

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

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines how language ideology and institutional power are constructed, negotiated, and reproduced in educational policy discourse, focusing on language hierarchy, linguistic representation, educational opportunities, and minority-language participation.

Subjects and Methods: This qualitative study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), informed by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective. Data were obtained from 36 national and regional educational policy documents across multilingual contexts in Asia, Europe, and Africa, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 24 participants in Malaysia, comprising 10 policymakers and 14 senior educators. Data were analyzed through thematic coding, lexical analysis, and documentary-interview triangulation.

Results: Five interconnected patterns emerged. National and international languages dominated policy references, accounting for 85.09% of coded references. Language functions were differentiated across educational domains, with minority and heritage languages primarily associated with cultural and foundational learning. Deficit-oriented learner labels represented 67.20% of coded learner descriptions. Economic rationality, particularly competitiveness and employability, legitimized language priorities. Explicit minority-language consultation appeared in only 16.67% of documents.

Conclusions: Educational language policies may recognize multilingualism while maintaining unequal linguistic legitimacy and institutional participation. The study highlights the importance of balancing global competitiveness with linguistic rights, inclusive curricula, and meaningful minority-community participation in educational decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Language policy in education is not merely a technical instrument for selecting languages of instruction; it is also a mechanism through which social values, institutional authority, and linguistic hierarchies are constructed and maintained. In multilingual societies, educational policies often negotiate competing demands for national identity, global competitiveness, cultural preservation, and equal access to learning. Recent scholarship emphasizes that language ideologies influence how languages and their speakers are valued, represented, and positioned within educational systems (Lee et al., 2023; Rymes et al., 2024; Mallinson, 2024). Consequently, policy discourse should be examined not only through its formal objectives but also through the assumptions and power relations embedded in its language.

Research across different national contexts demonstrates that educational policies frequently privilege dominant languages while assigning limited institutional space to minority and indigenous languages. Studies of Pakistan and Nepal reveal how national identity, globalization, and economic rationality shape language-policy orientations and reproduce unequal linguistic positions (Khan & Zaki, 2022; Poudel & Choi, 2022). Similar tensions are evident in the Philippines, where language policy reflects competing ideological commitments concerning multilingualism, national integration, and English proficiency (Zeng & Li, 2023; Velasco, 2025). In England, standardized language expectations are reinforced through curriculum and assessment mechanisms, while university language policies may construct inclusion and exclusion through hierarchical language arrangements (Cushing, 2023; Shirahata & Lahti, 2023).

The relationship between ideology and policy is also visible in educational institutions and classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs about multilingual learners influence their interpretations of language policy and their hypothetical policymaking decisions (Bernstein et al., 2023; Emerick, 2023). Community language ideologies, institutional histories, and official language arrangements further shape how policies are interpreted and enacted (Kiramba et al., 2023; Vogel, 2023; Lytra & Gelir, 2023). Recent studies also show that multilingual education initiatives may encounter tensions between inclusive policy commitments and implementation realities (Gao & Zheng, 2024; Zheng & Lawrence, 2024). These tensions are connected to deficit-oriented assumptions, unequal recognition, and the marginalization of particular linguistic identities (Syed, 2024; Reddick, 2024; Russell et al., 2024).

Emerging research has proposed alternative perspectives emphasizing linguistic justice, translanguaging, and plurilingual education. Such approaches question monolingual assumptions and highlight the educational value of learners' complete linguistic repertoires (Wei, 2022; Bettney, 2022; Alasmari et al., 2022). Evidence from English-medium instruction and multilingual classrooms indicates that selective recognition of students' languages can influence participation and inclusion (Sah & Li, 2024; Schmora & Piccardo, 2025). Related discussions address multilingual education outcomes, language-resource orientations, and equitable language allocation across educational settings (Ogbonnaya & Els, 2024; Aktürk-Drake, 2024; Delavan et al., 2025). Recent reviews further identify persistent challenges in advancing equity and inclusion through language education policy and practice (Woltran & Schwab, 2025).

Despite these contributions, further critical examination is needed to understand how educational policy discourse connects linguistic representation with institutional power across diverse sociolinguistic contexts. Existing research has often concentrated on particular countries, policy domains, or classroom-level practices, leaving room for comparative analysis of how ideological assumptions are normalized through official policy narratives.

Therefore, this study critically examines how language ideology and power are constructed, negotiated, and institutionalized in educational policy discourse. By analyzing policy documents and interviews with policymakers and senior educators, it investigates how dominant language choices are legitimized, how minority and heritage languages are positioned, and how these discursive patterns relate to linguistic inequality. The study contributes to critical sociolinguistics by treating educational policy as both a governance instrument and a site where language, authority, and social inclusion are negotiated.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative critical sociolinguistic research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language ideology, institutional power, and sociolinguistic inequality are constructed and reproduced in educational policy discourse. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focused on interpreting meanings, ideological assumptions, linguistic representations, and power relations embedded in policy documents and institutional actors' accounts rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships. The research conceptualized language policy not merely as an administrative instrument but as a social practice through which linguistic legitimacy, educational opportunities, and institutional priorities are negotiated.

The analytical framework was primarily informed by Fairclough's (1995, 2013) three-dimensional model of discourse, which examines the relationship between textual features, discursive practices, and broader social practices. It was also supported by van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive perspective, particularly the relationship between discourse, ideology, institutional knowledge, and the reproduction of social power. These perspectives enabled the study to investigate how particular languages are positioned as legitimate, economically valuable, or educationally desirable, while minority and heritage languages may be represented as secondary or institutionally marginalized. The study was conducted within the Malaysian educational context, characterized by the coexistence of Bahasa Melayu, English, Chinese, Tamil, and Indigenous languages. The research combined qualitative field data obtained from policymakers and senior educators in Malaysia with documentary analysis of educational policies from multilingual contexts. This combination provided an analytical basis for examining the relationship between formal policy discourse and institutional interpretations of language policy.

Research Location and Context

Malaysia was selected as the research setting because its multilingual educational environment provides a relevant context for examining the relationship between language policy, national identity, educational access, and global economic participation. The Malaysian educational system reflects the interaction between Bahasa Melayu as the national language, English as a language associated with international communication and educational advancement, and other community languages maintained through educational and sociocultural practices. The field component involved policymakers and senior educators whose professional responsibilities were related to educational policy formulation, curriculum development, language education, or policy implementation. Their accounts were examined to understand how language priorities were interpreted and negotiated within educational institutions. The Malaysian context was also considered in relation to national and regional policy documents addressing language instruction, multilingual education, linguistic inclusion, and educational development.

Research Participants and Sampling Technique

The interview participants consisted of 24 individuals, comprising 10 policymakers and 14 senior educators. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required individuals with relevant professional experience and institutional knowledge concerning educational policy and language-related practices. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research when participants are selected based on their capacity to provide information directly relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The policymakers were selected based on their involvement in educational policy development, language planning, curriculum administration, or institutional decision-making.

The senior educators were included because of their experience in educational leadership, curriculum implementation, language instruction, or school-level educational management. Their perspectives enabled the study to examine how formal policy objectives were understood and translated into institutional practices. The selection of participants was guided by their professional relevance to the research focus and their capacity to provide substantive information regarding language policy and educational practice. The sample was not intended to achieve statistical representativeness but to obtain information-rich accounts relevant to the study's analytical objectives. In qualitative inquiry, sample adequacy is associated with the relevance and richness of information obtained rather than numerical size alone (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Sources and Data Collection

The study utilized two principal sources of qualitative data: educational policy documents and semi-structured interviews. The documentary corpus comprised 36 national and regional educational policy documents from multilingual contexts across Asia, Europe, and Africa. These documents were examined to identify how language priorities, educational objectives, linguistic identities, and institutional responsibilities were represented in formal policy discourse. The documents were selected based on their relevance to language policy, language-of-instruction arrangements, multilingual education, curriculum development, linguistic inclusion, and the relationship between language and educational or economic development.

The documentary analysis was complemented by semi-structured interviews with the 24 policymakers and senior educators in the Malaysian research context. Interviews were designed to explore participants' understandings of language priorities, the roles of Bahasa Melayu and English, the position of minority and heritage languages, and the implications of language policy for educational opportunities and institutional practices. Open-ended questions allowed participants to explain their perspectives and provide contextual accounts of policy formulation and implementation. The combination of documentary and interview data enabled the study to examine language ideology at both institutional and practical levels. Policy documents were treated as formal representations of institutional priorities, whereas interview accounts were analyzed as situated interpretations through which policy meanings could be reproduced, negotiated, or contested. The documentary corpus was retained as a comparative source and was not treated as consisting exclusively of Malaysian policy documents.

Research Instruments

The research instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide and a documentary analysis matrix. The interview guide was developed according to the research objectives and the conceptual dimensions of critical sociolinguistic analysis. It focused on language hierarchy, language allocation, linguistic inclusion, educational opportunity, institutional decision-making, and the relationship between language policy and socioeconomic development. The semi-structured format ensured that the principal research themes were addressed while allowing participants to elaborate on relevant experiences and institutional perspectives. The documentary analysis matrix was used to organize information from the 36 policy documents, including document identity, issuing institution, geographical context, policy focus, language references, representations of social actors, and relevant discourse features. The matrix also supported the systematic identification of lexical choices, evaluative expressions, policy justifications, and representations of linguistic groups. An initial coding framework was developed from the research questions and theoretical concepts, while additional codes were allowed to emerge from the documentary and interview data. This combination of deductive and inductive coding enabled the analysis to remain theoretically informed without restricting the identification of context-specific findings.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis, supported by qualitative thematic coding and lexical analysis. The analytical procedure followed Fairclough's (1995, 2013) three-dimensional framework, encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, the analysis examined vocabulary, recurring expressions, evaluative language, modality, categorization, and the allocation of linguistic functions. At the level of discursive practice, attention was given to how policy meanings were produced, circulated, interpreted, and legitimized by institutional actors. At the level of social practice, the findings were interpreted in relation to educational governance, national identity, economic rationality, language hierarchy, and sociolinguistic inequality. The analysis was conducted through repeated reading of the documents and interview materials, identification of relevant textual segments, initial coding, thematic categorization, and critical interpretation.

The initial codes were organized into broader analytical categories, including language hierarchy, functional language allocation, learner representation, neoliberal policy rationality, and minority-language participation. The categories were subsequently examined to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and differences between formal policy discourse and institutional accounts. Thematic analysis was used to organize recurring meanings and patterns within the qualitative data, following the systematic approach described by Braun and Clarke (2022). However, thematic coding served as a supporting analytical procedure rather than a replacement for CDA. The analysis moved beyond identifying recurring topics to examine how linguistic choices and institutional representations constructed social categories, legitimized policy priorities, and positioned different language communities within educational discourse.

Table 1. Analytical Procedures for Critical Discourse Analysis

Analytical Stage	Analytical Technique	Analytical Focus
Data familiarization	Repeated reading of documents and interview transcripts	Contextual understanding and identification of recurring language references
Initial coding	Deductive and inductive qualitative coding	Language hierarchy, inclusion, policy justification, and social actor representation
Thematic categorization	Qualitative thematic analysis	Patterns of language ideology, educational opportunity, and policy rationality
Textual analysis	CDA-informed lexical analysis	Word choice, modality, evaluation, categorization, and linguistic legitimacy
Discursive interpretation	Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA	Relationship between textual representation, institutional practice, and social context
Data integration	Documentary and interview comparison	Convergence, divergence, and silences across data sources

Source: Adapted from Fairclough (1995, 2013), Braun and Clarke (2022), and Denzin (2012), as synthesized by the authors.

Table 1 presents the analytical procedures used to organize and interpret the qualitative evidence. The stages were conducted iteratively, allowing the researcher to return to the original materials whenever emerging interpretations required further examination. Descriptive frequency counts were used to identify the distribution of coded references, while the interpretation of ideological meaning remained grounded in textual context and critical discourse analysis.

Data Integration and Triangulation

Documentary and interview data were integrated through qualitative triangulation to strengthen the depth and credibility of the interpretation. Documentary evidence was used to identify formal policy representations and institutional priorities, while interview accounts provided insights into how policymakers and educators understood, justified, or negotiated those representations. The two sources were compared to identify convergence, divergence, and discursive silences. Convergence was examined when documentary and interview evidence reflected comparable language priorities or institutional assumptions.

Divergence was considered when participants' accounts complicated or differed from the formal representations contained in policy documents. Discursive silences were identified by examining the limited or absent representation of particular language communities, educational experiences, or forms of linguistic knowledge within the analyzed materials. Triangulation was not treated as a procedure for assuming that one source was inherently more accurate than another. Instead, it was used to develop a more contextualized interpretation of how language ideology and institutional power operated across formal policy discourse and professional accounts. This approach is consistent with qualitative triangulation as a means of examining complex social phenomena through complementary sources of evidence (Denzin, 2012).

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was supported by comparing documentary and interview evidence and repeatedly examining the original data to ensure that interpretations remained connected to the research materials. The integration of different data sources also provided opportunities to identify similarities and differences in the representation of language policy. Dependability was addressed through the systematic organization of source materials, coding categories, analytical stages, and records of coding decisions.

The analytical framework was applied consistently across the documentary and interview data, while remaining open to context-specific meanings. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in documentary passages and interview excerpts rather than relying exclusively on the researcher's assumptions. Reflexive consideration was also given to the possibility that the researcher's perspectives on multilingualism, educational equity, and language policy could influence the analytical process. Transferability was supported through the description of the Malaysian research context, participant categories, documentary scope, and analytical procedures. These descriptions enable readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other multilingual educational settings. In this qualitative study, reliability was understood as procedural consistency and analytical traceability rather than statistical internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha was therefore not applicable because the study did not employ a quantitative measurement scale.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible representation of participants. Interview participants were informed about the research purpose and the use of their accounts for academic analysis. Participant identities were protected through anonymized identification codes, and identifying information was excluded from the presentation of findings. Interview data and documentary materials were handled for research purposes, with attention to confidentiality and the integrity of the original evidence. Direct interview quotations were treated as empirical evidence and were required to correspond to the original interview records. The use of participant accounts was intended to preserve the contextual meaning of their statements while protecting their identities. Ethical approval and institutional authorization should be reported in accordance with the actual approval records of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the critical discourse analysis of educational policy documents and semi-structured interviews with policymakers and senior educators. The findings are organized into five interconnected themes: (1) the representation and hierarchy of languages in educational policy discourse, (2) the functional allocation of languages across educational domains, (3) the discursive construction of multilingual learners and educators, (4) the dominance of economic rationality in language policy, and (5) the limited representation of minority-language agency. The analysis integrates documentary patterns and interview accounts to identify how language priorities are represented, justified, and negotiated within educational institutions. The documentary findings are presented through descriptive tables, while interview excerpts provide contextual evidence of participants' perspectives.

Language Hierarchy in Educational Policy Discourse

The analysis of 36 national and regional educational policy documents identified an unequal distribution of references to different language categories. National languages and international languages received substantially greater textual attention than minority and heritage languages. This pattern indicates that educational policy discourse places greater institutional visibility on languages associated with national administration, formal education, and international communication. National languages accounted for 412 references (51.63%), followed by international languages with 267 references (33.46%). Minority and heritage languages represented 93 references (11.65%), while other languages accounted for 26 references (3.26%). The combined references to national and international languages constituted 85.09% of the coded language references. In contrast, minority and heritage languages represented a substantially smaller proportion of the documentary corpus. The textual distribution was accompanied by differences in the functions assigned to language categories. National and international languages were frequently associated with formal instruction, curriculum development, academic progression, and educational standards. Minority and heritage languages appeared more often in discussions of cultural identity, local knowledge, and community-based learning. The findings therefore indicate not only differences in the frequency of language references but also differences in their institutional positioning.

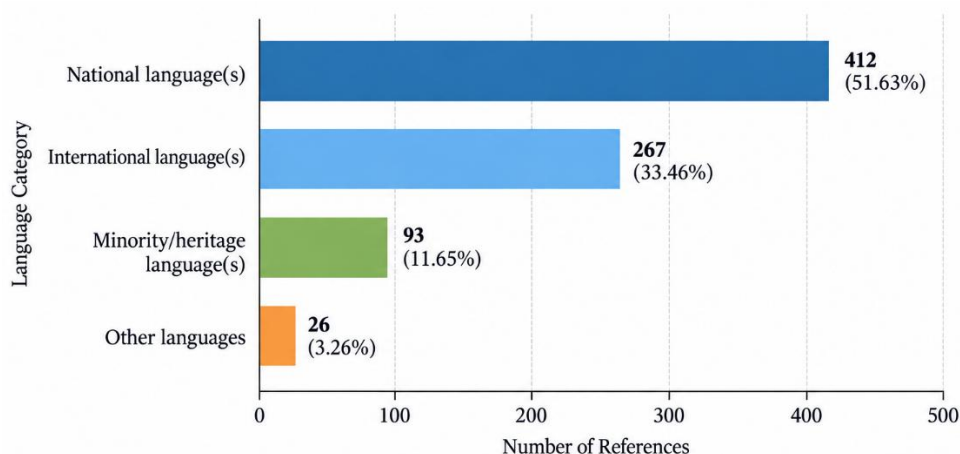


Figure 1. Distribution of Language References in Educational Policy Documents (n = 36)

Source: Authors' analysis of 36 national and regional educational policy documents.

The interview evidence reflects this distinction between the recognition of linguistic diversity and its institutional accommodation. A senior education officer acknowledged the importance of heritage languages while referring to limitations in their inclusion within academic structures.

"We recognize the importance of heritage languages, but the system cannot accommodate all of them at the academic level. These languages are important because they represent the cultural identity and historical experiences of different communities. However, incorporating every heritage language into formal education requires considerable institutional preparation. We have to consider curriculum structures, teaching materials, qualified educators, and available resources. The challenge is not necessarily a lack of recognition, but the practical capacity of the education system. As a result, some heritage languages receive recognition in policy documents without being fully integrated into academic instruction. This creates a continuing challenge between our commitment to linguistic diversity and the institutional arrangements currently available." (Senior Education Officer, Interview 7)

The statement identifies institutional capacity as a justification for limiting the academic role of heritage languages. The phrase "cannot accommodate all of them" presents the restriction as a practical constraint rather than an explicit rejection of linguistic diversity. This account corresponds with the documentary pattern in which minority and heritage languages receive comparatively limited representation.

Functional Allocation of Languages Across Educational Domains

The analysis further identified a functional differentiation in the allocation of languages across educational domains. Language categories were not represented as interchangeable resources but were associated with different educational purposes and levels of institutional authority. National and international languages occupied domains connected with formal academic progression, while minority and local languages were more frequently associated with cultural, foundational, or community-oriented functions.

Table 2. Functional Allocation of Languages in Educational Policy Discourse

Educational Domain	Language Category Predominantly Represented	Discursive Function
Primary education	National language	Foundational instruction and national educational integration
Secondary education	National and international languages	Curriculum delivery and academic progression
Higher education	International language	Academic communication and global participation

Science and mathematics	International language	Technical knowledge and academic standards
Cultural and moral education	Minority and heritage languages	Cultural identity and community knowledge
Early childhood education	Minority and local languages	Foundational communication and local learning

Source: Authors' qualitative coding of the 36 educational policy documents.

As presented in Table 2, the allocation of languages followed a differentiated pattern across educational levels and subject domains. National languages were associated with foundational instruction and educational integration, whereas international languages were more frequently linked to higher education, science, mathematics, and academic standards. Minority and local languages were primarily associated with cultural, moral, and early childhood education. This distribution indicates that language recognition was accompanied by unequal functional positioning. The presence of minority languages in educational discourse did not necessarily correspond to their inclusion in domains associated with advanced academic knowledge or formal assessment. Their representation was more closely connected to cultural continuity and foundational learning.

The distinction was also reflected in the interview account of a secondary school teacher, who described a discrepancy between students' linguistic backgrounds and the languages recognized by the curriculum.

"Students come with rich linguistic backgrounds, but the curriculum only values one or two languages. In the classroom, students bring different languages that they use in their families and communities. These languages are part of their identities and also influence how they understand and communicate knowledge. However, the curriculum provides limited opportunities for students to use these linguistic resources in academic activities. Most learning activities prioritize the languages officially recognized by the school system. Consequently, students' multilingual abilities are not always acknowledged as strengths that can support learning. I believe that education should recognize the linguistic backgrounds of students rather than treating them as separate from the learning process." (Secondary School Teacher, Interview 11)

The teacher's account identifies the curriculum as a site where linguistic value is selectively recognized. Although students possess diverse linguistic repertoires, the institutional curriculum is described as recognizing only a limited number of languages. This interview evidence corresponds with the documentary pattern in Table 2, particularly the restricted functional positioning of minority and local languages.

Discursive Construction of Multilingual Learners and Educators

The analysis identified recurring labels through which learners from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds were represented in educational policy texts. These labels included deficit-oriented descriptions as well as expressions that recognized linguistic diversity as an educational or cultural resource. The distribution of these categories is presented in figure 2.

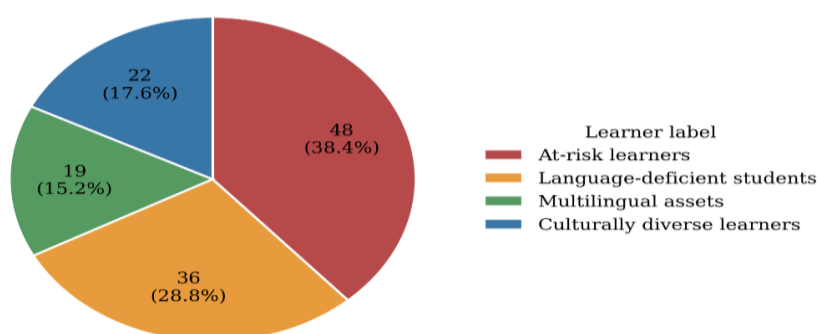


Figure 2. Representation of Learner Labels in Educational Policy Discourse (N=125)

Source: Authors' analysis of learner-related labels in the 36 educational policy documents.

Figure 2 shows that “at-risk learners” was the most frequently identified category, with 48 occurrences (38.40%), followed by “language-deficient students” with 36 occurrences (28.80%). In comparison, “multilingual assets” appeared 19 times (15.20%), while “culturally diverse learners” appeared 22 times (17.60%). The two deficit-oriented categories collectively accounted for 67.20% of the recorded labels, whereas the resource- and diversity-oriented categories accounted for 32.80%.

The findings demonstrate that learners’ linguistic backgrounds were frequently represented through categories associated with educational risk and language deficiency. These labels positioned linguistic difference in relation to institutional expectations of language proficiency and curricular conformity. In contrast, expressions such as “multilingual assets” and “culturally diverse learners” recognized linguistic diversity, although they appeared less frequently in the coded material. The account also corresponds with the distribution in figure 2, where deficit-oriented labels appeared more frequently than labels emphasizing multilingual resources.

Economic Rationality and the Representation of Language as Capital

The documentary analysis identified recurring references to competitiveness, employability, global standards, human capital, and efficiency in educational language policy discourse. These expressions were associated with the justification of language priorities and the expected contribution of language proficiency to educational and economic outcomes.

The interview data provided further evidence of how economic objectives were used to justify language policy decisions. A policy official described the use of an international language in higher education as a requirement for graduates’ participation in global competition.

“Using an international language in higher education is not a choice anymore; it is a necessity if we want our graduates to compete globally. In today’s educational environment, students are expected to possess language competencies that enable them to access international academic resources. We need to prepare graduates who can communicate beyond their national context. This is important not only for academic development but also for their future employment opportunities. Without adequate international language proficiency, students may experience difficulties participating in global academic and professional environments. Therefore, the use of international languages has become an important consideration in higher education policy. It is part of our effort to ensure that graduates are prepared for increasingly interconnected educational and professional systems.” (Policy Official, Interview 4)

The statement presents international language proficiency as closely connected to graduate competitiveness. The expression “not a choice anymore” frames the language decision as an unavoidable institutional requirement, while the reference to global competition links educational language policy to anticipated economic and professional outcomes.

The interview account corresponds with the documentary emphasis on competitiveness and employability. Across the analyzed policy materials, language was represented not only as a medium of communication but also as a resource associated with academic advancement, labor-market participation, and international engagement. This pattern was particularly visible in the positioning of international languages within higher education and specialized academic domains.

Table 3. Main Economic Discourses Identified in Educational Language Policy

Discursive Category	Main Representation in Policy Texts	Associated Policy Orientation
Competitiveness	Language proficiency as a condition for global competition	International positioning
Employability	Language as a qualification for employment opportunities	Workforce preparation
Global standards	Language proficiency as a component of educational quality	Academic benchmarking

Human capital	Language as an individual and national economic resource	Skills development
Efficiency	Language standardization as an institutional consideration	Educational administration

Source: Authors' thematic coding of economic and market-oriented expressions in the 36 educational policy documents.

Table 3 summarizes the principal economic categories identified in the documentary analysis. Competitiveness and employability were associated with the expected outcomes of language proficiency, while global standards and efficiency appeared in relation to educational quality and institutional organization. Human capital represented language as a resource connected with individual and national development. The interview evidence indicates that these economic considerations were also present in participants' explanations of language policy. The policy official's account specifically connected international language use with graduate competitiveness, illustrating how economic objectives were articulated in professional reasoning.

Policy Silence and Minority-Language Agency

The analysis identified limited explicit reference to consultation with minority-language stakeholders in the documentary corpus. Of the 36 educational policy documents, only six explicitly referred to consultation with minority-language stakeholders, while 30 contained no explicit reference to such consultation.

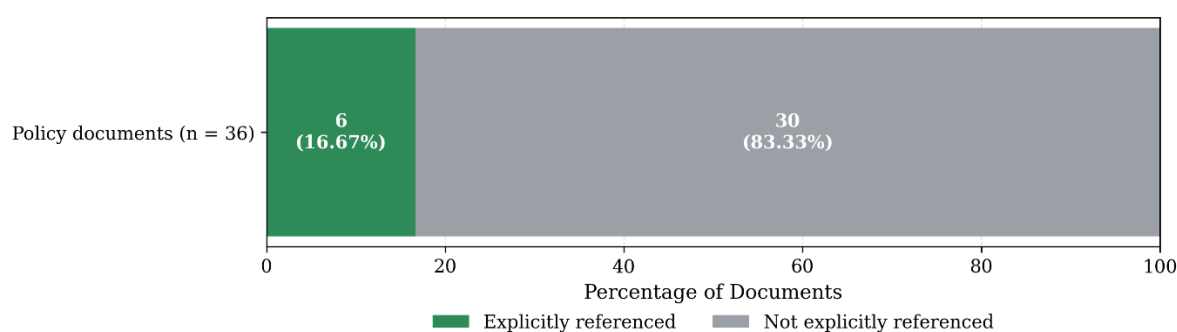


Figure 3. Minority-Language Stakeholder Consultation in Educational Policy Documents (n=36)

Source: Authors' analysis of stakeholder consultation references in the 36 educational policy documents.

Figure 3 indicates that explicit references to minority-language stakeholder consultation appeared in 16.67% of the analyzed documents, while 83.33% did not contain such references. The findings demonstrate that consultation with minority-language communities received limited explicit representation within the documentary corpus. This pattern was also reflected in the interview account of an academic policy analyst, who identified a difference between the language of inclusion and the representation of minority-language speakers in policy documents.

"Policies talk about inclusion, but the voices of minority language speakers are not really present in the documents. Many policy documents emphasize linguistic diversity and equal educational opportunities. However, when we examine how these policies are formulated, the participation of minority language communities is often not clearly documented. Their experiences and concerns may not be adequately represented in the language used to define educational priorities. This creates a difference between the principle of inclusion and its actual representation in policy development. Without meaningful participation, policies may reflect institutional perspectives more strongly than the needs of minority communities. Therefore, inclusion should involve not only formal recognition but also the active participation of minority language speakers in educational decision-making." (Academic Policy Analyst, Interview 15)

The participant's statement identifies the limited visibility of minority-language speakers within formal policy discourse. The account corresponds with the documentary distribution in Table 6,

where explicit references to stakeholder consultation were recorded in only six of the 36 documents. The findings indicate that minority-language communities were more frequently represented as subjects of policy regulation than as explicitly identified participants in policy consultation.

Integration of Documentary and Interview Findings

The comparison of documentary and interview evidence identified recurring relationships across the five analytical themes. Documentary patterns showed the distribution of language references, functional allocation, learner categorization, economic discourse, and stakeholder consultation. Interview accounts provided contextual evidence of how institutional actors described language priorities, curricular recognition, and minority-language representation.

Table 4. Integration of Documentary and Interview Findings

Analytical Theme	Documentary Finding	Interview Evidence	Integrated Finding
Language hierarchy	National and international languages accounted for 85.09% of coded references	Interview 7 acknowledged the importance of heritage languages while identifying limits to academic accommodation	Linguistic recognition coexisted with unequal institutional positioning
Functional allocation	International languages were associated with higher education and STEM domains; minority languages with cultural and foundational domains	Interview 11 described limited curricular recognition of students' linguistic backgrounds	Language functions were differentiated across educational domains
Learner representation	Deficit-oriented labels accounted for 67.20% of coded learner labels	Interview 11 described the gap between multilingual student backgrounds and curricular recognition	Linguistic diversity was frequently represented in relation to institutional language norms
Economic rationality	Competitiveness, employability, global standards, human capital, and efficiency appeared as recurring policy categories	Interview 4 linked international language use with graduate competitiveness	Economic objectives were used to justify language priorities
Minority-language agency	Only 6 of 36 documents explicitly referenced minority stakeholder consultation	Interview 15 identified the limited presence of minority-language voices in policy documents	Inclusive policy language did not consistently correspond to explicit stakeholder representation

Source: Integrated analysis of documentary coding and available semi-structured interview excerpts.

The correspondence between the documentary patterns and the available interview accounts. The findings show that language hierarchy was expressed through both the unequal distribution of language references and participants' descriptions of institutional constraints. Functional allocation was reflected in the association of particular languages with different educational domains, while learner representation revealed the prominence of deficit-oriented labels. Economic rationality appeared in policy categories and in the policy official's account of graduate competitiveness. The limited documentary representation of stakeholder consultation corresponded with the policy analyst's observation concerning minority-language voices. The

findings identify five interconnected patterns in educational policy discourse: unequal linguistic visibility, differentiated language functions, deficit-oriented learner representation, economic justification of language priorities, and limited explicit representation of minority-language agency. These patterns were identified through the integration of documentary coding and the available interview evidence.

Discussion

Language Hierarchy, Linguistic Legitimacy, and Institutional Power

The findings suggest that language hierarchy in educational policy is sustained not merely through the frequency of language references but through the unequal institutional value assigned to different linguistic resources. The prominence of national and international languages indicates that policy discourse associates linguistic legitimacy with national administration, academic advancement, and international communication. This pattern is consistent with Cushing (2023), who demonstrates how educational policy mechanisms reproduce standard language ideology by normalizing particular linguistic forms as legitimate and professionally desirable. Similar patterns have been identified by Shirahata and Lahti (2023), whose analysis of university language policies shows that institutional language arrangements may produce inclusion and exclusion simultaneously.

The present findings extend these studies by connecting documentary visibility with institutional explanations provided by educational actors. The recognition of heritage languages alongside limitations on their academic accommodation illustrates how inclusion can remain symbolic when institutional structures continue to privilege dominant languages. This observation corresponds with Aktürk-Drake (2024), who examines the changing policy orientation toward mother-tongue instruction, and Vogel (2023), who identifies contradictory approaches toward foreign and heritage languages in German educational policy. Zeng and Li (2023) similarly demonstrate that language policy in the Philippines reflects competing ideological orientations rather than a single coherent linguistic agenda.

The theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing language hierarchy as a relationship between discursive visibility, functional legitimacy, and institutional accommodation. This extends critical sociolinguistic perspectives by showing that language power is reproduced not only through explicit prohibition but also through differential recognition and the normalization of institutional constraints. The study therefore contributes to CDA by integrating textual patterns with participants' explanations of policy feasibility.

Practically, the findings suggest that educational policymakers should evaluate language policies beyond their formal declarations of linguistic diversity. Policy assessment should examine whether minority languages are represented in curriculum development, instructional resources, assessment, and academic progression. This implication is consistent with Alhamami (2023), who emphasizes the relationship between language rights and structural inequity in English-medium instruction, and Mallinson (2024), who discusses linguistic inclusion in educational contexts. The novelty of this study is its integrated examination of language hierarchy across policy documents and institutional narratives within a cross-regional documentary corpus and a Malaysian interview context. The findings indicate that linguistic inequality may persist even where policy discourse acknowledges multilingualism.

Functional Language Allocation and Unequal Access to Educational Domains

The findings reveal that educational policies assign languages different functions according to institutional domain and educational purpose. National and international languages are associated with formal instruction, academic progression, and specialized knowledge, whereas minority and heritage languages are more frequently positioned within cultural, foundational, or community-oriented domains. This differentiation is important because language allocation determines not only the medium of communication but also which linguistic resources are recognized as appropriate for advanced learning and knowledge production.

The pattern corresponds with Forbes and Morea (2024), who show that school-level language policies operate within an ecology of English, modern languages, and community languages. It

also resonates with Delavan et al. (2025), who argue that equitable language allocation requires context-sensitive decisions rather than simplified program models. In multilingual education, the allocation of languages cannot be evaluated solely by whether several languages are mentioned in policy. Their institutional functions and opportunities for use must also be considered. The present findings differ from approaches that treat language recognition as sufficient evidence of inclusion. The distinction between symbolic recognition and academic functionality demonstrates that a language may be acknowledged as a cultural resource while remaining peripheral to assessment, advanced instruction, or disciplinary knowledge. Poudel and Choi (2022) identify intersecting ideological influences in Nepalese language-in-education policy, while Poudel et al. (2022) connect language education policy with questions of curriculum decolonization.

These studies support the interpretation that language allocation is connected to broader decisions about knowledge, authority, and educational identity. The theoretical contribution is the articulation of functional stratification as a mechanism through which linguistic hierarchy is reproduced. This concept highlights that educational power operates through the distribution of language functions, not simply through language status. The practical implication is that policymakers should assess whether local and heritage languages can support learning across educational stages, including academic literacy and subject-specific instruction, rather than restricting their roles to cultural activities.

The novelty of this study lies in connecting functional allocation with the discursive construction of educational legitimacy. It demonstrates how apparently pragmatic decisions concerning curriculum, resources, and instructional feasibility may also have ideological consequences. Future policy evaluation should therefore investigate how language allocation affects learners' participation and access to disciplinary knowledge, without presuming that every multilingual policy arrangement produces equivalent outcomes.

Deficit-Oriented Learner Representation and the Politics of Multilingual Identity

The predominance of deficit-oriented learner labels suggests that multilingual students are frequently represented through institutional categories of risk, insufficiency, and language remediation. Such representations are not neutral descriptions because they establish assumptions about what learners lack and what educational intervention should prioritize. When linguistic difference is framed primarily as deficiency, institutional responses may focus on adapting learners to dominant language norms rather than recognizing their existing linguistic repertoires as educational resources.

This interpretation is consistent with Bernstein et al. (2023), who demonstrate that teachers' language ideologies are associated with their hypothetical policymaking concerning multilingual learners. Emerick (2023) similarly identifies the relationship between language ideology, institutional policy, and beliefs about emergent bilingual students. Burns and Quan (2025) further show how heritage-language learners may be positioned through standard-language expectations and assumptions about legitimate linguistic identities. These studies support the present finding that learner categorization can reproduce distinctions between institutionally valued and less-valued forms of linguistic competence.

The findings also correspond with Gu and Kim (2025), who examine how multilingual learners are defined across policy documents and educational standards. However, the present study adds a broader policy-discourse perspective by connecting learner labels with language hierarchy, functional allocation, and economic rationality. The analytical contribution is the identification of discursive learner positioning as a link between language ideology and institutional expectations. This perspective expands CDA by demonstrating how policy terminology can organize the perceived educational needs and capacities of multilingual students.

The practical contribution concerns policy language, teacher education, and curriculum design. Educational institutions should critically review terminology that presents multilingual learners primarily through deficit categories and consider formulations that recognize linguistic repertoires, community knowledge, and multilingual competence. Reddick (2024) emphasizes how educators navigate language ideology and pedagogy in refugee education, while Ezeh-

Kehinde and Salsbury (2025) show that learner identities are shaped through the local enactment of language-restrictive programs. The novelty of this study is its integration of learner labeling with broader institutional power relations rather than treating terminology as an isolated linguistic issue. Its implication is not that all risk-related labels should be removed, but that such categories should not obscure learners' linguistic resources or determine their educational identities in advance. Future research should examine how these policy representations are interpreted by students, teachers, and families in classroom settings.

Economic Rationality and the Instrumentalization of Language Policy

The findings indicate that economic rationality provides an important justification for language priorities in educational policy. References to competitiveness, employability, global standards, human capital, and efficiency frame language proficiency as an instrument for improving educational and economic positioning. This discourse is particularly visible in the interview account that presents international language use as necessary for graduate competitiveness. The statement illustrates how a policy preference may be framed as an unavoidable institutional requirement rather than a choice involving competing linguistic and educational priorities.

This interpretation is consistent with Rahman and Hu (2025), who examine neoliberal ideological orientations in English-medium instruction policy and the divergence between policy expectations and multilingual classroom realities. Gao and Zheng (2024) also identify challenges associated with the expansion of English-medium instruction, particularly in relation to multilingualism and educational equity. Choi and Poudel (2024) demonstrate that EMI implementation in under-resourced Nepalese schools is shaped by career aspirations and practical institutional conditions, while also generating equity-related concerns.

The present study extends these findings by showing how economic rationality operates alongside language hierarchy and functional allocation. The value of a language is not merely represented through its communicative capacity but through its anticipated contribution to employment, international mobility, and institutional competitiveness. Chen (2024) highlights the continuing relevance of equity and justice in language education, while Wei (2022) conceptualizes translanguaging as a political stance that challenges narrow assumptions about legitimate language use. The theoretical contribution is the interpretation of economic rationality as a legitimizing discourse that connects language choice with institutional priorities. It does not imply that employability or international communication are inappropriate educational goals. Rather, it demonstrates that these goals may become dominant when linguistic rights, cultural continuity, and local knowledge receive less explicit consideration.

Practically, language-policy planning should balance economic objectives with educational access, multilingual participation, and the recognition of local linguistic resources. This requires policymakers to evaluate not only the projected benefits of international languages but also the distribution of opportunities and constraints experienced by different learner groups. The novelty lies in showing how economic arguments, learner categorization, and language allocation operate as interconnected elements of policy discourse. Future studies could compare how these justifications are enacted in specific institutions and whether their implementation corresponds with the inclusive objectives stated in policy documents.

Minority-Language Agency, Policy Participation, and the Limits of Inclusion

The limited explicit documentation of minority-language consultation suggests a gap between the language of inclusion and the visibility of minority stakeholders in policy formulation. This finding is important because policy inclusion involves more than recognizing linguistic diversity as a principle. It also concerns who participates in defining educational priorities, whose knowledge is treated as relevant, and how community perspectives are represented in formal decision-making.

The pattern is consistent with Kiramba et al. (2023), who demonstrate the significance of community language ideologies for language policy and practice. Lytra and Gelir (2023) similarly show how official language policy intersects with locally situated language practices and dominant ideologies in minority-language contexts. Nakata (2024) raises questions about the

agenda-setting processes surrounding Indigenous languages and education. These studies indicate that language policy is negotiated across institutional and community contexts, rather than being determined solely by official documents.

The present findings add a documentary dimension to this discussion by showing that explicit consultation is not consistently visible in the analyzed policy corpus. This should not be interpreted as proof that consultation never occurred. Rather, it indicates that consultation was not explicitly documented in most of the examined texts. The distinction is important because documentary silence and actual absence are not equivalent.

The theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of minority-language agency as a dimension of discursive and procedural inclusion. This extends language-policy analysis beyond the presence or absence of language recognition to consider whether affected communities are represented as policy participants. Ogbonnaya and Els (2024) review multilingual education policy and learning outcomes in South Africa, while Russell et al. (2024) examine language policy and identity-building among newcomer and refugee students. Both provide relevant perspectives on the relationship between language, educational participation, and social inclusion.

The practical implication is that policy development should incorporate transparent consultation mechanisms, documented stakeholder contributions, and opportunities for minority-language communities to influence curriculum and language planning. The novelty of this study lies in linking the documentary visibility of consultation with the broader ideological organization of language policy. The study is limited by its cross-regional documentary scope, the Malaysian context of the interview component, and its reliance on available policy texts and interview accounts. The findings therefore do not establish causal effects on classroom achievement or represent all multilingual education systems. Future research should include direct participation by minority-language community members, longitudinal analysis of policy implementation, and school-level observation to examine how discursive inclusion is translated into educational practice.

CONCLUSION

Educational language policy discourse is not merely concerned with language selection but also functions as a mechanism through which institutional power, linguistic legitimacy, and educational inequalities are constructed and maintained. The critical discourse analysis of 36 educational policy documents and interviews with 24 policymakers and senior educators identified five interconnected patterns: the dominance of national and international languages, the unequal allocation of language functions across educational domains, the prevalence of deficit-oriented representations of multilingual learners, the influence of economic rationality on language policy decisions, and the limited explicit representation of minority-language participation. These findings demonstrate that formal recognition of linguistic diversity does not necessarily translate into equal institutional opportunities or meaningful participation in educational decision-making. The study contributes to critical sociolinguistics by conceptualizing language inequality through the interconnected dimensions of discursive visibility, functional legitimacy, learner representation, and institutional participation. Practically, the findings highlight the need for educational policies that balance global competitiveness with linguistic rights, cultural recognition, and equitable access to academic opportunities. Although the study is limited by its cross-regional documentary scope and Malaysian interview context, it provides a foundation for future research involving minority-language communities, classroom-level policy enactment, and longitudinal examination of multilingual education.

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