

Deconstructing the Discourse of Proficiency: Social Class and Preservice English Language Teachers

La deconstrucción del discurso de la competencia: clase social y profesores de inglés en formación

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The discourse of proficiency in English-language teacher education has been shaped by corporate demands for an ideal speaker. This discourse forces future English language teachers to meet rigid expectations that overlook their sociocultural traits, such as race, social class, and geographical location. This narrative case study draws on narrative frameworks and interviews to analyze how the social class of four English-language preservice teachers at a Colombian public university shapes their experiences of language proficiency. Findings suggest that participants experienced proficiency differently depending on their social class, cultural dispositions, and individual differences. Their stories deconstruct the taken-for-granted concept of proficiency and unveil broader sociocultural and political implications for English-language teacher education.

Keywords: narratives, discourse of proficiency, social class, teacher education

El discurso de la competencia en la formación de docentes de inglés se ha construido a partir de exigencias corporativas respecto de un hablante ideal. Este discurso exige a los futuros docentes que se ajusten a expectativas rígidas que excluyen características socioculturales como la raza, la clase social y la ubicación geográfica. Este estudio de caso narrativo recurrió a marcos narrativos y a entrevistas para analizar la incidencia de la clase social en las experiencias (o en el discurso) de competencia lingüística de cuatro docentes en formación de una universidad pública. Los resultados sugieren que los participantes experimentan la competencia de manera distinta según sus disposiciones sociales, culturales e individualidades. Sus historias deconstruyen el concepto normalizado de competencia y revelan implicaciones más amplias para la formación docente.

Palabras clave: clase social, discurso de la competencia, formación docente, narrativas

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Introduction

As professors in a BA in English at a Colombian public university, we were concerned about the preservice teachers' English language proficiency. Therefore, we reflected on this theme and its implications for pedagogy, curriculum, and didactics. We became aware of the various elements that contribute to its complexity. Proficiency goes beyond the development of linguistic competencies and is a socially-discursive construction inscribed in individuals' characteristics. These include social features (i.e., students' place of origin, former academic experiences, family support), psychological challenges (i.e., students' emotions, personality types, and coping strategies), cognitive mechanisms (i.e., students' learning strategies), or power issues (i.e., silence, exercise of the right to speak based on proficiency). Consequently, we decided to delve into the intricacies of English proficiency from the perspective of future English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers.

The study of students' English proficiency through a social-class lens has become a fertile field of inquiry due to the dearth of research on this topic in English language teaching (ELT). As Glodjo (2016) states, "in the past two decades, race, class, and gender have been the foci in TESOL identity research, yet race and gender have often been privileged as primary constructs of analysis while class is relegated to tertiary status" (p. 342). Our analysis of proficiency and social class is guided by a sociocritical perspective that addresses "issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 306). Advocating for social justice, we feel compelled to analyze the social mechanisms embedded in and enacted through students' language proficiency, considering class as a marker that enables or constrains academic achievement among English Philology students at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia.

Social class is pivotal in analyzing the underlying enactments of the discourse of proficiency. Through a Bourdieusean lens, we have witnessed that some students enter university fully equipped with language and academic competencies and cope with advanced English coursework, while others struggle significantly. Students' opportunities afforded by their *habitus*, prior sociocultural experiences, and former education influence the proficiency they display and seek to attain. Presumably, under the fallacy of homogeneity in language proficiency, promoted by established discourses, English language learners should have a fairly even level of language proficiency so that everyone can comfortably have a voice in classroom interactions. However, our experience is that there are entrenched, hard-to-overcome disparities when students enter higher education, as evidenced by asymmetrical grouping, interaction patterns, and peer-to-peer relationships. In our study, we examined the material and subjective conditions of four EFL preservice teachers, the coping mechanisms for handling high or low proficiency, and the social interactions with peers and professors within the framework of the discourse of proficiency. Thus, our research question is: How do four EFL preservice teachers experience the discourse of proficiency in their academic field, as shaped by social class?

Literature Review

The Dual Nature of Proficiency: A Tree Metaphor

In this study, proficiency is conceptualized from discursive lenses (Quintero González & Quintero-Polo, 2025). We propose a tree metaphor that captures a two-fold nature of proficiency. When picturing a tree, two main parts can be distinguished: observable elements such as branches, leaves, and fruit (i.e., the shallow nature) and hidden structures, such as its roots (i.e., the deep nature). Likewise, the discourse of language proficiency reflects a dual conception in which individuals'

success is measured by the attainment of certain linguistic abilities (shallow nature), which are internalized and used to some academic, professional, or economic advantage (deep nature).

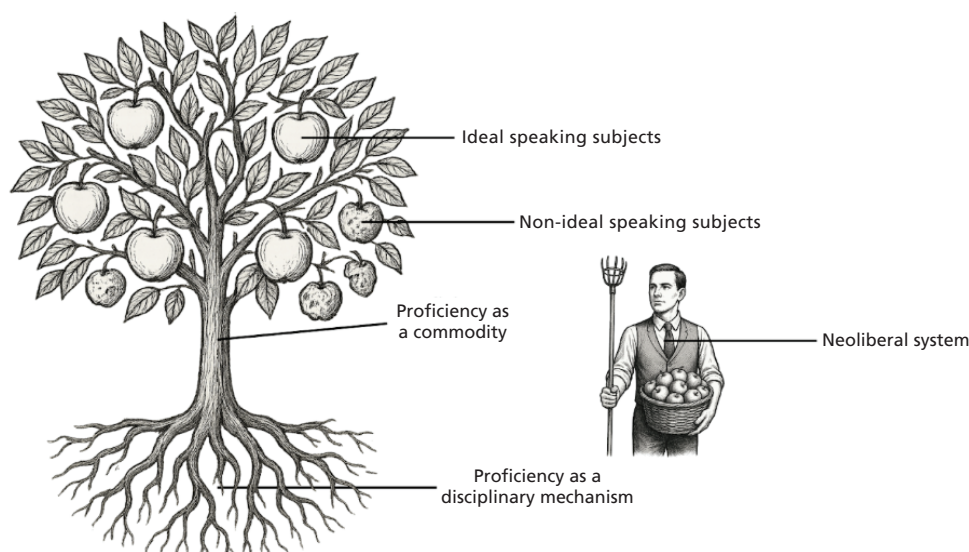
The discourse of proficiency has been shaped primarily by its linguistic dimension (Leung, 2022; Thirakunkovit, 2018), where the notion of an ideal speaker is promoted as someone whose command of a foreign language resembles that of native speakers (Bonilla Medina & Finardi, 2022). This dimension has been endorsed through mechanisms widely reproduced in Colombian educational settings, including institutionalized suggested curricula (Guerrero, 2008), graduation requirements, and bilingual policies (Mora et al., 2019).

Proficiency has been deployed by neoliberal perspectives to align individuals' skills with market-driven demands (i.e., competence in listening, speaking, reading, and writing for jobs). Such a structure functions within a homogenizing culture

that differentiates between ideal and non-ideal speakers (Milroy, 2002). It is also reified into international exams that act as gatekeepers (Shohamy, 2007). For instance, Colombians can apply for scholarships through ICETEX,¹ provided they submit English-language certification (Forero-Mondragón & Quintero-Polo, 2022). Thus, in our tree metaphor, the root sustaining the conception of language proficiency is the power and ideological-laden discourse that underpins ELT in Colombia. The system also resembles a fruit picker choosing good and bad fruit for the market: it deems individuals with high proficiency suitable, while speakers with fair or low proficiency are excluded from advancing in their careers (e.g., access to graduation, scholarships, or employment; see Figure 1).

We believe that discourses of competitiveness, standardization, quality, and language commodification (Ball, 2003; Rubdy & Tan, 2008) nurture the deep nature of proficiency. Essentially, these discourses position learners as docile subjects under neoliberal

Figure 1. The Dual Nature of Proficiency: A Tree Metaphor



Note. AI generated by the authors.

¹ The Colombian Institute for Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX, by its initials in Spanish) is a public entity that grants loans and scholarships for higher education in Colombia.

disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975/2002). Therefore, proficiency is constructed as a disciplinary mechanism configured by neoliberal *technologies of power*² aimed at controlling, shaping, and regulating the subjectivity of social actors to accommodate it to market demands (Bourdieu, 1980/2007; Foucault, 2004/2008). Those technologies, enacted through the discourse of proficiency, are disseminated via international exams, everyday educational practices, and institutional procedures to display a sense of qualified learners, in our case, future English educators.

To address language proficiency, we rely on Foucault (1975/2002), who identifies a series of technologies of power: *the exam*, *dividing practices*, *normalizing reward*, and *punishment*. So, through *exams*, individuals are *rewarded* or *punished* based on a binary classification of proficient vs. non-proficient (i.e., a *dividing practice*). For instance, in the BA program under study, future English teachers who want to proceed to the teaching practicum must take an exam to demonstrate a C1-level proficiency. Those who fail the exam cannot take the practicum. In fact, throughout the program, EFL preservice teachers are constantly subjected to exams to assess their language proficiency. Furthermore, proficiency-based agendas extend into their professional life as they need to “legitimize” themselves as English teachers and “validate” future learners’ language proficiency (Kamhi-Stein, 2016).

The discourse of proficiency operates as a neoliberal disciplinary mechanism, as language users are objectified and dehumanized for their proficiency performance. Such dynamics led us to consider the socioeconomic class conditions that endorse this system. Language users’ success or failure within the neoliberal machinery is inherently tied to individuals’ classed conditions, background, culture, and race.

Thus, proficiency appears to be a form of symbolic capital in social spheres (Bourdieu, 1980/2007). This dynamic reproduces socioeconomic disparities and prompted us to consider the role of social class within the discourse of proficiency as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1972/1977).

Symbolic Capital: The Case of Proficiency

There have been studies addressing social class and language education (Block, 2012, 2014, 2017; Vandrick, 2014); however, a gap remains regarding the intersection between language learners’ proficiency and social class. Block (2012) discusses multiple models for structuring social life into social class categories, including Marx’s (1867/1977) proletariat-bourgeoisie model, Weber’s (1922/1968) addition of dimensions of status and prestige, and Bourdieu’s (1972/1977) perspective on multiple forms of capital. In essence, we initially conceptualized social class as “an unofficial hierarchical stratification of people in a given society, who are ranked according to their social, economic, occupational, and educational statuses” (Vandrick, 2014, p. 86). However, we acknowledge that the ongoing transformation of social groups and the complexity of postmodern societies make it difficult to reach consensus on a specific social structure (Uribe Mallarino & Ramirez Moreno, 2019). Particularly relevant to the understanding of said *classed* structure is Bourdieu’s (1986) multi-dimensional conception of social class differentiation.

For Bourdieu (1986), an individual’s position within a social class category is related to their accumulated capital, their *habitus*, and the social domains (fields) they inhabit. Those dynamics create lifestyle patterns, distinctions, and hierarchies. This theoretical lens establishes three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social, which together constitute an individual’s symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986) argues that these capitals exist in objectified, embodied, and insti-

2 For Foucault (1988), technologies of power are control procedures to exert power and “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (p. 18).

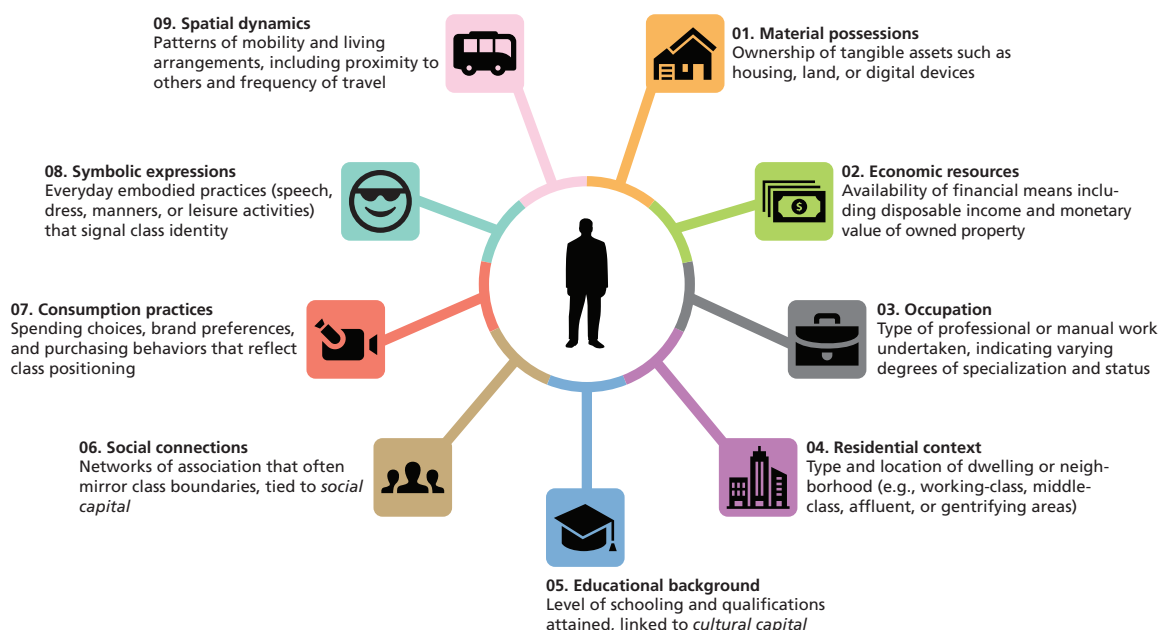
tutionalized forms. Economic capital refers to material wealth, objectified in property and other possessions. Cultural capital exists in embodied (e.g., accent, body movement, and manners), objectified (e.g., cultural ownership of artifacts such as art, books, and music), and institutionalized forms (e.g., academic qualifications and certificates). Social capital relates to social connections and relationships with equally or more powerful social actors. The accumulation of these capitals confers on individuals proportionate status and prestige within the social realm (Weber, 1922/1968). In fact, symbolic capital divides people into complex class groups based on their accumulation of capital and its correlation with status and prestige.

We believe that the accumulated forms of capital, coupled with Block's (2012) social class dimensions (see Figure 2), would position an individual higher or lower along the social class spectrum. However, such hierarchization (high, middle, and low classes) cannot

be assessed entirely through quantitative lenses (e.g., statistics or official stratification measures) but also requires consideration of an individual's lived experience of class. In Colombia, social class is often related to the type and location of dwelling through socioeconomic strata (one to six, which represent low-, middle-, and high-income status). Such a view has stratified neighborhoods as reflecting their inhabitants' social class. The reality is that the system was conceived as a means for taxation rather than a social class scheme. Consequently, the system does not account for the complexity of social class, as individuals' experiences might differ (e.g., hidden poverty³). Therefore, Block's dimensions offer a more comprehensive overview of social class, considering a wider spectrum of socioeconomic and cultural features.

Unpacking social class requires understanding the intertwined relationship among forms of capital, domains of social practice (*fields*), and individuals'

Figure 2. Key Dimensions of Social Class



Note. Authors' interpretation based on Block (2012, p. 194).

³ Hidden poverty refers to the households that, although classified in high socioeconomic strata, live in precarious conditions that do not reflect this official social classification.

habitus (Block, 2012). Fields are social arenas where individuals compete using capital to position themselves within power hierarchies and obtain status and prestige. *Habitus* is a long-lasting disposition of individuals, enacted across different contexts and configuring schemes of world perception, thought, and action (Bourdieu, 1972/1977). Accordingly, people filter discourses through their embodied *habitus*. The dominant discourse of proficiency, reproduced through institutions, individuals, and social groups, shapes learners' *habitus* and is internalized through recurrent exposure. The interaction is bidirectional, as individuals' *habitus* also reinforces or challenges the discourse. Thus, the discourse of proficiency carries implications regarding how individuals experience it on a social class basis.

The intersection between social class and language education was initially explored through the classed features of language. Studies conducted by Bernstein (1971) and Labov (2006) and Block's (2012) initial research on class sought to understand how social class divisions shape individuals' language use and the sociolinguistic implications. Hence, scholars were interested in characterizing the different class-based language varieties. However, Block criticized this initial approach, as researchers seldom explored the implications of language use for individuals' identities and lived class positions. Block advocated for a revival of social class in connection to applied linguistics.

We argue that proficiency acts as embodied symbolic capital, reinforcing power structures and widening social gaps. Accordingly, proficiency operates as a social discursive construct that displays individuals' social class positions. In its dual nature as an essential commodity and a neoliberal disciplinary mechanism, proficiency in a foreign language (especially English) has become one of the most salient markers of symbolic capital in emergent economies. Through standardized testing, proficiency is reduced to the sole criterion that grants individuals legitimacy, authenticity, privilege,

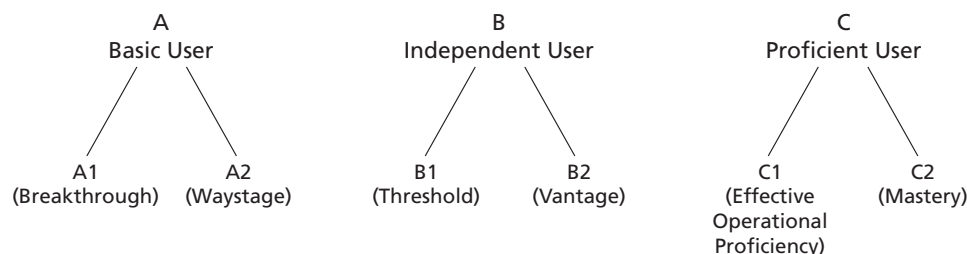
and status (Shohamy, 2007). In Colombia, this process is institutionalized through the dominance of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2021), which has heightened the prestige of proficiency within the symbolic capital of language teachers and learners. Consequently, proficiency, together with the CEFR, has homogenized language content, methodology, and assessment, reproducing social and cultural asymmetries in ELT.

Proficiency is also positioned as both a form of acquired knowledge and a marker of social class division. Ergo, proficiency levels and their labels (see Figure 3) implicitly produce social class distinctions. Such categorization aligns with the basic definition of social class, based on individuals' classification by the distribution and redistribution of material resources (Block, 2014) and their relationship to the market (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Proficiency is constructed as a defining feature of individuals' worth within the broader domains of ELT, while marginalizing and positioning others at the bottom of the social class pyramid. Individuals from more privileged backgrounds tend to have a stronger education that grants them easier access to language proficiency than those from less advantaged social backgrounds (Mora, 2022). Thus, higher or lower proficiency levels mediate access to social mobility, socioeconomic status, privilege, and legitimacy (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014). Eventually, proficiency becomes a gatekeeping mechanism embodied as an ideological apparatus that perpetuates neoliberal logics and social class disparities.

Method

We adopted a narrative case study approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore four pre-service teachers' experiences with the discourse of proficiency and its intersections with social class in a BA in English philology program. Stories reflected broader sociocultural and political contexts, offering

Figure 3. Common Reference Levels

Note. From *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (p. 23), by Council of Europe, 2001. Copyright 2001 by Council of Europe.

unique, context-specific insights (Yin, 2018). We (re) constructed how future English teachers navigate the discursive-laden mechanisms disseminated by proficiency-based goals. Accordingly, we threaded a multilayered lens drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, Foucault's technologies of power, and Blumer's micro-analytical symbolic interaction. Although rooted in different epistemological traditions, the participants' complex experiences with the discourse of proficiency led us to explore it from a multidisciplinary perspective to examine (a) the disciplinary and ideological dimensions of the discourse of proficiency and (b) their relation with the participants' social class and (c) the participants' meaning-making of said discourse.

We invited preservice teachers enrolled in the courses we taught. Four of them willingly accepted and signed the corresponding consent forms. Subsequently, we used narrative frameworks (Barkhuizen, 2014) to gather sociodemographic information and initial experiences about learning English. We use pseudonyms for the four participants: Julieta, Alba, Nikki, and Mia (all in their early 20s). Julieta and Alba grew up in rural environments, whereas Nikki and Mia are from Bogotá. We read the participants' narrative frameworks and prepared an in-depth narrative interview, drawing on preliminary analysis and following Block's (2012) class dimensions, to further explore the participants' social conditions in relation to the discourse of proficiency (see Figure 2).

The in-depth narrative interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.⁴ Subsequently, the participants' stories were thematically analyzed using Blumer's (1969) *symbolic interactionism*. The author outlines a three-dimensional micro-level framework with three main premises: (a) human beings act upon objects, people, or ideas, according to the meaning they hold for them; (b) meanings are socially constructed through language and symbols; and (c) those meanings are constantly modified when individuals interpret and deal with a phenomenon. Consequently, our participants act on their proficiency depending on the meaning they attach to it, which has been socially constructed and modified through interactions, experiences, and their reinterpretations of the discourse. We analyzed how participants have experienced proficiency in relation to immediate social activity contexts (micro level) and sociocultural institutions of ELT (meso level; Peña-Pincheira & De Costa, 2020). Finally, social class was considered holistically in participants' narratives (see Figure 4).

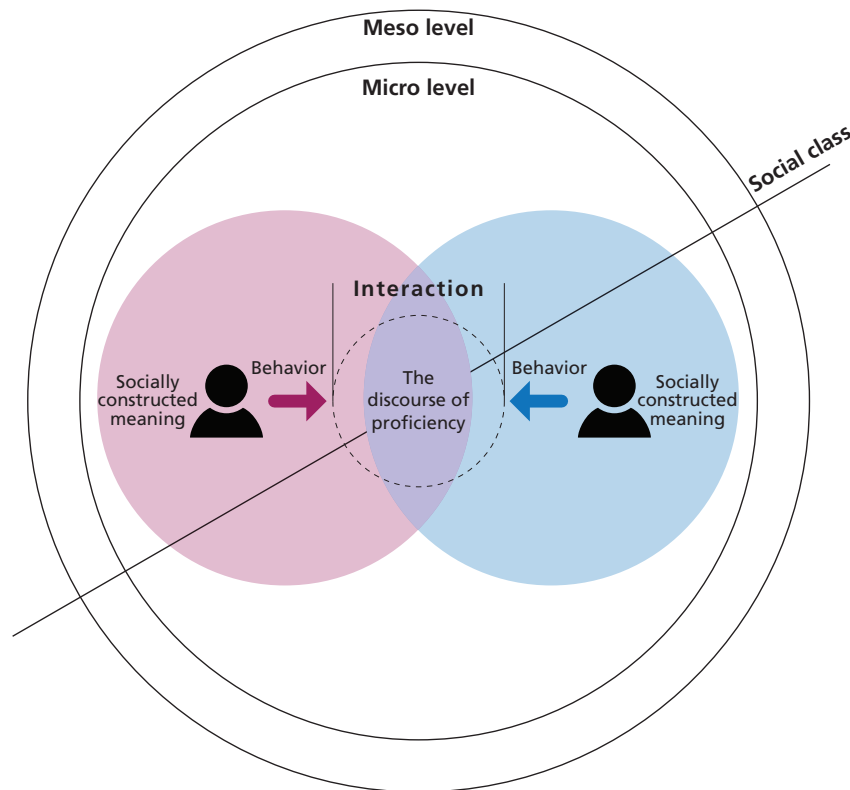
Findings

The Asymmetrical Nature of Proficiency

It seems that proficiency is experienced asymmetrically by participants, depending on their lived

4 We played the roles of teachers, researchers, and analysts. Similarly, as we recognize that our subjectivity is deeply implied, we invited our participants to read, interpret, or clarify ideas from the analysis.

Figure 4. Symbolic Interactionism With Proficiency



Note. Authors' interpretation based on Blumer (1969) and Peña-Pincheira and De Costa (2020).

social-class dimensions (see Figure 2). The accumulated forms of capital, rooted in these dimensions (Block, 2012), favor or constrain the attainment of proficiency, reinforcing social inequality within the ELT educational system. To exemplify, let us consider three key dimensions of Block's framework: residential context, consumption practices, and educational backgrounds. The data show that participants experience these dimensions differently based on asymmetrical conditions. These asymmetries include the divides between public and private schooling, rural and urban contexts, and access to cultural capital through books, technology, and the internet. We noticed that the disparities among participants' classed conditions mirrored the imbalance in their language proficiency. Thus, the higher the social class, the higher their knowledge of the foreign language was.

Social asymmetry involves the following features: Julieta and Alba, who had low proficiency, studied in rural schools that taught very little English and had few technological resources. Additionally, they had limited exposure to English (e.g., music, TV series, multimodal texts). However, they perceived themselves as proficient speakers because they did well in English classes at their high schools. Upon arrival in Bogotá for undergrad school, reality struck: their command of grammar, for instance, was far below that of their counterparts in Bogotá; exposure to media and resources was insufficient to meet language demands; and what they learned at school did not measure up to the requirements of the university program. For example, Julieta is originally from a small town and studied at a public school where English instruction was scarce, and there were few opportunities to interact

in English. Conversely, Niki is from Bogotá, where she studied at a bilingual school since kindergarten and, by the end of high school, had obtained high scores on English proficiency tests.

Consequently, proficiency appears to be an individual classed experience sustained by asymmetrical relationships rooted in the private vs. public and rural vs. urban divides in education. Nikki and Mia were born and raised in Bogotá, where they received a solid foreign-language education. Conversely, Julieta and Alba came from distant towns and had limited foreign-language education. In discussing the implications of schooling in classed education, Reay (2010) explains that schooling is a double-edged sword: for some, it means emancipation; for others, it reproduces inequalities, especially for more working-class students, who have to deal with the burden of a less sustained and fruitful schooling experience. In fact, research by Pérez (2023) demonstrates that students who receive private primary and secondary education and come from high-income families perform better on the state exam due to family resources, better internet connectivity, greater access to materials, and foreign-language courses compared to other demographics.

As our participants highlighted, not only do students from outside Bogotá have to handle the academic and social pressures of university life, they also need to adjust to an urban culture: navigating public transportation, facing insecurity and theft, and dealing with criticism from locals about regional accents. They also have to overcome the hardship associated with not living with their nuclear families. For us, the asymmetrical nature of proficiency resembles the constructs of inner and outer circles (Kachru, 1985), where the former, composed of countries where English is the official language, are invested as sites of privilege, while the latter struggle to attain that privilege.

For students in urban settings (which, in our analogy, function as inner circles), education is supposedly updated to reflect recent 21st-century skills. Conversely,

for those in the outer circles (i.e., the periphery of rural contexts), education is dated, borderline, and underdeveloped. In this case study, the results revealed that proficiency appears to be a site of privilege that is experienced asymmetrically. For Nikki and Mia, proficiency is an advantage, whereas for Julieta and Alba, it is a burden. Proficiency levels for them entailed normalizing rewards and punishments to align with the norms established in academic fields. We deem it pivotal to tell their stories, portraying the two sides within the discourse of proficiency to illustrate the asymmetries that divide students from the margins from those who enjoy classed privilege.

Discarded Fruits: Proficiency as a Classed Site of Struggles

Coming back to our tree metaphor, preservice teachers whose proficiency is fair or low may be compared to unripe fruits whose process is uneven, delayed, or obstructed by the social conditions of the soils in which they have been raised. Such a theme is constructed from participants who self-identified as internal migrants. When categorized within proficiency-based frameworks, the preservice teachers in our study face both vertical and horizontal tensions given their English proficiency levels. Their struggles are characterized by discourses and social practices that position them as low achievers or not yet “ripe” compared to their counterparts. This positionality within hierarchical relationships implies the belief that they are different and deficient relative to proficiency standards. Furthermore, their experience is shaped by the interaction between their classed realities and proficiency.

Due to social class constraints, these participants struggle to “ripen” under conditions that deny them the opportunity to acquire symbolic capital through foreign-language proficiency. Nonetheless, depending on their individualities, they employed varied coping mechanisms to navigate the rigidity of the discourse

of proficiency, as portrayed in our tree metaphor. The most prominent mechanisms include self-generated learning plans, peer dependency, and emotional discharge. The complex dynamic faced by the participants is best exemplified by their own stories and struggles. We elaborate on Julieta's and Alba's cases for this subcategory.

Julieta moved from her hometown to Bogotá to study her undergraduate program, and she was in her fifth semester.⁵ Back in her public high school, she considered herself a high achiever and received a scholarship to take an English course in recognition of her academic excellence (see Excerpt 1). Hence, she believed she knew enough English when she first started her undergraduate studies. However, we learned that she experienced tense moments (Excerpts 1 and 2) in her first-semester English courses at the university, as she realized she was not a high achiever because most of her classmates were more advanced.

Excerpt 1⁶

I arrived here, and the professor was already speaking English. My classmates spoke perfectly. When I enrolled, [the program] said that a basic English level wasn't necessary. So, I came in confident. I'd even taken a course, but it was a very basic one.

Excerpt 2

My classmates didn't exactly laugh at me; it was more like: "don't speak so harshly," "don't do this," or at one point, a teacher even pointed out that my English sounded "too *Santandereano*," meaning it didn't sound "right," that I had an accent, and that "that's not how you speak;" it should be more neutral. That's when I started thinking something was wrong with me. Sometimes my classmates would laugh at my phrasing. Maybe they didn't mean it maliciously, but I felt forced to believe I wasn't accepted... I did feel bad, because on top of that, I didn't really know English, I mean, I knew just the basics.

Julieta's case exemplifies a clash between her *habitus* (i.e., a girl from Santander with her own cultural dispositions) and the academic *field*, which is pervaded by the discourse of proficiency. While she perceived herself as a high achiever in high school, the university's social domain, imbued with the discourse of proficiency, prompted her to challenge her earlier beliefs and adjust to the new, uneven conditions of the undergraduate program. This new field is filled with ideologies and practices that positioned Julieta differently. We infer that proficiency for her professor and classmates implied adopting a "neutral" accent that characterizes what English is supposed to mean in this academic field. Such an imbalance positioned Julieta as deviant, as she felt excluded from the naturalized and hierarchical discourse of proficiency, both by vertical (the professor) and horizontal (classmates) factors.

Julieta needed to erase her embodied cultural traits (e.g., speaking loudly, using her cultural lingo) while speaking in the foreign language, as, for her, these traits foregrounded deviant representations of social class. Within our tree metaphor, Julieta's case illustrated how her embodied linguistic traits are seen as deviant within language ecologies and as a sign of improper ripening. In the discourse of proficiency, Julieta's initial cultural capital was excluded; hence, she struggled to secure positions of power as she acquired greater proficiency. From a class perspective, this clash is characterized by Julieta's symbolic and embodied capital, contrasted with the dominant cultural capital of the professor and most classmates, which is expressed in speaking "neutral," fluent English.

Julieta's excluded position within the discourse resembles Alba's, as she felt she did not belong because of her English proficiency. Alba is a nineteen-year-old student from a town in southeastern Colombia. Although she had been to Bogotá before, she moved in to continue her undergraduate studies. She was accepted into a public university as part of a special program that seeks to enroll students from rural and

⁵ At the time of the interviews, all participants were in their fifth semester (out of eight).

⁶ All excerpts have been taken from the narrative interviews.

remote areas with limited access to education. Alba thought her former proficiency in English would allow her to take classes in the undergraduate program; nevertheless, she realized her level was lower than that of her first-semester classmates. Alba described her English classes as “impossible.” She never positioned herself as deviant due to her *habitus*, as Julieta did; however, her stories reflected how her classmates secluded her from teamwork:

Excerpt 3

At the time, I really felt they were pulling away from me. Since I didn't have my own friend circle and they were this large, established group, it seemed like they were deliberately leaving me out. They didn't want me in their group because my skills weren't at the level needed for our assignments and activities.

Alba's self-perception regarding her classmates is tied to her proficiency in the language. In this sense, proficiency, as embodied symbolic capital, emerges as a prominent feature of *social connections* (i.e., grouping with her classmates; Block, 2012). Ultimately, proficiency not only positioned her higher or lower in the language education domain but also determined her social capital. Proficiency was inherently tied to forms of symbolic power exerted to classify individuals into specific groups according to their language level, while also accentuating vertical and asymmetrical social structures endorsed by an unequal educational system:

Excerpt 4

I've worked really hard because I feel like it's what I have to do, since I haven't had an education that allows me to reach a good level. So, I feel it has to be my own effort to achieve that, and I have to push myself even more to be able to make it.

Excerpt 4 also highlights Alba's interaction with the discourse of proficiency as it is subjected to disciplinary technologies of power (Foucault, 1975/2002), aligning her *habitus* with the oppressive academic field.

As Bourdieu (1972/1977) recognizes, *fields* are dynamic social arenas that position dominant individuals over dominated ones while competing for specific forms of capital. Initially, Alba recognized her position within the proficiency hierarchy as her peers excluded her, according to her, due to a lack of competence to undertake academic activities. She related her proficiency to her education back in high school. Thus, we found that proficiency depended on individuals' *former* classed educational experiences. For instance, Excerpt 4 shows Alba acknowledging that her schooling impacted her experience with proficiency.

Given this asymmetrical system, Alba stated that she developed coping mechanisms to reach a higher level. In Foucauldian terms, she was divided both within and from others as a deviant. Then, we interpreted Alba's interaction as indicating that high proficiency was required to access other forms of capital. Her reflection was grounded upon her previous educational background, which led her to conclude she was “behind.” Such a realization implied a self-entrepreneurial position to enter the competition fostered by the academic *field* in terms of proficiency. Alba's desire to fit in with the academic field was also present in Julieta's stories:

Excerpt 5

I want to be like them, in the sense of proficiency. It was like, “Oh, how beautifully they speak, how nice it must be to have that confidence, how lovely to be like that, you know?” It's that thing where you think, “I'd like to reach that level because I know they'll accept me more.”

Julieta's assertions evidence the disciplinary power that the discourse of proficiency exerts on preservice teachers' agency, as they see that they do not fit within the expected standard of language speakers. In Julieta's case, proficiency as capital prompts her to engage in imagined identities (Norton, 1995). She wishes to belong and to acquire proficiency so that she becomes more confident. For her, proficiency is the symbolic capital she needs to accommodate herself in the

academic *field*. Therefore, we interpreted this desire to speak with confidence and a certain level of proficiency as a display of the classed nature of proficiency, because Julieta yearns to engage in self-improving practices to belong to a group that embodies features of the urban middle class. This resonates with Block's (2012) class dimension of *symbolic expressions*, in which everyday embodied practices such as speech, dress, manners, and leisure activities signal class identity.

Alba's and Julieta's tensions, which originated in proficiency frameworks and are shaped by the academic field, are influenced by their social class. Both participants experience the discourse of proficiency differently, given their interactions with social class dimensions; nonetheless, both stories are intersected by an asymmetrical, marginalized position that shapes Alba's and Julieta's experiences of education and proficiency. By contrast, those whose accumulated capital positions them in a more privileged sphere enjoy the benevolence of the discourses of proficiency, as we will elaborate below.

Ripe Fruits: Proficiency as an Effortless Classed Privilege

Here, we make sense of the discourse of proficiency from a privileged perspective derived from effortless, classed academic experiences: Nikki and Mia did not struggle with proficiency, given their high level of English. Their lack of struggle is conditioned by socio-economic class features and, therefore, by their *habitus*. Niki is a twenty-year-old preservice teacher born and raised in Bogotá. Her narrative portrays her early, privileged exposure to English from kindergarten at a private institution and her success on the international exam she took upon graduating from high school. She said she felt like a kind of "native speaker," that is, she has internalized that notion of the ideal speaker, so pervasive in the established discourse of proficiency. Even her family echoed this discourse, constantly reminding her of the importance of learning English. We learned she was aware of her privileged position due to her

English level, and that she was positively acknowledged by her teachers (see Excerpts 6 and 7).

Excerpt 6

The reason I'm doing so well in my major and can handle myself with ease now is because I was privileged enough to have access to an English education that many others didn't get. For me, so many things come automatically.

Excerpt 7

I've always had this experience where professors give me a certain kind of special attention—in a positive way. That's both a privilege and a pressure. Because obviously, if a professor invests in you, it's because they see something in you. But then you have to meet those expectations, to push yourself harder and harder to achieve more.

Given Niki's position within the *field's* hierarchy, we believe her *habitus* harmoniously aligned with the expectations set. Interestingly, upon acknowledging her privileged position because of her proficiency level, she still keeps self-improving; however, not with the aim of vindicating her *habitus* within the *field* (as in Julieta's and Alba's cases), but to surpass the capital she already had. Through a class lens, Niki foregrounds her awareness of social-class privilege and the perks that come with it (e.g., bilingual education). Her stance reveals the urban middle-class mindset around success, tied to a *habitus* (Reay, 2016) that dictates the need to succeed academically and, therefore, to climb the social ladder. Similarly, her middle-class *habitus* aligns with that of her professors, in what Block (2012) calls a network of associations that often mirror class boundaries. Her story made us think that there is a classed connection with her professors, mediated by an endless illusion of excellence. Subsequently, Niki's position gave her the option to skip classes, as her professors offered. Although she took the lessons expecting to learn more, she deemed her classes insufficient:

Excerpt 8

You imagine there would be incredibly high standards, but I feel that, unfortunately, many English professors,

at least the ones I've had classes with, leave a lot to be desired (laughs). I feel they don't demand what really should be expected.

Unlike Julieta and Alba, Niki did not struggle with the academic system. This reinforces her attachment to the discourse of proficiency, within which she perceives herself as occupying a privileged position (a ripe fruit). In contrast to Julieta's and Alba's experiences, Niki was rewarded and positioned as superior vis-à-vis her less proficient counterparts. Similarly, her privilege was mediated by her social class (bilingual education, economic affordances, and institutionalized cultural capital in the form of tests or certifications). Niki's high proficiency level has also afforded the academic perks that have enabled her to navigate the university system easily. In the BA program, grade average determines the order in which preservice teachers register for classes at the beginning of each semester: those with a high grade average register first and, consequently, can select their preferred schedule. They are even eligible to study a second simultaneous degree:

Excerpt 9

I believe that being highly proficient in English has benefited me academically, professionally, and personally. Thanks to this, I've been able to maintain a high grade average, which has allowed me to apply for the dual degree program in German and to work and support myself financially when necessary. It's also given me the opportunity to access content and interactions that I have not only enjoyed but have also enriched me, even beyond an academic context.

These perks stem from Niki's disposition to learn as an individual and from her *habitus* as an urban middle-income person. Her success is not only due to the privileges of her social class, but also to her information consumption patterns: "I consume a lot of online content in English; almost everything is in English. So, I've often felt very bilingual" (Excerpt 10).

Niki's accumulated capital along middle social class dimensions allowed her to consume diverse content and interact differently with English, influencing her beyond the academic *field*.

As we shall see next in Mia's story, the discourse of proficiency not only grants academic perks, but it also consolidates economic capital. Mia is a twenty-one-year-old preservice teacher born and raised in Bogotá. She achieved an intermediate level of English upon graduating from a private high school. She said her relatives hold professional degrees, and she grew up being disciplined because of this. We learned that Mia was already working as an English teacher at a language institute. Being accepted as a teacher was relatively easy:

Excerpt 11

I felt confident about my English level, so I applied. The interview wasn't difficult. They didn't ask for a formal certificate. I mentioned I was studying, but it was mostly a conversation: "Let's talk in English. Share your perspective on this topic." Afterward, they simply said, "You passed." And that was it.

We saw that Mia was already a teacher as a reward for her high proficiency. Nevertheless, the ease of getting a job can result from her symbolic capital, materialized in access to various resources afforded by her social class. In her middle-class family, she had role models, was paid for private education, and had easy access to English:

Excerpt 12

Everything I consume is in English, all the series and movies I watch. Sometimes I listen to English music. I also think it's because, by nature, you're constantly immersed in an English-only environment.

Thus, Mia's social class inherently bestows economic, cultural, and social resources that have granted her significant symbolic capital. Additionally, her *habitus* not only matched the expectations of the academic

field but also enabled her to secure an early job. Within the tree metaphor, Mia's and Niki's stories accounted for the privileged dimension of fertile ecological conditions that apparently allow them to ripen naturally. However, the discourse of proficiency obscures the illusion of individual meritocracy and foregrounds the uneven, socially distributed classed conditions that make such ripening possible. This dynamic is enabled by academic benefits and by the economic and cultural capital that arise from the participants' trajectories.

We think Julieta's and Alba's distance from proficiency, as opposed to Niki's and Mia's, is not only geographical but also symbolic, cultural, and fundamentally socially classed. The distance portrayed determines preservice teachers' success or failure in navigating the disciplinary conditions established by the discourse of proficiency. Furthermore, the conditions created when interacting with proficiency led the participants to act differently. Notably, Julieta and Alba strove to adjust to the *field* by improving their level. The journey through the academic *field*, framed by proficiency, illustrates how proficiency functions as a classed mechanism that sustains the uneven ripening between speakers deemed desirable, worthy, and ready and those left suspended in a perpetual state of insufficiency.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has implications for teachers, policymakers, and research in ELT in Colombia. For educators, the findings underscore the marginalizing and privileging practices that the discourse of proficiency reproduces within the classroom. This division exacerbates disparities among students in the apparent neutrality of proficiency, while subtly perpetuating, rendering invisible, and widening the social class divide. Thus, we advocate for a humanizing pedagogy that recognizes proficiency as a valuable asset, but not as the sole feature in student profiling. This involves detaching ourselves from deficit models and

classroom practices that equate proficiency attainment with success and treating the students' diverse English repertoires, such as local accents and translanguaging practices, as resources.

At the policy level, we challenge the dominant position of standardized proficiency benchmarks, which function as gatekeeping mechanisms of apparent neutral measures of achievement. Standardization reinforces class divisions while privileging students whose access to private education, limitless resources, and center-based *habitus* position them above their peripheral and economically disadvantaged counterparts. In Colombia, with its marked social disparities, education must thrive to fulfill the mission of bringing about equal opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their social class. Hence, language policy should advocate for a humanizing, equity-oriented paradigm that recognizes the diverse trajectories of English learning in the center and the periphery, thereby supporting historically marginalized communities.

At the sociological level, implications also arise. The participants' classed experience of proficiency has impacted their success or failure. Inadvertently or not, the perceptions of the less proficient participants regarding how their partners did not consider them worthy of grouping with connect to phenomena experienced by working-class learners when mixed with middle-class counterparts (Reay, 2016). On the other hand, the middle-class participants displayed a fear of failure and a sense of intellectual superiority (instilled by parents and former schooling) as they attempt to climb the social ladder through education. With such a competitive mindset, it is no wonder that the more proficient participants do not want to mingle with the less proficient ones. A story like Niki's, for instance, reveals impatience towards anything that slows down progress. Likewise, the feeling of intellectual superiority is experienced by more proficient learners because of the awareness that they (as middle-class individuals) have had better opportunities (Reay, 2016).

Furthermore, the less proficient participants' awareness of their former educational limitations and the pressure to catch up highlight how they cope with systemic inequalities, as Campaz Camacho and Suárez Sanabria (2019) also found. The reproduction of social class relationships and the legitimacy of disparities push historically disadvantaged communities (e.g., Afro-Colombians, rural dwellers) to experience barriers to access quality education. In our study, we observed three forms of inequality tied to social class: cultural inequality (limited access to connectivity and information consumption habits), educational inequality (lack of preparation to cope with higher-education coursework), and institutional inequality (fewer opportunities for grouping when studying).

Our study echoes findings that the discourse of proficiency is experienced differently depending on participants' place of origin (urban vs. rural) and socioeconomic status (low-income vs. middle-income). Julieta's narrative of being asked to neutralize her accent demonstrates Reay's (2016) notion of fragmented identities. Often, working-class learners struggle more with inherited inequalities from high school while dealing with the middle-class habitus of higher education. Therefore, to belong and participate in the university culture, we saw that some participants were forced to become aware of practices and ways of being that, though natural to them, did not facilitate their adaptation to the predominantly middle-class culture at the university. Finally, we reaffirm the urgency of more social-class-based research in ELT. Identity markers such as race, gender, and ethnicity have received increasing attention within applied linguistics (Vandrick, 2014), but social class remains underdeveloped in Latin American contexts.

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