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Seeking Social Justice through English. Stories of (Dis)empowerment at a Women's College in India

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Abstract

In India as in much of the world, the growth of English and English-medium education is believed to be exacerbating social inequalities (Mohanty, 2017). However, English also has the potential to disrupt entrenched class and gender hierarchies by providing a viable pathway to socioeconomic mobility for the most marginalised communities (Vaish, 2005). Drawing on data from a doctoral research project based at a women's college in South India, this article explores English as a precarious tool for empowerment for a growing number of students who come from communities far from metropolitan centres and the English-speaking elite. The study deploys the capability approach, a social justice theoretical framework which has been sparingly used in language education. In interactive interviews, students report developing capabilities like aspiration, autonomy and voice through English but also share distressing accounts of rigid patriarchal structures which threaten to undermine the capabilities English can help develop. The paper also challenges neoliberal understandings of empowerment and suggests pedagogical tools which can enable a more transformative empowerment through English.

Keywords: English, India, gender, empowerment, capability approach.

Streszczenie

Ku sprawiedliwości społecznej poprzez język angielski. Przypadki (nie)upodmiotawiania w żeńskiej uczelni w Indiach

W Indiach, podobnie jak w wielu innych częściach świata, przeważa opinia, że rozwój umiejętności użycia języka angielskiego i edukacja w języku angielskim pogłębiają nierówności społeczne (Mohanty, 2017). Jednak język angielski ma również potencjał do podważania utrwalonych hierarchii klasowych i stereotypów płci kulturowej, oferując realną ścieżkę awansu społeczno-ekonomicznego dla najbardziej zmarginalizowanych społeczności (Vaish, 2005). W oparciu o dane z projektu badawczego będącego podstawą pracy doktorskiej, prowadzonej w żeńskiej uczelni w południowych Indiach, obecny artykuł analizuje język angielski jako narzędzie upodmiotowienia dla rosnącej liczby studentów pochodzących ze społeczności odległych od metropolii i anglojęzycznych elit, ale narzędzie niosące z sobą pewne ryzyko. Badanie wykorzystuje podejście zorientowane na umiejętności, w ramach pojęciowych teorii sprawiedliwości społecznej, które rzadko stosowano w edukacji językowej.

W interaktywnych wywiadach studentki relacjonują, że ich aspiracje, autonomia i własny głos rozwijają się poprzez naukę języka angielskiego, ale jednocześnie dzielą się niepokojącymi historiami o sztywnych strukturach patriarchalnych, które zagrażają rozwojowi tych umiejętności. Artykuł podważa również neoliberalne rozumienie pojęcia upodmiotowienia i proponuje narzędzia dydaktyczne, które mogą umożliwić transformacje tego upodmiotowienia poprzez użycie języka angielskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: język angielski, Indie, płeć kulturowa, upodmiotowienie, podejście zorientowane na umiejętności.

1. Introduction

English has occupied an irresolute place in India since colonial times. 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). For the patriarchy English is crucial to their sons' job prospects, while often little more than a notch up for their daughters' marriage prospects (Highet 2022). Scholars contrast the privileged English haves and the impoverished have nots who fall below the English line (Jayadeva 2018). Many write about the persistent coloniality of English and insist that it exacerbates India's social inequalities (Rao 2017). Others emphasise its potential to give voice and agency to disadvantaged communities (Vaish 2005). For millions of students 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 and social progress with obstinate societal barriers based on gender, religion, class and caste.

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. Most of its students come from lower income and disadvantaged backgrounds, often from rural and semiurban communities where opportunities to attain English proficiency are scarce. For many, navigating an English-medium higher education is a struggle and the college's axiom of 'English for empowerment' remains a nebulous ideal.

In this paper I explore how female students at the college navigate these complex tensions while confronting intersecting barriers of class and gender. In doing so I assess how English can at once empower and disempower their academic, professional and personal aspirations and how educators can nurture a more empowering and socially just language pedagogy. The data for this qualitative study come from interactive interviews and written student narratives, and is analysed through the lens of the capability approach, a social justice theoretical framework which has been sparingly used in language education.

In the next section, I provide an overview of English in India through the lens of socioeconomic and gender hierarchies. I then outline how these hierarchies are understood within the capability approach theoretical framework. This is followed by a summary of the methodology that guided the research, including my positionality as a White male researcher in a postcolonial context. In the findings section I recount the participants' stories on how English can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment, assessed through the capabilities of aspiration, autonomy and voice. The discussion that follows explores three distinct understandings of empowerment that emerged from the data.

2. English in India

2.1. Coloniality or social mobility?

The academic deliberations about the tensions around global English have become increasingly complex and contested. Narratives entangling English with neocolonialism (Canagarajah 2013; Pennycook 2017; Phillipson 1992), global capitalism (O'Regan 2021) and inequality (Kubota 2015) contrast with more optimistic accounts of English as a malleable lingua franca (Jenkins 2007), decentred from its colonial roots (Brutt-Griffler 2002), with the potential to emancipate and extend social mobility to marginalised populations (Vaish 2005).

These tensions around English are salient within India's vast multilingual landscape. Various governments in the decades since independence in 1947 have, with limited success, attempted to counter the elite position of English and to synthesise India's immense linguistic diversity. Twenty-two out of India's thousands of languages have been privileged with official status as 'scheduled languages' thereby marginalising many millions of minority language speakers (Pandey & Jha 2021). The imposed language hierarchy has driven many toward English, which is often seen as an "escape from intra-linguistic dominance" (Kalyanpur et al. 2023: 70). In addition, the suggestions of awarding 'national language' or

'sole official language' status to Hindi has been violently rejected by 'anti-Hindi agitation' in several southern states, most notably Tamil Nadu (Pandey & Jha 2021). Thus, Hindi serves 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 and social mobility among Indians from all parts of the country.

Indeed English has long been a language of economic opportunity in India, but in the current neoliberal era it "is not merely a route to success; for many, it is the very definition of success" (Boruah & Mohanty 2022: 53). As the language becomes available to a wider segment of the population, many wish to disentangle English from the clutches of the elite and leverage its power (Mukherjee 2003). 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. Despite a critical assessment of the schools' teacher-centred pedagogies and much else, Vaish (2008: 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 found that English could be a source of pride, but also a marker of shame and social stigma among students with lower proficiency, not dissimilar to the stigma which results from caste, class or religion (Highet & Del Percio 2021a: 114). A separate 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: 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: 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: 286) astutely observes that "for the vast majority of Indian students, English promises much but delivers little." 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: 9). Such perceptions connect to neocolonial and neoliberally driven attitudes which link English to a an ethically, morally, and racially superior model of being and seeing the world (Highet & Del Percio 2021b: 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 and hybridised into local practice (Pennycook 2010; Vaish 2008). 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: 623). My project answers their call by exploring how less privileged students navigate barriers of social class and gender in their quest for social mobility through English.

2.2. English and gender injustice

Earning a degree and learning English offers the prospect for women to seek out opportunities in lucrative and expanding fields like the digital economy (Vaish 2005). However, female students continue to be streamed into persistently gendered occupational courses such as teaching and nursing, with key decisions on study, work and life trajectories often made by their fathers (Chowdhury 2017). Thus, as Highet (2022: 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 higher education, 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 have 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). Highet's (2022: 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: 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: 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.

To assess how English empowers and disempowers students facing intersecting barriers of social class and gender I have deployed the capability approach theoretical framework, which I outline in the next section.

3. Capability Approach

3.1. Background to the Capability Approach

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. Despite its interdisciplinary application and its extensive use in education, 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 (Crosbie 2014; Imperiale 2017). As a participant-driven tool which foregrounds social justice, the CA is a compelling and intuitively appealing theoretical framework for a study on the lives of female students from underserved backgrounds in India, undertaken by a researcher from the Global North who is committed to a reflexive decolonial positionality.

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 2000). 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 2000: 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, the freedoms or opportunities to achieve a life they value (Sen 1999). 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).

Capability scholars also study how some capabilities bolster and interact with other capabilities. Nussbaum (2011) refers to capabilities which nurture others as 'fertile capabilities' and asserts they should be the focus of pedagogical and policy interventions. In this paper I focus on aspiration, autonomy and voice as examples of fertile capabilities which are key to the research on English and empowerment.

Empowerment is an important concept in the CA and is central to this study on how students navigate English in their studies and beyond. I conceptualise empowerment as "a process of undoing internalized oppression" (Nagar & Raju 2017: 4) while building "capacity for personal development and potential… to access new forms of knowledge which open the

mind and benefit society" (Esch 2009: 4). Given the neoliberal logic which underpins the role of English and language education (Highet & Del Percio 2021b), 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 and patriarchal social values (Proctor 2014). 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 I draw on scholarship which assesses how claims of empowerment in practice reflect neoliberal, socially liberal and transformative paradigms (Kraft & Flubacher 2020).

3.2. The CA in education: Human development vs human capital

The capability approach aligns with the human development paradigm, which 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 2006). 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: 134). 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 2006; 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: 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 2006; Walker 2012). Such an approach places priority on producing compliant workers but fails to nurture social justice, critical thinking and democratic values (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: 36).

3.3. The CA, English and language education

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 teaching models 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 (2014) on fostering intercultural dialogue among students in a multinational English language class spotlights agency and voice 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 empowerment and aspiration in a context of significant gender and social class barriers.

3.4. The CA and gender justice

The capability approach 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: 103). In assessing gender justice in education, CA scholarship is critical of approaches which focus on distribution and parity (Unterhalter 2007). It is instead 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 2023). 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). 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.

4. Methodology

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. Arriving as an accompanying spouse in a part of India which I had never 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 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).

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. The data collection was primarily carried out through interactive dialogic interviews, which have a wider purpose than traditional interviews, seeking a richer co-constructed understanding in order to interrogate power, culture and difference through a reflexive lens (Gubrium & Holstein 2012). 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: 4).

Aiming to counteract the power imbalance and the extractive nature of many research interviews (Kvale 2006), I invited participant interaction through written student narratives, photo prompts and vignettes. The written narratives took the form of a series of sentence prompts which participants were asked to complete, culminating in a story of their lived experiences, their aspirations and their reflections on how English empowers and disempowers their academic and personal journeys (Barkhuizen 2014). The opportunity to write a narrative ahead of the interview encouraged the students to engage with the topic before being asked questions in real time about it. 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 frequently lack confidence when engaging in spoken interaction (Attanayake 2020). Most importantly, the participants' narratives shaped the content of the interview and facilitated deeper and more reflective discussions.

In addition, I deployed photo prompts to reduce participant anxiety during interviews and to bridge culturally distinct worlds, thereby helping the interviewer and participant to more deeply co-construct meaning (Harper 2002). Photos depicting English on posters, adverts and signs elicited participants' views about how the language intersects with work opportunities,

global connections, study abroad schemes, social activism, social inequality and gender injustice. In a similar vein, I developed vignettes to give participants the opportunity to more candidly discuss sensitive issues, power asymmetries and the gendered cultural boundaries they must negotiate as young women (Kandemir & Budd 2018). 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. These tools contributed to the creation of a sufficiently safe cultural 'third space' (Kramsch & Uryu 2011) allowing for interviews to be more candid, interactive and dialogical. Thus, discussions focussed on each participant's unique and sometimes traumatic lived experiences with English and English-medium studies, mediated by gender and social class hierarchies. However, the 'third space' also enabled participants to candidly share aspirations enabled by English which transgress parochial social norms and patriarchal power structures.

To analyse the data I adopted a reflexive process of iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019), which resulted in an interplay between initial coding, developing and refining capability 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.

5. Findings

5.1. Aspiration for a better life

Student aspiration, defined by Walker (2007: 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 (2018: 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). 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.

Unlike Gauri, Gayatri wants to stay in India and join the civil service to advocate for the rights of women in her community. She feels that English is indispensable for her to join global discussions on gender equality and 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…?

For Gayatri, English is a vehicle which fulfils her aspiration to support women in marginalised communities whose languages she sees as excluded from wider discussions of social justice and who are consequently unaware of alternatives.

Gayatri and the other participants are clearly inspired by the opportunities English can offer. 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: 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 the potential to disrupt their cultural and social context.

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

5.2. Autonomy: 'My life, my decision'

In its most simple definition as "the capacity to be the source of one's actions" (Khader 2009: 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 of higher education, Walker (2007: 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… If the women start learning English and they start speaking in English… they will obviously feel confident in 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: 188) work with female college 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]…. She [didn't] know phonics, but… she took training… only two months and she is teaching classes daily, two hours more evening time… 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.

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.

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. Voice: 'Able to talk freely'

Student voice is defined by Walker (2007: 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 2014) and represents the development of the student's identity and the potential to have an impact in the wider world (Barnett 2007: 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). Indeed, many students shared stories in which proficiency in English made previously unattainable life aspirations and personal autonomy more conceivable. However, discussions about development of voice were far more cautious.

For the participants the capability of voice was especially undermined by the parochial social norms which curtail women's ability thrive with English. As Samira told me, "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 starting… that we are not suitable." Samira is nevertheless optimistic that change is possible. "Indian women will grow in English... They can reach their goals as they get rid of that thinking… We can definitely convince this society to stop their [gender bias]."

Many of the participants shared Samira's cautious optimism as they sought to find their voice in English. 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 feeling nervous and even considering dropping out, yet eager to contribute to my study.

For most of the participants the interview provided a rare opportunity to voice their thoughts, giving some 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 the interview provided them with their first genuine opportunity to voice their thoughts. "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: 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).

6. Discussion

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 (Esch 2009; Kraft & Flubacher 2020: 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). Much of the 'English for empowerment' discourse at the college falls firmly within this description. Indeed, the students' notion that English is an essential tool to survive in the highly competitive the job market follows this logic. Even if they overcome barriers imposed by their family and community, studies suggest that women are likely to face callous gender bias in the workplace (Goel 2018). 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 aspirational spaces available to the fortunate among the college's students, their ability to thrive may be limited as they possess neither the masculine Hindu upper caste standing nor the social and cultural capital of the transnational cosmopolitan (Ashutosh 2019). 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 flights from financial precarity articulated by participants were also often positioned as 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; Kraft & Flubacher 2020). We see this through participants who use English to access global discussions on social issues like gender equality, and who want to use their newfound freedom and voice to change in their communities. Appropriating English in this way is an act of defiance (Hooks 1994), especially for young women who are deemed 'unsuitable' to speak English and who are so removed from the urban, cosmopolitan, corporate, masculine elite who have for long held sovereignty over English and all the power that comes with it. The capabilities of aspiration autonomy and voice are especially crucial for such transformative empowerment to become a possibility, yet students feel that these are insufficiently developed 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 curtails autonomy and denies students a chance to unmute their voices.

To support transformative empowerment and the development of fertile capabilities like aspiration, autonomy and voice capability scholars urge educators to involve

> 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: 390).

For teachers, this means shifting away from top down, English-only, exam-focused pedagogies which reproduce hierarchies and injustices (Phyak 2021). Instead, a participatory and translingual ethos would allow students to use all of their communicative resources to support their learning, help find their voice and to use English on their own terms (Canagarajah 2013). Raising student awareness about the coloniality and power dynamics embedded in English would help confront the gendered notions that they are not suitable to pursue aspirations, to exercise their autonomy and develop their voice in English.

7. Conclusion

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, their confidence and their vision of English as the

indispensable language in which they too hope to voice their own stories of emancipation and empowerment.

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