

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

**Imagining Futures: Learning Motivation, Identity, and Self-
Perception in ELL Classrooms**

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**Imagining Futures: Learning Motivation, Identity, and Self-Perception in
ELL Classrooms**

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RESUMEN

En el contexto globalizado actual, el inglés ha consolidado su papel como *lingua franca*, funcionando como una llave de acceso a oportunidades académicas, profesionales y sociales. Sin embargo, su predominio plantea interrogantes sobre la identidad, las narrativas sociales y la equidad en las prácticas educativas. Este estudio de investigación-acción examina cómo el aprendizaje del idioma, la formación de la identidad y las *comunidades imaginadas* interactúan dentro de un aula en Ecuador. Basándose en el concepto de “inversión” de Norton (2013) y la noción de “comunidades imaginadas” de Pavlenko y Norton (2007), el estudio analiza cómo los estudiantes expresan sus aspiraciones, motivaciones y relación con el inglés mediante la implementación de un Proyecto de Amistad por Correspondencia con compañeros de Sri Lanka.

Los resultados muestran que el compromiso de los estudiantes con el inglés está influenciado por inversiones aspiracionales, la exploración de su identidad, el impacto de los medios de comunicación y las conexiones interculturales. Aunque muchos estudiantes perciben el inglés como una herramienta para la movilidad socioeconómica y la integración global, también lo valoran como un medio para la autoexpresión y la construcción de afinidades culturales. El estudio resalta la necesidad de priorizar la conexión humana en la enseñanza del inglés, cuestionando los enfoques competitivos impulsados por un sistema capitalista que suele dominar los contextos educativos. Se aboga por un cambio hacia una pedagogía centrada en el ser humano, que fomente relaciones significativas, empodere a los estudiantes para navegar paisajes socioculturales complejos y posicione al inglés como un puente hacia una comunidad global más inclusiva y empática.

Palabras clave: inglés como *lingua franca*, comunidades imaginadas, inversión, identidad, investigación-acción, Proyecto de Amistad por Correspondencia, Ecuador.

ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, English has solidified its position as a global *lingua franca*, serving as a key to accessing academic, professional, and social opportunities. However, its dominance raises critical questions about identity, societal narratives, and equitable teaching practices. This action-research study examines the intersection of language learning, identity formation, and imagined communities within a classroom context in Ecuador. Using Norton's (2013) concept of "investment" and Pavlenko and Norton's (2007) notion of "imagined communities," the study explores how students articulate their aspirations, motivations, and relationships with English through the implementation of a Pen-Pal Project with peers from Sri Lanka.

The findings reveal that students' engagement with English is shaped by aspirational investments, identity exploration, media influence, and intercultural connections. While many students envision English as a tool for socioeconomic mobility and global integration, the language also serves as a medium for self-expression and cultural alignment. The study underscores the importance of human connection in English teaching, challenging competitive, capitalist-driven approaches that often dominate educational contexts. It calls for a shift toward human-centered pedagogy that fosters meaningful relationships, empowers learners to navigate socio-cultural landscapes, and positions English as a bridge to a more inclusive and empathetic global community.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca, imagined communities, investment, identity, action research, Pen-Pal Project, Ecuador.

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INTRODUCCIÓN

In today's globalized world, English has cemented itself as the primary lingua franca, deeply woven into educational, professional, and social landscapes worldwide. This unprecedented spread can be attributed to a blend of historical, economic, and sociopolitical factors. Serrano (2016) highlights how this historical foundation has propelled English to the forefront as a global language, positioning it as more than just a means of communication. English has become a marker of social and economic status.

The current landscape reflects a world where English is often perceived as essential for academic advancement and professional success, acting as a gatekeeper to global resources and opportunities. As Pennycook (2012) discusses, this dominance extends into cultural and ideological realms, where English carries implicit values and norms that may influence or even overshadow local identities. While English facilitates access to international networks, it also presents barriers, particularly in non-English-speaking countries, where proficiency often determines one's academic and economic potential.

At the same time, the global spread of English has led to educational practices that often disregard the unique identities and motivations of students, instead focusing on English as an inherently beneficial skill. While learning English is frequently seen as a pathway to academic and professional success, this perspective alone can obscure the personal and social factors that condition how students engage with the language. Sociological theories offer a more nuanced understanding, suggesting that language learning is not merely about attaining proficiency but is instead deeply intertwined with each learner's social context and aspirations.

Concepts like Norton's "investment" and Pavlenko and Norton's "imagined communities" challenge the notion of English as a neutral skill, showing that students invest in English with the hope of accessing broader social, cultural, and economic opportunities. This

investment, therefore, is about constructing an identity within a globalized world. At the same time, the concept of “imagined communities” underscores learner’s connection to a broader, often idealized, social world they envision themselves becoming part of. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue that these communities, though not physically present, are psychologically influential, providing learners with a sense of belonging and purpose that can drive their motivation to learn.

As an English language teacher, I often encounter a notable gap between sociological theories on language learning and the traditional input-output perspective that still shapes much of classroom practice. Indeed, this complexity is often overlooked in favor of a more mechanistic view, where language acquisition is treated as a straightforward process of absorbing vocabulary and grammar. This approach risks missing the deeper, individual reasons students bring to language learning. Reasons tied closely to their aspirations, self-concepts, and the communities they envision joining.

Concerned about this disregard to students’ own identities and social positions in language classrooms, I decided to implement an action-research project in my classroom, centered on a Pen-Pal Project as a practical tool to bring these sociological insights into everyday teaching. Through this project, students exchanged letters with peers from Sri Lanka. These exchanges were designed to show insight into each student’s unique “investment” in English and their “imagined communities,” helping me observe and understand how English functions as a means for students to connect with the world and envision their future selves.

While this study is specific to my classroom context, I intend for its findings to resonate beyond my immediate setting. By closely examining how students articulate their personal connections to English and the communities they wish to join, I hope to identify insights into the broader challenges faced by language educators in other contexts. My goal is to provide an

overview of how action research can help teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice acknowledging the deeper motivations their students bring to learning English.

DESARROLLO DEL TEMA

The value of teaching English as a Lingua Franca

The concept of a lingua franca, a common language facilitating communication among speakers of diverse native tongues, has historically been tied to broader sociopolitical and economic forces. English's current dominance as a global lingua franca is deeply rooted in historical and geopolitical factors. As mentioned before, this historical foundation has established English as a marker of social and economic prestige (Serrano, 2016).

In the modern era, English has solidified its status as the most powerful global language, consistently ranking above others like Mandarin and Spanish in its ability to enable international communication and economic participation (Rojas & Hernández-Fernández, 2018; Pennycook, 2012). This centrality underscores the perceived necessity of English learning, particularly in developing regions where it is often seen as essential for accessing global resources and opportunities. For many countries in the Global South, including Latin America, English represents a pathway to socioeconomic mobility, embedding itself deeply into educational and professional aspirations (Rojas & Hernández-Fernández, 2018).

However, this perceived necessity warrants a more critical examination. As Pennycook (2012) observes, while English operates as a unifying force across geographical and cultural boundaries, it simultaneously serves as a vehicle for perpetuating inequalities in educational and professional contexts. English carries implicit cultural and ideological values, subtly reinforcing the norms and power structures of dominant English-speaking nations, making its spread far from neutral (Pennycook, 2012).

The role of English as a lingua franca has become increasingly prominent in Ecuador, driven by its integration into the national education system and its growing societal value.

Ecuador's engagement with English began in 1912, with its initial introduction in schools. By 1928, the Universidad Central had established English teacher training programs, although these efforts faced obstacles such as limited resources and a shortage of qualified educators (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020).

English became part of the national secondary school curriculum in the 1950s, and universities across the country began offering programs to support its instruction. However, these initiatives lacked standardization, and by the 1980s, significant disparities emerged between public and private schools. While public schools allocated only 1-2 hours per week to English instruction, private institutions offered up to 20 hours (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020).

In 1993, the government introduced a new curriculum, including the CRADLE program, which aimed to enhance English education and prepare students for a globalized economy. Although the program needed improvements, it marked a critical step in legitimizing English learning nationwide (González Arteaga, 2013).

The early 2000s saw English gain recognition for its role in fostering cultural exchange, global engagement, and access to technological and business opportunities (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020). In 2006, English became an official subject in both public and private schools, and the Plan Decenal de Educación aimed to address educational inequalities, improve teacher training, and expand access to quality education (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020).

Subsequent years saw continued reforms. In 2009, the Ministry of Education incorporated English into primary school curricula as an elective subject, though resources and administrative priorities dictated its implementation. By 2011, the curriculum expanded

to include 3-5 hours of weekly English instruction in primary schools (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020). In 2014, Agreement 0052-14 mandated English instruction from the second grade of primary school through the final year of high school, a policy implemented nationwide by 2016. The Go Teacher program further strengthened this effort by training educators to reach a B2 proficiency level through intensive programs and international opportunities (Mosquera & Villafuerte, 2020).

However, the legitimization of English in Ecuador's educational system has raised challenges that cannot be underestimated. They extend to bilingual education programs in indigenous communities, where policies prioritize Spanish and English over native languages like Quichua, further marginalizing indigenous linguistic identities (King & Haboud, 2002). This reflects a broader critique of English language policies across Latin America, where neoliberal motivations often prioritize global capitalist agendas over local sociolinguistic needs, risking the "symbolic annihilation" of native cultures (Ortega, 2024).

In the same way, while these initiatives have broadened English education, González Arteaga (2013) notes that English proficiency often correlates with social status and economic advantage, reinforcing its role as symbolic capital. Despite the institutionalization of English, indigenous languages continue to face marginalization, revealing an imbalance between promoting English as a *lingua franca* and preserving Ecuador's linguistic diversity.

It is clear that as a global *lingua franca*, English is widely recognized as a gateway to international opportunities, enhancing access to education, professional networks, and cultural capital (Serrano, 2016; Pennycook, 2012). This is the case of privileged students in Ecuador's private schools, where societal expectations impose English proficiency as a crucial marker for maintaining or advancing their socioeconomic status.

In private schools offering International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, these learners often envision themselves as part of global academic networks, pursuing international careers, or adopting lifestyles associated with Western, English-speaking cultures. Their investment in learning English reflects not merely a desire for linguistic proficiency but a deeper connection to imagined communities that transcend geographic boundaries. These aspirations to engage with global networks and access economic opportunities further shape their identities as English learners, tying their educational pursuits to broader social and cultural privileges.

This is the case of the institution I am currently working for, a prestigious private school in Quito, Ecuador with over 30 years of history. It serves an upper-middle-class community and is recognized for its academic excellence, holistic education approach, and sustainability initiatives. The school emphasizes leadership, responsibility, and environmental consciousness, aligning with its mission to develop self-aware and socially committed individuals.

The school's vision to become a socially valued and sustainable institution by 2026 drives its objectives, which include maintaining accreditations (COGNIA, International Baccalaureate), increasing enrollment, and promoting sustainability. As expected, English language education is held as a priority showcasing twelve hours of instruction every week in elementary school and nine in middle and high school.

Theoretical Sociological Approaches to English Learning

This intricate relationship between language acquisition and identity is deeply rooted in theoretical frameworks that explore the motivations behind learning languages and how these intersect with personal and social aspirations. For instance, Bonny Norton's theory of

investment offers a sociological perspective, challenging traditional views of motivation by emphasizing the dynamic and identity-driven nature of language learning. Norton (2013) argues that learners invest in a language not only for practical gains, such as jobs or education, but also for access to symbolic resources like cultural capital or identity transformation. This investment is closely tied to social relationships and power dynamics, highlighting how learners' identities influence their decisions to engage with a language.

Pavlenko and Norton (2007) extend this framework with the concept of imagined communities, borrowing from Benedict Anderson's idea. Imagined communities represent the idealized social groups that learners aspire to join, such as international academic institutions, professional networks, or culturally significant spaces. These communities exist in the learner's mind as future-oriented goals, providing a psychological connection to an envisioned identity. By engaging with English, learners position themselves as potential members of these Western globalized communities, motivating their sustained effort and investment.

These frameworks collectively highlight that English learning is more than just a technical skill. It is a deeply personal process intertwined with learners' identities, aspirations, and imagined futures.

Methods

Despite the theoretical insights into language learning, these frameworks often remain disconnected from the realities of classroom practice. While these theories emphasize the role of identity, aspiration, and sociocultural context in language learning, the traditional methodologies still prevalent in many classrooms reduce English education to standardized outcomes. This disconnection is particularly problematic in contexts like Ecuador, where

students often learn English through input-output approaches that overlook the humanistic potential of language learning. In many schools, the primary goal of English teaching is to prepare students for standardized exams. This narrow focus neglects the deeper personal and social dimensions of language learning, which theories of investment and imagined communities show.

This lack of alignment between theory and practice creates a critical gap. On the one hand, research demonstrates how learners benefit from envisioning themselves as members of broader, global communities through English, shaping their motivation and engagement. On the other hand, classroom instruction continues to prioritize rote learning and linguistic proficiency over fostering meaningful connections and identity development.

To address this gap, I implemented the Sri Lanka Pen Pal Project as an action research initiative. Based on the concepts of “Investment” and “Imagined Communities”, I designed this project to bridge sociological concepts with my personal teaching practice. The premise of the Pen Pal Project was to question whether we can communicate with people from all around the world using English. Sri Lanka was chosen for this project because it is located on the opposite meridian to Ecuador, emphasizing the global reach of the language. My classroom includes three groups of students, ranging from twelve to fifteen years old, with an average of nineteen students per group. Over the course of two months, my students engaged in a series of five written exchanges with peers from Sri Lanka through emails. These interactions explored diverse topics, including favorite food, traditional dishes, holiday destinations, personal profiles, hobbies, and daily activities. The culminating exchange, which will be the focus of the findings, explored students’ relationship with English learning, their expectations, and perceptions of the language. My students were able to take part in an authentic communicative challenge. From their emails, I gained key insights about their

investments in the English language while looking into their performance inside the English speaking global imagined communities.

In addition to fostering language development, the project allowed students to step into the role of social investigators. They analyzed the responses from their Sri Lankan counterparts, identifying similarities and differences in their English learning experiences. This investigative process involved interpreting data, generating summaries, and drawing conclusions, which were later presented to teachers and school authorities. The experience allowed my students to compare their investments with their Sri Lankan peers and reflect on the imagined community they share.

A total of twenty-nine samples taken from the last exchange were used as source material for this action research. They were thoroughly read and analyzed, looking for shared topics and experiences. The emails were then sorted into main categories. However, this approach proved to be unhelpful because many emails contained data that could fit inside different categories. Looking for another way to organize the information, I resorted to the use of analytical memos, drawing from many emails to exemplify a broad phenomenon. A list of citations was made to support every thematic group trying to reflect the diversity found among my students. Finally, the findings were organized regarding their internal relationships, as well as their connection to the sociological theory referred to.

Findings

1. Aspirational Investments

As sociological theories such as those proposed by Norton (2013) suggest, language learning is not a singular or uniform process; rather, it reflects the diverse and multifaceted ways students invest their time, energy, and emotions into acquiring a new language. These

investments are shaped by personal, social, and cultural factors, which influence learners' motivations and experiences in unique ways. The following analysis delves into the key themes that emerged from students' reflections, exploring how aspirational goals, evolving identities, intercultural interactions, and the influence of media shape their engagement with English and illuminate the complexities of the language learning process.

This complexity became especially evident in the pen-pal activity, where students provided rich insights into their varied investments in learning English. Despite belonging to a relatively homogenous group in terms of class background and academic socialization, their reflections revealed markedly different ways of relating to and engaging with the language. Nevertheless, for most students, English was seen as essential for achieving desired futures tied to international mobility. For instance, one student articulated their ambition, saying, “I want to live in U.S.A when I grow up” (Email 20). This statement reflects how students connect English proficiency with the possibility of physically relocating to a space where the language is dominant, imagining futures aligned with global mobility and personal growth. Similarly, another student expressed, “If I learn more English, I can go to a university in England” (Email 28). This highlights the association between English and access to prestigious educational institutions, where mastering the language is seen as an essential step toward achieving their academic aspirations.

Beyond individual aspirations for relocation or higher education, students also recognize the broader, practical utility of English within local contexts. As one student stated, “We use English to enter local universities and travel to other countries” (Email 10). Here, English is framed also as a resource for navigating opportunities closer to home, such as gaining access to local higher education institutions or enhancing their ability to engage with the world beyond their immediate surroundings.

These reflections underscore how aspirational investments in English are deeply tied to the concept of imagined communities. Students envision themselves as active participants in globalized spaces, aligning their goals with broader societal narratives that position English as a marker of upward mobility and international access. For instance, the desire to study in the United States or England signifies not only educational ambitions but also aspirations of cultural integration and professional advancement.

The multifaceted nature of these aspirations highlights how learning English is embedded in students' broader life narratives. While some are drawn to the academic prestige associated with the language, others find inspiration in its ability to facilitate global connections.

2. Identity and Self-Expression

However, students' investments are not only tied to imagined futures. Rather the language is closely tied to their current identities and how they perceive themselves both within their communities and the broader world. English serves as a powerful medium for students to articulate their identities and emotions, offering them new avenues for self-expression that might not be found in their native language. This theme explores the emotional and cognitive connections that students establish with English, illustrating its role as a transformative tool in shaping their evolving sense of self.

One student shared, "I really like to talk in English, I feel I can express myself in a different way" (Email 20). This statement highlights how English enables students to access a mode of self-expression distinct from their primary language, suggesting a cognitive and emotional liberation tied to their linguistic choices. For some, English becomes a tool for communication they explore to define their personal identity.

Another student elaborated on their preferences, stating, “To be honest I like British English better because it’s fancier and more like me” (Email 23). This reflection demonstrates how linguistic variations within English allow students to align with cultural identities that resonate with their aspirations or personal tastes. The student’s preference for British English suggests an alignment with an imagined identity that reflects sophistication or cultural affiliation.

Moreover, English seems to facilitate shifts in cognitive processes. One student remarked, “I feel I can think in English when I do this” (Email 12), pointing to a deeper level of engagement where the language becomes intertwined with their thought processes. This cognitive immersion indicates how English learning transcends functional usage, shaping how students perceive and interact with the world around them.

These reflections illustrate that English is more than just a medium of communication; it is a bridge to self-discovery and an evolving sense of self. For many students, English provides a space to explore facets of their identity that may be dormant in their native language. Whether embracing a cultural persona associated with British English or experiencing shifts in cognitive engagement, students are actively negotiating their identities through the language.

3. The Role of Media in Shaping Investments

In the same way, media plays a pivotal role in shaping students’ engagement with English, bridging the gap between formal learning and real-world application. Through movies, music, and games, students build their identities while immersing themselves in English speaking culture. This section explores how media serves as both a motivational factor and a learning resource.

One student shared, “I prefer to watch in English because I learn new words and also because it’s more fun” (Email 12). This comment highlights the dual role of media as a source of linguistic enrichment and enjoyment. By engaging with English-language media, students naturally acquire vocabulary and contextual usage, demonstrating the intrinsic motivation that media can inspire.

Another student emphasized the cultural appeal of media, stating, “Understanding beautiful songs and movies in English is my favorite part of learning English” (Email 29). This statement underscores the emotional connection students develop with English through media. By interacting with art and narratives in the target language, students deepen their appreciation for English and its cultural expressions.

The immersive power of media is further illustrated by one student who noted, “My favorite are movie soundtracks or songs” (Email 22). For this learner, music becomes a gateway to exploring English in a way that feels natural and engaging. These preferences reflect how media consumption integrates language learning into students’ daily lives.

These examples demonstrate how media allows students to bridge the divide between formal and informal learning, providing opportunities for independent exploration and practical application. Media immerses students in authentic language use, allowing them to interact with cultural contexts that might otherwise remain abstract in traditional classroom settings.

Moreover, through exposure to English-language media, students visualize themselves as participants in the global English-speaking world. This connection reinforces their motivation to learn, as media offers glimpses into cultural landscapes they aspire to engage with, be it through travel, academic pursuits, or creative expression.

4. Intercultural Connections

English serves as a medium for students to forge intercultural connections, situating their learning experiences within a broader global context. Through initiatives like the Pen-Pal Project students interact with peers worldwide, reflecting on how English facilitates their participation in imagined communities that extend beyond their immediate environments.

One student reflected on their bilingual interactions, saying, “Sometimes I speak English with my cousin who is American... but the English is not our first language because we speak Spanish, like all the Latam” (Email 7). This comment reveals an awareness of bilingual and intercultural realities, where English functions as a shared resource between diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The student’s ability to navigate between Spanish and English highlights the practical and symbolic role of English as a bridge connecting local and global identities.

This example is particularly compelling because it showcases a desire to create opportunities for meaningful language use beyond the classroom, even if these opportunities are somewhat contrived. The effort to engage in bilingual exchanges, despite the natural dominance of Spanish in the student’s personal life, reflects an investment in the symbolic capital English provides. However, this dynamic also points to a potential challenge: the limited organic opportunities to use English in everyday contexts. When these artificial moments cannot be consistently recreated, students may experience resistance or disengagement from the language.

Acknowledging this tension is critical for educators aiming to sustain student motivation. By recognizing the gap between classroom practices and real-world language use, teachers can design activities that better simulate authentic intercultural communication.

Providing students with structured but meaningful opportunities to use English can help bridge this divide, reducing the risk of frustration or resistance and fostering a more sustained and genuine engagement with the language.

Another student demonstrated curiosity about their peers' language use, asking, "I wonder how much English you speak outside of school?" (Email 7). This question reflects the student's developing interest in the cultural and linguistic practices of others, underscoring their curiosity and engagement with the lived realities of individuals in other contexts. Such inquiries suggest that students are beginning to visualize their participation in a multilingual and multicultural global community.

Further, the recognition of English as a tool for international communication is evident in one student's observation: "In Ecuador, we use English to communicate with people of other countries like Sri Lanka" (Email 7). This statement highlights English's role as a global lingua franca, enabling students to engage in cross-cultural exchanges and expand their understanding of diverse perspectives.

These reflections illustrate how English facilitates meaningful connections between students and their imagined global peers. Through intercultural interactions, students begin to see themselves as members of a larger, interconnected world. This aligns with sociological concepts of imagined communities, where individuals construct a sense of belonging with groups they may never physically encounter, unified by shared language and goals.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how English language learning intersects with students' aspirations, identities, and societal narratives. By analyzing their investments and the imagined communities they aspire to join, it becomes clear that

English learning is deeply rooted in personal and cultural contexts. This section delves into these insights, exploring their implications for educators, institutions, and policymakers, and reflecting on how these dynamics reinforce the broader societal positioning of English as a lingua franca. It also addresses the challenges educators face in balancing diverse student motivations with structured institutional demands, framing the discussion within the broader goals of equitable and transformative education.

The findings revealed a rich diversity in how students engage with English, reflecting varied investments and connections to imagined communities. Students see English as a language to master and as a pathway to achieving their aspirations. For instance, some students expressed desires to study abroad or pursue global careers, viewing English as essential for accessing prestigious opportunities. Others highlighted the role of English in self-expression, with preferences such as British English reflecting deeper cultural alignments.

A significant aspect of students' engagement with English involved its capacity to foster intercultural connections. Through initiatives like the Pen-Pal Project, students used English to interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, broadening their worldviews and developing an awareness of bilingual and multilingual realities. By navigating cultural differences and exploring the lived experiences of others, students began to see English as a bridge that connects them to a world beyond their immediate environment.

The role of media also emerged as a powerful influence in students' English learning journeys. Engaging with English-language movies, music, and games provided an immersive context where learning was integrated with entertainment and personal interests. Media facilitated language acquisition in authentic settings, allowing students to internalize

vocabulary, cultural nuances, and communicative practices. For many, media also shaped emotional connections to the language, with some students expressing their appreciation for the beauty of English songs or the cultural resonance of film narratives.

Students demonstrated overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward English language learning, viewing it as a gateway to social opportunities. For many, English was seen as a critical tool for achieving personal and professional aspirations, such as pursuing education abroad, advancing in global careers, or participating in cultural exchanges. This enthusiasm underscores the perceived societal value of English, particularly in contexts where it is associated with economic mobility, social prestige, and global interconnectedness.

These positive perceptions are deeply tied to students' beliefs about English as a lingua franca. This belief system aligns with broader societal narratives that position English as a language of power, access, and identity construction. By learning English, students internalize its symbolic value, associating proficiency with inclusion in globalized spaces and the ability to navigate complex cultural and professional landscapes. Such perceptions highlight the influence of societal systems and institutional structures, which reinforce the prominence of English through curriculum design and cultural messaging. By engaging with English, students are participating in a broader societal framework that continues to affirm its status as the language of opportunity and empowerment.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding the role of English as a lingua franca and the societal beliefs that sustain its prominence. Students' views of English as a tool for achieving global mobility and success reflect broader societal narratives that position the language as indispensable. These beliefs are mirrored in educational practices, which often emphasize English as a means of accessing cultural capital

and economic privilege. This alignment underscores a critical reality: as educators, we are not just teaching a language but also transmitting societal beliefs about its role and value. In doing so, we influence how students perceive not only English but also their place in the world.

The study highlights that English continues to function as a lingua franca because society collectively sustains this belief. Institutions reinforce its status through curricula, policies, and cultural messaging, while teachers and students engage with these narratives in the classroom. As educators, this calls for a deeper awareness of the beliefs we transmit and the implications they carry for our students and the societies we serve.

One of the primary goals of this action research project was to inform and improve teaching practice by bridging the gap between theory and classroom reality. The study's most significant implication for practice lies in prioritizing the investments and imagined communities of students, granting them greater importance than they are traditionally given. This requires a shift in pedagogy, where understanding our students becomes a central part of the teaching process. By acknowledging their unique motivations, aspirations, and social contexts, educators can design activities that allow students to actively participate in their learning journey. Such an approach positions students as co-creators of their educational experience, fostering a sense of agency and ownership. Reflecting on my own pedagogy, this project has reinforced the value of creating a classroom environment where students are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active, aware participants. By aligning activities with students' lived realities and future aspirations, teachers can empower learners to connect more deeply with the subject matter while building critical awareness of their roles within their communities and the broader world.

On the one hand, a key takeaway from this study is that knowing our students on a deeper, more personal level is fundamental to effective teaching. Beyond the transmission of language skills, teaching should foster human connection and meaningful relationships within the classroom. By dedicating time to understanding students' unique aspirations, motivations, and identities, educators can create an environment where learning becomes a shared, significant experience. This human-centered approach allows sociological theories, such as investment and imagined communities, to move from abstract concepts to practical applications. When teachers invest in building these connections, they support students' linguistic development while empowering them to navigate the complex socio-cultural landscapes that shape their language learning journeys.

On the other hand, one of the key challenges for educators lies in addressing the diversity of students' investments within structured environments that prioritize exam preparation and standardized outcomes. While institutional demands often limit flexibility, it is essential to remember that language learning is not an automatic, mechanistic process. Students bring unique motivations and aspirations to the classroom, and these must be acknowledged to foster meaningful engagement. A practical question arises: How do we balance the diversity of investments in our own context, especially when constrained by institutional structures?

As educators, it is essential to engage in critical self-reflection and ask ourselves fundamental questions about our role in the classroom: Are we teaching English solely to develop linguistic competence that fits students into a capitalist system where success is measured by productivity, competition, and the relentless pursuit of personal advantage? Or are we striving to teach English as a means of fostering connection, self-expression, and the ability to navigate the world as authentic individuals? In a system that often prioritizes

competition and economic survival, there is a risk of reducing language education to a mere tool for upward mobility, overlooking its transformative potential to nurture human connection. English, as a global lingua franca, holds the power not just to prepare students for competitive environments, but also to enable them to communicate meaningfully, express their identities, and build relationships across cultural and linguistic boundaries. It is in this space where students can use English to connect with others and discover their place in the world that we, as teachers, can make the greatest impact. By prioritizing connection over competition, we create opportunities for students to see English not as a symbol of pressure or privilege, but as a bridge to a more inclusive, empathetic, and interconnected global community.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between students' investments in English and their imagined communities, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a relatively privileged socio-economic context, focusing on students from a private school with extensive access to resources and opportunities. This homogeneity limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings, such as public schools or institutions serving less privileged communities.

Additionally, the small sample size of students restricts the scope of conclusions that can be drawn. A broader, more diverse sample would allow for a richer understanding of how English language investments and perceptions vary across different contexts and demographics. Moreover, the study primarily examined students' perspectives, leaving out

the equally critical dimension of teachers' beliefs and practices, which play a pivotal role in shaping the classroom experience.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should explore the interplay between students' and teachers' beliefs about English and its societal role. Investigating how teachers conceptualize English as a lingua franca and its implications for their pedagogical decisions would provide a more comprehensive view of the dynamics at play in language education. This line of inquiry could also reveal the extent to which teachers are aware of, and actively address, the sociological dimensions of language learning.

Expanding the research to include public schools and diverse socio-economic settings is another crucial direction. It would be valuable to examine whether students in less privileged contexts share similar investments in English or if their motivations differ based on localized socio-economic and cultural realities. Understanding these variations could help educators and policymakers develop more equitable and inclusive approaches to language education.

Finally, future research should consider how English functions as a "language of power" in various contexts. As a tool for accessing global opportunities, English often perpetuates socio-economic divides by privileging those with access to high-quality language education. Exploring how to bridge these divides by making English education more accessible and equitable could contribute to a more just and inclusive society.

CONCLUSIONES

Concluding Thoughts

This study underscores the profound influence of societal beliefs and institutional systems in shaping the role of English as a lingua franca. As educators, we must critically reflect on how our teaching practices reinforce or challenge these narratives. Teaching English is not a neutral act; it involves the transmission of beliefs about the language's value, its societal role, and its power to shape identities and futures. By becoming aware of these dynamics, we can make intentional decisions about how we teach, ensuring that we are not merely perpetuating inequalities but actively fostering equity and empowerment.

One of the most pressing questions for educators is, "Why are we teaching what we teach?" This inquiry compels us to look beyond an input-output model of education and consider the broader societal and cultural factors influencing language learning. English will continue to dominate as a global lingua franca as long as we, as a society, collectively believe in its value. By engaging critically with these beliefs, educators can challenge the systems that perpetuate inequities and advocate for practices that promote a more inclusive and just educational landscape.

Moreover, this reflection extends to understanding the role of English as a "language of power." While it opens doors to opportunities and resources, it also creates barriers for those without access to high-quality language education. Recognizing this duality is essential for fostering a more equitable approach to teaching. Educators have a unique opportunity to empower students by equipping them with the tools to navigate and challenge these systems, encouraging them to envision and work toward a more just future.

In conclusion, teaching English is not just about developing linguistic proficiency; it is about shaping identities, fostering aspirations, and connecting students to a globalized world. By embracing a human-centered approach, prioritizing meaningful relationships, and engaging with the broader societal implications of our work, educators can transform the classroom into a space of empowerment and opportunity. This transformation requires a shift in perspective, from delivering knowledge to fostering critical engagement with the socio-cultural realities of language learning. It is through this shift that we can truly make a difference in our students' lives and contribute to a more equitable world.

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ANEXO A: STUDENTS' EMAILS

Subject: English on my **life**

Hi, Sri Lanka friend

How are you? I'm good, I have a question & How do you learn English? I learn English in the school, I have English classes every day.

As I told you I learn English in the school at 1st grade we start to learn basic but when we start to learn in 3rd grade and in the high school is required to know English.

I have any questions for you: & when do you start learning English?, & You like English?, & All of your classes are in English?, & You choose to learn English?

That was all, I'm waiting for your answer
Marti.



↓
Ecuador
(I don't know how to draw the shield)



Subject: The last Hello!

Hi! This is our last mail, I'm really sad, I enjoy writing to you every week, Sri Lanka is a very interesting country, I want to go there in the future.

I think that English is in all the world and it moves countries and you can make new friends, for me English is the most important language in the world, what do you think? Did you know that Chat GPT checked my mails? It says that my mails are good, but I have to improve the grammar and punctuation. I would like to stay writing to you, I enjoy this adventure.

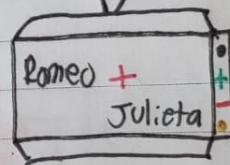
I have some questions for you!
Do you like to learn English?
How many English teachers do you have?

I will miss you, your friend from Ecuador.

Amelia



Mulala



Subject: last mail to Sri Lanka n'

Hi I'm Lu, this is the last email, I will be honest, I liked so much this activity.

I really like talking in English, I want to live in U.S.A when I grow up.



I start learning english since I was 5 years old. Also I like reading books and listening songs in English, that helps me so much in vocabulary. I like singers like Taylor Swift, tD, Thenthd and more.



I really like to talk in english, I feel I can express myself in a different way.

Also when I travel I can talk with people that don't speak in spanish



I will miss sending this letter. I hope one day you visit Ecuador, or I visit Sri Lanka! See you!!

Lu.

Subject: About English

Well, to start off I will tell you about english in my life. In my life english has always been important, since I like to travel to the U.S a lot. I started to learn the language at a year old in school but when I understood it for real was in 2022 to 2023 because I watched a lot of videos and movies in english. When did you learn english?

To be honest I like british english better because it's fancier and more like me. To me nowadays english is required for everything, its becoming a universal language at this point. Do you prefer American english or british english?

Good bye, Sebas

