

Decolonizing English in Higher Education: Global Englishes and TESOL as Opportunities or Barriers (SI on Global Englishes and TESOL)

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Abstract

English is core to HE (higher education) globally, with both HE and English seen as pathways to success for students. Yet, access to English is unequal and colonial ideologies associate English with Anglophone settings. Much of the research on English in HE has focused on elite institutions and students, while the majority of the world's HE students remain comparatively under-researched. This paper reports on a mixed-methods study of TESOL in five linguistically and socioculturally diverse HE settings in Colombia, Mexico, Iraq, Thailand, and Vietnam. The aims were to explore the roles and perceptions of English, TESOL, and other languages in policy and practice, (including multilingualism and Global Englishes) and how these related to processes of dis/empowerment and de/colonialization of HE. We sought to uncover the extent to which TESOL and English allowed or restricted access to opportunities of empowerment for different groups of students on their way to and through HE, and how English intersected with a range of dimensions of potential marginalization or privilege, particularly socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and rurality. We present findings from students through a questionnaire ($n = 1820$) and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at each of the sites ($n = 150$).

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INTRODUCTION

The huge rise in the use of English as a global language is reflected in the rapid spread of English language teaching (ELT/TESOL) into higher education (HE). English is increasingly core to HE through entry and exit exams and compulsory ELT courses for all students (not just those on English medium education (EME) programs). Both HE and English are positioned as providing students with opportunities for socioeconomic mobility nationally and globally. For instance, HE is part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Four of 'quality education' and English has a place as a compulsory language in government education policies around the world (Patel, Solly, & Copeland, 2023). However, the extent to which HE and English benefit all groups in society is debatable. Access to HE is typically unequally distributed across income groups, genders, marginalized, and minority communities (UNESCO, 2017). Likewise, in many societies, English is perceived as a language of the elite with 'quality' ELT only available to wealthier students, risking excluding others and further exacerbating existing inequalities (Erling, 2017). Moreover, colonial ideologies associating English with Anglophone countries may disempower, rather than empower, those who use

English as a lingua franca in multilingual settings, where English use is typically different from an idealized and limiting monolingual standard native variety. While much of the research on English in HE has focused on elite institutions and students, particularly in EME, the role of English for the majority of the world's HE students remains comparatively under-researched.

In response to these issues, this paper reports on a project that investigated ELT in HE in middle- and low-income settings (Colombia, Mexico, Iraq, Thailand, Vietnam) where the importance of English has grown significantly in the last decade, and in HE institutions (HEI) with socioeconomically diverse student populations. The research explored the roles and perceptions of English, ELT, and other languages in policy and practice (including multilingualism and Global Englishes), and how these related to processes of dis/empowerment and de/colonialization of HE. We sought to uncover the extent to which ELT and English allowed or restricted access to opportunities of empowerment for different groups of students in their way to and through HE in these settings, and how English intersected with a range of dimensions of potential marginalization or privilege such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and rurality.

We refer to 'decolonizing English' here as approaching English beyond 'colonial' national linguistic and cultural frameworks, while also acknowledging their symbolic power and seeking to actively deconstruct their hegemony. In particular, it is the notion of 'English' as a named language that needs decolonizing, as this lags behind actual speakers' practices of appropriation, and this discrepancy leads to persistent forms of discrimination and inequality. Thus, decolonizing English aims to decenter ideas of English from Anglophone orientations in both linguistic and pedagogic models (discussed further below).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two core approaches used in this paper are Decoloniality and Global Englishes (GE). GE is defined here as "the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions of global uses and users of English" (www.soton.ac.uk/cge) and includes the areas of World Englishes (WE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). WE perspectives have been key in introducing a plurality of Englishes away from the inner circle. ELF research has taken this a step further in investigating English outside of national frameworks as a variable communicative resource used as part of multilingual repertoires for intercultural and transcultural communication (Jenkins, Baker, & Dewey, 2018). The "Decolonial Turn," proposed by scholars in Latin America (e.g., Mignolo, 2012) and developed by many others (e.g., Santos, 2014) seeks to understand,

make visible and (where possible) undo lingering “unequal power, knowledge, race relations and resources, controlled and reproduced in the name of development” (Menezes de Souza, 2013, cited in Jordão, 2019, p. 33). This involves fighting/resisting “Global Designs” (Mignolo, 2012) whereby local (European/Anglophone) histories, epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmogonies about how to make sense of the world are made global/universal.

While coloniality is not in “a language” intrinsically, it is in the gaze and epistemologies with which we describe, study, and teach it. The idealized Anglophone native English speaker models prevalent in descriptions and teaching of English can be viewed as one such “Global Design.” These Anglophone Englishes are typically associated both linguistically and culturally with the US and UK and, to a lesser degree, other countries in Kachru’s inner circle (Jenkins et al., 2018). Moreover, the expansion of English in education policy and assessment is often underpinned by a neoliberal agenda of increased connectiveness and “efficiency” to enable global flows of capital (Kubota & Takeda, 2021; O’Regan, 2021; Sayer, 2015). However, GE research shows how multilingual users of English do not just accept and reproduce dominant and homogenizing “global designs” of English. Rather there are contestation, ownership, and appropriation struggles (e.g., Widdowson, 1994), transformation and re-semiotization (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2018), and complex and variable identity performances and forms of cultural affiliation (e.g., Álvarez Valencia & Wagner, 2021; Baker, 2022). Nonetheless, the impact of GE research on pedagogic practices, policies, and recruitment in ELT/TESOL remains limited (Rose & Galloway, 2019). TESOL continues to center on Anglophone monolingual native English speaker (NES) models of English language and culture as “standard,” despite its distance from the needs of the majority of the world’s multilingual and multicultural English language learners (Ibid). As argued above, this essentialist correlation between English and Anglophone “natives” represents a form of colonialism in reproducing a linguistic and educational ideology that places most “non-native” English users in a deficit position, restricting and marginalizing their multilingual and multicultural use of English (Jordão, 2019). Furthermore, access to this native “standard” is often only available through elite (and expensive) education and networks, further disadvantaging those who learn “other” types of English (Darvin, 2017; Tupas, 2019). As such, Anglophone models are both unobtainable and disempowering for most learners of English.

In contrast, a growing number of scholars and teachers within the fields of GE, TESOL, and decolonial pedagogy work on more empowering and inclusive teaching models that have the potential to challenge colonial, Anglophone ideologies (e.g., Álvarez Valencia &

Wagner, 2021; Baker, 2022; Canagarajah, 2023; Kubota, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Macedo, 2019; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Sifakis, 2019). An overview of all such studies is beyond this paper; nonetheless, core features of “decolonial” perspectives include de-centering the NES and essentialist Anglophone norms, challenging the hierarchization of languages and modes of interaction, and valuing students’ communicative resources, locally relevant knowledge and pedagogies, and addressing power imbalances and unequal opportunities in education and language use. Such approaches recognize the agency that multilingual and multicultural users have in adapting English and other semiotic resources to their communicative needs. The aim is, therefore, to provide a potentially more empowering approach to English and TESOL for both students and teachers in which both their use of English and other languages/resources are valued and their role in shaping English acknowledged. Yet, the extent to which these approaches are “empowering” students to simply participate more fully in neoliberal processes of globalization or enabling them to challenge colonialism and neoliberalism is debatable (Kubota & Takeda, 2021; O’Regan, 2021; Sayer, 2015; Tupas, 2019).

Additionally, whether these perspectives and aims are being successfully applied to everyday TESOL classroom practices is still an empirical question. Previous research suggests a mixed role for English and TESOL in marginalized communities. For example, the studies collected in Erling illustrate how ELT can contribute to security, stability, and peace in conflict situations around the world, while also recognizing that it is not a “panacea for poverty and skills development” (2017, p. 11). However, Kumaravadivelu (2016) is less optimistic concerning the ability of TESOL and the majority of its “subaltern” practitioners to remove themselves from colonial Anglophone orientations, given the continued central role of NES “standards” and “norms;” a view supported by studies of teachers’ attitudes to English language and speakers (e.g., Llurda, 2018). Canagarajah (2023) is more hopeful that with time and reflection, teachers can decolonialize their practices in ways that better represent their settings and students. Both Sayer (2015) and Kubota and Takeda (2021) argue that plurilingual approaches to English have the potential to enable students and teachers to appropriate the language in ways that challenge dominant neoliberal, colonial discourses, but at present policies in education and business strongly orientate to an expansion of English for neoliberal goals. Furthermore, Gimenez (2024) cautions that policy makers’ attempts to construct a less Anglophone, more GE-orientated TESOL curricula can result in both decolonial opportunities through promoting ELF perspectives and simultaneously unintended reproductions of colonial ideologies by curtailing the study of other languages.

Of relevance to this paper is the possibilities decolonial approaches to TESOL have in empowering groups of students for whom the increasing role of English may represent a further form of marginalization. As outlined in the introduction, access to English and TESOL is not evenly distributed and material conditions and diverse identities such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, urban/rural background, and sexuality frequently intersect in students' experiences of dis/empowerment (Kubota, 2020). It is now well-established that identities are constructed, ascribed, or resisted in a constantly ongoing process of negotiation (Block, 2014). Yet, despite Norton's (2000) seminal study over two decades ago, the importance of the material conditions in which these identity constructions and ascriptions take place is seldom explored, particularly in more socioeconomically stratified settings outside of the Anglophone world (Block, 2014; Darvin, 2017; Tupas, 2019). In relation to TESOL, the studies that currently exist demonstrate the significant influence that factors such as class and socioeconomic status (Block, 2014; Darvin, 2017), rurality (Draper, 2012), race (Kubota, 2020), gender (Appleby, 2010), and sexuality (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021) can have on students' experiences with and opportunities through English and TESOL. From a decolonial perspective it is also crucial that as researchers we do not take identity categories for granted and recognize that, for instance, socioeconomic status, class, or gender will be constructed and indexed differently in accordance with different sociocultural groupings and knowledge systems. In sum, while English and TESOL in HE have the potential to empower students, they also have the potential to reinforce colonial ideologies and further disempower marginalized groups. More research is thus needed on the role of English in diverse communities' experiences of TESOL and HE.

METHODOLOGY

To address these issues, we focused on middle and low-income settings where there has been a rapid expansion of English in “non-elite” HE but a scarcity of research. A network of research teams in each setting and the UK were established building on an existing research network.¹ Five HEI were selected based on relevance (i.e., institutions with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minorities, see Table 1) and accessibility to the research teams. While there were shared features between the sites as regards the socioeconomic status of students and the inclusion of potentially marginalized groups,

¹ All researchers had connections to The Centre for Global Englishes at the University of Southampton <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/research/groups/centre-for-global-englishes>.

TABLE 1
Student Demographic Data %

Gender/Sex	Female	Male	Other
	66.2	32.3	0.1
Socioeconomic status	Lower	Higher	
	72.3	21.4	
Ethnicity	Majority	Minority	Don't know
	77.9	18.1	1.3
First language	Majority	Minority	
	78.7	19.2	
Location of schooling	Urban	Rural	
	51.7	47.3	

there was a variety of language, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, rural, and urban populations between and within sites. In all settings, English or “foreign languages” (with English being the de facto choice) were a part of HE national education policies that orientated to internationalization, globalization, and external frameworks, such as the CEFR, for measuring “standards.” Within this overarching framework characteristics of the five sites are given below².

- There are currently around 1.6 million students in HE in Thailand from a population of 71.6 million. While overall student numbers have been decreasing due to an aging population, investment and structuring of HE has developed considerably in the last 10 years. Southern Thai University is a campus of a large government university located in the “deep south” of Thailand in which there has been an ongoing 20-year armed insurgency. Many local students and teachers are Muslim and Malay L1 speakers, while 95% of Thais are Buddhist and Thai L1 speakers. This has led to socioeconomic marginalization of this region and, lacking opportunities, many students struggle to learn English despite its primary role in Thai education.
- The number of university students in Vietnam has increased significantly during the last decade with over 2.1 million HE students in various learning modes out of a population of 97.5 million. Central Vietnam University is in a region considered less developed compared to the North and South of the country. The university has a high number of students coming from rural and/ or low-income families who have limited exposure to English language education. This is creating a gap between students in terms of socioeconomic status and rurality-urbanity, as English is increasingly popular in Vietnam and plays a key role in access to and progress through HE.

² Pseudonyms are used for all sites.

- HE in Iraq, like much of the country, has suffered considerably in recent decades from war, isolation, and armed insurgency. There are still high rates of non-completion of basic education and only 536,000 students in HE out of a population of 43.5 million. However, the situation has improved markedly in the last few years with Southern Iraq University being an example of this, growing from an initial two to 18 colleges today. English now has a significant role in HE in both entrance exams and as a compulsory subject for all students, but research on English in Iraqi HE remains scarce.
- Access to HE has increased steadily over the last 10 years in Mexico moving from 29.1% of school leavers to 34.7% currently. IU in Southern Mexico is one of 16 intercultural universities that provides education to marginalized indigenous communities that were historically excluded from HE, balancing the preservation of local languages and cultures, in this setting Mayan, with the promotion of “foreign” languages such as English. Although English plays a key role in the local tourism sector, the extent to which staff and students experience English as a complementary tool for empowerment or as another colonial language that disenfranchises them remains to be explored.
- HE in Colombia has grown in the last decade with around 2.3 million students enrolled in 2021 out of a population of 51.5 million. Southwestern Colombia University is located in one of the most diverse regions of Colombia. With more than 30 thousand students including mestizo, indigenous, and afrodescendant students, the campus is the space of encounter of multiple cosmogonies, languages, cultural practices, ethnic groups, and races. English is a dominant foreign language in the country and on campus, but further examination is needed of the challenges and the potential that students see in English as a possible source of empowerment, access, or inequality.

This project covered a range of issues related to the role of English and TESOL in HE in these settings, including during study, entry, and exit, and the extent to which English provided or restricted opportunities for different groups of students (see Baker et al., 2024). Here we focus on two aspects that emerged as particularly relevant.

1. What are the roles and perceptions of English, TESOL, and other languages (including multilingualism and Global Englishes) in policy and practice in these settings?
2. To what extent are TESOL and English seen as allowing or restricting access to opportunities of empowerment for different groups of students in their way to and through HE?

We adopted a mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2015) enabling a balance between large-scale quantitative analysis of survey data identifying broad trends, and small-scale qualitative data analysis providing rich descriptions of sites and individual experiences. Data sets and research instruments reported here comprise: questionnaires for students containing Likert scale, ranking, multiple choice, and short answer questions on demographic information, learning histories, experiences, and perceptions of English, TESOL, and multilingualism; semi-structured interviews (audio recorded and transcribed) with teachers, students, and administrators concerning experiences of English language use, learning and teaching, and multilingualism, linked to issues of access, diversity, decolonialism, and empowerment. Questionnaires and interviews were delivered in the majority L1 of each setting and transcriptions were in L1s too. Translation of selected extracts was undertaken by local teams. The project lasted approximately 24 months with data collection over 12 months. Final data sets were coordinated and collated by the UK team and shared with all.

Voluntary participants were recruited from students, English teachers, and administrators through contacts of the research teams at the sites. Purposive sampling was also used to represent the diversity of students in each setting.³ Ethical procedures in the UK and at each institution were followed involving informed consent, the right to withdraw, and anonymity. There were 1825 responses to the questionnaire with 30.2% Colombia, 24.7% Thailand, 19% Iraq, 13.9% Vietnam, and 12.3% Mexico, roughly reflecting the size of the institutions. Demographic data (Table 1) shows that there were more female respondents than male, which may be a result of the disciplines studied with many being language, arts, and humanities-related (Figure 1). Most students were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds which reflected the types of institutions chosen for the study. Interviews ($n = 154$) were conducted with students, teachers, and administrators at each of the sites.

Quantitative data analysis consisted of descriptive and inferential statistics (means tests [t -tests] and correlational tests [chi-squared]) from questionnaire responses. Cronbach's Alpha (0.909) for scale data indicated a high degree of reliability. The quantitative analysis was used to identify frequent themes and statistically significant relationships. Qualitative analysis used thematic and content analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) of interviews. The coding scheme was a mixture of top-down codes derived from the research aims and bottom-up codes that emerged from the data (Miles et al., 2014). Coding schemes

³ In most settings students were not recruited from researchers' current classes to avoid power imbalances. However, this was not possible in Thailand. Nonetheless, it was made clear to students that participation had no influence on grades and a research assistant undertook interviews to avoid undue pressure/bias.

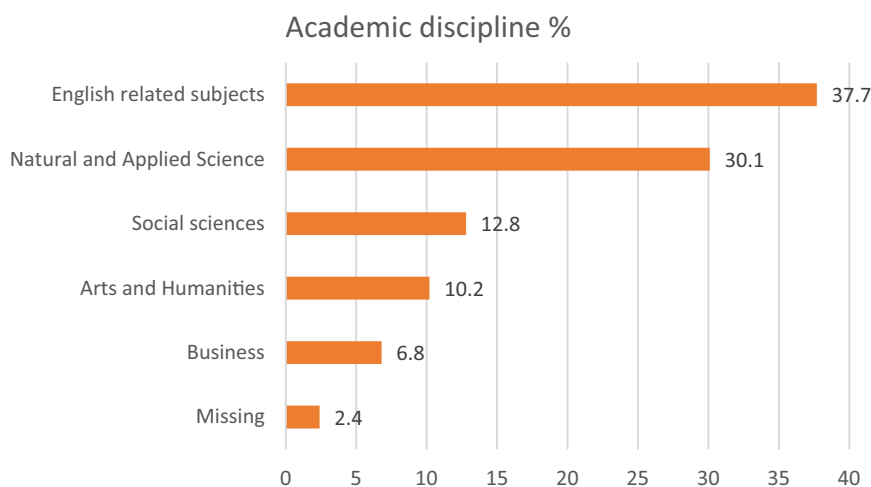


FIGURE 1. Academic disciplines.

were developed in collaboration between teams to ensure consistency in analysis; however, emergent codes specific to the data from each site were also included.⁴ The final aim was to provide a “thick description” of each research setting from multiple data sources, and at multiple levels from individual perspectives and experiences, to institutional overviews, and governmental policies.

Nevertheless, the limitations of each data source and instrument must be acknowledged and while triangulation enhances trustworthiness, it does not eliminate possible blind spots (Silverman, 2020). Trustworthiness was further supported through the balance of insider perspectives at each site and outsider perspectives of the other research teams. The longitudinal engagement of teams with the sites and the 24-month time frame of the project added more support. Transparency and reflexivity were addressed through audit trails and being explicit about researchers’ roles and influences. Although it is not possible to generalize from five HEI, the rich descriptions of the sites and participants’ experiences produce findings that may be transferable to other similar settings.

An additional limitation was that decolonial theoretical frameworks were not carried fully into the methodology. The requirements of funding bodies and HE institutions meant that a degree of top-down, a priori structure influenced the methodological

⁴ A statistical test of inter-coder reliability was not undertaken due to the multiple languages and different software packages used in the coding (the costs of commonly used qualitative software packages were beyond the resources of many settings). However, no quantitative claims (e.g. frequency) are made concerning the qualitative coding analysis.

choices and data analysis. Moreover, the role of Global North British education institutions in processes of continuing coloniality must be recognized. While the final focus and themes were driven by emergent data from the settings, this was based on analysis from the research teams, not the participants and agents in the sites. Nonetheless, the data offers a voice to English language teachers and students from under-represented settings in the Global South. Moreover, the research teams (and many authors of this paper) are from the Global South and this project provides an opportunity for dialogue between Global South and North scholars. Furthermore, the roles of the research teams in the sites before and after the project and continued follow-up activities with key agents attempt to counter the problems associated with extractivist research and a one-way flow of knowledge (Santos, 2018).

Finally, as discussed in the literature review, defining categories of identity is not straightforward, and operationalizing them in such diverse settings involves considerable discussion and compromise. Socioeconomic status was the most complex as it was measured differently in each setting. For ease of analysis, we divided into two groups (high and low) based on reported income compared to the national average and parents' occupations (supplemented by socioeconomic stratum for Colombia). Gender, ethnicity, and languages were self-identified by participants but translations could be contentious, and the cultural appropriateness of asking questions about social status, income, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality was carefully considered. Majority or minority status was based on the majority ethnic group of the country, but this too was not simple. In Mexico, the participants were the major ethnic group in the region but the minority nationally. Moreover, in Thailand, most participants identified with the majority Thai ethnic group as well as with regional religious (Muslim), cultural, and linguistic (Malay) groups which were nationally a minority. Therefore, limitations of both etic researchers' categorizations and emic self-categorizations need to be recognized. However, these "fixed" categorizations of identity were balanced by the more open discussion in the interviews. The data presented here will focus on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and rurality, as the themes that emerged as most significant in this research.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented by research questions with qualitative data further organized into themes drawn from the coding and identified as particularly relevant by the research teams in each setting.

RQ1—The Roles, Uses, and Status of English and Other Languages

The questionnaire data illustrates the extensive role of English in education for participants across sites, disciplines, and backgrounds. Almost all students reported pre-university experiences of studying English with a mean of 9.4 years; although, this was very varied (SD 5.7). Most experiences of English education were in school only with just 25% of respondents reporting private tuition. For many students English assessment was part of their university entry (62%) and exit (72%) requirements. 89% of students were currently undertaking English classes and, despite not drawing students from EME programs, 62% believed they needed English for some content subjects. Concerningly, given the extensive role of English, 79% of students were unhappy with their level of proficiency and 57% felt it was inadequate for their studies. Nonetheless, they overwhelmingly thought studying English was important (97%). While lower percentages than English, many students believed studying other languages was also important (68%) and 42% were currently learning an additional language. There were varied perceptions of the role and importance of English but with a continued influence of Anglophone Englishes. Although studying English for careers and experiences of intercultural communication were the highest two ranked motivations, a desire to meet NES was ranked 3rd out of 12 items (Table 2). Furthermore, Anglophone varieties of English were ranked highest for both usefulness and preference (Table 3). In contrast, only a minority wanted to sound like a NES themselves (28%) and nativeness was ranked last for desirable characteristics of a teacher (Table 4).

The qualitative data reiterated the importance students gave to English, as well as supplementing this with views from teachers and administrators. A common theme to emerge across the sites was English perceived as providing opportunities and “opening doors” (extract 1) for material, social, and cultural advantages. Lecturers and administrators repeated this perspective viewing English as a “tool” for career and economic advancement (extract 2). Conversely, those who are not proficient in English are seen as socioeconomically disadvantaged (extract 3).

English as providing socioeconomic dis/advantage (Extracts 1, 2, 3)

English opens many doors

(Student1, Colombia)

Because English is a tool, right? It is a tool, and in current job positions, if you want to communicate with the outside world, having English will be half the victory.

(Teacher 1, Thailand)

I have met people who go to the tourist area to work and they are discriminated because in that area, many people already speak English and when they are attending to foreigners if you do not speak English 'no, he doesn't speak English, we are going to designate him in other area where he doesn't have contact with people'.

(Student1, Mexico)

TABLE 2
Motivations for Studying English

	M	SD
English will allow me to meet and communicate with more and varied people from many different cultures.	1.74*	1.14
I will need English for my future career.	1.75	1.14
English will allow me to meet and communicate with native speakers of English and learn about their culture.	1.76	1.12
English will allow me to travel to many different countries and learn about different cultures.	1.78	1.14
English will allow me to share my culture with foreigners.	1.81	1.13
I will need English for further study.	1.83	1.13
English will allow me to have a fun and enjoyable experience.	1.92	1.13
Studying English makes me feel that I have accomplished something great.	2.03	1.17
English will allow me to get good grades at university.	2.19	1.14
English will help me express who I am and how I want to be seen by others.	2.21	1.17
English will allow me to pass exams.	2.21	1.15
Other people will respect me more if I have knowledge of the English language.	2.72	1.24

*Likert scale of 1–5 with 1 as the strongest agreement.

TABLE 3
Attitudes to English Varieties

Do you think there is a hierarchy of usefulness/ importance among the items listed?			Do you think the following items can be ranked in terms of which you like/favor the most?		
	M	SD		M	SD
American English	2.10*	1.33	American English	2.06	1.37
British English	2.62	1.51	British English	2.51	1.53
English as a lingua franca	2.96	2.00	Local English	3.18	1.95
Local English	3.32	2.01	English as a lingua franca	3.33	1.99
Australian English	3.84	1.60	Australian English	3.8	1.65
A mix of different kinds of English	4.07	2.24	A mix of different kinds of English	4.2	2.23
Indian English**	4.79	1.85	Indian English	4.97	1.86

*Ranked between 1 and 7 with 1 as the highest ranking.

**A regionally relevant World English variety was selected for each setting, for example, Indian for Thailand.

TABLE 4
Teachers

Who is a good English teacher?	M	SD
Any teacher with knowledge and experience in the use and teaching of English	2.00*	2.00
Any teacher with an excellent teaching methodology	2.11	2.15
A local teacher with a good level of proficiency in the language	2.15	2.20
A native speaker of the language	2.30	2.39

*Ranked between 1 and 4 with 1 as the highest ranking.

English was also perceived as a pathway to cultural exchange, allowing participants to share their own culture and learn about others. With some minority cultural groups, English was seen as providing an opportunity to share marginalized cultures with the wider world, as a teacher from an indigenous Mayan community explains (extract 4).

English for cultural exchange (Extract 4)

English allows us how to say it, that, to make myself known with more people and, what should I call it? Make people notice that, indeed, I do belong to an ancient civilization from a native zone but that I have a legacy, richness that I can share and collaborate, right? And, not only that, likewise I, well, sometimes these guys, is important to be willing to listen, correct? I mean listen and learn from others, right?

(Teacher1, Mexico)

In relation to other languages, English was often seen to complement, rather than replace, local languages with students needing to be literate in both, as the teacher explains in extract (5) regarding disciplinary knowledge for work and study. Furthermore, this complementary role is explicitly linked to the promotion of minority languages and cultures by the teacher in extract 6.

English as an addition to other languages (Extracts 5, 6)

English does not displace or replace Arabic as this is academia and students in Engineering must have their English developed. ... So, he must speak English, and at the same time he must speak Arabic. So, there is no language that threatens either in our work or study here.

(Teacher1, Iraq)

Students are taught that English is not here as an extinction of Maya. On the contrary, it is a tool that is going to be helpful to be heard in international spaces and not only for that but also to listen and to learn from others, that is what interculturality is about.

(Teacher1, Mexico)

Moreover, the socioeconomic and cultural advantages of learning an additional language were not restricted to English. Learning local minority languages was seen to provide career opportunities in the Mexican site (extract 7). In Thailand, a student explained how Arabic was beneficial for cultural and religious reasons and Malay for regional communication (extract 8).

Socioeconomic and cultural opportunities through other languages (Extracts 7, 8)

Here there are still many original communities that speak Maya and the guys have seen it. Some degrees more than others, those of agroecology, do like it because they hire those who know Maya because they know that in the communities they will be communicating.

(Administrator1, Mexico)

If from the point of view of being a Muslim, then Arabic is very necessary to learn because it is the language that the Prophet used. Allah descended upon the Quran in the language, something like this, right? And if not, it is likely to be Malay because it is a language like is closest to me. Then, if I need to contact someone, the people closest to us are in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, and the three countries already use Melayu.

(Student1, Thailand)

Like the questionnaire data, there were mixed attitudes toward Anglophone Englishes. On the one hand, many participants discussed the global role of English as a lingua franca with variable uses (extract 9), the importance of incorporating this into teaching, and even teacher hiring practices in the Thai site (extract 10).

English as a global lingua franca (Extracts 9, 10)

Now it is said that we must move from the multicultural to the intercultural and for that I think that English functions as a lingua franca, right?

(Teacher1, Mexico)

In the past, we have hired English teachers from various countries and found that each has strengths and weaknesses. Qualification as a teacher should not be determined by where they come from.

(Administrator1, Thailand)

On the other hand, there were other participants who strongly orientated toward Anglophone Englishes, including incorporating it into marking criteria (extract 11). Even when the role of other Englishes or “non-native” English teachers was recognized, it was often positioned as less “prestigious” than Anglophone Englishes (extract 12).

English as an Anglophone language (Extracts 11, 12)

Actually during speaking tests or when talking with students, if one student has an American English or a British English accent, or at least they speak with the intonation, I will be much impressed. And my criteria will be immediately affected... I have that orientation towards native accents.

(Teacher1, Vietnam)

Personally, I like to study with native speakers and second language speakers. It means people who use English as a second language. Actually, I like both, but I prefer native speakers because I feel like the version of English they use represents correct English.

(Student2, Thailand)

RQ2—The Roles of Socioeconomic Background, Ethnicity, and Rurality in Students’ Experiences

Although there were statistically significant differences across all the groups (gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, rural/urban, L1) in relation to factors investigated in the survey, socioeconomic status and ethnicity emerged as the two groupings which correlated with the largest number of significant differences. As noted in Table 1 most participants are from lower socioeconomic status families and these students are more likely to be from a minority ethnic group and educated in a rural setting. Furthermore, as shown in Table 5, these students are less likely to have had private English tuition, preparatory classes before university, to have used English outside of school, or to have traveled abroad. Additionally, they have studied English for fewer years, less hours a week, are less likely to need English for their content subjects, are less likely to be studying other languages, rate their English lower, and are less satisfied with their current level of English. Nonetheless, both groups have similarly positive attitudes to the importance of English and of learning other languages.

As noted previously, ethnicity intersected closely with socioeconomic status and had a similar influence on responses to

TABLE 5
Socioeconomic Status

	Socioeconomic status			
	Lower	%	Higher	%
Ethnic group*				
Majority	1015	60.1	349	20.7
Minority	276	16.3	27	1.6
Don't know/none	18	1.1	4	0.2
Secondary school*				
Urban	651	38.2	244	14.3
Rural	667	39.1	143	8.4
Private English language tuition*				
Yes	301	17.7	124	7.3
No	1013	59.5	265	15.6
Preparatory English classes before beginning this university program*				
Yes	347	20.4	161	9.4
No	970	56.9	226	13.3
Experiences traveling abroad*				
Yes	194	11.4	104	6.1
No	1125	65.9	284	16.6
Used English outside of school*				
Yes	552	32.4	218	12.8
No	763	44.8	170	10.0
Is English necessary for your content classes/other subjects?*				
Yes	800	55.1	250	17.2
No	351	24.2	51	3.5
Do you currently use English outside of English classes?*				
Yes	857	50.3	302	17.7
No	460	27.0	86	5.0
Is studying English important for you? ***				
Yes	1288	75.6	385	22.6
No	28	1.6	3	0.2
Are there other languages beyond English that you think are more important for you to learn? ***				
Yes	919	54.2	288	17.0
No	392	23.1	98	5.8
Are you attending foreign language classes, other than English?*				
Yes	525	31.0	229	13.5
No	784	46.3	156	9.2
Are you happy with your current level of English?*				
Yes	224	13.1	116	6.8
No	1094	64.1	272	15.9
Do you think your English proficiency is adequate for your study?*				
Yes	503	29.5	192	11.3
No	814	47.8	195	11.4
Years of learning English**				
Mean	9.38		10.38	
SD	4.68		4.52	
How many hours a week did you learn English on average?***				
Mean	5.48		9.19	
SD	8.91		13.43	
How would you rate your English proficiency?***				
Mean	2.34		2.14	
SD	0.66		0.62	

*Significant at <.001 (Pearson Chi-Square [2-sided]).

**Significant at <.001 (*t*-test [2-sided]).

***No significant difference.

questionnaire items. Minority students were, unsurprisingly, more likely to have a minority language as their L1, and also more likely to have had rural schooling (Table 6). Table 6 shows very similar findings to socioeconomic status with minority students reporting less previous English education and experiences of using English but similar positive attitudes to learning both English and other languages. The only difference was a higher rating for English proficiency by minority students, although the actual rating was very similar (2.15 vs. 2.31) and, importantly, they were more likely to be unhappy with their current level and feel it was inadequate for study. However, in terms of motivations for studying English (Table 2) minority students consistently rated all the items more positively at a statistically significant level (t -test [2-sided] $<.001$ or $<.05$).

Interviews with teachers and administrators confirmed the perception that students from lower socioeconomic groups and ethnic minorities were disadvantaged in their English education. This was manifested through lower levels of English than peers from other regions or social groups (extract 13), as well as less confidence on the part of the students themselves (extract 14).

Lower levels and confidence in English for marginalized groups (Extracts 13, 14)

I can instantly see that although some children from the three southern border provinces possess excellent language skills, the majority still struggle to keep up with their counterparts from the upper southern subregion... I think this is an immense inequality.

(Administrator/Teacher3, Thailand)

I would say, in terms of social class, in terms of ethnicity. Yes, I believe that there are some... let's say, certain geographic, ethnic and cultural contexts that have had much less access to language learning; that have had very limited and not very meaningful experiences. This has even led to stigmatization and to make them feel that they cannot.

(Administrator1, Colombia)

In the interviews, these disadvantages were often directly linked to rurality which resulted in less access to English in their environment and less access to technology which made English study more difficult (extract 15). Even if English education was provided, it could be inconsistent in its delivery and schools may have limited resources and teachers. This was contrasted with the more favorable English education received in urban schools (extract 16).

TABLE 6
Ethnicity

	Ethnic group			
	Majority	%	Minority	%
Secondary school**				
Urban	741	42.4	166	9.5
Rural	677	38.7	164	9.4
Private English language tuition*				
Yes	384	22.0	42	2.4
No	1033	59.2	287	16.4
Preparatory English classes before university program*				
Yes	477	27.3	47	2.7
No	941	53.8	283	16.2
Experiences traveling abroad*				
Yes	286	16.3	20	1.1
No	1135	64.8	310	17.7
Used English outside of school*				
Yes	699	40.0	89	5.1
No	718	41.1	241	13.8
Is English necessary for your content classes/other subjects?*				
Yes	894	59.8	197	13.2
No	277	18.5	127	8.5
Do you currently use English outside of English classes (e.g., social media, gaming, with family, etc...)?*				
Yes	1037	59.3	147	8.4
No	382	21.8	183	10.5
Is studying English important for you?****				
Yes	1394	79.7	320	18.3
No	24	1.4	10	0.6
Are there other languages beyond English that you think are more important for you to learn?****				
Yes	1007	57.8	212	12.2
No	405	23.2	118	6.8
Are you attending foreign language classes, other than English?*				
Yes	722	41.6	33	1.9
No	685	39.4	297	17.1
Are you happy with your current level of English?*				
Yes	304	17.4	51	2.9
No	1116	63.8	279	15.9
Do you think your English proficiency is adequate for your study?*				
Yes	618	35.4	106	6.1
No	800	45.8	224	12.8
Years of learning English***				
Mean	10.26		6.27	
SD	4.48		4.16	
How many hours a week did you learn English on average?***				
Mean	7.18		3.00	
SD	11.11		3.81	
How would you rate your English proficiency?***				
Mean	2.31		2.15	
SD	0.62		0.82	

*Significant at <.001 (Pearson Chi-Square [2-sided]).

**Significant at <.05 (Pearson Chi-Square [2-sided]).

***Significant at <.001 (*t*-test [2-sided]).

****No significant difference.

Rural marginalization (Extracts 15, 16)

The students who come from rural areas or who come from other regions have little access to English prior to the university, according to what they themselves comment. And if they live especially in rural areas, technology and internet access is also very difficult.

(Teacher1, Colombia)

I live in a rural area, so starting from 4th grade, the school allowed us to study English. However, after completing 4th grade, when I entered 5th grade, the school stopped teaching English. Then, in 6th grade, we started learning English again. I'm not sure why they didn't teach English in 5th grade @@. But now I see that in the city, students start learning English from 1st grade with a dedicated program.

(Student2, Vietnam)

At the same time, ethnic minority and lower socioeconomic status students in urban areas were also disadvantaged in access to “quality” English education and education in general and this was a theme that was particularly prevalent in the Colombian site including influences of urban violence (extract 17).

Urban marginalization (Extracts 17)

It really breaks my heart when I see them trying and they can't, because they haven't even mastered their Spanish or because the neighborhood where they come from is a very dangerous... I remember when I had a course from 6 to 8 a student told me: “Teacher, I have to leave at 7 because there are gangs in my neighborhood and they are robbing a lot” That kind of thing.

(Teacher2, Colombia)

In some cases, these different factors combined in complex ways with a history of marginalization for students which placed them at a disadvantage when entering university. As clearly articulated by a teacher in Mexico (extract 18), ethnic minority students were often reluctant to speak in English classes due to the lower status historically associated with their L1, a lack of fluency in Spanish (the language of state education), and seemingly poor previous educational experiences (via TV broadcasts and videos in rural communities).

Histories of marginalization and discrimination (Extract 18)

To make students speak has always been a bit complicated because they indeed do not speak. Those who are Mayan speakers do not

speak, they do not speak in Maya because they feel ashamed to speak in Maya by reason of some process, let's say a historical one where they have been discriminated because of the use of their language, right? They do not speak in Spanish because they have a lot of problems in communicating in Spanish, not all of them, but the majority of them come from TV-high school or TV-preparatory. Sometimes, the first contact they have with the English language is at the university and these students are not familiar to performing in public

(Teacher2, Mexico)

While, as the extracts above illustrate, many teachers and administrators were aware of these issues, not all recognized (extract 19) or accepted (extract 20) that these factors disadvantaged university students.

Rejection of marginalization (Extracts 19, 20)

We have some other students from rural regions across Diwaniayh but I do not know as I do not really care so much about this.

(Teacher2, Iraq)

I think it's mainly because the students are lazy and clearly not proactive in seeking opportunities. There are plenty of opportunities available nowadays, especially with the advent of internet communication.

(Teacher2, Vietnam)

A more positive perspective on the influence of students' previous educational experiences was offered by some teachers and students. They suggested that the lower starting point in English acted as additional motivation for studying English (extract 21), also supporting the higher motivational scores for these students reported in the questionnaire data. Moreover, as recognized by one Colombian teacher, students' multilingual backgrounds can serve as an aid in learning English (extract 22).

Marginalization as motivation (Extracts 21, 22)

In my opinion, the differences are due to geographical location, which affects the opportunities for accessing English education. Additionally, there are students in rural areas who are diligent in their studies, meaning they have a strong motivation and good study discipline, so they still excel academically.

(Teacher3, Vietnam)

And what I did not notice at the beginning was that this student from this Indigenous community spoke several indigenous languages; so let's say, she was not very familiar with English, but she already had a whole communicative competence, a whole language learning process and she applied it.

(Teacher3, Colombia)

DISCUSSION

The central place of English in these students' experiences to and through HE comes across clearly in all data sets. Students receive English education throughout their school years and this continues into university, as well as forming part of HE entry and exit requirements for many. However, the provision of English education was far from even. Students from lower socioeconomic and minority ethnic groups received less English education before university and had less opportunities to use English (e.g., for traveling abroad). At the same time, they reported "lower" quality English education with inconsistent provision, less resources, and less access to technology. The interview data also illustrated how this was linked to rurality for many students (although in Colombia urban marginalization was also highlighted). This resulted in a perception among students and staff that those from less privileged groups started at a "lower" point with English when entering university and, hence, had to work harder to catch up with more privileged peers. While many teachers and administrators were aware of these issues, others were less sympathetic and even dismissed such differences as irrelevant.

Despite these inequalities in English provision, there was an overwhelmingly positive perception of English among participants. English was seen as a "tool" that "opened doors" both socially and economically through better career and study opportunities. Indeed, motivation for studying English was highest among minority groupings as a potential vehicle to escape marginalization. However, as previously argued, and discussed below, the apparent "opportunities" provided by English need to be approached cautiously. English was also viewed as a medium of intercultural exchange, allowing students to share their cultures with the rest of the world and learn about other cultures. Again, this appeared particularly important for students from communities where their cultures had been historically marginalized, as in Mexico. Yet, these opportunities were not restricted to English, and learning other local, regional, and global languages (e.g., Mayan, Malay, Arabic) was also seen as advantageous; although in practice they were less frequently studied. Furthermore,

teaching staff emphasized that English was not a replacement for local languages but rather seen as an addition to them.

In contrast to this positive positioning of English in these communities, there were still mixed perceptions of the “ownership” of English. On the one hand, the role of English as a global lingua franca with diverse uses and users was recognized by many. Nativeness was not rated highly in terms of teaching criteria and in some cases (e.g., Thailand, Colombia) it was explicitly rejected as relevant to hiring practices. Moreover, as noted above, other languages and multilingualism were also valued. On the other hand, Anglophone varieties of English were still overwhelmingly rated as the most prestigious, and some students and staff expressed a preference for Anglophone Englishes as “better” and more “correct”, with a few teachers even explicitly incorporating native like English into assessment criteria (e.g., Vietnam).

While the focus of this paper is on shared findings, there were some important differences between sites.⁵ The Mexican university was established as an intercultural university to serve the local Mayan community and hence focused on meeting local community needs and goals. As a consequence, there were no academic entry requirements, including English, since this was seen as a barrier to indigenous students. The Colombian university, while not specifically designed to serve indigenous communities, made space for indigenous languages and practices in official policies. Furthermore, the Colombian site offered a counter to the perception that urban students necessarily had better opportunities than rural ones. Although policies giving space to diverse languages were less prominent in other settings, in Thailand Arabic as an international language had a significant presence alongside English. Furthermore, students’ and teachers’ identification with Islam and Malay culture and language was not seen as conflicting with their identity as Thais (despite Buddhism’s prominent role in Thai national identity and culture) and most did not self-identify as a minority group. This highlights the complexity and situated nature of terms such as “minority” and “majority” and “national” and “local” identities. Vietnam offered a key example of the link between rurality and limited English resources. Although quantitative data suggested similar access to English education, interviews with teachers and students repeatedly highlighted the lack of resources and inconsistency of the education provided, underscoring the importance of going beyond counting “hours” and “years” of education. In Iraq, there were issues related to gender and low completion rates of basic education, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ Space restrictions mean we cannot discuss this in detail but see Baker et al. (2024) for case studies of settings.

Overall, this study contributes to research on the intersection of different identities and communities in access to and experiences of English education, its place in HE, and the potential of English for both empowerment and disempowerment (e.g., Canagarajah, 2023; Kubota, 2020; Macedo, 2019). Of particular importance was the intersection of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and rurality. The findings highlighting the crucial role of the material/economic base in which these identities were situated (Block, 2014; Darvin, 2017; Norton, 2000; O'Regan, 2021; Tupas, 2019), with clearly documented effects from a lack of resources and opportunities. While there is debate about the necessity or relevance of English education in marginalized or economically deprived communities (e.g., Draper, 2012; Erling, 2017), the importance attached to English by such groups in this study suggests the need to direct further resources to these groups rather than restrict English education as an unnecessary “luxury.” However, the degree to which English actually delivers on its promises of opportunity and advancement needs to be approached critically (Erling, 2017). Staff and students in this study largely seem to align with the discourse of English as a “tool that opens doors,” imbuing English with a high degree of material and social capital (Block, 2014; Darvin, 2017). Yet, beyond anecdotal evidence, it is not clear if English leads to the career, study, or social opportunities hoped for, or to what extent English levels the field for marginalized groups. Furthermore, the material orientation of “opening doors” suggests an alignment with neoliberal rather than decolonial discourses. In contrast, the opportunities English offered to share marginalized cultures indicated a more decolonial potential for English, highlighting the tensions between different perspectives on English (Kubota & Takeda, 2021; Sayer, 2015).

The findings also add to our understanding of perceptions of English as a global lingua franca but extend them beyond the usual focus on “elite” groups of “successful” academics, students, or business people. Nonetheless, like much previous GE research (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2018; Rose & Galloway, 2019), this study demonstrates positive attitudes to English, alongside somewhat ambiguous perceptions of English as both a global language for intercultural communication beyond the Anglophone world, while still maintaining an ideology of Anglophone Englishes (especially American and British English) as more prestigious. The reproduction of an Anglophone nativeness criteria is particularly problematic for lower socioeconomic status, ethnic minorities, and rural students (as in this study) since their previous TESOL experiences (lack of teachers, school resources, internet or other media access) means that they typically have less exposure to Anglophone Englishes. This results in their “non-native” use of English being perceived as a lower level by many teachers, adding another

level of disadvantage and discrimination once they arrive at university. Yet, at the same time, and in contrast to earlier research (Kumaravadi-velu, 2016; Llorca, 2018), the frequent rejection of nativeness as a criterion for a “good” teacher, particularly in relation to hiring practices, suggests a more positive outlook for TESOL breaking free of the colonial orientations to Anglophone Englishes and speakers.

Although there are many potential implications and challenges for TESOL practices that emerge from this study (more than can be tackled in one paper), we believe that a combination of GE and decolonial teaching approaches offer a worthwhile avenue of exploration. Decolonial pedagogies advocate a de-centering of knowledge and practice and valuing of local cultures and cosmologies (e.g., Álvarez Valencia & Wagner, 2021; Canagarajah, 2023; Kubota, 2020; Macedo, 2019) and this aligns with GE approaches which propose a de-centering of English from Anglophone contexts and a recognition of the variable uses and users of English as a global lingua franca (Rose & Galloway, 2019). This involves acknowledging the multilingual and multicultural resources, and the translingual and transcultural process that using English as a lingua franca is part of (Baker, 2022). GE approaches also advocate valuing local teaching practices and materials and a rejection of exonymically (often Anglophone) imposed methodologies and content (Baker, 2022; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Sifakis, 2019). Finally, like decolonial perspectives, GE approaches encourage critical discussions of dominant discourses and challenging homogenizing discourses on language, culture, and identity (Baker, 2022). It is also crucial that these critical perspectives are applied to GE approaches themselves and the role of English and TESOL in students’ education, particularly whether diverse Englishes simply enables students to better serve neoliberal processes of globalization, or if this empowers them to challenge dominant colonial and neoliberal discourses. The details of how this might be done will be varied and are best left to teachers and researchers familiar with local needs and goals.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of limitations to this study that must be recognized. Firstly, while the study has a relatively large number of participants and settings, compared to the huge number of students of English in HE worldwide, no generalizations can be made. Furthermore, although similar trends between the sites have been identified and reported here, there are also important differences within and between sites that space restrictions mean we cannot explore. The

voluntary nature of study recruitment may mean that our participants were already positively disposed to English, with those who had less interest not responding to a call about English education. Crucially, this study drew participants who had already made it to university, and further research is needed investigating students who are unable or choose not to go onto HE and the role that English may or may not play in this. Equally important, is to establish if English provides the opportunities after graduation that students and staff hope for and more longitudinal research tracking students at this stage is needed. Related to this is the need to further explore the degree to which these “opportunities” align with neoliberal perspectives or more decolonial ones. Lastly, it would be beneficial to adopt a decolonial perspective to the methodology chosen for future research which gives participants greater agency in identifying core issues for investigation.

Nonetheless, this study has attempted to illuminate the role of English in and through HE for students, in under-researched “non-elite” HEIs in middle and low-income countries. It is crucial that we understand such settings since these likely make up the majority of the world’s population of TESOL students in HE. The findings demonstrate the extensive role of English in students’ education and the generally positive perceptions of English as offering opportunities for material and social benefits. However, English also operated as a barrier and potential additional form of marginalization for students from lower socioeconomic, ethnic minority, and rural backgrounds. This was mainly due to a lack of resources and opportunities for English education and use, as well as the continued prestige attached to Anglophone varieties of English, to which these students had less access. We have advocated GE and decolonial pedagogies that decenter English from Anglophone settings and users and value local multilingual and multicultural uses and teaching approaches. However, further research is needed to critically investigate the relevance of such approaches in TESOL.

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