

English as Academic *Lingua Franca* in Latin American Doctoral Education?

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Spanish is the fourth most spoken language globally, with nearly 500,000,000 native speakers, most of whom are located in Latin America. Over the past years, the region has experienced a growth in higher education enrollments and development, including a proliferation of doctoral programs.

Traditionally, the language of instruction for undergraduate education in Latin America—except in the Caribbean region—has been the first language of each country, either Spanish or Portuguese. This tradition of Spanish and Portuguese-speaking universities in Latin America contrasts with other non-English-speaking countries, which offer English-medium programs or have introduced policies of English requirements for graduation.

In global doctoral education, the trend toward “Englishization” is even stronger. Knowledge is overwhelmingly produced and communicated in English, which implies that new researchers must be able to both understand relevant, up-to-date knowledge of their disciplines and publish in the venues most valued by the global academic community. In terms of doctoral training, proficiency in English today has become a fundamental measure of quality and provides a distinctive competitive advantage to graduates entering the academic job market.

Although proficiency in English is a fairly objective index of the quality of doctoral training, there are several tensions around the predominance of this language as an academic *lingua franca*. I will address two of these tensions. The first is the struggle for the validity of Spanish as a scientific language. The second concerns the geopolitical and educational inequality that comes with the use of English in academia.

Academic Spanish and Directionality of Knowledge

It has become commonplace to point out that English is the universal scientific language, consequently imposing a canon of multilingualism on academics and doctoral students from non-English-speaking countries as a condition to join relevant disciplinary conversations. However, multilingualism is not a two-way requirement: The current hegemony of English responds to the geopolitics of knowledge production, which offers a directionality from the (English-speaking) center to the (non-English-speaking) periphery.

At the same time, universities in Latin America have implemented policies for the growth and promotion of research, including various accountability and funding mechanisms linked to scientific productivity. University accreditation criteria frequently include publication in mainstream indexed journals, which are published primarily in English. However, Latin American universities and agencies have fostered a model of local publishing in high-quality journals frequently run by universities or associations in a nonprofit model. As of October 2021, the Scopus database has listed 888 Latin American journals, around half of them in social sciences and humanities. A high proportion of Latin American journals listed in Scopus publish in Spanish or Portuguese or have either multilingual or bilingual models that include English. Of the total number of Latin American journals indexed in Scopus, 784 are open access and 574 are also indexed in SciELO, a database from the Global South that constitutes a paradigmatic example of the promotion of science in developing countries in a multilingual format. SciELO is a cooperative effort that indexes academic journals from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Uruguay, the West Indies, and Venezuela, with high standards of scientific quality. SciELO makes a large amount of research in Spanish and Portuguese available,

Abstract

While English requirements in higher education have increased worldwide, the language of instruction in Latin America tends to be Spanish or Portuguese. This article addresses the challenges that doctoral programs face when promoting both English as a means of academic participation and Spanish as a valid language for fostering regional scientific development.

Issues of educational equity should also be considered when implementing higher education language policies in Latin America.

although, according to a recent study by the Institute for Scientific Information, nowadays most of it is written in English. Over time, though, publication in Spanish has remained stable in the region.

I cite these initiatives as examples that enhance Spanish-language research and resist the North–South directionality of knowledge. These journals have allowed access to knowledge and scientific participation to large audiences in the region that would otherwise be entirely excluded from this possibility. In short, it has boosted scientific development in a region where there are still significant pockets of poverty and great educational inequalities that have dominated the political agenda in several countries in recent years. Therefore, rather than constituting a disincentive to the adoption of English, these cooperative responses offer an alternative model of scientific advance for developing countries.

Educational Disparities

Issues of educational equity should also be considered when implementing higher education language policies in Latin America. The disparity in educational quality continues to affect large populations in most countries of the region. The teaching of English is unevenly distributed in K-12 schooling of most countries and constitutes a significant challenge for students and universities during undergraduate and graduate studies.

I will take Chile as an example. The country has experienced tremendous growth in its doctoral program offerings. Chile's 56 universities currently offer 280 doctoral programs in different fields, 230 of which are accredited by the National Agency, meaning that they meet the minimum quality criteria for their students to be eligible for public funding. The most prestigious universities in the country require a foreign language, at least up to a competent reader level, but progressively a requirement of a B2 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (a “confident” command of the language) has become the standard. However, even in the most elite universities in the country, students struggle to meet this requirement.

Currently, regulations for doctoral studies at several universities require an English language certification, or, in some cases, another second language that each program determines as relevant to its discipline. This flexibility allows, for example, waivers for students cosupervised by French, Portuguese, or German-speaking universities, which in any case tend to be a minimal number. Hence, English language course sequences are added to the doctoral curriculum, which is already demanding, generating an additional challenge for those students who, although very talented in their specialties, did not receive this instruction in their previous schooling.

All in all, doctoral programs in Latin America face the dual challenge of promoting early entry into research and, at the same time, providing language proficiency that will enable future researchers to perform sustainably in a predominantly English-speaking environment. Doctoral theses by *compendium* of articles and publication requirements for graduation have created curricular spaces for this critical aspect of quality. Still, educational imbalances within countries, in the same way as global scientific participation imbalances, remain barriers to the adoption of the English language.

In summary, we need to rethink language policies at the doctoral level with a view that balances, on equal terms, publication in quality local, Spanish-speaking academic venues and the acquisition of English as a vital tool for global scientific participation. The former aims to strengthen knowledge production and networks in developing countries and challenges the directionality of knowledge. The latter provides emerging academics with critical resources and should become a central goal as early as in undergraduate curricula. Ultimately, early access to English may promote equal participation for Latin American students in their graduate programs and for Latin American scientists in their academic communities at the global level. ▲

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