom (2017) confronts the neoliberal narrative that agency is defined by 'grit,' and 'personal responsibility' and instead examines educational resilience through conversion factors shaped by structural inequalities. Subsequent studies conducted by Adamson (2021, 2022a, 2022b) in secondary schools in Tanzania and by Mackenzie (2022) in a Colombian university focus on how conversion factors and structural constraints, ranging from fear and shame (Adamson, 2022b, p. 8) to poor internet access (Mackenzie, 2022, p. 18), undermine disadvantaged students' English proficiency. Another study in a South African university identified race and social class bias as a structural constraint to academic participation for Black female students whose English accent was perceived to be 'rural' or 'ethnic' (Calitz, 2018, p. 64). My own study builds on these scholars' research, especially on how structural constraints, including language prestige, fear and gender bias undermine students' agency and capability development with English.

The CA has also been applied to scrutinising EMI in both secondary and higher education in postcolonial contexts. Adamson's (2021) research in Tanzania cited above, and Tamim's (2014, 2021) ethnographic work in Pakistan both found that a monolingual English-only classroom ethos leads to disconnection between language learning and content learning capabilities and is detrimental to student participation, confidence and the building of social relationships. In my study, I join these scholars in advocating for a translingual educational paradigm.

3.4.4 The CA and the Indian education context

There is a surprising paucity of capability scholarship in a field as extensive as Indian education, even though the topic has long been on the radar of scholars connected with India, including both Sen and Nussbaum. Drèze and Sen (2013) focus on the centrality of basic education as a means to literacy, economic opportunity, political voice, the understanding of health and legal rights, the empowerment of women in the family and society and the reduction of class and caste inequalities. Nussbaum's (2006, p. 387) scholarship on education and democratic citizenship was conceptualised during fieldwork in rural India, where she observed that "even when responsible teaching is done in the classroom, it is still primarily focused on rote learning, as students are crammed with facts and routinized answers for the various examinations they are going to sit."

Taking up Nussbaum's concerns in the HE context, Bhushan (2019, p. 216) argues that India's current system, guided by performance indicators, accreditation, ranking and exam success, has for teachers become a bureaucratised instrument "of domination and control aimed at directing action." To this bleak but honest scenario, Bhushan (2019) offers a capability framed alternative to policymaking in which teachers enjoy far greater freedoms and are thus empowered to fulfil their potential to transform the lives of their students. My own study likewise calls for greater autonomy for teachers to support and empower students through a participatory pedagogy.

The CA empirical research most resonant to my own is Lamo's (2019) narrative inquiry with two HE student in Jammu/Kashmir and Maharashtra. The study generates a list of nine capabilities (Appendix Two) based on personal, familial, societal, interpersonal and institutional factors and the influence they have had on their educational journeys. Lamo's motivation in applying the CA is to theoretically reposition higher education in India as an end in itself, thus confronting the current narrative of its instrumentality, as a means to economic advancement. Her capability list for students includes opportunities for exploration, holistic evaluation, facilitative teacher engagement and democratic institutional culture (Lamo, 2019, p. 243), all of which are lacking in Indian HE (Bhushan, 2019). Lamo acknowledges her work is exploratory and invites researchers to critically assess and follow up her capability list. My study takes up this task, adding the dimension of language as a crucial factor which has yet to be explored through a capability lens in the context of Indian HE.

Indeed, CA scholarship on language-in-education in India is virtually absent. One notable exception is Mohanty's (2008, 2017) theoretical work on how the surge in EMI intersects with power disparities, student agency and capability deprivation. My study offers a novel empirical contribution to the nascent CA discussion on language-in-education in India.

3.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explored the CA, a social justice driven theoretical framework which assesses human development and well-being through the lens of individual freedom and agency. The CA aims to empower individuals to choose to do and to be what they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). CA scholars also examine structural constraints (social barriers), as well as other (conversion) factors which undermine the ability of individuals to use the resources they have to develop their capabilities.

The most common critiques of the CA contend that the framework focuses excessively on the individual and does not sufficiently address power dynamics. CA scholars clarify that the approach has developed over time and gives

researchers ample space and conceptual capacity to evaluate collective processes, social dynamics and power imbalances. These lenses make the CA a powerful framework through which to examine gender injustice.

In terms of education, CA scholars look beyond its instrumental value of building human capital, instead focusing on its potential to advance people's well-being, build a culture of empathy, expand democratic freedoms and foster an emancipatory pedagogy. Though rarely featured in language education research, especially in India, the CA has been deployed to critique the coloniality, social inequality of English and EMI in the Global South.

Chapter 4: Positionality and methodology – A decolonial ethos

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on my positionality and discuss the methodological approaches, the data gathering tools and the ethical principles which underpin this qualitative study. I have sought to foster a decolonial ethos in carrying out this research project, with an understanding that "research itself is a powerful intervention," and has "the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance" (Smith, 2021, p. 229).

A decolonial ethos confronts the positivist epistemic paradigm that behoves researchers to uncover objective truths and their output to "be universal, generalizable and immutable" (Patel, 2016, p. 79). It is also aligned with an interpretivist epistemology, the notion that research data is mutually constructed from multiple realities and understandings by the researcher and the participants, who impact each other's social worlds during their interactions (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). A decolonial paradigm compels the researcher to take a reflexive stance, to be vigilantly mindful of the social setting, to confront Eurocentric power hierarchies, to empower the participants and the community, and to embed ethics into all aspects of the study (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Smith, 2021). Such a critical postmodern stance also "needs to maintain a greater sense of humility and difference and to raise questions about the limits of its own knowing" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 13). In this chapter I discuss how these principles have been integrated into my research project.

This chapter serves firstly as a reflexive account of my positionality as a White male researcher at a women's college in India and secondly, as an outline of the consequent methodological choices and ethical principles I followed while undertaking the study. In the first part, I reflect on how I positioned myself in an unexpected and unfamiliar research setting. I then discuss how I negotiated my status as a cultural outsider and the power dynamics in the community I was entering. I also address the issues of data ownership and whose interests the study has served. In the second part, I focus on the data collection, data

analysis and ethics. As such I provide an overview of the student participants and how they were recruited, as well as a rationale for my choice of language. I then discuss dialogic interactive interviews as my principal data gathering tool and how this was supported by narrative frames, photos and vignettes. Finally, I reflect on embedding an ethical mindfulness into all aspects of the research project.

4.2 A research context unforeseen

I did not anticipate South India to be the setting for my PhD thesis. When my partner's fellowship was unexpectedly moved there from Sri Lanka due to the Covid 19 pandemic my thesis project was suddenly in flux. Sri Lanka was familiar. For years I had lived and worked there, witnessed the civil war and the precarious peace, formed friendships and made acquaintances. India was largely unfamiliar, my previous visits mediated by the colonial gaze of the Western traveller (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This would be my first visit to Andhra Pradesh, my home for thirteen months.

Yet I was not new to adapting to unfamiliar places. When I was a child, my family migrated from Europe to Canada and as an adult I have frequently moved countries for work. I have been a teacher, teacher educator and project manager on various English language education initiatives and development projects in more than a dozen countries in Asia and Africa. Most of this work has been with the British Council, which I have gradually come to understand as a key exponent of linguistic imperialism and proponent of a neoliberal, neocolonial, Anglocentric world view (Phillipson, 1992). This research project in South India is part of my long journey of interrogating the coloniality of English and English language education, and how this has enabled my own privileged position in the postcolonial world, a privilege unafforded to the vast majority of people I have encountered there, including the participants in this study (Bozalek, 2011).

My partner's journey is similar to my own, privileged by her Whiteness and her Western passport. The aim of her fellowship was to raise the English

proficiency of undergraduate students at her designated host institution, a small women's college in a city removed from India's metropolitan centres of power. In the section that follows I explore the implication of the college's setting for this study.

4.3 A women's college in the mofussil

The setting of the college is urban yet decidedly non-metropolitan, most accurately and candidly depicted by the Bengali-English word 'mofussil'[3]. Its contemporary use betrays a geographic and social divide, "an ever widening gulf of academic and cultural power between the English-metropolitan and the Indian-language moffusil [*sic*]" (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017, p. 27).

At the college English is designated as the sole medium of instruction and the expected medium of communication for lecturers and students on campus. As ever, such top-down language edicts fail to capture multilingual realities (Pennycook, 2013). Telugu, the first language of most students, lecturers and the local community, often prevails in social interactions and mixes surreptitiously with English in lectures. Off campus, English is seldom heard or well-understood away from opulent or Westernised commercial venues, though is often displayed on signs in even the most modest of settings, as an aspiring yet unrealised lingua franca.

Long-serving staff at the college have noticed a change in the profile of students along with a decline in English proficiency. They say that the young women from the region's elite families who once enrolled in the college now opt for prestigious universities further afield. This perceived decline in status is corroborated by the college's marginal position in the government's national rankings (Ministry of Education, 2023b). Indeed as Indian higher education has

[3] The term 'mofussil' was frequently used in 19th century colonial India for anywhere outside of Kolkata, but its modern iteration evokes places and people away from India's major metropolitan centres (M. S. Roy, 2009; V. K. Roy, 2021).

opened up to wider sections of society (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017) current student cohorts typically come from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, women who the college sees as its mission to empower, with English as a key tool for empowerment. Chowdhury (2017, p. 140) argues that "the journey of higher education from the metropolis to the moffusil [*sic*] made the university more parochial." Linguistically, this means a cohort of students who have had little opportunity to engage with English, besides rote learning to pass exams (Pandey & Jha, 2021). As a result, low English proficiency has become a significant barrier for many of the college's students.

Thus, I determined that the college and its setting could provide valuable insight into the tensions around English and EMI discussed in Chapter 2, especially the discordant assessments of English as a language of disadvantage (Mohanty, 2017) and as one of decoloniality, emancipation and agency for marginalised communities (Vaish, 2005). A focus on the student experience, an underexplored perspective in field research, would be especially valuable (Coleman, 2017; Milligan, 2016; Walker, 2010). However, as a White male researcher at a women's college in the Indian mofussil, I understood that there would be significant power asymmetries and that my research project would constitute "a powerful intervention" (Smith, 2021, p. 228). In the section that follows I reflect on how I navigated these quandaries and worked toward a decolonial ethos in my engagement with the community.

4.4 Should I even be doing this?

There is significant critical scholarship which argues that outsiders ought not to carry out research with communities which are disempowered or marginalised. Given the self-evident power imbalance between myself and any potential research participants, I became resolutely mindful of the many epistemic and ethical objections to outsiders conducting research in contexts such as mine. I focused on the most salient of these, summarised as follow by Bridges (2001, pp. 371, 375, 378, 380):

- "Only insiders can properly represent a community."

- “Outsiders import damaging frameworks of understanding.”
- “Outsiders exploit insider participants in the communities they research.”
- “Outsiders’ research disempowers insiders.”

These objections raise serious concerns and therefore required a robust reflexive positioning and repositioning of myself in the research context, as well as an ongoing scrutiny of my research design. In the following section I begin this reflexive journey by assessing what it means to be an ‘outsider’ and interrogating the insider-outsider binary itself.

4.4.1 Challenging the outsider-insider binary

Critical scholars have persuasively appealed for ‘outsiders’ like myself who conduct research across cultures to reflect on being ‘social intruders’ in the research participants’ community (Shah, 2004, p. 565) and to even consider whether “the white researcher should stay at home” (Haw, 1996, p. 323). Such arguments, however, are grounded in an essentialised insider-outsider binary, which has been challenged by a wide range of theorists and research methodology scholars. Critics of this dichotomy suggest that the distinction between an insider and an outsider is complex and the boundary between them is blurred and ever changing. I gravitate toward Bridge’s (2009, p. 108) assertion that “in any particular situation we probably relate to others partly as an outsider and partly as insiders.”

Another frequent conceptual challenge to the insider-outsider binary is the misguided presupposition of homogeneity within groups. Tinker and Armstrong (2008, p. 53) caution against “overlooking the significant differences within as well as between groups, and failing to take account of the flexible and multifaceted nature of identity.” Indeed the CA framework, which underpins this study, foundationally rejects singular identities and recognises “the plurality of our affiliations” (Sen, 2006, p. xvii). As such, I saw in my participants not just female Indian students from the mofussil, but a heterogeneity of Hindus, Muslims and Christians; artists, poets and writers; musicians, singers and

dancers; athletes, runners and hikers and so on. Some of these identity markers intersect with my own, thus blurring the insider-outsider divide.

Indeed, several researchers who work cross-culturally with students have assessed their positionality on a spectrum of insider-outsiderness (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021), neither entirely as insiders nor outsiders, but as 'in-betweeners' (Milligan, 2016). This conceptualisation of a continuum has helped me to assess and reassess my positionality and to navigate the power imbalances embedded in my research context.

To accelerate my journey from being a campus outsider I contemplated my responses to Smith's (2021) germane questions which a community might ask a researcher like myself who unexpectedly appears on the scene. "Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix up our generator? Can they actually do anything?" (Smith, 2021, p. 10).

Nurturing a clear spirit based on solidarity, mutuality, a good heart and minimal baggage, though unable to fix the generator, I offered other ways to be useful to the community. I accepted invitations to volunteer as a writing teacher, a workshop facilitator, a clean campus drive champion and an events photographer. I attended weddings, cinema outings, holiday celebrations, staff lunches, classroom tea and cake parties and much else. Through these engagements I built relationships with the colleges' students, lecturers, security guards and cleaners. I did not 'helicopter' in and out just to do my research (Adame, 2021; CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021) but instead came to play different roles in the community, of which researcher was just one. My timeline was not measured in days and weeks but in months and years. No longer a guest on campus, I gradually ceased to be a cultural novice (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018); though far from being an 'insider', I became an 'in-betweener'.

4.4.2 Researching from 'in-between'

Conducting research from in-between nevertheless provided countless points for reflexivity. Surely I lacked a cultural insider's instinctive alertness to

“particular codes of conversation and patterns of behaviour regarding age, gender, social background and knowledge status” (Shah, 2004, p. 553). Perhaps my understanding of the local context was too cursory to “wield the tool of criticality” (Haw, 1996, p. 323) for robust data analysis. I therefore had to be exceptionally mindful of my assumptions, value judgements and any potential misunderstanding in order to avoid distortions and exaggerations in interpreting the data I would collect (Smith, 2021, pp. 228–229). I was especially cognisant of my lack of insider alertness to the contentious and seemingly latent issue of caste at the college.

However, I also understood that being a relative outsider who is engaged with the community can offer the researcher some advantages. First, my shortcomings in contextual and cultural understanding enabled me to seek detailed responses on matters which might be perceived as self-evident among insiders (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008, p. 55). Additionally, as I fall outside of local social hierarchies and structures, the students’ fears of being judged according to the community’s norms were reduced, perhaps enabling them to be more forthright during interviews (McNess et al., 2015). Finally I reflected on Bozalek’s (2011, p. 469) suggestion that “committed outsiders may often be better analysts and critics of social justice than those who live within the relevant culture.” Indeed, multiple scholars note that researchers may be too immersed in their communities to deploy a critical lens, especially if there is motivation to legitimise or safeguard a harmonious group identity (Bridges, 2009; Haw, 1996). In this vein, ‘cultural insiders’ can also misinterpret data and misrepresent participants (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008).

Mitigating such misinterpretation and misrepresentations while researching from in-between also requires caution about importing potentially damaging external frameworks of understanding (Bridges, 2001, p. 375). To this end I selected the CA, a transnational, participant-centred theoretical framework (Robeyns, 2017), aligned with projects committed to decoloniality and epistemic justice (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021; Talbot, 2023; Walker, 2018b, 2020), which I discuss in Chapter 3.

As an in-betweener, I was further mindful that researchers who tend toward opposite ends of the insider-outsider spectrum may well acquire different understandings of the community being researched (Bridges, 2001). More pointedly, I gravitate toward the postmodern notion that no two researchers, regardless of their insider-outsider positions, carry out and interpret a qualitative study in exactly the same way (Atkinson, 1998; Bridges, 2009; Bryman, 2015). I am further persuaded that these divergent accounts can be meaningful and enriching, while helping to resist "the 'ghettoisation' of the research process" (Haw, 1996, p. 329). However, these notions are dependent on the researcher's deep reflections on power hierarchies and the researcher-participant relationships (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008, p. 54). I thus turn to postcolonial power dynamics in the next section.

4.4.3 Assessing postcolonial power disparities

Navigating the many power imbalances in the research space demanded reflexivity. A crucial starting point was to scrutinise my interrelation with my host community "across historically loaded socio-political divides of black/white, east/west, colonial/imperial, developed/developing and others" (Shah 2004, p. 565). Postcolonial scholars suggest that these divides have been constructed by a Eurocentric, power-driven, orientalist discourse, featuring crude, essentialised depictions of the Global South and its people as the subsidiary 'other' (Said, 1978). The most deprived of the subjugated 'other,' known as the subaltern, are the voices unheard, silenced by the epistemic violence wrought against them through the hegemonic power of the Global North (Spivak, 2010). However, in line with the ethos of the capability approach (Sen, 1999) I strove to avoid the epistemic pitfall of a priori branding all of my research participants as powerless victims and myself as a (White) saviour offering a space to voice their pain (Straubhaar, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2018).

At the college power disparities were exposed by, for example, my partner's oversized private air-conditioned office, her lack of obligation to follow most institutional procedures and either a deep reluctance or exaggerated keenness by both students and staff to engage with the new foreign faces on campus.

Our teaching duties fell outside of the institutional structures imposed on the college and the pedagogical constraints imposed on the teachers. Our privileged positions enabled us to assume a less formal demeanour, to teach interactively and to raise critical issues such as gender equality and climate change. This model of engagement undoubtedly contributed to curtailing the formality of the student-teacher relationships and enabled some obligatory rituals, such as students standing at attention when the teacher arrives, to be gradually set aside.

The disrupted power dynamics enabled me to negotiate a culturally shared third space with the student research participants, transcending the parameters of the locally embedded social and hierarchical structures (Kramsch & Uryu, 2011; Pandey & Jha, 2021). This cultural third space offered students a degree of freedom to speak their minds, to disclose what they otherwise would have kept to themselves and to articulate their positions within their academic, social and family hierarchies. Several students candidly shared stories of overcoming staggering obstacles like child marriage, early motherhood, domestic violence and spiteful misogyny to attend college. Nearly all others were equally forthright about the rigid gender barriers they faced, thereby foregrounding gender as a salient factor of analysis in this study. However, I proceeded cautiously with the students' apparent candidness, resisting the urge to essentialise the common (mis)perceptions of Western openness vs. Indian hierarchy, and to be mindful of the anomalous relationships between myself and the participants, as well as the fluid boundaries in the still asymmetric power dynamic (Bozalek, 2011, p. 473).

In the next section I assess this power asymmetry in terms of data ownership.

4.4.4 Privileged information: Who owns it? Who benefits?

The participants' candid disclosures during interviews reminded me that I was "in receipt of privileged information" (Smith, 2021, p. 228) and compelled me to reflect on who owns the research data and whose interest it serves. While I cannot forsake the ownership of my PhD project, the notion of 'owning'

knowledge itself demands greater scrutiny. Knowledge as property is well established in Western academic practice as research data becomes a marketable commodity through publication and upward career mobility (Patel, 2016, pp. 35–36). However, knowledge can be shared and distributed freely; the researcher "can acquire it from people without denying it to them and can return it enriched" (Bridges, 2001, p. 382). I thereby championed a culture of shared ownership of the data, which was co-constructed in dialogic, interactive interviews with the students (Ellis & Berger, 2012). I shared interview transcriptions which were verified as accurate by most participants and helpfully corrected by several. I subsequently distributed a concise summary of key findings (Appendix Three) based on initial coding and received replies of appreciation and affirmation.

In addition to ownership, the question of whose interest is served and who benefits from the research must also be considered. I am unable to refute that my research project primarily serves my own interest, as I stand to gain professional merit from potential publications, conference presentations and the eventual completion of my PhD. To mitigate the imbalance of benefit while compensating the student volunteers for their participation, I have supported them as a proof-reader, CV editor, study abroad adviser and overall helper on campus. Following their participation, most of the students expressed sincere gratitude for being listened to and for a chance to contribute to a dialogue highly relevant to them, their classmates and future students. And while I understand that I am necessarily writing *about* this community of students, I have endeavoured to also write *from* and *with* the community as much as possible (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 7). In short, I have sought to conduct my research "in such a way that it contributes actively to the creation of a more just society" (Bridges, 2001, p. 383) and thereby hope that the benefits of this study are not entirely my own.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss my entry into the research context, the profile of participants in the study, the collection and analysis of the data and the ethical approaches I adopted.

4.5 Entering the research space

4.5.1 Ethnographic sensibility

As a participant-centred qualitative research project which involved spending considerable time in the field, this study appears to have many of the hallmarks of an ethnography. However, I have opted against explicitly labelling it as such, while aligning with the argument that "whether a qualitative study is ethnographic is a matter of degree" (Bryman, 2015, p. 462). Undertaking an ethnography commonly implies the immersion of the researcher in the social setting of a cultural group and designating participant observation of that group as the primary research method (Bryman, 2015; Creswell, 2006). However, I felt that the intermittence and the lack of formality in my engagement with the college did not allow for sufficient immersion within the student community to justify conducting comprehensive participant observation which could adequately address my research questions. I was further conscious that carrying out formally arranged lesson observations would likely trigger the Hawthorne effect, altering the classroom dynamic and the behaviour of both teachers and students (Allen & Davis, 2011). In addition, I was concerned about the ethical implications that could emerge if students declined or felt pressure to consent to classroom observation (Smette, 2019).

Despite opting against formal participant observation, my research has nevertheless been shaped by ethnographic sensibility. Thus, my engagement in the research space required spending extended time in the field and gaining an understanding of "how people collectively organize, understand, and live in the world" (McGranahan, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, ethics, respect, reciprocity and data ownership were central aspect of the research, while my advocacy for gender equality and social justice is aligned with the work of critical ethnographers (Creswell, 2006).

Diverging from most ethnographies, my engagement with the college was more incidental and personal. My informal voluntary role as a recurrent writing workshop facilitator, occasional photographer and periodic participant in the

college's social life was better suited for relationship building and raising my contextual awareness than it was for formal data gathering. Only after four months of such engagement did I feel that relationships had been sufficiently cultivated to begin recruiting student participants and for formal data collection to begin.

4.5.2 The research participants[4]

Altogether, seventeen female undergraduate students participated in my study. I used opportunistic and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2015), enabled by volunteer student participants from my writing workshops, who in turn assisted in recruiting interested classmates. I make no claim that saturation occurred following the seventeenth student's contribution as I believe that each participant's unique stories bring new 'data' to the fore, though I recognised that the participants' collective story had gradually converged from their seventeen unique voices (Saunders et al., 2018).

Overall, there was significant heterogeneity among the study's participants. Thirteen were pursuing BAs in fields including English literature, journalism, history, political science and social work. The remaining four were BSc students studying chemistry, biology, physics and computer science. Nearly all were nearing completion of their degree programme.

Although I was unable to obtain the college's socioeconomic data, I was told by colleagues that most students come from rural or 'disadvantaged' backgrounds and are usually the first in their families to attend higher education and to speak English. Approximately half of the participants fit this profile, while the others come from urban centres and from families closer to the Indian middle class. Though some from this comparatively privileged group have parents with

[4] To safeguard anonymity as much as possible I have not included a table with specific information about each participant.

degrees and basic English, none come from India's Anglophone or metropolitan elite.

The religious, geographic and linguistic heterogeneity of the participants is also relevant to note. Although the college is affiliated with a Christian church, there was roughly equal participation by Hindu and Christian students, with Muslim students also represented. Twelve of the students were from the immediate region where Telugu is the primary language. Five came from other Indian states and spoke a diversity of languages including Hindi and Urdu. All of the participants had done at least some of their primary or secondary education in English-medium.

I understood that the participant profile skewed toward the more socially mobile and English proficient among the college's students. This was also impacted by my rationale to use English as the sole language in which to conduct research for this study, which I discuss in the next section.

4.5.3 The language dilemma

My decision to conduct research for this study exclusively in English rather than to work with a Telugu interpreter was much deliberated. Failing to offer interviews in Telugu would exclude many potential participants and thus have a far-reaching impact on the data collected (Cormier, 2018). I would ultimately not hear directly from the most linguistically disempowered students, the ones lacking the proficiency and confidence to take part in this study, yet required by the college to study in English-medium. I further understood that conducting research in English was an expression of postcolonial power that I would hold over the participants (Cormier, 2018; Pennycook, 2001).

Nevertheless, several epistemic, ethical and practical considerations led me to proceed exclusively in English. I was especially mindful that using an interpreter would undermine the richness of deliberation that interactive dialogic interviews with known participants can bring. Researchers report on the social awkwardness and a reluctance by participants to disclose sensitive information with an interpreter in the room, especially if they are a cultural insider (Cormier,

2018, p. 334). Furthermore, the presence of interpreters often curtails speaking turns and forces interlocutors to speak succinctly with little elaboration (Kosny et al., 2014). Additionally, a non-professional who is a cultural insider may interpret or translate with a bias, or may inadvertently distort the meaning of the interview content (Cormier, 2018, p. 334). Any interpreter I could access would also likely be an insider potentially known by the participants, which would raise questions about anonymity and confidentiality. A further issue was the omission of the significant population of non-Telugu speaking students. I also considered the postcolonial notion that translation is ultimately not a neutral decoding of language and culture, but potentially a domestication of a subordinate culture which could well take away agency from the research participants (Pennycook, 2001). I thereby defer to fellow researchers proficient in Telugu and other languages to investigate the (dis)empowering impact of English and EMI.

In the following section I discuss interactive interviews and how these were supported with vignettes, photos and the participants' written narratives.

4.6 More than data gathering

4.6.1 Interactive interviews

Having established relationships with most of the research participants provided an opportunity to conduct interviews which were less structured and more dialogic and interactive, enabling me to mitigate the interrogative and extractive tendency of many research interviews (Kvale, 2006). Interactive interviews are more personal, collaborative and relational than conventional ones. They enable researchers to disclose information about themselves while making participants more comfortable to engage in greater depth, thereby "moving away from the orthodox model of distance and separation" (Ellis & Berger, 2012, p. 4). In practice this meant, for example, sharing my own experience as an immigrant child in Canada, lacking adequate English and struggling to cope with English-medium primary school. Such a disclosure of vulnerability

resonated with the participants' own challenges with EMI and assuaged the power disparity (Ross, 2017).

The dialogic interactive interview draws on postmodern conceptions, in which interviews have a wider purpose than traditional ones, seeking a richer co-constructed understanding in order to interrogate power, culture and difference through a reflexive lens (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). As such, my aim as a culturally removed interviewer went beyond collecting data, toward offering an emancipatory space for participants to reflect and challenge prevailing power structures and cultural norms, especially those linked to gender, to the extent they wished to do so. This form of deliberation is aligned with the bottom-up participatory engagement favoured by capability scholars (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999).

Despite my best efforts to position the interview space as interactive and emancipatory, I understood that many of the power asymmetries between myself and the participants would inevitably prevail (Kvale, 2006). Furthermore, as a male researcher interviewing young women, I was mindful of "the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones" (Fontana & Prokos, 2007, p. 61) and the potential discomfort for the participants to take part in an interview with a foreign male researcher. Consequently, I offered participants paired interviews but remarkably, none took up the offer. I further reflected on the interview location and its "role in constructing reality, serving simultaneously as both cultural product and producer" (Herzog, 2012, p. 207). I thus secured a private yet publicly visible setting on campus, but gave participants an option to choose their preferred space if the latter did not suit. However, I was aware that building rapport and providing a comfortable setting were insufficient in mitigating the barriers to making interviews genuinely interactive and dialogic. In the next two sections I discuss several qualitative research tools I deployed to help overcome these barriers.

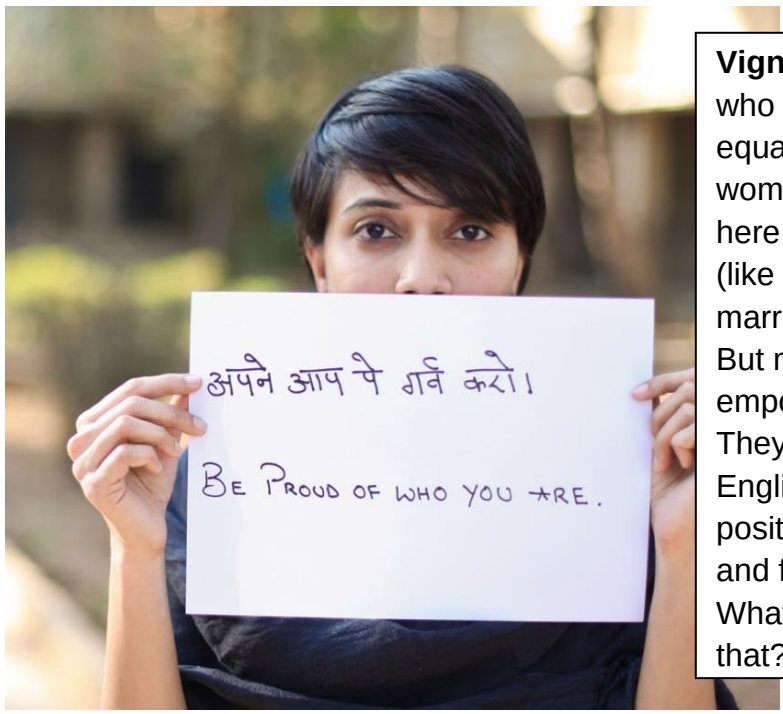
4.6.2 Vignettes and photos

To more effectively carry out interactive dialogic interviews I deployed three practical tools: vignettes and photos, which I discuss here, and narrative frames, which I discuss in the next section. In using these tools I aimed to counteract the extractive inclination and the one-way dialogue sometimes attributed to research interviews (Kvale, 2006) and to galvanise students who may have been reluctant to share ideas or lacked the confidence to believe they have anything useful to say (Milligan, 2016, p. 238).

For an interviewer, using vignettes involves formulating scenarios and eliciting responses, as opposed to asking questions directly (Bryman, 2015, p. 259). Because they are about other people, vignettes are especially useful when addressing sensitive topics which might be deemed too personal or intrusive to ask about directly (Griffin & Saeed, 2021; Kandemir & Budd, 2018). As such, I made use of vignettes when discussing how students might navigate patriarchal family structures and discrimination based on social class, caste and gender (see example in Figure 4.1). Formulating scenarios about hypothetical classmates was especially helpful to broach the sensitive topic of forced and arranged marriage, given that many of the participants were facing this predicament as they neared graduation.

As a supplement to the vignettes, I added photo elicitation to enrich the interview experience. Photos are a powerful tool which often elicit emotional responses and unanticipated discussions, thereby providing "a more intense focus on the importance of lived experiences than interviews or text alone" (Greenier & Moodie, 2021, p. 4). They also have the potential to bridge culturally distinct worlds and to help the interviewer and participant to more deeply co-construct meaning (Harper, 2002). I deployed photos and images to elicit participants' views about how English intersects with work opportunities, global connections, study abroad schemes, social activism, social inequality and gender injustice (Appendix Four). Discussing the story behind a photo depicting the Dalit goddess of English (Figure 2.1) enabled an engagement with the contentious issue of caste, though discussions usually shifted to social class, as the topic of caste is deemed somewhat illicit at the college. Another photo, showing a young woman holding a placard declaring "Be proud of who

you are," (Figure 4.1) generated far-reaching and personalised discussions about gender barriers, and helped to foreground patriarchal structures as a critical component of this study.



Vignette: "This is an activist who supports gender equality. I know that a lot of women, including students here, face many challenges (like unwanted arranged marriage) and other barriers. But many women also feel empowered by English. They believe knowing English can help create positive change for them and for women in society. What do you think about that?"

Figure 4.1 Photo elicitation with vignette (Findia, 2012)

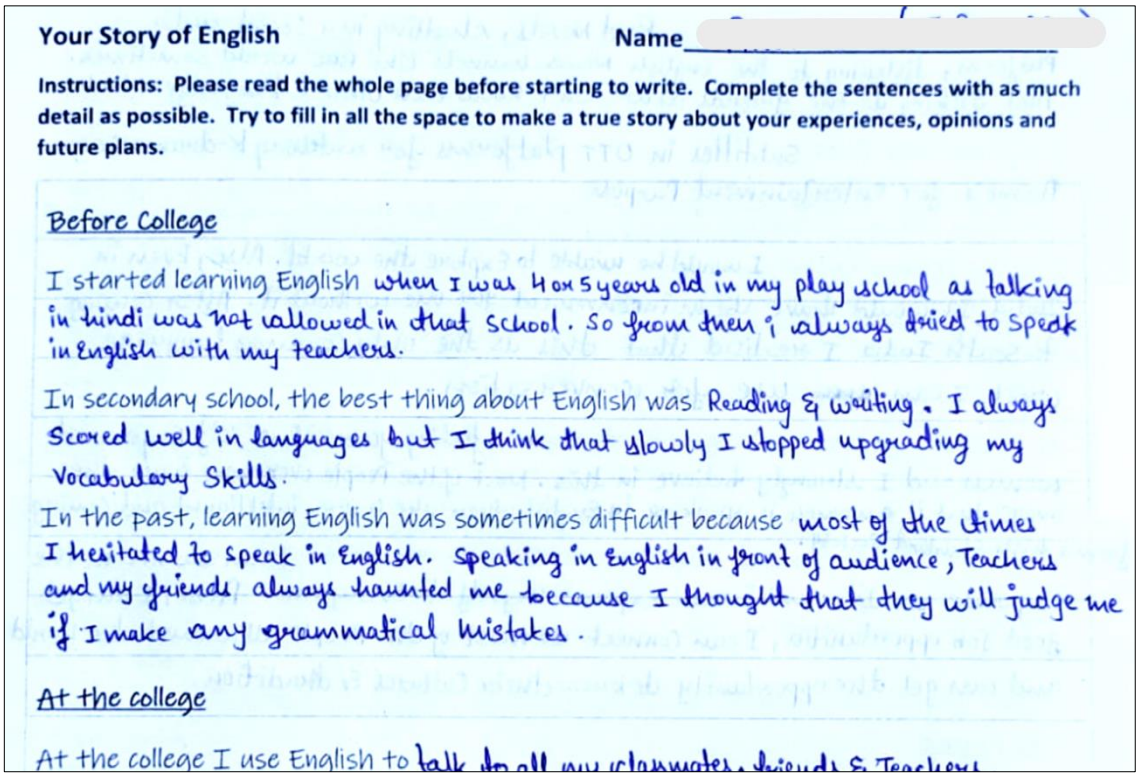
Ultimately, using vignettes in tandem with photos contributed to my aim of creating a sufficiently safe and secure 'third space' (Kramsch & Uryu, 2011) for interviews, enabling many of the participants to candidly discuss sensitive issues, power asymmetries and the gendered cultural boundaries they must negotiate as young women.

4.6.3 Narrative frames

The third instrument I used to support the interactive interviews was the narrative frame, a written form of narrative inquiry. Usually combined with other data collection methods, the narrative frame is a template consisting of sentence starters and blank spaces which form the skeleton of a coherent story relevant to answering the research question (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The participants are asked to first read all of the sentence prompts before filling in the blank spaces to produce a story of their lived experiences and their reflections (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 13). The method was developed by narrative

inquiry researchers as a scaffold for participants who required guidance when tasked to write an open-ended life narrative (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008).

After piloting an initial draft of the narrative frame with two students and making minor adjustments, I invited participants to complete the writing task (see Appendix Five for full task and Figure 4.2 below for sample section). All seventeen interviewees submitted narratives, which I read in advance of interviews to gain a better understanding of the students' backgrounds and to help personalise interview guides. Indeed narrative frames are designed to "serve an exploratory purpose" and are "useful for entry into a new or unfamiliar research context" (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 13). Many of the participants' narratives were comprehensive and contemplative, though some were slightly terse, and a small number had clearly misinterpreted some of the prompts. Nevertheless, each of the narratives provided a valuable springboard into deeper and more reflective discussions and served as a helpful tool for triangulation.



Your Story of English **Name**

Instructions: Please read the whole page before starting to write. Complete the sentences with as much detail as possible. Try to fill in all the space to make a true story about your experiences, opinions and future plans.

Before College

I started learning English when I was 4 or 5 years old in my play school as talking in hindi was not allowed in that school. So from then i always tried to speak in English with my teachers.

In secondary school, the best thing about English was Reading & writing. I always scored well in languages but I think that slowly I stopped upgrading my Vocabulary Skills.

In the past, learning English was sometimes difficult because most of the times I hesitated to speak in English. Speaking in English in front of audience, Teachers and my friends always haunted me because I thought that they will judge me if I make any grammatical mistakes.

At the college

At the college I use English to talk to all my classmates, friends & Teachers

Figure 4.2 Narrative frame segment (first section as completed by participant)

In light of the power imbalance discussed, the narrative frames served the important purpose of giving participants a greater role in shaping the content of the interview (Milligan, 2016). They also enabled participants to engage with the topic in written form before having to speak about it during the interview. This is especially valuable in the Indian context where English is often considered a library language which students are accustomed to reading and writing (Graddol, 2010) but often lack confidence when engaging in spoken interaction (Attanayake, 2020). For many students, the opportunity to reflect on and write out their ideas in advance significantly reduces the anxieties and stigmas which might well arise during an interview within the given power dynamic (Cook, 2012).

Finally, the narrative frames provided an accessible starting point for analysing the large volume of data generated by this study. I discuss data analysis in the following section.

4.7 Data analysis

In line with my positionality and methodological approach, I strove to embed reflexivity into the data analysis. To this end I was guided by scholarship on reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022) and on the importance of iteration for reflexively developing meaning from data (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). I additionally integrated my research questions and the capability approach theoretical framework into the process. In planning my data analysis strategy I understood that reflexive TA is to be undertaken “with theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). While my philosophical inclinations gravitate toward an interpretivist epistemology and an inductive orientation, I consider these to be on a spectrum rather than binary points (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Indeed, even though my analysis is participant and data-driven, it is guided by codes and themes that follow capability approach logic.

Reflexive TA further demands the centring of the researcher's subjectivity, "organic and recursive coding processes, and… deep reflection on, and engagement with, data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). To this end Braun and Clarke (2022) have developed a six phase reflexive TA process (Table 4.1), which served as the starting point of my data analysis strategy. Through this process I did not seek to uncover the 'truth' buried in interview transcripts, but instead immersed myself in the data and reflected on the sociocultural contexts of the participants' accounts and on how meaning was co-constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In the process of generating themes, I followed the notion that they

> do not passively emerge from either data or coding; they are not 'in' the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher. Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)	**Reflexive/Iterative Analysis** (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009)	**Research Questions**	**Capability Approach**
1. Familiarising yourself with the data (note taking)	What are the data telling me? (and the students?)		Empowering participants: sharing initial findings from data set in non-academic language.
2. Coding 3. Generating initial themes	What is it that I want to know?	How does English and English-medium education empower and disempower the students at an English-medium women's the college in India? What are the most significant structural constraints which undermine the students' empowerment through English? What changes to language pedagogy and practice could support the students' empowerment?	Capabilities, conversion factors and structural constraints informing codes and themes
4. Developing and reviewing themes 5. Refining, defining and naming themes 6. Writing up	What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?		Clarifying and defining final set of capability-based themes

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Table 4.1 Reflexive and iterative thematic analysis integrating the research questions and the capability approach

To support the six phases of reflexive TA, I drew on a simple iterative framework (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) which enabled me to more clearly and reflexively focus my data analysis, integrate my research questions and the capability approach framework into the process (Table 4.1). Thus, as I was familiarising myself with the data, I tackled the question "What are the data telling me?" and extended this to "What are the data telling the student participants?" Though not yet formally addressing my research questions nor my theoretical framing, it was impossible to ignore my own research agenda. I therefore reflected on how I was interpreting the data, how the participants and others at the college might interpret it, and what they would find most relevant. My integration of the capability approach at this stage was to consolidate participant empowerment within the process, affirming the participatory nature of the research, investigating what the students have reason to value and emphasising that their views matter (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2015). With this in mind I used my initial set of notes to produce a timely and practical findings summary in plain English (Appendix Three) for participants to read and provide feedback if they wished, an offer which several took up.

In the next two phases I began focused coding (Figure 4.3) and generating initial themes, this time guided by the question "What is it that I want to know?" At this stage I adapted and integrated my research questions while still reflecting on the first phase of what the data was telling me. As I moved to the next phases of developing, reviewing, refining, defining and naming themes, I considered the dialectical relationship between what the data were telling me and what I wanted to know. This process helped to shape the logic of my data analysis, in which the first research question on empowerment and disempowerment was driven by what the data was telling me. The capability approach here served as a way to shape and organise the concept of empowerment into the themes like global citizenship, aspiration, voice and others (Walker, 2007). The other research questions, focussed on structural constraints and pedagogical reform, represented more of what I wanted to know, requiring greater synthesis with the relevant theory and literature from the capability approach and critical applied linguistics. Themes were developed

"as patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593), which for me was the capability approach. Furthermore, in generating themes, I followed the principle that this process should be driven less by frequency and more by importance and meaningfulness to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Appendix Six and Seven contain a code report and mind maps of the thematic analysis process. Figure 4.3 below provides an extract of the coding process.

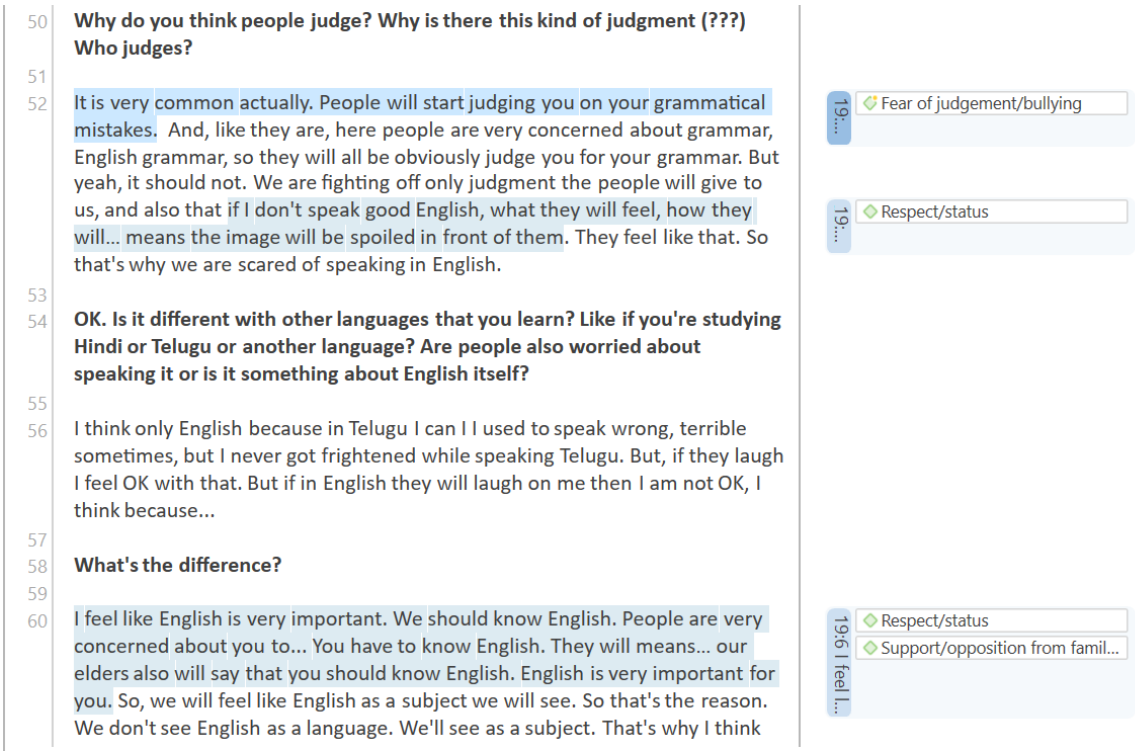


Figure 4.3 Extract of the coding process

All of this also points to a wider picture of "the reflexivity inherent in researchers' work, which further explains the interplay between interview questions, preconceptions, assumptions, and interpretations of their data" (Faircloth, 2012, p. 272). An example of this in my study was my misguided initial assumption that the participants would not be as willing as they were to confront issues of gender inequality so openly with a male researcher. Whether the reflexivity was inherent or proactive, this early reflection resulted in tweaking my approach to both the data collection and analysis and a more forthright engagement with an issue of critical importance to the participants.

My philosophical misgivings about positivist epistemologies sit somewhat uneasily with computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. I nevertheless opted to support my data analysis with Atlas.ti, although I proceeded cautiously. I was especially concerned about the fragmentation of the data during the coding process and thereby depersonalising and decontextualising the participants' narratives (Bryman, 2015, pp. 602–603). I was also cautious about paying excessive heed to the software's quantification of the data set, drawing the researcher's attention to various statistics including the frequency count within codes and the number of codes in a theme. Instead, I remained steadfast in my focus on importance over frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, I set aside Atlas.ti while familiarising myself the data and only began to use it for the formal coding process, mostly as a way to more efficiently manage the large volume of data. I declined Atlas.ti's repeated offers of automated and AI coding, ensuring that the software was following my analytical choices rather than guiding them. Nevertheless, I understand that using such software can influence the outcomes of the data analysis (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Niedbalski, 2022).

In the final section I discuss the ethical principles which have underpinned this study.

4.8 Ethical mindfulness

I understand reflexivity and ethics to be deeply interrelated concepts in qualitative research and ones which I considered guiding principles for the data collection process and the relationships cultivated during the course of this study. I was thus compelled to make a distinction between institutionally mandated 'procedural ethics' and the more comprehensive notions of 'ethics in practice' and 'ethical mindfulness', which demand reflexivity throughout the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Warin, 2011).

Adhering to the university's ethical procedures, I secured the agreement to conduct research from the college faculty and the informed consent of all seventeen student participants. However, I recognised that informed consent is

complex (Warin, 2011) and a signature does not adequately measure genuine willingness to engage in the research, especially when power imbalances are considered. As a mitigating principle, I only invited students to participate after the workshop series my partner and I taught on was complete. I also came to regard "consent as a process rather than an event" (Etherington, 2007, p. 603). As a result, I repeatedly assured all potential informants that they would face no adverse consequence if they declined to participate or withdrew even after consenting (BERA, 2024). While being vigilant about the power inequities related to consent, I also wished not to overstate the students' lack of agency to decline participation, in line with the capability approach's ethos to recognise individuals as active agents rather than suffering patients (Sen, 1999). I was assuaged by the fact that four students who had previously expressed interest opted out of participating in interviews. Confidentiality is another complex ethical norm in educational research but potentially difficult to fulfil (Walford, 2005). I have followed recommended data safeguarding procedures, used pseudonyms and refrained from disclosing defining details in endeavouring to protect the identities of the research participants. Though impossible to guarantee anonymity, I have ensured maximum discretion.

Going beyond the aforementioned procedural ethics, a reflexive ethical approach compelled me to balance my own needs as a researcher with the duty of care I had for the participants (Etherington, 2007, p. 614). This meant navigating with utmost sensitivity the cultural context of the participants, especially their position as young women in a web of patriarchal, classist, religious, ageist and other hierarchical structures, and my own relationship with them within the inherent power imbalances already discussed in this chapter. It also meant constantly interrogating how I was interpreting participants' stories and representing their perspectives (Etherington, 2007). To this end I strove to develop a keen sense of "ethical mindfulness," which I understood as a

> heightened sensitivity to understanding the relational aspects of the research process: an interdependent awareness of how I, as a researcher, am influencing my research participants' perceptions and a

> simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they are influencing me (Warin, 2011, p. 809).

Through this ethical lens, I also sought to confront the coloniality of social research in India and more widely in the Global South. I approached participants with humility, respect and sensitivity (Bridges, 2009), offering them a space to share experiences and to voice ideas, while amplifying their voices and supressing the indignity of White saviourism (Straubhaar, 2015) and the 'Western gaze' (Cole & O'Riley, 2010).

4.9 Chapter summary

In the first part of this chapter, I have scrutinised my positionality within the research context and affirmed the decolonial ethos of the study. As a newcomer to Andhra Pradesh and to the college, I aimed to adopt a reflexive posture, especially from my position as a privileged White male researcher conducting research with female students, some from disadvantaged backgrounds. This meant continuously scrutinising the profound power imbalances and breaking down the insider-outsider binary to take up a role as researcher and volunteer teacher. From this position, I have navigated questions about conducting research in a postcolonial cultural space and about sharing ownership of the data and the benefits of the study.

In the second part of the chapter, I have outlined the methodological and ethical approaches I undertook to gather and analyse the data. Seventeen students, most of whom I had come to know as a volunteer at the college, participated in the study. Dialogic interactive interviews were guided by the students' written narratives and supported by vignettes and photo prompts. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic and iterative analysis, underpinned by the capability approach. Ethical mindfulness underpinned the entire research process.

Chapter 5: Survival and resistance – Seeking empowerment through English

5.1 Introduction

In the three chapters that follow I recount and explore the participants' stories of empowerment and disempowerment through English, the significant barriers that students face and the pedagogical approaches which may help overcome these barriers. In this chapter I address the central research question concerning how English and English-medium education empower and disempower the students at the college. In next chapter I take up the second research question on the structural constraints which undermine the potential of student empowerment and capability development through English. In the last of the three chapters I address the third research question on the changes to language pedagogy and practice which could support the students' empowerment. Adhering to the principles of reflexive and iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) I have incorporated the participants' stories and the research questions into the capability approach to develop the themes which structure the chapters.

This first chapter is concerned with how the student participants are empowered and disempowered by English as they navigate EMI and life after college. I first explore how English is, at first glance, empowering and disempowering for its instrumental gatekeeping function of securing better study and livelihood opportunities, thus English and education as seen through the human capital paradigm. Then, through the prism of capabilities, I assess how English transcends its instrumental role into one which has the potential to empower the students to challenge social injustices and to shape their own futures. Lastly, I discuss the chapter's findings through three distinct lenses of empowerment: the neoliberal, the socially liberal and the transformative (Chacko, 2020; Esch, 2009; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p. 10).

5.2 English as human capital

In this section I examine the way students perceive English as a tool for empowerment in an instrumental sense, for continuing their studies, securing livelihoods, accessing knowledge and pursuing opportunities not available in their first languages mostly for the pursuit of economic ends. It is unsurprising that English, at first glance, is seen through an instrumental lens, especially in the neoliberal age. Multiple studies attests to demand for English being motivated by the potential for social mobility afforded by work and study opportunities, while policymakers who promote English do so to boost India's global economic standing (Azam et al., 2013; Graddol, 2010; Hayes, 2016; Mehdi et al., 2022).

Though taking resolute position against an exclusively human capital approach, capability scholars do not disregard the instrumental and economic roles of education. Walker (2005b, p. 34) takes a holistic approach, suggesting that "economic matters are inseparable from matters of culture and society," while Robeyns (2006b, p. 72) states simply that "having a decent education can make all the difference between starving and surviving, and between merely surviving and having a decent life." Indeed 'surviving' was a term specifically articulated by many student participants in their assessment of the role of English in their lives.

5.2.1 Surviving a competitive world

There was consensus among the students that English is an essential skill in a world which is becoming increasingly competitive, many emphatically suggesting that it is a matter of survival. Arya wants to apply for an MSc programme and work in the life sciences, both of which require a high level of English proficiency.

> If I didn't know English, it would be very difficult to survive in the world. Everything I see around me have first preference as English but not their own language. In order to compete in the mass competition, it's important to learn English... Because it's all about marketing and job. If

> you have to get into the job market, you're supposed to have good communication skills, and the first language is always English.[5]

Indeed the presupposition that proficiency in English is synonymous with good communication skills and an essential component of marketing yourself in the competition for jobs marks a stark neoliberal reality for the students (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b).

Arya's assertion that English is crucial in "the mass competition" in which the students find themselves was a recurring theme among participants, including Chandra, who wants to pursue an MBA and a career in business. For Chandra this trajectory means "survival of the fittest… to survive we have to know English… the only language… which we can communicate throughout the country, and it is the global language too." Analya, who wants to become a teacher, shares very similar sentiments. She cannot imagine pursuing a teaching career without English. "It is very difficult to survive in this competitive world without English."

The participants' notion of surviving in a competitive world may be less poignant than Robeyns' (2006b) contrast between surviving and starving. Yet the students are acutely conscious of the highly competitive environment in which they find themselves and the battles which lie ahead. I reflected on how this came to be in an entry in my research journal.

> There is an enforced culture of competition on campus which to me stands in contrast to the collaborative spirit among the students. Basically, they are forced at every turn to compete against one another. There are numerous organised competitions in everything from elocution to military marching. The students compete for exam scores, scholarships, internships, job placements and much more. The most

[5] In the spirit of decoloniality, I have declined to use the (*sic*) label to signal participants' utterances that might be considered non-standard English.

> successful are called ‘toppers’ which appears to serve as either a pejorative or a compliment. There is a huge banner at the entrance to campus with photos of the top earning recent graduates and their annual salaries.

My reflections are consistent with the observations of Highet and Del Percio (2021a, p. 100), who note that “[Indian] students are exhorted to develop neoliberal subjectivities whereby they seek to continually – and willingly – enhance their competitive edge.”

5.2.2 Overcoming barriers, surviving precarities

Having English as a competitive edge takes on an elevated significance for women who face multiple barriers. Layla echoes the prevailing view among the participants that “as an Indian woman, having good English means you can survive in this competitive world.” She is interested in studying astronomy and dreams of working in India’s space program, perhaps even as an astronaut. Layla understands that knowledge of English is especially important for women like herself who have designs on entering a male-dominated field.

> There are two [applicants], man and a woman. They have to choose one to get a job. If man doesn't know English they will still hire the man. So, if woman doesn't know English she will be rejected. So why? Because they think that women can't do this and men can, even if he doesn't know anything. So English skills…[mean] a lot in a woman's life… If you can't even speak fluent English, you are… rejected.

For Samira, who grew up in difficult circumstances, survival through English means overcoming the intersectional barriers of gender and social class. It also means securing a livelihood which will support her widowed and ailing mother. However, she feels that graduates with her social background are not well positioned to compete in the Indian job market. “We don’t have any jobs. Without going foreign we can't survive.” Her grandmother advises her to “go somewhere to earn more money, to get rid of all problems, all financial conditions… this is the main reason to learn English… I should go to America,

because my mother is the only backbone for me… I should remove her … problems."

Another student who has yet a different story of 'survival' through English is Miriam, a Christian whose community faces increasing marginalisation in the growing power of the Hindu nationalist movement (Drèze, 2020). As a practicing nun she has opted to align her life trajectory with her church.

> If I didn't know English I would have been lost and struggling when I was sent to my religious studies to Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Bangalore. I would have not been able to speak or understand anything…. I feel that I have my own [plans], though [the church leadership] have their own plans. I feel that after my… BA… I'll pursue my studies in MA, most probably, maybe in literature or something in English. After that I would like to do PhD. So, after PhD, if they allow me to do PhD, so I can be teaching.

For Miriam, the church provides a potential life-long safety net of education, employment and economic security, a viable alternative to the precarities and tensions of an arranged marriage and a shaky job market which many of her classmates will face. Her fluency in English has enabled Miriam to assume a leadership role among the sisters and the students at the college, and has put her in good standing for the secure future she envisions. Yet, she brings up a tension in which her own plans may not match those of the church leadership, thus potentially undermining her agency to pursue her own aspirations.

In the next part of this chapter, I take up the matter of agency and empowerment as they relate to English through the lens of participants' stories and human capabilities.

5.3 From human capital to capabilities

At first glance the participants' view of English proficiency as a matter of survival appears to fulfil practical needs, like navigating libraries, exams, assignments and future workplaces; filling in application forms and official documents; communicating with people and institutions from outside the region

(Graddol, 2010; Vaish, 2005). However, a more robust CA exploration uncovers stories of how English transcends the instrumental and is interwoven with student agency and empowerment beyond academic and economic well-being. I thus explore how English interrelates with the participants' capacity to "be the architects of their own lives and act to make a difference in the world" (Crocker, 2008, p. 19) as well as "to resist oppression" and "get a better deal" (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p. 39).

Drawing on multiple lists of educational capabilities I invoke the following six to explore student (dis)empowerment: global citizenship, critical thinking and narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 2002, 2006); aspiration, autonomy and voice (Walker, 2005b, 2007). I considered these capabilities to be the most conceptually aligned to the themes which developed from the iterative coding process described in the previous chapter (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

5.3.1 Global citizenship or 'global Indian'?

Conceptualising global citizenship, Nussbaum (2006, p. 390) invites students "to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group, but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern." In the context of India with its expanding global influence and its fast-growing diaspora, the role of English has expanded to include the construction of a global identity (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2019, p. 357). Scholars argue that these cosmopolitan concepts have been co-opted into a "gendered and classed discourse" (Dhuru & Thapliyal, 2021, p. 407) which ignores the diversity of internationally engaged Indians and homogeneously depicts the 'global Indian' as a masculine, affluent, upper-caste Hindu nationalist who supports India's neoliberal economic rise (Ashutosh, 2019).

While global citizenship may not have been on the minds of the participants, many had specific intentions to leverage their English for work, study or long-term migration abroad, thus becoming a very different profile of 'global Indian'. Miriam has every intention of living abroad as part of her work with the church.

For her, any conceptualisation of global citizenship appears to be deeply tied to her congregation and with English as its lingua franca.

> I left to home in 2012 for… religious studies. For us… English is like an international language, because… ours is international congregation and we are of different states, different cultures. So whenever we go to other places, we actually… don't know their language... I'm coming from western region of India where we are mostly, like we have the impact of Western culture. So, this Indian culture I find it a little difficult and those languages also to learn, it's quite difficult. So, for that institute we have English as the official language.

Miriam implies a connection between Indian languages and cultures, distinct from English and Western culture, toward which she feels an affinity. However, she stops short of directly linking English to the Christian faith despite their significant ties in colonial era education and missionary work (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). "For us Christians, it actually doesn't make much difference whether you speak in English or other language." She contrasts this linguistic agnosticism with the Hindu nationalist government's promotion of Hindi as the exclusive national language, with Hinduism as the national religion and aligning both to Indian national identity (Ranjan, 2021). Remarking on the duplicity of the government leaders, she notes that "when it comes to their own kids, they'll send their students to English-medium school", sentiments which echo criticisms in the press (Press Trust of India, 2022; Shepherd, 2020).

Miriam also emphatically asserts that English in India possesses a "uniting power to bring people together, because English, anybody can speak, like, because it's not our language, it's our second." Thus, for Miriam, English represents a means of resistance against the oppression of the Hindu nationalist government, the threat it poses to Christian and other non-Hindu communities and its appropriation of Hindi. English also enables her to position herself as an inclusive and pluralistic Indian and global citizen in the "contested space" (Dhuru & Thapliyal, 2021, p. 407) of how Indians at home and abroad construct their national identities.

Like Miriam, Layla comes from a religious minority and intends to study abroad. She reflects on her family's concerns about her global ambitions.

> So, I feel that people generally think that if you're talking English, you [adopt] their culture. They start changing their traditions… If I'm going somewhere outside India to live, I should not forget my own ethics. I should not forget my own religion… When I see the people wearing the culture of this… tradition, I like it. So, I try to change myself just to try that; how do I look… in their position? So, when I tried, my mom doesn't allow me, because she thinks that I'm changing my culture, I'm changing my religion… So that becomes a main thing.

Entering the 'contested space' of what constitutes the 'global Indian', Layla is compelled to reject a Eurocentric cosmopolitan identity (Andreotti, 2014) yet does not fit the Hindu nationalist 'global Indian' identity (Ashutosh, 2019). Echoing Miriam, Layla also sees English as a unifying language. "English is something that which makes common… It makes the people to get together." For Layla, English empowers her career aspiration in a male dominant field and her desire to connect with diverse people and cultures but disempowers her through her family's understanding of her cultural identity.

Samira's concerns about English and identity are somewhat different than Layla's, as she contemplates her plan to go to the United States and earn enough money to support her mother and grandmother.

> Most of the Indian women will get afraid to speak English, because they thought that, 'we are not fluent, we are not suitable to speak English.' As me… I thought that… that we are not suitable. Our financial conditions will not support us to grow… We are not suitable to speak English, we are not able to go [to] America. We are not suitable [for] America… That's their thinking only.… Indian women will grow in English... They can reach their goals as they get rid of that thinking.

Samira's intention to join the contested space of 'global Indians' is mediated by the intersecting barriers of class and gender. She considers English proficiency

to be the one attainable capability which can enable women in her position to gain confidence and access to otherwise unattainable global spaces, and to advance their agency. Thus, for Samira and other students who have the confidence, using English represents an act of resistance against the oppressive voices which tell them they are 'unsuitable' to be English speakers and 'global Indians.'

For all three students, proficiency in English has the potential to enable their agency through accessing globalised cultural spaces. However, this involves confronting rigid social boundaries and power dynamics as they seek to position themselves outside of their familial and cultural contexts.

Scrutinising social norms and power structures demands critical thinking, the second capability for education which I assess in the next part.

5.3.2 Critical thinking or 'by hearting'?

Nussbaum (2006) defines critical thinking as the capacity for critical examination of oneself, one's traditions and beliefs, and the use of logical reason and deliberative argument to foster democratic citizenship. Developing such capacities strengthens students' agency and empowers them to more effectively resist oppressive structures. However, it is well known that in all but the elite institutions in Indian higher education, input and rote learning prevail over the development of critical thinking and deliberation skills (Heslop, 2014).

Deepthi is considering whether to apply to study abroad to help fulfil her ambition to join India's civil service. She says that she is different from most students, who are primarily motivated by the prestige of an international degree and the potential for high salaries. Instead, she is more interested in a different way of learning.

> In my opinion, Indian studies like are not practical thing. It's theoretical. And we should by heart things, by heart learn things… In many areas we are not supposed to use our own thinking and also not

> allowed to express our own thinking. But… when compared to India… foreign is like liberal. It accepts liberal thoughts.

Many participants echoed Deepthi's concerns about rote learning (by hearting) but few had the same drive to overcome it. She believes that her proficiency in English could enable her to reject the oppressive institutional structures which limit her freedom to think independently, either by studying abroad or in one of the elite Indian institutions which she has heard have an ethos of critical engagement.

Like Deepthi, Ritika wants to escape the rote learning culture by studying on an MBA programme abroad. She is unequivocal in her belief that that "…the modern form of education is incomplete without a good knowledge of English." Given Chowdhury's (2017) assertion that Indian languages have been poorly developed for academic work there is little wonder that many students shared Ritika's view. However, she was also clear that many students struggle with English.

> I saw many people… like in the history or political science… OK this question below, this answer belongs to this question. If they get Telugu translation… they would easily write their own English [answer] on the exam. So, I saw many… of my friends doing that and they need a Telugu translation for that particular question, so that so that they can write easily in their own words, what they were expecting… about that matter.

This is indeed a far cry from Nussbaum's (2006, p. 390) assertion that history and political science are especially crucial subjects which require "a pedagogy that fosters critical thinking, the critical scrutiny of conflicting source materials, and active learning." Ritika's observation also highlights how low English proficiency precipitates an emphasis on cramming for exams, which in turn entangles an English only policy with a culture of rote learning and a paucity of critical thinking (Rao, 2018). Thus, for many students English represents a denial of agency, a linguistic barrier which hinders active learning and limits their ability to critically scrutinise their study material.

Gayatri has overcome countless barriers and intends to break many more. Having been a child bride and a mother in her early teens, she could only enrol at the college as an older student. She hopes to join India's civil service to help tackle the many social problems she sees are plaguing India. She speaks at length about casteism, religious conflict, youth unemployment, poor public education, political corruption and gender-based violence. However, she worries about toxic political discourse and the failure by many in communities like hers to critically assess such rhetoric (Nussbaum, 2006). In this regard she is determined help support a paradigm shift.

> So, I choose civil services. It is a powerful position in India... to change the society, to change the minds of the people… What are the problems facing the people? What are the reasons why government [is] not providing many things to the people?

Fulfilling Gayatri's vision requires confronting beliefs which claim to be authoritative, and imagining alternatives (Nussbaum, 2006). She feels that English is indispensable for her to learn about those alternative and to subsequently take on her role as the change agent she aspires to be.

> English is very important to read and to analyse the conditions of the different countries... What they are doing [about] women atrocities [which] are really rising in India... But some countries… the women at risk are reducing… What are the measures they are taking? What are the policies…? So, I want to know how… the world is running... If we know English, we speak…[to] different people.

While English proficiency has enabled Gayatri to access global discussions on social justice issues, her critical alertness and her motivation to become an agent of change are evoked from within her community and her extraordinary journey from child bride to college student to aspiring public servant. For Gayatri, English is a vehicle which enables her to be both the ears and the voice of the people in marginalised communities whose languages she sees as excluded from wider discussions of social justice and who are consequently

unaware of alternatives. She thereby hopes to leverage her English to strengthen the democratic citizenship among the members of the communities she serves, through a more informed and critically engaged deliberation on important issues of social justice and well-being (Nussbaum, 2006).

In the next section I explore how such issues interact with students' agency, through engagement with English literature.

5.3.3 Narrative imagination vs 'library ma'am'

For Nussbaum (2006), the third pillar of education for democratic citizenship is developing students' narrative imagination, expressly, to leverage the power of literature and the arts to foster empathy and understanding for people in vastly different contexts. Fostering empathy was likely not on the minds of colonial educators, who introduced English literature to Indian schools as a secular means to instil social order and morality, a role critics suggest it continues to fulfil in the modern day (Pennycook, 1998; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). At the college English literature students are assigned a variety of Indian and international texts, but classes focus less on literary critique and more on exam cramming. This is lamented by students like Gayatri who reflects on her three years as a literature student.

> But in that class very boring. I don't want to go classes at all. Something there is not as interesting and the practical knowledge is not [prioritised]… but only theoretical exams… So… being a literature student… I didn't read one novel… in that three years. In my class… we all read only [summary]… And we write answers… We don't pick the novel and we don't complete… the novel also… They don't read any books, but literature students [should] have to read books.

Gayatri and other frustrated literature students feed their passion for reading outside of their studies. Many say that their English proficiency has developed in tandem with their love of literature. Ulani is one such student who had struggled with English but was inspired by a popular Indian novel unavailable in Telugu.

> I wanted to search… only happiness. That's why I… start… reading novels and learning more… My first novel is 'Two States'…, it is a love story… In my second year intermediate I… went to library sir[6]… search the book and I… wanted [the library] ma'am will issue. 'I don't give to you, because… it is a love story.'... They will all say like that. 'You girls… don't study like that… Why you should have a love story?' Why do … some teachers… [tell] my library ma'am… that she can't issue… the book?… I want to study first… novel in my life and… last year I… buy… the book… Then it is silly to me because she… challenged me. That's why I will learn English... But that is the… mindset… They will think love story means… 'she will study [the book and] she will fall in love with somebody.' They… think like that, sir. I don't like that culture really.

Like Gayatri and Ulani, Nithya is an avid reader. She credits her high proficiency in English and her self-discovery to her interest in novels and lyrics.

> But English, like through books or any songs we can find ourselves. Like, who am I? Like learning a subject, means OK, you're studying for… months, but reading a particular book means you're finding yourself. We need to find ourselves in us.

Tabitha holds a similar reverence for English and reading in English.

> Learning English can also be a benefit in other ways. Like, if we want to read something which we love… it's gonna be… a step towards a new future, a step towards learning new things, a step on being strong, a step on having hope… I'm really glad to learn English... If I hadn't learned English... I could not know how to defend myself… how to protest for myself, and how to prove some people wrong if they try to discriminate a person, is what I have learned.

[6] Though I invited students to forgo the honorific, many continued to address me as 'sir'.

Reading books of their choosing in English has bolstered the agency, the critical consciousness and the overall self-development of these students. For Ulani and Gayatri, this has taken the form of an act of resistance against an oppressive educational culture in which exams supersede literary discussion and a patriarchal moral code restricts students' choice of literature. For Nithya and Tabitha, reading English novels has heightened their self-awareness and their understanding about how social injustice can be resisted, as well as providing the confidence to defend their interests.

However, the story is very different for the many students whose low language proficiency hinders their access to English literature. Mandated English and lack of local language resources are undermining the agency of these students by necessitating rote learning for exams and stifling the potential for critical discussion about literary texts in other languages. A lack of pedagogical training among lecturers results in the overuse of the banking method and missed opportunities for scaffolding discussions about assigned readings to accommodate various English proficiency levels (Heslop, 2014). Additionally, the love of reading for pleasure, in English or any other language, is insufficiently cultivated in a top-down exam-driven system.

This section has highlighted the way the student participants understand the dynamic interaction between English proficiency, student empowerment and Nussbaum's (2006) three key educational capability sets: global citizenship, critical thinking and the narrative imagination. In the following sections I explore how the students perceive the nexus between English and empowerment through the lens of three capabilities identified by Walker (2007): aspiration, autonomy and voice.

5.3.4 Aspiration for a better life

Student aspiration, defined by Walker (2007, p. 190) as "motivation to learn and succeed, to have a better life, to hope" is a key concept in education as seen through a capability lens. Aspiration is an especially powerful yet vulnerable capability for many students at the college, whose hopes for a better life are

likely to collide with the intersectional barriers of gender and class. Walker (2018a, p. 128) asserts that such students "need to have their capacity to aspire nurtured, be able to imagine possible futures, and have the agency to move them future-forward." Aspiration is often individual, yet socially embedded and is bolstered by cultural and societal change (Appadurai, 2004).

For many students at the college, English is an important part of a societal change that is ushering in a different future in which the language and its rewards are no longer the domain of the elite (Vaish, 2005). When we talked about the Dalit Goddess of English, participants like Danica conveyed an affinity to the view of English as a source of aspiration for a better life for the disadvantaged.

> Yes, in past … poor people … are not allowed to talk in English…. But, at present English is common language for all of us… In these days we are seeing so many farmers who are not educated and they are saying that 'my children should not be like me, they need to be well-educated and they need to get a good job.' So… they're keeping their children in English-medium schools.

As we had ostensibly been speaking about 'other' people, I asked Danica to imagine what her own life would be like if she did not know English. "I should also be as a farmer… because at present, in our state also, English is very important in every way. So, without knowing English, we may not study or… we may not get a good job." The aspiration to make a better life for herself and others like her drives Danica's ambition to become an English teacher.

Like Danica, Gauri comes from a small village where life for many is difficult. Although English has historically had little relevance here, it appears now to offer hope to some in the village.

> As world is growing and all is full of opportunities and … even in villages people are trying to speak in English sir… They came to know the importance of English… so they are changing themselves. And now in my village, I'm not the only person who speak English. There are some

> other people who is speaking, they are changing their lives, sir…I believe, that mostly the people who are living in villages… like my parents… they think… their son or daughter should get better life and sir, like if they go abroad, they will have better life.

Going abroad for a better life is what drives Gauri's aspiration to get her MA and a job in tourism management. English proficiency is, of course, central to fulfilling her aspirations.

> I wouldn't be here if I don't know English, sir, because it enlightened me, sir, to get more education to chase my dreams… I came out of the village and I started… to choose my career and I choose to learn English... I faced many difficulties while learning English. And that's made me like… I don't want to imagine my life without English, sir.

Tabitha also cannot imagine her life without English as she contemplates her future after college. She tells me about her many aspirations that she says would be impossible without English.

> I have so many goals... being a voice actor or... since I'm also good at art I might want to be a person who promotes video ... made into my own art… I'm interested in like photography and videography, so I'd like to take some training in that.

Contemplating the image of the Goddess of English, Miriam is intrigued by its potential to inspire.

> I feel that it's really empowering… and really giving hope for, not only for [the Dalit] community, even then others. Those of us who read [English], also it gives hope. Some of us may not be interested in learning English, but I feel that it has so much power in it, so much hope in it… like strong call for us to come and make use of English language.

While perhaps not divinely inspired by the Goddess of English, Miriam, along with Danica, Gauri, Tabitha and the other participants appear to be inspired by

English itself. Indeed, the students' stories expose how their proficiency in English enables them to aspire to lives that others in their communities are unable to access. As Conradie and Robeyns (2013, p. 562) argue, "aspirations are to a significant extent influenced by our social surroundings, our upbringing, the cultural and social context in which we move." For these students, their proficiency in English has disrupted their cultural and social context.

Aspiration for a better future is often interwoven with one's autonomy, which I explore next.

5.3.5 Autonomy: 'My life, my decision'

In its most simple definition as "the capacity to be the source of one's actions" (Khader, 2009, p. 171), autonomy forms an important part of the ethos of the CA and is an essential capability in supporting agency and empowerment. In the context in higher education, Walker (2007, p. 189) defines autonomy as, "being able to have choices, having information on which to make choices, planning a life after school, reflection, independence, empowerment", notions which are salient to this study.

Chandra is confident that her dream to get an MBA and to have a career in business will be fulfilled. Her confidence has come from being able to exercise some control over her life trajectory, a privilege many women in her position do not have. It is a privilege she connects with English proficiency.

> If women know English they can be obviously empowered, because here women are always dominated by the men, and if… they know English, they can stand for themselves… in all the places. And if anything… wrong is happening, they can stand for themselves… If we are learning English, we can be confident on ourselves… If the women start learning English and they start speaking in English… they will obviously feel confident on themselves. So, if they feel confident, they will be obviously empowered.

Chandra extends her thoughts on women's ability to 'stand for themselves' to the widespread predicament of forced marriage, which many of her classmates must navigate.

> Here girls are getting married early, early because parents are forcing them to get married. Obviously if they will be confident on themselves and they know English, probably they can go to the [court]… and they can file a case against them. And I am, I'm very much empowered by this.

Like Chandra, Tabitha feels that English proficiency has placed her in a better position to make independent decisions, which she insists it can do for other women.

> They can defeat the person… who's trying to discourage them… They can be like, 'you don't have a right to order my life, my decision. I know what I am doing.' But if there is anything, if I feel like that is wrong, I can correct myself… I feel strong.

This sentiment resonates with Walker's (2007, p. 188) work with female HE students who "identified the importance of being able to solve their own problems, of deciding for themselves what is good or bad." Other students echoed Chandra's and Tabitha's conviction that proficiency in English empowers women by enabling them to understand their rights and options, and to have the confidence to exercise them, thereby bolstering their autonomy, agency and ultimately, their well-being.

For some women, English proficiency can help thwart a forced marriage, for others it can earn a modicum of respect in contexts where it is in short supply. Gayatri, who herself is navigating the vestiges of childhood marriage and motherhood, tells me about a neighbour who was confined to the home by her husband and her imperious in-laws, but used her English proficiency to refute their insolence.

> My neighbour, …, she [is] teaching phonics, English phonics [on YouTube]. Other countries' people also joining. I was really shocked…. She [didn't] know phonics, but… she took training… only two months and she is teaching classes daily, two hours more evening time. She... got two lakhs for three months[7]. It was very interesting. So [English] is helpful to gain life, business and all. It helps… women [who are] in home only… earning money… I think it is very important to know, to learn English. Why? Because not only professional life… we are getting money we get respect also… Her husband was bank manager. He got [a good] salary and I said… 'why you choose YouTube classes and all, it is difficult, why you choose this?' She said… 'my husband earning [well] but his parents was not respecting me… If I'm earning [a higher salary than him], they are respecting me…' So, if we are earning money… independently, financially, then all the people are looking around there, they are respecting us. So, it is very important.

Respect from within their families and communities is difficult to earn for many young women, including Ritika, whose parents' strict rules and partiality toward her brother have galvanised her to seek her own life trajectory outside of India.

> I want to be settled in Switzerland. That's my favourite place to have my daily life… Like from my childhood I… [wasn't allowed] to go nowhere… relatives house… they won't send me actually. They won't send girls to other homes… I don't know why they cared that much… they [said], 'she shouldn't go anywhere.' So I have to get the freedom… wherever I go, I can be myself. So, I want to show them in that way, being away from home, being away from India, I want to show them that I can do much better than my brother, wherever I live.

[7] Two lakhs equal 200,000 Indian Rupees, more than an annual salary for many school teachers (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2023).

For Ritika, Gayatri's neighbour and others facing gender and class barriers, English proficiency offers them an autonomy otherwise unattainable, the potential to aspire to a different life, to resist oppressive patriarchal structures and to earn respect previously denied by families and the wider community.

In the next part I examine the capability of voice, the third and final capability for promoting agency (Walker, 2007).

5.3.6 Voice: 'Able to talk freely'

Student voice is defined by Walker (2007, pp. 184, 190) "…as the capacity to debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically" and "not being silenced through pedagogy or power relations or harassment, or excluded from curriculum, being active in the acquisition of knowledge." Voice is identified as a core capability in language education (Crosbie, 2013, 2014) and represents the development of the student's identity and the potential to have an impact in the wider world (Barnett, 2007, p. 90). Capability scholars further recognise that the development of voice is mutually dependent on the capabilities for aspiration and autonomy, which together are critical for bolstering agency (Appadurai, 2004; Crosbie, 2014; Lamo, 2019). Indeed, many students shared stories in which proficiency in English made previously unattainable life aspirations and personal autonomy more conceivable. However, the connection between English and the capability of voice was more equivocal.

Layla and I were nearing the end of our interview when she began to reflect on our hour-long deliberation.

> I personally want to say that when I came here, before that, I was very nervous to talk to you, because it's the interview and like, I've never talked to someone in English this long, so I was a bit nervous. So, by learning this language, I guess that I'm a bit confident that I could speak, at least…. at least that I could answer your questions.

Given Layla's confident demeanour and spoken fluency I was surprised to hear about her apprehension ahead of our meeting, but happy about her final

reflection. “Actually, I enjoyed this interview, personally because… I have faced a lot of problems and a lot of advantages and disadvantages using this language. So… I love to speak about this.”

Other participants shared similar stories of simultaneously feeling nervous yet eager to contribute to my study. Samira admitted that she had considered dropping out of the interview. I am grateful she persisted.

> It's my great opportunity to… [be] part of your PhD research… In September I felt OK. It's my great [opportunity]… [But]… at night… I'm not getting sleep, so I thought. ‘OK, should I drop? Should I continue with him? I should help.’ I'm thinking like this till 2:00 o'clock… So then ‘no, I should not research.’ What Tom sir will think, what all the others will think?… I won't listen their words. Tom sir is there. Tom sir will help. Whether he understand, he will not understand, I will speak with him. So, I decided to… play my role in your PhD research.

Participating in the interview provided students an opportunity to voice their thoughts, giving some participants a heightened feeling of freedom. Ulani was one such student. “I'm scared because of so many freeness... Now I feel free to talk with you, but that freedom [was given] to me, sir, [by] you.” Gauri felt much the same. “I'm also not confident to speak, but I made myself to talk with you today sir, because I'm little bit nervous, but I'm now, I'm able to talk freely sir.”

Gauri and many of the participants speak of a dearth of opportunity at the college for the students to ‘talk freely’, to share opinions, to debate or to inquire, yet a deep desire by many to do so. Few of the participants had previously engaged in any sort of extended dialogue or discussion in English which had not been rehearsed or learned by rote. Indeed, many confessed that their first genuine opportunity to voice their thoughts at the college came during the non-credit classes delivered by my partner or in my workshops and interviews. “In our classes there is no, like communication. It's… like one side teaching and we… as students we only listen. (Deepthi).” “In class there is no interaction…

between teachers and the students… and… no interaction between the students also … There is no speaking about academics" (Gayatri). "We are just following what the ma'ams are telling" (Danica).

Sen likens "freedom with the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value."(Sen, 1992, p. 31). When such opportunity is absent, it hinders not only student voice, but it is an 'unfreedom' which undermines their agency (Sen, 1999). This unfreedom is driven by the college's proclivity for exam preparation, a culture of top-down banking pedagogy and the resulting persistence of treating English as a library language (Graddol, 2010). In Chapter 7 I explore how interactive learning and pedagogies of participation can be galvanised and student voice nurtured.

5.4 Discussion: Beyond the binary of (dis)empowerment

The question of empowerment and disempowerment through English is often presented as a binary code by much of the literature, which commonly depicts the English haves and have nots (Phillipson, 2017), those who fall above and below the English line (Jayadeva, 2018), the advantaged some and the disadvantaged many (Mohanty, 2017). Exploring this question with students who are neither part of the English-advantaged elite nor the excluded English have-nots uncovers a more complex picture. To further probe into this ambiguous space I draw on scholars who have conceptualised three ideological perspectives on empowerment which resonate with this study's findings: the neoliberal, the socially liberal and the transformative (Chacko, 2020; Esch, 2009; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p. 10).

I consider empowerment in the neoliberal sense to be based on free market logic and promoting individualistic cultures of personal responsibility, entrepreneurship and heightened competition (Block et al., 2012; Carroll, 2022). Much of the 'English for empowerment' discourse at the college falls firmly within this description. Indeed, the students' notion that English is necessary for 'survival' in a competitive job market and a key to socioeconomic mobility follows this logic. Likewise, the migrations planned by some of the participants

may similarly be positioned as projects which aspire to entry into the world of global Indians and cosmopolitan elites, both identities underpinned by a socioeconomic transnational mobility governed by neoliberal logic (Dhuru & Thapliyal, 2021). While English can make these spaces available to the fortunate among the college's students, their ability to thrive may be limited as they possess neither the Hindu upper caste standing nor the social and cultural capital of the transnational cosmopolitan (Ashutosh, 2019). Indeed, lower caste Hindu and non-Hindu members of the Indian diaspora in the USA commonly face workplace caste discrimination and alienation as they do not fit into the dominant upper-caste Hindu culture (S. Kumar, 2023). In a similar vein, Formosinho et al. (2019, p. 181) caution that that "the supposed liberation of global citizens goes hand in hand with the (virtually oppressive) structuration of exportable working force." Consequently, empowerment as seen through the neoliberal lens may result in expanded agency without any significant change in power disparities (Drydyk, 2013).

For many of the study's participants, despite the pressures of the neoliberal age, English also represents a socially liberal empowerment, one in which they expect to be part of the decision-making processes which impact their lives (Kraft & Flubacher, 2020). The survival that many spoke about was sometimes articulated as a flight from financial precarity but at other times an escape from oppressive structures in the home, in the community and in wider society (Esch, 2009). So, while the potential of financial independence was deemed important, the respect gained by this appears to be valued as much as the income. Beyond earning a livelihood, the students expressed a deep desire to decide who, when and indeed whether to marry, which books to read, where and what to study, what work to take up and how to live their lives (Crocker, 2008). The capabilities of aspiration and autonomy thus capture much of the empowerment that students crave through English, the ability to chart their own futures, often through more instrumental modalities like work and study opportunities. In this way English for many is not just a library and work language (Graddol, 2010; Vaish, 2005), but one that can empower by building emancipatory capabilities. However, attempting to exercise autonomy and fulfil

aspirations may, for many students, clash with the patriarchal social structures and other societal barriers, for which English may be an insufficient tool to overcome (Highet, 2022; Highet & Del Percio, 2021b).

Hence it is useful to explore a third perspective on empowerment through English, which is its potential to be transformative. This means that in addition to changing their own conditions, students are empowered to challenge oppressive structures and work towards a more socially just world (Crocker, 2008; Drèze & Sen, 2002; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020). We see this through participants who say they use their English to access diverse worldviews, pedagogies and literatures. Some talked about joining global discussions on social issues, especially gender justice, disseminating their knowledge and galvanising change in the attitudes and the politics of their communities. Appropriating English in this way is an act of defiance (hooks, 1994), especially for young women who were deemed 'unsuitable' to speak English and who are so removed from the urban, cosmopolitan, corporate, masculine, Hindu nationalist elite who have for long held sovereignty over English and all the power that comes with it. The capabilities of critical thinking and voice are especially crucial for such transformative empowerment to become a possibility (Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2007), yet students feel that both are in short supply at the college. Indeed, empowerment through English cannot live up to its transformative potential amid an exam driven, rote learning pedagogical ethos (Heslop, 2014) which denies students the opportunity for critical engagement and the confidence to unmute their voices.

Thus, any promise of empowerment through English proficiency, transformative or otherwise, is not unequivocal, especially in the neoliberal age. Students from non-metropolitan areas may struggle to compete with graduates from more elite institutions, who speak a more prestigious variety of English (Highet, 2023). More broadly, the competitive advantage that English brings erodes over time as more students become proficient (Graddol, 2010). The women whose degrees and English proficiency have liberated them from the family patriarchy could well be subjected to flagrant gender discrimination in the workplace (Goel, 2018). Oppressive institutional hierarchies may replicate those of the

family and community, seemingly eroding newly gained autonomy. The income and respect earned with English in 'gig economy' initiatives like producing YouTube videos may be precarious and lack durability (Nair, 2022). Finally, the viability of the immigration projects on which so many students pin their hopes is far from certain. These sobering prospects point to the ever-present danger of people exceedingly looking to English as a panacea for socioeconomic exclusion (Phillipson, 2010).

Yet, for the students at the college, there appear to be just enough stories of graduates with successful jobs, friends on international scholarships and acquaintances who have 'made it' abroad, which feed their aspirations and their vision of English as the indispensable language in which they too hope to voice their own stories of survival, emancipation and empowerment.

5.5 Chapter summary

In this first of three findings chapters, I have explored how English has potential to be both empowering and disempowering to the students at the college. The participants identified English as a necessary tool for survival in an increasingly competitive world, a view entangled with a human capital view of education. Beyond this instrumental perspective, the participants value English for its potential to access globalised spaces in which they perceive a greater freedom to pursue their cultural, religious, educational, professional and literary interests. They also see English as essential to their aspirations for a better life, their quest for the autonomy to shape their own futures and their desire to voice their ideas freely. However, these notions are frequently at odds with patriarchal structures, other social hierarchies and the change-resistant educational ethos which they must navigate.

Finally, I discussed this chapter's findings through three distinct lenses of empowerment: the neoliberal, the socially liberal and the transformative (Chacko, 2020; Esch, 2009; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p. 10). Firstly, much of the empowerment envisioned by the participants falls firmly within a neoliberal logic, in which English is instrumentalised to compete in workplaces and

cosmopolitan spaces, but ones where other unanticipated oppressive structures lie furtively in wait. Similarly, oppressive structures can imperil socially liberal notions of empowerment, as the aspiration and autonomy which English has potential to bring to young women are mediated by entrenched patriarchal sensibilities. Finally, a transformative empowerment means entering an emancipatory space in which young women appropriate English to engage critically with the social world and to challenge injustice, while galvanising change in their own communities. However, such transformative empowerment is undermined by an uncritical and hierarchical pedagogical ethos.

Chapter 6: Confronting structural constraints – Prestige, fear and the patriarchal gaze

6.1 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored how English interacts with key agency-building capabilities and student (dis)empowerment. In this chapter I assess the structural constraints which impede students from developing these capabilities and bolstering their agency through English. Structural constraints refer to institutional practices, social norms, social influences and other societal factors which restrict the development of people's capabilities and undermine their agency (Robeyns, 2017). Such constraints also contribute to the negative conversion factors which obstruct individuals from turning available resources into valued functionings (see Figure 3.1). Drydyk (2021) likens structural constraints to second-order unfreedoms (Sen, 1999), and to systemic oppression and institutional injustice. Examining second-order unfreedoms enables us to look beyond immediate English language skills, which are attainable through course work and self-study to all students at the college as a first-order freedom. Second-order unfreedoms are the social constraints that sustain oppressive structures which undermine the agency of students and their ability to expand their capabilities through English.

Through the iterative, reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) previously outlined (see Table 4.1), I explore the participants' stories to address the second research question, focusing on the most significant structural constraints which undermine their empowerment through English. In doing so I have identified three second-order oppressive unfreedoms (Drydyk, 2021) which stood out in the data set in terms of their importance to the overriding research question on (dis)empowerment, the frequency of their mentions and the emphatic manner in how they were articulated. The first structural constraint I explore is the prestige of English in India and the implications of its elite status for non-metropolitan students; the second is the fear and anxiety that students experience when asked to speak English; the third is the persistence of patriarchal social norms which severely

undermine the agency of aspirational young women. In the discussion section I probe how these structural constraints interact with oppression, conflicting agency and capability deprivation.

6.2 A language of prestige

Since the time of the British empire English in India has been a symbol of wealth and status, "a gateway to social and economic prestige" (Pennycook, 1998, p. 95). In this section I assess how the study's participants experience this elevated status in its contemporary iteration, how local languages are perceived in India's linguistic hierarchy and how social class and gender intersect with English to create a structural constraint which disempowers many students.

6.2.1 A matter of respect

In CA scholarship respect signifies "self-confidence, self-esteem… being treated with dignity and not being diminished and devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion, or race" (Walker, 2007, p. 190). The idea that English proficiency boosts a speaker's self-confidence and helps to neutralise deeply rooted biases was articulated by every participant. Danica was unambiguous when she answered my question about the popularity of EMI in local communities. "Because in here, sir, speaking in English is a matter of respect. If we speak in English, then the people will see [us] in the high position." Ritika's sentiments were much the same. "English is like everything sir. It gives pride… People, they give the respect."

Saanvi astutely speculates that the prestige of English often usurps its communicative worth.

> Actually, English may not make much difference, but if we speak English… we have some kind of confidence and will be empowered internally, unknowingly… We know something … that's international… So, we feel inside that yeah, we also have something, that we are not nothing... We also can do anything. We also have something special.

That English in India is a matter of self-esteem and respect is built on specific perceptions about the language and the power that it holds. The participants repeatedly used adjectives like ‘professional’, ‘intelligent’, ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘highly educated’ to describe how English speakers are perceived. They made unequivocal proclamations about what English means in their own lives. “English makes a person a better person and a strong person” (Nithya); “It helps to show myself in a better way” (Saanvi); “It makes your life happier” (Analya); “By knowing English we may get a good behaviour” (Danica).

While some of these pronouncements may seem excessively lavish, the underlying perceptions which support them become tangible as they produce and reproduce a hierarchy in which English proficiency becomes a marker not only of one’s social and economic status, but of one’s personal qualities. Deepthi provides an example of how this plays out in her peer group.

> English… is the main important thing in my life... Even my friends who are not studying English literature, they consider me as like a knowledgeable girl. ‘She's reading English... It's nice.’ And like, I'm considered [to be an] intelligent girl.

Likening strong English to respect, intellect and general well-being risks inferring the opposite for those who struggle with English. Those with lower proficiency may be perceived as lacking knowledge, intelligence and professionalism, and to be less happy and less well-behaved. Such perceptions hold some currency among students. When asked to imagine their lives without English, the participants’ responses went beyond missed opportunities and forfeited aspirations. Without English, Ritika feared she “wouldn’t really know the world.” Deepthi figured she “would be only a frog in the well thinking it is the world.” Nithya worried that she would not “be a complete person” and nothing would make her “special from others.” Saanvi thought she would be “a dumb girl” and Chandra fretted that her “image [would] be spoiled.”

Emphatic comments like these align with previous studies which suggest English fluency is an important component of the cultural capital required for a middle-class identity, which is increasingly linked to the demands of the globalised capitalist economy (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b; Jayadeva, 2018). In this scenario failing to ascend above Jayadeva's (2018) 'English line' risks not only socioeconomic immobility but also being perceived to have personal shortcomings, thus engendering low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. Consequently, the growing prestige and respect that come with English can become a significant structural constraint which hinders the development of emancipatory capabilities like voice, aspiration and autonomy, thereby undermining students' agency.

6.2.2 (De)valuing India's languages

The perception of English as a matter of respect is necessarily linked to the positioning of other languages in India. Hindi is already the main lingua franca in the north and a rival to English elsewhere, but carries neither the prestige nor the respect that English does (Highet & Del Percio, 2021a). Devika, who herself is proficient in Hindi, agrees. "You know Hindi then fine, but in English… then you must be very good in your studies… There is a respectable thing in English." Analya's observation is more disquieting. "Those who speak in native language or anything they generally consider that he doesn't know anything. He doesn't know how to express his emotions or his feelings in a professional language." Indeed the deification of English and the marginalisation of local languages has a long history among the educated and professional elite in postcolonial India (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997). However, the fact that such discourse now has currency among the non-elite challenges Vaish's (2005) assertion that Indian languages are invulnerable to English hegemony.

Given that the language is held in such high esteem, it is unsurprising that the participants universally perceived English-medium education as more desirable than local language medium, despite the shortcomings they reported in their own experience of EMI. Indeed, studying in local languages carries a

considerable stigma, as reflected on by several students, including Tabitha. "If I'd grown up and gone to Telugu medium school, I think it's gonna be pretty embarrassing." Danica tells me about her classmates who are floundering. "They are coming here from Telugu-medium, so they are not understanding what they are teaching here. And they are struggling a lot." Miriam says much the same. "They are coming from, like, lower middle-class family, so they have not got the opportunity or because of the financial reasons or whatever. So, they have studied in their own mother tongue."

Having attended EMI schools, regardless of quality, is clearly a mark of status which divides students into an in-group and an out-group early in their academic lives. Indeed as Ramanathan (2015, p. 205) points out, "there are inequalities around English usage, with the language proficiency of the vernacular-medium student being typically regarded as 'insufficient' and 'lacking.'" These inequalities are exacerbated by the college's much flaunted English only policy that morphs into a campus-wide culture in which using other languages is an illicit act, regardless of how much it happens. Rather than allowing the diversity of student translingualism to thrive, the imposition of English aggravates the English and non-English binary. Phyak (2021, p. 226) convincingly argues that such EMI and English-only policies encompass a (neo)colonial monolingual education ideology which aims "to reproduce sociopolitical, economic, and cultural capitals, wrought by the neoliberal market." Indeed, it is the burgeoning neoliberal logic at the college and others like it which simultaneously drives the competition for internships and jobs, enacts English only rules and diminishes other languages into defiant sideshows.

6.2.3 Showing off or just practicing?

The ethos which privileges English at the college does not go unchallenged. Danica enjoys practicing her English with friends but laments that "if we are talking in English with somebody else, the other students who are seeing us, they'll think that … we are showing off." Deepthi was among several other students who also mentioned being accused of 'showing off.'

> If I speak in English, they're like, 'oh, you only know English.' They think it's a posh kind of thing to speak in English. 'You can speak in Telugu. Then why are you not speaking in Telugu? For study purpose you use English, not for speaking.' They'll comment like that.

Several students, including Nithya, felt especially discouraged by the enduring perception of English as the "Britisher's language" which is "not for us", despite its official status. However, it is reasonable to expect that using English when a common local language is available may be considered exclusionary and disruptive to social cohesion, especially in postcolonial contexts (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019).

These perceptions expose a tension in which English is considered a posh foreign language only for study and work, yet wildly popular as a lingua franca and a marker of success and respect. The tension is the result of the "many different discourses about English in India that emerge from different subject positions" (Proctor, 2014, p. 94). This tension also challenges the simplified but commonly articulated binary code that English in India is for economic mobility and local languages are for family, friends and cultural participation (Vaish, 2005). Samira recalls a story close to her heart of a trip to a local tourist site in which these tensions came to light.

> When we are traveling on bike… [my brother] used to talk with me in English, … the bike journey in English (laughing). That's the wonderful moments I had with my brother. What is interesting, all others [at the destination] will think we are foreigners, we came from foreign here... 'They should treat us…[like] we are Americans, we are foreigners, so you should speak to me in English', he will say. Then I will say, 'no, by seeing our faces they will understand we are Andhra.'

Samira's story uncovers a linguistically and racially driven social hierarchy and questions about postcolonial ownership of English. As such Samira and her brother entered a space which compelled them "to negotiate their own status as English speakers within larger, stratified imagined communities layered upon

the logics of coloniality, race, and class" (Highet, 2023, p. 3). It was a space in which the identities of language, social class and race intersected and collided, leaving the speakers unsure of where they stood in the hierarchy. For Samira and her brother, English on its own was an inadequate asset with which to impress their interlocutors and their choice to go with Telugu was perhaps to avoid being seen to "show off" by distinguishing themselves from the local population with English (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019). Had they arrived in an SUV instead of a motorbike and worn Western rather than Indian clothes, as elite English-speaking Indians might have done, they may have been more confident and more empowered to assert their status as English speakers. Samira here occupies a space on the edge of the English line, where empowerment through English filters through other markers of social status (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). This represents a space between the English haves and the have nots which many of the students at the college occupy and which tests their ability to exercise their agency through the language. However, by choosing Telugu over English, they may have exercised their agency to instead demonstrate their solidarity with the local community, rather than try to impress them (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019). It is unsurprising that navigating such a complex linguistic ecosystem can induce fear and anxiety, another significant structural constraint which I turn to in the next section.

6.3 A language of fear

The position of English as the language of prestige underwrites the fear and anxiety that many students feel when asked to speak it. Drawing on the work of Nussbaum (2000a) and other capability scholars, Walker' (2007, p. 188) includes emotional integrity as a key educational capability, focusing chiefly on "not being subject to fear, which diminishes learning." Fear and anxiety related to using English was repeatedly mentioned by all of the participants as a crucial barrier which stifles student participation and learning. This barrier is especially salient among students who face gender and social class barriers (Verma, 2014).

6.3.1 Fear of what?

Pavlenko's (2005, p. 33) research suggests that student anxiety with language learning "stems from perceived threats to the student's sense of security or self-esteem, and from fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, and apprehensions about communicating in a language in which one may appear incompetent or ridiculous." Arya experienced many of these fears early on in her schooling.

> [In school] I never used to stand, I never used to speak to anybody, because… we have to speak in English and I am not good at it. I had fear and… I never spoke… That's how people feel who are scared... of being judged by other people… They feel inferior, totally inferior. They won't come out. They will be sitting at the back of the classroom.

Like Arya, most of the participants said that the fear to speak English is driven by feelings of inferiority, which, along with the potential for mockery and bullying, contribute to students' low confidence. Ritika observed this in her classes at the college. "It's all about the shyness they have…. Some people don't have the idea on rules of grammar… If we… tell one word wrongly … some people in the surround, they laugh."

Miriam has likewise observed classroom spaces in which her less confident classmates experience fear and mockery.

> And to learn in English for them, it's difficult and they are frightened also because they may make mistakes. 'What others will think about me?... I may be a laughingstock for them. I worry to make fool of myself in front of others.' So, I feel that these are the major problems they feel.

Like Ritika and Miriam, most of the other participants pointed to the fear of making mistakes as the key driver of anxiety. According to Chandra, "it is very common actually, people will start judging you on your grammatical mistakes." Danica talked about the shame students can feel. "When we are talking in English… we make some mistakes and if they correct it, it will be good, but if they are pointing it will be… some… disgrace."

Critical scholars suggest that the ‘disgrace’ connected to making mistakes is the result of a neocolonial power imbalance which has privileged and standardised the varieties of English used by the Anglophone and Indian elite (Highet, 2023). This has produced the near universal belief in the ‘correctness’ of those privileged grammars, lexicons and phonologies, and the marginalisation of those who deviate from the standard or ‘correct’ forms (Canagarajah, 2022; Milroy, 2001). For many students, silence is preferable to the risk of public shame, which CA scholars assess to be a significant inhibitor of agency (De Herdt, 2008).

Rather than perceptions of poor English, some students’ anxiety, shame and silence may be triggered by other factors. In this regard Gauri spoke about some of her classmates. “They can speak, but they're afraid... Some… they know English, sir, but they won't utilise the opportunities which is providing by college.” Whether students fear making mistakes or being seen as ‘posh’, Gauri’s observation uncovers a paradox which entangles anxiety, shame and the high status of English, forming a structural constraint which precludes many students from converting the language learning resources provided by the college into valued capabilities and functionings.

6.3.2 3.2 Resilience or ‘grit’?

Some of the participants in this study feel like they have developed a resilience to the fear that still haunts their silent classmates. Nithya is a case in point.

> Like from past five, six years I have a fear, like if I talk in English, what others will think, if they'll make fun of me or I'll go to depression... Then I started motivating myself. ‘No, no, you can't be like this. You have to come up from that fear.’ And I need to find a new person in me. Like there is a difference between the old [Nithya] and the new [Nithya].

Nithya believes that her classmates can follow suit and overcome their fears by developing the same resilience that has enabled her success. Saanvi agrees. “English is for everyone… anybody can learn it. It's not a big task. If you work hard, you can get it.” Her comment implies that English has now been

extracted from the clutches of the elite and is more accessible to more students than in the past. Miriam ponders what she perceives to be a lack of resilience among some of the students in her class.

> They don't have their self-confidence. OK… after making mistake only I learn. That much confidence they do not have. They only think, 'Poor me, what I will do? I do not know English. They laugh at me'… [But] they have never made an attempt to come out of their own comfort zone... So, I feel … this is the major thing which is hindering them back, not to speak in English, or not to come forward.

A link between low confidence, poor English and students' lack of effort was often articulated by the participants. Indeed, while self-motivation, hard work and leaving their comfort zone have helped Nithya, Saanvi and Miriam develop their resilience and reach their language goals, they have also had specific support in doing so. Nithya spoke about her mother's influence. "My mother gave me this confidence…[she] told me… 'Don't think about others, think about you.'" Saanvi has a strong support network starting with her father, who is a school principal, fluent in English. For Miriam, being in the church congregation has given her access to a supportive multilingual, English-medium community. Such support forms a crucial conversion factor which strengthens resilience and helps combat fear and low confidence, while enabling these students to develop their capabilities with English. Others who lack such support may be less resilient, more likely to succumb to their fears and thereby stripped of their agency to thrive with English.

The popular perception that students are 'unsuccessful' because they lack the motivation, the work ethic or the 'grit' to overcome obstacles is amplified by a growing neoliberal narrative which places responsibility for success and failure squarely on individuals, with little focus on social structures or other extrinsic factors (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Akin to Nithya's, Saanvi's and Miriam's experience, CA scholars have identified conversion factors related to family and community support, as well as access to learning resources, as critical for developing student resilience (Mackenzie, 2022; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). It is

therefore unsurprising that the most proficient and confident participants were usually the ones whose resilience to the fear of English operated in tandem with these positive conversion factors, enabling them to convert their educational opportunities into valued capabilities and functionings.

The extent to which the students at the college develop key capabilities is deeply entangled with their experience of gender injustice, which I turn to in the next section.

6.4 Confronting the patriarchy

As we have seen, a supportive family or community is a crucial conversion factor to enable students' capability development with English. Conversely, as I discuss in this section, patriarchal social norms remain deeply embedded in the family and community (Nussbaum, 2000b) and form a significant structural constraint which severely undermines the development of young women's agency-building capabilities. I argue that this constraint constitutes what Nussbaum calls a "corrosive disadvantage,… a deprivation that has particularly large effects in other areas of life" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 44). Indeed, the patriarchy underpins a persistently corrosive social structure which every aspiring woman must confront.

6.4.1 Stories of trauma

There is great disparity in how English is navigated by families in which patriarchal structures predominate. Arya and Ritika share stories about their distressing experiences of the pressure they and their siblings faced to learn English as children.

> [My father] used to scold us a lot. 'You have to learn English, you have to learn English'. And since we had that fear like, 'OK [if we] will not do [it], he will beat us,' or something like that. So again, because of that fear, we just completed that task (Arya).

> My guardian was my grandfather at home. So, he is a military man, he knows English so well… Every day [he gave us] 10 words. We have to learn and we have to write [them] without seeing… If we didn't write that every day, we couldn't get any food then at home... So, he used to be the guide, very strict fellow (Ritika).

Being bullied into learning English stands in paradox to the many girls who are forcibly forbidden from doing so. Samira's story is an especially painful example of a family's conflict over a daughter's English schooling.

> Small town, sir… my father's native place. They want boy to born their family…. And they leaved me [at] my grandmother's house... So, I started growing here and my grandmother [enrolled] me in English-medium school... She wanted to [put] me in a good position from my childhood… So, I am studying very [well]... One day my father came and he took to me [away] and suddenly he [enrolled] me in Telugu-medium school. I'm not understand. I felt very badly. I have cried for one week... I'm failing in every… exam... I have said to my mother. 'Ma, I can't survive here. I will go to my grandmother… and I will study there.' Then she said 'No, your father will not allow to go your grandmother's house because you are becoming very naughty there.' I have studied there two years or maybe three years. After that my father [committed] suicide… Again, I joined in English-medium so that was so happy. After three years without learning, English is so difficult, sir. English is not easy to me. I have felt so bad... Three years I have studied in Telugu-medium. After three years [my] English is terrible, but I tried my best... One teacher I will never forget. Her name is Manisha, who helped me to learn English and to grow in English… After her, my brother and my brother-in-law both are supporting me to get in English. They always support me.

Emboldened by her own journey and the support of her allies, Samira envisions a world of gender equality along with her own plans for postgraduate studies.

> [If] every woman is… able to convince their family, they'll convince society. We can definitely convince this society to stop their [gender bias]… It starts in the family too. My mother will… support, but financial conditions are stopping her to help me.

While Samira's main barrier is now financial, many of her classmates have yet to convince their families, let alone society, to reject persistent patriarchal mores.

6.4.2 'My father's choice'

Persuading parents about the value of continuing to postgraduate studies and a career of their choosing is a tall order for many of the graduating students at the college. Layla tells me that English figures heavily in the decisions parents make on behalf of their daughters. "It helps to convince her parents for further studies or job or anything like that. So English is very important."

Arya has observed the tension many of her classmates are facing between pursuing life aspirations and fulfilling family obligations.

> Because now we are in a phase where we'll complete our degree, and many of the girls will… be forced to marry someone who they don't want to marry or they want to pursue something in life, but they are forced to do that. I don't think so English… will help at all, because it's their family and… especially I have seen this in Andhra Pradesh.

Saanvi has observed much the same but, like Layla, and most of the other participants, believes English could help tip the scales.

> If the girls learn English maybe they have chance to [attend] higher studies. Otherwise, the parents, they don't encourage ... Even though the girls who are studying in my class, my friends and all, even they have those parents, [who] just want her to complete graduation and then… go for marriage. That's it. They just want a qualification, just to print on their marriage card.

Saanvi's assertion that a young woman's higher education is often treated by her family as a vehicle to better marriage prospects is quietly echoed at the college and confirmed by other studies carried out in India (Highet, 2022; Sandhu, 2018). Indeed, nearly all of the participants, and several teachers I spoke to informally, told me about the obligation faced by many graduating students to marry, refrain from working or to pursue jobs deemed appropriate by their parents.

After graduating from the college, Ulani wants to train up for a career in IT but is facing a challenge from her father.

> My friends are doing jobs… I want to do job. Sir, after degree, I want to [earn] income. Why I should a girl [not work]? But my father telling 'you don't do anything, [you will marry]… you're naughty girl' he say. [I] want to prove myself and sir now I want to take decision… I want… to go IT sector, but my father [doesn't want that].

Ulani says her father would let her work but in a career of his choosing. "I… took BA literature because… my father forced [me]. [He says] 'teaching is the better option for you girl, because… after five years [you] will… get married.'" Empirical studies suggest that fathers in India take on an especially prominent decision making role for their daughters when choosing studies and livelihoods, and these are typically gender-mediated (Gautam, 2015, p. 31). Like Ulani, Pushpa is another participant whose father has selected teaching as an appropriate profession for his daughter. I asked her about her plans for postgraduate studies.

> Tom: Which subject do you want to study?
>
> Pushpa: My father choice. My brother tell.
>
> Tom: Your father's choice. OK. And what do you think he will choose for you?
>
> Pushpa: English.

Tom: English… If it was your choice, what choice would you make?

Pushpa: English too.

Tom: English also. So you agree with the choice… (Pushpa hesitatingly nods)

Unlike Ulani, Pushpa does not openly defy her father, though I did not interpret much confidence in her tentative nod of agreement with his choice. As a student with limited spoken fluency, it is not entirely clear whether Pushpa would independently choose English teaching as her preferred study and career path. From a capability perspective Pushpa's consent to study English and become a teacher may well be an example of an adaptive preference. This takes place when somebody who is deprived or oppressed curtails her aspirations as a result of her circumstance, and potentially diminishes her well-being (Robeyns, 2017). Pushpa is not alone in subconsciously adapting her preferences due to challenging family circumstances. Tabitha told me about some of her classmates and their lost aspirations.

> I think they don't have that confidence in themselves. They're… literally like, "I can't do this." They can do it, but they're scared to move further towards their dream world because their parents are like, like they scold them, they hate them so much that it breaks their heart, making them hopeless.

If students are rendered hopeless due to family discord and as a result adapt their aspirations, "they will only have modest goals, ambitions, and hopes, even if there are much more valuable options open to them" (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013, p. 566). The deprivation of the capability to aspire demonstrates the corrosive disadvantage that patriarchal structures inflict on so many young women. In the next section I examine the patriarchal norms through the lens of community and society.

6.4.3 The patriarchal gaze and the family name

A daughter's obligation to conform to her father's wishes is not just the product of family power dynamics, but also fulfils a wider set of hegemonic parochial social norms. Nakassis (2016, p. 255) refers to this gendered code as the "patriarchal gaze of society" which stubbornly prevails in many neighbourhoods and communities.

Determined to stick to her plans to enter the IT field, Ulani seeks the support of more amenable family members to convince her father to allow her to pursue her dream.

> My uncles and my… mom 's brothers... They will also telling. 'Like hey, you are woman. Why… you should have this much courage?… You don't show this courage to anybody because… the society is not good. You [are] rowdy.... That's why you will [face] many problems... Society [wants you] to keep quiet, then you will achieve more.' But I don't want sir.

Assessing why even her more supportive family members are reluctant to advocate on her behalf, Ulani recalls their reasoning. "'We have good name, why you spoil that name?' They will so much discourage sir." The community's patriarchal gaze pressures families to protect their 'good name' and constrains the voices of daughters like Ulani.

Layla tells me how she will have to continue to navigate the patriarchal gaze as she pursues her studies abroad and a career an aerospace.

> Actually, in India you have to follow your parents, whatever it happens… If you don't follow your parents, you're not a good child. So generally girls, especially girls, you know, get married only because of sake of their parents, so that their parents should not get a bad name.

With sufficient English proficiency and academic success, Layla will likely be able to exercise her agency and delay marriage to pursue her further studies and prestigious career. "For women it becomes… the foremost thing to learn English. If she doesn't know, she can be rejected."

Thus, English serves a gatekeeping role for women to avoid unwanted marriage while maintaining the family's 'good name'. Deepthi reflects on this with her own community in mind.

> And even our parents and their neighbours, they tell… 'no need for her to go for further studies, because she is not proficient in English.' So … they suggest… get her married, because she might not get a job if she is not proficient in English… And one of my friends got married after her twelve plus. Like she… failed an exam and she [was] forced to get married.

In the scenarios that Layla and Deepthi paint, the family's good name can be maintained either by the daughter succeeding with English in a lucrative and prestigious job or by getting married. In this way the patriarchal gaze leaves many women who 'fail' in English in precarious circumstances.

While an English education may be emancipatory for some women, for others, the patriarchal gaze prevails regardless of academic success. Gauri tells me about her community.

> Sir, if she speak good English also the gender bias is same... In the family if girl is getting more marks than boy, they prefer boy to get more education, sir. I want this thing to change in India, sir… We have three daughters, and my parents… send us far away from the home and we are studying… Everyone [in the village says] 'they're girls, only, now why you are making them to study?'... But this thing they have to change in the society sir. So then girl get whatever she wants. There are so many girls who is dreaming for better life in future sir.

Gauri's powerful call for societal change to achieve the girls' dreams of a better future resonates with Samira's optimistic belief in the power of persuasion.

But persuading society to put an end to gender bias will require changing the minds not just of family and the immediate community. Pondering her future in India's space programme, Layla worries that further obstacles lie ahead.

> Personally I have seen that in [the Ministry of] Defence, you get a job but if you're married you are not supposed to continue that job. So that becomes a drawback for her. So, if she gets married, she is not allowed to do the job afterwards.

Despite overcoming the obstacles of family and community, studies suggest that women like Layla are likely to face callous gender bias in the workplace (Goel, 2018). Thus we see a cycle of "corrosive disadvantage" depriving women in multiple aspects of their lives (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 44).

Confronting the patriarchal gaze and the corrosive disadvantage it brings require allies in families and communities. These allies and the sense that they can use English to exercise their agency gives women like Ulani, Gauri and Samira the confidence to take up the fight. Less confident students like Pushpa, lacking the support networks and English proficiency, are less likely to confront the patriarchal gaze. We thereby see how family and community dynamics, interacting with English and academic potential, operate as conversion factors which can support or constrain the development of capabilities like autonomy, aspiration and voice, which in turn can further bolster or undermine students' agency.

6.5 Discussion: Oppression, agency and capabilities

The three structural constraints explored in this chapter are the result of acute power imbalances which undermine the agency of many students to build capabilities with English. For policymakers and educators to mitigate these constraints, a closer examination of how power disparities can lead to student disadvantage is essential. To this end I draw on Drydyk's (2021) work on the interaction between oppression, agency and capabilities, which builds on Sen's (1985, p. 203) conception of "unfreedom." This scholarship suggests that cultures of oppression are often driven by the agency exercised by privileged groups consolidating their social advantage in the face of a threat to their dominance and increased competition for opportunities and resources (Drydyk, 2021, p. 528). In the context of this study, such a lens of inquiry supports a

better synchronic understanding of cooperation patterns among groups interested in maintaining linguistic and gender hierarchies, as well as a diachronic assessment of the interaction between the privileged groups and those on the margins seeking to disrupt the hierarchies. Importantly, the oppression described in this model is frequently structural and not necessarily deliberate, hostile or hateful, thus drawing parallels to critical race theory (Duncan, 2002).

Applying Drydyk's (2021) work to perceptions about the prestige of English, and that those who speak it 'well' are intelligent, professional and well-behaved, while those who do not are 'incomplete,' exposes a discourse that serves the interests of those who stand to benefit from their proficiency. Scholars suggest that such discourse is reinforced by the heightened competition to attain middle-class status, for which English is seen as essential in India's neoliberal economic trajectory (Highet & Del Percio, 2021a; Jayadeva, 2018; Sandhu, 2018). At the college, the competition for jobs, internships, scholarships and postgraduate placements is fierce and 'good' English is a key success factor. This perpetuates a divide between those whose English appears to measure up and those whose is deemed to fall short. In addition, the culture of mocking less confident students frightens them into silence and denies them their voice. Consequently, the collective agency exercised by those who perpetuate the high status of English amid a culture of fear subverts the agency of less confident students, who feel 'unfree' to use English and are restricted from developing their capabilities. In this context, the pushback against students who appear to be 'showing off' their English is unsurprising.

At an institutional level there is also interest in maintaining the prestige of English and the privileging of elite English grammars and varieties. From respected global institutions to local publishers and tuition schools, maintaining the high status of English and people's desire to attain the accepted elite standard supports a lucrative trade in exams, courses, textbooks and learning resources (Pennycook, 2017). For the lecturers and other professionals who gain positions of advantage due to their command of accepted grammars and phonological forms, it serves their interests to maintain elite ownership of

English and keep at bay those whose English does not quite match. This can be understood to be perpetuating "a dynamic Foucauldian process in which the English educated reserved and exercised the right of actively deciding the agenda and the outcome of English education" (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2019, p. 350). Indeed, metropolitan Anglophones would see their linguistic advantage dwindle if their elite English variety no longer held such sway.

It is also instructive to note the lack of success of duplicitous top-down attempts to disrupt the elite status of English in the region. India's Hindu nationalists' public posturing against English has gained little academic or popular traction, an unsurprising outcome given that the most vocal officials privately maintain their own Anglophone status and associated privileges (Press Trust of India, 2022). In a similar vein, a Sri Lankan presidential initiative in the early 2010s urged educators to 'speak English our way' and to teach the language without its colonial trappings, despite the ruling family's well-known Anglo-American entanglements. The scheme was rejected by the country's Anglophone academic elite for the threat it posed to their authority, and by minority groups for excluding a plurality of the island's English varieties (Meyler, 2015). In both cases we see language at the centre of a power struggle in which competing actors attempt to exercise their agency to maintain their positions of power, at the expense of the agency of others who are denied the chance to genuinely speak English their way. We also see that singular top-down edicts to decolonise language spaces need to be treated with caution and pluralistic bottom-up movements to be fostered, as I discuss in the next chapter.

Finally the patriarchal structures which impose severe barriers on the agency of young women can also be assessed through Drydyk's (2021) oppression and agency lens. While some of the participants were violently forced by family patriarchs to learn English, others were prohibited from doing so and many expect to be told how they will use their English, perhaps to marry up in the social hierarchy or to take up a job of their father's choosing. Should they attempt to exercise their agency and choose their own path, they may be 'scolded' for being 'naughty' and 'rowdy', and for spoiling the family's 'good name'. Perpetuating such discourse upholds the agency of fathers to maintain

the social order in their families and communities, which they control and benefit from, and see as potentially threatened by their aspirational daughters (Flood et al., 2021). The fact that women who have confronted blatant misogynistic practices at home must also do so in workplaces (Goel, 2018) is indicative of gender injustice as a corrosive disadvantage (Nussbaum, 2011). Drydyk (2021, p. 546) classifies such systemic oppression as 'subjection', as the scope of choices a woman is entitled to make come from "elsewhere in society." However, the fact that so many of the young women who participated in my research are willing to, at least privately, speak out against their subjection, and some to confront it directly, points to a growing tension of slowly shifting power dynamics. The most confident participants are appropriating English to leverage their agency to overcome the structural constraints they face and are thereby challenging the patriarchal gaze.

6.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored three structural constraints that undermine empowerment through English for young female students. Two of these are the prestige of English and the fear to speak it. These stem from a socially mediated culture which privileges English over local languages, and elite varieties over others. English-only rules exacerbate a binary of English haves and have nots and fosters a culture of embarrassed silence, bullying and illicit use of other languages. Students may be mocked for using the language 'incorrectly' or paradoxically for 'showing off' their fluency. These structural constraints are especially potent in a neoliberally-driven competitive context which demands student 'resilience' but ignores structures which undermine the development of their capabilities (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Finally, the persistent patriarchal gaze within families and the wider community (Nakassis, 2016) is identified as the third structural constraint which limits the emancipatory potential of the students' English proficiency and their higher education.

I discuss these structural constraints through the lens of Drydyk's (2021) work on the interaction between oppression, agency and capabilities. In so doing I

argue that institutions and the English-speaking elite collectively, and often subconsciously, exercise their agency to maintain their advantage by upholding structures which keep the status of English as a language of prestige. Likewise, the persistence of patriarchal structures is the product of the agency of those who stand to benefit from maintaining their privileged status.

Chapter 7: Emancipating the learning space – A pedagogy of support, participation and decoloniality

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored how three structural constraints interact with English to undermine student empowerment and the development of their capabilities, and how agency exercised by the powerful to maintain privilege can uphold these constraints.

In this chapter I address the third research question, concerned with the changes to language pedagogy and practice which could support the students' empowerment. For this I have leveraged the participants' lived learning experience, as articulated in their stories, which I coded as part of the reflexive thematic analysis process previously described. Through this iterative process I grouped codes related to the students' pedagogical experience into a single theme of actionable conversion factors. I adapted these to critical applied linguistics scholarship and identified three pedagogical paradigm shifts which could most effectively support student empowerment through English. The first of these is a shift toward a language supportive, translingual ethos which enables the students' multilingual skills to thrive and bolster their learning. The second is to curtail banking pedagogies and enable more interactive teaching and participatory learning. The third shift is to begin a process of decolonising English by raising critical language awareness among lecturers and students, thereby galvanising critical engagement with the colonial legacy of English and its contemporary power dynamics.

Exploring these paradigm shifts adheres to the ethos of the capability approach as they are the result of a participatory a bottom-up deliberative process (Sen, 1999) in the form of many informal discussions and my interactive interviews with the student participants. I have also attempted to uphold Sen's (2012) 'nyaya' vision of social justice, focusing more on achievable change, and less on the 'niti' vision, which seeks to find an illusory institutional ideal.

7.2 A language supportive ethos

A fundamental capability for effective education is for students to be “able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction” (Wilson-Strydom, 2016, p. 155). As we have seen in the previous chapters, this capability has been severely underdeveloped for a large segment of the student population at the college and for many others languishing in institutions with mandated EMI across India, South Asia and beyond (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017; Niranjana, 2013; Tamim, 2021). However, while scholars have long been arguing for the development of regional languages for higher education to mitigate this systemic weakness (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017; Niranjana, 2013), states like Andhra Pradesh, aiming to make graduates more globally competitive, are doubling down on EMI policy for colleges and universities (Apparasu, 2021). In this section I thus examine how teachers and students can better mitigate the challenges of EMI and subsequently explore how adopting a translingual ethos can enable multilingualism to thrive in the classroom.

7.2.1 Coping with EMI

The debate over language policy uncovers two paradoxes in terms of how EMI is perceived and enacted. Firstly, top-down monolingual language mandates are incompatible with the dynamic, free flow of language practice on the ground (Pennycook, 2013). Indeed local languages frequently displace English in India’s lecture halls (Niranjana, 2013, p. 14), yet English only rules render this practice illicit (Canagarajah, 2011). Secondly, regardless of the language realities on the ground, EMI is perceived positively by a great many students, who see it as a catalyst for raising their English proficiency and their chance for a better life (Macaro et al., 2018). This is the case for most of the participants in this study: “Teachers must try speaking in English, if they want the students to improve their English speaking skills and writing skills” (Tabitha). “If the lecturer starts speaking in English, the student will get the encouragement” (Nithya). “Studying in English-medium is something that motivated me to fulfil my dreams, what I want to achieve in my life” (Gauri).

However, for students like Samira EMI has come with struggles when language support is not given.

> In school days they used some… Telugu, some English, they mixed both. After coming here, they [mostly] teach in English... Sometimes I felt bad because… we can't understand English. So, we want some translate. At that time I used Google to translate this sentence to Telugu and I understood and again I have studied in English.

Samira's reliance on translation apps is a common coping mechanism for students who struggle to understand lectures. However, such tools are unlikely on their own to provide sufficient pedagogical support to students grappling with EMI. Ritika shares her vision of how lecturers could better support students who struggle with English.

> If [students] have any doubts, a teacher should be there to explain them everything, like how they can understand… Some of [the students] could get some words, some of them couldn't get [any] words, and even these people will be… shy… because they can't get up and ask ma'am. 'What does this word mean?' So, they will be like 'OK, we will Google that after'… but they don't Google, they'll forget. So, there itself, like particular time should be there only to learning, to talk in English … and some exercises… which give more knowledge about English.

Ritika's comment highlights a common desire among students to maintain an English-medium learning environment while receiving support in developing their English skills. However, lecturers do not typically consider language support as part of their remit and receive little or no professional development in how to provide it (Macaro et al., 2018). Additionally, the college's English department focuses on literature and does not offer comprehensive academic English training to support struggling students. Indeed, few Indian colleges and universities provide systemic support to develop students' academic English proficiency (Ashoka University, 2019). Regrettably, neglecting to provide academic language support deprives the most vulnerable students of a chance

to develop their capabilities and consequently undermines their agency and well-being.

To mitigate such a bleak scenario, Kim (2017) proposes several practical ideas on how HE institutions can provide bottom-up language support when policy reform is not forthcoming. The first is the establishment of a learning space in which language educators provide support for both students and lecturers, who themselves may have gaps in their English proficiency. Such a space could also be used to organise collaborations between language teachers and subject lecturers and thus offer better targeted support to students in their specific fields. Kim (2017) further suggests lecturers adopt intuitive but often overlooked practices, such as speaking slowly, pre-teaching key terminology, clarifying important concepts and providing visual support. Most importantly, Kim (2017) supports a transition to a student-centred pedagogy, empowered by flipped classrooms in which students become familiar with content in advance and lecture halls become spaces for questions, clarifications and discussions.

For Layla, the lecturer is central in enacting the changes that are needed and ensuring that students are supported and motivated to overcome their struggles with English.

> In the school the teacher is the main role in all of this. So, the teacher should be motivating… if the teacher has determined that he will do it, he will bring the change, then automatically you can see the change in the students… This teacher should have that passion to teach them… Both of them [struggle with] English. If both of them try, then they could learn something new. They will learn together. The growth will be together.

Layla's vision of teachers and students 'learning together' is notable as it challenges the deeply entrenched hierarchies between teacher and student (Attanayake, 2020; Pandey & Jha, 2021). Yet, a disruption of this power disparity has been floated in Indian capability scholarship (Lamo, 2019). Such a rupture to the established order would undeniably represent a threat, as many lecturers would be disinclined to acknowledge their limitations in English or to

surrender control of the learning space, and thus reject such collaboration (Drydyk, 2021). However, such a scenario would provide a far more democratic and empowering learning space for everyone, as well as an opportunity to transcend the spurious English only code by legitimising translingual communication, which I discuss in the next part.

7.2.2 Translanguaging

A language supportive ethos and a decolonised, democratic learning space could be established if the college's much flaunted English only edict was abandoned and translanguaging allowed to flourish. For students and lecturers at the college, legitimising translanguaging would bring to the fore all the linguistic and communicative resources of the interlocutors to negotiate meaning, enabling a quiet resistance to the ideological prominence given to autonomous demarcated languages, and their accompanying norms and practices as imposed by the privileged (Canagarajah, 2011, 2022, p. 40).

Although some of the most confident participants spoke unequivocally about the need for more draconian English only mandates, an ear to the ground on the college campus and evidence from the literature (Nakassis, 2016; Niranjana, 2013) suggest that multiple languages are commonplace in (nominally 'EMI') classes and elsewhere on campus. Miriam, who is not a strong Telugu speaker, talks about how students in the dorm mix languages, helping them build relationships and ease the pressure to speak 'correct' English.

> Through their broken English, they're coming and asking half in English, half Telugu… I feel … happy, at least the students are learning English. If they speak in broken English, whatever, I have no problem, but at least they're able to communicate… They are taking that initiative to come and just to speak.

Indeed, translanguaging occurs intuitively among multilingual populations, but often takes place surreptitiously in classrooms to maintain an EMI façade

(Canagarajah, 2011). Yet, as Ritika observes, mixing languages benefits both teachers and students.

> I've seen a girl in my class… she was Telugu medium [in secondary school] and… she got more difficulty to understand English. So, every teacher, if they ask any question to that particular girl, she used to tell some Telugu words while she was explaining any answer… in English language. So, they used to… correct those words and they used to, like they give the correct pronunciation and... she was OK.

Miriam's and Ritika's observations point to the futility of top-down language directives and the potential for translanguaging when it is allowed to thrive (Pennycook, 2013). In contexts absent of language mandates "teachers have provided safe spaces for students to adopt their multilingual repertoire for learning purposes, and teachers have themselves collaborated with students in using the repertoire as a resource" (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 8). Arya, who like Miriam is not fluent in Telugu, would welcome such a legitimised translingual learning environment. "I think it'll be interesting, because the people like me who have interest in other languages, they can come forward and they can learn the other language."

At the college, this would mean legitimising students' natural blending of Telugu, English, Hindi and other regional, local and indigenous languages, thereby transforming illicit whispering into self-expression and a learning resource. More than a policy change, translanguaging represents a paradigm shift which disrupts colonial language ideologies and top-down banking pedagogies, while fostering an inclusive, equitable and emancipatory learning environment (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021). Translanguaging thus has the potential to curtail the culture of rote learning and the lack of critical thinking commonly associated with less-proficient students who struggle with EMI (Rao, 2018). As such, for the students at the college, the common notion that English alone is essential for an emancipatory education would no longer hold so firm. Furthermore, a translingual ethos would have the potential to decentre the elite 'standard' English which is expected of them and mitigate the fear to actively

use the imposed standard in their communicative repertoire. Such an outcome would enable the voice of at least some of the previously silent and less 'globally inclined' students to emerge, thereby developing other capabilities such as autonomy and aspiration, and promoting the agency of students previously disempowered. However, translanguaging is dependent on lecturers taking up a pedagogy of interaction and participation, which I turn to in the next section.

7.3 Pedagogies of participation

In Chapter 5 I explored how students' agency is enabled by developing key capabilities, including voice, aspiration and autonomy. Appadurai (2004) convincingly argues that these capabilities can only be nurtured through practice, without which marginalised members of society are left to flounder. To this end Walker (2007, pp. 184–185) advocates for participatory learning spaces, asserting that "pedagogies of silencing and passive learning do not contribute to voice, aspiration, or autonomy."

However, silencing and passive learning are common critiques of Indian higher education. Critical scholars paint a bleak picture of outdated lecture-based pedagogies with poorly trained lecturers delivering inflexible curricula which lack relevance to the lives of the students and the local community (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017; Heslop, 2014). These shortcomings can have especially adverse consequences for female graduates who lack the relevant skills to enter a world of egregious gender bias (S. R. Chowdhury, 2017). Pedagogical reform which empowers students and develops their capabilities is clearly needed, but care must be taken to how this is carried out.

7.3.1 An international approach?

Most of the participants in this study have taken part in the English language fellowship programme which brought my partner and myself to the college. Saanvi compares her experience on these courses to her regular classes.

> Especially… speaking is important… Actually, we don't have that thing in our curriculum. Generally, we write, we read in books… we write in the examinations… Courses, especially for English language, if they come up with such courses like we have Shannon ma'am's class, yeah, that would be helpful. If we have in our curriculum, then that will be great.

Like Saanvi, Gayatri appreciated the student-centred approach taken by the visiting teachers.

> In Shannon ma'am class we are very interesting. She is always interacting, she asking questions, she playing games… she gives… different assignments. It is interesting. We always like to go Shannon ma'am class…. Sylvia ma'am class also… And I improved my presentation skills. I improved my speaking skills. In first year, I don't know how to speak... And afterwards I learned… how to speak to people, how to give presentations, how to write my own words.

Samira shares her experience in overcoming the fear to use English with a native speaker.

> At first I [was] also scared to speak with Shannon and she asked my name. I think.. [I] really took two to three minutes to say my name only to her in first class. I remember till now. But really it was a good experience for me. It is a good moment, excellent moment in my life.

These students' enthusiastic assessments of the international courses and teachers were widely echoed by the other participants, who were unequivocal about the type of pedagogy they prefer. "I want more interaction session, less… teaching session" (Gauri). "The lecturers, if they started teaching their own subject with more information, more interactive means, like interaction is very important between the lecturer and student. The interaction is missing. (Nithya). "Our teachers only teach… they don't listen to us. Shannon ma'am, she interacts with us… she's interested in knowing our ideas… She's always acceptable to take our ideas and she appreciates it. I pretty much like it." (Deepthi)

While there is little doubt that the interactive pedagogy embedded in high-end international language teaching is an appealing prospect for many students, its application in the wider context bears some scrutiny from a decolonial lens. The excessive praise lavished on the foreign teachers risks further glorifying the native speaker ideal and may result in expectations that local lecturers can take up a pedagogy which is incongruous with their working conditions (Holliday, 2006). Indeed, the international language courses were given privileges which enabled interactive pedagogy to thrive where it might otherwise languish. There were no high-stakes exams, student numbers were small and the furniture was adjusted to facilitate group learning. Moreover, the courses were prepared by specialist language teachers who are trained in learner-centred pedagogy and have more resources and time to implement it effectively. In contrast, local lecturers have classes of over fifty students crammed into lecture halls and are burdened with busy teaching schedules, rigid administrative tasks and immense pressure to teach to the exam. Additionally, international teachers have the privilege of being able to enter a cultural 'third space' with their students, where less formal social hierarchies can govern relationships and interactive teaching can more easily flourish (Kramsch & Uryu, 2011; Pandey & Jha, 2021). Nevertheless, the demands for more participatory learning by students must not be ignored. In the next part I explore how this can be done locally.

7.3.2 A reflective, collaborative pedagogy

Rather than attempting to adapt pedagogical approaches from international teachers, Kumaravadivelu's (2001, p. 539) advocates for "the development of context-sensitive pedagogical knowledge" through "a continual cycle of observation, reflection and action." Such a reflective cycle can also draw on how the students would like to be taught. Nithya, for instance, describes how lessons could be more engaging and relevant to students' lives.

> Like if, for example if we take history… the lecturer need to explain the lesson as a story. Yeah, if they explain that lecture as a story means OK, the people will get interest, OK, what will happen next?... If… that

> lesson [is delivered] as a lecture… they won't get interested, they'll get bored… A story… with lot of present examples and present situations… means we will be interested.

Nithya went on to talk about the need for a collaborative classroom dynamic. "We need to create a space for us, where we can express our feelings. So, the main thing is the students need to improve their English language through communicating with… friends first." Deepthi said much the same. "Group discussions… we usually don't have them. So, if we participate in group discussions then we… might know about the people's language and what to use and what not to use in English."

Nithya's and Deepthi's remarks highlight the importance of collaborative learning, developed through social relations and social networks, one of Walker's (2005b) core capability sets for education. However, the potential for emboldening such a collaborative ethos is at odds with the prevalent bureaucratic exam-driven system (Bhushan, 2019), as well as the growing neoliberal logic of competition and individual achievement so often celebrated at the college and more widely in India (Mathur, 2018; Varman et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there is a nominal space for teamwork and communication skills development in a human capital driven education context which educators can build on. More importantly, Bhushan (2019) argues that granting greater freedom to lecturers and prioritising student capabilities over bureaucratic processes would enable the empowerment of students and nurture a bottom-up learning environment. Indeed, the college's student body retains a spirit of peer support and mutuality, as visible to any visitor who sees groups of students collaboratively cramming for exams.

Locally informed interactive pedagogies and a collaborative ethos can pave the way for a paradigm shift toward decolonising and democratising English. To probe further into this decolonising process, I next explore how students can speak English on their own terms through classroom practice which confronts the notion of "correct" English.

7.3.3 Speaking English on their own terms

As detailed in the previous chapter, nearly all of the participants cited the fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed as a primary source of their anxiety to speak English, and the subsequent loss of their agency (De Herdt, 2008). When asked what kind of language training has been the most empowering to overcome such fears, many spoke about how language mistakes were managed by the teacher. Chandra and Layla describe experiences which put them at greater ease:

> [The teacher] started from very much basic and she involved us… 'You can do mistakes while speaking in English. I never bother about that', she told us. And we were very happy to participate... At last, we came up with how to make presentations... and the class was so interactive... It was so good. (Chandra)

> My English teacher was very good here… She always used to help me in all the assignments which she used to give. So, it made me feel comfortable here… I was never this interactive in my classes, so she [enabled] me to interact with her. She made me comfortable, so that I could even ask my doubts. Even if I'm wrong, she [said] I'm not going to get punished. (Layla)

Layla regrets that this teacher is no longer at the college and wishes her approach were more widely adopted to give anxious students more confidence. "They should be… free to speak anyways… even if they go wrong, there's not a problem." Arya feels much the same about how she overcame her fear and developed her speaking skills. "When I started talking and talking and talking, I never considered whether it is wrong or right, correct or wrong. I just spoke, that's it. And that's how I improved." Arya believes that giving a space for students to speak without fear of being 'wrong' would help build confidence.

> [The] girls who have come from Telugu background they will try to mingle in the class. So, by talking in their broken English… I see it's interesting for them, even they don't know, but they're trying and I'm sure

> they will succeed one day also. Because… if it's not correct, that doesn't mean you should not speak. You should speak whatever… comes to your mind. Never, you know, worry about the grammars and all that. This is that is how I… cope up with my bad English.

Despite her benign disposition toward grammatical accuracy, Arya's reflection on her 'bad English' reminds us of the neocolonial discourse in which 'good' and 'bad' English are defined by a class hierarchy which privileges 'native' and elite speaker norms and ridicules those who fall short (Highet, 2023). Such perceptions were palpable among many more participants. "If we get trained under [native speakers], then we'll get a good English because even our teachers they speak a lot of mistakes, so we learn the same mistakes" (Saanvi). "If we are learning with, like, you foreigners… we can also talk like you, some more fluency like you" (Danica). "You are the fluent and you are using professional English, but we can't use that" (Samira). "I want to speak just like you are speaking and just like the native speakers... I love the accent. Yeah, I want to speak like them. Maybe in the future I will be like that" (Chandra). "A problem I have with English is as it's not my native language I can't… speak fluently" (Ulani). "I have that inferior [feeling] that the native speakers… can't… understand my accent" (Deepthi).

The participants' pronouncements point to the persistent hegemonic clout of native speakers' English as 'professional' and their accent as highly desirable (Highet, 2023; Holliday, 2006). In contrast, being a non-native speaker is deemed a 'problem' which induces feelings of inferiority and the burden to make oneself understood to native speakers. In a world where users of English as a global lingua franca far outnumber native speakers and scholarship on unequal Englishes is fast expanding (Tupas, 2021), the lines between 'correct' and 'incorrect' language use and the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers are rightfully becoming blurred (Li, 2011). In this changing order English is heterogeneous and the negotiation of intelligibility outweighs accuracy as a marker of acceptable communication (Kubota, 2015). Thus, the students who wish to speak English on their terms without being ridiculed may

be slowly and quietly be disrupting the power dynamics which regulate English and undermine the agency of students like themselves.

To support such a disruption, I discuss below a decolonial, emancipatory language pedagogy which builds on the localised, translingual and participatory learning spaces outlined in this chapter.

7.4 Discussion: A decolonial agenda

As we have seen in these chapters, focusing on capabilities which empower students has the potential to cultivate a decolonial agenda (Walker, 2018b). However, we have also seen that structural constraints do much to disempower students and thus undermine this agenda. To leverage the CA's potential in this regard, an ethos of decolonising English can be nurtured by disrupting its hegemonic status as the language of native speakers, the metropolitan elite, powerful men and the neoliberal order. It behoves the college and others like it to help students confront the underlying systems which glorify English, privilege native speakers and present elite metropolitan varieties as the only acceptable standards. While no student should be discouraged from pursuing their own linguistic aspirations nor from learning the most accepted forms of the language, the privileged status of native standard English must also be recognised as a structural constraint which, for many students, limits the development of essential capabilities and is thus a source of disempowerment. Critical scholars therefore contend that teachers "have a responsibility not only to provide students with linguistic information about standard and nonstandard varieties of the language but also to provide them the framework in which to think critically about the social, political, and educational implications of language variation." (Curzan, 2002, p. 340). This means interrogating the historical and contemporary coloniality of English, promoting its indigenisation and ultimately working toward an emancipatory paradigm shift. Such a shift requires the localisation of English to be legitimised by a process of decolonisation, which Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 540) contends is "an attitude of the mind." Ultimately the students must be "empowered to examine the system and its language hierarchies critically, so that they can challenge that view if

they should choose to—with full control of the language variety of power" (Curzan, 2002, p. 342).

However, implementing such a paradigm shift among students at the classroom level comes with challenges. S. Roy (2015) brings up a predicament in her aim to raise critical awareness about English with her students at a women's college in Delhi. In upper streamed literature classes occupied mostly by metropolitan English-proficient students, teachers can "choose to de-link English studies from its elitist frames and talk about resistant postcolonial identities" (S. Roy, 2015, p. 521). However, in lower streamed language classes with mostly non-metropolitan students intent to learn the mechanics of English, S. Roy (2015, p. 521) laments that teachers "have no choice but to privilege learners' utilitarian expectations and their legitimate desire for social empowerment." For many students at the college, improving their English proficiency brings them closer to their aspirations of social mobility, and for some provides a fighting chance to confront oppressive gender and class structures. Thus, S. Roy (2015) argues that learning the language takes priority over analysing its sociopolitical position, which for many students would require extensive dialogue in first languages and time away from practicing English.

There are other limitations to a wider adoption of critically scrutinising English in language classrooms like the ones at the college. It is likely that many teachers have themselves had limited exposure to critical scholarship around the cultural politics of English. Such teachers may be inclined to initially deploy a soft approach focused on raising student awareness with little critical scrutiny of oppressive power hierarchies (Andreotti, 2014), resulting in a depoliticised cosmopolitan positioning of English as a neutral, hybridised and appropriated lingua franca (Kubota, 2016; Tupas, 2019). Indeed a genuinely decolonial language pedagogy would confront the authority of educational leaders who have benefitted from the status quo and who would be reluctant to support a curricular shift to critical language education (Drydyk, 2021). These limitations are underpinned by the human capital and neoliberal logics which govern higher education and perceptions about language and power (Highet & Del Percio, 2021a; Kubota, 2016; Martín Rojo, 2019). Students act on these

paradigms by positioning their learning about structural oppression as opportunities for self-transformation and self-improvement (Martín Rojo, 2019). All of these factors risk limiting the impact of critical language pedagogy to empowering individuals rather than galvanising collective resistance.

Despite these challenges, critical scholars believe that pushing for a disruption to the status quo is warranted. Pennycook (1994, p. 16), for instance, insists that focusing academic English classes purely on language "misses a crucial opportunity to help students to develop forms of linguistic, social and cultural criticism that would be of much greater benefit to them for understanding and questioning how language works both within and outside educational institutions." Pennycook (1994, pp. 18–19) further argues that "critical language awareness can focus on both language and content simultaneously (and thus questions the divide itself) and can develop analyses critical of both linguistic and social norms." For the college, this would require a careful implementation strategy, including raising lecturers' critical awareness about the postcolonial power dynamics of English and cultivating a translingual dialogic teaching approach which would, in turn, help rebalance student-teacher power dynamics. It is worth noting that undergraduate curricular content includes the colonial history of English in India (Evans, 2002) which can form the basis for discussions about contemporary linguistic injustices for both lecturers and students. High on the deliberation agenda would be Canagarajah's (2022, p. 28) notion that it "sometimes involves having to use the colonizer's language and engaging with colonizing epistemologies even to resist them." At the same time legitimising translanguaging would challenge the perception that English alone is fundamentally essential to attaining an emancipatory education. Thus, teachers and students would be undertaking the decolonial epistemic journey together, as an ongoing community practice rather than assimilating another academic product originating in the Global North.

Though I understand the dilemmas and limitations discussed above, I gravitate toward the view of scholars like Pennycook (1994) and LaDousa et al. (2022) who see merit in embedding a critical voice into the work of English departments at non-elite colleges like the one in this study. I substantiate this

view from my interactions with this study's participants and their thoughtful, earnest and often enthusiastic contributions on experiences and confrontations with English as a language of power. By offering a critical perspective to only higher streamed students at elite colleges, delivered monolingually in English (S. Roy, 2015), India's HE system risks adding a further dimension to the English divide (Jayadeva, 2018), those who are critically aware and those who are not. As Rubdy (2015, p. 44) posits, "in opening up spaces for the democratization of English and allowing greater equity for Englishes other than the metropolitan standards, decolonizing the mind of both the colonizer and the colonized is crucial."

The ultimate aim of this exercise is for students like those at the college to be empowered to "[use] English critically in relation to [their] local identities, interests, and values" (Canagarajah, 2023, p. 97). To this end I am convinced by Esch's (2009, p. 2) argument that "empowerment begins when we become aware that language is a symbolic tool for the exercise of power and influence." Having this critical awareness and landing on the privileged side of India's English divide, subaltern and other non-elite students can be in a position to confront and discredit the dividing line itself. Indeed, as the first generation in their families and communities to cross linguistic, class and gender divides, the students at the college are in a unique position to begin bridging the gulf between India's English haves and have nots, the metropolitan elites and the vernacular mofussil, the college and the community. As Pennycook (1994, p. 21) speculated three decades ago, "the decolonisation of English may well be a process on which decolonisations in other spheres will depend." For this emancipatory process to finally begin, students must first become critically aware of the power dynamics embedded in English, and be empowered to develop their voice and to exercise their agency using their own English, hybridised or otherwise, on their terms.

7.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have addressed the final research question on the pedagogical paradigm shifts which could facilitate student empowerment through English.

To this end I discussed adopting a language supportive ethos to help students cope with the challenges of EMI. This would also mean a transition from a hierarchical learning space in which English is imposed, to one less hierarchical and more translingual, enabling all participants to contribute with all of their linguistic resources and faculty in all subjects embedding English language support into their teaching. A second paradigm shift would supplant banking pedagogy with a participatory approach, especially in English language classes. This shift would eschew the temptation to take on Anglocentric pedagogies and would instead nurture a reflective and collaborative locally relevant pedagogy in which a supportive ethos would enable students to speak English with their own voices on their own terms, unhindered by elite standards.

The discussion on these findings explores the question of decolonising English by building critical awareness among lecturers and students on the coloniality of English. Rather than just focussing on the mechanics of the language, it is my conviction that all students should be aware of the cultural politics and power dynamics of English, enabling them to both ‘master’ the language, but also to position themselves as its rightful co-owners and as critical participants in the uneven power dynamic that English brings.

Chapter 8: Conclusion – Reflections and contributions

8.1 An abrupt end: Reflection on a mindful journey

India's complex relationship with English suddenly took a personal turn. After thirteen months my unexpected journey into the Indian periphery came to an abrupt end. The authorities hastily suspended the academic visas which brought my partner, myself and others working on English language support projects to India. We learned that this directive was part of a broader pattern of arbitrary and unexplained restrictions increasingly being placed on international scholars by the Indian government (Lem, 2022). Speculation circulated that the governing party was displaying its growing power and its alignment with a Hindi nationalist agenda, a not-so-veiled message to our host embassy that its English academic support programmes, and the soft diplomacy they represent, were no longer welcome.

It could be said at first glance that such an act of defiance against the hegemony of English in India is not unreasonable. Indeed, much scholarship asserts that the language retains its colonial legacy and its elite standing, while the drive toward English-medium education may well be exacerbating India's social stratification (Mohanty, 2017). My own work over many years with students and teachers of English in the Global South has led me to become increasingly wary of the neocolonial linguistic hierarchies which privilege the elite English varieties and the epistemologies that flow unidirectionally from the Global North to the South (Pennycook, 2017). Yet, I also recognise that English represents the aspirations of millions of people from marginalised and excluded communities to overcome perennial barriers of class, caste, gender, religion and linguistic nationalism, the forces which so severely undermine their dreams of liberation and socioeconomic mobility. The most colonial of languages is thus paradoxically upheld for its decolonial potential in formerly colonised lands (Vaish, 2005). These tensions were palpable at the women's college in South India where I unexpectedly landed, and which would become my research context. Far removed from India's English proficient metropolitan elite, many students at the college struggle with English-medium instruction.

They are forced to confront the colonial baggage and the inequality that are embedded in English, yet they also feel its aspirational and emancipatory potential.

Entering this context as a White male researcher and outsider compelled me to be vigilantly reflexive about my positionality and thus to be perpetually mindful of the power inequities, the research design and the ethics of my engagement with the students and the wider community. To this end I set out to cultivate a decolonial ethos and to, as much as possible, centre the students' voices (Kvale, 2006). As well as writing *about* the community I would endeavour to write *from* the community (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 7) while disavowing White saviour syndrome (Straubhaar, 2015). To integrate into life on campus, I volunteered to facilitate writing workshops, to assist with eco club campaigns and to photograph campus events. No longer an obscure outsider in the community, my extended stay enabled me to build collaborative relationships with staff and students and to recruit seventeen student participants for my research. Our interviews were interactive and dialogic (Ellis & Berger, 2012), with the obvious power imbalance and potential anxieties assuaged by our mutual familiarity, as well as participant-written narratives, photo prompts and vignettes.

To align with the decolonial ethos of the study, I opted for the capability approach as my principal theoretical framework. The CA lens enabled me to foreground human development, well-being and social justice within a colonially infused linguistic and educational context, expanding on the predominant human capital paradigm, which values English and education as economic goods (Robeyns, 2006b). In addition to its congruity with a decolonial project, the CA's scarcity in research on language education and its flexibility to integrate into a study grounded in critical applied linguistics made it an especially compelling theoretical framework. As such I operationalised the CA to answer my three research questions:

1. How does English empower and disempower students at a non-elite English-medium women's college in India?

2. What are the most significant structural constraints which undermine the students' empowerment through English?
3. What changes to language pedagogy and practice could support the students' empowerment?

In the remainder of this closing chapter, I summarise the findings of my study based on the three research questions and outline my contribution to the scholarship. I then discuss some of the limitations of this study and suggest further areas to explore. Finally, I share some closing reflections on the participants' continuing journeys and on the stories waiting to be told.

8.2 Summary of findings

8.2.1 How English (dis)empowers

In relation to the first research question, I explored the notion of English and English-medium instruction (EMI) as sources of empowerment and disempowerment. For most of the students, English proficiency means 'surviving' in an increasingly competitive world, in which the language is crucial to securing employment or a postgraduate placement. For others English provides a pathway for accessing work or study opportunities abroad, often to escape financial precarity and poor job prospects at home. This type of empowerment through English falls within a neoliberal logic (Chacko, 2020; Esch, 2009), supported by a human capital view of education in which English is instrumentalised to compete in workplaces and cosmopolitan spaces.

For some of the students, a more socially liberal and emancipatory form of empowerment (Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p. 10) can be supported by English, if capabilities like the narrative imagination, aspiration and autonomy are nurtured in their learning spaces. Examples of this form of individual empowerment ranged from students illicitly reading novels deemed 'unsuitable' for young women, to a story about a friend who is a housebound bride outearning her husband by clandestinely creating instructional English YouTube videos, and thus gaining the hard-won respect of her in-laws. For many participants, their proficiency in English has given them the means and the confidence to resist,

or at least delay, the predetermination of an arranged marriage and a life imposed by patriarchal norms.

Aligned with a socially transformative notion of empowerment (Esch, 2009; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p. 10) some students perceive English as a means to engage with critical worldviews and pedagogies, to resist Hindi linguistic and Hindu religious nationalism, to participate in global discussions on gender and other social injustices and to galvanise social change in their local communities. For such transformative empowerment to flourish, the capabilities of critical thinking and voice must be cultivated (Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2007). However, such notions are tempered by an HE system which the participants decried for its obstinate use of the banking approach and its culture of rote learning (Heslop, 2014), aggravated by EMI mandates on students who lack the proficiency and confidence to flourish with English. For these students, English and EMI can be profoundly disempowering.

8.2.2 Structural constraints

In addressing the second research question I assessed how the potential for students to be empowered through English is undermined by three structural constraints. The first of these is the perception among students of English as a language of prestige and its speakers as being 'more intelligent', happier and 'better behaved' than those who only speak local vernaculars. This positioning also privileges those who speak English to a native or elite standard and reinforces a social class disparity between those entitled to speak English and those 'not suitable'.

Entangled with the prestige of English is the second structural constraint, identified by nearly all participants as the fear that English elicits. Students fear being mocked by their peers for using the language 'incorrectly', or conversely, for 'showing off' their proficiency. This fosters a classroom culture of silence, bullying and an illicit disregard for the college's fruitless English-only mandate. These two structural constraints are especially potent in an HE context of heightened competitiveness which demands student 'resilience' but disregards

the social factors which hinder the development of their capabilities (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Drawing on Drydyk's (2021) work on the interaction between oppression, agency and capabilities, I argue that institutions and the English-speaking elite collectively, and often subconsciously, exercise their agency to maintain their privilege by upholding the structures which sustain their exclusive dominion over English.

Similarly, the third structural constraint, the enduring gender injustice of the patriarchal gaze (Nakassis, 2016), in both the family and the community, undermines many young women's aspirations and limits the emancipatory potential of the students' English proficiency and their higher education. Several students recounted traumatic childhoods in which they were either violently forced to study English or prohibited from doing so. Others lamented their fathers stubbornly insisting on choosing their study, career and life trajectories, an instinct they say is largely driven by the need to maintain the family's 'good name' within the community. Drydyk's (2021) model here suggests that the persistence of patriarchal structures is driven (often subconsciously) by the collective agency of men safeguarding their privileged status in the family and community in an era replete with social disruption.

8.2.3 Pedagogical paradigm shifts

Addressing the third research question, I align the participants' experience of EMI at the college with pedagogical paradigm shifts which could increase the potential for student empowerment through English. While English-only mandates were praised by the most proficient students, those who had struggled with English bemoaned the lack of language support with EMI. Many of the participants also lamented the top down pedagogy and lack of student participation in most of their classes, thus undermining crucial capabilities like voice and autonomy (Walker, 2007).

I thus advocate for adopting a participatory, language supportive ethos to help students cope with the challenges of EMI. This would embed English language support by all faculty into their teaching, accompanied by a transition to a less

hierarchical and more and translingual learning space, thereby developing the capability of voice among less confident students. However, the temptation to take up Anglocentric pedagogies would be rejected in favour of collaborative locally relevant learning in which students speak English with their own voices on their own terms, unhindered by what elite and native speakers deem appropriate and 'correct'.

I further argue that a drive to decolonise English learning spaces should be supported by raising critical awareness among lecturers and students about the coloniality and the cultural politics of English. The fact that this strand of critical education seems to only be accessible to students from the metropolitan elite (S. Roy, 2015) adds yet another layer to India's language divide. Disseminating this critical perspective to students and teachers in the Indian periphery is ultimately an invitation to undertake a decolonial epistemic journey and to gradually begin breaking down the English-driven binary divides which they persistently face.

8.3 Contribution and significance

Since starting this project I have encountered much scholarship and discussion which spotlights binaries and dichotomies, a code to which I have acquiesced but one which the study has forced me to interrogate. I have consequently become increasingly swayed by scholars who deem this duality to be a Eurocentric epistemic code which eschews plurality and paradox (Morreira et al., 2020). Indeed, this study has disclosed how the seventeen student participants in various ways straddle many of the binary divides which attempt to define their social and educational lives. They are neither the English haves nor the have nots, neither far above nor below the English line, neither Anglo-metropolitan elite nor the vernacular mofussil subaltern. Indeed, they are sometimes advantaged by English, but at other times disadvantaged; they are both empowered and disempowered. In their world, English is at once hegemonic and emancipatory. It simultaneously upholds and defies patriarchal structures, the Hindu nationalist agenda and the stranglehold of economic, social, cultural and intellectual power held by the privileged. Hence, this study's

principal empirical contribution is contained in the stories told by the young women from this 'in-between' group, a rare excursion into the lives of students situated in the postcolonial periphery who grapple with the complex tensions between the promise and the despair of English and EMI. This study has exposed how the coloniality of English intersects with contemporary India to shape discordant cultures, policies, pedagogies, gender discourses and power relations, all of which combine to both empower and disempower these 'in-between' students. It is through this neglected but vital perspective that we can assess how policy and pedagogy which aims to 'empower' students is reproducing oppressive structures and how we can work toward breaking them down (Esch, 2009; Kraft & Flubacher, 2020). In addition, it is these students on the fault lines between the English haves and the have nots who can contribute to narrowing the divides based on class, gender, caste, education and geography.

This study's contribution has also been enriched by the CA theoretical lens, which compelled me to explore how English intersects with human well-being. As such the study has overstepped the conventional epistemic confines in which the instrumental value of English within a human capital education paradigm are centred (Esch, 2009). Empowerment through increased study opportunities, work placement and migration prospects are thus also about students aspiring to a different life, making autonomous choices, finding their voice, and critically assessing the gender and social hierarchies which inhibit them (Walker, 2006). Applying the CA to language education has also enabled me to focus on structural constraints and to thus scrutinise previous work on language learning barriers in which they are often individualised. As such, we can see how social prestige, fear and patriarchal hierarchies intersect with English to undermine student development of key fertile capabilities like aspiration, autonomy and voice (Nussbaum, 2011). Moreover, a CA lens which examines 'empowerment' on a spectrum from neoliberal (Esch, 2009) to emancipatory (Kraft & Flubacher, 2020), and structural constraints which are driven by the conflicting agencies of the powerful and the marginalised (Drydyk, 2021), enables officials and educators to better scrutinise the extent to which

policies and pedagogies are maintaining privilege or challenging it. Thus, monolingual mandates, the compulsion toward 'correct' English, the clout of exams and the penchant for the banking model are more likely exposed as part of a system which maintains the privilege of the powerful and does little to empower the students through English.

Finally, this project contributes to the scholarship with its decolonial ethos, from reflexively navigating the many instances of power imbalance in the research space to advocating for a decolonial pedagogy. Pursuing a paradigm shift toward a participatory, translingual and critical pedagogy would provide students a pathway to more confidently navigate some of the structural constraints they face (Canagarajah, 2011). Understanding the cultural politics and the hegemonic structures intertwined with English would for many students begin a process of interrogating the linguistic hierarchy which positions English as the language of knowledge, intelligence, professionalism and much else (Pennycook, 1994, 1998, 2017). Likewise, it would challenge notions that native speakers are the ultimate models of 'good' English and that they have something to fear if they do not speak to this standard (Highet, 2023; Holliday, 2006). Such a shift would better support the students' language learning and level the linguistic playing field which currently benefits India's metropolitan Anglo elite. Fostering a critical pedagogical ethos would also surely elevate the struggle of gender justice for the graduating young women who each year prepare to confront the patriarchal gatekeepers standing between them and their aspirations.

8.4 Limitations and recommendations

This was a study rooted in the stories and perspectives of its student participants. However, these evolve over time and are told and understood differently, depending on the languages, cultures, world views, power dynamics and much else which forms the relationship between the participant and the researcher (Bridges, 2009). Though I was able to capture the students' struggles, fears and aspirations at a given juncture, I lacked the time and resources to capture their subsequent stories as young women navigating jobs,

graduate studies or growing pressures to acquiesce to an arranged marriage. A longitudinal study which follows aspirational students of English into their lives after college would shed further light on the interplay between English and empowerment.

This project also represents a starting point for further and deeper conversations with a greater variety of students and others who have a stake in how English is positioned in Indian HE and society. Limited by time and resources, I was only able to explore the stories of students in one women's college in a specific context. Countless others are waiting to be heard. For example, a comparative study with male and female students would further elucidate the role gender plays in how students experience and perceive their (dis)empowerment through English. Other possible comparative studies could likewise spotlight geographic, religious, social class and caste disparities, especially how these diverse communities experience and overcome structural constraints and build their capabilities through English. I especially urge more scholars to take up the CA in exploring these language and social justice issues.

In addition to being restricted by time and resources, my study was also mediated by my position in the research space as a familiar presence but a cultural outsider without proficiency in local languages. The strong rapport that I built with the students facilitated the emergence of a cultural third space which enabled many to share personal stories of appalling gender and social class injustice (Kramsch & Uryu, 2011). However, lacking insider knowledge, cultural codes and local language skills almost certainly resulted in a different understanding of the participant experience than a researcher from the community might acquire (Bridges, 2001). Conducting my research solely in English resulted in a pool of participants more confident to engage with a foreign male researcher than the general population of the college. Consequently, the stories of the students who are most disempowered by English could only be relayed through the filters of their more fluent peers. I therefore encourage local researchers to engage in studies and discussions in

local languages about what empowerment and disempowerment through English means for the many students whose voices are still to be heard.

Finally, this study's limited scope confined the formal data collection to only student participants, thereby necessarily excluding other critical stakeholders in the discussion on student empowerment through English. The voices of teachers and college principals are crucial to debates on pedagogical reform, especially those which seek to challenge power dynamics and monolingual teaching practice. Likewise, the voices of higher education officials and policymakers are essential in deliberations on how English can be better positioned to genuinely empower the growing cohort of HE students who are struggling with EMI. Especially relevant in this regard would be scholarship on the (in)compatibility between an exam driven system and an agenda which aims to decolonise English and emancipate language learning spaces. To probe further into how gender intersects with English, higher education and family/community aspiration, research with students' parents would provide valuable insight into the tension between persistent patriarchal modalities, expectations of social mobility and shifting social norms in a neoliberal world.

8.5 Final thoughts

As I write this, two years have passed since my interviews with the seventeen student participants. All of the fourteen who have kept in touch have taken up postgraduate studies, further education or employment opportunities. Most have left the city to pursue Masters degrees, some in metropolitan centres like Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad, others in smaller cities. Two have made it to Paris, enrolled in an English-medium MBA programme and another is hoping to join them on another course in France. The imagined boundaries that once segregated these young women from the metropolitan, the cosmopolitan and the 'global Indian' experience are theirs to breach.

But questions remain about what lies ahead. Are these years of relative autonomy respites from predestined futures governed by a resolute Hindu-nationalist or otherwise patriarchal order, instinctively enforced by companies,

institutions and families back home? How many will genuinely (continue to) be the architects of their own lives? And what about the participants who have not kept in touch? What about the countless students too frightened to participate in my research, too nervous to even say hello? How many have been failed by the drive to EMI, by the never-ending stream of exams and competitions, by the English-only rules, by the fear and the shame of getting it 'wrong'? How many have had to set aside their aspirations to make way for those of a younger brother or to placate the rage of a chauvinistic father?

To ponder a way forward I return to aspiration, autonomy and voice, the three fertile capabilities which nurture so many others and promote the agency of students to interrogate and confront the colonial and patriarchal structures which constrain their empowerment through English. It is incumbent on educational institutions like the college to much more seriously commit to allyship with the young women navigating these constraints and support students to develop these key capabilities. This will require an emancipatory decolonial pedagogy which promotes their agency rather than stifling it. It means repositioning English from a language which they at once fear and revere to one which they critically scrutinise and appropriate into their own communicative toolkit to deploy as they choose.

Appendix One: Summary of related empirical studies

Text	Focus	Context	Methods / Participants	Theoretical framework
(Highet, 2023) *Race, class and 'good' English in India*	-inequality of Englishes based on coloniality, race and class	NGO training centre in Delhi	Ethnography / interviews middle class students	Intersectionality – coloniality, race and class
(Highet, 2022) *"She will control my son": Navigating womanhood, English and social mobility in India*	-traditional vs neoliberal context for female English students			Bourdieu - theory of capital
(Highet & Del Percio, 2021a) *Hard work, growth mindset, fluent English*	- social mobility and English in a neoliberal context			
(Highet & Del Percio, 2021b) *When linguistic capital isn't enough*	-meaning of English speakerhood in neoliberal India			
(LaDousa et al., 2022) *Postcolonial language ideologies: Indian students reflect on mother tongue and English*	-student practices and perspectives related to multilingualism, mother tongue and English	Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinaga	Ethnography / interviews Students in elite HE institution	Postcolonial semiotics
(Jayadeva, 2018) *Below the English line*	- connection between English and entry into Indian middle class	English training centre in Bangalore	Ethnography middle class students	Bourdieu – theory of capital

(Verma, 2014) *Women in higher education in globalised India*	- female students, social anxiety and inequality with English-medium higher studies	10 colleges in Lucknow	Quantitative interviews and FGDs with female HE students	Bourdieu – theory of capital Gramsci - hegemony
(Nakassis, 2016) *Doing style: Youth and mass mediation in South India*	-student experience of institutional and peer group influence, focused on 'style' (chapter on English)	5 'elite/semi-elite English medium colleges in Madurai and Chennai, Tamil Nadu	Ethnography with college students	Liminal phenomenology and citational semiotics
(Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016) *Influence of motivation factors to learn English in Tamil Nadu*	- motivation and anxiety in learning and using English	Engineering college Tamil Nadu	Mostly quantitative, some interviews with students	Gardner's Socio-Educational Model on Motivation
(Attanayake, 2020) *Postcolonial curriculum practices in South Asia*	- confidence and anxiety to use English in HE - English as status marker	Universities in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and cross-section of India	Mostly survey data and small number of interviews with HE students	Post-colonialism
(Vaish, 2008) *Biliteracy and globalization*	- multilingual education; English as a language of social mobility for subaltern	secondary schools and a call centre in low-income Delhi district	Ethnography low-income students	Bourdieu – theory of capital Gandhi Sarvodaya
(Patil & Jagadale, 2018) *Anxiety as a barrier in English language learning*	- relationship between socio-economic factors and anxiety in learning English	University in Maharashtra	Quantitative research with BSc student	Anxiety models

(Tamim, 2021) *Language, class, and education*	- Inclusion, social class and privileging English proficiency - English-medium instruction in HE	Metropolitan Sindh and Punjab prov. Pakistan	Ethnography Interviews with secondary students from private and govt schools	Capability approach
(Tamim, 2014) *The politics of languages in education*	- English as gatekeeper language for career choice, - student agency and mandated English	Lahore, Pakistan	Ethnography Interviews with secondary/ undergrad students	Capability approach Bourdieu – theory of capital
(Lamo, 2019) *Capabilities of students*	-Student experience of higher education	Elite university in Mumbai	Narrative inquiry with two middle class postgrad students	Capability approach

Appendix Two: Capabilities for higher education

Nussbaum's capabilities for education for democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2002, 2006)

1. *Global citizenship:* the recognition of a common humanity and a perspective beyond individuals' own communities and nation states.

2. *Critical thinking:* the capacity to scrutinise traditions and received wisdoms.

3. *Narrative imagination:* the ability to empathise with people different than oneself through the study of literature and the arts.

Walker's ideal-theoretical list of capabilities for higher education pedagogy (Walker, 2005a, pp. 128–129)

1. *Practical reason*: Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices. Being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world. Having good judgement.

2. *Educational resilience*: Able to navigate study, work and life. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.

3. *Knowledge and imagination*: Being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject – disciplinary and/or professional – its form of academic inquiry and standards. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to comprehend the perspectives of multiple others and to form impartial judgements. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for political, cultural and social action and participation in the world. Awareness of ethical

debates and moral issues. Open-mindedness. Knowledge to understand science and technology in public policy.

4. *Learning disposition*: Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.

5. *Social relations and social networks*: Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems and tasks. Being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for collaborative and participatory learning. Being able to form networks of friendship and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.

6. *Respect, dignity and recognition*: Being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practices and human diversity. Being able to show empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listening to and considering other person's points of view in dialogue and debate. Being able to act inclusively and being able to respond to human need. Having competence in inter-cultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, to debate and persuade; to be able to listen.

7. *Emotional integrity, emotions*: Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Being able to develop emotions for imagination, understanding, empathy, awareness and discernment.

8. *Bodily integrity*: Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.

*9. Language competence and confidence: "*being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction." Added by Wilson-Strydom (2016, pp. 151–152)

Walker's list of capabilities for gender justice in education (Walker, 2007, pp. 189–190)

1. *Autonomy*, being able to have choices, having information on which to make choices, planning a life after school, independence, empowerment

2. *Knowledge*, of school subjects that are intrinsically interesting or instrumentally useful for post-school choices of study, paid work and a career; girls' access to all school subjects; access to powerful analytical knowledge, and including knowledge of girls' and women's lives; knowledge for critical thinking and for debating complex moral and social issues; knowledge from involvement in intrinsically interesting school societies, active inquiry; transformation of under- standing; fair assessment/examination of knowledge gained

3. *Social relations*, the capability to be a friend, the capability to participate in a group for friendship and for learning, to be able to work with others to solve problems and tasks, being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for learning and organizing life at school, being able to respond to human need, social belonging

4. *Respect and recognition*, self-confidence and self-esteem; respect for and from others; being treated with dignity; not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion, or race; valuing other languages, other religions, and spiritual practice and human diversity; showing imaginative empathy, compassion, fair- ness, and generosity; listening to and considering other persons' points of view in dialogue and debate in and out of class in school; being able to act inclusively

5. *Aspiration*, motivation to learn and succeed, to have a better life, to hope

6. *Voice*, for participation in learning, for speaking out, not being silenced through pedagogy or power relations or harassment, or excluded from curriculum, being active in the acquisition of knowledge

7. *Bodily integrity and bodily health*, not to be subjected to any form of harassment at school by peers or teachers, generally being safe at school, making own choices about sexual relationships, being able to be free from sexually transmitted diseases, being involved in sporting activities

8. *Emotional integrity and emotions*, not being subject to fear, which diminishes learning, either from physical punishment or verbal attacks; developing emotions and imagination for understanding, empathy, awareness, and discernment

Lamo's capabilities for higher education in India (Lamo, 2019, pp. 236–241)

1. Individuality and Personal Agency

2. Guidance and True Aspirations

3. Social Relations

4. Inclusion

5. Exposure and Opportunities for Exploration (Practical learning to support theory)

6. Presence and Access to Facilitative Institutional Infrastructure (Narrow the gap that advantages metropolitan students)

7. Holistic Evaluation

8. Facilitative Teaching Engagement (including confronting power inequities)

9. Secular, Democratic and Transparent Institutional Culture

Appendix Three: Summary of findings sent to participants

Summary of research findings on 'English as a tool for empowerment for female Indian college students'

How participants became good English users

- Most participants were encouraged by their parents and often had a relative or close contact who supported their English or who taught them.
- Several have been inspired by literature and have started reading for enjoyment in English.
- Others have used media platforms like Youtube to improve their English.

How English empowers

- Nearly all participants said that English is an important source of knowledge which is often not easily accessed in other languages they know.
- Having good English has made the participants more confident.
- Because of their good English participants are seen as being well-educated, intelligent etc.
- All participants said that good English enables many more job and study opportunities.

How English disempowers

- Students who are poor in English feel inferior, lack confidence. They often think they can't improve.
- There is a fear to speak English as many students worry about 'what others will think' if they sound bad or make mistakes.
- If a student has poor English, her job and study opportunities are much more limited.
- Students weak in English rely on rote learning, memorising scripts, summaries for exams etc. They often don't read the assigned books and only learn for exams, not for self-development.
- English is perceived by some people as the Britishers' language and not for local use.

English and rich/poor divide

- Some participants said English is seen as a posh language and people are thought to be showing off when speaking English.

- But the status of English is changing into a language for everyone.
- Almost all participants feel that everyone, including the poor and those facing social injustices, should be able to learn English and benefit from it.
- Nearly all say that students need to make effort to learn English; they don't face as many barriers as in the past because there is lots of government support for learners.
- Several linked English to India's 'development.'

English as a medium of instruction (EMI)

- EMI was widely seen as beneficial for students. English only lessons are mostly preferred over bilingual or multilingual teaching, though some participants were interested in multilingual teaching.
- Almost all participants thought that EMI in secondary school is a huge advantage over Telugu-medium to prepare for college. Most participants in this research project have mostly had EMI before coming to college.
- EMI in primary and secondary schools often means bilingual education. Usually, exams and textbooks are in English, but often lessons are in Telugu or a mix of English and Telugu. This also happens in the college, but less than in schools.

English, education and gender inequality

- Several respondents said that boys receive priority over girls in families, including in matters related to education.
- Good English can help girls and women have more power to make decisions in the family and become more independent, both financially through jobs and socially through status/respect.
- Most participants talked about the challenges for women to study, learn good English and the discrimination they face in the job market, especially if they have poor English.

English at the college and in classrooms

- Most students are happy with the opportunities they get to use and practice English at the college.
- Many participants said that students who are poor in English are often not interested or lack confidence to engage with English at the college.
- Most said that they enjoy interactive teaching and learning, and this methodology should be encouraged among the teachers to help students develop their English communication skills.

- Most also said that there should be a low pressure and friendly classroom atmosphere where students are not scared to speak English or to make mistakes.

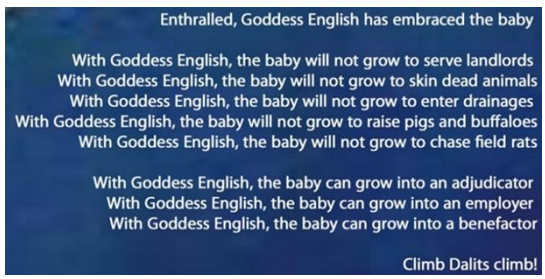
Participating in the interview

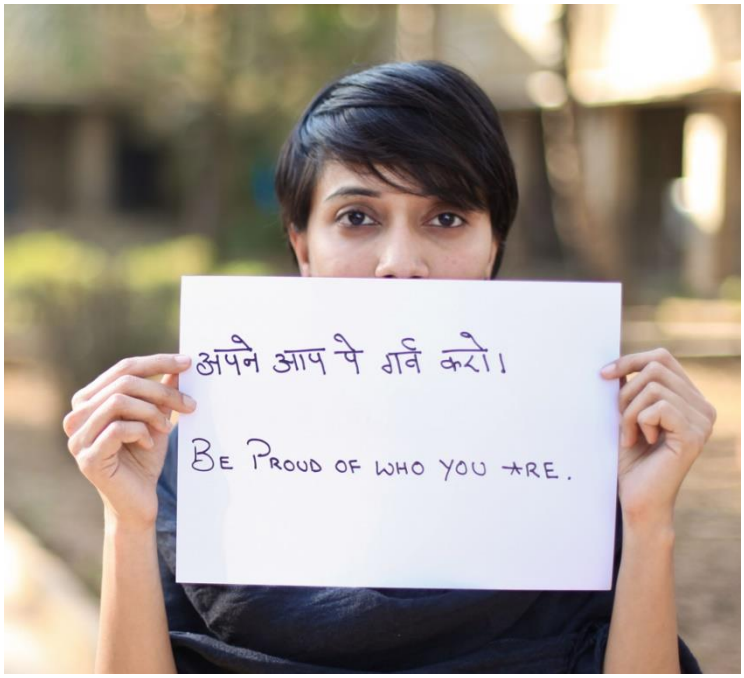
- Most of the participants said they appreciated the opportunity to interview in English and share their thoughts and opinions. For many, it was their first time to interact with an international researcher.
- Some said that they were at first nervous to come for the interview but felt good about doing it after it was finished.

21 November 2022

Thomas Kral

Appendix Four: Examples of photos used in interviews




अपने आप पे गर्व करो।
Be Proud of who you are.


WE WON'T DIE OF OLD AGE WE'LL DIE OF CLIMATE CHANGE
FRIDAYS FOR FUTURE

Appendix Five: Narrative frame

Your Story of English **Name_____**

Instructions: Please read the whole page before starting to write. Complete the sentences with as much detail as possible. Try to fill in all the space to make a true story about your experiences, opinions and future plans.

Before College
I started learning English
In secondary school, the best thing about English was
In the past, learning English was sometimes difficult because
At the college
At the college I use English to
Studying in English-medium is

A problem I have with English is
Another challenge is
I try to solve these problems by
Outside of the college
In my free time I use English to
I also use English for
If I didn't know English
As an Indian woman, having good English means

For me, knowing English as a global language means
<u>The Future</u>
In the future I would like to
Knowing English will allow me to
Overall, the main impacts of English on my life are

Appendix Six: Code report from Atlas.ti

Grouped by: Code Groups All (21) codes

Conversion factors: 7 Codes

- **Fear of judgement/bullying**
- **Interactive and supportive teaching/learning**
- **Interest in literature/culture**
- **Rote learning/banking**
- **Trans/mixed language**
- **Own interest/initiative**
- **Support/opposition from family/community**

Elevated status of English/West: 6 Codes

- **Development of India**
- **EMI as beneficial**
- **English as an unequivocal good**
- **Problematise local language**
- **Respect/status**
- **West/Anglo centrism/native speakerism**

Economic mobility: 2 Codes

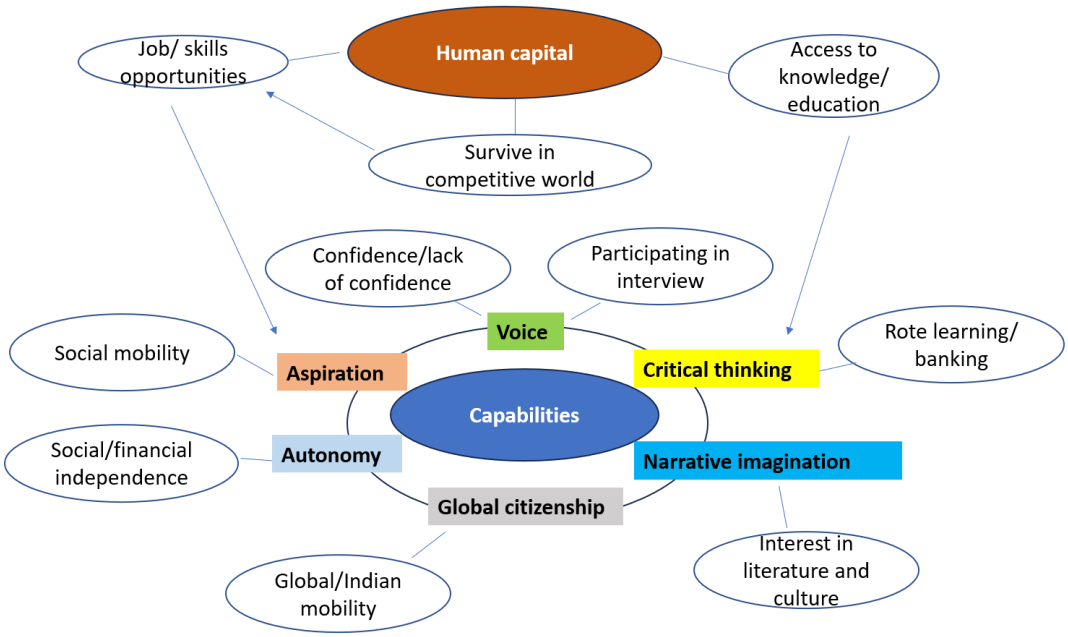
- **Job/income opportunities/skills**
- **Survive in competitive world**

Empowerment/Agency: 6 Codes

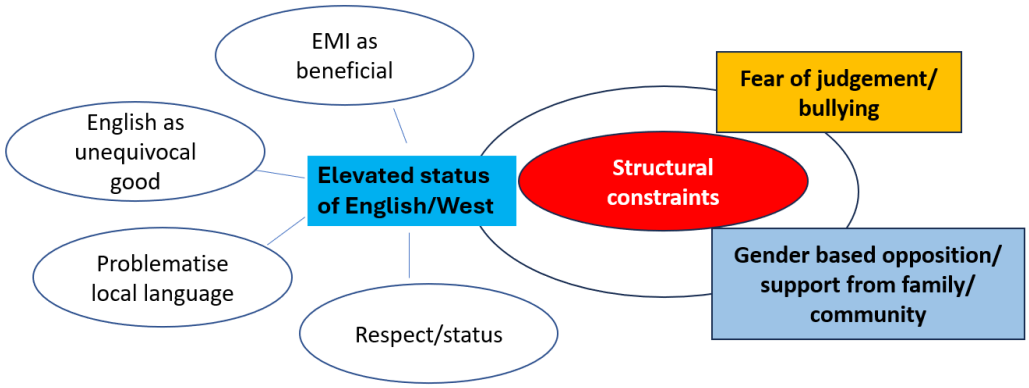
- **Access to knowledge/education**
- **Confidence/lack of confidence**
- **Empowered by participating in interview**
- **Global/Indian mobility/citizenship/voice**
- **Social mobility/aspiration better life**
- **Social/financial independence**

Appendix Seven: Manual development of codes and themes

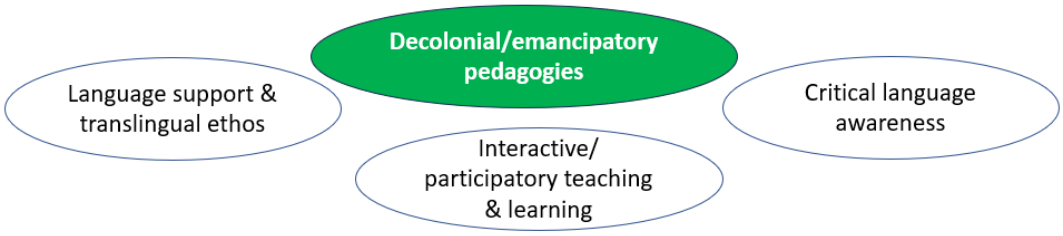
Research Question 1



Research Question 2



Research Question 3



List of abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BSc	Bachelor of Science
CA	Capability approach
ELF	English as a lingua franca
EMI	English as a medium of instruction
HE	Higher education
MA	Master of Arts
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
TA	Thematic analysis
TLF	Three language formula
WE	World Englishes

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