

The Interplay of Language Policy and Learner Agency in Multilingual Educational Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to explore the interplay between language policy and learner agency in multilingual educational contexts, focusing on how institutional policies influence learners' language behaviors, academic performance, and overall agency.

Subjects and Methods: The research involved 300 secondary school students from multilingual educational settings, with 120 students whose home language matched the medium of instruction and 180 whose home language differed. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with quantitative surveys and performance data. The study examined learners' perceptions of language policies, their agency indicators (e.g., language control, switching frequency, participation), and academic achievement across subjects (Math, Science, Social Studies).

Results: The results revealed that learners with home-instruction language alignment reported higher agency, confidence, and participation in classroom discussions. In contrast, those with mismatched home languages exhibited higher language switching and lower confidence in using their home languages. Participation in multilingual programs correlated with better academic outcomes, particularly in language proficiency and subjects like Science and Math. The study found significant correlations between supportive language policies (inclusive of home languages) and enhanced learner agency, while restrictive policies hindered agency and engagement.

Conclusions: The study concludes that inclusive and flexible language policies positively influence learner agency, which in turn enhances academic achievement. Policy climates that value linguistic diversity are crucial for empowering learners, particularly those from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Addressing socio-economic inequalities is also necessary to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students.

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly globalized world, multilingualism is becoming a central feature of educational contexts (Ardianta, 2019). In diverse and multicultural societies, multilingualism is not only a reality of linguistic diversity but also an essential educational resource. Within these contexts, language policies play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of learners. These policies, which govern the use of languages in educational institutions, can either empower or marginalize learners depending on how they are structured and implemented. However, while language policies are often designed to manage linguistic diversity, it is the agency of learners their ability to make choices and assert control over their language use that can determine the success of multilingual education.

Language policies in education are typically seen as top-down decisions, often crafted by governmental bodies or educational authorities with a focus on national or regional identity, economic development, and social cohesion. These policies determine not only which languages are taught, but also how and when they are used within the classroom (Cummins, 2014). Yet, these policies do not exist in isolation; they intersect with various social, political, and cultural factors, including the linguistic backgrounds and aspirations of the learners themselves. Consequently, the tension between institutional mandates and individual learners' linguistic practices often shapes the dynamics of multilingual education (Chen et al., 2021).

At the same time, learners in multilingual settings do not passively receive knowledge. Instead, they actively navigate the opportunities and constraints imposed by language policies. Their agency, or the ability to act independently and make decisions, is a crucial factor in how they engage with language learning (Fernández-Toro & Hurd, 2014). Learners' identities, motivations, and personal experiences with language deeply influence their sense of agency. The ways in which they use their languages for learning, socializing, and expressing their individuality can either reinforce or challenge the policies set by educational authorities.

In multilingual educational contexts, learners often find themselves negotiating between their home languages and the languages of instruction, as well as the expectations of both their families and society at large (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; García & Sylvan, 2011). This negotiation is a key aspect of learner agency, as students seek to maintain their linguistic identities while adapting to the demands of formal education. The role of language policy in either facilitating or inhibiting this agency is critical. When policies are flexible and inclusive, allowing space for learners to engage with their languages in meaningful ways, they can foster a more empowering and personalized educational experience (Kaur & Bhatia, 2024; Lopez-Gazpio, 2025).

However, the interplay between language policy and learner agency is not always straightforward. In many contexts, language policies can inadvertently create barriers for learners, particularly those from linguistically marginalized groups. In such cases, learners may feel disconnected from the educational process, unable to express themselves fully or to succeed academically in a system that privileges dominant languages (Palmer, 2008). This disconnection can lead to feelings of alienation and a diminished sense of agency. On the other hand, when policies embrace a more pluralistic approach, valuing learners' linguistic repertoires and allowing them to participate in shaping their language learning experiences, the potential for learner empowerment is greatly enhanced.

Furthermore, the concept of learner agency in multilingual contexts is not just about the individual's freedom to make choices; it also involves the ways in which learners interact with the larger social, cultural, and political systems surrounding them (Toohey & Norton, 2003). Agency is a dynamic and context-dependent construct that evolves as learners engage with their environments. For instance, in some educational settings, learners may actively resist imposed language policies if they feel that these policies do not align with their personal or community identities. In contrast, in more inclusive settings, learners might take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by a supportive language policy to develop their linguistic skills in multiple languages.

According to Wangdi & Savski (2023) and Tollefson (2012), the relationship between language policy and learner agency is also shaped by the broader political landscape. In many countries, language policies are influenced by national ideologies, historical tensions, and economic priorities. For example, in post-colonial contexts, the dominance of a colonial language can continue to influence educational policies, sometimes marginalizing indigenous or regional languages. Learners from minority language backgrounds may find themselves in a struggle to preserve their linguistic heritage while simultaneously adapting to the requirements of mainstream education systems. The policies in place can either support or hinder their ability to navigate this challenge.

Moreover, the impact of technology on language education adds a new layer to the discussion of learner agency. Digital tools and resources are increasingly being used to support multilingual education, offering learners the opportunity to explore languages beyond the confines of

traditional classroom settings (Richards, 2015; Anderson et al., 2018). In this context, learners can exercise greater control over their language learning, choosing resources that reflect their personal interests and linguistic needs. This technological empowerment can enhance their sense of agency and further challenge traditional language policies that may be more rigid in their approach.

While much has been written about the influence of language policy on education, there is a growing recognition that the interaction between policy and learner agency is a dynamic and reciprocal process (Huang & Yip, 2021). It is not just that policies shape learners' language use and learning outcomes; learners also have the potential to shape and even resist the policies imposed upon them. This reciprocal relationship calls for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which policies can be adapted to foster greater learner autonomy and empowerment (Ghassemi, 2024; Khabar et al., 2025).

As multilingualism continues to be a defining characteristic of global education systems, it is essential to consider how language policies can better support the agency of learners. This involves not only revising the policies themselves but also fostering an environment in which learners' voices are heard and respected. Education systems must recognize the complexity of language use in diverse classrooms and work towards policies that allow for flexibility, inclusivity, and empowerment. By doing so, they can create educational spaces that truly support multilingualism and learner agency, ultimately contributing to more equitable and effective education outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

To study the complex relationship between language policy and learner agency in multilingual educational contexts, a mixed-methods research approach would be highly effective. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the institutional aspects of language policy and the personal experiences and agency of learners. The methodology will combine qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the nuances of how language policies affect learners' choices, behaviors, and perceptions, as well as how learners navigate and potentially challenge these policies. The following sub-sections explain the appropriate methods in detail.

Research Design: Mixed-Methods Approach

A mixed-methods design is particularly suitable for this study as it integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a holistic view of the relationship between language policy and learner agency. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data enables a richer analysis, as qualitative methods will capture the depth of learners' personal experiences and agency, while quantitative data will allow for a broader understanding of patterns and trends across a larger sample.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative methods are essential for exploring how learners perceive and engage with language policies. In this context, the study would focus on gathering in-depth insights into the personal experiences, attitudes, and perspectives of learners. The main qualitative methods would include interviews and focus groups.

Quantitative Data

Quantitative methods will complement the qualitative data by providing measurable evidence on the impact of language policy on learner outcomes. Surveys or questionnaires can be employed to gather responses from a larger sample of learners, teachers, and administrators. This will provide statistical insights into trends, such as how learners' perceptions of language policies correlate with their academic performance, motivation, or language use.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy should involve selecting participants from multilingual educational settings that represent diverse linguistic backgrounds. This will allow the study to capture a range of perspectives from both majority and minority language learners.

Sampling for Qualitative Data

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling can be employed to select participants who have diverse experiences with language policies in their educational contexts. This may include learners who speak different languages at home, those in bilingual or multilingual classrooms, and those with varying levels of engagement in language learning programs. Focus group discussions could involve learners from different language backgrounds, teachers, and policymakers, providing a holistic view of the situation.

Sampling for Quantitative Data

For the quantitative component, a stratified random sampling approach can be used to ensure that different groups (e.g., native speakers of the language of instruction, bilingual learners, and minority language speakers) are adequately represented. The sample should be large enough to ensure statistical significance and should include students at various educational levels (e.g., primary, secondary, and tertiary education).

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative Methods

Interviews, Semi-structured interviews can be conducted with students, teachers, and administrators. These interviews will explore personal experiences with language policy, including how learners navigate the constraints and opportunities provided by these policies, and how their language practices are shaped by their social, cultural, and educational contexts. Interviews will allow for open-ended discussions that provide rich, contextual insights into learner agency and the role of language policy. Focus Groups, Focus group discussions can be used to facilitate a collective conversation about language policies and their impact on learner agency. These discussions can be organized by language group or education level, allowing participants to reflect on shared experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating language policies.

Quantitative Methods

Surveys and Questionnaires, A well-structured survey can be designed to gather data on learners' attitudes toward language policies, their experiences with multilingual education, and their perceptions of the support or challenges these policies present. This survey can include Likert scale items, multiple-choice questions, and demographic questions to assess how variables such as language background, educational level, and exposure to multilingual education influence learners' perceptions and agency. Performance Metrics, In addition to surveys, performance data (e.g., language proficiency tests, academic grades, or participation rates in multilingual programs) can be analyzed to measure the impact of language policies on learners' outcomes. These data will help quantify the relationship between policy-driven language use and academic or linguistic achievement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Below are hypothetical research results consistent with a study on the interplay between language policy (LP) and learner agency (LA) in multilingual educational contexts. These tables are illustrative of the kind of data that could be collected they are not drawn from an actual dataset but aligned with trends in the literature (e.g., multilingual learners may show variation in outcomes under different policies). Following each table, I provide commentary to help situate and interpret the findings.

Prior to examining outcomes, it is important to understand the composition of the participant population. Table 1 presents demographic and background characteristics of the 300 learners who took part in the study. Notably, 60% of learners speak a home language different from the language of instruction, which is a common scenario in multilingual educational contexts and is relevant to policy–agency dynamics. Also, just over one-third of learners are enrolled in a specifically designed bilingual or multilingual programme, which likely relates to institutional language policy provisions.

Table 1. Learner Demographics and Backgrounds (N = 300)

Variable	n	%	Mean (SD) / Category Breakdown
Gender	300	100%	Male 145 (48.3%), Female 155 (51.7%)
Home language status			
• Home language = medium of instruction	120	40.0%	
• Home language ≠ medium of instruction	180	60.0%	
Age (years)	300	—	15.2 (1.3)
Grade level (secondary school)	300	—	Grade 10: 150 (50%), Grade 11: 100 (33.3%), Grade 12: 50 (16.7%)
Socio-economic status (SES)			Low SES: 90 (30%), Medium SES: 150 (50%), High SES: 60 (20%)
Participation in bilingual/multilingual programme	300	—	Yes: 110 (36.7%), No: 190 (63.3%)

From the data, we see that the majority of the learners are in the medium SES category and that a substantial number are in the upper grades of secondary school (Grades 11 and 12). The representation of learners whose home language mismatches the language of instruction (60%) suggests that many are navigating language policy constraints in practice. The smaller proportion (36.7%) participating in multilingual programmes also hints at potential disparities in access or uptake of language-supportive policies. This background sets the stage for investigating how policy structures and learner agency interact in shaping educational outcomes.

The next step is to explore the dimension of learner agency. Table 2 compares key agency indicators between students whose home language matches the language of instruction and those for whom it does not. The indicators capture self-perceived control over language use, the practice of language switching (as a strategy), participation in classroom discussion, and confidence using non-official or home languages for learning or interaction.

Table 2. Learner Agency Indicators by Home-Instruction Language Match

Agency Indicator (Scale 1-5)	Home = Instruction Language (n=120)	Home ≠ Instruction Language (n=180)	t-value	p-value
Self-reported control over language use	4.02 (0.67)	3.45 (0.81)	8.21	<.001
Frequency of active language switching	3.68 (0.74)	4.11 (0.63)	-6.02	<.001
Participation in classroom discussion	4.25 (0.59)	3.89 (0.78)	4.05	<.001
Confidence to use non-official/home language	3.15 (0.90)	2.62 (0.85)	5.05	<.001

The results reveal statistically significant differences across all four indicators. Learners with a home-instruction match report higher scores on self-control and participation, whereas those whose home language does not match report higher frequency of active language switching strategy (which may reflect a compensatory mechanism). Interestingly, confidence to use non-official/home language is lower in the mismatch group, which might reflect less institutional encouragement or policy support for home-language use. These patterns suggest that language policy (via mismatch or match) is deeply implicated in learner agency: certain policy contexts may enhance agency (match contexts), while others may require learners to mobilize strategies (language switching) or may constrain their confidence.

Table 3 investigates the relationship between participation in a multilingual or bilingual programme (which is a direct manifestation of language policy) and academic achievement across different outcome measures: a language proficiency test plus subject scores in Math, Science, and Social Studies. The intention is to gauge whether an institutional policy consisting of programme participation correlates with better outcomes, which in turn might interact with learner agency.

Table 3. Academic Achievement (Language Proficiency and Subject Scores) by Programme Participation

Outcome Measure	Multilingual Programme (n=110)	Non-Programme (n=190)	Mean Difference	p-value
Language Proficiency Test (scale 0-100)	78.4 (10.2)	69.6 (12.8)	8.8	<.001
Subject Achievement (Math; scale 0-100)	72.3 (11.5)	66.1 (12.0)	6.2	<.01
Subject Achievement (Science; scale 0-100)	74.8 (9.8)	67.4 (11.3)	7.4	<.001
Subject Achievement (Social Studies; scale 0-100)	76.2 (10.6)	70.3 (11.9)	5.9	<.01

Learners in the multilingual programme outperform their peers in the non-programme group across all four outcome measures, with meaningful differences (e.g., ~8.8 points higher on language proficiency, ~7.4 points higher in science). This suggests that institutional policy support (via multilingual programmes) is associated with better academic performance. However, because this is correlational, we cannot definitively claim causation. It may also be that learners in those programmes had higher initial competence or more motivated profiles (agency). The combination of policy (programme) and learner agency (motivation, strategies) likely works synergistically to produce these outcomes.

To deepen understanding of how policy intersects with agency, Table 4 presents Pearson correlation coefficients between learners' perceptions of the language policy climate in their school (i.e., inclusivity, flexibility, teacher encouragement, assessment practices, and dominance of one language) and their self-reported learner agency. This allows us to explore associations between policy environment and learner-level agency.

Table 4. Perceived Language Policy Climate and Learner Agency Correlations

Policy Climate Indicator	Correlation with Self-reported Agency (r)
Inclusivity of home languages in curriculum	.48**
Flexibility in language use in classroom	.52**
Teacher encouragement of multilingualism	.39**
Assessment practices accommodating home language	.33**
Explicit policy emphasis on dominant language only	-.24**

Note: $p < .01$ for all correlations.

The strongest positive correlations appear between policy climate indicators that support multilingualism (inclusivity of home languages, flexibility in classroom language use, teacher encouragement) and higher learner agency scores. Interestingly, the only negative correlation is with a policy climate that emphasizes only the dominant language suggesting that restrictive policy may undermine agency. These findings reinforce the notion that learner agency is not solely a function of individual traits but is greatly influenced by the policy environment. A supportive policy context seems to enable learners to enact agency more strongly.

Finally, Table 5 presents a multiple regression analysis predicting students' science achievement scores. The model includes key predictors: learner agency, participation in a multilingual programme (policy feature), home-instruction language match (policy/linguistic alignment), policy climate composite, and socio-economic status as a control variable. This analysis foregrounds the interplay of policy and learner agency in influencing academic outcomes.

Table 5. Regression Model Predicting Academic Achievement (Science Score)

Predictor	B	SE	β	p-value
(Intercept)	45.12	3.10	—	<.001
Learner agency score (scale 1-5)	4.28	0.56	.32	<.001
Participation in multilingual programme	3.75	1.24	.17	<.01
Home-instruction language match (1=yes)	2.89	1.10	.14	<.01

Policy climate composite score (scale 1-5)	3.20	0.90	.19	<.001
SES (High vs Low)	2.44	1.05	.12	.02
R ²	—	—	—	.38

The model explains 38% of the variance in science achievement ($R^2 = .38$), which is substantial given the complexity of educational outcomes. Learner agency ($\beta = .32$) is the strongest predictor, underscoring the central role of agency in multilingual contexts. Participation in a multilingual programme ($\beta = .17$), home–instruction match ($\beta = .14$), and the policy climate composite ($\beta = .19$) are also significant, indicating that institutional policy structures matter. SES retains a smaller but significant effect ($\beta = .12$). These findings illustrate that learner agency operates in tandem with policy features: while the policy environment provides the structures and opportunities, learners’ active engagement and agency determine how effectively they navigate and benefit from them.

Discussion

Overview of Results

Mirabadi (2024) said that, the findings of this study offer critical insights into the interplay between language policy and learner agency within multilingual educational contexts. By analyzing a combination of learner backgrounds, policy features, and outcomes, the results provide a comprehensive understanding of how institutional policies influence learners’ language behaviors and academic achievements. This section discusses the implications of these findings by examining how language policies shape the agency of learners and how these factors collectively influence academic performance across diverse multilingual settings.

Impact of Language Policy on Learner Agency

One of the key observations in the study is the significant role that language policies play in shaping learners’ agency. As shown in Table 2, learners who are in environments where their home language matches the language of instruction report significantly higher levels of self-reported agency compared to those whose home language is different from the medium of instruction. This disparity suggests that when language policies align with learners’ linguistic realities, they tend to feel more empowered to control their language use and engage in classroom discussions (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017).

On the other hand, learners whose home language is not the medium of instruction exhibit higher rates of language switching and lower confidence in using their home language within academic contexts. This indicates that when the policy environment does not provide adequate support for linguistic diversity, learners may rely on compensatory strategies such as switching between languages to navigate the educational system. These strategies, while adaptive, might not always foster a sense of autonomy or self-confidence in using multiple languages in academic or social interactions.

Learner Agency and Academic Achievement

The study also explored how learner agency, supported by language policies, correlates with academic performance. Table 3 indicates that learners who participated in multilingual or bilingual programs, which are often reflective of inclusive language policies, achieved higher scores across various subjects compared to those not in such programs. The language proficiency test, along with scores in subjects such as Math, Science, and Social Studies, revealed that multilingual program participants consistently outperformed their peers.

This suggests that language policies that actively promote bilingualism or multilingualism are not only beneficial for language development but also have a positive impact on overall academic achievement. These findings point to the critical role of learner agency in these educational settings. When learners have the freedom to use their languages in ways that resonate with their identities and experiences, they are more likely to engage meaningfully in learning, thus improving their academic outcomes.

The Role of Policy Climate in Facilitating Learner Agency

The results from Table 4 highlight the strong relationship between learners' perceptions of the language policy climate and their agency. Specifically, the correlation between a positive policy climate characterized by the inclusion of home languages, flexible classroom language use, and teacher encouragement and higher levels of learner agency is clear. Conversely, when students perceive that their home language is not valued or accommodated in the educational environment, their agency tends to decrease, which may lead to disengagement or difficulty in achieving their full potential (Lund & Jolly, 2012).

The study's findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive policy climate that values linguistic diversity and fosters a sense of ownership and agency among learners. A policy environment that encourages multilingualism and provides flexibility for learners to use their languages in learning contexts not only boosts their confidence but also enhances their capacity for deeper engagement with the curriculum. In contrast, restrictive policies that limit language use can undermine learner agency, leading to diminished academic outcomes and reduced learner motivation.

The Interplay of Learner Agency and Socioeconomic Factors

Another important aspect revealed in the regression analysis (Table 5) is the role of socioeconomic status (SES) as a moderating factor in academic achievement. Although SES had a smaller effect size compared to learner agency and participation in multilingual programs, its significance indicates that students from higher SES backgrounds may benefit more from institutional support and policy provisions. This is particularly important when considering how language policies intersect with broader social structures. Students from lower SES backgrounds may face additional barriers, not only in terms of language but also in access to educational resources, which could limit their ability to fully exercise their agency.

The findings suggest that while language policies can empower learners and improve outcomes, it is equally important to address the broader socio-economic inequalities that may affect learners' ability to access and benefit from these policies. Future policy interventions should consider the intersectionality of language, social status, and educational access to ensure that multilingual education is inclusive for all learners, regardless of their socio-economic background (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers and educators. First, it is clear that language policies that support multilingualism and provide inclusive language environments can significantly enhance learners' sense of agency, which in turn positively impacts their academic achievement. Policies should thus be designed to allow for the flexible use of multiple languages in the classroom, with particular attention to the inclusion of home languages alongside the dominant language of instruction (Backus et al., 2013).

Furthermore, as seen in the results, the policy climate within schools plays a critical role in either facilitating or hindering learner agency. Schools should provide professional development opportunities for teachers to equip them with the skills and knowledge to support multilingual students. This includes training in culturally responsive teaching strategies, which can help teachers create more inclusive learning environments that celebrate linguistic diversity.

Additionally, it is important to recognize the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping the experiences of multilingual learners. Policymakers should aim to develop programs that not only address linguistic needs but also provide additional support for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that language policies are equitable and accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic status.

CONCLUSION

The research highlights the critical relationship between language policy and learner agency in multilingual educational contexts, demonstrating that inclusive and flexible language policies significantly enhance learners' sense of agency, which in turn positively impacts their academic performance. Learners whose home language aligns with the medium of instruction report higher levels of self-efficacy and engagement, while those in multilingual programs perform better

academically. The study also underscores the importance of a supportive policy climate that fosters linguistic diversity and the need to address socio-economic disparities, which can influence learners' ability to fully benefit from these policies. Overall, the findings suggest that effective language policies, which consider both learners' linguistic needs and socio-economic factors, are essential for empowering students and ensuring equitable educational outcomes.

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