Language Ideology and Power in Educational Policy Discourse: A Critical Sociolinguistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This study aims to critically examine how language ideology and power are constructed, negotiated, and institutionalized within educational policy discourse in multilingual contexts. It seeks to uncover how policy texts and institutional narratives shape linguistic hierarchies, marginalize minority languages, and legitimize particular language choices as natural or inevitable.*

Subjects and Methods: *The research adopts a qualitative critical sociolinguistic design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Data consist of thirty-six national and regional educational policy documents from Asia, Europe, and Africa, complemented by semi-structured interviews with policymakers and senior educators. Analytical procedures included thematic coding, discursive and lexical analysis, and triangulation between policy texts and interview data to identify dominant ideologies and power relations embedded in language policy discourse.*

Results: *The findings reveal a consistent prioritization of national and global languages particularly English as legitimate carriers of academic knowledge and economic value, while minority and heritage languages are symbolically acknowledged but functionally constrained. Policy discourse reflects strong neoliberal rationalities, framing language as economic capital linked to competitiveness and employability. Multilingual learners are often problematized through deficit-oriented representations, and minority language communities are largely excluded from decision-making processes, reinforcing top-down governance and linguistic inequality.*

Conclusions: *Educational policy discourse functions as a powerful ideological mechanism that normalizes linguistic hierarchies and marginalizes minority language agency. Addressing these dynamics requires participatory, equity-oriented language policies that recognize multilingualism as a central resource for sociolinguistic justice and educational inclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a central position in education, functioning not only as a medium of instruction but also as a symbolic resource through which knowledge, authority, and social values are transmitted (Hassen, 2015; Jahan & Hamid, 2019; Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). Educational systems rely heavily on language to structure curricula, assess learning outcomes, and define legitimate forms of participation. Consequently, decisions about language use in education are never neutral, as they reflect broader ideological orientations and political priorities embedded within society.

According to Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2019), educational policy discourse represents a crucial arena in which language ideologies are articulated and institutionalized. Through official policy documents, governments and educational authorities define which languages are valued, how they should be used, and who is expected to master them. These discourses shape not only classroom practices but also the social meanings attached to different languages and language varieties, influencing learners' identities and life opportunities.

Language ideology refers to socially shared beliefs and assumptions about language that justify particular linguistic arrangements and hierarchies. Such ideologies often present certain languages as modern, neutral, or economically valuable, while framing others as traditional, local, or less useful. In educational policy discourse, these ideological positions are frequently naturalized, appearing as common sense rather than as politically motivated choices (Neumann, 2023; Lipman, 2016; Houdek, 2018).

Power is deeply intertwined with language ideology in educational policy. Power operates through discourse by legitimizing specific language norms and marginalizing alternative linguistic practices (Khan, 2024). Educational policies often function as instruments of symbolic power, enabling dominant groups to maintain control over linguistic resources while constraining the linguistic agency of minority or marginalized communities (Johnson & Johnson, 2015).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, education is a key site where linguistic hierarchies are reproduced across generations. Manan et al. (2016) said that, schooling plays a decisive role in determining which languages gain institutional recognition and which remain confined to informal or private domains. As a result, educational policy discourse becomes a mechanism through which social inequality is maintained or, potentially, challenged.

Uysal & Sah (2024) and Venegas-Weber & Negrette (2023) said that, Critical sociolinguistics offers a theoretical framework for examining the ideological and political dimensions of language in education. Rather than treating language policy as a technical or administrative matter, this approach emphasizes the role of discourse in constructing social realities. It seeks to uncover how policy texts encode assumptions about language, identity, citizenship, and national belonging.

Educational policy discourse often frames language choices in terms of efficiency, global competitiveness, or national unity (Cino, 2020; Carnoy, 2016). While such framings appear pragmatic, they frequently obscure the unequal consequences of language policies for different social groups. Minority language speakers may be required to adapt to dominant language norms, while their own linguistic repertoires are devalued or rendered invisible.

In many contexts, the promotion of a dominant or official language in education is justified through narratives of social cohesion and economic development (Raffo & Gunter, 2008). However, these narratives may function ideologically to legitimize linguistic assimilation and suppress linguistic diversity. Educational policy discourse thus becomes a site where inclusion and exclusion are simultaneously produced (Done & Andrews, 2020).

Globalization has further intensified the ideological dimensions of language in educational policy. The increasing emphasis on global languages, particularly English, has reshaped national education systems worldwide (Ushioda, 2017; Hult, 2017). Policies promoting global language proficiency often position such languages as gateways to modernity and success, while reinforcing power asymmetries between global and local languages.

At the same time, educational policies frequently claim to support multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Yet, critical analysis reveals that such support is often conditional or symbolic. Multilingualism may be promoted in rhetoric, while institutional practices continue to privilege a narrow range of dominant languages within formal education (May, 2014).

Policy texts play a crucial role in constructing subject positions for students, teachers, and communities (Coburn & Stein, 2006). Through discourse, learners are positioned as ideal citizens who conform to prescribed linguistic norms, while teachers are framed as agents responsible for enforcing policy mandates. These discursive constructions shape how educational actors understand their roles and responsibilities within the linguistic order.

Johnson (2010) said that, despite the significance of language ideology in education, much policy research focuses on implementation outcomes rather than discursive processes. This leaves unanswered questions about how power operates through the language of policy itself. A critical sociolinguistic analysis addresses this gap by examining how policy texts produce meaning, authority, and legitimacy.

Critical discourse analysis provides methodological tools to investigate how educational policy discourse constructs and normalizes particular language ideologies. By analyzing lexical choices, framing strategies, and intertextual references, researchers can reveal how power relations are embedded within policy language. This approach highlights the ideological work performed by seemingly technical or neutral policy texts.

Understanding language ideology and power in educational policy discourse is particularly important in multilingual and postcolonial contexts (Phyak, 2021). In such settings, language policies are often shaped by historical inequalities and colonial legacies that continue to influence educational practices. Critical analysis allows these historical dimensions to be connected to contemporary policy debates.

Examining educational policy discourse through a critical sociolinguistic lens also has practical implications. By making ideological assumptions visible, such analysis can inform more equitable and inclusive language policies. It encourages policymakers to recognize linguistic diversity not as a problem to be managed, but as a resource to be valued within education.

This study therefore aims to critically analyze educational policy discourse to explore how language ideology and power are constructed, negotiated, and institutionalized. By focusing on the discursive dimensions of language policy, the research seeks to contribute to broader discussions on linguistic justice, educational equity, and the role of language in shaping social inclusion and exclusion within education systems.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

The study adopts a qualitative critical sociolinguistic research design, grounded in a critical discourse analytical (CDA) framework. This approach is appropriate because the research seeks to uncover how language ideology, power relations, and social inequalities are constructed, normalized, and legitimized within educational policy discourse. Rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships, the study focuses on interpreting meaning, ideology, and representation embedded in texts and talk. A critical qualitative design enables the researcher to treat language policy not as neutral regulation, but as a social practice shaped by political, economic, and ideological interests.

Data Sources and Data Collection

The primary data consist of educational policy documents and semi-structured interview data. Policy documents include thirty-six national and regional education policies from multilingual contexts across Asia, Europe, and Africa. These documents serve as institutional texts through which dominant language ideologies are articulated and circulated. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers and senior educators, allowing the study to capture how policy ideologies are interpreted, justified, and enacted in practice. The combination of document analysis and interviews enables methodological triangulation, strengthening the interpretive depth and credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis Technique: Critical Discourse Analysis

Data were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly drawing on discourse power perspectives associated with scholars such as Fairclough and van Dijk. CDA is suitable because it focuses on how discourse reproduces dominance, inequality, and ideological control in institutional contexts. Policy texts were examined at multiple levels, including lexical choice, thematic emphasis, functional allocation of languages, and discursive framing of social actors. This analysis allowed the researcher to identify how certain languages are positioned as

legitimate, modern, or economically valuable, while others are marginalized or symbolically contained.

Table 1. Data Analysis Techniques

Analytical Stage	Technique	Analytical Focus
Discourse identification	Critical Discourse Analysis	Ideological and power relations
Thematic coding	Qualitative thematic analysis	Dominant ideological themes (e.g., neoliberalism, competitiveness, inclusion)
Discursive coding	Discursive analysis	Subject positioning, labeling, and framing
Lexical analysis	Frequency and co-occurrence analysis	Ideological emphasis and normalization
Data integration	Triangulation	Convergence between documentary and interview data

Interpretive Integration of Interviews and Policy Texts

Interview data were analyzed interpretively to examine how institutional actors reproduce, negotiate, or naturalize policy discourses. Interview excerpts were treated as situated discursive practices rather than neutral reflections of reality. This analysis focused on how respondents frame language policy decisions as inevitable, technical, or economically necessary, thereby reinforcing dominant ideologies. Integrating interview findings with policy text analysis enables the study to trace ideology across both formal documents and everyday professional reasoning.

Analytical Orientation and Validity

Overall, the methodological approach positions language policy as a site of ideological struggle rather than administrative planning. Validity is strengthened through triangulation of data sources, transparency of analytical procedures, and alignment between research questions, data, and analytical framework. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis, thematic coding, and supportive quantitative patterns, the method is well suited to examine how language ideology and power operate within educational policy discourse and its implications for sociolinguistic justice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Ideology Representation in Educational Policy Texts

The analysis of thirty-six national and regional educational policy documents from multilingual contexts (Asia, Europe, and Africa) reveals consistent ideological patterns in the representation of language. Across the corpus, dominant national languages and global languages—particularly English were overwhelmingly positioned as primary languages of instruction, assessment, and academic legitimacy. Minority and heritage languages appeared significantly less frequently and were framed within limited functional domains.

Table 2. Frequency of Language References in Educational Policy Documents (n = 36)

Language Category	Number of References	Percentage (%)
National language(s)	412	52.1
International language(s)	267	33.8
Minority / heritage language	93	11.8
Other languages	26	3.3

The distribution of language references across policy texts indicates a clear ideological hierarchy embedded within educational discourse. Rather than positioning languages as equally valuable resources, policy documents consistently prioritize certain languages as vehicles of academic knowledge and institutional legitimacy. This pattern reflects a dominant ideology that equates educational quality and modernity with the use of national and global languages, while implicitly constructing other languages as peripheral to core educational goals. The marginal placement of minority and heritage languages suggests that these languages are symbolically acknowledged but structurally constrained. By confining their presence to cultural or heritage-related sections,

policy discourse frames them as supplementary rather than integral to teaching, learning, and assessment processes. This framing reinforces the perception that minority languages belong to the realm of identity and tradition, not to domains associated with intellectual authority, scientific knowledge, or socioeconomic advancement.

At a broader level, the findings reveal how educational policy discourse functions as a mechanism of power that normalizes linguistic inequality. By repeatedly foregrounding dominant languages and limiting the functional scope of others, policies shape institutional expectations about which languages are considered legitimate for academic success. This normalization operates subtly through textual emphasis and omission, making language hierarchy appear natural and inevitable rather than politically constructed. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that language ideology in educational policy is not neutral but deeply intertwined with broader social, economic, and political priorities. The unequal representation of languages reflects underlying assumptions about nationhood, globalization, and competitiveness, which continue to influence how linguistic diversity is managed within education systems.

Functional Allocation of Languages in Education

Further analysis indicates a clear functional stratification of languages within education systems. National and international languages were consistently assigned to high-status domains such as science, mathematics, higher education, and standardized testing. In contrast, minority languages were associated with early education, informal learning, or community-based programs.

Table 3. Functional Domains Assigned to Languages in Policy Discourse

Educational Domain	Dominant Language(s) Used
Primary instruction	National language
Secondary education	National + international
Higher education	International language
STEM subjects	International language
Cultural / moral education	Minority language
Early childhood education	Minority / local language

The functional separation of languages across educational domains reveals how policy discourse constructs unequal pathways to knowledge and opportunity. By reserving dominant and global languages for advanced academic subjects and assessment, educational systems implicitly define these languages as carriers of intellectual rigor, scientific authority, and future-oriented skills. This allocation shapes learners' trajectories from an early stage, as exposure to high-status knowledge becomes increasingly dependent on mastery of specific languages endorsed by policy.

At the same time, positioning minority languages within culturally oriented or early learning contexts assigns them a symbolic rather than instrumental value. While this recognition affirms their role in identity formation and moral development, it also limits their perceived relevance beyond foundational or community-based settings. As a result, language policy discourse reinforces a stratified educational order in which linguistic competence is unevenly linked to academic progression and socioeconomic mobility, sustaining broader patterns of linguistic and social inequality.

Discursive Construction of Learners and Teachers

The policy documents also construct specific subject positions for learners and educators. Students from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds are frequently framed as requiring support, intervention, or transition toward the dominant language. Teachers are positioned as agents responsible for implementing standardized language norms rather than mediators of linguistic diversity.

Table 4. Discursive Labels Applied to Learners in Policy Texts

Discursive Category	Occurrence
"At-risk learners"	48

"Language-deficient students"	36
"Multilingual assets"	19
"Culturally diverse learners"	22

The imbalance indicates that multilingualism is more often problematized than valorized in educational policy discourse.

Interview Findings: Policymakers and Educators

Semi-structured interviews with policymakers (n = 10) and senior educators (n = 14) provide further empirical evidence of how language ideology operates in practice. Respondents consistently emphasized economic competitiveness, international benchmarking, and employability when justifying language policy decisions.

One policymaker stated:

> "Using an international language in higher education is not a choice anymore; it is a necessity if we want our graduates to compete globally." (Policy official, Interview 4)

The interview excerpt illustrates how economic rationality and global competitiveness function as dominant ideological frameworks shaping educational language policy. By framing the use of an international language as an unavoidable "necessity," the policymaker naturalizes a particular language choice and presents it as a neutral, technical response to global demands rather than a political decision. This discourse effectively depoliticizes language policy, obscuring the power relations involved in prioritizing certain languages over others. Such justifications reflect a broader neoliberal orientation in education, where language is treated primarily as an economic resource linked to employability and international mobility. Within this framework, the symbolic and pedagogical value of national or minority languages is subordinated to market-oriented goals. The interview findings suggest that policymakers and educators internalize and reproduce these ideologies, reinforcing a hierarchy in which global languages are associated with progress and success, while other languages are positioned as less relevant to academic and professional advancement.

Another respondent acknowledged the marginalization of local languages but framed it as unavoidable:

> "We recognize the importance of heritage languages, but the system cannot accommodate all of them at the academic level." (Senior education officer, Interview 7)

Educators highlighted tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities:

> "Students come with rich linguistic backgrounds, but the curriculum only values one or two languages." (Secondary school teacher, Interview 11)

The interview excerpts reveal how the marginalization of local and heritage languages is both acknowledged and normalized within educational policy discourse. By describing exclusion as something the "system cannot accommodate," the senior education officer frames linguistic inequality as a structural inevitability rather than a consequence of policy choices. This perspective shifts responsibility away from institutions and obscures the ideological assumptions that prioritize certain languages as academically legitimate while rendering others impractical or expendable. At the classroom level, educators' accounts expose the disconnect between policy frameworks and lived linguistic realities. The teacher's statement underscores how students' multilingual repertoires are systematically undervalued by curricula that recognize only a limited number of languages. This tension highlights the power of policy discourse in shaping educational practice, where institutional language ideologies constrain pedagogical flexibility and silence linguistic diversity. Together, these findings suggest that language ideology operates not only through formal policy texts but also through everyday educational practices, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege dominant languages while marginalizing others.

Neoliberal Discourses in Language Policy

Quantitative coding also revealed the prevalence of neoliberal terminology in educational policy discourse. Keywords associated with economic rationality appeared with high frequency across documents.
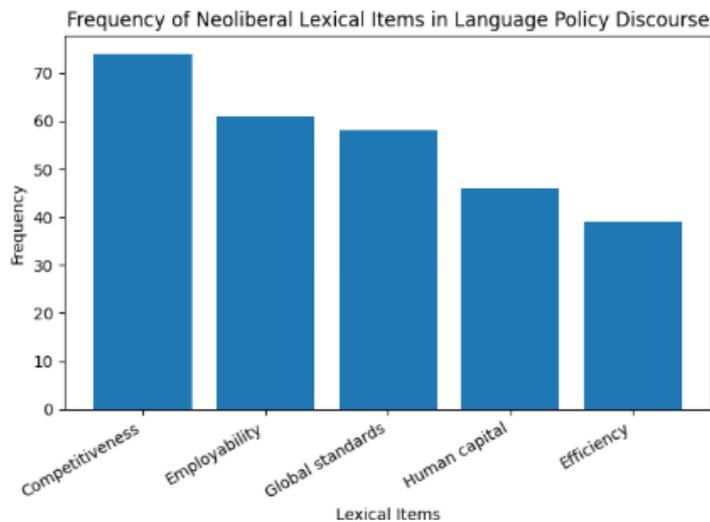

Figure 1. Frequency of Neoliberal Lexical Items in Language Policy Discourse.

The prominence of neoliberal terminology in language policy discourse indicates that educational language planning is increasingly shaped by market-oriented ideologies. Language is framed less as a cultural or social resource and more as a form of capital that can enhance individual and national economic performance. The frequent association of these economic discourses with international languages suggests that linguistic value is measured primarily through global competitiveness and labor market utility, rather than educational equity or cultural sustainability. As a result, policy narratives legitimize the prioritization of dominant global languages while sidelining alternative linguistic goals, reinforcing power relations that align education systems with neoliberal economic agendas rather than inclusive multilingual development.

Policy Silence and Absence of Minority Language Agency

Finally, the results show that minority language communities are rarely positioned as decision-making actors within policy discourse. Only 6 out of 36 documents explicitly referenced consultation with minority language stakeholders. Most policies adopted a top-down narrative, where language decisions were presented as technical or neutral rather than political.

One interview participant noted:

> *"Policies talk about inclusion, but the voices of minority language speakers are not really present in the documents." (Academic policy analyst, Interview 15)*

The interview excerpt underscores a critical gap between the inclusive rhetoric of educational language policies and their actual discursive practices. Although policies frequently invoke notions of diversity and inclusion, the absence of minority language communities as active agents reveals a top-down approach to language planning that marginalizes those most affected by policy decisions. By framing language choices as technical or administrative matters, policy texts obscure the political nature of linguistic governance and limit opportunities for meaningful participation by minority language speakers.

This discursive silence has important implications for power and agency in education. When minority communities are excluded from consultative processes, their languages are positioned as objects of management rather than as living resources shaped by their speakers. Such exclusion reinforces existing hierarchies, where dominant groups retain control over defining legitimate languages of education, while minority languages remain peripheral and symbolically included at best. The findings suggest that without genuine stakeholder involvement, claims of inclusivity risk becoming performative, failing to translate into equitable language policies that recognize minority language speakers as legitimate political and educational actors.

Discussion

Language Ideology as a Structuring Force in Educational Policy

The findings demonstrate that educational policy discourse operates as a powerful ideological mechanism that structures how languages are valued, ordered, and legitimized within education systems. Rather than presenting multilingualism as a plural and flexible resource, policy texts consistently construct a normative linguistic center dominated by national and global languages. This structuring effect is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, guiding institutions toward particular linguistic futures while narrowing the perceived possibilities for alternative language arrangements. Through repetition and emphasis, policies implicitly define what counts as "appropriate" language use in formal education, shaping long-term expectations for learners, teachers, and institutions alike.

Institutionalization of Linguistic Hierarchies

The functional distribution of languages across educational domains reveals how linguistic hierarchy becomes institutionalized through policy. By associating dominant languages with advanced knowledge, assessment, and academic progression, policies embed linguistic inequality into the architecture of education itself. This institutional logic transforms language proficiency into a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates access to symbolic capital, credentials, and mobility. Minority languages, while acknowledged, are systematically positioned outside pathways that lead to academic authority, reinforcing their subordinate status within the educational system. Such structuring ensures that linguistic inequality persists across generations, even in contexts that formally endorse diversity.

Problematization of Multilingual Learners

The discursive construction of learners further reinforces unequal power relations. Policy representations tend to frame multilingual students through deficit-oriented lenses, emphasizing remediation and transition rather than competence and resourcefulness. This framing shifts attention away from systemic constraints and places responsibility on learners to adapt to dominant linguistic norms. Even when multilingualism is recognized, it is rarely positioned as epistemically valuable within mainstream education. As a result, educational discourse risks pathologizing linguistic diversity, normalizing exclusionary practices under the guise of support and standardization.

Neoliberal Rationalities and the Marketization of Language

The prominence of neoliberal discourse highlights how economic rationality has become central to educational language planning. Policies increasingly justify linguistic choices through references to global competition, efficiency, and employability, reframing education as a site of market preparation rather than social transformation. Within this paradigm, language is valued primarily for its exchange value rather than its cultural, cognitive, or democratic significance. This instrumental orientation privileges languages associated with global capital while marginalizing those that do not align neatly with market logics, further entrenching inequalities under seemingly pragmatic policy rationales.

Policy Discourse, Power, and the Erasure of Agency

The limited presence of minority language stakeholders in policy narratives underscores how power is centralized within institutional actors. By excluding minority communities from decision-making processes, policy discourse transforms language governance into a technocratic exercise rather than a participatory political process. This erasure of agency allows dominant ideologies to remain uncontested, presenting linguistic hierarchies as inevitable rather than negotiable. The absence of minority voices not only weakens policy legitimacy but also undermines the possibility of developing genuinely inclusive and context-responsive language policies.

Implications for Educational Equity and Sociolinguistic Justice

Taken together, the findings suggest that educational policy discourse plays an active role in reproducing linguistic inequality by aligning language planning with dominant ideological, economic, and institutional interests. Rather than merely reflecting social hierarchies, policy texts contribute to their stabilization and normalization. Addressing these dynamics requires moving beyond symbolic recognition of diversity toward participatory policy frameworks that redistribute linguistic authority. From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, reimagining educational language policy entails recognizing multilingualism as a site of knowledge, power, and agency central to educational equity rather than peripheral to it.

CONCLUSION

The results and discussion demonstrate that educational language policy discourse consistently operates as a powerful ideological and political mechanism that structures linguistic hierarchies across multilingual contexts. By privileging national and global languages particularly English as the primary carriers of academic knowledge, assessment, and economic value, policy texts normalize unequal access to educational opportunity while marginalizing minority and heritage languages to symbolic or peripheral roles. The functional allocation of languages, deficit-oriented representations of multilingual learners, and the dominance of neoliberal rationalities collectively reinforce the perception that linguistic inequality is natural, necessary, and unavoidable. Interview data further reveal how these ideologies are internalized and reproduced by policymakers and educators, often framing exclusion as a structural inevitability rather than a consequence of deliberate policy choices. Moreover, the absence of minority language communities as active agents in policy-making highlights a significant imbalance of power, transforming language governance into a top-down, technocratic process that silences alternative linguistic voices. Taken together, the findings underscore that language ideology in educational policy is not neutral but deeply embedded in broader economic, political, and institutional agendas, calling for more participatory, equity-oriented approaches that recognize multilingualism as a legitimate source of knowledge, agency, and sociolinguistic justice within education systems.

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