

# Equity in English Language Education: Challenges and Opportunities through the Lens of Capability Approach

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## Abstract

This article considers how students in rural school in West Sulawesi experience English learning in their daily lived experiences and how this experience may support an attention to equity-oriented English education by using Capability Approach. Drawing on the significance of English proficiency for country's development, this study examines the challenges encountered by students in underprivilege areas which worsen the gap of inequalities in English education. This study also seeks to fills a gap by analysing how this challenge affects educational outcomes in rural school in West Sulawesi. Five high school's students were selected to be the participants through purposive sampling with some indicators including students' attendance at rural schools, different level of academic performance, and limited access to additional learning resources. Data were obtained through semi-structured interview and field observations, which enables a comprehensive understanding into students' learning experience. In addition, this study uses a thematic analysis to reveal the key findings, including themes such as resource barriers and learning challenges, motivations and perceptions, and socio-cultural factors in language acquisition. The result of this current project underscores the significant implications of the challenges on students in underprivilege areas, which greatly impedes their ability to develop their English proficiency. Through the promotion of equity in education and the bridging of the gap of urban and rural areas, these measures could create equal opportunities and contribute to broader efforts toward the development of the country.

**Keywords:** Equity; English Language; Capability Approach, Rural Areas; West Sulawesi.

English serves as the dominant international language that widely utilised in various aspects of life, from information access to science, including access to academic publications, the internet, and information technology. English proficiency significantly enhances individuals' ability to contribute to the development of country and the growth

of tourism that become a vital gateway to global market (Ayu et al., 2021; Shahrudin et al., 2013; Thitivesa & Siraphatthada, 2022). English proficiency opens so many doors to business opportunities, including international trade, tourism, and strategic sector employment. Previous studies have highlighted the significant relationship between English

proficiency and the economic development of one country. This emphasises the important of English skills in facing globalisation (Lauder, 2008; Marzuki, 2016; Sulistiyo, 2016). Recognising this strong connection, the authorities in developing countries like Indonesia, where English is not the primary language, view English as the means to enhance their economic and social conditions (Alhendi, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2011). As a result, English education become the key aspect in the development of a nation. In Indonesia, the link between English proficiency and development has been greatly emphasised through the inclusion of English as a mandatory subject in curriculum, particularly in schools and higher education institution (Wahyuni et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih et al., 2023). In West Sulawesi, access to quality English language in teacher education faces crucial challenges. Rural education is often perceived as encountering unique challenges compared to urban and suburban context. Major issues including inequality in education, such as the lack of qualified teachers, insufficient resources, and lack of parental support in learning experiences and hinder the capability of students in rural area to learn English effectively (Pramesty et al., 2022). Such difficulties explain a huge gap that exists between the rural students and the urban counterparts with regard to their prospects for English language learning and academic achievement. For these challenges, specific interventions are necessary in order to guarantee effective distribution of quality English education for all students irrespective of their location.

The right to equality in learning, as enjoyed globally through numerous conventions, gives the children a right to quality education not owing to their social background, race, gender or religion (Maclean, 2003). However, the actual opportunity in education means more than just providing access to resources. It is also involving the need to address and acknowledge diverse personal, social, and environmental factors

that influence students' learning experiences. The barriers such as financial constraints, lack of qualified teachers, and international cultural competence towards English can significantly influence students' capability. The challenges in rural schools often lead to lower English proficiency levels among students compared to students in urban area (Coleman, 2010; Nunan, 2003; Sakhiyya et al., 2018). This inequality in English education, which oppose its positive role in country's development, it can paradoxically worsen the existing social and economic disparities. Through the perspective of Capability Approach, this study considers the challenges and opportunities that students have when studying English in rural school in West Sulawesi. Therefore, the effective strategies can be identified to improve accessibility in English language education. These efforts are very important to enhance English proficiency of the students to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to access quality education.

### ***Capability Approach***

The 'Capability' is the core idea in the Capability Approach (CA), a concept developed by Sen. It is generally defined as the individual's freedom to pursue things or be in situations that they value, ultimately lead to a good life (Sen, 2009). The CA acknowledges that people in disadvantaged situations may need extra support to achieve similar well-being as others (Robeyns, 2005). For instance, students from low-income family in West Sulawesi might struggle with learning English due to financial limitations, lack of educational resources, or insufficient access to qualified teachers. Students who have family responsibilities might also find it hard to focus on their studies because of competing demands at home. By using the CA, educational planning in West Sulawesi can address these broader needs and aim to provide the necessary support and resources to help all students achieve their educational goals. This approach helps in understanding

how individual situations and the educational environment interact, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to improve resources and support. It emphasises creating fair educational opportunities that consider students' different needs and challenges, thus promoting a more inclusive and effective English language learning environment in rural areas.

Capabilities and functioning are central to understanding the educational experiences of students in both rural areas. While 'functioning' represents the tangible outcomes of English education, such as proficiency in English, capabilities refer to the broader opportunities students must develop these skills (Sen, 1992). A core strength of the capability approach is its clear goal, which is to broaden the opportunities for disadvantaged individuals to pursue meaningful activities and experiences by ensuring they have access to necessary resources and can make significant choices (Alkire, 2005). Consider the case of two students: one from a well-resourced urban school and another from a poorly resourced rural school. Both students may achieve similar levels of English proficiency (a functioning), but the capabilities they had to reach this point may differ dramatically. The urban student likely had access to quality teaching, learning materials, and extracurricular support, all of which expanded their capabilities to learn English. In contrast, the rural student may have attained the similar level of proficiency despite encountering significant challenges, such as limited access to qualified teachers, outdated materials, and a lack of English-speaking environments. Sen's concept of agency, the ability to act and bring about change, is critical in understanding the role of English education in West Sulawesi.

To illustrate this framework, consider a student striving to achieve certain level of proficiency in English. Learning English and using it effectively could be viewed as a capability, which is a freedom that a student might pursue if the required resources and opportunities are available. These resources

include access to quality English teachers, textbooks, language learning tools, exposure to English through media, and support from the school, parents and community. However, the capability to learn and master English does not merely depend on these resources. It also required various conversion factors that turn these resources into capabilities. These conversion factors can be categories as personal, such as the student's cognitive abilities to learn; social, such as family attitudes towards English education or peer influence; political, such as officials' policies supporting English language education in rural areas; economic, such as the availability of scholarships or financial aid for students to attend English courses; and environmental, such as the availability of electricity and internet access for online learning. The decision to actively engage in English learning and reach proficiency leads to what Sen refers as a 'functioning,' and this choice is influenced by individuals' agency and values, which are shaped by the conversion factors that previously influenced the potential to learn English. Consequently, English may be valued as a vital skill for future opportunities with determination. On the other hand, it may be considered less important from lack of publicity or from cultural or social standards. However, this depends on the type of attitude that the community or the national policy that encourages or discourages English learning in a particular country. This specific case illustrates that the opportunity to acquire English as well as the decision to do it refers not only to functioning of individual motivation. They stem from a complex interplay of factors that either enable or hinder students' educational journey in West Sulawesi.

### ***Equity***

Education equity is a broad concept, which concerns factors such as safety, health, environment, and physical facilities. A critical aspect of work on attaining educational equity is 'accessibility' which means that all nationals should have equal chances of learning and

succeeding at what they do. Current research emphasizes the importance of access in fashioning equity in education (Beyene et al., 2023; Kibrit et al., 2022; Sahek & Nasri, 2019). For English language learning in West Sulawesi, this means providing all students with the quality resources, assistance and access to the conditions that enable learners of any economic or cultural situation to succeed. It considers equity as encompassing more than a fair distribution of the resource type. It also involves other areas, for instance safety and health, environmental and infrastructural. Thus, learning environment in which all students should be free to work as well as be safe. In this regard, the term accessibility is provided a significant place within equity that is outlined to respond to the need for every learner to be provided an equal chance of learning and succeeding. This involves not only helping make sure each student is given a fair chance to learn as well as access to schools but also facilitating the availability of good teaching and learning resources, proper teaching and learning techniques alongside other support structures that meet a wide range of needs for different students. This premise is particularly appropriate in the West Sulawesi region where learners face major challenges to quality education. Current studies reflect on the role of access to influence equity in education in the current society. Studies by Beyene et al., (2023), Kibrit et al. (2022) and Sahek & Nasri (2019) highlight that prioritising on accessibility is essential to establishing a fair and inclusive educational system. This study indicates that when students are provided with equal access to educational opportunities, their chances of academic success significantly increase, regardless of their personal environment. By relying on Capability Approach (CA) perspective, equality in education is all about creating a level playing field where all students have the similar opportunities to reach their optimal potential. It is about removing the barriers that constrain students from accessing the resources and support they need to succeed

and ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, has the chance to learn, participate, grow, and achieve their goals.

## Method

The research questions guide this study, and the study uses a qualitative research approach. Employing interview and field study, it wants to examine the complex details of teaching English in schools in West Sulawesi. This site was chosen on the basis of high rural student attendance and the moderate level of development. However, some of the following limitations are worth considering. First, the educational statistics of West Sulawesi will need to be pursued further to ensure generalizability of the results. Second, there are limitations of the analysis in the current study. However, the government of Indonesia has recently come to realize that more needs to be done to improve education in West Sulawesi and thus has taken steps to ensure better education for its people. The study includes five high school students from West Sulawesi by purposive sampling depending on the attendance of rural or underprivilege schools, poor academic performance, and limited additional learning resources. Some of these participants were chosen in order to capture the diversity of the educational setting across the region and to show how the deficits of educational opportunities compare to the rest of Indonesia. To that extent, prioritization of the educational needs of the students is crucial in reducing the problems faced.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, allowing researchers to engage directly with participants. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained through a formal letter of consent, ensuring that participants fully understood the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Parental or guardian consent was also secured for participants under the age of 18 to comply with ethical research guidelines.

The data were analysed qualitatively



with the aid of thematic analysis for sampling qualitative data for patterns or themes. This approach helps in the analysis of the data in relation to other research finding thus offers a better understanding of the topic under study. As for the choice of research participants, this study uses the experience of high schools' students from the rural area of West Sulawesi and concentrates on their abilities to identify the existing issues of learning English as well as aspects of agency and autonomy. The participants in the study were five, of whom all were ninth-grade students attending Junior High School in rural areas of West Sulawesi, Indonesia. The qualitative interviews enabled gaining understanding of how those students learned English and the lessons they learned from it while studying at an underprivileged school. The study focuses on the way students perceive English learning and factors influencing their language learning in that context. The interviews, conducted in Indonesian language, were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes long. These recordings were analysed using thematic analysis to identify the key themes and patterns in the participants' experiences in learning English.

## Result and Discussion

The interview with informants and observations conducted in this research uncovered several key themes that underscore the challenges encountered by rural high school students in West Sulawesi in learning English. These findings resonate with Sen's Capability Approach that refers to the significance of access to opportunities and resources in enabling individuals to achieve their desired outcomes.

In urban settings, learning English is often perceived as valuable pursuit, it is also supported by conducive environments, and may quality resources. The physical, social, and cultural context in urban areas significantly enhance the process of acquiring English language skills (Zhang, 2023). Urban students

often exercise their choice by passively engage themselves in learning English that include joining English club or registering for extra English classes. On the other hand, rural students often encounter different thing. For them, English education is mandatory as opposed to elective, meaning they have a very little option in whether or not they take the language. As one participant expressed, "*I never chose to learn English; it's just a subject we have to take.*" Furthermore, a lack of resources and opportunities significantly hampers their ability to engage with or influence the way they learn English. Furthermore, a lack of resources and opportunities significantly constrains their ability to engage with or influence the way they learn English. Another student underscored this challenge by stating, "*We don't have enough books or proper materials, so learning English feels really hard.*" These experiences reveal that this has got a disempowering effect to the students in that they have less control over their learning process. This paper found that the externality aspect of the Capability Approach, particularly the conversion factors that establish the manner in which resources can be transformed into functioning, highlights these challenges faced by students in different parts of West Sulawesi.

In urban region there are positive conversion factors like availability of schools from where one can get all the necessary equipment, the teachers who are experienced and the environment which support the learning of English enables students to boost their capability of learning the language. These students can easily transform these resources into functioning of English proficiency. In rural areas, however, negative conversion factors such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and limited educational resources constrain students' capabilities. Despite these challenges, some rural students demonstrate educational resilience which is the ability to persevere academically despite adverse conditions. This resilience is a crucial capability that enable students to navigate obstacles and continue

striving for educational success, even when the odds are against them. Adaptive preferences, a concept within the CA, refer to the tendency of individuals to adjust their aspirations based on the constraints they face (Sen, 1992). In West Sulawesi, the Human Development Index is relatively low compared to other regions in Indonesia and Sulawesi, as reported by the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency. This lower development level contributes to significant educational challenges, particularly in rural areas, where disparities in resources and opportunities are more pronounced. Consequently, students in these rural areas have low expectations for their English proficiency due to the lack of support and resources available. As one student explained, *"We don't have English teachers who can really help us speak the language well."*

This limitation results in capability deprivation, preventing students from fully developing their English proficiency as they view it as an unrealistic or unattainable objective. One student expressed, *"Learning English feels impossible when we don't even have access to good books or good internet resources."* Such reflection highlights the critical importance of addressing resource of addressing resource disparities and providing support to rural students in enhancing their English proficiency.

This change may lead to capability loss, that implies students are prevented from attaining their full capability in English on the grounds that such performance is not achievable. On the long run this has the danger of aggravating this unfair cycle putting rural students in a disadvantaged compound as opposed to their urban counterparts in terms of ability and practice. To best understand the inequity and difficulties faced by students, applying the detailed Capability Approach on English language education in West Sulawesi schools has unveiled many observations. Thanks to this framework of five elements like capabilities, functioning, agency, conversion factors, and preferences, the investigations

help to shed the light on relationships between English education and human development as to the area. Finally, we see how this view provides valuable insight into how various and fair education policies are that should be in place to ensure that students in their various regions have an equal opportunity to access their potential.

### ***Challenges for high school students in learning English in West Sulawesi***

Five students in rural West Sulawesi all reported their difficulties when learning English, which results from inadequate learning materials, limited assistance and insufficient access to proper teachers. These difficulties are magnified by a condition that is rarely considered, namely specific learning difficulties, like most learning disorders, which, in most cases, go unnoticed because teachers in schools cannot understand them. Even if students would perhaps expect that recognising such challenges would result into a proper provision of support, they never get this so they continue to struggle with numerous challenges.

The educational framework in West Sulawesi appears to be designed to cater the majority and often neglect the needs of students with unique challenges. Consequently, these students struggle to keep pace with their counterparts, and the absence of targeted support further constraint their academic progress. Upon entering high school, these students typically have only a basic knowledge of English, starkly contrasting with their urban peers, who often begin with more advanced English skills. Urban students generally benefit from enhanced educational resources, such as private course or tutoring, language courses, and many more robust curricula, which create a substantial gap between rural and urban students.

In schools, English classes are rare and limited to simply passing by students, and do not help students make progress in this course. The difficulties that these students

face in their English lessons are as a result of regional contextual constraints in both economic and academic contexts, which act as barriers to effective learning of English, a subject often considered rigid in the first place. These barriers if continued will lead to feelings of overwhelm and some students inevitably drop out of their English class due to helplessness in dealing with these challenges.

The findings reveal that the lack of quality English education the student in rural areas is a common issue. A majority of learners are faced with numerous difficulties in achieving effective mastery of general English that include vocabulary and grammar mostly attributed to lack of coherent and adequate instructions. This is compounded by shortage of key educational inputs such as textbooks and other learning materials. Looking at the capability approach that was proposed by Sen, it can be seen that economic resources have a central role of opening up opportunities for improvement of the people's capabilities. Consequently, for the rural students in West Sulawesi, fluency in English is critical because it offers possibilities to grow their capacity. It affords them better employment opportunities, especially where employment demands proficient English speaking. Nonetheless, poor quality and scarce access to English education and poor employment opportunities in the rural areas limit the students from enhancing English as means for economic development. They are unable to acquire adequate and overall educational materials due to their limited resources, and thus their learning prospects and potential are also bounded.

The circumstance that the English classes were held only twice a week, then, worsened this problem even more. According to Sen, what is important is the world in which learning takes place and how this affects capabilities. One of the challenges of students is limited time to learn English since a lot of time is taken by other subjects. This stands in stark contrast to urban students, who benefit from more frequent and varied language instruction,

which give them greater opportunities to develop proficiency of the students. Economic constraints also play a pivotal role in limiting students' capabilities. Students who cannot afford additional support, such as private tutoring or online courses, experience increased stress and difficulties in keeping up with the curriculum. Sen's Capability Approach posits that economic resources are essential for expanding individuals' opportunities. The inability to afford extra English classes due to financial limitations restricts students' freedom to enhance their skills beyond what is provided in regular classes. The lack of financial resources means that students cannot access personalised support, which is available to wealthier peers. This economic barrier contributes to increased stress and hampers their ability to achieve proficiency in English.

Sen's framework emphasises that the capability to achieve desired outcomes is influenced by available opportunities. Furthermore, large class sizes in rural schools are another significant constraint. With over 40 students per class, teachers often struggle to provide individual attention. This situation limits students' opportunities to engage deeply with the material and address specific learning difficulties. Sen's approach suggests that educational structures influence individuals' freedom to achieve outcomes. Since the size of the groups is large most of the boys and girls are not privileged to get close attendance from faculty members who give support to the learners to grasp other levels of language structures required for academic success. Furthermore, the remaining levels of exposure to the English language outside of the classroom are also revealed as another effectively limiting factor in the data.

Often many students, especially those from communities where indigenous languages are valued, get very poor practice in English outside class. While the cultural importance of preserving indigenous languages is crucial, as emphasised by Hamka et al., (2024), this focus can inadvertently create challenges for

students learning English. Sen's Capability Approach provides a useful framework for understanding how these challenges arise. It underscores how the environment that shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors can significantly influence individuals' ability to achieve desired outcomes, such as proficiency in English.

In West Sulawesi, where indigenous languages are highly valued and dominate daily communication, it can be inferred that students face difficulties in developing their English language skills due to limited exposure and practice opportunities. Family responsibilities also significantly impact students' ability to focus on their studies. Another challenge is that regarding to substantial household duties, which is the struggle to balance these responsibilities with their academic work. Sen's approach considers how individuals' capabilities are shaped by their circumstances, including their time and energy availability. The need to juggle family obligations and schoolwork affects students' overall well-being and academic performance. Previous research on educational (Freire et al., 2020; Takács et al., 2021) suggests that students in challenging circumstances often develop coping strategies to navigate their educational and personal responsibilities. Although these strategies are considered important, they are, however, bound with external barriers such as family responsibilities that plays a big role in their effectiveness. In acquiring English learning, this resilience is further challenged in as much as student from rural areas have challenges.

Socioculturally, English opens a very good chance to communicate with people all over the world and take parts in cultural interchanges which are significant for personality and socialization processes. However, when it comes to culture, students who learn in rural setting have a challenge in getting the benefits as they hardly get to come across English speaking environment or more so resources. The combination of these stresses forms the rationale for the support that has to

consider coping style of the learners as well as the contextual demands which such students experience in such contexts.

## Conclusion

This research has examined various incidences that are related to the effect of English language teaching on high school students in West Sulawesi. This shows that English can either facilitate or hinder countless facets of the students depending on some contextual factors. The findings have also acknowledged that language especially English, occupies a key position in boosting the economic prospects and the probability of employment of the individuals. Hence it can provide potential ways to the economic development regardless of restriction of resources in the regions.

However, these benefits are often hindered by the challenges such as remote geographical conditions, the lack of infrastructure, and restricted access to digital tools. English can also potentially connect students with global world and foster personal development. Furthermore, while English provides access to a broader knowledge and learning materials, the lack of these resources in some rural areas still become the barriers for students and limit capabilities to fully benefit from the opportunities.

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