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Indigenous students' experiences with English language program in a private university in Ecuador, 2024.

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DEDICATORIA

A mi familia, por su apoyo incondicional y constante inspiración. A mis profesores, por su guía y paciencia, especialmente a mi tutor Tiago Bittencourt. Y a mis amigos, quienes con su compañía hicieron este camino más fácil, especialmente Nicolas Cavallero, Leo Cavallero y Miky Tamayo. Esta tesis es también el resultado de cada uno de ustedes.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis investiga las percepciones de los estudiantes indígenas sobre el tema de la internacionalización de la educación superior a través del inglés y, más específicamente, sus experiencias con el programa de inglés en una universidad privada en Ecuador. Desde mi perspectiva como docente de inglés en una universidad ecuatoriana, comencé a cuestionar si la enseñanza del inglés podría perpetuar desigualdades, especialmente para estudiantes indígenas que enfrentan desafíos únicos en entornos académicos dominados por este idioma. A través de un estudio de caso cualitativo de trece estudiantes indígenas en una universidad privada de Quito, esta investigación explora las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el inglés como una materia obligatoria, su impacto en sus identidades culturales y metas futuras, y su posible contribución a las desigualdades sociales. Basados en entrevistas semiestructuradas, los hallazgos revelan una visión compleja: aunque la mayoría de los estudiantes reconoce el valor del inglés para sus oportunidades académicas y laborales, también señalan su papel en la reproducción de desigualdades sociales y la marginación de lenguas nativas como el Kichwa. El concepto de "comunidades imaginadas" nos ayuda a comprender cómo los futuros deseados por los estudiantes pueden influir en sus actitudes hacia el aprendizaje del inglés. El estudio se centra en perspectivas críticas sobre la internacionalización de la educación superior que señalan sus posibles aspectos negativos y revela cómo ciertas suposiciones principales pueden no alinearse con las comunidades imaginadas de algunos estudiantes, colocándolos en una posición de desventaja. Esta investigación aboga por un enfoque matizado en la enseñanza del inglés, especialmente para grupos históricamente marginados, e invita a una discusión más profunda basada en las voces de estudiantes indígenas que han sido en gran medida ignoradas en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: internacionalización de la educación superior, percepciones de los estudiantes indígenas, inglés, comunidades imaginadas, perspectivas críticas, peligro para las lenguas nativas, desigualdades sociales.

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates indigenous students' perceptions on the broad issue of internationalization of higher education through English and more specifically their experiences with the English language program in a private university in Ecuador. From my perspective as an English teacher in an Ecuadorian university, I began to question whether English language education might perpetuate inequalities, particularly for indigenous students who face unique challenges in English-dominated academic environments. Through a qualitative case study of thirteen indigenous students at a private university in Quito, this research explores students' perceptions of English as an obligatory subject, its impact on their cultural identities and future goals, and its possible contributing factor to social inequalities. Based on semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal a complex view: while most students recognize the value of English for their future academic and job-related opportunities, they also note its role in reinforcing social inequalities and the marginalization of native languages such as Kichwa. The concept of "imagined communities" helps us understand how students' desired futures can influence their attitudes toward English learning. The study focuses on critical perspectives on the internationalization of higher education which points out its possible negative aspects and reveals how its main presumptions may not align with some students imagined communities and place them in a disadvantaged position. This research calls for a nuanced approach to English education, especially for historically marginalized groups, and invites further discussion based on indigenous students voices that have been largely ignored in Ecuador.

Key words: internationalization of higher education, indigenous students perceptions, English language, imagined communities, critical internationalization, danger to native languages, social inequalities.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I have always perceived my role as an English teacher through the lens of altruism, viewing it as a way of helping others. This view stemmed from the belief that the English language serves as a pragmatic tool for facilitating job opportunities and fostering cross-cultural communication. However, lately I have started to question whether it is such an unarguably good practice. This persistent doubt emerges from my own experience as an English language teacher in an Ecuadorian university. What I have noticed is that the majority of my students who fall behind academically and require additional help with the language are from indigenous communities. With ongoing pushes to universalize English language education, I began to wonder what types of injustices or violence are perpetuated with growing demands that all students learn the English language. I also began to wonder whether my role as an English language teacher is truly helpful or whether I am contributing to problems and inequalities such as the perpetuation of colonial logics that validate certain knowledge traditions over others. The doubts I began to have about the value of English language coupled with my observations of the challenges that indigenous students in my classes face made me want to investigate these issues further.

My experiences seem to be a part of a broader phenomenon, which is the Internationalization of higher education. Internationalization in this context, as described by Knight (2004), means focusing on global, cross-cultural, and international elements to improve education and research and to strengthen academic connections between countries. Within the literature on internationalization of higher education there are ample studies analyzing the centrality of English, positioning the language as a necessity. Indeed, according to Adriansen

(2022), English has become universalized through this phenomenon. There is an increasing demand for English to support student mobility, and it has evolved into a language of influence and power. As a form of capital that is acquired over time and through effort, English is frequently a prerequisite for university admission and future career success. However, the dominance of English as a global language can limit opportunities for teaching in local languages. Also, English as a requirement for studying abroad and future success can be frustrating for indigenous students whose own native language is not prioritized and whose access to English classes is limited (Adriansen, 2022, p.3).

With these considerations, there has been a more recent and growing field of studies that critique the internationalization of education, noting its colonial roots and how it may further marginalize populations that have been historically excluded from globalizing processes (Bamberger & Morris, 2023; Stein, 2017). This perspective in the literature is often termed "critical internationalization." It emphasizes questioning the assumed benevolence and neutrality of internationalization by highlighting how these practices can reinforce existing power structures that marginalize and exclude certain populations or individuals, and potentially further endanger native languages. Some scholars have even referred to English as a "killer language", arguing that its position as an academic requirement may threaten other languages (Estrada & Schechter, 2018).

While debate about the role of English abounds, missing in the current literature are studies that examine the lived experiences of historically marginalized populations as they engage with the requirements and demands of the internationalization of higher education. Indeed, while the current dilemma on English language education is widely presented in the academic literature, it is mainly theoretical and ignores the voices of students, especially those

of indigenous backgrounds. This is especially true in Ecuador where limited research has been conducted in higher education settings. To this end, I decided to conduct a qualitative case study that draws on semi structured interviews with thirteen indigenous students from a private university Ecuador, which is an institution with an extensive liberal arts program. The specific issue that my research addresses is how indigenous students at this university describe and understand their experiences with the institution's English language learning program. I believe it is a suitable site for the study, as it has the longest standing and most comprehensive affirmative action program in Ecuador that includes representatives of almost all the ethnic groups in the country.

My study provides an insight into indigenous students' attitudes towards English and into their background related to the difficulties they might have at the university in general and even more so in English classes. Insights from the interviews can provide greater understanding of the issue of internationalization and the inequality it produces. I look into students' perceptions on whether English should be a requirement within the university, ask if they agree with the university's emphasis on English language instruction and explore indigenous students' ideas on how to implement their cultural capital in the classes.

According to the findings of my work there is a broad agreement among the interviewees about the importance of English language and in favor of it being an obligatory subject at the university. Therefore, a positive consensus remains among the populations that one might think should be more critical of it. Most indigenous students agree that English creates more social inequalities, as not everyone has the same access to the language, but it is required from everyone nowadays. They also believe that English alongside Spanish place Kichwa in an even more endangered position. However, what seems to be the point is how they

foresee the importance of English in their future, with respect to the role English plays in their imagined communities. This a theory, that in the context of language learning, was proposed by Bonny Norton (2013) and refers to “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect with the power of the imagination” (Norton, p.8). In the context of language learning, it shows that the imagined community can determine how invested or motivated we are in acquiring the language. In my study, the students who see themselves working or studying in the cities or abroad recognize the relevance of learning English. However, a few students who wish to return to their communities were much less invested in learning that language and preferred dedicating their time to learn Kichwa, a language that fits into their future plans much better,

Nevertheless, there is a question that remains unanswered, and it is difficult to say if the students themselves would be able to answer it easily: Were they driven by a genuine desire to learn English or the fear that if they don’t, they would not fit into the modern world?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous studies analyzing the phenomenon of the internationalization of higher education and the role English language plays in this process. I will begin by defining the concept of internationalization, followed by an analysis of the role of English in this context. Next, I will examine the various perspectives that scholars have on this issue. Finally, I will identify gaps in the existing literature, particularly the lack of focus on the experiences and perceptions of indigenous students in Ecuador as they navigate the demands and requirements of internationalization of higher education.

2.1 The concept of internationalization of higher education

One of the first authors who defined the term of internationalization of higher education was Canadian scholar Jane Knight. Her definition underwent some changes, but finally she defined it as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, and service), and delivery of higher education at institutional and national level” (Knight, 2008, p.11). International practices of universities include international content in curriculum, international students, branch campuses, intercultural agreements, and English as medium of instruction and research. The intercultural aspect of the definition is supposed to address cultural diversity, and it seems to be the most complex element to achieve when it comes to practice, as its importance doesn't carry the same weight or economic profits and some other aspects. In her paper about the changing world of internationalization, Knight mainly focuses on multiple positive aspects of the phenomenon like: enhanced academic quality, better international cooperation and understanding, greater diversity in programs, or improvement in research and knowledge production. On the other

hand, she hardly mentions the possibility of a negative impact on native/indigenous identities, who are dominated by western way of teaching/learning and by English as a language of instruction. In the survey discussed by Knight conducted in 2005 by the International Association of Universities to investigate the risks of internationalization of higher education, the risk to cultural identity loss was scored very high mainly in Latin America. Also, the overuse of English posed medium level risk according to the survey. However, its risk can rise as it is increasingly seen as preferred language for learning and as a main language of instruction and research (Knight, 2008).

The number one risk in most regions was the commercialization of education. According to Knight and Altbach (2007), traditional internationalization was less profit based and included study abroad programs, international majors or sponsoring of foreign students. After the efforts for political decolonization of the global south in the mid-20th century, there has been a growth of universities and international academic exchange, nowadays more focused on profitable industry of knowledge, as education has largely moved from the domain of public or social responsibility to being treated as a private good (Altbach and Knight, 2007). Buckner and Stein (2020) made room for some doubts about the dominant discourse and definition of internationalization of higher education. They argued that there is no mention of global inequalities and power imbalances related to internalization. In their view the definition remains broad and vague and does not include discussions of unequal relations between the countries that could make students rethink their possible privileged or disadvantaged status. However, they find it interesting that the International Association of Universities included some risks of internationalization in their perspective, like inequality in access to higher education, overuse of English, a prestige orientation towards Western cultural elements, and loss of cultural or linguistic identity.

In another survey conducted by European Association of International Education, the main goals of internationalization are related to reputation, competitiveness, and employability, so just economic standing in the world seems to matter. Therefore, the purpose of higher education tends to be competitiveness in a global market not knowledge production, and internationalization helps to achieve this goal. There is an absence of discussion about political, economic, or cultural dimensions of internationalization and privilege it gives to western, rich, and English-speaking institutions. Not engaging critically in internationalization can exacerbate current inequalities (Buckner and Stein, 2020).

2.2 Role of English language in the process of internationalization of higher education

The English language has played a huge role in the phenomenon of internationalization of higher education. There has been a growing desire for English to facilitate students' mobility, as it has become the main language of instruction and research. Hence, it has become a language of capital and power, which is quite often a requirement for a university entry and future successful development. An example of English language dominance is EMI (English Medium Instruction) in non-English speaking countries' higher education system. Because of this practice, internationalization of higher education has often become associated with teaching in English. One of the benefits of providing courses taught in English is that it may attract a greater number of foreign students. According to Adriansen's (2022), ethnographic fieldwork in Denmark, there has been a growing tendency to teach more and more courses in that language, and it has created some tensions between English and local languages as the power of English might limit the potential of multicultural and multilingual development. Some authors went as far as describing English as a killer language (Khaled, 2020).

It is evident that there are two distinct interpretations of the global emphasis on English as part of the internationalization processes: one positive and the other negative. Apart from Knight, who, as discussed before, sees internationalization as a largely positive phenomenon, there are also other authors who see that phenomenon and English language as desirable and beneficial processes.

2.3 Positive perspective on the English as lingua franca

Estrada (2018) is one of the authors who dismisses English as a "killer language" and shows that with careful planning and community consultation, strategies for native language maintenance and English language teaching can be developed jointly. According to the results of the study conducted in trilingual (Mayo, Spanish, and English) settings of Mexico in terms of attitudes and perspectives, the majority of participants were positively disposed to keep the curricular design maintaining both native language and English instruction. The author refers to other experts who propose that the emphasis should be on finding ways for English and local languages to coexist without leading to the decline of the local language (Estrada, 2018).

Another author who believes that English and native languages can coexist in a state of mutual symbiosis is Lopez (2013). He believes that English and Spanish tend to be seen as economically successful languages, and, in contrast, indigenous languages are associated with backwards and impractical thinking. However, the article suggests that international languages taught critically can help promote minority languages. In response to the hegemony of English and other languages over native ones, Critical Ethnographic Action Research Projects were implemented, their main idea being for English to foster multilingualism and multiculturalism to challenge the inequalities between different cultures. What it means in practice is that in school children can use freely Mixtec, Spanish, and English, and that their values, heritage, customs

and stories are valued in the class. Therefore, this proposal is that English should be taught with a critical method valuing indigenous beliefs and practices (Lopez, 2013).

2.4 Negative perspectives on English as lingua franca

Critics of the role of English in Higher Education often highlight its role as a modern commodity and its colonial roots. For instance, Ortega (2023) argues that even though the colonies became independent, intellectual and academic dependency remained, and current education systems still follow the colonial traditions “promoted by English language teaching industry” (p.3) limiting the use of native knowledges and languages. As was mentioned before, education has become commercialized and teachers come to be seen as sellers of a product while students are seen as buyers (producers and consumers of the English language). Therefore, the English language has come to be seen as a commodity. There has been a shift in educational philosophy from pedagogical to market values and English has become a necessary tool to function in the current system and to participate in a global market. Ortega found out that Colombian educational policies see English as the only way to social mobility, even though Colombia is not a bilingual country. As a result, English is not necessarily learned for personal purposes, but just for professional purposes and for survival. One of her interviewees summarized the situation in these drastic words: “No English, no job, no food, we die” (p.13).

Another author who looks at the issue from more critical point of view is Veintie (2013). His critique is more related to general Western epistemology than to English per se. However, English, as we know, plays a central part in that process. According to him, the Western intellectual tradition is privileged in Ecuador and “alternative thinking of alternatives” that might serve indigenous ways more is nonexistent (Veintie, 2013, p.46) Even though Latin

countries became independent in early 19th century, the colonial structures of power didn't go away and indigenous people were still marginalized within the new independent nations. Since the elites were mainly members of the white/mestizo population, Eurocentric views and perspectives prevailed, and higher education was formed based on the traditions of European universities, while indigenous people's knowledge and practices were marginalized. As a response to this situation, in Ecuador indigenous movements have promoted a model of intercultural bilingual education to keep the indigenous traditions and languages alive.

2.5 Gaps in the existing literature

In the Ecuadorian context, the relationship between pushes for English education and the linguistic practices of indigenous communities has been largely examined in theory, with few empirical studies. Indeed, indigenous students' voices have been ignored in that discussion so far. There have been studies conducted in relation to indigenous people perceptions on that issue in Brazil (Pinetti-Passoni, 2019), Colombia (Ortega, 2023), or Mexico (Sanchez & Arzola-Franco, 2023), but there is a noticeable gap in research in this area within the context of Ecuador. My study could add new knowledge on how indigenous students in Ecuador experience internationalization of higher education through the English language, how it affects them, and what their ideas on how to fight any potential negative effects of the phenomenon are. To guide my thinking, I will be drawing on theories associated with critical internationalization, which, as mentioned before, focuses on questioning the benevolence and neutrality of the phenomenon.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to partially address the previously identified gap in the literature by examining indigenous students' perceptions on the issue of internationalization of higher education through English language. To address this goal, I conducted a qualitative case study at a private university in Quito with a strong liberal arts tradition. Moreover, the university has one of the oldest and most robust programs in Ecuador that promotes ethnic plurality. The liberal arts education is highly relevant to the ethnic diversity program as it emphasizes understanding different cultures and perspectives and expands students' competencies to appreciate the complexity and richness of diverse ethnic groups. The ethnic diversity program at the university is considered to be a pioneer in Ecuador. It started twenty-six years ago with only ten students but grew to have a total of five hundred and twenty, with ninety new students admitted each year. Also, internationalization processes that exist at this university make it a suitable site for the research. They include international branches, international students and teachers, students exchange programs, making English an obligatory language to learn and a medium of instruction for various classes.

To recruit potential participants for the study, I worked within my own network. Once I contacted students who identify as indigenous and were willing to participate, through a snowball approach to sampling I established contact with the remaining interviewees. I conducted interviews with thirteen students. Most of them come from Otavalo, some from Cayambe, Chimborazo, Cotacachi, and Cañar, and only one from the Amazon region Napo Alto. The majority are international relations students and speak Kichwa as their first language.

All participants engaged with semi-structured interviews that lasted between thirty-fourty-five minutes. As it is common with semi-structured interviews, the content and questions for each interview varied, based on participants responses. Nevertheless, all interviews addressed the broad themes of participants' previous social and academic experience, their aspirations and expectations of higher education, the participants' background, their previous experience with English, their attitude toward English as a foreign language and as a mandatory subject, their relations with other students and teachers in English classes, and their experience as ethnic minority students and as indigenous speakers in an English class. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and all quotes from interviews are my translation. To protect the students' identities, they were given different pseudonyms.

Once data collection was completed, I began the analysis process. I used thematic analysis to understand the data from my interviews. I closely examined the data to identify common themes or patterns. I used an inductive approach to allow the data to determine my themes. Once I became familiarized with the data by transcribing audio, reading the text and taking notes, I coded the data by highlighting sections of my text that I found relevant. Through the coding process, I could identify a series of themes such as English as a danger to native languages, English as a mandatory class at the university, or the students' imagined communities. When the themes were established, I examined their relationship in order to make some general assertions. Then, I returned to the data set in the effort to identify any disconfirming evidence.

Before presenting the findings, it is worth mentioning that who I am shapes my perspective and approach to the study. This concept in ethnographic methods is often referred to as reflexivity where the researcher recognizes his/her influence on the study, in data

collection stage and in the interpretation phase. It is important to create an honest dialogue with the participants (Guber, 2019). As an English teacher I have come across the issues raised by the emphasis on English learning in many of my classes and took it upon myself to investigate the problem and hopefully find solutions. However, my positionality as an English teacher might produce a possible imbalance of power since my participants are students, and it could impact our interactions. Nonetheless, I tried to make it clear that my aim is to help the students who may struggle in the English program, so that they could talk freely and openly about their attitudes towards the language. In addition, my own identity could also help shape our interactions positively. What the participants and I have in common is being outsiders and the need to adapt to the mainstream culture. The participants and I had to learn Spanish as second language, and I have also been an English language learner at some point. Finding these types of commonalities can break teacher/student or researcher/participant barrier.

In the next section, we will look into students' perceptions of the role of English within the university and ask if they agree with the university's emphasis on English language instruction and if they think it poses a danger to native languages and explore indigenous students' ideas on how to implement their cultural capital in these classes.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The main aim of my case study is to look into students' perceptions and experiences with the English language learning program at one of the major private universities in Ecuador. It focuses on addressing the broader topic of the universal push for internationalization of higher education through English, and how it can create issues of imbalance of power and can affect individuals differently. Debate in the literature related to the value of English is also reflected in students' responses. In this chapter, I will detail four main and interrelated topics that emerged from the interviews. These are: 1- English as an obligatory language at the university, 2- How students perceive their future goals in their imagined communities, 3- English as a danger to native languages, and 4- English as one of the causes of social inequalities.

4.1 English as an obligatory language

At the university where I conducted the study English is a mandatory subject and all students are required to demonstrate English proficiency at a B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to be able to graduate. The institution offers intensive English classes held daily over a two-month period. English courses provide learning at different levels, with placement tests to determine the appropriate entry level. The knowledge students have once they graduate ensures that they can communicate effectively in both academic and professional environments. In many cases, making English an obligatory subject can provide students with significant advantages in terms of global opportunities, access to resources, and employability. On the other hand, there is the issue of respecting local languages, students' background, and practical considerations within different fields of study. Consistent with the existing literature on the internationalization of education, students were divided in

their opinions on the obligatory role of English. Most of them believe that English is absolutely essential, and that it opens many doors, so making it obligatory motivates them to learn and helps them be ready to face the globalized world. Carlos, a student from Cayambe, believes that:

As a language, I see it as a potential tool because, for example, most research, jobs, books, and articles are in English. So, it's a tool to access information; I see it more as a key rather than an obstacle.

Moreover, Tamia, an anthropology student from Otavalo, argued that English is a fundamental language that opens doors to many future possibilities. She said that at first, she didn't see this, but once she graduated she realized how important the English language was.

Now that I've graduated and have a new perspective, I realize how essential it is. I wish I had had this mindset earlier to better take advantage of my courses and English classes. It's incredibly important, especially if you're aiming for more opportunities in the future, particularly if you aspire to have an international career.

On the other hand, there are few students who are against English being an obligatory language at the university. Inti, a student from the Amazon part of the country, believes that English should be optional among other languages. Being forced to learn this language makes him feel anxious and he would rather master Kichwa than English. He had to leave his community to go to a school in the closest town where Kichwa classes were not provided. What he has experienced is a part of a broader issue in which many indigenous students throughout their schooling are required to distance themselves from their cultural and linguistic heritage. Inti viewed the university as a potential place to explore this heritage but felt that English inhibited this. He wished to learn Kichwa at the university but again was faced with restrictions.

According to the university rules, he could not do that before finishing all of the required English levels.

That perspective (English being an obligatory language) can be seen as somewhat discriminatory toward other languages, as it depends on what you are interested in learning. It's important to have the option to choose the language you want to study from the beginning and focus on it. If you concentrate too much on English and don't succeed, you miss the chance to learn something you truly want. (...) Since I want to stay in my community, Kichwa would be more useful to me than English. So, for my future, English isn't as important.

He felt frustrated that the option to learn his mother tongue in his own country is taken away from him. Inti's perception is a part of another issue of how the domination of English can pose danger to local languages.

Huaira, an International Relations students from Cañar, provided a more nuanced response connecting the value of English to students' future goals. She noted that "the path you choose, whether it's learning Kichwa or English, will largely depend on you and the goals you have in life." Here discussion on the role of English resonated with existing concepts in the literature that connect students' investments in a language with how they construct their future. This concept is known as imagined communities and was introduced in the context of language learning by Bonny Norton (2013). It refers to groups of people we imagine ourselves to be a part of in the future. It highlights how an imagined community can influence our level of investment and subsequently motivation in acquiring a language. Although Huaira connected her viewpoint with the imagined communities' concept, she said that it was hard to say if English should be obligatory or optional. If it is obligatory, it can be an obstacle for those who

do not consider English to be a necessity in their lives and would rather learn their native language. However, if it is optional, it could be an easy way out for those who already speak Kichwa and miss an opportunity to learn another language. Her insightful perspective takes us to the theme of imagined communities that emerged in the interviews.

4.2 Imagined Communities

Imagined communities, as mentioned earlier, are groups we imagine ourselves to be a part of in the future. Bonny Norton used that concept in relation to language learning. However, Benedict Anderson was the one who came up with this term to describe a nation. He argues that nations are "imagined" because people within a nation can never know or meet all other members, but they have a similar mental image of their community (Anderson, 1983). Norton applied this concept to future not immediate imagined communities. In context of this study, it is related to how students perceive the importance of English in shaping their futures, specifically in relation to their imagined communities. In language learning, an imagined community can greatly influence one's investment and motivation to master a language. In this study, students who envision themselves working or studying in urban areas or abroad see learning English as essential. However, those who plan to return to their local communities are less motivated to learn English, preferring instead to focus on Kichwa, which aligns better with their future goals. Most of the interviewed students wish to study abroad, and later to work abroad or in the larger urban areas of the country. For this reason, they consider English to be a necessary tool to get to where they want to be. They need it now to get access to academic information that is mainly in English and for their possible futures. Carlos who would like to study and work in UK, believes that "as a language, it as a potential tool because, for example, most research, jobs, books, and articles are in English. So, it's a tool for accessing information."

Few of the students, on the other hand, see themselves back in their communities, not in big cities or abroad. They are the ones who do not feel the need to know English now or in their future, and it has become more of an obstacle for them. Maite, a student from Chimborazo who is doing two degrees in Business and in Administration, wishes to help in her parents' business in her community one day.

My family has a business, but it isn't systematized or run by a professional. They work in an empirical way. When I graduated as a technologist, I started working for a financial intermediation company. At that point, I realized I needed more knowledge. I felt that I couldn't settle for just having finished my technology degree. That's why my goal was to keep studying so that I could later help my parents with their business using the knowledge I gained.

Inti, the student from the Amazon region who felt frustrated about having to learn English and about not having many opportunities to learn Kichwa, hopes he could come back to his community once he graduates and help the local society with his newly gained skills. However, he sees this goal as difficult to accomplish.

I'm supposed to be studying to graduate and work on research projects for my community, to develop ideas, improve entrepreneurship, and the economy, especially related to my field of study. But once you graduate, it's like... you have to move forward. You don't return to your community. You come back after 5 or 10 years, during your free time from work because right now everything revolves around money. I'd love to create a project, live in my community, and help out, but I don't have the financial means to do so. For that, I need to work. And if I work for 5 or 10 years, it becomes harder to return.

Nevertheless, there were also two students who happen to be siblings and have a very similar positive vision of the value of English, and yet still want to return to their communities once they graduate. Unay, a law student, plans to study and work abroad and come back to his community with new knowledge and skills. His sister, Achik, wants to create a foundation to help people in need, especially women, and to come back to her community to put into practice what she learned.

My plan has always been to start a foundation to help vulnerable people. I'm not entirely sure how yet, but I want to carry out that project. I do want to return to my community to implement everything I've learned here, and bring it there. I want it to be a dream realized in my community, and to ensure that the gaps I experienced are not faced by future generations. I want them to learn even more than I did.

As we can see, quite often students' perceptions on the value of English were aligned with what communities they imagine themselves being part of in the future.

4.3 English as a danger to native languages

Despite students' varied views about whether English should be mandatory or not, most agreed that English posed a threat to the linguistic and cultural practices of indigenous communities. English has become a universal language that might be one of the forces that place native languages in danger of extinction. While some believe that these languages can coexist in a state of symbiosis, others believe English to be a parasite consuming local languages and spreading to many different areas of society. The vast majority of students that I interviewed agreed that Kichwa is in danger, although not only because of English, but because of the two dominant languages in Ecuador: Spanish and English. Like I mentioned before, sometimes it is a matter of survival to learn the dominant languages, and Rimai, a

student from Otavalo, confirms that idea: “In a country with little resources, priority is given to survival not to language maintenance and survival is easier with Spanish and English. (...) More resources are provided for the spread of English than Kichwa.”

Unay, another student from Otavalo, believes that English and Spanish, being high- status languages, changed the destiny of Kichwa. According to him:

English and Spanish are more prestigious languages and Kichwa unfortunately is not. Institutions don't know how to balance these languages. Globalization is not bad but we need to find the balance and it is in hands of institutions not individual people.

Alex, who comes from the region of Chimborazo, also agrees that: “Kichwa became a language that doesn't matter in contrast to Spanish and English. Dominant languages are endangering native ones, and when they die a part of history dies.” Inti summarizes the issue concluding that globalization and internationalization through English are inevitable, and that we can't resist globalization but need to find a way to save local languages at the same time.

A few of the students stated that English does not pose a threat to native languages. Several students are convinced that they can coexist. They believe in additive, not subtractive bilingualism, where dominant language does not replace the local one, but both can develop at the same time. As Tamia stated: “They can function together, not one against each other”. Samai had a very similar vision saying that: “English or Kichwa is just another language to learn”. As we can see, most students, with a few exceptions, acknowledged the danger of dominant languages, whereas all of them agreed that English can contribute to already existing social inequalities that will be presented in the next section.

4.3 English contributing to social inequalities

Apart from putting native languages in danger, there is one other possible negative consequence of the universal push for English. It can exacerbate existing social inequalities and marginalize further certain populations. It seems that nowadays only privileged people have access to learn English leaving less privileged ones in a very disadvantaged position. Not only is their access non-existent or limited, but, if they have access to English study at all, the quality of classes they receive is usually very low. All the interviewed students admitted that the level of teaching in the schools in rural areas was extremely low. They reported that teaching English was reduced to just completing written activities, and that no speaking practice was involved. Samai explains that:

I didn't really learn much in school; it was always like the same thing year after year, but even so, it was very difficult. I feel that the teaching methods didn't work. The methodology was more about completing exercises, not so much about speaking or using the language.

In addition, there was a significant turnover of teachers in rural schools, which makes learning less efficient and more stressful. Also, some students complained that the classes were lacking necessary equipment to teach the language. According to Achik:

In school, we did have classes, but they weren't really like proper classes, you could say, because it was always the same thing: a teacher would come, wouldn't get used to the class, and then leave. Another teacher would come, couldn't adjust, and then leave. And there were days when no teachers came at all, because hiring one and then another was a complicated situation.

As a consequence, people from communities face more occupational and educational problems. Achik confirmed how English can create inequalities by saying " I have missed many opportunities, both job-related and in university, because I don't know English well."

Samai also believes that the push for English can cause social inequalities.

I do feel that there is more social inequality because, for example, in rural schools the level of English is much lower. You can notice it among classmates and everything; you can see the difference. So, many times, people are divided based on whether they can speak English, and in a way, they are considered better. So, the language does create these distinctions between the two.

Furthermore, once the students started having classes at the university, their problems were not over. They reported that the teachers mostly adapt to the majority of the class instead of adapting to the level of the students facing the biggest challenges, and they are told to move too quickly through the material. Students believe classes should last longer than two months, so that the new material could be digested before moving on to the next topic.

Sara, a psychology student from Cotacachi, stated that:

Arriving at the university without even the basics of the English language is difficult because supposedly those who don't know English are placed in level one, but there are people who do know it. So, those who do know, I mean, they already have knowledge of grammar, of how to speak, whereas there are people like us from the community who barely know grammar, especially pronunciation. The teachers adapt to those who already know, and so, we, the ones from the communities, tend to stay quiet, we just listen and don't try to interact or learn the way we should.

Some students even suffered discrimination in English classes directed against their indigenous background. One of the interviewed students shared with me a worrying story about how the English teacher treated the indigenous students from his group on the first day of classes:

They would make us step forward if we were part of the ethnic diversity program. This created a barrier between us and the teacher, as well as with our other classmates, in my opinion and that of my peers. The teacher would always start by asking who was in the diversity program, and then he would say something like, 'If you are part of the ethnic diversity program, I will not have consideration for you. I know many of you ask for consideration or help, but that won't happen in my classes.'"

Only two students mentioned discrimination in classes in schools and at the university. However, they both graduated a while ago, and the appropriate action was taken by the university against the teacher who demonstrated discriminatory behavior. Current students reported that they did not suffer discrimination of any kind, and, on the contrary, they consider the university to be a safe place free of racial prejudices.

In conclusion, in this chapter we were presented with the perceptions of indigenous students on the topic of value of English as an obligatory language in higher education, as a tool or obstacle that might be helping them or impeding them to get to their imagined communities, as a danger to native languages and as a factor contributing to social inequalities. In the next chapter, we will examine their perceptions to try to understand them better and see what implications they provide.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In my research I was trying to find out what indigenous students' perceptions of the English program are at a private university in Ecuador and, in a broader view, their perceptions of the universal push for English in higher education. First of all, the participants mostly agreed that English should be an obligatory language at the university, as they believe that this language is an indispensable tool for future opportunities, both from academic perspective and career wise. However, most of them admitted that they faced various difficulties at different levels of the program as their previous language education did not prepare them for the methods or the pace of English classes in the higher education system. Most of them struggled with speaking activities and tended to be reserved and shy in classes. They often had to repeat the levels, and some of them were faced with the problem of not being able to graduate because of the lack of completion of all the English levels.

What was surprising was that, even though most of the indigenous students struggled in the English program at the university, and believed that it can cause danger to native languages and further marginalize disadvantaged populations, they still believed English is an essential language to know, and that it should be obligatory. Most of them admitted that they need English to be able to get a decent job or to study further, either in Ecuador or abroad. According to these findings, it seems that indigenous students' relation to the English language is largely predicated by how they perceive their desired futures. As Norton (2013) explained, when learners invest in language learning, they do so with the hope of gaining access to the imagined communities that they aspire to join (page 8). They invest more to be able to acquire linguistic skills but also to become a member of their future imagined group. English language students

are motivated by the desire to participate in communities they value or imagine themselves a part of in the future, which, as they all mentioned, opens door to many educational or job-related opportunities.

The concept of imagined communities aligns with the main presumptions of internationalization of higher education, which promotes the kinds of futures mentioned above. The implication of the fact that many of indigenous students wish to study or work abroad could be so-called indigenous “brain-drain”. English could be a tool that helps skilled, educated, or talented individuals leave their communities to pursue opportunities elsewhere which can result in loss of valuable human capital. Quite often people who leave their communities stay where they migrated, as these places provide more academic or occupational prospects for them. They also become used to their new realities, and it becomes a challenge to go back to their previous lives. Inti confirmed that point by saying that he wished he could return to his community, but he believes that once you graduate you need to keep moving forward, and that it is really hard to return. Similar phenomena happened in Poland in the 90’s where many university graduates emigrated to Western Europe in search for better paid jobs, and they started to return recently after more than 30 years when Polish economic situation has significantly improved (Hryniewicz, Jałowiecki, & Mync, 1992).

As we can see from the literature review and students’ responses, internationalization of higher education through English is not necessarily a beneficial process, and its presumptions may align with many students, however they can exclude others. Not only might it exacerbate existing inequalities, as students from privileged backgrounds with better access to English education gain more advantages, but it could also place students who don’t see their futures abroad or in the cities, but in their communities, in a disadvantaged position. English as an

obligatory language presents itself as more of an obstacle in these cases. The concept of imagined communities can help explain the negative impact on learners who are forced to learn a language that they do not envision themselves using in the future. If students cannot imagine becoming part of a community where that language has relevance, their investment in learning the language may be significantly diminished, and this results in weakened motivation. This lack of connection can lead to negative learning outcomes and disengagement. This, in turn, makes it difficult for those students to graduate if English is an obligatory subject.

Another significant proposal of the study is that the voices of indigenous students should be heard or even included in the decision-making process because they are the ones mostly impacted by the universities language policies. It is important as understanding indigenous students' perspectives can provide insights to develop curricula or language policies that align better with their values and needs. Ignoring their voices and not trying to understand their needs can cause disconnection from their cultural heritage that can impact their personal identity or academic engagement. Including their voices, needs, and proposals can add that cultural diversity element that seems to be missing in the process of internationalization of higher education. Since I had a chance to hear them out, here I present some of their recommendations and ideas. Even though only few participants mentioned English being an optional foreign language at the university, this idea still forms a recommendation. Some suggested an option to choose any foreign language to be completed before graduating, not just English, while others mentioned an option of studying English and Kichwa at the same time, which could make Kichwa more recognized and help those who wish to master their native tongue instead of the dominant one.

There was a discontent expressed by some that, even if English is the only obligatory language, the option to choose another language should not be limited to finishing English levels first. There are students who struggle and finish English levels at the same time that they graduate, so the possibility to learn another language of their interest is not available for them.

When it comes to classes, some students believed that teachers went through the material too fast and proposed having longer semesters (four months instead of two) for each level, so that more time could be spent on each topic instead of rushing through the material. Also, it seemed that many teachers adapted more to the majority of the class, when there were a group of more advanced students, instead of adapting to the specified level of the course, which left the minority of students who represented the actual level of the class in a disadvantaged position. This is especially visible in low levels like 1 or 2, where oftentimes most of the class has a higher level of English, and teachers adapt to them instead of focusing on those who are in minority but are in fact in the right class for their level.

The study participants also suggested that providing adequate language support for indigenous students could help them learn English better. Without proper support, marginalized students may struggle with academic performance, and this can further exacerbate educational inequalities. Therefore, another thing that was suggested were extra classes on Fridays for students who need additional help, and since most of them tend to be indigenous, it could be an initiative carried out by English Department and PDE department.

Moreover, including topics of indigenous culture in English classes was what all the students agreed on. They said it has not been mentioned before in classes, and that they mainly learnt about the cultures where English is spoken, however being able to talk in English about something so close to their own culture makes them feel more connected to the language they

learn and prouder of what they express. It is a part of so called cultural pedagogy where student's previous knowledge and practices are included in classes and we learn from students as they learn from us.

There are some limitations of my study that should be taken into account. I have only interviewed thirteen students, and probably a larger sample would give us more representative results. Also, I believe that a quantitative study could help understand the problem better and could complement the result of my research. I believe that interviewing teachers could also give a great insight on how they view the issues.

In conclusion, the internationalization of higher education through English presents both opportunities and challenges for marginalized populations. On one hand, it offers access to global knowledge, mobility, and potential for socioeconomic advancement, and on the other hand, it risks deepening educational and social inequalities and erosion of native languages and knowledge systems as well as can be a factor influencing indigenous brain-drain. The interviewed students are aware of both advantages and risks of that phenomenon and believe that English should remain an obligatory language at the university as it aligns with their imagined futures, however they wish their voices on how to improve the programs were heard.

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APPENDIX

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APPENDIX A: PROTOCOLO DE ENTREVISTAS

En primer lugar, gracias por aceptar participar en mi estudio. Me interesa conocer tu historia sobre tu experiencia en el aprendizaje del inglés en la USFQ. Tengo algunas preguntas que hacerte. No debería llevarnos más de 30-45 min. Por favor, recuerda que no tiene que responder a ninguna pregunta y que puedes terminar la reunión en cualquier momento. Espero que no te importe que esta entrevista sea grabada. Antes de comenzar, ¿podrías decir tu nombre y la fecha de hoy?

1. ¿Puedes hablarme un poco de ti?

- ¿Dónde vives?

- ¿Podrías describir tu comunidad?

- ¿Con qué grupo étnico te identificas?

- ¿Qué idiomas hablas?

- ¿Qué estudias?

2. ¿Podrías describir tu experiencia escolar anterior?

- ¿Cómo era la población escolar?

- ¿Qué idiomas aprendiste?

- ¿Qué idiomas utilizabas fuera del aula?

3. ¿Cuáles son tus expectativas en relación con la educación superior?

- ¿Por qué es importante para ti la educación?
- ¿Te gustaría estudiar en el extranjero?
- ¿Por qué elegiste esta universidad?, ¿cuáles son tus expectativas y fue difícil adaptarte?

4. ¿Podrías describir tu experiencia previa con el aprendizaje del inglés?

- ¿Dónde lo aprendiste? ¿Durante cuánto tiempo?
- ¿Disfrutaste de las clases?

5. ¿Qué opinas del idioma inglés?

- ¿Te gusta aprender nuevos idiomas?
- ¿Para qué crees que podrías necesitarlo?
- ¿Estás de acuerdo con el énfasis que pone la universidad en la enseñanza del inglés?
- ¿Debería ser el inglés un requisito en la universidad?

6. ¿Podrías describir tu experiencia con tu profesor de inglés y tus compañeros de clase?

- ¿Cómo describirías tus interacciones en clase con tus compañeros?
- ¿Cómo describirías tus interacciones en clase con tu profesor?
- ¿Cuál es tu nivel de compromiso en la clase?

7. ¿Cómo describirías tu experiencia como estudiante indígena en las clases de inglés?

- ¿Cuándo crees que se nota más tu origen étnico?

- ¿Cuándo te has sentido más cómodo y cuándo menos?

- ¿Crees que tu profesor proporciona un ambiente de apoyo a los estudiantes de minorías étnicas?

8. ¿Crees que tu capital cultural (creencias, ideas, lengua) se utiliza en clase?

- Si no se utiliza en clase, ¿crees que debería hacerse? ¿Y cómo?

- ¿Puedes dar ejemplos?

9. ¿Qué piensas de la tendencia global de usar el inglés en la educación superior como medio de instrucción y comunicación?

- ¿Qué piensas sobre este tema en el contexto del peligro para las lenguas indígenas y las desigualdades sociales?

Gracias por tu tiempo y su paciencia. ¿Tienes alguna pregunta? ¿Es posible que nos pongamos en contacto contigo en el futuro para una entrevista de seguimiento?